

# On the Ontological Status of the State

ERIKRINGMAR

*London School of Economics*

In which sense can we say that a state 'exists'? According to the realist school, the state is an *a priori* given; according to the pluralist school, it is nothing but a collection of various sub-state actors. As I argue, however, neither solution is satisfactory. If we give the state a transcendental status, it disappears *from* the world; if we see it merely as a set of empirical attributes, it disappears *in* the world. The way out of this dilemma is to stop talking about what states really are, and start instead to talk about what things they resemble. We make sense of our collective selves in the same way as we make sense of our individual selves — with the help of metaphors that are expanded into narratives. A question of 'being' is consequently always a question of 'being as', and states are constructed through the stories told about them.\*

According to a time-honoured metaphor, the state can be described in terms of a body. The state is a 'body politic', as it were, with a 'head of state' who governs its 'members' according to the dictates of 'reason', or *raison d'etat*. When thought of in this fashion the state is generally taken to exist in the same unproblematic fashion as other bodies that populate our universe — our individual bodies, say, or the heavenly bodies in the sky. The state-as-body is regarded as of a natural kind and an inescapable fact. Recently, however, this natural existence has increasingly come to be questioned. As several writers have pointed out, the state is much less unified and much less coordinated than bodies generally are sup-

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posed to be. Its parts are not only disjointed, but often enough also connected to other parts which in turn are connected to other bodies. If the state is a body it is surely very much like the bodies of the *Women of Avignon*, the prostitutes of Pablo Picasso's well-known cubist masterpiece.

As naive museum-goers sometimes point out, there is a sense in which the human beings portrayed by cubist painters look far from healthy. In fact, if one really looked like a person of Picasso's or Braque's imagination it would be doubtful whether one — in concrete and physiological terms — would be able to survive. And if this is the case for an individual, one may wonder what would happen to a state-as-body that looked the same way. Would such an entity really have much of a future, or would not interdependence and general dismemberment soon bring about its demise?

This is of course a question which has occasioned much recent scholarly debate, and — as so often — the scholars have been deeply divided in their diagnoses. Will the state die? Is the state dying? Is it perhaps already dead? Despite many arguments back and forth it has been excruciatingly difficult to settle this issue in a conclusive fashion. Regardless of which position we take there seems to be ample empirical evidence in our support. Yet — and much as in the famous Monty Python parrot skit — there is little agreement on which kind of evidence that finally would settle the matter. Given this somewhat confusing state of affairs, empirical investigations alone do obviously not suffice. What we need is not more empirical 'facts', but above all a consensus on a conceptual framework through which an empirical investigation can be carried out. We must define what we mean when we talk about a 'state' and we must figure out in which sense notions like 'existence' or 'non-existence' can be applied to this kind of an entity. Before we can come up with a diagnosis of the medical status of the state, we must, in other words, investigate its *ontological* status.

This article is devoted to a few remarks on this subject. I will begin by briefly reviewing the relevant International Relations literature and then investigate the curious metaphorical language through which the state is talked about in anthropomorphic terms — as a 'body', a 'person' or an 'actor'. As I will argue, this terminology was originally a medieval *locus communis* which in the Renaissance came to be applied to the sovereign state ruled by the absolutist prince. The prince personified the state, as it were, and as a result of this anthropomorphic definition a new political vocabulary and a new set of political options

were introduced. From the Renaissance onward, states have 'acted' in their 'national interests' on the 'world stage'.

Once defined in these terms, however, the state soon became subject to the same paradoxes which have clouded the modern individual's understanding of his or her own self. If we accept that the state in some sense can be regarded as a person, the question becomes what a person might be. As I will try to show, there are fundamental problems with the answers which modern philosophers have given to this question, and since I believe it is impossible to solve these problems within the metaphysical framework traditionally presented by scholars of international politics, we need to put both the individual and the state on an alternative, and more secure, ontological footing. What we need, I will argue, is a 'narrative concept of the person' which can correspond to a 'narrative concept of the state'.

### *Realists and Pluralists*

International Relations scholars are no doubt unaccustomed to reflecting on questions regarding the ontological status of the objects they study. Given the central importance of the state, however, they have in practice often been forced to consider what the state 'really is', and in what sense it can be said to 'exist'. If we allow for a simplification, we could say that there are two main sets of answers in the literature, associated with two very influential scholarly traditions — that of the realist school and that of the pluralists.<sup>1</sup>

To begin with the realists, their world is exclusively one of states and interstate relations (Waltz, 1979, 1986: 27-130). According to this perspective, the borders of the state separate one kind of politics from another — participation, democracy and the rule of law on the inside, and ever-threatening conflict and war on the outside (Bartelton, 1995: 186-236; Walker, 1993: 81-103). World politics is the politics of the outside, of life in an anarchic realm where every unit is forced to fend for itself. Here 'national interests' will come to govern all state actions. It is in the national interest of each state to gain power, at the very least enough power to assure its own self-preservation and at the very most enough power to dominate the world. Since there can be only one utility schedule and one set of interests pertaining to each state, the state can be thought of as a 'unified, purposive, utility-maximising, actor' (Bueno de Mesquita, 1981: 87-92).

According to the realists, in other words, the identity of the state and the interests which govern it are denned *prior to* the state entering into interaction with other states. The state is given *exogenously* to the analysis of it, and hence endowed with

something akin to a transcendental ontological status. To the realists the state is the presupposition of all theorizing — it is the assumption from which all subsequent conclusions can be drawn. Occasionally they may perhaps concede that the state is a historically situated institution and that as such it is subject to change, and parenthetically they may even admit that the state one day will disappear (Gilpin, 1986: 314; Morgenthau, 1948/1973: 10). Yet any such concessions will inevitably take the form of empirical observations and ad hoc additions to the main theoretical model. For the purposes of their theory, the realists have to take the state for granted.

The scholars associated with the pluralist camp are, however, highly sceptical both of this way of reasoning and of the conclusions reached (Hollis and Smith, 1991: 38-9). As they point out, the realists' description of the world is not only empirically incorrect, but also based on a flawed view of science. An honest scientist cannot simply 'posit' the existence of a certain entity in an *a priori* fashion since it is the very existence of this entity that should be investigated. As scientists we must look at world politics without any particular prejudices as to which kinds of objects it contains. Our concept of the state should emerge *as a result of* such an empirical investigation, not be a precondition for it.

As the pluralists go on to show, an empirical investigation will soon reveal the realists' view of the world to be very far from realistic. While the state indeed may be an important actor in world politics, it is not the only such actor and it is always competing with a host of others. In fact, contemporary world politics is populated with innumerable trans-, supra- and sub-national actors that form links and alliances without much regard for state borders. As a result, states have become increasingly interdependent and in the process the very distinction between domestic and foreign policy has become blurred (Keohane and Nye, 1977).

This conclusion is reinforced if we turn to a study of the *internal* life of the state (Allison, 1971; Steinbruner, 1974). As pluralist scholars have pointed out, the state is very far from a united, purposive, rational actor, but instead is made up of a multitude of different sub-national bureaucracies and organizations, each with its own agenda, its own set of goals and its own traditional ways of doing things. Under these circumstances, foreign policy will not be the result of rational calculations undertaken at a unified state level, but instead the product of a multitude of bargains struck at various sub-levels. That which we call 'the state' is only a loose set of ordered preferences, an enormous aggregation of individual preference schedules which always will be contingent upon day-to-day politicking.

How, then, should we arbitrate between these two descriptions? Is the state a transcendental, atomistic unit with a unified and pre-socially given set of interests, or is it a

mere bundle of sub-state actors and an aggregation of their preferences? Impressionistically we may perhaps feel that there is something to both pictures. Or rather — the two pictures seem to portray the same thing, only at different distances. When viewed from afar — either in time or in space — the state appears unified and purposive, yet when viewed close up it somehow loses both its unity and its sense of purpose. Yet if this is the case we have surely hit upon an entity of a very strange kind. It seems we need to take the state for granted in order to be able to analyse whatever goes on in world politics, yet the very same state mysteriously disappears once we start looking for it. The state simply vanishes somewhere in between the moment when we posited it as necessary and the moment in which we started investigating it. But if our view of the state depends on our perspective in this way, how can we ever hope to give an accurate, and final, description of it? Where, and what, is it? Does the state, or does it not, *exist*?

In order to explore this question let us turn to an investigation of the curious metaphorical language through which the state is talked about in terms appropriate to individual human beings. If the state, just like a person, is a 'subject', then in what sense can subjects be said to 'exist'? And what is in fact the connection between an individual and a collective self?

### *Man and State*

Although the state can be described in many different ways, when viewed from the outside — as one entity among others in world politics — it is almost invariably talked about in anthropomorphic terms. It is seen as an 'actor' or a 'person'; it is a 'someone' or a 'subject' to whom intentions, memories, rights and obligations are attached. Yet it is far from clear in what sense states can be thought of in analogy with human beings. This fact is also often acknowledged by International Relations scholars who invoke the anthropomorphic vocabulary only after making a standard apology. The comparison between the state and a person is a 'mere metaphor', we are told, which 'should not be taken literally' (Buzan *et al.*, 1993: 112; Gilpin, 1986: 318-19). Having prefaced their analyses in this fashion, the same scholars then go on to rely on the same vocabulary as one of the most fundamental — and in practice irreplaceable — assumptions of their research.

There is something very odd about this way of proceeding. If the metaphor in question indeed was purely arbitrary we would not expect it to be so difficult to avoid. If it is indeed the case that the anthropomorphic terminology consists of nothing but 'mere' metaphors, we would expect scholars to switch metaphors from time to time

and occasionally talk about the state in some other set of terms. Or — to be true to the purported tenets of science — to drop the reliance on metaphorical language altogether and instead talk about the state as it *really is*. Yet realists and pluralists alike seem neither willing nor able to take any of these steps, and this reluctance, or inability, seems to indicate that the connection between man and state is much stronger than is commonly presupposed. What, then, is the nature of this connection? Why can states be thought of as 'subjects' and why are they so easily compared with human beings?

One way of addressing this question is to undertake a philosophical investigation of the similarities which obtain between individuals and collective entities of various kinds (Carr, 1986: 122-52; Vincent, 1989: 687-715). Another way to address the same question is to treat it in historical terms. We could, that is, rephrase the philosophical question regarding the ontological status of the state as a *genealogical* question regarding how it came to be that the state came to be talked about in this set of terms rather than some other. In general, a genealogical approach is to be preferred if we doubt whether there is an intrinsic, 'real', connection between two entities and if we instead understand our task as being that of investigating the origin of a certain way of talking (Foucault, 1985: 139-64).

A promising point of departure for such a genealogy is provided by Jacob Burckhardt's seminal study of the Italian Renaissance (Burckhardt, 1860/1958). As Burckhardt points out, the Renaissance was the period in which man and state for the first time came to be thought of as independent and self-directing entities (Burckhardt, 1860/1958, vol. II: 279-302). At the same time it was far from clear what it meant to be a 'man' or what it meant to govern, or live in, a 'state'. Soon the status, role and purpose of both man and state became fashionable subjects worthy of many learned treatises and long intellectual debates.

Nowhere were these issues more prominent than at the courts of the new sovereign princes. The court was the pre-eminent cultural, intellectual and political centre of each country, and also the one social arena where young men and women had to appear in order to make a name for themselves. The Renaissance court differed markedly from the courts of the feudal lords of the previous era. During the Renaissance the upper class grew both in absolute terms and in relation to other social classes, and as a result the people who gathered at the courts of the princes were often of very diverse, and often quite humble, origins (Elias, 1985; von Martin, 1944).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, they often thought of themselves as free from the customs and traditional social roles which had governed the lives of their fathers. The men and women of the Renaissance regarded themselves as 'creations' and as 'works of art'; they believed they were able to 'fashion' themselves, to turn themselves into persons of their own free choice (Green-

blatt, 1980). A very similar process of 'fashioning' took place also in the case of the state. Here new rulers of often very dubious credentials, and often with a very tenuous hold on power, sought to buttress their claim to legitimacy and power by making new selves for themselves. Much archaeological and philological effort went into the creation of a credible past, preferably filled with illustrious warriors, biblical characters and other assorted classical paraphernalia (Machiavelli, 1532/1980: 33; Ringmar, 1996; Shennan, 1974).

There were, however, strict limits to the Renaissance man's ability to fashion his own self, and neither individuals nor states could in practice be whatever they wanted to be. As soon became obvious, the freedom of each individual was strictly limited by the power which the state exerted upon him or her, and the power of each state was in turn strictly limited by the power of other states. Perhaps we could say that the identity of both man and state were formed through a process of *subjectification* — man became a subject and aware of the unity of his self as he was *subject to* the techniques of power employed by the state, and the state became a subject and aware of the unity of its self as it was *subject to* the techniques of power of other states.<sup>3</sup>

The direct metaphorical connection between man and state was, however, forged through the person of the prince. Throughout die Renaissance the prince and die principality he or she ruled were very intimately related, and the one could not be conceived without the other. A state was not a state without a prince and a prince was not a prince without a state (Skinner, 1989: 90-102).<sup>4</sup> In order to talk about this intimate connection, the metaphor of the 'body' seemed particularly apt (Kantorowitz, 1957; Nederman and Langdon Forhan, 1993). In domestic political rhetoric the body metaphor was highly useful since it managed to reflect two of the most cherished notions of the contemporary ruling classes — mutual dependence between constituent parts and a hierarchical principle of organization. Just as all parts of the body were intrinsically linked, one subject depended on another, yet at the same time some parts — the head — were unquestionably more important than some others — the fingers, say, or the toes (Arendt, 1958: 53-4; Walzer, 1965: 171-83).

As far as relations *between* states were concerned, the body metaphor connected very nicely to the classical *locus communis* through which the world had been described in terms of a 'stage' (Frye, 1990: 196-211; Jacquot, 1957; Magistretti, 1971). In antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, die stage metaphor had often been invoked in order to describe the vanity of human beings and the emptiness of human life, and while this usage continued in the Renaissance, the metaphor was also given a very much more concrete content. As it turned out, die world as it had been explored through die great geographical discoveries was easily compared to the stage of a

theatre (Orgel, 1975; Strong, 1984: 65-74). Once the earth was fully encompassed it became, just like a Renaissance theatre, a closed, graspable and circular space; and just as an earth overlaid with grid-lines allowed for the precise calculations of relative movements, the stage allowed for relative movements between actors and things. Perhaps even more strikingly, the new art of perspective, introduced in the theatre in 1605, required the construction of a system of grids just like that of the longitudes and latitudes on the maps.<sup>5</sup> It should consequently not surprise us that the term '*theatrum*' soon came to be applied also to collections of maps. Thus the first atlas of the world, printed in 1570, appeared as the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* and it was soon followed by national 'theatres' in one country after another — *Le Theatre Franfois* in 1594 and *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* in 1611 (Brown, 1949/1977: 162). Similarly, it made sense for William Shakespeare to call his famous London theatre 'the Globe' (Schoenbaum, 1979).

If the world was a stage, then the state was the actor who acted upon it. Or to be more precise, it was the 'body' of the state which was inserted upon the stage of the world. As the head of this body, the prince was its natural governor; the movements of the state were the prince's movements; and the reason which guided it — the *raison d'etat* — was the prince's reason. Consequently, relations between states soon also came to be seen as relations between actors in a play (Anderson, 1983: 37). Interstate politics became interpersonal politics and world affairs became a drama, often of a tragic, absurd or even a *Commedia dell'Arte* kind.<sup>6</sup>

### *Atomism and Empiricism*

Given the close metaphorical connection between man and state it is hardly surprising that the discussions regarding the ontological status of the one soon came to be intimately connected to the discussions regarding the ontological status of the other. The 'concept of the person' as it was developed by the philosophers of the early modern era soon came to determine, and to be determined by, the 'concept of the state'.

This connection is explicit in the writings of authors as different as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume. According to Hobbes, the state could be thought of as a 'Feigned' or 'Artificial' person, and as already the cover-page of his most famous work made clear, Leviathan was a superman who, with sword and sceptre in hand, brought peace to the individual men out of whom he was composed (Hobbes, 1651/1968: 220; Meinecke, 1924/1984: 213). Yet also Hume found a deep affinity between the state and the individual, although for him the relationship worked the other way around. According to Hume, the individual was 'united' and 'one' not by virtue of some inherent pre-social



components, but simply because the individual could be ordered and organized in the same manner as a state. The unity which our imagination imposes upon our selves, Hume said, is the same kind of unity which 'the reciprocal ties of government and subordination' impose on the different members of a 'common-wealth' (Hume, 1739-40/1969: 309). While Hobbes thus regarded man as a metaphor for the state, Hume regarded the state as a metaphor for man.

Although many similar examples could be adduced from the works of contemporary and subsequent philosophers, the writings of Hobbes and Hume are of particular interest in the context of our discussion since they have come to provide the bases for the two most influential modern accounts of the self. Perhaps we could call them atomism and empiricism, respectively (Hollis, 1985: 217-33).

For Hobbes man was a pre-social atom, an entity which was fully formed *prior to* entering into interaction with other men.<sup>7</sup> Man thus understood consisted of two main parts — desires, first of all, but also a reasoning capacity which could be compared to that of a calculating device. Since desire and reason were natural, pre-social, features of the constitution of man, Hobbes believed they could serve as the foundation on which a theory of society could be built. Man, he said, had a desire for 'power after power' and the 'warre of every man against every man' which this quest produced could only come to an end through the intervention of the almighty Leviathan who organized the passions of men, pacified social interaction and brought order to society.

If we simplify a complex line of development, we could perhaps say that subsequent philosophers who built on Hobbes came to focus on ways in which the external coercive authority of Leviathan could be internalized, moved *into* man himself. Here, reason was given an increasingly important role as it was upgraded from a mere calculating device to a faculty vested also with the powers of judgement. John Locke, for one, agreed that men are pre-social creatures of both passion and reason, but reason according to him allows us not only to deduce given conclusions from given premises, but more importantly also to *reflect upon* ourselves and upon our passions. *As* a result of this reflection we can strengthen some of our passions, weaken some others, and in this way mould, remake and discipline ourselves (Taylor, 1989: 161-6).

According to Hume and all subsequent empiricists, however, all such transcendentalist talk was nonsense. Scientists should investigate the world empirically, not simply posit the existence of various objects in an *a priori* fashion. What we 'are' should not be settled by definitional fiat, but instead studied through the evidence provided by our senses. For a self to exist, Hume believed, there must be an impression which corresponds to this idea, and since we take ourselves to exist continuously, there must be an impression that remains the same throughout the whole course of our lives (Hume,

1739<sup>0</sup>/1969: 299-300). But since there are no such constant and invariable impressions, no idea of a self can be derived from them. Ergo, there can be no self and no personal identity which is extended over time. While other people perhaps may 'perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*, Hume argued, 'I am certain there is no such principle in me' (Hume, 1739-40/1969: 300). As an illustration of this point he turned towards himself:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, *I always stumble on some particular perception or other; of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never natch myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. (Hume, 1739-40/1969: 300)

If there is no empirical evidence for the self, in what sense can we be said to exist? Hume's answer followed directly from his empiricist convictions. Man, he said, is 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement' (Hume, 1739-40/1969: 300).

### *The 'Two-way Vanishing Trick'*

The connection between these early modern discussions regarding the ontological status of the person and our contemporary International Relations scholars' discussions regarding die ontological status of the state should be obvious. The realists' state is the Hobbesian man, the irreducible atom from which social life is constructed; the unified, integrated, rational actor constantly threatened through the *helium omnium contra omnes*. Similarly, the pluralists' state is the Humean man, a bundle of ever-changing wills, desires and preferences, lacking any real coherence or persistence over time.

As I pointed out above, it is difficult to make a choice between these two different pictures of the state, and it now seems evident that we face the same difficulty in the case of the two pictures of man. Should we be satisfied with a state which is a precondition of world politics, or should we grant that the state simply does not exist? Should we accept diat man has an irreducible transcendental status, or should we reject all talk of transcendence and thus die very notion of a permanent self? Surely both alternatives are equally unappealing. If we are left with a choice between a pre-social and transcendental self a la Hobbes or a self which is a mere bundle of perceptions and preferences a la Hume the question of existence can never be conclusively answered. In either case the self simply vanishes. As Martin Hollis has pointed out, the modern self

... is threatened in two directions. If it reduces to a Humean bundle of prefer-

ences, which are then traced to socialisation and hence to the system itself, it vanishes into the system which it was meant to explain. If it is a Hobbesian core, so private and so much at a distance from its public, legitimating masks that the real man is impenetrable, it vanishes from scientific inquiry. The puzzle is how to avoid this two-way vanishing trick. (Hollis, 1985: 227)

For Hobbes, man was a presupposition of all theorizing, but since that which a theory presupposes cannot be studied by that very theory, man himself could never be properly analysed. As far as the realists' view of the state is concerned this metaphysics resulted in a static and state-centric view of the world (Ruggie, 1986: 141; Wendt, 1987: 34(Mr)). The origin and formation of the realists' state can never be properly studied since a time without a state and without a state system has been ruled out by definition. Similarly, nothing particularly enlightening can be said regarding a possible future in which the state no longer will remain the most important political unit.

The Humean self, on the other hand, is simply too empty and too indeterminate. If a person can be reduced to a bundle of perceptions or preferences, then there is suddenly no one left to whom these perceptions and preferences can be said to *belong*. As a consequence, all notions of choice disappear from the analysis. Since there is no self, there is no longer anyone around who can assess and choose between different alternatives, and what a person does or does not do will instead have to be ascribed to custom, habit or material necessity (Hume, 1739/1969: 447-60). As heirs to this empiricist tradition, the pluralists have always tried to reduce the state to what they claim are its composite units. Or rather, since it in practice is next to impossible to talk about world politics without talking about states, the pluralists have been forced to adopt the traditional language, but always, as it were, in *mauvaise foi*. Their studies have been replete with anthropomorphic metaphors which they have had no way of understanding, and for which they have always felt the need to apologise.

The fundamental mistake committed by both atomists and empiricists is that they have looked for something which quite simply cannot be found. The question of existence has been formulated in such a way that the only acceptable answers have been those phrased in terms of that which 'really' exists. As a result of this move the ontological debate has turned into a referendum on the possibility of transcendence. If we with the Hobbesians accept transcendence, then we can agree that there is a location — otherworldly though it may be — which the self can inhabit; if we with the Humeans reject transcendence, then we must reject the entire notion of a self. Either way, however, the self vanishes — *from* the world with Hobbes and the realists, and in the world with Hume and the pluralists.

Yet, as I have stressed, both solutions are equally unsatisfactory. We all certainly

take our selves to exist — both as individuals and as collectives — but by 'existence' here we refer neither to something mysterious and transcendental nor to something fully reducible to empirical sense data. What we are as individuals and as states is not something metaphysical, yet at the same time it is not something merely physical. What, or who, then, is this non-metaphysical, yet not-merely-physical being? In concluding this article I will suggest a possible interpretation which, I believe, is able to put both the individual and the state on a more acceptable, and more secure, ontological footing. We could call it a 'narrative concept of the self.

### *A Narrative Concept of the Self*

Perhaps we should begin by reminding ourselves how difficult it is in fact to determine in what sense something really exists. If by 'real existence' we mean what substance a certain object is composed of, we will often be at a loss for an answer. There are many things which we take to exist which are neither metaphysical entities nor reducible to physical matter. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for example, is not a transcendental entity, but neither can it straightforwardly be reduced to pitches of sounds of varying lengths; Cervantes' *Don Quixote* surely exists but it is not other-worldly and not merely a collection of printed squiggles on paper (Dennett, 1981: 6-7). On the other hand, if by 'real existence' we mean how something *really* should be defined, we will often find that a conclusive definition is difficult to construct. No matter how we define a word, there are always some things which we would like to include under the definition that are excluded by it, and conversely, some things that we would like to exclude that are included (Taylor, 1970: 155-8). Is 'love', for example, *really* 'an intense affection for another person based on familial or personal ties'? Is 'God' *really* 'a being conceived as the perfect, omnipotent, omniscient originator and ruler of the universe'? (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1976). Yes perhaps, we may agree, but something certainly seems to be missing from these definitions. It would be odd to say that this is what these notions 'really are' and that they cannot be anything else. Obviously definitions vary between cultures, different times and different places.

Since in practice it is impossible to talk about what something 'really is' what we do instead is to talk about the things that this something resembles. We *see* things *as* other things and talk about what they *are like*; we give a thing 'a name that belongs to something else' (Aristotle, 1968: 1457b). This process of 'seeing as' is a fundamental process of the mind which underlies all attempts to understand and explain the world. That is, the world can be labelled, understood and given meaning with the help of *metaphor* (Black, 1955/1981: 63-82; Lakoff and Johnson, 1979; Ricœur, 1975).<sup>8</sup>

Hence metaphor is not only a feature of poetry, political rhetoric and eloquent dinner speeches, but it is also indispensable for the most exact and matter-of-fact of our discourses. Consequently, it is not coincidental, and not the result of sloppy linguistic habits, that physicists talk about 'black holes' or atomic 'nuclei'; that biologists talk about genetic 'codes' or ecological 'systems'; that economists discuss economic 'markets' that are 'in balance' (Bicchieri, 1988; Black, 1962; Hesse, 1966: 157-77; Rigotti, 1989; Saccaro-Battisti, 1983; White, 1973: 30-1).

Metaphor, I would like to suggest, provides us with a way to escape the philosophical cul-de-sac where Hobbes and Hume left us. If we cannot think of something 'in itself, but only in terms of other things, then 'existence' is not 'absolute existence', but always instead existence *under a certain description* (Goodman, 1984: 29-53). If meaning is made with the help of metaphor, then nothing can ever be 'in itself, and everything must derive whatever existence we give it from a comparison with other things. Putting the same point epigrammatically we could say that all questions concerning 'being' really are questions concerning 'being as' (Ricœur, 1975: 323-99).

If this point is accepted we understand why the international relations theorists we reviewed above had difficulties talking about the state in other than metaphorical terms. They *had to* rely on metaphor since no other — no literal — language was available to them. Since they were unable to say anything at all about what the state really is they were forced to talk about whatever they took the state to resemble. But if that is the case, there is of course no reason to be apologetic about this choice of vocabulary. These are not 'mere' metaphors and not 'short-hands' for anything else. Metaphor is rock-bottom. To ask for something more fundamental is to ask for too much, but also to ask for more than we need.

Yet metaphor alone does not suffice. A metaphor provides a single picture of life — a *Still-leben* — but it cannot deal with life as it unfolds over time. Before we can make proper sense of things we need to turn the many single images into a 'movie' which can run parallel to the movements of which we take our lives to exist. We do this as we tell *stories* about the metaphors we have come to embrace. First we see something *as something*, in other words, and then we construct a narrative about this something. In this way narrative becomes the process through which human beings make sense of the unfolding of their lives. When we wonder what happened, we tell a story that provides an answer; when we wonder what something is, we tell a story of how this something came to be; when we wonder who we are ourselves, we tell a story which locates us in the context of a past, a present and a future.

As theorists of narrative point out, all stories share a number of features (Brooks, 1992; Danto, 1965/1985; Martin, 1986). Most conspicuously perhaps they unfold

between a beginning and an end connected by means of a plot. The plot is characteristically structured around a couple of metaphors which tell us what the main characters are like, on what terms they interact, and what kinds of situations they are facing. The plot has a tension which typically is due to the scarcity of some vital resource — perhaps talent, time, knowledge or money. The main character wants to do something, but she lacks a crucial piece of information; her time is running out; she is too poor or too short-sighted. The tension requires release and release can only come about through the actions which the main character undertakes.<sup>9</sup> She quits her job, her husband or her parents' village; dies in her nineties, in abject poverty, or in Italy. As readers we understand the story as we respond to it with expectations regarding its completion. Although we do not want the story to end, we must constantly *envision* an ending for the story to make sense to us (Kermode, 1966).

Also when we make sense of our individual or collective selves we do so with the help of narrative. What we 'are' is thus neither a question of what essences constitute us nor a question of how we conclusively should be defined, but instead a question of how we are seen and a question of which stories are told about us. 'The actions and sufferings of life', as David Carr puts it, 'can be viewed as a process of telling ourselves stories, listening to those stories, and acting them out or living them through' (Carr, 1986: 61). '[M]an', according to Alasdair MacIntyre, 'is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal' (MacIntyre, 1985: 216). 'A man', as Jean-Paul Sartre concurs,

is always a story-teller, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as though he were recounting it. (Sartre, 1938/1972: 64)<sup>10</sup>

Following these authors and many others perhaps we could talk about a 'narrative concept of the self' (Schaffer, 1981: 25-9; Somers, 1994; Ricoeur, 1990: 170).<sup>11</sup>

What we are as subjects, I would like to suggest, is thus neither more nor less than the total collection of stories that we tell and that are told about us. Our selves thus understood are neither the shadowy denizens of some metaphysical non-space, nor merely the physical attributes of our bodies. This is of course not to deny that our bodies are genetically programmed in various ways and that we have physiological needs which do not depend on consciousness. The point is simply that we *as persons* are more than physical matter and that this 'more' is what comes into being through the stories that we tell.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, while a state may consist of all kinds of bureaucratic structures, institutional mechanisms and other body-like organs, it is — as an entity endowed with an identity — necessarily at the mercy of the interpretations given to it

through the stories in which it features.

*The Self Reappears*

If this argument is accepted, we are now in a position to return to our discussion above and to solve the mystery of the vanishing self. As we shall see, although neither the atomists/realists nor the empiricists/pluralists had the theoretical means to realize it, they did themselves chance upon a solution. The self that constantly seemed to be disappearing was in fact there all along.

Consider first Hume and the pluralists. As we are now able to see, the self that they failed to locate appeared as soon as they let go of their empiricist dogmatism and simply started telling the self's story. The language in which Hume delivered his refutation is highly revealing — 'For *my part*,' he explained, 'when / enter most intimately into what *I call myself*; /I always stumble'; 'I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception,' etc.<sup>13</sup> Although Hume was thus trying to reject the very notion of a self, he could only do so *as someone* who 'entered', 'stumbled', 'failed to catch', etc. (Ricoeur, 1990: 154). There he is, clearly visible to all readers, in the story he tells us about himself! Similarly the state which the pluralists rejected reappeared as soon as they stopped searching for it and instead started discussing concrete events and actual world politics. While the pluralists may have deconstructed the state in the theoretical sections of their books, they very quickly re-constructed it in the narrative sections. Their studies are replete with references to 'Russian interventions', 'American reactions', and 'Cuban military installations' (Allison, 1971: 101-43).

A similar argument can be made for Hobbes and the realists. Although their self was supposed to be defined in an *a priori* fashion, it could really only be grasped when talked about in narrative terms. In fact, historical narrative features prominently in both Hobbes' and the realists' analyses. This is never *actual* history to be sure, since any actual history inevitably would reveal the contingent and constructed character of both the individual and the collective self. Instead it is a story where the self is featured in a standardized and utterly predictable role; it is the self as a cartoon figure. According to Hobbes' version of this simplistic script, man escaped from the state of nature and turned himself into a civilized member of society. His account has a happy ending and — much as the Christian accounts it was designed to supplement — it is a moral story of self-overcoming. Thus while Hobbes indeed took man to be transcendently given, it was only through this story of redemption that man became real. The pre-socially given man *comes to appear* through the story told about his entry into society.

Story-telling has been an important preoccupation also of the members of the real-

ist camp. Inherently sceptical regarding the possibility of ever constructing a 'science' of international politics, many realists have instead turned their attention to a study of history (Morgenthau, 1946/1974: 37-40).<sup>14</sup> History, they have argued, can illustrate principles which cannot straight-forwardly be put into scientific models or perhaps even explicitly into words. The statesmen of the present can derive the wisdom they need only by studying the 'lessons' provided by the statesmen of the past. As a result of such exercises, we will gradually come to understand the true nature of the state. Thus while the state may be transcendental, and hence hidden, the 'spirit of the nation' does leave its trace in time. In this form the state may not be directly empirically verifiable, but it is nevertheless *present* and this presence can be felt by anyone who seriously engages in historical research.

Yet, and in sharp contrast to Hobbes, the realists' story is *not* a secular theodicy. It is not a happy story of redemption, but instead a pessimistic account of constant insecurity and perpetual threats. As a story it is of a peculiarly monotonous and repetitive kind. It is, we could say, a story of an eternal return (Kundera, 1987: 3-6; Nietzsche, 1882/1974: 229-30, 273-4; Nietzsche, 1885/1968: 267-72). As such it will always be very unsatisfactory, perhaps even somewhat uncanny. Human beings are not prepared to accept that there are conditions — a 'state of nature' — which does not end, and for this reason alone the realist teachings will necessarily appear immoral. Since it has no proper ending, the realists' story has no readily graspable *sense morale* and no morally edifying conclusion can be drawn from it. Not surprisingly, the being — the state — which appears in, and through, this account will at the same time seem unbearably heavy and unbearably light.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Politics of Story-telling*

If stories give meaning to our lives; if we as subjects are nothing more and nothing less than the stories we tell and that are told about us, then our stories will come to have very immediate political significance. This must be the case since the realm of meaning is where values, privileges, rights and obligations, are allocated. Meaning has value *as such*, we like to believe, and thus that which we have made sense of will necessarily appear as valid, and since valid also as legitimate and true. In this way, by telling the story of how the past came to produce the present, an individual or a group is able to back up his, her or its claim on economic, social and political resources. Our narratives will support, or undermine, a certain perspective on the world and hence also a certain distribution of power.

But stories will also have political significance since they determine which actions



we undertake. The tension of a plot needs to be released, I pointed out above, and release can only come about through the actions that the characters of the story perform. From the perspective of these characters, the 'directedness' of the story — its movement from 'once-upon-a-time' to 'happily-ever-after' — thus comes to correspond to the intentional quality of action. To have an intention to do something is always to locate a possible future action in the context of the plot of a narrative (von Wright, 1971: 115). In this way stories come to indicate which actions are, or are not, worth undertaking. This is also the case for the stories we tell about our collective selves. The narratives we construct about our state will specify who we are and what role we play in the world; how our 'national interests' are to be defined, or which foreign policy to pursue.

Given the political significance of narrative we should not be surprised that stories often are contested, doubted and rejected. Yet the political salience — the degree of 'politicization' — of a certain narrative necessarily depends on how many, and which, features of a story that the different audiences of a society are willing to accept. Most of the time, of course, we simply take our selves for granted and go about pursuing the kinds of goals that people, or groups, like ourselves are wont to pursue. Most of the time, that is, our stories concern our interests, not our identities; while there may be disagreement about what we *want*, we usually do agree on *who we are* (Ringmar, 1996: Chap 1-3). If this was not the case we would not be able to talk about an integrated and coherent 'person' or an integrated and coherent 'state'.

Social stability, the ability to predict the future, satisfaction with one's life, all presuppose the existence of a culture where there is a wide agreement on shared social meanings. The fundamental metaphors of a society must 'grow old' and 'die', as it were, and the stories told about these metaphors must become entrenched in social institutions and reflected in people's unreflective, everyday, actions (Ricoeur, 1988a: 165-81; Shelley, 1821/1966: 418). This is also indeed the case for a wide variety of social settings — for 'traditional' societies described by anthropologists, 'communitarian' societies described by social philosophers and for contemporary Western, 'post-ideological', societies. Naturally this description also fits a totalitarian society such as Czechoslovakia discussed by Vaclav Havel. Under the Communist regime, Havel tells us, only one official set of metaphors and one official story were allowed. Czechoslovakia was a 'workers' state', a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', that was 'building socialism' and a 'classless society'; the plot was constructed with the help of Marxist 'laws of history' which gave a scientific, and hence objective and complete, explanation of the past, the present, as well as the future (Havel, 1991: 335-6).

The difference between a traditional, a communitarian, a post-ideological and a

post-totalitarian society, I would like to suggest, lies not in the fact that the available set of meanings is restricted in the one case but not in the other — meanings are *always* restricted — but rather in the degree to which a taken-for-granted story is able to grab, and hold, the attention of its audience; the degree to which we are still willing to listen to the official story and to tell, and retell, it in our turn. What made Czechoslovakia under the Communists into a totalitarian society — or a 'post-totalitarian' society in Havel's vocabulary — was quite simply that no one any longer believed in the only story that was allowed to be told. And the reason for this cynicism was in turn that the official story was so utterly lacking in everything which we identified above as requirements of a successful narrative — individual, believable, characters who make real choices under conditions of uncertainty in a plot where the end is concealed and thus open to the future. 'Where everything is known ahead of time, the story has nothing to grow out of. Obviously, the totalitarian system is in essence (and in principle) directed against the story' (Havel, 1991: 333).<sup>16</sup>

Yet, no political or social order can last for ever. This must be the case since the world which a particular story has helped us make sense of will be only one meaningful world among others. There is, in other words, always a difference between the total number of interpretations which could be constructed and the particular subset of these which we happen to embrace. As a result there will always be unacknowledged facts to discover, and there will be more such facts the more thoroughly entrenched a particular narrative is.<sup>17</sup> The discrepancy between the 'actual' and the 'potential' opens up a space of cultural and political opportunity that can be seized upon by any individual or group that is able to present an alternative account of the world. To the extent that this alternative story is accepted, the taken-for-granted narratives will be undermined and public confidence in political leaders and social institutions that depend upon them will weaken accordingly. The result is an occasion when not only our interests, but also our *identities* are called into question; when we suddenly will be presented to ourselves as a new kind of character participating in a different kind of plot. In the case of an individual, perhaps we could call such a time an 'identity crisis'; in the case of a society, perhaps we could call it a 'formative moment'.<sup>18</sup>

Since so much is at stake, formative moments will always be characterized by intense rhetorical battles fought between different groups each advocating their own interpretation of the world. In these battles, traditional power-holders will try to reaffirm, or reinterpret, the old narratives which have kept them in power, while challengers will try to recode the established metaphors to suit their new purposes. One example of such a formative moment we have already discussed — the political battles through which the state came to be established as the dominant political entity in the early

modern era. Here princes, who called themselves 'sovereign', fashioned collective selves for themselves and their 'subjects' through stories which retraced the glorious history of the common-wealth to biblical or classical origins. Yet few of these stories were left unopposed, and alternative genealogies were soon proposed by traditional feudal lords, independent communities of peasants, or by the Catholic church in Rome.<sup>19</sup>

A similar rhetorical battle was fought at the time of the French Revolution as the deeply entrenched narratives of the *anciens regimes* came to be abruptly replaced by stories organized around the metaphors of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* (Chartier, 1990; Furet, 1978; Hunt, 1984; Ringmar, 1993). Since the whole point of the Revolution was to make a clean break with the past, however, the story which established the identity of the revolutionary state — and the story which buttressed the revolutionaries' claim to power — was not told as a genealogy, but instead as a story which connected the present to an imaginary future. It was the coming glories of *la patrie* which would make up for all the sacrifices of the present (Becker, 1932: 119-68). As we might expect, the past was instead the territory explored by the rival accounts through which conservative forces all over Europe sought to reclaim their lost privileges (Baker, 1990: 59-85; Pocock, 1989: 202-32).

Another formative moment took place at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a growing labour movement began to question the story through which the state had been interpreted during the preceding one hundred years. What the workers demanded was an eight hour work-day, but also access to the political and social institutions through which the state was governed. The new stories concerned 'democracy' and 'universal suffrage', and the state they described was a 'state of the people' and later also 'a welfare state'. Naturally these radical demands were opposed by members of the bourgeois ruling elite who sought to buttress their traditional position by inventing traditions of different kinds and by constructing a 'national history' filled with founding fathers, heroic kings and all sorts of other nationalistic paraphernalia (Furet, 1978: 19-22, 138ff; Hobsbawm, 1983: 263-307; Ringmar, 1993: 237-8).

In several places in the Third World, most notably in Islamic countries, a similar rhetorical battle is today raging between modernizing 'nation-builders' and fundamentalist groups.<sup>20</sup> According to the modernizers' story — and according to the many Western scholars and aid agencies who help ghost-write it — these states are 'backward' or 'underdeveloped' and must 'catch up' with the 'developed' countries; move from 'darkness' and 'obscurantism' to 'enlightenment' and 'reason', that is, to embrace democracy and a capitalist economic system. The fundamentalist's story, on the other hand, places the state in a religiously sanctioned ontological order. There is only one God, accord-

ing to this account, and the state must be brought into conformity with the laws which this God has made known through his Prophet. No progress or development outside of the law is possible since Islam is the last religion, the last dispensation. To submit to its stipulations is to gain contact with the eternal; to be safe in that which never changes. Yet as soon as people start to act in terms of this fundamentalist account change may be very rapid indeed. 'We will make a revolution', as the Imam proclaims in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*,

that is a revolt not only against a tyrant, but against history! . . . History is the blood-wine that must no longer be drunk. History the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies — progress, science, rights — against which the Imam has set his face. History is a deviation from the Path, knowledge is a delusion, because the sum of knowledge was complete on the day Allah finished his revelation to Mahound. 'We will unmake the veil of History . . . and when it is unravelled we will see Paradise standing there, in all its glory and light. (Rushdie, 1988/1992: 210-1)

Thus began the 'untime of the Imam' (Rushdie, 1988/1992: 215).

### *The End of the Story*

At the beginning of this article I made a brief reference to current debates regarding the future of the state, and in order for this article to come to a proper conclusion let us return to this theme. There are, we should note, a number of different versions of the 'end-of-the-state' thesis. In a liberal version, the state is bound to become increasingly irrelevant due to the impact of economic, political and social interdependence. In a classical Marxist version, the state will 'wither away' once the fundamental contradictions of society have been resolved. In a recently much touted, post-Hegelian version, history — or rather 'History' — has itself come to an end and as a result there is no longer a distinct place either for man or for the state as traditionally understood (Fukuyama, 1992: 287-339). In what we perhaps could call a 'post-Nietzschean' version, finally, we are informed regarding the imminent 'death of the subject' (Foucault, 1966/1973: 387; Rorty, 1989: 23-69). According to the proponents of this last thesis, 'humanism' was the ideology of the modern era, but we are now entering a 'postmodern' era in which the obsessive concern with man and his place and presence in the world soon will be forgotten. '*La mort de l'homme*' will accompany, and be accompanied by, '*la mort de l'etat*' (Bartelson, 1995: 237-48).

If we analyse these eschatologies in the light of our own discussion, a first thing to notice is how the debate regarding the future of the state is directly linked to a debate on the future of man. As I argued, man and state were born at the same time, they grew

up together, and hence it is not unreasonable to expect them to die a simultaneous death. Or more distinctly put: what we are discussing here is not only the future of the state or the future of man, but rather the future of subjectivity *tout court*. A second thing to notice is how closely subjectivity is connected to our ability to construct stories about our selves. This conclusion fits well with a point I made above — if we, as subjects, are nothing more and nothing less than the total collection of stories we tell about our selves, then the end of subjectivity will come when no stories can any longer be told about us. Man will disappear when we have come to the end, not of our own personal narratives, but to the end of narrative *as such*. Similarly, the state will disappear when the traditional 'meta-narratives' of our culture, including the Enlightenment idea of a 'universal history', are no longer passed on to new generations of audiences (Koselleck, 1985: 33-8).

Are we, then, approaching this end? In support of this thesis some writers have pointed to our contemporary scepticism towards stories and storytelling (Lyotard, 1979: 98-108). While the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the golden age of the narrative — as demonstrated, for example, by the rise of the novel, by the importance attached to the historical discipline or by the impact of nationalism — stories can, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no longer seduce us in quite the same way. During the last 50 years we have become accustomed to playing games not only with our novels and with our history books, but also with our selves.

Such loose apocalyptic talk is, however, not in itself evidence of the end of subjectivity. In fact the very opposite conclusion could be drawn. It should, after all, not surprise us that an ontology based on narratives will be profoundly preoccupied with endings (Kermode, 1966: 93-124). The end is, after all, what makes the story possible in the first place, and by envisioning this end we make stories make sense. This kind of envisioning is, I would argue, precisely what the discussion regarding 'the end of subjectivity' is all about. There is, in other words, a fundamental, yet highly ambiguous relationship between the end of the stories we tell about our selves — death — and the meanings we attach to our lives. On the one hand, death means the destruction of our selves. When our story is over we will no longer be, and for this reason death constantly threatens to make every moment of the story leading up to it lose its meaning. Death may terrify us for the simple reason that we never will be in a position to tell the story of what it was like to go through it. Death cannot be emasculated through narrative since death is the end of the narrative.

On the other hand, however, death is also a prerequisite of all stories. The story would not be if it did not end somewhere, and thus we — the subjects who appear in, and through, it — would not be either. This does not mean that death is the meaning of

life, but it does mean that death makes a meaningful life possible. We constantly need to envision the end of our story since only the end can make sense of, and give legitimacy to, the present. This is true not only for our individual but also for our collective selves, and it explains why politics needs its Utopias and why intellectuals constantly prophesy the end of this, that or the other.

Will subjectivity, then, ever come to a final end? Will individual and collective selves one day no longer be? Perhaps, perhaps not. What is certain, however, is that while the content that we give to our selves — the plots that we construct about our lives — will change dramatically in the future just as they have changed dramatically in the past, a self will exist as long as stories are told about it. To envision an end to these stories is a crucial part of what it means to understand a story and as such a prerequisite of subjectivity which in fact has very little to do with its eventual demise.

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- 1 This simplification can be justified in either of two ways. First of all I take it to be a fact that most practising scholars belong to either of these two camps. Secondly, I believe that these two positions exhaust the analytical options as they are presented today, i.e. all other potential positions could be reduced to one or the other of the positions I discuss.
- 2 The most famous such court is of course the one at Urbino (see Castiglione, 1528/1959).
- 3 The noun 'subject' is derived from the Latin *subjectus* meaning 'lying under or near', 'adjacent', 'exposed' or 'inferior', and is in turn derived from the past participle of the Latin *subicere*, 'to place under'. See 'Subject', *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, 1988, or 'Subject', in Johnson, 1755/1968, Vol. II.
- 4 In the Renaissance 'common-wealth' was of course the preferred terminology.
- 5 On the use of perspective in theatre, see Orgel, 1975: 10-11.
- 6 For an illustration see, for example, Machiavelli's description of the world scene as he had observed it during his career as a diplomat (Machiavelli, 1961: 133).
- 7 As Hobbes made clear, the life of man in this pre-social state was not only 'poor, nasty, brutish and short', but also 'solitary' (Hobbes, 1651/1968: 186; compare Taylor, 1989: 143-76; 187-210).
- 8 Throughout this article I use 'metaphor' as synonymous with 'analogy'. For a justification, see Lakoff and Turner (1989: 133).
- 9 Plot, as Aristotle suggested, is the *mimesis* of action. For a discussion see Ricoeur. (1988b: xi, 32-42).
- 10 'Un homme, c'est toujours un conteur d'histoires, il vit entouré, de ses histoires et des histoires d'autrui, il voit tout de ce qui lui arrive à travers elles; et il cherche à vivre sa vie comme s'il la racontait.' (My own translation.)
- 11 For an analogous discussion regarding the state, see the contributions to Bhabha. (1990).
- 12 On the distinction between 'persons' and 'bodies' see, for example, Oksenberg Rorty (1988: 61-77).
- 13 See above, p. 448. Emphasis added.
- 14 This is the case for the classical form of realism and not the more recent, Waltzian, variety.

- 15 The precise ontological import of the myth of an eternal return is debated. To Nietzsche and Kundera eternal return signifies heaviness — *das grosste Schwergewicht*; (Nietzsche, 1882/1974: 273) — but constant repetition could also gradually efface an entity and thus make it lighter. The cosmological basis of the myth is of course rejected by modern science. For a discussion, see Eliade (1949).
- 16 Control of the official story was of course precisely what kept the bureaucrats of Oceania busy. Also in Oceania only one, completely meaningless, story was permitted. Official story without meaning is totalitarianism without purpose, that is, terror. 'The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power' (Orwell, 1949/1989: 276).
- 17 This fact accounts for the peculiar fragility of a totalitarian society. Compare Arendt (1977: 177).
- 18 The notion of an 'identity crisis' is discussed in Erikson (1958/1993: 41-2, 261-2) compare Ringmar, 1996: Chap. 3; Scott, 1990: 202-7.
- 19 Battles of this kind are a main theme of Skinner (1978). The case of England is discussed in Walzer (1965), and the case of Sweden in Ringmar (1996, Chap. 6).
- 20 On the Islamic countries see, for example, Gellner (1992). More generally on the rhetoric of nation-building, see, for example, Apter (1963: 57-104).