The 'State' Hinders Understanding

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Nowadays political studies are too state-centered. I am referring to “state” as a form of polity, which is different from other classic forms, mainly “city,” “empire” and “federation,” which have been largely neglected. A single analytical category such as “state” cannot account satisfactorily for disparate political communities that, like elephants and mosquitoes, have population and area sizes more than one hundred thousand times higher than others, from China and India to Nauru or Vanuatu. In contrast to other forms of polity, the state is defined for its sovereignty, which implies a single source of legitimacy over a population within a fixed territory with stable borders. In this sense, the form “state” has existed in Western Europe within a historical period that began only about 300 years ago and is today essentially finished. The rest of the world has been unacquainted with the Westphalian notion of sovereign states. Russia and most of Asia have been durably organized as empires. In North America a federation was built from previously independent states. In former European colonies in Hispanic America and Africa there are many failed states. In the Middle East nation-state building is not succeeding due to local ethnic conflicts and for a lack of greater areas of economic and security cooperation. Actually, the West European states were able to survive as independent polities in the international arena only thanks to having colonial empires. When these disappeared, they began to create a new imperial-size area of economic and security cooperation among themselves – the European Union – which has reduced the relevance of the notion of state even where the original experience took place. It’s time to bring the city, the empire, and the federation back in.

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