

Article

The State as God

On Bourdieu's Political Theology

Victor L. Shammas

*Oslo Metropolitan University
University of Oslo*

Abstract Bourdieu's anthropology of the state can be interpreted as a form of political theology, premised on a pantheistic conception of the state, which is transcendental to social reality while simultaneously being lodged in all social matter. The state is a Leviathan that imposes a horizon of meaning beyond which social agents rarely, if ever, move. The anthropologist must transcend the *doxic* structures of the state by engaging in a labor of anamnesis, enacting a bringing-to-consciousness of the invisible and occluded operations of the state in its deployment of symbolic power, which serves to naturalize a series of dominant (yet arbitrary) categories, concepts, and representations. Bourdieu's ontological vision can be summarized in the concise formula, 'state = society = God.' A guiding methodical imperative for sociologists of the state-as-divinity is extracted from Bourdieu's lectures on the state: the *Deus Absconditus Principle*, which mandates detecting and uncovering the veiled divinity of the state in all aspects of social reality. It is the task of the anthropologist to channel, interpret, and challenge the pantheistic state.

Keywords Bourdieu, state theory, symbolic power, social categories, anamnesis

Thus, he who has God essentially apprehends God in a godly manner and to such a man He shines in all things, for all things have a Divine savour for him, and God takes shape for him in all things.'

Meister Eckhart, *The Talks of Instruction*

Introduction

In one of his final books, *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu writes something very obscure, almost mysterious, in characterizing the state: this political entity, writes Bourdieu, is nothing less than the 'realization of God on earth' (Bourdieu 2000, 245). This sort of quasi-mystical pronouncement, awash with theological overtones, is unusual in Bourdieu's writings. The statement is made even more noteworthy by the



pronouncement that follows. Bourdieu alludes to what appears to be a quotation from Durkheim, who, as Bourdieu tells us, writes somewhere (but we are not told where) that “‘society is God’” (Bourdieu 2000, 245).¹ In short, the *state is the realization of God on earth* and *society is God*, Bourdieu claims, and thus, by the law of identity, society should be taken to be equivalent to the state; if we reinterpret the notion of ‘realization’ as an expression of identity, Bourdieu’s ontological vision could be condensed into the following compact formula: *state = society = God*.

Bourdieu’s unsourced quotation is probably an allusion, and not really a direct quotation as such, to Durkheim’s observation, ‘I see in the Divinity only society transfigured and symbolically expressed’ (Pickering 1984, 230).² But Bourdieu’s usage involves a (perhaps intentional) misreading of Durkheim.³ For Durkheim’s claim is a straightforward Feuerbachian reading of religion as the embodiment of the beliefs of a social collectivity in sublimated form, a materialist reduction of religion, epitomized in Nietzsche’s speculative inversion: ‘Is man just God’s mistake? Or is God just man’s mistake?’ (Nietzsche 2005, 157). This sentiment is also echoed in Rousseau’s sociological theology as it appears in his *Confessions*, where Rousseau observes that ‘believers in general create God in their own image; the good make Him good, the evil, evil’ (Rousseau [1781] 1953, 218).

However, this is *not* what Bourdieu means when he claims that the state is the ‘realization of God on earth’ and that “‘society is God’” – two statements that together form the constitutive elements in what may be termed Bourdieu’s political theology – or his metaphysical conception of the state. Instead Bourdieu’s claim is more radical, paradoxically at once *more theological* and *more materialist*: Bourdieu claims that social reality is fundamentally divine, suffused with a series of unfounded beliefs that owe their genesis to the productive capacities of the state, the latter taking on the features of a transcendental entity. To Bourdieu, in differentiated societies there exists no horizon of meaning beyond the state: in a revealing phrase, Bourdieu notes that ‘the state is *meta*’ (Bourdieu 2014: 54), that is, a point beyond the social order, and an entity from

¹ The quotation marks are in the original, an interesting use of authorial distanciation that perhaps signals Bourdieu’s unease with writing in an overtly metaphysical register.

² See Bauman for a perspicacious discussion of Durkheim’s attempt to ‘deify society’ (Bauman 2010, 12-25).

³ A method of quoting that does not actually quote directly what it says it is quoting may strike Anglo-American readers as a barbarism, but it was not necessarily an unusual practice in the postwar French academic field. As Jean Hyppolite’s American translators note, this method of quoting can be termed ‘interpretive or tendentious’ (Cherniak and Heckman 1974, xii) but was not necessarily frowned upon in its local context. Bourdieu’s writings are replete with allusions and half-sourced quotations that serve to signal scholarly ease and mark a distance to the perceived pedantry of careful referencing. This amounts to a strategy of symbolic domination, operative within a very specific academic field, averse to that figure of repulsion in Nietzsche, the ‘specialist,’ who with ‘his zeal, his seriousness... his hunched back’ betrays a lack of all nobility (Nietzsche 1974, 322). To quote interpretively was for French intellectuals of a certain era and persuasion to assert one’s *distinction*, to use Bourdieu’s (1984) own famed term.

which there exists no additional beyond, so to speak.⁴ The state produces and reproduces the central vision of social reality while itself undergoing a kind of disappearing act:

To a certain extent the state would be a neutral site or, more exactly – to use Leibniz’ analogy according to which God is the geometrical of all antagonistic perspectives – the point of view overlooking all points of view, which is no longer a point of view since it is in relation to it that all points of view are organized (Bourdieu 2014, 5).

Bourdieu’s approach prevents the production of utterances all too typical of state theorists, as when Mitchell speaks of the state’s ‘boundary with society’ (Mitchell 1991): no such boundary can be said to exist, Bourdieu’s metaphysics of the state suggests, because society is constituted by the state – the state is lodged in all social matter. Arguably, Bourdieu’s theory of the divine state is a transposition of Hegel’s vision of the state as the ‘actuality of the ethical Idea’ (Hegel 2008, §257/p. 228), or, as one of the Additions (*Zusätze*) to the *Philosophy of Right* has it, as *Geist* made objective, ‘objective spirit’ (Hegel 2008, §258/pp. 228-229). The very ‘Idea of the state,’ in Hegel’s view (Hegel 2008, §259/p. 234), is actualized spirit, the state being infused with the spirit of a people,⁵ or ‘by its general way of looking at things and doing things’ (Inwood 2010, xvii). This view is echoed in Bourdieu’s theory of the state, which is perhaps the clearest instantiation of Hegel’s profound influence on his work (see e.g. Redding 2005), an influence emanating from the philosophical trinity that governed French philosophy in the postwar era, the so-called three Hs: Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger (see e.g. Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 12). If the state is God in Bourdieu’s account, it is a *pantheistic deity* – this was essentially Hegel’s view of divinity (see Magee 2010, 100-101) – because all of social reality is lodged in the state while not being reducible to the state, the state and social reality being mutually interwoven and interdependent (e.g. Bourdieu 2014, 165), a conception akin to the ‘bipolar God’ of Whitehead’s process theology (see Coppedge 2007, 321-323), whereby the figure of divinity is ‘both cause and effect... transcendent and immanent, idea and event’ (Rayment-Pickard 2007).

More contemporaneously, this vision of the state shares much with Steinberger’s notion of the state as an ideational entity. The state is a ‘structure of intelligibility’ (Steinberger

⁴ The notion of a *differentiated society* is a term of art in Bourdieu’s conceptual universe, referring to those societies that have evolved into distinct social fields (*champs*), i.e. semi-autonomous domains of specialized social action. For ‘when dealing with differentiated societies in which the state is constituted as a differentiated region among other differentiated regions, the sociologist knows that what he is taking as object are sub-worlds, fields,’ Bourdieu (2014, 93) observes, a point that does not obtain in undifferentiated societies which do not possess fields, viz. are not produced by the meta-entity of the state. Bourdieu grew conscious of the distinction between undifferentiated and differentiated societies through his Algerian fieldwork, that is, his ethnographic incursions into Kabyle society in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Bourdieu 1958), which transformed him from a *normalien* philosopher to a Lévi-Straussian ethnologist. Kabylia constituted an undifferentiated society inasmuch as it was not suffused by the operations of the state giving rise to distinct constellations of fields.

⁵ Hegel’s concept of *Geist* has commonly been translated as ‘mind’ or ‘spirit’; as has been well established by now, the term lacks a clear equivalent in English.

2004, 192) that would survive were even all the government ministries emptied, tax coffers drained, civil servants fired, and ministers assassinated: in such a disastrous situation, a state might still be said to exist – though not a very effective one, it must be said – because, to Steinberger, the state is first and foremost an idea that resides in the minds of the citizenry, consisting in a foundational vision of reality, a frame organizing the lifeworld, or a ‘comprehensive world-view’ that ‘provides a more or less systematic account of the fundamental relationship between thought and object’ (Steinberger 2004, 324). In a similar vein, Bourdieu claims that the state is a ‘principle of orthodoxy, of consensus on the meaning of the world’ (Bourdieu 2014, 6).

In this sense, Bourdieu’s theory of the state resonates with Charles Taylor’s claim that with increasing secularity, the fading or fragmentation of religious cohesion may be supplanted by a (seemingly paradoxical) secular brand of religiosity: ‘As the sense of living in Christendom fades, and we recognize that no spiritual family is in charge, or speaks for the whole, there will be a greater sense of freedom to speak our own minds, and in some cases these will inescapably be formulated in religious discourse’ (Taylor 2007, 532).⁶ To Bourdieu, such ‘religious discourse’ is really a transfigured discourse of the state.

To take but one example of how the state ingratiates itself in the minds of the populace: Gross has shown how one of the central tasks of modern statecraft is to manipulate and reengineer temporality. By ‘controlling a population’s sense of time,’ including fabricating a certain perception of ‘pastness’ – from the Viking mythos of the Nordic nation-states to the prominent role given to heroic founder-warriors in Israel, or the rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin in Putin’s Russia – the state decides ‘which collective memories are relevant and worth encouraging’ (Gross 1985, 67). Thereby, the state, in an almost Bergsonian way, crucially shapes the present through the past. The orchestration of temporality by the state is also one of Bourdieu’s favorite examples of its labor of manufacturing orthodoxy. Public holidays, for instance, are fixed by the state, giving rise to ‘the great “seasonal migrations” of contemporary societies’ that help bring about a shared, ‘lived experience of time’ (Bourdieu 2000, 175-176).

But even as the ‘well-founded illusion’ and ‘orthodoxy’ (Bourdieu 2014, 6) that make up the constitutive planks in the metaphysical conception of the state continue to prevail, the social universe rests atop something so paradoxical as an anti-foundational foundation: its non-foundational foundation goes all the way down, so to speak, requiring a Kierkegaardian leap of faith for its continued reproduction, being constructed on the insubstantial bedrock of agonistic competitiveness. So, while the state may seem to constitute a terra firma, it is really a sort of quicksand. The state may be ‘the name that we give to the hidden, invisible principles’ of the social universe, a ‘kind

⁶ Bourdieu would probably quibble with, or even contradict, Taylor’s voluntarist emphasis on discursive communicability as well as Taylor’s assumption that this development represents anything truly novel – insofar as individuals have lived in differentiated societies, Bourdieu would claim, they already exist in societies shot through with the divine metaphysics of the state. But Bourdieu’s arguments track Taylor’s quite closely in other respects. Incidentally, this should come as no surprise. Taylor is inspired by Hegel and Durkheim, two key theoretical influences on Bourdieu’s vision of social reality.

of *deus absconditus*' – again, the theological analogy is worth emphasizing – while simultaneously being a net producer of physical and symbolic domination, a site of 'physical and symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 2014, 7).⁷ Acts of symbolic consecration and evaluative judgments rely on a thick web of communal norms. But these never finally come to rest, all of them remaining contestable: nothing is ever taken off the table of political contestation, so Bourdieu suggests, because everything can be made the subject of symbolic struggle, i.e. competitions or battles over the right to wield symbolic power – and thereby to determine the 'principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu 2000, 113) that will govern the social universe.

The state combines and consolidates the divergent interests and opinions found in social space that would otherwise splinter away into a fractal-like state of near-total fragmentation. As an illustrative example, Bourdieu notes that Protestantism channeled its opposition to the Roman Catholic Church into the establishment of a new Church, laying the groundwork for additional church-centric rebellions, all of which might in turn beget their own oppositional churches, in an endless cascade of multiplying fracture. This entropic structure of schismatic repetition is the 'same destiny [that] befalls all the sects of the political world, "splinter groups," wings, tendencies, and factions which, being issued out of scission, are fated to endless scissiparity' (Bourdieu 2004b, 42). The infinite restlessness of a social universe left to its own devices can only be interrupted by an affirmative answer to the 'fundamental, quasi-metaphysical question' of whether a political entity, such as the state, is capable of forging a Rousseuian *general will*, akin to Mouffe's model of agonism over antagonism (construing liberal democracies as arenas of contestation between adversaries rather than Schmittian enemies) (Mouffe 2013). In a strongly Durkheimian vein, Bourdieu affirms that it is the task of the state to establish a consensus on the social world, which means putting an end to the potentially endless fragmentation of social life in differentiated societies (Bourdieu 2004b). This general will is nothing more than the orthodoxies of a state, which is a doxic structure, whose task it is to forge shared 'principles of vision and division' – a relatively coherent, unified set of categories, concepts, and representations.

Between Historicism and Scientism

The theological sentiments that round off the *Pascalian Meditations* are unusual in Bourdieu's writings. It is worth asking why they suddenly make their appearance toward the end of his career. Bourdieu shunned formulations that smacked of speculative metaphysics: his works are sprinkled with derogatory pronouncements on 'theoretical theory' (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991, 257) and derisive statements on poststructuralist philosophizing, or 'French theory' (Cusset 2008), as in Bourdieu's dismissal of Derridean deconstructionism as a 'thinly veiled form of

⁷ Pascal, to whom Bourdieu devotes much attention in the eponymous *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu 2000), perspicaciously observes in the *Pensées*: 'What do the prophets say of Jesus Christ? That he will obviously be God? No. Rather that he is a *truly hidden God*, that he will be unrecognized, that no one will think he is who he is, that he will be a stumbling block for many to fall over, etc.' (Pascal 2008, 78). This theological pronouncement resonates with Bourdieu's conception of the state as being (at times) a veiled entity, either through its role as a producer of naturalized categories that are misperceived as necessary or by operating at arm's-length through civil society and the market, entities whose apparent independence from the state serve to occlude their epiphenomenality to the state.

irrationalism' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 155), his self-professed distance from 'campus radicalism,' and his disregard for postmodern deviations from the 'rationalist spirit' of science (Bourdieu 2004, 105-106) – in other words, a conventional scientism that deviated from standard epistemologies only by its emphasis on the imperative of 'epistemic reflexivity' (see e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 36-46). However, towards the close of his career Bourdieu slipped into the register of a subjectivist metaphysics, buoyed by the legitimization effects attendant with his consecrated position in the highest reaches of the French academic field (Wacquant 2013), a position allowing him to depart from an objectivist aversion to political activism, engaging explicitly with the realm of politics by attacking neoliberalism and vocally supporting key labor unions and the wider anti-neoliberal left (e.g. Bourdieu 1998).

So why hint at the necessity of extending the project of critical, reflexive social science in the direction of a political theology? Crucially, Bourdieu reinserts God to resolve a contradiction between two mutually inconsistent positions within his epistemology, suspended between objectivist scientism and radical historicism. Bourdieu finds himself defending both positions with varying resolve at various times in his writings. In the final book published in his lifetime, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, Bourdieu lays bare the central epistemic challenge of his critical sociology: 'How is it possible for a historical activity, such as scientific activity, to produce trans-historical truths, independent of history, detached from all bonds with both place and time and therefore eternally and universally valid?' (Bourdieu 2004, 1). On the one hand, Bourdieu reflects on the central problem of the social sciences in *Pascalian Meditations*, 'sciences without a foundation,' which, in a non-scientistic rendition, 'insist that everything is historical' (Bourdieu 2000, 115). Bourdieu's own work suggests that science is an embedded activity that takes place within a particular field, which is itself manufactured by agents vying for the right to decide what is to count or be consecrated as properly scientific – and who therefore engage in practices that are shot through with history, involving operations suffused with symbolic power and therefore social domination. So how can Bourdieu establish a transhistorical point from which scientific knowledge could be produced and evaluated?

On the other hand, Bourdieu also remained wedded to a relatively conventional scientism, an orthodox epistemology emphasizing the value of rigorous methodology, illegitimacy of abstruse theorizing, and practical possibility of fixing universal truth-values. At times, Bourdieu claims it is possible to pronounce upon one's objects of study in a way that is not reducible to the exercise of symbolic power or to the fictions of a social game – in other words, in a way that is not sociologically reducible. Throughout his works, Bourdieu insists that it is possible to produce 'scientific knowledge' (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 181). Bourdieu's writings repeatedly suggest the possibility of establishing a clear boundary between the scientific and the non-scientific, one of the signal features of scientism, which, following Feyerabend, Lakatos (see Lakatos and Feyerabend 1999), the rise of Science and Technology Studies (e.g. Lynch and Cole 2005, 279-280), and Bourdieu's own radical historicism (e.g. Wacquant 1999), remains a questionable pursuit.

Bourdieu was only able to resolve the tension between these mutually exclusive positions with the aid of a figure of divinity, the 'transcendent and immortal... social order' (Bourdieu 2000, 245), more specifically, the *state = society = God* formula. Bourdieu

does not mean here a divinity in the traditional sense of a supernatural being suspended above human affairs, but rather a social divinity, an entity that establishes the social game and therefore comes to stand above it, a supersocial and not a supernatural being, providing meaning to all human activity and giving rise to all spheres of social action (or fields) through its metapositionality or transcendental status. This social divinity is the state.⁸

Here Bourdieu appears at his most Nietzschean. Famously, Nietzsche remarks in *Beyond Good and Evil* that philosophers present us with a mode of abstract, universal reason, even as their writings remain dressed-up versions of subjective evaluations of right. Philosophy is not 'love of wisdom' but 'love of *his* wisdom' (Nietzsche 1989, 13), wherein bearers of an objectivist scientism fail to realize the situatedness of all claims to knowledge:

They all pose as if they had discovered and reached their real opinions through the self-development of a cold, pure, divinely unconcerned dialectic... while at bottom it is an assumption, a hunch, indeed a kind of 'inspiration' – most often a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract – that they defend with reasons they have sought after the fact (Nietzsche 1989, 12).

Bourdieu's solution is to reintroduce the notion of divinity, in the guise of the state, as the guarantor of all knowledge. Truth is *divinely concerned*, to invert Nietzsche's terms, being suffused with the symbolic operations of the state. The state, 'like the divine *intuitus originarius*' simultaneously 'brings into existence by naming and distinguishing' (Bourdieu 2000, 245). The scope of the state's operations is sweeping: the state acts as the final guarantor of truth, right, judgment, prestige, and social worth. The state resolves an issue raised by Theodor Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* (1973), namely that of the role of metaphysical speculation and ontological theorizing for the empirical sciences. Adorno claims that philosophy has almost no impact on the traditional sciences. Scientists simply get on with their work and do not care much for the speculative wisdom of philosophers. They rely on statements of their methods to push through so much ontological noise emanating from the philosophical field. Thus, Adorno notes that the 'successful sciences are no longer seeking to legitimize themselves otherwise than by a statement of their method' (Adorno 1973, 73). Instead, empirical science 'accepts itself as given' and simply posits its own legitimate existence. Adorno predicts that even though science is divided into numerous arbitrary divisions, 'such as sociology, economics, and history,' this will sooner or later lead to insurmountable obstacles of a theoretical nature because their self-proclaimed 'self-evidence' can always

⁸ Interestingly, the term 'divine' can denote, in its noun form, God or a god, or, as a verb, 'discovering by intuition.' One example of this latter usage is (according to one commonly used dictionary): 'They had divined he was a fake.' And isn't this exactly what the state does? It *divines* who is or is not a fake, in other words, who counts and who does not count and what counts and what does not count – for instance, what is legitimately to be regarded as scientific and what does not count as a science – for instance, through the allocation of funds to research projects or recognition accorded to academic diplomas – or who is to gain admittance to prestigious social games and who is to remain on the margins of social space.

be disputed (Adorno 1973, 73). To Bourdieu, this metaphysical quest for a true foundation, a point beyond an arbitrary self-positing of a discipline's right to exist, is simply an ontological non-issue because it is always the state that stands as the first and final guarantor of the right of a scientific discipline to exist in the first place and in the last instance.

By its power to will arbitrary entities into existence, the state comes to take on godly proportions, a *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*, appearing as an entity that stands above reality and attaining those godlike features most commonly associated with divinity. According to Bourdieu, the state involves a divine mystery, the 'mystery of ministry' (Bourdieu 2004b), requiring a science of state that is itself equipped to tackle transcendence:

The state is this well-founded illusion, this place that exists essentially because people believe that it exists. This illusory reality, collectively validated by consensus, is the site that you are headed towards when you go back from a certain number of phenomena – educational qualifications, professional qualifications or calendar. Proceeding step by step, you arrive at a site that is the foundation of all this. This mysterious reality exists through its effects and through the collective belief in its existence, which lies at the origin of these effects (Bourdieu 2014, 10).

The state becomes the primary locus and central site of production of symbolic power, exerting a 'divinization effect' by imposing one particular perception of reality, by pretending that 'it is not itself a viewpoint' (Bourdieu 2014, 28). Deploying Durkheim's conceptual couplet of *logical conformity* (agreement on dominant categories of perception and action) and *moral conformity* (agreement on axiomatic values), Bourdieu characterizes one of the essential moments of the state – though it is certainly not the only essential component – as 'that which founds the logical conformity and moral conformity of the social world,' and therefore produces the 'fundamental consensus on the meaning of the social world that is the very precondition of conflict over the social world' (Bourdieu 2014, 4). In this way, the state is an entity that produces societal harmony, giving rise to a Hegelian ethical substance (*Sittlichkeit*), thereby (and simultaneously) producing the preconditions for all social agonism. A certain harmonious ordering is a necessary precondition for all struggle.

Doxic Structure

It is revealing that Bourdieu moves from equating God and the state to equating God and society. To Bourdieu, the state is equivalent to society because the social universe comes to be realized in and through the state. The conceptual equivalence between state and society marks Bourdieu's attempt to institute a solution by fiat to the Hegelian problem of the bifurcation (*Enzweiung*) of social life, what Jean Hyppolite describes as the problem of 'overcoming the dualism of the private man and the citizen' (Hyppolite 1969, 119; emphasis in original). Private individuals confront the social world in all their radical particularity, imbued with the peculiarities of their own interests and concerns. The citizen, on the other hand, comes to identify with the polity, moving beyond immediate personal interest to embrace the universal interests of the social order. Bourdieu's

conceptualization, however, is an attempt to show that the former really is inseparable from the latter: private individuals cannot really lead an existence independently from citizenly life, precisely because the state is a totalizing entity that permeates the being of all those residing under its aegis. Bourdieu approvingly quotes the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, whom he repeatedly returns to, and says, with only slight hyperbole, ‘Man today is only a state man’ (Bourdieu 2014, 215). In a Bernhardian turn of phrase, Bourdieu suggests that ‘we all have the state in our heads’ (Bourdieu 2014, 366). We are all creatures of the state, which is to say that we are the products of the state, according to Thomas Bernhard’s (1992) *Old Masters*: ‘The state gives birth to its children into the state... and it retains its hold over them.’ According to Bourdieu (and Bernhard), we do not see how far the state has entered into our being. We seldom recognize to what extent we are enmeshed in the state, Bernhard and Bourdieu suggest, so that we cannot even conceive of a reality or ourselves beyond or outside of the state.

Thus, Hegel’s tripartite distinction in the *Philosophy of Right* (1991) between the Family, Civil Society (*Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), and the State, which is simultaneously a temporally ordered scheme of personal evolution over a single life-course – one begins in the privacy of the family sphere, comes to be socialized into the communal order, and finally attains a properly universal view of things by aligning oneself with the state – is really an erroneously ordered account of social reality. Hegel’s scheme suggests an ordered progression from the first to the third via the second, Bourdieu would suggest, but in reality, it is the state that is constitutive of the social order and *identical to it*, so that the Family, Civil Society, and any other social field, are epiphenomena of the state. Thus, the very concept of what, legally and morally, can be said to constitute family life – whether divorce is permissible, or polygamy is to be outlawed, for instance – arises out of the state’s actions and priorities. Similarly, the apparent independence of civil society is a social illusion, Bourdieu suggests, concealing the fact that charitable organizations or so-called Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), a misnomer, always depend for their very existence on the state, either because of revenue streams derived from state coffers, for example, or because of the existence of a legal order that permits such entities to exist and operate in the first place (Bourdieu 2014, 31-32, 36). In this way, Bourdieu claims, the ‘distinction between state and civil society completely vanish[es]’ (Bourdieu 2014, 31).

This argument echoes Gramsci’s contention that the distinction between the state, markets, and civil society is a conceptual imposition (Gramsci 1971). The ‘distinction between political society and civil society... is merely methodological’ and ‘civil society and State are one and the same,’ Gramsci (1971, 160) writes, while the so-called *laissez-faire* markets are products of a ‘deliberate policy’ by the state, prefiguring Bourdieu’s assertion that markets are reducible to the state – a line of reasoning elucidated in a study of the French housing market (Bourdieu 2005), because the state gives rise to the market through its fabrication of a whole social order and, more specifically, a particular legal framework. Even Milton Friedman imagines (in his early writings) a substantively large role for the state (see e.g. Friedman 1951), in which a minimalistic conception of the state as an entity tasked with ‘polic[ing] the system’ could be shown to result in extensive responsibilities, even a gargantuan state, and more importantly, a primacy of the state over markets. As Wacquant (2012) notes, inspired by Bourdieu’s ambidextrous

model of the state (see Bourdieu 1998, 1-10), neoliberalism is not opposed to the state but reimagines and retools the state for the promotion of markets.

While Bourdieu comes to think of the state as a divine entity, Hegel contemplated religious institutions as states. In some ways, then, both assert the same conception of political authority as religious, or religious authority as secular: that the state is divine, or that the divine is state-like – even though Hegel approaches the issue from the opposite direction. Provocatively, in his essay on ‘The Positivity of Christian Religion,’ Hegel claims that churches are in fact little more than a type of state. ‘That the Protestant church, just as much as the Catholic, is a state, although it repudiates the name,’ Hegel writes, ‘is clear from the fact that the church is a contract of each with all and all with each to protect every member of the society in a specific faith and specific religious opinions, and to make arrangements for maintaining these opinions and fortifying every member in the faith’ Hegel (Hegel 1975, 105). A state, on this account, is a contractual enclosure of a circumscribed population that produces and reproduces a set of religious beliefs and a religious faith. Hegel’s notion of a church as a sort of state tracks Bourdieu’s political theology, albeit inversely: even if Hegel and Bourdieu ultimately arrive at a similar position, Bourdieu’s approach is to say that states are church-like while Hegel’s is to contend that churches are like states.

Admittedly, at times Bourdieu describes the state in more limited, traditionally sociological terms. In one lecture, narrowly defines the state as a ‘social field, a relatively autonomous social microcosm inside the surrounding social world, within which a particular game is played, the game of legitimate politics’ Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2014, 98). This modest, traditionalist view, a reversal to a non-metaphysical conception of the state, is consigned to the background with the appearance of *Pascalian Meditations* (appearing in its original French edition in 1997), where the idealistic, metaphysical view of the state as a supersocial entity ‘able to inculcate universally... identical or similar cognitive and evaluative structures’ (Bourdieu 2000, 172) is foregrounded and valorized. And even earlier, the metaphysical and non-metaphysical continue to coexist in Bourdieu’s writings.

What happens when we think of the state as akin to a divine entity? First, we realize why we fail to question the state. Godly beings are inscrutable and mysterious. The state, too, is shrouded in mystery. The state becomes a *doxic structure*, a producer of naturalized categories, concepts, and representations. It is difficult, though not impossible, to think beyond these representations, concepts, and categories. The task of the sociologist or anthropologist is to uncover these structures. Second, we begin to acknowledge the reason why we fail to see, think or act beyond a horizon of meaning that is constructed and imposed on us by the state. If divinity is the Absolute or the whole, then the state too, on this account, is the Absolute, a being that both transcends reality and inserts itself into every aspect of reality.

One ethico-political implication of Bourdieu’s metaphysics of the state seems to be that only actions from within the state can counteract the noxious effects of particular instantiations of statecraft. Political battles must be waged on the terrain of the state; or, to borrow Parsifal’s Wagnerian words: ‘Only the spear that smote you can heal your

wound' (*die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur, der sie schlug*).⁹ The state is the source of social life, and so if social struggles are to succeed, they must be waged over this very source, the point of origin that gives rise to the primordial creation of sociability, which is the state in all its obscure and occluded divinity. This is easier said than done because this very divinity is naturalized: a reality outside the realm of the state-as-creator seems nearly inconceivable.

This argument is developed by Joyce and Mukerji (2017) in a work on state theory informed by Bourdieu's emphasis on the state's production of a corporeal schemata, a bodily *hexis*, which is imprinted on the citizenry. 'The power of the state is mostly experienced outside discourse and below the level of conscious awareness,' Joyce and Mukerji (2017, 3) write, centering instead on a particularized habitus, which contributes 'strongly to [the state's] naturalization, the perception of it as a single, overarching "thing."' This 'thing' of which Joyce and Mukerji speak, or to use Bourdieu's terms, 'an X (to be determined),' (Bourdieu 1994, 3) is a veiled divinity extending beyond the confines of a mere administrative apparatus or a geographic terrain unifying its inhabitants under one nation; as a theory, it is more than a mere synthetic combination of Weberian, Marxian, Durkheimian, etc. theories of the state – a view of Bourdieu's theory of the state that Bourdieu himself nourishes by occasionally pulling away from a transcendental vision of the state to a more traditionally sociological or anthropological account – precisely because the state is this 'meta-field' (Bourdieu 2014, 198) or 'meta-power' (Bourdieu 2014, 311) that stands above and outside social reality, thereby making itself resistant to critical inquiry: the divine object is that which cannot be profaned with the scrutinizing eye or analytical gaze, an entity we must seemingly meet with 'downcast eyes', to use Jay's (1993) phrase.

Anamnestic Sociology

In elevating the state to a position of godliness, Bourdieu simultaneously allows for a science of society conceived as political theology, a discipline whose task it is to detail and deconstruct the omnipresence of this divine entity that is the state. Bourdieu implicitly introduces what one might call the *Deus Absconditus Principle*, a methodological injunction to search for the divine, state-like, or 'enstated,' in all things – to uncover the 'hidden god' that is the state's invisible or subtle traces and tracings in reality, the fingerprints and DNA of the state that are all over social space.

Bourdieu's critical sociology of the state-as-divinity is essentially a *sociology of anamnesis*, a calling-to-mind or bringing-to-consciousness of all those 'deep and repressed structures' (Bourdieu 1995, 4) – a statement tinged with psychoanalytic overtones, a movement which took the 'anamnestic recovery of forgotten and repressed experiences, thoughts, desires, or impulses' as its central task (Jay 1982, 7) – buried in the monistic matter constituting social reality, including inanimate objects and human bodies. Anamnesis is an antidote to the naturalization effect produced by and in the divinity of the state because it uncovers genesis, what Bourdieu calls 'the anamnesis of origin' at one point (Bourdieu 2000, 115). 'Free thought must be won by a historical anamnesis capable of revealing everything in thought which is the forgotten product of historical

⁹ 'Libretti: Parsifal.' <http://www.rwagner.net/libretti/parsifal/e-pars-a3.html>

work,' Bourdieu (1995, 312) observed, suggesting the central place of the concept in his understanding of crítico-reflexive sociology. The 'labor of anamnesis... a socioanalysis' is the name given to that effort which takes aims at excavating the buried historicity of particular categories of thought, 'reappropriating, through historical anamnesis, the product of the entire historical operation of which consciousness too is (at every moment) the product' (Bourdieu 1995, 256). Anamnesis is the historicization of consciousness, revealing how perception (and therefore action) is shot through with history, which means caprice, contingency, and arbitrariness: a critical sociology flowing from the metaphysical conception of the state means engaging in the 'anamnesis of all that ordinarily remains buried' (Bourdieu 1995, 108), to liberate social agents from the enormous condescension of the past, to invert E. P. Thompson's phrase.

It might be objected that Bourdieu exaggerates the totalizing effects of the state: there exist multiple gaps or cracks in the façade of the state as an Absolute being. Bourdieu would seem to agree with the hyperbole of Thomas Bernhard's (1992) character who pronounces with almost comical exaggeration that 'wherever we look we see only state children, state pupils, state workers, state officials, state pensioners, state dead... The state produces and permits only state people, that is the truth.' But Bourdieu's vision of the state is not of an omnipotent or omniscient being – what Adorno (2005) called the 'monstrous total State,' against whose 'terrors' people must simply learn to prepare themselves (Adorno 2005, 115). Bourdieu's conception of the state is of an *omnipresent* entity: the state is everywhere and in all things, at least in some measure or in some ultimate sense – an Aristotelian first cause or 'unmoved mover.'

Still, one might claim that Bourdieu overstretches a single, singular case, that of the French nation-state, which has, historically speaking, been strong, influential, and played an outsize role in determining the trajectory of French society. Bourdieu does speak on the basis of a particular French experience, and perhaps this experience is not universal, even for the relatively narrow subdomain of advanced, industrialized and post-industrialized societies. One might object that Bourdieu's emphasis on the role of the state in shaping the 'collective consciousness' through the educational system only holds true in societies where the state really controls the entirety of the school system. But what of societies where private, religious or charitable schools play an important role? Colleges in the United States are often private foundations, and so, one might reasonably claim, are not suffused with the state to the same degree as the (predominantly public) French university system. These are important challenges, but Bourdieu's response would probably be to say that even in those institutions that are nominally not operated directly by the state, the influence of the state will still make itself felt – through overarching legal and regulatory frameworks, or through research grants and student financing schemes, which exert an indirect influence, what Lukes would call the 'political agenda' in a 'three-dimensional' account of power (Lukes 2005).

Furthermore, in attempting to correct an original mistake – that of ignoring or underemphasizing the role of the state – by 'bringing the state back in,' Bourdieu might accept that he is committing a second mistake, that of exaggeration. In his lectures on the state, Bourdieu repeatedly returns to the idea of 'bending the stick too far,' a tongue-in-cheek allusion to Lenin's epistemological principle of 'one-sidedly distorting reality in order to emphasize what is deemed the "necessary" political point,' in the words of one

labor historian (Le Blanc 2012). Indeed, Bourdieu argued that a certain mode of sociological exaggeration was necessary for practical reasons, or as he put it: 'I believe I have to run the risk of saying things like this so that you will understand surprising things while being well aware that they need correction' (Bourdieu 2014, 167). Bourdieu contended that social scientists were forced to confront scholarly and popular orthodoxies, which often do not exist in propositional form, but remained submerged beneath the surface of propositional discourse: '[T]o shatter these non-proposed propositions, you have to make stronger counter-propositions in the other direction, exaggerating a bit' (Bourdieu 2014, 167). Despite Bourdieu's scorn for Althusser (e.g. Bourdieu 2004, 31), one finds the same metaphor deployed by the French Marxist philosopher. Althusser contended that 'one must think *in extremes*,' so that one 'occupies the place of the impossible' with the aim of 'mak[ing] the thought possible' (Althusser 1976, 171). This pragmatist penchant for exaggerated reversal finds an echo in Lenin, who advocated the need for one-sidedness as a sort of corrective device: 'To straighten matters out somebody had to pull in the other direction,' Lenin wrote ([1903] 1977, 489). Looming large over this epistemic strategy is Hegel's dialectical concept of sublation, wherein orthogonal positions collide and contradictions are resolved through preservation, cancellation, and elevation, the triadic movement of *Aufhebung*.

This raises an interpretive point, namely that of Bourdieu's playful use of irony, which is all too often ignored in serious-minded hagiographies and cheerless exegetical exercises. We should never forget the almost mischievous tenor of many of Bourdieu's quips, quotations, and asides, the tongue-in-cheek rhetorical style, the bombast and bathos so typical of the impeccably educated.¹⁰ So when Bourdieu says that society is God and the state is the 'realization of God on earth,' we should always be mindful of the self-conscious manner in which he is doing so – as a 'heterodox' academic patrician, as a Cartesian rationalist who knows that his words will shock his readers, who have come to expect nothing but non-theistic, secular, scientific pronouncements from this great *lector* of the ennobled French academy.

This should not detract from the essentially serious underlying argument about the overwhelming role of the state developed in the closing pages of Bourdieu's *Meditations* – as well as its *structural role* in Bourdieu's thought as such, that is, as a solvent against the corrosive tension between historicism and scientism. We should also avoid the intentionalist fallacy. We should both *read into* and *read out of* Bourdieu's arguments those

¹⁰ Despite Bourdieu's claim that he was inclined towards an 'objectifying distance... from the deceptive seductions of the Alma Mater' (Bourdieu 2000, 34), it remains striking how fully Bourdieu's work is a product of an academic habitus shaped by the *École Normale Supérieure* – how deeply it is enmeshed in the fabric of the *normalien* mode of life and scholastic style, characterized by an extreme work ethic, a heretical streak sustained by the almost aristocratic self-assuredness of unquestioned elite status, allusive references to a particular subset of ordained intellectual masters (such as Pascal [e.g. Bourdieu 2000] and Heidegger [e.g. Bourdieu 1991]), frequent usage of Greek and Latinate terms, and a coded language used to signal belonging to the upper echelons of the academy (as exemplified by Bourdieu's frequent allusions to psychoanalysis that fail to engage in a sustained 'working through' of the key concepts of Freudian thought, see e.g. Steinmetz 2006). In his haste to disavow his imbrication in the *normalien* attitude toward the lifeworld, Bourdieu was not Bourdieusian enough – a fate that often befalls great thinkers, as Ruda observes of Hegel (Ruda 2011, 168).

submerged entities and unknown quantities which would otherwise remain buried, moving between *exegesis* and *eisegesis*, extracting those structures eluding the author himself, while taking seriously those ideas Bourdieu nourished and needed. But after nearly two decades of posthumous theorizing in and around Bourdieu's oeuvre, it is high time we move 'beyond Bourdieu,' to use Atkinson's (2016) phrase, but, crucially, *with* Bourdieu, which is the treatment any serious thinker deserves to receive. We must move beyond those rote readings of Bourdieu's most widely known concepts that remain, as Wacquant (forthcoming) points out, 'ossified in the incomplete and redundant triptych of "habitus, capital and field."' One significant step along this route is to take seriously the metaphysical Bourdieu, or Bourdieu the metaphysician, who elevates the entity of the state to the place of the divine.

According to a (perhaps apocryphal) tale, Stalin is to have asked one of his courtiers threateningly, 'Do you know how much our state weighs, with all its factories and machines, the army with all its armaments, and the navy? (...) [A]nd can one man withstand the pressure of that astronomical weight?' (Orlov 1953, 123). On this point, at least, Stalin was right. The state does possess a pressure so astronomical that it transcends its merely material substrate, taking on transcendental proportions – an instantiation of Hegel's 'qualitative leap,' made famous by Marx in *Capital*. According to Bourdieu, the state is the ground on which all things stand, including claims to knowledge and social judgments of prestige: when a judgment of individual merit (under the ideology of an 'aspirational society') is traced back to its ultimate ground, far from arriving at some transhistorical property of merit, one comes crashing up against the symbolic operations of a state eagerly producing and reproducing a definite conception of merit. The state is therefore also ineluctably immanent, lodged in the very fabric of social reality. Because the state is a field (in Bourdieu's specific, technical sense of the term), the foundation of social reality is itself contestable and contested (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 102): the state is an anti-foundational foundation. Its effects are often obscure, though sometimes susceptible to a labor of anamnesis. It is the task of the sociologist to engage in this anamnestic labor, to gain a fix on those representations of reality produced by the state, which is itself a 'meta,' as Bourdieu says. If we pursue Bourdieu's logic to its ultimate end, the sociologist comes to take on the role of a high priest, a sacrosanct and sacred figure whose task it is to channel, interpret, even challenge the deity – and, perhaps, to usher in a truly secular age, which is to say: a world beyond the state.

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Victor L. Shammass is a Researcher at the Work Research Institute, Oslo Metropolitan University and Visiting Researcher in the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo, Norway. He is a recent co-recipient of a Peder Sather Grant from the Peder Sather Center for Advanced Study, University of California, Berkeley and his research interests include neoliberalism and punitivity. His work has appeared in journals such as the *British Journal of Criminology*, *Constellations*, *Punishment & Society*, *Law & Critique*, *Capital & Class*, *Continental Thought & Theory*, and *Criminology & Criminal Justice* and can be found on his website: www.victorshammass.com. Contacting author: victor.shammass@gmail.com