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The role and traditions of the State Reflections on Kenneth H.F. Dyson, The State tradition in western union, Oxoford University Press, 1980

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The role and traditions of the State Reflections on Kenneth H.F. Dyson, The State tradition in western union, Oxoford University Press, 1980

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Abstract (Ita): A quasi mezzo secolo dalla sua pubblicazione, il libro di Kenneth Dyson conserva profili di attualità. La riflessione sullo Stato, inteso sia come concetto teorico che come istituzione concreta, sollecita il lettore ad interrogarsi sul ruolo che esso riveste nel contesto contemporaneo. Tale analisi si estende alla ricerca delle forme più adeguate di manifestazione statale, finalizzate a garantire un equilibrio all'interno di un sistema pluralista e multilivello.

Abstract (Eng): Nearly half a century after its publication, Kenneth Dyson's book retains profiles of contemporary relevance. The reflection on the State, understood both as a theoretical concept and as a concrete institution, prompts the reader to question the role it plays in the contemporary context. This analysis extends to the search for the most appropriate forms of State manifestation, aimed at ensuring balance within a pluralistic and multilevel system.

Parole chiave: Stato; idea; istituzione

Keywords: Stato; idea; istituzione

The book[1] offers a comprehensive examination of the concept of the State, both as an idea and as an institution, within the context of Western Europe.

It highlights the similarities and differences between the Anglo-American tradition and the so-called "state-societies", the latter being marked by a State tradition that is notably absent in the former.

To address the complexity of this subject, the author adopts a multidisciplinary approach, ensuring that the analysis remains both accessible and intellectually rigorous.

Early in the text, Dyson offers clarifying remarks to orient the reader toward the book's objectives: «This book will have succeeded if it reverses the tendency in English-language studies of Western European politics to ignore the idea of the State, to write it off as an historical burden on the development of a democratic political consciousness or of some specialists on a particular country to handle it selectively with reference to the experience

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[1] Among other reviews, see D. Collins, *The State Tradition in Western Europe: A Study of an Idea and Institution by Kenneth Dyson; The Logic of Unity: A Geography of the European Economic Community by Geoffrey Parker*, in *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), pp. 502-503; M. Meadows, *Dyson "The State Tradition in Western Europe" (Book Review)*, in *Perspective*, Jul 1, 1981, Vol. 10, No. 6, p. 98; C. Tilly, *The State Tradition in Western Europe: A Study of an Idea and an Institution by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, in *The American Political Science Review*, Dec., 1981, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Dec., 1981), pp. 1073-1074; R. Bendix, *The State Tradition in Western Europe: A Study of an Idea and Institution by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (Feb., 1982), pp. 147-148; E. J. Eisenach, *The State Tradition in Western Europe by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, in *Political Theory*, Aug., 1982, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Aug., 1982), pp. 481-484; N. Lewis, *The State Tradition in Western Europe (Kenneth Dyson) (Book Review)*, in *The Political quarterly (London. 1930)*, 1982, pp. 87-89; B. Willms, *The State tradition in Western Europe. A study of an idea and institution by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, in *Der Staat*, 1983, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1983), pp. 125-127.

of their political system»[2].

The author employs a systematic and methodologically robust approach to critically engage with a diverse range of perspectives within a coherent comparative framework. Notably, Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to a detailed analysis of French, German, and British theories of the State. Through this comparative lens, Dyson draws insightful connections among these distinct intellectual traditions, elucidating their points of convergence and divergence, as well as their broader theoretical implications. This analytical strategy not only enhances understanding of the subject matter, but also facilitates a critical evaluation of the complex interrelationships among the various interpretive paradigms under discussion. It further offers a richer appreciation of the intricate web of ideas and conceptual frameworks that often elude rigid categorization.

Within this structure, theoretical foundations play a crucial role in shaping and (re)defining the State as an institution fostering integration and interdependence.

The title of the introduction («The State as Idea and Institution») encapsulates Dyson's central aim: to undertake a comprehensive historical and intellectual reconstruction of the traditions through which the concept of the State has evolved. This formulation expresses a dual ambition: to connect abstract theoretical formulations with their concrete institutional manifestations and to bridge the frequently separated domains of theory and practice, concept and context. Dyson presents the State not merely as a legal or political construct, but as a culturally embedded phenomenon whose meaning and function have undergone substantial transformations over time.

The first part of the book («The historical tradition of the State») lays the foundation for this inquiry by tracing the emergence and development of the modern State. Dyson outlines its defining features, paying particular attention to its institutional, social, and symbolic dimensions. He demonstrates that the State, far from being a static entity, has been continually shaped by historical contingencies, power struggles, and evolving societal norms.

Conversely, the second part («The intellectual tradition of the State») forms the conceptual core of the work. Here, Dyson engages with a wide array of socio-political, legal, and philosophical theories that have informed the understanding of the State across different traditions. He introduces a tripartite analytical framework — power, law, and legitimacy — through which he systematically examines these traditions. This structure enables him to delineate the internal logics and tensions of each approach, while drawing meaningful comparisons among them. In doing so, he reconstructs the intellectual genealogy of State theory and evaluates its relevance for contemporary political analysis.

The final part of the book («State as an ideal type and as a 'problem-defining' concept») brings the discussion into a more explicitly normative and practical register. Here, Dyson focuses on the evolving relationship between State and democracy, emphasizing their potential for mutual reinforcement. He explores how the conceptualization of the State can both illuminate and generate political problems. Particular attention is given to the chall-

[2] See K. H. F. Dyson, *The State tradition in Western Europe*, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1980, p. 7.

enges of translating abstract theoretical models into concrete institutional practices. Dyson investigates the tension between rigid frameworks and more adaptive, flexible governance structures, especially in contexts of crisis or transformation. His analysis reveals the difficulties of aligning theory with the reality of political practice.

Through this structured and multi-layered investigation, Dyson not only provides a critical synthesis of State theory, but also offers a compelling argument for its continued relevance in addressing contemporary challenges.

This point is underscored by the opening line of the preface: «This book has not been easy to write», a statement that reflects the conceptual richness and complexity of the term "State", which, in this context, far exceeds any mere technical definition.

To aid comprehension, Dyson outlines a set of shared characteristics that may serve as a «logically interconnected»[3] conceptual framework: «Besides referring to an entity or actor in the arena of international politics, state is a highly generalizing, integrating and legitimating concept that identifies the leading values of the political community with reference to which authority is to be exercised; emphasizes the distinctive character and unity of the 'public power' compared with civil society; focuses on the need for depersonalization of the exercise of that power; finds its embodiment in one or more institutions and one or more public purposes which thereby acquire a special ethos and prestige and an association with the public interest or general welfare; and produces a socio-cultural awareness of (and sometimes dissociation from) the unique and superior nature of the state itself»[4].

This reconstruction, which links shared values to the notion of authority, highlights the law's integrative role within society. It affirms the importance of the «embodiment of public powers»[5] and underscores «its holism, its normative concern with the nature of public authority and its rationalist preoccupation with the creative role of institutions»[6].

The author opens the discussion with the concept of the State, emphasizing its role in promoting unity. This is underscored, for example, in the following passage: «It was difficult, in a society that was characterized by pervasive fear of 'disintegration', for the intellectual to remain satisfied with an empirical and pragmatic outlook that was concerned with limited practical matters and the patient acquisition of partial knowledge»[7].

In this regard, Norman Lewis has observed that, in "State-less societies", «the absence of a rationalist conception of an ordered society has in turn contributed to the strength of pluralism and representation, a pragmatic view of politics, inert administration and a political elite which seeks not only to separate State and society but also associates with the latter to the advantage of informal networks»[8].

Conversely, «the formal rationality of working arrangements and the institutional embodiment of collective purposes inherent in a developed perception of public laws means that

[3] See K. H. F. Dyson, *The State tradition in Western Europe*, *cit.*, p. 207.
[4] See K. H. F. Dyson, *The State tradition in Western Europe*, *cit.*, p. 206.
[5] See N. Lewis, *The State Tradition in Western Europe (Kenneth Dyson) (Book Review)*, *cit.*, p. 87.
[6] See N. Lewis, *The State Tradition in Western Europe (Kenneth Dyson) (Book Review)*, *cit.*, p. 87.
[7] See K. H. F. Dyson, *The State tradition in Western Europe*, *cit.*, p. 83.
[8] See N. Lewis, *The State Tradition in Western Europe (Kenneth Dyson) (Book Review)*, *cit.*, p. 88.

chronic policy failure and/or indication of civil disobedience in State societies will probably be recognized as legitimation crises»[9]. This, in turn, implies that «the reaction is more likely to be the re-examination of first principles than crisis-management or pragmatic adjustment»[10].

Anyway, Dyson (re)introduces the question of the State into scholarly debate, reinvigorating it within a context that has evolved significantly. Through his analysis, he provides a disciplinary perspective on the broader research tradition. Some commentators have described the book as a «reference work with regard to specific topics concerning the idea of the State»[11], where the comprehensiveness achieved overlooks the reality that «not having enough space for a more detailed consideration of any one author, some of whom are clearly more important than others»[12].

Following the reconstruction outlined by Reinhard Bendix, Dyson's work may be seen as an introductory guide to the extensive literature on the topic: «a useful guide to further reading»[13].

Nonetheless, several scholars, particularly in reference to the book's later chapters, have remarked that the complexity of the analysis can leave readers «often more overwhelmed than informed»[14].

Still, the author's examples provoke meaningful reflection on the mechanisms through which order is maintained both within and beyond the State, and how various centrifugal and centripetal forces can be balanced.

For these reasons, despite being first published in 1980, the book remains remarkably relevant. It continues to offer valuable insights, even as societies have been transformed by wars, pandemics, economic upheavals, and technological revolutions. Though the external landscape has changed, Dyson's work still prompts profound reflection on enduring questions.

Moreover, the theoretical perspectives articulated throughout the text invite readers to critically examine the evolving nature and role of the State in the contemporary world. Rather than treating the State as a monolithic or isolated entity, Dyson emphasizes its complex internal architecture and deep entanglement with sub-national actors and institutions.

These include regional, municipal, and local entities that mediate the relationship between central authorities and diverse socio-political realities. They serve as channels through which localized concerns, socio-economic needs, and specific challenges are articu-

[9] See N. Lewis, *The State Tradition in Western Europe (Kenneth Dyson) (Book Review)*, *cit.*, p. 88.
[10] See N. Lewis, *The State Tradition in Western Europe (Kenneth Dyson) (Book Review)*, *cit.*, p. 88.
[11] See R. Bendix, *The State Tradition in Western Europe: A Study of an Idea and Institution by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, *cit.*, p. 148.
[12] See R. Bendix, *The State Tradition in Western Europe: A Study of an Idea and Institution by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, *cit.*, p. 148.
[13] See R. Bendix, *The State Tradition in Western Europe: A Study of an Idea and Institution by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, *cit.*, p. 148.
[14] Among others, see E. J. Eisenach, *The State Tradition in Western Europe by Kenneth H. F. Dyson*, *op. cit.*, p. 482.

lated and, to varying degrees, addressed within the broader framework of State governance.

At the same time, the State operates within an increasingly interconnected supranational order. Its actions are shaped not only by domestic imperatives, but also by interactions with other sovereign actors and transnational institutions.

This outward-facing dimension is crucial to ensuring systemic stability and fostering cooperation. The interaction between the national and supranational levels underscores the importance of understanding the State as a node within a broader network of governance.

In this multilevel system, the effectiveness of State action depends on the degree to which cooperation and collaboration can be achieved across both horizontal and vertical axes. Horizontal cooperation — among institutions or agencies operating at the same level of governance — and vertical cooperation — linking different levels from local to supranational — are both essential for the development, implementation, and enforcement of coherent regulatory framework. These forms of cooperation facilitate the articulation of shared goals, the harmonization of regulatory standards, and the efficient allocation of resources, thereby enhancing the State's overall capacity to respond to today's complex policy challenges.

In this context, the concept of the State — though grounded in diverse and often competing theoretical traditions — emerges as a vital instrument for both managing internal diversity and mediating among the competing interests that arise within and across different levels of government. Dyson highlights this point by linking such variations to distinct "traditions", each offering a different lens through which the State's legitimacy, role, and function can be understood and assessed.

Promoting a culture of autonomy — understood not as a threat to cohesion, but as a means to reinforce it[15] — may foster deeper commitment to shared rules and institutions. Such a perspective can enhance respect for regulatory frameworks, even in situations marked by uncertainty, crisis, or rapidly changing circumstances. Moreover, the idea of unity should not be seen as fixed or given; rather, it must be continuously constructed and reconstructed through political, social, and institutional processes that may, at times, extend beyond traditional geographical boundaries.

Dyson's work offers a significant contribution to the conceptual foundations of institutional life, particularly in relation to the modern State. By framing his analysis in relation to the dynamic evolution of statehood, he maintains a focus on those at the heart of political institutions: the people. In doing so, he reaffirms the importance of anchoring theoretical inquiry in the lived realities and practical consequences of governance.

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[15] See M. SAHADŽIC, *Asymmetry, Multinationalism and Constitutional Law*, London-New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 215 ss.; M. SAHADŽIC, *Non-Hierarchical Coordination of Multi-Level Asymmetries for (Dynamic) Stability. Finding the Balance Between Convergence and Divergence*, in M. SAHADŽIC, M. KOS, J. Kukavica, J. G. Wischhoff, J. SCHOLTES (eds.), *Accommodating Diversity in Multilevel Constitutional Orders. Legal Mechanisms of Divergence and Convergence*, London-New York, Routledge, 2023, pp. 35 ss.

In this regard, the relevance of Dyson's work extends well beyond the disciplinary boundaries of political science. Through a nuanced examination of key themes such as authority, power, freedom, and social cohesion, the author provides a rich and thought-provoking contribution of interest to scholars across a range of different disciplines.