Biopolitical Leviathan
Understanding State Power in the Era of COVID-19 through the Weberian-Foucauldian Theory of the State

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Abstract: The coronavirus pandemic made the biopolitics of infection control the core object of states around the world. Globally, states governed spheres usually free of state control, implementing various restrictions, closing down society in the process. This is possible due to the state’s capacities to act through and over society, grounded in the state’s powers. I argue that while the pandemic has led to useful and interesting state-centric Foucauldian literature on the politics of COVID-19, this literature has not fully taken the theoretical lessons of the pandemic into account. Explicating these lessons, I discuss how the pandemic invites us to reconsider the Foucauldian approach to the state. The purpose of this article is to combine the Foucauldian theory of power with a Weberian state theory based on Michael Mann’s work on the state and the sources of power, so to lay the foundations for a Weberian-Foucauldian theory of the state.

Keywords: autonomous power, biopolitics, coronavirus, Foucault, lockdown, Mann

The measures implemented by states to deal with COVID-19, touching upon citizens’ daily lives from funerals to births, show the importance of a question Nicos Poulantzas (1978: 11) posed decades ago; ‘who today can escape the question of the State and power?’ During the winter and spring of 2020, the Chinese strategy, a series of biopolitical interventions into society (Li 2021), was quickly appropriated by most states around the world. Most states,
including liberal democracies, implemented and enforced strict rules, which restricted civil liberties, from the right to work to the right to assemble, closed borders and schools, and confined huge parts of the population to their homes or nearby areas (Cheibub et al. 2020; Green 2021). The state showed its great power over society, including the market, forcing closedowns, also of corporations and businesses if their activities contradicted the state’s objectives (Anisin 2022; Jensen 2020; Malm 2020; Moiso 2020). During the pandemic, ‘ordinarily opaque features of politics are unveiled’ (Gjerde 2021a: 487). These opaque features relate to state capacities dormant during everyday life (Weiss and Thurbon 2022).

The pandemic was a political laboratory. First, politicians experimented with novel and old measures of control of population. Second, scholars studied these forms of state power, exploring their form, effects, rationales and other aspects of relevance. For a Foucauldian, this offers countless possibilities for testing and developing theory. Foucauldian scholarship, dedicated to the issue of power, offers a potent framework for studying power relations and mechanisms of power, including the politics of COVID-19. While the Foucauldian approach to power and rule is useful, and has produced interesting work on the pandemic, many Foucauldian scholars are notoriously sceptical to handle the state (Dean and Villadsen 2012). Foucauldians, especially from the governmentality studies tradition, prefer to analyse power and rule ‘beyond the state’ (i.e., Joseph 2010; Merlingen 2011; Miller and Rose 2008), even though Foucault’s work (2003, 2008a, 2009) largely constitutes a genealogy of the state. Nevertheless, Foucault (2008a, 2008b) recommends scholars to study the mechanisms of power beyond the apparatus of the state, dismissing arguments that the state is a centre or autonomous source of power, a lesson governmentality scholars usually subscribe to (i.e., Miller and Rose 2008).

However, the pandemic opens the possibility of rethinking the Foucauldian approach to the state. First, Foucauldians define the state as an effect, a way of governing and a nexus of power relations (Foucault 2008a; Jessen and von Eggers 2020; Lemke 2007). This approach is discarded by Foucauldians studying the pandemic, as we return to below, which define the state as an actor exercising power. Second, while Foucauldians dismiss the idea that the state is a centre of power (Foucault 1980, 1991, 2008a; Miller and
Rose 2008), the pandemic implies that the state is such a centre (Jensen 2020; Moisio 2020). Such insights can also be found in the Foucauldian literature on the pandemic. While part of an increasing number of Foucauldians recommending a more state-centred and less society-centred research agenda (i.e., Dean and Villadsen 2012; Jessen and von Eggers 2020; Kim 2021), my text is the first seeking to also break with the Foucauldian definition of the state as a nexus of power relations, to appropriate a Weberian definition of the state, and in the process, marry the Weberian and Foucauldian approaches into a Weberian-Foucauldian state theory.

For this purpose, we first discuss the Foucauldian theory of power and of the state. Second, we cover Foucauldian studies of state power during the pandemic, and how these texts break with the Foucauldian approach to the state, thereby inviting us towards a new analytical pathway, what we can call the Weberian-Foucauldian theory of the state. Third, to bring us towards such a direction, we discuss the Weberian theory of the state and its autonomous sources of power, offering a novel approach for Foucauldian scholarship on the state. Fourth, we discuss the Weberian work on the pandemic, based on Michael Mann’s work, so to enable our theoretical marriage. Fifth, we formalise this marriage by analysing the lockdown through a Weberian-Foucauldian lens based on the two literatures on the pandemic.

The Foucauldian Theory of Power

The Foucauldian literature reveals how power works, liberating us from a simplified understanding of power as something only working through repression, law and force – what Foucault (1990) calls the juridical model. Power is a ‘transformative capacity’ (Giddens 1987). It is a diffuse social and relational force repressing, producing or in other ways impacting activities, institutions and thoughts (Foucault 1980, 1991).

Foucauldians explore power as a network existing only relationally (Foucault 1980: 98; Deleuze 1988: 27). From this perspective, power is conceptualised as the multiplicity of forces and strategies operating within and between social relations of different kinds (Deleuze 1988: 70). This means referring to power as a mechanism, as something
which works. Therefore, we shall use the term *mechanisms of power* when discussing the Foucauldian approach to power. These mechanisms may be positive or negative, that is, they may produce or destroy (Foucault 1991). From our perspective, power is in other words a capacity which, when exercised, works through mechanisms, structured ways which power create effects. In our terminology, power’s mechanisms refer to power’s *microphysics*. We are in this regard primarily interested in two types of mechanisms: juridical-sovereignty and discipline – which we link to Weberian theories of state power further in this article – as well as the issue of biopolitics.

Sovereign power, what we shall call juridical-sovereignty, is the power to repress and deny, generally rooted in law. It is a vertical form of power moving through commands, capable of destroying and/or seizing property, freedom and life itself (Foucault 1991; Stenson 2005). It generally works through spectacular and ritualistic shows of force. Today, Foucault (1990, 1991, 2008a) finds juridical-sovereignty to be of less importance, with the growth of other forms of power, even though Foucault stresses that such changes are relative. However, the pandemic shows the looming relevance of juridical-sovereignty (Sandset and Villadsen 2023).

Discipline, on the other hand, is a decentralised, continuous and subtle form of power producing useful effects within individuals by reprogramming them, making them docile and amendable to reprogramming. Discipline is channelled through institutions like schools, prisons and the military. While juridical-sovereignty merely represses, discipline produces so to alter behaviour and mindsets, transforming the previously undisciplined individual into a disciplined subject. Discipline, to Foucault (1991, 2008b), is working subtly through relations of obedience and command, only visible within the relations where individuals silently obey the automatic and uniform imposition of disciplinary power.

Biopolitics entails biological life itself, for instance mortality rates, fertility rates, genetics and more, becoming objects of political administration, as life and politics interweave (Foucault 1990, 2008a). Biopolitics revolves around optimising the population’s vitality, thereby usually being a *biopower* operating at the level of *populations*, contrary to the disciplinary mechanisms targeting *individuals* (Foucault 1990). This type of politics is enabled by knowledge, usually produced by scientific disciplines, like statistics,
demography, epidemiology and biology. Such knowledge enables generalised action into the social body to correct and protect society from biological dangers, like unhealthy habits (i.e., smoking) or external threats (i.e., pathogens), which threaten the overall vitality of the population (Villadsen and Wahlberg 2015).

Moreover, and related to this, Foucault (2009) stresses the importance of security as a new mechanism of power. Security entails (re)directing forces, such as diseases, so to alter their impact, for instance by vaccination or increasing taxation on unhealthy substances so to limit their overall consumption, thereby affecting trends and their effects without cancelling out the objects of power. Liberal governmentality, also a core object of interest to Foucauldians, works by utilising autonomy as a political instrument, so to guide individuals through their own freedom, manifesting in self-regulation. This political rationality posits that the state shall limit its interventions into society and leave certain spheres free of political interventions (i.e., ‘civil society’), which is to be governed with indirect means through individual and organisational autonomy (Foucault 2008a; Miller and Rose 2008).

The Foucauldian Theory of the State

Beyond the mechanisms of power, that is, power’s microphysics, we have the macrophysics of power, which revolves around how these mechanisms can come into existence and operate as they do. The state is central to the issue of power’s macrophysics. As Bob Jessop (2011: 68) writes, especially after Foucault’s turn to governmentality, ‘Foucault gave a privileged role to the state as the point of strategic codification of the multitude of power relations and as the apparatus in which the general line formed meta-power’. Rather than studying how the state exercises power, Foucault (2008a, 2009) studies how the microphysics of power reveals processes of statification, that is, how spheres become part of the state, which occurs through the institutionalisation of practices and relations of power, establishing a link between the microphysics and macrophysics of power (Jessop 2007, 2011). One example is disciplinary institutions being appropriated by the state, which enables the generalisation of discipline throughout society (Foucault 1991).
Thus, the Foucauldian state is essentially a result of the institutionalisation and codification of power relations (Foucault 2009; Jessen and von Eggers 2020; Jessop 2011; Lemke 2007; Lichtenstein 2020). Foucauldians operate with a micro–macro link where the mechanisms of power at the microlevel create institutional patterns which shape the mechanisms of powers from above, regulating these mechanisms, where the state is the most important macrophysical piece, serving as a meta-power from where governmental rationalisations occur and thus lead to governmental practices, based on the microphysics of power.

However, what is the state? This ‘meta-power’, studied in Foucault’s (2003, 2008a, 2009) genealogy of the state, is defined as a result of discourses, processes and practices, rather than an entity. The state is defined as ‘the correlative of a particular of governing’ (Foucault 2008a: 7) and a codification of power relations and governmental practices (Jessen and von Eggers 2020). The state is discussed as an ‘instrument’ and ‘effect’ of power, but no enactor or source of power (Lemke 2007: 56). Thus, the Foucauldian approach, while offering an interesting lens for exploring the social history of the state and its institutional role in power relations, offers no way to study the state’s decisions to close down society and its interventions into society. After all, the non-agential definition of the state makes it clear that the state is envisioned to lack such autonomous and agential properties.

Moreover, Foucauldians strongly oppose the idea that the state should be seen as a centre of power (Foucault 1980, 1990, 2009; Merlingen 2011; Miller and Rose 2008). Discussing state-centric theories, such as the Hobbesian model of the Leviathan, that is, the autonomous state which contains power and acts over and through society, ready to intervene into it to safeguard the social order (Hobbes 1996), Foucault (1990, 2009) requests that we discard state-centric theories, such as the model of the Leviathan. Naturally, we must look beyond the state’s formal apparatus to understand (state) power (cf Mann 2012, 2013). Nevertheless, arguments against the state being a centre of power are seemingly contradicted by the politics of COVID-19, as well as the Foucauldian work on the pandemic, as we return to further in this article.

Before we move on, it should be noted that there is a secondary Foucauldian literature we largely bracket: the society-centred
Foucauldian literature dedicated exclusively to studying power ‘beyond the state’, which finds political power to largely operate beyond the state apparatus (e.g., Joseph 2010; Merlingen 2011; Miller and Rose 2008). From a Foucauldian perspective Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen (2012), Mathias Hein Jessen and Nikolai von Eggers (2020), as well as Jungbu Kim (2021) criticise this approach. Indeed, Dean and Villadsen (2012) as well as Jessen and von Eggers (2020) point out that Foucault’s turn to governmentality was a turn towards, not away from, the state. Therefore, these Foucauldians recommend scholars to not a priori dismiss the state’s relevance, as too many Foucauldians have been prone to do through the agenda of studying power ‘beyond the state’. As they rightfully proclaim, the state’s relevance is not fading. Rather, the strategies and tactics of the state are changing (cf Weiss 1998; Mann 2013).

We believe that the pandemic – and the Foucauldian scholarship on the pandemic – shows the utility of these arguments.

**The Politics of COVID-19: A Foucauldian View**

The COVID-19 pandemic is a context where the Foucauldian literature has much to offer, as power diffuses throughout various institutions and places, showing the importance of studying power beyond law and formal policies. It is also a context largely contradicting the last decades of Foucauldian priorities. Over the last decades, Foucauldians have been especially focused on the liberal governmentality dominating the various democracies of the world (Foucault 2008a; Miller and Rose 2008). This liberalism was quickly and effectively replaced by an interventionist rationale during the winter and spring of 2020 (Gjerde 2021b; Green 2021), despite traces of liberal governmentality surviving, even during the lockdown (i.e., Sandset and Villadsen 2023). With this, the state exercises power over entire societies, intervening wherever it finds it necessary.

Foucauldians find the politics of COVID-19 to be biopolitical, revolving around a political rationale of administrating and protecting public health (Horvath and Lovasz 2020; Højme 2022; Sandset and Villadsen 2023; Walby 2020). Similarly, the politics of COVID-19 is a biopower of the population, as states around the
world intervene into society to handle, regulate and manage their populations (Constantinou 2022; Mhazo and Maponga 2022; Triantafillou 2022). Related to the issues of biopolitics and biopower, the pandemic tends to be governed based on biopolitical predictive and calculative methods of rule. The biopower of the pandemic revolves around the state predicting and calculating present, past and future infection and mortality rates, as well as risk factors within the population, so to decide upon the severity and timing of measures, meant to reduce the overall infection rates by governing the population and its movement, interaction, travel, and so on (Jayasinghe et al. 2022; Sandset and Villadsen 2023). Surveillance grants the state a vision, allowing it to predict, calculate and ground decisions in abstract knowledge, which together with the biopolitical reasoning make up the state’s vision of the situation.

The politics of COVID-19 is made up of a complex web of power. Juridical-sovereignty, discipline, liberal governmentality and security converge in complex governing operations where the state seeks to handle its territory and population, the bodies and minds of individuals. This occurs at a global stage, as found in various Foucauldian studies discussing the pandemic at an international and theoretical level (Ayala-Colqui 2020; Colombo 2020; Sotiris 2020; Toscano 2020). This is also found in studies of individual countries scholars have studies with Foucauldian lenses, such as in China (Li 2021), Sweden (Girtli Nygren and Olofsson 2020), Estonia and Finland (Makarychev and Romashko 2020), Norway (Gjerde 2021a, 2022; Sandset and Villadsen 2023), Australia (Glitsos 2021), Zimbabwe (Mhazo and Maponga 2022), the UK (Jayasinghe et al. 2022) and Denmark (Højme 2022; Triantafillou 2022).

Some seek to ‘save’ the Foucauldian theory of the state by referring to the politics of COVID-19 as diverse and dispersed, and thus not under the control of the single entity of the state (i.e., Makarychev et al. 2020). Nevertheless, most Foucauldian literature on COVID-19 disregards the Foucauldian theory of the state. Contrary to Foucauldian approaches to the state, these studies deal with the state as an actor and centre of power, which regulates, controls and fosters numerous types of power in an impressive governmental operation. How is the state handled in a non-Foucauldian manner by these scholars, and what does this mean for their arguments? As established earlier, the Foucauldian definition of the state defines
it as a ‘way of governing’, an effect but no enactor of power. Let us offer a few examples of Foucauldian scholars breaking with this approach. Citizens are found to be ‘caught between two poles: the liberal biopolitics of self-governance and the disciplinary and sovereign power exerted by the state’ (Sandset and Villadsen 2023: 632). It is also found that the lockdown ‘stands testimony . . . to the state’s great potential for exercising power’ (Gjerde 2021a: 486). Similarly, it is argued that the response against COVID-19 is ‘consistent with state interventions to protect the health of the population or “biopower”’ (Mhazo and Maponga 2022: 2). Moreover, we are recommended to analyse and explore ‘how liberal governmentality informed the exercise of sovereignty, discipline and security in the state’s handling of the pandemic’ (Triantafillou 2022: 662). Such statements – common in the Foucauldian literature on the politics of COVID-19 – are based on a non-Foucauldian definition of the state. The state is defined as an actor, as the active subject exerting power over society, controlling, coordinating and regulating the bodies, relations and practices of entire populations placed under the state’s grip, through various mechanisms of power inseparable from the state. While different national contexts are governed differently, security, discipline, biopower and juridical-sovereignty are identified and explored, in Zimbabwe as in Norway, in China as in Denmark, as these different states are conceptualised as the centre of power.

While others have also recommended a state-centric Foucauldian approach (i.e., Jessen and von Eggers 2020; Kim 2021), we move beyond past arguments. These scholars recommend a Foucauldian theory of the state based on the Foucauldian definition of the state as non-agential. We recommend Foucauldians study the state with an agential lens, as the aforementioned studies on the pandemic. Seemingly, the state’s agency and central role during the pandemic forced these Foucauldians to treat the state in a Weberian-Foucauldian fashion. Treating the state in a Weberian-Foucauldian fashion means combining the Weberian understanding of the state as a political organisation acting upon and through society with the Foucauldian frame of prioritising power as it manifests itself in mechanisms of power at the local level. Breaking with the Foucauldian approach to the state, the pandemic invites scholars, including Foucauldians, to revisit the Hobbesian model of the state.
(see Kapust 2023). After all, the COVID-19 state behaves as Leviathan during the pandemic: it acts like a great social body existing within and beyond society, intervening into it from above when the pandemic is found to be threatening the social order. Therefore, we can call the COVID-19 state biopolitical Leviathan. This is both an empirical argument, based on the state’s status and stature during the pandemic, and a theoretical move showing our break with the Foucauldian model of the non-agential state.

However, these studies’ lessons on the state are implicit because the agential understanding of the state which they base their work on remains implicit. This is an issue that must be remedied, through theory-building. Moreover, mechanisms of power work based on institutionalised arrangements, roles and practices. Thus, referring to the agency of the state creates a black box. How can juridico-sovereign and disciplinary power be imposed upon society by the state? The arguments of the aforementioned Foucauldians are not disproven or disqualified by their inclusion of the state as actor, but there is a missing link – how could the state enact such mechanisms of power – especially disciplinary powers, which are found to operate beyond the formal state apparatus as a subtle and automatic form (cf Foucault 1991, 2008b)? To open this black box and identify this link, we may benefit from the Weberian approach to the state and the state’s autonomous powers.

The Weberian Theory of the State

From our position, which includes the aforementioned Foucauldian studies, the state is more than the aggregation, institutionalisation or codification of power relations. Based on Weberian insights from scholars of the state, we define the state as an actor. We define the state as a political organisation claiming the right to make and apply binding decisions, made up of a differentiated set of institutions and personnel, embodying the centre of a territorially demarcated area; within which the state is sovereign, as it has the right of self-determination; this establishes claims of a monopoly over the legitimate use of organisations of violence, such as military and police forces, which altogether constitutes an institutional-legal order led by the state (Giddens 1987; Mann 1984, 1986, 2012, 2013; Weiss 1998).
The state is an actor due to its ‘organizational structure [which] constitutes the state as a corporate agent’ (Wendt 1999: 207). The state’s agency is socially constructed and enabled through the organisation of personnel, roles and hierarchies enabling the state to enact collective actions by coordinating state agents fulfilling different roles, located in different social and spatial spaces. The state is a social body with organs and joints fulfilling numerous purposes.

But how can the state be autonomous and capable of exercising power over and through society? While Foucauldians dismiss the notion of state autonomy (Foucault 2008a; Jessen and von Eggers 2020; Miller and Rose 2008), state-centric scholars have convincingly demonstrated the importance of state autonomy for scholars interested in understanding the state. The state can act and reach decisions, for instance by playing nonstate actors against one another, using its position to mediate to choose the actions it prefers (Mann 2013; Nordlinger 1981). There are also numerous cases where states more or less unilaterally make binding decisions which are imposed upon society. Examples are manifold, ranging from economic transformations (Evans 1995), the implementation of unpopular laws and increased taxation (Nordlinger 1981), or war-making and foreign policy (Mann 2012, 2013). The pandemic is one such context showing state autonomy, as similar states within similar societies and resources available, such as the British and Australian states, act differently in an identical situation, based on political considerations originating within the state apparatus (Weiss and Thurbon 2022).

To understand state autonomy, we need to explore the macrophysics of power. We move away from the focus upon the institutionalisation of struggles and relations, despite its importance. We conceptualise the macrophysics of power based on what Michael Mann (1986, 1993, 2012, 2013) calls the sources of power. Mann (1986: 2–3) defines the sources of power as ‘generalized means’ which can be enacted, thereby having potential to manifest in the capacity ‘to organize and control people, materials and territories’. The state ‘cages’ various sources of power (Mann 1993). Within this ‘cage’, power can be dormant, until it is activated by the state (Weiss and Thurbon 2022). The sources or macrophysics of power enable power to be exercised, while exercised power manifests in mechanisms of power, that is, power’s microphysics.
While agreeing that power should ‘be analysed as something that circulates’ (Foucault 2003: 29) and is ‘exercised’ (Foucault 1980: 89), economic, administrative and repressive resources are also accumulated and concentrated within organisations (Mann 1993, 2013). This means seeing power as relatively dependent upon organisation – that is, organisational materialism – which posits that organisations increase the potency of power and thus serve as the core objects of interest for students of power (Mann 1993). We combine a Foucauldian structuralist approach to power as mechanisms with an agential approach with regards to the organisations caging and exercising power, through the distinction between the mechanisms and sources of power, mirrored in the distinction between the microphysics and macrophysics of power.

The Autonomous Powers of the State

State autonomy is a question of what Mann (1984) calls the autonomous sources of state power. These sources, caged by the state, enable the state to make collectively binding decisions within a society localised within its territorial boundaries, reaching down into various sectors of society like the economy or culture, where it acts, for instance by imposing taxation or standardising national cultures. While contrary to the general Foucauldian approach, which dismisses state autonomy as a ‘myth’ (Lemke 2007), Mann’s insights on the autonomous powers of the state are highly compatible with Foucauldian insights on power. We shall now discuss these sources – coercive and infrastructural power – and how they relate to Foucauldian concepts of relevance to the pandemic.

First, what Mann (1984, 1986) calls despotic power, which we shall call coercive sources of power to avoid the normative term ‘despotic’. Coercive power is the state’s power to enforce its will over society, rooted in organisations of violence, such as the police. The state’s monopoly over legitimate violence implies that the state is the only actor with the right to exercise violence, being a source of coercive power, increasing the state autonomy by making compliance with the state’s legal order compulsory (Mann 1984, 1986). These are sources of power enabling the exercise of repression and violence.
Coercive power relates to Foucault’s (1991, 2003) writings about juridical-sovereignty, as juridical-sovereign power is exercised through coercive sources of power, enabled by organisations ‘caging’ capacities for exercising violence. However, there is a key difference. Juridical-sovereignty manifests in negative assertions of power, in the seizures of rights and lives, and spectacular shows of force. While juridical-sovereignty is dependent upon coercive sources of power, coercive sources of power can be enacted for more complex tasks. For instance, the penal system, also a coercive source of power, works through disciplinary power (cf Foucault 1991).

Second, infrastructural sources of power. Mann (1984: 113) defines infrastructural power as ‘the institutional capacity of the central state . . . to penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions’. Infrastructural power refers to sources of power such as the state bureaucracy and other administrative means, technological infrastructure such as phone networks and surveillance technologies, material infrastructure such as roads, and the state’s level of embeddedness into society and thus ties with nonstate actors (Evans 1995; Mann 1984, 2013). These sources of power are enacted by the state exercising power through rather than over society. Infrastructural sources of power increase the state’s autonomy as the state obtains means of controlling, overseeing and regulating society in an automatic, nonviolent and highly efficient manner. Essentially, infrastructural power refers to the state’s control over human, material and other resources, nowadays based around rationalised organisations, that is, bureaucracies.

Foucauldians also focus upon the subtle, productive and potent workings of power, making it unsurprising that much of Foucault’s work covers infrastructural power. For instance, Foucault’s (1991, 2008b) writings about discipline complement Mann’s work on infrastructural power (see Byler 2023; Soifer 2008). Discipline is a manner of ruling through society, through the automatic governance enabled by the rationalised and bureaucratic organisations, architecture of power and surveillance technologies. This enables uniform control over human resources as well as the monitoring of bodies, manifesting in the accumulation and distribution of information about these bodies. Furthermore, Foucault’s (1990, 2008a) writings about biopolitics and biopower explore the issue of infrastructural
power (see Ayodele 2019; Byler 2023). Biopolitics is an infrastructural source of power, enabling the state to work so to ‘improve’ its population biologically, that is, to exercise biopower. Foucauldians study how this occurs through various institutions where power produces knowledge and works upon the biological bodies of individuals and populations, often through regulative and predictive forms of biopower meant to affect the population. Such forms of biopower are frequently related to security, as the state seeks to limit diseases, illnesses and other health concerns’ effects on the population by mitigating their impact, such as through vaccination programmes (Sandset and Villadsen 2023). However, biopolitics can also occur through facilitating and fostering self-regulation (Rose 2009). Biopolitics can be seen as an infrastructural source of power, whereas security, discipline, self-regulation and biopower operate based on infrastructural power, as such complex forms of power depend upon the concentration of knowledge, the rationalisation of organisations, bureaucratic techniques for handling human beings in a regulated manner, and practical technologies, like statistics or surveillance cameras.

Foucauldians show how infrastructural power works, whereas infrastructural power as a concept shows how these productive and complex mechanisms of power can work. The compatibility between Mann’s sources of power and Foucault’s mechanisms of power creates an analytical bridge, inviting us to study the link between how power manifests in mechanisms of power and how power can be exercised. While contrary to Foucault’s (1980) claims that power should not be studied as something held or possessed, we can have our cake and eat it too. While the state concentrates power by containing and thus holding the sources of power within itself, we can still study power as something exercised, exerted and imposed.

The Politics of COVID-19: A Weberian View

Foucauldians covering the mechanisms of power during the pandemic refer to the state exercising power – but how can the state exercise power? How can the state exercise juridical-sovereign power or discipline entire populations within a matter of days? Weberians
using Mann’s framework to study the politics of COVID-19 do not ask such Foucauldian questions, and yet they answer them. Scholars have used Mann’s framework to study countries such as Bangladesh (Ali et al. 2021), the Philippines (Hutchcroft and Gera 2022), India and South Africa (Chatterji et al. 2022), Australia and the United Kingdom (Weiss and Thurbon 2022), India, Pakistan, Vietnam and South Korea (Harris and Luong 2022), and Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay (González-Bustamante 2021). These scholars explore the state as an actor with capacities rooted in the sources of power it ‘cages’ and thereafter enacts, as the state in these countries imposed numerous restrictions upon society, governing through and over their populations. Except in the case of the Philippines, the aforementioned scholars prioritise studying the infrastructural sources of power over coercive sources of power because infrastructural sources tend to be more central for contemporary states’ governance of their own populations (cf Mann 2013; Weiss 1998).

These states are diverse. Among other things, they cage different quantities and qualities of power, the state-society relations structuring their room to act differ, and they are characterised by various political cultures and customs. Nevertheless, there was a certain global consensus on the need of coercion and formal interventions during the pandemic (Green 2021). For our theoretical purposes, we can appropriate two core lessons from this literature. First, the sources of power is an imperative concept, as demonstrated by how the pandemic reveals the enactment of dormant capacities (Weiss and Thurbon 2022). These studies show how power is not only exercised. Sources of power are also caged, prior to their use. While the aforementioned states govern with different degrees of repression, surveillance and criminalisation of dissent, using different techniques to monitor, regulate and control society, they generally base their measures primarily on infrastructural sources of power, while all use some levels of coercive sources of power. These sources of power were largely dormant, due to neoliberal governmentality positing that states should refrain from intervening into society (cf Miller and Rose 2008). However, the biopolitical crisis of COVID-19 forced states to intervene into society in numerous ways – through caged sources of power remaining dormant until they were needed (Weiss and Thurbon 2022). The aforementioned
scholars refer to the potency of the state bureaucracy, based around rationalised organisations consisting of professional corps of staff, capable of monitoring populations while distributing and accumulating information. This includes professional police forces with repressive capacities, needed to enforce the state’s will. This also revolves around the state’s relationship with society, as a legitimate and trusted state embedded into society can intervene more effectively into society. Infrastructural resources such as internet availability, medical infrastructure and literacy rates also affect the efficacy of the state’s interventions. These sources of power at states’ disposal affect the quality and form of state action (i.e., Ali et al. 2021; Chatterji et al. 2022; Harriss and Luong 2022).

Second, and building on this, is the agency of the state. The sources of power can be enacted in different ways. The sources do not automatically manifest in specific mechanisms of power. Rather, the sources must be used, and how they are used is a political question. While this is made clear by all aforementioned scholars, we refer to Linda Weiss and Elizabeth Thurbon (2022), as they offer a perfect case for demonstrating state agency and its relevance. They illustrate how the Australian and British states, despite cultural, institutional and ideological similarities, both isolated as islands where their populations and civil societies are highly similar, caging similar forms and levels of power, performed and acted very differently. The Australian state acted more coercively and decisively, with much reduced infection rates. Weiss and Thurbon (2022: 699) note that ‘political choice takes on a special significance in a national emergency’. Moreover, ‘political choice can enable dormant capacities to be activated’ (Weiss and Thurbon 2022: 705). Thus, not only are political choices imperative during crises, but it is by exploring the state as an actor that we can study how dormant capacities or caged powers are enacted (or not enacted) based on political choices. The fact that culturally, ideologically and institutionally similar states caging similar sources of power can act and perform differently, such as in the case of the UK and Australia, shows the validity of this argument. The politics of COVID-19 is, first and foremost, based on political choices, and the state is the choosing subject.

Accepting the agency of the state and the relevance of the sources of power, which states can keep dormant until they use
them, supplements Foucauldian scholarship. However, the aforementioned reflections are abstract. They tell us about the sources of power states cage and use. This offers an analytical framework for abstractly investigating state agency, formal measures and their effects on generalisable issues, such as mortality rates, compliance or reduction in movement. Nevertheless, the nature of the state’s governmental practices remains enigmatic. Taking these Weberian insights seriously let us to enrich the Foucauldian approach by exploring the state as an actor while taking into account how the state can act as it does by examining the resources it employs. Conversely, Foucauldian insights allow the Weberian to move beyond these generalised abstractions to study how the sources of power are translated into action.

**The Lockdown through a Weberian-Foucauldian Lens**

There is a silent conversation between Foucault and Mann’s Weberian work, between the Foucauldian and Weberian approaches. This reveals a possibility of studying the link between power’s microphysics and macrophysics by exploring the relationship between the mechanisms and sources of power. The aforementioned discussions have been leading up to this operationalisation of our Weberian-Foucauldian theory of the state. To do so, we analyse the lockdown, the most impressive show of state might during the pandemic. Based on the aforementioned Foucauldians studying the lockdown (i.e., Li 2021; Sandset and Villadsen 2023; Triantafi llou 2022), we understand the lockdown as the result of a series of disciplinary and juridical-sovereign mechanisms, manifesting at the level of denials and refusals, as well as the spatialisation of power and use of architecture to confine, control and regulate bodies, as well as their whereabouts and movements throughout society. The lockdown is a totalising political measure which affects the entire society, or in other words, all social relations, spatial spaces, and bodies within society. We shall now explore these mechanisms, and the sources enabling the state to enact them.

The lockdown is partly the result of a series of juridical-sovereign mechanisms working as spectacular shows of force. These mechanisms manifest in negative assertions of power. The bluestest
mechanism is the closedown. The state orders stores, schools, temples, bars, et cetera to close down, while closing the border, seizing various rights and denying various activities. This is frequently combined with more complex juridical-sovereign mechanisms, such as the ban on gatherings and the curfew. The ban on gatherings, that is, the suspension of the freedom of assembly, is a juridical-sovereign denial of social interaction prohibiting social arrangements beyond a limit, such as five, eight or twenty people. This makes gatherings, usually also within the private home, biopolitical affairs of the state. Social arrangements breaking the limit of the ban, such as political gatherings or religious rituals, are prohibited. This is the core of the lockdown. The core is commonly strengthened by curfews, which confine individuals to their local area, potentially their homes, manifesting in juridical-sovereign denials of crossing borders, as local areas or potentially even homes become biopolitical units confining individuals. These juridical-sovereign mechanisms, imposed to different degrees in different countries, work by seizing various liberties and rights, manifesting in fines or imprisonment if individuals disobey.

How can the state enact these juridical-sovereign mechanisms, denying entire populations basic liberties, such as working or leaving their homes? This repression is enabled by police forces and surveillance capacities, such as digital apps, drones and cameras, which the state cages and coordinates. The modern state, with its (claimed) monopoly over the legitimate means of violence, channels immense repressive capacities, constituting the binding nature of its orders, and thus, enabling the lockdown to be implemented and the orders constituting it to be enforced. The rationalised, bureaucratised organisation of violence makes open resistance result in fines or even imprisonment, creating risks and difficulties for whoever refuses to comply.

Moreover, these mechanisms are enabled by the infrastructural powers of the state, but we shall not cover this before we bring the issue of power’s spatialisation into the picture. This relates partly to the disciplinary division of spatial space; curfews and quarantines make local areas and homes political instruments where individuals are to be confined. Interestingly, the curfew works both as a juridical-sovereign mechanism denying individuals the right to leave their homes or other local areas and as a disciplinary mechanism
dividing up space and spatially segregating and confining bodies. Similarly, social distancing is a disciplinary form of rule manifesting in mechanisms of power keeping bodies physically apart throughout society, imposing disciplinary conditions under which individuals may leave their homes, enter pharmacies or leave for work, when this is permitted. The state disciplines entire populations by enforcing distancing and spatial confinement as well as increased handwashing, proper coughing techniques, social isolation, the use offacemasks and other biopolitically motivated prescriptions and prescriptions targeting bodies and bodily activities. The state makes entire cities, towns and even countries spatial sites of control where the body is placed within a tight infection control regime, and thus, forced to undertake various disciplined practices.

Such complex disciplinary operations, like the aforementioned juridical-sovereign denials, depend more on infrastructural than coercive sources of power. Therefore, the aforementioned Weberians prioritise infrastructural power. While medical infrastructure is central to states’ handling of the pandemic (González-Bustamante 2021), the core of the politics of COVID-19 revolves around state bureaucracy and embeddedness. Indeed, the state depends upon ‘the ability of administrators to act coherently, unencumbered by narrow political interests that might curtail effective action’ (Chatterji et al. 2022: 16). In other words, the state depends upon the professionalisation and rationalisation of the bureaucracy, which liberate the bureaucracy from individualised and personal decision-making, making bureaucrats automatically enact orders, distribute and accumulate information, as well as control material and human resources, relatively free of personal biases and interests (Mann 1993, 2013). This way, bureaucrats enact collective state actions based on rational calculations and rules from above. This makes it possible for the state to monitor that citizens, corporations and local authorities comply, creating networks of power where the state coordinates and regulates society in its entirety, through its various joints.

Beyond these generic bureaucratic necessities, the state depends on biopolitical sources of infrastructural power, related to knowledge about medicine, COVID-19, mortality rates, infection rates etc, as well as medical technologies and strategies for testing, calculating and predicting (cf Jayasinghe et al. 2022; Sandset and Villadsen
Health bureaucrats and the state’s connection to biopolitical institutions such as medical clinics, the pharmaceutical industry or actors engaged in creating medical surveillance instruments such as COVID-19 tracing apps, are core institutional resources, being beyond the state and still usable when the state requires it. Thus, while the state bureaucracy is key, the state depends on biopolitical resources beyond the formal apparatus of the state. In other words, the state depends on power relations beyond the state (cf Miller and Rose 2008). This embeddedness is a resource, partly because the state can use nonstate actors for biopolitical purposes (cf Evans 1995), and partly because compliance with juridical-sovereign restrictions depend upon high levels of trust in the state and acceptance of state coercion (cf Mann 1984). Therefore, the Bangladeshi state, being relatively infrastructurally weak, had to govern in a softer manner, as a state could not make citizens comply with unpopular policies like the lockdown without ‘an extraordinary and unprecedented degree of cooperation and trust between citizens and the state’ (Ali et al. 2021: 9). The state requires close cooperation with nonstate actors, and close ties with citizens, related to trust and legitimacy, in order to govern the entirety of society in such a totalising manner. Indeed, disciplinary power works through the objects of power, which become subjects of power, meaning that discipline requires high levels of compliance (Foucault 1991), and thus trust and legitimacy (cf Mann 1984). These powers beyond the state are informal infrastructural sources of power, as the ties and networks themselves are sources which the state can enact.

These three main resources: the bureaucracy, including the state’s control over human and material resources, the state’s relationship with and embeddedness within society, as well as the police and penal system, are the core sources of power underpinning and thus enabling the lockdown to be implemented. State actions can translate these sources of power into mechanisms of power. The form mechanisms of power take is contingent upon the manner which sources of power are utilised in action. The state, caging various sources of power, exercises power through these sources, in a manner which manifests in, among other things, disciplinary and juridical-sovereign mechanisms of power, as covered by Foucauldians, resulting, among other things, in the totalising measure we call the lockdown. These approaches complement one another,
opening a rich analytical and theoretical framework, allowing us to overcome the black box created by including the state as an actor in the Foucauldian literature, by taking into account the sources of power. Defining the state as a political organisation caging various sources of power which it can enact, we can explain how the state acts and how it can act, exploring the link between mechanisms and sources of power, and how they relate to the state. This lens can be described as a Weberian-Foucauldian theory for studying state power, a synthesis with mutual benefits.

Conclusions

Other Foucauldians have previously recommended a state-centric lens for Foucauldian scholars (e.g., Jessen and von Eggers 2020; Kim 2021). We support their research agenda, while moving in a theoretically different direction. By defining the state as passive, Foucauldians offer neither analytical nor theoretical means for exploring the state as an actor in cases where the state autonomously intervenes into society, making decisions and exercising its powers in different ways, such as during the pandemic. Therefore, contrary to Foucault (2008a, 2009) and others working with a Foucauldian-inspired lens (Jessen and von Eggers 2020; Lemke 2007; Lichtenstein 2020), we recommend Foucauldians to conceptualise the state as more than a nexus of power relations. The state is a nexus of power relations, but it is also an actor, as for instance seen when it intervenes into society to close it down. This position is shared by Foucauldians studying the politics of COVID-19, as they operate with an agential definition of the state. This may require a second step – explaining how the state can act. We recommend taking the sources of power which the state cages into account, thereby combining Foucault’s work with Mann’s Weberian state theory. This way, scholars can explore how the state acts through and over society, and how governmental practices translate sources of power into mechanisms of power.

This Weberian-Foucauldian theory of the state takes Foucault’s (1980, 1990, 1991) insights on power’s heterogeneity, complexity and local effects seriously. A Weberian-Foucauldian theory of the state does not contradict Foucauldian research agendas, but
it develops a different analytical stance with regards to the state. Exploring how states as actors cage sources of power may offer a multitude of interesting research agendas related to state power in questions as diverse as migration, gender relations, labour-capital relations or education. Moreover, this framework may offer compelling studies on nonstate organisations, such as corporations, crime syndicates or nongovernmental organisations, which too can cage and enact sources of power.

Our Weberian-Foucauldian theory of the state, however, is state-centred. It invites scholars to explore the relevance of the state beyond the crisis of COVID-19. This is justified by the ways mechanisms of power manifest in local contexts based on the state’s sources of powers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates that we should explore the extent to which the state’s actions crystallises in mechanisms of power in other contexts, too. Such studies should also examine whether the state acts in contexts apparently ‘beyond’ the state, and how this results in resistance, compromise and compliance at the microlevel, both in the face of individual and organisational resistance. A Foucauldian research agenda utilising Weberian insights may be ideal for exploring the nature and reach of the state in contemporary societies, studying the link between the microphysics and macrophysics around the world.

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