

# **A Documentary Theory of States and Their Existence as Quasi-Abstract Entities**

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*This article is concerned with the existence of states as a matter of fact, and it approaches that subject within the context of the ontology of social reality as a whole. It argues, first, that states do not have a place in the traditional Platonist duality of the concrete and the abstract. Second, that states belong to a third category – the quasi-abstract – that has received philosophical attention with a recently emerging theory of documentality. Documentality, derived from Austin's theory of performative utterances, claims that documents acts can bring quasi-abstract objects, such as states into being. Third and finally, it argues that the existence of quasi-abstract states should not be rejected on the basis of the Principle of Parsimony, because geopolitical theories that recognise the existence of quasi-abstract states will have greater explanatory power than theories that deny their existence.*

## INTRODUCTION

It appears that geopolitical entities exist. It appears that we live in a world of armies, navies, trade organisations, nations, governments, nongovernmental organisations, federal political units, counties, electoral districts, provinces, and most significantly for this article – states, which have long been a major focus of political geography.<sup>1</sup> However, at a foundational level, the legitimacy of these entities as subjects of academic, and especially scientific, investigation confronts an ontological problem not faced by the subjects of physical geography. Whereas rivers, lakes, and mountains have an existence independent of what people believe about them, it sometimes seems that

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many of the subjects of human geography only exist because people believe they exist. Many scholars, including philosopher John Searle, have recognised this as a critical issue for the study of the social world. Although there *appears* to be an objective reality of geopolitical entities, and social entities more broadly, their mind-dependent nature calls into question whether or not such entities actually exist, and therefore whether investigating them can result in knowledge. For example, if the United States only exists because people agree it exists, is its existence an objective fact? After all, perhaps everyone will think differently tomorrow. The mind-dependent nature of many geographic entities “raises certain crucial problems for the epistemology and ontology of geography, leading some to doubt whether geography can really be considered a science involved in making discoveries about the world, and whether or not the purported facts studied by geographers should really be considered as existing at all”.<sup>2</sup> Issues surrounding the mind-dependent nature of social entities were at the core of Searle’s investigation into social reality,<sup>3</sup> and they are at the core of this article.

This article is specifically concerned with the ontological status of states, and its central question is very basic. Do states exist, *or* do human beings only behave *as if* they exist? If they do exist, then what kind of entities are they and how are they established? Although the “common sense” position might be that states exist, scholarly investigations into their existence often come to the opposite conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Generally, they argue that the mind-dependent nature of states disqualifies them from genuine existence in the world. However, this article asserts that recent developments in ontology have provided scholars with new philosophical mechanics with which to answer the question of state existence in the affirmative and presents an argument contrary to what appears to be the prevailing thought. Whereas previous investigations into the state’s ontological status have analysed its existence without considering the wider concern of the existence of social entities as a whole, this article asserts that the question of state existence is the same as the question of the existence of a broad range of similar social entities. Thus, this subject is approached here within the general philosophical context of the existence of social objects. Specifically, it situates the question of state existence within the theoretical framework of a growing body of literature describing an ontological theory of documentality, which claims that documents have the ability to bring about changes in the world, including the genuine creation of new entities. This article argues that states are quasi-abstract objects (with position in time but not in space) that are often established by the constitutive powers of certain document acts.

The structure of this article is as follows. After briefly reviewing previous ontological thought on states, it will be argued that a major reason states have been so difficult to study is that they do not fit within the traditional Platonist ontological duality of the concrete and the abstract. Instead, they belong to a recently recognised third category – the quasi-abstract. Then the

article argues that states are grounded in records and representation and that document acts are often used to establish and manipulate states. Before concluding, this article rejects the argument that states should be eliminated from political theory based on the Principle of Parsimony, alternatively known as Occam's Razor, because recognising that states exist as quasi-abstract objects provides greater explanatory power than do geopolitical theories based solely upon human beings and their political behaviour. This is illustrated through a study of Iraq as a quasi-abstract object.

## THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE OF STATE EXISTENCE

Abrams once wrote that although the state is taken for granted "as an object of political practice and political analysis," scholars have remained "spectacularly unclear as to what the state is."<sup>5</sup> Since Abrams made that observation, the situation has not improved much. Nevertheless, investigation into state existence is of central importance for political geography. Many geopolitical activities are based on a belief in the existence of states, including some of the most significant actions involving human life. Wars are fought because people believe states exist. At other times, humanitarian operations may not be conducted because of a concern that the operations might violate the sovereignty of a supposedly existing state. For those reasons, among many others, these entities are very important to understand. But if states do not exist, then they cannot be subjects of social scientific study. Ringmar addressed this subject directly when he wrote,

An honest scientist cannot simply 'posit' the existence of a certain entity in an *a priori* fashion since it is the very existence of this entity that should be investigated. As scientists we must look at world politics without any particular prejudices as to which kinds of objects it contains. Our concept of the state should emerge *as a result of* such an empirical investigation, not be a precondition for it.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, arguably, ascertaining whether or not there are states is the necessary first step before trying to establish how these entities operate or interact. If investigations determined that there are no states, then political geographers and other scholars of political studies might be obligated to disseminate that knowledge. Although students might arrive for university education believing that there are states – the United States, China, Syria, Great Britain, and all the rest – they could be taught to abandon those beliefs during the course of their education. That way when students begin their careers – especially if they become government officials, lead armies, or command warships – they might be less inclined to take actions predicated upon beliefs in the nonexistent. No one needs to die to defend a state if

it does not exist. Likewise, there is no need to debate whether or not, for example, intervening in the 1994 slaughter of the Tutsis by the Hutu would violate the sovereignty of Rwanda if there were no Rwanda.

However, questions of existence are more difficult to answer regarding states than might be the case regarding tables or chairs, or even the rivers, deserts, and oceans with which physical geography is concerned, for at least three reasons. One reason is definitional difficulty. Ringmar recognised that correct definition must precede investigation of state existence when he wrote, "We must define what we mean when we talk about a 'state' and we must figure out in which sense notions like 'existence' or 'non-existence' can be applied to this kind of an entity."<sup>7</sup> It is therefore problematic that a multitude of definitions for the state have been put forward that identify the state as a variety of different entities, including a land,<sup>8</sup> an organisation,<sup>9</sup> a government,<sup>10</sup> a group of people,<sup>11</sup> a country,<sup>12</sup> and a legal entity.<sup>13</sup> Robinson addressed the distinction between states (legal persons of international law) and governments (organisations of people with certain coercive powers), and this distinction is followed closely here.<sup>14</sup> Governments, political communities, and even whole societies have been studied under the term "state," but this article takes a much narrower view regarding the entity to which the term "state" is applied. States are nonphysical political entities that were one of several competing political institutions that emerged out of feudal Europe.<sup>15</sup> This article will not belabor a definition of the state, but rather focuses on the state's nonphysicality as its critical characteristic for present purposes.

This nonphysicality is at the core of a second reason that states have been difficult to study. James writes that "no one has ever seen a sovereign state" and that "the absence of a physical referent has the consequence that one cannot tell those interested to go and have a look at the object in question and make up their own minds about its essential nature."<sup>16</sup> Observation is foundational in science, yet states cannot be observed. This characteristic alone would seem to prohibit their scientific study. States cannot be seen, heard, smelt, touched, tasted, or (it would seem) otherwise detected. Given this peculiar characteristic, scientists, whether physical or social, would seem justified in meeting popular belief in states with scepticism. Arguably, such scepticism is not only justified but may be *obligatory*. What *can* be observed, of course, is human behaviour. People can be observed *acting as if there are states*, or phrased differently, acting in statelike ways. For instance, one can observe people at the US Capitol, the White House, and the Supreme Court behaving in ways consistent with the existence of an unobservable United States. One can observe activities on the Fourth of July celebrating the "birth" of this entity, and soldiers can be observed swearing allegiance to it. People behave at the United Nations as if there are many such entities and differences between them must be reconciled. It is very likely that these people are behaving as if there are states because they believe these unobservable

states to exist. However, no conclusion regarding the existence of the states can be drawn from observations of the behaviour. After all, people can also be observed acting *as if* there are gods, ghosts, specters, haunts and other similar beings, but that has no bearing on their existence. This supposed characteristic of states appears to put them outside of what can be studied by science.

The third reason states are difficult to study is that they seem to be mind-dependent, and, if they exist, to do so only due to general human agreement. This characteristic places them in an ontological category with many other social objects, and hence motivates situating state existence within the context of the existence of social objects more broadly. As Searle remarked in his philosophical study, it appears that “there are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement. In a sense there are things that exist only because we believe them to exist.”<sup>17</sup> This prompts a very fundamental question that has tremendous importance for the state as a legitimate subject of scientific study – “How can there be an objective reality that exists in part by human agreement?”<sup>18</sup> This may be the underlying issue that complicates investigation into the existence of states. It *appears* as though it is a matter of objective fact that we live in a world dominated at the geopolitical level by states and the interstate system, and yet they only exist because people think they do. The state “appears to exist simultaneously as material force and as ideological construct. It seems both real and illusory. This presents a particular problem in any attempt to build a theory of the state.”<sup>19</sup> Because of this characteristic, the study of states becomes closely tied to the study of other so-called “mind-dependent” entities. Arguably, the mind-dependence of certain social objects, such as states, “has led to a widespread conceptual misunderstanding, namely that social objects are entirely relative, or that they are mere manifestations of the will. In this way, what is denied is that social objects are objects, and they are reduced to something that is endlessly interpretable or to a mere psychological event”.<sup>20</sup> Adherence to Platonist ontological thought may be partly responsible for this misunderstanding.

According to traditional Platonism, every existent entity is either concrete (meaning it exists in space and time) or abstract (meaning it exists in neither space nor time, such as the number three). Concrete entities can partake in causal relations, but abstract entities are “generally supposed to be causally inert in every sense.”<sup>21</sup> The distinction between these two kinds of objects “is supposed to be of fundamental significance for metaphysics and epistemology.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, for Platonists, if states exist, they must fall into one of these two categories. From the above discussion of the non-physical and unobservable nature of states, the proposition that states are concrete entities can easily be dismissed. However, the proposition that they are abstract entities requires further consideration. According to Platonism,

Because abstract objects are wholly non-spatiotemporal, it follows that they are also entirely non-physical (they do not exist in the physical world and are not made of physical stuff) and non-mental (they are not minds or ideas in minds; the [*sic*] are not disembodied souls, or Gods, or anything else along these lines). In addition, they are unchanging and entirely causally inert – that is, they cannot be involved in cause-and-effect relationships with other objects.<sup>23</sup>

The characteristics of abstract objects do not accurately reflect the (purported) characteristics of states. While states are not made of physical stuff, they are not wholly nonspatiotemporal. States do not have position in space (though their *territories* certainly do), but they do have temporal location. States can come into existence, endure for a period of time, and then cease to exist. Further, states are not causally inert. States cannot act *physically*, but they do appear to be able to act through physical agents who bear a representative relationship with them.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, according to a Platonist ontological schema, an object with the state's purported characteristics cannot exist.

The fact that states do not fit neatly within the concrete/abstract dichotomy has, on occasion, been briefly recognised. Abrams wrote that the state “is not an object akin to the human ear. Nor is it even an object akin to human marriage. It is a third-order object, an ideological project.”<sup>25</sup> Mitchell wrote, “The state cannot be dismissed as an abstraction or ideological construct and passed over in favor of more real, material entities” and that instead it must be placed “between conceptual and material, between abstract and real.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Painter wrote, “The state is not a structurally coherent object or even a rational abstraction.”<sup>27</sup> The problem has been that, in the absence of a philosophically grounded third category in which to place states, some scholars seem to try to “shoehorn” them into one or another category anyway, or they accept the consequences of traditional Platonism and deny the existence of states. Abrams, Gilpin, Wendt, and Painter all make such a denial. Abrams asserts, “The state as a special object of social analysis does not exist as a real entity.”<sup>28</sup> Gilpin directly declares, “The state does not really exist,”<sup>29</sup> and claims that confusion regarding the existence of states arises because speaking and writing about states as if they exist is a matter of linguistic convenience and economy.<sup>30</sup> Wendt bases his denial of the existence of states in an adherence to an “ontology of physicalism” – “the view that, ultimately, reality is made up of purely physical stuff (matter),”<sup>31</sup> which is even more restrictive in what it allows to exist than is Platonist ontology. As a consequence he writes that states are not real, but instead that “State personhood is a useful fiction, analogy, metaphor, or shorthand for something else.”<sup>32</sup> He relies on observable human behaviour to explain political phenomena, claiming, “What state persons really are, is the behavior and discourse of the individual human beings that make them up.”<sup>33</sup> Painter defines the state as an “*imagined* collective actor in whose name individuals

are interpellated (implicitly or explicitly) as citizens or subjects, aliens or foreigners, and which is *imagined* as the source of central political authority for a national territory.”<sup>34</sup>

Alternatively, others have argued that political scholars should simply remain agnostic about the existence of states. Certainly there are people who behave as if there are states, and scholars could accept that it *might* be possible that such entities exist, but since they cannot be observed, their existence can neither be confirmed nor denied. Geographers (and others who study political phenomena) would have come to the very edge of science’s capability to discover knowledge. Notably, Bartelson advocates state agnosticism in his analysis of the concept of the state in political discourse.<sup>35</sup> He claims, “An analysis of the presupposed presence of the state in political discourse can, and indeed must, be undertaken while remaining agnostic about the actual claims about the ontological status of the state advanced within a given discourse.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, he seems to agree with Abrams that the *idea* of the state should be recognised as an “ideological power” and “treated as a compelling object of analysis.”<sup>37</sup> Also very similarly, Abrams claims that the study of the idea of the state does not require the scholar to believe in states, and much less to assert their existence, in the same way that the “task of the sociologist of religion is the explanation of religious practice (churches) and religious belief (theology): he [*sic*] is not called upon to debate, let alone to believe in, the existence of god.”<sup>38</sup>

Given state agnosticism or the general denial of states as genuine objects, there has been a number of attempts to explain how something that is just “made up” can come to be accepted as actually existing by such a large number of people. Narrative theory is particularly notable in this regard, especially since Ringmar advocated a narrative understanding of the state.<sup>39</sup> Narrative theory has been especially influential in postmodernist thought because narratives are “associated with the kinds of knowledge that post-structuralists champion.”<sup>40</sup> However, it is very important to understand what a narrative is and what narrative theory is intended to explain in order to understand what light it might shine on the ontological status of states. At their core, narratives are stories.<sup>41</sup>

According to narrative theory, the narratives that people construct about objects are important because they “are stories that play a significant role in the creation of *meaning* within the human mind.”<sup>42</sup> Narratives are created to “*interpret* and understand the political realities around us.”<sup>43</sup> By understanding narratives one might better understand the political behaviour of human beings because “narratives affect our *perception* of political reality” and this will “in turn effect our actions or response to or in anticipation of political events.”<sup>44</sup> Narratives are “important in providing both individuals and collectives with a sense of purpose and place. The shared stories of a culture provide grounds for common understandings and interpretation.”<sup>45</sup> In his work on time and narrative,<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur argues that narratives are essential for

our understanding of one another in daily life,<sup>47</sup> which undoubtedly includes the political actions of others. Understanding why someone took a particular political action requires an understanding of what certain objects mean to that person, and those meanings may well have been assigned through narratives.

Therefore, while narrative theory helps one understand what meaning a group or an individual assigns to a particular state and how it is perceived, the existence or non-existence of the state is independent of what meaning it has to individuals or groups. The existence of a state cannot be inferred simply by the existence of narratives about it. After all, there are narratives about Camelot, but that does not imply the existence of Camelot. Therefore, an investigation of state narratives only gets us so far in understanding whether states exist. One can collect and study narratives about the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, or Mongolia, but in order to know if these stories actually refer to existing objects, one still needs to compare them with underlying facts about the world.

To Ringmar, the perception of some object is a prerequisite for the construction of a narrative. He writes, "First we see something *as something*, in other words, and then we construct a narrative about this something."<sup>48</sup> According to this account, first, people perceive the United States (for example) as something in our world, and then construct narratives about it. These narratives, "will support, or undermine, a certain perspective on the world and hence also a certain distribution of power"<sup>49</sup> and will have political significance insofar as they "determine which actions we undertake."<sup>50</sup> The narratives we construct about our state will "specify who we are and what role we play in the world; how our 'national interests' are to be defined, or which foreign policy to pursue."<sup>51</sup> But what kinds of narratives are constructed about perceived entities and why is beyond this article. Instead its focus is whether or not the perception of the United States as *something* in the world is correct. Thus, while narratives "can provide a rich source of information about how people make sense of their lives, put together information, think of themselves, and interpret their world"<sup>52</sup> they do not provide the kind of insight into the ontological nature of the entities featured in the narratives that is addressed in this article.

Other theories have been put forward for understanding the nature of states. At their core they often deny that states are existing objects and then couple that with an explanation (involving something like performative theory,<sup>53</sup> discussed below) as to why people believe in them and engage in certain statelike behaviours. Overall, however, this has left state theorists in an unfortunate position. Despite the seeming importance of states in our world, it might be that there are none at all. This means that many people are at best mistaken about a significant political feature of the world, or, at worst, are being deliberately misled about it. Further, state agnostics believe themselves to be in no position to comment on the existence of states one



way or another. Fortunately, new developments in philosophical ontology may provide a way to resolve this issue and provide a mechanic by which states can be confirmed to exist in an objective way. Importantly, there has been recent philosophical investigation into the possible existence of a third category of entities (beyond the concrete and the abstract) – called “quasi-abstract” entities – and the ontological mechanics behind their existence.<sup>54</sup> This article asserts that states are quasi-abstract objects.

Characteristically, quasi-abstract objects have “no physical parts” and yet they are historical entities, meaning that they are “tied to a certain time interval and to certain actions of specific players.”<sup>55</sup> Quasi-abstract objects are nonphysical. They have no location in space, but they do have location in time, which traditional Platonism misconstrues as being incompatible.<sup>56</sup> Although a quasi-abstract object “depends on physical reality, it is not itself a *part* of physical reality. It is, precisely, a quasi-abstract pattern that is tied to history and time in virtue of its relation to certain persons and events.”<sup>57</sup> These objects seem to make up much of the core concern of the social sciences, since they are “from the perspective of physical science, eldritch parts of this reality indeed, parts which will never be capable of being understood as products of any combination of physical building-blocks.”<sup>58</sup> However, quasi-abstract objects need some mechanic by which they are “anchored” in our world and by which one can determine that they are not “just made up” or are otherwise some trick of the mind. For concrete entities, physical matter provides this anchor. The equivalent anchor for quasi-abstract entities can be found in “the domain of records and representations.”<sup>59</sup> For scholars who hypothesise the existence of quasi-abstract objects, the study of records and recordings become a very important part of the investigation of quasi-abstract objects. Documents, a kind of record, are often very important in the creation and manipulation of quasi-abstract objects, and this has led to the development of documentality theory. One of the central observations in documentality theory is that when documents are prepared and officialised in certain ways, they can *do things* in our world – such as bind people to a contract, or even establish a whole new entity, like a corporation. If documents are often important to the establishment and manipulation of quasi-abstract objects in general, then one might suppose that documents can also be important in the establishment and manipulation of states. This is indeed the case. However, before examining state documents specifically, it is important to put the development of documentary theory within the context of the broader philosophical investigation of how the social world is constructed.

## DOCUMENTALITY THEORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF STATES

Documents are of critical importance for modern societies. It seems highly unlikely that today’s complex social environment could exist without

documents, documentation, and recording. One need only visit a legal library to see voluminous holdings of laws, rules, regulations, treaties, agreements, court rulings, declarations, executive orders, and the like that have long since surpassed the human mind's memorisation capability. It is possible to imagine a society without writing or documentation where specialised poets, singers, and other bards are employed to memorise important acts of government and travel around the country (or even the world) precisely reciting them whenever they need to be recalled or referenced. Societies have indeed operated in such a fashion – medieval Scandinavian lawspeakers are an obvious example<sup>60</sup> – but it is readily apparent that writing and documentation allow a much higher level of social complexity. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine such things as lengthy acts of government even existing for modern lawspeakers to memorise, since, without documents, there would have been no way to record drafts and revisions to laws as they were being formulated. Instead, everyone involved in their formulation would have to keep drafts, revisions, and proposed changes in their heads during discussions and negotiations until the final version could be settled upon for the lawspeakers to memorise. Thus, documentality recognises the importance of documents in our world and “seeks to use our understanding of the special role of paper and digital documents as a key to understanding all of social reality.”<sup>61</sup>

Arguably, Reinach laid a foundation for documentality theory in 1913 with his work on speech acts.<sup>62</sup> But, more directly, it has its roots in Austin's performative utterances,<sup>63</sup> which Searle further developed into declarations (producing what is sometimes called the Reinach – Austin – Searle theory of speech acts).<sup>64</sup> Searle notes, “One of the most fascinating features of institutional facts is that a very large number, though by no means all of them, can be created by explicit performative utterances.”<sup>65</sup> When the right person in the right context makes certain kinds of pronouncements (for example, “I dub thee knight”), a new state of affairs is brought into being. The uttered words can constitute new states of affairs. As it happens, early political agreements were conducted in this way – by “doing things with words” – specifically by swearing oaths. However, it is difficult for a society that relies upon performative utterances and the memories of those who heard them to construct a complex social reality. Therefore, methods were developed for documenting performative utterances. Early documents are *descriptive* of persons, places, and events. They might, for example, attest to the fact that certain speech acts (such as oaths of political agreement) were carried out under the right conditions. In fact, this remained the practice for making political agreements into the seventeenth century.<sup>66</sup> According to documentality theory, the documents produced to record that certain events (such as speech acts) took place, are “weak” documents. While extremely important for the development of complex social reality, they are “just” the registration of a fact for later reference.<sup>67</sup>

Eventually, however, documents came to do more than just record that certain utterances had occurred; *they became acts themselves*. Instead of just being able to “do things with words” through speech acts, many societies developed equivalent methods of “doing things with documents” through “document acts.”<sup>68</sup> When certain kinds of documents are prepared and made official, a new state of affairs is brought into being. Whereas, previously, in order to make a political agreement certain people needed to vibrate air molecules in certain ways with their vocal cords under specific conditions (e.g., an Egyptian Pharaoh speaking certain words in a temple of the gods that bind him and his successors to peace with another kingdom), agreements could now be made without the spoken word. The act could be inscribed into a document, such as by writing down the terms of an agreement and then having the contracting parties sign it or attach seals. Therefore, gradually the documents transitioned from being merely descriptions of verbal agreements to being *constitutive* of agreements or other states of affairs when signed and sealed under the proper conditions. Documents of this sort are called strong documents because they are the inscriptions of acts.<sup>69</sup> For example, the US Declaration of Independence was an inscribed act by which the thirteen colonies declared independence from Great Britain (see Figure 1). Roosevelt’s signature on a document that read “the state of war between the United States and the Government of Germany which has been thrust upon the United States is hereby formally declared” brought that state of affairs into existence (see Figure 2), and the signatures of Mamoru Shigemitsu, General Umezu, and the representatives of the Allies on a document entitled “Instrument of Surrender” aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri* surrendered the Empire of Japan at the conclusion of World War II (see Figure 3). The key advantage of document acts over speech acts lies in the document’s ability to endure and be referenced in ways the ephemeral enunciation of words and human memories cannot. Of course, people may *react* to these document acts in different ways. But the core issue is people often react to a document act precisely because of what it *did* (or did not do). For instance, people reacted differently to the surrender of Japan at the conclusion of World War II. Holdout Japanese may not have *believed* that Japan had surrendered – or deliberately chosen to ignore the surrender – but the surrender of Japan was inscribed in a document and so the actions of the holdout soldiers were therefore contrary to the facts. Moreover, the document act on board the U.S.S. *Missouri* was not merely an attempt to make Japanese soldiers *believe* Japan had surrendered, nor an attempt to trick them into laying down their arms, but was an inscribed act that *actually* surrendered Japan, and made that state of affairs a fact.<sup>70</sup>

From there, documentality goes a step beyond the claim that strong documents can bring certain states of affairs into being, and asserts that some strong document acts can actually *create new objects*, specifically quasi-abstract objects. A corporation is a frequently cited example of this situation.

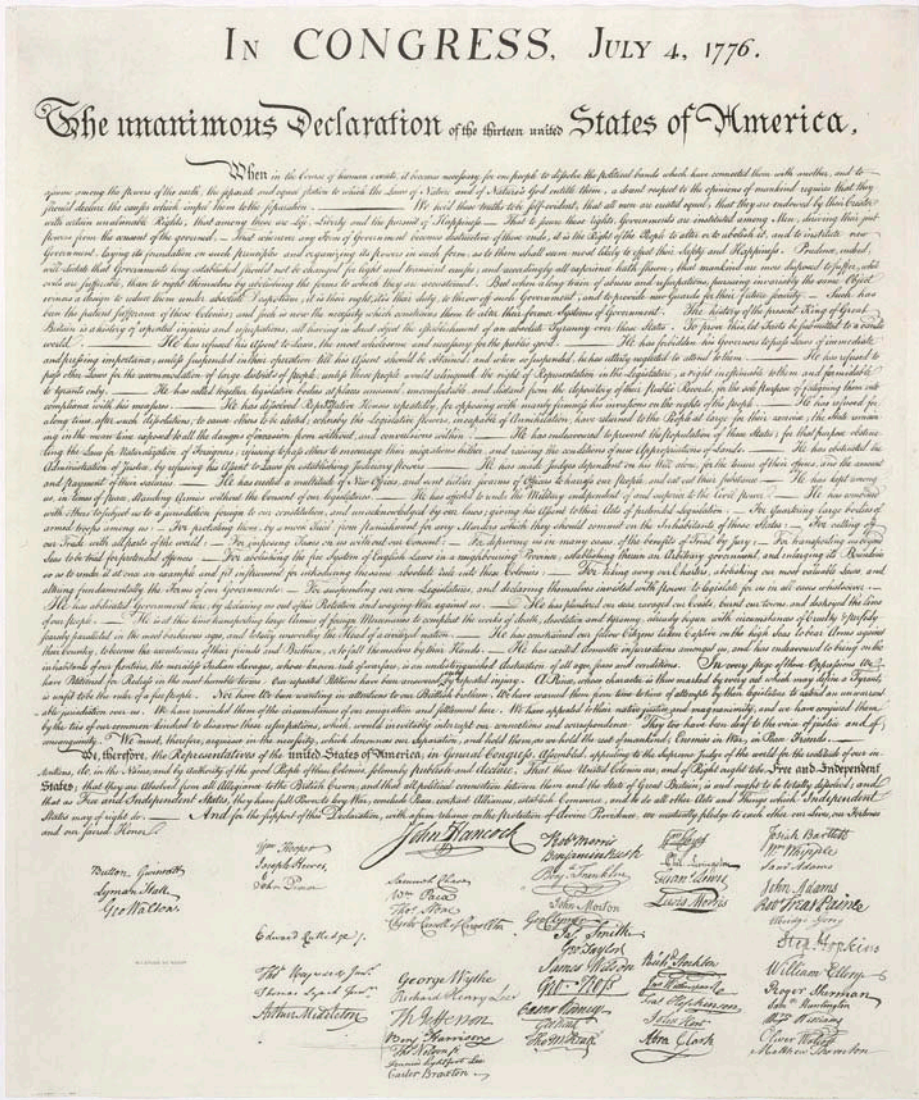


FIGURE 1 US declaration of independence. John Hancock's signature is a particularly famous geopolitical document act.

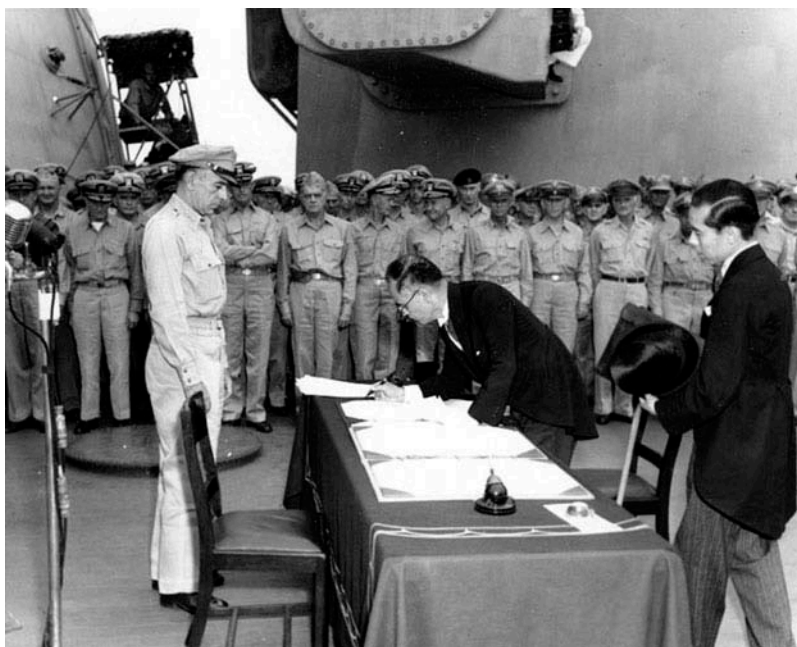
Corporations, being nonphysical legal entities, have position in time but not in space, and it is by preparing certain documents in specific ways and then executing certain document acts that corporations are established and come into existence. The hypothesis that quasi-abstract objects exist and can be brought into being through document acts has been a subject of ontological investigation that has included the works of de Soto,<sup>71</sup> Ferraris,<sup>72</sup> and Smith.<sup>73</sup> Especially relevant here is the Ferraris Thesis of the Documentality of Social Objects, as articulated by Smith, which states,



**FIGURE 2** Roosevelt signs the declaration of war.

Through the performance of inscribing acts (acts of signing or of publishing an official document; acts of writing on a hard drive, or on a baby's forehead, or of impressing something upon someone's memory) *we change the world* by bringing into being social objects.<sup>74</sup>

The emphasis on “changing the world” is very important for this theory. It is *not* merely that by inscribing acts in documents people are *tricked into believing* the world has changed. The position is much stronger than that – by inscribing acts in documents the world can *actually* change and new entities can *actually* be brought into existence. This makes documentary theory a social realist position. Social realism is the “doctrine that social reality exists, that entities such as claims, prices, financial transactions, elections, trials,



**FIGURE 3** Shigemitsu signs the surrender of Japan.

and weddings are not mere fictions and that our talk of such entities is not a mere collection of roundabout ways of talking about other things.”<sup>75</sup> This directly contrasts with social fictionalist positions such as those Gilpin and Wendt articulated when they claimed that there are no states, and speaking of them is only metaphor or shorthand for something else. Smith wrote that while such social fictionalism may save those who are dedicated to an ontology limited only to physical entities, it does so only “through the back door of false beliefs on the part of the persons involved,” as it means that human beings engaged in complex social interaction “trick [themselves] into believing that there are such entities in order to be able to go about their business.”<sup>76</sup> The Articles of Confederation (ratified by document acts in 1781) were not merely a psychological ploy to convince people to believe that a confederal union called “the United States of America” existed. On the contrary, the document is a strong document (an inscribed act) that had the power to constitute a new entity – a quasi-abstract confederacy. It made the existence of the confederal union a matter of fact. These documents acts are key to making judgments about what quasi-abstract entities exist and which do not. It is by evaluating the founding documents that established the United States that one can confirm that United States exists and that people who behave as if there is a United States are not in the wrong.

The ability of documents to bring quasi-abstract objects into being generally coincides with the emergence of states and the state system.<sup>77</sup> It has

been claimed that the series of documents signed in 1648, collectively known as the Peace of Westphalia, brought about the state system and “Westphalian sovereignty.” If this were true, then documentality theory would have a very direct role to play in the establishment of the modern geopolitical order. But, the idea that geopolitical history can be divided crisply and neatly into a prestate period and a state period by the Peace of Westphalia has long been challenged. In fact, that position has been regarded as “unwarranted”<sup>78</sup> and moreover “cannot be sustained after a careful analysis of the treaties themselves and a comparison with older peace treaties.”<sup>79</sup> Instead, although the period from 1450 to the Peace of Westphalia was “crucial for the development of the modern European states system and international law,”<sup>80</sup> the “emergence of the sovereign state was a very gradual and far from rectilinear process, which started in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the involvement of documents in the creation of the state system is more gradual and nuanced. The first states came into existence as people “gradually transferred their allegiance from an individual sovereign (king, duke, prince) to an *intangibile* but territorial political entity, the State.”<sup>82</sup> Treaties – very important geopolitical documents – provide evidence of this transfer of allegiance from concrete sovereigns to quasi-abstract states and therefore also of the emergence of states as objects in our world.

Lesaffer’s extensive investigation of historical treaties shows that the “preambles and the main articles of the peace treaties of the [medieval] period gave rulers, not the territories or countries they ruled, as treaty partners.”<sup>83</sup> Further,

Peace treaties, just like the other treaties between sovereign princes, were, from a juridical point of view, agreements between princes, not between political entities. From a strictly formal point of view, in signing the treaties, the sovereign princes did not act as a representative institution of an abstract political body; they acted in their own name. Only indirectly, through their internal power and authority, did they oblige their territories and subjects to the treaty.<sup>84</sup>

Conducting political agreements between individuals is a characteristic of prestate politics. Flint and Taylor recognised the prestate character of the political system of the medieval period (and before) when they remarked that “the historical continuities that are sometimes traced between modern states and medieval polities (Portugal, France and England are the main examples) are misleading at best and confusing at worst,” because “in legal terms, fourteenth-century Portugal was not a sovereign state operating in a system of sovereign states, and neither was England or France. They operated a different politics under different rules in a different world-system.”<sup>85</sup> There were no quasi-abstract states to bind through treaties in the medieval period. There were only monarchs and those who owed them allegiance. It was only

after documents began to gain the ability to constitute quasi-abstract objects that states came to be.

While it may be possible for states to be established in ways other than document acts, such as through a speech act, for the last few hundred years it has been common to establish states through constitutive document acts, likely because of the many advantages that document acts have. For the most recent example see South Sudan's Independence Act. But here, consider Winston Churchill's statement, "I created Transjordan with the stroke of a pen one Sunday afternoon in Cairo."<sup>86</sup> One could deny that this is a true statement. One might assert that the only thing that changed about the world that Sunday was that some ink was placed on a particular paper where there had been no ink before. No new entity was established. It is merely that, because of the placement of the ink, human beings began behaving *as if* Transjordan had been established. However, scholars who adhere to a social documentary ontology could oppose that position and take Churchill's statement as literally true. Churchill's pen stroke did create Transjordan because the document had the power to constitute the quasi-abstract geopolitical object. To be clear – the claim is not that states *are* documents, but rather that they can be (and very often are) brought into existence by certain document acts.<sup>87</sup> After such a document act and the establishment of the quasi-abstract object, it will continue to exist, even if at a certain time no one is thinking about it.

While a comparison between states and corporations should not be overdrawn, corporations and states exhibit at least one similar characteristic that is relevant here. On the subject of creating corporations, Searle wrote, "Once the act of creation of the corporation is completed, the corporation exists. It need have no physical realization."<sup>88</sup> As Smith elaborates, "While a corporation is not a physical entity, if a corporation is to exist then many physical things must exist, many physical actions must occur, and many physical patterns of activities must be exemplified."<sup>89</sup> But "once this entire panoply of institutional facts is in place . . . then a corporation exists. Yet the corporation is still no part of physical reality."<sup>90</sup> So it is with states. In order to establish a state, there are many physical things that must exist, many physical actions that must take place in the right order by the right people, but once that is done, the quasi-abstract state exists.

Notice how this understanding of states contrasts with performativity or a performative understanding of states. "Performativity is a discursive mode through which ontological *effects* (the *idea* of the autonomous subject or the *notion* of the pre-existing state) are established."<sup>91</sup> It asserts, quite contrary to the position articulated above, that "instead of there being a singular moment of constitution or invention that bring subjects into being, there is a process of recitation and repetition that is constrained by cultural and historical practices, but which also gives rise to new formations and possibilities."<sup>92</sup> This leads to the belief that states have materiality but not ontology, whereas the claim here is the reverse. States have ontology, but – being



quasi-abstract objects – no materiality. There are, of course, material objects (such as human beings) that act as their representatives and agents, but this materiality is a property of the human, not of the state. The United States (and other states) does not need to be constantly performed, created, recreated, or reproduced through endless repetition of certain actions in order to exist. Certain acts at certain times establish a state and then it continues to exist until it is destroyed<sup>93</sup> or otherwise disestablished.

Of course, it is not the case that anyone who draws up documents or draws lines on maps can establish geopolitical entities. Robinson writes, “Many lines are drawn on maps that never produce states, from children’s scribbles with crayons, to sophisticated demarcation by academics of potential states (like Kurdistan) that do not result in the creation of a state. At best only certain people, at certain times, in certain contexts, manage to create states by drawing lines on maps.”<sup>94</sup> Hence, an important element of documentary political geography would be determining who can establish or otherwise manipulate geopolitical entities through document acts and in what contexts. It would seem that one must be vested with certain powers, and certain conditions must be met, in order for his or her document act to potentially establish or manipulate states. Thus, this theory does not at all disregard traditional criteria for the establishment of a state (a government, a territory, a population, capacity to enter into relations with other states, etc.). That has been addressed at length in other literature. Here, these qualifications are considered part of the context in which the establishing act occurs. If a document act attempts to establish state where one or more of the necessary conditions do not manifest, the document act would simply not be successful in founding the state. The investigation of this subject is left to future research, however, and this article will continue by addressing an objection to the existence of quasi-abstract states on the basis that postulating their existence is an unnecessary multiplication of entities and therefore should be rejected.

### SAVING STATES FROM THE RAZOR

Accepting the existence of quasi-abstract entities is no small ontological admission and therefore should not be done without justification. One of the greater obstacles to the existence of quasi-abstract states is the Principle of Parsimony, commonly known as Occam’s Razor, which simply states, “Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.”<sup>95</sup> According to it, given competing explanations for some phenomena, the explanation that posits the least number of entities should be preferred. Therefore, one must consider whether or not all the phenomena in political geography and geopolitics can be explained by just the existence of human beings and their behaviour (and perhaps other concrete and abstract entities posited by classic Platonist

thought). It might be possible to create a complete and comprehensive theory that explains every aspect of political phenomena based solely on understanding humans and their statelike behaviour. If such a theory could be produced, then there would be no need to postulate the existence of quasi-abstract states. There would be nothing left for them to explain. Just as Lavoisier wrote of phlogiston, “If all of chemistry can be explained in a satisfactory manner without the help of phlogiston, that is enough to render it infinitely likely that the principle does not exist, that it is a hypothetical substance, a gratuitous supposition.”<sup>96</sup> Similarly, if there is nothing left for the state to explain, the state, like phlogiston, should be relegated to nonexistence. If geographers and other political theorists can explain all of geopolitics without states, then it is infinitely likely that there are none. States were merely hypothetical gratuitous suppositions of the mind. This seems to have been Radcliffe-Brown’s argument – states should be stricken from political theory as unnecessary because understanding governments and their workings, along with whatever processes of governance a society possesses, is sufficient to understand all political phenomena.<sup>97</sup>

Documentality theorists accept a much richer ontology than some other scholars, especially those who subscribe to physicalist ontologies, such as Wendt. Using Occam’s Razor to trim unnecessary entities from one’s ontology is an excellent thing to do, but one should take care not to trim necessary entities as well, because reducing the ontology of the world to nothing but physical particles leaves one only with “particles disposed tablewise, chairwise, professorwise, but the fact of knowing there are particles will not tell you much about the table, the chair, or the professor.”<sup>98</sup> Rather, “It is clear that the more objects there are, the easier it is to understand a world that is, as we often hear, complicated, and it is so precisely because there are so many objects.”<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the documentalist scholar must demonstrate there is some part of political geography that *cannot* be explained through recourse only to human behaviour. It must be shown that the complexity added to geopolitical theory by the inclusion of quasi-abstract documentary states is justified by an increase in explanatory power. Otherwise Occam’s Razor eliminates the quasi-abstract states, and political geography can carry on with a focus on human political behaviour (with the consequence that political geography would become a *behavioural* science). What then, cannot be explained only by behaviour? What is left unexplained if one does not posit the existence of quasi-abstract states?

Arguably, one answer lies in the inflexibility of the geopolitical system. If states merely are just nonexistent mind-dependent ephemera, then one might expect frequent, sudden, and unexpected shifts in what is true about geopolitical reality as people change their minds about what to believe and start to behave differently. Yet this does not happen, and there is something that provides stability to the system. This phenomenon is especially notable with regard to historical facts. Searle used the social fact that the New York

Yankees won the World Series in 1998 as an example of a social fact that is nevertheless immutable. Now that the Yankees have won the World Series in that year, “they are the victors of the 1998 World Series for all time and all contexts.”<sup>100</sup> Smith notes that even if we all began thinking and believing that Buffalo had won instead, that would not change the facts of the matter. Once social facts such as these are laid down, “then they become like other facts – like the facts one can look up in an encyclopedia – and this means that they enjoy the same sort of priority over mere beliefs as is enjoyed by the facts of natural science.”<sup>101</sup> The facts of the existence of the Soviet Union and of its belligerency in the Second World War are not in danger of being overturned because people change their minds. There is no critical mass of people who can simply choose to believe differently and alter these facts. The present condition of our social world is the result of the creation of a variety of social entities (not least of which are states) and their actions that are not merely mental ephemera. Documentalist theorists have a mechanism for explaining why, if some people do begin believing and behaving tomorrow as if there is no United States, they are behaving contrary to the facts.

Another advantage that asserting the existence of quasi-abstract states provides has been touched on earlier in the article. There are people who behave as if there is a United States, and by examining the founding documents of the United States it can be confirmed that the United States does exist and that these people’s behaviour is not in error. If there were also people who are behaving as if there is a “Republic of the Great Lakes” that encompasses parts of Michigan, Ohio, and Ontario, it would be possible to determine that these people are mistaken. There is no such entity. If one only recognises political behaviour, then there is no way to determine which group’s behaviour is consistent with geopolitical facts and which is not.

Also, very importantly, documentalist scholars are in a position to acknowledge the intuitive notion that the nonphysical entities studied by political geographers, such as states, are ontologically distinct from spectres, haunts, and ghosts. To a scholar who understands social reality only through human behaviour, spectres and states are ontologically equivalent in some respects. They are both nonabstract, unobservable, immaterial entities and potentially imaginary and nonexistent. Documentalists, however, are able to distinguish the two by noting that although there are documents that are *descriptive* of ghosts, specters, and haunts, there are no documents that *constitute* them, as there are with states. Specters and haunts are not quasi-abstract documentary entities. States are.

## INTENTIONALITY AND THE STATE’S RELATIONSHIP TO SOCIETY

Before a final illustrative example is offered, a few brief notes can be made regarding the sometimes supposed or presumed intentionality of the state

and about its relationship to society. The theory of quasi-abstract entities also exposes the classical dichotomy that states are either independent and self-willed intentional agents or simply nonexistent (leaving only governmental structures, narratives, and their effects) as a false one. According to some state theories, the state is conceptualised as having intentionality, while others have argued against this characterisation. The recognition that states are quasi-abstract objects grounded in documents should lay this question bare. Without a digression into a theory of mind, it at least appears that a mind is needed to be intentional. It should be obvious that quasi-abstract objects have no minds, and as a consequence they cannot have intentionality. Human beings in the governments that represent them have intentionality (and even collective intentionality, which Searle regarded a core manifestation in social creatures), but this only serves to underscore the importance of distinguishing a state from its government. Even though states are not *intentional*, they can be *agentive*, because they can act through representatives.<sup>102</sup> States *are* independently existing entities (even though they are socially created by certain – frequently documentary – acts), but are non-intentional, at least in part because they have no minds. Of course, people do often *perceive* states as having intentionality, and investigating why is an important subject of inquiry, though it is a question very different from the one being pursued here.<sup>103</sup>

Additionally, the classical question of whether or not a state can be distinguished from a society can also be addressed. While what exactly a society is remains contentious, and “society” is a “widely used term whose meaning remains frustratingly vague,”<sup>104</sup> a society can at least be generally described as “the organization of human beings into forms that transcend the individual person, bring them into relations with one another that possesses some measure of coherence, stability and, indeed, identifiable ‘reality.’”<sup>105</sup> Even with such a vague understanding of society, it is clear that states are not organisations of human beings.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, these two entities are distinct from one another. While states might *depend* on societies, that is very different from the assertion that states *are* societies.

## IRAQ AS A QUASI-ABSTRACT ENTITY

This penultimate section investigates the state of Iraq as a quasi-abstract entity. The chain of events following the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq has already been used to argue that a state is not a kind of organisation,<sup>107</sup> but they can also illustrate Iraq’s existence as a quasi-abstract object and even the importance of documents and document acts in its founding and subsequent history. Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime had governed Iraq since 1979, but was overthrown in 2003. After the invasion, Iraq was governed by a succession of temporary governments (the Coalition Provisional Authority,

the Iraqi Interim Government, and the Iraqi Transitional Government) before the reestablishment of a permanent government. The distinction between state and government is very evident in this chain of events, because, despite discontinuity of government, there was no disruption of the continuity of the state. This conclusion is supported by a number of factors, but the following three are particularly notable:

1. Iraq was not required to rejoin the United Nations following the invasion.
2. The United Nations lifted its sanctions against Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein.
3. Treaties signed between Iraq and Iran regarding their territorial boundary remained in force despite changes of Iraqi (and Iranian) government.

If one accepts the existence of states, these events can be understood rather straightforwardly. Iraq was not required to rejoin the United Nations after the removal of Saddam Hussein's government because it is the state of Iraq that is a member of that organisation and not Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime (or any of the other governments that have represented Iraq). The United Nations itself had been brought into existence by certain document acts, specifically the signatures and subsequent ratifications of the UN Charter. A representative of the state of Iraq, Mohammad Fadhel Jamali, signed the Charter on Iraq's behalf, and then the Iraqi government ratified the Charter (another document act) on 21 December 1945. Thereby, Iraq became a founding member of the United Nations. So long as Iraq exists (barring its withdrawal or expulsion), that entity is a member of the United Nations regardless of the government that represents it.

Years later, the Security Council levied sanctions on Iraq by preparing certain documents and then adopting them, the first being United Nations Security Council Resolution 661, adopted on 6 August 1990. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, these sanctions needed to be lifted precisely because they were levied against the state of Iraq, not against Saddam Hussein's regime. Had they been against Saddam's regime, there would have been no need to lift them, since that regime had come to an end. Lifting the sanctions against Iraq would require the preparation and adoption of new documents, most significantly the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1483. Last, but not least, the treaties between Iraq and Iran remained in force because the contracting parties to these documents were the states of Iraq and Iran, not their particular governments at the time. Changes of government were not of consequence in the continued applicability of the treaties. What was significant was the continued existence of the states. Therefore, it is arguable that Iraq – whatever Iraq is – endured the invasion and is a key entity in understanding these geopolitical situations.

However, it is not enough to simply assume the existence of a nonphysical Iraq that cannot be detected through traditional observational methods.

Documentality theory (and associated theories of speech acts) provides the mechanics by which the state of Iraq could come into being and the justification for ontologists and social scientists alike to accept its existence. Similarly to Smith's considerations regarding corporations, it took the existence of many physical things and many physical actions (many of them imbued with social meaning) to bring the state of Iraq into being. But once they were accomplished, the existence of Iraq became a matter of fact. The myriad of activities that took place during the British administration of the Ottoman vilayets of Basra, Mosul, and Baghdad (complicated by the fact that Turkey did not ratify the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres and therefore technically remained at war with the Allies until the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne) following World War I have been well documented. Historical examination demonstrates the importance of documents and document acts in the establishment of Iraq.

The state of Iraq could have come into existence as early as 11 November 1920 when Sir Percy Cox, the British High Commissioner for Mesopotamia, established the Council of State through documentary proclamation.<sup>108</sup> The Council of State was a provisional national government that arguably represented the state of Iraq formed from the three Ottoman vilayets. This council would play a key role in the establishment of Iraq as a monarchy on 11 July 1921, when it unanimously enacted another document, declaring "H. H. Amir Faisal King of 'Iraq, provided that High Highness' Government shall be a constitutional, representative and democratic government limited by law."<sup>109</sup> Regardless, Iraq existed at a geopolitical entity no later than the coronation of King Faisal I, which began with the Secretary of the Council of State's reading of a proclamation written by Sir Percy Cox (which had previously been communicated in draft form to the British Secretary of State for the Colonies), and also included the reading of another document professing the loyalty of the Council of State to King Faisal.<sup>110</sup> The King's coronation speech acknowledged that he was the king of an independent Iraq.<sup>111</sup>

After the coronation, Iraq negotiated the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty with Great Britain. This document was also an inscription of an act that required signatures (occurring on 10 October 1922) and the exchange of ratifications (occurring in Baghdad on 19 December 1924). Despite the interweaving of monarchy and state in such formal circumstances, the text of the treaty seems to make it clear that Faisal I was King of Iraq and that he was acting as a representative of a nonphysical geopolitical entity and not conducting a personal agreement with the King of Great Britain.<sup>112</sup> The treaty would remain in effect until the admission of Iraq to the League of Nations (which had also been established through document acts). Admission to the League marked Iraq's emergence as an independent state, free of the mandatory requirements set forth at the conclusion of World War I, in no small part because Great Britain and Iraq had prepared and officialised a document, namely the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922, which explicitly stated that the mandatory requirements –

and thus the relationship that the League of Nations accepted as fulfilling the terms of the British mandate over Mesopotamia – would terminate with Iraq's admission to the League. In preparation of this event, Great Britain and Iraq had prepared another document (the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930) that would come into force when Iraq became a member of the League.

To begin the process of admission to the League, the Iraqi Prime Minister inscribed a request in a document that Iraq be considered for membership in the League on 12 January 1932. The Sixth Committee of the League and a subcommittee thereof evaluated the supporting documents Iraq had sent with its request and prepared its own document, which the committee approved on 1 October 1932.<sup>113</sup> Iraq's formal admission to the League also happened through a document act on 3 October 1932.<sup>114</sup> Critically, it was the quasi-abstract geopolitical entity of Iraq that was admitted to the League and not King Faisal's monarchical government.

The entity that arguably was established by documentary proclamation by Sir Percy Cox prior to the existence of the monarchical government, and later admitted to the League of Nations through further documentary acts, was the same nonphysical geopolitical entity that would later join the United Nations, be placed under sanctions, and be bound to treaties with Iran. Once it was established, Iraq has continued to exist as a social object and interacted with the world through representatives.

## CONCLUSION

Mitchell once asked, "What is it about modern society, as a particular form of social and economic order that has made possible the apparent autonomy of the state as a free-standing entity?"<sup>115</sup> The answer may lie in modern society's use of documents. Documents and documentation are mechanisms which can allow freestanding social objects such as states to exist. These questions of existence are important because, especially when social reality is investigated, there may well be questions that are, or seem to be, unanswerable by any particular science, but "individual scientists have to take sides on them, and the sides they take will affect and sometimes even determine the questions they address as answerable in their disciplines, and the methods they employ to do so."<sup>116</sup> Because of this, "it is certainly better if the scientist makes an informed and conscious choice"<sup>117</sup> rather than operating by default. The existence of social objects should be taken seriously. This includes accepting the existence of states as objects in the world, even though scholars have been trying for decades to rethink them, reconceptualise them, redefine them, ignore them, go "beyond" them, and even deny their very existence. The result has only been that scholars are still confronted with the same simple and stubborn fact that J. P. Nettl recognised in 1968 – "the thing exists and no amount of conceptual restructuring can dissolve it".<sup>118</sup>

States cannot be dismissed as “just” social constructions, because it is documentary social construction that gives them their existence. These objects are not merely “in our heads.” The United States, like other states, is socially *constructed*, but is not *fabricated*. Such quasi-abstract objects have been established through collective intentionality and actions that have been imbued with societal meaning, but that does not mean that they are unreal, do not exist, or are merely collective hallucinations. States are vested with tremendous power and command the allegiance of many people and thus, the processes and methods by which we are able to establish such entities warrants study and understanding.

Here, it has been argued that states have been difficult to study because they do not fit within the traditional Platonistic duality of the concrete and the abstract. Instead, they belong to a category of entities known as the quasi-abstract, which is only beginning to be investigated and understood. Documentality theory provides a mechanism by which the existence of states as objects can be accepted. Not only can state theory progress by understanding the role documents play in the establishment and later manipulation of states, but so can our understanding of all geopolitical phenomena and even the entire social world, because today’s social world, which includes geopolitical phenomena, is not constructed from the ephemeral imaginings of minds, but is a far more stable and structured system. Documents provide the mechanism by which states can be admitted to exist and studied.

When one speaks of states, one actually does refer to entities with ontological standing in their own right. They are quasi-abstract in character, have temporal location, endure through time, act through physical agents, are grounded in representation and documentation, and are frequently established through document acts. Thus, one reaches the conclusion that states are *not* mind-dependent after all – they are dependent upon documentation and representation. While observations of the documents are not observations of the state (and states are not documents), documents can have the constitutive power to establish states, testify to their existence, and ensure that facts about these entities do not change merely because a person or a group of people happen to change what they believe is true.

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## NOTES

1. M. Dear, 'State', in R. Johnston, D. Gregory, G. Pratt, and M. Watts (eds.), *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2000) p. 788.
2. A. Thomasson, 'Geographic Objects and the Science of Geography', *Topio* 20/2 (2001) p. 149.
3. J. R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press 1995).
4. For examples see A. Radcliffe-Brown, 'Preface', in M. Fortes, and E. Evans-Prichard (eds.), *African Political Systems* (New York: Knopf 1955[orig. 1940]); R. Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism', in R. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia 1986); A. James, *Sovereign Statehood: The Basis of International Society* (London: Allen & Unwin 1986); P. Abrams, 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1/1 (1988); J. Painter, 'Prosaic Geographies of Stateness', *Political Geography* 25/7 (2006); E. Ringmar, 'On the Ontological Status of the State', *European Journal of International Relations* 2/4 (1996); A. Wendt, 'The State as Person in International Theory', *Review of International Studies* 30 (2004).
5. Abrams (note 4) p. 59.
6. Ringmar (note 4) p. 442. Emphasis retained from original. Henceforth, emphasis and parentheses in quotations will have been preserved from the original unless otherwise specified.
7. Ringmar (note 4) p. 440.
8. Dear (note 1) p. 788.
9. D. Knight, 'People Together, Yet Apart: Rethinking Territory, Sovereignty, and Identities', in G. Demko and W. Wood (eds.), *Reordering the World: Geopolitical Perspectives on the 21st Century* (Boulder: Westview 1999) p. 255.
10. J. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics* (New York: Routledge 1998) p. 129.
11. W. Gordon East and J. R. V. Prescott, *Our Fragmented World* (London: MacMillan 1975) p. 2.
12. M. I. Glassner and C. Fahrer, *Political Geography* (Hoboken: Wiley 2004) p. 31.
13. R. Paddison, *The Fragmented State: The Political Geography of Power* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1983) p. 60.
14. E. H. Robinson, 'The Distinction between State and Government', *Geography Compass* 7/8 (2013). For additional argument against states being organisations of people and instead being nonphysical legal entities, see E. Robinson, 'An Ontological Analysis of States: Organizations vs. Legal Persons', *Applied Ontology* 5/2 (2010) pp. 109–125.
15. For details on this emergence see H. Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994). Also see J. Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy* 1/1 (1994) for a critique of analysing the state as an ahistorical entity (for example, by projecting its existence into the politics of the ancient world) and ignoring its temporal and geographic genesis.
16. James (note 4) p. 6.
17. Searle (note 3) p. 1.
18. Searle (note 3) p. 2.
19. T. Mitchell, 'Society, Economy, and the State Effect', in *The Anthropology of the State* (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2006) p. 169.
20. M. Ferraris, *Documentality* (New York: Fordham University Press 2013) pp. 33–34.
21. G. Rosen, 'Abstract Objects', in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University 2012), available at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/abstract-objects>>, accessed 30 May 2013.
22. Ibid.
23. M. Balaguer, 'Platonism in Metaphysics', in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University 2009, available at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/platonism>>, accessed 30 May 2013.
24. For a theory of how nonphysical social agents can act through representation, see E. H. Robinson, 'A Theory of Social Agentivity and Its Integration into the Descriptive Ontology for Linguistic and Cognitive Engineering', *International Journal on Semantic Web and Information Systems* 7/4 (2011) pp. 62–86.
25. Abrams (note 4) p. 76.
26. Mitchell (note 19) p. 184.
27. Painter (note 4) p. 771.
28. Abrams (note 4) p. 76.

29. Gilpin (note 4) p. 318.

30. Ibid.

31. Wendt (note 4) p. 290.

32. Ibid., p. 289.

33. Ibid., p. 289.

34. Painter (note 4) p. 758, emphasis added. Painter does go on to add that even though states are “social imaginaries,” belief in them causes people to create real objects such as passports and border posts and engage in real activities relating to them. While the study of the interaction of citizens with governmental officials is of great importance in understanding the relationship people have with their governments and the broad competence of governmental power, it does not address the question at issue in this article.

35. J. Bartelson, *The Critique of the State* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2001). Bartelson also explicitly recognises the distinction between states themselves and concepts of them. The literature is replete with references to the “concept of the state” (see the works of Nettle, Mitchel, and Abrams for important examples), and at times it can even seem as though an author intends the study of the concept of the state to be synonymous with the study of the state itself. Perhaps it is because of the state’s nonphysical nature that there is a tendency in the literature to regard it as a concept, idea, notion, or something similarly mental. Bartelson, however, is distinctly unambiguous on this point and is careful to specify that his work is an analysis of the concept of states and that a study of states themselves would be a very different endeavour. He writes that an investigation of the concept of state is “fully distinct from questions of the state proper and its ontological status, since the former concerns a series of logical relations within discourse while the latter concerns a series of relations between discourse and what might be outside or beneath it” (p. 5). Similarly to Ringmar, he writes that the relationship between conceptualisations of states and their relationships with objects in the world is “something to be investigated rather than assumed” (p. 6). For greater detail on the relationships between concepts, ideas, and reality, see B. Smith, ‘Beyond Concepts: Ontology as Reality Representations’, in A. Varzi and L. Vieu (eds.), *Proceedings of FOIS 2004: International Conference on Formal Ontology and Information Systems* (Amsterdam: IOS 2004).

36. Bartelson (note 35) p. 6.

37. Abrams (note 4) p. 76.

38. Ibid., p. 80.

39. Ringmar (note 4).

40. M. Patterson and K. R. Monroe, ‘Narrative in Political Science’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998) p. 318.

41. Ibid.; W. N. Adger, T. A. Bengaminsen, K. Brown, and H. Svarstad, ‘Advancing a Political Ecology of Global Environmental Discourses’, *Development and Change* 32/4 (2001) pp. 681–715; M. Froese, ‘Towards a Narrative Theory of Political Agency’, *Canadian Political Science Association* (2009); M. Jones and M. McBeth, ‘A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?’, *Policy Studies Journal* 38/2 (2010) pp. 329–353. Being that narratives are stories, it is at least clear that states themselves are not narratives. If they were, then states and stories would exhibit the same properties, which they do not. A state is something that can act, such as by going to war. Stories do not seem to be agentive objects. Stories cannot wage war, even though a person may tell a story *about* a war, or the story may cause a war to be fought. States are not narratives, but, rather, narratives can be told *about* states.

42. Froese (note 41) p. 2, emphasis added.

43. Patterson and Monroe (note 40) p. 316, emphasis added.

44. Ibid., p. 315, emphasis added.

45. Ibid., p. 321, emphasis added.

46. P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990).

47. W. C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2011).

48. Ringmar (note 4) p. 451.

49. Ibid., p. 454.

50. Ibid., p. 454.

51. Ibid., p. 455.

52. Patterson and Monroe (note 40) p. 330.

53. C. Weber, ‘Performative States’, *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 27 (1998) pp. 77–95.

54. An overview of the philosophical discovery of social objects can be found in M. Ferraris, 'Social Ontology and Documentality', in G. Sartor, P. Casanovas, M. Biasiotti, and M. Fernández-Barrera (eds.), *Approaches to Legal Ontologies* (New York: Springer 2011).

55. B. Smith, 'Searle and De Soto: The New Ontology of the Social World', in B. Smith, D. Mark, and I. Ehrlich (eds.), *The Mystery of Capital and the Construction of Social Reality* (Chicago: Open Court 2008) p. 37.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., p. 43.

58. From page 344 of an English translation of the article: B. Smith, 'Les Objets Sociaux', *Philosophiques* 26/2 (1999). Translation available from the author's website at <<http://ontology.buffalo.edu/socobj.htm>>, accessed 30 May 2013.

59. Ibid., p. 44.

60. For discussion see W. I. Miller. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990).

61. B. Smith, 'How to Do Things with Documents', *Rivista di Estetica* 50 (2012) p. 194.

62. B. Smith, 'Document Acts', in *Proceedings of the Conference on Collective Intentionality* (Basel, Switzerland: 2010). For reasons of space, only an abbreviated overview of the development of documentality and document acts is provided here. For a much more detailed treatment, see B. Smith, 'John Searle: From Speech Acts to Social Reality', in B. Smith (ed.), *John Searle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) pp. 1–33.

63. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1962).

64. Searle (note 3). Although documentality has its roots in Austin's performative utterances, as does performativity, the two are at best only distantly related. Performativity is linked to Austin through Jacques Derrida and then Butler's interpretation of Derrida. Later, Weber would use Butler's notion of the performativity of gender to build a theory of performative states (Weber [note 38]), and in the development of imaginary geographies for the analysis of security in L. Bialasiewicz, D. Campbell, S. Elden, S. Graham, A. S. Jeffrey, and A. J. Williams 'Performing Security: The Imaginative Geographies of Current US Strategy', *Political Geography* 26/4 (2007) pp. 405–422. But, significantly, this article largely follows Searle's extension of Austin, rather than Derrida's (though see Ferraris, *Documentality* [note 20] for the relationship between Searle, Derrida, and Smith). Further, it has been argued that Butler's development of performativity is based in a misreading of Austin's work; see M. Nussbaum, 'The Professor of Parody', *The New Republic* 22 (1999).

65. Searle (note 3) p. 34.

66. R. Lesaffer, 'Peace Treaties from Lodi to Westphalia', in R. Lesaffer (ed.), *Peace Treaties and International Law in European History: From the Late Middle Ages to World War One* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004).

67. Ferraris, *Documentality* (note 20). It should also be noted that a broader study of recordings is also important for understanding social reality. The ability to record stories, narratives, songs, plays, speeches, films, etc., can be very important in the production of geopolitical identities, social cohesion, nations and nationalism, and in persuading populations to behave in certain ways or believe certain things. However, this use of documentation is not the focus of this article.

68. In a broad sense, any action done with or to a document is a document act. As Smith, (note 61) writes, many things can happen to documents. They can be "signed and countersigned, stored, registered, inspected, conveyed, copied, ratified, nullified, stamped, forged, hidden, lost or destroyed" (p. 182), as well as much more besides. Documentality studies all of this, but this article uses "document act" in the narrow sense of being the documentary equivalent of a performative speech act.

69. Ferraris, *Documentality* (note 20).

70. This also brings up the related point that the document act might still need to be communicated to relevant audiences. Because the document can be referenced in ways unrecorded spoken words cannot, documents may facilitate communication. But, critically, the communication of the document act is not an integral component of the inscription of the act. In some cases it is explicitly forbidden for document acts to be communicated, as when a government classifies a document "top secret."

71. H. de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books 2000).

72. M. Ferraris, 'Documentality or Why Nothing Social Exists beyond the Text', in C. Kanzian and E. Runggaldier (eds.), *Cultures. Conflict – Analysis – Dialogue, Proceedings of the 29th International Ludwig Wittgenstein-Symposium* (Kirchberg, Austria: Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society 2007); M. Ferraris,

'Science of Recording', in H. Hrachovec and A. Pichler (eds.), *Philosophy of the Information Society: Proceedings of the 30th International Ludwig Wittgenstein-Symposium in Kirchberg, Austria* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag 2008); M. Ferraris, 'Social Ontology and Documentality', in G. Sartor, P. Casanovas, M. Biasiotti, and M. Fernández-Barrera (eds.), *Approaches to Legal Ontologies* (New York: Springer 2011); and Ferraris, *Documentality* (note 20).

73. Smith, 'Searle and De Soto' (note 55); B. Smith, 'Document Acts', in *Proceedings of the Conference on Collective Intentionality* (Basel, Switzerland: 2010); B. Smith, 'The Ontology of Documents', in M. Okada (ed.), *Proceedings of the Conference on Ontology and Analytical Metaphysics* (Tokyo: Keio University Press 2011); and Smith, 'Beyond Concepts' (note 61).

74. Smith, 'How to Do Things' (note 61) p. 195.

75. Smith, 'Searle and De Soto' (note 55) p. 42.

76. Smith, 'How to Do Things' (note 61) p. 191.

77. The development of states also coincided with that of increasingly complex and bureaucratic governments. Ferraris, *Documentality* (note 20) briefly, but directly addressed the importance of documents to governments and their role in political power. He writes that government "conserves its power in the management and the distribution of documents" (p. 287), that "documentality generates political power," and that particularly illustrative examples of this are the "images of Talleyrand dictating as many as six letters as once, of Napoleon dictating until midnight, of Louis XIV dividing his time and formidable energy equally between those inscriptions in the broad sense that were parties, *levées*, and other spectacles, and those inscriptions in the narrow sense of the affairs of the state" (pp. 287–288). Therefore, regardless of whether one is concerned with the study of states or with that of governments, documents play an important role in understanding them.

78. A. Nussbaum, *A Concise History of the Law of Nations* (New York: The Macmillan Company 1947) p. 86.

79. Lesaffer (note 66) p. 9.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

82. Glassner and Fahrner (note 12) p. 14, emphasis added.

83. Lesaffer (note 66) p. 17.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

85. C. Flint and P. J. Taylor, *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality* (London: Prentice Hall 2007) p. 125.

86. Quoted in L. Collins and D. Lapierre, *O Jerusalem!* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1972) p. 83.

87. There is an important point of difference between what is being proposed in this article and the claims about the spatial extent of social objects that Ferraris [*Documentality* (note 20)] makes. He writes, "Social objects, such as marriages and academic degrees, occupy a modest portion of space – roughly the extent taken up by a document" (p. 33). This is because Ferraris's counterformulation to Searle's "*X* counts as *Y* in context *C*" is "Social Object = Inscribed Act" and because of his claim that social objects are made of inscriptions. As Smith ('How to Do Things' [note 61]) points out, if taken literally, this does not make sense. For example, it does not make sense to say that the US Constitution (much less the United States itself) "is *made* of tiny oxidizing heaps of ink marks on parchment, and matters are helped only slightly if we add together all the printed and digital copies of the US Constitution and assert that the US Constitution is the mereological sum of all these multiple inscriptions" (p. 195).

88. B. Smith and J. Searle, 'The Construction of Social Reality: An Exchange', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 62/1 (2003) p. 305.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

91. Bialasiewicz et al. (note 64), p. 408, emphasis added.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 407, parentheses and citations omitted.

93. See E. Robinson, 'The Involuntary Extinction of States: An Examination of the Destruction of States through the Application of Military Force by Foreign Powers since the Second World War', *Journal of Military Geography* 1 (2011) pp. 17–29. It would seem likely that certain kinds of military actions help bring about the necessary contexts for the social actions that could bring about the extinction of a state.

94. Robinson, 'An Ontological Analysis' (note 14) p. 113.

95. A. Baker, 'Simplicity', in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University 2011), available at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/simplicity/>>, accessed 30 May 2013.

96. A. Lavoiser, 'Réflexions sur le phlogistique', *Oeuvres* 2 (1862 [orig. 1777]) pp. 623–624.
97. Radcliffe-Brown (note 4).
98. Ferraris, *Documentality* (note 20) p. 16.
99. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
100. Smith and Searle (note 88) p. 306.
101. Smith, 'John Searle' (note 62) p. 27.
102. See Robinson, 'A Theory of Social Agentivity' (note 24).
103. For an investigation into the perception of states as intentional entities, see A. Faizullaev, 'Individual Experiencing of States', *Review of International Studies* 33 (2007) pp. 531–554.
104. C. Philo, 'Society' in D. Gregory, R. Johnston, G. Pratt, M. Watts, and S. Whatmore (eds.), *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2009) p. 701.
105. *Ibid.*, p. 701.
106. Robinson, 'A Theory of Social Agentivity' (note 24).
107. Robinson, 'An Ontological Analysis' (note 14).
108. P. Cox, 'VI-Proclamation', in A. L. Rush and J. Priestland (eds.), *Records of Iraq 1916–1966*, Vol. 2 (Chippenham Wilts: Antony Rowe Ltd. 2001) pp. 431–332.
109. 'Extract from the Minutes of the Council of Ministers' Meeting of Monday the 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1921', in A. L. Rush and J. Priestland (eds.), *Records of Iraq 1916–1966*, Vol. 2 (Chippenham Wilts: Antony Rowe Ltd. 2001) p. 694.
110. P. Cox, 'Telegram from the High Commissioner of Mesopotamia to the Secretary of State to the Colonies (Dated 23<sup>rd</sup> August)', in A. L. Rush and J. Priestland (eds.), *Records of Iraq 1916–1966*, Vol. 3 (Chippenham Wilts: Antony Rowe Ltd. 2001) p. 131.
111. P. Cox, 'Telegram from the High Commissioner of Mesopotamia to the Secretary of State to the Colonies (Dated 25<sup>rd</sup> August)', in A. L. Rush and J. Priestland (eds.), *Records of Iraq 1916–1966*, Vol. 3 (Chippenham Wilts: Antony Rowe Ltd. 2001) pp. 132–135.
112. This is slightly less clear regarding Great Britain given the frequent references to "His Britannic Majesty." A broader analysis of the texts of these treaties might be required, but given the historical emergence of Great Britain from medieval polities, it may be that it is more likely to maintain historical trappings, especially in such formal situations.
113. M. W. Graham, *The League of Nations and the Recognition of States* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1933).
114. See *Records of the Thirteenth Ordinary Session of the Assembly*, Sixth Plenary Meeting, 3 Oct. 1932, pp. 46–47, 51–52. Without a digression into the nature of sovereignty and a discussion of the possibility of nonsovereign states, this chain of events does suggest that a sovereign state can be ontologically identical to a nonsovereign entity. This might warrant further investigation.
115. Mitchell (note 19) p. 91.
116. A. Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Boulder: Westview 1988) p. 4.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
118. J. Nettl, 'The State as a Conceptual Variable', *World Politics* 20/4 (1968) p. 559.

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### A Documentary Theory of States and Their Existence as Quasi-Abstract Entities

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