



# Statehood As Belief: From The Floor Tile To The Historical Dynamics Of Institutional Elasticity

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## Abstract

This paper starts with a classroom thought experiment. I declared a single floor tile an independent nation, with a hamster cage as its prison and a wooden stick as its military, and asked my classmates to recognize each other's "tile nations." The scene is an analogy, not a test of Engels or Weber. It shows how belief and mutual recognition can make a small, artificial order feel real.

Building on this, the paper proposes a Balance Theory of Institutions: institutions work like a scale connecting decision-makers and ordinary people. They transmit commands downward and feedback upward, but the scale always tilts toward those who hold the power of definition. The paper then develops a Triadic Model: any historical event depends on motive, condition, and institution—none can be absent.

Re-examining Marx's theory through this framework reveals three tensions. The paper argues that idealism, materialism, and institutionalism each capture one dimension of truth, and the Triadic Model stitches them together. When institutions are too strong, dynastic cycles follow; when too weak, chaos; only when they remain elastic can conditions accumulate. History is not a machine; it is a scale—tilted by those who shape belief, read by those who bear the consequences.

## Keywords

State legitimacy; collective belief; balance theory; triadic model; institutional elasticity; Marxian tensions

## Introduction

What is the state? Every Chinese high school student can recite the textbook answer: the state is the product of irreconcilable class contradictions and an instrument of class rule. This definition did not emerge from nowhere. Engels (1884) wrote that the state is "a power seemingly standing above society... arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and increasingly alienating itself from it." He further concluded that the state is "in all typical periods... the state of the ruling class, and in all cases essentially a machine for the oppression of the oppressed classes." Weber (1946) offered a more neutral formulation: the state is "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." Both definitions converge on one direction: the state is an objective entity, sustained by material force—class relations or violence. They tell us what the state does and what it uses, but they do not tell us why people believe it is legitimate.

Research on state theory has broadly followed three paths. The materialist tradition asks whose interests the state serves; the contractarian tradition asks whence the state's authority derives; the idealist tradition asks how the state is imagined and maintained. Yet each path captures only one facet of the state; none provides a mechanism that connects them. March and Olsen (1984) treat institutions as "relatively enduring structures, rules, and conventions of political life," providing theoretical support for "institutions as connecting mechanisms." Thelen (1999) further points out that institutions are not



immutable "locked-in" states but are continually reinterpreted and enforced over time. This paper seeks to fill precisely this gap—the "missing middle."

After the Introduction, the argument is set out in seven sections. Section 1 describes the thought experiment. Section 2 proposes the Balance Theory. Section 3 develops the Triadic Model. Section 4 engages with philosophical traditions. Section 5 examines Marx through three tensions. Section 6 synthesizes idealism, materialism, and institutionalism. Section 7 illustrates the theory through cases. The Conclusion summarizes the argument.

This is a theoretical essay. It combines a classroom thought experiment with historically illustrated cases. The cases were chosen because they contrast sharply in institutional elasticity: the Chinese and British reforms in the late twentieth century, and Gu Jiawei's 2009 visit to Zhongnanhai. I do not treat these cases as a formal test of the Triadic Model; they are illustrations meant to show how the model can be used.

## Results and Discussion

### ***1. The Thought Experiment: Building a Nation on a Floor Tile and "I Oppress Myself"***

I chose a single floor tile in my classroom as my "territory." Why a tile? Because it is ordinary enough that any student could claim one. My territory measured roughly one square meter, its boundaries clearly marked with chalk. I placed a wooden stick beside the tile—my "state military"—and set a hamster cage in its center—my "state prison." Then I stood up and addressed the class: "I declare this tile my nation. I formally recognize each of your 'tile nations'—provided that you recognize mine." One by one, my classmates followed suit. We reached an informal agreement: mutual recognition of sovereignty, mutual non-aggression.

When the experiment concluded, I observed three things. First, statehood can be declared. Second, statehood requires recognition to acquire legitimacy. Third, statehood is, at its core, a collective belief. More significantly, the experiment exposed a boundary condition in the Marx-Engels framework: when a state shrinks to one person, class oppression disappears—yet the state remains. I am both head of state and sole citizen; both oppressor and oppressed. I have become my own oppressor—I oppress myself.

This sounds absurd, but it hits a blind spot in Marx's theory. Marx and Engels defined whom the state serves, but they did not define whom it serves when the state consists of a single individual. According to their definition, the state requires two classes: one that rules, one that is ruled. But in the tile nation, there is only me. If the state must be an instrument of class oppression, then I am now both the ruling class and the ruled—a logical contradiction. This contradiction is not a refutation of Marx but a refinement of him: Marx explained what the state is when it is large; he did not explain what it is when it is small.

Weber offered another perspective. In *Politics as a Vocation*, he wrote: the state is "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber, 1946). Under Weber's formulation, my "stick army" and "cage prison" already constitute a complete system of monopolized violence—no second class is required. Anderson (1983) went further. In *Imagined Communities*, he defined the nation as "an imagined political community." In my experiment, the tile became my territory only because my classmates and I treated it as one. When we recognized one another's tile nations, we were not engaging in coercion or contract; we were participating in an act of collective imagination. The belief became a shared reality because others took it up.

I should be clear about what this experiment can and cannot show. It is an analogy, not a boundary test of Engels or Weber. The classroom already sits inside a school and a state; my classmates' recognition is not recognition by other states, and a stick and a hamster cage are not a monopoly of



legitimate force. What the scene illustrates is how belief and mutual recognition can make a small, artificial order feel real. It does not show that a historical state can shrink to one person. Nor does it show that a state can be created by fiat. What it shows is that even a small, artificial order depends on mutual recognition—not on force alone.

Yet belief does not exist in a vacuum. It must be transmitted and sustained. The mechanism that performs this function is the institution. To understand why the state can exist on belief, therefore, we must understand how institutions transmit belief. This leads to the Balance Theory.

## ***2. The Balance Theory: Institutions as a Scale***

The Balance Theory of Institutions began with a simple observation: institutions are not neutral rules. They are transmission mechanisms. They connect decision-makers at one end and ordinary people at the other. What matters is not what an institution “stipulates” but what it “transmits.”

In the tile nation experiment, I set up a small institution through my own “declaration” and the class’s “recognition.” It occupied one square meter. Still, it did two things any institution does: it carried the belief “this is my country” to the whole class, and it turned that belief into something we all acknowledged. Institutions, at bottom, are connecting devices.

The image of a scale came later. I did not see it in the classroom. I saw it when I looked at the Chinese and British reforms. Both countries faced similar problems—state-owned enterprises in crisis. China used administrative decrees. Britain used parliamentary legislation. Different tools, similar results: workers were laid off, communities broke apart. The weight fell on ordinary people. Decision-makers were not the ones who paid. The scale tilts toward those who hold the power of definition.

“Scalar,” in English, usually means a quantity without direction, such as temperature or mass. What this paper describes is a balance: a scale that tilts. The name used here is therefore Balance Theory.

Why does it tilt? Because institutions are never neutral. The direction of the tilt depends on who sits at the “defining” end. When decision-makers are at one end and ordinary people at the other, the scale naturally leans toward the decision-makers. The design, the implementation, the interpretation—all are controlled by those who hold the power of definition. Whoever defines “legitimate” decides which way the institution leans.

But the scale is not only a one-way instrument of oppression. It also carries feedback. Commands go down; reactions come back up. Reform can produce table-pounding at the top and job-loss at the bottom at the same time. That is the scale transmitting weight from both ends.

Why a scale and not a seesaw? A seesaw is symmetrical. A scale implies weighing. In theory, decision-makers are supposed to balance the two ends—efficiency vs. equity, capital vs. labor, reform vs. stability. In practice, the tilt is set by whoever controls the definition of “legitimate.” The scale is not neutral. Its tilt is already preset.

Yet the feedback valve is not always closed. In February 2009, Gu Jiawei, a 23-year-old migrant worker who had just lost his job in Zhejiang, was invited into Zhongnanhai to speak to Premier Wen Jiabao about the draft Government Work Report. He made three requests: a portable pension system, service centers for migrant workers, and unified labor training. Wen Jiabao said his suggestions were “very important.” Less than a month later, they appeared in the official report. A laid-off worker’s voice became part of national policy.

That shows the valve can open. It does not change the overall tilt. Whether feedback travels depends on whether the institution leaves an interface open and whether decision-makers choose to open it. The scale still leans toward decision-makers. The feedback valve remains in their hands.



One more thing. "Elasticity" is a metaphor, not a law. When I say Rome was too rigid, or that Britain after 1688 was elastic, I am describing outcomes after the fact. The metaphor helps organize cases. It does not predict collapses in advance. What it does help explain is why similar material conditions can produce different reform paths—because the institutional scale transmits different weights.

### ***3. The Triadic Model: Motive, Condition, and Institution***

The Balance Theory explains how institutions transmit. It does not explain where institutions come from, why some are overthrown while others endure, or who sets the tilt of the scale. These questions need a second framework. I call it the Triadic Model.

The Triadic Model says that any historical event depends on three things: motive, condition, and institution. Motive is whether people want to do something. Condition is whether they can do it. Institution here means the rules, enforcement mechanisms, and feedback channels that decide how commands travel downward and how reactions travel upward. None of the three can be missing. I write it as:  $\text{Success} = \text{Motive} \times \text{Condition} \times \text{Institution}$ . If any factor is zero, the result is zero.

The model is not a copy of Marx's historical materialism. Marx puts condition first—the economic base determines the superstructure. The Triadic Model treats condition as one of three. Without motive, even good conditions do not lead to action. Without institution, even good conditions do not allow action. The model also differs from idealism. Idealism puts motive first—consciousness determines existence. The Triadic Model says motive is one of three. Without conditions, wanting alone is useless. Without institutions, wanting alone cannot travel.

I also need to subdivide "condition." It is not a single bag. It includes at least: technological condition, material condition, human condition, organizational condition, environmental condition, and historical condition. These can turn into one another. But separating them helps when analyzing a specific event.

The Triadic Model is useful because it can explain why similar conditions produce different outcomes under different institutions. When motive, condition, and institution all reach a critical point, revolution breaks out. When institutions stay elastic—able to adjust and absorb feedback—motive and condition can accumulate without overthrowing the system. The system corrects itself instead. I will illustrate this logic in Section 7.

### ***4. Philosophical Dialogue: Engaging with Three Traditions***

Before I criticize Marx, I need to say where this paper sits. Materialism captures the state's material face: violence, economic base, class interest. It explains where the state comes from but not why it persists. When the state shrinks to one person, class relations disappear—yet the state remains. Materialism cannot explain why this "one-person state" can still be called a state.

Contractarianism captures the state's consent face: Locke's "consent," Rousseau's "general will" (Rousseau, 1762). It explains where legitimacy comes from but not how institutions carry consent. In the tile nation experiment, my classmates and I did give mutual recognition. But that recognition worked not because it was a "contract." It worked because an informal institution carried it—mutual recognition of sovereignty, mutual non-aggression. Contractarianism misses this transmission mechanism.

Idealism captures the state's belief face: Hegel's "ethical idea" (Hegel, 1991), Anderson's "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983). It explains meaning but not the role of matter and institutions. When my classmates and I believed the tile was a "state," we were imagining something together. But the imagining lasted because of material conditions—the tile, the classroom, the chalk—and because of the institution of mutual recognition. Idealism misses both the material base and the institutional transmission.



The Balance Theory is a synthesis. Institutions are the glue connecting matter, consent, and belief. The state is not just a machine, not just a contract, not just an idea. It is all three. What binds them is institutions. Institutions carry the decision-maker's will into the worker's reality. They channel the general will into specific laws. They turn abstract ideas into lived belief.

"I oppress myself" is not a refutation of Marx. It is a refinement. Marx explained what the state is when it is large. The Balance Theory explains what it is when it is small.

### **5. Three Tensions in Marx's Theory**

A more careful reading of Marx suggests three tensions. These are places where his theory, as it is usually taught, runs into trouble under certain conditions.

#### ***Tension 1: Between economic base and superstructure, there is an institutional layer.***

Marx says the economic base determines the superstructure. That claim is powerful for capitalism. Applied to other periods, it needs qualification.

The High Qing is one example. According to Maddison (2007), China's GDP accounted for roughly 32.9 percent of the world total in 1820. The economic base was strong. Yet intellectual life was thin. Literary inquisitions, the eight-legged essay, and maritime prohibitions pressed hard on cultural production. Apart from *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Scholars*, little comparable work appeared.

Engels later qualified the claim. In his 1890 letter to Joseph Bloch, he wrote that the economic factor is not the sole determining one, and that the superstructure reacts back on the economic base. He also accepted that he and Marx were partly responsible when younger readers overstated the economic side. The High Qing example does not show that economics is unimportant. It shows that an institutional layer sits between the economy and culture.

#### ***Tension 2: Capitalism's "inevitable collapse" was postponed by institutional elasticity.***

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx argues that capitalism is doomed. His reasoning is that crises recur, workers grow poorer, and revolution follows.

That description fit much of the nineteenth century, when many workers lived near subsistence.

Capitalism later changed. Welfare systems, trade unions, suffrage, minimum wages, and universal healthcare were added one after another. Workers did not become poorer to the point of desperation, and the motive for rebellion weakened. Capitalism did not collapse. It absorbed parts of Marx's critique and extended its own life.

This is not a claim that Marx was wrong. He saw the internal contradictions. He did not fully anticipate that institutions could adjust themselves. When institutions remain elastic, contradictions can be absorbed instead of exploding.

#### ***Tension 3: "To each according to need" assumes that needs can be historically satisfied.***

In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx says the higher phase of communism will distribute "to each according to need." He treats "need" as something that can be met. But he does not unpack it: where do needs come from? Do they change?

Marx assumes that needs can be historically satisfied. He does not show that this assumption must hold. If needs keep expanding, "to each according to need" names a condition that may never arrive.



These three tensions do not mean Marx “missed” motive and institution. More precisely: his theory is strong for large-scale, long-term history, but weak for small-scale, short-term change. His “economic base determines superstructure” works under capitalism but needs qualification elsewhere. His “inevitable collapse” needs the variable of institutional elasticity. His “to each according to need” needs to confront the historicity of needs.

The Triadic Model—motive, condition, institution—can fill these gaps. But it does not overthrow Marx. It places him inside a larger frame. His insights remain central. They just no longer carry the whole argument alone.

## ***6. Synthesis: Idealism, Materialism, and the Triadic Model***

The three tensions above point in the same direction. Marx put his weight on “condition.” He had less to say about motive and institution. The Triadic Model is meant to hold all three.

I want to be careful here. I am not saying materialism is wrong. The materialist tradition forces a question that is hard to dodge: who benefits from existing institutions? Marx’s answer—the bourgeoisie—remains one of the sharpest tools in political economy. The problem is not the question. The problem is when the answer becomes the only answer. When that happens, the tool loses its edge.

The High Qing shows what I mean. When institutions are strong enough, they can run on their own, almost independent of the economic base. They can crush a society’s cultural production into a desert. That does not mean the economy is unimportant. It means the economy is not everything.

Idealism has its own strength. It reminds us that people are not machines pushed by material conditions. When I declared in class that “this tile is a state,” I was not reflecting some material necessity. I was making meaning. Anderson’s (1983) “imagined community” is powerful because he saw that belief itself is productive. But idealism often makes belief sound too easy. It can sound as if changing one’s mind would change the world. The tile nation worked not only because I believed. It worked because there was a tile, a classroom, and classmates willing to go along.

Institutionalism fills the gap between belief and reality. Institutions are not just rules. They are sets of transmission mechanisms that turn belief into action and commands into consequences. But institutionalism often treats institutions as neutral—as if they were just “rules of the game.” The Balance Theory breaks that illusion. Institutions always have a direction. And that direction depends on who holds the power of definition.

Institutions are plastic because they have to carry both motive and condition. When both are changing, institutions that do not change lose their capacity to transmit. If they change too fast, they lose stability. That is a tension, not a paradox.

The “I oppress myself” absurdity is not a refutation of Marx. It is a refinement. Marx explained what the state is when it is large. The Balance Theory tries to explain what it is when it is small.

## ***7. Case Illustrations: From Command to Feedback, From Rigidity to Elasticity***

Section 6 argued that when motive, condition, and institution all reach a critical point, revolution breaks out. When institutions stay elastic, they can absorb pressure instead of breaking. The cases below illustrate this logic. They do not test it. I am not trying to verify the model. I am showing how it can be used.

The Chinese and British reforms are the main examples. Zhu Rongji’s SOE reform had a clear motive, used administrative decree, and met ripe conditions. According to Chinese official statistics, around 40 million workers were laid off between 1995 and 2002 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Thatcher’s privatization (Thatcher, 1993) was equally clear in motive, used parliamentary legislation,



and met similar conditions. The result was the collapse of working-class communities (Jones, 2011). Different tools, similar weight. The scale tilted toward the decision-maker in both cases.

The feedback channel sometimes opens, as in Gu Jiawei's 2009 visit to Zhongnanhai, described above (Government Work Report, 2009). Feedback can travel upward. That does not make the scale neutral. The valve still sits in the decision-maker's hands.

What about the broader pattern? Rome, the Glorious Revolution, American independence, the Soviet collapse, Tocqueville's paradox—each of these could be described as too much or too little elasticity. But that description comes after the fact. I am not claiming the metaphor predicts collapse in advance. It helps organize the cases. That is all.

One more qualification. The five civilizational examples I mentioned earlier—Rome, 1688, 1776, 1991, 1789—are not all given equal weight. I mention them to show the range of the metaphor. I do not claim they all fit neatly. Rome was not Britain. The Soviet Union was not France. The point is not to explain every collapse. The point is to show that the same logic—elasticity matters—can be seen across different times and places. That is an illustration, not a proof.

## Conclusion

The paper began with a classroom experiment: a floor tile declared a nation. The experiment showed that belief and mutual recognition can make a small order feel real—but not that a state can shrink to one person.

That gap led to the Balance Theory: institutions are transmission mechanisms that carry commands downward and feedback upward, yet the scale tilts toward those who define legitimacy. The Triadic Model then added motive and condition to the analysis: any historical event depends on all three.

Reading Marx through this frame revealed three tensions: the institutional layer between economic base and superstructure, the postponement of capitalism's collapse by institutional elasticity, and the unproven assumption that needs can be historically satisfied. These tensions do not refute Marx; they mark the limits of his theory for small-scale, short-term change.

The Chinese and British reforms illustrated how the scale tilts toward decision-makers. Gu Jiawei's 2009 visit to Zhongnanhai showed that feedback can sometimes travel upward. These cases illustrate the model; they do not test it.

History is not a machine. It is a scale—tilted by those who shape belief, read by those who live with the consequences. A tile remains a tile. But when enough people treat it as a state, it becomes one—in the limited sense of mutual recognition among participants.

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