

1. TOWARDS A MARXIST THEORY OF THE STATE

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ABSTRACT. Though Karl Marx never developed a systematic theory of the state, he did have much to say about state action. In recent times philosophers have made attempts to capture essential elements of Marx's political theory in order to reconstruct a general understanding of his ideas about state action that is consistent with his theory of history. It has been my purpose in this paper to lay out and synthesize recent developments in this area with ideas developed in the late 1960's and early 1970's in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of what Marx meant. The debate of nearly two decades past, between instrumentalists and structuralists, is developed here in the context of more recent theories of "abdication" and "class balance" to generate four basic principles of state action consistent with Marx's statements about the state.

INTRODUCTION

Marx never worked out a systematic theory of the state. Nor did he provide any detailed analysis on either the relative autonomy of superstructural elements or the political structure and function of the bourgeois state in a developed and stable capitalist economy.¹ In a letter to F. Lassalle dated 22 Feb. 1858, Marx wrote of his intentions to produce a comprehensive and systematic study of the state as part of a larger projected work, of which he unfortunately produced only the first part, namely *Capital*. The section on the state, Marx says in a letter to Kugelmann in 1862, was to have dealt with "... the relation of different forms of the state to different economic structures of society". Such an account was never drafted.

In recent times Marxists have spent a good deal of time attempting to develop models of capitalist state action that are philosophically consistent and compatible with the few remarks Marx made about the state and its relative autonomy. The debate was confined to the simple dichotomy of instrumentalist and structuralist theories of the state. Most Marxists, especially those who initially advocated these theories, have rejected such positions as in themselves too simple to explain the complexities of state action. Though an adequate alternative model has been presented,

namely the "class-balance" theory of the state, it has neither been systematically argued for nor has it been shown how it can account for the kernel of truth imbedded in different formulations of instrumental and structuralist theories. I propose to lay out the main elements of instrumental and structuralist theories of the state and show that the class balance theory is more general and can account for the advantages of each while remaining very much within Marx's view of state action. This class balance theory is not the same as the position advocated in Marx's early writings on Bonapartism where he suggests that the state realizes a measure of autonomy only in exceptional circumstances. Rather, I will advocate a class balance theory where the state balances between opposing class interests purporting to represent the interests of each while playing one off against the other such that it manages to find room to pursue its own interests. The structuralist and instrumentalist theories of the state each make contributions to our understanding of why an autonomous state acts on the interests of the dominant class and this more sophisticated class balance theory, I will argue, takes advantage of these insights.

Structuralism and instrumentalism reflect the two basic ways that class interests can influence state policy; such interests can serve either as a constraint on state action or as a goal for governmental policy.² The first suggests that the state acts within a framework of structural barriers that prevent it from acting against the most important interests of the dominant class. The second would explain the state's essential class character by reference to goals set by pressures from individuals or factions of the dominant class. Each position is more complex than often assumed. I will attempt to develop the main contributions of each and show how the class balance theory shows the virtue of generality in its ability to account for each of these contributions.

2. INSTRUMENTALISM

Traditionally Marx was thought to advocate a position that considers the bourgeois state a mere "instrument" of the capitalist class.³ In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* Engels says that,

Because the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but because it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of these classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class. Thus, the state of antiquity was above all the state of the slave owners for the purpose of holding down the slaves, as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is an instrument of exploitation of wage labour by capital.⁴

Engels, in this piece written a year after Marx's death, presents a misleading picture of Marx's understanding of the capitalist state. Emphasizing the capitalist state's role in

holding down the oppressed class while ignoring the need for the state to moderate the excesses of individual capitalists, Engels places the capitalist state in the same category with pre-capitalist states. Calling the capitalist state an "instrument of exploitation of wage labor by capital" Engels has been taken to mean that the state is a mere tool or instrument through which the bourgeoisie directly dictate their desires consistent with their collective interests; that economic power translates directly into political power. This falsely implies that state action can be reduced to the will of individual members or factions of the bourgeoisie.

Furthermore, Engels often ignored Marx's copious references to the difference in collective and individual bourgeois rationality, leading Engels to confuse the role of the state. In *The Housing Question in Germany* Engels designated the Kaiser as a servant of the capitalist class and concluded that,

The state is nothing but the organized collective power of the possessing classes, the landowners and the capitalists, as against the exploited classes, the peasants and the workers. What the individual capitalists . . . do not want, their state also does not want. If therefore the individual capitalists deplore the housing shortage, but can hardly be persuaded even superficially to palliate its most terrifying consequences, the collective capitalist, the state, will not do much more.⁵

Marx, as we will see, clearly argued that the interests of individual capitalists were directly at odds with the interests of the class as a whole. Marx saw the need for an autonomous state capable of moderating the excesses of the profit-hungry individual capitalist for the sake of the interests of the class; hence Engels' conflation of individual capitalist interests with the collective interests of the whole bourgeoisie is misleading.

Among modern Marx scholars Instrumentalism found its primary expression in the early writings of Ralph Miliband. Miliband's instrumentalist position purports to explain state action by reference either to the class composition of state institutions, that is, the direct exercise of power by individuals in positions of power, or indirectly by influencing policy via political pressure groups. The state serves the interests of the dominant class, Miliband says, because those who make policy or most strongly influence it are either themselves members of the bourgeoisie or sympathetic to the needs of the bourgeoisie due to shared interests or pressure from factions of that class.

As an example of the indirect approach, Miliband, in *The State in Capitalist Society* says that,

In the Marxist scheme, the 'ruling class' of capitalist society is that class which owns and controls the means of production and which is able by virtue of the economic power thus conferred upon it, to use the state as its instrument for the domination of society.⁶

Here Miliband expresses an indirect version of the instrumentalist theory. The state simply cannot ignore "the pervasive and permanent pressure upon governments and the state generated by private control of concentrated industrial, commercial and financial resources".⁷ Hence, the class nature of state action, he says, is explained in terms of economic pressure brought to bear by the bourgeois interest groups.

It must be clear that this form of instrumentalism is decidedly reductionistic. The attempt here is to reduce state action to the will of bourgeois pressure groups. Such a position leaves little if any room for autonomous decision making on the part of the state. Moreover, reducing state action to the will of bourgeois pressure groups entails explaining the state's reformatory role by reference to those whose individual interests must be compromised for the sake of preserving the system. That narrowly rational individuals or factions of the bourgeoisie will use their immense economic pressure to force the state to act against their short-term individual interests for the purpose of maintaining the system simply flies in the face of experience and all that Marx said. We will return to this problem below.

Miliband also suggests that the state's class character can be explained directly, namely by the presence of members of the bourgeoisie or those sympathetic to their needs in the state apparatus itself. This has often been called the "class composition" model of the state. Miliband says that the kinds of men that succeed in politics in advanced capitalist countries are, "whatever their political labels or party affiliations . . . bourgeois politicians".⁸ He goes on:

For it is no more than a matter of plain political history that the governments of these countries have mostly been composed of men who beyond all their political, social, religious, cultural and other differences and diversities, have at least had in common a basic and usually explicit belief in the validity and virtues of the capitalist system, though this is not what they would necessarily call it.⁹

Similarly, he says that,

In this sense, the pattern of executive power has remained much more consistent than the alternation in office of governments bearing different labels and affecting different colorations has made it appear: capitalist regimes have mainly been governed by men who have either genuinely believed in the virtues of capitalism, or who, whatever their reservations as to this or that aspect of it, have accepted it as far superior to any possible alternative economic and social system, and who have therefore made it their prime business to defend it.¹⁰

Notice that Miliband's "class composition" model as he expressed it here does not entail the reductionistic instrumentalism we saw above. Here the state acts on the collective interests of the bourgeoisie, namely the maintenance of the system, since those in power believe in the virtues of the system itself. This does not suggest that they act on the wishes of individual members or factions of the bourgeoisie, that state action

can be reduced to the will of individual capitalists. Rather, the state acts as an instrument of capitalist class interests due to the fact that the state is composed of members sympathetic to the maintenance of bourgeois property relations per se.

This is not to say that all class composition models of instrumentalism must be non-reductionistic. One could interpret such a position as assuming that state actions can be reduced to the wills of individual members of the bourgeoisie that dominate the state apparatus and act on their own self-interest. Such a position is obviously absurd given the conflict of individual and collective bourgeois interests we will now briefly examine. Nonetheless, it should be clear that instrumentalism can be formulated in a reductionistic or non-reductionistic fashion.

I would argue first that the incommensurability of the individual and collective interests of the bourgeoisie makes the reductionistic approach of the paradigm instrumentalist position on its face absurd. Classical political theory from Hobbes onward portrayed the state as a means for a cooperative solution to the Prisoner's Dilemma for all members of society. Marx, however, saw that society was not made up of individuals with structurally identical if substantively opposed interests. For Marx, society consists of two or more opposing classes each with its own internal Prisoner's Dilemma.¹¹ In his historical writings Marx observed that the state in capitalism exists to find a solution to the Prisoners Dilemma played out by capitalists against one another while preventing a cooperative solution played out by the workers (via organization and solidarity). The capitalist state then, according to Marx, operates as a class state acting to preserve the distribution of property and hence enforce the interests of the dominant class.

In a later section of *The German Ideology* Marx says that the tendency of individual capitalists to exhaust the class on which their position depends occurs due to what amounts to a "Free-Rider mentality". He says that,

Capital that has such good reasons for denying the sufferings of the legions of workers that surround it, is in practice moved as much and as little by the sight of the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the earth into the sun. In every stock-jobbing swindle everyone knows that some time or other the crash must come, but every one hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbor, after he himself has caught the shower of gold and placed it in safety. *Après moi le deluge!* is the watchword of every capitalist and of every capitalist nation. Hence Capital is reckless of the health or length of life of the labourer, unless under compulsion from society.¹²

The Capitalist, Marx tells us, may know of the potentially fatal damage he inflicts on the system that allows him to extort his profit, yet he hopes to squeeze as much out of the worker to make the maximum profit possible while proclaiming that "*le deluge*" should come only "*après moi*".

Since the individual capitalist, in his thirst for profits, will burn up the very thing upon which his position depends, namely a ready supply of wage-laborers, the state, Marx argues, must intervene to protect the stability of the system. Of the Ten Hours bill he says that,

These excesses led to the outbreak of epidemics whose severity threatened the existence of capitalist and worker alike. In consequence the state was forced to introduce normal (working) days in the factories despite the bitter opposition of the capitalist class.¹³

In the face of capitalist extravagance, the state, according to Marx, acts to protect the interests of the capitalist class—the maintenance of the system—by placing limits on the working day, in spite of the outcries from the capitalist class itself. The Ten Hours Bill, Engels says, was the product of a situation where "the state was obliged to introduce measures to check the factory owners utterly ruthless exploitation."¹⁴ In their attempts to maximize profits the individual capitalists were destroying the foundations of their own position. And it was only under the compulsion of the state that these individual interests were tempered and the collective interests of the bourgeoisie realized.

Finally, in the *1861-3 Critique*, Marx explicitly recognizes the inherent conflict between bourgeois individual and collective interests. On the reduction of the working day in England, Marx says that,

For the individual capitalist is in constant rebellion against the general interests of the capitalist class as a whole.¹⁵

This direct statement shows that for Marx individual and collective interests of the bourgeoisie are fundamentally incompatible. Such incongruence can only make the reductionistic form of instrumentalism, on its face, absurd.

In his later work, Miliband comes to reject both sides of the instrumentalist account as in themselves sufficient to explain state action. Miliband finds both the "class-composition" model, the position that the personnel of the state system determines the class character of the state, as well as the "indirect pressure" model, in which the bourgeoisie dictate state policy through their immense economic power insufficient to account for a complete theory of the state.

Insofar as the class-composition argument is concerned, Miliband first notes that frequent and important exceptions to the general pattern of class correlation exist at both the upper and lower ends of the economic scale. Miliband is correct to point out that Marx had no problem with the idea that classes other than the dominant one may actually control the state. Marx says that the aristocracy in Britain and Bonaparte in France rule in the interest of the bourgeoisie even if they do not directly represent them. In an article written for the *New York Daily Tribune* Marx says that,

the entire Aristocracy agree, that the Government has to be conducted for the benefit, and according to the interests of the middle-

class, but they are determined that the bourgeoisie are not to be themselves the governors of this affair; and for this object all that the old Oligarchy possess of talent, influence and authority are combined, in a last effort, into one Administration, which has for its task (to keep) the bourgeoisie, as long as possible, from the direct enjoyment of governing the nation. The coalized Aristocracy of England intend, with regard to the bourgeoisie, to act on the same principle upon which Napoleon progressed to act in reference to the people: *'Tout pour le peuple, rein par le peuple'*.¹⁶

Though the Aristocracy in England ruled in the interests of the bourgeois class, Marx says that they prevented the state from being controlled by the bourgeoisie.

Moreover, the class-composition account neglects the fact that even when members of the bourgeoisie assume high positions of power they often do not act in a way that the dominant class, or its individual members, approve; historically many of the great reformers, those who act to moderate the excesses of the bourgeoisie (much to the dominant class' chagrin), have come from that class. Miliband notes that Franklin Delano Roosevelt epitomizes a case of a prominent member of the dominant class who acted to reform the system in spite of the objections from members of his class.¹⁷ Unlike Bonaparte or the British Aristocracy, Roosevelt comes from the ranks of the bourgeoisie, but he was hardly their instrument. Roosevelt acted on the class interests of the bourgeoisie by forcing reforms against the protests of individual capitalists and their factions that would ensure the survival of the capitalist system. Hence, members of the state that come from the dominant class are not always responsive to the will of that class.

Miliband also suggests that this class composition model cannot account for the cases where members of the lower classes worked their way into significant positions in the state apparatus without being absorbed into the bourgeoisie.

In all capitalist countries, members of the petty bourgeoisie, and increasingly the working class as well, have made a successful career in the state service, often at the highest levels.¹⁸

The class-composition model for state action then fails from below as well above. As Miliband says,

The class bias of the state is not determined, or at least not decisively and conclusively determined, by the social origins of its leading personnel.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, bourgeois participation in state practices goes a long way toward explaining the class character of the state. But as Miliband himself agrees, it is of itself not sufficient.

These at least are the reasons Miliband gives for rejecting the class composition model. However, it seems to me that these objections only hold against a class

composition model that assumes state action to be guided by members of the bourgeoisie or those sympathetic to the wishes of members of that class. Each of his counterexamples involves members of the bourgeoisie or members of another class acting on behalf of bourgeois class interest when individual members object; this of course reacts to a reductionistic form of the class composition model. However, such objections do little against the non-reductionistic interpretation of the class composition model set out above. In fact, they tend to support it.

Miliband similarly came to reject the claim that the state acts as a class state simply because of the economic pressure which the bourgeoisie is capable of wielding against the state by virtue of its ownership and control of economic resources. He accepts that the strength of bourgeois pressure groups accounts for much of state's class character; however, it cannot be held as decisive.

Capitalist enterprise is undoubtedly the strongest 'pressure group' in capitalist society; and it is indeed able to command the attention of the state. But this is not the same as saying that the state is the 'instrument' of the capitalist class; and the pressure which business is able to apply upon the state is not in itself sufficient to explain the latter's actions and policies.²⁰

Miliband is correct in rejecting the argument that the class character of the capitalist state derives from bourgeois pressure groups. While the bourgeoisie undoubtedly represent a substantial force that commands the attention of the state, Marx, as we saw, repeatedly observed that the capitalist state often enforced policy in the class interest of the bourgeoisie over and above the immense pressure from bourgeois factions for alternative state action.

3. STRUCTURALISM

Opposing the instrumentalism of the early Miliband was the structuralist position put forward by Nicos Poulantzas. In "The Problem of the Capitalist State" Poulantzas rejects Miliband's instrumentalism:

The **direct** participation of members of the capitalist class in the state apparatus and in the government, even where it exists, is not the important side of the matter. The relation between the bourgeois class and the state is an **objective relation**. This means that if the **function** of the state in a determinate social formation and the **interests** of the dominant class in this formation coincide, it is by reason of the system itself: the direct participation of members of the ruling class in the state apparatus is not the **cause** but the **effect**, and moreover a chance and contingent one, of this object coincidence.²¹

For Poulantzas, the function of the state is broadly determined by the structures of society, that is, functional relationships of various institutions to the process of sur-

plus-value production and appropriation. The state acts then as a class state due to its insertion into capitalist relations of production. Given these unavoidable structural constraints, the state, on Poulantzas' account, cannot be anything but a class state. Applying the structuralist methods and ideas of Althusser to the functioning of the bourgeois state, Poulantzas provides as his main contribution to the early debate an account of state action based on the objective constraints placed on policy making.

The sort of constraints Poulantzas is interested in refer to two different levels of analysis in Marx's writing. First, these constraints originate in the concrete relations of production as they are manifested in definite institutions and legal systems. For example the form of the state or the question of how the state is constituted as a Bourgeois democracy or absolutist state, etc., implies certain constraints; or how the state is situated in the national and international capitalist context vis-a-vis other international institutions in which it operates may constrain state action; or the state might further be constrained by pressures from factions and lobby groups of the bourgeoisie. Second, Poulantzas also refers to how the various aspects of the totality of a mode of production interrelate with each other toward the result of maintaining the mode of production. Here the state is seen as functioning under the general imperative requirements for the reproduction and accumulation of capital.

I will not pursue Poulantzas' position further. There is much debate as to the importance of structuralist elements in his work and entering into the debate will do little more than bog down the exposition of the present enquiry. Rather I propose to set out two basic structural constraints. Though undoubtedly there are many others, I will consider only one developed by Jon Elster and another by Claus Offe and Volker Ronge. These examples will serve to at least give us an understanding of the structuralist position such that the strengths and weaknesses can be assessed and the important elements sifted out.

In his book *Making Sense of Marx* Jon Elster suggests that prior to 1850, Marx held a theory of the state according to which it was a mere instrument for the economically dominant class, with no autonomy of its own.²² And, like others, Elster observes that in Marx's political writings from the 1850's we repeatedly encounter the idea that the state serves the interests of the capitalist class, without being the direct extension of its will as the earlier writings had argued.²³ Politics became for Marx, Elster says, an autonomous phenomenon constrained by economics but not reducible to it.

Marx's newfound interest in state autonomy arose, on Elster's interpretation, due to the fact that in 1850 the bourgeoisie flourished in European countries with political systems not directly geared to their interests—the bourgeoisie in 1848-52 turned away from power. The English capitalists, Elster notes, dismantled the successful Anti-Corn Law League, instead of using it to gain political power. They defeated the landowners on this issue but showed no interest in seizing power from them generally. Similarly, in France and Germany of 1848-9 the outcome of the bourgeois struggle against feudal absolutism and their bureaucratic regimes resulted not in their dissolution but rather in extensive entrenchment. If Marx wished to retain his theory that capitalist states were essentially class states he would have to say how non-capitalist

regimes could ultimately be explained by capitalist class interests. And for this, Elster claims Marx turns to what Elster calls an "Abdication Theory of the State".

Elster says that,

In Marx's political writings from the 1850's we repeatedly encounter the idea that the state serves the interest of the capitalist class, without being the direct extension of its will as the earlier writings had argued. Moreover, he strongly suggests that it is no accident that the state serves that interest. There is an explanatory connection: the bourgeoisie abdicate from power (France) or abstain from taking it (England, Germany) because they perceive that their interests are better served if they remain outside politics. I shall refer to this as "the abdication theory of the state", taking "abdication" in the extended sense in which it also includes deliberate abstention from power. It will be clear from the context when I am referring to abdication in the narrow, literal sense of giving up something one has and when it covers the case of not taking something one could get.²⁴

Marx, according to Elster, explained the fact that the bourgeoisie, in the 1850's, prospered under political systems not directly geared to their interests by what Elster calls the "abdication theory of the state". Elster suggests that a proper model for state autonomy in Marx's understanding of capitalism is one where the bourgeoisie either directly abdicate power or refrain from taking it.

Though the bourgeoisie abdicate power, in either sense, Elster claims they still possess the power to seize such power if they feel that it is necessary. This ability to retake power, should they decide that the state acts grossly against their interests in profit-maximization, sets a powerful constraint on state action. So long as the state works within this constraint and does not push the bourgeoisie too far, it can pursue its own interests. Nonetheless, the state must always be careful to never wholly abuse the interests of the bourgeoisie.

There are numerous reasons why the bourgeoisie would abdicate power. First, the bourgeoisie may deplore their own inability to defer satisfaction. This short-term greed presupposes a discussion of the bourgeoisie as a group affected by the free-rider problem. Here the bourgeoisie shy away from power as it is clear that they are not sufficiently effective as a collective agent to wield political power. They may be able to seize power if they wished, but they could not efficiently retain it.

Second, Marx clearly saw an advantage to the bourgeoisie in fragmenting proletarian attention. Diverting the discontent of the proletariat, at least in part, towards the state would diminish the extent to which it is expressed against the dominant class. Marx did suggest that Louis Napoleon offered a "concealment of the crown" and a motivation for the abdication of the French Bourgeoisie in the *coup d'etat* of December 1851. Similarly the dissolution of the Anti-corn Law League, as a deliberate step back from power, was presented by Marx as pursued in part for its value in diluting the focus of proletarian class consciousness and revolutionary zeal.²⁵

Lastly, one may argue that the bourgeoisie abstain from power since they were preoccupied with the business of making money. Seizing state power and the subsequent exercise of that power is an expensive and troublesome endeavor that only distracted the bourgeoisie from their more natural economic purposes. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx says that the bourgeoisie:

... proved that the struggle to maintain its **public interest**, its own **class interests**, its **political power**, only troubled and upset it, as it was a disturbance of private business.²⁶

Later on he says that the Bourgeoisie,

declared unequivocally that it longed to get rid of its own political rule in order to get rid of the troubles and dangers of ruling.²⁷

Marx then went on to note that the bourgeoisie even went so far as to punish its own journalists and men of letters who defended its political rights in print. In unmistakable terms, Marx says that the French bourgeoisie found political power to be more of an impediment to their business practices than it was worth.

Hence, Marx did formulate much of his analysis of the state of the model of bourgeoisie abdication. Such abdication, for the eminently rational reasons presented, places a significant constraint on state action. The ability of the bourgeois to retake state power, should the bureaucracy act against their interests to such a degree that the benefits of abdication no longer outweigh the harms inflicted by independent state interests, sets a sizeable restraint on state policy making.

Like the other formulations of state action we have so far looked at, there is a good deal of truth in this abdication model. However, in itself it is not decisive. Marx says that the Second Empire,

... was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost ... the faculty of ruling the nation.²⁸

In *The Civil War in France* Marx presents a picture of a bourgeoisie incapable of defending its own interests or in any way influencing state power. It is not that they chose to abdicate this power; rather they simply lost the capacity for effective political action.

In a letter to Marx 13 April 1866, Engels says much the same thing.

I see ever more clearly ... that the bourgeoisie is not capable of ruling directly, and that where there is no oligarchy, as there is in England, to take on the task of leading the state and society in the interests of the bourgeoisie for a proper remuneration, a Bonapartist semi-dictatorship is the normal form; it takes in hand the big material interests of the bourgeoisie even against the bourgeoisie, but

leaves it with no part in the process of governing. On the other hand, this dictatorship is itself compelled to adopt against its will the material interests of the bourgeoisie.²⁹

Like Marx, Engels says that the bourgeoisie was not even capable of assuming political power in the first instance. Where one cannot seize power it is hard to see how "abdication" makes any sense.

One might also object to the abdication model on the grounds that it does not account for the different forms of the state where the bourgeoisie do play a significant role. In a stable capitalist economy, an economy where the challenge to bourgeois hegemony is minimal, the bourgeoisie may dominate the state apparatus. Certainly Marx saw that the bourgeoisie often held strategic positions of power which enabled them to dictate some state policy. Hence, Elster's abdication model which assumes that the bourgeoisie give up power, cannot accommodate those cases where the state has a very minimal degree of autonomy.

A second structural aspect of the state's position in capitalism can be found in the work of Claus Offe and Volker Ronge. In their "Thesis on the Theory of the State" they suggest that,

Since the state **depends** on the process of accumulation which is beyond its power to **organize**, every occupant of state power is basically interested in promoting those conditions most conducive to accumulation. This interest does not result from alliance of a particular government with particular classes also interested in accumulation, nor does it result from any political power of the capitalist class which "puts pressure" on the incumbents of state power to pursue its class interest. Rather, it does result from an **institutional self-interest** of the state which is conditioned by the fact that the state is **denied** the power to control the flow of those resources which are indispensable for the use of state power. The agents of accumulation are not interested in "using" the power of the state, but the state must be interested - for the sake of its own power - in guaranteeing and safeguarding a "healthy" accumulation process upon which it depends.³⁰

If the state wishes to operate effectively and retain power it must take care, so Offe and Ronge tell us, to promote the financial needs of the dominant class. They are correct to insist that this institutional self-interest does not derive from instrumental pressure but is an important structural constraint on state action.

It is worth noting at least one weakness in the structuralist position itself. In *Marxism and Politics* Miliband suggests that

There are 'structural constraints' - but how constraining they are is a difficult question; and the temptation is to fall into what I have called a 'hyperstructuralist' trap, which deprives 'agents' of any freedom of

choice and manoeuvre and turns them into the 'bearers' of objective forces which they are unable to affect. This perspective is but another form of determinism - which is alien to Marxism and in any case false, which is much more serious.³¹

Miliband is right to point out that the structuralist position is inadequate to the extent that it entirely eliminates the voluntarism of the instrumentalist picture and negates individual responsibility. Individuals do exercise substantial influence on state policy and bear responsibility for that action. Hence, the structuralist position is not in itself adequate to explain state action though it does, as do the other theories presented, represent an important element in a more general theory of the state.

4. RELATIVE AUTONOMY

In all the theories of the state set out above, with the exception of reductionistic instrumentalism, the state is said to possess a significant degree of autonomy from the dominant class whose interests it serves. But what is this relative autonomy and what determines the degree of autonomy enjoyed by any given capitalist state? In his later work, Miliband rejects reductionistic instrumentalism and accepts the relative autonomy of the capitalist state. In *Marxism and Politics* he says that,

while the state does act, in Marxist terms, **on behalf** of the 'ruling class' it does not for the most part act 'at its behest'. The state is indeed a class state, the state of the 'ruling class'. But it enjoys a high degree of autonomy and independence in the manner of its operations as a class state, and indeed must have that high degree of autonomy and independence if it is to act as a class state³²

He says later on that,

What this relative autonomy means has already been indicated: it simply consists in the degree of freedom which the state. . .has in determining how best to serve what those who hold power conceive to the 'national interest', and which in fact involves the service of the interests of the ruling class.³³

The capitalist state then, Miliband tells us, possesses a substantial degree of autonomy from the dominant class in how it is to determine national policy. It should be noted that this is not entirely inconsistent with the class composition, nonreductionistic form of instrumentalism. If the state acts on the collective interest of the bourgeoisie, namely the maintenance of the system, because the state itself is made up of people who are sympathetic to the collective long-term needs of capital, they may have, or should I say must have, a significant degree of autonomy from members of the class itself.

Miliband suggests then that the degree of autonomy enjoyed by any capitalist state is "relative"; that is, directly geared to level of class conflict in any given historical context. He says that,

The degree of autonomy which the state enjoys for most purposes in relation to social forces in capitalist society depends above all on the extent to which class struggle and pressure from below challenge the hegemony of the class which is dominant in such a society. Where a dominant class is truly hegemonic in economic, social, political and cultural terms, and therefore free from any major and effective challenge from below, the chances are that the state itself will also be subject to its hegemony, and that it will be greatly constrained by the various forms of class power which the dominant class has at its disposal. Where, on the other hand, the hegemony of a dominant class is persistently and strongly challenged, the autonomy of the state is likely to be substantial, to the point where, in conditions of intense class struggle and political instability, it may assume 'Bonapartist' and authoritarian forms, and emancipate itself from constraining constitutional checks and controls.³⁴

Miliband tells us that state autonomy exists in direct proportion to the extent of class conflict and the challenge to bourgeois hegemony. Different states will have different degrees of autonomy in any given historical circumstance. The greater the degree to which a dominant class controls the economic, political, cultural and ideological terms of the society the greater its control over the state's ability to determine the "national interest", and vice versa. The extent of class conflict then determines the degree to which a state can achieve a measure of autonomy from pressure groups and individuals of the dominant class. Yet, it must be clear that no matter how minimal the degree of class conflict, the state must always possess some degree of autonomy.

Miliband's position accords well with the few references Marx makes to the general issue of capitalist state autonomy. Marx says that the state,

... is nothing more than the reciprocal insurance of the bourgeoisie against both its own members and the exploited class, an insurance which must become increasingly expensive and apparently increasingly independent as against bourgeois society, because the subjection of the exploited class becomes increasingly difficult.³⁵

Marx argues here that as the state's fight to insure the system of domination itself becomes more difficult, as the degree of challenge to bourgeois hegemony from below becomes increasingly acute, the state correlatively becomes increasingly independent from the dominant class. This suggests that the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a state increases as the level of challenge to the hegemony of the dominant class grows.

Similarly, in a passage from the *1861-3 Critique*, Marx said that,

As we know, whether a commodity is sold at a price above or below its value depends in practice on the relative power of the buyer and the seller (a power which is always determined by economic factors). Similarly, whether or not a worker supplies more than the normal amount of surplus labour will depend on the strength of the resistance he is able to offer to the boundless demands of capital. The history of modern industry teaches us, however, that the boundless demands of capital can never be restrained by the isolated efforts of the worker. Instead his opposition has to take the form of class struggle and only when this has led to the intervention of the state has it become possible to set certain limits to the overall length of the working day.³⁶

The workers ability to defend against the boundless excesses of capital "depends on the strength of the resistance he is able to offer". It is only when this resistance takes the form of class struggle, i.e., as a challenge to the hegemony of the capitalist class, that the state, in the interest of the system's stability, is forced to take actions to impose limits on the working day. Hence, the degree of class conflict determines the degree to which the state needs to and can afford to intervene against the individual capitalists. The more it needs to intervene, the more autonomy it will need from the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the degree of state autonomy, as Miliband suggests, depends on the degree of class conflict.

What we have then for the later works of Miliband is the idea that the starting point of the Marxist theory of politics and the state is its rejection of the classical picture of the state, that is the view of the state as a trustee, instrument, or agent of society as a whole. Marx, on Miliband's account, describes society as a class society with a state that is an essential means of class domination. Miliband says that,

It is not a neutral referee arbitrating between competing interests: it is inevitably a deeply engaged partisan. It is not 'above' class struggles but right in them. Its intervention in the affairs of society is crucial, constant and pervasive: and that the intervention is closely conditioned by the most fundamental of the state's characteristics, namely that it is a means of class domination—ultimately the most important by far of any such means.³⁷

The state, immersed in class conflict, intervenes to protect the stability of the system itself, and in doing so becomes the most effective means of class domination. Nonetheless, the state must remain essentially autonomous from the bourgeoisie in order to act effectively as a class state.

5. THE CLASS BALANCE THEORY

The Class Balance theory attempts to explain why the state acts as a class state and yet possesses significant autonomy from the dominant class by reference to its role in civil society -mediating class conflict. The state, on this model, plays on the bourgeoisie's fear of the working class to pursue policy decisions in its own interests

that perhaps stretch the limits of bourgeois interests. We have then a picture of the state immersed in class conflict purporting to represent the interests of each class such that it can, by divide-and-conquer, pursue interests of its own. Much like the small political party in a parliamentary government which is able to wield power disproportionate to its actual influence when it finds itself in a pivotal position between two major blocs, the state's political power comes not from its own resources so much as its position in the midst of strategic relationships.³⁸

This class balance theory of the state must be distinguished from the class balance model often attributed to Marx's analysis of Bonapartism.³⁹ Marx is often thought to put forward a theory of state autonomy where the state enters into a temporary empty space left when a balance of power between the classes is achieved. There is actually little basis for this interpretation in the work of Marx. Mainly this narrow form of the class balance theory is drawn from the same passage of Engels that established the instrumentalist position. Engels, immediately after saying that the state is an instrument of the bourgeoisie for the domination of the proletariat says that,

By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both.⁴⁰

This temporary view of state autonomy is not compatible with Marx's understanding of the incompatibility of collective and individual bourgeois interests. As we saw, the state must **always** have some degree of autonomy from the dominant class if it is to defend their long-term interest against the challenges to the stability of the system from self-interested individual members of the bourgeoisie. That the state must **always** have some autonomy from the dominant class makes this version of the class balance theory absurd.

John Elster suggests that the permanent class balance theory has some claim as Marx's general theory of the state. Of *The Civil War in France* Elster says that,

In the published version Marx says that the empire 'professed to save the working class by breaking down Parliamentaryism, and, with it, the undisguised subservience of Government to the propertied class'. At the same time, 'it professed to save the propertied classes by upholding their economic supremacy over the working class'. And Marx concludes that the empire 'was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation'. Clearly, this is a class-balance theory of the state. By promising to each of the major classes to protect it against the other, the government can rule autonomously. True, in the drafts Marx says that the Bonapartist state was the only possible **bourgeois** government, which rather suggests an explanation in terms of abdication. There is an apparent tension between these two points of view of the Bonapart-

ist state. Did it exploit the conflict between the classes to promote its own interest, or did it exist to promote, albeit indirectly, the interest of the bourgeoisie?

Elster says this is little more than a verbal nuance and goes on:

The state can indeed exploit the conflict between the classes present on the social arena to further its own interests, whatever these might be—imperialist expansion, economic growth, modernization of the nation, more power to the bureaucracy etc. Yet its interests can to a large extent only be promoted by respecting the interests of these classes themselves. This holds with respect to the bourgeoisie, as well as the workers, whose continued well-being and reproduction is a condition for their productive capacity. In fact, one peculiarity of the capitalist mode of production is that the state must relate itself to two distinct productive classes, each of which is indispensable for the production and hence for the tax basis of the state . . . The modern state must face the fact that there is not a single goose that lays the golden eggs. Rather, two geese are needed, and the state must take care that neither kills off the other. As long as it does, it can plausibly represent itself as defending the interests of the one against the other, and hence be able to demand concessions in return.⁴¹

In our discussion of structural constraints on state action we saw that the state is often motivated to act on capitalist class interests insofar as it shares those interests, e.g., the need for a prosperous bourgeoisie to provide tax revenues. The same holds of course on the class balance theory. Marx saw the state, in part, as a mechanism for reform, a means for moderating the excesses of the bourgeoisie. Such reform, for example state intervention in shortening the working day in the Ten Hours Bill, is the sort of policy that the state promises in its attempt to secure working class support against the bourgeoisie as a means, on the class balance theory, of achieving autonomy. This sort of policy, however, acts on both the class interest of the bourgeoisie along with the interests of state autonomy. It is in the class interest of the bourgeoisie that the working day be shortened so as to preserve the available pool of wage laborers and hence maintain the system as a whole even at the cost of cutting the rate at which surplus capital accumulates which shortening the working day produces—a result which opposes individual bourgeois interests. Respecting working-class interests here helps to preserve the system of property relations and hence to maintain both the economic power of the capitalist class and the political power of the state along with the added benefit to the state of an enhanced bargaining position and hence greater autonomy. It should be clear that the class balance theory adds to our understanding of how the state derives autonomy from the class whose collective interests Marx says it represents by placing the state squarely in the middle of the class conflict. And this is, for Marx, where it belongs.

I do not claim that my understanding of this class-balance theory is entirely original. Nor is it really new to Elster. My intention here is to synthesize the different theories of the state and show that this class balance model can account for the ad-

vantages of each theory of the state presented above. Now that instrumentalist, structuralist, abdication and class balance theories have been spelled out we can move on to see just how this class balance theory possesses the virtue of explanatory generality.

I propose four basic elements to the Marxist theory of the capitalist state:

- (1) The bourgeoisie influence state power through direct policy decisions of members of the state who are sympathetic to the needs of the bourgeoisie and indirectly by political pressure; however, such influence is not always decisive.
- (2) One of the main structural constraints on state action is the bourgeoisie's ability to dethrone the state should they act flagrantly against its interests.
- (3) The state acts on the collective interests of capital because the interests of the state often coincide with the interests of capital.
- (4) The degree of state autonomy depends on the level of class conflict.

I believe that propositions 1-4 are all consistent with the class balance theory of the state. The class balance theory, as we saw above, attempts to explain why the autonomous state acts as a class state by reference to its role in civil society—mediating class conflict. The state plays on the bourgeoisie's fear of the working class to pursue policy decisions in its own interests that perhaps stretch the limits of bourgeois interests. We have then a picture of the state immersed in class conflict purporting to represent the interests of each class such that it can, by divide-and-conquer, pursue interests of its own. By purporting to defend the interests of both classes the state can play one off against the other and in the process achieve a measure of autonomy from both such that it can pursue its own independent purposes.

(1) says that the bourgeoisie influence state policy directly and indirectly; however, this influence is not always decisive. The class balance theory can accommodate the actions of individuals and class factions unlike the abdication theory or other purely structuralist positions. On the class balance theory the state plays upon the power of both classes and their opposition to each other to achieve its own autonomous purposes. The state purports to represent all classes and thus must be largely responsive to pressure from bourgeois interest groups. Furthermore, individual members of the bourgeoisie may occupy important positions of power and directly influence state policy towards bourgeois interests. So long as the state as a whole is not unresponsive to proletarian interests such that it no longer appears to represent them, these bourgeois politicians can wield substantial power. However, on the class balance theory bourgeois influence, direct or indirect, could not be decisive or the state would not be autonomous and could not pursue its

own ends. Hence, the class balance theory of the state can accommodate (1).

(2) puts forward the claim that one of the main structural constraints on state action is the bourgeoisie's ability to dethrone the state should it flagrantly violate their interests. This is consistent with the state immersed in class conflict presented in the class balance theory. The state can play on the capitalist's fears of the working class to push the state's independent interests at the expense of the bourgeoisie, for example with heavy taxes, but only to a certain extent. At some point the costs to the bourgeoisie of such state excesses will outweigh their fears of the proletariat and force the bourgeoisie to take action against the state. Hence, the structural constraints set out in (2) set the limit to which the state can use the threat of proletarian revolution to push against bourgeois interests.

(3) says that the autonomous state acts as a class state in part because the state and the bourgeoisie share common interests. The state, on this theory, is actively involved in civil society. Hence, its position depends on the maintenance of the property relationships necessary to that social formation. This interest it shares with the collective interest of capital. Furthermore, the state on the class balance model still needs revenue and hence a healthy bourgeoisie to tax. To this extent the state still shares the interests in capital accumulation that the bourgeoisie do. Thus, the logic of (3) is consistent with the class balance theory.

(4) states that the degree of state autonomy depends on the level of class conflict. This, most of all, shows the explanatory force of the class balance theory. When class conflict is mild the state will have little leverage against the economic influence of bourgeois pressure groups. Individual members of the bourgeoisie will be able then to assume greater direct power in the state apparatus and impose their will on the state with little to fear from working class reprisals. If there is little challenge from below to bourgeois hegemony then the capitalists need not fear the working class to any significant degree and the state has little to use against the bourgeoisie as a means to realize its independent interests. However, if class conflict is acute, the state possesses a significant weapon it can use against the bourgeoisie. In such cases the economic power of the bourgeoisie faces such challenges that it has not the time nor power to oppose or depose the state. Moreover, the bourgeoisie, in times of crisis, must look to the state for protection, investing in the state as much power as necessary, and in extreme cases absolute power, in an attempt to save bourgeois property relations and hence their economic position of dominance. Generally then, the degree to which the bourgeoisie face a challenge is the degree to which the state can effectively use the bourgeoisie's fear of proletarian revolution as a means of generating its own autonomy. The sharper class conflict, the greater capitalist fears, the more the state can pursue its independent interests.

This, to be sure, shows that (4) is quite compatible with the class balance theory of the state.

I cannot at this point be satisfied that I have developed a Marxist theory of the state that is radically new. Most of what has been said above comes from the work of many eminent political theorists. It has been my only purpose here to systematize these theories and show that the main elements of the major Marxist theories of the state are compatible with a more general class-balance theory. This much, I believe, has been shown. □

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Eric Hobsbawm, "Marx, Engels and Politics", in Eric Hobsbawm, ed., *The History of Marxism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 247.
- ² Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 406.
- ³ John Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (New York: Longmans and Green, 1954), 138.
- ⁴ *Selected Works*, (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 587-8.
- ⁵ *Collected Works*, (New York, International Publishers, 1988), 302.
- ⁶ Ralph Miliband, *The State In Capitalist Society*, (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 23.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 69-70.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ¹¹ See Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 96-7.
- ¹² *Capital* v.I, Ben Fowkes (trans.), (New York: Vintage, 1977), 380-1.
- ¹³ Quoted in Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 187.
- ¹⁴ *Collected Works* v.10, (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 291.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 189.

- 16 *Collected Works* v.11, (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 473.
- 17 Miliband, *Marxism and Politics*, 71.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 21 Nicos Poulantzas, 1969 "The Problem of the Capitalist State", *New Left Review* no. 58, 73.
- 22 Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 408.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, 411.
- 25 See Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 147.
- 26 *Selected Works*, 159.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 28 *The First International and After*, David Fernbach (ed.), (New York: Random House, 1974), 208.
- 29 *Selected Correspondence*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982), 166.
- 30 Claus Offe and Volker Ronge, "Thesis on the Theory of the State", in *Classes, Power, and Conflict*, Anthony Giddens and David Held (eds.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 250.
- 31 Miliband, *Marxism and Politics*, 73.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 34 Miliband, "State Power and Class Interest", 61.
- 35 *Collected Works*, v.10, 333.
- 36 See note 15, *op. cit.*
- 37 Miliband, "State Power and Class Interest", 65.

38 See Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 108.

39 See, for Example, Anthony Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 189.

40 *Selected Works*, 588.

41 Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 425-6.