

# **Marxism and Social Science**

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# Marxism and the State

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At a time when Marxism is in retreat across the globe following the implosion and disintegration of 'actually existing socialism' (see, for instance, Aronson, 1995; McCarney, 1990; cf. Callinicos, 1991; Magnus and Cullenberg, 1995) and in an era in which the inexorable tide of globalisation is seemingly laying waste the nation-state (for an emblematic account see Dunn, 1994), it is tempting to conclude that: (i) *Marxist* state theory is an anachronism; (ii) *contemporary* Marxist state theory is an oxymoron; and (iii) a review of developments in the Marxist theory of the state is an exercise in flogging a dead horse. The central aim of this chapter is to suggest otherwise. Indeed the 'rectifying revolutions' of 1989 in Eastern Europe provide a long-overdue opportunity for Marxism – and hence the Marxist theory of the state – to liberate itself from what has too often passed in its name (namely the tyranny, autarky and oppression of 'actually existing socialism'). Reinvigorated in this way, Marxist state theory can provide a powerful critical and analytical tool in the interpretation and interrogation of 'actually existing capitalism'. In so doing it can contribute to our understanding of processes as seemingly diverse and as far from the gaze of Marxist orthodoxy as the reproduction of patriarchal relations in contemporary societies (see, for instance, Jenson, 1992) and the political economy of global environmental degradation (see, for instance, Hay, 1994a; O'Connor, 1991; Pepper, 1993).

Our analysis proceeds in three stages. In the first section we consider why it is that Marxists require a theory of the state and how Marxists have conceptualised this focus of their attention. We then trace the development of the Marxist theory of the state through the work of the founding fathers, its reformulation by Lenin and Gramsci, and the revival of interest in Marxist state theory in the postwar period. Finally

we consider current developments in the Marxist theory of the state before asking why do we need a *Marxist* theory of the state *today*?

## Marxism and the State: Flogging a Dead Horse?

The modern state is . . . an amorphous complex of agencies with ill-defined boundaries performing a variety of not very distinctive functions. (Schmitter, 1985: p. 33)

It might seem somewhat strange, if not downright defeatist, to begin a chapter on the Marxist theory of the state with this comment. Yet in one sense it provides a particularly appropriate starting point. For, as has been remarked elsewhere, 'there is no more arduous task in the theory of the state than defining this notoriously illusive and rapidly moving target' (Hay, 1996a, p. 2). We begin then with perhaps the second most neglected question in the study of the state – what is it? – before moving on to the first – why do we need a theory of it anyway? In fact, as we shall see, although the definitions offered by Marxists are often implicit rather than explicit, and although their justifications for a concern with the state are often somewhat cryptic, it is to their credit that theorists within this tradition have not been short of answers.

### *What is the State?*

A moment's foray into the now substantial annals of Marxist state theory will reveal that whilst Marxists may well rely *implicitly* upon certain conceptions and understandings of the state, they are notoriously bad at consigning these to the page. This makes it somewhat difficult to identify any analytically precise Marxist definition of the state as an object of inquiry, let alone one that is commonly agreed upon. Immersion in the archives, however, eventually yields certain family resemblances in the assumptions which inform Marxist conceptions of the state. These can be crystallised into a number of somewhat different formulations. Here we concentrate on four (for a more detailed discussion, see Hay, 1997).

*The State as the Repressive Arm of the Bourgeoisie* According to Martin Carnoy: 'it is the notion of the [capitalist] state as the repressive apparatus of the bourgeoisie that is the distinctly Marxist

characteristic of the state' (Carnoy, 1984, p. 50). This somewhat one-dimensional conception of state power (the state as the expression of the repressive might of the ruling class) is most closely associated with Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (1917 [1968]), but is also appealed to in the work of Engels (see, for instance, 1844 [1975] pp. 205–7; 1884 [1978] p. 340; cf. van den Berg, 1988, pp. 30–1). Its distinctive brand of functionalism (the attempt to explain something by appeal to its consequences) is well summarised by Hal Draper: 'The state . . . comes into existence insofar as the institutions needed to carry out the common functions of society require, for their continued maintenance, the separation of the power of forcible coercion from the general body of society' (Draper, 1977, p. 50).

*The State as an Instrument of the Ruling Class* The 'instrumentalist' position as it has become known (see below) provides perhaps the most prevalent conception of the state within Marxist theory. It is most often accorded the status of *the* Marxist theory of the state, despite the fact that instrumentalism itself spans a wide diversity of positions expressing rather divergent *theories* of the state. In its most crudely stated form it implies that the state is 'an instrument in the hands of the ruling class for enforcing and guaranteeing the stability of the class structure itself' (Sweezy, 1942, p. 243). Within this distinctive school, 'the functioning of the state is understood in terms of the instrumental exercise of power by people in strategic positions, either directly through the manipulation of state policies or indirectly through the exercise of pressure on the state' (Gold, Lo and Wright, 1975a, p. 34). Accordingly, the 'influence theorists', as Offe terms them (1974, p. 32), have concerned themselves with the analyses of (i) the patterns and networks of personal and social ties between individuals occupying positions of economic power in so-called 'power structure research' studies (Domhoff, 1967; 1970; 1980; Mintz and Schwartz, 1985; for a review, see Barrow, 1993, pp. 13–24); (ii) the social connections between those holding positions of economic power and the state elite (Domhoff, 1979, 1990; Miliband, 1969; for a review see Barrow, 1993, pp. 24–41); and (iii) the social processes moulding the ideological commitments of the state and social elite (Miliband, 1969).

*The State as an Ideal Collective Capitalist* The conception of the state as an ideal collective capitalist has its origins in Engels' frequently cited (though incidental) remark in *Anti-Dühring*, that 'the modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the

state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital' (1878 [1947] p. 338). Advocates of this conception of the state point to the fact that capital is neither self-reproducing nor capable on its own of securing the conditions of its own reproduction. For the very continuity of the capitalist social formation is dependent upon certain interventions being made which, though in the general interest of capital collectively, are not in the individual interest of any particular capital (Hirsch, 1978, p. 66). An external, and at least *relatively* autonomous, body or institutional ensemble is thus called upon to intervene on behalf of capital in its long-term general interests (as opposed to the conflicting short-term interests of individual capitals). This body is the state – the 'ideal collective capitalist' (Altvater, 1973; Offe, 1974, p. 40).<sup>1</sup>

*The State as a Factor of Cohesion within the Social Formation* Though most clearly associated with the work of Nicos Poulantzas, whose phrase it is, the notion of the state as a 'factor of cohesion' can be traced (as indeed it is by Poulantzas) to another incidental and (characteristically) underdeveloped comment by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*:

in order that . . . classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power seemingly standing above society that would moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state (Engels, 1884 [1978] pp. 205–6; see also Bukharin, 1921 [1926]).

Within this conception, the state is understood in terms of its effects and is defined in terms of its role in maintaining 'the unity and cohesion of a social formation by concentrating and sanctioning class domination' (Poulantzas, 1975, pp. 24–5; see also 1973, pp. 44–56, esp. 44, Gramsci, 1971b, p. 244; Jessop, 1985, 61, 177). We return to the problems of this conception below.

As the above discussion demonstrates, the state has meant (and continues to mean) many things to many Marxists.

*Why do Marxists Need a Theory of the State?*

Had Little Red Riding-Hood, having escaped the clutches of the wolf in the forest, found herself confronted by a Marxist state theorist, it is

not at all clear that her new adversary would have had much of an answer to her inquisitive 'what big books you write'. A particularly quick-witted Gramscian might well have replied: 'all the better to help *us* understand the conditions conducive to socialist transformation'.<sup>2</sup> Yet even this begs more questions than it answers. How precisely does a Marxist theory of the state advance the cause of progressive social transformation? The point is that Marxist state theorists – unlike, say, their feminist counterparts (compare Allen, 1990, with Brown, 1992; Connell, 1990; MacKinnon, 1982; 1983, 1985) – have rarely been called upon to offer any such justification for their theoretical endeavours and choices. There is, for instance, no explicit answer to the question 'why do *Marxists* need a theory of the state?' (far less, 'why does anyone else need a *Marxist* theory of the state?') within the voluminous Marxist literature on the state. Having said that, however, such answers are not difficult to construct.

Here, for once, we can usefully follow the so-called German 'state-derivationists'. For although their work is in many respects deeply problematic (see Barrow, 1993, pp. 94–5; Jessop, 1982, pp. 78–101), it did succeed in highlighting the centrality of the state to the process of capitalist reproduction. The derivationists, as the label would imply, sought to *derive* the form and function of the capitalist state from the requirements of the capitalist mode of production. For our purposes we are not concerned to demonstrate, as they were, that the state must by some inexorable inner logic necessarily satisfy such functional requirements, but merely that it is indeed implicated in processes crucial to the reproduction of capitalist relations. Thus, although their perspective can never *explain* the form and/or (dys)function of the capitalist state, as its advocates believed, it can nonetheless provide us with an exceedingly useful heuristic. For insofar as capitalist social relations *are* reproduced (and it does not take much insight to see that in the societies we inhabit they are), such functions must indeed be performed by some institution, apparatus, or combination thereof. It is not a particularly large step to suggest that many (if not all) of these institutions are either state apparatuses themselves or are heavily regulated by the state. The state thus emerges as a nodal point in the network of power relations that characterises contemporary capitalist societies and, hence, a key focus of Marxist attention. It is not surprising then that Ralph Miliband is led to conclude that: 'in the politics of Marxism there is no institution which is nearly as important as the state' (1977, p. 66).

So how, precisely, is the capitalist state implicated in the expanded reproduction of capital? Or, to put it another way, what are the functions that must be performed by the state *if* capitalist social relations are to be reproduced? Numerous aspects of this role can be identified. Taken together they provide ample evidence of the need for a distinctively Marxist theory of the state within Marxist theory more generally.

Firstly we might point to the fact that capital is fragmented into a large number of competitive units, yet crucially relies on certain generic conditions being satisfied if surplus value is to be extracted from labour and profit secured (Altvater 1973). Picture a hypothetical capitalist economy unregulated by the state (the archetypal free market) and comprised inevitably of a multitude of competing capitals. Such an economy is inherently crisis-prone. For no individual capital competing for its very survival will sacrifice its own interest in the general interest. Contradictions or 'steering problems' inevitably arise within such an unregulated economy, yet can never be resolved. Accordingly they will accumulate until they eventually threaten the very stability of capitalism itself, precipitating a fully-fledged crisis of the mode of production. A capitalist economy without regulation, despite the now pervasive rhetoric of the free-marketeters, is inherently unstable (Aglietta, 1979; Habermas, 1975, pp. 24–31; Hay, 1996a, ch. 5; Jänicke, 1990, p. 8; Offe, 1975).

Now enter the state – as a more or less 'ideal collective capitalist'. Altvater argues that this state must necessarily intervene within the capitalist economy to secure conditions conducive to continuing capitalist accumulation, thereby performing what he calls a 'general maintenance function' (Altvater, 1973; Jessop, 1982, pp. 90–1). This comprises (i) the provision of general infrastructure: 'the material conditions that are necessary to all business activities but that cannot be produced directly [*and profitably*] by individual private businesses' (Barrow, 1993, p. 80); (ii) the capacity to defend militarily a national economic space regulated by the state and to preserve an administrative boundary within which the state is sovereign; (iii) the provision of a legal system that establishes and enforces the right to possession of private property and which outlaws practices (such as insider-dealing) potentially damaging to the accumulation of capital within the national economy; and (iv) the intervention of the state to regulate and/or ameliorate class struggle and the inevitable conflict between capital and labour.

Such interventions establish what Jürgen Habermas terms the 'logic of crisis displacement'. By this he means that fundamental crises originating (as 'steering problems') within the economy (and which previously would have rung the death-knell of capitalism itself) now become the responsibility of the state as the supreme regulator of the economy. Crises are thus *displaced* from the economy (which does *not* have the internal capacity to resolve them) to the state (which *may*, or *may not*). If the state as currently constituted cannot resolve such a crisis, then in the first instance it is the particular form of the capitalist state that is called into question, not the very stability of the capitalist mode of production itself.<sup>3</sup>

The implications of this for a Marxist theory of the state are profound. For the state is revealed, once again, as playing a crucial role in safeguarding the circuit of capital. If we want to understand the operation of the capitalist mode of production we cannot afford to dispense with a theory of the state. Moreover Habermas' argument suggests that, if we wish to develop a theory of capitalist crisis (an understandably high priority within Marxist theory), then it is to the state that we must turn initially. For economic crises, at least within contemporary capitalism, are likely to become manifest as crises of economic regulation and hence crises of the state. In summary, if we wish to develop insights into the 'normal' functioning of the capitalist mode of production, and into the transformation of capitalism in and through moments of crisis, we require a dynamic theory of the capitalist state. It is to the resources we have at our disposal in developing such a theory that we turn in the next section.

### The Genealogy of the State in Marxist Theory

No aspect of Marxist theory has been so greatly blurred, distorted or befogged as this, (Lefebvre, 1972, p. 123).

#### *Marx and Engels: Horses for Courses*

In 1977, in the first (and probably still the best) systematic and comprehensive review of Marxist theories of the state, Bob Jessop noted that it was a 'truism' that Marx and Engels developed no consistent, single or unified theory of the state (1977, p. 353). By 1982 (in his book *The Capitalist State*) this truism had become a 'commonplace' and it is now so often remarked upon that it is perhaps

one of the few truly undisputed 'social scientific facts' (see, for instance, van den Berg, 1988, p. 14; Bertramsen, Thomsen and Torfing, 1990, p. 38; Carnoy, 1984, p. 45; Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987, p. 203; Finegold and Skocpol, 1995, p. 175; Miliband, 1965; Poulantzas, 1978, p. 20; Wolfe, 1974, p. 131; cf. Draper, 1977). *There is no (single) Marxian, far less Marxist, theory of the state*. This might be considered something of a devastating blow for a chapter on the Marxist theory of the state. Indeed reviewing Marxist state theory might be considered not merely an exercise in flogging a dead horse, but one that first required the altogether more macabre practice of exhuming and assembling a dismembered corpse limb by limb. Moreover, given the great variety of concerns that animated Marx and Engels' work (to say nothing of Marxism more generally), it is not at all clear that all the limbs belong to the same corpse. For, as Jessop notes, 'Marx and Engels adopted different approaches and arguments according to the problems with which they were concerned' (1982, p. 28). Nonetheless a clear development of Marx and Engels' ideas on the state can be traced.

*The Early Marx The Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State* (1843a [1975]) contains Marx's first extended reflections on the state. Though a sustained and at times polemical critique of Hegel, it is still couched within a fundamentally Hegelian framework. In Hegel's almost mystical idealism the separation between the state and civil society – between the universal and the particular – finds its resolution in the state. The latter is understood, not as an ideal collective capitalist but as an *ideal collective citizen* capable of expressing the general and communal interest of all its subjects. Marx regards this as pure mystification. Thus, although he accepts Hegel's distinction between state and civil society, sharing his understanding of the latter as 'the sphere of economic life in which the individual's relations with others are governed by selfish needs and individual interests' (ibid., p. 59), Marx denies that the state can indeed act in the universal interest. For insofar as state power is thoroughly implicated in the protection of property rights, the state actually functions to reproduce 'the war of each against all' in civil society. The solution lies in what Marx terms 'true democracy', 'the first true unity of the particular and the universal' (ibid., p. 88). The interpretation of this concept in the early Marx is highly contentious. The Althusserian structuralists wish to dismiss these early formulations as unredeemably Hegelian, and as separated by a radical 'epistemological break' from his 'mature' and 'scientific' later writings (Althusser, 1969, pp. 32–4, 62–4, 249). In

complete contrast, Shlomo Avineri detects in the concept of 'true democracy' what would later be termed 'communism'. Accordingly, he argues:

the decisive transition in Marx's intellectual development was not from radical democracy to communism, any more than it was from idealism to materialism . . . The *Critique* contains ample material to show that Marx envisages in 1843 a society based on the abolition of private property and on the disappearance of the state. Briefly, the *Communist Manifesto* is immanent in the *Critique*. (Avineri, 1968, p. 34; see also Colletti, 1972, pp. 41–2)

This latter reading is perhaps reinforced by Marx's essay *On the Jewish Question* (1843b [1975]). Here he distinguishes between political emancipation – associated with formal (and constitutionally codified) democracy – and real human emancipation (or 'true democracy'). While the former represents a significant advance it is but one step on the road to full human emancipation. The latter can only be realised by the transcending of bourgeois society to usher in a qualitatively new social order (Miliband, 1965, pp. 281–2). In his *Introduction* (1844 [1975]) to the *Critique*, Marx eventually identifies the proletariat as the agents of this transformation, laying the basis for a class theory of the state in his later writings.

*Marx Mark Two: The 'Mature' Works* 'like Henry Higgins who, through his work changed the object of his studies into something other than what it was, the purpose of the Marxist theory of the state is not just to understand the capitalist state but to aid in its destruction' (Wolfe, 1974, p. 131). In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels come closest to formulating a systematic theory of the state as a class state. They assert famously that the state is 'nothing more than the form of organisation which the bourgeoisie necessarily adopt both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interest' (1845/6 [1964] p. 59), a conception echoed in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848 [1967] p. 82). This broadly instrumentalist framework (which conceives of the state as an instrument in the hands of the ruling class) is identified by Miliband as Marx and Engels' 'primary' view of the state (1965, p. 283; see also Sanderson, 1963). Yet it is not their only formulation, nor does it remain unqualified. Indeed as Marx notes in 'The Class Struggles in France' (1850 [1978]) and 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' (1852 [1979]) it is often not the ruling class so much as fractions of the ruling

class which control the state apparatus. This is particularly so in the case of the most advanced capitalist societies of the time, England and France. Furthermore the personnel of the state often belong to an entirely different class to that of the ruling class. Such comments are a reflection of a modified and qualified, but nonetheless still essentially instrumentalist, conception of the state. The state is granted a certain degree of autonomy from the ruling class, but it remains *their* instrument – ultimately those who pay the piper call the tune.

At times, however, and particularly in their more historical writings, Marx and Engels' qualified instrumentalism gives way to a more structuralist position. Thus in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire' and again in 'The Civil War in France' (1871 [1986]), Marx grants the state a far more independent role than that previously assigned to it in, say, *The German Ideology*. This 'secondary' view of the state as Miliband describes it (1977, pp. 284–5), is restated by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884 [1978]). Thus, although Louis Bonaparte is seen by Marx as 'representing' (or at least claiming to represent) the smallholding peasants, neither he nor the state is a genuine expression of their interests. As Miliband explains, 'for Marx, the Bonapartist State, however independent it may have been *politically* from any given class remains, and cannot in a class society but remain, the protector of an economically and socially dominant class' (*ibid.*, p. 285, original emphasis). The very structure and function of the (capitalist) state would appear to guarantee (or at least powerfully select for) the reproduction of capitalist social relations. This impression is confirmed in 'The Civil War in France'. Here Marx categorically states that the apparatus of the capitalist state cannot be appropriated for progressive ends and that the revolutionary project of the proletariat must be to smash this repressive bourgeois institution. In so doing:

Marx implies that the state is a system of political domination whose effectiveness is to be found in its institutional structure as much as in the social categories, fractions or classes that control it . . . the analysis of the inherent bias of the system of political representation and state intervention is logically prior to an examination of the social forces that manage to wield state power. (Jessop, 1978, p. 62; see also Jessop, 1982, p. 27).

Given the sheer scope and diversity of the positions briefly outlined above, it is not surprising that Alan Wolfe is led to conclude, 'to study the state from a Marxist perspective means not the application of an

already developed theory to existing circumstances, but the creation of that very theory, based on some all too cryptic beginnings in Marx himself. Hence the excitement of the project, but hence also its ambiguity' (1974, p. 131). In the next section we embark on a roller-coaster ride through this exciting yet ambiguous world.

*The Ambiguity and the Excitement: Marxism and the State After Marx*

*Lenin and Gramsci* Lenin's writings on the state can trace a strong lineage to the Marx of 'The Civil War in France'. In *The State and Revolution* (1917 [1968]), regarded by Lucio Colletti as 'by far and away his greatest contribution to political theory' (1972: 224), Lenin draws out the implications of Marx's writings on the Paris Commune for revolutionary strategy. The state, he argues, is 'an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another' (1917 [1968], p. 266, original emphasis). Since the state is simply and unequivocally the repressive apparatus of the bourgeoisie, it cannot be used to advance the cause of socialist transformation. Moreover, as a coercive institution, it must be confronted by force. Hence, 'the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, but also without the destruction of the apparatus of state power' (ibid.). As Colletti again observes:

The basic theme of *The State and Revolution* – the one that indelibly inscribes itself on the memory, and immediately comes to mind when one thinks of the work – is the theme of revolution as a *destructive* and *violent* act . . . The essential point of the revolution, the *destruction* it cannot forgo is . . . the destruction of the bourgeois state as a power *separate* from and *counterposed* to the masses, and its replacement by a power of a new type. (1972, pp. 219–20, original emphasis)

Lenin's narrow definition of the state as an essentially coercive apparatus is reflected in his vision of revolution as a violent act in which the repressive might of the state is pitched against the massed ranks of the proletariat. Its consequences, of historical proportions, are all too apparent. Thankfully they may now be viewed with the benefit of some degree of hindsight. In contrast, Gramsci's more inclusive definition of the state leads him in a somewhat different direction.

Gramsci's distinctiveness and enduring significance lies in his attempt to incorporate human subjectivity as a dynamic agent within the Marxist philosophy of history (Femia, 1981, p. 1; see also Taylor,

1995, p. 252). His work thus marks a clear break with the economism and crude reductionism that had come to characterise the Marxist tradition since the death of Marx. The central question that he poses, and with which contemporary Marxist theorists continue to grapple, is this: what gives capital the capacity to reproduce and reassert its dominance over time despite its inherent contradictions? His search for an answer leads him to define a new concept (or, more accurately, to redefine an old concept) – that of *hegemony*; and to extend the Marxist definition of the state to include 'all those institutions and practices through which the ruling class succeeds in maintaining the consensual subordination of those over whom it rules (Gramsci, 1971b, pp. 244, 262). The key to Gramsci's theoretical toolbox is the concept of hegemony. With this he demonstrated that a dominant class, in order to maintain its supremacy, must succeed in presenting its own moral, political and cultural values as societal norms thereby constructing an ideologically engendered *common sense*. Yet, as Miliband observes, hegemony is not merely about instilling the values of the ruling class within civil society. Increasingly,

it must also be taken to mean the capacity of the ruling classes to persuade subordinate ones that, whatever they may think of the social order, and however much they may be alienated from it, there is no alternative to it. Hegemony depends not so much on consent as on resignation. (Miliband, 1994, p. 11)

For Gramsci then the obstacles to class consciousness are far greater than Lenin envisaged (and, it might well be argued, have become far greater since the time of Gramsci). While there is football on TV, the revolution is likely to be postponed indefinitely. As Gramsci's biographer, Giuseppe Fiori, comments:

the [capitalist] system's real strength does not lie in the violence of the ruling class or the coercive power of its state, but in the acceptance by the ruled of a 'conception of the world' which belongs to the rulers. The philosophy of the ruling class passes through a whole tissue of complex vulgarisations to emerge as 'common sense': that is, the philosophy of the masses, who accept the morality, the customs, the institutionalised behaviour of the society they live in. (Fiori, 1970, p. 238)

Gramsci's central contribution is to insist that the power of the capitalist class resides not so much in the repressive apparatus of the state as an instrument of the bourgeoisie – however ruthless and

efficient that might be<sup>4</sup> – but in its ability to influence and shape the perceptions of the subordinate classes, convincing them either of the legitimacy of the system itself or of the futility of resistance. This leads him to a highly significant observation and one for which he is rightly famous:

In the East the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The state was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238)

The implications of this for socialist strategy are highly significant, and Gramsci was not slow to point them out. Whereas in the East (Russia) where civil society was ‘primordial and gelatinous’ a *war of manoeuvre* – a ‘frontal assault’ on the state – was indeed appropriate, in the West such a strategy was doomed to failure. For in societies like his own the strength of the bourgeoisie lay not in the coercive resources that it could muster, but in its ability to legitimate its domination within civil society, thereby securing passive acquiescence. Thus before the proletariat could challenge the state it would first have to wage a successful *war of position* – a ‘battle for the hearts and minds’ within civil society. As Carnoy notes: ‘*consciousness itself* becomes the source of power for the proletariat in laying siege to the state and the means of production, just as lack of proletarian consciousness is the principal reason that the bourgeoisie remains in the dominant position’ (1984, p. 88). Gramsci had indeed succeeded in reinserting human subjectivity as a dynamic agent within the Marxist philosophy of history.

#### *Structuralism, Instrumentalism and the Miliband–Poulantzas Debate*

If the historical significance (however unfortunate) of Lenin’s writings on the state, and the theoretical and strategic prescience of Gramsci’s work, should guarantee them both a place in any discussion of the Marxist theory of the state, the same cannot be said of the (in)famous Miliband–Poulantzas debate (Poulantzas, 1969, 1976; Miliband, 1969; 1970; 1973; Laclau, 1975). Indeed its importance lies neither in the quality of the theoretical exchange nor thankfully in its historical significance, but rather in the problems it reveals in Marxist conceptions of the state and in its symbolic status as a point of departure for many contemporary developments. The debate sees neither protagonist at his brilliant theoretical best. Yet it does well display the

extremes to which Marxist state theorists seem, on occasions, inexorably drawn:

It takes the form of a dense theoretical exchange, initially polite but increasingly ill-tempered, about the source of power within contemporary capitalist societies and the relationship between the ruling class and the state apparatus in the determination of the content of state policy. Is the modern state a state in capitalist society or a capitalist state, and what difference does it make anyway?

Poulantzas’ opening salvo (1969) takes the form of a detailed textual critique of Miliband’s path-breaking *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969). Poulantzas notes the absence (excepting the work of Gramsci) of a systematic attempt to formulate a Marxist theory of the state and praises Miliband for his attempts to fill this theoretical vacuum as well as his devastating critique of the bourgeois mythology of the state. However, after the spoonful of sugar comes the medicine. In seeking to expose the dominant bourgeois ideology of the neutrality and independence of the state, Miliband is unwittingly drawn onto the terrain of his adversaries (1969, pp. 241–2). His reflections thus remains tarnished by the residue of bourgeois assumptions about the state – principally that power resides not in the state apparatus itself but in the *personnel* of the state. He thereby fails to grasp what Poulantzas sees as the objective structural reality of social classes and the state. Instead Miliband entertains the bourgeois mythology of the free-willed active agent. Accordingly he focuses on *class* in terms of intersubjective relationships instead of objective structural locations within the relations of production, and on the *state* in terms of the interpersonal alliances, connections and networks of the state ‘elite’ (ibid., p. 242) instead of the structure, form and function of this (capitalist) institution.

This point lies at the heart of the debate. Yet from here on it degenerates into a somewhat crude and polarised struggle between *instrumentalism* (Poulantzas’ caricature of Miliband’s position) and *structuralism* (Miliband’s caricature of Poulantzas’ position). Ironically, in the debate itself (though not in their more thoughtful work), both protagonists come close to living up to the crude parodies they present of one another.

*Instrumentalism*, as we have seen, tends to view the state as a neutral instrument to be manipulated and steered in the interests of the dominant class or ruling ‘elite’ (the term Miliband deploys). Its basic thesis is that the modern state serves the interests of the bourgeoisie in a capitalist society because it is dominated by that class. Such a

perspective asserts the causal primacy of *agency* (the conscious actions of individuals or social forces) over *structure*. In the determination of state policy, the personnel of the state are thus accorded primacy over the state's form and function (as a capitalist apparatus). As Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocpol note:

An instrument has no will of its own and thus is capable of action only as the extension of the will of some conscious actor. To understand the state as an instrument of the capitalist class is to say that state action originates in the conscious and purposive efforts of capitalists as a class. (Finegold and Skocpol, 1995, p. 176)

Instrumentalism (as expressed in the work of Domhoff and the early Miliband) may thus be regarded as *agency-* or *personnel-centred*, and as expressing a simple view of the relationship between the state apparatus and the ruling class: the ruling class is an instrument of the state apparatus (see Table 8.1). The instrumentalist thesis can be summarised in terms of its answers to three questions (see Box 8.1)

An instrumentalist theory of the state is thus a theory of *the state in capitalist society* (the title of Miliband's book) as opposed to a theory of the capitalist state. For if the state in a capitalist society is indeed

#### Box 8.1

- Q:** *What is the nature of the class that rules?*  
**A:** The capitalist class rules and is defined by its ownership and control of the means of production.
- Q:** *What are the mechanisms that tie this class to the state?*  
**A:** Socialisation, interpersonal connections, and networks. The capitalist class uses the state as an instrument to dominate the rest of society.
- Q:** *What is the concrete relationship between state policies and ruling class interests?*  
**A:** State policies further the general interests of the capitalist class in maintaining their domination of society.

*Source:* Questions from Gold, Lo and Wright, 1975a, p. 32; answers adapted from Barrow, 1993, p. 16.

capitalist it is only contingently so. That the state is engaged in the reproduction of capitalist social and economic relations is not in any sense guaranteed. Rather such a situation can arise only by virtue of the dominance of a capitalist 'ruling elite' within capitalist society and its personal ties to the members of the state apparatus.

In marked contrast, a *structuralist* position (such as that outlined by the state derivationists and by the Poulantzas of 'the debate') asserts the causal priority of structures over agents and their intentions. Agents are conceived of as the 'bearers' (or *Träger*) of objective structures over which they can exercise minimal influence. Within such a framework, the capitalist state is viewed as a structural system with form and function determined largely independently of the aspirations, motivations and intentions of political actors or members of the dominant class. It is a theory of the *capitalist state*. A structuralist account, as the term would imply, is *structure-* or *state-centred*. It also expresses a simple view of the relationship between the state apparatus and the ruling-class: the former acts in the long-term collective interest of the latter (see Table 8.1).

The Miliband–Poulantzas debate did not advance the cause of Marxist theory very far. However, in pointing to the limitations of both structure-centred and agency-centred accounts (see also Hay, 1995a), it has provided a point of departure for many recent developments in state theory. It is to the two most fruitful attempts to exorcise the ghost of the Miliband–Poulantzas debate that we now briefly turn.

*Beyond Structuralism v. Instrumentalism: Block and Jessop* Before considering the 'state of the art' in the Marxist theory of the state, it is important first to note that Miliband and Poulantzas were not to

TABLE 8.1 *Beyond structuralism vs. instrumentalism*

	<i>Personnel-centred (Agency-centred)</i>	<i>State-centred (Structure-centred)</i>
Simple view of the relationship between the state apparatus and the ruling class	Instrumentalism (Domhoff, early Miliband)	Structuralism (early Poulantzas, state derivationists)
Dialectical view of the relationship between the state apparatus and the ruling class	The state as custodian of capital (later Miliband, Block)	Strategic-relational approach (Jessop, later Poulantzas)

remain resolute and intractable in defence of the positions to which they were drawn in the heat of the theoretical exchange. Indeed both moved towards more dialectical conceptions of the relationship between structure and agency in their later work, locating political actors as strategic subjects within complex and densely structured state apparatuses. Thus Miliband, in an exercise of apparent contrition, concedes, 'the notion of the state as an "instrument" . . . tends to obscure what has come to be seen as a crucial property of the state, namely its *relative autonomy* from the "ruling class" and from civil society at large' (1977, p. 74). He emphasises the need for a consideration of 'the character of [the state's] leading personnel, the pressures exercised by the economically dominant-class, and the structural constraints imposed by the mode of production' (ibid., pp. 73–4; see also Miliband, 1994, pp. 17–18). Such observations are more systematically developed in the work of Fred Block (1987a, 1987b).

Block's concern is to demonstrate how, despite the division of labour between 'state managers' and the capitalist class, the state tends to act in the long term collective interest of capital. He begins by noting that the capitalist class, far from actively sponsoring major reforms in its long-term interest, often provides the most vociferous opposition to such measures. The capitalist class must then be regarded as simply incapable of acting in its own long-term collective interest. Yet at the same time

ruling class members who devote substantial energy to policy formation become atypical of their class, since they are forced to look at the world from the perspective of state-managers. They are quite likely to diverge ideologically from politically unengaged ruling-class opinion. (Block, 1987a, p. 57)

This provides the basis for an answer to Block's conundrum. State managers may in fact have interests far closer to the long-term collective interest of capital than capital itself (see also Marsh, 1995b, p. 275). Here Block points to the relationship of 'dependency' between state managers on the one hand, and the performance of the capitalist economy on the other. As Carnoy explains, such dependency exists since:

economic activity produces state revenues and because public support for a regime will decline unless accumulation continues to take place. State managers willingly do what they know they must to facilitate capital accumulation. Given that the level of economic

activity is largely determined by private investment decisions, such managers are particularly sensitive to overall 'business confidence'. (Carnoy, 1984, p. 218)

The state becomes the *custodian* of the general interest of capital. Block manages to reconcile within a single account a sensitivity to the intentions, interests and strategies of state personnel (and their relative independence from the ruling class) with an analysis of the structural context within which these strategies are operationalised and played out. His work displays a complex and *dialectical* view of the relationship between the state apparatus and the ruling class which escapes both the intentionalism and indeterminacy of instrumentalist accounts and the functionalism and determinism of structuralist formulations. In its overarching concern with state managers as utility-maximising rational subjects (Taylor, 1995, p. 264), it is nonetheless *personnel-* or *agency-centred* (see Table 8.1).

Though it represents a considerable advance on its more instrumentalist forebears, Block's work is still ultimately somewhat frustrating. For as Finegold and Skocpol point out (1995, p. 98), he remains ambiguous as to whether capitalist reforms initiated by state managers – and the subject of political pressure from both working and ruling classes alike – will *always* prove functional for capital in the last instance (for evidence of this ambiguity compare Block, 1987a, p. 62, with 1987a, p. 66). If so, then Block's gestural nod to the independent interests of state managers in promoting economic growth is scarcely sufficient to account for such an exact (and convenient) functional fit. If not, then how precisely is it that dysfunctional outcomes that might prove threatening to capitalist stability are avoided whilst those less damaging of the system (and, one might have thought, easier to avoid) are allowed to develop? Either way, Block seems to fall back on a residual functionalism which is not so very different from that associated with the notion of the state as an 'ideal collective capitalist'. His achievement should not, however, be underemphasised. Yet it surely lies more in his *recognition* of the need to specify the mechanisms ensuring that the actions of state personnel do not, by and large, jeopardise continued capital accumulation, than in the particular mechanisms that he proceeds to specify.

If Block's conception of the state as *custodian of capital* is the dialectical heir to the legacy of instrumentalism, then Bob Jessop's *strategic-relational approach* is the dialectical heir to the structuralist inheritance (see in particular Jessop, 1990; for commentaries, see

Barrow, 1993, pp. 153–6; Bonefeld, 1993; Hay, 1994b; 1995b, pp. 199–202; Mahon, 1991; Painter, 1995, pp. 63–6; Taylor, 1995, pp. 259–63). More convincingly than any other Marxist theorist past or present, he succeeds in transcending the artificial dualism of structure and agency by moving towards a truly dialectical understanding of their inter-relationship. Structure and agency logically entail one another, hence there can be no analysis of action which is not itself also an analysis of structure. All social and political change occurs through strategic interaction as strategies collide with and impinge upon the structured terrain of the strategic context within which they are formulated. Their effects (however unintentional, however unanticipated) are to transform (however partially) the context within which future strategies are formulated and deployed.

Such a formulation has highly significant implications for the theory of the (capitalist) state. Jessop follows the later Poulantzas in conceiving of the state as a strategic site traversed by class struggles and as 'a specific institutional ensemble with multiple boundaries, no institutional fixity and no pre-given formal or substantive unity' (Jessop, 1990, p. 267; Poulantzas, 1978b). The state is a dynamic and constantly unfolding system. Its specific form at a given moment in time in a particular national setting represents a 'crystallisation of past strategies' which privileges certain strategies and actors over others. As such, 'the state is located within a complex *dialectic of structures and strategies*' (ibid., p. 129, emphasis added). This introduces the important notion that the state, and the institutions which comprise it, are *strategically selective*. The structures and modus operandi of the state 'are more open to some types of political strategy than others' (ibid., p. 260). The state presents an uneven playing field whose complex contours favour certain strategies (and hence certain actors) over others.

Within such a perspective there can be no guarantee that the state (and governments wielding state power) will act in the general interest of capital (whatever that might be). Indeed, insofar as the function of the capitalist state can be regarded as the expanded reproduction of capital, the specific form of the capitalist state at a particular stage in its historical development is always likely to problematise and eventually compromise this function. The state thus evolves through a series of political and economic crises as the pre-existing mode of intervention of the state within civil society and the economy proves increasingly dysfunctional. The outcome of such crises, however, and the struggles that they engender cannot be predicted in advance. For if

we are to apply the strategic-relational approach, they are contingent upon the balance of class (and other) forces, the nature of the crisis itself and (we might add) popular *perceptions* of the nature of the crisis (Hay, 1996b, 1996c) – in short, on the strategically selective context and the strategies mobilised within this context.

Jessop's approach then, despite its concern with state structures and their strategic selectivity (see Table 8.1), and despite its structuralist pedigree, eschews all forms of functionalism, reductionism and determinism. The strategic-relational approach offers no guarantees, – either of the ongoing reproduction of the capitalist system or of its impending demise (though, given the strategic selectivity of the current context, the odds on the latter would appear remote). It is, in short, a statement of the contingency and indeterminacy of social and political change (1990, pp. 12–13). The casualty in all of this is the *definitive* (and very illusive) Marxist theory of the state. As Jessop himself notes, there can be no general or fully determinate theory of the capitalist state, only theoretically informed accounts of capitalist states in their institutional, historical and strategic specificity (Jessop, 1982, pp. 211–13, 258–9; 1990, p. 44).

We would appear to have come full circle. We end where we began, with a paradox: there is no Marxist theory of the state – there couldn't be.

## Conclusions

Why do we need a *Marxist* approach to the state *today*? For in a world which is seemingly either globalised or globalising and in which Marxism as a political project is defunct, it is tempting to dismiss Marxist attempts to theorise the state as anachronistic and of purely historical interest – if that. With the nation-state on the wane do we really need a theory of the state anyway? And even if we think we do, with Marxism in retreat why a *Marxist* theory of the state?

The first objection can be dealt with fairly swiftly. Yes, the current phase of capitalist accumulation is qualitatively and quantitatively different from all previous stages – both in terms of the international mobility of capital and in the truly global nature of the social, political and environmental pathologies with which it is associated. Yet it would be dangerous to conclude either (i) that this threatens to precipitate the end of the nation-state or (ii) that, even if it did, we could afford to dispense with the theory of the state. For whilst

national communities, states and governments still provide the primary focus of political socialisation, mobilisation, identification and representation, the nation-state is firmly here to stay. Moreover, while this remains so, the sort of concerted inter-state response necessary to deal with global ecological crisis is likely to be thwarted and hijacked by more parochial national interests and considerations. Hence the very form of the state itself (its national character) may militate against a genuinely global response to a genuinely global crisis. The *national* form of the state may problematise its *global* function. Environmentalism may concern itself with global problems, but environmentalists require a theory of the state (Hay, 1994b, p. 218; 1996d). Furthermore, as Jessop notes, the internationalisation of capital has rendered (more) porous the boundaries of formerly closed national economies, but it has not lessened the significance of national differences or indeed national *states* in the regulation of capitalist accumulation. The form of the state may have changed, and it may have been subject to a 'tendential hollowing-out' as many of its previous functions and responsibilities have been displaced upwards, downwards and outwards, but its distinctively national character remains (Jessop 1994a, 1994b, 1995; Hay and Jessop, 1995). Thus the process of globalisation (more accurately, the processes that *interact* to produce a tendential globalisation) merely demonstrate the continuing centrality of the state to the dynamics of capitalist accumulation.

Yet it is one thing to demonstrate the continuing need for a theory of the state in the abstract; it is another thing altogether to claim this as justification for a distinctively *Marxist* approach to the study of the state. The proof of this particular pudding must be in the eating and it should be recalled that there are a great variety of different flavours – and an even greater variety of different tastes. Nonetheless two general arguments for a sophisticated Marxist conception of the state (such as that formulated by Jessop) can be offered: one substantive, the other methodological.

For the first we can return to the above example. Environmental crisis has its origins in an industrial growth imperative. This might suggest the relevance of a theory of *the state in industrial society* to the political economy of ecology. Yet a moment's further reflection reveals that the growth imperative that characterises modern societies – and is thus responsible for the environmental degradation we witness – is a *capitalist* growth imperative, sustained and regulated by the institutions of a capitalist state. Environmentalists then need, not merely a

theory of the state, but a theory of the *capitalist* state. As such a theory, Marxism clearly has much to offer.

The second reason is somewhat more esoteric, and relates to the methodological sophistication of modern Marxist approaches to the state. Though characterised for much of its history by the seemingly intractable dispute between structural functionalism on the one hand and instrumentalism on the other, considerable methodological advances have been made in Marxist state theory in recent years. In this respect modern Marxist state theory has much to offer to Marxists and non-Marxists alike. For as authors like Anthony Giddens (1984) and Nicos Mouzelis (1991; 1995) have noted, the dualism of structure and agency (of which the structuralism–instrumentalism battle is merely a reflection) is not only a problem within Marxism but has characterised social and political science since its inception. In the strategic–relational approach it has been transcended in a simple yet sophisticated manner. Though not all will share the analytical, critical and political concerns that animate contemporary Marxist theory, few can help but benefit from the methodological insights it offers.

Jessop's central achievement has been to take Marxist state theory beyond the fatuous question: *is the modern state a capitalist state or a state in capitalist society?* If his work receives the attention it deserves, feminists need not duplicate the errors and deviations of Marxist theory by asking themselves: *is the contemporary state essentially patriarchal or merely a state in a patriarchal society?* Modern Marxist theory will probably never get the chance to follow Henry Higgins in transforming the object of its study. But those who might can surely learn a thing or two from its deviations . . .

## Notes

1. As Offe notes, 'it is not without good reason that Engels . . . calls the state the "ideal" collective capitalist; for the state as a "real" collective would clearly be a logical impossibility . . . firstly because the state apparatus is not itself a "capitalist" . . . and secondly because the concept of the collective capitalist is itself nonsensical in that competition . . . is essential for the movement of capital' (1974, p. 31).
2. To which an equally sharp Little Red Riding-Hood might be tempted to retort, 'My, what big words you use.' To that there is probably no suitable response.
3. Here we might think of the crisis of the 1970s in Britain. Though precipitated to some extent by economic factors (such as the exhaustion

of the postwar 'Fordist' mode of economic growth), as the subsequent Thatcherite restructuring demonstrates, this was a crisis of the British state, not of British capitalism per se (see Hay, 1996a, chs 5 & 6).

4. Languishing in a cell in one of Mussolini's prisons, Gramsci was only too well aware of the ruthless efficiency of the state's coercive arm.

## 9

# Marxism and the Welfare State

CHRIS PIERSON

The relationship between Marxism and the welfare state is complex. Since there is not one 'true' Marxism but many and since the experience of the welfare state under advanced capitalism has proved to be quite diverse, we should hardly expect to find a single and wholly consistent Marxist explanation of welfare state development. And so it proves. Some Marxists have seen the welfare state principally as a controlling agency of the ruling capitalist class. Others have seen it as the 'Trojan Horse' within which socialist principles can be carried into the very heartlands of capitalism. Again some Marxists have argued that the welfare state provides the indispensable underpinning for a market-based social and economic order, whilst others have seen it as incompatible with the long-run integrity of a capitalist economy. A number of Marxist and neo-Marxist commentators have managed to affirm all of these principles more or less simultaneously! At the same time, both Marxism and the welfare state have a history. It is clear that the welfare state as an object of Marxists' inquiry has changed through time and so (often in response to these changes) has the intellectual apparatus with which they have sought to explain it. In this chapter, we try to make sense of this diversity of Marxist explanations and consider whether Marxism can still tell us anything useful about welfare states.

### Marx and the Welfare State

It is natural enough to begin our consideration of Marxism and the welfare state with Marx. In doing so, two general comments are in