HOW RELATIVE IS THE RELATIVE AUTONOMY OF THE STATE? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF NEOMARXISM
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HOW RELATIVE IS THE RELATIVE AUTONOMY OF THE STATE? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF NEOMARXISM
Abstract

This article argues that neomarxism has failed to develop a methodologically sound and logically consistent theory of the different determinants of power relations in general and state power in particular. It is contended, however, that the seeds of such a theory may be found in the 'relational' approach to state power suggested by Poulantzas in his last years and partially resumed by Przeworski in the early 1980s. This view proposes that while state agents have the capacity to influence social processes due to their control over a wide range of political, economic and ideological resources, the degree of power they are able to exercise intrinsically depends on the level of support or resistance they find among different social actors, including the subordinate classes. It is suggested that a reformulation of this perspective may provide an alternative paradigm to the predominant pluralist and weberian traditions of state theory.

Resumen

Este artículo argumenta que el neomarxismo ha fracasado en desarrollar una teoría metodológicamente sólida y lógicamente consistente acerca de los distintos factores que determinan las relaciones de poder en general y el poder del estado en particular. Se afirma, sin embargo, que el germen de una teoría semejante puede encontrarse en el concepto 'relacional' de poder estatal sugerido por Poulantzas en sus últimos años y retomado parcialmente por Przeworski a comienzos de los años 80. Esta perspectiva propone que si bien los agentes estatales son capaces de influenciar procesos sociales debido a su control sobre una amplia gama de recursos políticos, económicos, e ideológicos, el grado de poder que los mismos pueden ejercer depende intrínsecamente del nivel de apoyo o resistencia que encuentren en diversos actores sociales, incluyendo las clases subordinadas. Se sugiere que una reformulación de esta perspectiva puede resultar en un paradigma alternativo a la tradiciones pluralistas y weberianas predominantes de teoría del estado.
Marx was the first to unmask with great clarity the ideological aspect of this supposed theory: the state is not just an instrument, an apparatus, a set of structures whose main and defining purpose is to enable the monopoly of force to be exercised. Over and above this, it is an instrument which serves particular (class) interests.

Norberto Bobbio, Which Socialism?

Introduction

Is there a ‘Marxist doctrine of the state’? Norberto Bobbio posed this question in the mid 1970s, arguing that western Marxism lacked a genuine theory of the state and politics in general. He was partially right. Neither Marx nor Lenin developed a comprehensive theory of politics. Marx considered political power in general, and the state in particular, to be an epiphenomenal or instrumental manifestation of the real —but “hidden”— locus of power: the objective position of the capitalist class as the owner of the means of production and controller of the process of production. Lenin, accordingly, proposed that once the revolutionary party was in power, the state would be a mere ‘transitional’ phenomenon, bound to disappear in a post-capitalist society.

Regarding contemporary Marxism, however, Bobbio’s claim does not seem to be true, at least not without some qualifications. In the last three decades, a burgeoning literature among neo-marxist theorists has challenged the main tenets of the orthodox marxist-leninist view of the state. From being a mere product of class power, the conception of political power was reversed, becoming the main determinant of the persistent reproduction of capitalist-class relations. Following the initial analyses of Gramsci and Althusser, Poulantzas proposed the idea that the state is a relatively autonomous structure which tends to reproduce class relations by virtue of the broad range of coercive, ideological and economic resources at its disposal within a hegemonic system of power. A different perspective, initiated by Claus Offe and predominant in contemporary studies, suggests that the state is better seen as an independent institution which tends to reproduce class relations as an indirect effect of the structural dependence of the state on the process of capitalist accumulation. Navigating a course between both strands of neo-marxist literature, other authors, like Adam Przeworski, explain the reproduction of capitalist relations of production as an effect of both the intervention of the state to secure the process

1 This question refers to the series of articles that Bobbio wrote between 1973 and 1976 about the relation between capitalism, socialism and democracy. See, for the English translation of these articles, Bobbio (1987).
of accumulation and the compromise between workers and capitalists that takes 
place within a hegemonic system of domination. All these studies, in turn, have paid 
particular attention to the role that democratic institutions play; not simply to 
obscure class domination, as in the traditional Marxist view, but as an independent 
factor that either enhances or creates contradictions in the process of capitalist 
reproduction.

What still holds true about all this literature is that, in spite of its many 
insights, the neo-marxist theory of the state remains deeply fragmented and 
contradictory. The main reason for this failure, I will argue, is the lack of a 
consistent theory of the different determinants of power relations. In this essay, I 
propose that the seeds of such a theory may be contained, albeit in an incomplete 
form, in Poulantzas' 'relational' notion of power. According to this concept, 
proposed by Poulantzas in his last years and partially resumed by Przeworski in the 
early 1980s, the state can never be considered as completely "separate" or "neutral" 
with respect to civil society because the degree of power it is able to exercise is 
always dependent on the support or resistance of the different social agents that act 
both within and outside its structures. These agents, in turn, enjoy different 
capacities to realize their interests according to their relative positions in the social 
structure and the opposition, resistance or consent they find in other social forces. A 
reconceptualization of this perspective, I suggest, may provide a viable theoretical 
framework to integrate the different findings of the recent neo-marxist literature into 
a coherent critique of the pluralist and weberian traditions of state theory.

I will begin my analysis by tracing the influence of the gramscian and 
althusserian paradigms in the neo-marxist theory of the state. In the second part, I 
move to consider the main themes of Poulantzas' theory, with a particular emphasis 
on his mature work. In a third part, I will analyze the different new trends of Marxist 
theory after Poulantzas, focusing on the work of Claus Offe, Fred Block and Adam 
Przeworski. I finally conclude by critically assessing the prospects for a 
reformulation of a Marxist theory of power and the current limits of Marxism in 
providing a comprehensive explanation of the state, power, and democracy in 
contemporary societies.

I. The Legacy of Gramsci and Althusser

Hegemony and the Consensual Basis of Class Domination

In contrast to Hegel and the idealist tradition in political philosophy, Marx 
developed two complementary views of the state. First, he proposed that the state, 
rather than being the highest product of the general development of human
consciousness, is merely a reflection of the dominant relations of production that shape ‘civil society’. Second, Marx argued that the state, far from being the representative of the common good, is no more than a coercive apparatus at the service of the interests of the dominant class. This conception of the state, in turn, was not essentially different in Lenin, for whom ‘the’ function of the bourgeois state is to hide, under a ‘democratic shell’, an essentially repressive reproduction of class structure and class relations. The idea of the state as a mere repressive apparatus of the bourgeoisie, however, proved insufficient in the early decades of this century for explaining the successive failures of mass workers’ movements and the rise of a reactionary fascism all too often supported by much of the working class.

In the face of these developments, Antonio Gramsci, a key member of the Italian Communist Party, proposed a different explanation of the relation between state and civil society and the mechanisms through which the ruling class is able to secure its political domination. In contrast to the prevalent marxist-leninist tradition, Gramsci argued that the specific trait of bourgeois domination in the West was not its permanent use of coercion to obtain compliance from the dominated classes. Rather, he suggested, the bourgeoisie often rules with the active consent of the working class. Accordingly, he developed an alternative Marxist view of the state as “the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci, 1971, 244).

For Gramsci, no less than for Marx, the state is an apparatus which does not represent universal interests, but those of the ruling class. This instrumentality of the state, however, lies not only in its monopoly of violence but in its control of a wide range of mechanisms of ideological indoctrination through which it consolidates what Gramsci calls ‘hegemony’ or the moral ascendancy of the bourgeois view of the world among the subordinate classes. As he puts it (in a reappropriation of Hegelian language), the state must be seen as an ‘ethical’ entity in so far as its main function is “to rise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces of development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes” (Gramsci, 1971, 258).

The main innovation of Gramsci’s theory within the Marxist tradition is not simply to point out the ideological functions of the bourgeois state, but rather his new view about the ‘superstructural’ moment of political domination. Different from classic interpretations of Marx, Gramsci does not reduce superstructures of political and ideological domination to a mere ‘reflection’ of the structure, the sphere of the relations of production. The complex of ideological and cultural relations, spiritual and intellectual life have a place of its own and a relatively independent role in explaining the pervasiveness of capitalist relations and their reproduction. On the other hand, Gramsci emphasizes the changing and often unclear limits between structure and superstructure in advanced capitalist systems. Whereas Marx made
Negretto/How Relative is the Relative Autonomy of the State?

civil society the locus of the material structures of production, Gramsci points out that civil society is also part of the superstructural sphere of domination. Many of the different apparatuses and organisms through which the hegemony of the bourgeoisie is realized belong, in fact, to the 'private' sphere of the civil society. In this sense, the 'educative' functions of political parties, unions, private schools or the church are as crucial as, say, the public legal system to understand the phenomenon of hegemony.

However relevant the moment of moral and cultural hegemony is to Gramsci for explaining the factor of consent in the reproduction of the capitalist system, it would be wrong to consider his analysis, as Norberto Bobbio does, a complete 'inversion' of Marx. According to Bobbio, Gramsci inverted traditional Marxist theory in two ways: first, emphasizing the primacy of civil society (consensus) over political society (force); second, arguing for the complete autonomy of the superstructural moment to explain the hegemony of the bourgeoisie in western societies (Bobbio, 1987, 139-61). This interpretation is inaccurate. In the first place, Gramsci is adamant that the "normal" exercise of hegemony does not exclude the real threat of force and coercion. As he points out, hegemony "is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent" (Gramsci, 1971, 80). In this sense, not only civil society, as the locus of ideological indoctrination, but also the state, qua coercive apparatus, belongs to the sphere of hegemony.

On the other hand, Gramsci did not conceive hegemony, as Bobbio suggests, in purely 'superstructural' terms. Along with the ethico-political or ideological dimension, Gramsci also proposed the existence of what we may call, following Przeworski, the "material" basis of capitalist hegemony (Przeworski, 1985). From this perspective, the superstructure —hegemony and its extension into and through the state apparatus— does not simply stand by itself: "for though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity" (Gramsci, 1971, 161). In other words, the notion of 'active consent' in Gramsci cannot be reduced to simple ideological manipulation. It also has a 'material base' which consists in general of the particular arrangements that from the point of view of production (like, for instance, the trade-off between higher salaries and higher rates of labor productivity) link workers' interests to those of capitalists. As Carnoy points out, it is not the separation of superstructure from structure that Gramsci stresses, but rather the dialectical relation between them (Carnoy, 1984, 75).

2 As we will see, the economic basis of hegemony corresponds to what contemporary Marxist theory calls the "legitimation" function of the state, which consists of the material concessions to workers that are necessary to maintain their compliance with the process of capital accumulation. See Offe (1984) y O'Connor (1972).
It is difficult, however, to defend a “correct” interpretation of Gramsci’s work. Perhaps because of the distressing conditions under which he was compelled to develop his thinking, Gramsci’s theory of the state and politics remained largely fragmented, incomplete and ambiguous. As it will become apparent in the next sections on Althusser and Poulantzas, and later with Przeworski, his theory is open to contradictory interpretations. In this sense, as Perry Anderson has pointed out, the main problem of Gramsci’s theory is that whereas in some definitions state domination is drastically opposed to the hegemonic function of civil society by making the latter the key element of class rule, in others, the distinction between state and civil society is cancelled out by making both terms part of a comprehensive system of domination (Anderson, 1977). The first model of the relationship between state and civil society gave rise to the liberal or ‘culturalist’ interpretation of Gramsci, for which ‘hegemony’, narrowly understood as consent through ideological mystification, is exclusively located at the level of civil society. This view not only neglects the role of force and economic domination but also the specific role of democratic institutions within the mechanisms of consent in advanced capitalist systems. It is in the political system and not merely at the level of civil society that we must search for the historical consent won from the masses within modern capitalist systems.

A more radical interpretation of Gramsci emerged from his model of state and civil society as a unitary system of hegemonic domination. In this formulation, civil society does not hold the monopoly of consent; nor does the state enjoy the monopoly of coercion. Both mechanisms are dispersed and intertwined through private and public structures alike. This perspective may account for the various mechanisms of coercion and ideological production that the modern state is able to control even beyond the “public” sphere of power. The risk, however, is that by eliminating the distinction between state and civil society we may be unable to determine the specific nature of the state within a democratic regime. This is the particular *problematique* that is at the core of the althusserian analysis of political structures and his theory of the ideological reproduction of capitalist systems.

**Althusser and the Structuralist Theory of the Political**

Although Gramsci’s theory of hegemony suggested that political action is relatively autonomous in advanced capitalist societies, he never specified what the specific articulation between the different spheres of the economic, the political and the ideological in capitalist systems is. This was the main contribution of Althusser and the French school of Structuralist Marxism.

According to Althusser, the most fundamental misunderstanding of Marx’s theory has been the idea that the different levels of the social structure are based on the genetic origin of a central “subject” or tenet of society. Each level of the social
structure, in this view, would represent a "pars totalis", the simple expression of a central subject. Just like in Hegel the different levels of reality were centered on the development of the 'absolute spirit', vulgar interpretations of Marx have thought that socio-economic structures or, in general, 'the economic base', constitute the central essence of a totality of which its different levels constitute a mere "reflection". It is this misinterpretation of Marx's "inversion" of the Hegelian system that has led, according to Althusser, to the inability to analyze the relative autonomy of superstructures and the specific efficacy of the different structural levels (Althusser, 1990).

Althusser argued that the late Marx, particularly in *Capital*, abandoned the idealistic "problematic of the subject" that was still present in his early writings. For the mature Marx, according to Althusser, a social structure consists of an ensemble of levels of structures whose specific efficacy is determined, only "in the last instance", by the relations of production. This determination in the last instance, however, does not mean that the economic holds the dominant role in the structure. According to Althusser and Balibar, the specific type of totality envisaged by Marx is a "structure in dominance" by which they mean that the economic can be said to be dominant only in so far as it attributes the dominant role to one instance or another (Althusser, 1970, 216-18).

In fact, in historical social formations, the determination of the economic structure in the last instance is always "overdetermined" by the forms of the superstructure and the specific national and international circumstances. As Althusser put it with elegance, in actually existing social formations, "the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes". In relation to this view, he argued that the characteristic trait of the capitalist mode of production is that, although the structure-superstructure relation is always determined in the last instance by the economic, the juridico-political and ideological superstructures enjoy a specific effectivity that is relatively autonomous from the economic base. This is the starting point of his analysis of the "Ideological State Apparatus" (ISA) in the reproduction of the capitalist system.

According to Althusser, the specific effectivity of the juridico-political and ideological superstructures, can only be apprehended from the dynamic point of view of the particular relations that make possible the reproduction of the system. From the point of view of reproduction, the state is more than a mere repressive apparatus which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class. The state, for Althusser, must also be regarded as an ensemble of

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3 "Contradiction and Overdetermination", p. 113. In relation to this point, Althusser and later Poulantzas make a difference between a mode of production and a social formation. While the first term indicates the determination that one single structure causes over the other levels in theoretical terms, the latter refers to the actually existing societies in which no single structure determines by itself.
Negretto/How Relative is the Relative Autonomy of the State?...

"ideological apparatuses". Just like Gramsci, Althusser considers that one of the most important functions of the state consists of its "educative" role, that is, the creation of consent among the subordinate classes through ideological indoctrination. It is not just because of its ability to instrumentalize the state as a coercive apparatus that the ruling class is able to reproduce the relations of production. As Althusser points out, "no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the state ideological apparatuses" (Althusser, 1971, 146).

There are important differences between Althusser and Gramsci's view of ideology in the reproduction of the relations of production. The first crucial distinction is the role and presence of the state in reproduction. Whereas Gramsci — at least in one of his best known formulations — located the mechanisms of ideological reproduction at the level of 'civil society', Althusser explicitly eliminates this term by making all ideological apparatuses part of the structure of the state. What matters for Althusser is not the location of the ideological apparatuses but the function they perform. The fact that most of them are 'private' (churches, parties, unions, families, schools, etc.) is irrelevant in so far as 'private' and 'public' is an unrealistic distinction internal to bourgeois law. They are all part of the state as long as they work for the reproduction of the system. The second crucial difference lies in the problem of the consent of the masses to the system of domination. While Gramsci's notion of "active consent" left room for the idea that hegemony is not always based on the ideological delusion of the subordinate classes (like in his notion of the 'material' basis of hegemony, and probably with respect to the institutions of parliamentary democracy), Althusser radically negates the possibility that the actions and real interests of individuals could play any role in explaining the functioning of society. Any ideology, says Althusser, interpellates individuals as 'subjects' endowed with consciousness and free will. These individuals, however, are subjects only by virtue of their subordination to the ruling ideology that places them in an imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence (Althusser, 1971, 167-8).

We may identify three major problems in Althusser's theory of the political. In the first place, his notion of totality and economic determinacy in the last instance. Although he starts by rejecting simple versions of economic determinism, the way he analyzes the different levels of the superstructure is too abstract to perceive their specific effectivity and autonomy vis-a-vis the economic structure. The articulation among the different levels of the social whole is reduced to a formal game of metaphors in which the economic plays the role of a hidden actor determining "which level is going to have the dominant role". As Laclau rightly points out, this is like saying that the economic structure somehow behaves like a king who reigns but does not rule (Laclau, 1977, 76). Put differently, in spite of the existence of other dominant structures, the economic is always an actor in disguise.
This creates a second problem. Although Althusser wants to expose a concept of the State as a concrete, objective structure, his notion of "ideological state apparatuses" ends up frustrating this attempt. Given the overriding imperative of reproduction, everything which serves to maintain the system, Althusser argues, forms part of the state. By so doing, however, the state ceases to be a concrete institution, and becomes simply a quality which pervades all the levels of a social formation (Laclau, 1977, 69). In the absence of a clear explanation of the mechanisms under which the state controls the process of ideological production in different spheres, the state becomes a sort of magical figure which is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

The final major problem with Althusser's theory is his highly functionalist bent. The concrete functioning and reproduction of the system is reduced to an 'automatic' play between structures that determine each other without the presence of any conscious agent. Both individuals and social classes alike are, for Althusser, mere "supports" or "bearers" of the structural relations in which they are situated. There is in this sense an ironic resemblance between the neoclassical vision of the market as a "self-regulated" order and Althusser's idea of reproduction. Somehow, the "cunning" of the structures inevitably works coordinating the actions of individuals and classes toward the reproduction of the system.

Althusser admits that, although the diversity of ideological state apparatuses (ISA) is unified beneath the ruling ideology, the ISAs do not form a compact, monolithic system of reproduction controlled by the dominant class or classes. The ISAs are relatively autonomous from the dominant class in the sense that, differently from the repressive apparatus, they are often open to the resistance and even partial occupation by the exploited classes. But how political struggle and combat of the dominated classes is possible remains unexplained by Althusser. Given the overwhelming presence of the ruling ideology, it is difficult to see what the exact bases of resistance of subordinate groups and their eventual capacity to destroy the ideological hegemony of the ruling groups are. A more complete analysis of the relation between the capitalist state and class struggle would be necessary to explain how state apparatuses can be contested, resisted and eventually conquered by the dominated classes.

II- Poulantzas and the Class-based Approach of State Power

Poulantzas' work is the major and most comprehensive attempt within the Marxist tradition to reconstruct a theory of the state and political power. Although indebted to Gramsci's analysis of hegemony and, particularly, to Althusser's structuralism,

4 Unless, of course, we resort to the Leninist solution of a frontal attack on the state apparatus and a dual power strategy through the leadership of the revolutionary party. It is not clear, however, that Althusser endorses this solution without qualification.
Poulantzas presents an approach that was absent in his predecessors: the particular relation between state power, social classes and class struggle in a capitalist system. It is difficult, however, to capture Poulantzas' theory in a simple formulation. Between the publication of Political Power and Social Classes in 1968 and L'etat, Le pouvoir, Le socialisme in 1978 his theory of the state experienced radical changes. Whereas his early work was very close to structuralism, and therefore subjected to some of the fundamental criticisms of this paradigm, Poulantzas' late theory presents an original theory of the state and political power that has been rarely recognized, even among Marxist theorists. I will therefore start by briefly assessing his early work in order to compare it with the later changes of his theory.

Poulantzas Early Theory: The State as a "Factor of Cohesion"

The Problem of Relative Autonomy

According to his early formulation, Poulantzas argues that the state must be seen as an organization for the maintenance of the conditions of production and the unity of the different levels of a social formation (Poulantzas, 1973, 44). Drawing upon Marx's analysis of the separation of state and civil society under capitalism, he proposes that the distinctive feature of the capitalist state:

[...] seems to be the fact that it contains no determination of subjects (fixed in the state as "individuals", "citizens", "political persons") as agents of production; and this was not the case in other types of state. At the same time this class state presents a further specific feature: namely, that political class domination is absent from its institutions. It presents itself as a popular-class state... The modern capitalist state thus presents itself as embodying the general interest of the whole society, i.e., as substantiating the will of that "body politic" which is "the nation" (Poulantzas, 1973, 123).

The capitalist class, then, unlike the dominant classes in other modes of production, is not a ruling class. Economic power, in other words, is not equivalent to political power under capitalism. The capitalist class may dominate the production process, but political rule, or territorial control, is ultimately vested in the officials of the state who act in the name of the general interest. The central paradox of the capitalist state, however, resides in the fact that, in spite of its relative autonomy from relations of production and class structures, it is a class state in so far as it tends to realize, at least in the long run, the interests of dominant classes. To understand this seeming contradiction, Poulantzas attempts to analyze how the state is part of class relations, and particularly, how its juridico-political structures affect the
political organization of social classes.

The State as Determinant of Political Class Struggle

According to Poulantzas, power consists of "the capacity of a social class to realize its specific objective interests" (Poulantzas, 1973, 104). This concept of power cannot be applied, as in the behavioralist tradition, to "inter-individual" relations, that is relations whose constitution in given circumstances is presented as independent from their place in the process of production. Power, for Poulantzas, always refers to a capacity that is in the first place determined by the objective position of a class in the process of production and the opposition to that capacity that other classes are able to exercise given their own positions in the socio-economic structures (Poulantzas, 1973, 104). How a class is able to realize its political interests refers to the problem of how a social class organizes itself at the political level. In this sense, the main claim of Poulantzas' theory is that, in a capitalist system, the organizational capacities of a class are determined by the specific institutions and mode of operation of the state.

In relation to its impact upon political class struggle, Poulantzas characterizes the capitalist state as a unifier of capitalist-class fractions and as an individualizer/isolator of the working class. This is a result derived not simply from the capitalist process of production but from the juridical and ideological structures of the state. Both private and public bourgeois law create among classes what Poulantzas calls the "isolation effect". In this view, the juridical and ideological structures isolate individuals by classifying them, not as agents of production, but as equal bearers of private rights (private law) and as equal citizens, members of a "national community". The constitution of individuals as equal "subjects" has the immediate effect of concealing from the agents of production the fact that the relations of production in which they are placed are class relations.

This effect is not based on a mere misperception or deception. As Poulantzas puts it, it is "terrifyingly real". As the isolation effect reconstitutes the reality of individuals, making them unable to recognize the existence of class relations and class domination, it also determines the reality of the state as a unified political entity. By virtue of the constitution of classes in masses of isolated individuals, the state is able to present itself as the representative of the 'general interest'. As a direct consequence, Poulantzas argues, "the capitalist state systematically conceals its political class character at the level of its political institutions: it is a popular-national state, in the truest sense" (Poulantzas, 1973, 133). The immediate consequence of this constitution of the state is that while workers assume the identity of citizens in the public realm, they tend to pursue their economic interests only in the sphere of 'private' life. In doing so, however, workers experience the weakening of their organizational capacities and contribute to the reproduction of
class structures and class domination.

Given that this isolation affects not only workers but also capitalists, it is intriguing how the state might be able to provide the latter with the necessary organizational capacity to realize their interests at the political level. The answer the early Poulantzas gave to this question is that the state, by virtue of its objective function in the social formation, necessarily acts as the political organizer of the different fractions of the dominant class into a coherent ‘power block.’ It is in this sense that the state may be conceived as both ‘the factor of cohesion of a social formation and the factor of reproduction of a system that itself determines the domination of one class over the other’ (Poulantzas, 1969, 73 my emphasis). The reason the capitalist state is a class state, then, is not because the state apparatus is directly manipulated by the dominant class. Instead, it is because the function of the state in a capitalist system (the reproduction of capital accumulation and class relations) and the interests of the different fractions of the dominant class tend to coincide in the long run.

The Hegemonic Unity of the Power Block

In order to explain how the system perpetuates itself, Poulantzas also relies on his own reformulation of the notion of hegemony. Hegemony, according to Poulantzas, refers to the complex of political practices of the dominant classes in a capitalist formation. As such, the concept of hegemony is used to explain two distinct phenomena: first, how the political interests of the dominant class become constituted as representative of the ‘general interest’ of the body politic; second, how the fractions of the dominant class can compose themselves into a ‘power block’, which reunifies competitive capitals under the leadership of the state. Whereas for Gramsci hegemony simply meant the different mechanisms through which the bourgeois world view penetrates the different spheres of society, Poulantzas wants to extend the concept to include the relation between the ruling ideology and political domination. According to Poulantzas, by accepting the possibility that a class can become ideologically dominant before the conquest of political power, Gramsci separated a given ideology from class domination and exploitation (Poulantzas, 1973, 209).

By hegemonic ideology, then, Poulantzas does not mean values and norms but, primarily, the objective level political practices that make possible the unification of the different fractions of the capitalist class and the reproduction of class relations of power. In this sense, Poulantzas also rejects the idea that the main effect of ideology, as Gramsci would put it, is to secure the ‘active consent’ of the dominated classes. Like Althusser, Poulantzas argues that the reproductive function of ideology cannot be applied to the agents of a formation. They are simple ‘bearers’ of the structures —economic and political, as well as ideological— in which they are
The Debate on the Early Poulantzas

The most important critique of Poulantzas’ early work came from Ralph Miliband, a Marxist theorist himself, who initiated a debate that shaped the future development of Marxist analyses of the state. According to Miliband, Poulantzas’ theory leads to “a kind of determinism, or rather, structural-superdeterminism, which makes impossible any realistic consideration of the dialectic relations between the state and the system” (Miliband, 1970, 59). By eliminating any sort of agency and individual action, Poulantzas, for Miliband, ends up creating a theory of the state without any kind of empirical support in terms of individual actions. Relying on his own work, Miliband argues, that the state tends to realize the interests of the capitalist class because of the influence that, through common social origins, personal ties, and often, direct participation, the bourgeoisie is able to exercise upon state bureaucracy (Miliband, 1969, 128-9).

Miliband’s critique on the grounds of ‘structural-superdeterminism’ is a sound one. However, it would be wrong to derive it from Poulantzas’ failure to perceive the relation between classes and the state as a set of ‘inter-personal’ relations. The structural determination of power relations need not be opposed to individual agency, as Miliband implies. It is perfectly possible to conceive that even if power is implicated in objective structural relations, it can only be exercised by intentional human agents who participate in these relations. The particular problem of Poulantzas’ structuralism is that it never tells us what the concrete functioning of the structures of power from a dynamic point of view is. Just like Althusser, in spite of his intention to create a ‘regional’ theory of the political in which the state is seen as a concrete structure with its own effectivity, Poulantzas dissolves the concrete functioning of this structure into the imperatives of an abstract economic determination in ‘the last instance’.

A related problem in Poulantzas’ theory, also brought up by Miliband, is the relation between state power and class power. State power, says Poulantzas, is “the power of a determinate class to whose interests the state corresponds” (Poulantzas, 1973, 100). The effect of this statement, according to Miliband, “is to deprive the state of any kind of autonomy at all and to turn it precisely into the merest instrument of a determinate class” (Miliband, 1973, 87). Again, this critique is correct, but not in Miliband’s terms. The crucial point of Poulantzas’ failure to distinguish between state power and class power, is not that it falls in the instrumentalism he was supposed to reject. What Poulantzas left unexplained, thus

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5 For an excellent account on the debate, see Carnoy (1984, 104-7).
6 In fact, most of the Poulantzas-Miliband debate is often obfuscated by their mutual accusations of “instrumentalism”.
affecting the clarity of his theory, is the exact relationship between economic and political power. Neither his notion of the 'isolation effect' nor his conceptualization of the functions of ideology and hegemony in a capitalist system adequately address the problem of how economic dominant class organizes itself as a specifically political force able to realize its objective interests.

The final major issue of the debate was the exact function of political democracy within Poulantzas' theory of the state. Although at times he seems to make the argument that the institutions of liberal democracy may create real rights for the subordinate classes, by and large, Poulantzas treated democracy as little more than the 'normal' political form under which the capitalist state hides its intrinsic class nature. This view, according to Miliband, is confirmed by the fact that Poulantzas provides no criteria to distinguish the specificity of democracy vis-a-vis the non-democratic forms of capitalist state. In particular, Miliband argues that Poulantzas ignored the distinctive trait of a democratic state by playing down the function of the institutional separation of powers as a limit to state action and by considering 'bonapartism' (i.e., a semi-dictatorial form of executive rule) the permanent reality of the capitalist state (Miliband, 1973, 88-92). In Poulantzas' defense, we must say that he did stress the specific differences between parliamentary democracy and what he called 'exceptional' forms of capitalist state. What is unclear is the exact role that political democracy plays in a capitalist system.

Just like Althusser, the early Poulantzas seems to treat the institutions of political democracy only at the level of an ideological function of the capitalist state which reinforces the concealment of class relations. Although he analyzes the existence of temporary and unstable compromises between capitalist and working classes, he does not consider these compromises as a result of the political power the working class may achieve in a democratic system. Rather, the partial and temporary realization of the economic interests of the dominated classes is only the result of the intervention of the state in order to help the reproduction of the system by virtue of its relative autonomy from the dominant classes and the different fractions of the power block. In other words, Poulantzas never tells us in what sense democracy may counteract state power and capitalist domination. At least in the first formulation of his theory, Poulantzas, like Althusser, remained within the orthodoxy of classic marxism in his functionalist analysis of constitutional democracy.

7 See, for instance, Poulantzas (1974). This difference Poulantzas traces between democracy and fascism is merely of degree. Fascism, as well as bonapartism and other regimes of exception, corresponds to a particular crisis of hegemony in which the power block is unable to absorb and neutralize its contradictions with the popular sectors through traditional (that is, peaceful and democratic) institutional channels.
Poulantzas' Late Theory: The State as a Balance of Class Forces and the Concept of Power

As a response to these criticisms and as a completion of his early work, Poulantzas proposed in the mid 1970s a new version of his theory of the state. According to this formulation, the state must be seen not merely as a product and a shaper of class relations but as a relation, or more precisely as "the condensation of a class relation" (Poulantzas, 1975, 26). Against the weberian tradition of state theory, Poulantzas claims that the state qua institutional ensemble, does not possess any power. Power emerges from class relations, particularly, from the class struggle that the state condenses and reflects in its institutions. If state power is conceived in this way, we may escape, according to Poulantzas, the illusory theoretical dilemma between the state understood as a 'thing', a passive tool in hands of a class or fraction, in which case the state is seen as having no autonomy whatsoever, or the state comprehended as a 'subject', a free standing entity which is completely autonomous from classes and endowed with power of its own. In either case, says Poulantzas,

"The relation state/social classes is comprehended as a relation of externality: either the social classes subdue the state (Thing) to themselves through the interplay of 'influences' and 'pressure groups', or else the state (Subject) subdues or control the classes. In this relation of externality, the state and the dominant classes are thus seen as two entities confronting each other, with the one possessing the power the other does not have, according to the traditional conception of zero-sum-power" (Poulantzas, 1976, 74).

In this new formulation, then, the state relates to social classes not only from without but also from within its own institutional structure. Whereas the earlier theory stressed the idea of the unity of state power, now the state is presented as an organization fragmented and often divided within itself. The state is seen as a 'strategic field' in which different classes and fractions occupy positions in order to realize their particular interests. To be sure, the position of the dominant classes within the state is radically different from that of the subordinate classes. The capitalist state favors the dominant class by making the predominant center of decision within the state (typically, the executive) permeable to the interests of the hegemonic fraction. The subordinate classes, in turn, are also present in the state structure but always in a relation of subordination, which impedes, without a radical transformation of the state, to use its contradictions for their advantage. The permanent conflicts and contradictions that affect the various organs and branches of the state occur as a reflection of the class struggle that takes place in the political arena. Just as in his early theory, the relative autonomy of the economic from the political allows the capitalist state to act simultaneously as a unifier of the power block under the hegemony of a determinate fraction of the dominant class and as an
isolator of the subordinate classes. But what now constitutes the autonomy of the state is precisely the fact that the state is divided within itself and no single class or fraction is able to dominate its whole structure. As a condensate of a class relation, the degree of power the state is able to exercise depends on the contradictions affecting the dominant class, and particularly, on the degree of resistance that the dominated classes are able to exercise within different state institutions.

From a theoretical point of view, Poulantzas tried to base his new theory of the state on a reformulation of the concept of power intended as a critique of the pluralist tradition (the state as a set of inter-personal relations) and the Weberian paradigm (the state as an autonomous institutional structure). As we saw, in his early definition of power Poulantzas considered that the capacity of class to realize its interests is not only dependent on the position of this class in a given socio-economic structure, but also on the capacity of other classes to realize their interests. He now wants to generalize this definition to include the idea that the degree of power of the state is also dependent on its particular interaction with social classes. To do so, he follows in part Foucault's critique of the traditional concept of power in western political theory.

According to this traditional notion, a subject A is said to have power over a subject B when A is able to make B do something he would not have done without the pressure from A. In this view, power is presented as a one-sided relation composed by an active subject (he who possesses 'power') and a passive object (he upon which power is exercised). Against this perspective, Poulantzas, following Foucault, maintains that power is always a two-sided relation: wherever power exists it creates its own resistance and the degree of that resistance is what ultimately constitutes the degree of power. In other words, power is a dialectic relation composed by two active elements (action and resistance) that mutually reinforce each other.

Poulantzas, however, differs from Foucault's notion of power in some fundamental respects. Whereas for Foucault power is inherent in all type of relations, Poulantzas considers that power emerges mainly from class relations and class exploitation. By failing to base power on certain structural relationships, Foucault, according to Poulantzas, is unable to tell us how power is acquired and what are the bases of resistance (Poulantzas, 1978a, 165). On the other hand, whereas for Foucault power is diffuse and lacks a specific center of reference, for Poulantzas, power in a capitalist society has a privileged place of expression: the state. In this sense, Poulantzas contends with Foucault that although different disciplinary practices may appear as diffuse and beyond the control of the state, they all have the state as the center of reference for the exercise of power. The state, says Poulantzas, "is the site of strategic domination of the dominant class in its relation to the dominated classes" at the same time it is the place where that domination is condensed (Poulantzas, 1978a, 165).
This reformulation of the concept of power has important implications, not only for Poulantzas' theory but also for the concept of power of traditional Marxist thinking. Although Poulantzas limits his critique to mainstream theories, we may argue that also classic Marxist thinking was attached to a zero-sum conception of power. This was implied both in the idea that the capitalist class becomes the dominant center of power in society by virtue of its objective position in the system of production and the state as a monolithic organization through which the capitalist class exercises its domination. For this type of thinking, the fact that the working class could acquire political power through democratic institutions is insufficient to introduce any real change in the system of domination. Poulantzas himself was close to this view in his early theory. Although claiming that the state, as a product and a shaper of class struggle, reflects the contradictions of the system, he ended up with an analysis in which everything happened as if those struggles were necessarily won by the dominant class by structural determination. As we will see, however, Poulantzas was in the end unable to extract the full consequences of his new approach.

The Productive Functions of Political Power

The second important transformation of Poulantzas' late theory refers to a reconceptualization of the different mechanisms through which the state consolidates class domination in a capitalist society. Although he still maintains that both the repressive and ideological apparatuses are essential to account for class domination, he now stresses that this distinction is unable to capture the complex reality of a modern capitalist society. Most of the so-called ideological apparatuses, Poulantzas argues, also exercise indirect forms of coercion outside the formal structure of the state. In other words, the ideological state apparatuses are not distinct from the repressive ones. On the other hand, he now criticizes Althusser's view (although he also includes, wrongly in my opinion, Gramsci's) of a state that does not function but through the means of repression-interdiction and ideology-occultation. This notion, Poulantzas argues, is misleading in that it assigns the state a primary negative role, a sort of permanent 'pouvoir d'empecher'. But power has a Janus-faced nature: half repressive and violent, half positive and based on consensus. Power is for Poulantzas (again following a Foucaultian theme) productive rather than simply repressive and negative. A clear example resides in the material concessions that the state offers to the dominated classes (more often than not as a result of class struggle) in order to obtain their consensus to the system. This consent, although in part induced by the state, is nevertheless a reflection of concrete and real interests. It is not merely subjective nor can it be reduced to simple propaganda (Poulantzas, 1978a, 35).

In a similar vein, Poulantzas argues that the legal institutions of the
Negretto/How Relative is the Relative Autonomy of the State?...

democratic state are not merely part of the repressive apparatus or a simple function of the ideological reproduction of the system. In his last work, Poulantzas goes beyond the idea that the legal system is only the sphere of formal (and in this sense, illusory) cohesion of individuals dispossessed of their means of production. He asserts, for instance, that the dominated classes do not find in the law a mere space of exclusion. It also establishes the place they must occupy in order to defend their interests. Poulantzas exemplifies this by pointing out that some of the actions of the state that supersede its repressive and ideological role, like economic interventions and —most important— material compromises imposed by the dominated classes, end up as part of the legal structure. In this sense, he argues, the law does not merely fool the people, it also creates real rights for the dominated classes (Poulantzas, 1978a, 92).

Just like the state, the modern juridical system is recognized as an important strategic field in the political struggle of the working classes. In particular, Poulantzas argues, the legal system not only enhances state power via individualization/isolation of social agents, but it may also be a limit to it. How? In two ways: first, by organizing a framework of permanent equilibrium of a compromise imposed to the dominant classes by the dominated ones, and second, by providing a more or less clearly defined space for the legitimate exercise of physical repression (Poulantzas, 1978a, 101). This view, as may be noted, abandons the typical functionalist analysis of bourgeois law of althusserian structuralism. The modern legal system only in part satisfies the needs of capitalist accumulation and class domination. As a limit to the exercise of power and state intervention, it must also be regarded as a fundamental conquest of the popular masses. This radical change of view about the law can only correspond to a new perception of the role of political democracy in a capitalist system.

Democracy and the Transition to Socialism

The last, and perhaps more significant transformation of Poulantzas’ theory resides in the abandonment of the Leninist theory of liberal democracy. He now believes, as Rosa Luxemburg put it, that without the so called “formal” freedoms and rights of representative democracy, “life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element” (Luxemburg, 1990, 71).

Without denying that the existence of democratic institutions may obscure the mechanisms of class domination, Poulantzas wants to stress the significance of liberal democracy as a conquest of the dominated classes in their struggle against class domination and state despotism. Whereas the individual is not as such a limit to state power (in so far as the very notion of the “individual” is an artificial construction of the state) it creates a limit in his role as the source of legitimate
power according to the principles of representative democracy. It is for this fundamental reason that representative democracy has to be supported by the dominated classes not only in case of a future transition to socialism but also in the meantime, as a bulwark against the emergence of different forms of "authoritarian statism".

In the era of monopolistic capitalism, state intervention in economic issues has been accompanied by a detailed regulation that enhances the role of the executive and the bureaucracy while it undermines the legislative functions of the parliament. At the same time, the traditional parties experience a crisis of representation. Whereas in the past the party system intermediated between the interests of the capitalist class and the state, now it is the executive which has become the place of direct negotiation of policies for the monopolistic fractions of the power block. This situation, Poulantzas argues, has definite negative effects on democratic institutions, in particular, the relaxation of constitutional controls and the permanent restriction of public liberties (Poulantzas, 1978a, 253).

The reformulation of the role of democracy in a socialist strategy follows Poulantzas' notion of the state as a strategic field and the concept of power as a dialectic relation between command and resistance. In this perspective, Poulantzas advocates a "middle road" between a social democratic and Leninist strategies. He proposes that representative democracy must be strengthened and used by the working class as an instrument to conquer strategic positions within the state structure. Resistance to state power, however, cannot be effective if it only remains external to the state and tries to subvert it from outside. New forms of direct democracy, then, are to be created to oppose the advance of statism in civil society. In other words, authoritarian statism can be avoided and a strategy of transition to socialism created only by combining the strengthening of representative democracy with the development of forms of direct, rank-and-file democracy. For state power to be contained (and eventually, transformed and destroyed) popular classes must struggle both from within and from without its institutional structures (Poulantzas, 1978b, 75-87).

The Inconsistencies and Merits of Poulantzas' Theory

The importance of Poulantzas' late theory on the state, power and democracy has been obscured by his failure to resolve two of the major problems repeatedly raised in the neo-marxist literature on the state. First, the relation between state and social classes in a capitalist mode of production. This is the problem that has often been approached under the label of the "relative autonomy" of the state. The second problem, closely related to the first, is the specific nature of the capitalist state, or, to put it differently, the specific mechanisms that make the modern state a capitalist state. In both discussions, Poulantzas provides a rather ambiguous answer which in
part reflects the incomplete transformation of his early theory.

In his last formulation, Poulantzas proposed the idea that the state must be seen as the material condensation of a relation of forces between classes. In this view, the state is considered as an institutional ensemble which, as such, has no political power of its own. The power of the state is the power of the class forces which act in and through the state. This proposition, is clear in its polemic intentions. Poulantzas wants to distance himself from those who see the state as a subject, with its own power and interests or as a passive object, a neutral tool in hands of a determinate class. But what is the exact meaning of the state as a material condensation of class forces? The notion is unclear in so far as the state, as Poulantzas points out, does not simply reflect a balance of class forces but actually constitutes and shapes that balance. If this is the case, then the state has to be part, in its own right, of a power relation. The reason for this confusion lies in the fact that Poulantzas made an unwarranted move from the idea —correct, I believe— that power must be studied as a dialectical relation to the formula that the state itself is a relation, or the material condensation of a relation. In final analysis, the notion of state autonomy, however relative, needs to be based on a definite conceptualization of what political power is and what its sources are. Poulantzas, however, never completed this task. Power is still for him the capacity of a social class to realize its specific objective interests. Class, then, is not only a locus but the only locus of power operating through individuals.

Equally problematic is Poulantzas' analysis of the mechanisms that make the bourgeois state a capitalist state. In his last work, Poulantzas shifts away from structuralist determinism to an insistence on the primacy of class struggle over structural causation. This is reflected in his increasing assertions that class struggles are reproduced within the heart of the state apparatus and his growing recognition of the tendency toward disunity and contradictions in the state apparatus. But in spite of this change of perspective, Poulantzas insists that however contradictory its policies may be in the short term, the state tends to realize the interests of the dominant class in the long term. It is by virtue of this inexorable outcome that Poulantzas rejects the idea, inspired by Gramsci, that the working class could achieve hegemony without first conquering central apparatuses of the state. At the time Poulantzas adopted a structuralist explanation of the functions of the juridico-political “region”, the reason why the state tended to realize the interests of the capitalist class was, albeit debatable, understandable. Although relatively autonomous from the dominant class, the state acts on its behalf by virtue of the determination of the economic in “the last instance”. But once Poulantzas abandoned the idea of structural determination and analyzed the role of the state as a reflection of the contradictions and dynamics of class struggle, we are at a loss to comprehend the specific mechanisms that make the policies of the state to coincide with the long term interests of the bourgeoisie. As Jessop points out, either Poulantzas’ solution is void because it cannot move from an
infinity of contradictory policies to an ambiguous, final result or else it is tautological because he merely postulates the resultant that his theoretical approach demands (Jessop, 1982, 183). How can the state be a defender of the status quo if it also participates in the ‘contradictions of class relations’?

In spite of these shortcomings, Poulantzas’ theory as a whole stands at the most important attempt to create an authentic theory of the political from a Marxist perspective. His failure lies in the reconceptualization of the problem of power. Even in the more subtle reflections of *L'etat, Le pouvoir, Le socialisme*, Poulantzas seemed unable to go beyond a theory of the class determinants of political power. Many of his insights about the state and power in general, however, are still worth considering. The idea that the state acts not only through repression and ideological occultation but also through the effective realization of the interests of the working class, the role of democracy as a source of popular power, the importance of constitutional rights as a limit against state power, and his redefinition of a socialist strategy in contemporary society, are all innovations in Marxist political theory and a completion of the rather ambiguous legacy of Gramsci and Althusser. In relation to the problem of power, Poulantzas’ ‘relational’ approach is also of particular interest. As I will argue later in this essay, the generalization of that approach may contain the elements for the reconstruction of an authentic Marxist theory of power and a consistent critique of alternative paradigms. Later developments in the neo-marxist theory have provided more satisfactory answers than Poulantzas’ with regard to the problem of the nature of the capitalist state. I shall argue, however, that they have not advanced in the creation of a comprehensive theory of politics from a Marxist perspective. It is to the critical analysis of this literature that I now turn.

**III-Beyond Poulantzas? The problem of the State in Recent Neo-Marxist Theories**

As a reaction against the failures of Poulantzas’ theory, most neo-marxist literature on the state has redefined the terms of the analysis about the nature and role of the state in a capitalist system. Three general trends may be differentiated: first, a growing emphasis on the economic role of the state and the limits and contradictions created by the process of capitalist accumulation itself; second, the recognition of the state as an independent actor in the process of capitalist accumulation; and third, a focus on the microfoundations of state power and its impact on the reproduction of a capitalist system. All these analyses pay particular attention to the contradictions created by the mixture of capitalism and democracy in advanced industrial societies. Given the wide variety of contributions, I will focus on three of the most representative authors of each strand of theorization: Claus Offe, Fred Block and Adam Przeworski.¹

¹ For an updated classification of the classic and neo-marxist theorizing on the state, see
Claus Offe and the German Debate

One of the first reactions provoked by Poulantzas’ work occurred in Germany, within the so called “derivationist” or “capital-logic” school. This school departed from the whole Gramscian-Althusserian legacy, inherited by Poulantzas, which insisted in the analysis of the political as an autonomous object of study. For the derivationist, a ‘materialist’ theory of the state—as in their view any Marxist theory should be—can only start by focusing on the contradictions and limitations that the process of capitalist accumulation imposes upon state action. It is, then, from the “anatomy” of civil society and, particularly, from the “laws of motion” of the capitalist process of production, that we must derive, according to this school, the political forms and limits of state intervention. The problem with this perspective is that, in tending to derive the state from the ‘requirements’ of the capitalist mode of production, it does not go much further than Poulantzas in the explanation of the nature and role of the state. As Giddens points out, the derivationist approach, just like Poulantzas’, contains a thinly veiled functionalism in its attempt to use the concept of ‘reproduction’ as an all-encompassing category of explanation (Giddens, 1981).

A more interesting perspective is taken by Claus Offe in his critique of both the poulantzian and derivationist framework. According to Offe, the concept of the capitalist state describes a form of political power which contains four major elements: a) the institutional exclusion of political power from organizing production according to its own political criteria; b) the indirect dependency of political power—through the mechanisms of taxation and dependence on the capital market—on the volume of private accumulation; c) the institutional self-interest of the state in promoting a process of accumulation upon which it depends but from which it is denied the power to control and; d) given the existence of a democratic political regime, the need of the state to conceal and deny (a), (b) and (c) in order to maintain its legitimacy as a ‘national-popular’ state (Offe, 1975, 139-40).

Offe maintains that the most significant feature of the contemporary state is the way it is enmeshed in the contradictions of capitalism. Given its structural dependence on capital accumulation and its political imperative to preserve legitimacy, the state, he argues, is faced with contradictory tasks. On the one hand, the state must sustain the process of accumulation and the private appropriation of resources; on the other, however, it must preserve the belief in itself as the impartial arbiter of class interests, thereby legitimating its power. In other words, the state is

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9 See, Holloway (1978, 6-7). Joachim Hirst, one of the best known representatives of the derivationist school, is a clear exponent of how the forms and content of the bourgeois state can be derived from a single “law of motion” of the process of capitalist accumulation, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. See, in the same book, his essay “The State Apparatus and Social Reproduction: Elements of a Theory of the Bourgeois State”, pp. 57-107.
forced to intervene in the accumulation process but it can only do so in a way in which it neither undermines the private character of the market system nor neglects the demands of the popular classes on whom it relies as a source of support (Offe, 1984). This view certainly departs from the derivationist perspective. Whereas for the derivationist, the limits of state action stem from the contradictions that affect the process of accumulation in itself (in particular, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall), Offe argues that the limits of state action reside in the contradictions created by the conflict between accumulation and legitimation. In other words, Offe introduces a “political” element in the analysis (the legitimation function) that is absent from the purely economic view of the derivationist school.

At the same time, Offe’s analysis also differs from Poulantzas’ in a significant aspect. If the state tends to realize the interests of capital in the long run, it is not because state power is in any way determined by class power but because it has an “institutional self-interest” in sustaining accumulation. In this sense, Offe admits that there is a class-character in state interventions, which comes from the class-specific selectiveness that the internal structure of the system of political institutions displays in order to fulfill the conditions that make possible the reproduction of the state itself. From this perspective, whereas for Poulantzas (in his last work) the crucial dynamic that makes the state a capitalist state is the displacement of class struggle and relations of domination from the economic to the political arena, for Offe, the crucial dynamic is the institutional interest of the state in the process of accumulation.

Regarding the impact of state intervention in the process of accumulation and class relations, Offe’s interpretation seems more plausible than Poulantzas’. The state’s interest in capital accumulation (and therefore, in the reproduction of the relations of production) does not mean that the state necessarily functions as a political organizer of the capitalist class or as an isolator of the working class. If it tends to realize the interests of capital, it is because of its institutional interest in so doing. On the other hand, given the limits imposed by the legitimation function, the state is never able to sustain the process of accumulation without creating serious contradictions in the system. The state may very well be in conflict, as Offe suggests, with individual capitalists and the working class in attempting to assure the reproduction of accumulation.

But Offe proposes a very narrow perspective for the study of the state. Whereas it is misleading to assert that the state can always act as a factor of cohesion or that, in spite of its short term contradictions, the state somehow manages to secure a system of class domination, it is also inaccurate to think of the state as inevitably trapped between the antagonistic logics of the economic and political system. In spite of his emphasis on the relative independence that state managers enjoy from

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immediate economic and social pressures, Offe ends up describing the state as a mere “reactive mechanism” which is incapable to successfully perform its different functions for any considerable length of time. We find in Offe’s work, neither a discussion about the ideological and repressive functions of the state nor about the independent role that a democratic political regime may play to stabilize its contradictory tasks of accumulation and legitimation. Offe gives considerable weight to the problem of legitimation, but in his analysis it only means the material gains that the state is periodically forced to provide to the working class to maintain its popular basis of support. In other words, legitimacy depends entirely on the process of accumulation. But the acquiescence of the subordinate classes to political power does not merely depend on —often unstable and volatile— material concessions. In their absence, the system may remain relatively free of conflicts because of the lack of visible alternatives, the threat of coercion, or simply because the enjoyment of civil and political rights is in itself a valuable reason for the working classes to tolerate temporary deprivations in the promise of a better future. The problem, then, of Offe’s theory —as well as of the derivationist perspective— is that it presents a state that displays a very little amount of political resources to maintain its system of domination.

*From Capital to a State-Centered Theories: Fred Block*

Whereas Poulantzas based his analyses on the class determinants of state action, Offe focused on the structural dependency of the state on the process of capital accumulation. Fred Block, instead, presents a third alternative which combines both analyses in a new perspective which emphasizes the role of the state as a truly independent political power in the face of capital and labor fractionalized interests.

In relation to the problem of how the ruling class relates to the state, Block maintains that neo-marxists should reject the idea of a “class-conscious ruling class”, capable of acting with some degree of political cohesion (Block, 1977, 8-9). In the absence of a class-conscious ruling class, Block contends, capitalists can neither take control of the state nor can they have by themselves the capacity to rationalize the process of capital accumulation. According to the logic of a capitalist system, he argues, there is a “division of labor” between those who accumulate capital and those who manage the state apparatus (Block, 1977, 8-9). Given this framework, the central theoretical task becomes to explain how, in spite of the division of labor, the state tends to serve the interests of the capitalist class.

Following Offe’s argument, Block maintains that state managers tend to serve the interests of capital, not because they are responsive to the bourgeoisie but because their future positions are dependent on some level of economic activity. State managers, then, tend to realize the interests of capital only indirectly, by being sensitive to the general conditions that are necessary to maintain “business
confidence" (Block, 1977, 15-6). This said, and although their view still falls short of a general understanding of what is necessary to reproduce the social order, Block argues that public officials have a broader view of society than capitalists. Unlike the individual capitalist, state managers do not have to operate on the basis of a narrow profit-maximizing rationality and are able to decide policies with a more favorable impact on the welfare of the whole society.

In order to explain how the state is able to satisfy a broader scope of interests, Block introduces another structural mechanism, taken from the Poulantzas' framework: class struggle. Class struggle, he argues, "is responsible for much of the economic dynamism of capitalism" (Block, 1977, 21). In Block's view, this struggle, carried out by the working class throughout this century, has made possible the expansion of the role of the state into economic regulation and social services. This expansion, in turn, has imposed greater rationality in the capitalist system. Class struggle and subsequent growth of the state, however, only occur under certain circumstances, in periods of depression and wars when capitalists are not as powerful compared to working class pressures and the capacity of state managers to act in relatively independent way.

This explanation, even more than Offe's describes state managers as acting according to a logic that is different from that of capitalists, even though they are interested in sustaining the process of accumulation for their own sake. This is a plausible view insofar as it presents an image of the state that is not, as in Offe's analysis, inevitably trapped into unsolvable crises. The problem, however, is that Block tells us neither what the bases of the general rationality of state managers are nor the specific political resources that constitute the state into an independent force in society. It is also unclear what is, in his view, the exact relation between state power and social classes. On the one hand, Block maintains that given the lack of class-consciousness, the state plays an independent role from both capitalists and workers. On the other hand, however, he suggests that state power is also a variable dependent on class struggle, particularly, on the demands of the working class in times of crisis. In this sense, neither the bases of independence nor the various forms of class determination of state power are sufficiently demonstrated at a theoretical level.

Przeworski and the Microfoundations of Capitalist Reproduction

Przeworski occupies an ambiguous role within the neo-marxist literature on the state. On the one hand, his analyses fall into the broad category of those, like Offe, who center the study of the state on its interaction with the logic of capitalist accumulation. On the other hand, he presents a radically new perspective in Marxist theory which tries to explain the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist systems not only in terms of structural limits and determinations of state action, but mainly in
terms of individual agency and choice. In so doing, he also introduces elements of the gramscian and poulantzian framework, like the role of hegemony and class conflict in capitalist societies.\footnote{Perhaps due to the novelty and still incomplete character of his theory, there are few analyses available of Preworski's contributions to state theory. For a brief overview of Preworski's theory of the state, see Carnoy (1984, 214-17).}

According to Przeworski, the persistence of capitalist-class relationships cannot be properly explained by either the direct control of capitalists over the state's reproductive mechanisms or the activities of a state that, however autonomous from class relations, somehow manages to reproduce capitalism by repressing the working class or organizing ideological domination where and whenever is necessary. These views on the state, he argues, have always stemmed from the assumption that the conflict of interests between workers and capitalists can only be regarded (as was the case of Marx himself) in a zero-sum fashion; that is, as if workers' pursuit of material interests could only be advanced if the institution of profit were abolished altogether. In other words, if an irreconcilable conflict over the realization of material interests is characteristic of any capitalist society and if capitalism withstood this conflict during at least one hundred years, then, some mechanism external to class relations (typically, the bourgeois state) must be evoked to explain this durability. Whether instrumentalist or structuralist, this is the core, for Przeworski, of all "functionalist" analyses of the state.

The fact is, Przeworski argues, that within the context of a democratic capitalist society the conflict of interests between capitalists and workers need not be a zero-sum game. Under certain economic and political conditions, workers themselves may choose capitalism because of what it can deliver materially (higher growth rates and increasing welfare) and politically (the civic and political rights of a parliamentary democracy). This is precisely the situation to which the combination of private ownership of the instruments of production with representative political institutions may lead: "a compromise between workers, who consent to the private appropriation of profit by owners of capital, and capitalists, who accept the democratic institutions through which workers can make effective claims for an improvement of their material conditions" (Przeworski, 1982, 215).

The very logic of capitalism offers this possibility. Since under capitalism most investment occurs out of profits, a reasonable level of profit is the necessary condition for continued production, consumption and employment. This means that in the absence of a feasible project of socialist accumulation (which Przeworski regards as highly unlikely given the immediate economic downturn that this project would produce) workers would be willing to moderate their distributive claims in exchange for higher rates of investment that are expected to increase their material welfare in some future period (Przeworski, 1982, 217). The compromise then takes the form of a trade-off between workers' militancy and capitalist consumption. In
this situation, Przeworski argues, the role of the state is “to enforce the compliance of both classes with the terms of each compromise and protect those segments of each class that enter into a compromise from a non-cooperative behavior of their fellow class members” (Przeworski, 1982, 236). When the compromise takes place the reproduction of capitalism results in the interest of all the parties involved: capitalists can secure profits, workers, higher wages, and the state, and appropriate level of revenue.

To explain why workers could behave as if capitalism were a positive-sum game, Przeworski resumés the gramscian theory of hegemony. Capitalist democracy constitutes a hegemonic system in which exploitation takes place with the “active consent” of the exploited. This means, following Gramsci, that hegemony is not merely a system of cultural-ideological domination: consent must also have a material basis. In other words, the reproduction of consent among wage earners requires that their material interests be to some extent satisfied within the capitalist system (Przeworski, 1985, 147). Consent, however always presupposes some level of coercion. In Przeworski’s interpretation of Gramsci, the acquiescence of the workers —however real— is never completely free. During normal times, the existence of coercion does not need the permanent and visible presence of the state. Coercion is ubiquitous precisely because the state, with its monopoly in organizing force, has the capacity to enjoin other (“private”) institutions to exercise coercion on its behalf. It is, then, a complex (and inseparable) combination of induced and real consent that explains the persistence of capitalist relations of production, at least in those countries where capitalism and democracy have remained in relative equilibrium. Hegemony, as Gramsci put it, is “protected by the armour of coercion” and when consent breaks down, coercion can still hold the system together. But this, of course, is the end of democracy.

Przeworski’s analysis is perhaps the most sophisticated within recent neo-marxist literature on the state. Different from other theories, but implicitly following the relational approach to power suggested by Poulantzas, he gives a complex account of the dynamic of class conflict in a capitalist society. In a non-deterministic way, Przeworski combines structural factors with purposive action to explain how the reproduction of capitalist-class relation depends, not only on the hegemonic position of the capitalist class, but also on the cooperative negotiation of the working classes. It is not clear, however, what the position of the state is in relation to class power. On one hand, it seems as if the state would follow the particular dynamic of conflict that takes place between capitalists and workers. For instance, when the conditions for compromise are possible, the state is presented as just enforcing the

12 See “Material Bases of Consent”, in Przeworski (1985, 167). In his analysis of hegemony, coercion and consent, Przeworski arrives at the same conclusion as Poulantzas, when he criticized Althusser’s division between ideological and repressive apparatuses. “The ideological state apparatuses, says Przeworsky, are the same as the repressive ones”. 


agreement on an equal basis. On the other hand, however, the ideological and repressive mechanisms of the state are always present to maintain a hegemonic system. Under what conditions (beyond some social-democratic experiences) and to what extent can the state act as a relatively unbiased enforcer of a class-compromise?

Przeworski rightly assumes that democracy is, in itself, a component of the active consent of the workers to capitalism. However, he regards that form of consent largely in terms of the chance that democratic institutions give to the working classes to demand improvements of their material conditions. This is not, however, a permanent feature of a democratic system. While democracy may not guarantee the perpetual maintenance of capitalist relations of production, it is also clear (and probably more certain) that it does not necessarily promote a fair distribution of income. That could only occur if, and only if, there exists a highly organized working class and a social-democratic party committed to represent and defend the interests of workers at a public level. In the end, I fear, Przeworski’s analysis is damaged because he implicitly assumes a social-democratic state as the only condition under which democracy and capitalism can remain in a relatively stable equilibrium.

IV. The State and the Problem of Power

From the point of view of a political theory of the state (whether “capitalist”, “socialist” or simply “the” state) the crucial problem that precedes any consideration about the role of the state, is the problem of power. Perhaps the best example to highlight the relevance of the notion of power is the pervasive role that the “instrumentalist” view has played in classic marxist theory. For Marx, power is determined by class relations which, in turn, are determined by the objective position of each class in the system of production. According to this view, the structural position of capitalists as private owners of the means of production and as controllers of process of production determines this class as the subject of power par excellence in a capitalist society. From this perspective, it follows that any other manifestation of power, including, of course, political power, could not be but ‘reflections’ or, at best, ‘instrumental’ forms for the expression of class power. This is the underlying assumption for definitions such as the executive of the modern state as “a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” or political power as “the organized power of one class for oppressing another” (Marx, 1978, 475, 490).

The classic Marxist notion of power also had important consequences in the ways class conflict was conceived. If the key source of contemporary power is the private ownership of the means of production, the working class is in general helpless in front of capitalist rule. Class conflict, then, takes the form of a zero-sum
game in which any gain for capitalists stands as a net loss for workers. From this immutable character of class conflict and class domination, it logically followed that anything short of a true revolution (abolishment of private property and "smashing" the state) could only perpetuate the continuous exploitative domination of the capitalist class. Any form of negotiation between capitalist and workers, if it takes place at all, is powerless to introduce any sort of control over capital or advance the real interests of the working class.

As we have seen, it would be incorrect to say that these are still the assumptions of contemporary marxist theory. The role of the state has been highlighted as an independent force in modern societies, class conflict is not always seen as a zero-sum game, and the institutions of political democracy have been regarded as a source of power that is independent from class domination. However, there is still no theoretical framework where the recent findings of marxist theory on the state, power, and democracy can be articulated in a coherent way. In this sense, some of Poulantzas' contributions in his late years deserve special attention. Poulantzas had the merit to propose, more accurately than other marxist thinkers, what Jeffrey Isaac calls a "realist" notion of power, that is, a view that defines power as the capacity to act possessed by social agents by virtue of the enduring relations in which they participate (Issac 1987, 80).

This view consists of two interrelated propositions. First, consistently with the general framework of Marxist theory, is the idea that power is implicated in the enduring structural social relations that characterize a particular society. In this sense, to locate the sources of power in a society is to locate the enablements and constraints that operate on the actions of all individuals and collective organizations that participate in that society. Second, and essentially, the premise that power always operates dialectically, and not according to a newtonian model of stimulus and response. Given the different resources distributed in social relationships, power is always open to contestation, resistance, and, eventually, negotiation. This in turn determines the relative capacities of both the dominant and the subordinate party in a power relation. This last characteristic of power, also allows for a proper understanding of the role of human agency. Although Poulantzas never developed this aspect, it is implicit that if power consists of a capacity to act that is in principle determined by a structural distribution of resources, the particular response of social agents according to that distribution of resources is crucial to account for the extent to which that capacity is actually exercised. In other words, whereas structural determination allows for the location of power, purposeful action always determines the particular dynamics of a power relation.

13 Although I will follow Isaac in his characterization of the "realistic" approach to power, I do not think, as he does, that this notion of power can be attributed to Marxism in general. In particular, the "relational" approach to power, although implicit in some of the recent neo-marxist literature, can only be attributed to Nicos Poulantzas.
This perspective may provide a viable theoretical framework for integrating the different contributions of the recent neo-marxist literature into a coherent critique of both the pluralist and institucionalist theories of the state. For the predominant pluralist tradition in American political science, what we usually call “the state” is reduced to a set of behavioral regularities constituted by the authoritative decisions of government officials. In this view, the role of the state (or better, “the government”) is that of a neutral arbiter of the interplay between different, although relatively equally powerful “interest groups” that operate at the level of civil society. The institutionalist paradigm, fully developed by Weber but with roots in the German idealist tradition, proposed a different concept. In this paradigm, the state, far from being an arena for the free competition among a plurality of social groups, is an autonomous institution which enjoys the capacity to organize and shape the interests of the different groups and classes that interact at the socio-economic level. Both views neglect the structural determinants of state power and the asymmetries of social and political resources that affect the capacity to act of different social groups.

The pluralist theory argues that all social groups enjoy roughly equal capacities for realizing their interests through their influence upon state policies. This view relies on the idea that power, as Dahl puts it, simply describes a relationship characterized by “A’s capacity for acting in such a manner as to control B’s responses” (Dahl, 1956, 13). This is an entirely subjectivist approach in which power is reduced to an interpersonal relation of influence and response. Once the subjects of a power relation are located there is no need to understand the structural determinants of the various degrees of relative power that individuals and groups are able to exercise. It is for this reason that pluralists think that the main way to discover the locus of power is to ask who rules rather than what type of social relationship determines both A’s capacity to act and B’s response.

As against this view, a relational theory of power may suggest that the capacity of each social group to realize its interests depends on both its own position and resources and on the position and resources of other groups in a given social structure. As Poulantzas pointed out, “the place of each class, and hence its power, is delimited (i.e., at once designated and limited) by the place of other classes” (Poulantzas, 1978a, 147 my translation). From this point of view, the capacity of the working class to realize its interests is circumscribed by the relative position that the capitalistic class, as owners of the private means of production, enjoy in the socioeconomic structure. As Offe, Block, and Przeworski indicate, the investment decisions taken by capitalists determine the rate of accumulation and, therefore, the amount of material resources the state itself is capable to extract from the total level of production. The working class is not powerless in this context. In the diverse forms of collective withdrawal of labor, and in the relative power that unions and working class parties may have in a political democracy, workers have their own means of resistance, which in turn constrains the power of employers. However, it
seems apparent that neither workers and capitalists can be treated as simple “interest groups” with an equal capacity to influence state policies nor can the state be seen as a “neutral” arbiter in the conflict of interests that takes place in society. Both in the collective interest of society and in their own self-interest, state officials tend to implement policies that, at least in the long term, are compatible with the interests of the capitalist class.¹⁴

By similar considerations, the weberian tradition also gives a partial account of the structural determinants of power relations. This view is based on the notion of power advanced by Max Weber, as “the probability that one actor within a relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Weber, 1978, 53). Different from the pluralist paradigm, Weber did not reduce this concept of power to interpersonal relations. He admitted that in modern capitalist societies there exist relatively permanent asymmetries in the distribution of resources and hierarchical structures of power. In his view, the distinctive character of modern societies is the emergence of classes according to a different access to the means of production and the creation of a particular political organization, the state, able to exercise power by virtue of its monopoly of the means of physical coercion. Like the pluralists, however, Weber conceived power relations in a one-dimensional way; as “power over”, thus neglecting the mechanisms that relate the different centers of power. Weber’s view rightly points out that modern state institutions are relatively independent from the socioeconomic setting and therefore enjoy the capacity to determine—not merely “arbitrate”—class interests and organize the general functioning of the economy. However, it grossly overlooks the way in which state power is itself determined by the specific location of different social forces both within and without state institutions. From the idea that the modern state is not simply an effect of capitalism nor a structure caused by class relations, Weber wrongly concluded that the state is a self-contained unit of bureaucratic structures able to exercise power over civil society in a completely autonomous way.

Different from the pluralist and institutionalist views, the relational approach to the study of power has the merit of indicating the dialectic dynamics and the structural constitution of all power, including the power of the state and that of dominant groups (Isaacs, 1987, 86). In particular, this view proposes that the state should never be regarded as either a “separate” or “impartial” entity with respect to civil society precisely because the degree of power it is capable to exercise is always dependent on the support, resistance and interaction of social forces with different structural capacities to influence state policies. To be comprehensive and consistent,

¹⁴ More recently, pluralist thinkers have made a major concession to Marxist theories of the state by admitting that, even in the context of a liberal democracy, the requirements of capital accumulation impose a systematic limit to state policies in order to secure the profitability and prosperity of the private sector. See, for instance, Dahl (1977, 60) and Lindblom (1977, 122-3).
however, this approach needs to be extended beyond the limits of most neo-marxist theories.

The first task of a revised Marxist theory of the state is to determine in what sense has the state its own place in power relations and not merely represents the “material condensation of a balance of forces between classes”. Given the multiplicity of functions the state performs in modern societies, from its traditional role as guarantor of internal order and national defense to its control over increasing material and technological resources, it has acquired a considerable capacity to influence social processes and class relations. As Michael Mann points out, as modern states pursue multiple functions, they can also perform multiple maneuvers to assert their own domination (Mann, 1984, 197). From this point of view, one possible line of analysis is to determine under what circumstances can the state intervene as a dominant actor in society. Situations of internal and external crisis and emergency suggest one instance in which the state may intervene as an autonomous force. In these situations, the state often appears as the only organization with enough resources to reorganize the political process or the general functioning of the economy. Even without a complete breakdown of constitutional rules (as in the case of a “bonapartist” or dictatorial state) it is also in times of crisis when the state shows a considerable degree of independence from all social groups, however dominant they could be in normal times. Related to this, of course, is the analysis of the problem of state militarism and nationalism. As the recent and past experience of former socialist countries may demonstrate, the development of authoritarian forms of statism cannot merely be attributed, as Poulantzas and other Marxist thinkers have proposed, to the particularly coercive nature of modern corporate capitalism. Both in liberal-democratic and authoritarian communist regimes, the strengthening of the mechanisms of repression and the growth of executive powers was to a large extent the result of the “national security” states that emerged out of the international competition for power.

In relation to the specific political resources the state is able to command to both secure its own dominion and the maintenance of the present structures of economic power, the role of coercion, ideology and active consent need further exploration. It is necessary to complete the work of the tradition of political analysis that from Gramsci to Poulantzas tried to explain the different mechanisms that both at the level of the state and civil society generate compliance to the status quo. As Przeworski points out, popular consent to the system is in part real and in part induced by ideology and coercion. However, the reasons why the state is present in the control of institutions that lay beyond its own sphere of action are still unclear. Related to the problem of consent and legitimacy is the role of democratic institutions. Most contemporary Marxist theories recognize that political democracy is neither a bourgeois illusion nor a mere veil to disguise capitalist relations of domination. However, it seems that a left radical view still has to explain the real
importance of political democracy. Democracy, after all, leaves open and undecided the problem of the distribution of social and economic resources, which, in turn, determine the relative bargaining power of different social actors. Why, then, would it matter beyond the contradictory or, conversely, stabilizing effect that representative institutions have for the “reproduction” of the system?

From a more general point of view, class relations are but one of the possible structural determinations of power relations. Although most neo-marxist theorists acknowledge the role that non-class conflicts may play in contemporary democratic societies, they generally overlook how gender and race may have an independent impact on power relations both among social groups and in relation to the state. The emergence of a new social movement based on gender, race or age, challenges the idea that there is a core set of power relations in advanced capitalist democracies. At the same time, in so far as these movements demand not state intervention but instead a sphere of autonomy, it seems necessary to explore how the action of the state is related to a broader range of conflicts in civil society (Offe, 1987). In other words, the existence of social antagonisms other than the social division of labor implies, if not a necessary abandonment of the centrality of class relations, at least a more comprehensive reformulation of the social basis of power.
Conclusions

The traditional, class-reductionist notion of power of classic marxism was never seriously challenged, at least not from a general theoretical framework, until the work of Nicos Poulantzas. Combining Marx's mature analyses of the state and capitalist-class relations contained in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Capital* with the "political" studies on hegemony and ideology of Gramsci and Althusser, Poulantzas provided a new concept of the state as a relatively autonomous structure not merely determined but also determinant of the reproduction of class relations in capitalist society. In his view, the institutional separation between the economic and the political that a capitalist mode of production entails, makes it impossible to explain the role of the state in the reproduction of capitalism by the direct control or influence of the capitalist class on the state. The reproduction of capitalism had to be explained by the ubiquitous mechanisms of coercion, ideological indoctrination, and consent that the state is able to control in order to act as an organizer of the hegemony of the capitalist class. At the same time, and particularly in his last work, Poulantzas maintained that neither capitalist class domination nor the different ways through which it is consolidated by state action form a monolithic block. Contemporary capitalist hegemony is constantly open to contradictions through which the working class is able to advance into different positions of power. Unfortunately, in spite (or perhaps, because) of the multiple transformations of his theory, Poulantzas provided neither a satisfactory account of the sources of state power, as different from class power, nor a clear explanation of the exact relationship between the two.

More recent Marxist theories initiated a different, but in a sense, more "orthodox" path. Abandoning Poulantzas' attempt to create a Marxist theory of the political, they have focused almost exclusively on the economic functions of the state and its interaction with the process of capitalist accumulation. In doing so, they have offered plausible explanations of the limits and contradictions that the process of capitalist accumulation creates in a capitalist democracy. But with the partial exception of Adam Przeworski, there is no general view of the different mechanisms through which the state is able to assert its own domination and the maintenance of capitalist relations of production. In this sense, after all the insistence on the state as a distinctive force in modern societies, neo-marxist theories still lack a complete explanation of the sources, limits and determinations of state power.

What explains the fragmentation of the current literature, is the absence of a coherent theory of power on which to construct a theory of the state. The basis of that theory may be contained in Poulantzas' "relational" approach to power. This view, to some extent present in Przeworski's work, makes possible combining the idea that while the state controls a wide range of political, economic and ideological
resources to assert its power, it is unable to exercise it in complete separation from
the structural relations that characterize a given society. According to this
perspective, the state can be seen as an institutional ensemble which, as such, can
only exercise power in interaction with different social groups and classes that
operate both within and without its institutional structures. At the same time, this
perspective on power allows to consider the dynamics of class conflict in a capitalist
society in a non-zero-sum fashion. Just as the state is unable to exercise power in
complete independence from classes and social forces, so is the perpetuation of
capitalist class domination dependent on the consent, negotiation and compromise of
subordinate classes. Only under a reformulation of the concept of power would the
neo-marxist theory of the state provide an alternative paradigm to the pluralist and
institutional frameworks. In this sense, unless Poulantzas’ analyses were resumed
and completed, we will have to agree with Bobbio and put into question whether
there is such a thing as a “Marxist Doctrine of the State”.
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