

1. Tamara Wattnem

Elster argues that over time Marx's more historically grounded analyses led him to grant some degree of autonomy to the state, unlike much of his earlier theoretical work. He goes on to suggest that part of the reason why Marx did not explicitly recognize real state autonomy was due to his "pre-strategic" conception of power. What do you think of this claim? Are Marx's assumptions about power best understood as "pre-strategic"? What are the various understandings of power undergirding different conceptions of the state inspired by Marx's work and what are their implications?

Commented [EW1]: Pre-strategic, I think, means two sorts of things in Elster's analysis (he is not explicit about this). (1) it means power is reduced to the direct capacity to coerce – "power grows out of the end of the gun" – rather than power is embedded in complex institutional relations. In particular, power does not mean the power that defines the feasible set of choices, but only the choice among alternatives within the feasible set. (that is his point on 406-7), (2) A second sense is when Elster claims Marx sees power as coming out of "pre-political resources" rather than out of the political system as such.

2. Pete Ramand

Elster constructs the state autonomy argument based on the interests and preferences of the capitalist class as a whole. This requires the capitalist class to act as a unified actor. However, in the Eighteenth Brumaire, Marx suggests that the capitalist class is politically divided. Each party in 1848 represented the interests of different fractions of capital (or classes such as the proletariat). While this is touched upon briefly by Elster in relation to the "abdication theory" etc, this complexity does not form part of the argument concerning autonomy.

It is conceivable that there could be a fraction of the capitalist class that is unconcerned about either the prospect of working class militancy or problems associated with short-term decision-making. Also, the extent to which differing fractions of capital attempt to influence state policy varies across time and space.

While Marx describes the bourgeoisie as "a band of warring brothers", he describes their fraternity in the last instance when facing threats. Without the threat of serious working class ascendancy there are few ways in which this group coordinate as a unified class (at the least there is the possibility of defection by 'rouge' capitalists/fractions of capital). This seems relevant to the present conjuncture where the threat of proletarian militancy is low and there is little regard to problems of short-termism with regard to the prospects for long-term capital accumulation (e.g. Environmental destruction). We could argue that levels of state autonomy varies according to specific configurations of class forces in a given society, but this does not fit neatly with the argument specified by Elster.

So, if we don't assume that the capitalist class act in a united manner, to what extent does Elster's reconstruction of Marx's argument regarding state autonomy hold?

Commented [EW2]: The general issue of internal divisions within the capitalist classes poses all sorts of problems of a simple "interests of the bourgeoisie" account of state policies. The idea behind it must be that we can distinguish between some sort of class-wide "fundamental interests" – which sometimes is also called "long-term interests" – and fractional interests.

3. Aaron Yarmel

John Elster characterizes explanatory autonomy as follows: “I shall say that the state has explanatory autonomy when (and to the extent that) its structure and policies cannot be explained by the interest of an economically dominant class” (405). In what follows, I will elaborate on and challenge this characterization.

The first thing to note is that explanatory autonomy exists on a spectrum. On one extreme, we can conceive of states described by the instrumentalist theory of the state: the state has no autonomy of its own, but is a mere instrument of the dominant class (408). On another extreme, we can conceive of states that are in no way influenced by the interests of an economically dominant class. For obvious reasons, is implausible that any existing states have been characterized by either extreme position. In the middle, we can conceive of states with varying degrees of autonomy. In many cases, the dominant class will *abdicate* power for various reasons (e.g., perhaps the bourgeoisie has no confidence in its ability to use power to further its own interests) (419).

My challenge is as follows. Imagine that a state exists, such that it is merely an instrument of the dominant class (this assumption makes the description simpler, but it is not necessary for the challenge to go through). In this state, the only institutions that exist are the ones that the dominant class has willed into existence. Suppose that the dominant class must choose between adopting policy A and policy B, such that the former is in the long-term interest of the dominant class while the latter is not. In scenario 1, the dominant class chooses A. In scenario 2, the dominant class chooses B. Intuitively, the state in scenario 1 does not differ from the state in scenario 2 with respect to *autonomy* (there is no difference whatsoever with respect to the control that the dominant class has over the state). Yet, after the policy decision, the organization of the institutions of the state in the first scenario is the only one that can be explained in terms of the *interest* of the dominant class (i.e., since choosing B is not in really in accordance with the interests of the dominant class). Therefore, Elster’s characterization gives us a counterintuitive result.

It will not be enough to assume that the dominant classes in both scenarios are *attempting* to pursue their interests. For to say that the policies and structure of X is explained by the interest of Y is very different than to say that the policies and structure of X is explained by Y’s having attempted to pursue its interest. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that an alternative characterization of autonomy could avoid my challenge by making use of just such an assumption. One such alternative is as follows: the state has explanatory autonomy when (and to the extent that) its structure and policies cannot be explained by what an economically dominant class perceives as being in its interest.

Commented [EW3]: But a Marxist would say that a in a capitalist state scenario 2 wouldn’t happen. The situation you set up here is precisely what the theory predicts won’t happen: If (a) state institutions are the result of “the will of the dominant class”, then (b) state policies will serve the interests of that class, so (c) your scenario 2 won’t happen – the dominant class won’t chose policies against its interests. (In your account there is some ambiguity, since you say policy A is in the *long-term* interests of the dominant class. A policy that is not in the long-term interests could still be in the short-term interests. The instrumentalist theory may be silent on this issue when short-term interests undermine long-term interests).

4. Sarah Farr

- Sweezy argues that piecemeal reform will never succeed in supplanting capitalism because the only demands that the state will concede to the working class are those that don't threaten the capitalist system. In his discussion of the role of democracy, however, he seems to leave open the possibility that democratic processes represent an opening for the working class to organize for socialist ends. I'm having some trouble reconciling these two positions.
- I'm interested in where we draw the boundary of the state. I'm thinking especially of the classes of workers who support the functions of the state: police officers, border enforcement, prison guards, but also workers employed by government subcontractors. To what extent do they constitute the state (protector of the interests of capital) or the working class (object of the capitalist state's control)?

Commented [EW4]: There is unquestionably a tension in these two claims, since Sweezy both endorses reforms that benefit workers and denies that cumulatively they could ever threaten capitalism because reforms that threaten capitalism would never be enacted by the state. The idea that might unify these two claims is that reforms that are compatible with capitalism (and may even solve problems – like the working day issue) also enable working class organization to grow and build solidarity that ultimately can be deployed against the state itself. But he isn't clear on this.

5. Kaan Jittiang

The question that I would like to discuss in the class this week is: how should we characterize the state?

What struck me most after going through the readings for this week is the interconnection between economics and politics. It is obvious that economics is the important factor that constrains politics and politics could not simply be reduced to economics. This line of argument seems to emerge clearly from the work of Elster. The important issue that strongly ties to this contention though is the question of the proper position of the state in the capitalist society. Because the state emerges out of class relations, some scholars keenly argue that it is impossible for the state to have autonomy. The dominant class within the society could arguably be the one establishing the state and therefore is able to direct the trajectory of state actions. Accordingly state is no less than the extension of the capitalist class. However, is this really the way we should characterize the state? What about the states in the capitalist society that have a provision on welfare and education for grassroots citizens, how should we understand those states? Doesn't this mean that state is actually a balancer of interests of all classes? Or else the provision of welfare and education that the state has is only to continue the reproduction of capitalism in the way that the state could still serve the interests of the capitalist class without having its direct intervention. It seems to me that the latter scenario is the issue of interest here because to a large extent the state derives power from the capitalist class and needs to cooperate with it in order to sustain itself. Whenever the state fails to deliver or protect the interests of the capitalist class, state may face backlashes because the capitalists may seek revenge by taking power back. I'm not sure whether the point that I'm making here is the case of several countries in the world right now, including the United States, or not. But it seems to me that it is. What do you guys think?

Commented [EW5]: Very tricky question. Much rides on the full elaboration of the idea of what I call "mediated class relations" – the way in which social relations other than those that directly define relationships between capital and labor connect a person to the class structure. Thus, when state workers are organized in unions this ties them to the broader worker class.

6. Griffin Bur

I'm most interested in the conceptualization of *relations of production* that Cohen and Elster both treat at some length and on which I think they implicitly disagree (I like Sweezy's book but I don't find the section on the state very unique on this question so I'm setting that excerpt to one side in my reply). I have two points to make on this. I have two points to make: the first concerns Cohen's arguments on

its own terms, and the second concerns the plausibility of the argument vis-à-vis other possible arguments (I'll bring in Elster as appropriate).

First, I think Cohen's chapter presents a **very sophisticated, definitive attempt to present a certain conception of "production relations" so as to rescue the traditional base-superstructure model as it exists in the Marxist tradition** (I don't think it exists, at least most of the time, in Marx) **and I am interested to hear what others make of it.** I'm particularly struck by the distinction between powers and rights (*KMTH*, p. 219) which assigns relations of production to the domain of force (it is, in Cohen's term, *rechtsfrei*), thus allowing the matching legal rights to be cleaved off into "superstructural relations" (I also think Cohen's philological intervention on this point is ingenious and correct; his clarification of Marx's use of [ostensibly but not actually] "legal" terms to define the relations of production is very clever). His accompanying reframing of the "architectural metaphor" (p. 231) as the "struts-roof" model is, in my mind, the most plausible (re)formulation of the "base-superstructure" that I have encountered.

Second, I want to pose the question to the group of whether the base-superstructure model is worth rescuing, even in a sophisticated form: is this model really Marx's and, much more importantly, is it persuasive as an approach to social relations? A third follow-up question, more germane to the content of the course but probably not answerable until the end, is: *how does this reconceptualization affect our understanding of the three Marxian theories of the state that Elster outlines* (the instrumentalist, abdication and class-balances theories--see pp. 408-428 in *Making Sense of Marx*). On the second question, I am personally persuaded by Derek Sayer's *Violence of Abstraction*, a very sympathetic book-length critique of *KMTH* and a representative of what Ellen Wood calls the "unitarian approach" to the base-superstructure problem: one which "attempts to bridge the discontinuities between 'base' and 'superstructure' by broadening the meaning of the 'base' itself" ("The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism", p. 74). Sayer argues that Marx "indeed did within this category [of "property or production relations"] relations which are, for traditional historical materialism, eminently 'superstructural'" (*Violence of Abstraction*, p. 63). My own reading of Marx's "philosophical works" (e.g. the 1844 manuscripts, the texts published as *The German Ideology*) is that, for Marx, that which is "material" is that which affects the relations of social (re)production: this is why "theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses" (*Towards a Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, no page available). I would argue that it does not have much to do with whether or not certain social factors lie in the "economic" or the "political-legal-ideological" sphere(s), the bifurcation of which is itself not an historical constant (as Elster notes, the so-called "Asiatic mode of production" as well as 20th century Communism seem to pose serious problems for the base/superstructure model because "the economic" and "the political" were so tightly integrated there--*Making Sense of Marx*, p. 405). Instead, I think it has to do with the "proximity" to those relations that constitute the core rules of social reproduction; the extent to which something is material is the extent to which it matters for social reproduction. At present, regarding my **third question**, I am not entirely sure how this broader reconceptualization would affect how we conceive of the state.

Commented [EW6]: The key move in Cohen is to introduce two functional explanations: one between the forces of production and the relations of production, and a second between the economic base and the superstructure. The materialism is driven by the PF/PR functional relation, and is then transmitted to the B/S relation (since the initial argument is that the production relations are functionally explained by the forces of production). This does NOT make relations of production "superstructural". Property rights are superstructural, but not the relations of production to which those legal forms correspond.

7. Benny Witkovsky

Who Wants State Power Anyway?

After completing these readings, thinking primarily about Elster's piece and to some extent Sweezy's, I'm left with question: why would any individual choose to be a part of the state apparatus?

In his discussion of the abdication theory of the state, Elster outlines (I think compellingly) the many reasons why Capital (as in capitalists writ large) might benefit from opting out of state power. But why don't those same concerns and motivations apply to every person in capitalist society? Wouldn't any individual or clique face the same fears about their own incompetence, worry about the threat to their own power or well-being and wish to avoid both the lost labor and contempt of the people that Elster suggests might keep capitalists out of the state? In the hypothetical interchange between A ("Capital") and B ("Government") that Elster illustrates on pages 406-407, both the Government's decision making power and its economic power are defined and limited by the parameters that Capital sets. While the Government might leverage this in certain instances to get this concession or that advantage, they can never fully break out of the limitations set by capital (presumably, can never outpace capital in terms of power or wealth).

Furthermore, in both this example and the discussion of the state in capitalism that Sweezy presents on page 248, the government is expected to have the motivation, ability and knowledge to serve the best interest of capital. Are we to assume that there exists a significant number of people who understand both the needs and the power of capital and yet abdicate the opportunity to join business for the limited power and pay of a government position?

Perhaps it is significant (beyond the obvious historical context) that throughout his analysis the autonomous state that Elster considers capitalism abdicating to is aristocratic. In an aristocracy a member of a royal family or a landed nobility has both a historic, tribal calling to government and (potentially) wealth of his/her own. This situation both compels the aristocrat into leadership and insulates them from some of the financial and personal risks of ruling (in some ways this structure almost relies on an aristocratic notion that working for a living is beneath the ruling class). What compels the democratic citizen who might choose a life of boundless enterprise to choose the limited potential of government power instead?

What is that additional element of state power, that opportunity to satisfy some interest or need that convinces someone that the cost of government is worthwhile? Elster clearly outlines the value to society to have a state exist, but not the value to the individual for being a part of the state. Are we to presume that in capitalist democracy the state is doomed to be staffed with the second stringers of the Bourgeoisie who couldn't hack it in industry? I suspect that this indicates some aspect of the state structure, some realm of power or capacity for gain that is under-theorized in these readings that makes government an alluring alternative – at least for some – to a life in capital.

Commented [EW7]: The answer to this question will depend a lot on the level of abstraction of the analysis of "the state". In a developed capitalist state with lots of social reproduction functions – education, health, the environment – then there are a lot of jobs to be had in the state which are attractive for all sorts of reasons. IN any case I think you need to distinguish the motivations of the rank-and-file state workers – civil service, teachers, police, planners, etc. – from state elites. For the former, state employment is a job, and often one that compares well with private sector jobs on some dimensions (even in the 19th century), especially job security. For state elites in the political class, the state often provides a revolving door into high level capitalist employment

8. Courtney Deisch

Reading the Sweezy, I am quite unsatisfied with his ambiguous understanding of the state. He never identifies the specific of the state that he goes on to theorize and I find this problematic as it limits the applicability of such a theory. In any attempt to investigate, contest, or defend his theory, therefore, the floor is left open for whomever seeks to consider the theory to define the state in a manner which best suits their aims, be they to investigate, contest, or defend. Assuming a Weberian definition of the state does not satisfy me as the reliance upon the term “legitimate” seems to indicate the need for a judgement upon, and therefore someone who has authority to judge, whether or not the use of force by an institution is legitimate, thereby granting that institution the status of ‘state’. Who is to determine this legitimacy? Those whom are governed? There are many examples of authoritarian and totalitarian states whose governments would thereby be regarded as not legitimate and the state, then, is left out of such a discussion. Otherwise, perhaps an outside institution or agency is granted authority to determine the legitimacy of the state? This, also, seems hardly viable as no outside institution or agency has proven historically resilient enough to outlast the history of the state (even if we consider the history of the capitalist state, this remains true). It is feasible that the legitimacy of a state may be granted by another state institution; however, there are many examples where outside state institutions disagree about the legitimacy of other ‘states’. We can choose to dispense with Weber’s definition of the state and take up, instead, an alternative such as Tilly’s. This would be perhaps more problematic as Tilly’s definition seems to indicate a protectionist view of the state that is in direct conflict with a Marxist perspective that the capitalist state in which the state is a mechanism of the ruling class to ensure the preservation and stability of the existing state structure. My question is, quite simply, what is the definition of the ‘state’ being theorized at present?

Commented [EW8]: The real weight of Weber’s definition is the monopoly of force over territory. An effective dictatorship has a monopoly and is thus distinguished from a Mafia band that doesn’t monopolize violence even though it uses it. What “legitimacy” adds is that the state has enforceable authority over the territory that is publicly recognized within a system of states.

9. Masoud Movahed

This week’s readings focused on the debates over the theoretical foundations of historical materialism. Though historical materialism has been an important aspect of Marxist tradition, Marx’s own enunciation of it is somewhat oblique and diffuse. Cohen’s book is an attempt, among others, to explicate the ‘causal structure’ in Marx’s arguments, and in so doing, create a properly analyzable account of historical materialism, in what he considers to be the most attractive iteration. The thrust of Cohen’s book is that the productive forces develop autonomously through history, and determine the social relations of production. The upshot is, for Cohen, something close to a technological determinism, in which the movement to a new mode of production is not arbitrary; not just related to class struggle but also to the functional requirements of the productive forces.

In the chapter “Base and Superstructure, Power and Rights” of his book, Cohen attempts to explicate the two notions of ‘base’ and “superstructure,” and argue that the relations of production can be defined in non-legal terms. Put most simply, the base is the economic structure while superstructure is the non-economic institutions of the society (i.e. legal, cultural, civil institutions). Cohen defines the legal terms of property and ownership in terms of power, which is conjoined with legal rights, but is not a synonymous to them. Since power is based on human relationships, Cohen maintains that base, namely productive forces, is the independent factor on which social relations, and therefore the

superstructure, rests. As he explains, what the legal system permits and forbids is wholly dependent upon its ability to sustain an economy in which the productive forces are used to their fullest extent.

But when Cohen turns to his thesis about structure-superstructure relations, he grapples with the difficulty to explain why it is that non-economic institutions do not explain the economic structure as much as the economic structure explains non-economic institutions? Or, as Cohen puts forward the question that: “Do they (men law-abiding society) have the rights because they have power, or do they have powers because they have rights” (232)? For Cohen, the question is “ambiguous,” and concedes that “in law-abiding society men have the powers they do because they have the rights they do.” He then contends that above analysis, though correct, is “incomplete...For it says that right *r* is enjoyed because it belongs to a structure of rights, which obtains because it secures a matching structure of powers” (232). In other words, according to Cohen, powers would not develop as they do were rights different, but that is why the rights are not different -because rights of the given kind suit the development of the powers. This is a plausible interpretation of how Marx regarded the structure-superstructure relationship, and Cohen then cites several texts from Marx that support it.

Cohen seems to exclude ideology from his analysis of superstructure, but he does not discuss why? Ideology is important simply because it reinforces structure (i.e. capitalism as a mode of production). For example, people from across the world—especially in light of the neoliberal turn in the past three decades—associate certain values such as democracy, pluralism, and civil freedoms to capitalism. Many—even those who are somewhat the victims of capitalism—believe that capitalism is the only system compatible with these values, and that socialism is intrinsically conducive to autocracy and dictatorship. All these are merely ideological obfuscations and empirically false, but people are still ideologically committed to them. So I certainly see ideology as an element of superstructure that reinforces structure.

Commented [EW9]: The pivotal idea here is a *functional explanation*: this is what renders these reciprocal effects asymmetrical.

Commented [EW10]: I don't think ideology is excluded from the superstructure. Where is Cohen do you see that exclusion?

10. Janaina Saad

According to Elster the state has “explanatory autonomy when...its structure and policies cannot be explained by the interest of an economically dominant *class*” (p. 405). He then mentions other non-class interests that may be driving state action, such as the “ruling clique” or “civil society as a whole.” But we can also conceive of (and empirically observe) state actions that systematically favor a *segment* of the capitalist class—catering to the particularistic interests of capitalists rather than the class as a whole. In such cases, the policy options may be suboptimal for the capitalist *class*. One way to think about such cases of state autonomy is that it invalidates several of the reasons for capitalists to abdicate power (outlined by Elster in p. 407), thus reducing their costs of taking political power. In such cases, the abdication theory of the state would predict that capitalists would generally choose to take direct political power (unless the capitalist class was too weak to do so), rendering this form of state inherently unstable. My question is the following: Is a form of state autonomy that benefits particular segments of the capitalist class compatible with Elster's conception of state autonomy?

Commented [EW11]: I think what probably needs to be sorted out here is the tension between immediate and fundamental interests, which are sometimes characterized as short-run and long-run, but the temporal character is not always so clear cut. The claim that the capitalist class is indeed a class is a claim about a unity of fundamental interests. So, the basic claim – in the way, for example, Sweezy talks about it – is that the state serves to preserve those interests. The problem arises, then, when the immediate interests of a segment of the capitalist class might contradict the fundamental interests of the class as a whole – since capitalists may be very divided over immediate interests.

11. Kris Arsaelsson

My key question following this week's readings is how seriously we should take the argument that the (development) of productive forces (technology, processes) functionally explain the structure and/or policy/actions of the state - or at least, in the last instance, property relations? It happens to be that there such productive forces have been developing at a significant pace in recent years while perhaps not in ways that strain the relations of production. Yet some (e.g. Inglehart and others under the rubric of *post-materialism*) argue that people's preferences and interests have shifted in recent decades because of increasing material security (higher certainty over basic material needs). If true then it might be argued that the power of labour is increasing over time. Thus, if a version of state autonomy theory which assumes that its actions are more or less determined by the relative power of classes would predict an increasing sensitivity to the preferences of labour. But even in the case of crisis, for example the recent financial crisis of Iceland where the whole financial sector went bankrupt and a left-wing government came to power, no meaningful changes to property relations were even discussed. And there were no serious indications of threats made by capital at all. The previous *system* was simply restored without even changes to rules or regulations that might constrain capitalist power over the economy. Is this indicative of the importance of the effect of the development of *productive forces* or something else, e.g. the structure or institutional design of the state which give privilege to certain preferences of the electorate or interests groups (e.g. Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995 and Gilens and Page, 2014) - or ideology or something else?

Commented [EW12]: I don't follow your point here? How does the shift to post-material values (if this is actually robust in the face of increasing precarity is another matter) imply that the power of labor has increased? Post-materialism in a capitalist society would still depend on the continuing stability of capitalism, and this requires catering to the interests of capital.

12. Loren Peabody

Cohen's functionalist explanation of legal structures and Sweezy's even grander claims about state action generally promoting the "overriding aim of preserving the system" (p. 248), left me at a loss for how use this level of theorizing for actually getting leverage on any empirical puzzle or how to test it against rival theoretical approaches. So Elster's restraint in making theoretical conclusions about the capitalist state as such came as a breath of fresh air. Yet I'm wondering if anybody thinks he goes too far when he writes, "the scope for autonomous decision-making by state officials according to other criteria than the interest of the capitalist class... is a strictly empirical issue" (pp. 421-422).

If the state's degree of autonomy from the economically dominant class is an entirely variable question that we can have no general expectations about, then it would seem as though there couldn't be a distinctively Marxian approach to the state that makes predictions that contradict those of the pluralist and state-centered alternatives. I would think that any Marxian theory would deny the possibility that "the state could in a real sense be more powerful than the economically powerful class" (p. 422) in a sustained manner (i.e., beyond limited periods of state dominance during special circumstances like war). Moreover Elster acknowledges that "it is obvious that the government in any society must take account of the interests of the entrepreneurs, since the state depends on them... [and] there is sometimes a real danger that the bourgeoisie might dethrone the government" (p. 421). I would doubt these limits to state autonomy are that "obvious" to all social scientists and I suspect Elster is neglecting their importance.

Commented [EW13]: I think his claim here is that these are not the only interests that the state "has to take account." It also has to take account of the reproduction of various other kinds of interests, and there is no reason to believe that one or the other of these impose the more restrictive set of feasible policies.

What's difficult for me about Elster's paragraph here is that it combines claims about (1) what degree of autonomy of the state Marxist approaches would expect to be possible and (2) what are their grounds for believing so. If he thinks we should not commit to theoretical claims about the scope of state autonomy, what about making an empirical case about the limits imposed by the economic power of capitalists? Are there cases of the state actually being more powerful than the economically powerful class in a sustained manner that defy Marxian expectations?

13. Youbin Kang

In determining the significance of intentions in mediating or shaping production relations (for example, capitalists that strategize to alter laws, as suggested by Elster) it is important to first determine whether these things are observable. Cohen disagrees. His analysis seems to illustrate such mechanisms as unobservable and sometimes unintentional forces, akin to Adam Smith's invisible hand. This then again facilitates Cohen's ability to distill certain concepts into articulated dynamics (such as his description of power as dependent on cost and difficulty.) I think that costs and difficulties are not objective facts for individuals and groups but often constructed subjectively and perhaps strategically. What do we think? (I think there are two parts to this, first the nature of social sciences to be able to uncover social processes and second the intentional strategizing by capitalists).

14. Samina Hossain

Elster's close survey of Marx's reading of the state, including his perception of Marx's changing attitude toward it, takes the reader on a rigorous and honest journey that reveals just how difficult it is to reconcile historical materialism with the complex relation between the state and the general population. For example, in the discussion on Marx's development of the abdication theory (after he observes the bourgeoisie shying away from power in the 1840s), Elster points to how Marx in some cases represents the bourgeoisie to be calculative and strategic (forfeiting the crown to save the purse) when the actual history is more ambiguous.

On page 418 Elster writes "there is not any suggestion that this prosperity could in retrospect be invoked to explain the defeat of the German bourgeoisie in 1849 as a voluntary abdication from power". He makes a similar critique of Marx's characterization of the absolute monarchy in *The German Ideology*: "Marx here conflates the apparent independence of the state with its transitory independence, as if future weakness proved the illusionary character of present strength" (pg. 423). Altogether, it appears as if Marx tries to make history fit his grand theory of historical materialism, at times by ascribing agency to the capitalists that is hard to verify. Elster argues that in order to determine the extent to which a state is free from (or reducible to) capitalist interests is an empirical issue that cannot be explained away by "conceptual juggling" alone.

Commented [EW14]: I'm not sure what is the specific point you are making about Cohen's argument. Most theorists allow for things like "intentions" to be part of explanations even though they are unobservable. You can observe what people *say* are their intentions, and then you can see if the actions are consistent with those pronouncements, but you can't observe the intentions themselves. That is different from "the invisible hand" which is a metaphor from an equilibrium process in which you can observe all of the actions: the way prices provide information to producers and consumers and the subsequent adjustment of their behaviors, etc. Anyway, I'm not sure exactly what issue you are referring to here.

In light of these critiques by Elster, I am wondering if G. A. Cohen, in his efforts to defend the theory of historical materialism, falls into a similar conundrum. Cohen's visual image of the four struts with a roof powerfully captures his argument about the supremacy of the base (relations of production), in spite of its limited reliance on the superstructure (property relations). I am wondering though, if in privileging economic interests over force a la Engels, whether Cohen is overlooking an alternative paradigm in which not capital, but authority over others or power, is the supreme objective and that accumulation of capital is a means, rather than an end, to achieving that higher aim?

Commented [EW15]: This visual image is in the service of a *functional* explanation, not a strategic explanation of the agency of capitalists over the state. He is not so much privileging economic interests as such, but economic structures. These structures would become highly unstable in the absence of a stabilizing force. We observe the stabilizing force in the state (and ideology and other aspects of the superstructure). We then hypothesize that the state takes this form precisely because it stabilizes the economic structure. One possible mechanism through which this stabilization comes about is the agency of capitalists, but there are other possibilities as well.