

Nicos Poulantzas

Political Power and Social Classes

NLB and S & W

Translation editor Timothy O'Hagan

I. The Concept of Politics

(i) POLITICS AND HISTORY; THE POLITICAL AND POLITICS

We have already established sufficient elements for an attempt to trace out the concept of politics in Marx, Engels and Lenin, and its relations to the problematic of the state. But two preliminary remarks must be made:

1. In this chapter, we shall try to pose the problems of the general Marxist theory of the state and of the political class struggle. This chapter, concerning as it does the general problem of the state, precedes in the order of exposition the chapter on social classes and the class struggle. This is not accidental. It is not, of course, because we can, in a logical order, enter upon an examination of the state without direct and joint reference to the class struggle; nor is it because this order of presentation corresponds to a historical order according to which the state exists prior to the division of society into classes; it is because social classes are the effect (we shall see in what exact sense later) of certain levels of structures, of which the state forms a part.

2. We shall introduce at this stage the distinction between the *juridico-political superstructure of the state*, which can be designated as *the political*, and political class practices (political class struggle) which can be designated as *politics*. But it must be borne in mind that this distinction will become clear in the following chapter on social classes, in which the distinction and relation between (i) structures and (ii) class practices, i.e. the field of class struggle, will be substantiated.

In Marx, Engels and Lenin the problem of the political and politics is linked to the problem of history. The Marxist position on this question derives from Marx's and Engels's two basic propositions in the *Communist Manifesto*, according to which: (a) 'Every class struggle is a political struggle', and (b) 'The class struggle is the motive force of history'. A first reading, of a *historicist* type, of the relation between these two propositions is evidently possible. Ultimately, such a reading presupposes the Hegelian type of 'totality' and 'history': this is, firstly, a type of simple and circular

structures
vs.
practices

the political
vs.
politics

totality, composed of equivalent elements, which is radically different from the complex structure in dominance which specifies the Marxist type of unity; secondly, it is a linear type of historicity, whose evolution is here and now contained in the origin of the concept, the historical process being identified with the growth (*devenir*)¹ of the self-development of the idea. In this 'totality', the specificity of the various elements in question is reduced to this principle of simple unity: the principle is identical with the concept, of which these elements constitute the objectification. History is reduced to a simple growth whose principle of development is the 'dialectical' passage of the concept from essence to existence.

It is in fact possible to make a historicist reading of the above Marxist propositions. As a result of such a reading, the field of the political would then include *not a particular structural level and a specific practice* but, in general, the 'dynamic/diachronic' aspect of every element, belonging to any level of the structures or practices of a social formation. For the historicist school, Marxism is a 'genetic' science of growth in general and, politics being the motive force of history, it is therefore, in the last analysis, a science of politics, or even a 'science of revolution', identified with this simple unilinear growth. From this the following consequences ensue: (a) an identification of politics with history; (b) what can be called an over-politicization of the various levels of structures and of social practices whose own specificity, relative autonomy and effectiveness is reduced to their dynamic-historical-political aspect (on this interpretation, the political constitutes the *centre*, or the simple common denominator, both of their unity (totality) and of their development. A particularly striking example of (b) is the notorious over-politicization of the theoretical level which ends in the 'bourgeois science/proletarian science' dichotomy); (c) an abolition of the very specificity of the political, which crumbles into all the other elements, not distinguished from one another, and so upsets the balance of the relation between the forces of a formation. These consequences make superfluous the theoretical study of the structures of the political and of political practice and lead to the ideological invariant voluntarism/economism and to the various forms of revisionism, reformism, spontaneism, etc.

In short, the political, in a historicist conception of Marxism, exactly occupies the role finally assumed by the concept in Hegel. I shall not

1. *Devenir* (German *werden*): the Hegelian 'becoming' is translated by the philosophically inaccurate, but stylistically more natural, *growth* in this passage. [Trans.]

consider the concrete forms which this problematic takes on. I shall merely give two quotations in order to locate the problem.

The first quotation is from Gramsci, whose political analyses, though always valuable, are often tainted by the historicism of Croce and Labriola. This quotation illustrates the results already pointed out:

The first question that must be raised and resolved in a study of Machiavelli is the question of politics as an autonomous science, of the place that political science occupies or should occupy in a systematic (coherent and logical) conception of the world, in a philosophy of praxis. The progress brought about by Croce in this respect in the study of Machiavelli and in political science consists mainly . . . in the dissolution of a series of false, non-existent or wrongly formulated problems. Croce based himself on his distinction of the moments of the spirit, and on his affirmation of a moment of practice, of a practical spirit, autonomous and independent though linked in a circle to all reality by the dialectic of distincts. In a philosophy of praxis, the distinction will certainly not be between the moments of the Absolute Spirit, but between the levels of the superstructure. The problem will therefore be that of establishing the dialectical position of political activity (and of the corresponding science) as a particular level of the superstructure. One might say, as a first schematic approximation, that political activity is precisely the first moment or level; the moment in which the superstructure is still in the unmediated phase of mere wishful affirmation, confused and still at an elementary stage. *In what sense can one identify politics with history, and hence all of life with politics? How then could the whole system of superstructures be understood as distinctions within politics, and the introduction of the concept of distinction into a philosophy of praxis hence be justified? . . . How is the concept of a circle joining the levels of the superstructure to be understood? Concept of 'historical bloc', i.e. unity between nature and spirit (structure and superstructure), unity of opposites and distincts.*²

In this quotation, the consequences of historicism noted above are already apparent; they lead here, as in the case of Theoretical Leftism of the 1920s, e.g. Lukács, Korsch, etc., to an over-politicization of a voluntarist kind: it provides the counterweight to economism within the same problematic.³

2. *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 136-7. For his identification of 'science' and 'philosophy of praxis' with politics, see *Il Materialismo storico e la filosofia di B. Croce*, Turin, 1948, pp. 117 ff., and *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo stato moderno*, Turin, 1949, pp. 79 ff. and 142 ff. For English translations of the more important passages from these works see *Prison Notebooks*.

3. See Althusser's analyses in *Reading Capital*.

My second quotation is taken from Talcott Parsons, the leader of the 'functionalist' school in contemporary sociology. This school will be discussed below at length, since, under the influence of Max Weber's historicism, it has become the dominant tendency in the analyses of modern political science.⁴ It is striking that simply by reason of the theoretical principles which it shares with Marxist historicism, it ends up with similar conclusions concerning the political and politics:

... political reality cannot be studied according to a specific conceptual scheme ... because ... the political component of the social system is a centre of integration for all the aspects of this system which analysis can separate, and not the sociological scene of a particular class of social phenomena. ...⁵

In what follows, it will be seen that, on the epistemological plane, there is in fact a direct continuity between the general conceptions of historicism and functionalism. The reduction of the political which results from it is quite plain: in this case the political becomes the simple principle of social totality and the principle of its development, in the synchronic-diachronic perspective which is characteristic of functionalism.

In the anti-historicist conception of the original problematic of Marxism, the political must be located in the structure of a social formation, not only as a *specific* level, but also as a crucial level in which the contradictions of a formation are reflected and condensed. This must be done in order to understand exactly the anti-historicist character of the proposition that it is the political class struggle which constitutes the motive force of history.

Let us begin with this last point which was brought out by Althusser. He showed that for Marxism, the principle by which we understand the process of transformation of societies is not a universal and ontological

4. T. Parsons, *The Social System*, Glencoe, 1951, pp. 126 ff.

5. This functionalist school is directly affiliated to historicism; furthermore, because of the importance which it has gained, it has even been presented as the 'alternative' to Marxism. As W. Runciman puts it in his excellent book *Social Science and Political Theory*, Cambridge, 1963: 'In political science, there is in fact one and only one serious candidate for such a theory ... apart from Marxism. ... [Its partisans] would claim ... that an alternative set of general propositions can be formulated which provide a better explanation of the known facts of political behaviour than Marxism has done' (p. 109). Or again: 'The fact remains, however, that some form of functionalism is the only current alternative to Marxism as the basis for some kind of general theory in political science' (p. 122).

type of history, related to a subject as its originating principle, but rather the theoretically constructed concept of a mode of production as a complex whole in dominance. From this concept, which is presented in historical materialism, can be constructed a concept of history which no longer has any connection with simple linear growth. Just as the levels of structures and practices present their own specificity, relative autonomy and particular effectiveness inside the unity of a mode of production and of a historically determined social formation, so also do their time sequences have different rhythms and metres.⁶ The various levels of a social formation are characterized by (i) an uneven development (which is an essential feature of the relation between these differential time sequences in the structure), and (ii) dislocations which are the basis for understanding a formation and its development. To this extent, transformations of a formation and transition are grasped by the concept of a history with differential time sequences.

Let us see the place which the political, and in particular *political practice*, occupies in this context. I use the concept of practice here in the sense of transformation of a definite object (raw material), resulting in the production of something new (the product) which often constitutes, or at the very least can constitute, a break with the given elements of the object. What is the specificity of political practice in this respect? Its *specific object* is the 'present moment'⁷ (as Lenin said), i.e. the *nodal point where the contradictions* of the various levels of a formation *are condensed* in the complex relations governed by over-determination and by their dislocation and uneven development. This present moment is therefore a *conjuncture*, the strategic point where the various contradictions fuse in so far as they reflect the articulation specifying a structure in dominance. The object of political practice, as it appears in Lenin's development of Marxism, is the place where relations of different contradictions finally fuse, relations which specify the unity of the structure; it is the starting point from which it is possible in a concrete situation to decipher the unity of the structure and to act upon it in order to transform it. So the object on which political practice bears is dependent on the various social levels: it bears at once on the *economic, ideological, theoretical* and

6. See the Introduction for the distinction between *mode of production* and *social formation*, a distinction which is essential for the *concept* of history.

7. See L. Althusser, 'The Materialist Dialectic', in *For Marx*. It is important to emphasize that given the present state of research, the concept of practice is still only a *practical (technical) concept*.

Object of political practice!

(in the strict sense) *political*, which, in their interrelation, make up a conjuncture.

The following consequence also ensues concerning the relation of politics to history: political practice is the 'motive force of history' in so far as its *product* finally constitutes the transformation of the unity of a social formation in its various stages and phases. *This, however, must not be taken in an historicist sense.* Political practice is the practice which transforms the unity, to the extent that its *object* constitutes the nodal point of condensation of contradictions of different levels with their own historicities and uneven development.

These analyses are important if we are to locate the concept of the political, and in particular the concept of political practice, in the original problematic of Marxism. In fact, these analyses of *the object and the product of political practice* cannot in themselves exactly locate the *specificity of the political*. They need to be completed by an adequate conception of the political superstructure.⁸ For if we define the political simply as *practice* with clearly defined objects and products, we risk diluting its specificity and finally identifying everything which 'transforms' a given unity as political. If we neglect the theoretical examination of political structures, we also risk losing the concept of the present moment of the conjuncture and collapsing it into the Gramscian notion of the 'moment' (a Hegelian notion). In short, in order finally to supersede a historicist account of the political it is not sufficient to stop at a theoretical analysis of the object of political practice; we must also locate inside a social formation the specific place and function of the level of political structures which are its objective: only to this extent will it be possible to bring out the over-determination by the political as related to a differential history.

To approach the heart of the problem: the political structures (what are called the 'political superstructure') of a mode of production and of a social formation consist of the *institutionalized power of the state*. Every time Marx, Engels, Lenin or Gramsci speak of political struggle (practice) by distinguishing it from economic struggle, they are explicitly con-

8. The problem here is what may be termed the *'juridico-political superstructure of the state'*. But this term spans too schematically two distinct realities, two relatively autonomous levels, namely the *juridical structures (the law) and the political structures (the state)*. Its use is legitimate in so far as the Marxist classics have effectively established the close relation between these two levels. But we must not forget that this term covers two relatively distinct levels, whose concrete combination depends on the mode of production and the social formation under consideration.

political structures

but Poulantzas' + Althusser's def. of the "State"
is so broad so to include all institutions of
control, coordination, etc.

Considering its specificity in relation to its particular *objective*, which is *the state*, as a specific level of structures in a social formation. In this sense, we do indeed find a *general definition of politics* in the Marxist classics: it is precisely the above-mentioned conception of political practice, which has as its object the present moment and which either transforms (or else maintains) the unity of a formation. But this is the case only to the extent that political practice has the political structures of the state as its point of impact and specific strategic 'objective'.⁹

Thus Marx says: 'The political movement of the working class has . . . as its *ultimate objective (Endzweck)* the conquest of political power.'¹⁰ It is also precisely in this sense that we must understand Lenin's statement: 'It is not enough that the class struggle becomes real, consistent and developed only when it embraces the sphere of politics. . . . Marxism recognizes a class struggle as fully developed, "nation-wide", only if it does not merely embrace politics but takes in the most significant thing in politics - the organization of state power.'¹¹ It follows from this quotation that the specificity of political practice *depends on* its having state power as its objective. It is important in this respect to re-emphasize Lenin's position in the texts written in 1917 on the problem of 'dual power', that of the state and that of the soviets. In fact, in these texts also Lenin continues to consider the objective of political practice as linked to the superstructure of the state. In Lenin's thought, the slogan 'all power to the soviets' is linked to the fact that he considers the soviets as a 'second state'. We shall examine later the distinction between state power and state apparatus; what is of interest to us here is that this slogan was not issued because the soviets were under the control of the Bolsheviks (in fact, the soviets at the time of this slogan were under the control of the Mensheviks), but because the soviets, in constituting a state apparatus which assumed some of the functions of the official state, constitute the *real state*. Hence the conclusion that this second state must be strengthened, with the aim of controlling it as a state: ' . . . The real essence of the Commune is not where the bourgeois usually looks for it, but in the creation of a *state* of a special type. Such a state has *already* arisen in

9. Thus, Verret's definition of politics is completely acceptable: 'Political practice is the practice of leadership of the class struggle in and for the state', *Théorie et Politique*, Paris, 1967, p. 194. I shall shortly come to the question of the relation between politics and the state as propounded by contemporary political anthropology.

10. Letter to Bolte, 23 November 1871, trans. in *MESW*, 1970, p. 673.

11. *Collected Works*, Vol. 19, pp. 121-2.

Russia, it is the Soviets. . .¹² Moreover, these analyses of Lenin's are derived from his theoretical position on the distinction and relation between the economic and political struggles. He had already defined this in its essentials in *What is to be done?*: 'Social democracy leads the struggle of the working class . . . not in its relation to a given group of employers alone, but . . . to the state as an organized political force. Hence it follows that not only must social democrats not confine themselves exclusively to the economic struggle . . .', or again, 'Political exposures are as much a declaration of war against the government as economic exposures are a declaration of war against the factory owners'.¹³

(ii) THE GENERAL FUNCTION OF THE STATE

This thesis, however, poses as many problems as it solves. Why does a practice which has the 'present moment' as its object and which produces transformations of the unity present this specific feature, namely that its result can be produced only when its objective is state power? Apparently, this question is not at all obvious, as is demonstrated on the one hand by the economist, trade-unionist tendency, whose objective is the economic; and on the other hand by the utopian-idealist tendency, whose objective is the ideological. To put the same problem another way, what is the difference between a reformist conception and Marx's, Engels's, Lenin's and Gramsci's conception of the passage to socialism, in its demand for a radical change of the state and for the smashing of the previous state apparatus, i.e. its theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat? In short, why, in Lenin's precise terms, is the basic problem of every revolution that of state power?

To solve the problem we must return to the scientific Marxist conception of the state superstructure and show that, inside the structure of several levels dislocated by uneven development, the state has the particular function of constituting the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation. This is precisely the meaning of the Marxist conception of the state as a factor of 'order' or 'organizational principle' of a formation: not in the current sense of political order, but in the sense of the cohesion of the ensemble of the levels of a complex unity, and as the

12. 'Letter on tactics', *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, p. 53.

13. *Selected Works*, Vol. I, pp. 144 and 171. On the relation between the economic struggle and the political struggle, see in particular pp. 83 and 92 below.

Problem: political structure
or, finally, is based in RP,
Marx in SF. ?

condensation of contradictions: what does
condensation really mean?

regulating factor of its global equilibrium as a system. In this way, we can see why political practice, whose objective is the state, brings about transformations of the unity and is thus the 'motive force of history': it is precisely by analysing this role of the state that we can establish the anti-historicist sense of the thesis. There are two possibilities. (a) The result of political practice is the maintenance of the unity of a formation, of one of its stages or phases (i.e. its non-transformation). This is because, in the unstable equilibrium of correspondence/non-correspondence of levels dislocated in their own time sequences, this equilibrium is never given by the economic as such, but is maintained by the state. In this case, the objective of political practice is the state as a factor for maintaining the cohesion of this unity. (b) Political practice produces transformations: in this case its objective is the state as the nodal structure in which this unity breaks, in so far as it is its cohesive factor. In this context it is possible to aim at the state as a factor for producing a new unity and new relations of production.

Even at this stage, we can see an indication of this function of the state in the fact that, although it is a factor of cohesion of a formation's unity, it is also the structure in which the contradictions of the various levels of a formation are condensed. It is therefore the place in which we find reflected the index of dominance and overdetermination which characterizes a formation or one of its stages or phases. The state is also the place in which we can decipher the unity and articulation of a formation's structures. This will become clear when we analyse the relation of structures to the field of class practices. We shall then locate the particular relation of the state to the conjuncture which itself constitutes the place in which the relation of the structures to the field of practices can be deciphered. It is from this relation between the state as the cohesive factor of a formation's unity and the state as the place in which the various contradictions of the instances are condensed, that we can decipher the problem of the relation between politics and history. This relation designates the structure of the political both as the specific level of a formation and as the place in which its transformations occur: it designates the political struggle as the 'motive power of history' having as its objective the state, the place in which contradictions of instances (dislocated in their own time sequences) are condensed.

Certain points must be made more precise. This way of posing the problem of the state allows us to solve a fundamental problem in the Marxist theory of the political. According to a whole Marxist tradition,

reproduction vs. transformation

pure reality
of the state?
FUNCTION
AND STRUCTURE
(condensation
of control)

to construct this sort of theoretical basis for the relation between the political struggle and the state is to fall into a 'Machiavellian' conception of the political. This tradition is based on Marx's condemnation in his youthful works of the conception of the 'exclusively political', i.e. a conception which reduces the political to no more than its relation to the state. According to this tradition, the objective of political practice is not the state, but the transformation of 'civil society', perhaps the relations of production.¹⁴ The mistaken reply to this badly posed problem is called economism: according to it, socio-economic relations are the specific objective of the political struggle. The reformist conception is located precisely in this schema. It is only by turning our attention to the original problematic of the state in the works of the mature Marx that we can grasp the relation between (i) the political struggle and the state and (ii) the relation between these levels and the ensemble of the levels of the social formation.¹⁵

But this definition of the political as the relation between political practice and the state is still too wide. Even though it is valid in general for social formations divided into classes, this relation can clearly be specified only within the framework of a given mode of production and of a historically determined social formation. In particular, with regard to the function of the state as the cohesive factor in a formation's unity, it is clear that it takes on different forms according to which mode of production and social formation is under consideration. The place of the state in the unity, in so far as it assigns specifying and constitutive limits to its regional structure, depends precisely on the forms which this function of the state takes on. The exact nature of these limits (What is the state?), and also their extension or restriction (Which structures and institutions form part of the state?), are closely related to the differential forms of this function, according to which mode of production and social formation is under consideration. This function of the state, becoming a specific function, specifies the state as such in the formations dominated by the CMP, characterized by the specific autonomy of instances and by the particular place which is there allotted to the region of the state. This characteristic autonomy is the basis of the specificity of the political: it

14. e.g. Max Adler, *Die Staatsauffassung des Marxismus*, Darmstadt, 1964, pp. 49 ff. It is regrettable that Adler's work has remained so little known, for he unquestionably possesses one of the liveliest and sharpest minds in the history of Marxist thought.

15. I shall temporarily ignore the problems of the relation between the state (the objective of political practice) and the 'present moment' (the object of political practice).*

determines the particular function of the state as the cohesive factor of the levels which have gained autonomy.

The function of the state as the cohesive factor in a formation's unity, which makes it the place in which the contradictions of the instances are condensed, becomes still clearer when we consider that a historically determined social formation is characterized by an overlapping of several modes of production. It must not be forgotten here that even when one of these modes of production succeeds in establishing its dominance by marking the beginning of the phase of expanded reproduction of a formation and the end of the strictly transitory phase, we are in the presence of a true relation of forces between the various modes of production present and of permanent dislocations of a formation's instances. The role of the state, the cohesive factor of this complex overlapping of various modes of production, is decisive here. This is particularly clear during the period of transition, characterized by a particular non-correspondence between property and real appropriation of the means of production. As Bettelheim rightly remarks: 'Such a dislocation entails important results with regard to the articulation of the different levels of the social structure. This non-correspondence involves a specific efficacy of the political level.'¹⁶ However, the state's specific efficacy understood precisely as the general cohesive function of a formation's unity, exists permanently in every formation where different modes of production overlap. It is particularly important in the capitalist formation where the dominant CMP stamps the domination of its structure on the various modes of production present, and in particular stamps on them relative autonomy of instances, given the dislocations which result from them.¹⁷

16. Charles Bettelheim: 'Problématique de la période de transition' in *Études de planification socialiste*, no. 3, p. 147.

17. Before tackling the Marxist classics which concern this problem, I should point out that some important works in contemporary political science are beginning to emphasize the role of the political as the factor of maintenance of a formation's unity. They are doing this in an attempt to 'define' the political and in some sense to react against Weber, who defined the state exclusively in terms of maintaining the 'monopoly of legitimate force'. In this way, Apter defines the political as a structure which holds 'defined responsibilities for the maintenance of the system of which it is a part' ('A comparative method for the study of politics', *American Journal of Sociology*, LXIV 3, November 1958). Almond insists on the fact that the regional structures of a system are constituted by their 'boundaries', the political having exactly the crucial 'boundary maintenance function' (Almond and Coleman, *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, Princeton, 1960, pp. 12 ff.; see also G. Balandier, *Anthropologie politique*, Paris, 1967,

CMP determines

reflected

A good deal of guidance on these questions is found in the Marxist classics. Marxist theory has succeeded in establishing the relation between the *state and the class struggle as political class domination*. And so, before trying to locate the relation of the field of the class struggle (and in particular the political class struggle) to the structures of a formation, it is important to notice that for Marxist theory, this relation of the state to the political class struggle involves the relation of the state to the ensemble of the levels of *structures*: i.e. the relation of the state to the articulation of the instances which characterizes a formation.

This emerges from Engels's analyses, in which he establishes, in sometimes rather paradoxical terms, the relations of the state to 'the ensemble of society'. Engels says:

It [the state] is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms and classes with conflicting economic interests might not consume themselves and society in a fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power seemingly standing above society that would alleviate the conflict, and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state.¹⁸

In order not to multiply quotations, I shall confine myself to this text. What Engels 'says' is that there is a relation between the state and political class domination and the political class struggle. But he also shows that the relation of the state to political class domination reflects (indeed condenses, in our sense of the term) the ensemble of the contradictions of society. What does the term 'society' mean here? For if these terms are not located in the context of the original Marxist problematic, we risk falling into a humanist outlook which relates the institution of the state,

p. 43). The same is true of several researchers who use the *cybernetic* model in their analyses, e.g. D. Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, 1965, and K. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government*, 1966, etc. I shall not discuss the cybernetic model, but it should be noted that it is not to be confused with the functionalist model. I shall simply point out the following: the defining criterion of the state structure as that structure which has the role of cohesive factor of the system, *combined* (as will be seen) with that of monopoly of legitimate force, appears to be a relevant one, but only for the CMP, i.e. in the case of the capitalist state. For these authors' views on the relations between the *political and the state*, see below I.I. (iii), note 28.

18. *Origins of the Family*, ch. 9, in *MESW*, 1970, p. 576.

the totality, to the 'vital needs' of a society. The term seems to refer *here* (elsewhere it can be given different meanings) to the rigorously defined concept of a social formation as a complex unity of instances. The state is related to the contradictions peculiar to the various levels of a formation, but only in so far as it represents the place where the articulation of these levels is reflected and where their contradictions are condensed. It is the admission of 'the contradiction of society with itself'.

The state, as Marx puts it, is 'the official résumé of society'.¹⁹ This conception of the state as 'résumé' of contradictions, in the sense of their condensation or fusion, was expressed by Marx, admittedly in a Hegelian perspective, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. I refer to Marx's analyses of the state in *The Poverty of Philosophy* because of Lenin's use of them in *State and Revolution*. Elsewhere,²⁰ Lenin quotes Marx's letter to Ruge, in which he says: '... the political state represents the table of contents of man's practical conflicts. Thus the political state, within the limits of its form, expresses *sub specie rei publicae* (from the political standpoint) all the social conflicts, needs and interests.' Lenin also characterizes the political (including the state and political class conflict) in epigrammatic terms as 'a concentrated expression of economics'.²¹

In this sense, the state, for Lenin, appears to be the place in which we can decipher the unity of structures and from which we can derive our knowledge of this unity: 'The only field in which this knowledge can be gained is that constituted by the relation of all the classes and strata of the population to the state and the government, i.e. the field constituted by the relation of all classes to each other.'²² This had already been indicated by Engels, when he called the state the 'official representative' of society: representative here in the sense of the place where the unity of a formation is deciphered. Finally, still in this sense, the state is also the place where the *ruptural situation* (*situation de rupture*) of this unity can be deciphered: the double power characteristic of the state structures constitutes, as Lenin demonstrated, one of the essential elements of the *revolutionary situation*.

19. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 156 (Appendix: Marx's letter to P. V. Annenkov, 1846).

20. Lenin, 'What the "Friends of the People" are and how they fight the Social-Democrats', *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 162 n.

21. Lenin, 'Once again the Trade Unions, the current situation and the mistakes of Trotsky and Bukharin', *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 527.

22. 'What is to be done?', *Selected Works*, Vol. 1.

This relation between the state and the articulation which specifies a formation originates precisely in the fact that the state has a function of 'order' (political order, of course) in political class conflicts, and also of global order (of organization in the broad sense) as the cohesive factor of unity. The state prevents political class conflict from breaking out in so far as this conflict *reflects* the unity of a formation. (This 'reflection' is not a relation of phenomenon to essence.) The state prevents classes and 'society' from consuming themselves: the use of the term 'society' indicates that it prevents the social formation from bursting apart. It is true that the Marxist classics did not theoretically elaborate this conception of the state but we do find numerous indications of it in their works. Thus Engels precisely characterizes this function of 'order' of the state as the 'organization of the particular class, which was *pro tempore* the exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production'.²³ Instead of lingering over the term 'external', which seems to involve a mechanistic conception of the relations of the 'base' to the 'superstructure', we should concentrate on the formulation of the state as the organization for maintaining both the conditions of production and the conditions for the existence and functioning both of the unity of a mode of production and of a formation. That remarkable Marxist theoretician, Bukharin, in his *Theory of Historical Materialism*, formulates very strikingly the conception of a social formation as a system of unstable equilibrium inside which the state plays the role of 'regulator'.²⁴ And finally, Gramsci's idea of organization, by means of which he analyses the function of the state, has this conception as its basis.

(iii) MODALITIES OF THE FUNCTION OF THE STATE

This function of order or organization of the state presents various *modalities*, related to the levels on which it is exercised in particular cases: i.e. technico-economic function at the economic level, strictly political function at the level of the political class struggle, ideological function at the ideological level. Nevertheless, the technico-economic function and the ideological function of the state are *overdetermined* by its strictly political function (that concerning the political class struggle) *in*

23. *Anti-Dühring*, p. 354.

24. *Theorie des Historischen Materialismus*, Hamburg, 1922, Vol. 2, pp. 162 ff. (English translation, *Historical Materialism*, Ann Arbor, 1961.)

that they constitute modalities of the global role of the state, which is the factor of cohesion in the unity of a formation. *This global role of the state is a political role.* The state is related to a 'society divided into classes' and to political class domination, precisely in so far as it maintains, in the ensemble of structures, that place and role which have the *effect* (in their unity) of dividing a formation into classes and producing political class domination. Strictly speaking, there is no technico-economic, ideological or 'political' function of the state: there is a global function of cohesion which is ascribed to it by its place, and there are modalities of this function overdetermined by the specifically political modality. This is the implication of Engels's statement: 'Here we are only concerned with establishing the fact that the exercise of a social function was everywhere the basis of political supremacy; and further that political supremacy has existed for any length of time only when it discharged its social functions.'²⁵

This thesis has been developed in many of the classic texts of Marxism. However, in describing a particular modality not directly related to political class struggle, theorists have frequently interpreted this thesis as a so-called relation of the state to 'society', independent of the struggle between classes. This is a very old thesis, dear to the social democrats and found in works as early as those of Cunow²⁶ and Renner²⁷: it *contrasts* the 'social functions' of the state with its political function, which alone is said to be connected with class struggle and class oppression. The same thesis can be found in most current analyses by the social democrat school of the 'Welfare State'. It is also sketched in outline in certain analyses of the despotic state in the Asiatic mode of production, a state whose existence is said to be related to different technico-economic functions (hydraulic and others) in a mode of production where social classes, in the Marxist sense, are seen as being absent.

Let us look more closely into the problem of these different functions of the state. I shall not yet examine them systematically, but I shall *simply point out* their relation to the political function, in order to elucidate the problem which concerns us.

In describing the forms adopted by this global role of the state the Marxist classics sometimes present it in a *historico-genetic* manner, setting

25. *Anti-Dühring*, p. 248.

26. H. Cunow, *Die Marxische Geschichts-, Gesellschafts-, und Staatstheorie*, 1920-1, Vol. 2, pp. 309 ff.

27. K. Renner, *Marxismus, Krieg und Internationale*, 1917, pp. 28 ff.

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out the relations between the state and its various levels as so many factors in the historical creation and birth not only of the state but also of social classes. But this problem of the historical birth of the state, though important, is clearly a separate one. Marx and Engels give outline answers, but we must take into account the inevitably limited nature of the historical information which they possessed.²⁸ We can however retain these analyses, in so far as they elucidate the functions of the state which are on a par with its place in the complex whole of a given formation divided into classes. The function of the state primarily concerns the economic level, and particularly the labour process, the productivity of labour. On this point we can refer to Marx's analyses of the despotic state in the Asiatic mode of production, in which a centralized power is necessary to carry out hydraulic work needed in order to increase the

28. It may be useful to mention here some problems of definition set by *political anthropology*, a subject still in its infancy. Some authors, e.g. G. Balandier (*Anthropologie politique*, 1967), Apter, Easton, Nadel, Pouillon, etc., have questioned the relations established by Marxism between the *political* and *the state*, while at the same time questioning the radical distinction between 'segmentary societies' (without states) and 'societies with a state' and insisting on the possibility of the existence of the political independent from the existence of the state in the strict sense. But the definitions involved must be clarified. These authors are correct, if we accept, as they do, a narrow, juridical (and for a long time preponderant) conception of the state. Indeed, most of these authors (see above, I.I. (ii), note 17) accept a definition of the political *analogous* to the one which I have just shown, but they specify that the political can exist independently from the state, for which they reserve a formal-juridical definition, by accepting for example Weber's criterion of the 'monopoly of legitimate force' or that of 'centralism'. The state is thus identified in a way with the modern state; see Easton, *The Political System*, and Balandier, *op. cit.* Nevertheless, the problem disappears if we follow Marx and Engels and emphasize that the *political* coincides with the emergence of an autonomized system of government in relation to a specialized and privileged group which monopolizes the state administration. In this sense, we can establish that:

(a) The radical distinction between 'segmentary societies' and 'societies with a state' based on a juridical conception of the state, becomes null and void.

(b) The political as a *particular 'region'* coincides with the minimal emergence of certain state forms, 'embryonic' even, according to Engels. This is the case for example with 'segmentary states'.

(c) The essential point is that the political and the state correspond to the *formation of social classes*: the historical process adopts some extraordinarily complex forms, Marx's analyses of the Asiatic mode of production being by no means an exhaustive list. In particular, the traditional Marxist contrast '*ties of kinship*'/'*class relations*', which overlapped with that of 'segmentary society'/'society with a state', must be revised. See R. Bastide, *Formes élémentaires de la stratification sociale*, Paris, 1965.

productivity of labour. In this context, Engels tells us with regard to the relation between the dominant class and the social division of labour:

It is clear that so long as human labour was so little productive that it provided but a small surplus over and above the necessary means of subsistence, any *increase of the productive forces*, extension of trade, development of the state and of law, or foundation of art and science, was possible only by a greater division of labour. And the necessary basis for this was the great division of labour between the masses discharging simple manual labour and the few privileged persons *directing labour*, conducting trade and public affairs, and, at a later stage, occupying themselves with art and science.²⁹

We must remember here the relation between the state (through the agency of the dominant class) and the general direction of the labour process, with particular reference to the productivity of labour. We are faced with this problem again when dealing with the division of labour in capitalist formations: this role of the state corresponds to the twin roles of the capitalist, those of exploitation and of organization-cum-supervision of the labour process. Furthermore we know the importance attached by Lenin to the technico-economic function of the state (including its function of accountancy) in his texts of 1917-20.

This function of the state as organizer of the labour process is only one aspect of its economic function, which also includes, for instance, the function of the judicial system, i.e. the set (*ensemble*) of rules which organizes capitalist exchanges and provides the real framework of cohesion in which commercial encounters can take place. The state's function vis-à-vis the ideological consists of its role of education, teaching, etc. At the strictly political level, that of the political class struggle, this function of the state is the maintenance of political order in political class conflict.

We arrive, then, at two results:

1. The state's global role as the cohesive factor in a social formation can, as such, be distinguished in particular modalities concerning the different levels of a formation, i.e. in functions which are economic, ideological and political in the strict sense of the term (the role in political class conflict).

2. The state's various particular functions, even those which are not directly concerned with the political level in the strict sense (i.e. political class conflict) can only be grasped theoretically in their interrelation, i.e.

29. *Anti-Dühring*, p. 250.

STATE
FUNCTION

Conclusion

* inserted in the state's global political role. This role adopts a *politica* character, in the sense that it maintains the unity of a formation inside which the contradictions between the different levels condense into a political class domination. It is in fact impossible clearly to establish the political character of the state's technico-economic function, or of its function of allocation of justice, by ascribing them directly to its political function in the strict sense (i.e. to its particular function in political class conflict). These functions are political functions to the extent that they aim primarily at the maintenance of the unity of a social formation based in the last analysis on political class domination.

It is precisely in this context that we can establish the *overdetermination* of the state's economic and ideological functions by its political function, *in the strict sense*, in political class conflict. For example, the state's economic or ideological functions correspond to the political interests of the dominant class and constitute political functions, not simply in those cases where there is a direct and obvious relation between (a) the organization of labour and education and (b) the political domination of a class, but also where the object of these functions is the maintenance of the unity of a formation, inside which this class is the politically dominant class. It is to the extent that the prime object of these functions is the maintenance of this unity that they correspond to the political interests of the dominant class; and this is the precise meaning of the passage quoted from Engels, for whom a 'social function' is always at the root of a 'political function'. This concept of overdetermination, applied here to the functions of the state, thus indicates two things: (i) that the various functions of the state constitute political functions through the global role of the state, which is the cohesive factor in a formation divided into classes, and (ii) that these functions correspond *in this manner* to the political interests of the dominant class.

The displacement of the index of dominance in the structures of a formation is reflected as a *general rule* in the concrete articulation of the *various functions* of the state within its global political role. (The state, as the place where the formation's contradictions are condensed, is the place where this displacement can be deciphered.) Lenin gives us the principles of this analytical model in his texts of 1917 on the state apparatus: in these he distinguishes the state's political function in the strict sense and the 'technical' function of state-administration (of which the function of accountancy forms a part), by showing the subordination (ascribed to the

specific articulation of the different levels of the Russian social formation) of this technico-economic function to the political function in the strict sense.³⁰

However, the ability to 'read' correctly the articulation of a formation in the articulation of the functions of the state presupposes a principle of reading: namely, a reading of the state's role as the cohesive factor in the unity of a formation. In this sense, in the global role of the state, the dominance of its economic function indicates that, as a general rule, the dominant role in the articulation of a formation's instances reverts to the political; and this is so not simply in the strict sense of the state's direct function in the strictly political class struggle, but rather in the sense indicated here. In this case, the dominance of the state's economic function over its other functions is coupled with its *dominant role*, in that its function of being the cohesive factor necessitates its specific intervention in that instance which maintains the *determinant role* of a formation, namely, the economic. This is clearly the case, for example, in the despotic state in the Asiatic mode of production, where the dominance of the political is reflected in a dominance of the economic function of the state; or again, in capitalist formations, in the case of monopoly state capitalism and of the 'interventionist' form of the capitalist state. Whereas in the case of such a form of the capitalist state as the '*liberal*' state of private capitalism, the dominant role held by the economic is reflected by the dominance of the strictly political function of the state – the state as 'policeman' [*P'état gendarme*] – and by a specific *non-intervention* of the state in the economic. This does not in the least mean that the state has no economic function (as Marx himself shows us in *Capital* in connection with factory legislation) but simply that this function does not have the dominant role. Indeed we shall see later on that it is wrong to consider, as is sometimes done, that the liberal form of state has never held important economic functions. In fact, what allows us to consider these functions of the liberal state as specific non-intervention in the economic, is precisely (i) the non-dominance of the economic function of the liberal state over its other functions (as compared with other forms of state, particularly the one corresponding to monopoly state capitalism); and (ii) what is correlative here, the non-dominance of the instance of the state as the

30. In particular see 'One of the fundamental questions of the Revolution', *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, p. 257. But Lenin distinguishes *stages* and *turning points* of transition, which are marked precisely by permutations in the dominance of the political and economic functions of the state.

cohesive factor in the ensemble of instances of a social formation of private capitalism.

We have therefore to make two additional remarks. Firstly, the state's role as the cohesive factor is not reducible to 'intervention' (in the full sense) by the state at the various levels, and particularly at the economic level. For example, the state's non-intervention in the case of private capitalism in no way means that the state does not maintain this function of cohesion: that function is manifested in this case by a specific non-intervention by the state at the economic level. At this point we need only mention the case of the legal system, which, as Marx and Engels showed, is a condition of the functioning of the economic, in that it not only fixes relations of production in the relations of formal ownership, but it also constitutes a framework of cohesion for commercial encounters, including those for the purchase and sale of labour power. Secondly, we should clearly recognize that though the state has the global function of cohesive factor in the unity, this does not in the least mean that for this reason it always maintains the dominant role in a formation, nor that when this dominant role is held by the economic, the state no longer has this function of cohesive factor.

2. Politics and Social Classes

INTRODUCTION

We now possess enough elements to examine the Marxist concept of social class and class conflict, and its repercussions on the field of the political: here we shall take into especial consideration the political works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Specific reference to these works in connection with this problem depends both on a principle of reading which concerns their theoretical status, and on the position adopted vis-à-vis the concept of social class.

It must be remembered here that the 'pure' CMP, which has been distinguished from a capitalist social formation, is composed in its pure form of various instances (economic, political and ideological) and is characterized, according to Marx, by a specific autonomy of its instances and by the dominant role taken on by the economic instance in it. This has important repercussions from the theoretical point of view. These various instances, as objects of theoretical research, are subject to a specific scientific treatment. These repercussions are clear as regards the theoretical status of *Capital*, which is a treatment of the CMP. But because of autonomization of the instances which characterize it and because of the dominant place occupied in it by the economic, *this treatment is centred on the regional instance of the economic in this mode*. This does not in any way mean that the other instances are absent from it; they are present, but only, as it were, *implicitly*, through their effects in the region of the economic. This element is in its turn important for the problem of social classes: we find in *Capital* some of the elements necessary for constructing the concept of class, but we must not forget that in it this problem is itself centred on the economic determination of social classes. This by no means implies that this economic determination is sufficient for the construction of the Marxist concept of social class, any more than the specific treatment of the economic instance of the CMP in *Capital* lessens the importance of the other instances for the scientific examination of this mode.

This is why Marx's and Engels's political works are so important in

CMP =
CAPITALIST
MODE OF
PRODUCTION

III

Fundamental Characteristics of the Capitalist State

INTRODUCTION

We shall now attempt to grasp some basic characteristics of the capitalist state. But first it is important to restate certain points vital for what follows.

A. The characteristics of the capitalist type of state are contained in the concept of that state which can be constructed from the 'pure' CMP as elaborated in *Capital*. However, owing to the specific autonomy of the instances proper to this mode of production the characteristics of the capitalist state are only sketched in implicitly in *Capital*. Consequently I shall refer mainly to the political works of Marx, Engels, Gramsci and Lenin, whose *double status* has already been pointed out (particularly in the case of Marx and Engels): as well as containing a study of historically given capitalist states, they contain at the same time a theory of the capitalist type of state. So as to indicate, in this way, the theoretical construction of the capitalist type of state, I shall refer to formations dominated by the CMP, in order to study the capitalist state in operation.

B. The state in its role as cohesive factor in the unity of a formation (a role which is especially important in the capitalist formation) has several functions: economic, ideological and political. These functions are the particular modalities of the globally political role of the state: *they are over-determined by, and condensed in, its strictly political function, its function in relation to the field of the political class struggle*. It is around this function and this relation that the following analyses will be grouped.

C. The nature of the relation between the state and the field of the class struggle belongs to the type of relations which hold between the structures and this field. The capitalist state, in which the specific autonomy of instances is located by its relation to the relations of production, *sets the limits* which circumscribe the relation of the field of the class struggle to its own regional structures. In other words, these state structures, as they

appear in the relation of the instances, *carry inscribed within them a set of variations* which in delimiting the class struggle achieve concrete reality according to the effects which this struggle has on the state within the limits thus set. Henceforth, when we say that in a capitalist formation certain characteristics of the class struggle are related to the capitalist state, it must not be understood as meaning that these characteristics are a simple phenomenon derived from its structures or that they are exhaustively determined by them. It must be understood as meaning that the field of the class struggle has fundamental effects on this state, effects which are realized within the limits set by its structures to the extent that they control a set of variations.

The line of demarcation between the relations of the state to the dominant classes and its relation to the dominated classes can give a guide to our study of this state. The capitalist state presents this peculiar feature, that nowhere in its actual institutions does strictly political domination take the form of a political *relation* between the dominant *classes* and the dominated classes.¹ In its institutions everything takes place as if the class 'struggle' did not exist. This state is organized as a political unity of a society of divergent economic interests and these are presented not as class interests but as the interests of 'private individuals', economic subjects: this is connected to the way in which the state is related to the isolation of socio-economic relations, an isolation which is partly the state's own effect. Because of this isolation, in performing its political function the state presents a characteristic ambivalence, depending on whether it is dealing with the dominant or the dominated classes.

1. With regard to the dominated classes, the function of the capitalist state is to prevent their political organization which would overcome their economic isolation: it does this by maintaining them in this isolation which is partly its own effect. The state assumes this function in a very particular form which allows a radical distinction to be drawn between this state and other states, such as slave or feudal states. These latter limit the political organization of the dominated classes by institutionally fixing the classes of slaves or serfs in their very structures by means of *public statutes*, that is to say, by institutionalizing political class subordination in the form of estates or castes. On the other hand, by virtue of its isolating effect on the socio-economic relations and by also taking advantage of this effect, the capitalist state maintains the political disorganization of the

1. Structure/Institution: see p. 115n above.

dominated classes, by presenting itself as the unity of the people-nation, composed of political-persons/private-individuals. The capitalist state thus fulfils its function both by concealing their own class character from the dominated classes and also by specifically excluding them from the state institutions, in so far as they are the dominated classes.

2. On the other hand, with regard to the dominant classes, the capitalist state is permanently working on their organization at the political level, by cancelling out their economic isolation which, in this case too, is the effect both of the state and of the ideological.

The capitalist 'popular-class' state's principal contradiction, i.e. the effective (class) aspect of its internal contradiction (that between private and public), could be described as follows: its function is to disorganize the dominated classes politically, and at the same time to organize the dominant classes politically; to prevent the dominated classes from being present in its centre as classes, whilst introducing the dominant classes there as classes; by relating itself to the dominated classes as representative of the unity of the people-nation, whilst at the same time relating itself to the dominant classes *qua* politically organized classes. In short, this state exists as a state of the dominant *classes* whilst excluding from its centre the class 'struggle'. Its principal contradiction is not so much that it 'calls' itself the state of all the people, although it is in fact a class state, but that, strictly speaking, it presents itself in its very institutions as a 'class' state (i.e. the state of the dominant classes which it helps to organize politically), of a society which is institutionally fixed as one not-divided-into-classes; in that it presents itself as a state of the bourgeois class, implying that all the 'people' are part of this class.

I. The Capitalist State and the Interests of the Dominated Classes

This first characteristic of the capitalist state depends on the specific autonomy of the political and economic struggle, of political and economic power and of political and economic class interests in capitalist formations. The capitalist state, characterized by hegemonic class leadership, does not *directly* represent the dominant classes' economic interests, but their *political interests*: it is the dominant classes' political power centre, as the organizing agent of their political struggle. Gramsci expressed this excellently when he remarked that:

The life of the state is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria . . . between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups – equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate interest (*Prison Notebooks*, p. 182).

In this sense, the capitalist state has inscribed in its very structures a flexibility which concedes a certain guarantee to the economic interests of certain dominated classes, within the limits of the system. To the extent that this guarantee is in accordance with the hegemonic domination of the dominant classes, i.e. with their political constitution vis-à-vis this state, as representatives of the general interest of the people, this concession is part of this state's very function. The concept of the capitalist state of course involves a specific function for *political ideology*, a form of power based on 'consent', which is organized and directed in a specific manner for the dominated classes. However, the aspect of the capitalist state under discussion here is not simply that of ideological conditioning. The notion of the general interest of the 'people', an ideological notion covering an institutional operation of the capitalist state, expresses a *real fact*: namely that this state, by its very structure, gives to the economic interests of certain dominated classes guarantees which may even be contrary to the short-term economic interests of the dominant classes, but

which are compatible with their political interests and their hegemonic domination.

This brings us to a very simple conclusion but one which cannot be too often repeated. This guarantee given by the capitalist state to the economic interests of certain dominated classes cannot be seen *per se* as a restraint on the *political power* of the dominant classes. It is true that the *political and economic struggles of the dominated classes* impose this on the capitalist state. However, this simply shows that the state is not a class instrument, but rather the state of a society divided into classes. The class struggle in capitalist formations entails that this guarantee of the economic interests of certain dominated classes is inscribed *as a possibility*, within the very limits imposed by the state on the struggle for hegemonic class leadership. But in making this guarantee, the state aims precisely at the political disorganization of the dominated classes; in a formation where the strictly political struggle of the dominated classes is possible, it is the sometimes indispensable means of maintaining the dominant classes' hegemony. In other words, according to the concrete conjuncture, a *line of demarcation* can always be drawn within which the guarantee given by the capitalist state to the dominated classes' economic interests not only fails to threaten the political relation of class domination but even constitutes an element of this relation.

In fact, this is a *particular* characteristic of the capitalist state stemming from the specific autonomy of the political superstructure from the economic instance, of political power from economic power. In the 'pre-capitalist' formations where the relation between the instances does not take this form, an 'economic' demand from the dominated classes (e.g. the repeal of a law, obligation or privilege) is most often a political demand directly challenging the system of 'public power'. Rosa Luxemburg correctly pointed out that the economic struggle is to some extent a directly political struggle, according to the content of these concepts in these 'preceding' formations.¹ These demands of the dominated classes can be satisfied only to the limited extent that they are compatible with the definite economico-political interests of the dominant classes and do not challenge the state's power. In the case of the capitalist state, the autonomy of the political can allow the satisfaction of the economic interests of certain dominated classes, even to the extent of occasionally

1. R. Luxemburg, 'The Mass Strike', and 'The Political Party and the Trade Unions', *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, New York, 1970, pp. 207 ff.

limiting the economic power of the dominant classes, restraining, where necessary, their capacity to realize their short-term economic interests; but on the one condition, which has become *possible* in the case of capitalist states, that their political power and the state apparatus remain intact. Hence, in every concrete conjuncture, the dominant classes' political power, which has become autonomous, represents in its relations with the capitalist state a *limit within which the restrictions of the economic power of these classes has no effect*.

Thus the capitalist state's particular characteristic feature of representing the general interest of a national-popular ensemble is not simply a mendacious mystification, because within these limits it can effectively satisfy some of the economic interests of certain dominated classes. Furthermore, it can do this without however allowing its political power to be affected. It is obviously impossible to delineate once and for all the limit of this hegemonic domination: it depends equally on the relation between the forces in the struggle, on the forms of the state, on the articulation of its functions, on the relations of economic power to political power and on the functioning of the state apparatus.

In this state, political power is thus apparently founded on an *unstable equilibrium of compromise*. These terms should be understood as follows:

1. *Compromise*, in the sense that this power corresponds to a hegemonic class domination and can take into account the economic interests of certain dominated classes even where those could be contrary to the short-term economic interests of the dominant classes, without this affecting the configuration of political interests;

2. *Equilibrium*, in the sense that while these economic 'sacrifices' are real and so provide the ground for an equilibrium, they do not as such challenge the political power which sets precise limits to this equilibrium;

3. *Unstable*, in the sense that these limits of the equilibrium are set by the political conjuncture.

So this equilibrium clearly does not indicate (as with a pair of scales) any sort of *equivalence* of power amongst the forces present. This latter meaning of equilibrium must not be confused with that attributed to it by Marx and Engels when they speak of the state's autonomy in the situation where, in the political struggle or in the relation between the political and economic struggle, the classes are close to a state of equilibrium. The equilibrium which is at issue here indicates the complexity and dislocation of relations of power in the framework of the capitalist state, and the

relations of force in the field of the economic struggle within the limits set by political power. In this sense, Gramsci pointed out:

Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. But there also is no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential.²

The capitalist state is therefore characterized by a *two-sided* feature: on the one hand, its autonomy vis-à-vis the economic involves the possibility of a social policy (according to the concrete relation of forces), i.e. of economic sacrifices to the profit of certain dominated classes; on the other hand, this very same autonomy of institutionalized political power sometimes makes it possible to cut into the dominant classes' economic power without ever threatening their political power. It is in this context that we should locate, for example, the whole problem of the so-called 'Welfare State', a term which in fact merely disguises the form of the 'social policy' of a capitalist state at the stage of state monopoly capitalism. The political strategy of the working class depends on adequately deciphering in the concrete conjuncture this limit which fixes the equilibrium of compromises and which is the demarcation line between economic and political power.

Now this 'social policy' of the capitalist state is sketched in implicitly in *Capital*, especially in the texts of Volume I concerning *factory legislation*, even though these deal only with false sacrifices which in fact correspond to the precise economic interests of capital.³ It is elaborated more clearly both in *The Class Struggles in France* – on the subject of the February Republic, which is a historical example of a capitalist state which had to present itself as a 'republic surrounded by social institutions' – and in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* with regard to Louis Bonaparte's 'social Caesarism'.⁴ Moreover, it is obvious that this 'social policy' of the state has nothing to do with state *intervention* in the relations of production in the strict sense of the term, which is an entirely different problem. I mean that the type of capitalist state, sketched in implicitly in *Capital*, involves the possibility inscribed within the limits of its structures of a 'social

2. *Prison Notebooks*, p. 161.

3. See P. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, New York, 1962, pp. 239 ff.

4. *MESW*, 1970, pp. 97 ff.

CRUCIAL
POINT

variability
of
limits

policy' whose realization and modalities (variations) obviously depend on the concrete relation of forces in the class struggle. So this 'social policy', though it may happen to contain real economic sacrifices *imposed on the dominant class by the struggle of the dominated classes*, cannot under any circumstances call into question the capitalist type of state, so long as it operates within these *limits*.

2. The Capitalist State and Ideologies

(i) THE HISTORICIST CONCEPTION OF IDEOLOGIES

The particular relation between the capitalist type of state and the dominated classes also manifests itself at the ideological level. In fact hegemonic class domination, as a particular type of class domination, marks the particular place and function of the ideological in its relations to the political in capitalist formations: in short, it marks the particular way in which '*bourgeois ideology*' functions politically. In fact, this particular feature of bourgeois ideology is merely the political aspect vis-à-vis the state of the specific operation of ideology as such, which Marx saw in *Capital* as the condition of existence of the CMP. The question is all the more important in that it concerns one of the crucial problems of political science, that of *legitimacy*.

On this subject, Gramsci's analyses of class hegemony are very enlightening, especially on this point: on the one hand Gramsci, with amazing acuteness, perceived the problems posed by the political functioning of bourgeois ideology in a capitalist formation; on the other hand, though his analyses are distinct from the typical historicist conception of ideologies as presented for example by Lukács, because of the historicist problematic which essentially governs his work, they demonstrate very clearly the impasses and errors to which this problematic of ideology leads. This is why a radical critique of the historicist conception of ideologies is so important as a prior condition to the scientific posing of the question.

To do this we must first of all briefly mention the problematic of ideology as found in the young Marx, which was centred on the subject. Marx's conception of ideology, as well as of the superstructures in general, was based on the model: '*the subject|the real|alienation*'. The subject is deprived of its concrete essence in the 'real', this concept of the 'real' being constructed theoretically from the ontological objectification of the subject. Ideology is a projection in an imaginary world of the subject's mystified essence, i.e. the alienating 'ideal' reconstitution of its essence, objectified-alienated in the socio-economic real. Ideology, modelled

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