

Class and Politics

The concept of class has had an erratic career in the contemporary analysis of politics. There was a time, not so long ago, when class played at best a marginal role in explanations of political phenomena. In the 1950s and early 1960s the dominant approach to politics was pluralism. Political outcomes in democratic societies were viewed as resulting from the interplay of many cross-cutting forces interacting in an environment of bargaining, voting, coalition building, and consensus formation. While some of the organized interest groups on this playing field may have been based in constituencies with a particular class character – most notably unions and business associations – nevertheless, such organizations were given no special analytical status by virtue of this.

From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, with the renaissance of the Marxist tradition in the social sciences, class suddenly moved to the core of many analyses of the state and politics. Much discussion occurred over such things as the “class character” of state apparatuses and the importance of instrumental manipulation of state institutions by powerful class-based actors. Even among scholars whose theoretical perspective was not built around class, class was taken seriously and accorded an importance in the analysis of politics rarely found in the previous period.

While class analysis never became the dominant paradigm for the analysis of politics, it was a theoretical force to be reckoned with in the 1970s. Ironically, perhaps, in the course of the 1980s, as American national politics took on a particularly blatant class character, the academic popularity of class analysis as a framework for understanding politics steadily declined. The center of gravity of critical work on the state shifted toward a variety of theoretical perspectives which explicitly distanced themselves from a preoccupation with class, in particular “state-centered” approaches to politics which emphasize the causal importance of the institutional properties of the state and the interests of state managers, and cultural theories which place discourses and

symbolic systems at the center of political analysis. While the class analysis of politics has by no means retreated to the marginal status it was accorded in the 1950s, it is no longer the center of debate the way it was a decade ago.

This is, therefore, a good time to take stock of the theoretical accomplishments and unresolved issues of the class analysis of politics. As a prologue to the discussion, the next section briefly looks at the concept of class itself. This is followed by an examination of three different kinds of mechanisms through which class has an impact on politics. Using terminology adapted from the work of Robert Alford and Roger Friedland,¹ I refer to these as the *situational*, *institutional*, and *systemic* political effects of class. I then briefly examine the problem of variability in the patterns of class effects on politics. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the problem of explanatory primacy of class relative to other causal processes.

The Concept of Class

The word “class” has been used to designate a variety of quite distinct theoretical concepts.² In particular, it is important to distinguish between what are sometimes called *gradational* and *relational* class concepts. As has often been noted, for many sociologists as well as media commentators, “class” is simply a way of talking about strata within the income distribution. The frequent references in contemporary American politics to “middle-class taxpayers” is equivalent to “middle-income taxpayers.” Classes are simply rungs on a ladder of inequalities. For others, particularly analysts working in the Marxian and Weberian theoretical traditions, the concept of class is not meant to designate a distributional *outcome* as such, but rather the nature of the underlying social relations which generate such outcomes. To speak of a person’s class position is

1. Robert Alford and Roger Friedland, *The Powers of Theory*, Cambridge 1985.

2. For a more extended discussion of varieties of alternative class concepts, see Erik Olin Wright, *Class Structure and Income Determination*, New York 1979, chapter 1, and “Varieties of Marxist Conceptions of Class Structure,” *Politics & Society*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1980; Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*; Frank Parkin, *Marxist Class Theory: a Bourgeois Critique*, New York 1979; Ralph Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Societies*, Stanford 1959; Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, New York 1966; Werner S. Landecker, *Class Crystallization*, New Brunswick 1981; John H. Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*, Oxford 1980; Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl, *The American Class Structure*, Homewood, Ill. 1982; Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London 1975; Gordon Marshall, Howard Newby, David Rose and Carolyn Vogler, *Social Class in Modern Britain*, London 1988.

thus to identify that person's relationship to specific kinds of mechanisms which generate inequalities of income and power. In a relational class concept, capitalists and workers do not simply differ in the amount of income they acquire, but in the mechanism through which they acquire that income.

It is possible to deploy both gradational and relational concepts of class in the analysis of politics. Many people, for example, use a basically gradational concept of class to examine the different political attitudes and voting behaviors of the poor, the middle class, and the rich. However, most of the systematic work on class and politics has revolved around relational class concepts. There are two basic reasons for this. First, relational concepts are generally seen as designating more fundamental aspects of social structure than gradational concepts, since the relational concepts are anchored in the causal mechanisms which generate the gradational inequalities. To analyze the determinants of political phenomena in terms of relational class concepts is therefore to dig deeper into the causal process than simply to link politics to distributionally defined class categories. Second, relational class categories have the analytical advantage of generating categories of actors who live in real interactive social relations to each other. The "rich," "middle," and "poor" are arbitrary divisions on a continuum; the individuals defined by these categories may not systematically interact with each other in any particular way. Capitalists and workers, on the other hand, are inherently mutually interdependent. They are real categories whose respective interests are defined, at least in part, by the nature of the relations which bind them together. Building the concept of class around these relations, then, greatly facilitates the analysis of the formation of organized collectivities engaged in political conflict over material interests.

Adopting a relational perspective on class, of course, is only a point of departure. There are many ways of elaborating such a concept. In particular, much has been made of the distinction between the Marxian and Weberian traditions of class analysis. Weberians, as has often been noted, define classes primarily in terms of *market* relations, whereas Marxists define classes by the social relations of *production*.³ Why is this contrast of theoretical importance? After all, both Marxists and Weber-

3. The concept of "market relations" is simpler than that of "production relations." Market relations are defined by the structured interactions of exchange that occur between actors who own different kinds of commodities. Production relations, on the other hand, also include the social relations into which actors enter inside the production process after such exchanges have occurred. Thus, when a worker sells labor-power to a capitalist in exchange for a wage, the market relation is confined to the interactions in which the right to use that labor-power is sold to the capitalist, whereas the production relation includes the social interactions that take place when that labor-power is actually deployed in production.

ians recognize capitalists and workers as the two fundamental classes of capitalist societies, and both define these classes in essentially the same way – capitalists are owners of the means of production who employ wage-earners; workers are non-owners of the means of production who sell their labor-power to capitalists. What difference does it make that Weberians define these classes by the exchange relation into which they enter, whereas Marxists emphasize the social relations of production?

First, the restriction of classes to market relations means, for Weberians, that classes only really exist in capitalist societies. The relationship between lords and serfs might be oppressive and the source of considerable conflict, but Weberians would not treat this as a class relation since it is structured around relations of personal dependence and domination, not market relations. Marxists, in contrast, see conflicts over the control of productive resources in both feudalism and capitalism as instances of class struggle. This is not simply a nominal shift in labels, for it is part of the effort within Marxism to construct a general theory of historical change built around class analysis. Aphorisms such as "class struggle is the motor of history" only make sense if the concept of "class" is built around the social relations of production rather than restricted to market relations.

Second, the elaboration of the concept of class in terms of production relations underwrites the linkage between class and exploitation that is central to Marxist theory. In the traditional Marxist account, exploitation occurs primarily within production itself, for it is in production that labor is actually performed and embodied in the social product. Exploitation, roughly, consists in the appropriation by one class of the "surplus labor" performed by another. While the exchange relation between workers and capitalists may create the *opportunity* for capitalists to exploit workers, it is only when the labor of workers is actually deployed in the labor process and the resulting products are appropriated by capitalists that exploitation actually occurs.⁴ The characteristic lack of

4. In recent years there has been a very lively debate over the question of whether or not exploitation can be adequately theorized strictly in terms of exchange relations. John Roemer, in "New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Class and Exploitation," *Politics & Society*, vol. II, no. 3, 1981 and *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge, Mass. 1982, has argued that the concept of exploitation does not require any analysis of the labor process or the "point of production." Exploitation can be generated strictly by the unequal exchange of commodity owners with different amounts of productive assets. His critics have insisted that while unequal exchange can generate exploitation, in the context of capitalism the unequal exchange between workers and capitalists would not generate exploitation unless surplus labor was actually performed in production, and this requires forms of domination inside of production itself. For the debate over Roemer's conception of exploitation and class, see chapter 3 above; Jon Elster, "Roemer vs. Roemer," *Politics & Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1981; Adam Przeworski, "Exploitation, Class Conflict and Socialism: the Ethical Materialism of John Roemer," *Politics & Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1981.

discussion of exploitation by Weberian class analysts thus, at least in part, reflects their restriction of the concept of class to the exchange relation.

While these differences between the Marxian and Weberian theoretical foundations of the concept of class are important for the broader theory of society within which these class concepts are used, in practical terms for the analysis of capitalist society the actual descriptive class maps generated by scholars in the two traditions may not be so divergent. As already noted, both traditions see the capital-labor relation as defining the principal axis of class relations in capitalism. Furthermore, scholars in both traditions acknowledge the importance of a variety of social categories, loosely labeled the "new middle class(es)" – professionals, managers and executives, bureaucratic officials, and perhaps highly educated white-collar employees – who do not fit neatly into the polarized class relation between capitalists and workers. There is little consensus either among Weberian or among Marxist scholars on precisely how these new middle classes should be conceptualized. As a result, particularly as Marxist accounts of these "middle class" categories have become more sophisticated, the line of demarcation between these two traditions has become somewhat less sharply drawn.⁵

While Marxist and Weberian pictures of the class structure of capitalist society may not differ dramatically, their use of the concept of class in the analysis of political phenomena is generally sharply different. Weberians typically regard class as one among a variety of salient determinants of politics. In specific problems this means that class might assume considerable importance, but there is no general presumption that class is a more pervasive or powerful determinant of political phenomena than other causal processes. Marxists, in contrast, characteristically give class a privileged status in the analysis. In the most orthodox treatments, class (and closely related concepts like "capitalism" or "mode of production") may become virtually the exclusive systematic explanatory principles, but in all Marxist accounts of politics class plays a central, if not necessarily all-encompassing, explanatory role. In the final section of this chapter we will examine the problem of explanatory primacy for class. Before we engage that issue, however, we will examine the various ways in which Marxist class analysts see class shaping politics.

5. This partial convergence underlies Frank Parkin's well-known statement that: "The fact that these normally alien concepts of authority relations, life-chances, and market rewards have now been comfortably absorbed by contemporary Marxist theory is a handsome, if unacknowledged, tribute to the virtues of bourgeois sociology. Inside every neo-Marxist there seems to be a Weberian struggling to get out." Parkin, *Marxist Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, p. 25.

How Class Shapes Politics

Robert Alford and Roger Friedland,⁶ building on the analysis of Steven Lukes⁷ and others, have elaborated a tripartite typology of "levels of power" that will be useful in examining the causal role of class on politics:

1. *Situational* power refers to power relations of direct command and obedience between actors, as in Weber's celebrated definition of power as the ability of one actor to get another to do something even in the face of resistance. This is the characteristic form of power analyzed in various behavioral studies of power.
2. *Institutional* power refers to the characteristics of different institutional settings which shape the decision-making agenda in ways which serve the interests of particular groups.⁸ This is also referred to as "negative power," or the "second face of power" – power which excludes certain alternatives from a decision-making agenda, but not, as in situational power, which actually commands a specific behavior.⁹
3. *Systemic* power is perhaps the most difficult (and contentious) conceptually. It refers to the power to realize one's interests by virtue of the overall structure of a social system, rather than by virtue of commanding the behavior of others or of controlling the agendas of specific organizations.

Alford and Friedland discuss this typology of power in an interesting way, using a loose game-theory metaphor: systemic power is power embedded in the fundamental nature of the game itself; institutional power is power embodied by the specific rules of the game; and situational power is power deployed in specific moves within a given set of rules. When actors use specific resources strategically to accomplish their goals, they are exercising situational power. The procedural rules which govern how they use those resources reflects institutional power. And the nature of the social system which determines the range of possible rules and achievable goals reflects systemic power. There is thus a kind of

6. Alford and Friedland, *The Powers of Theory*.

7. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London 1974.

8. Alford and Friedland prefer the term "structural power" for this second "level." All three levels of power, however, are "structural" in the sense of being systematically structured by and through social practices. The distinctive characteristic of this second level of power is the way it is embodied in features of institutional design, and thus it seems more appropriate to call it simply institutional power.

9. The idea of the "second face of power" was introduced by Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz in their analysis of "non-decision-making" in "Two Faces of Power," *American Political Science Review* 51, December 1962, pp. 947–52.

cybernetic relationship among these levels of power: the system level imposes limits on the institutional level which imposes limits on actors' strategies at the situational level. Conflicts at the situational level, in turn, can modify the rules at the institutional level which, cumulatively, can lead to the transformation of the system itself.¹⁰

The class analysis of politics is implicated in each of these domains of power and politics.¹¹ Although class theorists of politics do not explicitly frame their analyses in terms of these three levels of power, the distinctions are nevertheless implicit in many discussions.

Class and situational power

Much of the theoretical debate over the relative explanatory importance of class has occurred at the situational level of political analysis. Marxists (and non-Marxists heavily influenced by the Marxian tradition) typically argue that actors whose interests and resources are derived from their link to the class structure generally play the decisive role in actively shaping political conflicts and state policies. Sometimes the emphasis is on the strategic action of the dominant class, on the ability of capitalists to manipulate the state in their interests. Other times the emphasis is on the political effects of class struggle as such, in which case popular action as well as ruling-class machinations are seen as shaping state policies. In either case, class is seen as shaping politics via its effects on the behavioral interactions among political actors.

The theoretical reasoning behind such treatments of the class basis of situational power is fairly straightforward. Class structures, among other things, distribute resources which are useful in political struggles. In particular, in capitalist societies capitalists have two crucial resources available to them to be deployed politically: enormous financial resources and personal connections to people in positions of governmental authority. Through a wide variety of concrete mechanisms – financing politicians, political parties, and policy think tanks; financially controlling the main organs of the mass media; offering lucrative jobs to

10. Alford and Friedland also relate this typology to common political terms for the degree of polarization in political conflicts: liberal vs. conservative politics constitute conflicts restricted to the situational level; reformist vs. reactionary politics are political conflicts at the institutional level of power; and revolutionary vs. counter-revolutionary politics are located at the systemic level of power.

11. Alford and Friedland argue that the systemic level of power is the "home domain" of class theory, especially in its Marxian variant. That is, they claim that class theory is most systematically elaborated at the systemic level of political analysis and has the strongest claim to being the most powerful causal process at this level. Nevertheless, class analysis is by no means restricted to the systemic level; indeed, some of the most interesting recent contributions in recent years have been located at the other levels of power.

high-level political officials after they leave state employment; extensive lobbying – capitalists are in a position to use their wealth to shape directly the direction of state policies.¹² When combined with the dense pattern of personal networks which give capitalists easy access to the sites of immediate political power, such use of financial resources gives the bourgeoisie vastly disproportionate direct leverage over politics.

Few theorists deny the empirical facts of the use of politically important resources in this way by members of the capitalist class in pursuit of their interests. What is often questioned is the general efficacy and coherence of such actions in sustaining the class interests of the bourgeoisie. Since individual capitalists are frequently preoccupied by their immediate, particularistic interests (e.g. in specific markets, technologies, or regulations) when they deploy their class-derived resources politically, some scholars argue that they are unlikely to do so in ways which place the class interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole above their own particularistic interests. As Fred Block among others has noted, the capitalist class is often very divided politically, lacking a coherent vision and sense of priorities.¹³ Thus, even if capitalists try to manipulate politics in various ways, such manipulations often work against each other and do not generate a consistent set of policy outcomes.

The fact that capitalists have considerable power resources by virtue of their control over capital thus does not ensure a capacity to translate those resources into a coherent class direction of politics. What is more, in terms of situational power, capitalists are not the only actors with effective political resources. In particular, as Theda Skocpol,¹⁴ Anthony Giddens,¹⁵ and others have stressed, state managers – the top-level politicians and officials within state apparatuses – have direct control of considerable resources to pursue political objectives. While in many instances the interests and objectives of state managers may be congruent with the interests of the capitalist class, this is not universally the case, and when overt conflicts between state managers and the bourgeoisie occur there is no inherent reason why capitalists will always prevail. Even

12. The focus on these kinds of mechanisms which link the state to the bourgeoisie are by no means limited to scholars who explicitly see their work as Marxist. G. William Domhoff, in *The Powers that Be*, New York, 1979, *Who Rules America Now?*, Englewood Cliffs 1983, and *The Power Elite and the State*, Hawthorne, NY 1990, for example, specifically situates his work in opposition to "Marxism" (or, at least, to the main currents of neo-Marxism prevalent since the early 1970s) and yet places the networks and resources of capitalists at the center stage of his analysis of the "power elite."

13. Fred Block, *Revising State Theory*, Philadelphia 1987.

14. Theda Skocpol, "Political Response to Capitalist Crisis: Neo-Marxist Theories of the State and the Case of the New Deal," *Politics & Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1980.

15. Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, New York 1973; *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Berkeley 1981.

more to the point, in many situations, because of the disorganization, myopia, and apathy of the capitalist class, state managers will have considerable room to initiate state policies independently of pressures from the capitalist class.

These kinds of arguments do not discredit the claim that class structures do shape both the interests of actors and the political resources they can deploy in struggles over situational power. What is called into question is the blanket claim that class-derived interests and power resources are always the most salient.

Class and institutional power

It was at least in part because of a recognition that at the level of situational power capitalists are not always present as the predominant active political actors that much class analysis of politics has centered around the problem of the institutional dimensions of power. The argument is basically this: the state should be viewed not simply as a state *in* capitalist society, rather, as a *capitalist* state.¹⁶ This implies that there are certain institutional properties of the very form of the state that can be treated as having a specific class character to them. The idea here is not simply that there are certain *policies* of the state which embody the interests of a specific class; rather, that the very structure of the apparatuses through which those policies are made embodies those class interests.¹⁷

Claims about the class character of the institutional level of power involve what is sometimes called “non-decision-making power” or

16. This linguistic turn of phrase – “the state in capitalist society” vs. “the capitalist state” – was, to my knowledge, first formulated by Nicos Poulantzas in “The Problem of the Capitalist State,” *New Left Review*, no. 58, 1969, pp. 67–78, his well-known critique of Ralph Miliband’s book, *The State in Capitalist Society*, New York 1969. The thesis itself, however, has a long Marxist pedigree, going back to Marx’s own work, particularly his analysis of the class character of the state in his discussions of the Paris Commune. This theme was then forcefully taken up by Lenin in “The State and Revolution,” where he argued that because the very form of the state in capitalism was stamped with a bourgeois character, it could not simply be captured; it had to be smashed. For a general discussion of the problem of capturing vs. smashing the state, see Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State*, London 1978, chapter 5.

17. Policies as such could embody particular class interests because actors external to the state with specific class interests were able to impose those policies on the state. That is, if capitalists were always actively present politically and always predominant in conflicts involving *situational* power, then, even if the state itself was a completely class-neutral apparatus, state policies could be uniformly pro-capitalist. The claim that the form of the state itself embodies certain class principles was meant to provide a way of explaining why state policies are broadly consistent with the interests of the bourgeoisie even when capitalists are not present as the ubiquitous, active initiators of state policies.

“negative power.” The basic argument was crisply laid out in an early essay by Claus Offe.¹⁸ Offe argued that the class character of the state was inscribed in a series of negative filter mechanisms which imparted a systematic class bias to state actions. “Class bias,” in this context, means that the property in question tends to filter out state actions which would be inimical to the interests of the dominant class. The form of the state, in effect, systematically determines what does *not* happen rather than simply what does.¹⁹

An example, emphasized by Offe and Ronge²⁰ and Therborn,²¹ would be the institutional rules by which the capitalist state acquires financial resources – through taxation and borrowing from the privately produced surplus rather than through the state’s direct appropriation of the surplus generated by its own productive activity. By restricting the state’s access to funds in this way the state is rendered dependent upon capitalist production, and this in turn acts as a mechanism which filters out state policies which would seriously undermine the profitability of private accumulation.²² Or, to take another example, given considerable emphasis by Poulantzas,²³ the electoral rules of capitalist representative democracies (in which people cast votes as individual citizens within territorial units of representation rather than as members of functioning groups) has the effect of transforming people from members of a class into atomized individuals (the “juridical citizen”). This atomization, in turn, serves to filter out state policies that would only be viable if people were systematically organized into durable collectivities or associations. To the extent that this filter can be viewed as stabilizing capitalism and thus serving the basic interests of the capitalist class, then exclusive

18. Claus Offe, “Structural Problems of the Capitalist State: Class rule and the political system. On the selectiveness of political institutions,” in Von Beyme, ed., *German Political Studies*, vol. 1, 1974.

19. Offe emphasizes the extremely difficult methodological issues involved in empirically demonstrating such “negative selections.” The basic issue is being able to distinguish between things which simply have not yet happened from things which have been systematically excluded as “non-events” and therefore *cannot* happen.

20. Claus Offe and Volker Ronge, “Theses on the Theory of the State,” *New German Critique*, no. 6, Fall 1975.

21. Göran Therborn, *What Does The Ruling Class Do When It Rules?* London 1978.

22. Logically, one could have a capitalist system of production in which the state directly owns a significant number of enterprises and uses the profits from these businesses to finance its general budget, thus not needing to tax private capital and wages at all. The fact that with very few exceptions – such as the ownership of Statoil (the North Seal Oil Company in Norway) by the Norwegian State, or perhaps (if they are genuine capitalist states) the oil sheikdoms in the Persian Gulf – capitalist states do not acquire their principal revenues in this way is not a feature of capitalism as such, but of the way states have institutionally developed within capitalism.

23. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, London 1973.

reliance on purely territorial, individualized voting can be viewed as having a class character.²⁴

This way of understanding the class character of an apparatus suggests a certain functionalist logic to the thesis that the state is a capitalist state: its form is capitalist in so far as these institutional features contribute to the reproduction of the interests of the capitalist class. This functional logic has been most systematically elaborated in Göran Therborn's remarkable (and rather neglected) book on the state.²⁵ Therborn stresses that the real analytical bite of the thesis that the state has a distinctive class character occurs when the state is analyzed comparatively, particularly across historical epochs. The class character of the state apparatus is a variable; state apparatuses corresponding to different class structures will have distinctively different properties which impart different class biases on state actions. If this "correspondence principle" is correct, then it should be possible to define the specific class properties of the feudal state, the capitalist state and – perhaps – the socialist state. Take the example already cited of the mechanism through which the state acquires resources. In the capitalist state this occurs primarily through taxation, thus ensuring the fiscal subordination of the state to private capital accumulation. In the feudal state, revenues are acquired through the direct appropriation of surplus from the personal vassals of the king. And in the socialist state, state revenues are acquired through the appropriation of the surplus product of state enterprises. In each case, the argument goes, these class forms of revenue acquisition selectively filter out political practices which might threaten the existing class structure. Developing a nuanced inventory of such variability in class properties of the state is the central task of Therborn's book.²⁶

24. There is some ambiguity in many discussions of the class character of the state over the status of the claim that a particular formal property of the state – in this case atomized territorial representation – has a particular class character. Some writers – Therborn, for example – seem to suggest that the element in question inherently has a given class character. Others, for example, Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, London 1979, or Norberto Bobbio, "Are There Alternatives to Representative Democracy?," *Telos*, no. 35, 1978, suggest that the class character comes from the gestalt in which a given element is embedded. Territorial representation thus has a capitalist character because it is not articulated to various forms of more functional representation and direct democracy, rather than because intrinsically territorial representation as such reproduces capitalism.

25. Therborn, *What Does The Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*

26. Therborn develops an elaborate schema for building this inventory, organized around the distinction between inputs, internal processing, and outputs of state apparatuses. In all he compares the various class forms of the state in terms of eleven different aspects of state institutions. While the arguments supporting his specific claims are sometimes not entirely convincing, the conceptual structure he has developed is a valuable first step towards a more comprehensive conceptual repertoire of epochal variability in state forms.

Many critics of the thesis that the state has a distinctive class character have argued that this claim implies a functionalist theory of the state. This accusation is certainly appropriate in some cases. In the early work on the state by Nicos Poulantzas,²⁷ for example, and even more in the work of Louis Althusser,²⁸ there was very little room for genuinely contradictory elements in the state. The class properties of the capitalist state were explained by the functions they served for reproducing capitalism. The functional correspondence principle for *identifying* the class character of aspects of the state slid into a principle for *explaining* the properties of the state.

This kind of functionalism, however, is not an inherent feature of the class analysis of the institutional level of political power. While the thesis that state apparatuses have a class character does follow a functional logic (i.e. what makes a given property have a given "class character" is its functional relation to the class structure), this does not necessarily imply a full-fledged functionalist theory of the state.²⁹ Therborn, for example, does not insist that states will invariably embody the requisite class features that are optimal for the reproduction of the class structure within which they exist. Feudal properties of the state can persist within capitalist societies, and it is even possible that prefigurative socialist properties can be constructed within capitalist states. In general, then, the state can have many contradictory elements. In Therborn's view it is to a large extent class struggle – the balance of power at the situational level of analysis – which determines the extent to which a given state will fully embody the properties which are indeed functional for reproducing the dominant class.

Class and systemic power

To say that capitalists have *situational* power is to say that they command a range of resources which they can deploy to get their way. To say that

27. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, London 1973.

28. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, New York 1971.

29. It should be noted that a functional logic is not the only possible way of constructing a conceptual correspondence between class and aspects of the state. One might argue, for example, that there are homologies between class relations and state apparatuses which have nothing to do with the functional relation between the two. Capitalism could create atomized relations between individuals (via market competition) which are translated into atomized political relations in the state through some mechanism like imitation or diffusion, without political atomization in any way benefiting capitalism. Some strands of state theory in what is sometimes called the "capital logic" or "capital derivation" school seems to argue for this sort of non-functional, form-correspondence, in which formal relations within capital-labor relations are somehow copied within political relations without there being any implication that the latter reproduce the former.

they have *institutional* power is to argue that various institutions are designed in such a way as to selectively exclude alternatives which are antithetical to their interests from the political agenda. To say that they have *systemic* power is to say that the logic of the social system itself affirms their interests quite apart from their conscious strategies and the internal organization of political apparatuses.

The idea that capitalists have such systemic power has been forcefully argued by Adam Przeworski, building on the work of Antonio Gramsci. Przeworski writes:

Capitalism is a form of social organization in which the entire society is dependent upon actions of capitalists. . . . First, capitalism is a system in which production is oriented toward the satisfaction of the needs of others, toward exchange, which implies that in this system the immediate producers cannot survive on their own. Second, capitalism is a system in which part of the total societal product is withheld from immediate producers in the form of profit which accrues to owners of the means of production. . . . If capitalists do not appropriate a profit, if they do not exploit, production falls, consumption decreases and no other group can satisfy its material interests. Current realization of material interests of capitalists is a necessary condition for the future realization of material interests of any group under capitalism. . . . Capitalists are thus in a unique position in capitalist system: they represent future universal interests while interests of all other groups appear as particularistic and hence inimical to future developments.³⁰

So long as capitalism is intact as a social order, all actors in the system have an interest in capitalists making a profit. What this means is that unless a group has the capacity to overthrow the system completely, then at least in terms of material interests even groups opposed to capitalism have an interest in sustaining capitalist accumulation and profitability.

This kind of system-level power has been recognized by many scholars, not just those working firmly within the Marxist tradition. Charles Lindblom's well-known study, *Politics and Markets*, for example, is built around the problem of how the interests of capitalists are imposed on political institutions by the operation of markets even without any direct, instrumental manipulation of those institutions by individual capitalists.³¹ Indeed, this essential point, wrapped in quite different rhetoric, is also at the core of neo-conservative supply-side economics arguments about the need to reduce government spending in order to spur economic growth.

There are two critical differences between Marxist treatments of this

systemic level of analysis and most mainstream treatments. First, Marxists characterize these system-level constraints on politics as having a distinctive *class* character. Neo-conservatives do not regard the private investment constraint on the state as an instance of "class power," since they regard capitalist markets as the "natural" form of economic interaction. The constraint comes from the universal laws of economics rooted in human nature. In contrast, the Marxist characterization of these constraints in class terms rests on the general claim that capitalism is an historically distinct form of economy. More specifically, the treatment of capitalism as imparting systemic power to the capitalist class depends upon the thesis that there is an historical alternative to capitalism – usually identified as socialism – which embodies a different kind of class logic and thus generates a different pattern of systemic power.

The second important difference between Marxist and mainstream perspectives on the constraints capitalism imposes on the state is that most liberal and neo-conservative analysts see this system-level logic as much less closely tied to the institutional and situational levels of analysis than do Marxists. Neo-conservatives, in particular, grant the state considerably more autonomy to muck up the functioning of the capitalist economy than do Marxists. For neo-conservatives, even though the political system is clearly dependent upon the private economy for resources and growth, politically motivated actors are nevertheless quite capable of persisting in high levels of excessive state spending in spite of the economic constraints. The state, being pushed by ideological agendas of actors wielding situational power, can, through myopia, "kill the goose that lays the golden egg." The reason Marxists tend to see state spending and state policies as less likely to deviate persistently from the functional requirements of capitalism is that they see the levels of situational and institutional power as generally congruent with the level of systemic power. The structure of state apparatuses and the strategies of capitalists, therefore, generally prevent too much deviation from occurring. Neo-conservatives, on the other hand, see the three levels of politics as having much greater potential for divergence. They believe that the democratic form of institutions and the excessive mobilization of popular forces systematically generates dysfunctional levels of state spending which are not necessarily corrected by the exercise of capitalist situational power or the negative feedback.

Variability in the Effects of Class on Politics

We have reviewed three clusters of mechanisms through which class shapes politics: the class-based access to resources which can be strategic-

30. Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Cambridge 1985, pp. 138-9.

31. Charles Lindblom, *Politics and Markets*, New York 1977.

ally deployed for political purposes; the institutionalization of certain class-biases into the design of state apparatuses; and the way in which the operation of the system as a whole universalizes certain class interests. Frequently, in the more theoretical discussions of these mechanisms, the class character of these mechanisms is treated as largely invariant within a given kind of class society. Abstract discussions of "the capitalist state," for example, emphasize what all capitalist states have in common by virtue of being capitalist states. Relatively less attention has been given to the problem of variability. In many empirical contexts, however, the central issue is precisely the ways in which class effects concretely vary across cases.³² Let us look briefly at such variability in class effects at the situational, institutional, and systemic levels of political analysis.

One of the central themes of much Marxist historical research is the shifting "balance of class forces" between workers and capitalists (and sometimes other classes) in various kinds of social and political conflicts. Generally, expressions like "balance of forces" refer to the relative situational power of the contending organized collectivities – i.e. their relative capacity to actively pursue their interests in various political arenas. The task of an analysis of variability in the class character of situational power is thus to explain the social determinants of these varying capacities. Generally this involves invoking mechanisms at the institutional and systemic levels of analysis. Thus, for example, the enduring weakness of the American working class within electoral politics has been explained by such institutional factors as the existence of a winner-take-all electoral system which undermines the viability of small parties, the lack of public financing of elections which enhances the political influence of financial contributors, and voter registration laws which make voter mobilization difficult, as well as by such systemic factors as the location of American capitalism in the world capitalist system.³³ Each of these factors undermines the potential situational power of the working class within electoral politics. This enduring situational weakness, in turn, blocks the capacity of the popular forces to alter the institutional properties of the state in ways which would enhance their power. While in all capitalist societies it may be the case

32. One way of characterizing this issue is that Marxist discussions of the class character of politics have tended to be framed at relatively high levels of abstraction, where the central issue is variability across modes of production. Less attention has been given to specifying the effects of class at more concrete levels of abstraction, where the central issue is forms of variation within capitalism itself. For a methodological discussion of the problem of class analysis at different levels of abstraction, see Erik Olin Wright, *Classes*, London 1985, chapter 1 and *The Debate on Classes*, London 1990, pp. 271–8.

33. For an extended discussion of the ways the US electoral system erodes working-class political power, see Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote*, New York 1988.

that capitalists have disproportionate situational power, capitalist societies can vary considerably in power of different subordinate groups relative to the bourgeoisie.

The same kind of variation is possible in terms of power embodied in the institutional properties of the state. In various ways, non-capitalist elements can be embodied in the institutional structure of capitalist states. Consider the example of workplace safety regulations. A variety of institutional forms can be established for implementing safety regulations. The conventional device in most capitalist states is to have a hierarchical bureaucratic agency responsible for such regulations, with actual enforcement organized through official inspections, licensing requirements and various other aspects of bureaucratic due process. An alternative structure would be to establish workplace occupational safety committees within factories controlled by employees with powers to monitor compliance and enforce regulations. To build such administration procedures around principles of "associational democracy" violates the class logic of the capitalist state by encouraging the collective organization rather than atomization of the affected people.³⁴ To the extent that such non-capitalist elements can be incorporated into the institutional structure of the capitalist state, the class character of those apparatuses can vary *even within capitalism*.³⁵

Finally, some theoretical work entertains the possibilities of variation in the class character of systemic power within capitalist societies. The essential issue here is whether the overall relationship between state and economy within capitalism can significantly modify the dynamics of the system itself. Do all instances of capitalism have fundamentally the same system-logic simply by virtue of the private ownership of the means of production, or can this logic be significantly modified in various ways? Most Marxists have insisted that there is relatively little variation in such system-logic across capitalisms, at least as it relates to the basic class character of system-level power. The transition from competitive to "monopoly capitalism," for example, may greatly affect the *situational* power of different classes and fractions of classes, and it might even be reflected in changes in the class character of the institutional form of the

34. The expression "associational democracy" is advanced by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance," *Politics & Society*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1992, as a general way of understanding ways in which democratic institutions can institutionally articulate with organized collectivities rather than simply atomized citizenry.

35. Acknowledging such variation raises a host of complex conceptual issues. By virtue of what can the state still be considered a "capitalist" state if it can incorporate non-capitalist elements in its internal organization? What precisely does it mean to say that the capitalist logic remains *dominant* within a state that contains heterogeneous class elements, thus justifying the use of the adjective "capitalist"? Can a state apparatus which contains contradictory class principles in its internal organization be stably reproduced over time?

state (for example, petty bourgeois elements in state apparatuses might disappear as capitalism advances). But the basic system-level class logic, Marxists have traditionally argued, remains organized around the interests of capital in both cases.

There has been some challenge to this view by scholars generally sympathetic to Marxian perspectives. Gosta Esping-Andersen, for example, argues that differences in the forms of the welfare state (which he refers to as conservative, liberal and socialist welfare state regimes) can have a basic effect on the system-logic of capitalism, creating different developmental tendencies and different matrices of interests for various classes.³⁶

Joel Rogers has forcefully argued a similar view with respect to the specific issue of industrial relations.³⁷ He argues that there is an "inverse-J" relationship between the interests of capital and the degree of unionization of the working class. Increasing unionization hurts the interests of capitalists up to a certain point. Beyond that point, however, further increase in unionization is beneficial to capitalists, because it makes possible higher levels of coordination and cooperation between labor and capital. What this means is that if, for example, the legal regime of industrial relations prevents unionization from passing the trough-threshold in the curve (as, he argues, is the case in the U.S.), then unions will be constantly on the defensive as they confront the interests of capital, whereas if the legal order facilitates unionization moving beyond the trough (as in Sweden), then the system-logic will sustain unionization. High unionization and low unionization capitalisms, therefore, embody qualitatively different system-patterns of class power within what remains an overall capitalist framework.

Class Primacy

Few scholars today would argue that class is irrelevant to the analysis of political phenomena, but there is much contention over how important class might be. The characteristic form of this debate is for the critic of class analysis to attack class *reductionism*, i.e. the thesis that political phenomena (state policies, institutional properties, political behavior, party strategies, etc.) can be fully explained by class-based causal processes. Defenders of class analysis, on the other hand, attack their critics

36. Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton 1990.

37. Joel Rogers, "Don't Worry, Be Happy: Institutional Dynamics of the Postwar Decline of Private Sector US Unionism," *University of Wisconsin Law Review*, 1990. See especially pp. 29-42.

for claiming that political phenomena are completely independent of class determinants. Both of these positions, when stated in this form, have no real defenders. Even relatively orthodox Marxists introduce many non-class factors in their explanations of any given example of state policy and thus are not guilty of class reductionism; and even the most state-centered critic of class analysis admits that class relations play some role in shaping political outcomes.

The issue, then, is not really explanatory reductionism versus absolute political autonomy, but rather the relative salience of different causal factors and how they fit together.³⁸ A good example is the recent discussions of the development of the welfare state sparked by the work of Theda Skocpol and others advocating a "state-centered" approach to the study of politics. In an influential paper published in the mid-1980s, Orloff and Skocpol argue that the specific temporal sequence of the introduction of social security laws in Great Britain, Canada and the United States cannot be explained by economic or class factors. Rather, they argue, this sequence is primarily the result of causal processes located within the political realm itself, specifically the bureaucratic capacities of the state and the legacies of prior state policies.³⁹

The empirical arguments of Orloff and Skocpol are quite convincing, given the specific way they have defined their object of explanation. But suppose there was a slight shift in the question. Instead of asking, "why was social security introduced in Britain before the First World War, in Canada in the 1920s and the USA in the 1930s?" suppose the question was "why did no industrialized capitalist society have social security in the 1850s while all industrialized capitalist societies had such programs by the 1950s?" The nature of class relations and class conflicts in capitalism and the transformations of the capitalist economy would surely figure more prominently in the answer to this reformulated explanatory problem.

In general, then, the issue of causal primacy is sensitive to the precise formulation of the explananda. It is certainly implausible that class (or anything else) could be "the most important" cause of *all* political phenomena. For claims of causal primacy to have any force, therefore, it is essential that the domain of the explanations over which the claims are being made be well defined. Can we, then, specify the domain of

38. For an extended philosophical discussion of the problem of assessing the relative explanatory importance of different causes, see Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, London 1991, chapter 6.

39. Ann Orloff and Theda Skocpol, "Why Not Equal Protection? Explaining the Politics of Public Social Spending in Britain, 1900-1911, and the United States, 1880s-1920," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 49, no. 6, 1984, pp. 726-50.

explananda for which class is likely to be the most important causal factor?

Class analysts have not, in general, systematically explored this metatheoretical issue.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, implicit in most class analysis of politics are two very general hypotheses about the range of explanatory problems for which class analysis is likely to provide the most powerful explanations:

1. The more coarse-grained and abstract is the explanandum, the more likely it is that general systemic factors, such as class structure or the dynamics of capitalism, will play an important explanatory role. The more fine-grained and concrete the object of explanation, on the other hand, the more likely it is that relatively contingent causal processes – such as the specific legislative histories of different states or the detailed rules of electoral competition – will loom large in the explanation.⁴¹ All things being equal, therefore, the decision to examine relatively nuanced concrete variations in political outcomes across cases with broadly similar class structures is likely to reduce the salience of class relative to other causal processes.
2. The more the reproduction of the class structure and the interests of dominant classes are directly implicated in the explanandum, the more likely it is that class factors – at the situational, institutional and systemic levels – will constitute important causes in the explanation. This is not a tautology, for there is no logical reason why class mechanisms must be causally important for explaining class-relevant outcomes. Such a hypothesis also does not reject the possibility that causal processes unconnected to class might play a decisive role in specific instances. But it does argue that one should be surprised if class-based causal processes do not play a significant role in explaining political phenomena closely connected to the reproduction of class structures and the interests of dominant classes.

40. An important exception is the innovative work of G.A. Cohen on the explanatory scope of Marxist theory. In particular, his analysis of “restricted” and “inclusive” historical materialism is an attempt to give precision to the explananda of historical materialism. See Cohen, *History, Labour and Freedom: Themes from Marx*, Oxford 1988, chapter 9.

41. Imagine, in the above example, that one state passed social security legislation in February and another in September of the same year and one wanted to explain this sequence. The specific details of legislative calendars is likely to figure very prominently in the explanation.

PART II

Socialism
