

# Class, State and Power

## A Line of Demarcation

What is the character of the relationship between, on the one hand, social classes – basically defined by their position within the economy – and, on the other, the exercise of political power through the state? Is there a ruling class in this or that country? If there is, which is that class? How does it exercise its rule? How may it lose its power? Although the last of these questions raises complex problems of prediction and strategy, the others seem quite simple and straightforward. The real difficulty arises when we attempt to answer them. If we disregard prejudices of an ideological nature, the issue involved here appears to be the famous one of scientific method. This essay, indeed, is intended as a methodological contribution to analysis of certain crucial scientific and political problems of class, state and power.

Discussion of these questions has given rise to an intensive as well as extensive polemic. But can we be sure that genuinely different replies are being proposed? From what we know of 'paradigms' and 'problematics', would it not rather be naive to assume that the writers concerned, whose scientific and political formations are extremely diverse, are referring to the same problem – even if they use the same, or similar, words?

Upon closer consideration, this does prove to be an unwarranted assumption. However, our aim here is not to present a critical survey of the overabundant literature, but to outline a set of questions and propose methods with which to answer them. We shall not adopt a new, idiosyncratic approach, but rather follow an old-established one – hopefully with greater rigour than has been done in the past. But before we can begin, it is first of all necessary to draw a sharp

line of demarcation between this and other types of question.

Leaving aside subtler points and distinctions, we may identify three basic approaches to the study of political power. By far the most common of these centres on the question: *Who has power?* It asks, for example: Who governs this country? Who rules America? Does anyone at all run this community?<sup>1</sup> We may call this the *subjectivist* approach, in the sense that it seeks to locate the subject of power. It evidently includes the further question: How many hold power? A few or a large number? A unified group of families, an institutional elite of top decision-makers, or competing groups? Everyone or no-one really? Within this shared problematic, many different analyses and solutions may then be proposed, particularly in the United States, a lively debate has emerged in relation to both methods and conclusions of research. Truly there seems no end to the polemics among theorists of 'pluralism', 'the power elite' and 'the ruling class'.<sup>2</sup>

Remaining essentially within the framework of liberal political

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, New Haven 1961; W. Dombhoff, *Who Rules America?* Englewood Cliffs 1967; N. Polsby, 'How to Study Community Power: The Pluralist Alternative', in *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 22 1960.

<sup>2</sup> The methodological debate has been fought out above all in the pages of the *American Political Science Review* (APSR). An overview may be gained from the Reader edited by R. Bell, D. Edwards and H. Wagner: *Political Power*, New York 1969. An earlier, European survey, conducted from a liberal-pluralist point of view, is: R. Aron, 'Classe sociale, classe politique, classe dirigeante', in *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 1960 No. 2, pp. 260-82. In 1971, the APSR published another round, between F. Frey and R. Wolfinger (Vol. 65, pp. 1081-1104). As for the radical, 'elitist' theorists (so called not because they are elitists, but because they find elitism to be the prevailing doctrine) the most important writings include: P. Bachrach-M. Baratz, *Power and Poverty*, New York 1970; S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London 1974. The methodology of the Dombhoff school was expounded in a special issue of the US journal *The Insurgent Sociologist*, 'New Directions in Power Structure Research' (ed. W. Dombhoff) 1976. Among the principal contributions to the substantial polemics are the following: a) from the elitist side: F. Hunter, *Community Power Structure*, Chapel Hill 1953; C. W. Mills, *The Power Elite*, New York 1956; W. Dombhoff, op. cit. 1967 and several later, more specialized works; M. Creson, *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution*, Baltimore 1971; and R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, London 1969 - a book which, although coming from a tradition of Marxist research, falls essentially within this category; and b) from the pluralist side: D. Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd*, New York 1953; R. Dahl, op. cit. and *Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consent*, Chicago 1967; and a work which leans in this direction: A. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, London 1973.

ideology, or at least political theory<sup>3</sup>, the debate has accepted liberal conceptions of democracy as its starting-point and proceeded to investigate whether or not contemporary manifestations of democracy in the United States correspond to ideal norms.

The second approach enjoys much more limited currency outside a few highly specialized departments of academia. Its focus is the businessman's question: How much - how much power, that is to say? It lays stress on 'power to do' rather than on 'power over', and on the exchange and accumulation of power rather than its distribution. Since analysis of political power is, in this case, modelled on one or another form of liberal economic theory - textbook marginalist micro-economics (Buchanan-Tullock, Downs), economic development theory (Huntington), or more sophisticated contemporary liberal economic analysis (Coleman, Hernes) - we may term this the *economic* approach.<sup>4</sup> In its micro-economic variants, it occupies a framework which is much the same as that of the more rigorous subjectivists: power is studied in terms of preferences, alternatives, choices, and so on. In fact, some of the 'economic' theorists are also interested in questions of 'power over'.

The Marxist, *historical-materialist* approach is profoundly different. In contrast to the two others, it starts not from 'the point of view of the actor' but from that of the ongoing social process of reproduction and transformation. If it were to be condensed into a single question comparable to the others, it would be formulated thus: What is the character of power and how is it exercised? The historical-materialist mode of investigation, then, seeks above all to define the nature of power, not its subject or quantity. This feature is expressed in the scandalous interrogation of Marxism-Leninism: Democracy of which class? Dictatorship of which class? *Capital* itself was not written primarily in order to reveal 'who are the rich and who are the poor', or to assess the magnitude of existing wealth. Marx's central objective was rather to lay bare 'the economic law of

<sup>3</sup> While C. Wright Mills, for instance, was unquestionably a radical liberal, writers like Lukes or Miliband start out from premisses of liberal political theory without politically adhering to liberalism.

<sup>4</sup> T. Parsons, 'On the Concept of Political Power', in idem., *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*, New York 1967; S. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven 1968; A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York 1957; J. Buchanan-G. Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent*, Michigan 1962; J. Coleman, *The Mathematics of Collective Action*, London 1973; and G. Hernes, *Makt og ansvar*, Oslo 1975.

motion of modern society', to show how wealth and poverty, domination and subjugation are (re-) produced and changed. Thus, the basic focus of analysis was neither property nor property-owners, but *capital* – that is to say, specific historical relations of production connected in a determinate manner to the productive forces, the state, and the social ensemble of ideas.

This approach has important implications which should be spelled out clearly from the outset. Marxists are interested in the relationship of classes to state power for a very particular reason. They view the state as a separate material institution, functioning as the nodal point of the relations of power within society. The state as such has no power; it is an institution where social power is concentrated and exercised.<sup>5</sup> According to the axioms of historical materialism, class and state condition each other: where there are no classes, there is no state. In class societies, moreover, social relations are first and foremost class relations. Thus, by definition, every state has a class character, and every class society has a ruling class (or bloc of ruling classes). In other words, Marxist discourse does not pertain at all to the subjectivist debate on whether there exists a ruling class. If it seeks to identify the ruling class and the class character of state power, it does so in order to discover the characteristic social structures and relations which are promoted and protected above all others by the material force of the state; and in order to determine the conditions under which they may be changed or abolished. The class character of a given state power does not necessarily refer to back-stage string-pulling; it denotes the societal content of the actions of the state, and indicates thereby the ruling class of that society. There then arises the question of how this class rule is grounded and maintained, and how it can be overthrown.<sup>6</sup>

### ... and its rationale

In a scientific mode of discourse, lines of demarcation should be motivated by reference to procedural canons. Now, although the historical-materialist approach to political power constitutes a

<sup>5</sup> This point has been emphasized and elaborated in the very important works of Nicos Poulantzas: *Political Power and Social Classes* (NLB 1973) and *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (NLB 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the authors' introduction to J. Fabre-F. Hincker-L. Sève, *Les communistes et l'état*, Paris 1977 – a book of great theoretical and political import; and François Hincker's interventions in the debate on 'Crise du capitalisme, crise de la société, crise de l'état', in *La Nouvelle Critique*, February 1977.

specific problematic, it may in fact be compared with the other two in respect of analytical value. For this purpose we may discuss all three in the loose and general terms of 'power to do' and 'power over'. Individual contributions to analysis may, of course, rest upon blatant ideological distortions of their own. But the basic inadequacy of the two non-Marxist approaches may be said to lie in their failure to grasp their own limitations. Furthermore, their own achievements deal with specifications and special cases of the more general overall problematic of historical materialism and are thus susceptible to incorporation by the latter.

The problem of 'power to do' raises the question: Power to do what? It is naturally not without importance to identify and quantify the range of politically influential subjects, or to assess the power resources of a given state. (To take but one extreme example, which has at times been tragically neglected by not a few Marxists, a competitive democracy must evidently be distinguished from a Fascist dictatorship or a murky oligarchy, even though all three may be manifestations of bourgeois class power.) But once we have located the most influential power subject or subjects, we are faced with another problem: What does this power subject do with its power? What do the rulers do when they rule? Where do the leaders lead the led? In non-Marxist discourses, this whole area is either ignored or treated in a manifestly inadequate fashion. It would involve only a slight caricature to say that the pluralist-elitist debate comes down to the following opposition: Look, many have power, that is good! No, look, few have power, that is bad!

The typical reply given to the question 'power to do what?' is 'power to realize one's interests'; or, as Talcott Parsons's Panglossian conception of world would have it, 'the interest of the effectiveness of the collective operation as a whole'.<sup>7</sup> In view of the enormous variety of historical forms and systems of power, this can hardly be considered a satisfactory answer. Only within a given social form and time-perspective does it seem possible to attach a precise empirical meaning to the utilitarian notion of 'interest'. What, for example, is the interest of a Fascist or military dictator, or that of a democratic prime minister? In the short run, it may be suggested, to stay in power. But does that really illuminate the matter? Similarly, while the marginalist models of micro-economics may provide a

<sup>7</sup> Parsons, op. cit., p. 308.

picture of market transactions, they contribute little to our understanding of the rise and dynamics of capitalism, or of the mechanisms and crises of capital accumulation.<sup>8</sup>

By ignoring or evading the problem of 'power to do', the non-Marxist approaches tend to be unable to account for historical social change. Characteristically, the classical elite theorists, who really thought through the consequences of their analyses, held that society does not basically change at all. This is true of all of them: Gumplowicz, Mosca, Pareto, Michels. Instead, they depicted an eternal cycle of the rise, rule, degeneration, and fall of elites, tending ultimately to reduce people and society to biology.<sup>9</sup> Now, although men certainly are biological organisms, it is an obvious fact that human society has changed over the ages and assumed a number of different forms. The task of social science must be to analyse these historical modes and their processes of transformation – a task which cannot be accomplished if the psyche, will and interests of the subjects of power are taken as the starting-point. These subjects must be brought into systematic relationship with the historical social context in which they rule. It is with this, and not the detection of dark conspiracies, that Marxism is concerned.

From the historical-materialist standpoint, classes are the bearers of definite relations of production. Thus, to identify the bourgeoisie as the ruling class involves the location of state power within the matrix of the dynamics and contradictions of capitalism, as it presents itself, with its particular tendencies, possibilities and problems, at a given stage and conjuncture. Similarly, every government is related to a particular ruling class within a specific historical social matrix which circumscribes what is done by the state and determines the possibilities of change.

From one point of view, the non-Marxist analyses may thus be said to deal implicitly with a number of significant specifications of class rule, while from another they appear as *de facto* concerned with a special case of it. This distinction will become clear upon examination of an aspect of 'power over'. Are the various moments of the rule of power-subjects related to one another? Should we

<sup>8</sup> Cf. my 'Ekonomiska system: Vetenskap och ideologi', in my *Klass och ekonomiska system*, Staffanstorps 1971. A provisional English translation has been made for Frank Roosevelt at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York.

<sup>9</sup> For a demonstration and references see G. Therborn, *Science, Class and Society*, NLB 1976, Ch. 4 part III.

conclude that social power is random and unpatterned wherever it does not emanate from a unified power-subject, such as an autocratic group or individual, or a consensual social collective? If not, how should the relationship be studied, and how may it be grasped?

The contemporary Western debate between theorists of pluralism and elitism has concentrated on the secondary problem of whether there is an *interpersonal* relation between the different moments of the exercise of power in society. Are they united by a cohesive elite which takes all the major decisions in important areas? Or is decision-making power fragmented among groups which have little or no connection with one another? Such a formulation of the issue effectively ignores the fact that interpersonal fragmentation of decision-making does not necessarily imply a random and unpatterned structure of events. Indeed, it is a basic, and seemingly legitimate, assumption of social science that all occurrences in human society are in some way patterned and therefore susceptible to comprehension by scientific analysis. Pluralist and elitist contributions have thus focussed on only a single possible form of the patterning of power – one, moreover, which is hardly the most important form in complex modern societies.

Little is to be gained by the observation that, apart from interlocking membership in cohesive power groups, another kind of interpersonal identity exists: the sharing of ideas, a consensus of values.<sup>10</sup> For in contemporary societies, such a consensus is extremely general and abstract, and the precise modes of its emergence, functioning and maintenance still have to be explained.<sup>11</sup> It

<sup>10</sup> Robert Dahl has written: 'democratic politics is merely the chaff, it is the surface manifestation, representing superficial conflicts. Prior to politics, beneath it, enveloping it, restricting it, conditioning it, is the underlying consensus among a predominant portion of the politically active members.' *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Chicago 1956, p. 132. But what if 'consensus' is the surface manifestation of something else, which 'envelops', 'restricts' and 'conditions' both the consensus and electoral politics?

<sup>11</sup> This is a weak spot in Ralph Miliband's otherwise well-substantiated critique of the pluralist thesis (*The State in Capitalist Society*). Miliband shrinks in the end from analysis of those forms in which neither the governmental personnel nor the upper echelons of the administrative apparatus are essentially recruited from the economic elite. In such cases, he merely refers us to the ideology of the political leaders as a part of the bourgeois consensus. (See Ch. 4 part IV.) Although he provides some empirical material and suggestions for a study of the problem, the latter remains fundamentally outside his mode of analytical control. For analysis of advanced bourgeois democracies, as well as of reformism, fascism and military regimes, it would seem indispensable to elaborate a more complex model than that

analysed primarily with a view to finding its subjects – identifiable, free and responsible originators of acts (and non-acts). He seems to remain stuck within the pluralist-elitist alternative: either a unified elite or various elites and leadership groups. (It remains obscure, moreover, how the inter-relationship of these groups functions as a relation of power over others – unless they themselves are aware of the connection between them.)

Marx opened up a path out of the pluralist-elitist impasse. But it has gone almost completely unnoticed among sociologists and political scientists, including those who have in a more or less critical fashion explicitly referred to Marx. The radical novelty of the Marxian approach seems to have been all but drowned in subjectivist treatments and re-interpretations. Marx argued that study of a given society should not just focus on its subjects or structure, but also and at the same time inquire into its process of *reproduction*. Significantly, it is in examining the latter process that Marx analyses the class relationships of exploitation and domination.

Capitalist production, therefore, under its aspect of a continuous connected process, does not create only commodities and surplus-value. It also produces and reproduces the capital relation itself: 'on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer.'<sup>18</sup> In a refutation of subjectivist conceptions of market exchange prevalent in 18th and 19th-century economics, Marx also provided a critique *ante diem* of 20th-century sociologists: 'To be sure, the matter looks quite different if we consider capitalist production in the uninterrupted flow of its renewal, and if, in place of the individual capitalist and the individual worker, we view them in their totality, as the capitalist class and the working class confronting each other. But in so doing we should be applying standards entirely foreign to commodity production.'<sup>19</sup>

From the perspective of reproduction, the dominant question of all subjectivist approaches to the study of power – Who rules: a unified elite or competing leadership groups? Is the economic elite identical with or in control of the political one? – is displaced by the

Marx's view implies not that the power of the capitalist is a fate to be accepted, but that it can be combated and abolished. His argument does suggest, however, that it is rather pointless to accuse the capitalists of not behaving as something other than capitalists. From Marx's standpoint, the arm of criticism is ultimately replaced by the criticism of arms, that is, by the class struggle in all its forms.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 724.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 732.

must further be shown how different forms of 'consensual power' pattern people's lives and give rise to certain objective social structures and relationships.

Bachrach and Baratz<sup>12</sup> and more recently Lukes<sup>13</sup> have developed important methodological critiques of pluralism, introducing the notions of institutional 'mobilization of bias', 'non-decision-making'<sup>14</sup> and, in the case of Lukes, latent conflicts and effects of inaction.<sup>15</sup> But they do not deal with the present problem of 'power over'. In fact, the subjectivist orientation of these writers seems to preclude a solution on the basis of the theory of elitism. While their refined methods are able to sound deep-lying manifestations of elite rule, they can hardly be expected to find social patterings of the exercise of power other than those of a unified power-subject. In the case of Bachrach-Baratz, this limitation is strongly implied in their view of power as an inter-personal relation between A and B, as well as in associated concepts.<sup>16</sup> Lukes, for his part, is led by his moralistic preoccupation with responsibility to disregard impersonal forms of domination and concentrate on cases where it may safely be assumed that the power-subject could have acted in a different manner from the one he chose. In this context he actually throws in a distinction between power and fate!<sup>17</sup> For Lukes too, then, power should be

of Miliband. Similarly, the valuable work of William Domhoff on the upper-bourgeois backgrounds and connections of American politicians and administrators, and on the cohesiveness of the top stratum of the US bourgeoisie, would greatly benefit if it were located within a much more elaborate conceptualization and analysis of the power structure and contradictory development of US society.

<sup>12</sup> Bachrach-Baratz, *op. cit.* See also their articles: 'The Two Faces of Power' and 'Decisions and Non-decisions: An Analytical Framework', in *APSR*, vols. 56 and 57 (1962 and 1963) respectively.

<sup>13</sup> Lukes, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> A non-decision denotes 'a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker.' Bachrach-Baratz, *op. cit.* 1970, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> Lukes, *op. cit.*, Chs. 4 and 7. The author draws upon the work of Creson (*op. cit.*).

<sup>16</sup> Bachrach-Baratz, *op. cit.* 1970, Ch. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Lukes, *op. cit.*, pp. 55–6. Cf. Marx: 'I do not by any means depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours. But individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests. My standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.' *Capital*, Volume 1, Penguin/NLR 1976, p. 92. Of course,

interrogation: What kind of society and what basic relations of production are being reproduced? By what mechanisms? What role do the structure and the actions or non-actions of the state (or local government) play in this process of reproduction? Do they further it, merely allow it to take place, or actively oppose it?

The analysis of reproduction enables us to explain how the different moments of the exercise of power in society may be inter-related, even in the absence of a conscious inter-personal connection. They are, in reality, linked to one another by their reproductive effects. Thus, the given relations of production may be reproduced – and furthered or permitted by state intervention – even where the exploiting (dominant) class, as defined by those relations, is not in ‘control’ of government in any conventional sense of the word. The fact that a specific form of exploitation and domination is reproduced constitutes this too as an example of class rule. The importance of this reproduction in the exercise of power within society is clear from this instance.

### Excursus for Sociologists

In order to elucidate the distinctive character of Marx's *démarche* and make comparison possible within a sociological context, it may be useful at this point to take a fresh look at the classical, and still very important, source of sociological anti-Marxism in the fields of class, power and stratification – namely, Max Weber's treatment of these themes in *Economy and Society*. We intend here not to undertake a comprehensive analysis, but only to spell out the relationship between the Marxist problematic and the object of Weber's preoccupation in these texts.<sup>20</sup> We say ‘texts’ in the plural because *Economy and Society* deals twice with class, status and power – both in the first part, which presents Weber's conceptual system, and in the second part, which, although written earlier, contains an elaboration of this system.<sup>21</sup> Weber's concepts are introduced separately: parties in the third chapter on *Herrschaft*; estates or ‘status groups’ (*Stände*) and classes in a fourth chapter of their own. Later, however, they are treated together, in a single section of the chapter on political communities.

<sup>20</sup> In my *Science, Class and Society* (op. cit.), I have attempted to locate the theoretical core and historical context of Weber's sociology.

<sup>21</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, New York 1968, pp. 481–88, 500–17, 926–38.

In one of the best introductions to Weber, Gerth and Mills write about his concept of class: ‘In locating the class problem in the market and in the streams of income and property, Weber points towards production and its modern unit, the capitalist enterprise.’ The authors imply that Weber here concurred with Marx, and they go on to indicate what they see as the additional contribution made by Weber: ‘By making this sharp distinction between *class* and *status*, and by differentiating between types of classes and types of status groups, Weber is able to refine the problems of stratification to an extent which thus far has not been surpassed.’<sup>22</sup> Essentially the same view of Marx and Weber is presented by Giddens, although he has his own criticisms of Weber and of his theories of class. Giddens also thinks that the two theorists had the same conception of the market: ‘In clarifying some of these matters we may start from the premise, which is fundamental for both Marx and Weber: that, in capitalism, the market is intrinsically a structure of power, in which the possession of certain attributes advantages some groups of individuals relative to others.’<sup>23</sup> According to Giddens: ‘There are two principal respects in which the [Weber's] analysis differs from Marx's “abstract model” of classes. One is . . . differentiation of “class” from “status” and “party”. The second . . . equally important . . . is that, although Weber employs for some purposes a dichotomous model which in certain general respects resembles that of Marx, his viewpoint strongly emphasizes a pluralistic conception of classes.’<sup>24</sup>

However, in order to understand Weber's view of stratification and power and to compare it with that of Marx, it is essential to realize that Weber's notion of capitalism issued from highly diverse sources: Austrian marginalist economics, German historicism, and some elements of the Marxist analysis – above all the attention paid by it to a historical economic system called capitalism.<sup>25</sup> One of the effects of this interesting combination of influences is the tendency of modern-day readers to take Weber's Marxist-sounding words, like class or capitalism, as denoting Marxian concepts.

As Gerth-Mills and Giddens quite rightly point out, Weber defines class in terms of position in the market. Weber emphasized:

<sup>22</sup> H. Gerth-C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber*, New York 1958, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Giddens, op. cit., pp. 101–2. Cf. the similar view of Frank Parkin in his *Class, Inequality and the Political Order*, London 1971, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Giddens, op. cit., p. 42. Emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> Therborn, op. cit. 1976, pp. 270 ff.