

2.

Finding the Ruling Class: Defining the Class Character of State Power

So far we have set forth two basic guidelines for a historical-materialist analysis of the problems of class, state and power. First, the central question must concern the class character of state power, since the ruling class is defined as such by its exercise of that power. Secondly, state and political power must be analysed in relation to the ongoing processes of social reproduction and transformation. The primary focus is thus neither the inter-personal relations of various 'elites' (ranging from family background to current social intercourse), nor the decision-making process *per se* (decisions and non-decisions, as well as the issues affected by them). The crucial object is rather the *effects* of the state upon the production and reproduction of given modes of production, whether actual or hypothetical.

How then does the state affect and enter into the processes of social reproduction and change? This is determined by *what* is done (and in certain key cases, *not* done) through the state, and by *how* this is done through the state. The second aspect, which is addressed in the other essay of this volume, refers to the structure of the state apparatus – to the class character of the organizational form of the state. The first aspect refers to state power. When we say that a class holds state power, we mean that what is done through the state positively acts upon the (re-) production of the mode of production, of which the class in question is the dominant bearer. The classical expressions 'taking' and 'holding' state power should not be interpreted in the sense that state power is a thing which can be grasped in the hands. It is rather a process of interventions in a given society

effected by a separate institution which concentrates the supreme rule-making, rule-applying, rule-adjudicating, rule-enforcing and rule-defending functions of that society. To take and to hold state power signifies to bring about a particular mode of intervention of the special body invested with these functions.

An Analytical Schema

In order to study the place of the state within the processes of social reproduction, we have first of all to ask: What is to be reproduced? In answer, we may identify three basic objects: the relations and forces of production, the character of the state apparatus, and the particular ideological superstructure with its specialized apparatuses of qualification and subjection. In all three spheres – economic, administrative-repressive and ideological – positions and processes are reproduced at the same time as suitable individuals are reproduced (or freshly recruited) in sufficient number to fill the positions. That the state has to reproduce itself is probably obvious. But it may be asked why we refer here only to the state apparatus, and not also to state power. It is principally a matter of the order of analytical exposition. In this section we are concerned with the definition of state power in terms of the reproductive effects of state interventions; it would not be very meaningful to locate the character of something in its effects upon the reproduction of itself. Below we shall reverse the sequence: having defined the class character of state power and the ruling class, we shall go on to look at its determinants and the way in which it is maintained.

Since the class character of state power denotes the class character of what is (re-) produced through the interventions of the state, a number of further definitions need to be made. The character of the relations of production raises no difficulty, since it was in terms of these that we originally defined classes. The problem of the class character of the superstructure, however, has hardly ever been systematically tackled by Marxists. In the other essay of this book, we attempt to elaborate the character of the state apparatus. Concurrently, I am working on a class analysis of ideology. But, for the moment, we shall have to leave this as a blank box in the schema of analysis, humbly asking the reader to assume, provisionally, that the class character of ideologies and ideological apparatuses may be

determined in a rigorous fashion. Some rough indications that this is so are already rather commonplace.

Finally, we have to order the effects of the state interventions in some way. At least as a first approximation, we may distinguish four types of effect. Three of these are fairly evident logical possibilities. An intervention may further (increase), allow (maintain) or break existing relations of production. However, state power is exercised not according to a pre-established functionalist harmony, but in and through the struggle of antagonistic classes. In this process it may be necessary to have recourse to concessions and compromises, whereby, for instance, the state goes against the logic of capital accumulation without breaking it.

It should be noted that the analysis presented here does not make use of the notion of class interest. Class character is defined by reference to observable relations and structures, the class nature of which is derived from the basic definitions, axioms and propositions of historical materialism. Marxists who have employed the notion of class interest have encountered great difficulty in giving it a precise empirical meaning⁴¹; and, whether or not it is agreed that application of the concept outside an extremely limited range is inherently dubious, it seems clear that it is dispensable for most scientific purposes. In a theory of rational action, 'interest' may be assigned an exact meaning as part of a definite game, applying to a number of clearly demarcated social situations, on the market and elsewhere. But when used in more complex contexts to denote 'long-term', 'objective' or 'true' interests – that is to say, something other than factual preferences – the notion seems to provide a spurious objectivity to essentially ideological evaluations. Be that as it may, my use of the concepts of class and relations of production should be perfectly acceptable to Marxists, and, at least for the sake of the argument, to non-Marxists as well.

On the basis of the above remarks, we may now propose the following analytical schema for location of the ruling class and assessment of the class character of a given state power.

⁴¹ At least this is my impression even of Poulantzas's treatment of the subject in *Political Power and Social Classes* (op. cit) and *Fascism and Dictatorship* (NLB 1974). The same point is cogently argued in Claus Offe's penetrating essay: 'Klassenherrschaft und politisches System. Zur Selektivität politischer Institutionen', in his book *Strukturprobleme des Spätkapitalistischen Staates*, Frankfurt/Main 1972.

Class character of state power (= effects of state interventions).

<i>Effect on class character of state apparatus</i>	<i>Effect on relations of production</i>			
	<i>Further</i>	<i>Maintain</i>	<i>Go against</i>	<i>Break</i>
Further	1	2	3	(4)
Maintain	25	6	7	8
Go against	9	10	11	12
Break	(13)	14	15	16

The logical possibilities 4 and 13 appear to be empirically out of the question. Strictly speaking, we should also have charted the effects upon the class character of the ideological superstructure. But that would have yielded 4³ (i.e., 64) cells, and there are typographical limitations, if none other, on even my taxonomic zeal. In fact, the schema is intended not as a collection of pigeon-holes, but as a guide to, and reminder during the course of, concrete analysis. It is proposed as an instrument with which to answer questions such as that which was posed by Maurice Dobb in his debate with Paul Sweezy over the transition from feudalism to capitalism: Which class ruled in England prior to the 17th-century Civil War?⁴² It is also relevant to the current debate in France on whether contemporary state power in that country is monopoly-capitalist or bourgeois in character⁴³, as well as to the seemingly interminable dispute on the Left about the nature of the Soviet Union.

However, a number of further points have to be clarified and specified in order to render the schema capable of application. The only effects we can consider in the present context are direct and immediate ones; if we were to go beyond these, we would incorporate the dialectics of social contradictions into the definition of state power, with, at times, the most absurd results. For example, on the eve of the Great French Revolution, in the throes of a deep fiscal crisis, the *ancien régime* continued to uphold a fiscal structure based upon noble privilege. This quite rapidly proved to be a major cause of the outbreak of the Revolution. In the medium term, then, this manifestation of state power had the effect of breaking up the nobility's feudal privileges and establishing a bourgeois state. But

⁴² M. Dobb, 'A Reply', in R. Hilton (ed.) *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, NLB 1976, p. 62.

⁴³ See, for instance, the debate in *La Nouvelle Critique*, February 1977, op. cit.

it would be ridiculous to call the fiscal policies of the *ancien régime* an expression of bourgeois state power. In view of this extreme possibility, a rigorous analysis cannot allow tampering with the time-scale, even though the consequences may not always be so fatal.

At the same time, it is clear that, in a particular situation, there are a number of different ways in which the existing relations of production or class state may be maintained or furthered. Thus, a certain intervention may very well go against prevailing ruling-class opinion, while objectively furthering or maintaining its mode of exploitation and domination. A well-known case in point is Roosevelt's New Deal: 'The rich may have thought that Roosevelt was betraying his class; but Roosevelt certainly supposed [reflecting in spring 1935 on the mounting opposition from business circles] . . . that his class was betraying him.'⁴⁴

This frequent phenomenon, which is of major importance in understanding social dynamics, is obscured by the concentration on 'issues' and 'decisions' characteristic of the methodology of the pluralist subjectivists.

State Power and State Apparatus

In the practice of both science and politics, the problems of state power and the ruling class assume great complexity. Normally, within a single society there coexist several different modes of production, as well as three or more classes each capable of different forms of alignment. Moreover, these classes are often divided into fractions, whose precise comparative power it may be crucial to assess. To take another example, the schema itself provides for a number of ambiguous combinations, such as maintenance of given relations of production together with breaking of the corresponding state apparatus, or vice versa. All these problems are the subject of intense debate within the labour movement and have to be tackled head on.

State power and state apparatus are analytically distinct concepts – that much is quite clear. But what is their range of variation in relation to each other? Is it adequate to name class A the ruling class, even where the state apparatus is still maintained and impregnated

⁴⁴ A. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, Vol. III, London 1960, p. 273.

by class B, on the grounds that the mode of exploitation represented by class A is furthered above others by the state? This is not an exercise in abstract thinking. The transition from feudalism to capitalism raises just this question in a number of instances.⁴⁵ On the eve of the English Civil War, little remained of feudal relations of production, but the absolutist Stuart state apparatus was still fundamentally feudal in the sense elaborated in the other essay of this book. Nor did the abolition of serfdom in Russia involve any change in the Tsarist state. In fact, in most countries other than France, such disjunctures seem to have been the rule rather than the exception. Similar ones may also be found in the transition from capitalism to socialism, with the important qualification that here a decisive change in the state apparatus precedes transformation of the relations of production. The NEP period in the USSR, when maintenance of a new socialist state apparatus was combined with the fostering of both capitalist and petty-commodity production, is probably the clearest example of such a phenomenon.

These well-known cases of disjuncture between state and economy provide glimpses of a number of areas of complexity. Not only do several different classes and modes of production co-exist; they also inter-penetrate one another in many ways, giving rise to hybrid forms and special transmutations. Neither relations of production nor forms of state and ideology are single entities which either do or do not exist. For instance, neither in Prussia nor in Russia did the abolition of serfdom and the development of grain-growing for the export market entail the disappearance of labour rent and a dependent labour force on the noble estates.⁴⁶ The English aristocracy continues to dominate the countryside to this day; and among the feudal forms retained by the English state apparatus is a House of

⁴⁵ For an overview see Hilton, *op. cit.*; the international historians' colloquium published as *L'abolition de la 'féodalité' dans le monde occidental*, 2 vols., Paris 1971; and the vast panorama brilliantly drawn by Perry Anderson in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, NLB, London 1975.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 273 f., 348 ff. The classical works are: Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, in *Collected Works* Vol. 3, Moscow 1964; and the summaries of Max Weber's research into the subject contained in his essays 'Entwicklungstendenzen in der Lage der ostelbischen Landarbeiter', and 'Agrarstatische und sozialpolitische Betrachtungen über zum Fideikommissum in Preussen', in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Tübingen 1924, and *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*, Tübingen 1924, respectively.

Lords, which had more than a purely symbolic and ceremonial significance as late as the time of the 1945–1951 Labour Government.⁴⁷

The above schema is intended as an instrument with which to unravel these complexities and particularities, not as an *a priori* grid serving to conceal or ignore them. It will be of little use if it is applied in mechanistic manner. The attempt to determine the class character of state power and the ruling class necessarily involves risky judgments and qualitative analysis. But if it is grounded on conceptual clarification and elaboration of criteria, the undertaking need be neither arbitrary nor unrealizable. The problems we have just mentioned call for further specification in at least three important respects: the weight to be attached to the character of the state apparatus; the meaning of class alliance; and the content of hegemony within an alliance composed of entire classes or fractions thereof.

On the whole, Marxists have tended to allot a crucial importance to the character of the state apparatus – from the government to the repressive apparatus. Thus, they have not suggested that the bourgeoisie was the ruling class in Tsarist Russia between 1861 and 1917, or that it constituted, together with the petty bourgeoisie, the ruling class of the USSR from the launching of NEP to the campaigns of collectivization and industrialization. Similarly, analysis of the bourgeois revolution in England has centred on the period between 1640 and 1689, rather than on the earlier dismantling of seigniorial rents and rights. But if these approaches have been correct, and if the distinction between state power and state apparatus is valid, then attachment of such weight to the character of the latter must still be grounded in a theoretical elucidation! At first sight it may even appear to contradict a fundamental proposition of historical materialism: that which concerns the determinant role of the economic base.

The key role accorded to the character of the state apparatus derives from the definition of the latter as a material crystallization of the relationships and division of labour dominant in society. Its tenacious materiality thus provides an objective point of insertion of a time dimension into the analysis of state power. In order to pre-

⁴⁷ The Lords delayed implementation of the government's steel nationalization bill until after the new elections of 1950. See D. Howell, *British Social Democracy*, London 1976, p. 155.

clude *ad hoc* juggling with the time scale and with long and contradictory chains of indirect causation, we have had to confine the analysis of state power to the direct and immediate effects of state interventions. However, there is evidently a strategic time dimension to the consolidation and preservation of state power and the position of the ruling class, situated as these processes are within the confrontation of opposing classes. The character of the state apparatus is crucial to the indirect and delayed effects of state interventions in the economy and ideological superstructure. But these may be taken into account without recourse to an elastic time scale, so long as the direct and immediate effects of state policies are assigned primary importance in study of the character of the state apparatus.

The state apparatus occupies this special place in relation to the positions of the ruling class for two main reasons. First, everything that is done by the state is done through the state apparatus; it thus provides a filter determining the modality of state economic and ideological interventions. Moreover, the manner in which state economic and ideological policies of a given aim and content are actually implemented is a crucial determinant of their effects, particularly those of an indirect and intermediate kind.

Secondly, the state apparatus, as a material condensation of class relations, affords a strategic base for an overall change in state policy. Once it is entrenched in the state apparatus, the ruling class or hegemonic class of an alliance enjoys a privileged position of strength, from which it may proceed to withdraw concessions and end or shift alliances.

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of the way in which the character of the state apparatus influences the outcome of various policies is provided by the effects of ostensibly anti-feudal land reforms upon landowner-peasant relations. The impact of these varies greatly indeed from the French Revolution through 19th-century Prussia and Russia to the contemporary Third World. In France, the revolutionary bourgeois state carried through such a radical abolition of feudalism that even the post-1815 Restoration was unable to reverse the process; whereas the control exercised over the state by the Prussian Junkers and Russian *dvoryanstvo* for a long time made it possible for them to maintain their rule over the countryside with only slight modifications here and there. Nationalizations of capitalist enterprise offer another example. Although the post-

war nationalizations in Western Europe – from Finland to France, from Britain to Austria – indicated a real temporary weakness of the bourgeoisie, they posed no threat to its power. For the capitalist character of the state apparatus ensured that the nationalized enterprises were from the very beginning administered on capitalist lines, and thus easily reintegrated into the bourgeois order.

The second reason for the particular importance of the state apparatus is best illustrated by the early history of the socialist revolutions – from the Russian October to the Cuban experience. If we disregard the shortlived and unsuccessful period of Russian War Communism, all of these revolutions initially fostered peasant petty-commodity production and even capitalist enterprise, at the same time as they brought about a more or less complete smashing and transformation of the bourgeois state apparatus. There thus arose a class alliance comprising the proletariat, the petty-bourgeoisie and the 'national bourgeoisie'. Within this alliance, it has often been said, the working class played the leading, hegemonic role, because the proletarian character of the state apparatus secured for it a decisive position of strength from which to end the alliance and embark upon socialist construction.

In the Russian case, the previous revolutionary transformation of the state apparatus enabled this historical turn to be accomplished within a basic political continuity – even if it did not rule out violence and purges at the top. By contrast, where a particular class complements its economic advance by gaining the upper hand in the state apparatus, the rupture of the former class alliance has tended to take the form of a more or less violent revolutionary break. Although the subject cannot be explored here, the intriguing complexity of most bourgeois revolutions is probably attributable to the fact that the feudal aristocracy did not rule alone before the revolution. In most states, it seems rather to have formed and led an alliance with the bourgeoisie (or a fraction of it). Revolution was then precipitated by a challenge to that hegemony by the bourgeoisie (or by fractions of it, perhaps not previously allied to one another, or newly linked up with subordinate fractions of the aristocracy). In some such way it may be possible to gain a theoretical understanding of the character of Stuart Britain and of the conflicting forces within the Civil War – a war which has been empirically designated by its foremost historian as one of 'country *versus* court'.⁴⁸ Fresh light may also be cast

⁴⁸ C. Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714*, Edinburgh 1961, p. 102.

on the large role of non-bourgeois popular forces in bourgeois revolutions, and many other phenomena.

Now, the state apparatus itself bears the imprint of definite class relations: if the economic base of a class undergoes erosion and collapse, or is not set again on solid foundations, then its impact on the state apparatus must evolve accordingly, although perhaps with some time-lag. This process too is well known from the history of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. However, there is more to disjuncture between the state apparatus and the dominant relations of production than just a time-lag. Co-existence of the two involves various forms of inter-penetration and permutation of classes and modes of production. Nevertheless, in any given society there is only a single state. It is true that it is composed of a number of different apparatuses, whose mode of inter-relation tends to correspond to the intricacy of the social formation. But except in times of acute political crisis, these apparatuses form a more unified system than the one produced by the circulation processes which articulate the different modes of production. Thus, while basically determined by the class relations of society, the state apparatuses – as a materialized condensation of those same relations – tend to manifest them with a particular rigidity.

The discontinuity between the specific unified materiality of the state apparatus and the complex pattern of interpenetrating classes and modes of production constitutes another basic reason why state power is not a redundant concept. Much important knowledge would never be produced were we simply to say that the class whose mode of dominance is manifested in the organization of the state apparatus is the one which holds state power and makes up the ruling class. The situation where a state furthers one mode of production while retaining a state apparatus impregnated by the dominant class of another provides us with a valuable insight into the relations between class, state and power, as well as an important key to the future development of society and its class relations.

Definitions and Procedures

Bearing in mind these considerations, we may now propose the following definitions and basic analytical procedures. In order to account for the complexity of social formations, the schema presented above normally has to be applied at least *twice*, in the course of investigating the effects of state interventions upon two distinct