

Compare and evaluate of the instrumentalist and structuralist theories of state

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Introduction

This essay compares and evaluates two principal Marxist theories of state, the instrumentalist and the structuralist theories. For the development of insight into the functioning of the capitalist mode of production normally, and the transformation of its system (contemporary capitalism) in and through its moments of economic crisis, and therefore of state, there is a requirement for a dynamic theory of the capitalist state (Jessop, 1978). A state refers to an organized community living under the government which is defined as a unified political system. The government refers to the administrative bureaucracy, the particular group of people controlling the apparatus of the state, the means through which the state power is employed at a given time. States are served by continuous sequences of different governments (Poulantzas, 1976; Miliband, 1965).

The instrumentalist position crudely implies that the state serves to enforce and guarantee the stability of the societal class structure in the capitalist system as an instrument in the hands of the ruling class. The functions ascribed to the state are therefore understood with regard to the exercise of power by personnel in strategic positions through this instrument (the state) either directly through manipulation of policies or indirectly through exerting pressure on it. On the contrary, the instrumentalist view fronts the argument that the state can be viewed as being a direct servant of the ruling or capitalist class coming under the direct control of the members of this class in key positions of power in the state, the administrative bureaucracy.

The Marxist theories of state highlight the centrality of the state to the capitalist reproduction process. In capitalist societies, it is evident that capitalist social relations are reproduced and the state is therefore implicated in this crucial process of the reproduction of capitalist relations (Jessop, 1982; Jessop, 1978). Such a function ought to be performed by some apparatus, institution or a combination and often many, if not all, of these institutions are either heavily regulated by the state or are state apparatuses themselves (Jessop, 1977; Mandel, 1971). The state therefore emerges as the node in the network of power relations characteristic of contemporary capitalist societies and hence becomes the key focus of attention for Marxists.

Capital is fragmented into numerous competing units and yet is reliant on crucial generic conditions that have to be satisfied for profits to be secured and surplus value extracted from labor (Ross and Trachte, 1990). A capitalist economy unregulated by the state, a truly free market, and characterized by the multitude of competing capital is inherently unstable and prone to crisis. It suffers contradictions and steering problems that can never be resolved unless regulation is instituted to manage the conflicting interests (Jessop, 1982). Continual accumulation eventually threatens the stability of the capitalist economic system itself and its modes of production (Wright, 1977; Poulantzas, 1976). The state must of necessity intervene within this risk-prone economy to secure ideal conditions conducive for continued capitalist production, supremely regulating the economy and safeguarding the circuit of capital (Sweezy, 1942).

With regard to the instrumentalist theory, Paul Sweezy (1942) notes that the state is, “ an instrument in the hands of the ruling class for enforcing and guaranteeing the stability of the class structure itself” (p. 243). Miliband (1983) affirms this theory identifying the class that rules in a capitalist society to be one that “ owns and controls the means of production and which is able, by virtue of the economic power thus conferred upon it, to use the state as its instrument for the domination of society (p. 23). These concepts follow Marx’s famous Dictum in The Communist Manifesto which states that “ the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Miliband, 1965).

Miliband makes the conception of the state as non-existent, but as a conceptual reference point standing for “ a number of particular institutions which, together, constitute its reality, and which interact as parts of what may be called the state system” (Miliband, 1983, p. 49). He emphasizes that state power lies in these institutions and through them, the people occupying leadership positions in each of them wield this power in different manifestations (Miliband, 1983, p. 54).

The basic thesis of this perspective is that in modern economies, capitalists have the ability to formulate policies that represent their interests in the long-term, as well as to ensure, through institutions of the state, that the policies are adopted, implemented and enforced (Stone, 1971). The modern state, in this regard, is dominated by the capitalist class and serves the interests of the capitalism. Under the capitalist system, specific organizations of government, culture society and the economy, often in

competition, institutionalize the control of key resources which typically consist of wealth, status, force and knowledge. The instrumentalist approach thus views the organized possession, ownership and control of these key resources in any society as the basis for the exercising of power.

Institutions enable the organization of power in a society, vesting individuals occupying positions of authority within them such as the board of directors and executive officers the capacity to make decisions regarding the deployment of key resources owned or controlled by the institution. Government also bestows authority on its public officials to employ administrative coercion or force wherever needed against anyone who fails to comply with the law (Stone, 1971; Domhoff, 1990). The individuals occupying these positions of authority control different types of power which can be characterized as economic, political or ideological. Power can thus be imputed to these particular groups of individuals in light of their control of key resources, with wealth and income (capital) often the generalizable source of power in a capitalist society (Stone, 1971; Domhoff, 1990; Miliband, 1970).

Normally, the capitalist class has the ability to mobilize key resources and to deploy them more efficiently and with greater capacity than other classes in society which is the theoretical basis for Miliband's postulate that "the ruling class which owns and controls the means of production and which is able, by virtue of the economic power thus conferred upon it, to use the state as an instrument for the domination of society" (Laclau, 1975). The capitalist class is in essence an economic network overlapping between and based upon

institutional position such as management and property relations such as ownership (Mandel, 1971; Miliband, 1983). The corporate elite in modern economies, for instance, wield immense economic power through their authority over resource allocation within individual firms and the deployment of the same resources towards other diverse, wide-reaching goals such as political, educational and cultural goals (Domhoff, 1990; von Braunmuhl, 1978).

This approach is founded on the assumption that capitalist societies are prone to crises inherently, which originate in the regular economic stagnation cycles and/or continual conflicts between capital and labour precipitating class wars (Gold et al., 1975). Poulantzas argues that the capitalist mode of production in its basic structure brings forth class practices that tend to contradict and crisis tendencies that inevitably lead to the disruption of the capitalist system, a situation which necessitates the involvement of a separate structure that serves to maintain the system restoring its equilibrium (Laclau, 1975; Jessop, 1977). Due to these, structuralists argue for the necessity of the state to intervene politically to mediate class struggles and to maintain economic stability in capitalist societies (Sweezy, 1942; Gold et al., 1975; Poulantzas, 1978). Poulantzas (1976) argues that in the capitalist mode of production, the general function of the state, is ideally as “ the regulating factor of its global equilibrium as a system” (p. 45).

The structuralist theory disputes the idea fronted in the instrumentalist position outlined above taking the position that through the crucial influence

of individuals in control the institutions of the state, have to function in ways that the general viability of capitalism is ensured into the future. It views the mode of production in a capitalist system specifically as a form of capitalism, not because members of the capitalist class hold state power in the powerful positions, but because the state, in its institutions (legal, political and economic) produces the logic of capitalist structure (Gold et al., 1975; Poulantzas, 1976).

From a structural perspective therefore, it would be argued that institutions of the state, which include the legal institutions, function to serve the long-term interests of capital and capitalism, unlike what appears to be fronted by the instrumentalist perspective, which appears to focus on the short-term interests of the leading capitalist class (Poulantzas, 1980). The structuralist fraternity thus argues that the state and its constituent institutions have some degree of independence from the elite in the capitalist or ruling class.

As summarized by Ernest Mandel (1971), the protection and reproduction of the basic fundamental relations of production, the social structure of societies in a capitalist system, form the function of the state as far as this is not attained automatically through the processes of the economy.

Consequently, in their approach, structuralists front the argument that state policies and institutions are best understood through their function in maintaining the capitalist system.

The relationships that organize the production and distribution of commodities, essentially, private property and the market constitute the economic structure of a capitalist society (Stone, 1971; Ross and Trachte,

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1990). The political structure consists of the institutionalized power of the state while the ideological instance refers to the collective thought systems and the subjective consciousness of individual actors existing in a given society (Poulantzas, 1976; Laclau, 1975). Structuralists advance the idea that the modes of production can be analyzed regarding the interrelations of functions between these economic, ideological, and political structures essential for the sustenance of a particular mode of production (Jessop, 1982; Offe, 1972; Przeworski and Wallerstein, 1982).

A capitalist society is considered stable when all these structures, as a cohesive system, function to maintain relations of production and hence the ability, in the capitalist system, to appropriate surplus value from workers. However, structuralists note that as a result of the capitalist system's internal development, there are a variety of contradictions that are constantly at work within the system including economic crisis, class struggles and uneven development which generate crises of capital accumulation, as well as simultaneously undermining the domination of the ruling class (Wright, 1977; Poulantzas, 1978). This is what Marx posits as “the tendency for the rate of profit to fall” (Jessop, 1978)

Competing factions are created by the practice of capital accumulation which generates fragmentation among the classes (Offe, 1972; Hall, 1980). Poulantzas maintains that uneven development results in an unstable equilibrium between economic, political and ideological instances (Poulantzas, 1978; Przeworski and Wallerstein, 1982). Structural equilibrium is therefore maintained by the state acting as a mediator preserving and

enhancing capitalist interests through interventionist policies and institutional reforms. The modalities of the state constitute political functions insofar as their objective of operation is to maintain and stabilize a society in which the capitalist class dominates and exploits (Wright, 1977; Gold et al., 1975).

At the heart of the debate between the two theories is the concept of state power which unlike instrumentalist theorists, structuralists generally insist that it is not merely reducible to governmental institutions (economic, political or ideological) and state personnel. These, Poulantzas argues, have no power or cannot exercise power, but are arenas through which political power can be exercised and thereby exist by virtue of their role and function in a capitalist society (Poulantzas, 1978; 1976). He observes that the structure does not refer to the simple principle of organization that is external to the institution, the concrete social institutions making up a society, but refers to the systematic function of interrelationships among the institutions to the production of surplus-value and appropriation (Poulantzas, 1980; Sweezy, 1942).

Defining state power as the capability of a social class to attain its objectives through state apparatus, which he also defines as “ the unity of effects of state power (i. e. policies) and the network of institutions and personnel through which the state function is executed,” Poulantzas (1978; Laclau, 1975) emphasizes the unity of function between the power of the state and its apparatus with the latter conceived to intrinsically include functions executed through state institutions by state personnel. The main indicators

of state power objective are the influences of state policies on the accumulation of capital and the class structure (Poulantzas, 1976; Sweezy, 1942).

Under the structural view, notwithstanding their personal affiliations or beliefs and due to the logic of the capitalist system, state bureaucrats are constrained to act on behalf of capital (Stone, 1971). The state's fiscal functioning and therefore legitimacy is dependent on and constrained by the economy and of necessity, therefore, serves the interests of the capitalist class (Stone, 1971; Sweezy, 1942). Also noteworthy, policies of state and its stability are central to the creation of a favorable business climate and the confidence that sustains investments and therefore economic growth (Stone, 1971; Gold et al., 1975). Through these assertions, Poulantzas claim that, in a capitalist system, political power has its constitution outside the state apparatus in the relations of production, the private control of assets of production, is founded. The conception of the functioning of the state going against bourgeoisie interests is thus deemed impossible, as it would imply the removal of its basis of power and control of the means of production.

In the relations of production, the ability to locate power outside of the state poses a serious challenge to the instrumentalist perspective of the state apparatus as the repository of state power (Laclau, 1975). While Miliband seeks to expose the dominant bourgeois ideology with his critique of its mythology, he however entertains the bourgeois assumptions about the state particularly that power resides in the personnel of the state rather than in the state apparatus. He focuses on class in terms of inter-subjective

relationships and on the state in terms of interpersonal alliances, connections and networks of the state elite (Laclau, 1975; Ross, 1979). Poulantzas, in his support of the structuralist theory, differs with this view fronting the objective structural reality of social classes and the state, with the class being objective structural locations within the relations of production, and the state being the structure, form and function of the this capitalist institution (Poulantzas, 1978; Przeworski and Wallerstein, 1982).

Being agency- or personnel- centered and viewing the state as a custodian of capital, instrumentalism views the state as an instrument which is manipulated and steered according to the interests of the ruling elite or dominant class. This perspective asserts the pivotal superiority of agency, the individuals' conscious actions and social interests/ forces, over structure. Personnel of the state are thus afforded dominance over the capitalist apparatus – the form and function of the state. The foundation of this perspective lay in Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skopol's argument that “ an instrument has no will of its own and thus is capable of action only as an extension of the will of some conscious actor” (Domhoff, 1990, p. 42). This implies that the action of the state as an instrument under the control of the capitalist class has its origin in the purposive and conscious efforts of capitalists as a class in the structure (Domhoff, 1990; Stone, 1971).

Conclusion

Instrumentalism assumes primarily that through its ownership and control of the means of production, the capitalist class rules. Socialization, interpersonal connections and networks tie this class to the state and the

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state is used as an instrument to dominate the rest of society. Thus it is not guaranteed that the state is engaged in the reproduction of capitalist social and economic relations, rather, a situation can arise contingent upon the dominance of the capitalist ruling elite within capitalist society, and its personal ties to the members of the state apparatus.

In marked contrast, structuralism emphasizes the underlying importance of structures over agents and their intentions. Agents are regarded as having minimal capacity to influence the objective structures they bear. This perspective is structure- or state-centered, and views the state as acting in the interest of the ruling class collectively in the long term. The capitalist state's form and function are essentially determined independent of the intentions, motivations and aspirations of members of the dominant class or political actors. The outcome of this is a political and economic system that retains the capitalist nature and turns state personnel into mere functionaries executing policies that are imposed upon them by the capitalist system.

However, it is evident that the state does not always dominate as it is often necessary in modern economies for businesses and elites to communicate with policymakers through avenues such as lobbying, campaign contributions and/or consulting which are considered to be transmission belts between capital and the state. With this view, the power structure emphasized by an instrumentalist approach can at least have some influence affecting whether or not the state exerts its full capacities on behalf of capital. The subsidiary mechanisms that this view emphasizes turn out to be

required for the effective functioning of the major mechanisms pointed out by structuralists.

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