Lecture 14. Sociology 621
What is "Politics"? What is "The State"?
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I. INTRODUCTION

Marxists have always held that the state plays a pivotal role in sustaining the class domination of ruling classes. Without the intervention of the state, especially its repressive interventions, the contradictions between classes would become so explosive that bourgeois domination could hardly survive for an extended period. The state, nearly all Marxists insist, *fulfills an essential function in reproducing the class relations of capitalist society*.

This general approach can be called a *class-centered functional view of the state*. In one form or another it has been the core of traditional Marxist state theory.

1. BASE/SUPERSTRUCTURE

This kind of functionalist argument was a central part of the thesis in classical Marxism that the state was part of the "superstructure". I do not want to dwell on this classical view, since it is not widely supported in contemporary discussions (at least in this form), and we will look at this more closely when we discuss historical materialism at the end of the semester, but it is worth briefly explaining its logic.

What is a Superstructure?

1. *Superstructures support bases*: without superstructures bases would collapse.

2. G.A. Cohen's image: a roof holding up the struts. Without the roof, the struts fall down.

3. *Bases explain superstructures:* The explanation for the presence of the roof is the need to hold up the struts. The base explains *functionally* the form of the superstructure: the state exists and takes the form that it does because it is necessary to reproduce class relations.

4. Superstructures are not epiphenomenal: they have tremendous effects.

This kind of explanation is called a *functional explanation*.

2. FUNCTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

2.1 The structure of functional explanations

A functional explanation is an explanation in which the beneficial effects of a structure are an important part of the explanation of the structure itself. The classic examples come from biology:

Q. Why do birds have hollow wings?
A. Because these are necessary if they are to fly.

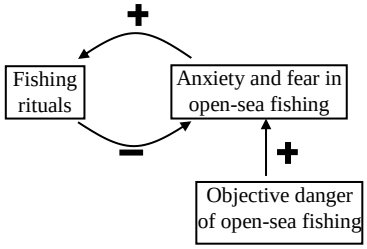
Q. Why do giraffes have long necks?
A. Because this enables them to eat the leaves of the acacia tree

A consequence of something helps to explain its existence.

One of my favorite examples in sociology is Mallinowski's famous explanation of fishing rituals among the Trobriand islanders:

> Rituals occurs because they have the effect of reducing fear. The explanation of rituals is via their consequences. Since this reduction in fear is beneficial to the community, we can say that there is a functional explanation of the occurrence and persistence of rituals.

Functional diagram of Mallinowski's functional explanation of Trobriand islanders fishing rituals (from Art Stinchcombe: *Constructing Social Theories*):



2.2 functional vs intentional explanation

Functional explanations are distinct from what is sometimes called an "intentional explanation". An intentional explanation is an explanation in which the anticipated effects of an action enter into its explanation. When it is said, for example, that a particular law was adopted because politicians believed it would serve the interests of the capitalist class, an intentional explanation is being offered. A functional explanation, in contrast, would explain the law by its actual effects, not just its intended effects. The two may work together, of course: we could say that the introduction of the law was intentionally explained, but its persistence is functionally explained (i.e. the law remained in place because of its actual effects).

2.3 functional explanation & functional description

Many people dislike functional explanations because they are too easy to make, they are often facile, they are hard to prove or disprove. More specifically, it is very easy to slide from a functional description to a functional explanation. A functional description simply points to the beneficial effects of something. We observe that rain makes flowers grow. We can say that rain is functional for the flowers. There is nothing objectionable in such a descriptive claim. But we would regard as absurd the corresponding functional explanation: why does it rain? It rains so that flowers can grow. (Note that religions often do slide from functional descriptions to explanations in the natural world, where "God" becomes the mechanism which underwrites the functional explanation: Rain exists so that flowers can grow because God designed it that way).

Cohen stresses that it is essential to distinguish a functional description from a functional explanation. To say that rain dances among the Hopi Indians (one of Cohen's favorite examples) contributes to social cohesion is to present a functional description; to say that the existence Hopi rain dances is explained by the fact that they contribute to cohesion is to offer a functional explanation. Cohen's thesis is that historical materialism -- the Marxist theory of history -- rests on such functional explanations.

Empirical observation about beneficial effects, therefore, is not equivalent to a demonstration of a functional explanation, but it can provide a basis for an *inference* about a dispositional fact which adds credibility to a functional explanation. If a functional explanation is correct, then there must exist some sort of underlying mechanism -- sometimes called a "feedback mechanism" -- which explains how it comes to pass that the structure is reproduced by virtue of its beneficial effects. In the case of functional explanations in biology, Darwinian natural selection constitutes the core of such mechanisms: the beneficial effects of a trait increase

the probability of the genes which produce the trait to be passed on to offspring. Cohen argues that an elaboration of such mechanisms is certainly useful in defending a functional explanation and is ultimately important for the theory within which the functional explanation figures to be complete. But he insists that a specification of such mechanisms is not logically necessary for believing a functional explanation to be valid.

3. What is wrong with the superstructural view of the state?

The basic problem usually identified is the absence of adequate *mechanisms* that explain the functionality of the superstructure. The functionality of the state -- or anything else -- cannot be taken for granted; it is not automatic, but must be socially produced and sustained. The image of the state-as-superstructure tends to short-circuit the investigation of such mechanisms. Still, I think it is legitimate to sustain the functional *description* of the state as a working hypothesis and starting point for analysis, as a way of posing a set of questions.

4. Modifying the Functional Image.

Three kinds of theoretical moves have characterized Marxist discussions that have rejected the strong superstructural notion of the state:

(1) State as arena of struggle → *contested* functionality. First, it is now often argued that the state is also an object and arena of class struggles, struggles which may impinge on the capacity of the state to fulfill this "essential function." While the class nature of the state is still generally accepted, its functionality is viewed as more problematic and potentially even contradictory because of the effects of struggles.

(2) the State in a complex system → *contradictory* functionality. The state faces multiple demands to satisfy functional needs of capitalist social reproduction, and the conditions for satisfying the needs are incompatible. This means that it is forced to engage in contradictory actions, self-undermining, inconsistent, unstable. There is no stable equilibrium. This becomes further complicated because in order to fulfill any of these function, the state needs some meaningful autonomy, but such autonomy can intensify these contradictory processes.

(3) The state as an historically specific structure: *contingent contradictory functionality*. Taken together, these two arguments -- that class struggles may impinge on the ability of the state to serve the ruling class and that state actors may have some autonomy from ruling class interests -- have seriously challenged the traditional functionalism of Marxist state theory. There is a general recognition that a full account of the capitalist state must integrate on the one hand an analysis of the state's functions and the mechanisms which enable the state to fulfill those functions, and, on the other, an analysis of the process of struggle and institution-building which transforms the state and its mechanisms and which generates potentially contradictions within the state itself. Understanding such "**contingent, contradictory functionality**" will be the guiding theme of our exploration of the theory of the state.

II. Basic Concepts for understanding politics & the state

In this first lecture on the state we will try to clarify the basic conceptual terrain that will be used throughout our discussions of politics and the state. Four interconnected concepts are particularly important: 1. politics 2. political power 3. domination 4. the state. These concepts are all hotly contested. The definitions which I will offer, therefore, should not be viewed as reflecting a general consensus within contemporary Marxism. Indeed, in certain respects, what I will have to say by way of definition is not even distinctively Marxist in that these definitions could be adopted within quite nonMarxist substantive arguments.

1. POLITICS

1.1 Practice. In order to define "politics" we must first define the concepts of "practice" and "political practice". Practice is defined as human action analyzed in terms of its transformative effects on the world. This does not imply, it must be emphasized, that social action is *no more* than objective, transformative effects or that the subjective meanings of the actors are irrelevant to understanding action. Indeed, as we shall see, one of the critical issues in contemporary Marxist discussions is the relationship between conscious political practice -- those practices in which the subjective meanings are political as well as the objective effects -- and the unintentional political aspects of other kinds of practices. The point is that the subjective state of the actor is not part of the very definition of political practice.

1.2 General format of discussions of practice:

All practices have the following formal properties:

- *Raw material* – the object of transformation
- The *means* of transformation – the instruments, tools, organizations, etc. that are used by people to accomplish the transformation
- The *process* of transformation
- The *product* of transformation

The simple paradigm case is economic practice:

- *Raw material* = nature
- The *means* of transformation = means of production, productive forces
- The *process* of transformation = the labor process, production process
- The *product* of transformation = use-values

All practices can be analyzed in these terms.

1.2 Political Practice. What then is *political* practice? I will define political practice as *human social action that transforms power relations*. Contrast: with:

> ***economic* practice** which transforms nature (into use-values) and
>
> ***ideological* practice** which transforms human lived experience (into subjectivity).

1.3 Reproduction as Transformation. "Transformation" is an encompassing term in these definitions. A social practice that reproduces a given social relation, which maintains it in a given form, would also be considered a political practice. A reproductive political practice, in a

sense, **transforms a social relation into itself**. The assumption underlying this characterization of reproduction is that:

> *Social relations never continue simply out of pure inertia. This is especially true in cases where social relations contain inherent antagonisms of interests (or what can be called contradictions); such relations do not continue unchanged simply by existing. Reproduction of antagonistic social relations should be viewed as an active process of blocking certain specific kinds of transformations*.

The implication here is that an antagonistic social relation like that of class exploitation requires specific processes for its maintenance, otherwise it would be transformed through struggle.

1.4 *Type* vs *Aspect* of Practice. In discussions of political practice it is important to distinguish the political *aspects* of social practices in general from political practice as a *type* of practice. To speak of the political aspects of any social practice (eg. the political aspects of economic practices) is to discuss the ways in which a given practice reproduces and transforms social relations, even if those transformations were not intended by the actors. To speak of political practice as a type of practice, on the other hand, implies that the intention of the actors is to produce such transformations. Actors are conscious subjects and may take social relations as the intentional object of their actions. *Politics*, then, is the term we use when discussing interactions among political practices in which the political aspects are intentionally pursued by the actors.

1.5 Multiplicity of Types of Political Practice. Understood in this way, politics can be identified with every type of social relation:

- gender politics produce and reproduce power relations connected to gender;
- classroom politics produce and reproduce the power relations between teachers and students;
- class politics produce and reproduce class relations.

Even if there are reasons to treat class politics as particularly central to understanding large scale social changes, it is incorrect to identify politics as such with class politics or to treat all other types of politics as simply reflections of class politics.

It is also incorrect, under the definition of politics as interactions among conscious political practices, to restrict politics to the "public sphere". Politics occurs within families and other intimate relations in the private sphere as well as factories, schools, and, of course, the state itself. This is the meaning of the feminist slogan "the personal is political". What is more, it is a political question, not one given once and for all by the social relations themselves, precisely where the boundary between the public and private -- and thus the public and private spheres of political practice -- is drawn. While there may be good reasons in the study of politics to focus on the public arena of the formal "political system", especially the state, the theoretical domain of politics is much broader than this.

This definition of politics and of political practice is considerably broader than that implicit in many Marxist analyses where often the analysis of politics is restricted to practices oriented to the state. Under such more restricted definitions, *if* one could imagine a society without a state, then there would be no politics as well. The withering away of the state, to use a venerable Marxist slogan, would also signal the withering away of politics.

In the definition which I have offered, politics is an intrinsic feature of human social life because power is an intrinsic feature of social relations, and while the hypothesized withering away of the state would certainly radically transform the terrain on which political practices occurred, politics as such would continue. If anything, one might expect, politics would loom larger in the daily life of average people, since the conscious transformation of power relations would no longer be primarily delegated to experts and politicians but would be a central feature of everyday practices.

2. POLITICAL POWER

2.1 Power in General. All practices of whatever sort involve "power", i.e. *capacities to produce the transformations* specific to the practice. "Economic power" in these terms refers to the capacity to transform nature, political power to the capacity to transform power relations, and ideological power to the capacity to transform subjectivity.

2.2 Instrumental & structural power. The expression "capacity to transform" has both an **instrumental** and **structural** meaning. The instrumental meaning is the simplest. To say that a particular individual or group has a great deal of political power is to say that they effectively control a variety of resources which enables them to effectively transform social relations. These resources constitute the "means of production" of political practice and the conscious use of those means of production to accomplish transformations is what we have called "politics".

In addition to this instrumental meaning of political power, however, it is important to specify a sense in which a group can be structurally powerful politically even if the individuals in the group do not consciously wield instruments of political power. This occurs when the *unintended political aspects of social practices reproduce or transform social relations in ways which serve the interests of the group in question*. For example, as we will see in more detail later, the economic practices of capitalists have systematic political effects. The patterns of investment and disinvestment impose constraints on the political choices of all groups in the society and thus deeply shape the possibilities of transforming social relations even if capitalists do not use their investments consciously as political weapons. Of course, capitalists may also use investments as a conscious political instrument -- as when investment strikes are consciously used to shape state policies. This would be an instance where economic power is being deliberately used to enhance political power. But even apart from such instrumental political uses of economic power, the control over investments by capitalists gives them structural political power.

2.3 Means & efficacy of Instruments of power. In analyzing any type of power, whether it be economic, ideological, political, it is important to establish both what constitutes the principle *means of transformation* used within the practice in question and the determinants of the *efficacy* of those means of transformation. This way of talking is most familiar in the case of economic power. Economic power is the capacity to produce transformations of nature:

> The "forces of production" constitute the means of production deployed in such practices, and the efficacy of those forces of production is defined largely by their technical productivity. The economic power of an individual or class thus depends both upon *the extent to which it monopolizes the means of production* -- property rights -- and the productivity of the means of production which it controls.

2.4 Organizations as the "Means" of Politics. As in the case of economic practices, the analysis of political power involves specifying the "means of production" of political practice, or what I will call "means of politics", and the efficacy of those means. The prototypes of "means of politics" are *political parties* and the *state,* i.e. *organizations*.

> *Organizations are central to political power because of their role in mobilizing collective action and constraining choice.*

But really any resource that bears on the capacity to transform relations can be considered pertinent to political power. Thus, many economic resources are simultaneously political resources and can enhance political power. The translation of economic resources into political power can operate through very crude mechanisms, for example when money is used to bribe officials or "buy one's way into office", or in quite subtle ways, as when the need for private investments shapes the political agenda discussed by politicians. How material resources are to be treated -- as elements of economic power or political power or both -- depends upon what is being explained, what effects and transformations are being considered. One of the pivotal theses of Marxism is precisely that economic power is the basis of political power, i.e. the effective control over the material means of production is the basis for the control over the means of producing/transforming social relations.

Political power is also affected by the efficacy of the means of politics, not simply the degree to which they are monopolized by particular actors. In the economic case it is easy to talk about the "productivity" of the forces of production. There is a fairly well defined concept of technical progress, of the surplus producing capacity of a given technology and knowledge, etc. The parallel concept is more problematic in the domain of politics, but is nevertheless pertinent. *Different political organizations are able to produce different effects -- they have variable efficacy.* This is not just a question of who controls them or how thoroughly they control those organizations. *States may be strong or weak,* efficient or inefficient as political means of production. The "incapacity" of the state is a critical problem, as we shall see in a later discussion. Similarly for political parties: working class party organizations vary in their ability to effectively mobilize workers for struggle. Lenin's arguments for the necessity of a vanguard party in his famous essay, "What is to be Done?", is precisely an argument about the political productivity of different means of politics open to the working class.

3. DOMINATION

3.1 Power vs Domination as concepts. In many discussions of power, power is equated with "domination": if there is no domination, there is no power. I think that power -- the capacity to transform relations -- is distinct from domination -- situations in which there are unequal distributions of power. Even in a utopian communist, egalitarian society there must be politics and power, but there need not be domination.

Domination, then, is a way of describing the distribution of power. Domination exists within a relation when one individual or group or category asymmetrically has power *over* another individual or group or category. (If the power of one group over another was symmetrical -- that is, each group had power over the other -- then this would not be domination).

3.2 The Multiple faces of Domination. The expression "power over" is a complex one and has been subjected to many interpretations in political theory. There are at least three meanings that

have been widely used. These have been identified by Steven Lukes, in his influential book, *Power: a Radical View* (London: McMillan, 1974), as "three faces of power" (which in our terms are three faces of domination):

1. A dominates B when A can get B to **do something even over the objections** of B: instrumental power
2. A dominates B when A can **define the range of alternatives** open to B, within which B freely chooses what to do (negative power, nondecisionmaking power).
3. A dominates B when A is able to **realize A's interests at the expense** of B's interests, even if B freely cooperates with A.

3.3 System-logic notions of power/domination

Bob Alford and Roger Friedland have referred to these three forms as **situational** power, **institutional** or organizational power and **systemic** power (see *The Powers of Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, chapter 1). These can best be understood in the metaphor of politics as a game as suggested in an early lecture:

> **Systemic power** concerns power over what game is to be played = revolutionary v counterrevolutionary politics;
>
> **Organizational power** concerns power over the rules of the game = reformist v reactionary politics;
>
> **Situational power** concerns power over plays within a given set of rules = liberal vs conservative politics.

Systemic *domination*, then, refers to a situation in which there are deep asymmetries of power in shaping which game is played; institutional domination refers to a situation in which these asymmetries determine the precise rules of the game; and situational domination is a situation in which particular actors can dictate to others specific actions. As we shall see in subsequent discussions, many of the debates within the Marxist theory of the state and politics revolve around the interplay of these different faces of power and domination.

[3.3 A parenthetical note on situational politics. In the case of both institutional power and systemic power it is clear that social relations as such are the objects of politics. To talk about which game is played or the rules of the game is precisely to talk about the reproduction and transformation of social relations. Situational power, on the other hand, seems to have less to do with social relations as such. The concept looks like it simply refers to direct control over the *practices* of one person or group rather than over relations. Should this, then, still be viewed as an instance of *political* power?

To say that A gets B to do something B would not otherwise do is to say A has the capacity to reproduce a particular social relation between A and B, a relation within which B will act in the proscribed way. The sanctions at A's disposal are precisely what defines the relation between A and B, and A's power (capacity) consists in preventing B from escaping that relation (this is what transforming a relation is). To say that a manager dominates workers by being in a position to force them to do particular tasks (which they otherwise would not do) is a shorthand for saying that workers are unable to transform the relation within which they must obey their bosses and that the costs to the individual worker of trying to escape the relation are greater than

staying in it. This does not imply that workers are *powerless* within this relation, since they are formally free to quit and that they can collectively resist the domination of the boss in various ways. But they are, nevertheless, dominated situationally in so far as their capacity (power) to determine their specific activities within production are less than the capacity of their bosses.]

4. THE STATE

4.1 General definition.

Domination is not just a problem of interpersonal relations as the metaphor of A getting B to act in particular ways suggests. Domination is inscribed in social institutions of various sorts. This is crucial, for it is the institutionalization of domination that makes it stable over time.

The state, in these terms, is:

(1) *the most superordinate,*
(2) *territorially centralized*
(3) *institution of domination in a society*.

Therborn has a nice way of formulating this superordinate territorial domination:

> the state concentrates "supreme ruling-making, rule-applying, rule-adjudicating, rule-enforcing and rule-defending functions of [a] society" (p.145)

Political power may be unequally distributed within many arenas of social life -- in the family, in the factory, in the community. Each of these may be sites of domination. *To the extent* that these specific sites of domination in a given territory are themselves dominated by a centralized apparatus, that apparatus can be called a "state".

4.2 Contrast with Weberian definitions and some Marxist definitions.

This definition of the state is somewhat at odds with conventional definitions in both the Weberian and Marxist traditions. Weberian definitions of the state typically define the state as an apparatus which "monopolizes the legitimate use of force" over a territory. The definition above does not assert either that the state monopolizes violence or that its rule is legitimate. To be sure, it may well be the case that states generally do more or less successfully monopolize violence over a territory, and also that this monopoly of violence is generally viewed as legitimate by at least a significant part of the population (and certainly by the personnel of the state itself). But neither of these seems to me to be essential to the very definition of the state. The essence is *super-ordinate domination* in *territorially centralized* institutions; it will be variable the extent to which that domination rests of violence and is legitimate.

The definition is also somewhat at odds with most Marxist definitions, since it does not explicitly insist that states are apparatuses of *class* domination, but just *political* domination. While I in fact believe that states are apparatuses for class domination for reasons we will explore, I do not think that this should be built into the definition of the state itself. Rather it is a proposition which has to be argued on independent grounds. The basis for the argument revolves around the relationship between economic power and political power, and thus political domination. It is not, however, logically entailed by the very concept of the state.

4.3 Variability in the ***degree of stateness***.

Defining the state as the superordinate, territorially centralized apparatus of domination implies, as Pierre Birnbaum has suggested, that historically, *empirical "states" vary in their degree of "stateness"*. That is, they vary in both the extent to which domination is in fact territorially centralized, and in the extent of the domination that is so centralized. High levels of stateness occur when there are high levels of domination and territorial centralization; low levels exist where there are either high levels of relatively autonomous decentralized domination (eg. in feudal states) or low levels of domination altogether (eg. in radically democratic political systems). This is the sense in which genuine "democracy" as a social principle of the exercise of political power is anti-statist, and the radical extension of democracy as envisioned in classical Marxist theories of the revolutionary socialism in fact signals at least a partial dissolution of the state (i.e. a reduction of the stateness of state apparatuses).

Important implication: the withering away of the state does not equal the withering away of politics and does not necessarily imply the withering away of domination

5. STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The meaning of any theoretical object is shaped by other concepts with which it is contrasted. In the case of political practice, these contrasts involve the distinction between political, economic and ideological practices. In the case of the state itself, the contrast that is frequently introduced in Marxist discussions is between the state and what is called "civil" society.

The concept of civil society is a particularly vague one in many discussions. Generally it is used to refer to those aspects of social life that have what could be termed strictly *external* relations with the state. That is, they exist autonomously from the state, have their own mechanisms of reproduction, but in various ways interact with state apparatuses. Primary examples of social relations "in" civil society are social networks of various sorts, secondary associations, what are loosely called communities, and families.

Critics of the state/civil society dichotomy have argued that because the state has become more and more implicated in everyday life, in production, accumulation, the family, and so forth, it no longer makes any sense to imagine a sphere of social relations constituted independently of the state. All aspects of social relations have *internal* relations with the state proper and therefore should not be analytically separated into a distinct sphere.

These criticisms, in my judgment, conflate the important fact that all social relations and practices have political *aspects* with the problem of distinguishing the state *as a specific apparatus* from other institutional arenas in a given territory. In the terms of the definition of the state elaborated above, the state/civil society distinction hinges of the existence of arenas of political practice in which, at a minimum, situational power is not exercised by the state or state officials. If the state exercises situational domination throughout the society, then the state is not simply the most superordinate territorially centralized organization of domination; it has become the only organization of domination. *This is the image embodied in the concept of the totalitarian state:* the state directly penetrates all sites of social practice. So long as this is not the case, then there remains sites of political power, struggle and initiative -- sites of politics -- that cannot be subsumed under the state as such. This is what is meant by civil society.