The Marx Problem in Marxian State Theory

CLYDE W. BARROW*

ABSTRACT: More than a quarter century after the Miliband-Poulantzas debate renewed interest in Marxist political theory, there is still no agreement on what constitutes a Marxist theory of the state. The state theory debate has produced a range of competing theories including instrumentalism (Miliband), structuralism (Poulantzas), derivationism (Altvater), systems analysis (Offe), and organizational realism (Skocpol). Each of these theories is grounded in a conception of “the Marxist tradition,” but each theory diverges in its definition of what counts as Marx’s “political” writings. Efforts to arbitrate between competing theories of the state by returning to the Marxian classics are futile, first, because the classical texts are “incomplete” and, second, because they are ambiguous and often self-contradictory. Hence, as long as Marx’s writings remain a key referent for the development of state theory, it will be necessary to recognize that a range of positions is defensible from within the intellectual canon and that the canon itself provides no basis for arbitrating among the competing theories.

IN THE UNFINISHED THIRD VOLUME of Capital, it was Marx’s clear intent to develop a theory of the state, which he considered an integral part of his overall analysis of the capitalist mode of production. However, despite these intentions, it is now widely recognized that one cannot find a completed theory of the state in the writings of Marx and Engels, at least in the sense that they never developed “a theoretical analysis of the capitalist state to match the scope

* The author acknowledges the special contribution of his former research assistant, Robert Mauro, to the completion of this manuscript.
and rigor of *Das Kapital*" (Jessop, 1977, 354; Editorial Collective, 1973, 2). Consequently, Marxist political theorists frequently turn to Marx's and Engels' so-called "political writings" for guidance in constructing this never-finished theory of the state. Yet, in drawing on these texts, Marxist political theorists are relying at best on "a fragmented and unsystematic series of philosophical reflections, contemporary history, journalism and incidental remarks" (Jessop, 1977, 354) that are often self-contradictory when taken as theoretical statements of generalizable significance (Duncan, 1982, 129).

Therefore, in my book *Critical Theories of the State*, I abandoned the orthodox ritual of rehashing Marx's and Engels' observations on the state, partly because several previous works had already performed this task with admirable detail (Girardin, 1973; Draper, 1977; Jessop, 1977; 1982), but also because meta-theoreticians had concluded that a repeat of this exercise was not likely to yield any additional insights into the state theory debate (Skocpol, 1987; Ollman, 1993, Chap. 4). However, I did assert that real tensions are structured into Marx's political thought in the form of dialectical antinomies. This claim was posed in sharp contrast to numerous efforts that sought to construct a grand synthesis of Marxian state theory (Block, 1977; Draper, 1977; Jessop, 1982; 1990; Held and Krieger, 1984; Alford and Friedland, 1985; Lehman, 1988; Das, 1996).

The purpose of this essay is to develop that thesis with greater specificity, not by reading Marx again, but by reconstructing and comparing the competing readings of Marx, which provide the basis for different theoretical approaches to the state. I argue that the conceptual disputes among critical state theorists cannot be resolved by further or closer readings of the Marxian classics (cf. Thomas, 1994), because the dialectical antinomies of Marxian state theory are built into the Hegelian logic of Marx's *Capital*. Moreover, a further difficulty in relying on Marx and Engels to arbitrate between competing theories of the state is not just that *Capital* is incomplete, but that the Marxian classics are compatible with a range of political theories depending partly on the selection of what counts as a political text. In this respect, different theories of the state are not based merely on competing interpretations of "the same" Marx, but as I seek to document, state theorists are literally not reading the same Marx.
1. The Miliband–Poulantzas Debate

The publication of Nicos Poulantzas' *Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales* (1968) and Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969) initiated a return to the state in political science and sociology (Easton, 1981; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985; Comninell, 1987; Thernborn, 1987; Almond, 1988), but their works simultaneously began the fragmentation of Marxist political theory into pieces that may never be reassembled into a coherent synthesis (Carnoy, 1984; Alford and Friedland, 1985). Miliband and Poulantzas challenged the dominance of "bourgeois social science" by drawing on a Marxist tradition that both theorists identified with the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Gramsci. In *The State in Capitalist Society*, Miliband (1969, 5; 1994) argues that "the most important alternative to the pluralist–democratic view of power remains the Marxist one" and he retained this commitment until his death in 1994. Miliband (1977, 1) explicitly identifies "classical Marxism" with "the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and, at a different level, [with] those of some other figures such as Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, and Trotsky."

Miliband's understanding of classical Marxism is based on his observation that Marx "never attempted a systematic study of the state" (Miliband, 1969, 5). He was well aware of the fact that "this was one of the tasks which he [Marx] hoped to undertake as part of a vast scheme of work which he had projected in the 1850s but of which volume I of *Capital* was the only fully finished part." Thus, in contrast to the theoretical scope and rigor of *Capital*, Miliband identifies the *political* writings of classical Marxism primarily with time-bound and journalistic historical narratives, such as Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and the *Civil War in France* and with Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* and *State and Revolution*. Hence, for Miliband (1977, 1–2), Marx's political writings "are for the most part the product of particular historical episodes and specific circumstances; and what there is of theoretical exploration of politics ... is mostly unsystematic and fragmentary, and often part of other work." Ultimately, therefore, although references to the state in different types of society constantly recur in almost all of Marx's writings, Miliband (1969, 5) concludes in the final analysis that: "... as far as capitalist societies are concerned, his [Marx's] main view of the state throughout is summarized in the
famous formulation of the *Communist Manifesto*: "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (original citation from Marx and Engels, 1937, 18).

According to Miliband (*ibid.*), this thesis "reappears again and again in the work of both Marx and Engels; and despite the refinements and qualifications they occasionally introduce in their discussion of the state . . . they never departed from the view that in capitalist society the state was above all the coercive instrument of a ruling class, itself defined in terms of its ownership and control of the means of production." Miliband (1969, 6) considered Lenin's *State and Revolution* to be merely "a restatement and an elaboration of the main view of the state" found in the *Communist Manifesto*, while after Lenin "the only major Marxist contribution to the theory of the state has been that of Antonio Gramsci."2

Miliband identifies the chief deficiency of contemporary Marxist political theory as the fact that nearly all Marxists have been content to assert the thesis articulated in the *Communist Manifesto* as more or less self-evident. Thus, for Miliband (1969, 7), the primary objective in renewing state theory was "to confront the question of the state in the light of the concrete socioeconomic and political and cultural reality of actual capitalist societies." Miliband suggests that Marx provided a conceptual foundation for the socioeconomic analysis of capitalist societies, Lenin provided guidance for a political analysis, and Gramsci supplied the conceptual apparatus for a cultural and ideological analysis of capitalist societies. Hence, Miliband was convinced that the central thesis and conceptual structure of Marxist political theory was effectively in place and that what Marxism needed was empirical and historical analysis to give concrete content to this thesis and its theoretical concepts. The intended purpose of *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969, 7) was "to make a contribution to remedying that deficiency."

---

1 Piven (1994, 25) recounts that "a mutual friend told me not long ago that Ralph had been deeply moved as a young man by the *Communist Manifesto.*" Similarly, Blackburn (1994, 22) observes that Miliband was aware that "the young socialist militant who first lent him a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* perished in a Nazi extermination camp.

2 Miliband (1977, 2) argues that "none of the greatest figures of classical Marxism, with the partial exception of Gramsci, ever attempted or for that matter felt the need to attempt the writing of a 'political treatise'." Elsewhere, Miliband (1970, 309) argues that "*The State and Revolution* is rightly regarded as one of Lenin’s most important works. . . . In short, here, for intrinsic and circumstantial reasons, is indeed one of the ‘sacred texts’ of Marxist thought."
Despite his well publicized methodological differences with Miliband (Poulantzas, 1969, 1976; Miliband, 1970; 1973), Poulantzas’ *Political Power and Social Classes* (1978a, 1, 42) also claims to draw on the classical texts of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gramsci and “to provide a systematic political theory by elucidating implicit ideas and axioms in their practical writings.” However, it will come as no surprise that Poulantzas’ epistemological attitude toward these texts was far more complex and problematic than Miliband’s position. In *Political Power and Social Classes*, Poulantzas cites Louis Althusser’s work as the basis for his claim that Marxism consists of two united but distinct disciplines called dialectical materialism and historical materialism. According to Poulantzas (1978a, 11), dialectical materialism (i.e., Marxist philosophy) “has as its particular object the production of knowledge; that is the structure and functioning of thought” (see Althusser, 1969). Marxist philosophy is essentially a process of reading the classic texts rigorously to *produce the concepts necessary to an understanding of history and society.*

Althusserian structuralists viewed the historical development of Marx’s own thought as exemplary of this process and to that extent they emphasized a distinction between the young Marx and the mature Marx. For Althusserians, including Poulantzas, Marx did not become a “Marxist” until he wrote *The German Ideology* which constituted his “epistemological break” with bourgeois categories of thought, although Marx’s thought does not reach full maturity until the publication of *Capital* (see Therborn, 1976).

Thus while Miliband places Marx’s and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* at the center of Marxist political theory, Poulantzas (1978a, 20) identifies *Capital* as “the major theoretical work of Marxism” (see Althusser and Balibar, 1977). Nevertheless, Poulantzas’ (1978a, 21) reading of *Capital* leads to the parallel conclusion that while providing “a systematic theoretical treatment of the economic region” of the capitalist mode of production, there is “no systematic theory of ideology . . . to be found in *Capital* . . . nor is there a theory of politics in it.” Hence, with respect to political theory, Poulantzas (1978a, 18) understood that an Althusserian epistemology had to deal with two problems from the outset: 1) problems related to the “raw material” of theoretical production and 2) problems concerning the status of what texts among the Marxist classics count as “political.”

---

3 Poulantzas (1978a, 18) emphasizes that the raw materials of political theory are “the texts of the Marxist classics.”
The chief difficulty in designating *Capital* as the central theoretical work of Marxism is that it is an unfinished work. It contains no theory of social class, no theory of the state, no theory of transition from one mode of production to another and, yet, it explicitly intends to address those issues. The known gap between what Marx intended in *Capital* and what Marx accomplished before his death leaves a text that is rife with lacunae, omissions, and stated intentions that are never fulfilled in fact. Hence, Marxist philosophers, particularly Althusserian structuralists, are faced with the task of not only clarifying the existing text, but of completing the existing text. For Althusserians, Engels' role as editor of the final volumes of *Capital*, and his role in explicating various ideas in *Anti-Dühring* and the *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* provide exemplary models of the type of intellectual production involved in completing the central text. Therefore, Poulantzas concludes that to produce a theory of the capitalist state, it is not only necessary to "read *Capital,*" but to "write *Capital*" (or at least its political equivalent). Interestingly, Poulantzas concurs with Miliband that after Engels, it was Lenin and Gramsci who did most to advance this task.

Unfortunately, as Poulantzas observes, these Marxist classics do not specifically discuss politics and the state at the same level of theoretical *systematicity* as one finds in Marx's *Capital*. Thus, Poulantzas (1978a, 19) emphasizes that:

in order to use the texts of the Marxist classics as a source of information, particularly on the capitalist state, it has been necessary to complete them and to subject them to a particular critical treatment. Because of the non-systematic character of these texts, the information contained in them sometimes appears incomplete or even inexact . . .

Consequently, for Poulantzas (1978a, 21), the concepts required for a theory of the capitalist state are merely *implicit* in the texts of the Marxist classics. Importantly, in sorting out the issue of which classic texts count as political, Poulantzas distinguishes between those theoretical texts that "deal with political science in its abstract–formal form, *i.e.*, the state in general, class struggle in general, the capitalist state in general" and "the political texts in the strict sense of the term." Among the former, Poulantzas includes Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* and *The Civil War in France;* Engels' *Anti-Dühring;* Lenin's *State and Revolution,* and Gramsci's *Notes on Machiavelli.* It is inter-
est that Poulantzas never clearly defines "the political texts in the strict sense of the term," although his subsequent citations indicate that they include Marx's The Poverty of Philosophy, Engels' Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State, Lenin's What Is to be Done?, Gramsci's Prison Notebooks; and numerous pamphlets by Lenin and personal letters by Marx. It is remarkable that the one prominent classic not included on this list is the Communist Manifesto, the one work that Miliband considered key to constructing a Marxist theory of the state.

2. Capital Logic and State Derivation

The Miliband–Poulantzas debate captured the attention of radical scholars for almost ten years, but by the end of the 1970s, Marxist state theorists began looking for ways to move beyond the parameters of the instrumentalist–structuralist divide. Indeed, as early as 1973, the journal Kapitalistate introduced American and British scholars to the German state derivationists and offered this intriguing approach to state theory as a promising alternative to the instrumentalist–structuralist stalemate (Sinz, Delgado, and Leibfried, 1973; Altvater, 1973a; 1973b). In a prefatory essay by Rudolf Sinz, Ana Delgado and Stephen Leibfried (1973, 96), derivationists offered the possibility of transcending the methodological antinomies of instrumentalism and structuralism by reassessing "the logical status and interrelationship of various parts of Marx's non-completed Critique of Political Economy." In particular, derivationists argue that in Capital Marx articulates a methodological distinction between the process of empirical and historical research and the "analytically determined mode of presentation (Darstellungsform) of the research results." Empirical and historical research may generate "facts," but Marxian political theory, as exemplified in Capital, involves the derivation (explanation) of those findings from the underlying "logic of capitalist development." Thus, derivationists called attention to a methodological bifurcation running through the core of Marx's Capital consisting


5 The central concepts of derivationist theory became increasingly attractive to British and American state theorists in the mid-1970s, because the approach seemed to explain the "profit squeeze" (i.e., the supply-side crisis) afflicting advanced capitalist economies at the time.
of its functionalist logic, on the one hand, and its use of empirical and historical research to "illustrate" that logic, on the other hand. From this perspective, instrumentalism was emphasizing the latter tendency in *Capital*, while structuralism was emphasizing the former tendency. In this respect, the separation of these Marxian antinomies into two separate and competing tendencies was a movement backwards theoretically from the "original" Marx; a falling away from the Marxian *aufgehen*ben. Nevertheless, derivationists were convinced that recombining the logical and the historical, or the economic and the political in Marx would be inherently difficult for contemporary thinkers schooled in behavioral or functionalist social science, "since comprehending Marx’s method presupposes an understanding of Hegelian logic."

6 The state derivationists were largely neglected in the Anglo-American debates until 1978, when John Holloway and Sol Picciotto (1978) published an English translation of the most important derivationist essays. Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 2–3) called attention to this "new departure in the Marxist theory of the state" which was "elaborating the scientific categories developed by Marx" in order to systematically derive the state as a political form from capitalist relations of production. In following the lead of Sinz, Delgado, and Leibfried, Holloway and Picciotto criticized the economic determinism of instrumentalists for paying little or no attention to "the specificity of the political" and for assuming that "the actions of the state flow more or less directly from the requirements of capital." Yet, in overreacting to the instrumentalist approach, they argued, structuralists had failed "to pay close attention to the conditions of capital accumulation" and had adopted a "politician" approach in contrast to economic determinism. Thus, while instrumentalism assumed that the political was an epiphenomenal superstructure determined directly by the economic base, structuralists assumed the relative separation of the economic and political levels. From the perspective of this critique, the Miliband–Poulantzas debate had constructed "an illusory polarity between the approaches." In fact, Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 3) conclude that "what both poles of this dichotomy [i.e., Miliband and Poulantzas] . . . have in common is an inadequate

---

6 Offe (1984, 252) calls attention to "the strange Hegelian tones of this new orthodoxy and its emphasis on self-enclosed and deductive forms of reasoning."
theorization of the relation between the economic and the political as discrete forms of capitalist social relations." Consequently, derivationists claimed that the only way to break out of this dichotomy was to develop "an adequate theory of this relation."

It is from this relational standpoint that the state derivationists initiate their critique of previous interpretations of the Marxist classics. For example, Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 3) argue that neither Miliband nor Poulantzas had tried "to build systematically on the historical materialist categories developed by Marx . . . in Capital in order to construct a Marxist theory of the state."\(^7\) Miliband merely provided empirical illustrations of a specifically historical claim in the Communist Manifesto, while Poulantzas sought to supplement (or substitute) the categories of Capital with an entirely new set of political concepts. Despite their apparent methodological divergence, "the false polarity" between instrumentalism and structuralism was based in a shared reading of Capital. For both Miliband (implicitly) and Poulantzas (explicitly), "Capital is primarily (although not exclusively) an analysis of the 'economic level' and the concepts developed there (value, surplus value, accumulation, etc.) are concepts specific to the analysis of that level." Thus, insofar as Miliband and Poulantzas "base themselves on Marx's writings, they consider it necessary to develop not the 'economic concepts' mentioned above, but the 'political concepts' developed in fragmentary fashion in Marx's 'political writings' and the more 'political' parts of Capital (the discussion of the Factory Acts, etc.)" (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978, 3–4).

Derivationists sought to bridge the false polarity of the Miliband–Poulantzas debate by challenging their shared assumption that "the political" is a separate and specific object of science with its own categories of analysis. The centerpiece of the derivationists' theoretical project was an interpretation of Capital that sees in Marx's great work not an analysis of the "economic level" but a materialist critique of political economy, i.e., a materialist critique of bourgeois attempts to analyse the "economy" in isolation from the class relations of

---

\(^7\) Thus, Offe (1984, 261), who was a frequent target of derivationist criticism in Germany notes that "after the climax of the German student movement in 1968, there was a strong turn towards a Marxist theoretical orthodoxy in the subjects of economics, law, and political science. . . . controversies drew too heavily and selectively upon some of the holy writings of classical Marxism."
exploitation on which it is based; consequently the categories elaborated in *Capital* (surplus value, accumulation, etc.) are seen not as being specific to the analysis of the "economic" level but as historical materialist categories developed to illustrate the structure of class conflict in capitalist society and the forms and conceptions (economic or otherwise) generated by that structure. From this it follows that the task is not to develop "political concepts" to complement the set of "economic concepts," but to develop the concepts of *Capital* in the critique not only of the economic but also of the political form of social relations. (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978, 4.)

Thus, the derivationist analysis of the political "draws its inspiration less from Marx's overtly political writings than from *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*" (ibid., 17). In other words, it is not enough to read *Capital*, nor is it necessary to "rewrite *Capital*"; rather, one needs to read *Capital* politically as the basis for a theory of the state. However, as Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 4) observe, the "universally accepted" starting point for Marxist state theory throughout the 1970s had been "the separation of the political from the economic in the analysis of capital." Importantly, the specific theoretical effect of an economic reading of *Capital* is that, first, "the question of the interrelation between the structures [political and economic] is neglected" and, for the derivationists, this relation is the defining paradigmatic contribution of Marxist social science. Second, an economic reading of *Capital* isolates consideration of the state from "the laws of motion of capital and the tendency for the rate of profit to fall" by relegating the operation of these concepts exclusively to the economic sphere. This separation of political theory from *Capital* not only leads to an analysis of the political that proceeds in isolation from the economic; it also separates Marxian state theory from the underlying dynamics of capitalist development (i.e., the laws of motion of capital).

8 Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 10, 17–18) note that derivationism "starts from an attack on those who try to construct a specific theory of the political, and insist on the need to start from the materialist categories developed by Marx in *Capital*" and, thus, they adopt "a view which sees in *Capital* not an economic analysis but a materialist critique of the economic form."

9 For example, Cleaver (1979, 3) re-examines Marx's "analysis of value through a detailed study of Chapter One of Volume I of *Capital*. "Cleaver argues that Marx "wrote *Capital* to put a weapon in the hands of workers. ... By reading *Capital* as a political document, workers could study in depth the various way in which the capitalist class sought to dominate them," although the legacy of the Marxist tradition has "served to all but remove the book from the battlefields of class struggle."
that can provide a Marxist theory of political development. Hence, according to the derivationists, the "false point of departure" adopted in previous Marxian analyses had cut those theories off "from the principal source of change in capitalist society" (Holloway and Picciotto, 6).

In contrast, derivationists argue that Capital is not an analysis of "the economic" in isolation from the political, but just as its subtitle states, a critique of political economy. Consequently, Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 14) contend it is wrong "to see capital simply as an economic category," because "the economic and the political are both forms of social relations, forms assumed by the basic relation of class conflict in capitalist society, the capital relation: forms whose existence springs, both logically and historically, from the nature of that relation." The relationship between the economic and the political as separate forms of the "capital relation" is therefore the conceptual focus for a political reading of Capital and the derivationists' starting point for developing a Marxist theory of the state.

In this respect, the derivationists' political reading of Capital emphasizes that Marx's critique of political economy "sought to penetrate behind the categories of political economy to discover the social relations which they concealed, to show that categories such as exchange value, price, etc. are not objective eternal reality, but merely represent historically determined forms assumed by social relations.

10 Hence, according to Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 10), Miliband and Poulantzas both fail "to take as their starting point of their analysis the laws and historical development of the capitalist process of accumulation and production." This failure has "two consequences of fundamental importance: first, they are unable to analyze the development of political forms; secondly, they are unable to analyze systematically the limitations imposed on state action by the relation of the state to the process of capital accumulation." Likewise, Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 12) "insist on starting with the category of capital because it is the contradictions of the capital relation (as the basic form taken by class antagonism in capitalist society) which provide the basis for understanding the dynamic of social and political development in capitalism."

11 Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 178, fn. 2) argue that in Marx's Capital "production relations or relations of exploitation, are neither economic nor political, in capitalism they appear as distinct economic and political forms of social relations, but the task of Marxist theory is precisely to criticize and transcend these forms." For example, Fine and Harris (1976, 109).

12 See Blanke, Jurgens and Kastendieck, 1976. The state derivation debate was initiated with an article by Muller and Neussus (1978); see Sinz, Delgado, and Leibfried, 1978, 96. Muller and Neussus claim that Marx's analysis of the relation between money and commodities in Capital is "derived" logically from his analysis of the source of this relation, i.e., the money form is derived from the contradictions of the commodity (use value/exchange value); in the same way, Muller and Neussus contend the state form must also be derived from the contradictions of capitalist society.
in bourgeois society” (ibid., 17).13 This analysis enables one “to see Marx’s categories as simultaneously logical and historical categories” that bridge the gulf between Miliband’s empirical–historical analysis and Poulantzas’ structural–functional analysis (ibid., 27). In this manner, derivationists sought to reestablish a “Hegelian” symmetry between the functional “logic” of capitalist development, historically specific forms of class struggle, and the political development of the capitalist state form.14

Thus, according to the derivationists, the key to a new theoretical breakthrough would be to conceptualize the state by analyzing “the relation between its development and the developing contradictions of the capitalist mode of production” (ibid., 5). This analysis of the capital relation would accomplish two objectives. First, by linking the development of state forms to the contradictions of capital accumulation, it becomes possible to link the development of class struggle and, thereby, state forms to the dynamic element in Marx’s analysis of capitalist development. Second, by emphasizing the contradictions of capital accumulation, it also becomes possible to establish the limits of state action in relation to the capitalist economy (ibid., 6). From this perspective, Miliband and Poulantzas are both equally under the illusions of bourgeois political economy insofar as each of them assumes the analytic separation of the economic and the political. To this degree, Miliband and Poulantzas both adopt “the fetishized categories of bourgeois thought” by accepting “the frag-

13 For example, Holloway and Picciotto cite Marx (1905, Vol. 1, 87): “The categories of bourgeois economy consist of such like forms (value, money, etc.). They are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities” (emphasis added by author). Thus, Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 17) suggest that “in his critique of the economic forms, therefore, Marx does not simply analyze one form after another: starting from the basic form of value and the social relations it expresses and from which it springs, he ‘derives’ the other forms from those social relations. For Marx, to analyze a form is to analyze its (historical and logical) genesis and development.”

14 Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 12) conclude that Capital defines a dynamic capital relationship that links functional logic and historical development: “While it is axiomatic that ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ (Communist Manifesto), it is of decisive importance for understanding that history to realize that the form of class struggle, the form of class antagonism varies from one society to another, and that the form of class struggle has a central role in determining the dynamic of that struggle. The form which class antagonism, the form which class exploitation takes in capitalist society was the object of Marx’s analysis in Capital. It is only on the basis of an understanding of the specific form of capitalist class exploitation, based on the extraction of surplus value, that we can understand the dynamic of class struggle in capitalism and hence of the social and political development of capitalist societies.”
mentation of bourgeois society into the economic and political” as a theoretical starting point (ibid., 14).

Given their alternative reading of Marx, the derivationists also dissent from Miliband’s and Poulantzas’ identification of Lenin and Gramsci as the most significant Marxist political theorists since Marx and Engels. Instead, the derivationists embraced the work of Eugene Pashukanis (1951), particularly a 1923 essay entitled “General Theory of Law and Marxism.” Pashukanis, whose work had been largely neglected by Marxists in Britain and the United States, was the first to derive legal and state forms directly from the nature of capitalist commodity production. Significantly, Pashukanis claims that although the method of logical derivation only appears in its fully developed form in Capital, it originates in Marx’s Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right and is repeated in The German Ideology. Muller and Neususs (1978) echo this claim by citing numerous passages to document that Marx, in his early writings, frequently asserts that the capitalist state has the appearance of autonomy and separation from civil society, but that its role in the capitalist mode of production is the basis of the illusion of the state. Hence, the question of the form of the capitalist state, as posed by Pashukanis (1951, 185), is:

why does the dominance of a class . . . take the form of official state domination? Or, which is the same thing, why is not the mechanism of state constraint created as the private mechanism of the dominant class? Why is it dissociated from the dominant class — taking the form of an impersonal mechanism of public authority isolated from society?

The answer proffered by derivationists such as Elmer Altwater (1973a, 1973b), Muller and Neususs (1978), and by Bernhard Blanke, Ulrich Jurgens, and Hans Kastendiek (1978) is that in one way or

15 Pashukanis (1951), Holloway and Picciotto (1978, 12) observe that “the problem had already been posed in those [derivationist] terms in 1923 by Pashukanis . . . whose relevance to the German debate was realized only after the debate was under way.”

16 Muller and Neususs (1978, 180–81, fn. 1–4) quote a passage in Marx and Engels (1970, 106–107, 54): “. . . since the state is the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests, and in which the whole civil society of an epoch is epitomized, it follows that all common institutions are set up with the help of the state and are given a political form. Hence the illusion that law is based on the will, and indeed on the will divorced from its real basis — on free will.” Likewise, Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, in Tucker (1978, 22), where Marx observes that “the abstraction of the state as such belongs only to modern times . . . the abstraction of the political state is a modern product.”
another capital would destroy its own basis — for example, the labor power of the workers — if not restrained by a separate state or it would fail to reproduce the conditions of its own existence without the state (e.g., infrastructure). Thus, if it is Marx’s *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* and *The German Ideology* that raise the problem of state derivation, and *Capital* that exemplifies its methodological approach, it is Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* that supplies the conceptual solution to the derivationist puzzle. For regardless of their particular analysis, German derivationists persistently return to a key passage from *Anti-Dühring* which emphasizes the role and necessity of the state as an “ideal collective capitalist.” According to Engels (1972, 304):

the modern state, too, is only the organisation with which bourgeois society provides itself in order to maintain the general external conditions of the capitalist mode of production against encroachments either by the workers or by individual capitalists. The modern state, whatever its form, is an essentially capitalist machine; it is the state of the capitalists, the ideal collective body of all capitalists.”

However, as Altvater (1973a, 100) noted early in the derivationist debate, the problem with this solution is that the state is “never an actual, material, total capitalist, but rather always simply an idealized or fictitious total capitalist” (cf. Clarke, 1983). Therefore, the state is necessarily prone to systematic “realization crises” in which it fails to successfully act as an ideal collective capitalist. Moreover, the major methodological advance of derivationist theory was ostensibly “to have established the essential prerequisite for an understanding of the state based on the dialectic of the form [logic] and content [history] of class struggle” (Holloway and Piccioletto, 1978, 30). However, after establishing this methodological goal, none of the derivationists was ever successful in putting Humpty Marx back together again; in part, because the dialectical disjuncture between logic and history structures Marx’s *Capital* and, therefore, problematizes *Capital’s* relationship to Marx’s historical “political” works (Gerstenberger, 1978). Consequently, the Germans’ ultra-orthodox project ground to a halt after only five years and it collapsed even more quickly in Great Britain and the United States (1984, 262).

17 Altvater (1973a, 100); Muller and Neususs (1978, 184, fn. 12) cite the same “capitalist machine” passage from *Anti-Dühring*.
3. Systems Analysis

The failure of the derivationist project by the early 1980s symbolized an emerging crisis of Marxism (Anderson, 1976; Aronowitz, 1981; Giddens, 1983; Touraine, 1988; Aronson, 1995). Marxist state theory began to stagnate intellectually because it could not transcend its own methodological antinomies, while Marxism's political attractiveness waned with the crisis of the welfare state and the decline of traditional labor movements and left-wing parties (Pierson, 1995). A movement toward "post-Marxist" political theories was one consequence of this intellectual and political crisis (Frankel, 1987). Certainly, one of the most compelling strains of post-Marxist political theory to emerge from this period is the systems analysis of Claus Offe, Jürgen Habermas, and Andre Gorz. Importantly, this approach to post-Marxism continues to emphasize — much to the consternation of post-modernists — that Marxian concepts are still necessary, if not sufficient for understanding a new postindustrial capitalism.

For example, while embracing post-Marxism in his Farewell to the Working Class, Andre Gorz (1982, 12, fn. 8) emphasizes that despite its crisis "the conceptual apparatus of marxism is irreplaceable, and it would be as childish to reject it wholesale as to consider Capital, despite its unfinished and luxuriant condition, as revealed truth." Elsewhere, Gorz (1985, vii) reiterates his claim that "it is impossible to understand the meaning of the present crisis" without Marxian categories, "which does not mean that marxist theory is sufficient, or beyond criticism.18 Later, in his Critique of Economic Reason, Gorz (1989, 86) continues to insist that "the meaning Marx read in historical development [i.e., communism] remains for us the only meaning that development can have" in capitalist societies. Similarly, Claus Offe (1984, 254) often points out that his work is "greatly indebted to classical Marxism and the very important sociological tradition that emerged from the Second International."19

18 Gorz (1985, 114, fn. 6) explicitly chastises "the poverty of marxist theory" for labeling his analysis "a rejection of marxism."
19 Offe (1984, 284) notes that he remains "fascinated by what I think is the core argument in Marx's own analysis, namely, that processes of commodification, in which labor is illegitimately treated as if it were a commodity, presupposes the existence of power relationships... I consider this elementary Marxian thesis to be still important, and essential for any macro-sociological account of late capitalism." Similarly, Offe (1984, 254) challenges "anybody's right to monopolize definitions of marxism and its limits."
Marx's *Capital* remains an important text for the post-Marxian systems analysts, but it is the *Grundrisse* that rises to the forefront of their economic analysis. The *Grundrisse*’s position as the core theoretical text among post-Marxist systems analysis provides the textual reference for a postindustrial (not post-modern or post-capitalist) reading of *Capital* and the more “utopian” sections of *The German Ideology* and *Critique of the Gotha Program*.\(^{20}\) In the *Grundrisse*, post-Marxist systems theorists find an analysis of postindustrial capitalism that stretches Marxian categories — particularly the law of value — to the limits of their applicability and it does so not because of their inadequacy, but because the developmental logic identified by Marx is being completed in postindustrial capitalism. Thus, the categories of *Capital* alone are no longer sufficient for understanding contemporary capitalism; not because Marx was wrong, but precisely because he was so correct in his analysis. What makes the post-Marxists post-Marxist is not the idea that Marxian concepts need to be “supplemented” or replaced by new analytic categories, but that Marxist analysis has so correctly predicted the long-term trends of capitalist development that a rupture in *Capital*’s “law of value” is now the basis of a disorganized postindustrial capitalism.

For example, Andre Gorz (1985, 8) begins his analysis of postindustrial capitalism by acknowledging that since the mid-1960s orthodox Marxist economists such as Ernest Mandel, Paul Sweezy, and others had predicted “the exhaustion of economic growth and the advent of a depressive cycle” based on the development of traditional Marxian categories (see Mandel, 1978; Baran and Sweezy, 1966). Most importantly, orthodox Marxist economists saw the warning signs of a crisis in the rising organic composition of capital and the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Gorz (1985, 9) agrees that statistically “the tendency that Marx (within quite different parameters) described as ‘the rise in organic composition of capital’ was thus borne out” in the increasing substitution of constant (fixed) capital for variable (circulating) capital (see Marx, 1905, Vol. I, 197–456, 671–710). Indeed, the essential characteristic of postindustrial capitalism is the

---

\(^{20}\) Gorz (1989, 1) echoes a theme articulated by Habermas in many of his current writings: "What we are experiencing is not the crisis of modernity. We are experiencing the need to modernize the presuppositions upon which modernity is based... an indication of the need for modernity itself to be modernized."
displacement of human labor power (both intellectual and manual) with automated and cybernetic technology.

However, the failure of Marxian economics to correctly predict rising profits and economic growth along with rising unemployment and underemployment during the 1980s was due to a fundamental theoretical error in *Capital*. It has often been pointed out, as Gorz notes correctly, that while Marx links the tendency for the rate of profit to fall with the rising organic composition of capital, there is no mathematical (i.e., logical) necessity for profits to fall as the organic composition of capital rises. Rather, the falling rate of profit and the rise in organic composition of capital are linked historically in *Capital* to the success of the class struggle which leaves capitalists with no alternative but to substitute constant capital for variable capital (factor substitution) or flee to areas of lower labor costs (globalization) (Gorz, 1985, 11). Thus, faced with such a crisis in actuality — as institutionalized in the welfare state — capitalist enterprises that were capable of doing so resolved the profits squeeze of the 1970s with one or both of two strategies: a) flight to less developed countries and b) the substitution of technology for human labor power. In this respect, the orthodox Marxist analysis of late capitalism correctly forecast a deep and protracted crisis of capitalism, but since the socialists’ solution to that crisis was anchored in the continuing advance of organized labor they were actually incapable of “breaking from the logic of capitalism” (*ibid.*, 6). This is not to say that the conceptual tools for such a break could not be found in Marx, but articulating these concepts required that Marxists “break with the law of value” (*ibid.*, 43). Moreover, as Offe (1984, 283) notes such a break implied that assumptions “about the centrality of labor within classical Marxism must also be questioned” (cf. LaClau and Mouffe, 1985).

In fact, Marx often questions these assumptions in the *Grundrisse* as documented by Gorz, Offe, and Habermas. For example, Gorz (1985, 45, 29) argues that “the disappearance of market laws (as Marx showed in the *Grundrisse*), just like the disappearance of the law of value, is an inevitable consequence of automation. . . . In short, the technological revolution brings a transformation which completely overturns the bases of economic reasoning” in *Capital*.21 While Gorz

21 Gorz (1985, 33) and quoting the *Grundrisse*, notes that “Marx forecast that ‘the transformation of the means of labor into the automatic process’ would go together with ‘the abolition of direct individual labor and its transformation into social labor’.”
(1982, 27), Offe, and Habermas each point out that Marx anticipated a rupture in the law of value, they are equally critical of Marx for thinking this rupture was creating “a process in which the development of the productive forces would result in the replacement of the army of unskilled workers and laborers — and the conditions of military discipline in which they worked — by a class of polytechnic, manually and intellectually skilled workers who would have comprehensive understanding of the entire work process, control complex technical systems and move with ease from one type of work to another.”

However, as Gorz and others conclude, Marx was wrong in assessing the long-term implications of technological development on working class formation. Indeed, Gorz (1982, 28) argues “that exactly the opposite has occurred” from what Marx anticipated, because “automation and computerisation have eliminated most skills and possibilities for initiative and are in the process of replacing what remains of the skilled labor force (whether blue or white collar) by a new type of unskilled worker.” Hence, Gorz (1982, 3) argues that “the abolition of work is a process already underway and likely to accelerate” in the coming decades (see Marx, 1973b, 321–26, 384–89).

Similarly, in Knowledge and Human Interests, Habermas (1971, 326–29, fn. 7–13) conceals an extended subtextual analysis of the Grundrisse in a series of footnotes, even though it anchors his epistemological position and provides the basis for his analysis of the crisis tendencies in late capitalist systems in Legitimation Crisis. As with Gorz, Habermas (1971, 37) identifies key passages in the Grundrisse that anticipate a technological future where “knowledge is itself potentially a productive force.”

Most importantly, Habermas (1971, 48–49, fn. 10) identifies

22 Gorz (1967) embraced this same logic earlier in his thinking as did several other “new working class” Marxists. See Mallet, 1975; Touraine, 1971. More recently, see Bowles, Gordon, and Weiskopf, 1990.

23 Gorz (1982, 70, fn. 3; 71, fn. 4) notes that Marx was well aware of this trend, as documented in the Grundrisse, where, “after describing with remarkable prescience the separation of the laborer from science and technology, as they acquired the reified form of fixed capital in the means of production [automation and computerization], Marx went on nevertheless to predict that, thanks to the freeing of time, fully developed individuals would become the subjects and agents of the immediate process of production. The polytechnic and scientific development of the individual through automation is an illusion.”

24 Similarly, Habermas (1971, 36) observes that “the knowledge generated within the framework of instrumental action takes on external existence as a productive force.” For example, Habermas (1971, 47, fn. 7) quoting Grundrisse: “The development of fixed capital indicates the extent to which general social knowledge has become an immediate force of production and therefore the conditions of the social life process itself have come under the control of the general intellect” (citation from Marx, 1973, 706).
"an unusual passage from the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, which does not recur in the parallel investigations in *Capital*":

To the degree . . . that large-scale industry develops, the creation of social wealth depends less on labor time and the quantity of labor expended than on the power of the instruments that are set in motion during labor time and which themselves in turn — their powerful effectiveness — themselves in turn are in no proportion to the immediate labor time that their production costs. Rather they depend on the general level of science and technological progress, or the application of science to production. (Marx, 1973b, 704–705.)

Thus, as the law of value ceases to organize capitalist power relations, it also displaces class and class struggle from the conceptual center of sociological and political analysis. The theoretical lacuna opened by this line of argument has been plugged by the concept of a capitalist system (Ofhe, 1984, 257). Consequently, for Ofhe and Habermas in particular, Niklas Luhmann (1990, 1995), the most influential systems theorist in Germany, emerges as one of the most significant political and state theorists since Engels.25

Of greater political significance, however, is that as the law of value is ruptured by the rising organic composition of capital, Ofhe (1984, 284) projects that the capitalist labor market "is shrinking in its potential for determining both relations of social and political power and collective identity." As a power mechanism, the capitalist labor market "remains basic" to an understanding of capitalist society, but as it gradually contracts "an ever smaller part of the entire social structure is directly determined by it." Consequently, as Gorz (1982, 4) insists: "the manner in which the abolition of work is to be managed and socially implemented constitutes the central political issue of the coming decades." Furthermore, a solution to this problem that involves something other than a society based on mass unemployment, will require "post-Marxian" political solutions, because

---

25 McCarthy (1975, 146, fn. 7; 147, fn. 9) observes that Niklas Luhmann is “currently the most influential German systems theorist” and that Luhmann “is one of the principal sources” of Habermas’ systems-analytic approach. Likewise, Keane (1984, 12) notes that “Ofhe uses a revised version of systems theory to analyze the present difficulties of the welfare state . . . which draws upon Marxism and the work of the leading German systems theorist, Niklas Luhmann.”
it calls "for new mechanisms of distribution independent of the laws of the market and the 'law of value'".

Gorz and Offe develop the idea of a post-Marxian, postindustrial socialism primarily along two lines of analysis. First, Gorz (1982, 12, fn. 8) points out that in "the traditional marxist schema" as outlined in the Critique of the Gotha Program,

socialism is a transitional stage towards communism. During this transition, the development and socialisation of the productive forces is to be completed; wage labour to be retained and even extended. The abolition of wage labour (at least as the dominant form of work) and market relations is, according to the schema, to be realised with the advent of communism.26

However, Gorz (1982, 12, fn. 8) maintains that "in advanced industrial societies, socialism is already historically obsolete," because "political tasks have now gone beyond the question of socialism, and should turn upon the question of communism as it was originally defined" in the Critique of the Gotha Program and The German Ideology.27 Gorz (1985, 32) insists that the technological revolution allows "the production of a growing volume of commodities with diminishing quantities of labor and capital" and, consequently, the "aims and methods of economic management clearly cannot remain those of capitalism, any more than social relations can remain based on the sale of labor power, that is, on waged work." Nevertheless, Gorz (1985, 32) goes on to conclude further that "neither can this management be socialist, since the principle 'to each according to his labor' has become obsolete and the socialization of the productive process (which, according to Marx, was to be completed by socialism) has

26 Marx (1973a, 8–10) identifies socialism as "the first phase of communist society" where, "as it emerges from capitalist society," the same principle of distribution "prevails as in the exchange of commodity-equivalents, so much labor in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labor in another form," i.e., from each according to his ability, to each according to his labor.

27 Elsewhere, Gorz (1985, 42) observes that "we have then, following Marx's formula in Critique of the Gotha Program, gone beyond the principle of 'to each according to his labor': the principle 'to each according to his needs' must now regulate production and exchange." Similarly, Gorz (1985, 114, fn. 4) notes: "From The German Ideology onwards, Marx defines communism as 'the abolition of labor and of all domination by the abolition of classes themselves,' insisting that it is by the abolition and not merely the redistribution of labor that communism is distinct from all previous revolutions." See, Marx (1970, 32–53) for the relevant passages. Also, Marx (1975a, 10–11), where "a higher phase of communist society" is identified with the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need!"
already been accomplished. Automation, therefore, takes us beyond capitalism and socialism.”

In fact, Gorz (1982, 123) suggests that the term “post-industrial socialism” is actually an inappropriate descriptor of post-Marxian politics, since the proper “Marxist terminology would have us refer straightforwardly to ‘communism,’ meaning that stage in which the ‘fullest development of the productive forces’ has been realized and where the principal task is no longer to maximize production or assure full employment, but to achieve a different organization of the economy so that a full day’s work is no longer a precondition for the right to a full income. . . . We have almost reached that stage.”

Obviously, this conclusion renders obsolete any critical theory or political strategy based exclusively on an analysis of labor and class struggle.

Despite these conclusions, Gorz (1989, 232–33) and Offe acknowledge that class and class struggle remain pivotal sources of political conflict, if for no other reason than “the fact that the trade-union movement is — and will remain — the best organized force” in any broader social and political movement (Frankel, 1987, 224–26). Furthermore, as Gorz (1982, 78) concedes, even if postindustrial socialism, or more appropriately communism, was “the result of genuinely democratic political debate involving parties and movements, its application will still entail planning, and planning requires a state.”

For Gorz, as for many post-Marxists, the welfare state is accepted as the embryo of a compensatory political mechanism that decouples income distribution from labor market participation and the law of value through entitlement distributions. Yet, as Gorz recognizes, the existing welfare state also utilizes dependency on redistribution as a mechanism for regulating individual and social behavior by imposing behavioral qualifications on supervised access to entitlements. Thus, Gorz (1982, 42) simultaneously acknowledges that the actually

28 See also Levine (1993). Gorz’s identification of liberation with the abolition of work under communism also draws heavily on Marx’s distinction between “the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom” in Capital, Vol. III; see Tucker, 1978, 439–41.

29 Offe (1984, 285) argues that the revolutionary potential of the labor movement “has been exhausted to the extent that it ignores the fact that the wage-labor–capital relationship is not the key determinant of social existence and that the survival of capitalism has become increasingly contingent upon non-capitalist forms of power and conflict. Any labor movement that ignores this and avoids trying to make links with conflicts generated by consumers, clients, citizens, or inhabitants of an ecosystem becomes solipsistic. In my view, the crucial problem for the labor movement is how to become more than a labor movement.”
existing welfare state is an “apparatus of domination and administration, whose unrestricted power runs down towards a dislocated society which it endeavors to restructure according to the requirements of capital.” Gorz (1982, 4) concludes that continuing down this path of political development “can only lead to the state taking greater charge of individual lives. . . . It replaces or complements, as the case may be, exploitation with welfare, while perpetuating the dependence, impotence and subordination of individuals to centralized authority.” Gorz (1982, 8) agrees that it is hard to see how a servile “non-class” could seize power and redefine entitlements as a new form of property rights; this problem refocuses political theory on the state as a coercive or repressive mechanism (Keane, 1984, 270).

4. Organizational Realism

These concerns were reinserted into the state theory debate by a second post-Marxian approach known as organizational realism. Organizational realism is largely identified with the work of Theda Skocpol and Fred Block.30 Although organizational realism is considered a post-Marxist approach to the state, it is important to emphasize once again that as post-Marxist political theory, it considers Marxist concepts necessary, if not sufficient, to an understanding of the state and political development. It is often forgotten that Theda Skocpol (1979, xii, 292) calls explicit attention to her “commitment to democratic socialism” and, especially in her earliest work, she insists that “Marx’s call for working-class–based socialism remains valid for advanced societies.” Similarly, in States and Social Revolutions, Skocpol notes that “Karl Marx’s theory of revolutions and vision of socialism have served as more or less explicit points of reference for many of the arguments of this book.”31

30 The early works of Skocpol and Block are often called the “state autonomy” approach, but this term is too narrow to capture the full range of the theory’s methodological claims. Consequently, I refer directly to Skocpol (1979, 31) who describes her approach as “an organizational, realist perspective on the state.” Interestingly, the other paradigmatic work in constructing the state autonomy approach, Block (1987, 197) acknowledges the help of Skocpol, among others, “for their help on this article.” Likewise, the two served together for many years on the editorial board of Politics and Society, which has been closely identified with this approach to state theory.

31 Likewise, Skocpol (1979, 34) observes that “Marxism has been the social-scientific theory most consistently and fruitfully used by historians to elucidate various particular revolutions.”
As her key reference point, Skocpol largely accepts Marx’s theoretical conception of economic and social structure as theoretically adequate. In particular, she (1979, 13) regards “the Marxist conception of class relations as rooted in the control of productive property and the appropriation of economic surpluses from direct producers by nonproducers” as “an indispensable theoretical tool for identifying one sort of basic contradiction in society.”

32 Thus, Skocpol anchors her basic theoretical conception of social structure, contradiction, and revolution in the classic Marxian texts on political economy, especially Capital and Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. However, Skocpol (1979, 35) finds that Marx’s Capital, as well as the other works of political economy she draws upon, reveals a persistent gap between structure and history when confronted with the necessity of explaining actual states, rather than ideal states, or the political development of historical class struggle, rather than the structural basis of class struggle (cf. Callinicos, 1988). Consequently, Skocpol (1979, 13) concludes that “the interaction between Marxist theory and history is incomplete because historical cases have not been used to test and modify the explanations offered by the theory.”

According to Skocpol, the only significant work that attempts to systematically bridge this gap is Barrington Moore, Jr.’s, Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (1966), a book that combines a Marxist conception of class struggle with the method of comparative history. However, in criticizing Moore’s execution of this project, Skocpol (1979, 13) finds that “it is one thing to identify underlying, potential tensions rooted in objective class relations understood in a Marxist manner. It is another thing to understand how and when class members find themselves able to struggle effectively for their interests.” To answer these kinds of empirical and historical questions, Skocpol (1979, 14) finds that “the political-conflict argument that collective action is based upon group organization and access to resources, including coercive resources, is especially fruitful.” In other words, in the historical analysis of actual class struggles, it is necessary to not only identify classes and their objective interests relative to other classes, but “to investigate the presence or absence (and the exact

32 Skocpol (1979, 7) insists that “the key to any society is its mode of production or specific combination of socioeconomic forces of production (technology and division of labor) and class relations of property ownership and surplus appropriation.”
forms) of the organization and resources available to members of classes for waging struggles based upon their interests."

The explanatory gap between structure and history appears in Marxist state theory specifically in the way that political crises are viewed as "little more than epiphenomenal indicators of more fundamental contradictions or strains located in the social structure," while political groups are seen merely "as representatives of social forces" (Skocpol, 1979, 25). Thus, the structure and activities of state organizations "are treated as the expressions of the interests" of dominant or victorious socioeconomic forces. In this regard, Skocpol (ibid.) argues that a key assumption running through all previous Marxian conceptions of the state is the idea "that political structures and struggles can somehow be reduced (at least 'in the last instance') to socioeconomic forces and conflicts. The state is viewed as nothing but an arena in which conflicts over basic social and economic interests are fought out."33

Interestingly, Skocpol (1979, 26) suggests that the "reductionist" tendency in contemporary state theory is a retreat from the original Marxian classics which "see the state as basically organized coercion." To illustrate her claim, Skocpol (1979, 174) draws on Marx's The Civil War in France, where he refers to "the centralized State power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature — organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labor." Similarly, in describing Lenin as "the foremost Marxist theorist" since Engels, Skocpol (1979, 26) calls attention to his State and Revolution, where Lenin insists that: "A standing army and police are the chief instruments of state power."

In this respect, Skocpol (1979, 26–27) praises the "classical Marxist theorists" (i.e., Marx, Engels, and Lenin) for not collapsing state and society analytically and for conceptualizing the state as "a specialized kind of power in society, not equivalent to or encompassing all dominant class power." Nevertheless, Skocpol criticizes these same classical Marxist theorists for continuing to explain the basic function of the state in social terms; namely, that classical Marxists "regard the

33 Thus, in contrast to other Marxian state theories, Skocpol's (1979, 31) organizational realism "refuses to treat states as if they were mere analytic aspects of abstractly conceived modes of production, or even political aspects of concrete class relations and struggles. Rather it insists that states are actual organizations controlling (or attempting to control) territories and people."
state as a system of organized coercion that invariably functions to support the superordinate position of dominant classes or groups over subordinate classes or groups.” Thus, whatever the variations in the state’s historical form, it is “seen as a feature of all class-divided modes of production; and, invariably, the one necessary and inescapable function of the state — by definition — is to contain class conflict and to undertake other policies in support of the dominance of the surplus-appropriating and property-owning class(es).”34 With this single statement, Skocpol (1979, 27) explicitly indicts all contemporary Marxist state theories, including Miliband (instrumentalism), Poulantzas (structuralism), Therborn (derivationism), and Offe (systems analysis).

From the perspective of this historical critique, Skocpol (1979, 27) concludes that classical Marxism and contemporary state theories have failed across-the-board to consider the state as an autonomous structure — a structure with a logic and interests of its own not necessarily equivalent to, or fused with, the interests of the dominant class in society or the full set of member groups in the polity. Within the terms of these theories, it is consequently virtually impossible even to raise the possibility that fundamental conflicts of interest might arise between the existing dominant class or set of groups, on the one hand, and the state rulers on the other.

However, without a concept of state autonomy, Skocpol argues that Marxist political theory cannot account historically for the political phenomenon that is central to Marxist theory, namely, revolution. Consequently, Skocpol (1979, 284) challenges the common assumption of previous Marxist political theories by insisting that “state power cannot be understood only as an instrument of class domination, nor can changes in state structures be explained primarily in terms of class conflicts.” Instead, state theory needs a set of concepts capable of explaining and recognizing “the potential autonomy of the state.” Skocpol (1979, 287) defines this autonomy as a set of conditions which includes the idea “that states are potentially autonomous not only over against dominant classes but also vis-à-vis entire class structures or

34 Skocpol (1979, 284) argues that “as a theorist ... Lenin followed Marx in maintaining that historical developments in class relations were the structural matrix from which revolutionary contests for state power arose, and in believing that class conflicts were the means by which questions about the forms and functions of state power would be resolved.”
modes of production."\textsuperscript{35} Hence, Skocpol (1979, 28) concludes that "it is unquestionably an advance to establish (or reestablish, since this surely was the classical Marxist position) that states are not simply created and manipulated by dominant classes."\textsuperscript{36} Rather, "the administrative and coercive organizations are the basis of state power as such" and "where they exist, these fundamental state organizations are at least potentially autonomous from direct dominant-class control" and, in conceptualizing this set of conditions, Skocpol (1979, 28, 304, fn. 4) "owes a good deal to Max Weber."\textsuperscript{37}

Conclusion

Since the Miliband–Poulantzas debate concluded in 1976, Marxian state theory has undergone a succession of conceptual modifications exemplified by the works of Elmer Altvater, Jürgen Habermas, Claus Offe, Andre Gorz, Fred Block, and Theda Skocpol. While each new approach to state theory has a conceptual foundation in the Marxian classics, each successive theoretical approach not only proposes a new reading of the Marxian classics, but advances a competing definition of Marx's "political writings" and a different pantheon of key figures in the development of a "Marxist tradition" (see Table 1). The one unifying theme in Marxist state theory is the idea that Marx’s \textit{Capital} — or for postindustrialists a \textit{Capital} read through the \textit{Grundrisse} — is the core theoretical text against which one must develop and measure a theory of the state.

Yet, even this consensus is illusory. Miliband and Poulantzas emphasize the "incompleteness" of \textit{Capital}, as exemplified in Volume III, but offer competing and incompatible definitions of what it means to complete \textit{Capital}. The derivationists identify Marx's analysis of the value form in \textit{Capital}, Volume I, Part I as the text's foundational concept. In direct contrast, systems analysts look to \textit{Capital}, Volume I, Part VIII,

\textsuperscript{35} Skocpol (1979, 27) goes on to note that "this possible line of argument has been for the most part carefully avoided" by Marxist state theorists. Similarly, see Skocpol, 1973; Block, 1987, Chap. 5.

\textsuperscript{36} Block (1987, 55) finds a textual basis for this claim primarily in Marx's analysis of class representation in the \textit{EIGHTEENTH BRAUMAIRE OF LOUIS BONAPARTE}.

\textsuperscript{37} Importantly, Skocpol (1979, 29–30) acknowledges that "the extent to which they actually are autonomous, and to what effect, varies from case to case" and, consequently, "the actual extent and consequences of state autonomy can only be analyzed and explained in terms specific to particular types of sociopolitical systems and to particular sets of historical international circumstances."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Approach</th>
<th>Core Theoretical Text(s)</th>
<th>Core Political Texts</th>
<th>Secondary Political Texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentalism</td>
<td>Marx, Capital, Vol. III</td>
<td>Engels, Anti-Dühring</td>
<td>Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marxism, Communist Manifesto</td>
<td>Lenin, Civil War in France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marxism, Communist Manifesto</td>
<td>Marx, The German Ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marx, Capital, Vol. I</td>
<td>Lenin, State and Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Marx, Capital, Vol. I</td>
<td>Weber, Economy and Society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Chapter 25 on the "General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," as an especially significant anticipation of a rupture in the law of value. Finally, Skocpol refers to Marx's *Capital* only vaguely as a "key point of reference."

Thus, even if one assigns theoretical priority to *Capital* as the basis for evaluating the consistency, compatibility, or significance of secondary historical texts, it is impossible to imagine how a text that is itself contested can ever provide a basis for arbitrating the meaning and significance of Marx's "political" works. Consequently, it is no surprise that Marxian state theory branches out in numerous directions depending upon how Marx's political writings are defined and, of course, this logic of dissociation leads to an even further divergence in the identification of important secondary Marxist thinkers. Hence, at this point in the development of Marxian state theory, it is historically necessary to acknowledge that neither Marx's writings, nor the Marxist tradition, can provide an overarching synthetic viewpoint from which to reconcile the competing positions within state theory. As long as Marx remains a key referent for the development of Marxian state theory, it will paradoxically be necessary to recognize that a range of positions is defensible from within that intellectual tradition and that it is unlikely (perhaps logically impossible) that any overarching synthetic viewpoint can be articulated as *the* Marxist theory of the state.

*Center for Policy Analysis*  
*University of Massachusetts/Dartmouth*  
*285 Old Westport Road*  
*North Dartmouth, MA 02747–2300*  
*charrow@massd.edu*

**REFERENCES**


