

Interrogations #9. Aford & Friedland
March 30, 2017

1. Griffin Bur

My contribution for this week was stimulated by footnote 19 in Erik's chapter which endorses Offe's admission that the latter's proposed "filter mechanism" to explain the class character of the state is very hard to empirically demonstrate. **My question is: is this the case? does this matter? and if so, how much?** I've been thinking about this since I became familiar with the kind of argument Offe is making a few years ago, and the answer I've settled on is that it is, indeed, very hard to test this kind of argument empirically without making use of very stylized facts, but that it does not matter much. I think that the purpose of state theory, to take a phrase from Kant, is to establish "conditions of possibility" for the (non-)reproduction of class society and the resulting limits set on state action (it tells us that, ultimately, Alford and Friedland's logics of bureaucracy and democracy must be compatible with the logic of capitalism *or else* capitalism will by definition no longer be capitalism, whether through socialist transformation, total social collapse, and so on)...but that this is all that a "general theory of the capitalist state" can or should do. I think Erik's "two implicit hypotheses" at the end of his chapter basically express my position. **This is a somewhat general question about the purposes and stakes of state theory** that probably could have been asked any week of this course, but since I found the Friedland and Alford reading fairly non-controversial (though useful), I figured I would comment on this since it's a more contentious claim that generates some interesting conclusions. For example, the "minimalist" reading that I'm endorsing has some implications for research questions about the relative salience of "class" and "non-class" factors anchoring, say, the decision to introduce welfare legislation in the US, in the case of the Skocpol and Orloff essay cited. Since the ultimate class character of this legislation would only be determined in the long-run (according to social struggles over the implementation of the legislations), asking about the short-run factors behind its drafting might simply be a kind of question that Marxian state theory is not designed to answer (as Erik, if I read him right, suggests)--this is then where arguments about competing and temporarily-autonomous social logics a la Alford and Friedland would come into play.

2. Aaron Yarmel

Alford and Friedland write the following: "The capital-labor relationship is hidden by the visibility of owner-worker relations in corporations and buyer-seller relations in markets. The media dramatize certain relations. Their silence about others, primarily the capital-labor relationship, is another empirical indication of class hegemony" (430). My assumption is that, by 'media,' they are referring to the mainstream media (e.g., CNN, NBC, The New York Times, and the BBC). Are they right that the media are silent about capital-labor relations, and, if so, do they draw the correct lesson from this silence? Presumably, the fact that a *particular* journalist chooses to not talk about the capital-labor relationship is not evidence of class hegemony. In some cases, journalists have simply chosen to focus on different issues (e.g., maybe someone is focused on gender relations). In other cases, a journalist may be critical of capitalist institutions and base their critique on something other than an explicit discussion of the capital-labor relationship. For example, someone could write an article about the harms associated with

Commented [EOW1]: The problem, of course, is that unless a theory makes some kind of prediction, then there is no way that one could ever be surprised by empirical observations. I think there are fairly strong expectations about the congruence of state policies with the reproduction of capitalism and this sets in motion a research agenda. Surprises from this expectation call for a search for specific mechanisms to explain the deviation.

the commodification of non-human animals (who are not themselves considered laborers) in a competitive market. While it is plausible that any particular journalist could have a reason to not discuss the capital-labor relationship, it is implausible that every journalist would have such a reason. If no journalist talks about this issue, then this would be evidence of class hegemony.

A quick google search led me to a recent op-ed in the New York Times, a quotation from which is as follows: "Capital's share of national income has risen, while labor's share has fallen — even though it includes lavish compensation of executives who are paid disproportionately through stock grants, options and bonuses. To restore prosperity for all, we need to spread the benefits of economic growth to entrepreneurial citizens through profit-sharing and the ownership of capital. This isn't some radical notion; it has a long tradition in America" (Blasi et al., 2015). This certainly seems like a discussion of the capital-labor relationship, so the situation is not one in which *no* mainstream media outlet allows for the discussion of this issue. The situation, rather, has to be one where there are imperfect mechanisms that do a pretty good job, but not a perfect job, of filtering out discussions of this topic.

Commented [EOW2]: While it is reasonable to see silences as a feature of hegemony, A&Fs claim that the media is silent about the capital-labor relation seems just wrong and not a very good candidate for their claim. The most crucial silences that bear on hegemony, I think, are silences about alternatives to capitalism.

3. Courtney Deisch

I was very interested in the typology of powers developed and found it very useful in considering various levels of power: situational, structural, and systemic power. I was particularly stricken by the application of the typology to the political spectrum and found the application helpful (Alford and Friedland, 410). However, the placement of the systems of power within a game theory framework befuddled me. In Wright's explanation of the typology, situational power was deployed through the moves of the game by given actors. Institutional power is expressed in the rules of the game. Systemic power is "embedded in the fundamental nature of the game itself". (Wright, 93). While reflecting on this typology within the metaphor of game theory, I became quite perplexed when considering the difference between the rules of the game and the game itself. How can we consider the game itself as imbuing a systemic level of power without considering the rules which dictate the game? Can the game itself be defined without reliance upon reference to the rules of the game? Where do we draw the line between the rules of the game and the game itself, and thus between institutional power and systemic power?

Commented [EOW3]: It is not really "game theory" — it is more of a game metaphor.

Commented [EOW4]: This is an excellent question, and it implies that there needs to be a distinction between rules that constitute the game — make it a specific kind of game -- and second order rules that constitute a specific implementation of the game. Some rules impose limits of variation on others.

4. Janaina Saad

Alford and Friedland argue that different levels of power (situational, institutional and systemic) correspond to distinct forms of politics: over the moves within the game, the rules of the game, or the nature of the game itself respectively. The authors seem to suggest that socialist politics over the game itself operates at the systemic level of power. However, it seems to me that there is a possibility for socialist politics to operate throughout the different levels of power. For instance, socialist politics over the "rules of the game" may comprise struggles for a universal basic income. Socialist politics over the "plays in the game" may refer to struggles over de-commodification of a basic good or service. In these cases, a class theoretical approach (rather than managerial or pluralist theories) would have primacy in explaining the forms of politics operating at the institutional and situational levels respectively.

Commented [EOW5]: This might be closer to a change in a rule of the game — the rules that govern what is left up to the market and what is not. A struggle over the level of funding for an already decommodified service is more like a move in the game.

Moreover, since the authors focus on the constraints of systemic power on institutional power and institutional power on situational power, they fail to incorporate into their analysis the opportunities for situational politics to affect institutional and systemic power. In light of these observations, my question is the following: how can we reconcile their model of power and politics with the potential for socialist politics to operate across the different levels of power?

Commented [EOW6]: This is an interesting issue. My Real Utopias perspective certainly argues that we can create coherent lines of connection between moves within existing rules and socialist politics are the level of the game itself. This idea – that there are socialist moves within capitalist rules of the game – implies that some kind of interest-group politics can embody, in some sense or other, the same values (and thus ultimately interests) that are also present in struggles over the game.

5. Kris Arsaelsson

Alford and Friedland define politics as mediating “between institutional contradiction and human action [...] a conflictual relationship” which is impossible in the context of “consensus or unchallenged rule” (p. 409). I felt that this conception, in light of their overall framework, to be potentially very helpful in gaining a better understanding of political struggle. Yet, then they immediately claim:

“The distinction between the causes of a politics and its consequences is critical, because we can understand the causes of a politics in terms of factors at each level of power - situation, structure, system - yet be unable to predict the outcomes of political action, because of the interplay of the same set of factors. The complex and contingent character of politics prevents prediction. Thus the outcomes of political action are not clues to the basic character of politics, because of the intentions of political actors may be confounded by historical and structural factors over which actors have neither understanding or control” (p. 409, my highlights).

What are the theoretical/empirical implications of their claim, especially in regards to their emphasis on complexity, contingency and the confounded intentions of actors?

Commented [EOW7]: I don't quite see the tension you see between the two quotes. I think they are saying there is a close connection between the causes of politics (i.e. of the conflicts that are at the heart of politics) and the intended consequences of politics, but not the actual consequences. The actual consequences are too heavily shaped by unintended effects – and thus you cannot read back from the actual outcomes to the causes. They may overstate the contingency here, but it is a reasonable claim.

6. Youbin Kang

Alford and Friedland uses autonomous institutional logics, of democracy, market, and bureaucracy, and their contradictions to explain the actions of the state. In arguing for their autonomy, they criticize the inability of Marxist theories of the contradiction between accumulation and legitimation to recognize the institutional autonomy of bureaucracy and democracy (p.434). They engage Offe's work to point out that the capitalist economy not only depends on the legitimacy of the reproduction of labor power, “but also upon the increasing use of noncommodified organization of social life to expand the commodified forms.”

However, Alford and Friedland's interesting point in highlighting the autonomy of each of these spheres (that predict the probability of certain kinds of politics) seems to lack the ability to incorporate the “noncommodified organization of social life” to their theoretical model in a convincing way. Their examples of noncommodified organization of society, such as the tactics used by proponents against racial, gender, and post-colonial lines of contention are only elicited at the level of situational power, and the logic of democracy. I wonder whether institutional actors of noncommodified social life that have used systematic powers such as in how racial dynamics have led to fascist politics (Trump), or colonial forms into socialist politics (North Korea) is necessarily autonomous along the lines of the three

Commented [EOW8]: I think it is somewhat far-fetched to call North Korea “socialist”, at least if this word has any Marxian content.

logics. Although their explanation does offer that certain autonomous logics, such as the logic of bureaucracy, can interact with both systemic and situational politics, it seems to lack a theory of their interaction, only to propose that certain logics are more likely to be paired with certain powers. Is it helpful that these terms are presented in a nested format? Is there an implicit hierarchy, or primacy of logics, and levels of power? or as Wright contends, does it depend upon the causal primacy and definitional domains of one logic over the other?

Commented [EOW9]: There does seem to be some sort of implicit hierarchy in the framing of the three domains as system/structure/situation. They hedge this, but the nested idea suggests that the higher levels impose limits of possibility on the lower levels.

7. Benny Witkovsky

In their model of situational, institutional and systemic power, Alford and Friedland have created a convincing model that, it would seem, could be used to address a host of other questions beyond those about the state in capitalism and the class character of the state.

Does Alford and Friedland's model allow us to consider other types of systemic power beyond class power? It seems like you could make a compelling argument that patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, etc. are systemic forces that function in a similar way to capitalism. Does their model allow for there to be more than one type of systemic power in play in a society? Can the game be both capitalist and racist at the systemic level, or does one of those need to be considered institutional rather than systemic?

Commented [EOW10]: This is a challenging idea: what precisely does it mean to say that male domination and race domination is systemic? In the capitalism/market/class case this is a claim about something more than the idea capitalist class relations exist through a society; it is a claim about there being a system-dynamic, "laws of motion", connected to these relations.

Finally, there is an elegant way that in their model systemic power (capitalism) sets the terms of politics and the situational and institutional lever – if I understand it, conservative and liberal situational politics are about the shape of the market, who has access to it and what is subject to the market, and reform and reactionary institutional politics are about determining the relationship of the state to the market. Do these terms or logics need to change if we are considering other types of systemic power? Is there argument that situational and institutional politics about race, gender, etc. are still fundamentally about the market, or is there a different central mechanism we need to be thinking about?

8. Loren Peabody

Overall, I found Alford and Friedland's integration of pluralist, managerial and class theories of the state very helpful in combining insights of different theoretical traditions and in clarifying the systemic, institutional, and situational levels of power. Still, I'm wondering if at times everything comes together almost too neatly in their schema and I'd like to clarify how a couple of issues might fit into it.

First, they elaborate the strategic use of resources at the situational level, the design of state apparatuses at the institutional level, and the limitations imposed by capitalism at the systemic level—yet I'm wondering where ideology, culture and discourse would fit in. As impressive as their integration of different traditions is, they seem to have left out discursive approaches to politics.

Second, Alford and Friedland suggest there is an affinity between the three theoretical traditions, the three levels of analysis, and Luke's three dimensions of power. I was wondering if we could explicitly discuss "systemic power," pinning down a clear definition, what makes the concept "contentious," and

Commented [EOW11]: This would seem most concentrated in the situational level – the level of democracy – since this is where most collective action takes place most of the time. But I guess it also operates in the reform/reactionary politics which target the bureaucratic/organizational level.

how useful it is. Is this really the “home domain” of the class perspective, or does it bear more-or-less equally on strategic and institutional power as well?

9. Masoud Movahed

Alford and Friedland’s book *Powers of Theory: Capitalism, the state, and democracy* is an attempt to synthesize the theories of state from the “pluralist,” “managerial,” and “class” perspectives. In so doing, they revise a vast body of theoretical literature on theories of state while developing their own theoretical synthesis, which strives to void the gaps within each of the three perspectives. The authors’ goal is to trace and identify the capitalist state through its various theoretical perspectives: the democratic state, the bureaucratic state, and the class-oriented state. The upshot is a book which is aimed at explicating each perspective, examining both its relations with its logic and also the realities of the capitalist state. Alford and Friedland use various concepts to frame their analyses. A crucial notion is what they term as “home domain” of each perspective. For instance, “the home domain of the pluralist perspective “is the political behavior of individuals and groups and the influence their interactions have on government decision making” (p.4). The level of analysis is centered around individual. The world view frames social systems as complex interdependencies of individuals, and the central societal processes concern individuals’ political participation. Given this perspective, for Alford and Friedland, roles, norms, values, beliefs, and the political participation of the individuals and their cultural orientations constitute the central dimension of society.

Part 2 presents the managerial perspective, which is somewhat similar to the power-elite theories of the state. The home domain of this perspective is the “organizational structures and interrogational networks.” The level of analysis is centered around bureaucratic structure with the state being the most dominant form of bureaucratic structure in the society. Class perspective is the third theoretical framework on the state. Its home domain is the web of relationships among capitalist property relations, the state, and democracy. The level of analysis for class perspective is societal. There seems to be a robust interdependence in each domain between the issues that identified and the language of identification. As Alford and Friedland note, their “concern is not with the politics’ of language—with the ideological content and uses of words to convince and mystify—but rather with the language of politics—the different ways, in which theories of the state are conveyed by the language in which they are couched, and the way language itself carries the content of the theories” (p.14). In this sense, the home domain could be thought of as a paradigm: a modality of analysis that has its own internal logic, language and methodology.

Another important concept is what they term as the ‘powers of theory.’ This has at least following three meanings. First, theories of the state have power in the sense that they are able to explain the actions of the state. Hence, the perspectives from which we look at the states, have crucial political consequences. Furthermore, theories of action shape what we know. As Alford and Friedland themselves note, “theories shape the consciousness of social groups, telling them what actions are likely to be treated by the state as legitimate or illegal” (p.388). Third, theories carry assumptions about the nature of the society. Therefore, “theory dominates the categories of language itself” (ibid).

As I noted above, Alford and Friedland are fundamentally concerned with the language of interpretation, and not the politics of language. They place democratic politics and bureaucratic behavior within the ambit of capitalist state theory, and then they develop a theory of state. There is no question that the sophistication of their analysis is the great strength of the book. But my question is that how successful Alford and Friedland have been in synthesizing the three perspectives? Also, it seems to me that Powers of Theory is about the theory of social behavior as much as it is about the theories of state, so how can we assess whether the synthesis of the three perspectives has been a successful theoretical project?

Commented [EOW12]: This question is a bit to general – you haven't indicated what you think might be sources of failure or slippage or incompleteness.

10. Kurt Kuehne

I keep reading versions of the same cop-out: “We limit ourselves primarily to theories and empirical studies of states in societies considered modern, industrialized, and capitalist...Although our mode of inquiry can be applied to societies other than the capitalist democracies in Western Europe and North America, we will not, except in passing, consider studies of non-Western or either pre-capitalist or socialist societies” (Alford; 6-7).

What is it about non-Western states that is so challenging, and what might that tell us about the broader range states of in general, or perhaps about the practice of academic theorizing? If the objective is to create theories about human social relations, what of the other 85-90% of the world population and other 80% of recognized states that are not governed by Western, capitalist systems? Why not consider fully “modern, industrialized, and capitalist” societies like Japan, Taiwan, or Korea? Why not consider studies beyond Western Europe and North America? Why not examine non-Western socialist politics before making sweeping claims about the tendencies of socialist politics?

I wouldn't mind Alford's self-limitation so much if his conclusions weren't so global—or if I didn't feel similar concerns week after week. Alford presents a typology of the situational, structural, and systemic levels of power (see the diagram on page 411), and thereby presents theories about the origins of liberal and conservative politics, of reform and reactionary politics, and of socialist and fascist politics. Nowhere in this chapter, or in Chapter 1, does Alford limit his conclusions to the “capitalist democracies in Western Europe and North America.” Can we defend this?

Commented [EOW13]: I agree that it is completely arbitrary to exclude non-Western capitalist democracies. The exclusion of precapitalist state and post-capitalist states is more reasonable since the pluralist model in particular was explicitly designed to deal with democratic forms of political competition.

Maybe the issue here is that some of the triplets they deploy – games/rules/moves – seem general enough to apply to any state, whereas others – market/bureaucracy/democracy – clearly don't. They sometimes treat these different triplets as having a strong isomorphism, and other times not.