

Studies in Marxism and Social Theory

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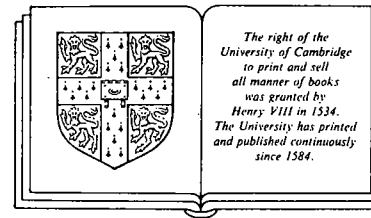
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7. Politics and the state

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In this study of Marx's theory of political institutions and political processes, the focus will largely be on the capitalist societies that Marx observed around 1850. The discussion will build upon and extend that of the previous chapter, to take fuller account of the specifically political dynamics of the class struggle. Also Marx's predictions for the communist revolution and his visions about the post-revolutionary society will be studied in some detail, supplementing discussions in earlier chapters.

In 7.1 the emphasis is on the relation between the state and the class structure. I argue that, without fully admitting it, Marx found himself compelled by events to accord to the capitalist state a large measure of autonomy, certainly larger than his theoretical preconceptions had prepared him for. In 7.2 I turn to his theory of political process, and notably his theory of revolution. This involves examining, first, his theory of the classical bourgeois revolutions in England and France; next, his practical and theoretical interest in the revolutionary wave that swept over Germany in 1848–9; and finally, his ideas about the impending communist revolution. In 7.3 I consider his theory of the outcome of that revolution, that is the successive political and economic stages of communist society. I do not discuss Marx's writings on international politics. Doing

so would require an amount of space out of proportion to the interest they can command today.¹

7.1. The nature and explanation of the state

The theory of the capitalist state or, less tendentiously, of the state in capitalist society, has been among the most influential of Marx's ideas. By and large, the influence has been harmful rather than benign. The theory is set out in a half-conspiratorial, half-functionalist language that invites lazy, frictionless thought.² The parts that can be salvaged from it are the ones in which Marx, almost in spite of himself, views politics as an autonomous phenomenon that is constrained by economics but not reducible to it.

Since the notion of *state autonomy* is central, I begin in 7.1.1 by explaining the concept of the state and go on in 7.1.2 to discuss the concept of autonomy. In 7.1.3 I set out the best-known Marxist theory of the state, according to which it (or its "executive") "is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie".³ In 7.1.4 I argue that in the aftermath of 1848 Marx worked out a more complex theory, according to which the bourgeoisie abdicates from political power (or abstains from taking it) because this best serves its interest. In 7.1.5 I discuss an alternative and more far-reaching way of stating the abdication theory, according to which the autonomy of the state emerges as a permanent feature of the modern epoch, due to the continued presence of several opposed classes.

7.1.1. An ambiguity in the notion

The state may be defined either by *what* it does or by *how* it does whatever it does. An example of a definition of the second type is Weber's, in terms of the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Marx clearly tends towards a definition of the state in terms of its functions. In this he follows the tradition, or one tradition, in political theory. The state was commonly seen as the provider of public goods, notably law and order, but also economic goods that could not be provided efficiently by individuals. Broadly speaking, the state embodies the cooperative solution to a Prisoner's Dilemma involving all individuals in the society of which it is the state.⁴ According to Marx, the task of the state can indeed be formulated in

¹ On this topic, see Papaïannou, *De Marx et du Marxisme* and Molnar, *Marx, Engels et la Politique Internationale*.

² For discussion and references see my "Marxism, functionalism and game theory".

³ *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 486.

⁴ For modern discussions, see Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, ch. IV; Baumol, *Welfare Economics and the Theory of the State*; Taylor, *Anarchy and Cooperation*; Schotter, *The Economic Theory of Social Institutions*.

terms of this dilemma, but with different players. The task of the state is to provide a cooperative solution for the Prisoner's Dilemma faced by the members of the economically dominant class, and, as part of this task, to prevent the members of the dominated class from solving *their* dilemma. I shall return to this instrumentalist conception in 7.1.3.

We must ask, however, whether Marx totally neglected the tasks of the state that benefit *all* members of society (even though possibly to unequal extents). In the *Grundrisse* there is a lengthy discussion of the conditions under which public works, for example road construction, will be undertaken by private enterprise.¹ First, there must be a sufficiently large concentration of capital to carry out the work. Secondly, the enterprise must be profitable. Thirdly, as a condition for the profitability, there must exist a demand for the public good. As Marx knew, the demand may in part be created by the good itself: "A road itself may so increase the forces of production that it creates new traffic which then makes the road profitable."² According to Marx, in a fully developed capitalist mode of production all public goods would be provided privately:

All *general conditions of production*, such as roads, canals, etc. whether they facilitate circulation or even make it possible at all, or whether they increase the force of production (such as irrigation works etc. as in Asia and, incidentally, as still built by governments in Europe), presuppose, in order to be undertaken by capital instead of by the government which represents the community as such, the highest development of production founded in capital. The separation of *public works* from the state, and their migration into the domain of the works undertaken by capital itself, indicates the degree to which the real community has constituted itself in the form of capital.³

Marx does not seem to have been aware of the obstacles to such transfers of public goods to private industry. It may be impossible to internalize the benefits from the public good; and even if this obstacle is overcome, by means of a toll or a similar arrangement, private provision may lead to a wasteful duplication of efforts.⁴ True, Marx does mention in passing that private industry, to get a profit from public works, requires "protective tariffs, monopoly, state coercion",⁵ but the reasoning behind this statement is obscure, and the mention of the state is in any case at odds with the central idea being defended.

The tasks that will devolve on private industry apparently do not include the provision of health and education services. The question, however, is

¹ *Grundrisse*, pp. 524ff. ² *Ibid.*, p. 531. ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 530–1.

⁴ The patent system, for instance, typically leads to a great deal of duplication of innovative activities, as briefly explained in ch. 4 of my *Explaining Technical Change*.

⁵ *Grundrisse*, p. 531.

whether these are undertaken on behalf of all members in society, or on behalf of the capitalist class only. In 4.1.4 I argued that Marx was inconsistent on this point, sometimes explaining the health and education clauses in the factory legislation by the interests of "society" and at other times by the interests of the capitalist. If we adopt the latter view, and add the idea that the general conditions of production will be provided by private industry, then it appears that all the tasks of the state will either be performed on behalf of capital or devolve on capital. No tasks will truly be performed because they are in the interest of all members of society. This is certainly one major strand in Marx's thinking about the state, expressed in the general statements to be quoted in 7.1.3.

On the other hand Marx often makes a distinction between the class-specific and class-neutral tasks of the state, for instance in *Capital III* when he discusses the similarly dual nature of supervision in the capitalist factory:

The labour of supervision and management is naturally required wherever the direct process of production assumes the form of a combined social process, and not of the isolated labour of independent producers. However, it has a double nature. On the one hand, all labour in which many individuals cooperate necessarily requires a commanding will to coordinate and unify the process, and functions which apply not to partial operations but to the total activity of the workshop, much as that of an orchestra conductor. This is a productive job, which must be performed in every combined mode of production. On the other hand – quite apart from any commercial department – this supervision work necessarily arises in all modes of production based on the antithesis between the labourer, as the direct producer, and the owner of the means of production. The greater this antagonism, the greater the role played by supervision. Hence it reaches its peak in the slave system. But it is indispensable also in the capitalist mode of production, since the production process in it is simultaneously a process by which the capitalist consumes labour-power. Just as in despotic states supervision and all-round interference by the government involves both the performance of common activities arising from the nature of all communities, and the specific functions arising from the antithesis between the government and the mass of the people.¹

In several texts from 1871–5 Marx discusses these "common activities arising from the nature of all communities". They refer to the "state" that will remain under communism, in the sense that administrative as distinct from governmental functions will still exist. These passages are cited and discussed in 7.3.3. For the present purposes the important fact is that the need for coordination and public goods will persist in communism. There is no reason why we should not refer to the coordinating agency as a state,

¹ *Capital III*, pp. 383–4.

in conformity with a main strand in political theory. The substantial question is whether there will be a need for violence to back the decisions of this agency. Although Marx is silent on the issue, the general tenor of his references to communism makes it hard to believe that he thought violence would be required.

Should we, then, define the state as an agency that executes the common interests of the economically dominant class? Or as an agency that realizes the common interests of society? Or is there some third alternative? Neither of the proposals will work both for capitalism and communism. Under communism, the first is useless; under capitalism, the second is misleading, as can be seen from the following case. Imagine that some public project, for example the construction of a railway, will bring material benefits to all members of society, but that workers benefit more than capitalists. If the latter control the state apparatus, they might abstain from the project if they fear it will upset the balance of class power to their detriment. In other words, a class state will act to further the common interest only to the extent that it coincides with the particular interest of the class.

Actually the proposals fail because they preempt important substantive questions. We need a definition of the state that enables us to locate it independently of what interests it serves. We may then ask whether the state, thus defined, actually serves some particular or general interest. The definition must also be consonant with Marx's general views if it is to be of any help in understanding his political theory. Thus Weber's definition fails doubly: first because Marx would deny that the capitalist state has legitimacy, and also because he would deny that the communist state rests on violence. A satisfactory definition could be in terms of the capacity to impose decisions that as a matter of fact have binding force, leaving it an open question whether the compliance rests on violence, a belief in legitimacy, solidarity or some other source. Or one could simply define the state apparatus in terms of its core component, the maintenance of internal order and defence against external enemies. Since my task here is not to provide a theory of the state, I do not have to choose one or the other of these options, since for practical purposes they give the same result. Also, they do not in any way preempt the question as to the interests, if any, served by the state.

7.1.2. The autonomy of the state

The central question in the Marxist theory of the state is whether it is autonomous with respect to class interests, or entirely reducible to them. The main issue that will concern us here is the causal, or – more generally –

the *explanatory autonomy of the state*. Now, for this issue to be a meaningful one, the state and the economic structure must in some sense be distinct entities. As in the case of the relation between productive forces and relations of production (5.1.1), the conceptual separation must be established before the question of a causal or explanatory link can be raised. Hence I begin by discussing the *conceptual autonomy of the state*.

This conceptual autonomy can be denied on two grounds: either by an argument that in *all* societies political phenomena, broadly conceived, are part of the economic structure; or, more specifically, by arguing that this is the case at least in *some* societies. I shall discuss these arguments in that order.

The first issue can be phrased as a question: "Can the base be distinguished from the superstructure?"¹ Briefly stated, the argument against the distinction is that since ownership must be backed by the state and hence presupposes a political system, it cannot enter as an independent variable in the explanation of that system. G. A. Cohen has recently attempted to answer this objection, by his distinction (referred to in 5.1.1) between legal ownership and effective control. On his view the economic structure can be defined in terms of relations of effective control, which in turn enter into a functional explanation of the legal relations of ownership. The forms of *de jure* ownership exist because they stabilize *de facto* relations of effective control. Cohen cites several historical examples to show that many legal innovations did in fact arise in this way.² The question is whether the programme can be carried out in all cases. I doubt that it can, since in many cases there is no independently existing control that is stabilized by the legal relations. In some cases, such as patentable knowledge, the control can *only* be achieved through legal rights (5.1.1). In other cases the control as a matter of fact has never been achieved by non-legal means, hence there is nothing for the law to stabilize. True, even in these cases one can say that the control is more stable than it would otherwise have been – but this is not to say that there is something (namely the effective control) that is stabilized by the law.

How serious is this difficulty? Does it do away with the ambition of historical materialism to explain political phenomena in terms of the economic structure? I do not believe it does. Observe that the explanandum includes both the structure of the political system and the actual decisions made.

¹ Cp. Lukes's essay with this title. Actually this question is more general than the issue of state autonomy, since it also covers the problem of distinguishing the economic base from kinship, religion etc.

² Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, pp. 226ff.

Among the latter, some take the form of enacting laws while others do not; of the laws enacted some concern the forms of ownership while others do not. It is perfectly consistent to try to explain all political phenomena that do not relate to matters of legal ownership in terms of those that do. Moreover, one may attempt to explain changes in the legal ownership structure in terms of the interest of an economically dominant class. These attempts may or may not succeed, but at least there is no ground for thinking that the base-superstructure problem prevents them from getting off the ground.

The second objection to the conceptual autonomy of the state is more specific and more damaging. It concerns the problem of distinguishing the economic from the political in societies where the state is the principal owner of the means of production, as in the Asiatic mode of production where rent and tax coincide.¹ The point is not that in such cases the theses of historical materialism are false: rather they cannot even be coherently stated. How can the state be explained by the economic structure if the state *is* the economic structure?

To bring the problem into focus, we may distinguish between three ways in which economic and political phenomena can be separated from one another. First, they may be sustained by entirely different groups of *people*. This was approximately the case in classical Greece, where production was largely carried out by slaves, and trade by free non-citizens. M. I. Finley quoted Xenophon on the measures that "should be taken by the state in order that every Athenian may be maintained at public expense", and adds that the scheme reveals "a mentality which pushed to the extreme the notion that what we call the economy was properly the business of outsiders".²

Next, the two domains may be seen as sets of *roles* rather than persons, with the possibility that any given person may occupy both economic and political roles. This according to Marx is what distinguishes the modern state from the ancient: "The contradiction between the *democratic representative state* and *civil society* is the completion of the *classic* contradiction between public *commonweal* and *slavery*. In the modern world each person is *at the same time* a member of slave society and of the public commonweal."³ In this case it is perfectly possible to argue that how people behave in one domain enters into the explanation of how they behave in other spheres. It could be the case, for instance, that the political relation

¹ *Capital III*, p. 791.

² Finley, "Aristotle and economic analysis", pp. 51-2.

³ *The Holy Family*, p. 116; see also *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, p. 32.

of domination is explained by the economic relation of exploitation even if the same individuals participate in both.

Thirdly, we may not be able to distinguish between the domains otherwise than by the fact that a given action may have different *aspects*, some of which may be singled out as economic and others as political. This is the case for the Asiatic mode of production as described by Marx, or for contemporary communist societies. The action of the imperial tax collector or the regional secretary for planning has an economic aspect in the sense that it has consequences for production, distribution and consumption. Similarly it has a political aspect in the sense that it has consequences for law and order, rebellion and acquiescence. These consequences could of course enter into the explanation of the action – but could they also serve to explain one another? G. A. Cohen has shown, by an ingenious example, that the economic aspect or consequence of a policy can indeed serve to explain the political aspects of the same policy,¹ so there is no conceptual objection to this idea. The empirical issue is whether the historical tributary societies were relevantly similar to the society imagined in this example. In my opinion they were not, and so it appears that there are cases in which the base is indistinguishable from the political superstructure and in which, therefore, historical materialism is inapplicable. Since my concern below is exclusively with the capitalist state, however, this need not retain us.

I shall say that the state has explanatory autonomy when (and to the extent that) its structure and policies cannot be explained by the interest of an economically dominant class. The explanation may be found in some other set of interests, for example the interest of the ruling clique or the interests of society as a whole. Or the actions of the state may be explained as the outcome of the internal decision-making apparatus of bureaucracy, including routines and bargaining procedures that do not realize any well-defined interest.² Whatever the alternative is, the autonomy is defined negatively, as the absence of class-interest explanation. It might appear obvious that Marx denied the autonomy of the state in this sense, but matters are more complex. Rather he tended to affirm it in many cases – and then go on to assert, paradoxically, that the autonomy itself can be explained in terms of class interest or, alternatively, in terms of class structure. State autonomy, that is, may be explained by the fact

¹ Cohen, "Restricted and inclusive historical materialism", note 30. He imagines that the ruling class could issue instructions simultaneously to peasants and to the police that are to supervise the peasants, since one and the same set of phonemes could mean different things in the peasant language and in the language spoken by the policemen.

² See Allison, *The Essence of Decision*.

that it is useful for the economically dominant class – or it may be allowed by the fact that there is no single dominant class.

These ideas form the topic of 7.1.4 and 7.1.5 below. I shall anticipate somewhat on that discussion by offering an analysis of what it means to have political power. I believe that Marx held a narrow, *pre-strategic* conception of power that prevented him from recognizing that the state had autonomy in a real sense and not only as a fief from the capitalist class. Observe first that there are two ways in which group interest can shape political policies: by serving as a maximand for the policy choices or as a constraint on them. On first glance, it is tempting to say that if the choice between the feasible political alternatives is always made according to the interest of one group, then it has concentrated all power in its hands. On reflection, however, we see that power also must include the ability to define the set of alternatives, to set constraints on what is feasible. The following scenario is intended to bring out the relation between these two ways of wielding power. It is constructed so as to be applicable to nineteenth-century European politics, as a strategic game between Capital and Government, with the working class as an important background variable. In slightly modified form, however, it could also be applied to aspects of twentieth-century politics.

Imagine that there are two agents: A (“Capital”) and B (“Government”), initially facing a given number of alternatives. B has the formal power of decision to choose among the feasible alternatives, A may have the power to exclude some of the alternatives from being considered. We assume that in A’s judgment some alternatives are very bad, to be avoided at all costs. Among those remaining, some are judged better than others, but none is outstandingly superior. If the bad alternatives can somehow be excluded from the feasible set, it might not matter much if B within the restricted set chooses an alternative that is not highly ranked by A. It might not even be necessary for A to exclude the inferior alternatives. B – acting on “the law of anticipated reactions”¹ – might abstain from choosing any of these, knowing that if he does A has the power and the motive to dethrone him. Moreover, to the extent that what is bad for A is also bad for B, perhaps because B’s affluence depends on that of A, B might not want to choose an inferior alternative even if he could get away with it. On the other hand, A might actually welcome the fact that B does not choose the alternative top-ranked by A, for example if A does not want to be seen as having power or if he deplors his own inability to

defer satisfaction. Or, if he does not welcome it, he might at least tolerate it as the lesser evil, compared to the costs involved in *taking* the formal power of decision (as distinct from the costs involved in *having* it). In either case B would be invested with some autonomous power of decision, although its substance might be questioned, since ultimately it can be said to derive from A. B, one might say, has autonomy as a fief from A.

Consider, however, the same situation from B’s perspective. He will correctly perceive his power as deriving from the cost to A of having or taking power. To be sure, B’s power is limited by the fact that there are certain bounds that he cannot transgress without provoking A into taking power for himself, possibly also by the need to avoid killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. But conversely A’s power is limited by his desire not to assume power unless provoked. Both actors, in fact, have power, of an equally substantial character. They need not, of course, have equal amounts of power. The exact distribution of their powers to shape the outcome depends on the strength of A’s aversion to having or taking power, as well as on B’s need to avoid harming A.

Anticipating on 7.1.4, we may speculate on the motive A could have for not wanting power. One reason might be the presence of a third actor C (“the working class”), who is already involved in a struggle with A and who also tends to oppose whoever has the formal power of decision. For A it might then be better that B have the formal power, so that some of C’s attention and energy should be directed towards B and correspondingly diverted from A. Another reason might be that A knows that if in power he will take decisions motivated by short-term gains to himself, and that he wants to prevent this by letting the power remain safely outside his reach. From the point of view of A’s long-term interest it may be better having the decisions taken in accordance with B’s interest (although not as good as if B would take them to promote A’s long-term interest). A third reason could simply be that if one has to devote some of one’s time to political decision-making there is less time left for pursuing private interests. Again, those interests may be harmed by someone else’s exercising the formal power, but perhaps less so than if one is distracted by having to assume it oneself. As to the reasons for not wanting to *take* power, assuming one would not mind having it, one explanation could be a short time horizon. To go into politics is like a costly investment, bearing fruit only after some time, while requiring outlays in the present. If one’s interests are reasonably well respected in the present, the prospect of a future in which they might be even better respected need not be very attractive, considering the costs involved in the transition. This also creates an incentive for B to make these

¹ Friedrich, *Man and his Government*, ch. 11.

costs as large as possible, and to make sure that A's interests are just sufficiently respected to make the costs an effective deterrent.

If Marx believed that the government held power as a fief from capital, it was because he held a limited view of what constitutes a political resource. On this view, power grows out of the end of a gun – or, more generally, out of money and manpower. Yet the power base of a political actor can also be his place in a web of strategic relationships. The capitalists' fear of the working class, for instance, gives a lever to the aristocratic government that has little to do with the positive resources which it actually has at its disposal. From a quite different domain, one may cite the disproportionate power that can accrue to a political party that happens to be in a pivotal position between the two major political blocs. These are forms of power that arise out of the political system as such, not out of pre-political resources.

I conclude that in such cases the fact of state autonomy can be explained in terms of class interest, even if the autonomously made state decisions cannot. A class may have the ability to take the political power: that option is within its feasible set. Yet it may have some weakness that makes abstention a superior option. I have been arguing that the autonomy of the state is not made less substantial by the fact that the class keeps out of politics rather than being kept out of it. We are, in fact, dealing with an intermediate case between two "normal" situations. At one extreme is the situation in which no class would be able to dethrone the government, because the latter has superior means of coercion at its disposal. At the other extreme we have the situation in which the economically dominant class has nothing to fear from taking power, and consequently takes it. Marx was concerned with the paradoxical case in which a dominant class has the ability, but not the inclination, to concentrate the formal powers of decision in its own hands.

7.1.3. The instrumentalist theory of the state

I first set out Marx's best-known theory of the state, according to which it is a mere instrument for the economically dominant class, with no autonomy – derived or substantial – of its own. I shall argue that Marx held this view up to about 1850, and then abandoned it when he saw that the European bourgeoisies shied away from the power that was supposed to be theirs for the taking. The intellectual problem this created for him is well formulated by Eric Hobsbawm: "In short, the bourgeois revolution had failed in 1848 or led to unpredicted regimes whose nature probably preoccupied Marx more than any other problem concerning the bourgeois state: to states

plainly serving the bourgeoisie's interest, but not directly representing it as a class."¹ In 7.1.4 I argue that Marx's solution to this dilemma was the abdication theory of the state.

The canonical formula is that "the executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie".² The "but" (*nur*) expresses the reductionist conception of the state that Marx held before 1850. What are these common affairs? Clearly, they include the defence of the bourgeoisie against the workers, through anti-combination acts to prevent trade unions, use of police and army to repress strikes, harsh laws against theft etc. In addition they include the defence of the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole against its individual members. "The bourgeois state is nothing more than the mutual insurance of the bourgeois class against its individual members, as well as against the exploited class."³ I shall discuss the second task in somewhat more detail.

In *The German Ideology* Marx makes it clear that the relation between individual capitalists is that of a Prisoner's Dilemma (6.2.3): "The attitude of the bourgeois to the institutions of his regime is like that of the Jew to the law; he evades them whenever it is possible to do so in each individual case, but he wants everybody else to observe them."⁴ Elsewhere in the same volume he dwells at length on the opposition between the individual and the collective interest of the capitalist class. The discussion is embedded in a polemic against Max Stirner, who had argued that the state was the real owner of private property. Marx comments:

The fact that the ruling class establishes its joint domination as public power, as the state, [Stirner] interprets and distorts in the German petty-bourgeois manner as meaning that the "state" is established as a third force against this ruling class and absorbs all power in the face of it . . . Because the bourgeois do not allow the state to interfere in their private interests and give it only as much power as is necessary for their own safety and the maintenance of competition and because the bourgeois in general act as citizens only to the extent that their private interests demand it, [Stirner] believes that they are "nothing" in the face of the state . . . Further, since the bourgeois have organised the defence of their own property in the state . . . [Stirner] believes that "the state has the factory as property, the manufacturer holds it only in fee, as possession". In exactly the same way when a dog guards my house it "has" the house "as property", and I hold it only "in fee, as possession" from the dog. Since the concealed material conditions of private property are often bound to come into contradiction with the *juridical illusion*

¹ Hobsbawm, "Marx, Engels and politics", p. 245.

² *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 486. Similar expressions are found in *The German Ideology*, p. 90; *Deutsche-Brüsseler-Zeitung* 11.11.1847; *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 27.2.1849.

³ Marx, review of Girardin's *Le Socialisme et l'Impôt*. ⁴ *The German Ideology*, p. 180.

about private property – as seen, for example in expropriations – [Stirner] concludes that “here the otherwise concealed principle, that only the state is the property-owner whereas the individual is a feudal tenant, strikes the eye” . . . [Stirner] here transforms the contradictions belonging to the *existence* of private property into the *negation* of private property . . . [The] bourgeois, and in general all the members of civil society, are forced to constitute themselves as “we”, as a juridical person, as the state, in order to safeguard their common interests and – if only because of the division of labour – to delegate the collective power thus created to a few persons.¹

In addition to the tasks cited here – the maintenance of competition and the laws of expropriation – we should mention the limitation of the working day discussed in 4.1.4. Observe that the reference to the maintenance of competition shows that Marx had in mind the *long-term* interest of the capitalist class (6.2.1). At any given moment, it may rather be in the collective interest of that class, or of capitalists in individual industries, to form a cartel to maximize their joint profits. This, however, might jeopardize the dynamic force of competition that underwrites the continued viability of capitalism.² We may recall that Marx was also aware of the need for intertemporal capitalist solidarity with respect to the limitation of the working day.³ Hence the state at any given time is not simply the instrument of the current generation of capitalists, but a means to the survival of capitalism as a system. It is in principle ready to sacrifice not only individual capitalists, but even the short-term interests of the class as a whole.

If this is so, we must ask whether the state could not also counteract the tendency to economic crises that according to Marx would bring about the downfall of capitalism. If capitalism is in the danger of being destroyed by individual entrepreneurs acting out of self-interest, why could not the state curb their greed as it did in the case of the Ten Hours Bill? To answer the question, we must consider the nature of the crises that according to Marx would bring capitalism to a halt (3.4). Broadly speaking, these rest on the falling rate of profit due to labour-saving innovations and on difficulties in realizing profit due to low effective demand. Marx would probably have dismissed as absurd the idea that the process of technical change could be controlled by the state so as to prevent a fall in the rate of profit, and it is indeed hard to imagine how this could be done. By contrast, creation of effective demand by the state has been a main tool in the regulation of modern capitalism. Marx discusses this idea in connection with Malthus, who had argued that to create “an adequate demand”, the income from

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 355ff. ² Cp. my *Logic and Society*, pp. 129–30.

³ *Zur Kritik (1861–3)*, p. 162, cited in 4.1.4.

rent must be supplemented by other means: “These consist of heavy *taxation*, of a mass of sinecurists in State and Church, of large armies, pensions, tithes for the priests, an impressive national debt, and, from time to time, expensive wars.”¹ There is no indication, however, that Marx believed these proto-Keynesian remedies would have any effect in delaying the downfall of capitalism or in making it less probable.

7.1.4. The abdication theory of the state

In Marx’s political writings from the 1850s we repeatedly encounter the idea that the state serves the interest of the capitalist class, without being the direct extension of its will as the earlier writings had argued. Moreover he strongly suggests that it is no accident that the state serves that interest. There is an explanatory connection: the bourgeoisie abdicate from power (France) or abstain from taking it (England, Germany) because they perceive that their interests are better served if they remain outside politics. I shall refer to this as “the abdication theory of the state”, taking “abdication” in the extended sense in which it also includes deliberate abstention from power. It will be clear from the context when I am referring to abdication in the narrow, literal sense of giving up something one has and when it covers the case of not taking something one could get.

In Marx’s writings the notion of abdication arises in several contexts, not just with respect to the state in capitalist society. I shall say a few words about the other references towards the end of this subsection, in order to support some general propositions about the reasons an actor could have for abdicating power. First, however, I survey the abdication theory of the state in capitalist society. Before 1848 Marx explicitly rejected the idea that the capitalist class would ever be content with government by proxy:

[According to Stirner] “it makes no difference” to the bourgeoisie whether it rules unrestrictedly or whether its political and economic power is counterbalanced by other classes. [Stirner] believes that an absolute king, or someone else, *could* defend the bourgeoisie just as successfully as it defends itself. And even “its principles”, which consist in subordinating state power to “*chacun pour soi, chacun chez soi*” and exploiting it for that purpose – an “absolute monarch” is supposed to be able to do that! Let [Stirner] name any country with developed trade and industry and strong competition where the bourgeoisie entrusts its defence to an “absolute monarch”.²

¹ *Theories of Surplus-Value*, vol. 3, p. 51. ² *The German Ideology*, pp. 200–1.

The view was reiterated a few years later, in an article in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* criticizing the constitution of December 1848:

[There] is not the slightest doubt that the imposed Constitution solves the "social question" in keeping with the views of the aristocracy and the bureaucracy, in other words, it presents these gentlemen with a form of government which ensures the exploitation of the people by these demigods. But has the imposed Constitution solved the "social question" from the standpoint of the *bourgeoisie*? In other words, does the bourgeoisie receive a political system enabling it freely to administer the affairs of its class as a whole, i.e. the interests of commerce, industry and agriculture, to make the most productive use of public funds, to manage the state budget as cheaply as possible, to protect national labour effectively from without, and within the country to open up all sources of national wealth silted by feudal mud? Does history provide a single example showing that under a king imposed by the grace of God, the bourgeoisie ever succeeded in achieving a political system in keeping with its material interests? . . . Bourgeois industry *must* burst the fetters of absolutism and feudalism. A revolution against both only demonstrates that bourgeois industry has reached a certain level when it must either win an appropriate political system or perish.¹

The event of the 1850s disproved this dilemma. The bourgeoisie in the main European countries flourished under a political system not so directly geared to their interest. Hence Marx made a theoretical retreat in order to explain this anomaly in a way consistent with historical materialism. He had to face the fact that the bourgeoisie was "la première classe possédante à n'être pas gouvernante",² and yet retain the view that ultimately economics is the explanation of politics. The abdication theory was supposed to provide the solution. I shall discuss it with respect to England, France and Germany, with the main emphasis on the English case. The reason for singling out England is that a number of writers have been struck by the apparently anomalous relation between state and society in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, and offered widely different comments on this fact. Using these as reference points, the specific character of Marx's explanation is better brought into focus.

(1) An editorial in *The Economist* from 1862 – possibly by Walter Bagehot – was titled "The advantage to a commercial country of a non-commercial government". It argued that "not only for the interest of the country at large, but especially for the interest of its commerce, it is in the highest degree desirable that the Government should stand high above the influence of commercial interest".³ This suggests that the aristocratic

¹ *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 22.1.1849; cp. *ibid.* 10.12.1848.

² Veyne, *Le Pain et le Cirque*, p. 117.

³ *The Economist* 4.1.1862. I owe this reference to Grindheim, "How could the aristocracy govern when the bourgeoisie ruled?"

government of England was a solution to the bourgeoisie's weakness of will. Like Ulysses binding himself to the mast, the bourgeoisie accepted the aristocratic government because they could not trust themselves not to succumb to the temptation of short-term greed.¹

(2) A related argument was offered by Joseph Schumpeter, substituting lack of ability for weakness of will. In his words, "a genius in the business office may be, and often is, utterly unable outside it to say boo to a goose – both in the drawing room and on the platform. Knowing this he wants to be left alone and to leave politics alone." Hence, "without protection by some non-bourgeois group, the bourgeoisie is politically helpless and unable not only to lead its nation but even to take care of its particular class interest. Which amounts to saying that it needs a master."²

(3) A more sober explanation was offered by G. D. H. Cole. He argued that the industrial capitalists "were too occupied with their own affairs to wish to take the exercise of political authority directly into their own hands" – "provided that the government did not govern too much, and protected their property against levellers from below as well as against extortions in the interest of the old aristocratic class".³ I read this as suggesting that to the bourgeoisie the opportunity cost of going into politics exceeded the expected gains, given the knowledge that the government would not go too far against their interest.

(4) Seymour Lipset, citing Engels, argues in a quite different way from all the preceding writers. Engels had written that "the English bourgeoisie are, up to the present day, so deeply penetrated by a sense of their social inferiority that they keep up, at their own expense and that of the nation, an ornamental caste of drones to represent the nation worthily at all state functions". According to Lipset, this "is a situation in which an old upper class, which had declined in economic power, continued to maintain its control over the governmental machinery because it remained the highest status group in society".⁴

Of these, the first three writers argue that it was somehow in the interest of the bourgeoisie to stay away from power, but it is doubtful whether any of them offers an *explanation* of the abstention in terms of these benefits. This is rather implausible in the case of *The Economist* and Schumpeter, probably also with regard to Cole. The last clause cited from

¹ See also my *Ulysses and the Sirens*, ch. II.8.

² Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 138.

³ Cole, *Studies in Class Structure*, pp. 84–5. ⁴ Lipset, "Social stratification: social class".

Cole is best taken to say that the bourgeoisie would have taken power if provoked, not that they decided to keep away from power unless provoked. The last idea is quite implausible, since the very point of Cole's argument is that the bourgeoisie were not a "they" in the sense of being a collective actor. Lipset, by contrast, definitely does propose an explanation, in which, however, the interest of the bourgeoisie plays no role whatsoever. His explanation nevertheless is compatible with either (1) or (2). It may be the case, that is, that the weakness of the bourgeoisie which permitted the aristocracy to retain power was also a weakness that made it in the interest of the bourgeoisie that the aristocracy should have the power.¹

Marx differs, then, from all the preceding in arguing that the explanation of bourgeois abstention from power is to be found in the benefits it provided. In 6.3.3 I have cited some of the texts in which he makes this argument, to which I now add a few other, more immediately political passages. The central idea is that in England the Whigs traditionally held the monopoly on government, but that from a certain point onward it had to be exercised in the interest of the capitalist class:

The Whigs are the *aristocratic representatives* of the Bourgeoisie, of the industrial and commercial middle class. Under the condition that the Bourgeoisie should abandon to them, to an oligarchy of aristocratic families, the monopoly of government and the exclusive possession of office, they make to the middle class, and assist it in conquering, all those concessions, which in the course of social and political development have shown themselves to have become *unavoidable* and *undelayable*. Neither more nor less . . . Ever since the "glorious revolution" of 1688 the Whigs, with short intervals, caused principally by the first French Revolution and the consequent reaction, have found themselves in the enjoyment of the public offices. Whoever recalls to his mind this period of British history, will find no other distinctive mark of Whigdom but the maintenance of their family oligarchy. The interests and principles which they represent besides, from time to time, do not belong to the Whigs; they are forced upon them by the development of the industrial and commercial class, the Bourgeoisie. After 1688 we find them united with the Bankocracy, just then rising into importance, as we find them in 1846, united with the Millocracy. The Whigs as little carried the Reform Bill of 1831, as they carried the Free Trade Bill of 1846. Both Reform movements, the political as well as the commercial, were movements of the Bourgeoisie. As soon as either of these movements had ripened into irresistibility; as soon as, at the same time, it had become the safest means of turning the Tories out of office, the Whigs stepped forward, took up the direction of the Government, and secured to themselves the governmental part of the victory. In 1831 they extended the political portion of

¹ Hence it might be possible to establish a lawlike generalization to the effect that "Whenever abstention would be in the interest of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie abstains", yet this would not provide an explanation.

reform as far as was necessary in order not to leave the middle class entirely dissatisfied; after 1846 they confined their Free Trade measures so far as was necessary, in order to save the landed aristocracy the greatest possible amount of privileges.¹

Another article extends this reasoning to all "three fractions of the Aristocracy, Tories, Peelites and Whigs":

the entire Aristocracy agree, that the Government has to be conducted for the benefit, and according to the interests of the middle-class, but they are determined that the bourgeoisie are not to be themselves the governors of this affair; and for this object all that the old Oligarchy possess of talent, influence and authority are combined, in a last effort, into one Administration, which has for its task [to keep] the bourgeoisie, as long as possible, from the direct enjoyment of governing the nation. The coalited Aristocracy of England intend, with regard to the bourgeoisie, to act on the same principle upon which Napoleon I progressed to act in reference to the people: "*Tout pour le peuple, rien par le peuple.*"²

Read in itself this might suggest an enlightened paternalism by the aristocracy on behalf of the bourgeoisie, but the first passage shows that the aristocracy was also moved by self-interest: that of the Whigs *qua* governing clique and that of the landowning class to which they belonged. The interests of the bourgeoisie were *constraints* on the realization of the aristocratic interests, but within them some scope was left for manoeuvring, because the bourgeoisie had positive incentives to stay away from power (6.3.3). The abstract logic of this argument was set out in 7.1.2, and there is no need to repeat it here.

Note, however, a crucial premise of that argument: the bourgeoisie was a collective actor that as such *decided* to abstain from political power. In the absence of this premise it is difficult, I believe impossible, to make explanatory use of the benefits that the bourgeoisie derived from having the working class fight a two-front war against Capital and Government. This is a rather paradoxical idea, that a class should crystallize only to decide to return to its former, uncrystallized state. Yet we must distinguish, as did Marx, between different levels of class consciousness. As stated in 6.3.3, his argument was that after the victory of the Anti Corn Law League the next, logical step would have been to go forward and form a political party. The refusal to do this, and the dismantling of the League, may be seen as a collective decision to leave politics in the hands of the aristocracy. Yet I also believe that in Marx this intentional reasoning was inextricably combined with subterranean functionalism, to the point where they become indistinguishable.

¹ *New York Daily Tribune* 21.8.1852. ² *Ibid.*, 28.1.1853.

This is also true of his analysis of French politics. True, the English and the French case differ in many respects. Whereas in England the bourgeoisie confronted (and made use of) the traditional Whig monopoly on power, in France they had to come to grips with a long tradition of *étatisme*. Yet, as already indicated in 6.3.3, the same intentional-cum-conspiratorial-cum-functional analysis underlies both arguments.

Consider first a statement about the independence enjoyed by the Bonapartist state:

[Under] the absolute monarchy, during the first revolution, under Napoleon, bureaucracy was only the means of preparing the class rule of the bourgeoisie. Under the Restoration, under Louis Philippe, under the parliamentary republic, it was the instrument of the ruling class, however much it strove for power of its own. Only under the second Bonaparte does the state seem to have made itself completely independent. As against civil society, the state machine has consolidated its position so thoroughly that the chief of the Society of December 10 suffices for its head.¹

In an article entitled "The rule of the Pretorians" Marx later made the same point with respect to the French *army*, which from being a tool for a "specific social interest" had itself become the predominant interest group.² Numerous statements to the same effect occur in the various versions of *The Civil War in France*.³

In all these passages Marx points to the independence of the state, and then adds that this is only an appearance. In essence the Bonapartist state was a class state. Yet the way in which he tries to anchor it in the class structure is ambiguous. In the first of the cited passages he goes on to say that the state power is not suspended in mid-air, but rests on the support of the small peasantry. This support did not spring from the real interest of the peasants, but from their imaginary interests – the *idées napoléoniennes* that had made sense fifty years earlier, but were by then obsolete. This power base was not economic but ideological, yet none the less solid for that. It was not, however, a sufficient condition for the Bonapartist regime. In addition, it needed the support or at least the acquiescence of the bourgeoisie.⁴ Bonaparte stood for tradition; he embodied a historical continuity that as it were brought him over the threshold to a plausible candidacy. For that candidacy to be crowned with success, the offer had to meet a corresponding demand. The helplessness of the bourgeoisie – which Marx interpreted as a cry for help – gave him what he needed.

¹ *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, p. 186. ² *New York Daily Tribune* 12.3.1858.

³ *The Civil War in France*, pp. 53ff, 100ff, 137ff.

⁴ Cp. the analogous explanations of fascism in terms of the active support of the petty bourgeoisie and the tacit support of capital.

In 6.3.3 I cited a passage where Marx says that the bourgeoisie "must forfeit the crown" to save its purse, a clear statement of the abdication theory. A similar assertion occurs towards the end of the work:

Manifestly, the bourgeoisie had now no choice but to elect Bonaparte. When the puritans of the Council of Constance complained of the dissolute lives of the popes and wailed about the necessity of moral reform, Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly thundered at them: "Only the devil in person can still save the Catholic Church, and you ask for angels." In like manner, after the coup d'état, the French bourgeoisie cried: Only the chief of the Society of December 10 can still save bourgeois society! Only theft can still save property; only perjury, religion; bastardy, the family; disorder, order! As the executive authority which has made itself an independent power, Bonaparte feels it to be his mission to safeguard "bourgeois order". But the strength of this bourgeois order lies in the middle class. He looks on himself, therefore as the representative of the middle class and issues decrees in this sense. Nevertheless, he is somebody solely due to the fact that he has broken the political power of this middle class and daily breaks it anew. Consequently he looks on himself as the adversary of the political and literary power of the middle class. But by protecting its material power, he generates its political power anew.¹

Now, it may be true that the bourgeoisie offered little resistance to the *coup d'état*, and that they did well for themselves under the regime that followed. These two facts do not, however, add up to an act of abdication, nor to a deliberate acquiescence. Once again, Marx was misled by his search for meaning in history.

There are no similarly clear statements about the abdication of the German bourgeoisie after 1850. After the defeat of the 1848 revolution in Germany Marx made no dissection of its causes and consequences even remotely comparable to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. In his articles during the 1850s there is virtually no mention of internal German developments until his visit to Germany in December 1858 and January 1859. Here he first describes how the revolution, and the ensuing counterrevolution, "succeeded in driving the Government back, not behind 1848, not behind 1815, but even behind 1807",² by restoring the power of landed aristocracy and gentry, corporations and guilds. He then adds that what the bourgeoisie thus lost in political power, it gained in wealth:

But there is another side to the medal. The revolution had dispelled the ideological delusions of the *bourgeoisie*, and the counter-revolution had done away with their political pretensions. Thus they were thrown back upon their real resources – trade

¹ *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, pp. 193–4.

² This, in fact, is the normal pattern of a counterrevolutionary movement: it attempts to go beyond the pre-revolutionary situation, not back to it, for a reason well expressed by Giscard d'Estaing in an interview with *Le Monde* 8.1.1975: "Il n'est certainement pas question de revenir à la situation d'avant 1968, et d'abord parce que la situation avant 1968 comportait les conditions qui ont créé 1968."

and industry – and I do not think that any other people have relatively made so immense a start in this direction during the last centennial epoch as the Germans, and especially the Prussians . . . The rage of getting rich, of going ahead, of opening new mines, of building new factories, of constructing new railways, and above all of investing in and gambling with joint-stock company shares, became the passion of the day, and infected all classes from the peasant even to the crowned prince, who had once been a *reichsunmittelbarer Fürst*. So you see the days when the Bourgeoisie wept in Babylonian captivity and drooped their diminished heads, were the very days when they became the effective power of the land.¹

The last phrase closely parallels the conclusion of the text from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: by protecting the material power of the bourgeoisie, Bonaparte generates its political power anew. The vanquished, turning inward on themselves and the pursuit of their private interest, become rich and prosperous to the point where a new bid for power becomes tempting. (Cp. also the “Babylonian captivity” of Germany and Japan after 1945.) In the comment on Germany, however, there is not any suggestion that this prosperity could in retrospect be invoked to explain the defeat of the German bourgeoisie in 1849 as a voluntary abdication from power.

I have surveyed various texts in which Marx suggests that the capitalist class might abstain from entering the political arena. I now turn to a few other texts that discuss the problem of abdication or political abstention with regard to other groups. In a text from 1847 Marx first explains why the German bourgeoisie “seek as far as possible to make the change from *absolute* to *bourgeois* monarchy without a revolution”, and then adds why the prospects for a constitutional monarchy are poor:

But the absolute monarchy in Prussia, as earlier in England and France, will not let itself be amicably changed into a bourgeois monarchy. It will not abdicate amicably. The princes’ hands are tied both by their personal prejudices and by a whole bureaucracy of officials, soldiers and clerics – integral parts of absolute monarchy who are far from willing to exchange their ruling position for a subservient one in respect of the bourgeoisie. Then the feudal estates also hold back; for them it is a question of life and death, in other words of property or expropriation. It is clear that the absolute monarch, for all the servile homage of the bourgeoisie, sees his true interest on the side of these estates.²

The passage may be read in the light of Adam Przeworski’s theory of the conditions for a negotiated transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes. On his view, the main condition is that one finds an institutional compromise which ensures “that the forces associated with the

authoritarian regime find a significant presence under democratic conditions”.¹ The emphasis is on the *institutional* compromise, as opposed to a substantive one. Substantive compromises have no enduring stability under democratic conditions; they may change as majorities come and go. Only if the compromise is built into the democratic institutional structures is there a chance that the authoritarian regime will be prepared to abdicate peacefully, as an alternative to violent dethronement. According to Marx, this condition was not met in Germany. For the feudal estates the continued presence of the regime was “a question of life and death” over which no compromise was possible.

Towards the end of his life Marx also became concerned with a different form of political abstention as a possible strategy for the working class. In an article from 1873 on “Political indifferentism” he warns against adoption of this policy, arguing that it is an ultra-leftist deviation that on the pretext of awaiting the definitive “social liquidation” leads to quietism in the present. He cites his anonymous opponent as arguing that “to combat the state is to recognize the state”, because any involvement – even hostile – with bourgeois institutions must lead to a betrayal of the true principles. Hence, presumably, the working class should beware of accepting universal suffrage, should the ruling classes offer to abdicate from their monopoly on political power. Against this view Marx offers two arguments: in the first place power must be achieved step by step, and in the second place one does not have the right to neglect the sufferings of those currently living, if they can be allayed by political action within the system. I return to this issue in 7.2.2.

On this background we may conclude by a brief typology of the reasons for abdication from power, including “active indifference” and other forms of deliberate abstention. With one exception they are all taken from the works cited and discussed earlier.

First, one may abdicate from power because one has no trust in one’s ability to use it in one’s best interest, fearing that one may be betrayed by weakness of will or sheer incompetence. I have indicated how such arguments were used on behalf of the capitalist class in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, exactly the same reasoning has been applied to the working class in the twentieth century. It has been argued, for instance, that the working class should beware of worker-owned firms, because of the short time horizon and the low rate of investment they would imply.² “If capitalism did not exist, the workers would have to invent it.” Also

¹ Przeworski, “Democracy as a contingent outcome of conflict”.

² Kydland and Prescott, “Rules rather than discretion”, p. 486.

¹ *New York Daily Tribune* 1.2.1859. ² *Deutsche-Brüsseler Zeitung* 18.11.1847.

trade unions have argued against industrial democracy on the grounds that their members do not possess the necessary competence. "We are not ready for it yet."¹

Secondly, abdication may be the preemption of dethronement, that is the lesser of evils. This may happen both in the negotiated transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes, and in the reverse transition from democracy to authoritarianism. In both cases the abdicating group will need a guarantee that its interests will in fact be better protected than they would have been in the case of a violent overthrow. Following Przeworski, I have indicated that in the transition to democracy this would be some institutional compromise. In the reverse case, the abdicating group would have a guarantee against being killed off if in some sense it is the goose that lays the golden eggs. Hence the bourgeoisie may give up democracy and abdicate to Bonapartism or fascism because they know that their presence and their prosperity are required to fill the coffers of the state.²

Thirdly, there is the theme of the poisoned gift. The holder of power may give it away to an adversary in the expectation that the latter will use it "responsibly" and, in fact, in the interest of the former. Thus intelligent capitalists may give away part of their decision-making power, expecting that the workers will be more restrained in their wage claims when they are co-responsible for the firm. Conversely trade unions have often resisted cooptation, on the ground that their role is in the opposition, not in the government.³ The ultra-leftist form of political indifferentism clearly rests on a similar argument.

Fourthly, there is the sheer opportunity cost of taking power or having it. Again, this applies to workers no less than to capitalists. Resistance to industrial democracy is sometimes due to the workers' belief that they have better things to do in their free time than participate in meetings about how to run the firm. Or at least they may be averse to undertake the training process that would be needed to be able to do so. Similarly, the capitalists may prefer to use all their time to run the firm instead of taking some time off to run the country.

Fifthly, abdication can be a way of defusing opposition, or shifting it

¹ This attitude is amply demonstrated in unpublished work by Trond Bergh on the Norwegian debate on industrial democracy after 1945.

² Note, however, that the tax policy that maximizes tax income will not in general be the same as the one that maximizes before-tax profits, hence the interest of the rulers is not in the prosperity *per se* of the bourgeoisie.

³ This view has notably been championed by H. A. Clegg, e.g. in his *Industrial Democracy and Nationalization*, pp. 19ff.

onto another agent or group. This, we have seen, was Marx's major argument. He believed that the capitalists kept away from power in order to deflect the indignation of the workers against the government or against the landowning classes. This differs from the poisoned-gift strategy in that power is not shifted onto the main enemy, but to a third agent who can absorb some of the attention of that enemy.

Lastly, abdication may be motivated by the desire to improve one's bargaining situation by making certain concessions to the adversary physically impossible. This is the method of "public side bets" discussed with great subtlety by Thomas Schelling.¹ In typical cases, of course, a reduction of the set of options available to one entails a loss of power, but in certain situations this may actually enhance the probability of getting one's way. Thus the government in some countries has abdicated power to the International Monetary Fund in order to be able to reject inflationary wage claims. This reason for abdication has not been discussed in any of the examples cited earlier. It is not surprising that it is absent in Marx, given what I have called his pre-strategic conception of power. There is no inherent reason, however, why it should not find application to the kind of cases that concerned him. Local branches of multinational firms often abdicate power to the central office, so as to be able to resist the claims made by the workers. "Our hands are tied." (But, like Ulysses, we asked for the tie.)

To conclude, Marx never succeeded in proving that the state in a capitalist society must be a capitalist state. It is obvious that the government in any society based on private enterprise must take account of the interests of the entrepreneurs, since the state depends on them both for its tax base and for providing employment and welfare for the workers – a task that could otherwise fall to the state. Moreover, there is sometimes a real danger that the bourgeoisie might dethrone the government if its interests are not sufficiently respected. I suspect that in modern capitalist societies the latter constraint usually is redundant or slack, and that the first reason for respecting private property will make the government adopt a policy that is "good enough" for the bourgeoisie, given its various reasons for not wanting to take power and assuming that it could do so if it wanted to. (In feudalism, by contrast, the political constraint may have been the binding one.)² Yet, even admitting these facts, there will be some scope for autonomous decision-making by the state officials according to other criteria than the interest of the capitalist class. How much scope is a

¹ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, ch. 2.

² See notably Brenner, "The agrarian roots of European capitalism", pp. 50ff.

strictly empirical issue. It could turn out that the political risks to the bourgeoisie of taking power were so large that it could be made to accept a policy that went quite strongly against its interest, and that at the same time the policy that maximizes state income is quite different from the one that would maximize capitalist profit. If these two conditions are met, the state could in a real sense be more powerful than the economically dominant class. Or it could turn out that the state out of its self-interest is constrained to track very closely the policies that are optimal from the point of view of capitalists. The argument must be made on such empirical grounds, not in terms of conceptual juggling.

7.1.5. The class-balance theory of the state

Marx also suggests a different explanation for the autonomy of the state, namely that the struggle between two opposed classes allows the state to assert itself by divide-and-conquer. This holds especially for absolute monarchy, but the theory also has some claim to be considered as Marx's general theory of the modern state.

According to Marx, absolute monarchy in its inception was not the tool or the representative of any class – be it the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie. Perry Anderson, for instance, argues that it was a “feudal monarchy”, whose seeming “distance from the class from which it was recruited and whose interests it served” was in fact “the condition of its efficacy as a state”.¹ This says that absolute monarchy was for the feudal aristocracy what in Marx's view the Bonapartist state was for the bourgeoisie – a tool, but at one remove. Marx, however, did not apply this theory to absolutism. Rather, he looked at absolute monarchy as a competitor to the main classes, not as a tool, however indirectly, of either. In *The German Ideology* formulations abound to this effect. He refers to the period as one in which “royal power, aristocracy and bourgeoisie are contending for domination and where, therefore, domination is shared”.² Elsewhere we find this characterization of the state in Germany:

The impotence of each separate sphere of life (one can speak here neither of estates nor of classes, but at most of former estates and classes not yet born) did not allow any of them to gain exclusive domination. The inevitable consequence was that during the epoch of absolute monarchy, which assumed here its most stunted, semi-patriarchal form, the special sphere which, owing to division of labour, was responsible for the administration of public interests acquired an abnormal independence, which became still greater in the bureaucracy of modern times. Thus, the state built itself up into an apparently independent force, and

¹ Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, pp. 18, 108. ² *The German Ideology*, p. 59.

this position, which in other countries was only transitory – a transition stage – it has maintained in Germany until the present day.¹

In a characteristically teleological vein, Marx here conflates the *apparent* independence of the state with its *transitory* independence, as if future weakness proved the illusionary character of present strength. Elsewhere a more interesting argument is offered, to the effect that the autonomy of the state was *self-defeating*, in that it was harnessed to a purpose that in the long run favoured one of its competitors, namely the bourgeoisie. The “actual progressive function” of the absolute monarchy, Marx writes in 1847, was the encouragement of “trade and industry and thereby at the same time the rise of the bourgeois class as necessary conditions both for national strength and for its own glory”.² Similarly, in the articles on “Revolutionary Spain”, he contrasts the development in that country with that of the “other great states of Europe”. In the latter,

absolute monarchy presents itself as a civilizing center, as the initiator of social unity. There it was the laboratory in which the various elements of society were so mixed and worked, as to allow the towns to change the local independence and sovereignty of the Middle Ages for the general rule of the middle classes, and the common sway of civil society.³

This corresponds to the relation between Bonapartism (or the German government after 1849) and the bourgeoisie: “by protecting its material power, he generates its political power anew”. The absolute monarchies could not assert themselves without promoting the interest of their main competitor, the bourgeoisie. “Plenty” was a means to “Power”, and soon a rival to power.⁴ According to the pre-1850 writings the absolute monarchy paved the way for the naked class rule of the bourgeoisie, by strengthening it to the point where it “had to claim its share of political power, if only by reason of its material interest”.⁵ According to the later writings, the development of the bourgeoisie showed that with the strength went a new weakness, its vulnerability to working-class opposition. I return to this perspective below.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195; see also p. 90.

² *Deutsche-Brüsseler-Zeitung* 18.11.1847. The passage is quoted more fully below.

³ *New York Daily Tribune* 9.9.1854; see also the “Urtext” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 19–20.

⁴ For this contrast, see Viner, “Power versus plenty as objectives of foreign policy”. In the present context the point is that the power struggle between the absolutist state and the bourgeoisie was not simply over the division of the surplus, but also over its creation. By contrast, the relation between the state and the feudal nobility was closer to zero-sum (with the qualifications mentioned in 6.3.2), since they fought over the division of the surplus extracted from the peasantry. See also Brenner, “The agrarian roots of European capitalism”, pp. 78ff.

⁵ *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 10.12.1848.

The Spanish case turned out differently. Initially the rise of absolute monarchy took place according to the general scheme just set out:

Several circumstances conspired in favour of the rising power of absolutism. The want of union between the different provinces deprived their efforts of the necessary strength; but it was, above all, the bitter antagonism between the classes of the nobles and the citizens of the towns which Charles employed for the degradation of both.¹

Yet unlike what happened elsewhere on the continent, this process did not lead to the rise of the bourgeoisie. Spanish absolutism vegetated for several centuries, showing that it really belonged to a different genus altogether:

[While] the absolute monarchy found in Spain material in its very nature repulsive to centralization, it did all in its power to prevent the growth of common interests arising out of a national division of labour and the multiplicity of internal exchanges – the very basis on which alone a uniform system of administration and the rule of general laws can be created. Thus the absolute monarchy in Spain, bearing but a superficial resemblance to the absolute monarchies of Europe in general, is rather to be ranged in a class with Asiatic forms of government. Spain, like Turkey, remained an agglomeration of mismanaged republics with a nominal sovereign at their head.²

This suggests a general principle. A monarchical dynasty, to retain its power, must take care not to strengthen it, since it can do so only by strengthening its main competitor, the bourgeoisie. Of course, it then runs the risk that if it does not strengthen its power, it will be annexed by rival nations less cautious in this respect. The autonomy of the state is threatened from within, by the bourgeoisie, and from outside, by other states. What is strength with respect to the external enemy is weakness with respect to the internal, and vice versa. A balance may be found, but not easily. It can be stabilized only by the emergence of an enemy of the internal enemy – by the rise of the working class that drives the bourgeoisie to ally itself with its former opponent against the new one.³

This, in fact, corresponds well to Marx's analyses before and after 1848. Let me quote more fully from the 1847 article partly excerpted above:

¹ *New York Daily Tribune* 9.9.1854. ² *Ibid.*

³ I do not suggest that many, or any, absolutist rulers were so clear-sighted. In most cases they no doubt believed it possible to have their cake and eat it too; to have industrialization without modernization; an economically strong bourgeoisie with no political ambitions. For discussions of this form of wishful thinking in Russia and China around the turn of the century, see Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky*, pp. 100ff and *passim*, and Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, vol. I, especially chaps. IV and VII.

Once society's material conditions of existence have developed so far that the transformation of its official political form has become a vital necessity for it, the whole physiognomy of the old political power is transformed. Thus absolute monarchy now attempts, not to *centralise*, which was its actual progressive function, but to *decentralise*. Born from the defeat of the feudal estates and having the most active share in their destruction itself, it now seeks to retain at least the *semblance* of feudal distinctions. Formerly encouraging trade and industry and thereby at the same time the rise of the bourgeois class, as necessary conditions both for national strength and for its own glory, absolute monarchy now everywhere hampers trade and industry, which have become increasingly dangerous weapons in the hands of an already powerful bourgeoisie.¹

At this time Marx believed that the sorcerer's apprentice would not be able to call back the forces he had unleashed. German absolutism would not be able to turn the clock back. The early phase of the 1848 movement seemed to prove him right, yet the outcome was the very re-feudalization which the regime had in vain strived for before the revolution. Writing in 1859, Marx describes the strengthening of feudal institutions and concludes that "the boldest dreams of the King, which had remained dreams during the eight years of his absolute regime, had all become fulfilled by the Revolution, and shone as palpable realities in the light of day during the eight years from 1850 to 1857".² Although the presence of the working class is not mentioned in this context, it is clear from other writings (7.2.1) that the retreat in 1849 was in fact due to the increasing salience of this new enemy.

The Bonapartist state may be understood in the same light, if we recall the various texts from *The Civil War in France* cited in 6.3.3. In the published version Marx says that the empire "professed to save the working class by breaking down Parliamentarism, and, with it, the undisguised subservience of Government to the propertied class". At the same time, "it professed to save the propertied classes by upholding their economic supremacy over the working class". And Marx concludes that the empire "was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation".³ Clearly, this is a class-balance theory of the state. By promising to each of the major classes to protect it against the other, the government can rule autonomously. True, in the drafts Marx says that the Bonapartist state was the only possible *bourgeois* government, which rather suggests an explanation in terms of abdication. There is an apparent tension between these two

¹ *Deutsche-Brüsseler-Zeitung* 18.11.1847.

² *New York Daily Tribune* 1.2.1859.

³ *The Civil War in France*, pp. 138–9.

points of view on the Bonapartist state. Did it exploit the conflict between the classes to promote its own interest, or did it exist to promote, albeit indirectly, the interest of the bourgeoisie?

From the discussion in 7.1.4 it should be clear that this nuance is little more than a verbal one. The state can indeed exploit the conflict between the classes present on the social arena to further its own interests, whatever these might be – imperialist expansion, economic growth, modernization of the nation, more power to the bureaucracy etc. Yet its interests can to a large extent only be promoted by respecting the interests of these classes themselves. This holds with respect to the bourgeoisie (7.1.4), as well as the workers, whose continued well-being and reproduction is a condition for their productive capacity (4.1.4). In fact, one peculiarity of the capitalist mode of production is that the state must relate itself to two distinct productive classes, each of which is indispensable for production and hence for the tax basis of the state. There is a contrast here to the absolutist state, which had an incentive to encourage the growth of the bourgeoisie at the expense of the unproductive nobility. The modern state must face the fact that there is not a single goose that lays the golden eggs. Rather, two geese are needed, and the state must take care that neither kills off the other. As long as it does, it can plausibly represent itself as defending the interests of the one against the other, and hence be able to demand concessions in return.¹

To conclude, it is hardly too much to say that Marx made the autonomy of the state into the cornerstone of his theory. True, his intention was no doubt to explain it in terms of the deliberate abstention or abdication from power by the bourgeoisie, implying that the autonomy was granted rather than achieved, illusory rather than substantial. Yet we have seen that it is difficult to uphold this view. From his writings there emerges a picture that corresponds better to the actual historical development than to the theoretical professions he formed early on. It is a view of the state as an active, autonomous agent from the sixteenth century onwards, pursuing its own interests by harnessing those of others to its purpose. The basic explanation is to be found in the presence of several opposed classes, allowing the government to play an active role by mediation and divide-and-conquer.

Only during one period, perhaps, was the state in danger of being

¹ In modern capitalist societies matters are more complicated, not only because of universal suffrage, but also because the main classes have become strategic actors in the full sense instead of simply being dummies to be manipulated by the state. For an illuminating approach to the problem see Przeworski and Wallerstein, "The structure of class conflict in democratic capitalist societies".

reduced to a mere tool of the bourgeoisie – an organ whose actions could be explained functionally through the interests of that class. This is the period separating the two great bourgeois revolutions, that of 1640–88 and that of 1789. Broadly speaking, this was the time when the bourgeoisie was yet unaware that when rising they carried with them a class that would ultimately be a greater threat to their interests than monarchy, landowners and bureaucrats had ever been. It did not take long, however, before the first confrontations with the workers impressed on them the need to compromise with their former enemy – giving the state a new leverage and independence of action. This closing of the ranks is nowhere better described than in a passage from the *Theories of Surplus-Value*. Here Marx first comments on Adam Smith's "hatred" of the unproductive state and church officials, saying that his "is the language of the still revolutionary bourgeoisie, which has not yet subjected to itself the whole of society, the State etc.". He then goes on as follows:

When on the other hand the bourgeoisie has won the battle, and has partly itself taken over the State, partly made a compromise with its former possessors; and has likewise given recognition to the ideological professions as flesh of its flesh and everywhere transformed them into its functionaries, of like nature to itself; when it itself no longer confronts these as the representative of productive labour, but when the real productive labourers rise against it and moreover tells it that it lives on other people's industry; when it is enlightened enough not to be entirely absorbed in production, but to want also to consume "in an enlightened way"; when the spiritual labours themselves are more and more performed in its *service* and enter into the service of capitalist production – then things take a new turn, and the bourgeoisie tries to justify "economically", from its own standpoint, what at an earlier stage it had criticized and fought against.¹

If we look closely at Marx's writings, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that what in Marxist theory is supposed to be the "normal case"² – the subservience of the state to the interests of the bourgeoisie – is only exceptionally realized. Similarly, "the 'natural' alliance between an impatient radically-minded industrial bourgeoisie and a formative proletariat was broken as soon as it was formed".³ An

¹ *Theories of Surplus-Value*, vol. 1, pp. 300–1. To be sure, this passage tries to present the bourgeoisie as the main actor in the process; but I think the substance of the analysis fits into the perspective I have proposed.

² Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, vol. I, p. 497.

³ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 195. I quote the phrase somewhat out of context, since Thompson does not use it as a general characterization of the modern period, but only with reference to England.

essence that makes such rare appearances on the historical scene cannot be that essential.

7.2. The theory of revolution

Marx's theory of modes of production (5.1) says that changes in the relations of production occur when and because they enter into contradiction with the productive forces. At that point, according to the 1859 Preface, "begins an epoch of social revolution" – new relations of production replace the old ones. According to the usual view, this social revolution is *stabilized* by the legal and institutional changes brought about by a political upheaval, or revolution in the narrower sense.¹ Pre-legal and illegal changes in the relations of production are necessarily more limited in their effect than a political revolution. The former occur only or mainly to the extent that they correspond to individual interests, and will not respond to the collective interests of a class as such. In order to realize these class interests, formal changes in the legal system of rights and compulsions are needed. Capitalism may have emerged piecemeal by the individual actions of entrepreneurs, but for its full development it needed the stable framework of law. As for communism, Marx apparently thought that incremental and local steps were out of the question, some remarks on cooperatives and joint-stock companies notwithstanding (7.2.2). The superiority of communist relations of production presupposes that communism is established on a nation-wide scale.²

Given the central role of political revolutions in the process of social change, it is obviously important to arrive at an understanding of their causes and consequences. Marx has little to offer by way of a systematic account. His theory of revolution must be reconstructed from scattered passages, most of which were written with an immediately political purpose. In 7.2.1 I consider his accounts of the bourgeois revolutions in the three European countries that were his constant points of reference: The

¹ I have suggested in 7.1.2 that in some cases the political change may be part and parcel of the social change, in that the process of *de facto* change may be inseparably bound up with the changes made *de jure*. See also the following note.

² Hence we have to ask whether the explanation of the relations of production suggested by Cohen (*Karl Marx's Theory of History*, ch. VI) refers to their stabilized or non-stabilized form. It could be the case that the pre-legal form of new relations of production were inferior (*qua* promoters of the productive forces) to the legal form of the old relations, yet that the new relations would be superior when stabilized by law. Indeed, I argue below that Marx believed this to be true of communist relations of production as compared to capitalist ones. If this is the case, there can be no autonomous economic development: either there is no development (because the pre-legal forms are not taken up) or the development is not autonomous (because the legal form is essentially involved).

English Revolution of 1640–88, the French Revolution of 1789 and the German Revolution of 1848. In 7.2.2 I consider his various suggestions about the communist revolution – what could trigger it off and how it could develop subsequently.

7.2.1. The bourgeois revolutions

With the exception of a few remarks in *The Holy Family*, Marx nowhere offers more than brief comments on the French Revolution.¹ He deals somewhat more extensively with the English Revolution, in a review from 1850 of Guizot's *Discours sur l'Histoire de la Révolution d'Angleterre*. This also offers some useful comparisons between the two bourgeois revolutions, pointing to similarities as well as differences. By contrast, the comments on the German Revolution are abundant in the extreme, but often too immersed in the details to be of analytical value. For England and France we have a bird's-eye view that does not allow us to identify the actual mechanisms and forces at work; for Germany we see the mechanism at such close quarters that the overall design is lost. These textual constraints must be kept in mind.

Marx perceived the classical bourgeois revolutions as the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy, with a republican interregnum. "Everywhere the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy is effected only after fierce struggles and after passage through a republican form."² Hence it would be wrong to focus on the transition from monarchy to republic as *the* revolution; this is only a stage in a process whose overall form is "two steps forward, one step backward". Some other similarities between the English and the French Revolutions are the following. First, in their origin they were conservative rather than innovative, especially in France:

[The] French revolution began just as conservatively as the English, indeed much more so. Absolutism, particularly as it manifested itself finally in France, was here, too, an innovation, and it was against this innovation that the parliaments rose and defended the old laws, the *us et coutumes* of the old monarchy based on estates.³

Furthermore, both events were characterized by a vain appeal by the king to the people. Quoting Hobbes, Marx refers to the people as "*puer robustus sed malitiosus*, a robust, but ill-natured youth, which permits no kings, be

¹ *The Holy Family*, pp. 118ff.

² Review of Guizot, p. 254. With respect to France, the constitutional monarchy is the one established in 1815, not the brief episode after 1789.

³ Review of Guizot, p. 253.