

**Session 1, Sociology 924, *Theories of the State*  
September 6, 2005**

**Introduction: the problem of the “state” in social theory**

**I. Review of logistics of the course:**

1. **Assumed background:** this is a tricky matter: I want the discussions to be at a fairly high level – a PhD seminar should not be the first exposure to the range of ideas in a topic. But some people are very good at catching on and are willing to do extra background reading. As you will see when you look at the reading assignment for next week, this is vastly too much reading – by an order of magnitude – if this is all new. That session is meant as review.

**2. weekly interrogations:**

- **rigid requirement: due by noon on Sunday (the day before seminar).** interrogations should raise an issue/problem you want to talk about
- We will read and comment in some detail on your memo, circulate these comments to everyone in the class by Monday noon, and distill an agenda for the seminar on the basis of what you write.

**3. Term papers**

Term papers are not books, they are not dissertations. They are serious pieces of work, but still work of a scale and level of ambition that can be finished within a semester. We have reduced the number of seminar meetings in order to give you a month without regular classes to work on your papers.

**4. Mini-Conference**

**5. Some principles of good discussions**

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## II. The Theoretical scope of the course

When I first taught this seminar in the early 1980s it was almost exclusively preoccupied with the Marxist tradition of state theory. We began with the major works of the late 1960s and early 1970s that chartered the main contours of the Marxist state theory debate – Poulantzas, Miliband, Anderson, Jessop, Therborn, Offe, and some fairly obscure writers in the German capital logic school. And then we turned to a series of empirical studies that in one way or another touched on these very abstract theoretical debates. Gradually in successive iterations of the course I shifted the center of gravity from the issue of varieties of perspectives within the Marxist tradition to an encounter with a broader array of theoretical ideas going outside the parameters of a strictly defined Marxist approach. There is some loss in this shift: there is something exciting about immersing oneself in a single broad theoretical tradition and working through the fierce debates that animate that tradition. I continue, myself, to work within the Marxist tradition of social theory and continue to believe that it provides the most rigorous anchor for a critical sociology of contemporary society. But it is no longer the case that the debates within Marxism across its various internal divisions constitute the most vibrant site of intellectual work in which new ideas are being generated, and so I feel it is better now to cast our theoretical net across a wider spectrum. Within this wider arena, Marxist-influenced ideas remain important, and we will still devote considerable time to work that is clearly part of that tradition, but the thrust of the course will not primarily be about internal debates within Marxism as such.

One of the consequences of opening up the theoretical agenda of the course is that it is no longer the case that all of the work we will be reading situates itself as dealing with the “theory of the state” as such. That expression – the theory of the state – is mainly deployed within Marxist work or Marxist-inflected work. All of the things we will read revolve around the analysis of the state, state apparatuses, state policies, and closely related phenomena, but not all of it is framed in terms of “the theory of the state.” I don’t think this is a particular problem, but it does mean that the language and concepts used in the various things we will read will not have the same kind of continuity that would exist if all the work shared a common theoretical tradition.

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### III. A Agenda of Issues

There are a number of issues which I think we should keep in mind as we read both the theoretical and empirical materials throughout the semester. Here is a preliminary list. You could treat these as a kind of check-list of theoretical and methodological questions to ask of any of the works we study:

#### I. Metatheoretical issues

“Metatheory” refers to a wide range of issues that bear on the way you construct theories – basically the rules of theory construction. All sociological analyses and theories involve many meta-theoretical problems, and sometimes these take center stage in theoretical debates. In discussions of theories of the state, a number of metatheoretical issues are important:

##### 1. Levels of abstraction.

One of the big metatheoretical issues in social theory is the problem of the appropriate level of abstraction for the investigation of different sorts of problems and questions. The theory of the state is one of the areas of scholarly work in which this problem has been especially prominent. Within the Marxist tradition there is considerable work which attempts to forge exceedingly abstract theoretical concepts for understanding the state. In the most extreme cases the concept of the state is derived from the “logic of capital” and its properties elaborated on the basis of a formal analysis of the functional requirements of capitalism as a system. But Marxism is not alone in attempting extremely abstract concepts of the state: microfoundational theories of the state in the rational choice tradition also attempt to elaborate highly formalized, abstract concepts and theories. So, one of the issues we will want to address throughout the semester is problem of levels of abstraction:

- What levels of abstraction are treated as legitimate in the work you are reading?
- Is there an explicit discussion of this issue?
- Is a distinction made between the level of abstraction of the *concepts* in the theory and the level of abstraction of the *explanations* developed within the theory?

##### 2. Types of explanation

Social science encompasses a fairly wide range of different kinds of explanations, and one of the things to look for in any study of the state is the nature of its explanatory structure. Of course, a given work may invoke a variety of explanatory logics. In particular it is worth distinguishing the following:

- *Agentic explanations*: explanations of observations that rely on the beliefs, strategies, choices, actions of individuals. This sometimes rests of methodological individualism as a general stance towards social theory, but it need not. Microfoundational explanations need not be micro-reductionist.
- *Structural explanations*: explanations that invoke the properties of various kinds of relations and structures.

- *Counterfactuals*: the role in an explanatory argument of arguments of the form “what would have happened if?”
- *Path dependent explanations*: explanations that emphasize the ways in which an outcomes is dependent upon a specific trajectory of events over time, often focusing on some pivotal “switching point”. Path dependent explanations often invoke counterfactuals.
- *Negative selectivity*: explanations of what is excluded, of what does not happen, ofn “nonevents.” This is especially important in some class analyses of the state in which the claim is that class properties of the state exclude certain things from happening.
- *Functional explanations*: explanations of a structure or an event on the basis of the functions it serves within some system. This is an important kind of explanation within some Marxist accounts of the state.

## II. Substantive Theoretical Questions

### 1. The specific theoretical objects in the analysis of “the state”

The expression “Theory of the State” encompasses a wide range of theoretical objects. In everything you read it is worth making a list of what precisely the theory is about. Unfortunately, this is not always obvious. Among others, the following theoretical objects will appear in many readings:

- state policies/actions: what the state *does*
- the nature of state apparatuses
- the nature of state *actors* and their degree of autonomy of action
- “political power”
- political conflicts/struggles

### 2. What defines the boundaries of “the state”? What institutions/apparatuses are part of “the state”?

One question to pose to every theoretical treatment of the state is what specific array of institutions fall within the category, “the state”. Possibilities, entertained by different theorists, include:

- police, military, courts, legislatures
- schools
- churches
- electoral political parties
- officially licensed trade unions
- the family

This may seem like a semantic issue, but there are real theoretical stakes in these kinds of boundary-debates. Althusser adopts a massively expansive definition of the state and includes all

of these; most theorists adopt much more restrictive lists. Michael Mann, in fact, excludes the military.

Conceptual boundary discussions always involve elaborating a space of concept demarcations and contrasts. Some people object to this kind of discussion and prefer a fuzzy-boundary approach to concepts in which, for example, stateness is viewed as a dimension or matter of degree, and some institutions are more statist than others, but there is no sharp boundary condition of being “the state”. That is legitimate, but even fuzzy-boundaries require a clear, non-fuzzy definition of the dimensions of variability that define “stateness”.

In discussions of these conceptual space issues, the pivotal demarcations are typically drawn as the state vs civil society or the state vs the economy. One of the issues to look at in every reading is precisely how such contrasts are drawn.

### 3. Variations

Whenever you encounter a theoretical object in a reading one of the questions to ask is: *what spectrum of variation characterizes this object*. This is closely linked to the level of abstraction problem, since different levels of abstraction specify different forms of variation (ie. the variation among breeds of dogs within the category “dog” is at a lower level of abstraction than the variation within the family of canines in which dogs, wolves and coyotes are instances). In Marxist theories of the state the most fundamental spectrum of variation was the capitalist state vs feudal state vs socialist state (or “dictatorship of the proletariat”). That spectrum of variation is completely absent from most nonMarixst theories of the state.

Most of the discussion of variation we will encounter this semester concerns variations in the character of the state *within* capitalist societies. In the readings we should try to give precise to the ways these variations are understood and explained:

- How should we *conceptualize* the variations in the form of the state in capitalist societies?
- What are the salient dimensions of these variations?
- What defines the specificity of the “welfare state”, the “laissez faire” state, the “interventionist” state?
- How should we *explain* the variability in forms of the capitalist state?
- Are these to be explained primarily by the changing *functional requirements* of capital accumulation? By the *instrumental interests* of the capitalist class? By *class struggle*? By the interests of *state elites*? By dynamics located internal to the organizational structure of the state? Or what?

### 4. Class and State

Not all of the work we will examine will be preoccupied by the problem of the link of class and state. Nevertheless, one of the central themes throughout the course will be the issue of the ways in which the state can be viewed as *embodying a specific class character*. This is a complex issue, and many contemporary writers on the state reject the whole “problematique” (as the French call it) of the class character of states. This is at the core of the famous debate over

whether the state is a “state in capitalist society” or a “capitalist state”. A number of important issues are in play here:

- Do the apparatuses, institutions, and organizations that make up the state have a distinctive “class character”?
- How unitary is the class character of the state? How coherent and integrated are the apparatuses of the state thought to be with respect to this class character? To what extent can there be enduring contradictions and disjunctures within the state?
- What evidence would be needed to demonstrate the class character of the state?
- Is there a distinction between the class character of state policies and of the state as such?

### **5. The state and emancipatory social change**

Ultimately I am interested in worrying about the issues we will be exploring in this class because they bear on the problem of radical, emancipatory social change. In the classical Marxist tradition the state figured centrally in such discussions: the state was seen as the major impediment to transforming the class structure in emancipatory ways. The capitalist state was characterized as a functional superstructure engineered so as to reproduce capitalism and block radical challenges. Seizing the state – and radically transforming the class character of its apparatuses – was seen as the necessary condition for the long-term transcendence of capitalist class relations towards a classless society.

This issue – the relationship of the state to radical social emancipation – is no longer at the core of discussions of the state. Studies of the state and globalization, explanations of variations in the welfare state, and studies of the developmental state in the third world are not really concerned with obstacles to a radically egalitarian society in which class oppression is withering away, but rather with the realities of variations in states on the possibilities for progressive politics within the spectrum of capitalisms.

Even though the problem of emancipatory potential is off the theoretical (let alone political) agenda, I want us to continually bring this issue to the foreground and ask of each reading we discuss how it bears on the problem of understanding the possibilities for more fundamental, emancipatory social change.