WHAT DOES THE RULING CLASS DO WHEN IT RULES? 
SOME REFLECTIONS ON DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO 
THE STUDY OF POWER IN SOCIETY 

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What is the place of power in society? What is the relationship between class and power? Answers differ, as is to be expected, given the obvious significance of class and power to the evaluation of a given society. The question itself, however, appears simple and straightforward enough. Ideological biases apart, what seems to be at issue is the famous question of scientific method, of what is the most adequate method to answer the question. But is the question really so clear and simple? From what we know about “paradigms” (Kuhn) and “problematics” (Althusser) of science is it very likely that, for example, a proletarian revolutionary and critic of political economy (Marx), a German academic historian and sociological follower of Austrian marginalism (Weber), a descendant of Jeffersonian democracy (Mills), an admirer of contemporary liberal economics (Buchanan-Tullock, Parsons), or an adherent of some of the ruling political ideas of present-day USA (Dahl, Giddens), would be concerned with the same problem and ask the same question—even when they use the same words?

Leaving subtler points and distinctions aside we can distinguish at least three different major approaches to the study of power in society. The first and most common one we might call the subjectivist approach. With Robert Dahl it asks: Who governs?, or with William Domhoff: Who rules America?, or in the words of a British theorist of stratification, W.G. Runciman: “who rules and who is ruled?” or in the militant pluralist variant of Nelson Polsby: “Does anyone at all run this community?”

This is a subjectivist approach to the problem of power in society not in the same sense as “subjective” in the so-called subjective conceptions of stratification, which refer to stratification in terms of subjective evaluation and esteem, in contrast to stratification in terms of, say, income or education. It is a subjectivist approach in the sense that it is looking for the subject of power. It is looking, above all, for an answer to the question, Who has power? A few, many, a unified class of families, an institutional elite of top decision-makers, competing groups,
everyone, or no one really? The focus of the subjectivists is on the power-holding and power-exercising subject.  

The common subjectivist question can then be studied and answered in various ways. This has in fact given rise to a very lively methodological as well as substantial debate in the United States in the fifties and sixties, which still has not been superseded, between the “pluralists” and the elite and the ruling class theorists. Essentially, it has been a debate within the framework of liberal political ideology and liberal political theory, accepting the liberal conception of democracy as a starting-point and then investigating whether the contemporary manifestations of liberal democracy, in the present-day United States or in other Western countries, correspond or not to that conception. But it has also included important contributions from Marxist authors, who have basically confined themselves within this framework, accepting battle on the terrain chosen by the enemy. The latter case, by the way, highlights the far-reaching effects of prevailing ideology, shaping even the form of opposition to itself.

Outside the subjectivist fold and its internal polemics about different methods and answers, another type of question is raised by some authors who base themselves on liberal economic ideology and liberal economic theory. We might label it the economic approach. In the businessman’s manner, the question here is not who, but how much. Power is regarded above all as a capacity to get things done. The primary emphasis is on “power to” rather than “power over” and the crucial question is not the distribution but the accumulation of power. As a theory of power the economic approach features two main variants, a sociological and a utilitarian. The main proponent of the former is Talcott Parsons. Parsons conceives power “as a circulating medium, analogous to money” and defines it as “generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions—whatever the actual agency of that enforcement.”

In the utilitarian “economic theories of democracy,” little attention and consideration is allotted the phenomenon of power and its conceptualization. Politics is seen from the perspective of an “individualist theory of collective choice” and the meaning of power is then derived from the assumed blessings of market exchange. “This approach”, write Buchanan and Tullock, “incorporates political activity as a particular form of exchange; and, as in the market relation, mutual gains to all par-
ties are ideally expected to result from the collective relation. In a very
real sense, therefore, political action is viewed essentially as a means
through which the power of all the participants may be increased, if we
define power as the ability to command things that are desired by men.”

Although they can be said to share a common approach to power,
inspired by liberal economics, concentrating as they do on non-conflictual
“power to”, the two main variants of the economic approach also show
differences that are by no means insignificant. In the sociological vari-
ant, power is generated and operates in social relationships, whereas in
the utilitarian conception it is basically a non-relational asset. In both
the problem of class and power by and large disappears.

With little of the elaborate theoretical imagination of the above-men-
tioned authors, the economic approach to power has also been applied
to the problems of political development and “modernization”, above
all by Samuel P. Huntington. Huntington starkly emphasizes the impor-
tance of the “accumulation of power” over the question of its distrib-
ution. He opens his book Political Order in Changing Societies by proclaiming,
“The most important political distinction among countries concerns not
their form of government but their degree of government. The differ-
ences between democracy and dictatorship are less than the differ-
cences between those countries whose politics embodies consensus, community, legiti-
macy, organization, effectiveness, stability, and those countries whose
politics is deficient in these qualities.”

To Huntington it is the general liberal ideas about economic development,
rather than liberal economic theory, which provides the model.

The third approach might be named a structural-processual approach.
But with its focus on society as an objective structured totality and on
contradiction, motion, and change, we had perhaps better call it the
dialectical-materialist approach, embodied in the new scientific study of his-
tory and society founded by Marx, historical materialism. Here the pri-
mary focus is on the historical social contexts and modalities of power,
and the first question is: What kind of society is it? Then: What are the
effects of the state upon this society, upon its reproduction and change?

The central task of Capital was not to identify those who have the
wealth and those who are poor, nor those who rule and those who are
ruled, but, as the author pointed out in his preface, to lay bare “the
economic law of motion of modern society.” That is, Marx was above
all interested in how wealth and poverty, domination and subjugation
are being (re)produced and how this can be changed. The basic focus
of study is on neither property nor the property owners but on capital,
that is, on (particular historical) relations of production and their relationship to the productive forces and to the state and the system of ideas.

II

This third approach to the problem of power in society owes its more roundabout character to the fact that it seriously and systematically tries to tackle two fundamental problems largely neglected by the other approaches. One concerns “power to”, the other relates to “power over”.

One question which should be seriously faced is: Power to do what? What is a particular amount of power used for? The utilitarian answer—to maximize one’s utility—is hardly very satisfactory in view of the enormous variety of historical social forms, and thereby systems, of power. For the same reason we do not learn very much from Parsons’ discussion of power in terms of realization of “collective goals.” Nor should it be assumed a priori, or made a part of the definition, that, as Parsons contends, power is exercised “in the interest of the effectiveness of the collective operation as a whole”, rather than in the interest of the exploitation of one class by another.

What “power to” means depends on the kind of society in which it operates. A Marxist analysis of a given society first of all focuses on its mode(s) of production, its system(s) of relations and forces of production.

By determining the relations of production the Marxist analyst at the same time determines if there are classes in the given society and what classes there are, because classes in the Marxist sense are people who occupy certain positions in society as basically defined by the relations of production. If immediate production—in husbandry, agriculture, industry, transport, etc.—and the appropriation and control of the surplus produced are separated among different role incumbents, and are not united in an individual or in a collective, there are classes. And the different modes of separation (slavery, feudalism, capitalism, etc.) mean different classes.

Determining the relations of production does not pertain only to the context of political power. It is also directly related to the question of power, since the separation between the immediate producers and the appropriators of the surplus product entails specific relations of domination and subordination. Exploitative relations of production directly involve relations of domination, and in what may be called the key passage of Marx’s materialist interpretation of history he says, “The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers, determines the relation of domination and servitude,
as it emerges directly out of production itself and in turn reacts upon production.” Marx then continues and makes his basic proposition about the relationship between the economy and the polity (the meaning, truth and fruitfulness of which proposition is under debate): “Upon this basis, however, is founded the entire structure of the economic community, which grows up out of the conditions of production itself, and consequently its specific political form. It is always the direct relation between the masters of the conditions of production and the direct producers which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden foundation of the entire social edifice and therefore also of the political form of the relation between sovereignty and dependence, in short of the particular form of the state.”

For the adherents of the subjectivist approach, in both its pluralist and elitist variants, to raise the problem of “power to do what?” means to ask: What do rulers do when they rule? Where do the leaders lead the led? To say or imply that what rulers do when they rule is to maintain their ruling position is at best trivial—and not infrequently wrong. Intentionally and unintentionally what rulers do and do not do affects the ruled, and the same sort of power subjects—in terms of personal background and present interpersonal relations—may affect the ruled in very different ways. There are different effects under pluralism or elitism, different effects under, say, military governments and centralized “oligarchical” organizations. And there are many ways for a ruling class to exercise and maintain its rule, other than by supplying, from its own ranks, the political personnel. It may therefore be argued that rulers and ruling classes would be better identified not by their names and numbers, their social background and power career—although all this is of course not without importance—but by their actions, that is by the objective effects of their actions. From this perspective, the Marxist interjects into the subjectivist discussion, polarized around democracy and dictatorship or, in its contemporary, somewhat lower-pitched versions, pluralism and elitism: democracy of what class, dictatorship of what class?

There is a second aspect to what rulers do when they rule. Talcott Parsons once made a famous critique of utilitarianism for its inability to account for social order. What all kinds of subjectivist elite and ruling class theorists are unable to do is to account for social change. Characteristically enough, the classical elite theorists, who really thought out the consequences of their theories, all basically held that society did not change. Instead they drew a picture of an eternal cycle of rising, ruling, degenerating, and falling elites. This goes for all of them, Gumplowicz, Mosca, Pareto, and Michels. Ultimately they tended to
reduce people and human society to biology.23 Now, though men certainly are biological organisms, it is an obvious fact that human society has changed over the ages of its existence and has taken a number of forms. The task of a social science must necessarily be to analyse these different historical forms and their change. This cannot be done by taking the subjects of power, their psyche, their will, as the starting point, but only by taking the social context in which they rule.

The society in which the rulers rule contains certain possibilities and tendencies of change. The rulers rule in a certain stage of development of a certain social structure, and their rule both affects and is affected by the tendencies and contradictions inherent therein. The subjectivists stop before analysing these tendencies and contradictions and typically conclude: Look, only a few have power, that is bad! Or: Look many have power, that is good! It should be noted that the important thing in this context of power and change is the effect of the rule—not directly upon individuals, nor upon the gains and handicaps it means for persons and groups24—but upon the social structure and social relationships in which the individuals live, because it is the latter, rather than the sheer fact of being handicapped or exploited, which determine the possibilities of change and revolt.

Besides the problem of “power to”, there is also a very important neglected problem involved in “power over”. Are the different moments of the exercise of somebody’s power over somebody else related to each other? If we assume neither that social life is completely random and unpatterned, nor that it is a unified, consensual, collective operation, then how should the relationships be studied and how can they be grasped?

At first sight it might appear gratuitous to call this a neglected problem, as it is precisely what the substantial polemics between pluralists and elitists have been about. True to their common subjectivist core, however, the pluralists and the elitists have concentrated on a secondary aspect of the problem. What they have been debating is whether there is an interpersonal relation between the different moments of power in society: Is there a cohesive elite which unites the different exercises of power by making the decisions in different areas? Or is there a fragmentation of decision-making between different little or not-connected groups? What this formulation of the issue does not take into serious account is that an interpersonal fragmentation of decision-making does not necessarily mean that the different power events are random and unpatterned. On the contrary, it is a basic, and it seems, warranted, assumption of social science that the events in human society are in
some ways always patterned, and therefore possible to grasp by scientific analysis. What the elitism-pluralism theorists have been doing, then, is to concentrate on the existence or non-existence of one possible form of the patterning of power in society and, it should be added, on a form which hardly seems to be the most important one in modern complex societies.

Little is gained in answering this kind of objection by referring to another kind of interpersonal identity than that ensured by overlapping membership in cohesive power groups—by referring, that is, to a common identity of ideas, to a consensus of values. How is a particular kind of consensus and its maintenance to be explained, and how does it actually operate, so general and abstract as it tends to be in modern societies? What objective social structures and social relationships are brought about and/or maintained, how are people’s lives patterned by the different exercises of supposedly consensual power?

Important methodological critiques of pluralism have been developed by Bachrach and Baratz, and most recently by Lukes, with their inclusion of institutional “mobilization of bias” and of “non-decision-making,” and in the case of Lukes, of latent conflicts and of the effects of inaction. But they do not deal with the present problem, of “power over.” In fact, the subjectivist orientation of these authors seems to preclude a way out for the elitists in this respect. What their refined methods can do is to detect more hidden manifestations of elite rule, but they can hardly find social patternings of exercise of power other than those of a unified power subject. With Bachrach-Baratz this is strongly implied by their conception of power, and its related concepts, as an interpersonal relation between A and B. With Lukes it follows from the author’s moralistic concern with responsibility. For this reason Lukes is uninterested in impersonal forms of domination and wants to concentrate on cases where it can be assumed that the exerciser(s) of power could have acted differently from how they did. And in this context he throws in a distinction between power and fate! To Lukes too, then, power should be analysed primarily with a view to finding subjects of power, identifiable, free, and responsible originators of acts (and non-acts). He seems to remain stuck within the pluralist-elitist framework, of either a unified elite or various elites or leadership groups (whose interrelationship as a relation of power over others remains obscure, unless they themselves are aware of their relationship).

Marx opened up a path out of the pluralist-elitist impasse, one which seems to have remained almost completely unnoticed among sociologists and political scientists, including writers who have explicitly referred to
Marx, more or less critically. The radical novelty and dissimilarity to others of the Marxian approach seems to have been drowned in subjectivist receptions and reinterpretations. The way out indicated by Marx is that the study of a given society should be not just a study of its subjects nor of its structure only, but also and at the same time should be an inquiry into its process of reproduction. Significantly, it is in the study of the process of reproduction that Marx analyses the class relationships of exploitation and domination.

Capitalist production, therefore, under its aspect of a continuous connected process, of a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital relation; on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer. In a critique of the subjectivist conceptions of market exchange in 18th- and 19th-century economics Marx provided a critique in advance of 20th-century sociologists as well: “To be sure, the matter looks quite different if we consider capitalist production in the uninterrupted flow of its renewal, and if, in place of the individual capitalist and the individual worker, we view them in their totality, the capitalist class and the working-class confronting each other. But in so doing we should be applying standards entirely foreign to commodity production.”

For the study of power in society the perspective of reproduction means that the commanding question of all the variants of the subjectivist approach—Who rules, a unified elite or competing leadership groups? Is the economic elite identical with or in control of the political elite?—is displaced by the question: What kind of society, what fundamental relations of production, are being reproduced? By what mechanisms? What role do the structure and actions and nonactions of the state (or of local government) play in this process of reproduction, furthering it, merely allowing it, or opposing it?

The analysis of reproduction makes possible an answer to the question of how the different moments of the exercise of power in society are interrelated, even if there is no conscious, interpersonal interrelation. They are interrelated by their reproductive effects. A given kind of relations of production may be reproduced without the exploiting (dominant) class defined by them being in “control” of the government in any usual and reasonable sense of the word, even though the interventions of the state further and/or allow these relations of production to be reproduced. And yet the fact that a specific form of exploitation and domination is being reproduced, is an example of class rule and is an important aspect of power in society.
III

The limited aim of this paper is to distinguish between different approaches to the problem of class and power, particularly between the dialectical-materialist (Marxist) approach and the variants of the subjectivist approach. Such a distinction seems important in order to open up possibilities for the application of the specific Marxist approach, given the fatal flaws of the prevailing subjectivist one. The distinction is particularly important at the present juncture in the social sciences, where, in spite of a renewed interest in and acknowledgement of Marx, an evaluation of the truth and fertility of Marxist theory tends to be made impossible by the amalgams currently fashionable in post-1968 sociology. In such eclectic constructions—which appear to be made according to a recipe like, one part Marx, two parts Weber, and two parts more recent sociology (including ingredients supplied by the cook himself), seasoned with differing amounts of hot (radical) and mild (liberal) spices—the distinctly Marxist analysis is drowned.

With such an aim, the present paper is not a direct contribution to the study of class and power. But within this limitation I will finally try to indicate a few guiding threads for a Marxist type of empirical investigation of the problem of class and power. That only rather general and tentative guiding threads will be offered reflects, I think, not only the limitations of the present paper and of its author, but also the fact that Marx opened up a radically new scientific path, to be constantly cleared of the lush vegetation of dominant ideologies, and on which only the very first steps in the direction of systematic theory have been taken.

The primary object of empirical study, for a grasp of the relations of class, state, and power, should be neither interpersonal relations between different elites (for instance, the government and the business elites), nor their social backgrounds, nor issues and decisions and non-decisions—although all this is important. The primary object should be the effects of the state on the (re)production of a given (whether found or hypothesized) mode (or modes) of production. The relations of domination entailed by the relations of production are concentrated in the state. Through the state the rule of the ruling class is exercised. The character of this rule has to be grasped from the effects of the state. There are two aspects to these effects: what is done (and not done) through the state, and how things are done that are done through the state. We need a typology of state interventions and a typology of state structures.
The typology of state structures should distinguish among the differential effects (of legislative, administrative, and judiciary arrangements and procedures, of mechanisms of governmental designation, of organization of army and police, etc.) upon the extent to which the state can be used by different classes—that is, their effects on whether and to what extent the rule of a given class of people (with certain characteristics and qualifications as defined by their position in society) can operate through the state structure under investigation. In this way broad types of state structures can be identified and distinguished in terms of their class character, for example feudal states, bourgeois states and proletarian states (in which the principle of “politics in command”, as realized in soviets, workers’ parties, mass movements of cultural revolution, etc., seems to be a central characteristic). Various specific state apparatuses, such as legislative bodies, the judiciary, or the army, could also be studied from this point of view. It should of course not be assumed that a concrete state at a specific point in time necessarily has a homogeneous class character in all its institutions—which raises the problem then of how to establish its dominant class character.

To study the process by which the state actually operates we also have to have a typology of state interventions (including non-interventions significant to the (re)production of given relations of production). Such a typology could be almost endlessly refined. Basically, however, it should comprise two dimensions. One concerns what is done, and the other how it is done. In other words, one refers to the external effects of state intervention on other structures of society, above all on the relations of production, (but also on the ideological system), and the other refers to the internal effects upon the state itself. State intervention can either further, merely allow, or go against, and at the limit break, given relations of production.

And they can either increase, maintain, or go against, and at the limit break, given relations of political domination as embodied in the character of apparatuses of administration (and government) and repression. (The possibilities of successfully breaking given relations of production are fundamentally determined by the particular stage of the relations and forces of production, and the stage of the relations of force between classes which this implies.) The following table illustrates the types of state intervention possible along these two dimensions.
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<tr>
<th>Effect upon given relations of political domination (Structure of administration and repression)</th>
<th>Effect upon given relations of production</th>
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<tr>
<td>Further</td>
<td>Allow</td>
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<td>Increase</td>
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<td>Maintain</td>
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<td>Go against/Break</td>
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This typology can be applied both to a given political measure, such as a social security program, nationalization, a land reform, a school reform, etc., and to the sum of actions undertaken by a given government over a given period. It is in this way that the class character, in the Marxist sense, of a regime or a policy is to be ascertained. For example, a nationalization act or a land reform can allow and even further capitalist relations of production if it is carried out through the rules of the capitalist game, involving compensation more or less at market value, implementation through the established legislative and administrative procedure, and the creation of enterprises run by new owners using wage labor for profit (or for subsidizing other enterprises run for profit). But such measures can also be put into effect in the opposite manner, without necessarily meaning the complete abolition of capitalism in the society. A regional policy can be carried out with the help of various kinds of subsidies, such as tax rebates, to capitalist enterprises, thus following the logic of capitalist relations of production but making a certain localization of plants more profitable. But the same measure can also go against that logic, through mandatory planning. The class character is determined on the basis of the identity of the dominant (exploiting) class (i.e., the dominant class of the particular relations of production furthered or allowed by the interventions). If there is a discrepancy in the effects upon the relations of production and the structure of the state, this indicates a contradictory and unstable situation. For instance, in the case of the last period of Czarist Russia, the state furthered the developing capitalist relations of production while at the same time basically maintaining a largely pre-capitalist form of state; Soviet Russia in the 1920’s allowed capitalist relations of production to develop while maintaining a proletarian dictatorship; and the Allende
regime in Chile partly allowed, partly went against, capitalist relations of production while maintaining the existing state structure (its administration, judiciary, and army).

It should be underlined that, as a rule, there are a number of ways in which given relations of production can be furthered in a given situation. Opinions therefore usually differ over which is the best one. Consequently, a given state intervention may very well go against the current opinion of business organizations, but still further capitalist relations of production. The bourgeoisie as a class, and its interests, are not identical with the identity or ideas of a particular group of business leaders at a particular point in time. From this perspective we can understand the pattern that frequently appears in capitalist politics, wherein policies, when first introduced, are opposed by business groups and conservative parties, but once carried out, are accepted by them, with longer or shorter delay (e.g. collective bargaining, social security programs, Keynesian economics). This phenomenon is hidden by the issues-and-decisions approach of the pluralist methodologists.

The ruling class of a given society is the exploiting class of that exploitative system of relations of production furthered (above others, if there are other relations of production in the society) by the content and form of the totality of state interventions during a given period. The ruling class need not necessarily be the economically dominant class, in the sense of the exploiting class of the dominant mode of production in a society where there are several modes of production (e.g., self-subsistence farming, feudalism, petty commodity production, capitalism).

One possible refinement of the typology is to distinguish among their effects on the two different classes (exploiting and exploited) that bear the exploitative relations of production that the interventions in question further, allow, or go against. For instance reformist governments usually are to be found in squares 4 and 5 in the table above although certain of their measures will be found in 1 and 2, as for example anti-strike measures—but a more refined typology would direct the study to their possible effects on the relations of distribution within the given relations of production. Another refinement, as regards the effects on the state, would be to differentiate between the class effects on the administrative and on the repressive apparatuses of the state. Fascist regimes, analyzed in terms of their effect on capitalist relations of production, belong in square 1, but they are more closely characterized within that type by their increase in the repressive apparatus of the bourgeois state. A third elaboration would be to distinguish between effects of the state on different fractions of capital, e.g., industrial versus banking (or commercial or agrarian) capital, domestic versus foreign capital, big (monopoly)
versus small capital. In this way different hegemonic fractions of the bourgeoisie can be identified.

What the ruling class does when it rules, in the Marxist sense, then, is not to make, as a compact unit, all important decisions in society. The rule of the ruling class is exercised by a set of objectively interrelated but not necessarily interpersonally unified mechanisms of reproduction, through which the given mode of exploitation is reproduced. The ruling class, in this sense, is not a unified power subject. The rule of the ruling class is not necessarily, and is usually not, expressed in conscious collective decisions and actions by the class as a whole. What the ruling class does when it rules is not primarily a matter of subjective intentions and actions. Its rule is embodied in an objective social process, through which a certain mode of production is maintained and expanded, guaranteed and furthered by the state. This means that the pluralist-elitist debate does not pertain to the existence of a ruling class in the radically different Marxist sense. What that debate is concerned with are certain aspects of the mode of organization of the ruling class, such as its cohesion.

It should be noticed that neither the existence of a ruling class, nor what class is the ruling class, nor the amount of its power, are defined here *a priori*. What classes there are has to be uncovered by an analysis of the relations of production in a given society. The ruling class has to be identified and the amount of its political power, the range of its rule, has to be ascertained by a study of the structure and the interventions of the state. The dialectical-materialist approach to power in society is an empirical approach, although of a quite different kind. Having located the ruling class, another task is then to lay bare the mechanisms of its rule, which includes finding an answer to why the actual interventions of the state function—as such mechanisms.

The state power of the ruling class is part of the total reproduction process of society. As Poulantzas has pointed out, there are two aspects of reproduction (and it should be added of revolution as well): the reproduction of the positions of the given social structure, and the reproduction of individuals who can occupy them. For example, capital, wage labor, and capitalist enterprise have to be reproduced, as does the state apparatus. The reproduction of position also involves, at least in the long run, the production and reproduction of a compatibility between the different levels of the social structure. The reproduction of capitalism requires not only the reproduction of capitalist enterprise but in the long run the reproduction of a compatible capitalist state as well.
But also, new generations of individuals—and the given individuals year in and year out—have to be trained to occupy the given positions, to be qualified or subjected to fulfill adequately the tasks provided by the social structure. Out of the new-born infants a given proportion have to be reared to become owners and managers of capital, other portions to become workers, white collar employees, and administrative and repressive personnel, or petty-bourgeois farmers, shop-keepers, and artisans.

What broad types of mechanisms of reproduction—within which we can seek and find the concrete mechanisms in concrete societies—can be identified? One of primary importance is, of course, economic constraint. Economic constraint functions, in ways laid bare by specific economic analysis, in and through the stage of the productive forces, the inherent dynamics of the relations of production, and the interdependence of the forces and relations of production. It operates on various levels and decisively affects both the reproduction of positions and of the agents to occupy them. A given level of the development of the productive forces excludes certain relations of production, makes them untenable or obsolete and non-competitive; and the necessity for some kind of material reproduction then favors certain other relations of production, and determines the range of political options, such as for the Bolshevik government after the civil war. On a lower level, economic constraint imposes certain limits upon what a capitalist corporation or a feudal manor can do to stay in business, limits for instance on the extent to which one corporation or manor can tamper with the capitalist and feudal relations of production governing other corporations or manors. Economic constraint operates in a constant process to reproduce a certain structure of economic positions, by sanctions of bankruptcies, unemployment, poverty, and sometimes outright starvation. Economic constraint is an important mechanism for keeping even revolutionarily-conscious peasants and workers in line and harnessing them for the reproduction of the society they would like to overthrow.

Another important type of mechanism of reproduction is political, and includes two basic subtypes, administration and repression, which in modern societies are both regularly concentrated in a distinct state apparatus (or, rather, system of state apparatuses). Through administrative interventions—taxation, regulations, subsidies, countercyclical policies, etc.—the reproduction of a certain mode (or modes) of production is favored or hindered. Administration also functions in the reproduction of agents for the positions of the given modes of production, through
such things as manpower policies (from binding peasants to their landlords to stimulating labor market mobility) and social security policies (from providing dreaded workhouses to supplying social security benefits, which function both to alleviate dangerous discontent and to stimulate business). Administrative interventions operate to ensure the overall compatibility of the substructures of society. The mechanism of administration also includes mechanisms for the reproduction of the state apparatus itself, embodied in constitutional provisions, procedures for the handling of issues, or legal conceptions. These can hinder a government which may intend on far-reaching social change, or can restrict the accessibility to the state of certain classes or sections of classes.

Repression is the other important political mechanism of reproduction. The development or maintenance of certain modes of production can be repressed by the army, the police, prisons, or the executioner. Movements of opposition can be repressed in various ways and degrees. (One interesting and neglected object of study in this respect concerns to what extent the development of the labor movement in the United States has been stopped by repression, especially after World War I and World War II.) Individuals who refuse to accept any of the given positions can be taken care of, for instance in prisons or in mental hospitals.

Mechanisms of reproduction, then, are not only, nor even mainly, ideological, as sociologists are prone to assume. But ideological mechanisms are of course important too. Their primary role is not in legitimating the prevailing system, but rather in a differential shaping of aspirations and self-confidence and in a differential provision of skills and knowledge. This process of qualification and subjection, in which little human animals are formed into members of different classes, takes place in a number of ideological apparatuses: the family, the educational system, the church, the mass media, on-the-job training, and the workplace (where so much of the inculcation of hierarchy and discipline takes place). These apparatuses and the dominant ideological formation which takes place in them, are not necessarily congruent with each other. One particularly problematic relationship is that between the family and other apparatuses, such as the church and (above all in modern capitalism) the educational system. On the one hand, the family is an important mechanism of reproduction; but on the other, a certain amount of individual mobility is crucial to the reproduction of the system. For individual mobility implies that the commanding positions are occupied by more competent persons, as well as offering an obvious channel of discontent. As Marx pointed out, referring both to capitalist enterprise and to the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages: “The
more a ruling class is able to assimilate the most prominent men of the dominated classes the more stable and dangerous is its rule.”

The Marxist perspective notes that rigidly differentiated access to the educational system tends to make exploitation less stable. In the Marxist perspective, what is most important to the reproduction of exploitation is not differential access to the educational system, but the differential educational system itself. Mobility, then, is essentially an ideological mechanism of reproduction. So also is another phenomenon dear to all subjectivists, interpersonal intercourse, which contributes to a common outlook among the representatives of different constituencies.

Through these mechanisms of reproduction the ruling class can exercise its rule and keep state power without necessarily having to supply the political and administrative personnel. The economic laws of motion of a given society set a very high threshold for their possible trespass by politicians. The structural arrangements of the state (its class character) circumscribe the state interventions decided upon by the government. The ideological mechanisms of reproduction shape both the politicians—even labor politicians with no personal intercourse with the bourgeois cream—and the population at large, including the exploited classes.

All these mechanisms operate in and through the conflict and struggle of classes. Class struggle then does not mean, even mainly, battles between unified, self-conscious entities. It means conflict and struggles between people who occupy different positions in exploitative modes of production.

Reproduction and revolution, consequently, are not to be understood in terms of mechanisms of reproduction versus class struggle. The reproductive mechanisms also produce, at the same time, mechanisms of revolution. To realize this is, of course, a basic feature of a dialectical approach. Marx analyzed, for instance, how the expanded reproduction of capital also meant the development of contradictions between the relations and the forces of production. That analysis might be extended to the political and ideological processes of reproduction. For example, the strengthening of the state—and with it the strengthening of administrative and repressive operations of the state—which characterizes the modern, imperialistic state of capitalism, has been accompanied by more devastating contradictions among capitalist states. The two world wars of the 20th century gave rise to non-capitalist regimes among a third of humanity. Similarly, at the ideological level, the role of the intelligentsia, both in old Russia and China and recently in the advanced capitalist societies, testifies to the fact that the mechanism of qualification and subjection might also take on the character of a revolutionary mechanism,
developing a contradiction between qualification and subjection. There are also mechanisms of revolution which operate in and through the class struggle. And, looked at from the other side of the same coin, the class struggle is fought in and through mechanisms of reproduction and revolution. But all that is another part of the story, and, maybe, part of another paper.

Notes

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7. In the egalitarian orientation of Bachrach-Baratz this focus is coupled with a look-out for who, if any, gain and who, it any, are handicapped by the existing “mobilization of bias”. Besides their above-mentioned articles see their *Power and Poverty* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1970).


9. The most important example is R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969). The polar opposite kind of Marxist stance is exemplified by N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Class* (London: NLB, 1973). In a well-argued article the latter has been criticized for not coming to grips with, and thus not really revealing the weaknesses of, the problematic of his opponents: E. Laclau, “The Specificity...
of the Political: The Poulantzas-Miliband Debate”, *Economy and Society* (1975), pp. 87–110. Although mainly restricted to a distinction between different approaches to the problem of power, the present article tries to take account of the criticisms of both Poulantzas and Miliband. At the same time I am indebted to them both for their very valuable contributions.


18. Power in a society should of course be studied not only in terms of the non-specific, extra-organizational power of organizational elites, but also in terms of the mode of organization itself, particularly the mode of organization of people’s working lives, which differ both in the kind and the amount of domination and independence. However, the Marxist focus on exploitation and class is related to the discussion of power only in the broad sense of the latter, in the sense of A significantly affecting B in a situation of possible negative sanctions against B’s non-compliance. The specification of power in terms of responsibility, choice, and agreement, and distinctions between fate, coercion, authority, manipulation, and power, are internal to a subjectivist discourse and as such are outside the Marxist analysis proper. The latter does not start from “the point of view of the actor” but from ongoing social processes.


20. Consider, for instance, the sterility of the Michels type of organizational theory when faced with the completely different behavior of Social Democratic and Communist parties in August 1914 and September 1939, respectively.


24. This is in contrast to the approach of Bachrach-Baratz, *op. cit.*

25. Dahl has written, “...democratic politics is merely the chaff. It is the surface manifestation, representing superficial conflicts. Prior to politics, beneath it, enveloping it, restricting it, conditioning it, is the underlying consensus... among a predominant portion of the politically active members.” R. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 132. But what if “consensus” is the surface manifestation of something else, “enveloping, restricting and conditioning” electoral politics?
26. This is a weak spot in the otherwise well-substantiated critique of pluralist these by Miliband (op. cit.). Miliband basically shrinks from really analysing governments whose personnel is not recruited from the economic elite, and where the higher echelons of the administration may also be recruited otherwise. In such cases he merely refers to the ideology of the political leaders as part of a bourgeois consensus (see ch. 4, part IV). He does provide some empirical material and suggestions for a study of the problem, but it is fundamentally outside his model of control. For the analysis of advanced bourgeois democracies, of reformism fascism, and military governments, a more complex model seems crucial. Similarly, the important works of William Domhoff, on the haute-bourgeois backgrounds and connections of American politicians and administrators, and on the cohesiveness of the top-most stratum of the US bourgeoisie, would benefit from being located in a much more elaborate conceptualization and analysis of the US power structure and of the contradictory development of US society.

29. A nondecision means “a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker,” Bachrach-Baratz, op. cit. (1970), p. 44.
30. Lukes, op. cit., chs. 4, 7. Lukes draws upon the work of Crenson, op. cit.
32. Lukes, op. cit., pp. 55–56. Cf. Marx: “I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense couleur de rose. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.” Das Kapital, I, p. viii; Capital (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), vol. 1, p. 10. Marx’s view certainly did not mean that the power of the capitalist was a fate to submit to, but something that could be combated and abolished. It does mean, however, that it is rather pointless to accuse the capitalists of not behaving like non-capitalists. The Marxian standpoint implies, of course, that the arm of criticism is replaced by the criticism of arms (i.e., the class struggle in all its forms).
34. Ibid., p. 549 and p. 586, respectively.
35. This seems to indicate a way out of the dilemma posed by Claus Offe in his very penetrating essay, ‘Klassenherrschaft und politisches System. Zur Selektivität politischer Institutionen’, in his Strukturprobleme des kapitalistischen Staates (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972). This is an “objectivist” approach to the problem of the selectivity of the state, but it is not based on any definitions of the objective interests of the revolutionary class, which Offe rejects (p. 86). Neither does it mean that an empirical inquiry into the class character of the state only can be made post festum, as Offe concludes (p. 90), when the class struggle has developed to the point where the limits of a given state appear.
36. Fascism is also distinguished by its furthering of monopoly capitalist relations of production, which points to still another distinction in terms of fractions of classes furthered or disadvantaged by the state interventions. Cf. N. Poulantzas, Fascism and Dictatorship (London: NLB, 1974).
38. Parsons treats the problem of reproduction or “pattern-maintenance” solely in terms of transmission of values. For a relatively recent formulation see T. Parsons. The System of Modern Societies (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 10–15. Similarly all “social sources of stability” singled out by Parkin (op. cit., 1971, ch. 2) refer to ideological mechanisms: mobility, the educational system, religion, gambling, and the fostering of beliefs in luck. A noteworthy exception is H.F. Moorhouse’s interesting account of the political and economic constraints imposed upon the British working class up to

39. To identify the ideological mechanisms of reproduction with the processes of legitimation would imply that people do not revolt against the given rule under which they live because they regard it as legitimate. This seems hardly warranted. People may not revolt, political and economic constraints aside, because they do not know the kind of domination they are subjected to. That is, they may be hold ignorant not only of its negative features but of its positive claims and achievements as well. They may be ignorant of alternatives, or they may feel themselves incapable of doing anything about it, even if they know of other possible types of societies. But this ignorance, disinterest, and lack of confidence are not simply there, as characteristics of certain individuals and groups, they are produced by definite social processes. See the important distinction between pragmatic and normative acceptance made by Michael Mann, “The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy.” American Sociological Review 35 (1970), pp. 423–39. The one-eyed concentration on legitimation is often related to a normative conception: that every rule should be based on the true and knowing consensus of the ruled, thereby holding it legitimate. See, for instance, J. Habermas, Legitationsprobleme im Spatkapitalismus (Frankfurt: Suhrkapm, 1973), esp. pp. 162ff. But that is another question. Interestingly enough, Habermas and Offe both accept Weber’s ideal type of competitive capitalism, against which they contrast modern capitalism with its enormously increased amount of state interventions, supposedly making more ideological legitimation necessary (Habermas, op. cit., Ch. II; Offe, “Tauschverhaltnis und politische Steuerung. Zur Aktualitat des Legitimationsproblems,” in Offe, op. cit., pp. 27–63). This view tends to veil the important role of ideology in the era of competitive capitalism—the era of human rights declarations, of the ascendance of bourgeois nationalism, and of still-strong established and dissenting religions—and to veil as well the economic and Political mechanisms of crisis and revolution in the present period, a period which has witnessed the shattering of the economic foundations of the British Empire and is witnessing the shaking of the supremacy of the United States.
