

## Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)\*

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(1933-1981)

**Abstract** The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is. There is a state-system: a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society. There is, too, a state-idea, projected, purveyed and variously believed in in different societies at different times. We are only making difficulties for ourselves in supposing that we have also to study the state - an entity, agent, function or relation over and above the state-system and the state-idea. The state comes into being as a stucturation within political practice; it starts its life as an implicit construct; it is then reified - as the *res publica*, the public reification, no less - and acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice. The ideological function is extended to a point where conservatives and radicals alike believe that their practice is not directed at each other but at the state; the world of illusion prevails. The task of the sociologist is to demystify; and in this context that means attending to the senses in which the state does not exist rather than to those in which it does.

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'When the state itself it is danger', Lord Denning said in his judgment yesterday, "our cherished freedoms may have to take second place, and even natural justice itself may have to suffer a setback'.

'The flaw in Lord Denning's argument is that it is the government who decide what the interests of the state should be and which invokes 'national security' as the state chooses to define it', Ms Pat Hewitt, director of the National Council for Civil Liberties, said yesterday'.

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When Jeremy Bentham set out to purge political discourse of the delusions and fantasies generated by the many 'alegorical contrivances' through which self-interest and sectional power are masked as independent moral entities, the notion of the state did not enjoy wide currency in English political or intellectual life. Had it done so he would surely have included it along with 'government' 'order' and 'the contsitution' as one of those terms peculiarly apt to foster 'an atmospher of illusion' - a fallacy of confusion at best, an 'official malefactor's screen' at worst, giving spurious concreteness and reality to that which has a merely abstract and formal existence.<sup>1</sup> By 1919, however, the combined efforts of hegelians, marxists and politicians had wrought a change: 'nearly all political disputes and differences of opinion', Lenin could then observe, 'now turn upon the concept of the state' - and more particularly upon 'the

question: what is the state?<sup>2</sup> At least among sociologists his observation seems to be still very largely correct; fifty years of asking the question have not produced any very satisfactory or even widely agreed answers. At the same time the sort of invocation of the state as an ultimate point of reference for political practice voiced by Lord Denning, and the sort of objection to such invocations voiced by Ms. Hewitt, have become steadily more commonplace. We have come to take the state for granted as an object of political practice and political analysis while remaining quite spectacularly unclear as to what the state is. We are variously urged to respect the state, or smash the state or study the state; but for want of clarity about the nature of the state such projects remain beset with difficulties. Perhaps a new Benthamite purge is opportune?

### **1. The Problem in General**

Political sociology, according to W. G. Runciman, springs from the separation of the political – and more especially the state – from the social. It is constructed as an attempt to give a social account of the state with the latter envisaged as a concrete political agency or structure distinct from the social agencies and structures of the society in which it operates, acting on them and acted on by them. It is, we are told, this ‘distinction...which makes possible a sociology of politics’.<sup>3</sup>

Marxism, sociology’s only serious rival in the search for a contemporary theory of the state, builds, superficially at least, on a very similar distinction. Most varieties of marxism assume that adequate political analysis must, as Marx put it, proceed on the basis of ‘the actual relation between the state and civil society, that is, their separation’.<sup>4</sup> Within that framework the crucial issue in marxist political analysis then becomes the question of the degree of actual independence enjoyed by the state in its relations with the principal formations of civil society, social classes. Even when marxist writers, such as Poulantzas, overtly reject this framework they do so only to substitute for the separation of state and civil society a problematic formulated as ‘the specific autonomy of the political and the economic’ within the capitalist mode of production. And the resulting problem about the nature and function of the state is to be resolved through analysis of the relations of the state to the field of class struggle by way of an unmasking of the autonomy of the former and the isolation of the latter. Here, too, the problematic envisages the state as in effect a distinct entity and the task is to determine the actual forms and modes of dependence or independence that relate it to the socio-economic.<sup>5</sup>

Yet this common context of analysis, extant and agreed for over a

century, has not proved very fruitful. Political sociology is rich in agendas: 'the major empirical problem of political sociology today would seem...to be the description, analysis and sociological explanation of the peculiar social structure called the state', 'political sociology starts with society and examines how it affects the state'. But it is noticeably poor in performance. The fact that Dowse and Hughes find hardly anything implementing such agendas to include in their textbook accurately reflects the state of the field.<sup>6</sup> The sociology of the state is still best represented by the fragmentary observations of Max Weber. And the striking feature of Weber's political sociology is that it is, as Beetham has so clearly shown, at its best a highly *ad hoc*, historically specific, analysis of complex systems of class politics with little or no provision for the state as something separate from class politics.<sup>7</sup> For the rest, the intellectual separation of society and the state in sociology seems in practice to have meant the exclusion of the state from the political - distinctive notions such as the 'polity' serve to collapse the identity of the state rather than to clarify it.<sup>8</sup>

Marxist writers have attended to the analysis of the state more thoroughly and explicitly but, with the possible exception of the analysis of Bonapartism, not on the whole all that much more conclusively. The great debate on the relative autonomy of the state, which looked so promising when it was launched, ended with a sense that its problems had been exhausted rather than resolved. The main protagonists turned their attention to other issues. By 1974 Ralph Miliband was urging political sociologists 'from a marxist point of view' not to dissipate their energies in further studies of our speculations about the state but to embrace an alternative problematic couched in terms of wider and differently conceived processes and relationships of domination.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Nicos Poulantzas moved from the opaque conclusions of his struggle to clarify a marxist theory of the state - 'the state has the particular function of constituting the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation' - not to attempt a more exact clear and empirically specific formulation of such ideas, but rather to the study of particular regimes and to the larger problem of the class structure of capitalism.<sup>10</sup> The only agreed results of the debate appeared to be a mutual recognition of a number of important features of the presumed relationship of state and society which could not, as yet anyway, be adequately demonstrated. Thus, the credibility of the notion of class domination is saved - but then it is of course *given* in all varieties of marxism - but the demonstration of such domination in the context of particular states remains unaccomplished. At this level the state once again succeeds in defying scrutiny.

It seems necessary to say, then, that the state, conceived of as a substantial entity separate from society has proved a remarkably elusive object of analysis. Aridity and mystification rather than understanding and warranted knowledge appear to be the typical outcomes of work in both the traditions within which the analysis of the state has been regarded as a significant issue in the recent past. Possibly this bafflement has to do with the way both traditions have conceptualised the state. In fact of course the marxist problem with the state is quite different from the sociological problem with the state and they must be explored independently. Before doing that, however, we should note the way in which commonsense constantly reinforces the taken for granted wisdom of both traditions.

## **2. The Problem in Particular**

The everyday life of politics suggests forcibly that the conception of the state offered in marxism and political sociology is – whatever the difficulties of operationalising it – well-founded. Commonsense impels us to the inference that there is a hidden reality in political life and that that reality is the state. Either way, the search for the state and the presumption of its real, hidden existence are highly plausible ways of ‘reading’ the way the public aspects of politics are conducted. The naive research experience of sociologists who have attempted to study what they regard as the workings of the state or any of its presumed agencies is our most immediate store of commonsense in this respect. Anyone who has tried to negotiate a research contract with the Home Office or the Department of Health will be aware of the extreme jealousy with which such agencies instinctively protect information about themselves. The presumption, and its effective implementation, that the ‘public sector’ is in fact a private sector about which knowledge must not be made public is all too obviously the principal immediate obstacle to any serious study of the state. The implementation of the claim takes a variety of ingenious forms. One of the most familiar is the combination of bland public assurances that state agencies would welcome ‘good’ research into themselves, coupled with the apologetic but quite effective mutilation or vetoing of almost all actual research proposals on grounds of defective or inappropriate methodology or other ‘technical’ considerations. It is a nicely disabling technique of knowledge control to claim that it is the procedural defects of the proposed investigation rather than its object that justifies the refusal of access. Nor can there be many who have been through this type of experience who doubt that ‘good’ in such contexts means supportive – a sociology of decision not a

sociology of criticism. Again, there is the blocking or warping of research on grounds of the need to protect an undefined public interest or, more brazenly, the interests of subjects. Attempts to study topics as diverse as the behaviour of officers of the Supplementary Benefits Commission and the attitudes of army wives have in my own experience foundered on such rocks. And if one approaches the more serious levels of the functioning of political, judicial and administrative institutions the control or denial of knowledge becomes at once simpler and more absolute of course: one encounters the world of official secrets.

Any attempt to examine politically institutionalised power at close quarters is, in short, liable to bring to light the fact that an integral element of such power is the quite straightforward ability to withhold information, deny observation and dictate the terms of knowledge. It would be a substantial service to the sociology of the state simply to collect, document and try to make sense of sociologists' experiences in this respect. Until that is done it seems only reasonable in the face of such elaborate efforts at concealment to assume that something really important is being concealed – that official secrecy must take the blame for many of the current shortcomings of both sociological and marxist analyses of the state.

But can it? Perhaps we have here only a spurious difficulty. So often when the gaff is blown the official secrets turn out to be both trivial and theoretically predictable.<sup>11</sup> More often still when the state papers are opened and the definitive scholarly work is done it only serves to affirm or add detail to the interpretations read from the surface of events by sharp-eyed and theoretically informed observers thirty years earlier.<sup>12</sup> Let us enter a note of doubt about the importance of official secrecy before going on.

For meanwhile commonsense in all its forms dulls such scepticism. *Private Eye* finds its existence imperilled by even trivial flirtations with the task of political research. The *Sunday Times* provokes a public crisis by its attempts to publish the gossipy and unrevealing secrets of Richard Crossman's *Diaries*. And Philip Agee and Mark Hosenball find themselves deported because, they and we are told, their knowledge might endanger the lives of employees of the 'state' – unknown and unknowable actual people whose existence as 'state's-men' is really jeopardised by what is presumably the truth about their activities. Simultaneously Joe Haines reports the persistent, covert and devious management of knowledge by Treasury officials in their battle to impose a statutory incomes policy on elected politicians pledged to fight such a policy.<sup>13</sup> And Tony Bunyan finds himself in the odd situation of being able to demonstrate the existence of a highly effective and repressive political police in this country in the 1930s while having his

suggestion that such agencies still exist in the 1970s dismissed as 'unconvincing' because, in effect, he had failed to break through the dense and hazardous barrier of contemporary police secrecy.<sup>14</sup> The fact that someone can impose secrecy is surely evidence both that that person has power and that he has something to hide - commonsense infers.

In sum, the experience if not the findings of both academic and practical political research tends towards the conclusion that there is a hidden reality of politics, a backstage institutionalisation of political power behind the onstage agencies of government; that power effectively resists discovery; and that it may plausibly be identified as 'the state'. In other words it remains reasonable to assume that the state as a special separate and autonomous entity is really there and really powerful and that one aspect of its powerfulness is its ability to prevent the adequate study of the state. We seem to have evidence that the state itself is the source of the state's ability to defy our efforts to unmask it.

### **3. An Alternative**

I want now to suggest that this whole involvement with the problem of the state may be in an important sense a fantasy. We have, I shall argue, been trapped both in political sociology and in marxism by a reification which in itself seriously obstructs the effective study of a number of problems about political power which ought to concern us - even though the weight of post-Hegelian received ideas probably made the entrapment inevitable. The difficulty we have experienced in studying the state springs in part from the sheer powerfulness of political power - the ability of Mr. Rees to deport Mr. Agee and give no reason for doing so other than the interest of the state is a fact and does need explaining. But it is perhaps equally a consequence of the way we have presented that problem to ourselves.

In trying to reconstitute the issue I shall begin by suggesting that the difficulty of studying the state can be seen as in part a result of the nature of the state, but in an equally large part must be seen as a result of the predispositions of its students. In both respects the business of 'studying the state' seems to be shot through with highly Benthamite fallacies. And we might do better to abandon the project in those terms and study instead something which for the moment and for want of a better term I will call politically organized subjection. In other words I am suggesting that the state, like *the* town and *the* family, is a spurious object of sociological concern and that we should now move beyond Hegel, Marx, Stein, Gumplowicz and Weber, on from the analysis of the state to a concern with the actualities of social subordination. If there is indeed a hidden reality

of political power a first step towards discovering it might be a resolute refusal to accept the legitimating account of it that political theorists and political actors so invitingly and ubiquitously hold out to us – that is, the idea that it is ‘the state’. My argument, in sum, is that we should take seriously the remark of Engels – one of the few classical sources of the marxist theory of the state *not* cited in *Political Power and Social Classes*, incidentally - to the effect that, ‘the state presents itself to us as the first ideological power over man’. Or the notion presented so forcibly in *The German Ideology* that the most important single characteristic of the state is that it constitutes the ‘illusory common interest’ of a society; the crucial word there being ‘illusory’.<sup>15</sup>

Before developing that argument it will help to look a little more closely at the difficulties of marxism and political sociology in their contemporary intellectual dealings with the state.

#### **4. The State of Political Sociology**

Despite the constant assertion by political sociologists that their discipline is constituted as an attempt to give a social explanation of the state, the state is in practice hardly considered at all in the normal conduct of political sociology. What has happened instead is that the notion of the polity, or in Daniel Bell’s most recent writing, ‘the public household’ has absorbed the notion of the state.<sup>16</sup> The sociological explanation of the state is replaced by the sociological reduction of the state – an observation made trenchantly by Sartori as long ago as 1968.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this transformation is not entirely unprofitable. In advancing their case for making the polity the central concept of political sociology Parsons, Almond and Easton, the principal advocates of that project, had at least one strong card in their hand. This was of course the claim that the important thing to study was not structures but functions.<sup>18</sup> In effect they were going back on the proclaimed agenda of political sociology to the extent of arguing that the distinctiveness of the state, or the political was a matter of processes not of institutions; that the state was a practice not an apparatus. That claim still seems to me, as a principled revision of the agenda, entirely sound. But if we go back to the models of the polity that functionalist writers offered us in the 1960s and then compare them with the empirical work that has actually been done by political sociologists in the last twenty years an odd discrepancy appears. Many of the formal accounts of the polity proposed in the pioneering days of political sociology took the form of input-output models.<sup>19</sup> In those models the commonsense functions of the state – the determining and implementing of goals, the enforcement of law, the legitimation of

order, the expropriation and allocation of resources, the integration of conflict – were all characteristically assigned to the output side of the political process. There is of course an absurdly mechanistic quality about such models. Nevertheless, what must strike one about the body of work political sociologists have actually produced since their field was defined in this way is that almost all of it has been concerned with input functions not output functions. Even after its functional reconstitution the state has not really been studied. Here again, Dowse and Hughes reliably represent their colleagues.<sup>20</sup> What has been studied is political socialisation, political culture, pressure groups (interest-articulation), class and party (the aggregation of interests), social movements including the Michels' thesis about the oligarchic degeneration of social movements, riots, rebellion and revolution.<sup>21</sup> Overwhelmingly, attention has been paid to the grass-roots processes of the polity and not to the coordinating, power-deploying central functions. Why should this be?

A simple answer would be that political sociologists, like their colleagues in other fields are, in organising their research interests in this way – in studiously averting their eyes from the state and attending instead to its subjects – merely displaying the timorous and servile opportunism rightly and variously trounced by Andreski, Nicolaus, Gouldner, Schmid, and Horowitz but still it seems rampant in the normal determination and selection of social science research projects.<sup>22</sup> The temptations of the 'eyes down, palms up' mode of research organisation are compelling and reductive, not least for people who are themselves in positions of privilege which might not withstand much scrutiny from below.

Nevertheless, my own feeling is that venality is not the whole of the story, or even in this country a large part of it. Nor, I think, can we blame the types of occupational time-serving and semi-conscious identification with power of which Nicolaus and Horowitz make so much in the United States. British sociology and certainly its professional association are much less implicated, happily, with the institutions of power than their American counterparts. One advantage of not being perceived as useful is that one is left relatively free as an academic to do the work one wants to do. To that extent the failure of political sociologists to attend to the state, even within their own problematic, must be explained in terms of their intellectual rather than their material proclivities. There is perhaps a strictly professional pathology of political sociology which defines the important and researchable problems of the discipline away from the state. The most obvious aspect of this pathology is methodological. The distinctive methods of political sociology, from public opinion polling onwards, are adapted to studying the



attitudes and behaviour of large, accessible and compliant populations and are not adapted to studying relationships within small inaccessible and powerful networks. Conversely consider what happened to the efforts of American political sociologists to study even the modest power structures of local communities: the whole field was at once transformed into a swamp of virulent accusations of methodological ineptitude. More generally, from the publication of *The Power Elite* onwards all attempts by political sociologists to examine the authoritative or repressive functions of the polity have suffered this methodological reduction. The line from Dahl to Bachrach and Baratz, to Lukes, to Abell marks a steady retreat from talking about political practice to talking about how one might talk about political practice; an obsession with good method: better to say nothing than to risk being charged with muck-raking.<sup>23</sup> The notion that a sufficiently large accumulation of methodologically impure forays into the description of power in the manner of Mills might add up to something convincing does not seem to have been considered.

Over and above the methodological prohibition, however, there is a more substantial theoretical obstacle within political sociology that serves to discourage attention to what political sociologists themselves claim is the central problem of their field.

Two main difficulties can be identified here. First, the functional translation of the notion of the state effected by Easton, Almond, Mitchell and others and generally accepted as a crucial defining strategy of political sociology has left political sociologists with a curiously nebulous, imprecise notion of just what or where their supposed principal explicandum is. A vague conception of the functions being performed – ‘goal attainment’, ‘rule adjudication’ and so forth – necessarily opens the door to a vague conception of the structures and processes involved in their performance. It is clear for example, to take the case of Almond and Coleman, that even under the conditions of high specificity of structure attributed to ‘modern’ polities no one-to-one relation between ‘governmental’ structures and the ‘authoritative’ functions is going to emerge. Thus, although ‘the analytical distinction between society and polity’ continues to be insisted on by these authors the structural identification of key phases of the polity, let alone their relation to society, defeats them.<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Keller is quite in line with the mood of her colleagues therefore when she abandons the concept of the state in favour of the more inclusive, and less committing, notions of ‘a social centre, a core, a fulcrum’, settling in the end for the idea of ‘unification around a symbolic centre’.<sup>25</sup> The idea of the centre preserves the conception of state functions in principle but leaves all questions to do with the execution of such functions disastrously

wide open. Moreover, it inhibits both empirical and conceptual analysis of the relevant processes by drastically reducing the specificity of the functions themselves. As indicated already the real tendency of political sociology is perhaps not to explain the state at all but to explain it away.

The second problem has to do with the persistence within political sociology of an initial interest in a particular type of substantive issue, the question of the entry into the arena of political action of previously quiescent subject populations. Within the broad intellectual framework of the field, the separation of state and society, this became the compelling practical problem for almost all of the pioneers whose work was taken as effectively defining what political sociologists did. There were many reasons for this concentration of interest, some radical, some conservative, but its overall consequence is clear. In practice political sociology became a body of work centred on such themes as 'the extension of citizenship to the lower classes', 'working class incorporation', 'conditions for stable democracy'. In almost all of this work the state, or some equivalently real, institutionalised nexus of central power was virtually taken for granted – either because it was thought of as historically given or because it was assumed to be a dependent variable vulnerable to the impact of the external social forces which were the immediate object of concern. Accordingly although a sense of the state was there the state was not treated effectively as part of the problem to be investigated. What makes studies like Peter Nettl's analysis of the German Social Democrats so exceptional as contributions to political sociology is that they do treat the problem of the entry of new groups as a genuinely two-sided matter involving both state and society in active interaction.<sup>26</sup>

Taken together, these theoretical and substantive inclinations of political sociology go a fair way to explain why its concern with the state has remained – for all its importance in principle – so rudimentary in practice. Insofar as it *has* been developed, moreover, it has been largely as an unexpected result of studies of the presumed 'input' functions and processes of the polity such as political socialisation and not a consequence of a direct assault on the central issue. That is to say, the best of the socialisation studies have found that sort of input to be rather strongly shaped by powerful downward actions and influences emanating from 'the centre'.

The study of political socialisation, one of the most flourishing branches of political sociology, itself makes good sense within the general pattern of interest in the problem of 'new groups'. The issue posed by new groups is simply extended to include the taming of what Parsons has called the 'barbarian invasion' of infants as well

as the control of what Lipset has termed the 'populist excesses' of more mature invaders. Nevertheless, work in this area has in an odd way tended to 'rediscover' the state; and it is to that extent one of the more creative and promising features of contemporary political sociology – see, for example, Dawson and Prewitt's discussion of the business of 'learning to be loyal', or David Easton's demonstration of the way children are led to confuse parents, presidents and policemen in a single package of benign authority.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, it is true that such studies discover the state in only a rather special aspect. What is perceived is a rather powerful agent of legitimation. Those sociologists attracted to a Weberian conception of politics, of whom Daniel Bell is perhaps the most interesting contemporary representative and for whom, in Bell's words 'the axial principle of the polity is legitimacy', will conclude that real progress is being made by research on political socialisation.<sup>28</sup> Those who envisage the state as an altogether more forcible agency of control and coordination will find such a conclusion bland and inadequate if not vacuous. But the question is, can sociologists of this second persuasion demonstrate that a state of the kind they believe in actually exists? What the socialisation studies have done – along with other work more explicitly focussed on legitimation processes, such as that of Mueller – is to establish the existence of a managed construction of belief about the state and to make clear the consequences and implications of that process for the binding of subjects into their own subjection. Furthermore, they have shown that the binding process even if not effected by the state proceeds in terms of the creation of certain sorts of *perceptions* of the state. From Stein's claim that 'the King is the embodiment of the pure state idea' to the American child's belief that 'the President is the best person in the world' is hardly any step at all.<sup>29</sup> The discovery that the *idea* of the state has a significant political reality even if the state itself remains largely undiscovered marks for political sociology a significant and rare meeting of empiricism and a possible theory of the political.

In other words the state emerges from these studies as an *ideological* thing. It can be understood as the device in terms of which subjection is legitimated; and as an ideological thing it can actually be shown to work like that. It presents politically institutionalised power to us in a form that is at once integrated and isolated and by satisfying both these conditions it creates for our sort of society an acceptable basis for acquiescence. It gives an account of political institutions in terms of cohesion, purpose, independence, common interest and morality without necessarily telling us anything about the actual nature, meaning or functions of political institutions. We are in the world of myth. At this point the

implications for political sociology of my suggested alternative approach to the study of state perhaps become clear. One thing we can know about the state, if we wish, is that it is an ideological power. Is it anything more? Myth is of course a rendering of unobserved realities, but it is not necessarily a correct rendering. It is not just that myth makes the abstract concrete. There are senses in which it also makes the non-existent exist. From this point of view perhaps the most important single contribution to the study of the state made in recent years is a passing observation of Ralph Miliband's at the start of chapter 3 of *The State in Capitalist Society* to the effect that: 'There is one preliminary problem about the state which is very seldom considered, yet which requires attention if the discussion of its nature and role is to be properly focused. This is the fact that the "state" is not a thing, that it does not, as such, exist.'<sup>30</sup> In which case our efforts to study it as a thing can only be contributing to the persistence of an illusion. But this brings us to the point where it is necessary to consider the implications of my alternative approach to the study of the state for marxism.

## **5. The State of Marxist Theory**

The most remarkable feature of recent marxist discussions of the state is the way authors have both perceived the non-entity of the state and failed to cling to the logic of that perception. There seem to be compelling reasons within marxism for both recognising that the state does not exist as a real entity, that it is at best an 'abstract-formal' object as Poulantzas puts it, and for nevertheless discussing the politics of capitalist societies as though the state was indeed a thing and did 'as such, exist'.<sup>31</sup> Of course, Marx, Engels and Lenin all lend their authority to this ambiguity, assuring us that the state is somehow at one and the same time an illusion and 'an organ superimposed on society' in a quite non-illusory way; both a mere mask for class power and 'an organised political force' in its own right.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, instead of directing their attention to the manner and means by which the *idea* of the existence of the state has been constituted, communicated and imposed, they have come down more or less uneasily in favour of the view that the existence of the idea of the state does indicate the hidden existence of a substantial real structure of at least a state-like nature as well. There is an imperceptible but far-reaching slide from the principled recognition of the state as an abstract-formal object only to the treatment of it as a 'real-concrete' agent with will, power and activity of its own. Even Miliband, notably the least mystified of marxist analysts of the of the state, moves along that path to a point where we find that the state does, for example, 'interpose itself between the

two sides of industry – not, however, as a neutral but as a partisan', and has a 'known and declared propensity to invoke its powers of coercion against one of the parties in the dispute rather than the other'.<sup>33</sup> And Franz Oppenheimer who in 1908 made a valiant attempt to demonstrate that the concept of the state was no more than 'the basic principle of bourgeois sociology' and to expose the realities of forcible political appropriation, or as he put it 'robbery' behind and underpinning that principle, found himself talking of the state as 'itself' the robber; he unmasks the state as one sort of real-concrete object only to reconstitute it as another.<sup>34</sup> But the most complex and ambiguous version of this distinctive marxist ambiguity is of course that of Poulantzas.

Before attempting an account of Poulantzas' dealings with the state, however, it is worth considering why marxism generally should have proved so susceptible to this sort of ambiguity. I think it results from an unresolved tension between marxist theory and marxist practice. Marxist theory needs the state as an abstract-formal object in order to explain the integration of class societies. In this sense I can see little real discontinuity between the young Marx and the old or between Marx and marxists: all are hypnotised by the brilliant effect of standing Hegel the right way up, of discovering the state as the political concentration of class relationships. In particular the class relationships of capitalist societies are coordinated through a distinctive combination of coercive and ideological functions which are conveniently located as the functions of the state. Conversely, political institutions can then be analysed from the particular point of view of their performance of such functions within the general context of class domination. At the same time marxist practice needs the state as a real-concrete object, the immediate object of political struggle. Marxist political practice is above all a generation of political class struggle over and above economic struggle. To that extent it presumes the separateness of the economic and the political: separate political domination is to be met by separate political struggle. And one can easily see that to propose that the object of that struggle is merely an abstract-formal entity would have little agitational appeal. The seriousness and comprehensiveness of the struggle to conquer political power call for a serious view of the autonomous reality of political power. Paradoxically, they call for a suspension of disbelief about the concrete existence of the state. In effect to opt for political struggle thus becomes a matter of participating in the ideological construction of the state as a real entity.

Maintaining a balance between the theoretical and practical requirements of marxism thus becomes a rather intricate matter. It is achieved in *The German Ideology* but not often elsewhere: 'every

class which is struggling for mastery, even when its domination...postulates the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of mastery itself, must first conquer for itself political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest, a step to which in the first moment it is forced;...the practical struggle....makes practical intervention and control necessary through the illusory 'general interest' in the form of the state'.<sup>35</sup> More commonly, the requirement for a unity of theory and practice works itself out by the theoretical acceptance of the state as a genuine, extant, 'organised political force' acting in its own right; theory then becomes a matter of deciphering the relationship between the actions of that force and the field of class struggle. The ambiguity of many marxist accounts of the state may thus be understood not so much as a matter of doctrinal error but rather as expressing a conflation and confusion of theory and practice instead of a true unity.

Both Miliband and Poulantzas very nearly escape from this difficulty. But neither quite succeeds. Miliband, having recognised the non-entity of the state, substitutes a fairly familiar political scientists' alternative which he calls the 'state-system', a cluster of institutions of political and executive control and their key personnel, the 'state-elite': 'the government, the administration, the military and the police, the judicial branch, sub-central government and parliamentary assemblies'.<sup>36</sup> Plainly, these agencies and actors do exist in the naive empirical sense as concrete objects and it is perfectly possible, desirable and necessary to ask how they relate to one another – what *form* of state-system they comprise – and how they, as an ensemble, relate to other forces and elements in a society – what *type* of state is constituted by their existence. These are in effect just the questions that Miliband does pursue. The claim that, taken together, these agencies and actors 'make up the state', is a perfectly sound analytical proposition and serves to differentiate the state as an abstract object quite clearly from the political system as a whole. But there are other crucial questions about the nature and functions of that object in relation to which Miliband's approach is less helpful. The difficulty comes to the surface when at the end of *The State in Capitalist Society* Miliband tells us that 'the state' has been the 'main agent' that has 'helped to mitigate the form and content of class domination'.<sup>37</sup> The conclusion we might have expected, that political practice or class struggle has mitigated class domination by acting on and through politically institutionalised power or the state system is not forthcoming; instead the state reappropriates a unity and volition which at the outset the author had been at pains to deny.

Far from unmasking the state as an ideological power the more

realistic notion of the state system serves if anything to make its ideological pretensions more credible. And thus a key task in the study of the state, the understanding and exposure of the way in which the state is constructed as an 'illusory general interest' remains both unattempted and if anything harder to attempt on the basis of this type of realism. A striking feature of the two long chapters in which the legitimation of capitalist society is discussed by Miliband is the virtual absence of the state from them. Not only does he see legitimation as occurring mainly outside the state system ('the engineering of consent in capitalist society is still largely an unofficial private enterprise'), through political parties, churches, voluntary associations, mass media and 'capitalism itself', but the legitimation of the state system itself *as the state* has no place in his account. If the construction of the state does indeed occur independently of the state to such a degree – the principal exception is naturally education – and can be attributed to agents with a quite immediate and concrete existence perhaps other political processes, such as the mitigation of class domination, could also be explained in this more immediate and concrete manner. In any event it is odd that in a work written at the culmination of a period that had seen an ideological reconstruction of the state – as the 'welfare state' – as thorough as anything attempted since the 17th century that sort of link between domination and legitimation should have been ignored. Could it have anything to do with a failure to resolve the dilemma that marxism, knowing the state to be unreal 'for purposes of theory' needs it to be real 'for purposes of practice'?

Like Miliband, Poulantzas begins by proclaiming the unreality of the state. It is not for him a 'real, concrete singular' object, not something that exists 'in the strong sense of the term'.<sup>38</sup> Rather, it is an abstraction the conceptualisation of which is a 'condition of knowledge of real-concrete objects'.<sup>39</sup> My own view is rather that the conception of the state is a condition of ignorance, but more of that shortly. Consistently with this view of the problem he at once adopts a functional rather than a structural account of what the state is: by the state we are to understand the cohesive factor within the overall unity of a social formation. But actually, factor is an ambiguous word implying both function and agency. And functions are of course institutionalised. The slide begins. The function of cohesion is said to be located in what Poulantzas calls 'a place' – the place in which the contradictions of a social formation are condensed.<sup>40</sup> The particular point of studying the state is thus to elucidate the contradictions of a given system which are nowhere so discernible as in this particular site. And secondly, to apprehend just how the system in question is rendered cohesive despite its contradictions.

The idea of the state or the political as 'the factor of maintenance of a formation's unity' is in itself quite banal and conventional in non-marxist political science and therefore, apart from the way in which the definition directs attention to process rather than to structure in the first instance little special value can be claimed for this aspect of Poulantzas' analysis. The more specifically promising element has to be the claim that the maintenance of unity involves the creation of 'a place' within which contradictions are condensed – in other words the suggestion that an empirically accessible object of study is brought into being which, if studied aright will reveal to us the modalities of domination within given social systems. The question is, what sort of place is it – abstract-formal or real-concrete? A consistent functionalism would of course propose only the former. Poulantzas, however, appears to speak of the actual political-juridical structures of 'the state', of 'the political structures of the state', the institutionalised power of the state, 'the state as an organised political force' and so forth.<sup>41</sup> Suddenly we are in the presence of the real state again. And in this case the reappearance is quite explicitly linked to considerations of political practice: 'political practice is the practice of leadership of the class struggle in and for the state'.<sup>42</sup>

So function becomes place and place becomes agency and structure – the specific structures of the political. The crux of the analysis appears to be this: we are interested in the performance of a particular function, cohesion, and we postulate that that function is performed in a particular place, political structures, which we call the state: the empirical question to be answered concerns the relationship of the state to class struggles. what, then, is gained by introducing and insisting upon the state as meaning both the name of the place and the agent of the function? Does the naming not serve to make spuriously unproblematic things which are necessarily deeply problematic? I am not seeking to belittle what is in many ways a pioneering and important analysis of the political processes of class societies. But I think we do need to ask whether the centrality given to the state in that analysis is really a service to understanding. That there is a political function of cohesion effected repressively, economically and ideologically in class societies is plain enough and calls for elucidation. To identify it as 'the global role of the state' seems to me, by introducing a misplaced concreteness, to both over-simplify and over-mystify its nature.

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that Poulantzas clearly recognises that large parts of the process of cohesion, and of the condensation of contradictions, are not performed within commonsensically 'political' structures at all but are *diffused* ubiquitously through the social system in ways which make any



simple equation of the state and political structures of the kind proposed by Miliband untenable if the functional conception of the state is to be seriously pursued.<sup>43</sup> The danger now is that the notion of the global functionality of the state will lead one into a forced recognition of the global structural existence of the state – a sense of its immanence in all structures perhaps. Certainly, the move is towards an abstract understanding of the state which is so structurally unspecific as to seem either to make the conception of the state redundant, or to substitute it for the conception of society. It seems that the key political functions cannot be definitively assigned to any particular personnel, apparatuses or institutions but rather ‘float’ with the tides of class power.<sup>44</sup>

And the same difficulty of location dogs the attempt to treat the problem from the structural side. Poulantzas adopts a familiar distinction between institutions and structures, a distinction in which institutions are already abstract-formal objects, normative systems rather than concrete agencies. Class power is exercised through specific institutions which are accordingly identified as power centres. But these institutions are not just vehicles of class power; they have functions and an existence more properly their own as well. At the same time a structure, an ideologically hidden organisation, is constituted out of their existence. This hidden structure of power centres appears to be what is meant by the state.<sup>45</sup> And the task of studying the state would thus seem to be primarily a matter of lifting the ideological mask so as to perceive the reality of state power – class power – in terms of which the structuring is achieved; and secondly, a matter of identifying the apparatuses – functions and personnel – in and through which state power is located and exercised. Neither task is unmanageable in principle; but the management of both presupposes a fairly determinate conception of state functions. And this, I have suggested, is what Poulantzas, for good reasons declines to adopt.

So functions refuse to adhere to structures, structures fail to engross functions. The particular functions of the state, economic, ideological and political, must be understood in terms of the state’s global function of cohesion and unification. The global function, eludes structural location. Perhaps it would be simpler to dispense with the conception of the state as an intervening hidden structural reality altogether?<sup>46</sup> If one abandoned the hypothesis of the state would one then be in a better or a worse position to understand the relationship between political institutions and (class) domination?<sup>47</sup>

Before considering that possibility we should note the existence of a less drastic alternative. It would be possible to abandon the notion of the state as a hidden structure but retain it to mean simply

the ensemble of institutionalised political power – much in the manner of Miliband. On page 92 of *Political Power and Social Classes* and at frequent intervals thereafter Poulantzas appears to favour this alternative. We are now offered the idea of institutionalised political power (that is, the state) as ‘the cohesive factor in a determinate social formation and the nodal point of its transformations’.<sup>47</sup> Here, too, we have a perfectly manageable basis for the study and understanding of the state. But unfortunately in the light of Poulantzas’ correctly comprehensive sense of how cohesion is achieved – which is, of course, supported by Miliband’s analysis of legitimation – the attribution of that function simply to institutionalised political power is plainly inadequate. Either the state is more than institutionalised political power or the state is not on its own the factor of cohesion.<sup>48</sup> We may therefore want to consider seriously the first possibility; the possibility of abandoning the study of the state.

## 6. The Withering Away of the State

In his Preface to *African Political Systems*, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown proposed that the idea of the state should be eliminated from social analysis.<sup>49</sup> He found it a source of mystification and argued that the concepts of government and politics were all that was needed for an adequate conceptual grasp of the political. My suggestion is not as radical as that. I am proposing only that we should abandon the state as a material object of study whether concrete or abstract while continuing to take the *idea* of the state extremely seriously. The internal and external relations of political and governmental institutions (the state-system) can be studied effectively without postulating the reality of the state. So in particular can their involvements with economic interests in an overall complex of domination and subjection. But studies proceeding in that way invariably discover a third mode, dimension or region of domination – the ideological. And the particular function of the ideological is to mis-represent political and economic domination in ways that legitimate subjection. Here, at least in the context of capitalist societies, the *idea* of the state becomes a crucial object of study. In this context we might say that the state is the distinctive collective *misrepresentation* of capitalist societies. Like other collective (mis)representations it is a social fact – but not a fact in nature. Social facts should *not* be treated as things.

Since the 17th century the idea of the state has been a cardinal feature of the process of subjection. Political institutions, the ‘state-system’, are the real agencies out of which the idea of the state is constructed. The problem for political analysis is to see it as an

essentially imaginative construction, however. Engels – admittedly only the young Engels – came as near to understanding the issue in this way as anyone has done. As early as 1845 we find him arguing that the state is brought into being as an idea in order to present the outcome of the class struggle as the independent outcome of a classless legitimate will. Political institutions are turned into ‘the state’ so that a balance of class power – which is what Engels means by ‘society’ – may masquerade as unaffected by class. But, and here we return to the present modes of analysing the state, ‘the consciousness of the interconnection’ between the construction of the state as an independent entity and the actualities of class power ‘becomes dulled and can be lost altogether’. More specifically, ‘once the state has become an independent power vis-à-vis society, it produces forthwith a further ideology’ – an ideology in which the reality of the state is taken for granted and the ‘connection with economic facts gets lost for fair’.<sup>50</sup> My suggestion is that in seeking to dismantle that ideology it is not enough to try to rediscover the connection with economic facts *within* the general terms of the ideology as a whole, the acceptance of the reality of the state. Rather, we must make a ruthless assault on the whole set of claims in terms of which the being of the state is proposed.

The state, then, is not an object akin to the human ear. Nor is it even an object akin to human marriage. It is a third-order object, an ideological project. It is first and foremost an exercise in legitimation – and what it being legitimated is, we may assume, something which if seen directly and as itself would be illegitimate, an unacceptable domination. Why else all the legitimation-work? The state, in sum, is a bid to elicit support for or tolerance of the insupportable and intolerable by presenting them as something other than themselves, namely, legitimate, disinterested domination. The study of the state, seen thus, would begin with the cardinal activity involved in the serious presentation of the state: the legitimating of the illegitimate. The immediately present institutions of the ‘state system’ – and in particular their coercive functions – are the principal object of that task. The crux of the task is to over-accredit them as an integrated expression of common interest cleanly dissociated from all sectional interests and the structures – class, church, race and so forth – associated with them. The agencies in question, especially administrative and judicial and educational agencies, are made into state agencies as part of some quite historically specific process of subjection; and made precisely as an alternative reading of and cover for that process. Consider the relationship between the acceptance and diffusion of John Locke’s account of political obligation and the reconstitution of government on the basis of private accumulation in 18th century England.<sup>51</sup> Or consider the

relationship between the discovery of the civil service as an integral element of the state and the scale of operations achieved by capitalist production and marketing in the last quarter of the 19th century.<sup>52</sup> Not to see the state as in the first instance an exercise in legitimation, in moral regulation, is, in the light of such connections, surely to participate in the mystification which is the vital point of the construction of the state.

And in our sort of society at least mystification is the central mode of subjection. Armies and prisons are the back-up instruments of the burden of legitimacy. Of course what is legitimated is, insofar as it is legitimated, real power. Armies and prisons, the Special Patrol and the deportation orders as well as the whole process of fiscal exaction – which Bell shrewdly sees as ‘the skeleton of the state stripped of all misleading ideologies’ – are all forceful enough.<sup>53</sup> But it is their association with the idea of the state and the invocation of that idea that silences protest, excuses force and convinces almost all of us that the fate of the victims is just and necessary. Only when that association is broken do real hidden powers emerge. And when they do they are not the powers of the state but of armies of liberation or repression, foreign governments, guerilla movements, soviets, juntas, parties, classes. The state for its part never emerges except as a claim to domination – a claim which has become so plausible that it is hardly ever challenged. Appropriately enough the commonest source of challenge is not marxist theory or political sociology but the specific exigency created when individual revolutionaries find themselves on trial for subversion, sedition or treason. It is in documents like Fidel Castro’s courtroom speech – and almost uniquely in such documents – that the pretensions of regimes to be states are unmasked.<sup>54</sup>

The state is, then, in every sense of the term a triumph of concealment. It conceals the real history and relations of subjection behind an a-historical mask of legitimating illusion; contrives to deny the existence of connections and conflicts which would if recognised be incompatible with the claimed autonomy and integration of the state. The real official secret, however, is the secret of the non-existence of the state.

## **7. Deciphering Legitimacy**

The form of misrepresentation achieved by the idea of the state in capitalist societies is incisively and thoroughly grasped by Poulantzas even though he fails to grasp the full extent to which it is a misrepresentation.<sup>55</sup> It seems to me that this combination of insight and failure of vision is directly attributable to his principled objection to historical analysis – and here we come to a serious

practical question about the study of the state. He sees perfectly clearly what the idea of the state does socially but because history is not permissible in his scheme of analysis he can only explain how it is done by assuming that it is done by the state. The state has to exist for him to explain his own observations. Only a very careful investigation of the construction of the state as an ideological power could permit a recognition of the effects he observes in combination with a denial of the notion that they are effects of the state.

In capitalist societies the presentation of the state is uniquely pervasive, opaque and bemusing. Centrally it involves the segregation of economic relationships from political relationships, the obliteration within the field of political relationships of the relevance or propriety of class and the proclamation of the political as an autonomous sphere of social unification. Poulantzas perceives all this admirably and with a clarity not achieved in any previous text: 'by means of a whole complex functioning of the ideological the capitalist state systematically conceals its political class character at the level of its political institutions'.<sup>56</sup> His analysis of the 'effect of isolation' which is the special and pivotal mirage of the idea of the state in capitalist societies is wholly compelling. And yet, having come this far he cannot accept that the idea of the state is itself part of the mirage. Rather, he insists that the structures of the state must not be reduced to the ideological: 'the state represents the unity of an isolation which, because of the role played by the ideological is largely its own effect'.<sup>57</sup> His argument appears to involve both the claim that the state is an ideological fraud perpetrated in the course of imposing subjection and the belief that the state has a non-fraudulent existence as a vital structure of the capitalist mode of production.

I suggest that the former can be shown clearly to be the case and that the latter is an undemonstrable assertion making sense only within a closed theoretical system but having no independent warrant or validity. Once again one can only be impressed by the narrowness of the miss. Again and again he comes within an inch of wholly unmasking the state; again and again his theoretical presuppositions prevent him from following his own argument to its proper conclusion. Thus: 'the role of ideology...is not simply that of hiding the economic level which is always determinant, but that of hiding the level which has the dominant role and hiding the very fact of its dominance'.<sup>58</sup> Ideology in other words displaces power from its real to an apparent centre. But even this does not lead to the conclusion that in the capitalist mode of production where 'the economic...plays the dominant role' and where accordingly 'we see the dominance of the juridico-political region in the ideological', the state might be primarily an ideological power, a cogently effected

misrepresentation.<sup>59</sup> What he really needs is two distinct objects of study: the state-system and the state-idea. We come, then, to a fundamental question. We may reasonably infer that the state as a special object of social analysis does not exist as a real entity. Can we agree with Radcliffe-Brown that it is also unnecessary as an abstract-formal entity – that it does nothing for us in the analysis of domination and subjection? Obviously my own conclusion is that we can. Indeed, that we must: the postulate of the state serves to my mind not only to protect us from the perception of our own ideological captivity but more immediately to obscure an otherwise perceptible feature of institutionalised political power, the state-system, in capitalist societies which would otherwise seize our attention and prove the source of a trenchant understanding of the sort of power politically institutionalised power is. I refer to the actual disunity of political power. It is this above all that the idea of the state conceals. The state is the unified symbol of an actual disunity. This is not just a disunity between the political and the economic but equally a profound disunity within the political. Political institutions, especially in the enlarged sense of Miliband's state-system, conspicuously fail to display a unity of practice – just as they constantly discover their inability to function as a more general factor of cohesion. Manifestly they are divided against one another, volatile and confused. What is constituted out of their collective practice is a series of ephemerally unified postures in relation to transient issues with no sustained consistency of purpose. Such enduring unity of practice as the ensemble of political institutions achieve is palpably imposed on them by 'external' economic, fiscal and military organisations and interests. In the United Kingdom for example, the only unity that can actually be discerned behind the spurious unity of the idea of the state is the unity of commitment to the maintenance, at any price, of an essentially capitalist economy. This sort of disunity and imbalance is of course just what one would expect to find in an institutional field that is primarily a field of struggle. But it is just the centrality of struggle that the idea of the state – even for marxists – contrives to mask.

My suggestion, then, is that we should recognize that cogency of the *idea* of the state as an ideological power and treat that as a compelling object of analysis. But the very reasons that require us to do that also require us not to *believe* in the idea of the state, not to concede, even as an abstract formal-object, the existence of the state. Try substituting the word god for the word state throughout *Political Power and Social Classes* and read it as an analysis of religious domination and I think you will see what I mean. The task of the sociologist of religion is the explanation of religious practice

(churches) and religious belief (theology): he is not called upon to debate, let alone to believe in, the existence of god.

### **8. Towards a Recovery of History**

The obvious escape from reification, the one rejected by Poulantzas and neglected by Miliband is historical. The only plausible alternative I can see to taking the state for granted is to understand it as historically constructed. Even so, the unmasking is not automatic as Anderson's analysis of Absolutism makes clear.<sup>60</sup> The argument of *Lineages of the Absolutist State* shows very clearly how a particular presentation of the state was constructed historically as a reconstitution of the political modalities of class power. Yet even this author is not able to shake off the notion of the state – indeed 'the State'. Every time he uses that word, others – regime, government, monarchy, absolutism – could be substituted for it and the only difference would be to replace an ambiguously concrete term with ones of which the implications are unambiguously either concrete or abstract. But it is not just a semantic matter. Anderson's treatment reveals two processes of political construction. The first is the centralisation and coordination of feudal domination – the 'upward displacement of coercion' as he rather oddly puts it – in the face of the declining effectiveness of local control and exaction. This was a reorganisation of the apparatus of feudal administration on a basis which enhanced the possibility of political control of the underlying population in the interests of the nobility but did so in a way that also created the possibility of more effective political coercion in the political process among the nobility.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the nature of the construction as a whole is plainly demonstrated; a shift from individualised to concerted coercive subjection of rural populations to noble domination through the invention of new apparatuses of administration and law. Law provides the common ground in which the first aspect of the construction of absolutism meets the second. This was the *ideological* construction of the 'Absolutist State' as the panoply of doctrine and legitimation under which the reorganisation of feudal domination proceeded and in terms of which it was presented. The essential elements of this ideological construction were, Anderson argues, the adoption of Roman law as a legitimating context for centralised administration and the formulation in European political thought from Bodin to Montesquieu of a general theory of sovereignty providing a still higher-level rationale for the administrative reconstruction that was taking place.<sup>62</sup> The idea of the state was created and used for specific social purposes in a specific historical setting – and that is the only reality it had. Everything else is more precise.

It could be said that Anderson does not quite do justice to the turbulent nature of these processes of political construction. Early modern European history should perhaps be seen rather more definitely as a struggle within the European nobilities to hammer out or grasp a basis for generalisable renewed noble domination – a struggle in which the kings tended to prevail because the available bases both institutional and ideological could be secured by them as kings in a uniquely effective way. Quite apart from killing their rivals the royal victors could both impose and legitimate noble domination better than the vanquished nobility. Similarly, one might want to add to Anderson's analysis of the persistent feudal bias of these regimes in their dealings with bourgeois groupings rather more emphasis on the way in which the manner of the reconstitution of feudal domination in this period *permitted* certain types of bourgeois activity to flourish; the crisis of the aristocracy was solved by the creation of juridical, political and ideological frameworks which both saved the aristocracy and tolerated the bourgeoisie; among the unfavoured they were uniquely favoured.<sup>63</sup> However, such modifications would not impair recognition of the masterly nature of Anderson's work as a whole. For this particular historical context he does demonstrate just how the idea of the state as a 'veil of illusion' is perpetrated in the course of an entirely concrete institutional reconstruction of domination and subjection. Even his own uncritical use of the term 'the state' to indicate relations and practices he persistently shows to be much more precisely identifiable than that, although it weakens the impact of his argument, does not wholly undermine the historical demonstration he achieves.

If that sort of radical unmasking of the state is possible for absolutism, why not for more recent political arrangements? Of course there is a certain brutal candour and transparency about absolutism which subsequent constructions have not reproduced. 'L'état, c'est moi' is hardly an attempt at legitimation at all; it so plainly means 'I and my mercenaries rule – O.K.?' Yet on balance I think it is not the devious cunning of more recent political entrepreneurs that has deceived us but rather our own willing or unwitting participation in the idea of the reality of the state. If we are to abandon the study of the state as such and turn instead to the more direct historical investigation of the political practice of class (and other) relationships we might hope to unmask, say, the Welfare State as effectively as Anderson has unmasked the Absolutist State. The state is at most a message of domination – an ideological artefact attributing unity, morality and independence to the disunited, amoral and dependent workings of the practice of government. In this context the message is decidedly *not* the medium – let alone the key



to an understanding of the sources of its production, or even of its own real meaning. The message – the claimed reality of the state – is the ideological device in terms of which the political institutionalisation of power is legitimated. It is of some importance to understand how that legitimation is achieved. But it is much more important to grasp the relationship between political and non-political power – between in Weber's terms class, status and party. There is no reason to suppose that the concept, let alone belief in the existence, of the state will help us in that sort of enquiry.

In sum: the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is. It is, one could almost say, the mind of a mindless world, the purpose of purposeless conditions, the opium of the citizen. There is a state-system in Miliband's sense; a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society. And its sources, structure and variations can be examined in fairly straight-forward empirical ways. There is, too, a state-idea, projected, purveyed and variously believed in in different societies at different times. And its modes, effects and variations are also susceptible to research. The relationship of the state-system and the state-idea to other forms of power should and can be central concerns of political analysis. We are only making difficulties for ourselves in supposing that we have also to study the state – an entity, agent, function or relation over and above the state-system and the state-idea. The state comes into being as a structuration within political practice; it starts its life as an implicit construct; it is then reified – as the *res publica*, the public reification, no less – and acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice. The ideological function is extended to a point where conservatives and radicals alike believe that their practice is not directed at each other but at the state; the world of illusion prevails. The task of the sociologist is to demystify; and in this context that means attending to the senses in which the state does not exist rather than to those in which it does.

### Notes and References

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Handbook of Political Fallacies*, edited by H. A. Larrabee, Harper and Brothers, New York 1962.

<sup>2</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'The State', *Selected Works*, vol. II, New York, 1943, p.639.

<sup>3</sup> W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory*, Cambridge, 1963, p.32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33, citing *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, I, p.492, 'Aus der Kritik der Hegelschen Staatsrecht'.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, New Left Books, London, 1973, pp.130-37 and 150-53.

Incidentally I find Poulantzas' attempt to discredit other varieties of marxism in this respect – especially the work of Lefebvre and the Italian School – as resulting from 'a play on words' in the reading of Marx, quite unconvincing. On the contrary, what Lefebvre, Della Volpe and others have done is to read the key passages of Marx literally – if anything, too literally.

<sup>6</sup> P. Orleans and S. Greer, 'Political Sociology' in R. L. Faris (ed.) *Handbook of Modern Sociology*, Rand McNally, New York, 1964, p.810 is the source of the first agenda and R. Bendix and S. M. Lipset, 'Political Sociology: an Essay and Bibliography', *Current Sociology*, 1957, vi, p.87 of the second. And see R. E. Dowse and J. Hughes, *Political Sociology*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1972, for the general dearth of appropriate subsequent work.

<sup>7</sup> D. Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics*, Allen and Unwin, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> I have enlarged on this theme in *Political Sociology*, Allen and Unwin (forthcoming); and the point is also made by Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp.40 and 266.

<sup>9</sup> R. E. Dowse, *Report of a Conference on Political Sociology* sponsored by the Political Science Committee of SSRC, Social Science Research Council, London, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p.44; the question of the nature of the state is of course returned to at some length in two of this author's later works, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, New Left Books, 1974 and *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, New Left Books, 1975, but the problem of precisely identifying and locating the functions of the state is not advanced.

<sup>11</sup> Almost any of the endless series of political autobiographies, private papers, diaries and so forth that flow from the pens of retired politicians or end up in those collections of family papers eventually released to historians will confirm this point; what is revealed is that the egotism of politicians is always more inflated than one might have imagined and that the inter-personal politicking had a sharper edge than one could have guessed. It is very rare indeed for accounts of this sort, however well-informed, to significantly alter the publicly available and previously established sense of the essential character and power structure of a regime. The explanation of 'events' may be changed but not the understanding of 'states'. It is at the level of the ephemera rather than the necessities of political life that the revelation of the backstage world of politics is startling; the most obvious recent British example is R. H. S. Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, Longman, London, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> The 'school' of history represented by the work of Maurice Cowling is quite important in this respect. The most exhaustive scrutiny of the most minute evidence leads only to the conclusion that *The Impact of Labour* (M. Cowling, Cambridge University Press, 1971) or *The Impact of Hitler* (M. Cowling, Cambridge University Press, 1976) was to intensify political infighting, re-shuffle the personal alliances and opportunities of individual politicians and clarify in the minds of political actors the class and other alignments of political power which had already been understood by

informed journalists and uninformed historians. Once again the surprises prove to be all at the level of events not of structures.

<sup>13</sup> Joe Haines, *The Politics of Power*, Hodder & Stroughton, London, 1977; it is of course symptomatic of the way political realities are masked in advanced capitalist societies that the public reception of this book should have been almost entirely in terms of the author's comments on personal political relationships and that his highly perceptive and informed analysis of an institutional structuring of power should have been virtually ignored.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Bunyan, *The Political Police in Britain*, Quartet, 1976 and cf., the review of this book in *Rights*, I, i, 1976.

<sup>15</sup> F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* in (e.g.) L. Feuer (ed.) *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, Doubleday, New York, 1959, p.236; K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1965, p.42 – although it must be admitted that the crucial statements of this view were marginal additions by Engels to the main text of the collaborative work; which possibly confirms a view I have long held that to have done himself full justice Engels should have collaborated with Durkheim rather than with Marx.

<sup>16</sup> D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, New York, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> G. Sartori, 'From Sociology of Politics to Political Sociology' in S. M. Lipset (ed.) *Politics and the Social Sciences*, Oxford University Press, 1969.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., T. Parsons, 'Voting and the Equilibrium of the American Political System', in E. Burdick and A. Brodbeck (eds.) *American Voting Behaviour*, Free Press, 1959; D. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1965; G. Almond and J. Coleman, *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1960; W. Mitchell, *The American Polity*, Free Press, 1966. The net perception of political process achieved by this school of analysis could perhaps be formalised in something like the following manner:

### **Political Systems**

Social systems have common *functional problems*:

- adaptation
- integration
- pattern-maintenance
- goal-attainment

Functional problems are handled by *functional sub-systems*:

- economy
- household
- culture
- polity

Polities (political systems) perform common *functions*:

- selection and specification of goals
- allocation of costs and values
- authorisation

The performance of these functions involves:

- creation of a *political role-structure* within which binding decisions can be made

Political role-structure is generated through sets of *interchanges* between the polity and other social sub-systems:

Input:	demands support resources	role structure/ decision-making	Output:	decision implementations controls
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The *communications* involved in these interchanges generate also a *political culture*: political culture operates as a medium of feedback from output to new inputs, etc.

The *social processes* central to the operation of political systems may be further specified:

Input:	political socialisation recruitment articulation and aggregation of interests.	Output:	legitimation promulgation administration
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All political systems have *structure*: but not common items of structure.

All political structure may be analysed in terms of common *organisational properties and levels*:

levels:	government – regime – community
properties:	external differentiation – internal differentiation and functional specificity of roles – visibility – formalisation – institutionalisation of competition for leadership roles – stratification of influence – balance of formal and informal structures.

The *style* of action of all political structure may be evaluated along four value-dimensions (pattern variables):

ascription vs. achievement  
particularism vs. universalism  
effectivity vs. affective neutrality  
diffuseness vs. specificity

All real-world political structure is multi-functional; the style of all political performance is 'mixed'.

Plainly, such a conception has neither operational nor theoretical need for the concept of the state. The state has not been explained; but it has been explained away.

<sup>19</sup> The best known of course is that suggested by David Easton, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Dowse and Hughes, *op. cit.*, but note especially the *absences* in their chapter 5, 'Structures of Power in Industrial Society'.

<sup>21</sup> This pattern was already evident in the bibliographies of the field produced in the 1950s – for example, Lipset and Bendix, *op. cit.* – and is no less so in the 1970s; consider the 'Further Reading' proposed by Dowse and Hughes.

<sup>22</sup> S. Andreski, *Social Science as Sorcery*, Deutsch, London, 1972; M. Nicolaus, 'The Professional Organisation of Sociology; a View from Below', in R. Blackburn (ed.) *Ideology in Social Science*, Fontana, London, 1972; A. Gouldner, 'The Sociologist as Partisan', in *For Sociology*, Allen Lane, London, 1973; I. Horowitz *Professing Sociology*, Allen Lane, London, 1972.

<sup>23</sup> R. Dahl, *Who Governs?*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1961; N. Polsby, *Community Power and Political Theory*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1963, and 'Pluralism in the Study of Community Power', *The*

*American Sociologist*, iv, 2, 1969, p. 118; P. Bachrach and M. S. Baratz, *Power and Poverty*, Oxford University Press, 1970; S. Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, Macmillan, London, 1974; P. Abell, 'The Many Faces of Power and Liberty', *Sociology*, xi, 3, 1977 p.3.

<sup>24</sup> Almond and Coleman, *op. cit.*: compare especially the promise of the Introduction with what is actually offered in the Conclusion.

<sup>25</sup> Suzanne Keller, *Beyond the Ruling Class*, Random House, New York, 1963, p.34.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Nettl, 'The Social German Democratic Party as a Political Model' *Past and Present*, 1965.

<sup>27</sup> K. Dawson and J. Prewitt, *Political Socialisation*, Little Brown, Boston, 1971; D. Easton et al., *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children*, Aldine, Chicago, 1967; F. Greenstein, 'The Benevolent Leader', *American Political Science Review*, liv, 1960, p.934; and generally, Dowse and Hughes, *op.cit.*, ch.6.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Heinemann, London, 1976, especially pp.220-232.

<sup>29</sup> L. von Stein, *Das Koenigtum*, Leipzig, 1850, cited in E. Schraepler, *Quellen zur Gesichte der sozialen Frage in Deutschland*, Musterschmidt Verlag, Goettingen, 1960, p.130; J. Hess and D. Easton, 'The Child's Changing Image of the President', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, xxiv, 1960, p.632.

<sup>30</sup> R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969, p.49.

<sup>31</sup> In a comment on an earlier version of this paper Dr. P. R. D. Corrigan makes the point very forcefully, 'that the state is both illusory and there – indeed, its 'thereness' is how the illusion is sustained' and again that the state is 'an illusion in the sense that its claim to be what it appeared to be is invalid; it is not illusory in the sense that it is not a logical error, a problem with our vision, or a conjuring trick that sustains it but precisely those powers and relations which its claim to be what it appears to be conceals'. It could also be said, however, that whether or not the state is really there marxist analysis has to treat it as really there in order to locate key phases of the integration of class power which otherwise remain elusive; this seems to be especially the case in Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, pp.155-58.

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion of these dualities in the work of Marx, Engels and Lenin in S. W. Moore, *The Critique of Capitalist Democracy*, A. M. Kelley, New York, 1969.

<sup>33</sup> R. Miliband, *op. cit.*, p.81.

<sup>34</sup> F. Oppenheimer, *The State*, Bobbs Merrill, New York, 1914.

<sup>35</sup> *German Ideology*, part I, p.53.

<sup>36</sup> R. Miliband, *op. cit.*, p.54.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.266.

<sup>38</sup> N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, p.12; 'It can be said that in the strong sense of the term, only *real, concrete, singular* objects exist. The final aim of the process of thought is knowledge of these objects: e.g. of France or England at a given moment of their development'. Quite apart from the epistemological shakiness of the distinction as illustrated by the example we are left with a situation in which all the tools of thought – mode of production, class, state and so forth – are in the strong sense agreed to be unreal and the task of thought is to use them without reifying them. My suggestion is that it is precisely when these tools are least useful that the danger of reification is greatest; in that sense 'mode of production' is an

effective tool, 'the state' is not.

<sup>39</sup> Poulantzas, *op. cit.*, p.39.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.45, 47-51; and cf., *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, pp.158-9.

<sup>41</sup> *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp.44, 93, 132.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43; Poulantzas is here citing the 'completely acceptable' words of J. Verret, *Théorie et Politique*, Paris, 1967, p.194. The problem for this sort of analysis is naturally especially evident in any consideration of political practice. For purposes of practice the state is treated as primarily a structure – and indeed the most obvious and delimited structure, political institutions ('the state as a specific level of structures in a social formation' p.43). For purposes of theory the state is primarily a set of functions - of cohesion, condensation of contradictions, isolation, and so forth. And the trouble is that the functions manifestly do not reside in the structures; the structures are simply not the 'place' where the functions are performed. So the state begins to be redefined as some more abstract, generalised, impalpable sort of structure.

<sup>43</sup> Poulantzas makes this point against Miliband very effectively in the debate between the two authors originally published in the *New Left Review* and re-printed in R. Blackburn *op. cit.*, pp.238-63, see especially pp.251-2. Conversely, Miliband very effectively makes the point about the structural elusiveness of the state in Poulantzas' conception, see especially, p.256. Both criticisms are of course entirely well taken and appropriate.

<sup>44</sup> This is especially evident in Poulantzas' discussions of the relationship between the state and the dominant class in capitalism; cf., *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp.296-307 and *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* pp.156-62 where we are told, for example, that the state has a 'specific role' in 'elaborating the political strategy of monopoly capital' only to find that that role is never in fact either specified or located by this author and indeed cannot be because as a matter of principle the state 'does not have its own power but...forms the contradictory locus of consideration for the balance of forces that divides even the dominant class itself'. For all its apparent precision the term 'the state' actually indicates chaos.

<sup>45</sup> *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp.115-17; but once again any sense of concreteness, of a defined empirical referent for what one is talking about is quickly dissipated; 'the state', in the sense of political institutions is only one among a cluster of power centres, companies, cultural institutions and so forth being cited as others; yet it is via the *ensemble* of power centres that functions of the state are executed.

<sup>46</sup> Alternatively one could in order to focus the mind on its abstract-formal character try to conceive of the state not as an agent, object or structure but as a relationship. This is indeed the solution favoured by Poulantzas in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* ('the state is not a thing but a relation', p.161). But unfortunately this formulation proves as unstable as all those that have gone before it; the relation turns out to be 'more exactly the condensation of the balance of forces' within the dominant class and between that class and others. Although this is in principle an empirical claim it is not in fact pursued as such. Meanwhile the relationship increasingly turns back to an agent. Although in any sort of common sense usage relationships would be said to have functions rather than ends Poulantzas seems driven to attribute independent volition to the relationship. Thus, the state 'takes responsibility for the interests of the hegemonic fraction, monopoly capital' (p.157); and again, it 'takes responsibility for the interests of monopoly capital as a whole' (p.158).

Relationships, however do not act in this sense; marriage does not take responsibility for the interests of men in relation to women, though it could well be said to function to that end. In practice Poulantzas does not 'avoid the false dilemma in which contemporary discussion of the state is trapped, between the state as a thing and the state as a subject' by regarding it as a relationship. His understanding of the dilemma is correct but the effort to treat the state consistently and exclusively as a relationship defeats him; instead of going on to ask what sort of relationship and between whom? he reverts to the sterile issue of the 'relative autonomy of the state...inscribed in its very structure'.

<sup>47</sup> The point to be emphasised here is that domination is a crucially important problematic and that trying to deal with it by thinking about the state really seems to have proved extraordinarily unprofitable. I am not suggesting that if we think away the state we shall do away with domination – I would hate to be accused of that sort of Young Hegelianism. But it does begin to seem possible that the real relations of domination within the state-system and between it and other interests and institutions and groups might be seen more clearly were it not for the apparent problem of the state.

<sup>48</sup> This was of course the nub of the debate between Miliband and Poulantzas referred to above; and it was their inability to agree on a locus for the factor of cohesion other than institutionalised political and governmental power (Miliband's state-system) which mainly explains the inconclusive and slightly demoralising way in which that debate ended.

<sup>49</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, 'Preface', M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems*, Oxford University Press, 1940.

<sup>50</sup> F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in (e.g.) L. Feuer, op. cit., pp.236-7.

<sup>51</sup> C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford University Press, 1962.

<sup>52</sup> A valuable analysis of this connection is provided by P. R. D. Corrigan, *State Formation and Moral Regulation in 19th. century Britain*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Durham, 1977.

<sup>53</sup> D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p.220, quoting Rudolph Goldscheid.

<sup>54</sup> M. Aleximer (ed.) *On Trial*, Lorrimer Publishing, London, 1968.

<sup>55</sup> N. Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, pp.195-223.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133; but note that the state even here is an agent as well as a mystification; this author simply cannot escape from the veil of illusion created by the idea of the state even though he knows it to be a veil of illusion.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.210-211.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.211.

<sup>60</sup> Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolute State*, New Left Books, London, 1974.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.12-22, 429-30.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.24-30, 424-6.

<sup>63</sup> This point is indeed conceded *en passant* by Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.23, but figured very prominently in the various writings of Engels: cf., *Anti-Dühring*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1947, p.126, and of course the famous passage in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Marx, Engels, *Selected Works*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1962, 'By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other.....' etc.

*Editorial note:* It is important to repeat that this paper was written in 1977, before the publication of Poulantzas's *State Power, Socialism* (London, New Left Books, 1978) Part 1 of which ('The institutional materiality of the state') could have led Philip Abrams to modify somewhat his commentary on Poulantzas. That this last work of Poulantzas draws from Foucault is another marker for an explainable absence in Abrams's text.