

# State, Class Struggle, and the Reproduction of Capital

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In the last few years, the Marxist theory of the state has been the focus of continuous debate. The main aim of most of the contributions to the debate has been to steer a middle way between ‘vulgar’ conceptions of the state as a mere tool of capital and ‘reformist’ conceptions of the state as a neutral institution standing outside and above the class struggle. The focus of recent discussion has been the attempt to develop an adequate account of the capitalist state as a particular historical form of social relation. The emphasis in most contributions has been on the ‘externality’ of the state in relation to particular capitals and on its ‘particularity’ as a *political* institution, standing apart from the forms of class struggle surrounding the production and appropriation of surplus value. Within this framework various solutions have been put forward, usually seeing the state as a sort of external guarantor of the conditions of capitalist reproduction, whose subordination to capital is effected through the subordination of the material reproduction of the state to the reproduction of capital; through the political and administrative systems that ensure the dominance of the capitalist class; and through the ideological subordination of the working class to capital.

Although much progress has been made in the analysis of the capitalist state, the results have been in many ways disappointing, and the political conclusions drawn from the analysis have often been insubstantial. One of the major weaknesses has been a tendency for contributions to oscillate between the extremely abstract, and often formalistic, analysis of ‘state derivation’ that too often reduces to another version of structural-functionalism, and extremely concrete, and often empiricist, attempts at historical analysis. The failure adequately to integrate form and content perhaps indicates that something has gone wrong, both methodologically, in failing to locate correctly the levels of abstraction appropriate to particular concepts, and substantively, in the way in which the problem of the state has been posed in the first place.

The political weaknesses of our analysis are closely related to these theoretical failings, and have become especially apparent with the challenge thrown down to both social democratic and Marxist orthodoxy by the New Right. One of the most fundamental questions we have to resolve is whether the New Right is a fleeting phenomenon that will soon come up against the realities of capitalist state power, or whether it rather represents a major shift in the character of state power, and so the terms of political struggle. Should we be sitting back, waiting to resume the same old battles, or has the whole battlefield moved on?

We can, of course, look to history and see in today's developments a re-run of the thirties, with a new 'fascism with a human face' as the greatest threat, implying an obligation on socialists to submerge themselves in popular democratic campaigns in defense of trade unionism, of freedom of speech and assembly, against racism and sexism, in defense of welfare rights etc. However, history never simply repeats itself, and capitalism in the 1980s is not capitalism in the 1930s.

Only an adequate theory of the capitalist state can help us to decide whether simple comparisons with the 1930s are legitimate or not, for only such a theory can distinguish between those features of the capitalist state that are essential to it as a capitalist state, those features that belong to a particular stage of capitalist development, and those features that are contingently determined by the outcome of particular struggles. The New Right has challenged many of our preconceptions about the essential features of the late capitalist state, and about the historical tendencies of capitalist development, by proposing to roll back the frontiers of the state without any regard for the supposed necessity of this or that aspect of the state, and without any consideration of the supposed contradiction between the 'accumulation' and 'legitimation' functions of the state.

In this paper I want to try to take up this challenge, as provocatively as possible, and to have another look at the capitalist state. I do not want to propose yet another theory of the state, not least because part of my argument is that the state cannot be derived conceptually. Rather, I want to raise some questions about the kinds of relationships that we should be focusing on, and particularly those between class struggle, the reproduction of capital, and the state.

## 1 The Problem of the State

The problem of the state is often posed as the problem of reconciling the class character of the state with its institutional separation from the bourgeoisie: what are the mediations through which the state is, despite its apparent neutrality, subordinated to capital? This is usually presented as a problem peculiar to the *capitalist* state. However, it needs to be stressed that the state is not a peculiarly capitalist institution, it is an institution common, in different forms, to all class societies. Moreover, the institutional separation of the state from the exploiting class is a feature of all class societies, whence, for example, the confusions in recent discussion of the asiatic mode of production and of the absolutist state, in which the apparent subordination of the exploiting class to the state apparatus, in the one case, and the apparent independence of the state, in the other, have been taken as signs of the inadequacy of Marxist analysis. The mediations between class and state have to be developed in every form of class society, for in every class society the state is institutionally separated from, and 'external' to, the exploiting class. This point is very important to the extent that recent accounts have explained the particularisation of the state on the

basis of properties peculiar to capital, rather than as a general characteristic of the relation between class and state.

The reason for this confusion has been the tendency to treat the two aspects of the problem of the state at the *same* level of abstraction, because the concept of the ‘state’ is treated at the same level of abstraction as the concept of ‘class’: the problem is posed as a problem of explaining at one and the same time how the state is *both* a class state *and* appears institutionally separated from the capitalist class. The basic argument of this paper is that this is to conflate levels of abstraction in the analysis of the state. The problem is not one of reconciling an immediate relationship between class and state with a manifest separation of the two, a problem that is irresolvable. It is the problem of explaining how a form of class rule can appear in the fetishised form of a neutral administrative apparatus, just as the rule of capital in production appears in the fetishised form of a technical coordinating apparatus. The apparent neutrality is not an essential feature of the state, it is rather a feature of the fetishised form in which the rule of capital is effected through the state. It is, therefore, something that should emerge at the end of the analysis, and not something that should be inscribed in the analysis from the beginning. This means in practice that the state has to be derived from the analysis of the class struggles surrounding the reproduction of capital, instead of being derived in some way from the surface forms of appearance of capital. The essential feature of the state is its class character; its autonomy is the surface form of appearance of its role in the class struggle. In the end, this is because the concept of ‘class’ as the concept appropriate to the social relations of production in their most general and abstract form, and the concept of the ‘state’ as the institutional form appropriate to one aspect of class rule, are concepts that have to be developed at different levels of abstraction.

## 2 The Autonomy of the State

Arguments that see the autonomy of the state as an essential feature tend to rest on the claims that (a) the state represents the general interests of capital against the particular interests of particular capitals; (b) the state rests on the abstraction of force from the immediate relations of production; (c) the state rests on the abstract character of the commodity form. Let us look very briefly at these three claims.

(a) As Marx argued in his critique of Hegel, there is no such thing as a ‘general interest’. The ‘general interest’ of capital, as of society, is a pure abstraction. All that exists is a particular resolution of conflicting interests. The ‘general interest’ of capital as something standing outside the particular interests of particular capitals does not exist as a condition for the state. It is rather the result of a particular resolution of the conflicts between particular capitals and of the contradiction between capital and the working class. Explanations of the state that rest on the claim that the state expresses a ‘general interest’ defined in abstraction from class struggle, reduce to an abstract and tautologous

functionalism.

(b) The claim that the particularisation of the state rests on the abstraction of force from the immediate relations of production and its institutionalisation in a separate body is one that rests on an assertion that quite simply is false. On the one hand, it is not true that the state claims a monopoly in the use of the means of physical violence — private citizens are permitted to use a greater or lesser degree of physical compulsion in the defense of their own person and property. On the other hand, the force on which the day-to-day reproduction of capitalist social relations rests cannot be reduced to the physical violence that is its ultimate sanction. The reproduction of capitalist social relations rests on the forcible exclusion of the working class from the means of production and subsistence, on the compulsion to work beyond the necessary labour-time, and on the capitalists' appropriation of the product. Although expressed in property rights and enforced by law, the social relations of production are not constituted and reproduced by the threat of state violence; rather, the social reproduction of capital and of the working class is the other side of the material reproduction of society. Thus, workers can violate capitalist property rights by occupying a factory, by liberating supermarkets, or by burning down banks. But this does not transform capitalist social relations of production; for capital is a social relation that exists as a totality and that cannot be reduced to one of its forms. Capitalist property is founded not on the rule of law or on the supposed state monopoly of the means of violence, but on capitalist social relations of production. Finally, capitalists do not simply rely on the state to defend their property, a task the state and its police force are simply not equipped to perform. Rather, capitalists, like other citizens, maintain and defend their property with fences, padlocks, safes, burglar alarms, security guards, store detectives and vigilante patrols without constant recourse to the agencies of the state. While it may be true that under capitalism, as in all class societies, the state *codifies* property rights and *regulates* the use of force, it is by no means the case that the state *constitutes* property rights or *monopolises* the use of force.

(c) The abstract character of the commodity form is a feature of the surface form — it is the form in which social relations between commodity producers appear as the relations between things. To derive the abstract character of the state form from the abstract character of the commodity is to treat the state as an institution that can only relate to capitalist social relations as they appear on the surface. But on the surface these relations appear as the relations between free and equal commodity owners. This approach makes the apparent neutrality and particularity of the state into its essential characteristic — its class character being something that lies outside the state. The class character of the state then becomes a contingent fact, based on the material and ideological subordination of the working class in 'civil society' and not an essential feature of the state form itself. However, the essential feature of the state is not its autonomy, but its class character. Its autonomy is a characteristic of the surface forms in which its subordination to capital appears.

### 3 The Necessity of the State

If the essential feature of the state is its *capitalist* character, how is this to be explained? The state derivation debate tended to take as its starting point the demonstration of the *necessity* of the state. But what is meant by the necessity of the state? Does the reproduction of capital necessitate a state, or is capital, in principle, self-reproducing?

For Hegel, a state was necessary precisely to represent the general interest over against the conflicting claims of private interests — a society based on pure egoism was an impossibility. Against Hegel, classical political economy claimed that a state was not necessary to represent the general interest. It was necessary and sufficient that there be a collective institution to guarantee the sanctity of private property — ‘for the defense of the rich against the poor’ (Adam Smith) — for the operation of the market to secure the best of all possible worlds. Marx aligned himself clearly with political economy and against Hegelian conservatism. In *Capital*, Marx offers an analysis of the self-reproduction of the capital relation, within which the social relations of capitalist production are regulated, albeit in a contradictory and crisis-ridden fashion, by the operation of the market. The conditions for the self-reproduction of capital are a sufficient degree of development of the forces of production, that is the historical basis of capitalist social relations, on the one hand, and the subordination of the individual to the social relations of capitalist production, on the other. This subordination is *possible*, once the capitalist mode of production is established, on the basis of purely ‘economic’ mechanisms, although there is no reason to expect capitalists to deny themselves the opportunity of developing collective institutions to supplement the force of imposed scarcity and necessity in securing their domination. However, the implication of Marx’s analysis is that the state is not, in the strictest sense, *necessary* to capitalist social reproduction, so that none of the concepts developed in *Capital* presuppose the concept of the state while, on the other hand, the state cannot be derived logically from the requirements of capitalist social reproduction. The necessity of the state is, therefore, not formal or abstract, it is the historical necessity, emerging from the development of the class struggle, for a collective instrument of class domination: the state has not developed logically out of the requirements of capital, it has developed historically out of the class struggle.

The development of the state as such a class instrument, and the institutional separation of the state from particular capitalist interests, is also a historical development as ‘private’ institutions acquire a ‘public’ character, and as ‘public’ institutions are subordinated to ‘private’ interest. This does not, however, mean that it is a purely contingent development; it is a development that is governed by historical laws that have to be discovered on the basis of Marx’s analysis of the historical laws governing the development of the capitalist mode of production.

## 4 The Reproduction of Capital and the Class Struggle

The crucial question in developing the Marxist theory of the state is that of the level of abstraction at which it is appropriate to introduce consideration of the state. It should go without saying that the state cannot be analyzed at the same level of abstraction as capital. The state does not *constitute* the social relations of production, it is essentially a *regulative* agency, whose analysis, therefore, presupposes the analysis of the social relations of which the state is regulative. The analysis of the capitalist state conceptually presupposes the analysis of capital and of the reproduction of capitalist relations of production, despite the fact that in reality, of course, the state is itself a moment of the process of reproduction.

We have also seen that the state is not logically *necessary* for the reproduction of capitalist social relations, however important it might have been historically in securing that reproduction. It is possible to analyze the process of capitalist reproduction through the production, appropriation, and circulation of commodities in abstraction from the state, as Marx does in *Capital*. The state is *not* a hidden presupposition of *Capital*, it is a concept that has to be developed on the basis of the analysis already offered in *Capital*. However, if the state is not necessary either for the constitution or for the reproduction of capitalist social relations, the question arises of what basis there is for a *theory* of the state. Is the concept of the ‘state’ a concept that can be derived analytically at all, or is it merely a concept that describes a particular institution that has no inner coherence, but only a contingent, if universal, historical existence? This seems to me to be the dilemma that has frequently confronted Marxist discussion of the state.

The way out of the dilemma, it seems to me, is through the concept of class struggle, a concept that makes it possible to make the transition from the level of abstraction of the concepts of *Capital* to their historical application to the real world. *If there were no class struggle, if the working class were willing to submit passively to their subordination to capitalist social relations, there would be no state.* The development of the state is an essential aspect of the development of the class struggle, and has to be seen as an essential form of that struggle. Thus, it is the class struggle that is the mediating term between the abstract analysis of capitalist reproduction and the concept of the state. The problem of conceptualising the problem of the state is then the problem of conceptualising the class struggle, and, in particular, the problem of conceptualising the variety of forms of the class struggle and the relationship between those forms. The starting point for the analysis of the class struggle has to be Marx’s analysis of the contradictions inherent in the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, on the basis of which the class struggle develops.

Against the recent vogue for structuralist interpretations of Marx, that tend to lead to functionalist accounts of the state, I think it is important to stress that capitalist production is not a *structure* with a given foundation, it is a *pro-*

cess whose reproduction depends on its reproducing its own foundation. It is, moreover, a contradictory process in the sense that its reproduction involves the repeated suspension of its own foundations, which is why reproduction is necessarily marked by class struggle. In reproducing itself capital also reproduces the working class, but it does not reproduce the working class as its passive servant, it reproduces the working class as the barrier to its own reproduction. This is the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, whose concrete unfolding constitutes the history of capitalism. Let us look briefly at the moments of the reproduction process of capital in this light, in order to identify this relationship between contradictions and class struggle a bit more concretely.

The class relation between capital and labour is reproduced only through the production and reproduction of surplus value. If we start the circuit of capital with the exchange of money capital for labour-power, we find a relationship between the owner of capital and the free labourer, free from imposed obligations and free from the means of production and subsistence. This relationship *presupposes* the separation of the labourer from the means of production and subsistence, but from the point of view of this exchange such a separation is an *external* presupposition: it remains to be seen whether it is a presupposition that is external to the process as a whole (in which case it would have to be guaranteed by the state and enforced by the law). Within the exchange relation itself the two parties really do stand as free and equal commodity owners. However, in exchange the foundations of this relationship are immediately suspended: the labourer receives the means of subsistence, and is given access to the means of production. During the time of production the dispossession of the labourer is no longer the dominant feature of the class relation. On the other hand, in the hidden abode of production the labourer is no longer free, for the reproduction of capital depends on the capitalist controlling the process of production and compelling the labourer to work beyond the necessary labour-time. However, the relations of production, defined by the subordination of labour to capital, come into contradiction with the forces of production, within which labour is the active agent of production, a contradiction expressed in the struggle for control over the process of production. Although the capitalist can appeal to his 'property rights' — his right to hire and fire — as the ultimate sanction against individual workers, more subtle mechanisms have to be used to secure the subordination of the collective labourer. Such mechanisms include: the incorporation of the means of regulating the labour process into the means of production; the construction of divisive hierarchies within the collective labourer (especially the separation of mental from manual work and the subordination of the latter to the former); and the development of gender, ethnic, and cultural divisions within the collective labourer which are superimposed on occupational hierarchies. The technical and managerial stratum comes to play a special role as the capitalist requirement to maximise the amount of surplus labour-time and to minimise the turnover time of capital is translated into the 'technical' norms of productivity and efficiency.

Once production is completed the labourer is once again free, but in the

meantime has consumed his or her means of subsistence and so is compelled once more to sell his or her labour-power. Thus, the external pre-supposition of the circuit of capital has become its result. The capitalist, on the other hand, has to assert his 'rights' acquired through the free purchase of means of production and labour-power, to appropriate the entire product, and then has to realise his capital in the form of money, if the circuit is to reproduce itself, by selling his commodities to other capitalists or to workers.

The question we now have to ask is, what is the foundation of this class relation between capital and labour? Does the reproduction of capital *require* some external agency to guarantee that foundation? I argued above that there is no such external requirement, that capitalist social relations do not *presuppose* a state either to constitute or to guarantee them. However, we have also seen that the circuit of capital does have certain presuppositions — in particular it presupposes the separation of the labourer from the means of production and subsistence that provides the material basis for the subordination of the working class to capital. However, this separation is not an externally given circumstance; except in the phase of 'primitive accumulation' when it is created by the dissolution of feudal society, it is a relation that has constantly to be reproduced. In the sphere of exchange the workers appear as free individuals, separated from the means of production and subsistence. But in the sphere of production the workers appear as a collective force, united with the means of production and in possession of means of subsistence. This is the material foundation of the counter-power of the workers against capital. The reproduction of capital depends on the capitalists' ability to maintain the subordination of the workers in production and to limit their ability to organise as producers, creating and sharpening divisions and hierarchies within the working class in order to assert the claims of capital as the necessary agent of coordination and direction. It is only on this basis that capital, and the reproduction of the separation of the workers from the means of production and subsistence, can be reproduced. Therefore, the subordination of the working class to capital is not given by the external presupposition of the separation of the workers from the means of production and subsistence. It involves more fundamentally the ability of capital to use the material, ideological, and political means at its disposal to maintain effective power over the working class in the class struggle so that the working class, in reproducing itself, is compelled also to reproduce the chains that bind it to capital.

Although in principle, as Marx shows in *Capital*, it is *conceivable* for capital to be self-reproducing, the reproduction of capital is, as we have seen, a process beset with contradictions in which the foundations of that process are constantly suspended and have constantly to be reproduced. Capital sets up barriers to its own reproduction that can only be broken down through its successful conduct of the class struggle. In waging that struggle there is no reason why capital should rely only on its material power. Thus, in seeking to overcome the barriers to the expanded reproduction of capital, capitalists use every weapon at their disposal, and one such weapon, of course, is the power of the state. However, the contradictory foundation of capital means that the reproduction of



capital can never overcome the barriers that it confronts, but can only suspend them provisionally. As a result, the state is not a functional agency that can resolve these contradictions. It is rather a complementary form through which capital attempts to pursue the class struggle in a vain attempt to suspend its contradictory character.

## 5 The Reproduction of Capital, Class Struggle, and the State

Capital did not create the state, either logically or historically. Just as capital developed out of the contradictions generated by the emergence of commodity production within feudal society, so the capitalist state developed through the class struggles that accompanied this development, on the basis of the feudal state form. The period of transition saw a revolution in both the mode of production and its associated state form as capitalists sought to seal their dominance over civil society by assuring the subordination of the state to the reproduction of their own class. However, this subordination was not direct, even in the period of transition. To secure its political victory over the feudal ruling class, capital had to present itself as the representative of society as a whole. From the very beginning the subordination of the state to capital was mediated in particular ways that serve to define the specificity of the capitalist state form and that underlie the apparent autonomy of the state. These are the mediations through which the domination of capital over civil society is translated into its domination over the state.

Just as capital originally confronted the working class as an external pre-supposition, created by the dissolution of the feudal order, so too it originally confronted the state as a legacy of the old mode of production. In the development of capitalism, however, the state comes to be subordinated to the reproduction of capital so that the state comes to complement the direct power of capital in achieving the always provisional subordination of the working class. On the one hand, though, the subordination of the state is not to be understood in the sense of the subversion of an institution that has some kind of functional existence in abstraction from the class struggle between capital and labour. It is not another level of society, 'relatively autonomous' from the reproduction of capital, it is a moment of that reproduction and so an integral part of the class struggle. On the other hand, capital and the working class do not directly confront one another *as classes* in the form of the state, any more than they directly confront one another *as classes* in the exchange of capital for labour-power or in the immediate process of production. The state form of the class struggle is merely one moment of the class struggle, complementary to the other moments of that struggle. Thus, the class struggle does not appear immediately in the state form any more than it appears immediately in the exchange of capital for labour-power. The crucial question is how to define the mediations through which political struggles are, nevertheless, determined as moments of the class

struggle.

It is important not to underestimate the extent to which the capitalist class seeks directly to impose its class interests on the state, and indeed such direct political intervention by sections of the capitalist class is a normal aspect of the functioning of the state. Direct political intervention can acquire decisive importance in periods of crisis that call for a restructuring of the forms of political domination. There is a tendency for sophisticated intellectual Marxists to turn their backs on the evidence of such direct interventions in order to concentrate on more subtle mechanisms. The development of the capitalist state form is not a spontaneous unfolding of the logic of capital, it is something arrived at through trial and error in the unfolding of the class struggle, conditioned to a considerable extent by the direct agency of sections of the capitalist class and so, incidentally, conditioned by the outcome of struggles within that class. However, behind the direct representation of the interests of the capitalist class lie the more fundamental, if less immediate, relations between capital and the state that serve to secure the domination of the capitalist class over the state.

Within capitalist society the production of use-values takes place only as the means for the production of surplus value. The reproduction of the state as a material force therefore depends on the reproduction of the capitalist social relations on the basis of which the use-values appropriated by the state are produced. On the other hand, the state can only intervene in directing the material reproduction of society by modifying the conditions for the production and reproduction of surplus value. These are the fundamental ways in which the material relations between capital and the state are mediated. Both its existence as a material force and the forms of its social intervention are subordinated to the need to secure the expanded reproduction of capitalist social relations of production. Moreover, this is not simply a passive constraint, for the emergence of barriers to the reproduction of capital impose themselves as barriers to the reproduction of the state and so of its ability to carry out its designated tasks. However, the subordination of the state to the reproduction of capital, which determines the state as a moment of that reproduction, is not simply given by the logic of capital. As a moment of the reproduction of capital the state is also a moment of the class struggle and the forms and limits of the state are themselves an object of that struggle. The growing social character of capitalist production, and particularly the increasing internationalisation of capital, certainly narrow the limits within which the state can intervene to modify capitalist social relations of production without precipitating an interruption in the material reproduction of capital. Such an intervention would undermine the conditions for the production and appropriation of surplus value. But the state, nevertheless, has the power to intervene within those limits, and indeed has the power to violate those limits at the cost of precipitating a crisis. The mediations between capital and the state do not determine that the state will intervene to act in the 'best interests' of capital, or even that a particular government will not use the levers at its disposal to undermine altogether the reproduction of capital. Thus, the state is not simply a tool of capital, it is an arena of class struggle. But the form of the state is such that if the political class struggle

goes beyond the boundaries set by the expanded reproduction of capital, the result will be not the supersession of the capitalist mode of production but its breakdown, and with it the breakdown of the material reproduction of society.

While the material relations between capital and the state are the material basis of the subordination of the state to capital, this subordination is in turn mediated by the forms through which the class struggle is waged politically. Accompanying the rise to dominance of the capitalist mode of production, the bourgeois political revolution sealed the transfer of state power from the feudal aristocracy to the capitalist class. However, the bourgeois revolution was not carried out in the name of capital, it was a more or less popular democratic revolution, in which capitalists often played a minor part. As a revolution against feudal restriction, feudal privilege, and feudal exploitation in the name of freedom of the person and of property and of equality before the law, it mobilised demands that did not simply express the surface appearance of the capitalist form of exploitation, but also expressed the popular resistance of petty commodity producers to feudal tyranny. The capitalist class has always represented a small minority of the population, and could hardly be expected to be able to secure and maintain state power in its own name. Nor could its rule be expected to persist if it rested merely on ideological mystifications corresponding to the appearance of freedom and equality. The key to the political dominance of the capitalist class lies in its ability to represent its own interests as the interests of 'society' or of the 'nation'. However, this ability is no mere ideological fiction; it rests on the dominance of capitalist social relations of production and on the material relations between capital and the state that together determine that the condition for the material reproduction of the state and of society is the expanded reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

In its struggle with the feudal ruling class, the basis on which the capitalist class can identify its own interests with those of society is the progressive character of the capitalist mode of production in developing the forces of production. With its political triumph, it can identify its own interests with those of society on the basis of the identification of the conditions for its own class rule with the conditions for the material reproduction of society and of the state. Thus, the interests of the capitalist class are not only represented directly, as capitalists act as 'technical' 'managerial' and 'financial' advisers, and as their political representatives formulate strategies and policies designed to secure the expanded reproduction of capital, but also in the mediated form of a 'national' interest in the material reproduction of society and of the state, behind which the dominance of capital is concealed as the silent presupposition. The state, therefore, *appears* as neutral and autonomous for the same reasons as capital *appears* as a mere technical factor of production, on the basis of the identification of the conditions for the material reproduction of capitalist society with that of its social reproduction (an identification that, incidentally, becomes more precarious as the internationalisation of capital is not matched by a breakdown of the nation state).

However, the relationship between the material and the social reproduction of capital is essentially contradictory. This contradiction is the basis of the

class struggle; it has various qualitative aspects, corresponding to the variety of barriers that capital establishes to its own reproduction and defining the various qualitative forms of the class struggle. Thus, for example, the subordination of the working class to capital contradicts its active role in production; the homogenisation of labour-power as a commodity contradicts the need for a differentiated working class and contradicts the conditions of the reproduction of labour-power; the socialisation of production contradicts the private appropriation of the product; the restriction of resources contradicts the inflation of workers' needs; the subordination of the daily life of the worker to the reproduction of labour-power as a commodity contradicts the human aspirations of the worker. It is on the basis of these contradictions that the concrete reality of the class struggle develops. But the contradictory foundations of capital mean that the reproduction of capital can never surmount the barriers it confronts, it can only suspend them provisionally, and this applies as much to the political forms of the class struggle as it does to those in which capitalist and worker confront one another directly.

The powers appropriated by the state are powers that correspond to the tasks that devolve to it and the means with which it is endowed to fulfil those tasks. Thus, the powers of the state are not determined independently of its functions. However, these functions are not abstractly defined and then imposed on the state as determinants of its 'essence' They emerge historically out of the barriers to the reproduction of the capital relation, on the basis of the class struggle through which capital is reproduced. Moreover, the fact that these barriers express the contradictory foundations of capitalist production means that capital does not impose unambiguous 'needs' on the state, since the needs of capital are themselves contradictory. The need to force down the value of labour-power contradicts the need to reproduce labour-power; the need to educate the working class contradicts the need to reduce to a minimum the drain on surplus value; the need to break down all non-capitalist social relations contradicts the need to sustain the family as the unit for the reproduction of labour-power; the need to introduce administrative regulation contradicts the need to maintain the discipline of the market; in short, the need to secure the material reproduction of society contradicts the need to secure its social reproduction. Moreover, these contradictions also underlie contradictions between particular capitals and groups of capitals, as moments of social capital, that find expression not only in economic competition but also in political conflict.

The needs of capital at every point come into conflict with the aspirations of the working class, so that the state is not simply a form of capital, it is a form of the class struggle. Like production, however, although it is an arena of struggle, it is a form through which the subordination of the working class to capital is reproduced. Thus, the form and the content of the state are the result of an always provisional resolution of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, but never of their supersession. For the latter to be achieved a political revolution is not enough — the overthrow of the state can only be on the basis of a social revolution through which the working class expropriates the expropriators and transforms the social relations of production.

## 6 The Working Class and the State

The class character of the capitalist state, represented by its material and political subordination to capital, means that the working class is always the object of state power. The judicial power of the state stands behind the appropriation of labour without equivalent by the capitalist class, while preventing the working class from using its collective power to assert its right to the product of its labour. The administrative regulation of the material reproduction of capitalist society is mediated through the reproduction of the exploitation of the working class. Thus, the working class confronts capital not only directly, in the day-to-day struggles over the production and appropriation of surplus value, but also indirectly, in the struggle against state power.

The forms which the working class has developed to further its collective resistance to the exercise of state power have varied, but the historical tendency of the capitalist mode of production has been for a provisional incorporation of working-class resistance into the state apparatus through the system of political representation. The incorporation of the working class tends to replace the direct resistance of the working class to the power of the state on the basis of its own collective organisation by the mediated relation channelled through the political representatives of the working class. This development was again no spontaneous evolution of the logic of capital, but marked a particular phase in the development of the class struggle. Faced with the threat that both capital and the state would be overwhelmed in a confrontation with the collective power of the working class, capital progressively widened the franchise to include larger and larger sections of the working class. Thus, the incorporation of the political representatives of the working class into the state apparatus represented a change in the form of the class struggle that in turn had important consequences for its content and for its subsequent development.

The framework of parliamentary representation is one in which social power is expressed as an abstract collectivity of individual interests, not as the concrete expression of collective power, so that the development of the aspirations of the working class is not matched by the development of any power to satisfy those aspirations — but this occurs so long as the working class is prepared to subordinate its challenge to the power of the state in the parliamentary form. Thus, the aspirations of individual workers to improve their conditions of life are transformed, through the alienated form of parliamentary representation, into a political pressure on the state to increase the rate of accumulation. This occurs because the material subordination of the state to capital dictates that the only means the state has of improving the workers' conditions of life is by intensifying the subordination of the working class to capital and intensifying the rate of exploitation — with the result of advancing one section of the working class at the expense of another. Since the interests of individuals appear as their individual interests in the conditions of sale of the particular commodity that serves as their 'revenue source' the alienated form of parliamentary representation serves to divorce the interests of individual workers from those of the class. For within the working class the relations between individual workers as

owners of labour-power come into conflict with one another as they compete on the labour market. Moreover, their aspirations as workers within the process of production come into conflict with one another on the basis of the hierarchical organisation of the labour process. Thus, the parliamentary form of representation serves to reinforce the divisions within the working class in expressing the competition between groups of workers, divisions which are further fostered and exploited by the political representatives of capital as the latter seek to establish an identification between groups of workers and 'their' capitalists. On the other hand, the parliamentary form demobilises the working class in substituting the state for their own collective organisation as the means proffered for realising their class aspirations. The parliamentary form of representation serves to divorce the political representation of the working class from the source of its power and to deflect the opposition of the working class from capital in order to turn it against itself. The development of parliamentary representation for the working class, however much scope it may provide for improving the material conditions of sections of the working class, far from being an expression of collective working-class strength, becomes the means by which it is divided, demobilised and demoralised.

However, the development of parliamentary representation does not mean that the working-class abandons its resistance to capitalist state power, or channels such resistance solely through 'political' channels: it is important not to identify parliamentary politics with the political class struggle, or to treat the illusions of the parliamentary form as corresponding in some sense to the essence of the capitalist state. The working class does not simply abandon its collective aspirations in accepting admission to the franchise, and it continues to wage the class struggle through other than parliamentary channels as it confronts state power directly in the day-to-day conduct of the class struggle. The working class does not simply accept the division between economic demands, to be pursued legitimately through trade unions which mobilise the collective power of workers, and political demands, to be channelled through the political party and parliament. The boundaries of the 'economic' and the 'political', the definition of the 'rights' of capital and of the working class, and the forms of class mobilisation are a constant object of class struggle, with the working class constantly pressing beyond the limits accorded to it by capital and the state. Thus, workers occupy factories; encroach on the rights of management; mobilise against state policies as workers, as unemployed, as women, or young people, as tenants; and they take to the streets to confront the repressive arm of the state directly. Moreover, the inadequacy of the parliamentary form to the aspirations of the working class has meant that the state has to concede a growing political role to the collective organisations of the working class, as expressed in the political role played by the trade union movement and by a wide range of other working-class organisations. In this context, both 'corporatist' and 'pluralist' developments represent responses to the inadequacy of the parliamentary form.

## 7 Conclusion: The Capitalist State, the Class Struggle, and Socialism

In this paper I have tried briefly to argue that recent Marxist discussion of the capitalist state has failed to integrate form and content sufficiently to achieve an adequate account of the state. I have tried equally briefly, and very roughly, to indicate the ways in which a better integration of form and content might be achieved by developing Marx's analysis of the contradictory character of capitalist reproduction as the basis of an analysis of the developing form and content of the class struggle. Within this account, several features that some have seen as essential to the capitalist form of state — in particular its autonomy, its externality and its particularity — turn out to be features of the form of appearance of the state and not its essential determinants. Political struggle is one moment of the class struggle, and cannot be analyzed in isolation from the other moments of that struggle.

I have also paid particular attention to the subordination of the state to capital and to the various mediations through which this subordination is achieved. Further discussion would involve more detailed historical investigation of the development of these mediations, rather than any attempt to elaborate the remarks above into a systematic 'theory of the state.' However, it is more appropriate, in conclusion, to raise the question of the political implications of the analysis developed here.

My central argument has been that the class struggle is as much about the form as about the content of politics. The state cannot be isolated from other moments of the class struggle, for those different moments are complementary to one another, and the relationship between them is itself determined in the course of the class struggle. This is the context within which we can begin to locate the distinctiveness of the New Right. Since the end of the nineteenth century the historical tendency has been for liberal reformers to respond to the threat of working-class self-organisation and extra-parliamentary activity with a programme of social and political reform that replaced or modified the discipline of the market, relying instead on political regulation through the state, and involving the political incorporation of the working class. The distinctiveness of the New Right lies in

its attempt to alter the balance of the class struggle in the opposite direction, replacing state regulation by regulation through the commodity form and removing the working class from its 'privileged' political position. However, this development cannot be seen simply as a reactionary return to nineteenth-century politics, nor as a more humane version of the fascism of the thirties, for it is a strategy that is firmly rooted in the class struggles of the 1980s, and in particular it is one that capitalises on the divisions, the demobilisation, and the demoralisation of the working-class movement that has been the price paid for decades of sheltering under the wing of a paternalistic state. For the bulk of the working class the activities of politicians and trade union leaders alike are matters of indifference, scorn, or contempt. Few of them are seen as working-class heroes, or even as representatives of the working class. Indeed, the activities of the working class's self-proclaimed representatives make many sections of the working class — blacks, women, the young and the old — reluctant to identify themselves with their class at all. The relative success of reaction throughout the capitalist world can be put down as much as anything else to the demobilisation of the organised working class that developed as the workers were first lulled into trusting their political representatives to achieve their liberation and then, losing faith in its leaders, the working class was left demoralised and divided.

The need to mobilise resistance to reactionary governments has led many on the left to acquire a renewed faith in the parliamentary system, seeking to democratise working-class parties and to broaden their appeal in order to secure electoral victory and a reversal of past defeats. But such a response is to focus on the content of politics at the expense of its form. For many of us the lesson of the 1960s and 1970s was precisely that questions of form are more fundamental than questions of content. It is not simply petty-bourgeois individualistic romanticism that leads us to reject traditional parties and sects (though no doubt we do draw on the one good feature of petty-bourgeois culture in this way!). It is much more a belief that socialism is not simply about such quantitative matters as the distribution of income and wealth, pressing as such matters are, it is most fundamentally about the creation of an alternative society, against capital's insistence that (in Margaret Thatcher's immortal words) 'there is no alternative'. It is about making qualitative changes, about *transforming* social relations, about replacing the alienated forms of capitalist political and economic regulation by new forms of collective self-organisation and democratic control; and it is only on the latter basis that the state, and the power of capital, can be effectively confronted. Thus, a *socialist* response to the rise of the New Right cannot be reduced to a defense of statism and welfarism; it can only involve the building and rebuilding of collective organisation. This means not only organisations such as trade unions, which organise workers at work, but also organisations of tenants, of young workers, of black and migrant workers, of women workers, so that the divisions within the working class and the fragmentation of working-class experience can be broken down through the development of a united movement. In the last analysis, as the experience of the 'socialist' countries shows only too clearly, the building of socialism can only



be on the basis of the self-organisation of the working class .