

The Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology

Edited by

Kate Nash and Alan Scott

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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Introduction <i>Kate Nash and Alan Scott</i>	1
PART I APPROACHES TO POWER AND THE POLITICAL	
1 Developments in Marxist Theory <i>Bob Jessop</i>	7
2 Developments in Pluralist and Elite Approaches <i>Richard Bellamy</i>	17
3 Rational Choice Approaches to Analyzing Power <i>Keith Dowding</i>	29
4 Power, Government, Politics <i>Barry Hindess</i>	40
5 Society, Morality, and Law: Jürgen Habermas <i>Max Pensky</i>	49
6 A Political Sociology for Complex Societies: Niklas Luhmann <i>Stefan Lange and Uwe Schimank</i>	60
7 “Postmodern” Political Sociology <i>David Owen</i>	71

8	Studying Power <i>John Scott</i>	82
 PART II THE STATE AND GOVERNANCE		
Formation and Form		
9	Theories of State Formation <i>Gianfranco Poggi</i>	95
10	Political Legitimacy <i>David Beetham</i>	107
11	Gender and the State <i>R. W. Connell</i>	117
Political Processes		
12	Administration, Civil Service, and Bureaucracy <i>Antonino Palumbo</i>	127
13	Policy Networks <i>Peter John</i>	139
14	Parties and Political Intermediation <i>Herbert Kitschelt</i>	149
15	Protest and Political Process <i>David S. Meyer</i>	164
16	The Media and Politics <i>John B. Thompson</i>	173
Violence and the State		
17	The Political Sociology of War <i>Alan Scott</i>	183
18	Revolution <i>Michael Drake</i>	195
19	Terror Against the State <i>Donatella della Porta</i>	208
 PART III THE POLITICAL AND THE SOCIAL		
State and Civil Society		
20	Civil Society and the Public Sphere <i>Larry Ray</i>	219

21	Trust and Social Capital <i>Arnaldo Bagnasco</i>	230
22	Markets and States <i>Colin Crouch</i>	240
23	Markets Against States: Neo-liberalism <i>Fran Tonkiss</i>	250
	The Politics of Collective Identity and Action	
24	Beyond New Social Movements: Social Conflicts and Institutions <i>Pierre Hamel and Louis Maheu</i>	261
25	The Politics of Ethnicity and Identity <i>Aletta J. Norval</i>	271
26	Imagined Communities <i>Alan Finlayson</i>	281
27	Political Rituals <i>Sigrid Baringhorst</i>	291
28	The Politics of Popular Culture <i>John Street</i>	302
29	Body Politics <i>Roberta Sassatelli</i>	312
	Citizenship	
30	Citizenship and Gender <i>Ruth Lister</i>	323
31	Postnational Citizenship: Reconfiguring the Familiar Terrain <i>Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal</i>	333
32	Governmentality and Citizenship <i>Giovanna Procacci</i>	342

PART IV POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Democratization

33	Transformation, Transition, Consolidation: Democratization in Latin America <i>Joe Foweraker</i>	355
34	Feminism and Democracy <i>Judith Squires</i>	366
	Postmodernization, Fragmentation, Globalization	
35	Postmodernization <i>Jan Pakulski</i>	375

36	Nationalism and Fragmentation Since 1989 <i>John Schwarzmantel</i>	386
37	A New Phase of the State Story in Europe <i>Patrick Le Galès</i>	396
38	The “Singapore Model”: Democracy, Communication, and Globalization <i>Danilo Zolo</i>	407
	<i>Bibliography</i>	418
	<i>Index</i>	462

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Introduction

KATE NASH AND ALAN SCOTT

Editors of a volume such as this are at the outset confronted with a simple choice. Either they can attempt to impose conceptual order on the area by selecting one of a number of possible paradigms and asserting, or simply tacitly assuming or pretending, that the one that they have selected is, is becoming, or should be *the* dominant or only legitimate paradigm, or they can seek to “tell it as it is” and to represent all the voices seeking attention or perspectives vying for position within the field. Either option has its advantages and limitations. The first may achieve order but at the price of partiality. The second is in danger of creating a cacophony of voices which all too often talk past, or simply seek to drown out, each other. At the same time, representative approaches are bound to be both too inclusive – leaving the boundaries of the discipline or subdiscipline open and vague – *and* not inclusive enough; something is bound to slip through the net; someone’s favored topic is going to be under-represented or omitted. We have chosen the second option with all its attendant dangers. Thus, postmodernist perspectives vie with rational choice; institutionally focused approaches are to be found alongside broad theoretical position statements; opposing definitions of what counts as “political” are set alongside each other. We have in effect taken the somewhat quaint but attractive term “companion” rather literally. A companion is not a lexicon or dictionary. It does not aspire to be definitive. It is more an invitation to partake in, or at least eavesdrop on, a debate, or debates.

The problem of boundaries is particularly intense in the case of a subarea like political sociology which exists within or between the two disciplines which have formed it, and in turn partly been formed by it: political science and sociology. To put the point more sharply, is political sociology any more than a transit station through which new(ish) issues or perspectives travel before they become established within one or other of the two more institutionally secured disciplines? If the answer were unambiguously “yes” then a companion to political sociology would be a considerably slimmer volume than the one you have in your hands. By assuming that political sociology is more than just such a transit station we have risked another possible boundary problem. The list of topics included here might leave political scientists wondering what part of their

discipline is *not* political sociology and may awake the suspicion that political sociology is a Trojan Horse. A similar suspicion might well be raised in the minds of sociologists when they see how much of cultural and economic sociology can be included under the rubric of political sociology.

These dangers have been intensified by developments within political science and sociology themselves which have, for example, pointed up the previously underestimated political importance of culture (e.g. in the analysis of social movements or of new forms of citizenship). At the same time, globalization is said to call into question the centrality of the basic unit of political analysis – nation-states – *and* sociological analysis – national societies. Such developments, or alleged developments, have in turn stimulated new forms of analysis, for example of cultural or identity politics. Theoretical developments beyond as well as within these disciplines – for example, feminism, postmodernism – have caused a radical rethinking of the nature and purpose, or even legitimacy, of the social sciences. One possible conclusion from such developments is that political sociology (or the social sciences generally) are caught within a framework which is itself redundant and that such matters would be better addressed through newer (and thus more innovative?) disciplines such as cultural studies. Thus new contenders emerge and turf wars intensify. An alternative interpretation is that political sociology, precisely because of its location in the gaps of the conventional boundaries drawn between the political, cultural and economic is, and always has been, in a particularly good position to absorb and transmit emerging developments, to understand the ambiguity of these – possibly arbitrary – boundaries and to recognize the intimacy of the connections between these “spheres.” Assuming this more benign, or convenient, interpretation we have sought both to include newer debates and to range beyond “the political” to include aspects of “economic” or “cultural” life where these touch on the concerns of contemporary political sociologists and political scientists (e.g. social capital, or ethnicity and citizenship).

It follows that there is necessarily an element of arbitrariness in the – equally necessary – division of the book into sections. The first section includes overviews of the most prominent theoretical perspectives on power and politics represented in the following pages. The second, “state and governance,” gathers articles in which relations between the state and different institutions, organizations, and groups in society are central issues. The articles in the third section, “the political and the social,” are less directly concerned with action oriented towards the state. They deal with the very definitions of social space implied in different divisions between state and society; with collective action which does not necessarily take the state as its focus; and with forms of citizenship in which the distinction between social and political is particularly difficult to draw. Finally, the fourth section takes the topical theme of “political transformations” as its rationale.

Several of the chapters “speak to each other” across these divisions: disagreeing with each other, providing an example to support a case made elsewhere, or discussing the same material from a different point of view. The days when social scientific debates could be neatly characterized with reference to one or two dichotomies (Marxist vs. Weberian; structural vs. action approaches, or even

modern vs. postmodern) are over. As a result of this pluralization, or perhaps fragmentation, of social scientific discourse, this volume contains a broad range of shadow debates. As editors, we have cross-referenced these points of contact and contrast where we find them most useful or interesting. Given the complexity and diversity of current debates, we have chosen to gather the chapters according to topics rather than impose an even more artificial categorization in terms of schools or perspectives. But there is also continuity across the volume in that all the contributors were asked to address the most recent developments in their area of study, as well as providing background to welcome newcomers to ongoing debates. It should, therefore, be something of a companion to current events as well as to the discipline of political sociology.

Part I

Approaches to Power and the Political

1

Developments in Marxist Theory

BOB JESSOP

Marxist approaches to power are distinctive in focusing on its relation to class domination in capitalist societies. Power is linked to class relations in economics, politics, and ideology. The aim of much recent Marxist analysis has been to show how class power is dispersed throughout society, in order to avoid economic reductionism. In capitalist societies the state is considered to be particularly important in securing the conditions for economic class domination. Marxists are also interested in why dominated classes collude in their oppression and address issues of resistance and strategies to bring about radical change. In this chapter, as well as a summary of the main trends in contemporary Marxism, Jessop also offers a brief assessment of its disadvantages as a sociological analysis of power: its neglect of social domination that is not directly related to class; a tendency to over-emphasize the coherence of class domination; the continuing problem of economic reductionism; and the opposite danger of a voluntaristic account of resistance to capitalism.

Marxists have analyzed power relations in many different ways. But four inter-related themes typify their overall approach. The first of these is a concern with power relations as manifestations of a specific mode or configuration of class domination rather than as purely interpersonal phenomena lacking deeper foundations in the social structure. The significance thus attached to class domination by no means implies that all forms of power are always exercised by social actors with clear class identities and class interests. It means only that Marxists are mainly interested in the causal interconnections between the exercise of social power and the reproduction or transformation of class domination. Indeed Marxists are usually well aware of other types of subject, identity, antagonism, and domination. But they consider such phenomena largely in terms of their relevance for, and their overdetermination by, class domination. Second, Marxists are concerned with the links – including discontinuities as well as continuities – between economic, political, and ideological class domination. Despite the obvious centrality of this issue, however, it prompts widespread theoretical and empirical disagreements. For different Marxist approaches locate the bases of class power primarily in the social relations of production, in control

over the state, or in intellectual hegemony over hearts and minds. I will deal with these alternatives below. Third, Marxists note the limitations inherent in any exercise of power that is rooted in one or another form of class domination and try to explain this in terms of structural contradictions and antagonisms inscribed therein. Thus Marxists tend to assume that all forms of social power linked to class domination are inherently fragile, unstable, provisional, and temporary and that continuing struggles are needed to reproduce the conditions for class domination, to overcome resistance, and to naturalize or mystify class power. It follows, fourthly, that Marxists also address questions of strategy and tactics. They provide empirical analyses of actual strategies intended to reproduce, resist, or overthrow class domination in specific periods and conjunctures; and they often engage in political debates about the most appropriate identities, interests, strategies, and tactics for dominated classes and other oppressed groups to adopt in order to challenge, most effectively, their subaltern position.

POWER AS A SOCIAL RELATION

Marxists are interested in the first instance in powers as capacities rather than the exercise of power as the actualization of such capacities. They see these capacities as *socially structured* rather than as *socially amorphous* (or random). Thus Marxists focus on capacities grounded in structured social relations rather than in the properties of individual agents considered in isolation. Moreover, as these structured social relations entail enduring relations, they involve reciprocal, if often asymmetrical, capacities and vulnerabilities. A common paradigm here is Hegel's master-slave dialectic – in which the master depends on the slave and the slave on the master. Marx's equivalent case is, of course, the material interdependence of capital and labor. At stake in both instances are enduring relations of reproduced, reciprocal practices rather than one-off, unilateral impositions of will. This has the interesting implication that power is also involved in securing the continuity of social relations rather than producing radical change. Thus, as Isaac notes, “[r]ather than A getting B to do something B would not otherwise do, social relations of power typically involve both A and B doing what they *ordinarily* do” (1987: 96). The capitalist wage relation is a particularly useful example here. For, in voluntarily selling their labor-power for a wage, workers transfer its control and the right to any surplus to the capitalist. A formally free exchange thereby becomes the basis of factory despotism and economic exploitation. Nonetheless, as working class resistance in labor markets and the labor process indicate, Marxists note that the successful exercise of power is also a conjunctural phenomenon rather than being guaranteed by unequal social relations of production. They regard the actualization of capacities to exercise power and its effects, if any, as always and everywhere contingent on circumstances. Moreover, as capacities to exercise power are always tied to specific sets of social relations and depend for their actualization on specific circumstances, there can be no such thing as power in general or general power – only particular powers and the sum of particular exercises of power.

GENERAL REMARKS ON CLASS DOMINATION

Marxism differs from other analyses of power because of its primary interest in class domination. In contrast, Weberian analyses, for example, give equal *analytical* weight to other forms of domination (status, party); or, again, radical feminists prioritize changing forms of patriarchy. But Marxists' distinctive interest in class domination is not limited to *economic* class domination in the *labor process* (although this is important) nor even to the economic bases of class domination in the wider economy (such as control over the allocation of capital to alternative productive activities). For Marxists see class powers as dispersed throughout society and therefore also investigate political and ideological class domination. However, whereas some Marxists believe political and/or ideological domination derive more or less directly from economic domination, others emphasize the complexity of relations among these three sites or modes of class domination.

Even Marxists who stress the economic bases of class domination also acknowledge that politics is primary in practice. For it is only through political revolution that existing patterns of class domination will be overthrown. Other Marxists prioritize the political over the economic not just (if at all) in terms of revolutionary struggles but also in terms of the routine reproduction of class domination in normal circumstances. This makes the state central to Marxist analyses not only in regard to political power in narrow terms but also to class power more generally. For the state is seen as responsible for maintaining the overall structural integration and social cohesion of a "society divided into classes" – a structural integration and social cohesion without which capitalism's contradictions and antagonisms might cause revolutionary crises or even lead, in the telling phrase of the *Communist Manifesto* [1848], to "the mutual ruin of the contending classes."

Economic Class Domination

Marxism is premised on the existence of antagonistic modes of production. Production involves the material appropriation and transformation of nature. A mode of production comprises in turn a specific combination of the forces of production and social relations of production. The productive forces comprise raw materials, means of production, the technical division of labor corresponding to these raw materials and the given means of production, and the relations of interdependence and cooperation among the direct producers in setting the means of production to work. The social relations of production comprise social control over the allocation of resources to different productive activities and over the appropriation of any resulting surplus; the social division of labor (or the allocation of workers to different activities across different units of production); and class relations grounded in property relations, ownership of the means of production, and the form of economic exploitation. Some Marxists emphasize the primacy of the forces of production in producing social change but the majority view (and current wisdom) is that the social relations of production

are primary. Thus most Marxists now regard the social relations of production rather than the productive forces as the basis for economic class domination. Indeed it is these social relations that shape the choice among available productive forces and how they get deployed in production.

Given the primacy of the relations of production in economic class domination, some Marxists emphasize the power relations rooted in organization of the labor process. This is considered the primary site of the antagonism between capitalists and workers and is the crucial site for securing the valorization of capital through direct control over labor-power. Various forms of control are identified (e.g. bureaucratic, technical, and despotic), each with its own implications for forms of class struggle and the distribution of power between capital and labor. Other Marxists study the overall organization of the production process and its articulation to other aspects of the circuit of capital. Thus emphasis is placed on the relative importance of industrial or financial capital, monopoly capital or small and medium enterprises, multinational or national firms, and firms interested in domestic growth or exports. Different modes of economic growth are associated with different patterns of power. Atlantic Fordism, for example, based on a virtuous circle of mass production and mass consumption in relatively closed economies, was compatible for a time with an institutionalized compromise between industrial capital and organized labor. This supported the Keynesian welfare national state with its distinctive forms of economic, social, and political redistribution. But increasing globalization combined with capital's attempts to increase labor market flexibility have undermined these conditions and encouraged a neo-liberal assault on the postwar compromise in several countries (see Crouch, chapter 22, and Tonkiss, chapter 23, in this volume).

Political Class Domination

Marxist accounts of political class domination begin with the state and its direct and indirect roles in securing the conditions for economic class domination (see Poggi, chapter 9, in this volume). The state is emphasized for various reasons: first, since market forces themselves cannot secure all the conditions needed for capital accumulation and are prone to market failure, there is a need for some mechanism standing outside and above the market to underwrite it and compensate for its failures; second, economic and political competition between capitals necessitates a force able to organize their collective interests; third, the state is needed to manage the many and varied repercussions of economic exploitation within the wider society. Marxists argue that only if the state can secure sufficient institutional integration and social cohesion will the extra-economic conditions for rational economic calculation and, a fortiori, capital accumulation be secured. This requires a sovereign state that is relatively autonomous from particular class interests and can articulate and promote a broader, national-popular interest. Where this project respects the decisive economic nucleus of the society, then the state helps to secure economic as well as political class domination. This is often held to be more likely in bourgeois democratic political regimes than dictatorial regimes (see Moore

1957; Gramsci 1971; Poulantzas 1978; Offe 1984; Jessop 1990; and Barrow 1993).

There are three main Marxist approaches to the state: instrumentalist, structuralist, and “strategic-relational.” Instrumentalists see the state mainly as a neutral tool for exercising political power: whichever class controls this tool can use it to advance its own interests. Structuralists argue that who controls the state is irrelevant because it embodies a prior bias towards capital and against the subaltern classes. And strategic-relational theorists argue that state power is a form-determined condensation of the balance of class forces in struggle. I now illustrate these three views for the capitalist state. Different examples would be required for states associated with other modes of production.

Instrumentalists regard the contemporary state as a *state in capitalist society*. Ralph Miliband expresses this view well in writing that “the ‘ruling class’ of capitalist society is that class which owns and controls the means of production and which is able, by virtue of the economic power thus conferred upon it, to use the state as an instrument for the domination of society” (1969: 22). More generally, those who talk of the “state in capitalist society” stress the contingency of state-economy relations. For, despite the dominance of capitalist relations of production in such a society, the state itself has no inherently capitalist form and performs no necessarily capitalist functions. Any functions it does perform for capital occur because pro-capitalist forces *happen* to control the state and/or because securing social order also *happens* to secure key conditions for rational economic calculation. If the same state apparatus were found in another kind of system, however, it might well be controlled by other forces and perform different functions.

Structuralists regard the state as a *capitalist state* because it has an inherently capitalist form and therefore functions on behalf of capital. This view implies a correspondence between form and function such that the state is *necessarily* capitalist. But what makes a state form capitalist and what guarantees its functionality for capital? Structuralists argue that the very structure of the modern state means that it organizes capital and disorganizes the working class. Claus Offe (1972, 1984) has developed this view as follows. The state’s exclusion from direct control over the means of production (which are held in private hands) means that its revenues depend on a healthy private sector; therefore it must, as a condition of its own reproduction as a state apparatus, ensure the profitability of capital. Subordinate classes can secure material concessions only within the limits of the logic of capital – if they breach these limits, such concessions must be rolled back. But capital in turn is unable to press its economic advantages too far, however, without undermining the political legitimacy of the state. For, in contrast to earlier forms of political class domination, the economically dominant class enjoys no formal monopoly of political power. Instead the typical form of bourgeois state is a constitutional state and, later, a national-popular democratic state. This requires respect for the rule of law and the views of its citizens.

The strategic-relational approach was initially proposed by a Greek Communist theorist, Nicos Poulantzas and has subsequently been elaborated by the British state theorist, Bob Jessop. Poulantzas extended Marx’s insight that

capital is not a thing but a social relation to propose that the state is also a social relation. Marx showed how continued reproduction of the material and institutional forms of the capital relation shaped the dynamic of capital accumulation and the economic class struggle – but the dominance of these forms could not in and of itself guarantee capital accumulation. This depended on capital's success in maintaining its domination over the working class in production, politics, and the wider society. In his later work Poulantzas applied this insight to the capitalist state. He saw the modern form of state as having certain inbuilt biases but argued these were insufficient in themselves to ensure capitalist rule. Indeed they even served to reproduce class conflict and contradictions within the state itself so that the impact of state power depended heavily on the changing balance of forces and the strategies and tactics pursued by class and non-class forces (Poulantzas 1978).

The suggestion that the state is a social relation is important theoretically and politically. Seen as an institutional ensemble or repository of political capacities and resources, the state is by no means a class-neutral instrumentarium. It is inevitably class-biased by virtue of the structural selectivity that makes state institutions, capacities, and resources more accessible to some political forces and more tractable for some purposes than others. This bias is rooted in the generic form of the capitalist state but varies with its particular institutional matrix. Likewise, since it is not a subject, the capitalist state does not and, indeed, cannot, exercise power. Instead its powers (in the plural) are activated through changing sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state apparatus in specific conjunctures. If an overall strategic line is ever discernible in the exercise of these powers, this results from a strategic coordination enabled by the selectivity of the state system and the organizational role of parallel power networks that cross-cut and thereby unify its formal structures. However, as Poulantzas notes, this is an improbable achievement. For the state system itself is necessarily shot through with contradictions and class struggles and the political agents operating within it always meet resistances from specific forces beyond the state, which are engaged in struggles to transform it, to determine its policies, or simply to influence it at a distance. It follows, if one accepts this analysis, that there is no end to political class struggle. Only through its continual renewal can a capitalist power bloc keep its relative unity in the face of rivalry and fractionalism and maintain its hegemony (or, at least, its dominance) over the popular masses. And only by disrupting the strategic selectivity of the capitalist state through mass struggle at a distance from the state, within the state, and to transform the state, could a democratic transition to democratic socialism be achieved.

Ideological Class Domination

Marx and Engels first alluded to ideological class domination when they noted in *The German Ideology* [1845–6] that “the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class” and related this phenomenon to the latter's control over the means of intellectual production. Their own work developed a number of perspectives on ideological class domination – ranging from the impact of