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REVIEW FEATURE ESSAY

BRINGING THE ECONOMY BACK IN (AGAIN):
CONCEPTIONS OF THE CAPITALIST STATE AND THEIR
RELEVANCE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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The economic role of the state has been the central issue in recent debates on public policy. This is particularly manifest in the numerous works on "reindustrialization" that have inundated the media, business press, public policy discussions, and best-seller lists. These seek to explain the recent stagnation of the U.S. economy, and offer corresponding policy recommendations for "economic revitalization." Whether conservative "free market" proponents, "corporatist" advocates of a national "industrial policy," or social-democratic critics of capitalism, all focus on the problematic relationship between the state and the economy in the contemporary U.S.--though they disagree on what that relationship is.¹

At the same time, there has been a great deal of work on the state in recent political and sociological theory. Previous conceptions of the nature of the state in a capitalist system have been challenged, and new ones formulated. Much of the contemporary debate on the theory of the capitalist state is directly relevant to the recent political and economic upheavals in the U.S. As usual, however, the separation of "theorists" and "policy analysts" in social science has precluded much contact between these two bodies of literature.

This paper considers one of the central issues in contemporary political sociology--the question of the "autonomy" of the state--in the context of recent political and economic events in the U.S. A number of political theorists have challenged the dominance of what they see as an overly-deterministic conception of the state. They advocate "bringing the state back in" by emphasizing the *independent* influence of state structures, state manager, political parties, and "political" factors over other social and (especially) economic phenomena. Some of this work stressing the "primacy of the political" addresses the deficiencies of previous mainstream orientations in political science and political sociology--for example, pluralist conceptions, or structural-

functionalism (Cf. Skocpol, 1985:4-5). But most of it is directed toward the recent body of work on the state within the Marxist tradition--with varying degrees of sympathy.

Perhaps the most prominent of these critics in mainstream American sociology are Theda Skocpol and an associated group who employ a "historical-comparative" method to counter the perceived over-emphasis on the *economic* determinants of the political by neo-Marxists.² However, there has been an extensive debate *within* the neo-Marxist literature on the "relative autonomy" of the state as well. While statements supporting a degree of state autonomy can be traced back to Marx and Engels,³ the issue has become especially important since the late 1960s. Two of the most prominent theorists in this regard have been Nicos Poulantzas in France (building on the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser) and Claus Offe in Germany (influenced by Weber and the critical theory tradition as well as by Marx). In the U.S., the recent work of Fred Block (1979, 1980) has extended the concept of state autonomy while attempting to remain within (broadly construed) Marxist parameters.

This essay will focus on the work of Skocpol and Block.⁴ For both, the issue of state autonomy is central. Each is writing in the American context, and are critical of what they see as the overly-abstract nature of much neo-Marxist work. Both seek to bring the debate on the state to a more concrete and historical level. This invites an assessment of the relevance of their work for interpreting current policy-oriented debates on the state and the economy in the U.S. It will be argued here that, while they provide some welcome corrections to the deficiencies of certain neo-Marxist conceptions, their own work suffers from an *over-emphasis* on the independence of the political sphere from economic and societal constraints. This seriously undermines their usefulness for explaining the vagaries of recent U.S. economic policy, or for bringing to light the limits of most of the current prescriptions for "reindustrialization."

CONCEPTIONS OF STATE AUTONOMY: SKOCPOL AND BLOCK

Some Neo-Marxist 'Ideal Types'

Most critiques of Marxist theories of the state attack one or both of two well-known "types." One is the so-called "instrumentalist" perspective, which stresses the more or less conscious control of state policies and state apparatuses (either directly or through powerful indirect influence) by a capitalist

ruling class, or at least a faction of the most powerful capitalists. This view is usually attributed to Miliband (1969), Domhoff (1967), and theorists of "corporate liberalism" like Kolko (1963) or Weinstein (1968). The other type is the "structuralist" orientation, most often linked to the early writings of Poulantzas (1974). Here the state is seen as the more or less automatic force of "social cohesion" which mediates the intra- and inter-class conflicts inherent in a capitalist mode of production. While not directly controlled by capitalists, the capitalist state nevertheless "functions" to reproduce the conditions of capitalist production.

In addition, a third ideal-typical perspective is often distinguished in the Marxian tradition, usually referred to as the "class struggle" approach. Within the contemporary neo-Marxist debates, this approach emerged as a critique of both instrumentalist and structuralist views--notably, in the later work of Poulantzas himself (Poulantzas, 1980; see also Esping-Anderson et al., 1976). From this perspective the capitalist state is shaped by the political manifestations of the economic struggle between classes or class fractions; the structure and activities of the state are thus determined by the outcomes of these struggles.⁵

Each of these three "types" evokes a particular problematic, and a specific type of critical inquiry. If one's target is an "instrumentalist" theory, then the fundamental questions are: is there direct (or at least strong indirect) control of state apparatuses and state policies by a capitalist ruling class? And what are the mechanisms through which the capitalist class uses the state to promote its own interests? With structuralist arguments, one must ask: what are the structural constraints upon the state under capitalism? Or, what are the imperatives or "functions" of a specifically *capitalist* state which must be accomplished if the reproduction of capitalism is to occur? For the class-conflict approach: how is the conflict between economic classes in capitalist society reproduced in the political sphere, in the control over state apparatuses and state policies? And how do the outcomes of such struggles affect *changes* in the structure and actions of the state?

Block's Ambiguous State Autonomy

In his well-known essay, appropriately titled "The Ruling Class Does not Rule" (1979), Fred Block criticizes one type of Marxist determinism while retaining an overall approach to the capitalist state that is squarely within the tradition. On the one hand, he rejects the instrumentalist idea of a class-conscious capitalist class controlling the state. For Block, the necessity of

interest in individual profit maximization and the competition between capitals precludes the formation of a coherent consciousness of the long-term interests of "capital" as a whole. Instead, he argues that there is "a division of labor between those who accumulate capital and those who manage the state apparatus" (1979:130). This group of autonomous "state managers" is not identifiable with either the capitalist class or the working class. Even Poulantzas' conception of "relative autonomy," he argues, does not go far enough "in recognizing the specificity of the political" (1980: 228).

On the other hand, Block retains the Marxist concern with the structural mechanisms "that make a state a capitalist state" (1979:128)--i.e. those mechanisms that *constrain* and *limit* the options of state activity in a capitalist economy. This means that "the central theoretical task is to explain how it is that despite this division of labor [between capitalists and state managers], the state tends to serve the interests of the capitalist class" (1979:130). This attempt to explain both independent state managers and the structural constraints upon state activity under capitalism leads to some crucial ambiguities, as will be shown.

There are two "major structural mechanisms" that constrain the state and the actions of state managers under capitalism, according to Block. The first is the dependency of state managers on successful *capital accumulation*. Block outlines this relationship as follows:

First, the capacity of the state to finance itself through taxation or borrowing depends on the state of the economy. . . . Second, public support for a regime will decline sharply if the regime presides over a serious drop in the level of economic activity, with a parallel rise in unemployment and shortages of key goods.

In a capitalist economy the level of economic activity is largely determined by the private investment decisions of capitalists. This means that capitalists, in their collective role as investors, have a veto over state policies. . . . This discourages state managers from taking actions that might seriously decrease the rate of investment. It also means that state managers have a direct interest in using their power to facilitate investment. . . . In doing so, the state managers address the problem of investment from a broader perspective than that of the individual capitalists. This increases the likelihood that such

policies will be in the general interest of capital (1979:133).

The other key structural mechanism exerting force on state policy is that of *class struggle*:

In its struggles to protect itself from the ravages of a market economy, the working class has played a key role in the steady expansion of the state's role in capitalist societies. . . . The working class has not been the only force behind the expansion of the state's role in these areas. Examples can be cited of capitalists who have supported an expansion of the state's role into a certain area either because of narrow self-interest. . . or because of some farsighted recognition of the need to co-opt the working class. However, the major impetus for the extension of the state's role has come from the working class and from the managers of the state apparatus, whose own powers expand with a growing state (1979:137).

The state, then, is determined by the interaction and relative power of these three sets of interests--those of capital, the working class, and the state managers themselves. For example,

Where there is strong popular pressure for an expansion of social services or increased regulation of markets, the state managers must weigh three factors. First, they do not want to damage business confidence. . . . Second, they do not want class antagonisms to escalate to a level that would endanger their own rule. Third, they recognize that their own power and resources will grow if the state's role is expanded (1979:138).

According to Block, capitalists, lacking a coherent class consciousness, are basically short-sighted and self-interested, and thus generally oppose the expansion of the state into the private sector. But if their control of capital is so pervasive, how do we explain the magnitude of the state's intrusion into the economy? And how would state managers obtain the independence necessary to enact policies for long-term stability and the welfare of all? Block's answer is that there are certain periods "in which the decline of business confidence as a veto on government policies doesn't work" (1979:139). These are periods of war, major

depressions, or postwar reconstruction, "in which dramatic increases in the state's role have occurred" (1979:139). Thus a certain degree of independence is guaranteed by the vagaries of the market itself, or by historical contingencies such as war, as well as by the position of managers relative to other classes.

The attempt to link structural constraints with autonomous state managers ultimately results in ambiguity regarding the degree of independence of the political sphere. For example, in a paper that attempts to go beyond Poulantzas' concept of "relative autonomy," Block states that "the starting point of an alternative formulation is the acknowledgment that state power is *sui generis*, not reducible to class power" (Block, 1980:229). But in the same paragraph he qualifies this seemingly strong statement of state autonomy: "But the exercise of state power occurs within particular class contexts, which shape and limit the exercise of that power. These class contexts in turn are the products of particular relations of production" (1980:229). On the next page, Block discusses the possibility that "state managers, to improve their own position, will seek to expropriate, or at the least, place severe restrictions on the property of dominant classes" (1980:230). But a few sentences later he appears to revoke this degree of possible independence for state managers under capitalism:

In social formations dominated by the capitalist mode of production, the dominant historical pattern has been the development of a *modus vivendi* that is highly favorable to the owners of capital. Not only have state managers been generally restrained from attacking the property rights of capitalists, but the exercise of state power has largely been used in ways that strengthen the capitalist accumulation process. This *modus vivendi* is rooted in the class context created by capitalism (1980:230).

Ultimately, Block's critique of overly-deterministic theories of the capitalist state applies, at most, only to a relatively simplistic instrumentalist argument that identifies capitalists and the managers of state apparatus.

Skocpol's Independently Determinate State

Skocpol's argument for the autonomy of the political sphere goes far beyond Block's focus on the class character of state actors, and deals with the *organizational* effects of state structures on economy and society. Her basic charge is that "neo-Marxists of all varieties have so far given insufficient weight to state and party

organizations as independent determinants of political conflicts and outcomes" (1980:156). In a historical study of New Deal legislation, Skocpol (1980) critically examines each of the three neo-Marxist theories of the state outlined above, and finds them wanting.

Skocpol first assesses the adequacy of instrumentalist assumptions, selecting as her example the theory of "corporate liberalism" as it appears in the work of Weinstein (1968), Domhoff (1970), and Radosh (1972). "For theorists of corporate liberalism," she argues, "the New Deal is envisaged as a set of clever capitalist strategies to stabilize and revitalize a U.S. economy dominated by large corporations" (1980:161-2). Tracing the history of the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Wagner Labor Relations Act, she sets out to disprove this assumption. While certain facts seem to fit the corporate liberal picture, these theorists avoid asking the "key questions:"

Was there at work during the 1930s a self conscious, disciplined capitalist class, or vanguard of major capitalists, that put forward functional strategies for recovery and stabilization and had the political power to implement them successfully? Were most corporate leaders (especially big, strategic businesses) prepared to make concessions to labor? Did business opposition to the New Deal come primarily from small business (1980:163)?

Skocpol's answer to all of these questions is no. In her view, capitalists were insufficiently class conscious to recognize their own long-term interest in reform and government intervention into the economy, and this partially explains the *failure* of the NIRA to promote economic recovery (1980:164). Business worked with a "trade association consciousness" that limited the type of economic coordination that was acceptable to them. They stubbornly opposed almost all concessions to labor; a fact which Skocpol argues led eventually to the much more far-reaching reforms of the Wagner Act (1980:166-7). And by late 1934, "big business" joined the bandwagon in opposition to all New Deal reforms, along with small businessmen, farmers, labor, and so on (1980:167-8), thereby resisting policies by state managers that might have promoted economic recovery. It is significant that Skocpol's main argument against instrumentalist assumptions is *not* about the participation of capitalists in government policy-making; indeed she documents this participation. It is, rather, their failure to transcend narrow self-interest in the exercise of state power, which (for Skocpol)

demonstrates their lack of class consciousness and led to their failure in solving the crisis of capitalism of the 1930s.

The foil in Skocpol's critique of the structuralist perspective is (as it is with almost all such critics) the *early* Poulantzas, whose approach she terms "political functionalism." Once again she stresses the *failure* of the NIRA as evidence of the failure of theory, since

Poulantzian theory predicts functional outcomes of state policies and interventions. It offers little direct theoretical guidance for explaining why and how failures of state policies could occur, especially not failures threatening to capitalism (1980:172).

Somewhat ironically, given her critique of instrumentalism, Skocpol attacks Poulantzas' concept of "relative autonomy" by demonstrating the *lack* of autonomous state managers in relation to business interests. This lack of independence allowed powerful corporations and trade associations to dominate policy, which had negative long-term consequences, as noted above.

Arguably, a more autonomous form of state regulation could have kept prices down and facilitated expanded production. In any event, when businessmen themselves became the state, government intervention could do little more than reinforce and freeze the economic status quo (1980:173-4).

To many readers, this may appear as a remarkably "instrumentalist" statement. But, in keeping with her emphasis on the primacy of the political, Skocpol stresses particular organizational factors of the state as responsible for the influence of capitalists in government, rather than the reverse. The lack of a developed, centralized administrative capacity, the particular relationship between the three branches of government in the U.S., etc., are factors cited in the failure of the NIRA and other attempts at economic rationalization. These factors are always *historically contingent*:

Government capacities vary with the political histories of various countries; in turn, the capacities affect what can be done for capitalist economies and for capitalists both in "normal" times and in crisis situations. Functional, adaptive state interventions do not always occur, and a

large part of the explanation for whether they do or do not, and for the exact forms of state intervention, lies in the prior histories of the state structures themselves (1980:178).

Such observations do not bode well for structuralist, or any other "grand theory" of *the* capitalist state, let alone a theory of the State in general (see Skocpol, 1985:28).

Skocpol is much more favorably disposed to the "class struggle" perspective, which is more congruent with an emphasis on the determinate role of state structures and party organizations. Her major example of this approach is Block's essay "The Ruling Class Does Not Rule," examined above. However, always wary of reducing the state to any "societal" level phenomena, she refuses to accept "class struggle" as the determinant motive force of state activity. But here Skocpol seems to reverse her earlier position on the state structures of the U.S. in the 1930s, for in regard to working class struggles she stresses the *importance* of autonomous state managers. She notes the "decisive" initiatives "by liberal politicians within the Democratic party" in promoting the progressive labor legislation of the New Deal (chief among these actors was Robert Wagner). While labor discontent may have provided an important catalyst,

The U.S. industrial working class of the 1930s was not strong enough either to force concessions through economic disruption alone or impose a comprehensive recovery program through the national political process. It depended greatly on friendly initiatives and support from within the federal government and the Democratic party (1980:189).

On the other hand, Skocpol also argues that existing "government and party structures" in the U.S. probably prevented more radical, social democratic reforms during the Second New Deal period of 1935-38, when the possibility for such reforms existed (1980:191-5).

Skocpol's basic conclusion is that "existing political constraints--specifically, the U.S. government and political parties of the 1930s" (1980:197) prevented both the successful rationalization of capitalism during its most serious period of crisis, and more progressive social and economic reforms. Each of the neo-Marxist positions examined fail to grasp this adequately, since "no self declared neo-Marxist theory of the capitalist state has arrived at the point of taking state structures and party

organizations *seriously enough*" (1980:200). In fact, she concludes that there really can be no one theory of the capitalist state, since capitalism in general has no politics, only (extremely flexible) outer limits for the kinds of supports for property ownership and controls of the labor force that it can tolerate. States and political parties within capitalism have cross-nationally and historically varying structures. These structures powerfully shape and limit state interventions in the economy, and they determine the ways in which class interests and conflicts get organized into (or out of) politics in a given time and place. More than this, state structures and party organizations have (to a very significant degree) independent histories. . . . In short, states and parties have their own structures and histories, which in turn have their own impact upon society (1980:200).

THE AUTONOMY OF THE CAPITALIST STATE: AN ASSESSMENT

The critiques of neo-Marxist theories of the state by Block and Skocpol both focus on the three types outlined above, and their corresponding problematics. Their arguments will be assessed here by first considering their critique of the "instrumentalist" brand of reductionism, and then their positions on the structural determinants of the state. Their views on the "class struggle" problematic will be incorporated in the discussion of structural constraints, since the issue is the determination of state structures and actions by "societal" factors (in this case, the conflict between classes and class fractions).

State Autonomy and the Instrumentalist Problematic

The fundamental question in the instrumentalist debate concerns the direct (or at least strong indirect) influence or control of state apparatuses and policies by the capitalist class. It is, then, about state *actors*: the relative power of participants in state structures and their class background. Both Block and Skocpol focus on the *class consciousness* of capitalists, and the (actual or potential) conflicts between capitalists and state managers.

Both Block and Skocpol attack a straw man in their critiques of instrumentalism. No "instrumentalist" of any note holds the simplistic views upon which they focus their rebuttals. For example, both Miliband and Domhoff recognize that key state positions are not always held directly by capitalists. They also

acknowledge the conflicts *between* capitalists that manifest themselves in disputes over policy (see, for example, Carnoy, 1984:211-14 on Domhoff's position). The crux of their work is to demonstrate, nevertheless, the relative power of the capitalist class over state policy.

For both Block and Skocpol, the central element of their critique is the inability of capitalists to maintain a coherent consciousness of their long-term interests as a *class* (vs. their individual interests). For Block it is inherently problematic due to the conflicts between individual capitalist interests. Skocpol attempts to document this inability historically in her examination of the New Deal. But how "coherent" and "far-sighted" must capitalists be to verify the most important claims of the instrumentalists? Is the issue the relative power of capitalists over the mechanisms of the capitalist state, or their *success* in promoting stable accumulation with a minimum of social disorder? For Skocpol, at least, it is clearly the latter that is essential. But is this the crucial issue? Further, her standard of "far-sightedness" is such that the failure of business leaders to support labor reforms, or economic planning that threatened their profits, indicates a *lack* of class consciousness.

Unlike many of the structuralist claims, the instrumentalist problematic lends itself to empirical examination. Interestingly, Block posits the existence of "autonomous state managers" with *no* empirical support. Skocpol, at least in her critique of instrumentalism, offers historical evidence of the *dominant* influence of business. Her rejection of instrumentalism, again, is based on its lack of success in revitalizing the economy (of course she stresses the particular state structures of the U.S. for making possible this ill-fated domination by business). Skocpol's empirical evidence actually corresponds rather well to instrumentalist claims. The fact is, no critique of this perspective--by Marxists or non-Marxists--has adequately refuted the vast empirical evidence for the pervasive influence of capitalists over the state, especially in the U.S., provided by Domhoff (1967; 1970; 1979), Useem (1980; 1983), and others working in the tradition of "power structure research."⁶ There may be other valid criticisms of instrumentalism--e.g. its lack of *explanatory* power due to its neglect of theoretical conceptualization--but its claims have not been *empirically* refuted.⁷

The instrumentalist argument has not been refuted by Block or Skocpol at the level intended. However, they do raise some important questions that bear directly upon this problematic. It is certainly a valid contention that different state structures may

allow a different balance of class forces, and a different degree of capitalist participation; for example, in the U.S. versus a more social-democratic system like Sweden (see Weir and Skocpol, 1985). And the nature and intensity of the resistance by non-capitalist classes or groups also influences the degree of capitalist power, as Block and other "class struggle" theorists suggest (see also Quadagno, 1984). On the other hand, it can be argued that the "instrumentalist" problematic is only of *secondary* importance in the debate on the theory of the capitalist state. As Poulantzas, Block, and many others have argued, it is not *necessary* that the "ruling class" rule directly--even if it is *possible*, or even historically existent. There may be structural constraints that induce "state managers" (whatever their class background) to act in the interests of capital. It simply may not matter who these managers are.

I would like to suggest an analogy in this context. There are numerous parallels between Block's theory of "autonomous state managers" and the theory of *managerialism* in industrial sociology. On the one hand, the existence of autonomous managers is an empirical issue. On the other hand, it doesn't *matter*, since it can be argued that capitalist states, like capitalist enterprises, are subject to the imperatives of capital accumulation and the structural, class-based conflicts of interest that exist within them.⁸ This takes, us, then, to the more important critique of neo-Marxist theories of the state.

State Autonomy and the Structural Problematic

To a great degree, then, the instrumentalist issue is not crucial. It is still possible to develop a theory of the capitalist state which posits certain necessary requisites performed by the state, without them having to be done by capitalists. However, it is crucial to specify what these "necessary requisites" are, as well as the mechanisms through which they are accomplished, if we are to have a theory of the capitalist state. Thus the question is: *are* there any such imperatives, unique to a capitalist mode of production, about which we can make universal claims?

Here Block and Skocpol diverge dramatically. Once again, both set up a straw-man--in this case the structuralism of the *early* Poulantzas.⁹ But Block's criticism is that Poulantzas is too abstract and automatic, and does not spell out "the concrete mechanisms that make a state a capitalist state" (1979:128). He goes on to specify what he sees as the structural mechanisms that constrain the capitalist state: dependency on *capital accumulation*, and *class struggle*. Skocpol, on the other hand, rejects the very possibility of a theory of *the* capitalist state, opting for the inductive

development of "middle-range generalizations" using the "historical-comparative method" (1985:13).

Are there structural "imperatives" or "constraints" upon capitalist states? Before responding, the meaning of such concepts, and the conception of 'theory' itself, must be carefully specified. To say that a capitalist state "must" do a, b, or c does *not* (or at least it should not) imply any teleological assumptions about actual *historical* determinacy. This confusion has abounded ever since critics began attacking Marx's "laws" of the capitalist mode of production as laws of *history*. Rather, it means something like the following. Given a particular definition of 'capitalism,' *if* capitalism exists over time, then certain characteristics ("free" [market allocated] labor-power, private ownership of the means of production, market allocation of capital, etc.) must be reproduced--*by definition!* Further, given certain contradictory tendencies inherent in a capitalist mode of production (competition, economic crises, periodic unemployment, inter- and intra-class conflicts, etc.), a capitalist *state* "must" carry out certain measures--*if* capitalism is to be reproduced. Such abstract, analytic statements, based on the definition of central concepts, is the means by which a theory of the capitalist state is constructed. It is then applied to real historical phenomena to see if it explains anything.

These theoretically posited "imperatives" could be termed "functional prerequisites." But the *difference* between this approach and Anglo-American "structural-functionalism" cannot be emphasized enough. There is no teleological necessity implied. An actually existing capitalist state may *not* do what is "necessary" to reproduce capitalism, and for all kinds of historically contingent reasons. But then, it would no longer be a *capitalist* state. A theory of the capitalist state specifies what the state must do *if* capitalism is to be reproduced. It is obvious that the *particular* actions required must vary tremendously depending on the specific socio-historical context. But those who argue for the possibility of a theory hold that there are some fundamental "imperatives" and "constraints" that act upon *all* state structures in capitalist systems.

No attempt will be made here to argue in support of a particular list of "structural imperatives." I will simply cite the most commonly posited candidates. At the center of all neo-Marxist approaches to the capitalist state is the necessity of reproducing the conditions for capital accumulation. The state's first task is to guarantee the reproduction of the capital-labor relation, which it does through the political-legal system. Further, given the uneven and contradictory nature of the accumulation process, periodic crises occur. Given the potential social

disruptions that may result, extra-economic mediation is required to reproduce the conditions favorable for accumulation. This is also provided by the state. But what mechanisms should "motivate" the state to carry out the required actions? Block suggests one: the dependency of state managers on capital accumulation itself. Here he builds on the work of Offe (1974; 1975), as does O'Connor (1973), who also emphasizes the need for the capitalist state to promote accumulation. Even Skocpol hints at this. In assessing the capacity of states to achieve certain goals, she says we must ask "What authority and organizational means does a state have to deploy whatever financial resources it does enjoy?" (1985:17). We must ask this because

A state's means of raising and deploying financial resources tell us more than could any other single factor about its existing (and immediate potential) capacities to create or strengthen state organizations, to employ personnel, to coopt political support, to subsidize economic enterprises, and to fund social programs (1985: 17).

A neo-Marxist would answer: precisely! And in a capitalist system (as Block notes), the private control of economic resources and the possibility of a "capital strike" provide a powerful incentive for "state managers" to promote accumulation. The actions of the state may be inadequate, as Skocpol well documents. It is also possible that the state will exercise its monopoly over the means of violence to *appropriate* major control over economic resources.¹⁰ But then it would not be a *capitalist* state.¹¹

In addition to these "economic" imperatives, theorists of the capitalist state usually posit a number of necessary political, legal, and ideological functions. Skocpol is right to stress the historical diversity of such phenomena. But again, neo-Marxists argue that a number of minimum prerequisites can be specified for *any* capitalist system. Examples usually include the preservation of private property (including the "free" disposition of one's own labor-power) and individual legal "rights" (such as that of contract) backed by the coercive power of the state. There are also structural conflicts of interest inherent in a capitalist system, both between classes, and between fractions of classes. As in any political system, these conflicts must be mediated if order is to be preserved. What is unique is the particular class-character of these conflicts based on the ownership and control of capital, as "class conflict" theorists point out.

It has also been argued that the need to preserve order and mediate potential social conflicts requires the capitalist state to maintain a certain degree of *legitimacy*. This, in turn, requires provision for the *social welfare* of citizens that is not provided by the market. Many theorists have characterized the capitalist state as having a legitimation/social welfare function, alongside the promotion of accumulation (see Offe 1974, 1975; Habermas 1975; O'Connor 1973; Wolfe 1977). Since these measures often act to offset the vagaries of market-based allocation, they tend to be redistributive. This suggests a key way in which class-based conflicts of interest are translated into the political sphere as a battle over the "social wage."

Whatever the proposed relationship between the "accumulation" and "legitimation" tasks of the capitalist state, all neo-Marxist theories stress that *accumulation must take precedence*. To turn Skocpol's political sociology "on its side, if not on its head,"¹² the imperatives of accumulation limit the capacities of capitalist states to promote legitimation and social welfare, to the extent that the redistributive effects of the latter threaten accumulation. This is an important (and contemporarily relevant) example of the economic constraining the political. As we have recently experienced in the U.S., periods of economic stagnation seriously affect the ability or willingness of the state to provide "non-productive" resources to its citizens.¹³

There is certainly merit to the argument that a degree of autonomy for state managers may result from (or be necessary because of) a particular balance of class forces (Block). It is also true that specific, historically determined political structures or political culture can affect the *way* these struggles manifest themselves (Skocpol). But capital accumulation is still the primary imperative in a capitalist state. It can be promoted in different ways, and co-exist with state actions that benefit non-capitalist interests to varying degrees. But there are boundaries beyond which even the most liberal *capitalist* state cannot go. And there are structural conflicts of interest that reflect a class-based division of ownership and control of economic resources, no matter how well these conflicts are mediated by a "welfare state." Upon these fundamental characteristics a theory of the capitalist state can be constructed. This possibility is rejected by Skocpol. But by doing so, as Carnoy points out, "she courts the danger of falling into an *ex post facto* empiricism that is atheoretical and explains nothing" (1984:220, f.n. 5).

Earlier I suggested parallels between Block's arguments for autonomous state managers and the debate on managerialism. I

will end this section by suggesting another analogy. The emphasis on the primacy of state structures by Skocpol and other "historical-comparative" theorists is very similar to earlier developments in organization theory. Both locate their theoretical and methodological roots in Weber.¹⁴ And both share the same theoretical *problems* in explaining the relationship between the particular organization of interest and capitalism. Just as a theory which posits the determinative autonomy of a bureaucratic organizational structure is not adequate in explaining a *capitalist* enterprise, a theory which posits the determinate autonomy of state structures is not adequate for explaining a *capitalist* state. Both must "adapt" in particular ways to an "environment" structured by the imperatives of capital accumulation and class-based conflicts of interest--if they are to survive as *capitalist* organizations.¹⁵

A CONCLUDING COMMENT ON THEORY AND POLICY

In the previous discussion I have examined two arguments for the autonomy of state structures or state managers in relation to other societal (especially economic) phenomena. An assessment of these arguments concluded that there are limits to the concept of 'state autonomy' beyond which the possibility of a theory of the capitalist state is undermined. This possibility is not seriously threatened by positing the existence of autonomous state managers in opposition to instrumentalist claims, as Block does. The empirical validity of this claim is, however, open to question.

On the other hand, Skocpol's idea of state and party structures that are independent, or even determinate of, the "societal" processes of capital accumulation and class struggle does directly challenge the possibility of a general theory of the capitalist state. This is in fact Skocpol's intention in "bringing the state back in." While the limits of this paper prohibit an adequate defense of this assertion, I contend that an overemphasis on 'state autonomy' undermines the explanatory power of political theory when attempting to understand developed capitalist systems. It should be emphasized that no judgment is made on the value of this approach in analyzing pre-capitalist, developing, state socialist, or other non-capitalist systems. The "primacy of the political" may well be a valid assumption in these cases, and it is not surprising that the bulk of the work in this approach focuses on non-capitalist systems. But to understand the capitalist state, it is necessary to "bring the economy back in."

What does this long excursus on political theory have to do with public policy? I contend that the proper theory of the

capitalist state can aid greatly in understanding recent political and economic history, and in interpreting recent debates on public policy. Neither recent U.S. history nor recent policy provide much evidence for the usefulness of a concept of state autonomy taken to Skocpol's extreme. I will suggest the greater explanatory relevance of a neo-Marxist approach by considering briefly the current debates on the American economy.

The relationship between the state and the economy has been the central issue in recent attempts to explain the stagnation of the U.S. economy since the early 1970s. It is also the focus of the competing recommendations for policies to stimulate "economic revitalization." Conservative "free market" advocates blame state intervention into the market process for our troubles; a legacy, in their view, of the liberal "Keynesian" welfare state of the 1960s. "Corporatist" advocates of a national industrial policy seek a degree of government coordinated economic planning for re-establishing our competitive position in the world economy. Social-democratic critics of capitalism see the recent crisis as a manifestation of corporate greed, government collusion with capital, and the contradictory nature of capital accumulation itself. They advocate a more active role for state, local, and national governments in promoting social welfare over maximum economic growth; they also push for a more democratic representation in the political and economic decision-making process.¹⁶

The striking thing about these otherwise quite different perspectives is that they all operate with a view of the state that is constrained by precisely the same structural forces as those elaborated by neo-Marxist theories. The two fundamental issues immanent in every position in the "reindustrialization" debate are (1) the crucial role of the state in promoting accumulation; and (2) the class-based conflicts of interest that are reflected in the competing policy recommendations, and in the struggles over control of the state apparatus itself.

Conservatives and "corporate liberals" both see our recent problems in "supply-side" terms; that is, as the result of structural and institutional obstacles to investment and adequate capital formation.¹⁷ They disagree on exactly what these factors were. But both groups agree that the primary task of the state is to re-establish the conditions for renewed accumulation. The "state managers" of the 1960s and 1970s are seen as having failed in carrying out this primary state function. "Corporatists" and conservatives also agree in their assessment of recent policy history as a manifestation of class-based conflicts of interest (they do not usually use these terms!). For both, one of the major obstacles to

economic growth has been the "politicization" of the economy that occurred in the last 20 years. This allowed too many interest groups access to the state policy-making process. The result was increasing political pressure for various "entitlements" and other "unproductive" forms of "social consumption" that siphoned-off an ever-growing share of our productive resources. Conservatives and corporatists differ in their respective solutions to this problem, however. The former advocate a reduction of the economic role of the state and a return to more market-based allocation. The latter do not stress reducing the direct economic role of the state, but propose that we place decision-making power in the hands of "responsible" elites.

Social democrats also stress the accumulation function of the capitalist state, as well as the class-based struggles (they usually *do* use these terms) over economic resources and social welfare that has been translated into public policy over the past 20 years. Since most are at least indirectly influenced by a Marxist conception of the capitalist state, they recognize the possible *contradiction* between accumulation and social welfare in a period of economic stagnation. Many have also noted the potential conflict between capitalism and *democracy*, as those with an interest in renewed accumulation work to push back the representation of non-capitalist interests in state policy (see Bowles and Gintis, 1982). Since re-establishing the conditions for maximum economic growth is not their top priority, most social-democratic analysts advocate the expansion of democratic participation in economic policy decisions, and expansion of the social welfare provisions of the state. Just as many conservative and liberal theorists will not admit the degree to which policies promoting renewed accumulation are detrimental to the interests of other classes, social democrats are not always clear about the degree to which the state policies they advocate transcend the limits of the possible for a *capitalist* state. Understandably, they hesitate to advocate measures that could be seen to require the destruction of capitalism.¹⁸

Neo-Marxist theories of the capitalist state are useful not only in understanding the structural constraints of the modern capitalist state, but also in locating the debates on economic policy both politically and ideologically. Each perspective in the "reindustrialization" debate consciously or unconsciously operates with a model of the capitalist state that assumes these imperatives. This is necessarily so, since there is little in the recent political history of the U.S. to suggest the superior relevance of the 'state autonomy' model. But this suggests one final question. Past "revisions" of theories of the state have usually reflected changes in

the socio-historical context in which the author is situated (German social democracy for the late Engels; the emergence of centralized European welfare states which lead to the "relative autonomy" of Poulantzas and Offe; etc.). One wonders, in a period which has seen the most successful offensive on the state by capital since the 1920s, what historical developments have stimulated the recent theories of state autonomy?¹⁹ In the case of the authors dealt with in this essay, perhaps the answer is that it is not recent historical events that they are reacting to, but the recent history of political *theory*. Block builds upon elements of neo-Marxism that have emerged in the last 15 years; Skocpol reacts against these trends in political theory. This is fruitful to some extent, of course. But it is important not to throw the baby out with the bath, especially in an epoch when the concepts that have informed recent neo-Marxist scholarship appear so relevant.

FOOTNOTES

1. Conservative "free market" perspectives range from traditional conservative views on the need for stable growth, low inflation, a balanced budget, and minimum government intervention into the marketplace (Feldstein, 1980; McKenzie, 1983; Schultze, 1983) to monetarists (Friedman and Friedman, 1981), to "supply-side" enthusiasts (Gilder, 1981; Wanniski, 1979). The Reagan administration represents a somewhat uneasy mix of each of these views (see, for example: Council of Economic Advisors, 1982; Executive Office of the President, 1981). Among the most prominent "corporatist" perspectives, representing varying degrees of "liberalism," are Magaziner and Reich (1982); Reich (1982a, 1982b, 1983); Rohatyn (1980, 1983); and Thurow (1980, 1984). There is also a wide range of specific policy recommendations among "social democrats," but see Alperovitz and Faux (1984); Bluestone and Harrison (1982); Bowles, Gordon, and Weisskopf (1983); Carnoy and Shearer (1980); Kuttner (1984); and Miller and Tomaskovic-Devey (1983).
2. See Skocpol (1979, 1980, 1984, and 1985); Evans, et al. (1985); Weir and Skocpol (1985); and Skocpol and Amenta (1986). For a more extensive bibliography of works in this tradition, see the endnotes to Skocpol (1985).
3. For example, see Jessop, 1977:355.

4. However, the argument of this paper is also relevant for the so-called 'post Marxist' theories of the state, such as those of Cohen (1983), Gorz (1982), and Urry (1981). See Pierson (1984) for an overview of these perspectives.
5. The proponents of each of these positions, of course, can point to supporting passages in the texts of Marx and Engels. See Jessop (1977).
6. For a comprehensive overview of this evidence, see Useem, 1980.
7. Quadagno's (1984) study of another crucial piece of New Deal legislation--the Social Security Act--is informative in this context, for she draws on historical evidence very similar to Skocpol's, but comes up with a different interpretation. Rejecting Skocpol's model, Quadagno (1984:645) concludes that

More important than existing bureaucratic structures were political pressures exerted by locally dominant economic interest groups. Dominant groups won't support state actions that aren't in their best interests, and state actions cannot succeed without this support. Political structures simply cannot be analyzed as autonomous entities but must be considered in terms of their underlying economic dimensions.

8. This analogy is clear in Useem's (1980) discussion, where he deals with both issues--managerialism and the question of a capitalist ruling class.
9. Poulantzas' early work serves as *everyone's* straw-man structuralist position, since its level of abstraction, functionalism, and failure to specify the mechanisms through which capitalist states are induced to reproduce the conditions of capitalist production make it easy to criticize. Skocpol is probably justified in calling it "political functionalism." However, Poulantzas himself acknowledged the problems in his early works; his later formulations are more sophisticated. See Carnoy (1984:108-27).

10. Block (1980:234) considers this possibility in his discussion of the "tipping point," the idea that "the state's role in the economy can reach a tipping point past which capitalists lose their capacity to resist further state intervention, leading ultimately to the Leviathan state." His prime example is Nazi Germany.
11. I am ignoring the argument that Soviet-style "state socialist" systems can be construed as "state capitalist" because surplus is still extracted from workers who do not own or control the means or products of production. Without argument, I will assert that this stretches the definition of "capitalism" too far, and misses some fundamental (and obvious) differences between the two systems.
12. A response to Skocpol's (1985:25) assertion that "Directly or indirectly, the structures and activities of states profoundly condition . . . class capacities. Thus the classical wisdom of Marxian political sociology must be turned, if not on its head, then certainly on its side."
13. See Wolfe's (1981) history of the "politics of growth" in the U.S.--and its limitations, which have become clear in the economic stagnation since the 1970s.
14. For her appropriation of Weber's methodology, see Skocpol (1985:7-8). She also acknowledges the influence of Otto Hintze (1985:8) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1985:20-21) on her own "historical-comparative" method. Hers is a very *selective* use of Weber, however. In fact, in an earlier methodological essay, Skocpol is somewhat critical of "Weberian" approaches to historical sociology, and favors the inductive method of John Stuart Mill (see Skocpol, 1984)! It is clear that her own approach is much closer to Mill, though he is not cited in the later essay.
15. For criticisms of mainstream organization theory that parallel those of Skocpol presented here, see the essays in Zey-Ferrell and Aiken (1981).
16. See note 1 above for references to each of these approaches.

17. Both are reacting against the so-called "Keynesian" demand- and distribution-oriented policies supposedly dominant in the 1960s.
18. For a critical analysis of various "reindustrialization" strategies, especially those of social democrats, from a left perspective, see Collier (1985).
19. As Block (1980:242, f.n. 23) observes, citing Alan Wolfe, "just as Marxists have developed an extremely sophisticated theory of the state, capitalists have reverted to crude instrumentalism." Of course, given his own position, he goes on to state that "this is only a part of the story." True, but it is an *important* part when considering contemporary policy in the U.S.

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