



An Introduction to Politics, State and Society

Founding Arguments: Theorizing Politics, Power and the State

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Founding Arguments: Theorizing Politics, Power and the State

Key Concepts and Issues

- Defining the modern state
- Elite theories of politics and the state
- Pluralist theories of politics and the state
- Marxist theories of politics and the state
- Corporatist theories of politics and the state
- Feminist theories of politics and the state
- Foucault, politics and the state

Key Theorists and Writers

- Valerie Bryson
- Robert A. Dahl
- Michel Foucault
- David Held
- Michael Mann
- Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels
- Keith Middlemas
- Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto
- Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband
- Shelia Rowbotham
- Charles Tilly
- Sylvia Walby

Although the study of the polity – of the structures, operation and processes of government and social decision making – is usually deemed to be within the purview of political science, sociologists have always maintained a keen interest in the issue. The study of the polity is more than the study of political parties and voting patterns. It includes the social decision-making process – a process that has an impact on every member of a society. (Knuttila, 1996: 231)

What is the State?

In recent years it has been impossible to give even a cursory look to any major book concerning politics or political sociology without being struck by the increased prominence of writings on the theories and structure of the state (see Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987; Hay, 1996; Jessop, 1982; Jordan, 1985; Nash, 2000; Poggi, 1990; Schwarzmantel, 1994). Yet as we shall see, such writings are highly diverse and conflicting regarding the main features of the roles and functions of the state. Indeed, there is not even a universally agreed definition of the meaning of the concept.

One feature on which there has been agreement, however, is the importance of the state, which, by the nineteenth century, had become the key political actor in most developed countries. At its peak in the United Kingdom, the state promised to intervene directly to provide care and support for its citizens from cradle to grave. Over the past 30 years, however, the ideology, nature and forms of state intervention have changed dramatically.

Central developments have featured a 'hollowing out' of state powers, in a whole series of moves towards more regulatory and less interventionist roles for the state. This has taken place against a background of increasing privatization and market liberalization.

To begin to understand this it is necessary to outline the development and structure of the state. As a starting point, it is possible to conceive of the state in two main ways. First, as the apparatus of rule of government within a particular geographical area; and secondly, as the social system that is subject to a particular set of rules or domination. Although Hall and Ilkenberry (1989: 1) confirm that there is much disagreement, they suggest a composite definition of the state would include three main features. A set of institutions staffed by the state's own personnel, at the centre of a geographically bounded territory, where the state has a monopoly over rulemaking.

Further, Hall (1984: 9–10) identifies the following traits of the modern state: that power is shared; that rights to participate in government are legally or constitutionally defined; that representation is wide; that power is fully secular; and that the boundaries of national sovereignty are clearly defined. While such definitions refer to 'ideal types', they still offer useful starting points when considering the contemporary state.

Despite the difficulties in reaching any agreement on a definition of the state, one thing is clear, that the state has a direct influence on all our lives. Importantly, through its key institutions, we as individuals often feel that we experience the modern state in a way that is very different from other institutions in our society. As opposed to the somewhat nebulous and sometimes shadowy concept of the state, the family, for example, is often seen as a much more direct part of our experience. We feel we know about it at first hand. We can all offer some 'commonsense' definition of what the family is, or at least what it should be. Most feel

that they are in a position to comment on the relationships within the family, and the functions and roles it should perform. This is not so as far as the state is concerned. Most often the state is seen as highly abstracted, or at the commonsense level as something separated from everyday life, which sets about imposing its will from above through a detached and inaccessible bureaucracy.

While much of our experience of the state is indeed indirect, certainly compared with other institutions such as the family, the state profoundly influences our lives. If we continue to look at the family we see that its structure and experiences can be highly mediated by the state. For example, by supporting or downgrading particular welfare or health services, or by providing or not providing realistic levels of child benefit and childcare. The state, of course, also claims the right to monitor the family, to legitimate professional intervention if certain functions are not fulfilled. Further, the state still claims the role to legitimate marriage itself and the form the family takes.

We will encounter this again in [Chapter 4](#). For the moment, however, it is important to point to how this notion of a normative family finds expression at different levels. At its most basic, for example, bigamy remains a criminal offence, enforceable by the law. Not all examples are so direct, however. Throughout the decade and a half of New Right administration in the 1980s and 1990s social policy regarding the family became central to the political agenda and has remained there ever since.

During this time, the Conservative administration consistently reemphasized its commitment to free market principles, individual enterprise, a minimal state and increased personal responsibility. Throughout the last Conservative administration there was also a restatement of a belief in antistate welfare policies, and a reduction in welfare provision by the state, even though tensions arose because many saw a clear conflict between these views and the claims to be 'pro-family'. In the most recent period, the post-1997 New Labour administration has promoted a slightly different notion of the family (see [Chapter 4](#)), but this too has been strengthened by a variety of forms of intervention directed by the state seeking to mould the family in a particular form.

The state may not necessarily take on an overt interventionist role to enforce its desires, however. Rather, it plays a crucial role in determining what is, and importantly, what is not, socially acceptable behaviour. There is, for example, a clear ideological position put forward by the state regarding the family. Getting married and having children is clearly still acceptable, and is supported by a strong social construction of what is 'normal' family relations, which is only rarely, if ever, referred to directly in legislation.

The state, however, still largely 'frowns' upon other forms of alternative living, such as gay couples, or single parents, particularly single mothers, that do not conform to the dominant construction and perceived prominence of the private nuclear family as the core of our society. The state can also sometimes, as in the case of homosexuality, directly use the force of law to support its views. More broadly, the social security system, tax system, financial benefits and agencies of social intervention remain structured by a dominant view, based on traditional morality, of the desired structure of the family in the contemporary United Kingdom.

Here, the state also seeks to identify ideologically what is and what is not political (see [Chapter 2](#)). This is done in part at least, by defining what is deemed legitimate and what illegitimate, what is legal and what illegal, those who are 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. Most crucially, it occurs by defining what is properly seen to be in the public domain and what in the private.

So, for example, despite much intervention by the state concerning the family and family law, the dominant view of the domestic domain of sexual politics, gender divisions, sexual violence and unpaid labour are that all should remain firmly located within the private. In particular the right to ownership and accumulation of private wealth and property is supported and promoted by the state. As Held (1984) points out, however, in our own society, the issue of private property is depoliticized, treated as if it were not a proper subject area for politics. By so defending the private and the right of individuals to accumulate private wealth the state has already taken sides. It does so with regularity, intervening directly in other highly politicized arenas surrounding gender, class, ethnicity and definitions of citizenship and conceptions of identity and nationhood.

Society without the State

There are, however, also societies within which the state is not highly developed. Indeed, there are even a few societies that it may be reasonable to refer to as 'stateless'. The Nuer of southern Sudan and the Jale of the highlands of New Guinea, are two examples of such societies. These are often based on hunter-gatherer economies and do not have the need to co-ordinate large numbers of people, or control the use of stored resources, within a fixed territory. They therefore tend not to depend on central organizations or have a recognizable state organization. Likewise, small-scale agrarian societies, while often operating within a fixed geographical location, rarely have clearly demarcated boundaries or a clear political organization.

That does not mean, however, that such societies are devoid of any mechanisms of political regulation. Indeed, far from it. If we consider other social structures within non-industrialized societies, for example, we can find larger groups, which often share a common language and culture, and which usually obtain food from cultivation and the herding of animals. Such societies are politically organized in a variety of ways. Family and kinship structures, custom and traditions, or the authority of religious leaders may all have important roles to play in dispute regulation and political structure. Village councils or groups of elders often take decisions on public matters and perhaps the monitoring of relations of kinship and descent.

Elsewhere, chiefdoms involve a ranking of people and a centralized authority. The chief is the inheritor of office, and performs a series of administrative roles: such as the distributor of resources, the arbiter of the legal system, and perhaps even religious functionary. Keesing (1981), studying the Polynesians of Hawaiian Islands, describes how in their political organization, the islands are divided into chiefdoms, each ruled by a 'paramount chief, whose authority combined secular powers and religious authority.

It is also possible to find examples of non-industrialized societies where the concept of the state is somewhat more highly developed. Here, people are recognized as being a citizen of a territorially defined political unit, and status derived from lineage becomes less meaningful. State organization, as it does exist, surrounds the authority of central control, the co-ordination and structuring of different social groups, for example, slaves, bureaucrats, priests and politicians. Thus, Roberts (1979: 137) suggests that where the state is partly developed, the features many non-industrialized societies share is the presence of a supreme authority, 'ruling over a defined territory, who is recognized as having power to make decisions in matters of government (touching at least defence and the public services), is able to enforce such decisions and generally maintain order within the state.'

All of these are examples of the state as a social phenomenon, constructed in differing forms under particular historical conditions. Held (1992: 73) further distinguishes some of the key features of stateless and state societies, as outlined in [Table 1.1](#).

Table 1.1 Features of Stateless and State Societies

Stateless societies	State societies
Informal mechanisms of government	Political apparatus or governmental institutions differentiated from other organizations in the community
No clear boundaries to a society	Rule takes place over a specific population or territory
Disputes and decisions settled by family or kin groups, or by larger tribal structures headed by a chief with the support of a council	Legal system backed by a capacity to use force
Relationships and transactions significantly defined by custom	Institutional divisions within government (the executive, civil service and army, for example) are formally co-ordinated

Source: Held (1992)

The state itself has, of course, changed its form over time. In Europe, the embryonic nation-state emerged from around the fifteenth century, and largely achieved a full-blown form by the nineteenth century. The nation-state that has emanated since then largely consists of a 'people' or 'peoples', expressing their right to self-determination, and within a 'sovereign' territory. Further, they claim the right to defend specific geographical boundaries against real or imaginary aggressors, irrespective of the persons who actually govern them. Moreover, within the modern nation-state, a government is seen to have authority over the area and is the ultimate power within it. The modern nation-state marks the replacement of absolutist rulers by a set of rules administered by a state-organized bureaucracy. It is in this that the state is seen to achieve legitimacy. Much of this will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter when we consider directly issues of political legitimacy within the United Kingdom.

The Rise of the Modern State

In the meantime, however, it is important to recognize that the contemporary state is in no way 'natural', although some may project it as such. Nor does it mark a stage in an evolutionary cycle that inevitably follows on from tribes and chiefdoms as a form of political organization. Many recent debates, in defining the state, have concerned the relationship between state power and other forms and sources of social power. Therefore, equally important in defining the state itself is the definition of civil society and those areas of social life such as economics, cultural activities and political interaction which are organized by private arrangements outside the direct control of the state. Indeed, a key task for any developed state is how it can take charge of, or control, major aspects of civic society. However, as we shall see, this involves an extremely complex set of social processes and interaction that we shall examine in much more detail in the forthcoming pages.

So how have the major phenomena surrounding the modern state emerged? The state is relatively new in human terms, and the nation-state even more so. Its original form was primarily that of the ancient empire, the Assyrian, Egyptian, Minoan, Mycenaean, Macedonian, being clear examples, or the city-state as demonstrated by the regimes in Babylon, Athens,

Sparta and Rome.

The development of the state coincides with the development of other crucial social phenomena. These include written language, the growth of the centralized management of surplus economic production, in the shape of taxation and the use of organized 'legitimate' state forces to guard against internal threat and external enemies. Also important in the development of the above states was that they had a centralized belief system or ideology, usually in the form of a state religion. Their leaders were invested either with god-like status, or with the power of the gods as their agents. Often the earliest state managers were priests in states based on theodicy.

Another perspective can be found in the work of Mann. In *States, War and Capitalism* (1988) he provides evidence of how the relationship between the state and society dramatically changed with the onset of industrial capitalism. Prior to this the state has an approximately autonomous role about civil society. Afterwards, 'for most analytic purposes the State can be reduced to class structure'. Focusing on the different conditions necessary to create large-scale networks of social interaction, Mann argues that in agrarian societies, economic and infrastructure weaknesses make this impossible. However, the development of military organization was one means by which larger-scale interventions were made possible. So, for example, in both Rome and China it was the army that established the boundaries of the state, largely by erecting physical barriers. This made possible other key developments, such as a taxation system within the established borders.

Mann (1988) contrasts this with more modern conditions of communication, which have made it possible for economic relations to integrate large physical spaces. This has consequences for the form of state power. Modernity has realized the rise of statist regimes, which were as much concerned with coercion as production. While all empires have acquired territory through force, what have differed are patterns of consolidation following conquest. At certain phases economic means could not provide incorporation, only later did economic imperialism, within a military-protected border, take over.

Other important insights into the development of the modern state are provided by Tilly (1990). For him the state has historically performed three essential activities. These are, first, statemaking. That is the attacking of competitors and challengers within the territory claimed by the state. Secondly, warmaking through attacking rivals outside the territory already claimed by the state. Thirdly, protection, which takes the form of attacking and checking rivals of the rulers' principal allies, whether inside or outside the state's claimed territory.

There are, however, other crucial activities of the state. These are extraction, whereby the state draws from its subject population the means to carry out the process outlined above. Another key role is adjudication, the authoritative settlement of disputes among members of the subject population distribution. The state also intervenes in the allocation of goods among members of the subject population. Finally, the state demands control of the creation and transformation of goods and services by members of the subject population.

Importantly for Tilly, after the middle of the eighteenth century, states began direct intervention in local communities, households and productive enterprises. Rulers frequently sought to homogenize their populations, in linguistic, religious and ideological terms. This had many advantages, not least that a homogenous population meant that the masses were more likely to identify with their rulers, communications could run more efficiently, and an administrative innovation that worked in one segment was likely to work elsewhere as well. Furthermore, people who sensed a common origin were more likely to unite against external threats,

whether real or perceived.

With the installation of direct rule also came those forms of surveillance that make local administrators responsible for the prediction and prevention of social movements and organizations that could threaten state power. The remit of the state thus expanded far beyond its military core, and in return for their loyalty its citizens began to make new demands on it, for protection, adjudication, production and distribution. As direct rule expanded throughout Europe, the welfare, culture and daily routines of ordinary Europeans increasingly came to depend on whichever state they happened to reside in. This was particularly so as states began to impose national languages, national educational systems, conscripted national military service, and so on.

Contemporary Nation-States

Given the above, it can therefore be reasonably claimed that all modern states are nation-states, with distinct political apparatuses, holding supreme jurisdiction over a demarcated territorial area, backed by a claim to a monopoly of coercive power, and enjoying a minimum level of loyalty from its citizens.

A further defining characteristic of the nation-state is that most of those living within its boundaries and structured by its political system are citizens of that state, with rights and duties directly relevant to that state. Technically, of course, this is not the case in the United Kingdom, where those living within the boundaries of the state are not citizens, but subjects of the Monarchy. However, bar a very few cases, such as political exiles or refugees, everyone is today identified within a particular nation-state.

Finally, modern nation-states are often directly associated with the wider concept of 'nationalism'. The two are, however, by no means synonymous. We shall explore this more fully in the next chapter. Meanwhile, however, Giddens (1985) provides some useful initial distinctions. He suggests that on the one hand, nationalism may be primarily understood as a psychological phenomenon, with 'affiliations of individuals to a set of symbols and beliefs emphasising commonality amongst members of a political order'.

On the other hand, for Giddens a nation is a collectivity, existing within a demarcated territory, which is subject to a unitary administration, monitored both by internal state apparatuses and those of other states. The nationstate, which exists in a complex of other nation-states, 'is a set of institutional form of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries (borders), its rule being sanctioned by law and direct control of the means of internal and external violence' (Giddens, 1985: 121).

Clearly, not only do people recognize the state, they also 'believe' in it and see it as having 'legitimate' roles in their everyday lives. Most accept its right, albeit sometimes reluctantly, to structure and restrain their day-to-day existence. The majority respects at least some of its institutions: the Monarchy; Parliament; the law courts; the police; and the military. Most are aware that they no longer live under the rule of all-powerful sovereigns, rather that they inhabit nation-states within which law and order and politics have become highly specialized endeavours. Politicians, for example, periodically offer themselves to gain popular support for the right to control public policy and the nation's strategy and resources. Police forces and the military are authorized by the state to use force to maintain internal order and protect state boundaries from external threat.

People also clearly internalize and accept psychologically the boundaries and parameters of the nation-state. Or they may seek to change the existing physical parameters of the state. In the United Kingdom the most contested boundary surrounds the six counties of Northern Ireland, which has given rise to much bloody conflict and the antagonism of the past 30 years. It is obvious here that national identity does not fit with the existing borders of the nation-state. This issue will be dealt with in some detail in [Chapter 5](#). Fundamentally, however, the conflict revolves around two mutually exclusive senses of national identity. Nationalism need not, however, find such negative expression. Many are profoundly proud to be Irish or Welsh, Libyan, Argentinean, Afghan, and so on. The relationship between nationalism and the nation-state is not therefore a straightforward one. It will be explored further in later chapters.

Some of the above statements could easily give the impression that the state is a single actor with a highly unified set of goals and aims. This is, of course, far from the case. Any state is composed of many individuals, organizations and groups. What is of interest is how, and why, they combine to pursue collective goals. How is authority legitimized and maintained by a dominant group and what political forces exist to block them in their goals, or to challenge their position? To begin to answer some of these questions it is necessary to discuss further some of the central perspectives on power and the contemporary state. It is also intended to link this with a wider discussion, already highlighted, concerning where the boundaries of state and society fall, the connections between micro and macro, local and global levels of society, and how the conjunctions between them may be conceptualized and understood.

The examination in the following section will be necessarily brief, but it will begin by focusing on six fundamental sociological approaches, which can provide the tools to understand central notions of power, politics and the state in democratic capitalist societies. These approaches are: elitism; pluralism; Marxism; corporatism; feminism and Foucaultian perspectives.

Elite Theory, Politics and the State

Let us begin with one of the oldest sets of explanations regarding politics, elite theories that consider power to be concentrated in the hands of some select grouping. To try to outline its tenets simply, elite theory suggests that a single group, the ruling elite, take all the major decisions in determining the direction and organization of liberal democracies. Clearly, there may well be overlap here with other approaches, such as Marxism, and their concept of the concentration of economic and political power in a small elite, the ruling class. However, in elite theory the dominant group is not seen as deriving its power directly from the economy.

Indeed, as we shall see in this section, some of the more 'classical' works of elite theory were written from expressly anti-Marxist positions. They take as a common starting point the belief that the state is permeated at key decision-making levels by dominant social groups and that the state functions to serve the interests of this powerful minority.

This classical approach within elite theory can be traced back to the works of Pareto and Mosca, two late nineteenth-century Italian social scientists. For Mosca, the political ruling elite was made up of individuals whose 'natural aptitudes' best suited them for the task of leadership. The group's training, socialization, education and life experiences all supported this. Thus, he rejected the notion that the position of the elite was explicable in terms of economic relations. Rather, for Mosca the ruling group consists of all the separate ruling minorities in a society, a political elite, which is both a necessary and inevitable feature of society. As Mosca himself writes:

Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye. In all societies ... two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all the political functions, monopolises power and enjoys all the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner which is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent. (Mosca, 1939: 50)

For Pareto, elites were not necessarily based on the qualities of the individuals involved. Rather, they were an inherent characteristic of organizations once they grew beyond a certain size. Important decision-making in large-scale organizations or complex societies simply cannot concern all of those involved. Rather, what inevitably happens is that decision-making is condensed in the hands of a small number. A further consequence of this is that the elite becomes self-perpetuating, with its own interests, not necessarily in harmony with those of the larger organization. Such an elite becomes entrenched and extremely difficult to replace. Hence, for Pareto, much social life was governed by underlying non-rational psychological forces, explicitly rejecting any notion that the dominant group in society results from economic structures.

Pareto thus divided elites into two major types: those who came to power using 'instincts of combination', and those who achieved it through 'persistence of aggregates'. The former tend to use 'ideas and imagination', the latter order and stability. This led to Pareto's now famous characterization between the ideal types of such group, the first as 'foxes' and the second as 'lions'. Importantly, to explain the political dynamics of society, Pareto further introduces the notion of the circulation of such elites. The foxes may replace the lions, gradually through stealth. Or the lions may replace the foxes, but if this takes place it is usually done quickly and involves physical force. The elites circulate because, once in power for some time, their inherent weaknesses are revealed. Thus, foxes may compromise and concede their dominant position too often, or the ruthlessness that lions use to maintain their position may become increasingly unacceptable to large numbers.

Another writer often included in classical elite theory is Michels. He, like both Pareto and Mosca, was in part at least responding to the works of Marx. Briefly, Michels suggests that it is the elites rather than the masses that exercise most power in society. Therefore, in order to understand any society one must concentrate any examination on powerful elites, the bases of their power, how they exercise it, and the purposes for which they exert power.

These principles led Michels to formulate the 'iron law of oligarchy'. This claims that once leaders gain delegated authority, the tendency is always for them to turn it to domination. Because leaders are in power, they always tend to appear superior. Any criticisms of the individual can seem to be, or may be represented, as an attack on the institutions and structures of power. Michels puts it as follows:

Organisation implies the tendency to oligarchy. In every organisation, whether it be a political party, a professional Union, or any other organisation of the kind, the aristocracy tendency manifests itself very clearly. The mechanism of the organisation, while conferring a solidity of structure, induces serious changes in the organised mass, completely inverting the respective positions of the leaders and the led. As a result of organisation, every party or professional Union becomes divided into a minority of directors and a majority of directed. (Michels, 1993: 113)

There is a further non-Marxist line of thought on the elite that emerges from the works of C. Wright Mills. Writing in the USA in the 1950s, he suggests that the elite is embedded in the structures of society and therefore highly institutionalized in the USA. A 'power elite' made all the most crucial judgements and remained in a position, 'to make decisions having major consequences' (Mills, 1956: 4). This elite consisted of three sets of leadership: first, corporate; secondly, military; and thirdly, political. While those who support a pluralist analysis may point to this as supporting their thesis, Mills would no doubt argue that such pluralism took place only at the 'middle level of power' and only to the agenda set by the ruling elite.

Here, Bottomore (1979) has also made important distinctions. On the one hand, he argues that there exists a political elite, made up of individuals who actually exercise power, and which includes members of the government, those in high administration, military leaders, leaders of 'powerful economic enterprises' and perhaps influential families. On the other hand, there can be identified a 'political class' comprising the political elite but supplemented by leaders of opposition parties, trade union leaders, leading businesspeople and politically active intellectuals. If we follow this definition, the political elite is seen to be composed of the bureaucratic, military, aristocratic and business elites while the political class will include elites from other areas of the social world.

In contemporary Britain, for example, Scott (1991, 1994, 1996a, 1996b) effectively demonstrates how British politics has been dominated by an alignment of the capitalist class with the entrepreneurial, professional and managerial classes. The capitalist class has remained dominant, disproportionately represented in all key areas of the state elite. Clearly, here it is possible to follow Bottomore to suggest that the basis for elite power may rest on a variety of sources. This idea will now be considered more fully, beginning with pluralist perspectives, many of which developed as a counter to the elite perspectives outlined above.

Pluralist Theory, Politics and the State

Stated bluntly, most pluralists believe that a concentration of power in any one individual or grouping is simply not possible in any complex society. Rather, it should be recognized that political power is both fragmented and widely dispersed. It is held by groups of people acting together to press particular causes and viewpoints. For this reason many pluralists do not even talk explicitly of the 'state' at all. More often they seek to substitute the term 'government' and express views in terms of 'political actors' and 'political demands' made to the administration. The pluralist view of politics in part draws on the notions of political power as outlined by Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter.

From a Weberian perspective, while class interests tend to predominate in advanced capitalist democracies, ruling alliances are also determined by status groups and political alliances. So, for example, Weber, in *Economy and Society*, classically spoke of 'stratification by class, status and political parties' (1978: 926–39). Hence, classes, status groups and parties are all phenomena of the 'distribution of power'. However, whereas for Marxists the underlying mode of power is the economy, for Weberians it tends to be the bureaucracy (1978: 212–26, 956–1003; see also [Chapter 6](#)).

Schumpeter (1976) supports many of Weber's thoughts on political behaviour and argues strongly that there is a limit to mass political participation. Hence, democracy was important as a means of generating responsible government, rather than as a form of providing power for the majority. Political representatives must always, therefore, be 'sensitive' to the demands

of the electorate. Much of Schumpeter's concept of politics surrounded the notion of the politician as a 'dealer in votes'. Indeed, for Schumpeter, modern democracy is little more than a system through which rival political elites contend for power through organized elections. Importantly, like Weber, he regards politics as a distinct area of life, largely separate from the economy.

Pluralism also draws to some extent on another political tradition, that of liberalism, which upholds the individual as the core of 'moral worth'. Perhaps the best known exponent of such views is Adam Smith, and perhaps the best known of his views surround his insistence that the state play a minimal role in the social organization of society. Underlying this is the belief that political power is always open to abuse and there was a need to control all forms of power. Thus, the idea emerges of the limited state, restraining state action and limiting its activities. From a traditional liberal perspective a limited, restricted state is not a weak state, rather it exists to guarantee basic 'natural rights' of the individual. One of the key functions of the state, therefore, becomes the protection of the individual from arbitrary interference, whether from other individuals or the state itself. The state itself has to be controlled and constantly checked in case it infringes civil liberties.

Such a notion of pluralism cannot, however, always be reconciled with ideas of democracy. Indeed, the liberal state is by no means synonymous with participation by the masses, or government by the people. Many pluralists, for example, tend to argue that the direct political involvement of the entire population in the modern nation-state is impossible. Consequently, it is pluralism that offers the only practical form of democracy within complex social structures. Ensuring freedom of speech, and that any individual is free to join a group to promote a particular perspective through pressure group politics, means that no one individual or group can become dominant. Society is seen to operate best through compromise and politics through consensus.

While the term 'pluralism' is sometimes used to refer to a school of coherent political thought, this is by no means the case. However, in its modern form, pluralism is largely associated with the works of Robert A. Dahl (1961, 1966, 1982, 1989), whose views dominated pluralist thought throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s. He claims power describes a relationship, such as A's capacity for acting in such a manner to control B's responses (Dahl, 1956). Elsewhere, Dahl (1961) suggests power is a successful attempt by A to get B to do something he or she would not otherwise do. In this sense, Dahl's concept of power follows directly from Weber's, highlighting a narrow range of observable conflictual aspects as the essence of political life.

Dahl's particular concern was with the distribution of power in local communities in USA. Here, certainly according to the views of protagonists, political parties and pressure groups have both come to assume some measure of power. The ultimate outcomes, the eventual political decisions made, and their realizations, were all the results of compromises between these various foci of power. The basis for this is the belief that in any political system there should be a plurality of different centres and influences and that power should not be concentrated in the hands of any one person or group. The political system should be based on competing parties, a network of pressure groups and associations, and a separation of economic and political powers.

Importantly, economic leaders do not coincide or overlap with political leaders, As Dahl puts it in the context of his major study of 'New Haven':

Economic notables, far from being a ruling group, are simply one of the many

groups out of which individuals sporadically emerge to influence the policies and acts of city officials. Almost anything one might say about the influence of the economic notables could be said with equal justice of about half a dozen other groups in the New Haven community. (Dahl, 1961: 72)

There are clear implications here for pluralist analysis, which assumes competition on an equal basis between rival interest groups. For Dahl, all social and political power is 'non-cumulative'. The nature of political power and pluralist competition is strongly affected by this wider structure of power and wider social context. Most importantly, power is disaggregated. Competition, in other words, is not on equal terms, and there is an unequal distribution of resources. Some groups may have greater economic, social or political influence than others, and the state will be more responsive to them, but only in the narrow areas they represent.

At the heart of the pluralist argument is the belief that no group has the ability to dominate over a wide range of different interest areas and that there is no coherent or cohesive 'ruling group'. Power is diffuse in society, and there is no concentration within particular groupings. One reason why pluralists adopt this perspective is that their methodology tends to focus on visible 'decision-making' processes and on overt statements of interests by orderly groups and counter-statements by those organized in opposition.

In the context of New Haven, there were many conflicts to determine public policy, as different groups pressed for different sectional claims. However, this very process of barter and compromise ensures that policy decisionmaking was healthy and in the interests of the general population. Dahl concludes that it is not political parties, interest groups, social and economic elites, or politicians who govern. Rather, leaders and masses govern together. For pluralists this is central to an understanding of politics. To gain legitimacy for actions, leaders frequently surrounded their covert behaviour with democratic rituals. The distinction between the rituals of power and the realities of power is frequently an obscure one. First, some people influence decisions more directly than others do because they are closer to the stage when laws are vetoed. Secondly, the relationship between leaders and citizens in a pluralistic democracy is frequently reciprocal.

The members of the political stratum are a small group of individuals who are the main bearers of political thought and skills. They are politically dynamic and involved in an inter-community network of other political activists. The political stratum is not a static, stable grouping. Rather, it is easily penetrated because competitive elections give politicians a powerful motive for expanding their coalitions. The members of the stratum are affiliated with different political parties. However, although members of the stratum are directly and primarily involved in shaping political issues, they are also easily manipulated by politicians. Through reward and deprivation of political favours, the politician can manipulate support on certain issues.

For Dahl, even if a minority of leaders controls the policies of political associations, the policies of the leaders in local government would tend to reflect the preferences of the populace. Citizens have little direct influence on policies, but they may exert a large degree of indirect influence through elections. The state is seen as having a range of pressure groups each trying to influence government. Politics is therefore based on consensus, involving small, increment adjustments and fine-tuning by government to maintain the equilibrium in place between competing pressure groups. As Gray (1989: 305) suggests in the context of the United Kingdom, 'pluralists stress the democratic nature of politics ... and see government as the voice of the people'.

A further key question within pluralism therefore surrounds the operation and maintenance of an equilibrium of power in society. Pluralists tend to talk of power as being in balance. So if there is a producers' group, then a consumers' group may organize around what it sees as oppositional interests. Both have economic power. Both can influence government decision-making and the direction that an administration might take. The same is true of the representatives and interest groups. Underlying much pluralist argument is the assumption that there is always a rough balance of forces between such groups, no matter how oppositional or polar their competing perspectives.

Central for many pluralists is the separation of economic and political power in society. Directly countering Marxist perspectives, pluralism seeks to deny that political power and state control are linked to powerful economic interests. Following on from this, the state is seen as neutral, arbitrating impartially between the conflicts of classes and other social groups. It regulates without taking sides. The state is not linked to the interests of a 'ruling class', but rather it works to represent all significant social groups. This sometimes leads to what can be called a social-democratic or reformist reading of pluralism. The state in Western Europe has introduced advanced systems of social welfare; therefore the state can no longer be seen as an instrument of the capitalist class. In short, it is possible gradually to reform the state by democratic means.

Another central value within pluralism is the belief that liberal-democratic states are not structured by a dominant ideology. Rather, there is a clear diversity and plurality of ideas, which are expressed through a variety of channels. This denies any uniformity of belief. Hence, an informed public raises issues for political discussion, which is free to express its views. Politics is thus seen as a process of choice and competition between a variety of political parties and pressure groups. Opposition political parties keep governing parties in check. Regular elections guarantee accountability and allow citizens to choose the representatives and government they want. The electoral process thus ensures the protection of the rights of minorities in opposition.

So how do pluralists conceptualize the ways in which the state should be organized? There is some difficulty in answering this question. As Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987) point out, in many cases pluralists do not have a coherent theory of the state. Indeed, many pluralists are loath even to talk about such a concept, regarding it as having clear overtones of a unified and centralized organization. Instead, pluralist theorists tend to refer to the state in terms of its discrete entities such as the police, the courts, judiciary and so on.

However, some key pluralist overviews can be identified. Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987: 41–9) further outline three models of the pluralist state: the weathervane model; the neutral state model; and the broker state model. It may be useful to consider these in slightly more detail.

First, the 'weathervane' model. Some pluralists, particularly those writing in America in the 1950s, regard the state as passive, merely a weathervane of public opinion. Its direction is altered by pressure groups in society. Policymaking and its implementation involve the success of one pressure group's policies over another. State neutrality means that state organizations are most responsive to, and biased towards, the strongest and most highly organized pressure groups.

Moreover, the existing structures of the state represent the outcome of negotiation between past pressure groups. Different pressure groups have been successful in different policy areas at different times. This has structured the form and shape of the postwar liberal-democratic state. State development is thus seen as a product of democracy, the state having

been responsive to its citizens' demands.

Secondly, the 'neutral state' model. This view has been developed by pluralists who have some reservations with the above, in particular the notion that the state simply mirrors civil society. Rather, they believe the state should be 'actively neutral'. Its main task should be to act as a referee. If the state is interventionist, it should be to promote fairness. For pluralists operating within this model, the state's major role is to referee competing pressure groups, and to protect those which are weakest in terms of organization. The state should therefore mediate in the 'public interest', and be responsive to electoral and pressure groups. It also has a further role, making sure that disorganized and weaker groups are not too alienated. For those who hold such views, the state's growth is best explained in terms of responses to pressure groups, whereby public officials interpret demands and pressures to steer the liberal-democratic state along the direction pointed to by key pressure groups in the public interest.

Thirdly, the 'broker state' model. Within this model public policy decisions reflect neither the interests of pressure groups nor the pursuit of public interests. Rather, the direction of public policy reflects activities and concerns within the apparatus of the state itself. State brokers may act as intermediaries but they retain their own interests. State functionaries are, therefore, more autonomous than in the weathervane model, but they are also more self-interested and self-promoting than in the neutral model. In the broker model, state officials facilitate the acceptance of policy compromises among key groups. The broker state is not a distinct organization, nor can it be seen as passive or neutral. It consists of pressure groups of common interests formed between both formal and informal groups. One consequence is that the divisions between public and private sectors disappear.

Following on from the above, pluralists adopt a particular view of the organization and bureaucratic administration of the state. Administrative elites are seen as impartial and dispassionate, passively responding to public pressures. Most readily adopt Weber's classic concept of bureaucracy, where state administrators are seen as operating without their own preferences. However, following the models outlined by Dunleavy and O'Leary, it is clear that those who adopt the 'broker state model' may well be cynical of this view. Rather, broker pluralists expect government departments to be fertile ground for elite group formation. Bureaucracies are internally divided, and administrators' behaviour is affected by the social background from which they come.

Also depending on which model is adopted, there are consequences for the workings of the state. Within the weathervane model, for example, parliament is seen as having a diminutive guiding role. At most it is little more than a 'rubber-stamping' forum for decisions made in the public arena. Policy coordination, if it does occur, is undirected and unintentional. The neutral state model, however, does provide for a more sophisticated and formalized coordinating role by the state, whereby institutionalized pluralism is expressed through a cabinet system of government. Even within this model, however, such a role is far from advanced. This broad notion of a neutral state has led to much criticism, particularly from Marxists, and it is to these ideas which we will now turn.

Marxist Theory, Politics and the State

The core argument of a traditional Marxist approach to the state is easily presented. It is that the interests of the ruling classes dominate the organization and functions of the state. Further, political power and the nature and form of the state itself are closely linked. The

economic organization of society and the resultant class structure provide the overriding roles in determining the nature of the state and patterns of social life. The state is therefore an extension of civil society, a political apparatus structured and shaped by class relations.

The origins of this view lie with Marx and Engels themselves. In *The German Ideology* (1970: 90) they claim that the modern state is 'nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeois are compelled to adopt, both for internal and external purposes for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests'.

In class society the state cannot be a vehicle for the communal interest. All politics is 'class politics', capitalists and workers are constantly in conflict over the distribution of scarce economic resources. The state is therefore the product of the historical struggle between classes.

So, far from taking the role of neutral judge that others suggest, the state reinforces the social order in the interests of the capitalist class. The state is best understood as an institutional superstructure resting on the economic base. Marx outlines the importance of this base-superstructure metaphor in the following passage:

The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers ... which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. (*Capital*, Vol. III, 1970: 791)

To understand fully the power of the state, it must be recognized that it is fundamentally structured by the system of economic production. The dominant economic class shapes it and the state operates in the interests of the dominant class. It is only following the proletarian revolution, with the development of a classless society, that the state as it currently exists will be dissolved.

Although these central tenets of a Marxist approach can be clearly stated, one problem for those seeking to be guided by such writings is that at no time did Marx himself approach the topic of the state in anything resembling a coherent manner. Indeed, the most comprehensive statement of traditional Marxism is found in the work of Engels, 'The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State' ([1884] 1967). From this and much of the other, albeit partial material written by Marx, however, three consistent Marxist readings of the state have emerged.

First, an instrumental model of the state. This is often seen as the most 'orthodox' model, summed up by a much quoted passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, in which the 'executive of the modern state' is seen as 'but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. Underlying this are the interests of bourgeoisie, who in opposition to other social classes must try to control the state to protect their interests. Capitalists have a common interest as a class. The state must act therefore in the long-term interest of capital rather than in the interests of individual capitalists.

Secondly, the reading of the state as arbiter outlined in Marx's account of the 1848 revolution in France, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1963). Crucial here is Marx's suggestion that the state apparatus may operate in a way which is autonomous from the direct control of capitalists. Marx saw this as an exceptional historical period, in which class struggle was equally balanced. State power acquired a certain degree of independence from both capitalists and the proletariat. However, even in such an untypical regime the state's autonomy from capital on economic issues was very limited.

Thirdly, it is possible to identify a functional reading of the state in the works of Marx. This view emerges through a reading of *Capital*, Volume III (1970). The state apparatus forms part of the superstructure, which is determined by the economic base, hence, state policy is set and determined by an impersonal logic. This drives government in a capitalist society to develop the economy by its own logic and maintain social stability by coercive means if necessary.

From the above it is possible to identify two clear models concerning the relationship between classes and the state. In the first model the state generally, and bureaucratic institutions in particular, may take a variety of forms of sources or power. These need not be directly linked to the interests of, or be under the direct control of, the dominant class in society, in the short term at least. The state retains a degree of power independent of this class and its institutional forms are 'relatively autonomous'.

Following the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, power is seen as accumulated in the hands of the executive at the expense of civil society and the political representatives of capitalist class, the bourgeoisie. The state is seen as a vast set of institutions, with the capacity to shape civil society and even curtail to some extent the bourgeoisie's capacity to control the state. The very scope of these bureaucratic institutions is seen as giving the state the power not only to steer social arrangements but also to constrain the interests of capital.

The second model suggests that the state itself and its bureaucracy are class instruments, which structure society in the interests of the ruling class. At its crudest, this view suggests that the state is a simple non-autonomous reflection of the economy. Bureaucratic mechanisms extend great influence on political decisions and their outcomes. It is within the context of the second position that Lenin's analysis of the state developed. This is reflected in his insistence that the eradication of capitalist relations of production must be accompanied by the destruction of the capitalist state apparatus. The state as a class instrument has to be destroyed and replaced with direct democracy of the masses.

Lenin's views on the topic are best expressed in *State and Revolution* ([1917] 1981) where he claims the state is merely a machine for the oppression of one class by another, very often by 'a special repressive force'. The ruling class maintains its grip on the state through alliances with government. The vital business of the state takes place not in representative assemblies but in state bureaucracies where alliances are established out of public view. Hence, democratic rights such as elections, freedom of assembly or the press are merely a 'shell' and actually benefit the dominant class. Such institutions appear to be open while the dominant group controls them through ownership and control of resources.

Overall, it is important to recognize two interconnected strands in traditional Marxist accounts of the state. The first concerns the state with a degree of power that is independent of class forces. The second sees the state merely as superstructure directly serving the dominant class. Contemporary Marxist writers obviously draw on these models, but have examined in more detail the relationships between the economic base, the dominant class and the shape

and form of the state.

Within this, several important perspectives have emerged. Particularly significant has been the notion of the possibility of the relative autonomy of the state from its economic base. Hence, much Marxist discourse and debate regarding the state remains structured by the exchange between two Marxist writers, Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband.

The publication of Poulantzas' first book *Political Power and Social Classes* (1973) sparked off an intense debate within academic Marxism. In direct response, Miliband's work (1969) was written from a viewpoint that has been termed 'instrumentalist'. That is, it examined how the state is used as 'an instrument in the hands of the ruling class'. Poulantzas' approach, however, is often termed 'structuralist'.

Miliband's central concern was to draw the distinction between government and the state. Certainly the government is the most conspicuous facet of the state, but that does not mean it is the most important. The state is a wide concept and includes the bureaucracy, the police and judiciary, important economic institutions such as the banks, and national, regional and local representative bodies. Most importantly, the state has a level of autonomy. What enables the state to operate in the interests of the dominant class is twofold: first, its ability to represent itself as unbiased and neutral; and secondly, the ability to make concessions to the subordinate classes which actually serve to maintain the position of the dominant group.

Overarching this, however, is a further factor, that the dominant class is drawn from those with similar socio-economic backgrounds and characteristics. Importantly, this means that the dominant group possesses shared economic and social perspectives and values. Put straightforwardly, the state serves the interests of the capitalist class because it is controlled by that capitalist class. As Miliband (1969: 22) clearly states, the ruling class 'use the state as its instrument for the domination of society'.

In contrast, Poulantzas writes that the state provides the 'factor of unity' in a social formation. It essentially plays the decisive role in mediating the central contradiction of capitalism. He analyses the unifying function of the state in terms of its impact on the working class and the capitalist class. The state atomizes the working class through transforming workers into individual citizens, while representing itself as the interest of society as a whole. For the capitalist class, however, the state serves the function of guaranteeing the long-run interests of that class as a whole. The bourgeoisie cannot be considered a unified class with unambiguous interests. Rather, it is highly fractional. The only way these can be protected is through the state's relative autonomy, that is, a state structure that can transcend the interests of only one part of the class.

Poulantzas' fundamental thesis is that functions of the state are broadly determined by the structure of society rather than by the people who occupy positions of state power. He regards the background of the dominant class as all but irrelevant, arguing that the structures of the system merely reflect the degree to which the institutions of the state are embedded in society. So, for example, he writes:

The direct participation of members of the capitalist class in the state apparatus ... is not the important side of the matter. The relation between the bourgeois class and the state is an objective relation. This means that if the function in a determinate social formation and the interests of the dominant class coincide, it is by reason of the system itself; the direct participation of members of the ruling class in the state apparatus is not the cause but the effect ... of this objective coincidence.

(Poulantzas, 1969: 245)

The starting point of structuralist analyses is an examination of the contradictions arising from the economic base of society and how the state operates to neutralize these incongruities. The focus of any analysis should be the class structure in society, and particularly the contradictions rooted in the economy (Poulantzas, 1978: 123–41, 255–62, 275–89, 296–307). The functioning of the state, Poulantzas concludes, maintains the unity of a social formation based on class domination. The state's role as the cohesive social factor is not reducible to 'intervention' by the state at various levels, and particularly at the economic level.

Most of those adopting an instrumentalist perspective believe that the modern state operates to secure the interests of a small, enormously rich group. The government, judiciary, civil service, and the top ranks within the police and army manage the interests of the wealthy dominant class. Following this line it is possible to argue that the Thatcher era and what has followed has seen a strengthening of the position of an elite from a particular socio-economic background.

In general, 'instrumentalist' theory has been criticized as inadequate in explaining contemporary politics of the state, much of which cannot be understood simply as the outcome of control by specific capitalists. The state apparatus it is argued, is more complex than this. Structuralist theory attempts to situate how the direction of state policy formation lies beyond the socio-economic background of those involved. The economically powerful class in society may be united by property, but different political and economic interests equally divide them. So, the dominant class includes wealth that lies in agriculture, manufacturing, the City or even in e-commerce or new technologies.

At times the interests of these groupings may coincide, at others they may radically diversify and become conflictual. A key role of the state is to preserve the control of the ruling class by creating a system which promotes bourgeois values, no matter who is in power. The state therefore becomes the structure by which the long-term interests of capital are reconciled.

Importantly, this means that the state is able to present itself in neutral terms, as the effective managers of the resources of the nation. Therefore, the state can have a degree of autonomy from the economically powerful. Clearly, if this is so, it reveals a highly contradictory process in society. On the one hand, the state continues to have the support of the vast majority, by claiming to be responsible to the democratic political process. On the other hand, however, the state remains highly undemocratic, in terms of its distribution of scarce assets, economic privilege, capital and wealth.

By pointing out much of the above, and despite what is a somewhat obscure and at times inaccessible style, Poulantzas' work is of central theoretical importance within Marxism. It moves away from the notion that the state can be understood as a simple instrument in the hands of the ruling class. Poulantzas made an important advance by relocating the line of inquiry. The debate between Miliband and Poulantzas and the subsequent discussion it invoked laid the groundwork for the next wave of Marxist and neo-Marxist writings.

In Miliband's (1991) more recent analysis, for example, he maintains that hegemonic processes are central to the bourgeoisie displacing any sense of radical alternatives to the organization of contemporary society. Miliband gives the example of class struggle in the USA, a country where organized, radical, powerful opposition to dominant class values and ideas is largely absent, as an example of a successful hegemony being constructed.

Significantly, Miliband suggests the same trends are now visible in British politics. Here, Miliband argues that the underclasses are those most economically damaged by the power struggle operating throughout all levels of contemporary capitalist society. They constitute the most deprived members of the working class: 'the permanently unemployed, the disabled and those largely or entirely dependent on payments from public funds' (Miliband, 1991: 23).

This analysis by Miliband is essentially one of power and domination, the power elite and the underclass representing the respective winners and losers of class struggle and hegemonic manipulation. Miliband also argues that the process of proletarianization of the middle classes is another aspect of a long and historic struggle with capitalism, a struggle in which the working classes have been betrayed by the adoption of social democratic policies by the labour movement.

Hence, Miliband refocuses on a central issue, namely, how to restrain capital in the face of global pressure and interdependence, and turn it aside from the inevitable consequences of its own rationale and dynamic. Given the recent move to social democracy, the weakening of the labour movement, the worldwide integration of capitalism and the inadequacies of collective services, the working classes and increasingly sections of the middle classes are likely to be ever more exploited.

We shall encounter these views again later in the book, particularly regarding the breakdown of the postwar political order, the development of post-Fordism, the emergence of the New Right and globalization. Briefly, however, on the one hand, Miliband, and other writers like John Urry, have continued to argue that the modern state operates to preserve the interests of a small, extremely wealthy dominant class. In short, the political, administrative and legal elites and the executive arm of the state manage the interests of this class.

On the other hand, the works of others, such as David Coates (1989, 1994, 1995), suggest that what is of real importance is how the economically powerful class are unified by property but divided by economic and political objectives.

Corporatism, Politics and the State

Others, of course, have different ideas on these issues. One such grouping are those working broadly within the parameters of corporatist ideology. The range of views, which can be fitted under the term 'corporatist', is wide. They would certainly include writers such as Schmitter (1979) and Middlemas (1979, 1986, 1990, 1991), but also in some ways less conventional 'pluralists' such as Pahl (and Winkler, 1974) and Winkler (1976, 1977a, 1977b) might also be covered by the term.

It is, however, in the work of Schmitter that we find corporatism most clearly stated as an ideal type. For him, corporatism can be understood as:

a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organised into a limited number of singular, compulsory, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognised or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports. (Schmitter, 1974: 93–4)

Fundamental to corporatist thinking is the idea that the determination of interests becomes

systematized along strict guidelines set by the state. So, for example, membership of representative groups, such as trade unions or business confederations, becomes compulsory. Further, organizations such as trade unions have the power to negotiate legally binding settlements which, importantly, are recognized by the state. In response, those representing corporate interests will support agreed policies. The state directs the activities of predominantly privately owned industry in partnership with the representatives of a limited number of hierarchically ordered interest groups. Power in real terms, lies mainly in the hands of the bureaucrats and professional decision-makers.

Corporatism has, however, had a wide variety of interpretations. It has, for example, been used to refer to the system in place in Italy under fascist rule. Here, Mussolini used the concept more or less as a device of direct political control. Established trade unions were 'dissolved' and instead the corporate state was based on worker and owner syndicates. Strikes were declared illegal, and prices, profits and production rates were set by the state. Local syndicates were represented at regional and national levels through 'corporations'. The leaders of these corporations were members of a 'national council', by which the economy was centrally organized, controlled and directed.

Mussolini headed Italy's highest political body. He appointed the heads of all corporations and hence directed and controlled the economy. The corporate state in Fascist Italy was thus also used as a mechanism to quash any popular dissent, through the promotion of the notion that only the elite was in a position to discuss political issues. Further, it is clear that the state overly rewarded its supporters while punishing opposition under the guise of corporate efficiency (see Griffin, 1995; Kitchen, 1976; Neocleous, 1997; Robson, 1992).

In Western Europe corporatism has developed within the context of an accommodation between the representatives of capital and labour. Thus, at its height in the United Kingdom during the 1970s, the state reflected a clear 'corporate bias' (Middlemas, 1979: 371). Indeed, Middlemas further claims that British governments had displayed a 'corporatist bias' since the end of the First World War. Much of this was directed at running the economy rather than at any wider role within the state. In it, leading corporatist bodies included the civil service, large companies and organizations, such as the Confederation of British Industries, and the Trades Union Congress, in institutionalized state agencies.

A prime example in practice was the social contract policies adopted during the governments of Labour Prime Ministers Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. This saw the manifestation of the 'tripartite model' and the attempt to institutionalize the support of the representatives of capital and labour as partners in the economic planning and running of the state. Indeed, in the period of the social contract between 1974 and 1977, a concordat was formed between the trade unions and the Labour government. Together they negotiated a series of non-statutory agreements on wage increases. In return, the Labour administration promoted a package of social and employment legislation and promoted the role of the trade unions, alongside the representatives of business, in determining the country's macro-economic policy.

The development of this corporate solution must be understood in the context of Britain's long-term economic decline. Throughout the twentieth century the relative weakness in the United Kingdom's domestic economy was increasingly brought into sharp relief by the growth of the USA, Germany and Japan as international trading nations. The strength of Britain's trading position had been based on its control over an overseas empire, its markets and the City of London's position as a centre of world funding, international business and foreign investment. However, one long-term consequence of this focus was a lack of investment in

home industry and low growth rates in the economy of the United Kingdom. In turn, political policies throughout the last century favoured the City of London and the financial sector at the expense of manufacturing. The culmination of the above political and economic factors was an inability to compete abroad and a steady loss of markets. In response, the political parties developed a series of fluctuating policies to try to halt this decline.

Hence, corporatism may be understood as one option to achieve the halt of long-term economic decline. Winkler (1976) argues, therefore, that by the mid-1970s, the United Kingdom had taken on a more corporatist hue as a result of a slowing down of the process of capitalist accumulation. Changes in the economy involving industrial concentration, increasing international competition and declining profits all moved the state towards the adoption of corporatism.

Elsewhere, Pahl and Winkler (1974) further suggest that the corporate politics of the 1970s developed a power structure based on four major objectives. First, the elimination of fluctuations in the economy. Secondly, organization around the central principle of collaboration, placing the nation's interests before those of any individual, firm or trade union. Thirdly, that strategies should aim for controlled economic objectives and, therefore, fourthly, that there is some implicit element of discipline over those who seek to engage in different objectives.

In broad terms corporatism is most concerned with effectiveness. The role of the state is to set unambiguous national goals and to provide the framework for the necessary allocation of resources. The emergence of corporatism in practice was the result of changes in capitalism brought about largely by failed economic performance (see Cawson, 1982, 1986; Williamson, 1989).

As a result, in the United Kingdom of the mid-1970s both capital and organized labour highlighted different features and demanded different forms of economic intervention and the integration of labour into a tripartite system. It remains difficult to see, beyond perhaps some short-term income policy, how the interests of this group can be represented. Such a strategy had important consequences. As Coates explains:

Corporatism as a strategy for running the country actually *weakens* the state. It leaves politicians and civil servants dependent upon the ability of the *networks* they have built, and the private *hierarchies* which feed into them, to deliver their constituents on time, regularly and in good shape. The very building of a network precludes the possibility of major structural reform, if that reform involves a systematic diminution in the power of one of the participants to the agreement. (D. Coates, 1995: 154, original emphasis)

We shall continue to explore the roles of the state much more fully in later chapters. Before that we will, however, consider another core theoretical approach and critique of traditional social and political thought, that of feminism. In particular, feminists challenge what they regard as the tendency of much of mainstream social and political thought to universalize those political experiences associated with men.

Feminist Theory, Politics and the State

From within a feminist perspective, politics is seen as an activity definitely not restricted to the domain of public decision-making. Indeed, central to feminist arguments is the critique of

other narrow definitions and understandings of politics as something operating in the public domain. By arguing that the 'personal is political' many feminists seek to challenge and undermine traditional divisions in society between the public and the private. Such demarcations are largely seen as conventions, which only serve to conceal relations of power between men and women. In fact it may well be that those areas marked as private actually represent the most political of all sections of social life. As Lovenduski and Randall explain:

Intimate and familial relationships may be shown to have a political dimension: for example, how you dress your little girl, or whether you let a man open a door for you, are decisions that have a political component. Since the end of the 1960s feminist campaigns have helped to politicise and bring on to the public agenda a succession of issues formerly associated with private or personal life: abortion and reproductive rights, women's health, domestic violence, incest, sexuality and language are examples of this. (1993: 5–6)

Underlying much of the feminist analysis is the concept of patriarchy. Broadly, this refers to the traditional and systematic dominance of women by men. However, there remains much discussion within feminism as to the precise meaning of the term. A useful starting point is Walby's *Theorising Patriarchy* (1990). She argues that the concept of patriarchy may be clarified by considering six interrelated structures through which gender relations are constructed and reproduced. These are paid employment, household production, culture, sexuality, violence and the state.

In Walby's view there has been a move in British society away from a predominantly private form of patriarchy to a public one, in which the state and the market play important roles. Despite there being differences among feminists in approach (see below) and, as a consequence, differences in how they define patriarchy, the concept remains central to much feminist analysis and the view of politics that emerges from it.

There is, of course, no such thing as a feminist approach to politics. Tong (1992), in an extremely useful review of contemporary feminist thought, refers to feminism as 'kaleidoscopic' in its approaches. She suggests that while the initial impression may be one of 'chaos and confusion', in reality all are concerned with 'new relationships for personal and political life' (1992: 238). Further, as Belsey and Moore (1997: 14) suggest, feminist theories and 'the patriarchal knowledges they contest, have been in constant battle over Truth'. Thus, much of contemporary feminist theory provides a key dynamic in politics. As Mary Evans (1997: 3) argues, for feminists, 'the intellectual past should not sit like a dead weight on our shoulders, but should be used – with scepticism and even irreverence – to understand the present'.

Bryson (1992) clearly identifies the most commonly held feminist views on power, politics and the state. They include the following perspectives:

- **Liberal feminists:** who believe essentially women are rational beings just like men. Hence, they are entitled to the same legal, social and political rights.
- **Marxist feminists:** who centrally believe that those rights outlined above can only benefit a few middle-class women. Most women and men remain oppressed by capitalism. The key to women's liberation is therefore the class struggle.
- **Socialist feminists:** who seek to take the 'best' of Marxist Feminism and Radical Feminism to explain how class and sex oppression act together within capitalism.
- **Radical feminists:** who claim that the above ideas ignore the central feature of male power and that because the 'personal is political' power and politics have to be redefined

in our society.

All the above feminist theories are, to a greater or lesser extent, tied up with the broader notion of social change. What follows is an outline of each of these.

Liberal Feminism

For those working within the tradition of liberal feminism change has to come through the recognition and adoption of the broad claim of men and women to have equal rights. These writers draw on 'classical' liberal notions of the rights of all individuals to freedom, autonomy and a distinct voice in how they are governed. Indeed, as Carter (1988: 167) explains, 'historically, liberalism is the first social theory that offered the possibility of equality to women, since it developed in opposition to theories stressing a political, social and sexual hierarchy based on tradition, "nature" and order ordained by God in the scriptures'.

This line of thought can be traced back to John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, first published in 1869. In this work Mill suggests that women are brought up to restrict their real nature, forced into a denial of themselves, and that they could only live through their husbands and children. The situation could only be improved by letting women realize their full potential for the benefit of both themselves and society. Mill further argues that the state had to remove legal restrictions which denied women equal civil and political rights, so that women be allowed to participate fully in public life.

Some of Mill's ideas regarding the role of the state were extremely radical for Victorian times. He did not, however, suggest any essential changes concerning family structure. He felt that giving women equal rights to work, divorce and property would also increase their choice regarding marriage. If, however, women did choose marriage, then he saw a continuation of the traditional division of labour. Individuals should have equal rights but the state should not intervene to create further social equality.

Central also to the origins of liberal feminist thought is Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ([1792] 1975). She applied rationalist ideas to all, arguing that women were also capable of moral self-development and were held back because they were 'socialized' into the values of weakness and femininity, and degraded by having to study to please men. Later liberal feminists built on such ideas to argue that 'freedom and equality' require legal reform and legislation, economic independence and the ability to influence politics directly, initially in demands for the vote and universal franchise.

In feminism's modern form, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) marks an important landmark. Friedman's work considers middle-class suburban women in the USA during the 1960s. Largely restricted to the world of home and children, such women lacked inner fulfilment and thus suffered from a lack of identity and purpose in their lives. Thus, Friedan argues that such women were kept from growing to their full human capacities, experiencing a 'slow death of mind and spirit' (1963: 266) and encouraged to define themselves in overtly feminine and domestic terms.

Friedan challenges this situation, urging the development of the full potential of women, especially in the public arena. The role of the state should be to ensure that women had equal rights to opportunities in colleges and the professions so women could develop their latent abilities. For the liberal tradition, the state should remove barriers to individual achievement through creating legal equality and preventing employment discrimination. While

women were visible as sex objects they were invisible in the public domain. As she puts it with the discourse of the time:

As the Negro was the invisible man, so women are invisible people in America today: women who have a share in the decisions of the mainstream of government, of politics, of the church – who don't just cook the church supper, but preach the sermon; who don't just look up the ZIP codes and address the envelopes, but make the political decisions; who don't just do the housework of industry, but make some of the executive decisions. Women, above all who say what their own lives and personalities are going to be, and no longer listen to or even permit male experts to define what 'feminine' is or isn't. (Cited in MacArthur, 1993: 388–9)

The role of the state is therefore conceptualized as that which should ensure women have equal rights and equal access to opportunities. The state should guarantee that any obstacles to the fulfilment of women's potential will be removed, and that any form of discrimination countered legally by the state. Practical strategies would, for example, include legislation to allow women to compete on an equal basis in the labour market and the provision of childcare and equality of access to higher education.

Marxist Feminism

Strategies such as those outlined above have, however, come under criticism from within feminism. In particular, those adopting socialist and Marxist feminist perspectives challenge the notion that legal reform and legislation can ever adequately tackle and redress the subordinate position of women. Rather, they point to economic issues as the fundamental source of exploitation. In this sense, both socialist and Marxist feminists draw on a common theoretical root of the class structure and the inequalities that emerge from it.

Although Marx and Engels expressed some cutting criticisms of the 'bourgeois family' in the *Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 1967), they never really discussed equality for women at any length. Instead it was Engels who sought to apply Marx's framework to the topic, most notably in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* ([1884] 1967). Here he argues that the position of women cannot be seen in isolation from the overall economic structure and social system. Rather, women are oppressed in several ways, by domesticity, by legal inequalities and by capitalism. Structural inequality surrounding gender functions to the benefit of the capitalist system, not just individual men. Central too is the position of women as a 'reserve army of labour', and the concept of the 'monogamous marriage' developed to meet the requirements of the passing on of private property within the legal family.

For Engels, it is the transition to socialism that will alleviate women's exploitation. The organization of domestic tasks, where women are largely confined to the home, would be transformed, placed on a collective basis. Women, freed from household work would be able to enter the public sphere on equal terms. Such a situation could never take place under capitalism, no matter how advanced and numerous the legal reform and legalization. Some middle-class women may benefit from such legislation, but it cannot serve women as a whole or dramatically alter their position as a group. Instead, women must be liberated from the private functions of wife and mother and be allowed to become an active public worker in a socialized economy.

For many, Marxist analyses can also directly explain the position of women in society. Under capitalism, it is their class position that best accounts for many women's lowly status and

oppression. Bourgeois women simply do experience the same level of oppression as proletarian women. Women's position in society is thus the result of the political, social and economic structures of capitalism. Any meaningful attempt to change women's position must recognize this context.

For this reason feminists writing within this tradition have sought to explore and analyse the position of women in the workplace and as a 'reserve army of labour'. Women, it is argued, constitute an 'ideal type' of reserve army as they can be moved into and out of the labour market with reasonable ease, as for example, during the Second World War. By and large, however, married women are easily excluded from official statistics if it suits the state, as for example in unemployment figures. Moreover, women whose husbands are working do not put a burden on the state and those women who do work are largely restricted to highly defined sections of the labour market (Beechey, 1982).

This leads us to another major discussion within Marxist feminism, that of the arena of 'domestic labour'. There have been many debates around this issue, which Bryson summarizes as follows:

[whether] women's domestic work should be seen as some kind of precapitalist mode of production outside of the money economy; whether it is essential to the reproduction of labour power under capitalism and whether in fact it does produce exchange value in the strict Marxist sense (in the form of the labour power of the adult male worker, sold like any other commodity on the market, with his overalls neatly pressed and sandwiches in his pocket). (Bryson, 1992: 238)

As Bryson (1992) points out, these debates are not merely of academic concern but structure political action by women. Thus, for some Marxist feminists, the essential features of women's work under capitalism are its trivialization and seeming inconsequence. Further, women are increasingly regarded merely as consumers and providers of service industries.

Contrary to this, Benston (1969: 16) argues that women themselves actually constitute a class because they are responsible for the production of 'simple use values in those activities associated with the home and family'. Women's oppression cannot be alleviated by allowing them to enter the labour force unless there is a parallel 'socialization' of household work, cooking, cleaning, childcare, and the like. By this means, society will finally recognize how socially necessary housework is and women will finally receive the respect that they deserve.

However, if we accept another view, that women's domestic work does in fact constitute the production of 'surplus value', it becomes strategically important to Marxists as another site for struggle. One practical strategy emerging from this would be to support demands for 'wages for housework'. Such payments should be made by the state because it is capital which profits from women's exploitation, and payments for housework will reduce accumulation by the state.

In conclusion, Marxist feminism rests on the assertion that the social relations of the modern family, with women as reproducer and consumer, and man as producer, are capitalist constructs. Only changing the nature of the capitalist system itself can alter these constructs and the position of women in society. For women to be fully liberated requires the elimination of the basis of the capitalist economy. Society cannot be changed by appeals to reason, or justice, or to liberal conscience, but only by involvement in collective class struggle.

Socialist Feminism

Obviously socialist feminism also draws on, and sometimes overlaps with, many of the same core tenets of Marxist feminism outlined above. This is particularly true of the idea that women's situation cannot be understood in isolation from its socio-economic context. Many Marxist feminists, of course, draw for their inspiration on the works of Engels and Marx. These writers are also revisited by a number of key socialist feminist writers with whom Marxist feminists have much in common. Indeed, in real terms the line between Marxist and non-Marxist socialist feminism is often, to say the least, blurred. However, as Tong (1992: 173) suggests, socialist feminism is largely the result of feminists' dissatisfaction, 'with the essential gender-blind character of Marxist thought – that is, with the tendency of Marxist patriarchy to dismiss women's oppression as not nearly as important as workers' oppression'.

Some important starting points are the works of Rowbotham (1972a, 1972b, 1973) and Mitchell (1971, 1974). In theoretical terms, such feminists highlight the intermeshing of capitalism and patriarchy. Pragmatically, socialist feminists argue that the legal reforms, which liberal feminists strive for, are mere 'tokens' and cannot hope to form the basis to improve the overall position of women. Rather, housework must be socialized and collectivized, accompanied by dramatic transformations in the economic and social structure.

Mitchell (1971), for example, seeks overtly to move away from the traditional Marxist feminist position and, in particular, the idea that a woman's position is derived directly from her position to capital. Rather, she argues that women's status is also determined by their role in both production and reproduction, the socialization of children and sexuality. She thus claims that Marxist approaches incorrectly seek to reduce women's position to the economic. Mitchell expands on this (1971: 100–1) when she says, economic demands 'are still primary, but must be accompanied by coherent policies for the other three elements (reproduction, sexuality and socialization), policies which at particular junctures may take over the primary role in immediate action'.

Indeed, Mitchell further argues that the family is the main reason that the move towards 'women's liberation' was slow. The family must be understood in broad terms, as an economic, ideological and as a biosocial unit. Even if there is a move towards the socialist mode of production, this will not ensure the end of women's oppression unless there is an equivalent transition in the psychological and ideological constructions of the family.

Moreover, many socialist feminists argue that with the break-up of the postwar political consensus on the welfare, the impact of the state on women's lives was increasingly seen as 'ambiguous'. Rowbotham (1990) argues that many of the anti-state positionings of feminists were formulated in a time when welfare provision by the state was not under challenge. Many of the assumptions of the first wave of feminists can no longer be taken for granted. The major impact of feminism on the state in the 1980s and 1990s was in relation to the continued demands to democratize and decentralize the state. In particular, the provision of welfare services continue to prove to be a major battleground, reflecting something not consumed passively but the result of active participation.

Sexism is thus best understood as a function of the capitalist system. Under socialism domestic tasks would be placed on a collective basis: women would be free of housework and able to participate fully in paid work. A socialist solution therefore involves the liberation of women from the private functions of wife and mother, allowing them to participate fully in a collectivized economy. Socialist feminists argue that liberals who focus upon legal and political reform, without seeking to change the nature of the family and economic system will

fail to alter women oppression.

Further, as Smart (1991) indicates, such an analysis has become increasingly valid for feminists. Following the rise of the New Right and the acceptance of much of the rhetoric of neoliberalism, especially in regarding the nuclear family as 'conventional wisdom', the relationship between women and the state became increasingly contradictory. The burden for care on women was further reinforced. Moreover, in many ways for Smart:

the family is becoming the main welfare agency ... certain structural changes have occurred with the growth of the number of married women in the labour market, the extension of the period of children's economic dependence, the greater longevity of grandparents and, most recently, chronic unemployment. All these factors mean that families, or more correctly mothers and daughters, need support if they are to continue to provide care and welfare for other members whilst also joining the labour market. But it is this support that recent measures are undermining. (Smart, 1991: 167)

Radical Feminism

A further perspective to be considered is radical feminism. Unlike those arguments already considered, which in various ways seek to reinterpret existing ideas, the emergence of radical feminism marks a break with previous traditions of political thought. It sets about constructing an agenda and political platform which essentially redetermines women's attitudes to themselves and those images imposed upon them by men; men's hatred of women; and the theoretical explanation of causes of women's oppression. Underlying this is the belief that neither changes in the legislative or economic systems can really transform the existing social relationships between men and women. Further, the feminist 'solutions' offered above are still all within male-defined parameters, offering only equality of opportunity and competition on male-dominated terms.

The answer for radical feminists is in a 'woman-centred' analysis of politics, especially the 'problems' of reproduction and the family. Fundamental to the project is the transformation of the social categories of masculinity and femininity. It is this notion which is central to the core theoretical statements within radical feminism, such as Firestone's, *The Dialectic of Sex* (1979). Drawing on the writings of both Marx and Freud, she argues that the biological differences between men and women mark the most basic class division of all. As she explains (1979: 232): 'Nature produced the fundamental inequality – half of the human race must bear or rear children for all of them – which was later consolidated, institutionalized, in the interests of men.'

Attempts at radical social transformation have so far failed because the repression of women and children will continue as long as the family will. Nor is it possible to bring it about by way of state institutions. The state itself functions to preserve patriarchy. In this sense reforming the state is not central to radical feminist analysis. It is merely another manifestation of patriarchal power, reflecting other deeply-rooted structures of oppression. The state is a symptom of male oppression, not the disease.

That is not to say that the state does not embody the interests of men rather than women, or that feminist demands are likely to be conceded by the state. State legislation cannot change the real position of women. Indeed, the legitimization of state intervention in key areas of social policy may only serve to increase the power and dominance of the male state.

In similar vein, Millett (1977) uses the term 'patriarchal government' to describe the institution by which 'half the population which is female is controlled by that half which is male'. In doing so, Millett argues that patriarchy runs through all economic and social structures and reinforces the relations between individual men and women in personal and sexual relationships. The conclusion to be drawn is that personal relationships and personal attitudes are necessarily political in nature. Foremost, 'the personal is political' a phrase which has become one of the key rallying cries of radical feminists over the past two decades.

It is, however, the family which Millet singles out as the key institution of women's oppression, 'mediating between the individual and the social structure', the family 'effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient' (1977: 33). Patriarchy is thus reproduced through the socialization of young people into its key values, relationships and roles. The traditional family and the marriage institution must therefore be targets for radical social change. Indeed, Millet stresses an end to traditional sexual inhibitions and sexual freedom to undermine male supremacy and segregated gender roles.

Such ideas have led to the development of several important strategies by radical feminists, notably, the development of women's autonomous self-help groups, organized around the principal of non-hierarchy. Several of these groups also emphasized separatism and/or political lesbianism. The reasoning behind this is straightforward. Only lesbians can really be feminists because only they can be entirely 'women centred'. For many radical feminists, lesbianism is much more than an expression of sexual preference. Rather, it marks an external expression of the rejection of patriarchal heterosexual sexuality, and a rejection of controlling forms of oppression, domination and power.

The resultant discussion as to whether heterosexual women could be 'real' feminists and, wider arguments about sexuality, desire, identity and politics, structured much of the debate within radical feminism, and the feminist movement as a whole, throughout the 1980s. Later radical feminist writings have seen a shift in emphasis away from the oppression of women through social organization and physical dominance and towards a discussion of male control through ascendancy in the arenas of culture, language and knowledge.

Spender (1983, 1985), for example, argues that women's knowledge and understanding of the world has been suppressed and that there exists a long and 'forgotten' lineage of feminist thought. Likewise, Coole (1994: 1) suggests that political thought in the West 'has provided grounds for excluding women from citizenship while functioning discursively to construct the feminine identities it denigrates'. We shall return to this and other closely related ideas in [Chapter 2](#).

For radical feminists, the kind of equality suggested by an agenda of equal rights and equal opportunities remains male defined. The notion that the main aim for women is that they should be able to compete with men on their own terms, rather than fundamentally to transform masculinity and femininity is a false one. Women should not model themselves on men, but rather should develop an analysis based on co-operation and non-aggression. The problem is not legal inequalities, or capitalism, but rather reproduction and the family.

Hence, the radical feminist perspective is overtly critical not only of mainstream social and political theory, but also of other feminisms. For radical feminists, Marxist inspired and promoted social transformation would merely mark just another coup among men. Social Democratic perspectives are suspect because when it comes to the crunch, feminists cannot expect male radicals to support them.

What is needed, therefore, at least to begin with, is some form of separatism, based around women working together with women in self-help, non-hierarchical groups. The women's movement should be, and indeed must be, autonomous. For these reasons, lesbianism plays a central organizational and political role. Revolutionary change can only come about by way of a radical transformation of society, through converting the nature of the family and sexual relationships.

Conservative Feminism and Postfeminism

Another view has arisen in recent years, which suggests that the link between the personal and the political, as projected by the second wave of feminist writers and activists, has become a thing of the past. Further, there has been a response to contemporary feminist debates in the form of a 'backlash' from conservative writers who have expressed strong doubts about the validity of challenging traditional gender roles. From this perspective, there is an underlying belief that women have a 'distinctive role', which should be highly valued in society and should remain 'different', rather than seeking equality.

Hence, Goldberg (1977) argues that all societies, whether developing or industrialized, past or present, traditional or revolutionary, express forms of patriarchal authority based upon universal gender differences. The 'fact' that biologically men are more aggressive leads to inevitable differences in the organization of politics and society. Goldberg concludes that as physiological differences cannot be changed, women should not seek to vie directly with men, but rather should develop their own natural feminine role.

There are other contemporary critiques of feminism emanating from the political Right (see Barry, 1994; Levin et al., 1992). Kenny (1994) offers a perspective that directly challenges the proposition that women are disadvantaged relative to men by the traditional patriarchal family. For her, the 'two-income norm' is now adversely affecting the ability of couples to start a family. Likewise, Wilson (1994), writing in the same volume as Kenny, claims that gender equality cannot be achieved in all occupations because men and women have different personalities, talents and different 'natural' interests rooted in the biological differences between them.

Others have suggested that we now live in a 'postfeminist' era. While the term 'postfeminism' remains somewhat nebulous, it is growing in usage. It first manifested in popular culture through performers such as the Spice Girls and Madonna. In populist writings it is found in the works of Wolf (1993). Indeed, the term seems to have originated in popular culture in the mid-1980s with sections of the media. If it is possible to identify that which binds postfeminism together, it is a refusal to accept any definition of women as victims and to project the notion of strong women in control across many aspects of social life. Postfeminism suggests that young women are articulating a set of ideas and forms of expression by women that regard traditional feminism as irrelevant to contemporary life and social relationships.

Elsewhere, Roiphe (1994) suggests that instead of highlighting women's strengths, the contemporary feminist movement merely demonstrate their vulnerability. For Denfeld (1995), feminism has come to represent an image of female victimization. Further, contemporary feminism merely represents an extremist cabal, which sees a continued female victimization in an all-powerful patriarchal system. This, alongside open hostility to heterosexual practices, merely alienates younger generations that believe that most of the battles around feminism have already been won.

These ideas have not gone unchallenged from within feminism. At the heart of the response to postfeminism is the re-emergence of Greer with the publication of *The Whole Woman* (1999). In this work she dismisses post-feminism as a phenomenon led by the multinationals and globalized corporations. Further, she argues that postfeminism is a luxury that can only be afforded by those in the affluent West. This broad argument is supported by several writers who claim that postfeminism lacks relevance to black and lesbian women and that it marks a break with, rather than builds upon the previous generation of feminist experiences (see Jowett, 2000; Mirza, 1998; Phillips, 1991, 1993).

Such responses have led some to talk of a 'third wave' of feminist writings located within these responses. Hence, Bryson (1999a) has further argued that the concept of patriarchy still has great relevancy and remains a piercing analytical force. Certainly it should not be abandoned by the current generation of feminist writers. Elsewhere, Bryson (1999b) suggests that the reason for the apparent decline of the autonomous women's movement is the 'normalization' of many of its activities and demands into social, academic, economic and political life.

Feminism remains a broad church; this is reflected in the range of views held by feminists on politics and the role of the state. All feminist thinking challenges traditional definitions of politics in the public arena towards the politics of everyday life. Further, feminist analysis criticizes the social construction of knowledge, power relations and identity. As Weedon defines it, feminism is a politics:

directed at changing existing power relations between men and women in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become. (Weedon, 1987: 1)

Foucault, Politics and the State

It is possible to argue, with some justification, that no man since Marx has had such an influence on thinking regarding power and society as Michael Foucault. Pivotal to this contribution is the attempt to deconstruct existing power structures. While clearly aware of it, his writings tend to downplay the role of the material and centralized power of the state. Rather, he focuses on the role of the state as a shaper and propagator of discourses. Indeed, the concept of 'discourse' is central to the whole Foucaultian project. By this he means that broad sets of ideas, meanings and possible statements about a subject that are dominant at particular times among particular sets of people.

This, of course, in part resembles the Marxist concept of ideology. Within Marxism, dominant ideas and values are traced back directly to the class whose interests they serve. For Foucault, however, there is no presumption of necessary power inequality. Those who shape the discourse are also subject to it.

Foucault rejects the Marxist theory of ideology because it presumes that there is a 'reality' from which individuals are cunningly separated by 'false consciousness'. The concept of discourse differs from that of ideology because it does not assume that there is a 'truth', which ideology conceals. Rather, a discourse sets about defining its own truth. It defines what can be said about a particular subject, what can be seen as the logic of an argument, and what are understood as the acceptable premises in such arguments.

This reading of discourse has important consequences for understanding power. Many of the

arguments outlined in this chapter suggest that we can best understand power as the imposition of a dominant will upon individuals or groups. Foucault disputes this approach, arguing that there is no such thing as power, but rather 'powers'. There are a variety of ways in which an individual, group or class can impose their ascendancy over others. For Foucault, power is based on knowledge and, in particular, the ability of discourses to define 'truth'. Knowledge does not constrain. Rather, it works by defining certain goals as much more desirable than others. As Foucault argues, power:

is not to be taken to be the phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogeneous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others.... Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application. (Foucault, 1980: 98)

Hence, Foucault seeks to deny that power exists as a single entity and to distinguish between different forms of power, such as repressive or coercive power or creative and enabling power, between the legal power of the state and power that is based on the possession and control of knowledge. Power, in Foucault's terms, can be thought of not as repressive, but as productive. Power produces knowledge that can be seen in the currently prevailing discourse. Above all, for Foucault, knowledge represents the power to define. Hence, power and knowledge are inseparable, knowledge decrees what can be done, to whom, and by whom.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1979), for example, Foucault focuses on creative powers. That is, the power of that which is defined as the 'norm' or 'normality' and power based on 'knowledge' of new scientific discourses. Importantly, he introduces the notion that there can be 'resistance' to the imposition of discourses. In the same way that power and knowledge may be dispersed throughout society, so too may there be alternative discourses which may be drawn upon. In the case of the homosexual, Foucault further gives the example of how medical, psychiatric, welfare and legal discourses came together, in the Victorian era, to construct the modern homosexual as a specific 'type' of person.

The scientific truth, or in Foucault's term 'knowledge', concerning sexuality was constructed by the medical profession, moral reformers and social legislators to present homosexuals as 'perverted' individuals with a 'deviant' sexuality. Through these various discourses sexual irregularity was steadily annexed to mental illness. The notion, of the 'sick' homosexual was thus the creation of these new discourses. Once homosexuals were so identified, they were labelled and excluded from 'normal' arenas of life and normal social interaction. This disciplinary power was (and is) so successful because, ultimately, it relies on self-regulation by those involved.

What of Foucault's further notion that power and resistance operate together, and that one is never present without the other? Foucault claims that resistance is formulated on the basis of alternative discourses. Those who are 'excluded', set apart because of their homosexuality, for example, have several strategies open to them. One tactic is simply to deny the legitimacy of the category. To refuse to accept that such sexual behaviour is an indication of abnormality or deviancy. However, given the strength of the 'scientific discourse' that dominates society, such a strategy may well prove fruitless.

There is another line of resistance, however. This is to accept fully the 'label' of homosexual, but refuse to accept the wider societal implications of the label. That is, to assert politically and socially the legitimacy of a wide range of sexual orientations, preferences and relationships, of which homosexuality is just one. This would include the right to contend the legitimacy of stable homosexual 'family' relationships. In so doing, the discourse of the family could be invoked as a discourse of strength, around which resistance may well be usefully articulated.

For Foucault, power does not rest with particular individuals or groups. Rather, it is present in a multiplicity of discursive struggles. Therefore, Foucault clearly rejects those who support what he calls totalising discourses and narratives. This obviously means that his views come into direct conflict with other theoretical perspectives, such as Marxism and feminism, which try to explain power in terms of single societal dimensions.

Ultimately, however, Foucault is not prepared to give one particular worldview the stamp of 'truth'. His core belief is that power operates not from the top down, but from the bottom up. The lives of individuals are therefore structured not by the filtering down of power and ideologies from a dominant group. Rather, those widespread oppressions in society, such as class and gender, are seen as arising from local power relationships. Those who are in a position to make use of them then appropriate these relations.

Hence, with slight exceptions, there is very little talk, or even recognition, of the state in Foucault's work. This is mainly because his concern with 'the micro-physics of power', focusing on how power is exercised in modern Western societies, means the state is seen as decentralized. Various techniques of power are autonomous, each developing its own rationality and logic, and with its own internal dynamics. Such an approach involves abandoning any notion of the economic as a fundamental determinant of change, although Foucault (1979) admits that it was initially the economic take-off of the West that necessitated these new forms of regulation and control.

Power is not seen as a property or a possession, nor does it reside exclusively with any one class to be used against another, as it is traditionally understood in Marxist social analysis. Instead, 'power is everywhere'. In rejecting class unity as the main location of political resistance, Foucault directly challenges existing political understandings and particularly the organization of many of those on the political Left. Further, his conception of positive power, rather than repression as the way in which social order has been achieved, effectively shifts the site of control into the social itself.

Evaluating Theories of Power and the State

So how can we begin to evaluate these notions of power and the state? Although certain theorists have argued that elite rule and democratic accountability are compatible, this remains a highly problematic and contested area. While it may be possible, in certain circumstances, to determine which elite rules, the system of concentrating power within the elite group cannot itself be challenged. The greatest input that the majority can hope for is to be allowed to decide every few years which elite will rule on its behalf. This can hardly be seen as a positive or progressive role.

It is also possible to identify several key weaknesses within pluralism. The pluralist analysis rests primarily on the belief that there exists a politically literate and well-informed electorate. In broad terms, most pluralists believe that any political changes should be incremental, and

that the *status quo* should dominate decision-making. Politicians, as a group, do not favour vested interests, and competing claims for scarce resources in society can and should always be reconciled within the democratic arena.

Further, all groups are seen as possessing the ability to gain access to some section of the state apparatus. In key policy areas under represented interests, or the interested of less well organized groups, can be catered for by setting up new agencies. Strong cabinet or presidential executives are the best way of guiding policy. Further, the collective actions of the state are benevolent and have a caring overview of the needs of society. However, many pluralists are hostile to centralized states and strongly believe that decentralization ensures participation and 'control' over politicians. In pragmatic terms there is strong support for local government, with distinct powers from central government.

It is also possible to identify several further criteria of the pluralist perspective. First, there is the central belief that no single group in society is able to exercise systematic control over more than one range of issues. Secondly, the view that there is equilibrium of power between pressure groups, especially the most important consumer groups, and particularly between capital and labour. Thirdly, the view that there is a separation of economic and political power. Fourthly, and crucially, the belief that the state is essentially 'neutral' in its character. Fifthly, most would claim that an essential part of complex society is a plurality of ideas and an absence of a dominant ideology.

For pluralists, the modern democratic state rests on the belief that politics operates through certain power centres, notably government, parliament and particularly the cabinet. There are checks and balances on these against erratic or authoritarian decisions that may be taken against majority interests. These include regular elections and the guarantee of free speech. Real power is dispersed among a wide range of pressure groups. There may at different times be coalitions of interests, but these change over time and involve different groups and organizations both inside and outside parliament. The neutral positioning of the state encourages lobbying, political campaigning and compromise between competing groups. Hence, politics is inevitably limited in its effectiveness. All of the nation's needs cannot be solved, all of the competing interests cannot be met. It is therefore essential that the protection of the voters' democratic rights is placed with parliament.

Perhaps the most telling criticism of the pluralist approach is that they operate within a highly restricted concept of what power is, and how politics actually works. In the context of the United Kingdom this means an overt focus on public policy-making, legislation and the actions of government.

Further, there is an almost unquestioning acceptance of the distinctions between public and private areas of life, the latter considered to be autonomous from the economy in particular. Pluralists tend to concentrate on political participation and decision-making in the public arena. There is little room within pluralist ideas for any operation of politics beyond the observable, the operation of interest groups who do not manifest openly, or for the state to take any role beyond that of referee.

Overall, perhaps the clearest challenge to pluralists is the charge that they concentrate their focus on a limited dimension of political power, that which is readily observable and which is seen to operate in the public domain. This is what Lukes (1974) calls the 'one dimensional view' of power.

This issue is addressed directly by Marxism's core argument, that in capitalist societies power

rests with a coherent capitalist class. The state therefore acts to secure the continuance of 'bourgeois' domination. Within the United Kingdom, managers and those in leading positions in the judiciary, the law and the like are all recruited from within the dominant class and gender grouping. This 'ruling class' utilizes social networks to secure access to core decision-making roles within the state and civil society. Overall, from this perspective the state is seen as an 'instrument' of capital.

Poulantzas, however, argues that the instrumental approach of Miliband ignores, or at least is insensitive to, those structural factors that condition state action. For Poulantzas, Miliband cannot account for the role of the state in continually reproducing capitalist society, even if this means its actions may conflict with the short-term interests of the capitalist class. The state thus often acts in a 'relatively autonomous' manner in order to ensure the preservation of the capitalist order. These polar positions of 'instrumentalism' and 'structuralism' have set the parameters for a continuing debate within neo-Marxism concerning the role of the state in advanced capitalist society.

The resulting post-Marxist writings have, for example, developed a central concern with the stability of the modern capitalist state. Later in the book we shall engage with the works of two such writers, Habermas and Offe. Both have emphasized how endemic economic crisis and social conflict force a reaction, that of an increasingly interventionist state, with responsibility for the containment of these conflicts.

We shall consider these views later in relation to issues surrounding the legitimation of state power in the United Kingdom. Despite the demise of Marxist orthodoxy following the 'collapse of communism' in the revolutions in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991, Marxism remains influential in informing much theoretical debate.

Corporatism is another theoretical position that has important things to say on the form of politics, development of the economy and levels of state intervention within the United Kingdom. As a form of political expression it stresses the manner in which large interest groups can combine informally in co-operation to regulate the economic structure and core areas of social life. The emphasis on consensus hopefully results in a more conciliatory form of politics.

In the United Kingdom by the mid-1970s, this manifested in the concept of a 'social contract', whereby 'social partners' sought to govern the running of the state. Importantly, however, there were always key groups and dynamics which found them outside the embrace of corporatist structure, even at its height. Since the early 1980s corporatism has found itself under attack, both theoretically and pragmatically, from all sides.

For liberal theorists, the structured nature of corporatism marks the decay of pluralism. For those adopting a Weberian perspective, it marks a further development in 'rational-legal' domination, and increases the power of bureaucracies. For a number of Marxists, corporatism merely represented a stage of the development of advanced capitalism, whereby basic class conflicts were disguised.

From a Marxist perspective, rather than introducing the end to class conflict, corporatism institutionally solidifies the balance of class power at a particular point in history. Both Westergaard (1977) and Panitch (1976, 1980, 1985) have provided telling criticisms along these lines. Indeed, Westergaard suggests that corporatism is a model whereby the state is seen to exist 'above' or 'outside' competing social and economic interests.

The state, however, remains capitalist and structured by the capitalist maxim of the 'maximization of profit'. Under corporatism there is no notion of changing its mode of production, or its organizing principles. Hence for Panitch (1980, 1985), corporatism marks a political strategy to suppress working-class militancy, any opposition to its exploitation and the potential of the organized labour movement. At its heart, corporatism ensures that the capitalist class still has control of the state. Any co-operation by the trades union movement largely benefits business interests rather more than it does the labour movement.

Such a perspective was far from accepted on the political Right, which saw corporatism as a sop to the organized Left. With the emergence of the New Right, the United Kingdom state ditched any notion of corporatism. 'Thatcherism' took a very different route in the search for a successful economic system, introducing market competition as the core organizational principle. As we shall see in [Chapter 3](#), the New Right, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, pursued an unambiguously 'anti-corporatist' tone, re-emphasizing the confrontational nature of politics and the primacy of the market over any form of agreed economic intervention and political consensus.

Overall corporatism has had little long-term impact on the structure of the state. That said, the concept of corporatism, albeit in a limited form, has resurfaced in recent times. In particular, the promotion of a stakeholder society by New Labour has breathed some life into the notion. We will discuss this in much more detail later, but here it is suffice to flag up a possible re-emergence of corporatism on to the political agenda, promoted by writers such as Hutton (1995a, 1997) and sections of the parliamentary Labour Party and New Labour leadership.

The very mention of a reawakening of corporatist values, however, has led to a reaction from those on the political Right. Hence, Brian Mawhinney, the then Conservative Party Chairman, in discussing the notion of a stakeholder society (see [Chapter 4](#)), revived many of the Tory demons of the recent past when he claimed that the emerging trends within New Labour in the mid-1990s were in essence corporatism. He went on to say, 'the Trade Unions, the vested interest groups, the Labour-dominated local authorities... it's second-hand socialist policies wrapped up in Tory ribbons. ... It is a devious way to attempt to bring in new taxes through the back door' (*Guardian*, 8 January 1996).

In reviewing feminist views on politics and the state it is clear that we encounter not one, but several key perspectives. Sometimes these arguments and political positions are overlapping, sometimes contradictory. Lovenduski and Randall (1993: 7) point to several important trends in contemporary feminist analysis. They suggest a coming together of the politics and strategies of radical and socialist feminists. It is the strategies of liberal feminists, and the attempt to integrate more women into public life, that have, however, become most influential and clearly seen in the British context.

Further, Lovenduski and Randall (1993: 353–8) suggest that the decline and deradicalization of the women's movement has been accompanied by, and 'in many ways was a consequence of, its greater involvement with state agencies and the growing presence of feminists in mainstream institutions' (1993: 15). This increasing involvement by feminists in the agencies of the state, and the increasing impact of feminist ideas in these areas, is one of the greatest 'gains' of the contemporary women's movement.

The feminist gaze thus proves to be an incisive analytical tool. Some of the more interesting material in the most recent wave of feminist writing seeks to embrace and encompass several strands of feminist thought. The works of Jagger (1983) or Young (1990), for example, often seek to integrate socialist, Marxist, radical and indeed psychoanalytical approaches within

feminism. Such an approach, as Tong points out, has the potential to 'resolve the existing differences among many currents of feminism' (1992: 193).

Obviously, however, it is also important to highlight the major traditions of thought within feminism. Depending on which strand of thought is adopted, there are competing feminist views of the state. Overall, for many feminists, practical political issues and actions are as important, if not more important, as theoretical issues. Nonetheless, feminist writings have become increasingly sophisticated in their writings on power and the state.

Many feminist writings now seek to distinguish between the experiences of groups of women, such as those differentiated by class, ethnicity and race (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1982; Lorde, 1992; Mama, 1995). Other feminists reject all universalizing discourses, seeking to locate their views within postmodernist thought. Most postmodern feminists seek to connect modernity with masculinity. Hence, the supposedly neutral universal truths of modernist thinking are actually deeply located in male power. Truth is not seen as external or neutral, but rather constructed through multiple determinants of experience, such as exclusion and repression (see Flax, 1990; Grosz, 1990, 1994; Spivak, 1992).

One important point highlighted in recent feminist writings is that women's experience of politics, and their comparative positions in the social structure of the United Kingdom, varies considerably. Rowbotham (1993: 1) highlights the importance of this. Rather than seeing women as a homogeneous grouping on to which a prescription for change can be applied, she argues that the emancipation of women and gender relations must be understood in relation to other aspects of women's lives. Further, nobody is simply a woman. Women are born into a particular family, class and race and at a particular time in history.

Foucault's work has been open to several political critiques. First, the notions of 'resistance to power' appear extremely unrealistic to some. Indeed, it appears at times to be built on a series of somewhat prosaic statements rather than any coherent political strategy. Secondly, there is the anarchistic thread that runs through his work. If power and resistance are 'everywhere', how are we to evaluate one form of resistance against another? For example, how are we to decide which would be progressive and which would be reactionary? The only way out is to introduce value judgements, which at the same time would seem to suggest that, to some extent at least, we are able to stand outside of power. Thirdly, Foucault at times seems to embroider and accent the role of the deviant. One way this is done is by regarding their actions as unique and difficult to clarify for their purposes of normalization (Foucault, 1977). Another is through the construction of particular individuals who are seen as standing up to and resisting power, shrugging off its effects (Foucault, 1979).

Politics and the State: Some Conclusions

How then should the individual hope to understand and have any meaningful input into the political process? Indeed, it must be asked whether, in contemporary society, individuals have any chance of influencing the political world around them, or altering the decision-making processes often made at national and supranational levels?

Although the state remains central to most of our lives, its place is seen as challenged by several current trends. This can be seen in what Jessop (1990) calls a 'hollowing out' of the state. This is a process whereby many of the functions once performed by the state have gradually been transferred to other institutions. It can be seen in developments such as privatization (see [Chapter 3](#)) and globalization (see [Chapter 7](#)).

Despite this, it would seem that in the United Kingdom the legitimacy of the state, certainly outside Northern Ireland, is rarely questioned on a mass level. One example of when this did happen in Britain, however, was with the mass protests surrounding the Poll Tax in the early 1990s (Tonge, 1994). Another recent example was seen in the widespread and co-ordinated protests against the level of taxation on petrol and other fuels organized throughout 2000? Although such events are rare, it does not follow that uncritical attitudes towards the United Kingdom state and its actions are the norm.

Even in time of 'war' this is often the case. It is clear that many Britons opposed the sending the task force to the Falklands/Malvinas in 1981, even though a majority may have supported it. At the time of the Gulf War, while there was considerable populist support for 'Desert Storm', there was also a solid core of opposition, and a reasonably coherent 'anti-war' movement. During 2001, tens of thousands of individuals took to the streets in organized protests in opposition to the bombing of Afghanistan. Yet such voices of discord were able to gain little prominence in the political arena of the time. Many opposition groups still often claim exclusion from the political agenda.

From what has been said already, it should be apparent just how 'contested' notions of power and debates concerning the roles of the state remain. This chapter has outlined some of the conventional building blocks that are often drawn upon to try to answer these questions. As we shall see, there are those who believe that ideologically single theories cannot account for the plurality of identities that exist in the modern world.

Further, we shall also encounter arguments that the ideological positions we have reviewed have largely been made irrelevant by a new postmodern frames of reference, or that the politics and power relationships within individual nation-states have been rendered immaterial by the forces of globalization.

The theories outlined above cannot, however, be ignored. Much of the rest of the book will introduce material which either seeks to build upon, or at times fundamentally challenges the models already discussed. The ideas in [Chapter 1](#) remain core reference points for orienting individuals to the political world and for providing explanations in relation to the market economy, conflicts over national and political identities, and the contemporary politics of social inclusion and exclusion. To begin with, let us consider in more detail the nature of the state and the dynamics of power as it continues to develop within the United Kingdom.

Discussion Questions

- **How should we best understand the concept of the state?**
- **Discuss the view that only Marxists have produced a coherent analysis of the contemporary state.**
- **How useful are pluralist theories in explaining the relationships between power and the state in contemporary societies?**
- **What chance do people have of influencing the political world?**

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- pluralism
 - corporatism
 - feminism
 - postfeminism
 - marxism
 - pressure groups
 - elites

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