Marx, the State and Functional Explanation

Introduction

It is generally accepted that there is no single theory of the state to be found in Marx’s writings but a variety of themes and perspectives, some of which appear to be at odds with each other (Miliband, 1965; Jessop, 1977 and 1984; Barrow, 1993; Wetherly, 1998; Hay, 1999). A common distinction is between an ‘instrumentalist’ conception of the state (most famously expressed in *The Communist Manifesto*) and an idea of the state as autonomous from the dominant class (found in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*). For Miliband (1965) these constitute, respectively, Marx’s ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ views on the state. According to Elster ‘the central question in the Marxist theory of the state is whether it is autonomous with respect to class interests, or entirely reducible to them’ (Elster, 1985, p. 402).

However this way of presenting Marx’s views is unhelpful because it suggests a false dualism or even antithesis. Elster’s ‘central question’ actually conflates two, and each is most fruitfully posed not in ‘either-or’ but ‘both-and’ terms. The first concerns whether the state can be understood simply in instrumental terms, however conceived, or whether there are non-instrumental causal influences that need also to be taken into account. An instrumental account need not be confined to the influence of class interests alone, still less to the interests of the capitalist class, but might also include non-class interests and social forces. Non-instrumental causal influences may include, in particular, structural constraints faced by the state. Although instrumental and non-instrumental forms of explanation might be conceived as alternatives, a more productive approach is to investigate how they may be combined. State actions can be the effect of *both* the
exercise of power by a dominant class and structural constraints emanating from the nature of the capitalist economic system. The second question concerns the limits of independent action by the state, or state autonomy. Reductionist theories reject the concept of the state as a subject with its own interests and capacities but see it as reducible to, or a reflection of, society-centred influences and forces. State-centred theories, on the other hand, emphasise the independent interests and capacities of the state. However, a society-centred approach need not assume reductionist form, just as a state-centred view need not conceive the state as a closed system. State actions can be the effect of both the push of interests from inside the state and external pressures of an instrumental and/or non-instrumental kind.

Identifying these two central questions makes clear that the state should not be seen as either autonomous or reducible to class interests. For example, the state can be autonomous from the capitalist class but still conceived as an instrument controlled by other social forces and, equally, the state can be conceived non-instrumentally without being autonomous in virtue of structural constraints. Further, by posing these questions in ‘both-and’ terms we can see that an instrumental account of the state can be combined with understanding of the force of structural constraints, and these society-centred influences on the state can be combined with a state-centred account of the capacity of the state to pursue its own interests. Thus the autonomy of the state is a question of degree, and this relative autonomy is an aspect of instrumental and non-instrumental (structural) causal influences and their theoretical combination.

The over-arching framework for this approach to the theory of the state can be found in Marx’s theory of history, insofar as the state is included in the superstructure. The theory of history constitutes Marx’s general theory of which the particular theory of the state is a constituent element. The key text is the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy in which Marx characterises the relationship between the economic and political realms in terms of the famous ‘base and superstructure’ metaphor.

The totality of ... relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure ... At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production ... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins