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The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results

Michael Mann

Introduction

This chapter tries to specify the origins, mechanisms and results of the autonomous power which the state possesses in relation to the major power groupings of 'civil society'. The argument is couched generally, but it derives from a large, ongoing empirical research project into the development of power in human societies.¹ At the moment, my generalizations are bolder about agrarian societies; concerning industrial societies I will be more tentative. I define the state and then pursue the implications of that definition. Two essential parts of the definition, centrality and territoriality, are discussed in relation to two types of state power, termed here *despotic* and *infrastructural* power. State autonomy, of both despotic and infrastructural forms, flows principally from the state's unique ability to provide a *territorially centralized* form of organization.

Nowadays there is no need to belabour the point that most general theories of the state have been false because they have been reductionist. They have reduced the state to the pre-existing structures of civil society. This is obviously true of the Marxist, the liberal and the

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¹ To be published as a three-volume work: *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. I: *A History of Power from the Beginnings to 1760 AD* is published by Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986; vol. II: *A History of Power in Industrial Societies* will appear from the same press in 1987; vol. III: *A Theory of Power* will follow, consisting of a series of essays comparable in scope and style to this one.

functionalist traditions of state theory, each of which has seen the state predominantly as a place, an arena, in which the struggle of classes, interest groups and individuals are expressed and institutionalized, and – in functionalist versions – in which a General Will (or, to use more modern terms, core values or normative consensus) is expressed and implemented. Though such theories disagree about many things, they are united in denying significant autonomous power to the state. But despite the existence of excellent critique of such reductionism² and pite the self-criticism implied by the constant use of the term 'relative autonomy' by recent Marxists,³ there has still been a curious reluctance to analyse this autonomy.

One major obstacle has been itself political. The main alternative theory which *appears* to uphold state autonomy has been associated with rather unpleasant politics. I refer to the militarist tradition of state theory embodied around the beginning of the century in the work of predominantly Germanic writers, like Gumpowicz,⁴ Ratzenhofer and Schmitt. They saw the state as physical force, and as this was the prime mover in society, so the militaristic state was supreme over those economic and ideological structure identified by the reductionist theories. But the scientific merits of these societies were quickly submerged by their political associations – with Social Darwinism, racism, glorification of state power and then fascism. The final (deeply ironic) outcome was that militarist theory was defeated on the battlefield by the combined forces of (Marxist) Russia and the (liberal democratic and functionalist) Western allies. We have heard little of it directly since. But its indirect influence has been felt, especially recently, through the work of 'good Germans' like Weber, Hintze, Rustow and the anarchist Oppenheimer, all influenced to one degree or another by the German militarist tradition, and all of whose major works have now been translated into English.⁵

I am not advocating a return to this alternative tradition, even at its scientific level. For when we look more closely, we see that it is usually also reductionist. The state is still nothing in itself: it is merely the embodiment of physical force in society. The state is not an arena where

2 S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961.

3 N. Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*, Paris, Maspero, 1972; G. Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*, London, New Left Books, 1978.

4 L. Gumpowicz, *The Outlines of Sociology*, Philadelphia, American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1899.

5 O. Hintze, *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. F. Gilbert, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975; F. Oppenheimer, *The State*, New York, Free Life Editions, 1975; A. Rustow, *Freedom and Domination: An Historical Critique of Civilisation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975.

domestic economic/ideological issues are resolved, rather it is an arena in which military force is mobilized domestically and used domestically and, above, all, internationally.

Both types of theory have merit, yet both are partial. So what would happen if we put them together in a single theory? We would assemble an essentially dual theory of the state. It would identify two dimensions: the domestic, economic/ideological aspect of the state and the military, international aspect of states. In the present climate of comparative sociology, dominated by a Marxified Weberianism, domestic analysis would be likely to centre upon class relations. And as states would now be responding to two types of pressure and interest groups, a certain 'space' would be created in which a state elite could manoeuvre, play off classes against war factions and other states, and so stake out an area and degree of power autonomy for itself. To put the two together would give us a rudimentary account of state autonomy.

That is indeed precisely the point at which the best state theory has now arrived. It is exemplified by Theda Skocpol's excellent *States and Social Revolutions*. Skocpol draws upon Marx and Weber in about equal quantities. She quotes enthusiastically Otto Hintze's two-dimensional view of the determinants of state organization: 'first, the structure of social classes, and second, the external ordering of the states - their position relative to each other, and their over-all position in the world', and she then expands the latter in terms of military relations. These two 'basic sets of tasks' are undertaken by 'a set of administrative, policing and military organizations headed, and more or less well co-ordinated by, an executive authority' for whom resources are extracted from society. These resource-supported administrative and coercive organizations are 'the basis of state power as such'. This power can then be used with a degree of autonomy against either the dominant class, or against domestic war or peace factions and foreign states.⁶ A very similar approach underlies Charles Tilly's recent work;⁷ and Anthony Giddens has argued in similar vein.⁸

Now I do not wish quite to abandon this 'two-dimensional' model of the state - for I, too, have contributed a detailed analysis of English state finances in the period 1130-1815 starting from such a model.⁹ All these

6 T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 29-31.

7 C. Tilly, *As Sociology Meets History*, New York, Academic Press, 1981, chapters 5 and 8.

8 A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, London, Macmillan, 1981.

9 M. Mann, 'State and society, 1130-1815: an analysis of English state finances', in M. Zeitlin, ed., *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. I, Connecticut, J.A.I. Press, 1980.

works advance beyond reductionism. We can develop their insights considerably further, and so penetrate to the heart of state autonomy, its nature, degree and consequences. But to do this we must make a far more radical, yet in a sense peculiar and paradoxical, break with reductionism. I shall argue in this chapter that the state is merely and essentially an arena, a place, and yet this is the very source of its autonomy.

Defining the State

The state is undeniably a messy concept. The main problem is that most definitions contain two different levels of analysis, the 'institutional' and the 'functional'. That is, the state can be defined in terms of what it looks like, institutionally, or what it does, its functions. Predominant is a mixed, but largely institutional, view put forward originally by Weber. In this the state contains four main elements, being:

- 1 a *differentiated set of institutions* and personnel, embodying
- 2 *centrality*, in the sense that political relations radiate outwards from a centre to cover a
- 3 *territorially demarcated area*, over which it exercises
- 4 a monopoly of *authoritative binding rule-making*, backed up by a monopoly of the means of physical violence.¹⁰

Apart from the last phrase which tends to equate the state with military force (see below), I will follow this definition. It is still something of a mixed bag. It contains a predominant institutional element: states can be recognized by the central location of their differentiated institutions. Yet it also contains a 'functional' element: the essence of the state's functions is a monopoly of binding rule-making. Nevertheless, my principal interest lies in those centralized institutions generally called 'states', and in the powers of the personnel who staff them, at the higher levels generally termed the 'state elite'. The central question for us here, then, is what is the nature of the power possessed by states and state elites? In answering I shall contrast state elites with power groupings whose base lies outside the state, in 'civil society'. In line with the model of power underlying my work, I divide these into three, ideological, economic and military groups. So what, therefore, is the power of state elites as against the power of ideological movements, economic classes, and military elites?

¹⁰ See for examples the definitions of S. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, New York, The Free Press, 1969, p. 5; R. N. MacIver, *The Modern State*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1926, p. 22; C. Tilly, 'Reflections on the History of European State-making', in

Two Meanings of State Power

What do we mean by 'the power of the state'? As soon as we begin to think about this commonplace phrase, we encounter two quite different senses in which states and their elites might be considered powerful. We must disentangle them. The first sense concerns what we might term the *despotic power* of the state elite, the range of actions which the elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalized negotiation with civil society groups. The historical variations in such powers have been so enormous that we can safely leave on one side the ticklish problem of how we precisely measure them. The despotic powers of many historical states have been virtually unlimited. The Chinese Emperor, as the Son of Heaven, 'owned' the whole of China and could do as he wished with any individual or group within his domain. The Roman Emperor, only a minor god, acquired powers which were also in principle unlimited outside of a restricted area of affairs nominally controlled by the Senate. Some monarchs of early modern Europe also claimed divinely derived, absolute powers (though they were not themselves divine). The members of the contemporary Soviet state/party elite, as 'trustees' of the interests of the masses, also possess considerable despotic (though sometimes strictly unconstitutional) power. Great despotic power can be 'measured' most vividly in the ability of all these Red Queens to shout 'off with his head' and have their whim gratified without further ado – provided the person is at hand. Despotic power is also usually what is meant in the literature by 'autonomy of power'.

But there is a second sense in which people talk of 'the power of the state', especially in today's capitalist democracies. We might term this *infrastructural power*, the capacity of the state actually to penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm. This was comparatively weak in the historical societies just mentioned; once you were out of sight of the Red Queen, she had difficulty in getting at you. But it is powerfully developed in all industrial societies. When people in the West today complain of the growing power of the state, they cannot be referring sensibly to the despotic powers of the state elite itself; for if anything these are still declining. It is, after all, only 40 years since universal suffrage was fully established in several of the advanced capitalist states, and the basic political rights of

C. Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 27; and Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, New York, Bedminster Press, 1968, vol. I, p. 64.

groups such as ethnic minorities and women are still increasing. But the complaint is more justly levelled against the state's infrastructural encroachments. These powers are now immense. The state can assess and tax our income and wealth at source, without our consent or that of our neighbours or kin (which states before about 1850 were never able to do); it stores and can recall immediately a massive amount of information about all of us; it can enforce its will within the day almost anywhere in its domains; its influence on the overall economy is enormous; it even directly provides the subsistence of most of us (in state employment, in pensions, in family allowances, etc.). The state penetrates everyday life more than did any historical state. Its infrastructural power has increased enormously. If there were a Red Queen, we should all quail at her words – from Alaska to Florida, from the Shetlands to Cornwall there is no hiding place from the infrastructural reach of the modern state.

But who controls these states? Without prejudging a complex issue entirely, the answer in the capitalist democracies is less likely to be 'an autonomous state elite' than in most historic societies. In these countries most of the formal political leadership is elected and recallable. Whether one regards the democracy as genuine or not, few would contest that politicians are largely controlled by outside civil society groups (either by their financiers or by the electorate) as well as by the law. President Nixon or M. Chaban-Delmas may have paid no taxes; political leaders may surreptitiously amass wealth, infringe the civil liberties of their opponents, and hold onto power by sly undemocratic means. But they do not brazenly expropriate or kill their enemies or dare to overturn legal traditions enshrining constitutional rule, private property or individual freedoms. On the rare occasions this happens, we refer to it as a *coup* or a revolution, an overturning of the norms. If we turn from elected politicians to permanent bureaucrats we still do not find them exercising significant autonomous power over civil society. Perhaps I should qualify this, for the secret decisions of politicians and bureaucrats penetrate our everyday lives in an often infuriating way, deciding we are not eligible for this or that benefit, including, for some persons, citizenship itself. But their power to change the fundamental rules and overturn the distribution of power within civil society is feeble – without the backing of a formidable social movement.

So, in one sense states in the capitalist democracies are weak; in another they are strong. They are 'despotically weak' but 'infrastructurally strong'. Let us clearly distinguish these two types of state power.

- 1 The first sense denotes power by the state elite itself over civil society.
- 2 The second denotes the power of the state to penetrate and centrally co-ordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure. The

second type of power still allows the possibility that the state itself is a mere instrument of forces within civil society, i.e. that it has no despotic power at all. The two are analytically autonomous dimensions of power. In practice, of course, there may be a relationship between them. For example, the greater the state's infrastructural power, the greater the volume of binding rule-making, and therefore the greater the likelihood of despotic power over individuals and perhaps also over marginal, minority groups. All infrastructurally powerful states, including the capitalist democracies, are strong in relation to individuals and to the weaker groups in civil society, but the capitalist democratic states are feeble in relation to dominant groups, at least in comparison to most historical states.

From these two independent dimensions of state power we can derive four ideal-types in figure 1 below. The *feudal* state is the weakest, for it

		Infrastructural co-ordination	
		Low	High
Despotic power	Low	Feudal	Bureaucratic
	High	Imperial	Authoritarian

Figure 1 Two dimensions of state power

has both low despotic and low infrastructural power. The medieval European state approximated to this ideal-type, governing largely indirectly, through infrastructure freely and contractually provided and controlled by the principal and independent magnates, clerics and towns. The *imperial* state possesses its own governing agents, but has only limited capacity to penetrate and co-ordinate civil society without the assistance of other power groups. It corresponds to the term 'patrimonial state' used by writers like Weber and Bendix.¹¹ Ancient states like the Akkadian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian and Roman approximated to this type. I hesitated over the term *bureaucratic* state, because of its negative connotations. But a bureaucracy has a high organizational capacity, yet cannot set its own goals; and the bureaucratic state is controlled by others, civil society groups, but their decisions once taken are enforceable through the state's infrastructure. *Contemporary capitalist democracies* approximate to this type as does the future state hoped for by most radicals and socialists. *Authoritarian* is intended to

11 M. Weber, *Economy and Society*; R. Bendix, *Kings or People*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978.

suggest a more institutionalized form of despotism, in which competing power groupings cannot evade the infrastructural reach of the state, nor are they structurally separate from the state (as they are in the bureaucratic type). All significant social power must go through the authoritative command structure of the state. Thus it is high on both dimensions, having high despotic power over civil society groups and being able to enforce this infrastructurally. In their different ways, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union tend towards this case. But they probably traded off some loss of infrastructural penetration for high despotic powers (thus neither attained as high a level of social mobilization during the Second World War as the 'despotically weak' but participatory Great Britain did). Nor is this to deny that such states contain competing interest groups which may possess different bases in 'civil society'. Rather, in an authoritarian state power is transmitted through its directives and so such groups compete for direct control of the state. It is different in the capitalist democracies where the power of the capitalist class, for example, permeates the whole of society, and states generally accept the rules and rationality of the surrounding capitalist economy.

These are ideal-types. Yet my choice of real historical examples which roughly approximate to them reveals two major tendencies which are obvious enough yet worthy of explanation. First, there has occurred a long-term historical growth in the infrastructural power of the state, apparently given tremendous boosts by industrial societies, but also perceptible within both pre-industrial and industrial societies considered separately. Second, however, within each historical epoch have occurred wide variations in despotic powers. There has been no general developmental tendency in despotic powers – non-despotic states existed in late fourth-millennium BC Mesopotamia (the 'primitive democracy' of the early city-states), in first-millennium BC Phoenicia, Greece and Rome, in medieval republics and city-states, and in the modern world alike. The history of despotism has been one of oscillation, not development. Why such wide divergencies on one dimension, but a developmental trend on the other?

The Development of State Infrastructural Power

The growth of the infrastructural power of the state is one in the logistics of political control. I will not here enumerate its main historical phases. Instead, I cite some logistical techniques which have aided effective state penetration of social life, each of which has had a long historical development.

- 1 A division of labour between the state's main activities which it co-ordinated centrally. A microcosm of this is to be found on the battle-fields of history where a co-ordinated administrative division between infantry, cavalry and artillery, usually organized by the state, would normally defeat forces in which these activities were mixed up – at least in 'high intensity' warfare.
- 2 Literacy, enabling stabilized messages to be transmitted through the state's territories by its agents, and enabling legal responsibilities to be codified and stored. Giddens emphasizes this 'storage' aspect of state power.¹²
- 3 Coinage, and weights and measures, allowing commodities to be exchanged under an ultimate guarantee of value by the state.
- 4 Rapidity of communication of messages and of transport of people and resources, through improved roads, ships, telegraphy etc.

States able to use relatively highly developed forms of these techniques have possessed greater capacity for infrastructural penetration. This is pretty obvious. So is the fact that history has seen a secular process of infrastructural improvements.

Yet none of these techniques is specific to the state. They are part of general social development, part of the growth of human beings' increasing capacities for collective social mobilization of resources. Societies in general, not just their states, have advanced their powers. Thus none of these techniques necessarily changes the relationship between a state and its civil society; and none is necessarily pioneered by either the state or civil society.

Thus state power (in either sense) does not derive from techniques or means of power that are peculiar to itself. The varied techniques of power are of three main types: military, economic and ideological. They are characteristic of all social relationships. The state uses them all, adding no fourth means peculiar to itself. This has made reductionist theories of the state more plausible because the state seems dependent on resources also found more generally in civil society. If they are all wrong, it is not because the state manipulates means of power denied to other groups. The state is not autonomous in this sense.

Indeed, the fact that the means used are essentially also the means used in all social relationships ensures that states rarely diverge far from their civil societies. Let us examine what happens when a state pioneers an increase in logistic powers. A characteristic, though slow-paced example, is literacy. The first stages of literacy in Mesopotamia, and probably also in the other major independent cases of the emergence of

12 A. Giddens, *Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*.

civilization, occurred within the state. In this respect, the state was largely codifying and stabilizing two kinds of emergent norms, 'private' property rights and community rights and duties. The first pictograms and logograms enabled scribes at city-state temple-storehouses to improve their accountancy systems, and denote more permanently who possessed what and who owed what to the community. It solidified relations radiating across the surrounding territory and centred them more on itself. Writing then simplified into syllabic cuneiform script still essentially within the state bureaucracy, and performing the same dual functions. Writing was an important part of the growth of the first imperial states, that is of the Akkadian and subsequent empires of the third and second millennia BC. Literacy was restricted to the bureaucracy, stabilized its systems of justice and communications, and so provided infrastructural support to a state despotism, though apparently in some kind of alliance with a property-owning economic class.

Yet the general utility of literacy was now recognized by civil society groups. By the time that the next simplifications, alphabetic script and parchment, became common (around the beginning of the first millennium BC), state domination had ended. The main pioneers were now not despotic states but decentralized groups of peasant-traders, village priests, and trading peoples organized into loose federations of small city- or tribal-states like the Arameans, the Phoenicians and the Greeks. From then on, the power of such groups, usually with non-despotic states, rivalled that of the despotic empires. What had started by bolstering despotism continued by undermining it when the techniques spread beyond state confines. The states could not keep control over their own logistical inventions. And this is generally the case with all such inventions, whatever period of history we consider. In our time we have instances such as 'statistics': originally things which appertain to the state, later a useful method of systematic information-gathering for any power organization, especially large capitalist corporations.

However, converse examples are not difficult to find either, where states appropriate infrastructural techniques pioneered by civil society groups. The course of industrialization has seen several such examples, culminating in the Soviet Union whose state communications, surveillance and accountancy systems are similar to those pioneered by capitalist enterprises (with their states as junior partners) in the West. In this example what started in civil society continued in state despotism. Infrastructural techniques diffuse outwards from the particular power organizations that invented them.

Two conclusions emerge. First, in the whole history of the development of the infrastructure of power there is virtually no technique which belongs necessarily to the state, or conversely to civil society. Second,

there is some kind of oscillation between the role of the two in social development. I hope to show later than it is not merely oscillation, but a dialectic.

The obvious question is: if infrastructural powers are a general feature of society, in what circumstances are they appropriated by the state? How does the state acquire in certain situations, but not others, despotic powers? What are the origins of the autonomous power of the state? My answer is in three stages, touching upon the *necessity* of the state, its *multiplicity of functions*, and its *territorialized centrality*. The first two have often been identified in recent theory; the third is, I think novel.

Origins of State Power

1 *The necessity of the state*

The only stateless societies have been primitive. There are no complex, civilized societies without any centre of binding rule-making authority, however limited its scope. If we consider the weak feudal cases we find that even they tend to arise from a more state-centred history whose norms linger on to reinforce the new weak states. Feudal states tend to emerge either as a check to the further disintegration of a once-unified larger state (as in China and Japan) or as a post-conquest division of the spoils among the victorious, and obviously united, conquerors.¹³ Western European feudalism embodies both these histories, though in varying mixtures in different regions. The laws of the feudal states in Europe were reinforced by rules descending from Roman law (especially property law), Christian codes of conduct, and Germanic notions of loyalty and honour. This is a further glimpse of a process to which I will return later: a perpetual dialectic of movement between state and civil society.

Thus societies with states have had superior survival value to those without them. We have no examples of stateless societies long enduring past a primitive level of development, and many examples of state societies absorbing or eliminating stateless ones. Where stateless societies conquer ones with states, they either themselves develop a state or they induce social regress in the conquered society. There are good sociological reasons for this. Only three alternative bases for order exist, force, exchange and custom, and none of these are sufficient in the long run. At some point new exigencies arise for which custom is inadequate; at some point to bargain about everything in exchange

¹³ O. Lattimore, 'Feudalism in history: a review essay', *Past and Present*, no. 12, 1957.

relations is inefficient and disintegrating; while force alone, as Parsons emphasized, will soon 'deflate'. In the long run normally taken-for-granted, but enforceable, rules are necessary to bind together strangers or semi-strangers. It is not requisite that all these rules are set by a single monopolistic state. Indeed, though the feudal example is extreme, most states exist in a multi-state civilization which also provides certain normative rules of conduct. Nevertheless most societies seem to have required that some rules, particularly those relevant to the protection of life and property, be set monopolistically, and this has been the province of the state.

From this necessity, autonomous state power ultimately derives. The activities of the state personnel are necessary to society as a whole and/or to the various groups that benefit from the existing structure of rules which the state enforces. From this functionality derives the potentiality for exploitation, a lever for the achievement of private state interests. Whether the lever is used depends on other conditions, for – after all – we have not even established the existence of permanent state cadre which might have identifiable interests. But necessity is the mother of state power.

2 *The multiplicity of state functions*

Despite the assertions of reductionists, most states have not in practice devoted themselves to the pursuit of a single function. 'Binding rule-making' is merely an umbrella term. The rules and functions have been extremely varied. As the two-dimensional models recognize, we may distinguish domestic and international, or economic, ideological and military functions. But there are many types of activity and each tends to be functional for differing 'constituencies' in society. I illustrate this with reference to what have been probably the four most persistent types of state activities.

1 *The maintenance of internal order.* This may benefit all, or all law-abiding, subjects of the state. It may also protect the majority from arbitrary usurpations by socially and economically powerful groups, other than those allied to the state. But probably the main benefit is to protect existing property relations from the mass of the propertyless. This function probably best serves a dominant economic class constituency.

2 *Military defence/aggression,* directed against foreign foes. 'War parties' are rarely coterminous with either the whole society or with one particular class within it. Defence may be genuinely collective; aggression usually has more specific interests behind it. Those interests may

be quite widely shared by all 'younger sons' without inheritance rights or all those expansively-minded; or they might comprise only a class fraction of an aristocracy, merchants or capitalists. In multi-state systems war usually involves alliances with other states, some of whom may share the same religion, ethnicity, or political philosophy as some domestic constituency. These are rarely reducible to economic class. Hence war and peace constituencies are usually somewhat idiosyncratic.

3 *The maintenance of communications infrastructures*: roads, rivers, message systems, coinages, weights and measures, marketing arrangements. Though few states have monopolized all of these, all states have provided some, because they have a territorial basis which is often most efficiently organized from a centre. The principal constituencies here are a 'general interest' and more particular trade-centred groups.

4 *Economic redistribution*: the authoritative distribution of scarce material resources between different ecological niches, age-groups, sexes, regions, classes etc. There is a strongly collective element in this function, more so than in the case of the others. Nevertheless, many of the redistributions involve rather particular groups, especially the economically inactive whose subsistence is thus protected by the state. And economic redistribution also has an international dimension, for the state normally regulates trade relations and currency exchanges across its boundaries, sometimes unilaterally, sometimes in alliance with other states. This also gives the state a particular constituency among merchants and other international agents – who, however, are rarely in agreement about desirable trade policy.

These four tasks are necessary, either to society as a whole or to interest groups within it. They are undertaken most efficiently by the personnel of a central state who become indispensable. And they bring the state into functional relations with diverse, sometimes cross-cutting groups between whom there is room to manoeuvre. The room can be exploited. Any state involved in a multiplicity of power relations can play off interest groups against each other.

It is worth noting that one example of this 'divide and rule' strategy has been a staple of sociological analysis. This is the case of a 'transitional state', living amid profound economic transformations from one mode of production to another. No single dominant economic class exists, and the state may play off traditional power groups against emergent ones. Such situations were discussed by both the classic stratification theorists. Marx analysed and satirized Louis Bonaparte's attempts to play off the factions of industrial and finance capital, petite bourgeoisie,

peasantry and proletariat to enhance his own independent power. This is the 'Bonapartist balancing act', so stressed by Poulantzas¹⁴ – though Marx (and Poulantzas) rather underestimated Bonaparte's ability to succeed.¹⁵ Weber was struck by the ability of the Prussian state to use a declining economic class, the agrarian landlord Junkers, to hold onto autocratic power in the vacuum created by the political timidity of the rising bourgeois and proletarian classes.¹⁶ All the various groups in both examples needed the state, but none could capture it. Another example is the development of absolutism in early modern Europe. Monarchs played off against each other (or were unable to choose between) feudal and bourgeois, land and urban, groups. In particular, military functions and functions performed in relation to dominant economic classes were different. States used war as a means of attempting to reduce their dependence on classes.¹⁷

These are familiar examples of the state balancing between predominantly classes or class factions. But the balancing possibilities are much more numerous if the state is involved in a multiplicity of relations with groups which may on some issues be narrower than classes and on others wider. Because most states are pursuing multiple functions, they can perform multiple manoeuvres. The 'Bonapartist balancing act' is skill acquired by most states. This manoeuvring space is the birthplace of state power.

And this is about as far as the insights contained within current two-dimensional theory can be expanded. It is progress, but not enough. It does not really capture the distinctiveness of the state as a social organization. After all, necessity plus multiplicity of function, and the balancing act, are also the power source and stock in trade of any ruthless committee chairperson. Is the state only a chair writ large? No – as we will now see.

3 *The territorial centrality of the state*

The definition of the state concentrates upon its institutional, territorial, centralized nature. This is the third, and most important, precondition of state power. As noted, the state does not possess a distinctive means of power independent of, and analogous to, economic, military and

¹⁴ Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*.

¹⁵ V. Perez-Diaz, *State, Bureaucracy and Civil Society: A Critical Discussion of the Political Theory of Karl Marx*, London, Macmillan, 1979.

¹⁶ L. Lachman, *The Legacy of Max Weber*, London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1970.

¹⁷ Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*; E. Trimberger, *Revolution from Above: Military Bureaucrats and Development in Japan, Turkey, Egypt and Peru*, New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1978.

ideological power. The means used by states are only a combination of these, which are also the means of power used in all social relationships. However, the power of the state is irreducible in quite a different socio-spatial and organizational sense. Only the state is inherently centralized over a delimited territory over which it has authoritative power. Unlike economic, ideological or military groups in civil society, the state elite's resources radiate authoritatively outwards from a centre but stop at defined territorial boundaries. The state is, indeed, a place – both a central place and a unified territorial reach. As the principal form of state autonomous power will flow from this distinctive attribute of the state, it is important that I first prove that the state does so differ socio-spatially and organizationally from the major power groupings of civil society.

Economic power groupings – classes, corporations, merchant houses, manors, plantations, the *oikos* etc. – normally exist in decentred, competitive or conflictual relations with one another. True, the internal arrangements of some of them (e.g. the modern corporation, or the household and manor of the great feudal lord) might be relatively centralized. But, first, they are oriented outwards to further opportunities for economic advantage which are not territorially confined nor subject to authoritative rules governing expansion (except by states). Economic power expansion is not authoritative, commanded – it is 'diffused', informally. Second, the scope of modern and some historic economic institutions is not territorial. They do not exercise general control of a specific territory, they control a specialized function and seek to extend it 'transnationally' wherever that function is demanded and exploitable. General Motors does not rule the territory around Detroit, it rules the assembly of automobiles and some aspects of the economic life-chances of its employees, stockholders and consumers. Third, in those cases where economic institutions have been authoritative, centralized and territorial (as in the feudal household/manor of historic nobilities) they have either been subject to a higher level of territorial, central control by the (imperial) state, or they have acquired political functions (administering justice, raising military levies etc.) from a weak (feudal) state and so become themselves 'mini-states'. Thus states cannot be the simple instrument of classes, for they have a different territorial scope.

Analogous points can be made about ideological power movements like religions. Ideologies (unless state-led) normally spread even more diffusely than economic relations. They move diffusely and 'interstitially' inside state territories, spreading through communication networks among segments of a state's population (like classes, age-cohorts, genders, urban/rural inhabitants etc.); they often also move

transnationally right through state boundaries. Ideologies may develop central, authoritative, church-like institutions, but these are usually functionally, more than territorially, organized: they deal with the sacred rather than the secular, for example. There is a socio-spatial, as well as a spiritual, 'transcendence' about ideological movements, which is really the opposite of the territorial bounds of the state.

It is true, however, that military power overlaps considerably with the state, especially in modern states who usually monopolize the means of organized violence. Nevertheless, it is helpful to treat the two as distinct sources of power. I have not the space here fully to justify this.¹⁸ Let me instead make two simple points. First, not all warfare is most efficiently organized territorially centrally – guerrillas, military feudalism and warrior bands are all examples of relatively decentred military organizations effective at many historical periods. Second, the effective scope of military power does not cover a single, unitary territory. In fact, it has two rather different territorial radii of effective control.

Militaristic control of everyday behaviour requires such a high level of organized coercion, logistical back-up and surplus extraction that it is practical only within close communications to the armed forces in areas of high surplus availability. It does not spread evenly over entire state territories. It remains concentrated in pockets and along communications routes. It is relatively ineffective at penetrating peasant agriculture, for example.

The second radius enables, not everyday control, but the setting of broad limits of outward compliance over far greater areas. In this case, failure to comply with broad parameters such as the handling of tribute, the performance of ritual acts of submission, occasional military support (or at least non-rebellion), could result in a punitive expedition, and so is avoided. This radius of military striking power has normally been far greater than that of state political control, as Owen Lattimore brilliantly argued.¹⁹ This is obviously so in the world today, given the capabilities of modern armaments. It is also true of the Superpowers in a more subtle sense: they can impose 'friendly' regimes and destabilize the unfriendly through client military elites and their own covert paramilitary organizations, but they cannot get those regimes to conform closely to their political dictates. A more traditional example would be Britain's punitive expedition to the Falklands, capable of defeating and so delegitimizing the Argentine regime, and remaining capable of repeating the punishment, but quite incapable of providing a political future for the Islands. The logistics of 'concentrated coercion' – that is, of military

¹⁸ For a full justification see Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, vol. I, chapter 1.

¹⁹ O. Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History*, London, Oxford University Press, 1982.

power – differ from those of the territorial centralized state. Thus we should distinguish the two as power organizations. The militarist theory of the state is false, and one reason for this is that the state's organization is not coterminous with military organization.

The organizational autonomy of the state is only partial; indeed, in many particular cases it may be rather small. General Motors and the capitalist class in general, or the Catholic Church, or the feudal lords and knights, or the US military, are or were quite capable of keeping watch on states they have propped up. Yet they could not do the states' jobs themselves unless they changed their own socio-spatial and organizational structure. A state autonomous power ensues from this difference. Even if a particular state is set up or intensified merely to institutionalize the relations between given social groups, this is done by concentrating resources and infrastructures in the hands of an institution that has different socio-spatial and organizational contours to those groups. Flexibility and speed of response entail concentration of decision-making and a tendency towards permanence of personnel. The decentred non-territorial interest-groups that set up the state in the first place are thus less able to control it. Territorial centralization provides the state with a potentially independent basis of power mobilization, being necessary to social development and uniquely in the possession of the state itself.

If we add together the necessity, multiplicity and territorial centrality of the state, we can in principle explain its autonomous power. By these means the state elite possesses an independence from civil society which, though not absolute, is no less absolute in principle than the power of any other major group. Its power cannot be reduced to their power either directly or 'ultimately' or 'in the last instance'. The state is not merely a locus of class struggle, an instrument of class rule, the factor of social cohesion, the expression of core values, the centre of social allocation processes, the institutionalization of military force (as in the various reductionist theories); it is a different socio-spatial organization. As a consequence we can treat states as actors, in the persona of state elites, with a will to power and we can engage in the kind of 'rational action' theory of state interests advocated by Levi.²⁰

The Mechanisms for Acquiring Autonomous State Power

Of course, this in itself does not confer a significant degree of actual power upon the state elite, for civil society groups even though slightly

²⁰ M. Levi, 'The Predatory theory of rule', *Politics and Society*, vol. 10, 1981.

differently organized may yet be able to largely control it. But the principles do offer us a pair of hypotheses for explaining variations of power: (1) State infrastructural power derives from the social utility in any particular time and place of forms of territorial centralization which cannot be provided by civil society forces themselves; (2) The extent of state despotic power derives from the inability of civil society forces to control those forms of territorial centralization, once set up. Hence, there are two phases in the development of despotism: the growth of territorial centralization, and the loss of control over it. First function, then exploitation; let us take them in order.

Because states have undertaken such a variety of social activities, there are also numerous ways in which at different times they have acquired a disproportionate part of society's capacity for infrastructural co-ordination. Let me pick out three relatively uncontentious examples: the utility of a redistributive economy, of a co-ordinated military command for conquest or defence, and of a centrally co-ordinated 'late development' response to one's rivals. These are all common conditions favouring the territorial centralization of social resources.

The redistributive state seems to have been particularly appropriate, as anthropologists and archaeologists argue, in the early history of societies before the exchange of commodities was possible. Different ecological niches delivered their surpluses to a central storehouse which eventually became a permanent state. The case is often over-argued,²¹ but it has often been archaeologically useful.²² The military route was, perhaps, the best-known to the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century theorists like Spencer, Gumpłowicz and Oppenheimer.²³ Though they exaggerated its role, there is no doubt that most of the well-known ancient empires had the infrastructural powers of their states considerably boosted by their use of centralized, highly organized, disciplined, and well-equipped military forces for both defence and further conquest; Rome is the example best-known to us.²⁴ Third, the response of late industrial developers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the interference of their early-industrializing rivals is well known: a cumulative development through countries like France, Prussia, Japan and Russia of more and more centralized and territorially confined mobilization of economic resources with state financing and

21 E. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1975.

22 C. Renfrew, *The Emergence of Civilisation: the cyclades and the Aegean in the Third Millennium B.C.*, London, Methuen, 1972.

23 H. Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, 1-vol. abridgement, London, Macmillan, 1969; Gumpłowicz, *Outlines of Sociology*; Oppenheimer, *The State*.

24 K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978.

state enterprises sheltering behind tariff walls.²⁵ But it also has earlier parallels – for example, in the history of Assyria or the early Roman Republic, imitating earlier civilizations, but in a more centralized fashion.

Note that in all cases it is not economic or military necessity *per se* that increases the role of the state, for this might merely place it into the hands of classes or military groups in civil society. It is rather the more particular utility of economic or military *territorial centralization* in a given situation. There are other types of economy (e.g. market exchange) and of military organization (e.g. 'feudal' cavalry or chariotry, castle defence) which encourage decentralization and so reduce state power. In all these above examples the principal power groupings of civil society freely conferred infrastructural powers upon their states. My explanation thus starts in a functionalist vein. But functions are then exploited and despotism results. The hypothesis is that civil society freely gives resources but then loses control and becomes oppressed by the state. How does this happen?

Let us consider first that old war-horse, the origins of the state. In some theories of state origins, the loss of control by 'civilians' is virtually automatic. For example, in the militarist tradition of theory, the leading warriors are seen as automatically converting temporary, legitimate authority in wartime to permanent, coercive power in peacetime. Yet as Clastres has pointed out, primitive societies take great precautions to ensure that their military leaders do not become permanent oppressors.²⁶ Similarly, the redistributive state of the anthropologists seems to have contained a number of checks against chiefly usurpation which makes its further development problematic. In fact, it seems that permanent, coercive states did *not* generally evolve in later prehistory. Only in a few unusual cases (connected with the regional effects of alluvial agriculture) did 'pristine' states evolve endogenously, and they influenced all other cases.²⁷ The problem seems to be that for centralized functions to be converted into exploitation, organizational resources are necessary that only actually appeared with the emergence of civilized, stratified, state societies – a circular process.

However, the process is somewhat clearer with respect to the intensification of state power in already established, stratified, civilized societies with states. It is clearest of all in relation to military conquest states. We know enough about early Rome and other, earlier cases to

²⁵ This strategy was classically described by A. Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press, 1962.

²⁶ P. Clastres, *Society against the State*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1977.

²⁷ I make this argument at greater length in my *Sources of Social Power*, vol. I, chapters 2–4.

extend Spencer's notion of 'compulsory co-operation'.²⁸ Spencer saw that conquest may put new resources into the hands of the conquering centralized command such that it was able to attain a degree of autonomy from the groups who had set it in motion. But Spencer's argument can be widened into the sphere of agricultural production. In pre-industrial conditions increasing the productivity of labour usually involved increasing the intensity of effort. This was most easily obtained by coercion. A militarized economy could increase output and be of benefit to civil society at large, or at least to its dominant groups. Obviously, in most agricultural conditions, coercion could not be routinely applied. But where labour was concentrated – say, in irrigation agriculture, in plantations, mines and in construction works – it could. But this required the maintenance of centralized militarism, because a centralized regime was more efficient at using a minimum of military resources for maximum effect.

This would really require considerable elaboration. In my work I call it 'military Keynesianism' because of the multiplier effects which are generated by military force.²⁹ These effects boost the despotic power of the state vis-à-vis civil society because they make useful the maintenance of centralized compulsory co-operation, which civil society cannot at first provide itself. It is an example of how centralization increases general social resources – and thus no powerful civil society group wishes to dispense with the state – yet also increases the private power resources of the state elite. These can now be used despotically against civil society.

Provided the state's activities generate extra resources, then it has a particular logistical advantage. Territorial centralization gives effective mobilizing potentialities, able to concentrate these resources against any particular civil society group, even though it may be inferior in overall resources. Civil society groups may actually endorse state power. If the state upholds given relations of production, then the dominant economic class will have an interest in efficient state centralization. If the state defends society from outside aggressors, or represses crime, then its centrality will be supported quite widely in society. Naturally, the degree of centralization useful to these civil society interests will vary according to the system of production or method of warfare in question. Centrality can also be seen in the sphere of ideology, as Eisenstadt argues.³⁰ The state and the interests it serves have always sought to

²⁸ I outline this process in 'States, ancient and modern', *Archives européennes de sociologie*, vol. 18, 1977.

²⁹ *Sources of Social Power*, vol. I, chapter 9.

³⁰ Eisenstadt, *Political Systems of Empires*.

uphold its authority by a claim to 'universalism' over its territories, a detachment from all particularistic, specialized ties to kin, locality, class, church etc. Naturally in practice states tend to represent the interests of particular kinship groupings, localities, classes etc., but if they appeared merely to do this they would lose all claim to distinctiveness and to legitimacy. States thus appropriate what Eisenstadt calls 'free-floating resources', not tied to any particular interest group, able to float throughout the territorially defined society.

This might seem a formidable catalogue of state powers. And yet the autonomous power achievements of historical states before the twentieth century were generally limited and precarious. Here we encounter the fundamental logistical, infrastructural constraints operating against centralized regimes in extensive agrarian societies. We return to the greater effective range of punitive military action compared to effective political rule. Without going into detailed logistical calculations here, but drawing on the seminal work of Engel and van Crevelde, we can estimate that in Near Eastern imperial societies up to Alexander the Great the maximum unsupported march possible for an army was about 60 to 75 miles.³¹ Alexander and the Romans may have extended it to nearly 100 miles, and this remained the maximum until the eighteenth century in Europe when a massive rise in agricultural productivity provided the logistical basis for far wider operations. Before then further distances required more than one campaigning phase, or – far more common if some degree of political control was sought – it required elaborate negotiations with local allies regarding supplies. This is enhanced if routine political control is desired without the presence of the main army. So even the most pretentious of despotic rulers actually rules through local notables. All extensive societies were in reality 'territorially federal'. Their imperial rule was always far feebler than traditional images of them allows for.³²

So we have in this example two contrary tendencies: militaristic centralization followed by fragmenting federalism. Combining them we get a dialectic. If compulsory co-operation is successful, it increases both the infrastructural and the despotic power of the state. But it also increases social infrastructural resources in general. The logistical constraints mean that the new infrastructures cannot be kept within the

³¹ D. W. Engel, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978; M. van Crevelde, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

³² This is now well recognized by many writers, for example J. H. Kautsky, *the Politics of Aristocratic Empires*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1982; E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983; and A. Giddens, *Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, pp. 103–4.

body politic of the state. Its agents continually 'disappear' into civil society, bearing the state's resources with them. This happens continually to such regimes. The booty of conquest, land grants to military lieutenants, the fruits of office, taxes, literacy, coinage all go through a two-phase cycle, being first the property of the state then private (in the sense of 'hidden') property. And though there are cases where the fragmentation phase induces social collapse, there are others where civil society can use the resources which the despotic state has institutionalized, without needing such a strong state. The Arameans, Phoenicians and Greeks appropriated, and further developed, the techniques pioneered by the despotic states of the Near East. Christian Europe appropriated the Roman heritage.

My examples are relatively militaristic only because the process is easiest to describe there. It was a general dialectic in agrarian societies. In other words, imperial and feudal regimes do not merely oscillate (as Weber, Kautsky and many others have argued), they are entwined in a dialectical process. A range of infrastructural techniques are pioneered by despotic states, then appropriated by civil societies (or vice versa); then further opportunities for centralized co-ordination present themselves, and the process begins anew. Such trends are as visible in early modern societies as in the ancient ones from which I have drawn my examples.

Such a view rejects a simple antithesis, common to ideologies of our own time, between the state and civil society, between public and private property. It sees the two as continuously, temporally entwined. More specifically it sees large private property concentrations – and, therefore, the power of dominant classes – as normally boosted by the fragmentation of successful, despotic states, not as the product of civil society forces alone. So the power autonomy of both states and classes has essentially fluctuated, dialectically. There can be no general formula concerning some 'timeless' degree of autonomous state power (in the despotic sense).

But the contemporary situation is relatively unclear. Power infrastructures leaped forward with the Industrial Revolution. Industrial capitalism destroyed 'territorially federal' societies, replacing them with nation states across whose territories unitary control and surveillance structures could penetrate.³³ Logistical penetration of territory has increased exponentially over the last century and a half.

What happens if a state acquires control of all those institutions of control divided historically and elsewhere between states, capitalist enterprises, churches, charitable associations etc.? Is that the end of the

³³ Giddens has argued this recently in his *Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*.

dialectic; because the state can now keep what it acquires? Obviously, in macro-historical terms the Soviet Union can control its provincial agents, and hence its provinces, in a way that was flatly impossible for any previous state. Moreover, though its degree of effective authoritarianism can be easily exaggerated (as in 'totalitarian' theories, for example), its centralization tendencies are novel in form as well as extent. Group struggles are not decentralized, as they are substantially in the capitalist democracies, nor do they fragment as they did in agrarian societies. Struggle is itself centralized: there is something pulling the major contending forces – the 'liberals', 'technocrats', 'military/heavy industry complex' etc. – towards the Praesidium. They cannot evade the state, as agrarian dissenters did; they cannot struggle outside the state, as capitalists and workers often do. Does this authoritarian state exist despotically 'above' society, coercing it with its own autonomous power resources? Or does its authoritarian despotism exist in milder terms, firstly as a place in which the most powerful social forces struggle and compromise, and secondly as a set of coercive apparatuses for enforcing the compromise on everyone else? This has long been debated among theorists of the Soviet Union. I do not pretend to know the answer.

The bureaucratic states of the West also present problems. They are much as they were in relative power terms before the exponential growth in logistical powers began. Whatever the increases in their infrastructural capacities, these have not curbed the decentred powers of the capitalist class, its major power rival. Today agencies like multi-national corporations and international banking institutions still impose similar parameters of capitalist rationality as their predecessors did over a century ago. State elites have not acquired greater power autonomy despite their infrastructural capacities. Again, however, I am touching upon some of the central unsolved theoretical issues concerning contemporary societies. And, again, I offer no solution. Indeed, it may require a longer-run historical perspective than that of our generation to solve them, and so to decide whether the industrial revolution did finish off the agrarian dialectic I described.

Thus the impact of state autonomy on despotic power has been ambiguous. In terms of traditional theory results might seem disappointing: the state has not consistently possessed great powers – or indeed any fixed level of power. But I have discussed interesting power processes of a different kind. In agrarian societies states were able to exploit their territorial centrality, but generally only precariously and temporarily because despotic power also generated its own antithesis in civil society. In industrial societies the emergence of authoritarian states indicates much greater potential despotism, but this is still somewhat controver-

sial and ambiguous. In the capitalist democracies there are few signs of state autonomous state power – of a despotic type.

But, perhaps, all along, and along with most traditional theory, we have been looking for state power in the wrong place. By further examining infrastructural power we can see that this is the case.

Results: Infrastructural Power

Any state which acquires or exploits social utility will be provided with infrastructural supports. These enable it to regulate, normatively and by force, a given set of social and territorial relations, and to erect boundaries against the outside. New boundaries momentarily reached by previous social interactions are stabilized, regulated, and heightened by the state's universalistic, monopolistic rules. In this sense the state gives territorial bounds to social relations whose dynamic lies outside of itself. The state is an arena, the condensation, the crystallization, the summation of social relations within its territories – a point often made by Poulantzas.³⁴ Yet, despite appearances, this does not support Poulantzas' reductionist view of the state, for this is an active role. The state may promote great social change by consolidating territoriality which would not have occurred without it. The importance of this role is in proportion to its infrastructural powers: the greater they are or become, the greater the territorializing of social life. Thus even if the state's every move towards despotism is successfully resisted by civil society groups, massive state-led infrastructural reorganization may result. Every dispute between the state elite and elements of civil society, and every dispute among the latter which is routinely regulated through the state's institutions, tends to focus the relations and the struggles of civil society onto the territorial plane of the state, consolidating social interaction over that terrain, creating territorialized mechanisms for repressing or compromising the struggle, and breaking both smaller local and also wider transnational social relationships.

Let me give an example.³⁵ From the thirteenth century onwards, two principal social processes favoured a greater degree of territorial centralization in Europe. First, warfare gradually encouraged army command structures capable of routine, complex co-ordination of specialized infantry, cavalry and artillery. Gradually, the looser feudal levy of knights, retainers and few mercenaries became obsolete. In turn this presupposed a routine 'extraction-coercion cycle' to deliver men,

³⁴ Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*.

³⁵ This is elaborated in much greater detail in my 'State and society, 1130–1815'.

monies and supplies to the forces.³⁶ Eventually, only territorially centred states were able to provide such resources and the grand duchies, the prince-bishops, and the leagues of towns lost power to the emerging 'national' states. Second, European expansion, especially economic expansion taking an increasingly capitalistic form, required increased military protection abroad, more complex legal regulation of property and market transactions, and domestic property forms (like rights to common lands). Capitalistic property-owners sought out territorial states for help in these matters. Thus European states gradually acquired far greater infrastructural powers: regular taxation, a monopoly over military mobilization, permanent bureaucratic administration, a monopoly of law-making and enforcement. In the long run, despite attempts at absolutism, states failed to acquire despotic powers through this because it also enhanced the infrastructural capacities of civil society groups, especially of capitalist property-holders. This was most marked in Western Europe and as the balance of geopolitical power tilted westwards – and especially to Britain – the despotically weak state proved the general model for the modern era. States governed with, and usually in the interests of, the capitalist class.

But the process and the alliance facilitated the rise of a quite different type of state power, infrastructural in nature. When capitalism emerged as dominant, it took the form of a series of territorial segments – many systems of production and exchange, each to a large (though not total) extent bounded by a state and its overseas sphere of influence. The nation-state system of our own era was not a product of capitalism (nor, indeed, of feudalism) considered as pure modes of production. It is in that sense 'autonomous'. But it resulted from the way expansive, emergent, capitalist relations were given regulative boundaries by pre-existing states. The states were the initially weak (in both despotism and in infrastructure) states of feudal Europe. In the twelfth century even the strongest of them absorbed less than 2 per cent of GNP (if we could measure it); they called out highly decentralized military levies of at most 10–20,000 men sometimes only for 30 days in the campaigning system; they could not tax in any regular way; they regulated only a small proportion of total social disputes – they were, in fact, marginal to the social lives of most Europeans. And yet these puny states became of decisive importance in structuring the world we live in today. The need for territorial centralization led to the restructuring of first European, then world society. The balance of nuclear terror lies between the successor states of these puny Europeans.

³⁶ See the brilliant treatment of this matter by S. Finer, 'State and nation building in Europe: the role of the military', in Tilly, *Formation of National States*.

In the international economic system today, nation-states appear as collective economic actors. Across the pages of most works of political economy today stride actors like 'The United States', 'Japan', or 'The United Kingdom'. This does not necessarily mean that there is a common 'national interest', merely that on the international plane there are a series of collectively organized power actors, nation-states. There is no doubting the economic role of the nation-state: the existence of a domestic market segregated to a degree from the international market, the value of the state's currency, the level of its tariffs and import quotas, its support for its indigenous capital and labour, indeed, its whole political economy is permeated with the notion that 'civil society' is its territorial domains. The territoriality of the state has created social forces with a life of their own.

In this example, increasing territoriality has not increased despotic power. Western states were despotically weak in the twelfth century, and they remain so today. Yet the increase in infrastructural penetration has dramatically increased territorial boundedness. This seems a general characteristic of social development; increases in state infrastructural powers also increase the territorial boundedness of social interaction. We may also postulate the same tendency for despotic power, though it is far weaker. A despotic state without strong infrastructural supports will only claim territoriality. Like Rome and China it may build walls, as much to keep its subjects in as to keep 'barbarians' out. But its success is limited and precarious. So, again we might elaborate a historical dialectic. Increases in state infrastructural power will territorialize social relations. If the state then loses control of its resources they diffuse into civil society, decentering and de-territorializing it. Whether this is, indeed, beginning to happen in the contemporary capitalist world, with the rise of multinational corporations outliving the decline of two successively hegemonic states, Great Britain and the United States, is one of the most hotly-debated issues in contemporary political economy, but one which must here be left as an open issue.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the state is essentially an arena, a place – just as reductionist theories have argued – and yet this is precisely the origin and mechanism of its autonomous powers. The state, unlike the principal power actors of civil society, is territorially bounded and centralized. Societies need some of their activities to be regulated over a centralized territory. So do dominant economic classes, churches and other ideological power movements, and military elites. They, therefore,

entrust power resources to state elites which they are incapable of fully recovering, precisely because their own socio-spatial basis of organization is not centralized and territorial. Such state power resources, and the autonomy to which they lead, may not amount to much. If, however, the state's use of the conferred resources generates further power resources – as was, indeed, intended by the civil society groups themselves – these will normally flow through the state's hands, and thus lead to a significant degree of power autonomy. Therefore, *autonomous state power is the product of the usefulness of enhanced territorial-centralization to social life in general*. This has varied considerably through the history of societies, and so consequently has the power of states. //

I distinguished two types of state power, despotic and infrastructural. The former, the power of the state elite over civil society classes and elites, is what has normally been meant by state power in the literature. I gave examples of how territorial-centralization of economic, ideological and military resources have enhanced the despotic powers of states. But states have rarely been able to hold on to such power for long. Despotic achievements have usually been precarious in historic states because they have lacked effective logistical infrastructures for penetrating and co-ordinating social life. Thus when states did increase their 'private' resources, these were soon carried off into civil society by their own agents. Hence resulted the oscillation between imperial/patrimonial and feudal regimes first analysed by Max Weber.

By concentrating on infrastructural power, however, we can see that the oscillation was, in fact, a dialectic of social development. A variety of power infrastructures have been pioneered by despotic states. As they 'disappear' into civil society, general social powers increase. In volume I of my *The Sources of Social Power*, I suggest that a core part of social development in agrarian societies has been a dialectic between centralized, authoritative power structures, exemplified best by 'Militaristic Empires', and decentralized, diffused power structures, exemplified by 'Multi-Power Actor Civilizations'. Thus the developmental role of the powerful state has essentially fluctuated, sometimes promoting it, sometimes retarding it.

But I also emphasized a second result of state infrastructural powers. Where these have increased, so has the territoriality of social life itself. This has usually gone unnoticed within sociology because of the unchallenged status of sociology's master-concept: 'society'. Most sociologists – indeed, most people anywhere who use this term – mean by 'society' the territory of a state. Thus 'American society', 'British society', 'Roman society' etc. The same is true of synonyms like 'social formation' and (to a lesser extent) 'social system'. Yet the relevance of state boundaries to what we mean by societies is always partial and has varied

enormously. Medievalists do not generally characterize 'society' in their time period as state-defined; much more likely is a broader, transnational designation like 'Christendom' or 'European society'. Yet this change between medieval and modern times is one of the most decisive aspects of the great modernizing transformations, just as the current relationships between nation-states and 'the world system' is crucial to our understanding of late twentieth-century society. How territorialized and centralized are societies? This is the most significant theoretical issue on which we find states exercising a massive force over social life, *not* the more traditional terrain of dispute, the despotic power of state elites over classes or other elites. States are central to our understanding of what society is. Where states are strong, societies are relatively territorialized and centralized. That is the most general statement we can make about the autonomous power of the state.