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BEYOND MARXIST STATE THEORY: STATE AUTONOMY IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

ABSTRACT: *Recent theories of the state often draw attention to states' autonomy from social preferences. This paper suggests that the phenomenon of public ignorance is the primary mechanism responsible for state autonomy in democratic polities. Such theorists as Skocpol and Poulantzus, who do not take account of public ignorance, either underestimate the state's autonomy or stress causal mechanisms that are necessary but not sufficient conditions for its autonomy. Gramsci's concept of ideological hegemony is promising, even though it is far too insistent on the penetration of ideology of any kind beyond relatively small numbers of political sophisticates.*

Until relatively recently, examinations of state activity marginalized the state's autonomy from social interests. Previous structural-functionalist, pluralist, and Marxist theories emphasized "the importance of interest and pressure groups in policy-making" (Almond 1988, 866), and downplayed the state's ability to operate autonomously from these interests.[1] However, the 1970s and 80s saw an explosion of interest in the autonomous capabilities of state actors.[2] Numerous studies examined a variety of instances where state actions diverged from societal interests. Such studies are most commonly associated with the efforts of Theda Skocpol, et al., to "bring the state back in" to social analysis. However,

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state autonomy has also been the subject of various neo-Marxist scholars, such as Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband.

Unfortunately, the existing accounts have not been successful in isolating the variables responsible for state autonomy. Barbara Geddes has commented:

> Although several authors have discussed the subject, no one has confirmed empirically the existence of political or social characteristics that allow governments to act autonomously. . . . As a result, analyses tend to focus more on the policy outcomes themselves rather than on the state structure that is hypothesized to produce the outcome. (Geddes 1994, 5–6.)

This paper attempts to suggest the empirical grounding for state autonomy that has thus far eluded state theory. I argue that certain characteristics of democratic mass publics—specifically those associated with their pervasive political ignorance—provide a powerful explanation for why states often enjoy autonomy from society.[3]

Isolating the public's political ignorance as the key independent variable for state autonomy provides a distinct departure from most existing state theories. To focus on the dynamics of the public's political knowledge is to recognize that society's primary check upon state actions is exercised through elections and public opinion. Concern with the interaction between public opinion and state actors highlights the unique mechanisms of domination that are created by democratic institutions. As this approach attributes state autonomy to the mass political ignorance that became salient following the state's adoption of such institutions, it may be helpful to call it "democratic state theory" so as to differentiate it from theories that, like Skocpol's, draw on premodern societies in conceptualizing the determinants of state autonomy.[4]

As democratic state theory emphasizes the importance of elections and public opinion, neither the ability of social groups to overthrow the state militarily nor to manipulate it economically may be as important in determining the degree of state autonomy as they were before the advent of modernity, nor as important as is the public's knowledge—or lack of knowledge—of the state's activities. If the mechanisms of reward and punishment that elections exercise over state agents are the primary means by which social preferences are translated into approval or disapproval over state policy and personnel, it may be quite important that empirical studies of the public's understanding of politics show a majority of the public to be ignorant of the most basic political information.

If the public is deeply ignorant of the government's activities, state actors may enjoy a significant degree of autonomy simply because the public is unaware of what they are doing.

A democratic state theory would therefore illuminate significant aspects of state autonomy that have eluded prior theories, which are briefly reviewed and evaluated below. Skocpol's (1985) state theory focuses on the state's policy instruments (i.e., state capacities), which are necessary but not sufficient conditions for state autonomy. After discussing Skocpol's theory, I review several key studies of public opinion and voter behavior that illustrate the extent of the public's ignorance. In this section I suggest that public ignorance is perhaps the key independent variable responsible for state autonomy. Next I examine whether neo-Marxist state theory, exemplified by the work of Poulantzas (1978), suitably explains state autonomy. I contend that if we take cognizance of public ignorance, Poulantzas underestimates the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the democratic capitalist state. In this section I also summarize some of the concepts introduced by Antonio Gramsci. I suggest that while the public's ignorance lends support to Gramsci's analysis of ideological hegemony, such hegemony results from different mechanisms than those Gramsci held responsible. I conclude with a general discussion of state theory.

Non-Marxist State Theory

For purposes of contrast, we might label Skocpol's version of state theory non-Marxist state theory (hereafter NMST).[5] The contributions of NMST are varied and numerous.[6] In the interest of brevity I have chosen to use Skocpol as an ideal type, while noting that many NMST researchers depart from her method of analysis.

The chief NMST claim is that contrary both to the normative rationale of democratic states and to empirical theories such as Marxism and pluralism, "states conceived as organizations claiming control over territories and people may formulate and pursue goals that are not simply reflective of the demands or interests of social groups, classes, or society" (Skocpol 1985, 9). NMST investigates the ability of state actors to undertake such policies, as well as the impact of those policies on the content and workings of politics. According to Skocpol, the state officials most likely to pursue autonomous goals are "organizationally coherent collectivities of state officials, especially collectivities of career

officials relatively insulated from ties to currently dominant socioeconomic interests" (ibid.). The specific factors responsible for state autonomy from society vary. Skocpol notes:

> The extranational orientations of states, the challenges they may face in maintaining domestic order, and the organizational resources that collectivities of state officials may be able to draw on and deploy—all of these features of the state . . . can help to explain autonomous state action. (Ibid., 9.)

Skocpol attributes much weight to the organizational capabilities of states:

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

Perhaps one reason Skocpol emphasizes the state's financial and military capacities is that she often sees state autonomy as a matter of forcibly imposing actions or policies upon a resistant public.[7] The success of such efforts would be ensured if (contrary to pluralist and Marxist accounts) the state had a source of revenue independent of, say, a particular social class or set of societal groups, and a military force that was willing and able to act against public manifestations of social disapproval of state policies.

This is a distinctly autocratic view of state-society interaction—one that seems to overlook the fact that the primary manifestations of societal (dis)approval in the modern era are electoral. In the modern age, the state's military and financial resources, or lack thereof, flow from (electoral) manifestations of societal opinion—positive or negative—rather than from the state's autonomy from such manifestations.

Although she does not acknowledge this macrotheoretical problem with her understanding of state autonomy, at the micro level Skocpol implicitly recognizes the limitations of NMST. In her review of the literature, Skocpol notes that the factors responsible for state autonomy often do not concern military or taxation capabilities. In her discussion of J. P. Nettle's "The State as a Conceptual Variable," the explanation Skocpol gives for the divergent degrees of autonomy enjoyed by the French and American states is their different constitutional traditions.

Skocpol (1985, 22) concludes that "various sorts of states . . . give rise to various conceptions of the meaning and methods of 'politics' itself, conceptions that influence the behavior of all groups and classes in national societies." The importance of variables that lie outside the state's organizational and military capabilities suggests that a more successful version of NMST may need to appeal to other factors to fully account for why certain states gain autonomy from social preferences.

By using public ignorance as a central independent variable to explain state autonomy, the shortcomings of NMST could be mitigated. Such an approach also indicates when states may be dominated by society. Indeed, the flip side of public ignorance is that although the public is generally politically ignorant, this condition is not absolute. In modern democracies legislative personnel, in particular, face the possibility of removal if the public, for whatever reasons, rejects their bids for reelection. This creates (at least) two possible ways society may dominate the state. State actors can be evicted from office if they make mistakes that the public is aware of and rejects. Social domination of the state can also occur if states anticipate social mobilization against their policies. Even if the state enjoys ignorance-derived autonomy when it takes a specific action, state actors must often try to anticipate whether the public will become aware of actions it may reject, and then punish state actors at the ballot box.[8]

The Public's Ignorance of Politics

Studies of public opinion documenting the mass public's political ignorance paint a rather dismal picture of the average citizen in the industrialized West. They indicate that the overwhelming majority of the populace is ignorant not only of the content of the ideologies that dominate modern political discourse, but even of the most basic features of politics.

The first point was demonstrated in Philip Converse's groundbreaking paper, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964). Converse showed that most citizens exhibit a disturbing amount of political ignorance, and that there are striking differences between the levels of political knowledge possessed by the general public and the relatively sophisticated political elites. Unlike politicians and other members of the political elite, the public is grossly unaware of which issues "go together" ideologically. In a survey in which respondents were asked

"What do the terms liberal and conservative mean to you?" only 17 percent of the respondents gave an answer that roughly coincided with an accurate description of the terms, and 37 percent could not name *any* difference between "liberal" and "conservative." Subsequent research has borne out Converse's finding that descriptions of political ideology such as the following were far from being the weakest that pollsters encounter:

> For some reason conservative gets identified with the South—identified with drabby looking clothes vs. more something I would wear, drabby clothes, too, but it is just a different type.

> Oh conservative. Liberal and conservative. Liberal and conservative. [. . .] I wouldn't know. [. . .] Liberal . . . liberal . . . liberal . . . liberal. And conservative. Well, if a person is liberal with their money they squander their money? Does it fall into that same category? (Neumann 1986, 120.)

The public's ignorance of politics is not restricted to its innocence of ideology. Many studies of voter behavior document the public's blatant misunderstanding of the most basic political issues and structures of government (Neumann 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, ch. 2, and 1991; Bennett 1988). Localized political information, such as the names of senators and Congressional representatives, are also unknown to a majority of U.S. citizens. In 1989, approximately 70 percent of Americans could not name the senators of their home state, and 71 percent could not identify the member of Congress from their home district (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 94).

More important for present purposes, the public is often ignorant of the policies the state implements, and of whether their elected representatives support or oppose given policies (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 262–64). In one study, Barbara Hinckley (1980, 644) found that only 10 percent of voters in an NES survey could remember a single bill their representative voted on.[9]

Knowledge of foreign policy is equally abysmal. In 1964, at the height of the Cold War, only 38 percent of the American public knew that the Soviet Union was not a member of NATO (Page and Shapiro 1992, 10). In the 1980s, only 43 percent of surveyed Americans knew of the Strategic Defense Initiative, and a mere 22 percent knew it was U.S. policy to retaliate with nuclear weapons against a Soviet attack on Western Europe (ibid.). Following massive media coverage of the Geneva summit attended by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, a

majority of Americans could not name the leader of the Soviet Union (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 62).

Public Ignorance and Heuristics

Although the public is often ignorant of political issues, many have argued that public knowledge of politicians' personal traits or the general stance of political parties reduces the amount of information the public needs to cast a relatively informed vote (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Converse 1990; Zaller 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991 and 1993; Stimson 1990). Instead of devoting large amounts of effort to becoming familiar with dull and complicated issues, people use the positions of political parties or favored politicians as heuristics to reduce the amount of time and energy necessary to form an opinion about a given issue (but see Kuklinski and Quirk 2000, and Lau and Redlawsk 2001, for criticisms of the effectiveness of heuristics).

Although the extent to which the public uses information shortcuts may have important ramifications for the *malleability* of public opinion, their use does not radically alter the picture of a largely ignorant public and a largely autonomous state. Indeed, the public's use of heuristics may *enhance* state autonomy by conferring public approval on policies undertaken by trusted officials or parties, even if the policies, evaluated in their own right, might meet with public disapproval. Elite domination of mass opinion may create situations where state officials may actually dictate what the public's preferences will be, by shaping the heuristics in play. John Zaller's work, in particular, is replete with examples of public opinion following (not leading) the positions communicated by party leaders, even on such contentious issues as the Vietnam War (Zaller 1992).

Marxist State Theory

Because it interferes with the main societal check on democratically legitimized states, public ignorance seems far likelier to generate modern states' autonomy than the variables identified by previous forms of non-Marxist state theory. But despite Marx's tendency to reduce the state to the role of serving the interest of the dominant social class, some forms

of neo-Marxist state theory begin, at least, to accord public ignorance an important role in providing state autonomy.

It is important to note at the outset that there is rampant disagreement among Marxists regarding the nature of the capitalist state. While Marx (like Engels and Lenin) is usually seen as advancing a non-autonomous account of the state, many take Marx's (and Engels's) various comments on the state as the basis for hypothesizing the relative autonomy of the capitalist state.

A comprehensive review of the numerous Marxist theories of the state is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper, and can be found elsewhere.[10] For present purposes, I have chosen to elaborate only on those theories that incorporate claims of autonomy in their analysis.

Marxist theories that treat the state as instrumental to the interests of the dominant class may be called instrumentalist Marxist state theories (IMSTs). Such treatments "stress the causal primacy of the individuals or social forces in charge of the state system—in the most extreme cases seeing the state system as a wholly neutral instrument" (Jessop 1990, 250). Such analyses contend that in capitalist societies the state's interests are intimately tied to capital. The state draws its funding from the bourgeoisie, is staffed by the bourgeoisie, and serves bourgeois interests (Marx 1972, 187). This view can be found in Marx's Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and more recently in Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969).

Although IMSTs view capitalist states as advancing the interests of the bourgeoisie, some of them see the bourgeoisie as often falling victim to a collective-action problem. The anarchy of production, and capitalists' willingness to pursue economic projects that are individually beneficial but that do not reflect their long-run collective interests, can create situations that potentially threaten the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. These instabilities occasionally require the state to act "contrary to the demands of a shortsighted, narrow minded bourgeoisie in order to safeguard capitalist relations of production and maintain political stability" (Nordlinger 1981, 47–48).

Yet in such instances the bourgeois state cannot simply act to further the true interests of capital. The state must counter the resources members of the capitalist class may direct toward opposing the state's efforts. The primary factor governing the state's ability to act autonomously is the relative strength or weakness of such resources.

> *By way of exception*, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both. . . . Such was the Bonapartism of the First, and still more the Second French Empire, which played off the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. (Engels 1972, 753, emphasis added.)

Similarly, Trotsky (1973, 26) suggests that in Tsarist Russia, "it was not the equilibrium of the economically dominant classes, as in the West, but their weakness which made Russian bureaucratic autocracy a self-contained organization."

Although Marx and Trotsky allow that the capitalist state sometimes acts autonomously, such autonomy is not a regularly occurring feature of the capitalist state. Autonomy occurs only in exceptional situations, when the weakness or equilibrium of antagonistic classes creates room in which the state can maneuver.

Gramsci and Ideological Hegemony

Instrumental Marxist accounts of the capitalist state were early attempts to deal with recognized instances of state autonomy. However, the focus of such accounts on the strength or weakness of the bourgeoisie severely restricted the space they allowed the state for autonomous action. This is not true of the version of Marxist state theory Antonio Gramsci developed early in the twentieth century. Although a committed socialist, Gramsci was not satisfied with the explanatory power of traditional Marxist analysis. He recognized that such analysis failed to account for not only why the proletariat failed to overthrow capitalism in countries where it was highly advanced, but why proletarians appeared to become less militant over time. These phenomena led Gramsci to develop explanations of the weakness of radical modern social movements that went beyond those offered by conventional Marxist social analysis.

Although Gramsci continued to operate within the Marxist tradition, he introduced a concern with the role ideological superstructures had upon social interactions. Gramsci justified this theoretical move by arguing that the "hegemonic" ideology of the dominant (capitalist) class infuses the realm of culture—the superstructure that rests on the economic base. This hegemonic ideology is able to accomplish what the

state's blunt coercive apparatuses would be unable to do: obtain the *active* consent of the dominated classes to the capitalist social system.

For Gramsci, intellectuals play a crucial role in determining the hegemonic ideology. Such intellectuals can be divided into two broad categories. There are "traditional" intellectuals, such as scientists and professors; and more importantly, there are "organic" intellectuals. Organic intellectuals, drawn from the ranks of each class, serve to define and clarify the interests of that class. Such intellectuals give a class "homogeneity and an awareness of its function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (Gramsci 1971, 5), and they attempt to advance the hegemony of their class over the rest of society (ibid., 12).

In capitalist societies the superstructure is dominated by intellectuals drawn from the capitalist class. This superstructure consists of two primary levels:

> the one that can be called "civil society," that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private," and that of "political society" or "the State." These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of "hegemony" which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of "direct domination" or command exercised through the State and "juridical" government. (Ibid.)

Yet for Gramsci the traditional distinctions between structure and superstructure, state and civil society, become blurred,[11] as both are involved in creating the mechanisms necessary for the continued reproduction of capitalist social relations through the hegemonic domination of the capitalist class.

> [Should not] the "State" . . . be understood not only [as] the apparatus of government, but also the "private" apparatus of "hegemony" or civil society? (Ibid.)

The seemingly imprecise division between state and society can be clarified given Gramsci's definition of the state. Gramsci writes:

> The state is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains their domination, *but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules.* (Ibid.)

In this definition Gramsci notes that since elements of society that are usually considered "private" serve to enforce the capitalist classes' domi-

nation of society, such "private" elements need to be considered as part of the state. Gramsci's position is drawn out when he illustrates how the state's historical development, and hence the degree of hegemony enjoyed by the capitalist class, is often contingent upon the activities of "private" social organizations:

> In the (anyway superficial) polemic over the functions of the State (which here means the State as a politico-juridical organization in the narrow sense), the expression "the State as policeman". . . means a State whose functions are limited to safeguarding of public order and of respect for the laws. The fact is glossed over that in this form of regime . . . hegemony over its historical development belongs to private forces, to civil society—which is "State" too, indeed is State itself. (Ibid.)

The state's participation in the formation of the hegemonic superstructure of society is crucial, as it secures the active consent of the mass public to existing capitalist social relations. In this sense, both the private and public institutions of capitalist societies take roles in perpetuating class division.

> Gramsci assigned to the State part of this function of promoting a single (bourgeois) concept of reality, and, therefore, gave the State a more extensive (enlarged) role in perpetuating class. . . . It was not merely lack of understanding of their position in the economic process that kept workers from comprehending their class role, nor was it only the "private" institutions of society . . . that were responsible for keeping the working class from self-realization, but it was the *State itself* that was involved in reproducing the relations of production. . . . The State included the hegemony of the bourgeoisie in the superstructure. (Carnoy 1984, 66.)

Gramsci believed that the resulting capitalist ideological hegemony served to explain why highly developed capitalist countries enjoyed more social stability, and a subsequent decline in overtly coercive activity by the politico-juridical state. In a discussion of the comparative revolutionary developments in Russia and Europe, Gramsci (1978, 199) argues that:

> the determination, which in Russia was direct and drove the masses onto the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in central and western Europe is complicated by all these political super-structures, created by the greater development of capitalism. This makes the action of the masses slower and more prudent, and therefore requires of the revolutionary party a

> strategy and tactics altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917.

Gramsci's analysis of hegemonic ideology recognizes that there are many arenas, in both civil and political society, that are responsible for the creation and synthesis of ideology. Yet

> the state has always been the protagonist of history. In its organs the power of the propertied class is centralized. Within the state, the propertied class forges its own discipline and unity, over and above the disputes and clashes of competition, in order to keep intact its privileged position in the supreme phase of competition itself: the class struggle for power, for pre-eminence in the leadership and ordering of society. (Gramsci 1977, 74.)

Ideological Innocence vs. Gramscian Hegemony

If anything, Gramsci goes too far in his correction of Marxist economism. It is hard to believe that ideological hegemony is even necessary in light of Converse's demonstration that the public is ignorant of the content of dominant political ideologies. Such ideological innocence indicates that the mass publics of industrial democracies are not aware of the philosophical rationales elites use to justify their class positions. If the proletariat's default position is no (political) consciousness, then generating false proletarian consciousness is a luxury in which the (allegedly) hegemonic capitalist class need not engage. And as their material position improves, the notion that class consciousness would occur to the workers naturally if not for hegemonic capitalist ideology loses whatever initial plausibility it might have had.

Indeed, the poorest and most disadvantaged citizens are the most ideologically unaware (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 255–58). Gramsci apparently never escaped the assumption that class consciousness is so natural that its absence must be explained by the intervention of some other ideology. This means that he never really came to grips with the social condition—working-class apathy—that he was trying to explain. More broadly—regardless of the specific society in question—one wonders why the ignorant public's "consent" must be anything but predominantly *inactive*.

The divergence in the use of ideology by elites and private citizens

illustrates this point. Political elites tend to use a coherent set of unifying philosophical ideas to organize political information. These ideologies are constructed by acts of "creative synthesis" by people such as Marx (and Gramsci). Such ideologies make groupings of issues appear as "natural wholes," and help political elites determine which issues "go together" (Converse 1964, 211). By contrast, the average citizen is typically immersed in political ignorance, often using cues from opinion leaders (including, perhaps, cues to folkloric or commonsensical ideas) to compensate for their low level of awareness. Since the public is usually ignorant of the nature of the decision heuristics (such as political ideology) that opinion leaders use to determine their issue positions,[12] a modified, but more extreme, version of ideological hegemony seems to be at work. Far from actively accepting a hegemonic ideology, the public is not even aware of what ideology motivates the opinion leaders from which it takes its cues. The result is a disturbing combination of public inactivity and ignorance-derived subordination.[13]

Structural Marxist State Theory

Gramsci's work on philosophy, culture, and politics provided several conceptual tools that were used by subsequent theorists. Gramsci's theory of hegemony and state power served an important, albeit often-criticized, role in Nicos Poulantzas's structuralist account of the capitalist state. Structuralist approaches claim that "the social structure has no creative subject at its core. Rather the social formation is a system of objective processes without subjects. . . . Individuals are the 'supports' or 'bearers' of the structural relations in which they are situated" (Carnoy 1984, 89).

In *Political Power and Social Classes*, Poulantzas developed the most comprehensive structuralist account of the capital state.[14] Poulantzas (1978, 271) quickly dismisses IMST on the basis of its inconsistency with the historical examples of capitalist states found in Marx's writings:

> In Prussia during the particular period of transition from the feudal mode of production to the capitalist mode of production, the Bismarckian state took on a totally particular autonomy. . . . The autonomy of the state's structures allowed it to accomplish the passage from feudalism to capitalism against the politically dominant feudal class, by consolidating

> the emerging economic domination of the bourgeois class and by elevating it to political domination. The Prussian state thus had an autonomy vis-à-vis the politically dominant feudal class and this autonomy cannot be reduced to equilibrium of force between the landed nobility and the bourgeoisie.

For Poulantzas (1978, 255), the capitalist state is characterized by "the *unity proper* to institutionalized political power and its *relative autonomy* [from economic classes]." The state's relative autonomy from social classes is crucial to the stability of capitalist societies, since the state acts as a "factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation . . . and as the regulating factor of its global equilibrium as a system" (ibid., 44–45, emph. removed).

One of the capitalist state's functions is to impose a specific judico-political ideology upon its citizens. This ideology is one mechanism that masks the true class nature of social relations, isolating and splintering the cohesion of the working classes, which come to see other social agents as individuals, not as members of classes that may have contradictory interests.

However, this "isolation effect" also splinters the cohesion of the bourgeoisie, which suffers from an "incapacity to raise itself to the strictly political level [due] to its inability to achieve its own internal unity: it sinks into fractional struggles and is unable to realize its political unity on the basis of a politically conceived common interest" (Poulantzas 1978, 284). Enter the capitalist state, which is not marred by the disorganizing effects of class struggle. The state "takes charge, as it were, of the bourgeoisie's political interests and realizes the function of political hegemony which the bourgeoisie is unable to achieve. But *in order to do this, the capitalist state assumes a relative autonomy with regard to the bourgeoisie*" (ibid., 284–85). Poulantzas claims that its autonomy allows the state to intervene to arrange compromises with the dominated and dominant classes when the long-term interests of the dominant fraction are threatened (ibid., 285).

The state is able to arrange such compromises because of its ability to manipulate social actors' perceptions of its goals. The state "constantly appears as the strictly political unity of an economic struggle. . . . It presents itself as the representative of the 'general interest' of competing and divergent economic interests which conceal their class character from the agents who experience them" (Poulantzas 1978, 133). Al-

though the state claims to advance the general interests of society, it is really advancing the long-term interest of the hegemonic class.

> The hegemonic class is the one which concentrates in itself, at the political level, the double function of representing the general interest of the people/nation and of maintaining a specific dominance among the dominant classes and fractions. (Ibid., 141.)

Poulantzas attributes state autonomy to two sources. The first is rooted in his functionalist explanation of the state's role in class-divided societies. Poulantzas (1970, 70) claims that "social classes and the State [are] *objective structures*, and their relations [are] an *objective system of regular connections*, a structure and a system whose agents, 'men', are in the words of Marx, 'bearers' of it—*träager.*" More specifically,

> [The state] presents a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant classes and fractions, but it does this exactly to the extent that it possesses its own peculiar unity (unity of class power) as a specific level of the [capitalist mode of production] and of a capitalist formation. At the same time it possesses this institutionalized unity in so far as it is relatively autonomous from these classes or fractions, i.e. because of the function which devolves upon it vis-à-vis these classes or fractions. (Poulantzas 1978, 256.)

This explanation explicitly rejects the notion that state autonomy results from the will of individuals or social classes (ibid., 256–67). Instead the state is an objective structure that is functionally necessary for class-divided societies; "the function of the state is to maintain the global cohesion of a class-divided social formation. . . . The capitalist state is the first to specialize in this function through its structurally-determined capacity to secure hegemonic class leadership" (Jessop 1982, 181).

Such a structural account of the capitalist state leaves little room for human agency. However, after noting the structural features and requirements of the capitalist state, Poulantzas goes on to claim that state autonomy is contingent upon the specific historical arrangement of existing social forces.

> Thus, in its relations to the field of the class struggle, the capitalist state's relative autonomy depends on the characteristics peculiar to the economic and political class struggle in the [capitalist mode of production] and in a capitalist formation. This must be understood in the general sense of the relations between the structures and the field of the class

> struggle. In this sense, the state sets the limits within which the class struggle affects it; the play of its institutions allows and makes possible this relative autonomy from the dominant classes and fractions. The variations and modalities of this relative autonomy depend upon the concrete relation between social forces in the field of the political class struggle; in particular, they depend on the political struggle of the dominated classes. (Poulantzas 1978, 289.)

This seems to indicate that the degree of state autonomy can be manipulated by the specific historical experience of class-divided societies. Poulantzas's recognition that history and specific social conditions are relevant for the state's autonomy stands in tension with the more structural elements of his analysis (Jessop 1982, 182–83). By introducing the specifics of the class/political struggles as an intervening variable that can influence state autonomy, Poulantzas opens his account to empirical verification. Indeed, at times Poulantzas is quite explicit regarding the importance of the political struggles of the dominated classes, and the effects such struggles have on the state's autonomy.

> However, in order concretely to take on this relative autonomy which, inscribed in the play of its institutions, is what is precisely necessary for hegemonic class domination, the state *is supported by* certain dominated classes of the society, in that it presents itself, through a complex ideological process, as their representative: it encourages them in various ways, to work against the dominant class or classes, but to the political advantage of these latter. In this way it succeeds precisely in *making* the dominated classes *accept* a whole series of compromises which appear to be *their* political interest. (Poulantzas 1978, 285.)

However, for the state to enlist the dominated classes to work against themselves and accept a series of compromises they believe to be in their political interest, the dominated classes must be aware of the state's policies and their class implications. In light of the public's well-documented ignorance, which is magnified among society's most disadvantaged members,[15] it is implausible that such political awareness exists.[16]

In light of public ignorance, the state might not have to mask possible class bias in its policies in order to convince the public that it is advancing a classless national interest. The public's rampant ignorance of state activities and policies strongly suggests that the mechanisms Poulantzas holds responsible for the permeation of false consciousness among the dominated classes cannot work. However, public ignorance

also indicates that the state's autonomy may be more extreme than even Poulantzas is willing to recognize.

Beyond Marxist State Theory

That state personnel often engage in autonomous actions is a powerful insight that remains underdeveloped to this day. While recognizing such autonomy, neither Marxist nor non-Marxist approaches to state theory offer convincing explanations of how democratic states achieve it. How can they be autonomous from electoral preferences? Non-Marxist state theory tends to omit democracy itself in its account of autonomous states. Its focus on the state's organizational, military, and taxation capabilities may be appropriate for premodern state structures,[17] but slights the electorally democratic features of the modern state that are—at least nominally—the very stuff of its existence.

By contrast, neo-Marxist theories about the state's ideological manipulation of the mass public are attempts to deal with the democratic features of modern states. However, the Marxist tradition within which these theories operate constricts their examination of democratic institutions. Although Gramsci and Poulantzas recognize that the political culture propagated either by the state or by the hegemonic fraction of the bourgeoisie often misleads the *demos*, the specific mechanisms they hold responsible for such domination are dubious. Far from any active endorsement or consent, the static ignorance of the mass public seems likely to be responsible for its acceptance of the state's ideological agenda.

Because recent approaches to state theory fail to identify the most likely possible cause of democratic states' autonomy, public ignorance is a useful independent variable for future studies of state action. One of the advantages of such studies is that they could provide clear criteria for when modern democratic states are constrained by society. Such constraint is exercised when public opinion is mobilized against a specific policy or actor. Although the empirical evidence seems to indicate that the public is rarely capable of such mobilization independently of opinion leaders, opinion leaders (such as interest groups) may also effectively constrain state actors with the *potential* mobilization of latent opinion (e.g. Zaller 1994, 284–86).

Taking account of the role of public opinion in the interactions between democratic states and societies is crucial for achieving an accu-

rate understanding of the modern state's operation. The public's pervasive political ignorance, and its frequent reliance upon state-situated opinion leaders, provides a sound empirical basis for expecting even modern states to operate autonomously from the societies they govern.

NOTES

1. I wish to qualify this claim by noting that previous pluralist research often recognized the existence of state autonomy (see Almond 1988, 854, 855). My contention is simply that states and state autonomy were not the focus of their studies. I do not intend to suggest that this research be denigrated. Quite the contrary, the interactions between states and interest groups, both of which may enjoy autonomy derived from public ignorance, may be a fruitful and empirically accurate perspective for state-society interactions.
2. See for example Amsden 1992, Bates 1981, Cummings 1984, and Johnson 1987.
3. State autonomy as derived from public ignorance has been noted previously. See Friedman 1997, 455–56, and Sorens 2000, 26.
4. For the purposes of this essay, I will essentially follow Weber and define the state as a collectivity of individuals who determine and undertake activities from which there is considered—by most members of "society"—to be no legitimate appeal. Although this definition may seem to load the dice in favor of state autonomy, the principle that is supposed to legitimize the authoritative activities of the state is, in democratic societies, public opinion—the will of society—as manifested in popular elections.
5. Often referred to as "state-centered state theory," I have chosen to use the "non-Marxist" designation to avoid possible confusion regarding the redundancy of the former term.
6. See Nordlinger 1981, Krasner 1984, and Skowronek 1984.
7. However, Skocpol (1985, 22) also notes that states "not only conduct decision-making, coercive, and adjudicative activities in different ways, but also give rise to various conceptions of the meaning and methods of 'politics' itself."
8. See Arnold 1990.
9. Some have argued that measuring levels of information possessed by members of the public may underestimate the amount of knowledge they actually possess. According to this view, individuals have running tallies of evaluations that process information, enabling them to make judgments and then forget the specific reasons for their evaluations, which they retain "on line." Unfortunately, research (McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh 1989) has demonstrated that the on-line model is typically used by the politically sophisticated; "those less involved in politics, however, are not as motivated to engage in on-line processing of information" (Rahn, Krosnick, and Breuning 1994, 587).

10. For comprehensive overviews see Jessop 1982 and 1990, Carnoy 1984, and Van den Berg 1988.
11. At one point Gramsci (1971, 160) allows that, "in actual reality, civil society and the State are the same thing." See Anderson 1977 for a discussion of the conflicting definitions Gramsci gives of the state.
12. It seems likely that the public's ignorance of state representatives' use of political ideology may contribute much to the perceived legitimacy of Western democratic states.
13. This is not to suggest that ideology is a particularly effective decision heuristic for reaching policy positions.
14. See also Poulantzas [1978] 2000.
15. In one such study, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) found significant gaps in the political knowledge held by the poor, women, and ethnic minorities. A series of survey questions conducted in 1989 found that men were 1.35 times more likely to answer correctly than women, the affluent 1.59 times more likely than the poor, and whites twice as often as African Americans (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 157).
16. It is likely that Poulantzas would claim that political ignorance is the effect of the structural autonomy of the capitalist state, and not its cause.
17. It is possible that this focus is due to Skocpol's attention to premodern states in her doctoral thesis, *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). I am indebted to Jefferey Friedman for this suggestion.

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