

# Bringing What State Back In? Neo-Marxism and the Origin of the Committee on States and Social Structures

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## Abstract

This article examines the interdisciplinary movement to “bring the state back in,” advanced during the 1980s by the Committee on States and Social Structures. Drawing on the Committee’s archives at the Social Science Research Council, I show that its influential neo-Weberian conception of the state was developed in dialogue with earlier neo-Marxist debates about the capitalist state. However, its interpretation of neo-Marxism as a class reductive and functionalist variant of “grand theory” also created a narrative that marginalized the latter’s contributions to the literature on the state. This displacement had lasting consequences, for while neo-Marxist approaches had provided a critical perspective on the relationship between the social sciences and the state, the Committee’s narrative had a depoliticizing effect on this subject matter. Reconstructing this moment both recovers the forgotten influence of the New Left and neo-Marxist scholarship on postwar political science and sociology, and elaborates on the contested history of the state as a political concept.

## Keywords

state, political science, Marxism, New Left, liberalism

The 1980s saw a revival of interest in the study of the state (Farr 2008). Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol’s (1985a) edited volume *Bringing the State Back In* did not initiate this movement, but it remains the most influential and representative work of this intellectual turn. This volume came out of the Committee on States and Social Structures, an interdisciplinary collaboration sponsored by the Social Science Research Council that was planned between 1979 and 1982, and which operated between 1983 and 1990. By advancing a broadly neo-Weberian framework against “societally reductive” approaches like pluralism, structural functionalism, and Marxism, the Committee reasserted the state as a key conceptual variable for the study of political and social change, defining the parameters of state-centric research in sociology and political science for later scholarship.

The Committee originated from the “second wave of historical sociology” (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005), but it soon influenced political science research on topics like social revolutions and regime transformations, the development of welfare states, and social capital (Skocpol 2008). It ensured that “the concept of the state was brought firmly back into the mainstream of U.S. political science” (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009, 7), and also spurred

meta-theoretical discussions about the state as an object for social inquiry (Almond 1988; Bendix et al. 1992; Mitchell 1991; Nordlinger, Lowi, and Fabbrini 1988). At the same time, it left an ambiguous legacy. One objection had to do with its critique of pluralism, either that the Committee misrepresented these accounts (Almond 1988), was derivative of an earlier conflict between pluralism and statism (Gunnell 1995), or was merely counter-intuitive to the views of most American political scientists (Dryzek 2006). Another line of criticism questioned its novelty. Theodore Lowi (Nordlinger, Lowi, and Fabbrini 1988, 885) argued that the state was never forgotten but “only overshadowed” between the 1930s and 1950s, while Ira Katznelson (2003), a former member of the Committee, later argued that post–World War II political science was already concerned with the relationship between liberal democracy and state institutions.

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In this paper, I reexamine the origins of the Committee to show that its contribution and legacy was entwined in the methodological and normative controversies of the American social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s. The Committee was driven by a younger generation of social scientists, who were inspired by the political and cultural upheavals of the 1960s to challenge intellectual, status, and gender hierarchies in the academy. Its members were prompted to reevaluate the American state in a comparative and historical context, after having seen how state institutions were more insular and autonomous from society than pluralism allowed (as became apparent during the Vietnam War) and yet could also be deployed for egalitarian purposes, as with the postwar welfare state. It was time, they suggested, that this ambiguity, which had long been the subject of both critique and prescription among social theorists, was supplemented by an *analytical* focus on the modern state's capacities (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985b, 363–64). For that reason, they advanced an interdisciplinary, macro-historical, and structural approach to the study of social change, as a corrective to both the individualism of behavioral and pluralist political science and the ahistorical universalism of postwar sociology (Katznelson 1992, 729).

Just as importantly, the Committee was a response to contemporary neo-Marxist scholarship on the capitalist state, which influenced its research agenda and self-justification. Many of the Committee's members were graduate students and junior scholars when neo-Marxism first began drawing interest in the American social sciences during the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the time of the Committee's formation, neo-Marxist research on the state was a theoretically pluralistic and explicitly political research program advancing an understanding of the state as a contradictory matrix for capital accumulation, a condensation of social forces and practices, and a terrain of political struggle (Hay 1999). Although the "neo-statist" turn initiated by the Committee was not merely a "polemic internal to Marxism" (Almond 1988), the latter was the main interlocutor through which the Committee formulated its claims about the neglect of the state in existing American social science. While some observers previously recognized this continuity between neo-Marxist state theory and the Committee (Cammack 1989, 1990; McLennan 1989), today, this theoretical legacy is almost entirely forgotten. I suggest the Committee's narrative about the "return" to the state in the American social sciences displaced and retroactively minimized the influence of the neo-Marxist scholarship that preceded it, as radical ideas were channeled into academic trajectories and blunted in the process. While the Committee incorporated aspects of the neo-Marxist accounts, including its interest in the relationship between the state, capitalism, and liberal democracy, it also subsumed them into a nar-

rower framework of ostensibly value-neutral, disciplinary scholarship.

The Committee's intervention had a number of lasting consequences. First, moving away from what it saw as societally reductive approaches, it overemphasized a bureaucratic conception of the state. Second, it adopted a more neo-positivist mode of inquiry, which dovetailed with the political retreat of the left during the 1980s, in depoliticizing the state by treating it as one operationalizable variable among others (as in discussions of "state capacity"), rather than as a target of democratic demands and political praxis. Last, it reinterpreted the history of the postwar social sciences to retroactively write out the Marxist influence. In effect, the Committee "brought the state back in" to political science and political sociology, but its intervention simultaneously marginalized a framework that had provided a standpoint of critical and practical reflexivity for studying the ideological relationship between the American social sciences and the state.

In the following section, I recount how dissatisfaction with pluralism and modernization theory in the late 1960s encouraged a younger generation of sociologists to find a more critical account of historical development in a loose "Weber/Marx combinatory" (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005, 65). I then reconstruct the Committee's critique of neo-Marxism on the state and comparative historical research. As evidence, I draw on the Committee's planning documents stored at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Tarrytown, New York.<sup>1</sup> While *Bringing the State Back In* shows a cursory awareness of contemporary Marxist debates, the Committee's papers, primarily dating to 1980–1983, suggest a more sustained engagement and re-appropriation of contemporary Marxism. Following that, I discuss how the Committee's intervention and narrative came to affect later theorizations of the state. I conclude that while the neo-Marxist debates provided a reflexive and interdisciplinary standpoint for evaluating the relationship of postwar capitalism and the state to the social scientific discourses that framed these phenomena, the Committee's legacy was to largely bracket away this metatheoretical question. In doing so, it created a new narrative that amplified its own novelty, while adapting discussions of the state to a narrower framework that stripped them of their earlier, critical connotations.

## Transformations in Postwar Social Science

Pluralism and modernization theory, the dominant frameworks in political science and sociology for much of the postwar years, came under growing scrutiny in the mid-1960s. They were challenged by an "uppity generation" of young scholars sympathetic to the New Left and

energized by the civil rights, feminist, and antiwar movements (Kesselman 1981; Skocpol 1988). Pluralist theory, which had stressed value-neutral social science and the importance of interest groups for governance (Ciepley 2000), was criticized as emblematic of the blind spot that the American social sciences had toward their own regime. Pluralism's failure to account for the uneven distribution of power within American society and in American foreign policy had led to a "new revolution in political science" (Easton 1969). The Caucus for a New Political Science implicated pluralism's conservatism and neglect of normative questions about citizenship, democracy, and engaged scholarship in the ongoing "crisis of authority" in major American institutions (Surkin and Wolfe 1970, 6), while the journal initially associated with the Caucus, *Politics & Society* (Editorial Introduction 1970; see also Barrow 2017), invoked C. Wright Mills in its first issue by noting the "depoliticization of the study of politics" and "paucity of critical analysis" that typified mainstream social science.

Critiques of pluralism and structural-functionalism were first advanced in sociology rather than political science, making this an interdisciplinary intellectual movement (Burawoy 1982; Flacks 1982; Hechter 1979; Manza and McCarthy 2011). Modernization theory, developed in research collaborations like the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Comparative Politics active from 1954 to 1972, had framed social development in linear and universal terms, emphasizing cross-national comparisons on the spectrum of "tradition" and "modernity" (Katznelson 2009; Latham 2008). In contrast, it became clear to the new generation that the "reverberations of political conflicts inside the United States and across the globe" during the 1960s could not be explained either by "static and developmentalist versions of structural functionalism" or "economic-determinist and linear evolutionist readings of Marxism" (Skocpol 1984, 3). New theoretical frameworks and research agendas were needed to tease out the historical relationships between economic development, state structures, and regime types.

Two key resources for this turn were a new reading of Max Weber and the debates about the state then circulating in western European Marxist circles. The "first wave" of postwar historical sociology exemplified in the works of Reinhard Bendix (1964) and Barrington Moore Jr. (1966) had advanced a critique of modernization theory and of psychological and cultural explanations of social change (Calhoun 1996). Breaking with the Parsonian interpretation of Weber as a theorist of consensus, Bendix recovered the importance of domination and conflict in his thought, while arguing for a comparative-historical approach to theory and concept formation (Caldwell 2002; Rueschemeyer 1984). Following Bendix, the scholars of the "second wave of historical sociology"

included this interpretation of Weber alongside Tocqueville, Marx, and Durkheim, in forming the canon of classical social theory used to ground the nascent field of historical sociology (Connell 1997; Skocpol 1984).

Just as importantly, these scholars were introduced to the neo-Marxist discussions of the state in the wake of Ralph Miliband's (1969) *The State in Capitalist Society* and the English translation of Nicos Poulantzas' (1973) *Political Power and Social Classes*. Both books challenged pluralist and structural-functionalist theories in the American social sciences that had marginalized the state concept while substituting analogous notions such as the political system. Yet they relied on quite different theoretical frameworks to explain the state's role for the ongoing maintenance and reproduction of capitalism. Miliband (1969, 55, 59) had argued that the unequal distribution of power and resources found in pluralist democracies were not aberrations but inherent to postwar capitalist societies, with the overlapping interests and social backgrounds of the capitalist class and state elites creating an ideological consensus on political and economic affairs. In contrast, Poulantzas (1973, 44–45) argued against the idea that the state directly implemented the preferences and interests of the capitalist class. In place of this "instrumentalism," he emphasized the capitalist state's relative autonomy, which unified the disparate interests of the capitalist class into a hegemonic bloc while atomizing the working class through its juridical and repressive institutions. Despite their differences, both works shared a critical perspective on the relationship between social scientific theory and the state, observing that pluralism either neglected or concealed the real role of the state in perpetuating class divisions within capitalist society.

Because Miliband's account shared similarities with American "elite theory" critiques of pluralism made by Mills (1956), Schattschneider (1960), and McConnell (1966), its influence on post-behavioral political science and political sociology was more immediate. Miliband served on the advisory board of *Politics & Society* between 1970 and 1973 (Barrow 2017), and by the mid-1970s, the American Political Science Association would list him as among the most-cited political scientists in the profession (Newman 2003, 185). Discussing Miliband's book in the *American Political Science Review*, Benjamin Barber (1970) concluded that "the Marxist perspective comes far closer to capturing the relevant realities of the Western system of power than the sublimely complacent fixations of the pluralists." Meanwhile, Poulantzas' account had a lasting impact by encouraging more theoretical rigor in Marxist studies of the state. One U.S. journal called his book "a classic within the Marxist theory of the state" and the Anglophone social sciences (Book Notes 1975), while another noted that it "bridges Marxist

and ‘Western’ social science writings with remarkable acuity” and thus “deserves a broad public among American social scientists” (Tiersky 1976, 187; see also Bridges 1974).

These books, and the Miliband-Poulantzas debate in the *New Left Review*, became the main referents for American social scientists on contemporary Marxist treatments of the state (Barrow 2002; Jessop 2008). However, the lasting effect of the debate, which mostly revolved around methodological questions, was to reify state theory into “instrumentalist” and “structuralist” camps. By 1975, an influential essay in *Kapitalistate*, a key outlet for introducing contemporary neo-Marxist scholarship to a U.S. audience, noted the polemical character of recent work on the state (Gold, Lo, and Wright 1975). The following years saw the appearance of important contributions by Offe (1974), Therborn (1978), and Block (1977) that sought to push beyond this dichotomy. Block’s work, in particular, with its focus on the constraints and imperatives faced by state managers, anticipated the research questions later taken up by the Committee (Skocpol 1980). Together, this scholarship stressed the interactions between state power and class politics, as well as the importance of critical reflexivity about that relationship from the standpoint of the social sciences. Nevertheless, despite signs of this research trajectory developing beyond the terms of the Miliband-Poulantzas debate toward a view of the state as the outcome of social and political struggles, the lasting perception of the impasse between “instrumentalist” and “structuralist” approaches remained. This led even sympathetic critics like Katznelson (1981, 632) to observe that Marxists’ hesitance to engage with the Weberian view of the state placed “artificial, even crippling, limits on the development of Marxist social thought.”

A younger generation of scholars, thus, found new theoretical resources in both the critiques of pluralism advanced within neo-Marxist scholarship and the emergence of historical sociology as a distinct field of inquiry (Skocpol 1984; Smith 1991). Along with J. P. Nettl’s (1968) essay “The State as a Conceptual Variable,” exemplary macro-historical studies of capitalist development by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), Perry Anderson (1974), and the *Annales* school illustrated the ability of this new framework to inform research on the state, class structures, and social conflict. The Marxian theoretical heritage provided a common “regime of knowledge” or point of reference (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005, 20), allowing these scholars to consciously blur the disciplinary boundaries between political sociology and political science to overcome the methodological and normative shortcomings of mainstream social science. Yet as the notion of the “capitalist state” proved to be an evasive analytic object, with Marxist approaches diverging into

irreconcilable and competing explanatory theories, the corrective to this “theoreticism” was to supplement it with a Weberian model that was more attentive to empirical and historical variations among modern states, and to their potential autonomy from class forces. The following section shows how the Committee developed this position and its own scholarly identity in dialogue with neo-Marxists, while also characterizing its project as a critique of their penchant for “grand theory” and class reductionism.

### Bringing the State Back In

The Committee was developed in numerous meetings between Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, while the former two were tenured professors of sociology at Brown, and the latter an assistant professor of sociology at Harvard. From 1980 to 1983, they built a network of similar-minded scholars, linked either by institutional affiliation or generational affinity, until its executive body was expanded to also include Albert Hirschman (Institute for Advanced Study), Peter Katzenstein (Cornell), Stephen Krasner (Stanford), Ira Katznelson (The New School), and Charles Tilly (Michigan).<sup>2</sup> The Committee’s interdisciplinary outlook, reflected in its reach beyond the sociological profession—Katznelson, Krasner, and Katzenstein were all tenured political scientists, Hirschman a polymath economist, and Tilly an endowed chair in social science—was fitting, insofar as the state was a broad subject lending itself to the permeable disciplinary boundaries of macro-historical social science.<sup>3</sup>

This research initiative was a culminating experience for scholars who as students had witnessed how “existing relations of power in state, economy, and society could be very unjust” and had developed a “sense that protests and rebellions could make a difference” (Skocpol 1988, 630). Now assistant and associate professors, they channeled their earlier political sensibilities into influential institutional positions and challenged academic hierarchies, as in the case of Harvard’s controversial denial of tenure to Skocpol in the fall of 1980. Following that decision, which drew new attention to the challenges faced by women in the social sciences, Skocpol was recruited by Katznelson to a joint appointment in sociology and political science at the University of Chicago (see Skocpol 1988, 2007). Her grievance proceedings against Harvard, the decision to pursue which she attributed to the “general esteem in which protest against perceived injustice is held by my generation” (Skocpol 2007, 638), lasted the majority of her five-year stay at Chicago. Yet one of the positive outcomes of that career obstacle was the opportunity to extend this research agenda to another influential institution, placing it into a closer dialogue with political

scientists and establishing collaborative partnerships with female graduate students such as Margaret Weir, who later also became a contributor to *Bringing the State Back In* (Robertson 1994, 133).

The Committee was inspired by contemporary theoretical and methodological debates about macro-historical research spurred by the earlier neo-Marxist scholarship. At the time, a spate of notable works by Skocpol (1979), Ellen Kay Trimberger (1978), Stephen Krasner (1978), and Alfred Stepan (1978) had explored phenomena like state formation, war-making, and the relationship between bureaucratic power and capitalist development. Following Tilly (1975), these authors advanced a view of states primarily as administrative, coercive organizations that were potentially autonomous from social and class forces, and whose basis of power and interests were irreducible to interest groups, as in liberal-pluralist conceptions of government, or the economically dominant class, as in Marxist conceptions (Hobden 1999; Sanderson 1988). In *States and Social Revolutions*, Skocpol (1979, 29) argued states were a “set of administrative, policing, and military organizations” coordinated by an executive authority. In this framework, states were treated as compulsory associations that claimed control over territories and people, and that were “potentially autonomous from (though of course conditioned by) socioeconomic interests and structures” (Skocpol 1979, 14). During critical junctures such as the New Deal, state organizations could act against dominant-class interests by making strategic concessions to subordinate classes (Skocpol 1980). At the center of this distinction was a pushback against Marxist conceptions that saw states either as “analytic aspects of abstractly conceived modes of production” or “political aspects of concrete class relations and struggles” (Skocpol 1979, 31), or as having to do with “dominant class control over the means of production” (Skocpol 1985, 9).

The initial proposal submitted by Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1980b, 2) to the SSRC built on this recent interest in the “macro-comparative study of state development and state capacities in relation to different social structures and patterns of social change.” It also posited that “the state has come increasingly to be viewed as an important, relatively autonomous, actor,” which both shaped and was shaped by long-term processes of societal change and the surrounding social structure. Given the importance of states for social stability, capitalist development, and policy formation, the project promised to “clarify approaches and issues that seem most likely to cut across different areas and periods, and to stimulate intellectual coordination of diverse research efforts on the state” (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1980b, 3). At its heart was an attempt to crystallize “an agenda of questions and lines of analysis that

were exciting and fruitful across different substantive literatures” (Skocpol 2007, 700), and to determine the most conducive framework for the construction of middle range theory and the production of empirical research about the state.

At its February 1982 organizing conference in Mt. Kisco, New York, titled “States and Social Structures: Research Implications of Current Theories of the State,” the Committee outlined its intent to “develop better conceptual and methodological tools for the comparative study of states and their surrounding social structures” (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1980a). Accordingly, the conference sessions focused on the theoretical frameworks of studying the state; state capacity, economic development, and social redistribution; states and transnational relations; and state structures and social conflict (Committee on States and Social Structures 1982). Later, the Committee suggested additional themes, including the analytic definition of state structures; state capacity and strength in relation to society; bureaucratic institutions in relation to classes and interest groups; and the historical divergence of state capacities in relation to pre-existing state structures, the world-system, and the degree of economic organization and class conflict (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1982).

Contemporary neo-Marxist studies were crucial interlocutors for the Committee. It noted how the burgeoning literature on the capitalist state developed by Anderson (1974), John Holloway and Sol Picciotto (1979), Miliband (1969), Offe (1974), Poulantzas (1973), Göran Therborn (1978), and Wallerstein (1974) had shed valuable light on the transition to the capitalist mode of production, the socioeconomic function of states in advanced industrial democracies, and the dynamics of dependent states within the world capitalist economy. They had also introduced a new theoretical lineage that changed the terms of social scientific discussion by underscoring the state’s importance to capitalist development and modernization, and critiquing pluralist and structural-functionalist accounts (Skocpol 1985, 5). As Skocpol noted in a special issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* on Marxist inquiries of labor, class, and states, despite her skepticism of “totalistic macrotheoretical frameworks,” the hypotheses raised by Marxism about historical patterns and transformations were worthy of research and debate (Burawoy and Skocpol 1982, vii).

However, the Committee wished to correct the direction taken by this scholarship in the wake of the Miliband-Poulantzas debate. Following the debate’s parameters—and thus its pitfalls—it schematically identified three tendencies within this literature: instrumentalism, where the state reflected the interests of the dominant social groups via their members holding positions in the state apparatus; structuralism, where state personnel implemented “the

objectively determined requirements for systemic stability” regardless of the dominant social groups’ support for those policies; and the “pluralist” or “class conflict” model where the state expressed the outcome of social conflicts in which subordinate groups could prevail (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1980a).<sup>4</sup> Despite their significant theoretical differences, the Committee portrayed all these strands as sharing two fundamental flaws stemming from positing the capitalist mode of production as an analytical starting point, which hindered their usefulness for comparative historical research: excessive conceptual abstraction and a societally reductive framework. The methodological stalemate of Marxist state theory was taken to be caused by its penchant for abstraction and neglect of the empirical and historical details necessary to advance research on the state.

First, neo-Marxist theories were prone to abstract generalization about features and functions shared by all states within a mode of production, a phase of capitalist accumulation, or a position in the capitalist world-system. For Evans and Rueschemeyer (1980), certain strands of Marxist research suffered from “severe problems of a rationalist insulation from historical reality and of exclusionary claims to a single right approach.” Meanwhile, for Skocpol (1980, 200), “almost all neo-Marxists theorize about ‘the capitalist state’ in general, thus attempting to explain patterns of state intervention and political conflict in analytic terms directly derived from a model about the capitalist mode of production as such.” Accounts of state autonomy like Poulantzas’ and Therborn’s that attempted to provide typologies of features shared by states within different modes of production fell short of offering concepts, explanatory hypotheses, or research agendas that captured the comparative and historical aspect of state structures and their activities (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1980b, 6). Although neo-Marxist theories were potentially applicable and testable in comparisons of states *across* different modes of production, they were ineffective for comparative historical analysis of cases *within* the capitalist mode of production, since their abstraction made it harder to “assign causal weight to variations in state structures and activities across nations and short time periods” (Skocpol 1985, 5, 33n16).

This variation in state activities led the Committee to reject the possibility of a “universally applicable” theory of the state specific to a given mode of production. For Skocpol, “the gap between abstract theoretical concepts and cross-national variations is just too wide. Needed, instead, are concepts for analyzing political institutions and their effect . . . that are somewhat decoupled from the Marxian staple concepts of ‘modes of production’ and their associated ‘class relations’” (Skocpol 1982, 42). Rather than the “application of analytical conceptual

abstractions,” the Committee instead wished to provide “explanations built on propositions about the activities of concrete groups” (Skocpol 1985, 31). For the purposes of comparative analysis, it argued that the state was “more usefully treated as an institutional entity and a social actor than as an abstract category” (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1980b, 4).

A second assertion was that all strands of neo-Marxist research remained society-centric, in emphasizing the “social functions of the state—as an arena for class struggles and an instrument of class rule—and they typically sought to generalize about features shared by states within a mode of production or a phase of capitalist accumulation” (Committee on States and Social Structures 1983, 6). This was the case even with the “class struggle” accounts offered by Therborn (1978), Offe (1974), and Gösta Esping-Andersen, Erik Olin Wright, and Roger Friedland (1976). Per Skocpol, these authors shared a view of the state as a nexus of institutions with selective or channeling effects that shaped class struggles and outcomes in favor of capitalist interests. While this was in principle compatible with the Committee’s focus on how state structures patterned class relations, it was said to overlook that states “have their own organizational forms and logics, which in turn influence politics not only in class-biased ways but also in ways equally relevant (or irrelevant) for all classes” (Skocpol 1982, 41). In addition, accounts like Therborn’s that turned to class struggles to explain variations in modes of production frequently lapsed into tautologies and away from “testable theoretical generalizations” (Skocpol 1982, 42). Neo-Marxist approaches ruled out how, instead of being the byproduct of class struggles, autonomous state action could shape and influence how those struggles unfolded (Skocpol 1985, 5).

Skocpol’s reading of Poulantzas illustrates both sides of this critique. In *Political Power and Social Classes* and the debate with Miliband, she saw his argument in favor of the relative autonomy of the capitalist state as an effective rebuttal to instrumentalism. However, the abstraction and functionalism of this approach obscured how institutional arrangements and structural necessities could lead to variations in state capacity. Poulantzas had inflexibly posited the capitalist state as a necessary and general feature of the capitalist mode of production, instead of “seeking to explain the varying capacities of different states in various circumstances to formulate and implement policies adequate to the needs of the dominant classes or economies” (Skocpol 1982, 13; 1985, 33n22). Poulantzas’ later turn to a political class struggle approach devoted more attention to the specific institutional and hegemonic variations within different types of capitalist states. Yet Skocpol (1982, 14) also saw this as a regression, because by re-conceptualizing the state as a

condensation of power relations dependent on a changing balance of dominant class fractions, he backtracked away from his earlier insights about state autonomy to the class reductionism she saw as characteristic of Marxist state theory.

Given these two concerns, the Committee treated neo-Marxist accounts as potentially useful for generating theoretical problems, analytical concepts, and causal hypotheses about the relationship between state and society, but also as insufficient for testing those same concepts and hypotheses through comparative-historical case studies and the construction of generalizations proceeding from empirical research (Barrow 1993, 125). Neo-Marxism, it argued, could not fully grasp the phenomenon of state autonomy without reducing it to either social processes or to abstract functionalism. Hence, the Committee sought to move beyond a “generalized theoretical discussion over whether ‘the state,’ or ‘the state in capitalist society,’ has an independent impact on the course of societal change.” Instead, it argued that the solution to these theoretical dilemmas lay in the “development of hypotheses about the variable conditions for autonomous and effective state action and to the advancement of comparative research” on the state (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1980, 15). Rather than first positing a general theory of the state, it proposed to draw on individual case studies within predetermined research areas to build conceptualizations and explanations of state structures and capacities that took into account their cross-national and historical variations. Only a comparative-historical framework of inquiry that rejected “grand theory” could “conceptualize the organizational structures of states, to explain how they are formed and reorganized over time, and to explore how states affect societies through their policies and through their patterned relationships with social groups” (Committee on States and Social Structures 1983, 1).

### The Politics of State Theory

Neo-Marxism influenced the Committee’s theoretical background by defining the initial parameters of a critical social scientific account of the state, and by introducing a longstanding intellectual tradition as an alternative mode of analysis. For that same reason, the Committee’s identity and purpose hinged on whether it could substantively distinguish its own research agenda. The Committee appropriated the neo-Marxist focus on the relationship between socioeconomic and political power, and their critique of pluralism’s omission of the state. However, it also positioned itself as recovering an analytically distinct understanding of the state from the “society-centered” frameworks of both pluralism and Marxism. It did so by framing neo-Marxism as a class reductive and

functionalist variant of “grand theory,” and by stressing the autonomy of the state contra group and class pressures. Moving beyond metatheoretical disputes about the state by instead emphasizing “testable, variable-based propositions” (Katznelson 2009, 99) placed this research agenda into closer dialogue to the social scientific mainstream. But it also weakened the self-reflexive impulse behind the New Left’s original interest in the state as part of a broader discussion of the relationship between professional social science and the liberal context in which it was being produced (as in the Marxist critiques of pluralism), as well as of political strategy. This depoliticized what had been an inherently political subject matter, presenting it as a value-neutral relationship between state and society, just as both the American state and the left that was bound up with it were entering into the crisis period of the 1970s and the conservative turn of the 1980s.

First, the Committee’s treatment of pluralism and Marxism as equally societally reductive approaches was a rhetorical framing that amplified the novelty of its own approach. It suggested that the hegemonic status of pluralism in the American social sciences had encouraged a “conception of the state as a mere reflection of social structure and social change,” in contrast to a continental European tradition of social theory that saw the state as often opposed to society (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1980b).<sup>5</sup> Yet it also tagged the neo-Marxist scholarship as a similar societally reductive position, despite the fact that much of it refuted both pluralism and elite theory in the American social sciences of the 1960s. Scarcely noting this in its review of existing scholarship on the state, the Committee collapsed the substantial theoretical differences between these two strands of thought. This minimized the main thrust of the Marxist critique of pluralism, to present its own account of state autonomy, drawing on the Weberian tradition, as a more promising way for researching the state.

More recently, Skocpol (2008, 111) has clarified that the Committee was neither calling for “society-centered or economic-determinist explanatory approaches to be turned on their head,” nor advocating a “monomaniacal focus on bureaucratic politics.” Nevertheless, the Committee was interested in exploring the potential autonomy of an entity called “the state” from a web of relations called “society”—something it argued both pluralism and Marxism neglected. Confronted with the problem of demarcating the boundaries of the state from society, it never settled on the parameters of this distinction, alternating between treating the state as an aggregate of individuals or bureaucratic groups, or as a set of organizations having a prior unity as a collective political agent vis-à-vis society. Disaggregating the state not only allowed for a more fine-grained view of policy formation processes by state managers and institutions but also left

undetermined the basis of their unity as something called “the state.” However, treating the state as a coherent unity required dissolving the Marxist notion of social classes into an undifferentiated notion of “society” to act as its obverse. This made it difficult to conceive how class struggles could penetrate, and be incorporated and reflected *within* the state (Cammack 1989).<sup>6</sup> The latter, relational approach to the state and social classes was increasingly advocated in neo-Marxist research by the late 1970s, in the works of Poulantzas, Therborn, Block, and others. Yet the Committee’s emphasis on the bureaucracy as the key indicator of state capacity displaced that line of inquiry, in favor of an approach that made it easier to study the state as an organizational entity.

Second, by rejecting the Marxist focus on developing a theory of the capitalist state, the Committee reframed the problem in a way that stripped much of the political content from discussions of the state. Marxist debates about conceptualizing “the capitalist state” or “the state in capitalist society” had illustrated how these theoretical discussions spoke to broader questions about the social origins of state power, the formation of hegemony, and what the absence of the state from pluralist theory said about the ideology of the social sciences. Despite their methodological disputes and absence of a single paradigm, they had agreed on the necessity of studying the state as part of a broader project of the critique of capitalist democracy (Therborn 2009, 149), since it was both the precondition and source of stability for capitalist accumulation. Crucially, they also saw the state not merely as a structural force but as an object of theoretical and political practice toward which social struggles could be directed. Developing a critical account of the capitalist state was a task with significant political implications given the crises of industrialized societies during the 1970s and the neoliberal turn. Their interest in the nature and functions of the state was situationally motivated by strategic concerns about the changing role of left parties and movements with regard to organized political power in capitalist societies (Panitch 1980). Despite its theoretical abstraction, there was a concretely political element to the Marxist scholarship, its goal being to clarify the functions and limits of the capitalist state for the purposes of informing future political practices.

In contrast, the Committee’s depiction of Marxism as a “grand theory” too general for the purposes of studying states’ activities and capacities, and its reduction of the state to its “visible” institutions and effects for easier operationalization, bracketed away the critical thrust of New Left discourses about the state. Its desire to supersede the instrumentalist-structuralist debate within Marxism through greater empirical and historical specification led to a theoretical agnosticism about the state (Binder 1986; Colburn 1988), and a more neo-positivist

stance characterized by analytic classification, the formation of mid-range theory, and the rejection of overt normative considerations (Adcock, Bevir, and Stimson 2007, 265). It largely set aside the puzzle of why the state concept appeared and disappeared at different points in the history of the social sciences in the United States, while its focus on the methodological shortcomings of Marxist accounts neglected how the latter were concerned with the state in a critical and political capacity, rather than just in a metatheoretical sense. Concerned with the attainment of greater social scientific legitimacy, the Committee largely avoided normative propositions about the state, maintaining that an understanding of state actions and capacities needed to be “free of automatic activations of visions about what states ought to do or ought not to do,” and that “studying state action should not entail either glorifying state power or overestimating its efficacy” (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985b, 364–65).

Insofar as there was a normative component to this project, it entailed shifting from conceiving the state as a *capitalist* state to a more neutral entity, an “autonomous structure . . . with a logic and interests of its own” (Skocpol 1979, 27). Given the declining influence of organized labor and the reorganization of class power in favor of transnational capital, the Committee’s emphasis on states’ abilities to influence society was an attempted defense of the ongoing role of public institutions to secure egalitarian goals within advanced capitalist societies (Katznelson 1992, 733). In that respect, its approach can be understood as a response to existing critiques of the state on both the left and the nascent neoliberal right (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985b, 364). Thus, while the Committee’s agenda retained echoes of the New Left, it turned the language of state autonomy from an analytic and strategic component in the theorizing of postwar capitalism, as it had been for the neo-Marxists, to a means by which state institutions could regulate capitalist social relations to maintain the postwar social democratic order. This represented a more moderate shift in political orientation, as an adaptation to the broader decline experienced by Marxist political movements and the rightward shift in American politics and culture in the wake of the 1980 election.

Last, the Committee leveraged its academic networks and the SSRC’s resources to obtain greater legitimacy for its “neo-statist” research agenda in sociology and political science. While it fell short of its intent to create “no less than a Kuhnian paradigm shift” (Katznelson 1992, 729), the Committee had a lasting influence. By the time it was decommissioned in 1990 due to the SSRC’s budgetary constraints, it had implemented a series of working groups on Contemporary Patterns of State-Led Industrialization; the Transnational Diffusion of Policy-Relevant Economic Knowledge; States, Knowledge-Bearing Occupations,

and Social Policy Making; and War Settlement and State Structures. It also published two edited volumes (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Hall 1989), organized annual seminars and working groups, produced a newsletter, and provided research grants. The Committee's directors were not involved with policymaking beyond the academy, but their collective experience and professional stature ensured that it had a wide reach in scholarly circles, while its representation of the state was disseminated via workshops, research groups, and publications. The proliferation of state-centric research in comparative politics and American political development during the 1990s was a testament to this program's influence on later scholarship (Adcock, Bevir, and Stimson 2007; Barkey and Parikh 1991; Levi 2002).

The Committee's intervention came at a critical point in the history of the postwar social sciences. By the early 1980s, the growing interest in the state was widely understood as tied to the recent prominence of Marxism in the academy (Kesselman 1983). While most visible in sociology, this shift was also felt in political science, despite it generally remaining less hospitable to Marxist ideas.<sup>7</sup> "Restoring the State to Political Science" was chosen as the theme of the 1981 APSA conference, on the basis that this multifaceted concept was "the one common thread in all subfields within the discipline" (Lowi and Tarrow 1980, 436–37). In that year's Presidential Address, suggestively titled "Another State of Mind," Charles Lindblom (1982) noted that contemporary neo-Marxists like Miliband, Poulantzas, Offe, Jürgen Habermas, and James O'Connor had raised crucial questions about the viability and efficacy of liberal democracy, the role of state institutions in mediating social conflicts, and the tension between corporate interests and popular legitimacy—which adherents of "conventional theory" (pluralism) were only belatedly catching up to. By focusing on a concept largely absent from the social scientific mainstream, Marxist scholars pointed to its importance in the reproduction of capitalism, and provocatively suggested that pluralists' inability to talk about this topic was symptomatic of an unacknowledged ideological bias. Even critics such as David Easton (1985, 144–45) recognized the impact that Marxism, with its "renewed awareness of the importance of history and of the significance of the economy, social classes, and ideology," had on the revival of the notion of "political science as a study of the state." In the words of Block (1987, 22), "ideas and arguments that developed initially on the leftward fringes of American academic life are now part of mainstream discussions in political sociology and political science."

At the same time, the pressures of disciplinary specialization that reemerged in both political science and sociology after the waning of the New Left undercut the generally interdisciplinary account of Marxism (Manza

and McCarthy 2011). By prioritizing empirical research at the expense of metatheory, the Committee advanced an organizational account of the state, and cemented for later scholarship the definitive interpretation of Marxism as an excessively abstract and societally reductive dead end. One result was a theoretical narrowing that led to a starker contrast between neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian strands of research than the intersecting history of these influences actually suggests. For example, while the Mt. Kisco conference featured contributions from Block, Offe, and Therborn, their essays were not included in *Bringing the State Back In*, leaving only Katznelson as a more sympathetic representative of that position.<sup>8</sup> While largely incidental, this omission contributed to this research agenda's general integration into the social scientific mainstream (Calhoun 1996, 309).<sup>9</sup> Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis note that *Bringing the State Back In* "had relegated theorists such as Miliband, Offe, Block, Therborn, and Poulantzas to a couple of paragraphs and footnotes" (Aronowitz and Bratsis 2002, xii). For Mark Blyth (2006, 494), the unwillingness of comparative politics scholars to embrace European Marxism led them to find "refuge in a sanitized Poulantzian analysis of late capitalism called 'state theory.'" Similarly, for Leo Panitch (2002, 93), this critique led to a "remarkable impoverishment of state theory."

While the Committee did successfully preserve some elements of the neo-Marxist research agenda in an academic context in which the New Left legacy of the 1960s was waning, it also had the lasting effect of making that literature more easily subsumable within its narrative about the shortcomings of the American social sciences concerning the state (Waddell 2012). As a result, the influential role of neo-Marxist research as an interlocutor and initial catalyst for the revival of interest in this fundamental concept was, retroactively, written out of the history of why the state was "brought back in." Along with this, the critical and reflexive role that the study of the state represented within the radical social sciences during the heyday of the New Left, as a commentary on the relationship between liberal democracy and capitalism, was weakened and largely forgotten.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the movement to "bring the state back in" to political sociology and political science, spearheaded in the early 1980s by the Committee on States and Social Structures, had its intellectual origins in the New Left, emerging through a double mediation via the "second wave" of historical sociology and neo-Marxist debates about the capitalist state. Both traditions allowed a new generation of scholars to use the rallying call to study the state as a means of questioning the relationship

between the social sciences and the liberalism of the postwar American regime, expressed via frameworks like modernization theory and pluralism. However, as the Committee reworked these tendencies into a systematic research agenda, it also largely cut ties with its New Left roots. Shedding its neo-Marxist affinities and insulating the study of the state from its earlier connections to the critique of capitalism and left political strategy, it instead advanced an organizational conception of the state that it saw as both more conducive to empirical research and as capable of withstanding increased scrutiny in the more conservative political and cultural context of the 1980s.

The Committee's displacement of the neo-Marxist research on the capitalist state had lasting theoretical and political consequences. Today, the state remains a contested concept, where no theorization of it escapes partial falsification, nor is decisively falsified as a whole (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987, 33). This inherent ambiguity is also what makes it possible to approach the changing usages of this concept as symptomatic of the socio-historical context and ideological frameworks within which they are advanced. By initially questioning the "statelessness" of postwar American social science, Marxist accounts had provided a critical standpoint for investigating how knowledge *about* the state was produced, institutionalized, and disseminated in ways that either hid the state from view or reproduced it as an objective social reality. In contrast, the Committee's shift away from this standpoint preserved some of its insights but also depoliticized the study of the state, both as a scholarly concept and as a real entity toward which socio-political demands could be directed. The lasting effect of this turn was the closure of an influential and still-developing research agenda, leading to the forgetting of its ongoing insights for discussions of neoliberalism, pluralist and elite theories of democracy, and the relationship between capitalism and liberal democracy, all of which are once again drawing scholarly attention today.

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### Notes

1. Documents accessed at the Rockefeller Archive Center, 2016, May 25.
2. By then, the Committee's membership counted four former Harvard graduate students: Evans, Skocpol, Krasner, and Katzenstein.
3. The organizers solicited feedback from many scholars, including Gabriel Almond, Theodore Lowi, Eric Nordlinger, and Guillermo O'Donnell. Others, including Miliband, Norberto Bobbio, and Ernesto Laclau, were considered for outreach but did not participate in the project.
4. Skocpol (1980) initially proposed these broad typologies in her study of the New Deal as a case for examining neo-Marxist theories of state autonomy.
5. Skocpol (2008, 110) later noted that "postwar social scientific theories, especially in American academia, treated politics and public policy making as largely a reflection or byproduct of social, economic, cultural dynamics."
6. Skocpol (1982, 11–12) explicitly rejected the latter view of the state, as advanced by Therborn, in the original draft of her introductory essay to *Bringing the State Back In*.
7. Block and Piven (2010, 207) note that "political science weathered the period of rebellion in the 1960s with only minor modifications to the curriculum."
8. Guillermo O'Donnell was slated to present a work titled "Beyond Relative Autonomy: The Current Marxist Debate" but withdrew shortly before the conference took place.
9. Personal correspondence with Claus Offe and Göran Therborn (2018, June 10), and Fred Block (2018, September 6).

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