ALTERNATE ROUTES

A Critical Review

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EDITORIAL STATEMENT

Alternate Routes is a critical review of sociology and related disciplines. We strive to publish the critical work of graduate students which will inform and be of interest to students and teachers of social science. In our view, sociologists must be critical, both of their own society and of the work of other social analysts. We seek, therefore, to publish work which challenges existing sociological and societal orthodoxies. To achieve this goal we require manuscripts. We encourage graduate students among our readers to submit essays, reviews, commentaries and rejoinders on a wide variety of subjects. We particularly welcome work which treats some aspect of Canadian society within the wider concerns of critical social science.

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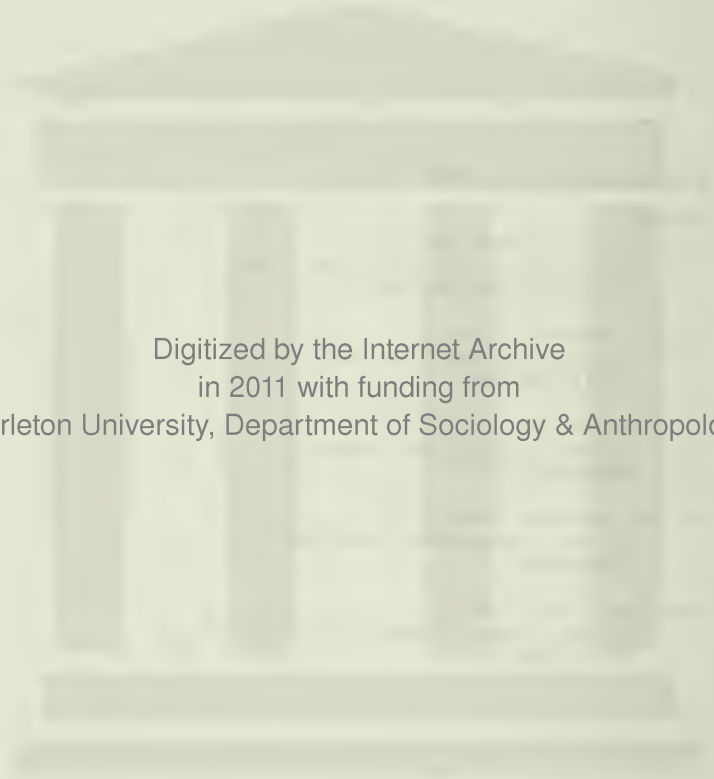

Elections, State Policy and the Marxian Tradition in Political Sociology: An Interview

Robert Alford

Introduction

Like the discipline in general, political sociology in North America has undergone considerable change since the early 1960s. In his career and publications, Robert Alford reflects many of those changes, which are of more than merely historical interest for scholars working in political sociology.

Alford is probably best known in Canada for the published version of his doctoral thesis, Party and Society: The Anglo-American Democracies. In this comparative study of "class voting" in Great Britain, Australia, the United States and Canada, he found that Canada scored lowest on the index of class voting. Although not always welcomed or accepted by them, this seminal work has provided subsequent Canadian scholars with an agenda for debates on the methods, conceptions, indicators and

explanations concerning the presence of class in Canadian elections.[1]

From these early pluralist beginnings, Alford went on to study the development of health policy in New York, from what might be called an elite perspective, and later to studies of political participation and urban politics from a broadly Marxian perspective, critical of both elite and pluralist approaches. Along the way, an article on paradigms in political sociology summarized some of the differences among these approaches.[2]

The transformations represented by Robert Alford's career, which reflect and are part of broader changes in political sociology, are of more than historical interest because he has attempted to combine the insights, levels of analysis and concepts of pluralist, elite and Marxist approaches into a perspective able to deal with the complexities of politics in liberal democracies. The interview is presented in the hope that it will stimulate thought and discussion on the relationships among voting, the operations of state agencies, capital accumulation, and social class. Directions for further work are indicated tentatively in the interview, but they need to be developed in theoretical reflection and empirical research on politics in Canada and elsewhere. That the interview ends abruptly, with loose ends left dangling, is thus appropriate.

Robert Alford was interviewed at Carleton University on March 20, 1980, by Jim Conley.

1. E.g. R. Ogmundson, "Party Class Images and the Class Vote in Canada," American Sociological Review 40 (1975): 506-512.

2. See the interview for references.

J.C. To start from the beginning, you are probably best known in Canada for Party and Society,[1] where you compare class voting in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. As you no doubt know, it continues to inspire work by Canadians such as John Myles and others. Your recent work seems to take a starting point that's a long way from the pluralist assumptions that were behind Party and Society. That change seems to reflect wider trends in political sociology in North America. How do you explain this change in North American sociology, and perhaps in Robert Alford? Second, do you consider the kind of voting study you did in Party and Society to be worthwhile still? If it is and you were to do it today, would you do it differently? In what ways? How would you analyse the electoral system and elections in liberal democracies?

R.A. Those are large questions and it is a little hard to formulate a coherent and well-developed answer on the spur of the moment. I suppose the quick and easy, but basically accurate answer to the first one is that the change in my own perspective does reflect certain trends in North American political sociology. Old problems have persisted and new crises have emerged which cannot be theoretically understood or politically dealt with in the framework of existing political theories or mechanisms for liberal reform. That's the quick answer. I think the change in sociology is more marked than in other social sciences partly because of the more diverse intellectual traditions within sociology. Historically, sociology always has been more

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[1] (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963)

influenced by Marxist or neo-Marxist ideas. Even people who have been pluralists have always included some aspects of analysis of the class structure. Lipset is the best example. I think his Agrarian Socialism is a very important work. Whatever criticisms you can make of sociology, many in the field recognize the importance of class interests and the class structure for state policy. The critical tradition is not alien to sociology; it remains dormant under some historical conditions and re-emerges under others.

With respect to the second part of your question, elections and voting are not merely devices to control or co-opt popular struggles. They are important democratic institutions, however much they are biased and distorted through the ways in which participation is rendered fictitious and despite the fact that voting and party competition have relatively little effect on major developments. My answer is that voting studies are important, and I don't think they have to be done within a pluralist perspective.

I haven't really thought about the issue of how I would do Party and Society differently. That book differed from the classic pluralist analyses of voting in the sense that I was analyzing class voting as an attribute of the system, rather than examining the factors predisposing individuals to vote in a certain way. The "Columbia" and "Michigan" traditions were primarily interested in the determinants of the voting decision.[2] You have on the one hand the concern of the Michigan school with issues, candidates and party identification as the triple determinants of individual behavior.

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[2]The classic studies respectively are: Bernard Berelsen, et al., Voting (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1954) and Angus Campbell, et al., Elections and the Political Order (NY: Wiley, 1966).

On the other hand, you have the more institutional concern of the Columbia school with cross-pressures and the impact of religion versus class in the earliest studies. Because I was a student of Lipset's I drew more upon the Columbia tradition in my dissertation, but I transformed it into a structural analysis of an attribute of the system and not of a set of individual variables predicting individual voting. I still think that was the right way to do it. With different measures, in the light of John Myles' critique of the index of class voting[3] and with more theoretically self-conscious and empirically adequate indices of the social base of parties in different regions and nations, such studies can still be useful. Now given the line of development of my more recent work, I would look for the links of voting much more with state policy, the political strategies of elites and the changing class situation in particular political units. I now would use a much broader theoretical framework for the analysis of elections and voting.

J.C. I found what you said earlier about elections being important a bit surprising. Although it may simply be my reading of it, the paper on political participation and public policy you did with Roger Friedland[4] gives me the impression of a concentration on the symbolic effects of voting and similar forms of political participation, and an emphasis on the social control aspects rather than the policy effects of political participation.

R.A. I absolutely agree; I think you stated the point of that article correctly. But elections have both aspects: they are genuine democratic

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[3] John Myles, "Differences in the Canadian and American Class Vote: Fact or Pseudo-fact," American Journal of Sociology 84, No. 5, March 1979, pp. 1232-1237.

[4] "Political Participation and Public Policy," Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. I, 1975, pp. 429-479.

institutions because they provide equal rights to participate to all citizens and because their outcome installs a regime with great potential power over important decisions. The fact that they are genuine gives them great symbolic power as an instrument of social control. That's the paradox.

Elections have an impact: Proposition 13 in California is a good recent example. It was an overwhelming demonstration of the electoral power of the people. This particular decision had reactionary consequences, but the referendum shows people that their vote has an impact. Elections and the machinery of voting, and the biennial and quadrennial spectacles of party competition around congressional and national elections in the United States do absorb the political attention of the population. In that sense they are like sports events: the symbolic function of elections that Murray Edelman and Ike Balbus, among others, have emphasized. But they wouldn't have that effect if they did not have genuine and real political import as well. If elections were purely spectacle and thus only symbolic, they would not have that impact.

J.C. In a recent paper[5] on the urban fiscal crises, or better, on urban fiscal strains and the way crises are created out of them, you and your co-authors try to analyse the forces making for a rise in public expenditures. In the context of neo-conservative or reactionary attacks on public expenditures (particularly social services) exemplified by Proposition 13, which seem to be able to mobilize many people against the visible sources of their personal fiscal strains of taxes, etc., that sort of analysis seems

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[5] Roger Friedland, Frances Fox Piven, and Robert R. Alford, "Political Conflict, Urban Structure and the Fiscal Crisis," Intl. Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Vol. 1 #3, Oct. 1977, pp. 447-471.

an important topic for left sociologists. They are politically important, but as you and your co-authors note at the end of that article, in the absence of any mass movements of political change, they seem also to be politically impotent. Do you see that sort of analysis connecting up in any way to political movements, and in more general terms, what role does sociological analysis have in this kind of situation?

R.A. Well, you're asking three or four related but somewhat different questions. I do think that our point was an important one, namely that there is a potential political basis for challenges to the cuts in public and social services. But I don't see that our analysis or others like it have had much direct impact in mobilizing a reaction to them. The connection between research and intellectual analyses and political movements has always been a highly indirect and mediated one, so that the role of critical analyses of particular policies and their impact in enlivening a movement or providing ammunition for it is quite unclear.

J.C. It is also a question that seems to have plagued sociologists. They usually seem to have been particularly concerned about the social and political effects of their work and often try to give what they do some political relevance. It is very obvious in the case of Piven and Cloward's Poor People's Movements,[6] where the analysis is intended to inform the strategy of that sort of movement. It is less clear in the case of most other work, but there still seems very often to be some political impetus.

R.A. Of course Piven and Cloward are among the few Left social scientists who have been actively involved in the movements that they write

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[6] (New York: Vintage Books, 1979)

about. As you know they were instrumental in helping to shape the Welfare Rights Movement and earlier Cloward helped form Mobilization for Youth in New York City. But it is unclear what their analyses contributed as opposed to their own presence as organizers. It may be that sociologists have to participate directly in order to have an impact, like anybody else.

J.C. We've already spoken indirectly about a flowering of Marxist sociology in North America. As a paradigm in sociology, is Marxism a fragile flower always in danger of fading, or is it a fairly hardy young weed that will strongly resist any attempts to get rid of it? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Marxist theory and research in sociology?

R.A. That question presupposes an answer to a question that you didn't ask. I think it's a mistake to talk about Marxist sociology, because I think that implies that Marxism is a sufficiently comprehensive and adequate theory by itself on which to base an analysis of society. Marxist concepts are intrinsically interdisciplinary, and for Marx they belong to a "critique of political economy." Even that currently popular phrase--"political economy"--seems to me in some ways to be untrue to the spirit of Marxism as a critique of the partial theories that derive from the arbitrary disciplinary boundaries of the social sciences and history. There is also another reason why speaking of "Marxist sociology" is not a good idea. I think such a usage reinforces and maintains lines of antagonism within political and theoretical debates that are not healthy. That is, it tends to set up a polarization between people who are willing to include themselves as Marxists and those who are then willy-nilly in a non-Marxist camp, I think that is politically and theoretically dangerous.

To answer your question rephrased, I would regard Marxism as an intellectual tradition that should be available and dealt with seriously by all sociologists as a very important component both of the education of students and available for people to deal with regardless of the problem they are working on. Given that, I would say that the Marxist theoretical tradition is developing and likely to have more and more influence, if it avoids the double tendencies towards self-ghettoization and repression: the exclusion of people who use the Marxist tradition from jobs, or the intimidation of those who have jobs. While political repression is certainly not created by sectarianism, it is at least made possible to some extent by the tendency of the Left to fragment and become hostile sects.

You asked about the strengths and weaknesses of Marxism as a paradigm in political sociology. Let me speak to the strengths first. First, in a Marxist analysis crises of the state are not simply exogenous phenomena that burst upon the scene like a storm but are explainable within the structure of the theory and of the society. Second, class relations and class conflict are recognized directly and centrally as having an independent causal impact on state policies and state structures. Organizations of both capital and of the working class are regarded as among the fundamental forces at work in society, both to shape its structure and to bring about change. To start from those premises as starting points of analysis I think is a contribution of fundamental importance.

The main deficiencies of Marxism in political sociology are that Marxism has no satisfactory theory of the state or of democracy. The recent attempts to develop a concept of the relative autonomy of the state do not go far enough in recognizing the internal dynamics of the state. Once institutionally established, separated by the very requirements of capitalist rule, the state

cannot be understood in any direct way as representing the interests of the capitalist class. That is recognized in general by the formula "relative autonomy of the state" but not in practical analysis. In concrete analyses these tend to fall back on either an "instrumentalist" or a "structuralist" perspective, either to discover to what extent agents of the capitalist class are directly present in the making of state decisions or to assume that the structure of the state in the "last instance" serves or represents the interests of capital as a whole. Neither of these assumptions is a good starting point for analysis.

J.C. If I'm not mistaking your position, your solution to that problem is basically to look at the consequences of state policy, at who benefits from state policy. That leaves the question of who is served by state policy open, but it doesn't avoid the functionalist trap of going from who benefits to an implied causal mechanism. The only way to avoid that is to go back and look at the causes of state policies, and it seems to me that the so-called structuralist theory of the state is at least starting to do that. You're correct that there is still this assumption that in the last analysis (a nice loophole) the state will serve the capitalist class or a fraction of the capitalist class. But there is starting to be a recognition, e.g., in Poulantzas' State, Power, Socialism,[7] that you have to look at the mechanism by which that happens and an implicit question of whether that is always going to happen.

R.A. Well, it is certainly inadequate to say "to look at the mechanism" because that formulation still accepts the assumption that "that happens" (i.e. the function for capital) in the normal political process. That assumption is precisely what has to be questioned. That is the theoretical inadequacy of the Marxist tradition at

[7]London: NLB, 1978.

this time. I'm obviously gliding over the significant differences among Marxists with respect to this question, e.g., among Miliband, Poulantzas, and O'Connor,that Leo Panitch and others have been trying to specify and which are very important.

In talking about the consequences of state policy I wasn't saying that approach will solve all the problems because that is not really a theoretical position but rather an "entry point," the point where you analytically enter this complex system and develop a research question which will enable you to ask something quite concrete. The opposite approach is somewhat easier--to postulate, and be right, incidentally--that the causes of state policies and state structures are constrained in some broad way by the fact that the state exists within the capitalist context. But if one examines the consequences of state policies then I think it's harder tc accept that theoretical postulate. Both for causes and consequences, the form and level of class conflict--among other factors--have an impact.

I think that in the famous Poulantzas-Miliband debate they're both right. What I mean by that is that Poulantzas is right in arguing that the direct participation of members or agents of the capitalist class is indeed as he puts it "chance and contingent," that it's not necessary for the capitalist class always to be present in order for their interests to be served. But I think Miliband was right in saying that we have to specify the concrete conditions under which specific political elites function and in whose interests they function. You can't postulate that the structure of the state is organized in such a way as to serve capitalist interests either in the short run or in the long run.

J.C. There's a difference of levels then.

R.A. That's right. The issue must be defined as one about the historical conditions under which different class agents must be mobilized to serve their interests. It has to become a historically concrete problem. I would even argue that if you find members of the capitalist class directly present, it is a sign that they are either losing or in danger of losing. That is, only in political and economic crisis must they become active in order to influence policy. If the state is running smoothly, then in effect they don't have to be active (it is even better that they are not active) to have their interests served. I'm not arguing this empirically; this is a theoretical speculation.

Now look at what this theoretical position leads to. Certain kinds of issues are likely to become public, visible, and then politically open to the participation of more groups. In such instances of crisis the situation has the appearance of pluralism, that is, the outcome is genuinely uncertain. Therefore ruling elites and dominant class interests are vulnerable in those moments and must mobilize if the outcome is indeed vital to their interests. Yet the outcome is problematic, because the issues have become public and visible and therefore politicized. That's why "mapping" the whole range of state decisions and state policies is important. Otherwise you tend to have a biased sample of either those issues and decisions which are insulated from popular and democratic influence or those which are highly politicized and in which the outcome is genuinely doubtful.

J.C. In the article about the urban crisis that we've already referred to, the argument is made that there is a segregation between public and politicized issues dealing with what O'Connor[8] calls legitimation and you call political integration, and the insulated ones, out of public view and

[8] The Fiscal Crisis of the State. New York: St. Martin's, 1973.

concerned with accumulation. Are you saying then that in cases of crisis the ones that are ordinarily insulated become public issues?

R.A. No, not necessarily, but if they do then the balance of political and class forces has shifted and the outcome becomes problematic. We are assuming that we are dealing with capitalist societies that are democratic in the sense that mechanisms of participation do make a difference, if popular interests get mobilized. I'm not at all assuming that the balance of power always shifts in moments of crisis, quite the contrary.

J.C. Both in Health Care Politics[9] and in this urban crisis article, and in contrast to much Marxist writing that tends to see crises as more or less automatic results of tendencies of the system, you appear to be arguing that crises are created by elites as a way of resolving strains that exist within the state.

R.A. I guess this might be looked at as the transposition into the state of what Marxists used to call in the economy a "shakeout," i.e., the destruction or elimination of the less efficient firms in the economic crisis. Maybe political crises have that same character, as a way of getting rid of the less efficient state agencies.

J.C. It sounds awfully conspiratorial.

R.A. No, not necessarily. I don't think we intended to imply (although we may have come close to it) that crises were that free floating and could be created by political elites almost at their will. Certainly not. Different interests are strategically located at different places to take advantage of crises and to exacerbate them, to define them ideologically in certain ways

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[9](Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975)

or to use them to get leverage in different ways. Once a situation like that is in existence, the outcome is to some extent open. They may not be able to control the outcome. Popular interests may mobilize and have an impact that could not be foreseen or controlled. And not all crises are created by elites in any direct sense, for example the sort of thing discussed by Piven and Cloward in Poor People's Movements.

J.C. In Party and Society you did a comparative study, and in the urban crisis article called for more comparative studies of such phenomena. It seems very often that Marxists and left sociologists haven't done that, often I suppose because they find that a lot of very basic work has to be done in their own society before any attempt is made to be comparative (such is the case in Canada, I'd say). Do you see much prospect for real comparative work that takes account of the different levels of analysis in political sociology?

R.A. I think this is a general problem for people working in the Marxist tradition and for others. Perhaps it is more difficult for people working in the Marxist tradition because of their refusal to see different levels or different units of analysis as autonomous. The best Marxist analyses are both multi-level and historical, so the problems of comparative analysis are compounded. I'm not sure that it's a good starting point to say that much of the fundamental work has to be done in one society, because you don't know what the criteria for relevance are until you have some sense of comparison. If you're doing a case study of one country, you can quickly get enmeshed in the details which may be unique so that they are not generalizable. If the specific family alliances among elites, say, in Canadian society are completely idiosyncratic and yet have decisively influenced some rather

critical investment decisions, you may not know that unless you've started out with a comparative framework using the economic consequences of ruling class family networks as your problem.

It's a chicken and egg problem to some extent. You don't know what the relevant factors are until you've done the comparative study, but you don't know how to do the comparative study unless you know enough about each case to make the comparison. It depends on the state of knowledge in a particular area as to whether it's better to get the facts straight history of a particular institution or state policy. A lot of groundwork like that certainly has to be done in many areas.

On the other hand, it may be better to start out comparatively, if you are able to develop a comparative framework using theoretical guidelines as to what is relevant. This rather important issue of research design underlines the importance of creating a research group where it's possible to have a genuine division of labour, not necessarily collective work but at least a genuine intellectual division of labour on some of these problems.

J.C. In the sense of people working on different problems or people working in different areas?

R.A. Both. I recommend this approach highly. People in France, Britain, the United States and Canada may be working on pension policy, for example. They get together for an initial conference where they compare notes in a kind of gestalt about the general pattern of the policy making and history of pensions. The process will sensitize them to the dimensions of variability as well as about factors each person is not aware of because some process is absent in their own country. If the research process becomes a quasi-collective division of labour both detailed case studies and systematic comparisons can be done at once in some sense.

I advance that vision of the ideal research process as theoretically desirable but in practice I haven't done any more comparative work than most other people. But I have been involved in an international group trying to work on urban crises. We want to analyze the differences in the specific structures of the state which deal with these problems. In Canada, for example, you could look at the centralization and de-centralization of the state as a political strategy, not as the iron boundaries within which political struggle occurs. The very structure of the state is an object of political and class conflict.

J.C. One question that lies behind some of the questions I've already asked concerns a paper you did on paradigms in political sociology several years ago.[10] In that paper, you appear to simply set out the alternative paradigms without really taking a stand on any of them. In the work you've done since then you do seem to take some position. What I would like you to do is not so much to say that one is better than another (although I want you to do that too), but rather to state the grounds on the basis of which you would say that you should use one paradigm in preference to another. Perhaps you'd have to take all three in any concrete problem.

R.A. The essay you refer to was written in 1973 and it certainly did not take a stand on any of them. It attempted to state the assumptions of the class, elite and pluralist paradigms and contrast their distinctive assumptions and power to explain different aspects of social reality. To some extent I would still take that position, i.e., that there is no adequate general theory. As

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[10] "Paradigms of Relations Between State and Society," in Leon Lindberg, et al., editors, Stress and Contradiction in Modern Capitalism (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1975), pp. 145-160.

I said earlier in the interview, Marxism has no satisfactory theory of either the state or of democracy and can only with great effort be extended to cover some phenomena. They tend to be regarded as residual or unique features of the "social formation" or of the "conjuncture." I don't object to that mode of theorizing as long as it's clear what limited realms of experience and historical evidence the person who is making that statement realizes they are explaining, that other historical processes and factors remain open for investigation and interpretation.

But you're also certainly right that in later writings I come closer to containing what I would now describe as the insights of pluralism within a combination of elite and class perspectives. If I had to describe the nature of a position or a synthesis I would put it that way. The autonomy of groups and the free formation of preferences as in the classic pluralist approach to politics I regard as a useful mode of explanation only within a very narrow range of real political issues. I think there are certain parameters or conditions under which you can describe the outcomes of political conflict using a pluralist model, but those conditions then have to be specified using concepts drawn from essentially a theory which specifies the autonomy of the state structure and the autonomy of the class structure. I realize that's a cryptic statement. You're raising one of the most fundamental epistemological issues, that is, how (if it is possible) to integrate alternative paradigms or perspectives. In effect you're asking me to give you a brief and almost glib synthesis, which is a very difficult thing to do, but I will try.

First, the requirements of legitimation and accumulation in the capitalist state requires that the state be institutionally separated from the economy, that is the state cannot be under the direct and visible control of the capitalist class for various reasons that the neo-Marxists have specified.

Second, once the state is institutionally separated, it becomes internally differentiated into a politicized and de-politicized sector. This differentiation does not happen in ways which necessarily serve the interests of capital. This is the elite component and it is not the same as either an instrumentalist or a structuralist Marxist prediction of the structure.

Now the pluralist element is that the politicized sector is genuinely open to change brought by the demands of diverse social groups. The political energies of the mobilized groups and parties are absorbed in attempts to influence state decisions largely in the politicized sector of the state. You could call it the sector of pluralist politics, which consumes the political energies of the population in certain kinds of reforms. The issues around which it is possible to mobilize,or to have an impact are quite limited. This interpretation is quite consistent with the whole pluralist position. For example, the whole argument of Dahl in Who Governs?[11] (in different language) is that the impact of political action is limited to the political consensus at any given time, to a quite limited set of issues. Now the pluralists do not theorize political consensus: that's their residual category. What accounts for those constraints on the effective range of issues? Very briefly, I think both the internal differentiation of the state structure at any given time and the way in which the state is organized in a larger sense to meet certain kinds of requirement for a capitalist economy limit the impact of political mobilization.

What I have just given is a structural description, not a prediction of any particular outcomes. I've attempted to state the ways in which each theory

[11] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961)

locates a particular aspect of reality and explains it with distinctive factors. Again, that's only an approach, only a starting point, but I think it enables one to take into account the incredibly complex and diverse panoply of political actors that get involved in a particular situation, without saying that all the sound and fury of pluralist politics is all of reality, or even the most important part. The other levels still exist at which issues are being decided and benefits allocated. (Incidentally, I am currently struggling with a book which will expand this argument, with many illustrations from the empirical literature.)

J.C. The way you've done it is to go from structures to be analysed in class terms, to the more specific structures of states, such as the segregation of agencies, and finally to the sound and fury of pluralist politics. Presumably you can trace it back then to the effects of pluralist politics on transforming the other levels.

R.A. That's precisely right. If you take seriously the idea that the outcomes of the actual issues that emerge into political conflict are not completely determined by the structure of the system, then one can develop a more adequate explanation for the incredibly internally contradictory and fragmented structure of the state and the diverse public policies it produces.

J.C. And it would account then for circumstances where it seems that the state is not serving the needs of the capitalist class.

R.A. That's correct. This approach argues that if you look at a "cross-section" of the state at any given point in time it will be a reflection simultaneously of the impact of popular mobilization, of working class and other group interests as reflected in various organizations, of the outcomes of the internal strategies of state elites struggling to build bureaucratic empires

and of the direct impact of capitalist class interests either mobilized or not mobilized depending on the existing policy of the relevant state agency. Because the state depends upon economic growth and tax revenue, it's internal processes are biased (in ways the structuralists have stated) toward the interests of capital. The sum total is a highly internally contradictory apparatus. The implication of this approach is that one cannot and should not leap to quick and easy judgments about the overall function of the state.