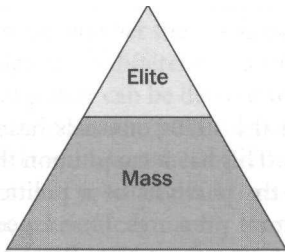


Power-elite model: single, coherent elite



Competitive elite model: fractured elite

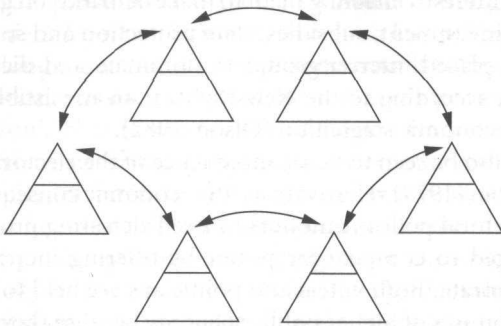


Fig. 4.1 Elite models

Concept

Democratization

Democratization refers to the transition from authoritarianism to liberal democracy. The most important features of this process are the granting of basic freedoms and particularly political rights, the establishment of popular and competitive elections, and (especially in postcommunist regimes) the introduction of market reforms. Democratization encompasses three, sometimes overlapping, processes. First, the old regime breaks down; this usually involves a loss of legitimacy (see p. 210), generally linked to economic failure and the faltering loyalty of the police and military. Second, 'democratic transition' witnesses the construction of new liberal-democratic structures and processes. Third, 'democratic consolidation' sees these new structures and processes becoming so embedded in the minds of elites and the masses that their removal becomes unthinkable. Democracy thus becomes 'the only game in town' (Przeworski, 1991).

Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Austria) was a consequence of the drift towards economic management and intervention. As government sought to manage economic life and deliver an increasingly broad range of public services, it recognized the need for institutional arrangements designed to secure the cooperation and support of major economic interests. Where attempts have been made to shift economic policy away from state intervention and towards the free market (as in the UK since 1979), the impact of corporatism has markedly diminished.

The significance of corporatism in terms of democratic processes is clearly considerable. There are those who, like the British guild socialists, argue that corporatism makes possible a form of functional representation, in that individuals' views and interests are articulated more by the groups to which they belong than through the mechanism of competitive elections. What is called 'corporate pluralism' thus portrays tripartism as a mechanism through which the major groups and interests in society compete to shape government policy. Most commentators, however, see corporatism very much as a threat to democracy. In the first place, corporatism only advantages groups that are accorded privileged access to government. 'Insider' groups therefore possess a political voice, while 'outsider' groups are denied one. Second, corporatism can work to the benefit of the state rather than major economic interests, in that the **peak associations** that the government chooses to deal with can be used to exert discipline over their members and to filter out radical demands. Finally, corporatism threatens to subvert the processes of electoral or parliamentary democracy. Policy is made through negotiations between government officials and leaders of powerful economic interests rather than through the deliberations of a representative assembly. Interest-group leaders may thus exert considerable political

Peak association: A group recognized by government as representing the general or collective interests of businesses or workers.

power, even though they are in no way publicly accountable and their influence is not subject to public scrutiny.

New Right view

The emergence of the New Right from the 1970s onwards has generated a very particular critique of democratic politics. This has focused upon the danger of what has been called 'democratic overload': the paralysis of a political system that is subject to unrestrained group and electoral pressures. One aspect of this critique has highlighted the unsavoury face of corporatism. New Right theorists are keen advocates of the free market, believing that economies work best when left alone by government. The danger of corporatism from this perspective is that it empowers sectional groups and economic interests, enabling them to make demands on government for increased pay, public investment, subsidies, state protection and so on. In effect, corporatism allows well-placed interest groups to dominate and dictate to government. The result of this, according to the New Right, is an irresistible drift towards state intervention and economic stagnation (Olson, 1982).

Government 'overload' can also be seen to be a consequence of the electoral process. This was what Samuel Brittan (1977) referred to as 'the economic consequences of democracy'. In this view, electoral politics amounts to a self-defeating process in which politicians are encouraged to compete for power by offering increasingly unrealistic promises to the electorate. Both voters and politicians are held to blame here. Voters are attracted by promises of higher public spending because they calculate that the cost (an increased tax burden) will be spread over the entire population. Politicians, consumed by the desire to win power, attempt to outbid one another by making ever more generous spending pledges to the electorate. According to Brittan, the economic consequences of unrestrained democracy are high levels of inflation fuelled by public borrowing, and a tax burden that destroys enterprise and undermines growth. As characterized by David Marquand (1988), the New Right view is that 'democracy is to adults what chocolate is to children: endlessly tempting; harmless in small doses; sickening in excess'. New Right theorists therefore tend to see democracy in strictly protective terms, regarding it essentially as a defence against arbitrary government rather than a means of bringing about social transformation.

Marxist view

As pointed out in relation to people's democracy, the Marxist view of democratic politics is rooted in class analysis. In this view, political power cannot be understood narrowly in terms of electoral rights, or in terms of the ability of groups to articulate their interests by lobbying and campaigning. Rather, at a deeper level, political power reflects the distribution of economic power and, in particular, the unequal ownership of productive wealth. The Marxist critique of liberal democracy thus focuses upon the inherent tension between democracy and capitalism: that is, between the political equality that liberal democracy proclaims and the social inequality that a capitalist economy inevitably generates. Liberal democracies are thus seen as 'capitalist' or 'bourgeois' democracies that are manipulated and controlled by the entrenched power of a **ruling class**.

Marxism thus offers a distinctive critique of pluralist democracy. Power cannot be widely and evenly dispersed in society as long as class power is unequally distributed.

Ruling class: A Marxist term, denoting a class that dominates other classes and society at large by virtue of its ownership of productive wealth.

Indeed, in many respects, the Marxist view parallels the elitist critique of pluralism. Both views suggest that power is ultimately concentrated in the hands of the few, the main difference being whether the few is conceived of as a 'power elite' or as a 'ruling class'. However, significant differences can also be identified. In the first place, whereas elitists suggest that power can be derived from a variety of sources (education, social status, bureaucratic position, political connections, wealth, and so on), Marxists emphasize the decisive importance of economic factors, notably the ownership and control of the means of production. Moreover, elitists are less clear about the significance of elite rule, acknowledging, for example, that when competition exists within a fractured elite policy may, to some extent, be shaped by democratic pressures. Marxists, in contrast, tend to argue that the ruling class is bent on pursuing its own economic interests, and that it makes concessions to other classes only in order to stabilize capitalism and perpetuate a system of unequal class power.

Modern Marxists, however, have been less willing to dismiss electoral democracy as nothing more than a sham. **Eurocommunists**, for example, abandoned the idea of revolution, embracing instead the notion of a peaceful, legal and democratic 'road to socialism'. Neo-Marxists such as Jürgen Habermas (see p. 214) and Claus Offe (1984) have nevertheless drawn attention to the contradictions, and perhaps inherent instability, of capitalist democracy. In this view, on the one hand, the democratic process forces government to respond to popular demands, leading to an inexorable rise of public spending and a progressive expansion of the state's responsibilities, especially in economic and social life. On the other hand, the long-term survival of capitalism is threatened by a fiscal crisis in which high taxes become a disincentive to enterprise, and ever-rising government borrowing leads to permanently high inflation. Forced either to resist democratic pressures or to risk economic collapse, capitalist democracy would, Habermas (1973) argued, find it increasingly difficult to maintain legitimacy. These issues are discussed at greater length in Chapter 10.

Summary

- The very popularity of democracy has threatened its use as a meaningful political term, and perhaps reduced it to a mere 'hurrah! word'. The meanings of the term have ranged from a system of rule by the masses and a form of government based on direct and popular continuous popular participation to rule by the majority and a system of party competition that operates through regular and popular elections.
- Debates about the nature of democracy have tended to focus on three central issues. First, who are the people, or how far should political power be distributed? Second, should the people in effect rule themselves, or should government be left in the hands of politicians and parties that claim to represent them? Third, what matters is it appropriate to decide collectively through the use of democratic processes?
- There are a number of rival models of democracy, each offering its own version of popular rule. These include: classical democracy, which is based on the principle of popular self-government; protective democracy, which is rooted in the individualist assumptions of liberalism; developmental democracy, which is concerned with broadening the scope for popular participation; and people's democracy, which pays particular attention to the distribution of class power.

Eurocommunism: A form of deradicalized communism that attempted to blend Marxism with liberal-democratic principles.

- Classical democracy, which is based on the political system in Athens in Ancient Greece, is defended on the grounds that it alone guarantees government *by* the people. Protective democracy gives citizens the greatest scope to live their lives as they choose. Developmental democracy has the virtue that, in extending participation, it widens liberty and fosters personal growth. People's democracy aims to achieve economic emancipation, rather than merely the extension of political rights.
- In practice, there is broad acceptance of a particular model of democracy, generally termed liberal democracy. Its central features are that it is an indirect and representative form of democracy that is based on regular elections. It operates through party competition and electoral choice, and it observes a clear distinction between the state and civil society, thus allowing for the existence of autonomous groups and private property.
- There is considerable controversy about how liberal-democratic systems work in practice. Pluralists praise their capacity to guarantee popular responsiveness and public accountability. Elitists highlight the tendency for political power to be concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority. Corporatists draw attention to the incorporation of groups into government. The New Right focuses on the dangers of 'democratic overload'. And Marxists point to tensions between democracy and capitalism.

■ Questions for discussion

- Why has democracy come to be so universally well regarded?
- Is direct democracy in any way applicable to modern circumstances?
- What are the principal virtues of democracy?
- What are the drawbacks or dangers of democracy?
- Which model of democracy is most attractive, and why?
- Do modern forms of representative democracy deserve to be described as democratic?
- What are the major threats to democracy in modern society?

■ Further reading

Arblaster, A. *Democracy* (2nd ed.) (Milton Keynes: Open University Press; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). A succinct and thoughtful introduction to the theory of democracy.

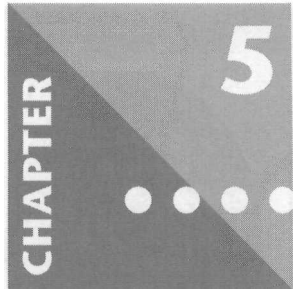
Dahl, R. *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989) A wide-ranging and thorough discussion of the democratic ideal and democratic practices.

Gill, G. (2000) *The Dynamics of Democratization: Elite, Civil Society and the Transition Process* (Basingstoke: Palgrave). A clear and accessible overview of the scale, scope and character of democratization in the contemporary world.

Held, D. *Models of Democracy* (2nd ed.) (Oxford: Polity Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). A rigorous and stimulating examination of rival models of democracy and the present state of democratic theory.

Macpherson, C. B. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). A short, lucid and perceptive discussion of important themes in liberal-democratic theory.

The State



'The purpose of the State is always the same: to limit the individual, to tame him, to subordinate him, to subjugate him.'

MAX STIRNER *The Ego and His Own* (1845)

The shadow of the state falls upon almost every human activity. From education to economic management, from social welfare to sanitation, and from domestic order to external defence, the state shapes and controls, and where it does not shape or control it regulates, supervises, authorises or proscribes. Even those aspects of life usually thought of as personal or private (marriage, divorce, abortion, religious worship and so on) are ultimately subject to the authority of the state. It is not surprising, therefore, that politics is often understood as the study of the state, the analysis of its institutional organizations, the evaluation of its impact on society, and so on. Ideological debate and party politics, certainly, tend to revolve around the proper function or role of the state: what should be done by the state and what should be left to private individuals and associations? The nature of state power has thus become one of the central concerns of political analysis. This debate (the so-called 'state debate') touches on some of the deepest and most abiding divisions in political theory.

The central issues examined in this chapter are as follows:

Key issues

- ▶ What is the state, and how can it be distinguished from government?
- ▶ How has state power been analysed and explained?
- ▶ Is the state a force for good or a force for evil?
- ▶ What roles have been assigned to the state? How have responsibilities been apportioned between the state and civil society?
- ▶ Is the modern state under threat, and, if so, how are its powers being usurped?

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Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)

German philosopher. Hegel was the founder of modern idealism and developed the notion that consciousness and material objects are in fact unified. In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) he sought to develop a rational system that would substitute for traditional Christianity by interpreting the entire process of human history, and indeed the universe itself, in terms of the progress of absolute Mind towards self-realization. In his view, history is, in essence, a march of the human spirit towards a determinant endpoint. His major political work,

Philosophy of Right (1821), portrayed the state as an ethical ideal and the highest expression of human freedom. Hegel's work had considerable impact upon Marx and other so-called 'young Hegelians', and it helped to shape the development of both liberal and fascist thought.

What is the state?

The term 'state' has been used to refer to a bewildering range of things: a collection of institutions, a territorial unit, a philosophical idea, an instrument of coercion or oppression, and so on. This confusion stems, in part, from the fact that the state has been understood in three very different ways, from an idealist perspective, a functionalist perspective and an organizational perspective. The *idealist* approach to the state is most clearly reflected in the writings of G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel identified three 'moments' of social existence: the family, civil society, and the state. Within the family, he argued, a 'particular altruism' operates that encourages people to set aside their own interests for the good of their children or elderly relatives. In contrast, civil society was seen as a sphere of 'universal egoism' in which individuals place their own interests before those of others. Hegel conceived of the state as an ethical community underpinned by mutual sympathy - 'universal altruism'. The drawback of idealism, however, is that it fosters an uncritical reverence for the state and, by defining the state in ethical terms, fails to distinguish clearly between institutions that are part of the state and those that are outside the state.

Functionalist approaches to the state focus on the role or purpose of state institutions. The central function of the state is invariably seen as the maintenance of social order (see p. 389), the state being defined as that set of institutions that uphold order and deliver social stability. Such an approach has, for example, been adopted by modern Marxists, who have been inclined to see the state as a mechanism through which class conflict is ameliorated to ensure the long-term survival of the capitalist system. The weakness of the functionalist view of the state, however, is that it tends to associate *any* institution that maintains order (such as the family, mass media, trade unions and the church) with the state itself. This is why, unless there is a statement to the contrary, an organizational approach to the definition of the state (see below) is adopted throughout this book

The *organizational* view defines the state as the apparatus of government in its broadest sense: that is, as that set of institutions that are recognizably 'public' in that they are responsible for the collective organization of social existence and are funded at the public's expense. The virtue of this definition is that it distinguishes clearly between the state and civil society (see p. 8). The state comprises the various

- Government is the *means* through which the authority of the state is brought into operation. In making and implementing state policy, government is 'the brains' of the state, and it perpetuates the state's existence.
- The state exercises *impersonal* authority. The personnel of state bodies is recruited and trained in a bureaucratic manner and is (usually) expected to be politically neutral, enabling state bodies to resist the ideological enthusiasms of the government of the day.
- The state, in theory at least, represents the permanent interests of society: that is, the *common* good or general will. Government, on the other hand, represents the *partisan* sympathies of those who happen to be in power at a particular time.

Rival theories of the state

Reaching an agreement about what we mean by 'the state' provides a basis upon which to examine a deeper problem: what is the nature of state power, and what interests does the state represent? From this perspective, the state is an 'essentially contested' concept. There are a number of rival theories of the state, each of which offers a different account of its origins, development and impact on society. Indeed, controversy about the nature of state power has increasingly dominated modern political analysis and goes to the heart of ideological and theoretical disagreements in the discipline. These relate to questions about whether, for example, the state is autonomous and independent of society, or whether it is essentially a product of society, a reflection of the broader distribution of power or resources. Moreover, does the state serve the common or collective good, or is it biased in favour of privileged groups or a dominant class? Similarly, is the state a positive or constructive force, with responsibilities that should be enlarged, or is it a negative or destructive entity that must be constrained or, perhaps, smashed altogether? Four contrasting theories of the state can be identified as follows:

- the pluralist state
- the capitalist state
- the leviathan state
- the patriarchal state.

The pluralist state

The pluralist theory of the state has a very clear liberal lineage. It stems from the belief that the state acts as an 'umpire' or 'referee' in society. This view has also dominated mainstream political analysis, accounting for a tendency, at least within Anglo-American thought, to discount the state and state organizations and focus instead on 'government'. Indeed, it is not uncommon in this tradition for 'the state' to be dismissed as an abstraction, with institutions such as the courts, the civil service and the military being seen as independent actors in their own right, rather than as elements of a broader state machine. Nevertheless, this approach is possible only because it is based on underlying, and often unacknowledged, assumptions about state neutrality. The state can be ignored only because it is seen as an impartial arbiter or referee that can be bent to the will of the government of the day.

The origins of this theory of the state can be traced back to the writings of seventeenth-century social-contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (see p. 45). The principal concern of such thinkers was to examine the grounds of **political obligation**, the grounds upon which the individual is obliged to obey and respect the state. They argued that the state had arisen out of a voluntary agreement, or social contract, made by individuals who recognized that only the establishment of a sovereign power could safeguard them from the insecurity, disorder and brutality of the **state of nature**. Without a state, individuals abuse, exploit and enslave one another; with a state, order and civilized existence are guaranteed and liberty is protected. As Locke put it, 'where there is no law there is no freedom'.

In liberal theory, the state is thus seen as a neutral arbiter amongst the competing groups and individuals in society; it is an 'umpire' or 'referee' that is capable of protecting each citizen from the encroachments of fellow citizens. The neutrality of the state reflects the fact that the state acts in the interests of *all* citizens, and therefore represents the common good or public interest. In Hobbes' view, stability and order could be secured only through the establishment of an absolute and unlimited state, with power that could be neither challenged nor questioned. In other words, he held that citizens are confronted by a stark choice between absolutism (see p. 28) and **anarchy**. Locke, on the other hand, developed a more typically liberal defence of the limited state. In his view, the purpose of the state is very specific: it is restricted to the defence of a set of 'natural' or God-given individual rights, namely 'life, liberty and property'. This establishes a clear distinction between the responsibilities of the state (essentially the maintenance of domestic order and the protection of property) and the responsibilities of an individual.

Concept

Neopluralism

Neopluralism is a style of social theorizing that remains faithful to pluralist values while recognizing the need to revise or update classical pluralism in the light of, for example, elite, Marxist and New Right theories. Although neopluralism embraces a broad range of perspectives and positions, certain central themes can be identified. First, it attempts to take account of modernizing trends, such as the emergence of postindustrial and postcapitalist society. Second, while capitalism is certainly preferred to socialism, free-market economic doctrines are usually regarded as obsolete. Third, western democracies are seen as 'deformed polyarchies', in which major corporations exert disproportionate influence.

uphold them, citizens must enjoy some form of protection against the state, which Locke believed could be delivered only through the mechanisms of constitutional and representative government.

These ideas were developed in the twentieth century into the pluralist theory of the state. As a theory of society, pluralism (see p. 78) asserts that, within liberal democracies, power is widely and evenly dispersed. As a theory of the state, pluralism holds that the state is neutral insofar as it is susceptible to the influence of various groups and interests and all social classes. The state is not biased in favour of any particular interest or group, and it does not have an interest of its own that is separate from those of society. As Schwarzmantel (1994:52) put it, the state is 'the servant of society and not its master'. The state can thus be portrayed as a 'pincushion' that passively absorbs pressures and forces exerted upon it. Two key assumptions underlie this view. The first is that the state is effectively subordinate to government. Nonelected state bodies (the civil service, the judiciary, the police, the military and so on) are strictly impartial and are subject to the authority of their political masters. The state apparatus is therefore thought to conform to the principles of public service and political accountability (see p. 393). The second assumption is that the democratic process is meaningful and effective. In other words, party competition and interest-group activity ensure that the government of the day remains sensitive and responsive to public opinion. Ultimately, therefore, the state is only a weather vane that is blown in whatever direction the public at large dictates.

Modern pluralists, however, have often adopted a more critical view of the state, termed the neopluralist theory of the state. Theorists such as Robert Dahl (see p. 274), Charles Lindblom and J. K. Galbraith (see p. 193) have come to accept that modern industrialized states are both more complex and less responsive to popular pressures than classical pluralism suggested. Neopluralists, for instance, have acknowledged that business enjoys a 'privileged position' in relation to government that other groups clearly cannot rival. In *Politics and Markets* (1977) Lindblom pointed out that, as the major investor and largest employer in society, business is bound to exercise considerable sway over any government, whatever its ideological leanings or manifesto commitments. Moreover, neopluralists have accepted that the state can and does forge its own sectional interests. In this way, a state elite, composed of senior civil servants, judges, police chiefs, military leaders and so on, may be seen to pursue either the bureaucratic interests of their sector of the state or the interests of client groups. Indeed, if the state is regarded as a political actor in its own right, it can be viewed as a powerful (perhaps the most powerful) interest group in society. This line of argument encouraged Eric Nordlinger (1981) to develop a state-centred model of liberal democracy, based on 'the autonomy of the democratic state'.

The capitalist state

The Marxist notion of a capitalist state offers a clear alternative to the pluralist image of the state as a neutral arbiter or umpire. Marxists have typically argued that the state cannot be understood separately from the economic structure of society. This view has usually been understood in terms of the classic formulation that the state is nothing but an instrument of class oppression: the state emerges out of, and in a sense reflects, the class system. Nevertheless, a rich debate has taken place within Marxist theory in recent years that has moved the Marxist theory of the state a long way from this classic formulation. In many ways, the scope to revise Marxist

attitudes towards the state stems from ambiguities that can be found in Marx's own writings.

Marx did not develop a systematic or coherent theory of the state. In a general sense, he believed that the state is part of a 'superstructure' that is determined or conditioned by the economic 'base', which can be seen as the real foundation of social life. However, the precise relationship between the base and the superstructure, and in this case that between the state and the capitalist mode of production, is unclear. Two theories of the state can be identified in Marx's writings. The first is expressed in his often-quoted dictum from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848:82): 'The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. From this perspective, the state is clearly dependent upon society and entirely dependent upon its economically dominant class, which in capitalism is the **bourgeoisie**. Lenin thus described the state starkly as 'an instrument for the oppression of the exploited class'.

A second, more complex and subtle, theory of the state can nevertheless be found in Marx's analysis of the revolutionary events in France between 1848 and 1851, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* ([1852] 1963). Marx suggested that the state could enjoy what has come to be seen as 'relative autonomy' from the class system, the Napoleonic state being capable of imposing its will upon society, acting as an 'appalling parasitic body'. If the state did articulate the interests of any class, it was not those of the bourgeoisie, but those of the most populous class in French society, the smallholding peasantry. Although Marx did not develop this view in detail, it is clear that, from this perspective, the autonomy of the state is only *relative*, in that the state appears to mediate between conflicting classes, and so maintains the class system itself in existence.

Both these theories differ markedly from the liberal and, later, pluralist models of state power. In particular, they emphasize that the state cannot be understood except in a context of unequal class power, and that the state arises out of, and reflects, capitalist society, by acting either as an instrument of oppression wielded by the dominant class, or, more subtly, as a mechanism through which class antagonisms are ameliorated. Nevertheless, Marx's attitude towards the state was not entirely negative. He argued that the state could be used constructively during the transition from capitalism to communism in the form of the 'revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat'. The overthrow of capitalism would see the destruction of the bourgeois state and the creation of an alternative, proletarian one.

In describing the state as a proletarian 'dictatorship', Marx utilized the first theory of the state, seeing the state as an instrument through which the economically dominant class (by then the proletariat) could repress and subdue other classes. All states, from this perspective, are class dictatorships. The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was seen as a means of safeguarding the gains of the revolution by preventing counter-revolution mounted by the dispossessed bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, Marx did not see the state as a necessary or enduring social formation. He predicted that, as class antagonisms faded, the state would 'wither away', meaning that a fully communist society would also be stateless. Since the state emerged out of the class system, once the class system had been abolished, the state, quite simply, loses its reason for existence.

Marx's ambivalent heritage has provided modern Marxists, or neo-Marxists, with considerable scope to further the analysis of state power. This was also encouraged by the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (see p. 203), who emphasized

Bourgeoisie: A Marxist term, denoting the ruling class of a capitalist society, the owners of productive wealth.
