

# Marx and Weber and the Understanding of Politics within Development Studies

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The aim of this paper is to review briefly the basic understanding of politics and the state found in the writings of Marx and Weber and to discuss how the conceptions of the two social scientists have been received and applied within contemporary development studies. Some of the concepts have already been dealt with in other papers included in this volume, particularly in those by Lars Rudebeck and Olle Tornquist. I can be rather selective, therefore, and focus upon the issues of relative autonomy and the issue of structure and agency.

Towards the end of the paper, I will suggest ways of combining various modes of analysis and concepts inherited from Marx and Weber.

At the outset it should be noted that the Marxian approach focuses attention on the economic context of political activity, while that of Weber's focuses more on the political level itself - or more specifically upon authority systems and forms of legitimacy and organisation.

The presentation is organised under the following headings:

1. Marxian conceptions of politics and the state
2. Weber's conception of politics and the state
3. The issue of relative autonomy and the state in development studies
4. The issue of structure and agency in development studies
5. Towards a synthesis of competing modes of analysis.

## 1. Marxian Conceptions of Politics and the State

Marx did not himself elaborate any comprehensive theory of politics or a clearly defined concept of the state. As pointed out by Bob Jessop, Marx' own writings on the state comprises "a fragmented and unsystematic series of philosophical reflection, contemporary history, journalism and incidental remarks." (Jessop, 1977, p 354). Bob Jessop has identified six different approaches and concepts in Marx' writings on the state (*ibid.* pp

354-357). A summary presentation may be found in Martinussen (1991A, p 16).

The six different conceptions may be characterised as below:

- \* The state as a parasitic institution with no essential role in economic production and reproduction;
- \* The State as an epiphenomena, i.e. a surface reflection of the system of property relations and the resulting economic class struggles;
- \* The state as the factor of cohesion in a given society;
- \* The state as an instrument of class rule, as 'captured' by the dominant class;
- \* The state as a set of institutions with no pre-assigned properties; and
- \* The state as a system of political domination.

It is apparent from this listing of different conceptions that Marx did not leave behind a coherent and comprehensive theory about the state or politics. His influence in this area, therefore, stems more from his overall methodology and mode of analysis.

According to his methodology and mode of analysis, the state - as any other societal phenomenon or institution - can only be understood and explained within the context of the social relations of production and reproduction. Or stated somewhat differently, any analysis of the state should be embedded within a wider theory of society, viewed as an evolving historical entity (Clark & Dear, 1984, p 6).

It follows from this that the state can not be understood exclusively within the political sphere. In this sense, the Marxian conception could be termed society centered - as opposed to state centered (cf. Martinussen 1991A, p 11f). It is worth noting, however, that approaches and conceptions have recently appeared which call themselves state centered and statist Marxist theories (e.g. Clark & Dear 1984). Thus, we find today at least four main conceptions of the state and its relationship with the rest of society:

- \* A mainly *instrumentalist* conception which sees the state as acting primarily under the influence from particular elite groups in society (e.g. Ralph Miliband);
- \* A *structuralist* conception which tries to explain state forms and modes of intervention with reference to structural limitation and determination - with or without social classes as mediating forces (e.g. Nicos Poulantzas);
- \* A *capital logic* conception focusing upon the links between the nature and development of capital and the state - often in such a way that the state is almost reduced to an epiphenomena - a form explained exclusively by its affinity to the existing form of capitalism; and
- \* A sort of *statist* conception which tries to strike a balance between what they see as a society-oriented reductionist approach and the non-Marxist theories that assume complete state autonomy as a possibility.

All the four interpretations and elaborations of Marx can be found within development studies today. With the exception of the capital logic school adherents to all these conceptions of the state have also further elaborated concepts of class, interest and power in their analyses of Third World countries.

As with the concept of the state itself, Marx did not leave behind a coherent set of concepts for analysing class, interest and power, let alone a full-fledged explanatory theory. But he did leave behind important fragments which, when combined with his overall modes of analysis, could be used as a basis for elaborating propositions about classes, power and the state.

Let me try to illustrate how power can be incorporated into what Stinchcombe has called the Marxian functional argument (Stinchcombe 1968, p 93 ff. - which I have also applied in a comparative study of forms of regime in India and Pakistan; cf. Martinussen, 1980, p 866ff.).

A fundamental starting point of Marxian analysis of societal structures and processes is that certain outcomes are beneficial to some groups while they harm others. In these terms, a Marxian theory of history attempts to explain why certain structures giving advantages to one class or other groupings are destroyed and replaced by structures giving advantages to another class or

other groupings. The distribution of power is deemed to play a vital role here.

If for our illustration of the functional argument we choose the form of regime in a society, it should be noted first that this political structure is essentially conceived of as a product of political-ideological struggles among the social classes and other groupings in that society. Second, it is assumed that the individual classes and other societal groupings seek to influence the form of regime in such a way as to gain optimal influence thereby on the political decisions and their implementation.

The relative power of social classes is determined by (a) the mode of production, ownership and control over productive property and the authority system required by a given technology; (b) structures of political processes; and (c) the strength and independence of class organisations vis-a-vis organised representatives of opposing classes. The mode of production changes over time with technological innovations. The other determinants of relative class power also tend to change. Consequently, the distribution of power among social classes changes.

This will, in turn, bring about changes in the form of regime because the classes which have relatively increased their power will try to change and transform this political structure in order to increase their own influence upon decision making and implementation. They may for a period be prevented from doing so, because the social forces getting advantages from the existing arrangements have sufficient power to repress the upcoming class or classes. This was the case in Britain, for instance, when the nobles for some time could prevent the emerging national bourgeoisie from taking over the government and introduce parliamentary democracy to replace the feudal state. But eventually the nobles had to give up their control over the state, because the power supporting their interests in retaining a feudal state form decreased relatively as compared with the power of the capitalist class, the working class and other social forces who favoured a parliamentary democracy.

The logic of this argument may be presented as in the figure below, where the arrows indicate different interests and preferences and the 'feed-back loops' refer to the processes through which the struggling classes use their power to retain or change the form of regime, as the case may be.

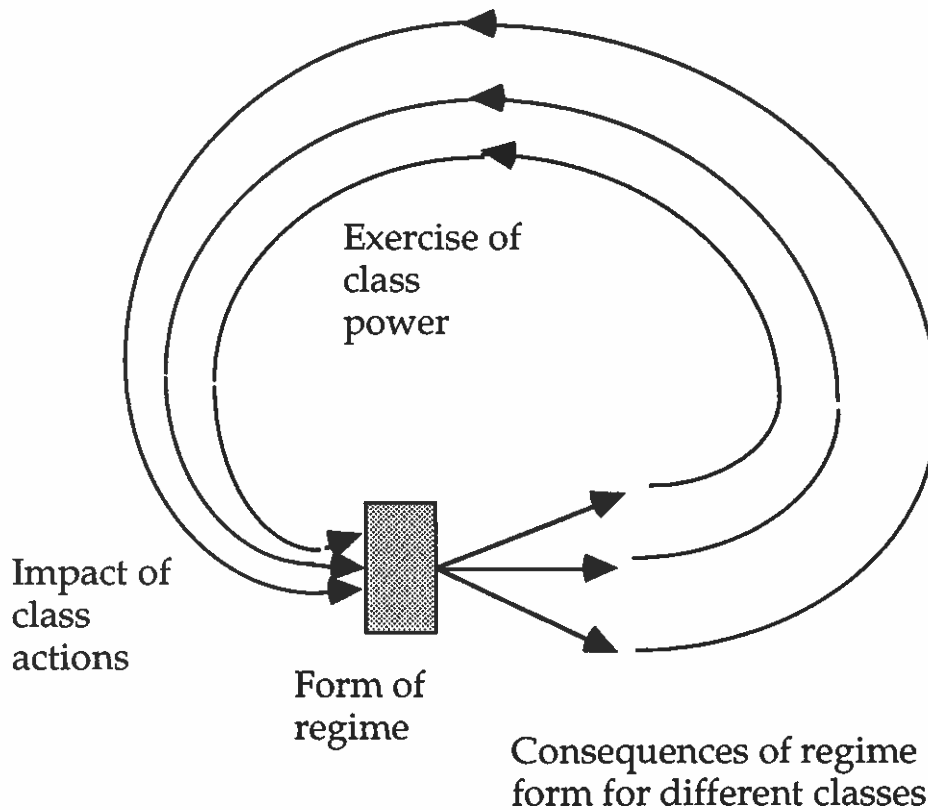
It is all much more complicated in reality, of course, and the complexity is compounded by the fact that a particular form of

regime by providing asymmetrical access possibilities for different classes in itself may act as a powerful determinant of the outcome of the struggles. Yet, the logic structure of the argument has proved useful in empirical analyses concerning not only regime forms but also, e.g., as a method to explain different modes of state intervention in industrial development where the relative power position of the national bourgeoisie vis-a-vis foreign capital has emerged a particularly critical determinant (cf. Martinussen, 1980, p 1113ff.)

Now let us briefly review the conception of politics found in Weber's writings.

I wrote in the introduction to this volume that Marx had generally been much more influential in development studies than Weber. But when it comes to the understanding of politics and the modes of analysis applied to politics in the Third World, I am not so sure this proposition is valid. At least, Weber - as indicated in other papers - left a strong, albeit sometimes un-acknowledged impression upon modernisation and post-modernisation theories.

## The Logic Structure of the Marxian Functional Argument<sup>1</sup>



## 2. Weber's Conception of Politics and the State

The essence of politics in the broader sense of the term, according to Weber, is characterised by the attempt to attain one or more supra-individual goals (Bruun 1972, Ch. 5).<sup>2</sup> Weber's unit of analysis here, as elsewhere, is a selected aspect of human behaviour. What he is referring to, then, as politics is the aspects

<sup>1</sup> The figure is based on figure 3.8, p 94, in Stinchcombe, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> As the main purpose of the present paper is not to analyse the writings of either Marx or Weber in greater detail, but rather to trace the impact of their thinking and discuss their relevance and importance for contemporary development studies, I have left out references to the original German texts which I have read over the years. Instead, references are given to secondary literature on Marx and Weber. Readers interested in going deeper into the original texts may find relevant references in this secondary literature. In the case of Weber, the work referred to above by Bruun may serve as a standard 'access code' to the German texts.

of behaviour aiming at achieving goals not decided by the individual alone, but by several individuals.

It is important for Weber to stress that politics can not be defined by the specific character of the goals or by their content. That would introduce undue valuations on the part of the researcher. Instead, all goals must in principle be accepted, and political behaviour defined as behaviour with intended consequences involving a certain behaviour on the part of other persons and aiming at attaining common goals.

Weber also defines politics in a much narrower sense as behaviour in relation to the state, which in modern societies is characterised by its monopolisation of the means of physical violence.

Politics necessarily involves conflicts, because individuals in any society will disagree on values. To attain particular goals, therefore, requires power.

*Power* is the ability of one actor within a social relationship to carry out his or her own will despite resistance from others. Power can be found in many forms, but Weber strongly emphasise that power in the last resort is physical violence.

Although power in this sense is an important concept in Weber's understanding of politics, it appears that when trying to explain aspects of human behaviour Weber is much more preoccupied with the different types of rationality which may inform and affect behaviour.

His conceptions of variants of ideal types of rationality have not always been understood properly among development researchers (not even by otherwise well-informed writers like Vandergeest & Buttell 1988, 686f. - who appear to know about only one of Weber's four ideal types). Therefore I will briefly present Weber's basic ideas - using the summary presentation prepared originally by Bruun (1972, p 221 f.) - but simplified and further interpreted by me.

Based on Weber's own writings we may identify at least four variants of ideal types relating to human behaviour. It should be noted that they are all concerned with explaining aspects of human behaviour with reference to factors peculiar to human behaviour rather than to non-human factors of any kind. The four variants can be summed up as below.

- (1) The type of *teleological rationality*. To the extent this rationality prevails, the behaviour will be causally adequate

(kausal adäquat) in relation to attaining the goals striven for.

- (2) The type of *axiological rationality*. Here the emphasis is upon acting in immediate keeping with certain commitments. Weber uses the terms 'sinnhaft adäquat'. I think that one could say that goal achievement is in the behaviour itself.
- (3) The type of *comprehensible, non-rational* behaviour, like e.g. behaviour motivated by belief in religious predestination or jealousy.
- (4) The type of *incomprehensible* behaviour, where the motivation remains obscure to the observer.

Weber used these ideal types in two different ways: (a) As aids to the *presentation/description* of scientific results; and as heuristic instruments of *causal analysis* - to help formulate hypotheses; to understand and explain social phenomena and certain aspects of human behaviour.

Weber combined (1) and (2) - teleological and axiological rationality - into bureaucratic rationality which is probably one of the most influential concepts taken over from Weber in development studies.

Bureaucracy and the associated rationalisation of behaviour was for Weber an ideal type - not necessarily an ideal condition or a tendency that he liked. Actually, it is easy to find several indications in Weber's writings that he was worried about the strength and importance acquired by the bureaucracy in Germany in his own life time. He also suggested strategies aimed at constraining and reducing the importance of bureaucracy - like a popularly elected parliament and charismatic political leaders.

Irrespective of such views on bureaucracy, Weber found the concept extremely useful to interpret and explain tendencies in society. His basic proposition was that the advance of capitalism was inevitably tied up with the rise of ever more efficient bureaucracies - with greater and greater degrees of formal rational organisations at all levels of social interaction.

Read in context, the proposition was more complicated. He did not propose that bureaucracy would ever come to determine human behaviour completely in accordance with the type of rationality embodied in this kind of formal rational organisation.



What he proposed, rather, was that to the extent that the conditions isolated in his ideal type were met with in real life, only to that extent could real behaviour be expected to conform to the ideal type. The ideal type, therefore, can not itself be used as an explanation. It requires empirical analysis to establish the degree of resemblance between reality and the ideal type - but, as said earlier, the type can function as a heuristic instrument of causal analysis.

After these summary presentations of the Marxian and Weberian conceptions of politics and the state we shall now turn to discussing briefly two issues in development studies where the modes of reasoning have been strongly influenced by Marx and Weber, i.e. the issue of relative autonomy of the state and the issue of structure and agency.

### 3. The Issue of Relative Autonomy of Politics and the State

Behind much of the disagreements regarding the role of politics and the state in societal development lies a controversy over the degree of state autonomy. Perhaps the issue can not be formulated that way within the Weberian tradition, because here it is taken for granted that political processes, as aspects of behaviour, can be meaningfully studied even without taking into consideration a wider theory of society. Consequently, it may be more appropriate to deal with the issue of autonomy as a structure-agency problematic. We will do so in the following section. On the other hand, it appears warranted to conclude from Weber's writings that he held the view that bureaucracy and the associated rationalisation process had only a limited impact upon the rest of society. Bureaucracy itself could not produce capitalism - only promote capitalism the emergence of which would depend upon many other factors. In this sense, Weber's analysis of bureaucracy came very close to a Marxist analysis of bureaucracy's relative autonomy, particularly an analysis of this kind within the Althusserian framework. But otherwise, the issue of state autonomy is more important within the Marxian and Marxist traditions.

Because of Marx' own focus upon material conditions and economic processes there was a tendency in most of his writings to deal with political phenomena as determined by economic structures. In other writings, like *The German Ideology*, he sometimes referred to the modern state as if it were determined

by the social classes - "Die Selbständigkeit des Staats kommt heutzutage nur noch in solchen Ländern vor, wo die Stände sich nicht vollständig zu Klassen entwickelt haben.. (MES, p 180). By implication the autonomy of the state is essentially eliminated in class societies.

Friedrich Engels a few decades later tried to interpret Marx' writings as less deterministic. For that purpose he used the concept 'relative autonomy' to denote that within certain limits set by the economic structures and the social classes the state could act independently in response to other factors.

Ever since then, the issue of relative autonomy has been discussed extensively among Marxist scholars. For almost a century, there was a widespread tendency to deal with the autonomy question as if it were a theoretical and methodological question - a question of creating and delimiting a certain abstract space for the capitalist state. This was also the case when, in the Althusserian tradition, relative autonomy was conceived of along with quite sophisticated concepts like 'determination by the economic in the last instance'; and 'structural causality and determination by the structure-in-dominance' (Althusser, 1965; 1971).

When applied by neo-Marxist scholars - also within development studies - there was a tendency to take relative autonomy - alone or in conjunction with the other Althusserian concepts or similar concepts - as an explanatory concept. There was a tendency to believe that instead of calling for explanation, this concept itself actually did the explaining (Kaviraj, 1989, p 140).

This tendency often appeared along with some kind of functional explanation which took it for granted that if the state intervened in accordance with particular class interests, this intervention was also explained by the presence of the concerned class. As pointed out by Jon Elster and others, this kind of explaining can not be used in the social sciences - not unless supplemented by a genuine causal explanation (Elster, 1986, Ch. 4).

The two tendencies were gradually replaced by new modes of reasoning in development studies during the 1980s. Actually, Sonntag as early as in 1973 (Sonntag, 1973) proposed to deal with the issue of relative autonomy not primarily at a theoretical level but more as an empirical and historical question, when he tried to explain the high degree of state autonomy identified in peripheral countries with reference to these states' dependency upon extra-

societal economic structures. Sonntag proposed that the degree of autonomy in relation to the intra-societal conditions and social forces could in this way be explained by referring to the extra-societal determination of the state. This extra-societal determination was not exclusive, but dominant as compared with the impact of the intra-societal conditions and forces.

With the exception of classical dependency theory, most neo-Marxist approaches have addressed the autonomy issue in ways similar to Sonntag's.

Particularly the 'new political economy' approaches - Marxists as well as non-Marxists - have approached the problem as an empirical problem and formulated hypotheses about the degree to which - and the reasons why - politicians and bureaucrats in African and Asian countries can take the initiative and formulate their own policies rather independently of social classes in their societies.

Some of these approaches have also done away with the otherwise widespread fallacy of aggregation when trying to explain policies in the Third World. William Liddle (Liddle, 1992) has rightly criticised some of the 'dependent development' theorists for trying to explain government policies at very high levels of aggregation, without looking for the particular actors and interests affecting the formulation of policies at sector level or below. This is exactly what some of the adherents to the 'new political economy' have done. I would refer especially to Robert Bates' excellent study of markets and states in tropical Africa (Bates, 1981).

Now, the point I want to extract from all this is that relative autonomy should be dealt with not only at a theoretical level but also as an empirical question. We need a concept of relative autonomy as an abstract or logical construction to fit the issue into the overall theoretical framework. But beyond that this concept should be used as an aid to formulate propositions and hypotheses to be used in a dialogue with realities.

When studying policies in Third World countries we should consider both supply and demand factors - in the terminology used by Przeworski (Przeworski, 1990). We should look at the factors in society which determine the 'demand' for particular policies. But we should also consider the factors that determine the 'supply' of policies, accepting that the state apparatuses and their personnel may supply policies autonomously (a) in their own self interest, and (b) in the interest of the public as interpreted by

the state managers. Further, the analyses should be carried out at both disaggregated and aggregated levels of policy.

To get any further in outlining guidelines in this area I think we have to take into account more explicitly the actors involved. This implies looking at the policy processes more from a Weberian perspective, perhaps, but - as I will argue - this is not necessarily incompatible with a Marxian mode of analysis. It rather complements that analysis.

#### 4. The Issue of Structure and Agency

Let us try first to approach the issue of structure and agency from a Marxist point of view. I think a recently published doctoral dissertation by Curt Sørensen could be a useful starting point (Sørensen, 1992).

Sørensen's overall aim is to explain the victory of fascism in Central Europe while at the same time indicating why fascism did not succeed in Northern Europe. For that purpose he divides reality - analytically - into three layers or levels (p 594 ff.). I fail to recognise the logical difference between two of his layers or levels (II and III), although in relation to empirical studies it may be appropriate to subdivide the analyses as done by Sørensen. In order to simplify the argument, however, I will present it with only two levels:

- \* Basic historical conditions and structures; and
- \* Releasing causes and agents.

The basic historical conditions refer to forces of production, division of labour, prevalent values and norms, political culture, dominant ideologies, classes and forms of state. These conditions can not be changed in the short term. They constitute conditions (Verhältnisse - with a term from Marx) which predispose and arrange for particular patterns of development - but they do not determine the outcome. Instead, the outcome - like the victory of fascist parties and other organisations - is the result of conscious political action - and non-action on the part of others.

Using a terminology from other Marxist scholars (e.g. Kaviraj, 1989) we could talk about structural determination or limitation, on the one hand, and the 'logic of the situation', on the other hand. Structural tendencies take long periods to mature and

decline, while situational opportunities open and close within a short time period. Structures may then be described as a combination of constraints

- \* which agents in history do not necessarily register; but
- \* which, nevertheless, affects and limits the outcome. Certain outcomes are impossible, others - and a number of different ones - are possible.

In Marxist analysis in general there has been a tendency to focus mainly upon the limiting structures and deal only occasionally and not very systematically with individual agents. I think there are opportunities for improving Marxist analyses here by taking inspiration from rational choice approaches developed within a neo-Weberian tradition - like Ilchman & Uphoff (1969) - and as applied in development studies by Bates (1981).

Liddle (1992) has described their approaches as a treatment of classes and other social forces as constraints and opportunities *to be weighed* by decision makers faced with a policy problem - rather than as determinants that overwhelm and deny the individual's capacity for autonomous choice. I think this is a more appropriate way of dealing with the agency-structure dichotomy than those prevailing in Marxian and neo-Marxist analyses. And I do not find it incompatible with the basic mode of analysis inherited from Marx. But of course within that framework we would tend to assign particular emphasis not only to economic structures but also to social classes. This requires a few more comments because of the widespread criticism levied against this primacy given to social classes in Marxist analyses.

Colin Leys is undoubtedly right when he says that class is not a very central concept for understanding developments and politics in Iran or Chad - as he said in a lecture given at IDS, Roskilde in 1989 (Nov. 11). But I tend to think that he and many other Marxist scholars have gone too far in discarding class as a prominent reference point in political analysis. Let me try to explain my position.

First of all it should be stressed that social classes are not actors or agents in the sense we just discussed. They do not mean to do anything like human actors do. The class position of individuals also do not determine the behaviour of these individuals. That may be the case for some people, but it is definitely not the case as a general rule.

Still, social classes are appropriate reference points for any analysis of political actions and policies. Objectives and interests can be ascribed to social classes - and actions can be interpreted in relation to class objectives and interests. Outcomes can be analysed in class terms as promoting particular class interests and opposing others. Actions are then given significance in class terms. But - as Kaviraj has amply put it - "it is men (or women!) who act, and who must act before classes and other abstractions can act through them" (Kaviraj 1989, p 168).

The main reason for assigning particular importance to social classes - as compared with other social forces - is that the objectives and interests ascribed to them in Marxian analysis have to do with their unique bases in the economic structures. Actions promoting the interests of a national bourgeoisie, for instance, at the same time promotes particular forms of economic structures, particular modes of production and social relations. Compared to this, the 'interests' of, say, a civil bureaucracy are at a lower level. They may be just as important in a particular conjuncture, in a particular situation. But realising or not realising the 'interests' of a civil bureaucracy will give little or no indication about societal changes at the structural level of aggregation.

That is why we need the social classes as mediating concepts between agency and structures in Marxian analyses.

Further, I do believe that social classes also reflect and affect patterns of action in the long run. Both positively, in the sense that the power of social classes in conjunction with the structural limitations allow certain outcomes and impacts to occur, while others are impeded or prevented. And negatively, in the sense that the absence of powerful and politically organised class representatives may prevent robust patterns from emerging. On this latter point I would say that the near absence or extreme weakness of national bourgeoisies in most African countries can be used to partly explain why no coherence has been brought about in state interventions and allocation of resources. Other points in support of the fundamental argument here may be found in my criticism of Gorm Rye Olsen in Martinussen (1991 B). An excellent review of class concepts - Marxian as well as Weberian - may be found in Val Burris' article in Wiley (1987).

## **5. Towards a Synthesis of Competing Modes of Analysis**

As a reflection of emerging tendencies among scholars towards convergence in methodological terms I would like to conclude this presentation by trying to indicate very briefly how a Marxian approach could be combined systematically with a Weberian - or a neo-Weberian - approach to the understanding of political change. This would imply a combination of:

- \* An analysis of class and power and an interpretation of outcomes in class terms; and
- \* An analysis of human behaviour and its motivation - of what people do and why they do so in terms of the subjective meaning they attach to their actions.

Let us consider again the Marxian functional argument applied to an analysis of regime forms. As mentioned earlier, the logic of the argument may be applied to other political changes including changes in broad policies. What I suggest is basically the introduction of some kind of individual choice models with one or several ideal types of rationality with the aim of

- \* describing the behaviour of individual actors; and
- \* to aid in the formulation of hypotheses concerning the causes - the motives - for the individuals' ways of acting.

The Marxian functional argument may then be used to explain the outcome in broad and vague terms at the macro level - the 'choice' of parliamentary democracy in preference of the feudal state or autocratic personal rule - or, to take another example, the 'choice' of political-bureaucratic allocations over market allocations in agricultural policies.

The complementary neo-Weberian analysis could be used then to describe the actual decision-making processes and the outcomes in more specific terms - the 'choice' within the broader framework of e.g. highly centralised parliamentary democracy with elections every fifth year and a bias in electoral representation in favour of urban areas - or the 'choice' of specific marketing boards and agricultural development projects favouring certain regions and producers of specific crops, etc.

I think this way of combining strong points from the two major traditions would be particularly relevant for the 'new' problematic in development studies. The focus here is no longer

upon the generalisable features of development processes in the Third World as a whole - like it used to be in the days of both modernisation and dependency theory. Rather the focus is upon differences among Third World countries and the forces that have led to the dramatic variations in peripheral societal formations.

Some of these variations may be explained mainly with reference to differences at the structural level, but other variations among structurally similar societies can be explained only if we include the agency level. When it comes to specific policies at a disaggregated level, the explaining would require systematic analyses at the agency and individual actor level.

Much more work needs to be done in order to develop a coherent analytical framework, but I believe that the ideas outlined above may serve as a starting point.

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