

Lecture 22. Sociology 621  
**The State & the working Class:  
The Democratic Capitalist State and Social Reproduction**  
November 30, 2011

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We have discussed general problem of the debates over the class character of the state and explored claims that the state in capitalist societies has a distinctively bourgeois character, a form that systematically produces class effects. In this lecture we will look much more closely at one particular *type* of capitalist state, capitalist democracy, and explore in more detail its actual mechanisms of operation, the ways in which it structures and restructures class struggle.

### **1. The Puzzle**

Marx, in a famous passage from *Class Struggles in France* portrayed the linkage of democracy and capitalism as an intensely contradictory couplet:

The comprehensive contradiction of this constitution, however, consists in the following: the classes whose social slavery the constitution is to perpetuate, proletariat, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, it puts into the possession of political power through universal suffrage. And from the class whose old social power it sanctions, the bourgeoisie, it withdraws the political guarantees of this power. It forces the political rule of the bourgeoisie into democratic conditions, which at every moment help the hostile classes to victory and jeopardise the very foundations of bourgeois society. (Marx/Engels, *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, vol.I, Moscow, pp.235-6)

Lenin, writing some sixty years later in *The State and Revolution*, claimed that parliamentary democracy was the “best possible shell” for the perpetuation of bourgeois rule.

Can these two positions be reconciled? Do they reflect distinct theoretical stances towards the problem of “bourgeois democracy” or do they simply reflect the changing conditions of bourgeois rule from the mid-19th century to the twentieth century? How can capitalism be effectively reproduced when the vast majority of the electorate is propertyless and elects the political leadership? This is the puzzle we will address in this section.

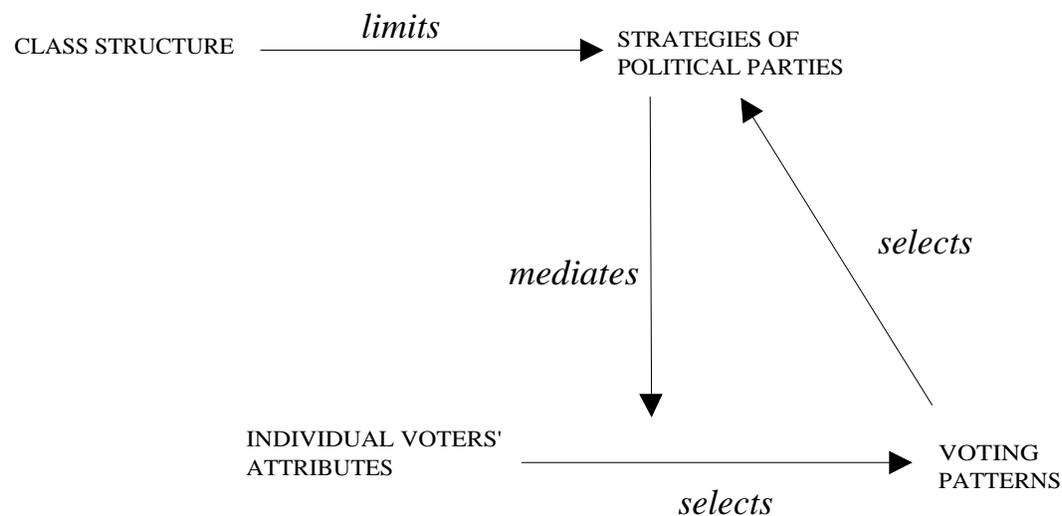
These issues are hardly simply questions of textual interpretation: the debate over the class character of parliamentary democracy remains at the very heart of both theoretical and political debates over the state on the left today. Can the state be “used” by different classes in the pursuit of their class interests, or does the state have a monolithic class character? Does the parliamentary form of the capitalist state contain within itself contradictory principles? Particularly since the “problem of democracy” has become such a central political concern given the history of “actually existing socialist” states, the answers to such questions are of fundamental importance.

## 2. Electoral Politics: Przeworski's Analysis

Przeworski's work offers a radical alternative to conventional pluralist approaches to studying voting (see the appendix to these notes for a discussion directly of pluralist approaches). The central point to get out of Przeworski is that he insists that *a theory of voting cannot be reduced to a theory of voters*. To understand voting one must understand the logic/dynamics of the social structures within which this activity takes place. A theory of voting, therefore, is a theory of the ways in which social structures shape the possible actions of parties and individuals and how those actions in turn restructure the constraints in subsequent elections.

### 2.1 The Model:

The basic model of the analysis is thus something like this:



Party strategies directly mediate the process by which individual, micro-processes take place. Parties organize voters, and the extent to which workers will vote like workers depends to a large extent on the choices of parties, on whether they will attempt to mobilize workers as workers into politics.

Those party strategies, of course, do not take place in a void, and are themselves shaped by the class structure faced by the party on the one hand, and by the outcomes of previous elections (which depends in part on the strategies of other parties on the other).

**[Drop from lecture Alternative explanations for party strategies]**

Let us see more precisely how Przeworski develops this analysis. He begins by asking a fairly straightforward question, one that might well be asked by any social scientist: why do socialists invariably end up reproducing capitalism? Why do parties formally dedicated to the advancement of the interests of the working class into the workings of a capitalist system of domination? Two solutions to this question are dismissed from the outset:

1) **simple economic explanations** which see cooptation/integration as the result of the inexorable march of economic development.

2) **voluntaristic** explanations which explain the sell out of socialist parties by the “misleadership” of party elites.

Both of these “explanations” are inadequate because they fail to provide any sustained account of the actual mechanisms which produce integration. In the misleadership arguments there is no explanation of why leaders become misleaders. Either one has to adopt, by default a Michelsian iron law of oligarchy argument, or it is necessary to posit explicitly the structural conditions which produce a certain form of leadership. The economic argument equally fails by failing to show how economic development is translated into structured options for parties, options which are embodied in strategies which have the effects of integration.

3) The correct strategy for dealing with this question is to try to sort out the **complex economic-political-ideological conditions** under which this sort of integration can take place:

*Economic conditions:* Exploitation is the necessary condition for realising any short run goals within a capitalist society. What is good for GM is good for America (and the working class) in the specific sense that workers suffer from bankruptcies and dislocations given the continued existence of capitalism.

*Political conditions:* Bourgeois democracy provides a mechanism for redistribution of the surplus already extracted: workers as workers have no claim on the surplus, but as citizens there is a social mechanism (electoral parliamentary democracy) for processing such claims, for gaining back some of the past exploitation. Such a structure of politics directs struggles necessarily over immediate interests.

*Ideological conditions:* Bourgeois interest always involve a convergence of immediate and fundamental interests, and the realization of their interests as the precondition for the realization of all other future immediate interests of other classes; their interests thus become universal, whereas the proletariat appear as particularistic.

## 2.2 The Nested Dilemmas of Social Democracy

Given these structural conditions, three dilemmas are sharply posed to working class parties:

1. **Participation:** whether to participate at all in bourgeois political institutions.
2. **Alliances:** whether to seek the cooperation and alliance of other classes.
3. **Anti-capitalism:** whether once in power to pursue revolutionary reforms or reforms which strengthen capitalism.

Since the third of these concerns the strategies of socialist governments in capitalist societies rather than the problem of electoral politics per se, I will emphasize the first two of these dilemmas in the rest of this discussion.

The critical point is that any of the possible strategic choices are contradictory: there are no noncontradictory choices possible. One might add (Przeworski doesn't really make this point) that this is what distinguishes a revolutionary situation from others: the contradictory character of strategic options disappears.

### 2.3 The logic of the first dilemma:

It is only through participation in the capitalist democratic process that workers can redress their past exploitation. The pursuit of short-run/immediate interests forces participation in electoral politics, even though this may erode longer term/fundamental interests. And the dilemma is that if a party opts for keeping out of the electoral arena, it is essentially opting for a lower capacity to deal with immediate issues.

### 2.4 The problem of the second dilemma:

The working class is not an absolute majority in any capitalist country. Certainly the heart of the working class--manual labor in the productive sector--is not a majority. Since the electoral game is a game of numbers requiring 51 percent for victory, this implies that to one extent or another, socialist electoral parties will have to make appeals to other classes outside of the proletariat, and thus: "The process of the electoral organization of the masses constitutes the process of the disorganization of the working class." In order to function as a vote getting party by attracting allies, the party must minimize its function as a class party, and this in turn reduces its capacity to attract workers as well. Thus the ultimate contradiction/dilemma: "Hence class based electoral parties can neither limit their appeal to the working class and win elections, nor can they universalize their appeal without losing votes of workers."

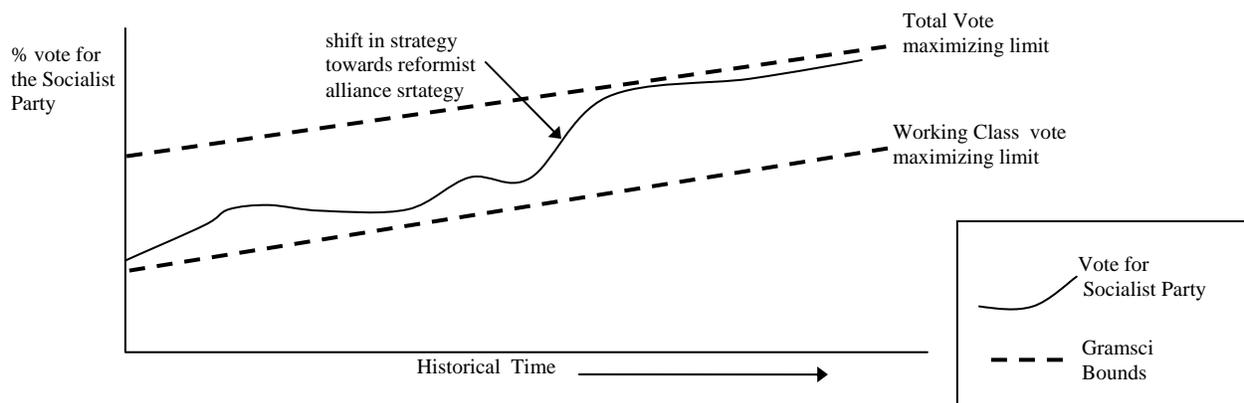
The result is that parties are caught in a structural contradiction which they cannot simply opt out of. The purpose of a scientific investigation of parties and voting--voting, not voters--is to organize theoretically the components of this structure of constraints/contradictions and try to grasp the way such constraints have pushed party activity in given directions.

In the essay on the history of social democracy in the readings, Przeworski examines historically how European socialist parties negotiated these dilemmas and how as an outcome of the choices they made the programs of their parties became progressively integrationist, committed to strengthening capitalism rather than transforming its basic structures.

In the larger work of which this is a part (*Paper Stones*) Przeworski also attempts to formalize these dilemmas into a mathematical model of the constraints faced by parties and the consequences of different strategies within those constraints. Without going into the formal details of his analysis, he takes the class structure of the society as the basic “independent variable” in the sense that the class structure poses to the socialist party the trade-offs faced in trying to appeal to nonworking class voters in order to obtain 50 percent of the vote. With a few additional assumptions, Przeworski can make estimates of what he calls the “**Gramsci bounds**” on the vote:

**the upper bound** = the maximum vote a socialist party could obtain by consistently pursuing a vote-maximizing strategy within the constraints it faces;

**the minimum bound** = the vote that would be obtained by pursuing a strategy which attempts to maximize the purity of its class base in the proletariat.



These bounds change over time as a function primarily of changes in the class structure. Przeworski then uses the calculations of these bounds -- the objective parameters faced by party strategists -- to see counterfactually what difference different strategies could make. You could ask: what would have happened if the German SDP had adopted the Swedish strategy?

This is a radically different kind of analysis from anything envisioned by pluralist voter-centered theorists like Lipset. Indeed one can reasonably say that the entire methodological stance of Lipset's analysis totally precludes this sort of investigation. The questions are unaskable given the individualist premises of the analysis. The central point is that it is impossible to understand voting by beginning with an examination of the experiences of individual voters, their characteristics and the forces which shape their attitudes, etc. The analysis must begin at the political level with an analysis of the structures encountered by parties engaged in real struggles with real political projects/objectives. It is the actions of these parties in struggle as they attempt to organize classes (or disorganize classes) which determines the extent to which individuals actually experience their lives in terms of one sort of cleavages or another. Political struggle--class struggle at the level of politics--is thus decisive in the very formation of classes, that is in the determination of the social expressions of underlying cleavages. But--and this "but" is the decisive aspect of the problem--party strategies are structurally constrained.

We thus have a complex dialectic of structure, strategy, transformation. The micro-experiences of individuals matter in this dialectic and are consequential in determining why individuals act the way they act; but the process by which such micro-determinations occur can be understood only when embedded in this broader dialectical context.

### **2.5 Logic of Third Dilemma:**

To win re-election need to improve things, which means making capitalism work better: dilemma = remaining faithful to revolutionary ideals and losing the next election or compromising those ideals and staying in power. Possible way out = "nonreformist reforms" = reforms which a) make capitalism work better and b) open up space for more radical transformations in the future.

### Appendix A. Rogers & Cohen Analysis of the mechanisms of Representative Democracy

A good deal of recent Marxist work on the state has been devoted to answering the puzzle of the compatibility of representative democracy and capitalism. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers have synthesized these various arguments in an elegant and interesting way in their book *On Democracy* (reference in readings). Like Przeworski they argue that the two traditional Marxist explanations for the durability of capitalism under democratic regimes -- repression or false consciousness -- are unsatisfactory. As an alternative, they propose that *capitalist democracies structure the rules of the game of political conflict in such a way that class struggles are directed towards short-run gains consistent with the reproduction of capitalism:*

“Capitalist democracy is in some measure capable of satisfying the interests encouraged by capitalist democracy itself, namely interests in short-term material gain.... Consent is based on narrowly defined calculations of private advantage.” pp.51-52

Two issues:

- [1]. Capitalist democracy reduces political conflict to material short-term advantage;
- [2] concomitant difficulties of moving out of this to an alternative system.

The pivotal mechanism underlying this = *how capitalism --> time horizons of actors within politics.*

Reasoning:

- (1). Welfare of workers is contingent upon welfare of capitalists, because income depends upon jobs depends upon investment depends upon profits.
- (2). Capitalist democracy provides workers with a political means of securing the fruits of past savings, and thus reduce material uncertainties which are endemic to capitalism.
- (3). So, why not challenge capitalist relations themselves? Answer: different requirements of short-term material and long-term fundamental interests struggles:

Contrasts between short-term and long-term struggles in capitalist democracies (Note: this is a claim about the effects of time horizons and temporality of struggles)

	SHORT TERM	LONG TERM
1. Coordination	easy	difficult
2. institution- alization	regularized	noninstitutional
3. aims	clear, agreed	opaque, contested
4. probabilit- ities	low risk; some success likely	high risk; no partial success
5. Prisoners Dilemmas	easy to solve	very difficult to overcome; uncertain personal costs; bad information
6. Effects on material interests	partial gains	large transition costs, even if information and coordination not an issue

(4). RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS: advantages of capitalists politically within a democracy in spite of the fact that they are small in numbers with few votes. Essentially Offe & Wiesenthal's kind of argument:

coordination easier, communication easier, ends better defined, information costs tolerable and worth translating into lobbying, prisoners dilemmas easier to solve. This constitutes the material basis for effective instrumental action by capitalists.

(5). Motivational presuppositions: The operations of these mechanisms have the effect of structuring nearly *all* values/motives around material interests. If you want quality childcare for humanistic purposes, you need resources, and getting those resources requires entering the game: nonmaterial interests become bound to material, short-term interests. Even the pursuit of radical needs pushes actors towards participation in the democratic game and this pushes actors towards short-term, etc. strategies.

(6). OUTCOME = CLASS COMPROMISE. The terms are variable, depending upon balances of power, but the enforcement of the compromise and its periodic restructuring occurs through the state.

## Appendix B

### Marxist vs. Non-marxist Approaches to the Study of Electoral Politics

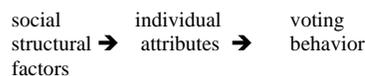
[These notes are from lectures from an earlier version of the course in which we spent a week on nonMarxist approaches to politics and democracy which we contrasted to Marxist approaches]

In what follows I will lay out the reasoning behind the conventional strategy of political sociology, exemplified above all by Lipset's study, *Political Man*. This should be read as a contrast to the kind of logic present in the neoMarxist approach represented in the work of Przeworski on Social Democracy discussed above..

#### The analysis of voting in pluralist theory

Individuals cast votes in elections, and the sum total of those individual acts determines the victor in the contest. These are elemental facts--it appears--of parliamentary politics. If the outcome is the result of an aggregation of individual acts, then--the reasoning implicitly goes--to explain the outcome we must explain those individual acts themselves. And to explain individual acts means to understand why some people vote one way and others vote another way. How do we go about this? We investigate the differences between individual attributes of various sorts and see how they are related to individual electoral behavior. Thus the logic of conventional political sociology's approaches to voting: instead of actually studying voting as such the research becomes a study of voters.

The structure of such research is painfully simple: Social conditions are seen as determinants of individual attributes, psychological states, values, interests, etc., and these in turn are seen as determinants of political behavior. So the model looks like this:



Lipset's study exemplifies this logic well. Let us look at a number of specific propositions in his analysis:

*Development and left voting.* On p. 45 Lipset writes: "Economic development, producing increased income, greater economic security, and widespread higher education, largely determines the form of the 'class struggle,' by permitting those in the lower strata to develop longer time perspectives and more complex and gradualist views of politics." He then goes on to

present data which show that there is a fairly strong inverse relationship between the wealth of the country and the vote for communists.

What can we say about this proposition? First of all, the descriptive claim in this proposition is reasonably accurate, although even that could be questioned. Overall, given certain unspecified historic conditions, it is probably true that reformist politics within the working class tend to occur more readily in wealthier countries. But even if that is true, Lipset's explanation of this fact would be open to serious question. The central reason Lipset gives for this relations is that education and other factors make it possible for workers to have a "more complex" view of politics. That is, structural factors are seen as having their central effect or importance via their effects on individual psychology. The individual is the receptacle of structural forces.

This kind of causal process is even sharper in Lipset's discussion of working class authoritarianism: because of the limited character of workers lives, their limited contacts with diverse intellectual currents, the rigidity of their family life and so on, their personalities become rigid/narrow/authoritarian, and this type of personality predisposes them to leftist propaganda. In Lipset's words, they become "susceptible" to extremism.

The logic of the explanation, then, is of the following sort: social structures shape individuals creating predispositions to act in various ways; immediate interests then determine the specific political behavior of the individual, the type of party that individual is likely to support in conjunction with those predispositions. There is no serious discussion by Lipset of the possibility that workers in poorer countries are more radical/extreme precisely because the class structures *are* more polarized in those countries and their conditions objectively more oppressed, or because there are no objective possibilities for reform because of the rigidity and authoritarianism of the ruling classes. Lipset never examines whether the hostility to civil liberties (or at least the lack of importance given to them) by workers relative to petty bourgeois social categories is because, in this society, workers are objectively excluded from the exercise of those civil liberties and see a "free press" (for example) as an instrument of domination, not liberation. The point is that Lipset totally discounts the structural realities faced by workers except in the ways those realities shape the worker.

*Isolation and radicalism.* See p. 76 for examples on isolation and its effect on the extremism of miners, lumberjacks, etc. Again, the descriptive thesis is probably correct. But the logic behind it is again totally psychologistic: isolated people are not exposed to broader ideas. They are isolated from the pluralistic influences of a democratic society, and it is because of this that they take an extreme position.

Lipset never provides a sustained theoretical discussion of the concept of "isolation," what its real social content is. Is it that isolated communities have a narrow particularistic view of the world, or could it be that isolated communities are shielded from some of the ideological-political cooptive/integrative manipulations of the larger society and thus have a truer vision of the capitalist world? Class relations may be less mystified and sharper in "isolated" communities, and the social relations within the working class stronger making the class capacities of workers

more durable. The class solidarity of community life and the sharpness of the exploitation within production, then, can be interpreted as demystifying capitalist social relations rather than mystifying pluralist relations. In order to adopt Lipset's position on this question, it is necessary to accept his assumption that the world is genuinely pluralistic. Only then would it make sense to regard factors which make people reject pluralism as sources of mystification. In effect, Lipset, even more than most Marxists, identifies as "false consciousness" (=extremism, authoritarianism) any view of the world which differs from his. See p. 90 for his discussion of "black and white" views of society.

*Cross-pressures.* Probably one of the most famous propositions of Lipset concerns his arguments about the effects of cross-pressures--cross-cutting cleavages of social life--on voting. These cross-cutting cleavages are the real stuff of pluralism and they play a central role in his analysis of the stability of bourgeois democracy. Lipset makes two propositions about these cross-pressures: i) cross-pressures produce apathy by tearing individuals in contradictory directions and thus encouraging vacillation and indecisions (see p. 217). (ii) cross-pressures encourage deviations from expected left voting, since a person torn between pressures for voting left and voting conservative will probably vote conservatively since this would link that person to higher status sources of identifications (and, as Lipset argues, people have a natural drive to feel superior to others if possible, see p. 240).

Again, probably these propositions have a certain descriptive validity, at least in certain societies in certain periods. The difficulty is that it is possible to posit an endless list of cross-pressures which any individual faces, and it is necessary to have an explicit theory of the ways in which these cross-pressures become organized socially. The central question is the social processes/forces which transform specific pressures or cleavages into sources of identification and action, especially collective action. Przeworski stresses this point, as we shall see: "Social cleavages are not a datum. Whether a particular social distinction becomes the source of a cleavage expressed in behavior is the effect of struggles which result in a particular vision of society with which people go about living their daily lives. Social divisions become lived as cleavages because they become organized as such." (p. 22, Przeworski \* .) Lipset takes the cleavages of a society for granted and never analyses the problem of the relatively weights given to various sources of identification. The picture presented is that individuals face/experience cleavages, not collectivities, and the resolution of those cleavages is understood in solely individualistic terms: individuals experience cross-pressures which produce intra-individual indecision.

A note on pluralism: The central premise of pluralist theory is the multiplicity of social cleavages in advanced industrial society. This is unquestionably a correct description of immediately encountered sources of identification/ conflict. What pluralism as a social theory fails to do is theorize the relationship among these cleavages. There is no theoretical reason advanced why one sort of cleavage--class cleavages--should have any primacy over any other. The only basis for "explaining" the preponderance of one cleavage over another, of one source of

social identification over another would be an historical account of the development of a cleavage, not to provide a structural account of the underlying contradictions and dynamics which generate and *reproduce* a given pattern of cleavages.

### Some General Methodological Criticisms

Four general issues seem especially important: (i) methodological individualism; (ii) multifactorial causal logic; (iii) ahistorical character of concepts; (iv) ideological character of assumptions.

(i) *Individualism*. Lipset does not totally ignore social structural issues. Social structure does play an important role in his work. But the social structure has its causal efficacy only in terms of its embodiment in individuals as individuals, especially in individual psychological processes. There is no place for genuinely collective actors/forces, nor for structural contradictions and processes which shape social options irrespective of individual psychologies. Above all, there is no theory of the processes of transformation of structures themselves, and the problems this poses to actors within those structures.

(ii) *Causal logic*: Multifactorial causation with each factor adding a small incremental push to the outcome. There is no concept of structural causation, no understanding of the different ways in which causes shape an outcome, and, of course, no concept of contradictory/dialectical determination.

(iii) *Concepts*: Lipset treats concepts like 'democracy,' 'class,' etc., as if they had identical content in all societies. This leads him to make absolutely absurd statements about the history of politics, as on p. 311 when he claims that the social bases of Jeffersonian politics are the same as the modern Democratic-vs.-Republican parties. To make such a statement requires a complete distortion of the radical transformations in the class structure that have taken place in the past 180 years. It is only through the use of utterly superficial empiricist concepts--like "upper" and "lower" strata--concepts which are no more than simplifications of a complex reality, concepts formed through a process of sifting rather than critique, that it is possible to make such a claim. In Jefferson's time there wasn't a working class to speak of, so it is meaningless to say that the party had the same social base as the modern Democrats. This is true only in the sense that the peasant rebellions of Germany in the middle ages and the slave revolts in ancient Greece all constitute the "same" social base: the bottom of social hierarchies. Whenever words like "poor," "lower strata," "consensus," and the like are used in discussions of politics, you can be fairly certain that the methodology is uncritical/empiricist.

(iv) *Ideological assumptions*: Three of these seem especially important to me:

(1) *The only possible alternative to bourgeois democracy is dictatorship/tyranny*. There are no other options. The definition of democracy on p. 27, which limits the concept to representation and leadership selection reflects this strongly liberal-ideological definition. The possibilities of delegate/conciliator/soviet democracy (proletarian democracy) is never entertained, and therefore critics of bourgeois democracy become necessarily to Lipset opponents of democracy itself.

(2) *Elections are the locus of serious power relations in a bourgeois democracy*. Classes only have differential power in the sense that they may be able to bring greater resources into the electoral arena, but there is no such thing as “structural power” or systemic power, no relations or domination outside of elections that could act as the fundamental constraints on elections themselves. The Leninist critique of bourgeois democracy, that real power lies in the bureaucratic relations of domination, is never dealt with. In other works when such issues are discussed, the question is always posed simply in terms of the extent to which it is possible to demonstrate *influence* of various pluralist groups on the various bureaucratic/administrative centers of power. The power relations that are embedded in the very structure of the state are not discussed: they remain opaque to the concepts used in the analysis (those concepts cannot penetrate to reveal the conditions which make electoral exchanges possible as a basis for political power).

(3) *Class interests may be conflictual but irreconcilable/contradictory*. The Marxist/communist account of class relations is therefore ideological and simplistic. The world is genuinely pluralistic, and if you disagree with this you are “authoritarian.” How do we know the world is pluralistic? Look around and you see many varieties of conflict and you see endless examples of compromise and negotiation between classes. In other words, the “facts” of immediately encountered experience demonstrate the pluralistic quality of social life.