

Lecture 1

A Framework for an Emancipatory Social Science

Erik Olin Wright

University of Wisconsin - Madison

November, 2007

OUTLINE

I. What is “Emancipatory Social Science” ?

II. Three Tasks

III. Taking the ‘Social’ in Socialism Seriously

IV. Pathways to social empowerment

V. Conclusions

I. What is *Emancipatory Social Science*?

Definition:

Emancipatory social science seeks to generate scientific knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression and creating the conditions in which people can live flourishing lives.

Emancipatory: identifies a central moral purpose in the production of knowledge – the elimination of oppression and the creation of the conditions for human flourishing.

Science: recognizes the importance of systematic scientific knowledge – not just philosophy and social criticism – about how the world works for this task.

Social: implies that human emancipation depends upon the transformation of the social world, not just the inner self.

II. The Three Tasks of Emancipatory Social Science

- 1. Diagnosis & Critique***
- 2. Envisioning Alternatives***
- 3. A Theory of Transformation***

Task 1. DIAGNOSIS & CRITIQUE
Normative foundations:
radical democratic egalitarianism

1. **Social justice**: *In a socially just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives.*
2. **Political justice**: *In a politically just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary political means to contribute to the collective control of the conditions and decisions which affect their common fate.*

Task 1

The core critique of capitalism

Capitalism simultaneously creates potentials for universalized human flourishing and expansive democracy and blocks the full realization of those potentials.

- 1. Capitalism perpetuates eliminable forms of human suffering and obstructs the universalization of conditions for human flourishing.**
- 2. Capitalism blocks the full realization of democracy.**

Task 2. Envisioning Alternatives

I. Desirability

**(1)
Desirable
alternatives**

II. Viability

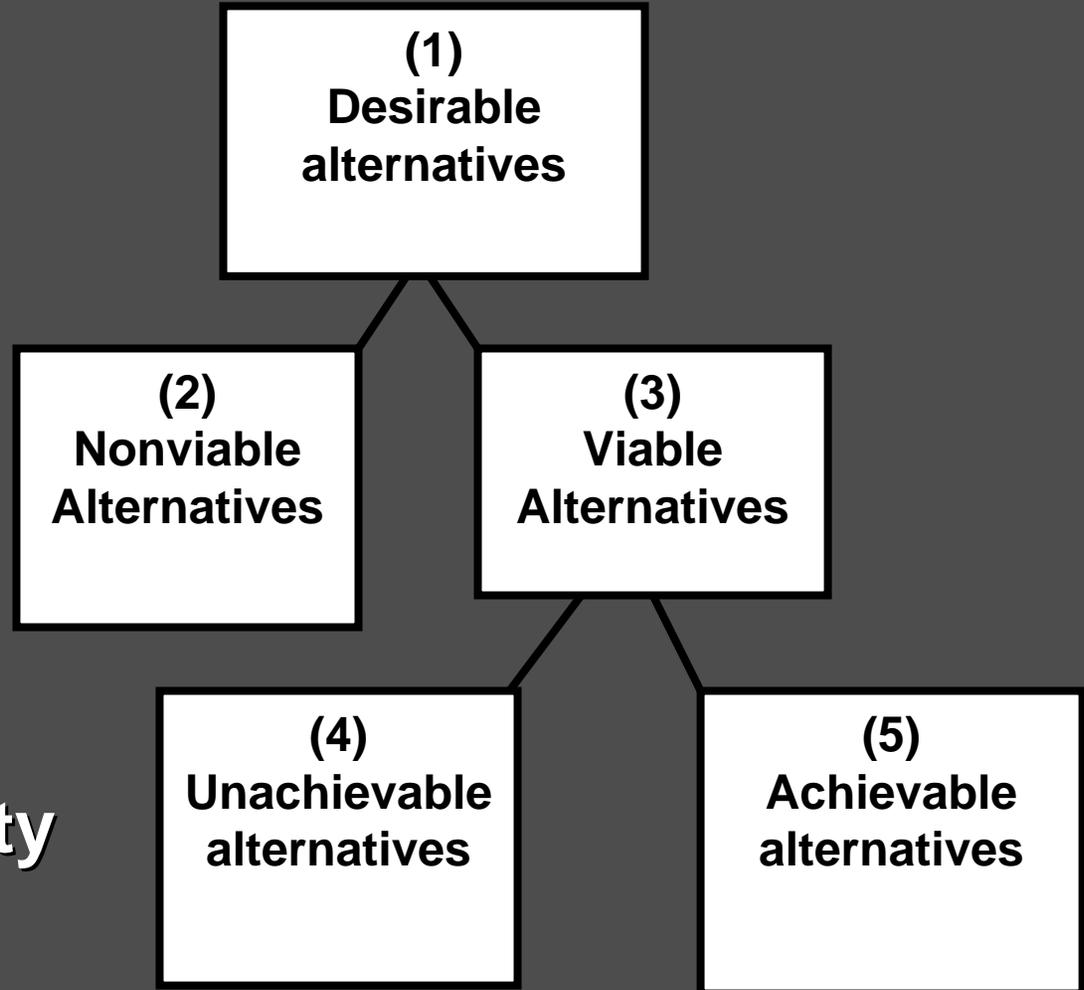
**(2)
Nonviable
Alternatives**

**(3)
Viable
Alternatives**

III. Achievability

**(4)
Unachievable
alternatives**

**(5)
Achievable
alternatives**



Task 3. Elements of a Theory of Transformation

1. A Theory of Social Reproduction: *obstacles to emancipatory transformation*
2. A theory of gaps, limits and contradictions of reproduction: *possibilities of transformation*
3. A theory of trajectories of unintended social change: *future prospects for obstacles and possibilities*
4. A theory of transformative strategy: *what is to be done?*

Strategic logics of Transformation

1. Ruptural (radical break in institutions):
Revolutionary socialist tradition
2. Interstitial (build new institutions in the cracks of the system): Anarchist tradition
3. Symbiotic (use existing institutions to solve problems in ways that transform institutions): Social democratic tradition

**III. An approach to
Viable Alternatives to Capitalism:
Taking the “Social” in
Socialism Seriously**

Conceptual building blocks

1. Power

2. Types of power

3. Types of Economic Structures

4. Hybrids

Three kinds of power

1. Economic power: power based on the control of material resources.
2. State power: power based on the control of rule making and rule enforcing over territory.
3. Social power: power based on capacity to mobilize voluntary cooperation and collective action.

THREE ECONOMIC STRUCTURES: CAPITALISM, STATISM AND SOCIALISM

Capitalism: an economic structure within which the means of production are privately owned and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of economic power. Investments and the control of production are the result of the exercise of economic power by owners of capital.

Statism: an economic structure within which the means of production are owned by the state and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of state power. State officials control the investment process and production through some sort of state-administrative mechanism

Socialism: an economic structure within which the means of production are “socially owned” and thus the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of what can be termed “social power.” Social power is power rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, associational action in civil society. In socialism the control over investment and production is organized through diverse mechanisms of social empowerment.

THREE ECONOMIC STRUCTURES: CAPITALISM, STATISM AND SOCIALISM

Capitalism: an economic structure within which the means of production are privately owned and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of economic power. Investments and the control of production are the result of the exercise of economic power by owners of capital.

Statism: an economic structure within which the means of production are owned by the state and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of state power. State officials control the investment process and production through some sort of state-administrative mechanism

Socialism: an economic structure within which the means of production are “socially owned” and thus the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of what can be termed “social power.” Social power is power rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, associational action in civil society. In socialism the control over investment and production is organized through diverse mechanisms of social empowerment.

THREE ECONOMIC STRUCTURES: CAPITALISM, STATISM AND SOCIALISM

Capitalism: an economic structure within which the means of production are privately owned and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of economic power. Investments and the control of production are the result of the exercise of economic power by owners of capital.

Statism: an economic structure within which the means of production are owned by the state and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of state power. State officials control the investment process and production through some sort of state-administrative mechanism

Socialism: an economic structure within which the means of production are “socially owned” and thus the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of what can be termed “social power.” Social power is power rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, associational action in civil society. In socialism the control over investment and production is organized through diverse mechanisms of social empowerment.

THREE ECONOMIC STRUCTURES: CAPITALISM, STATISM AND SOCIALISM

Capitalism: an economic structure within which the means of production are privately owned and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of economic power. Investments and the control of production are the result of the exercise of economic power by owners of capital.

Statism: an economic structure within which the means of production are owned by the state and thus the allocation and use of resources for different purposes is accomplished through the exercise of state power. State officials control the investment process and production through some sort of state-administrative mechanism.

Socialism: an economic structure within which the means of production are “socially owned” and thus the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of what can be termed “social power.” Social power is power rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, associational action in civil society. In socialism the control over investment and production is organized through diverse mechanisms of social empowerment.

The idea of *HYBRIDS*:

All real economic systems are complex combinations of capitalism, statism, and socialism. We call an economy “capitalist” when capitalism is dominant. The possibility of socialism, therefore, revolves around the problem of enlarging and deepening the socialist component of the hybrid. I refer to this as the problem of pathways to social empowerment.

IV.
**FIVE PATHWAYS TO
SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT**

PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

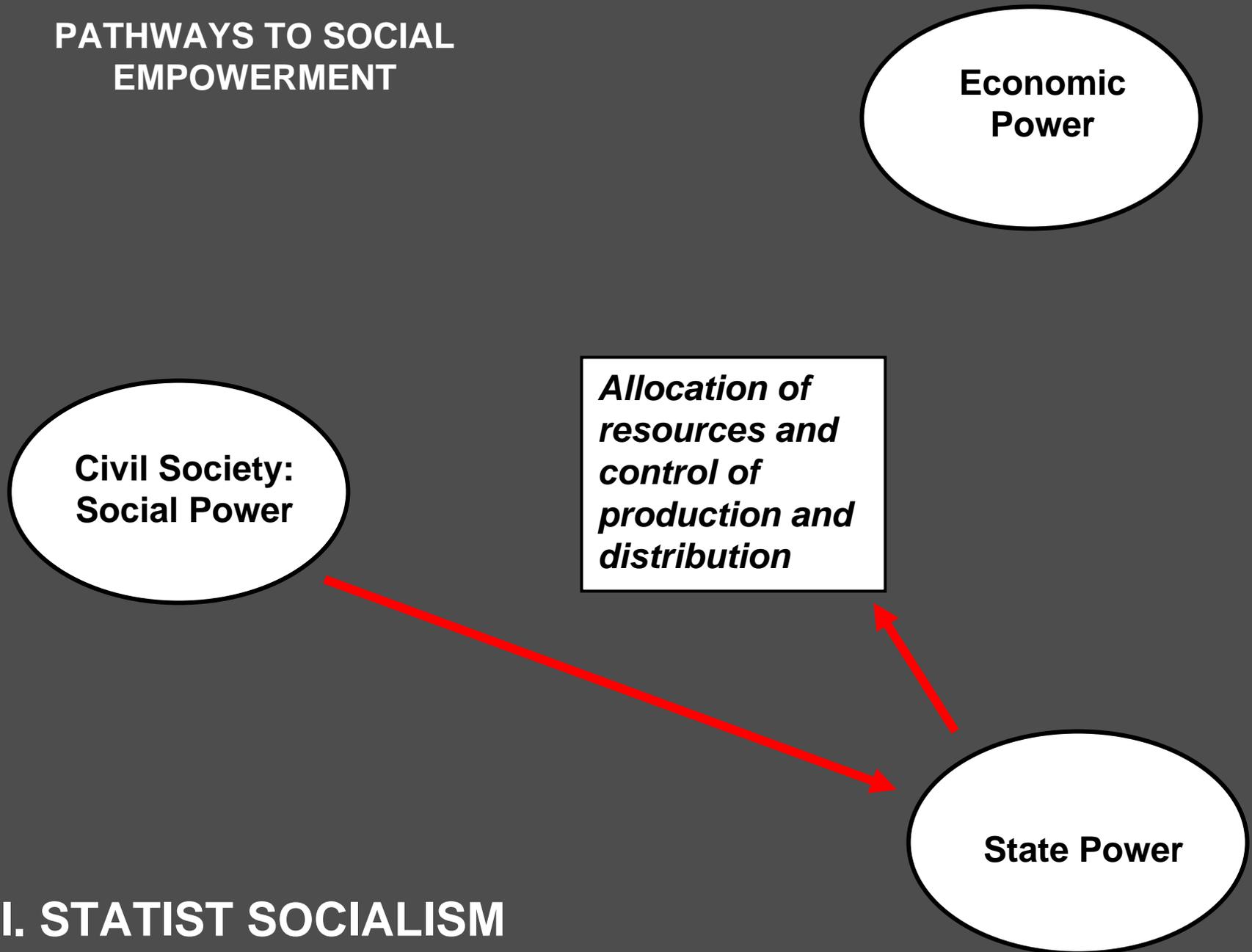
**Economic
Power**

**Civil Society:
Social Power**

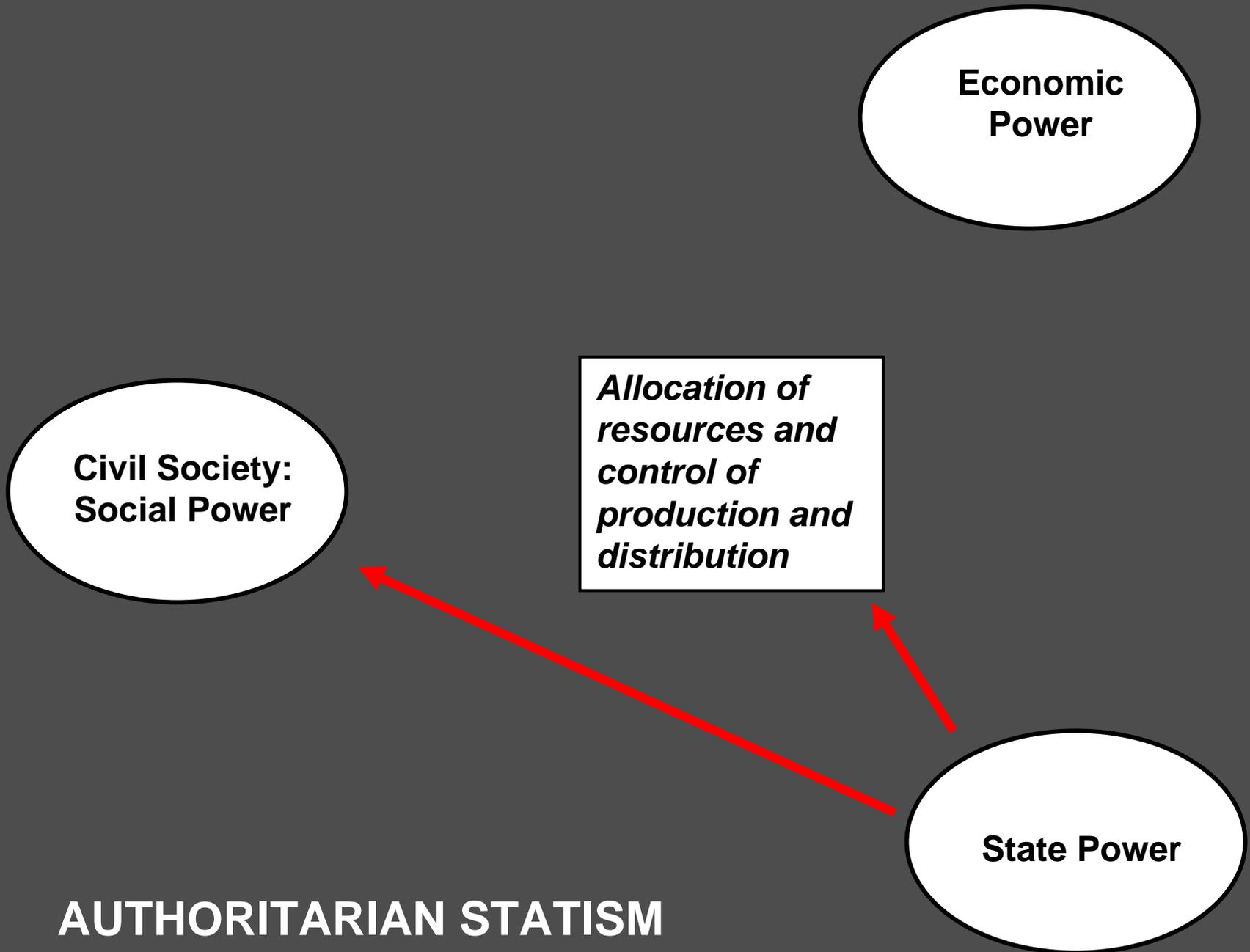
*Allocation of
resources and
control of
production and
distribution*

State Power

PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT



I. STATIST SOCIALISM



AUTHORITARIAN STATISM

**PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL
EMPOWERMENT**

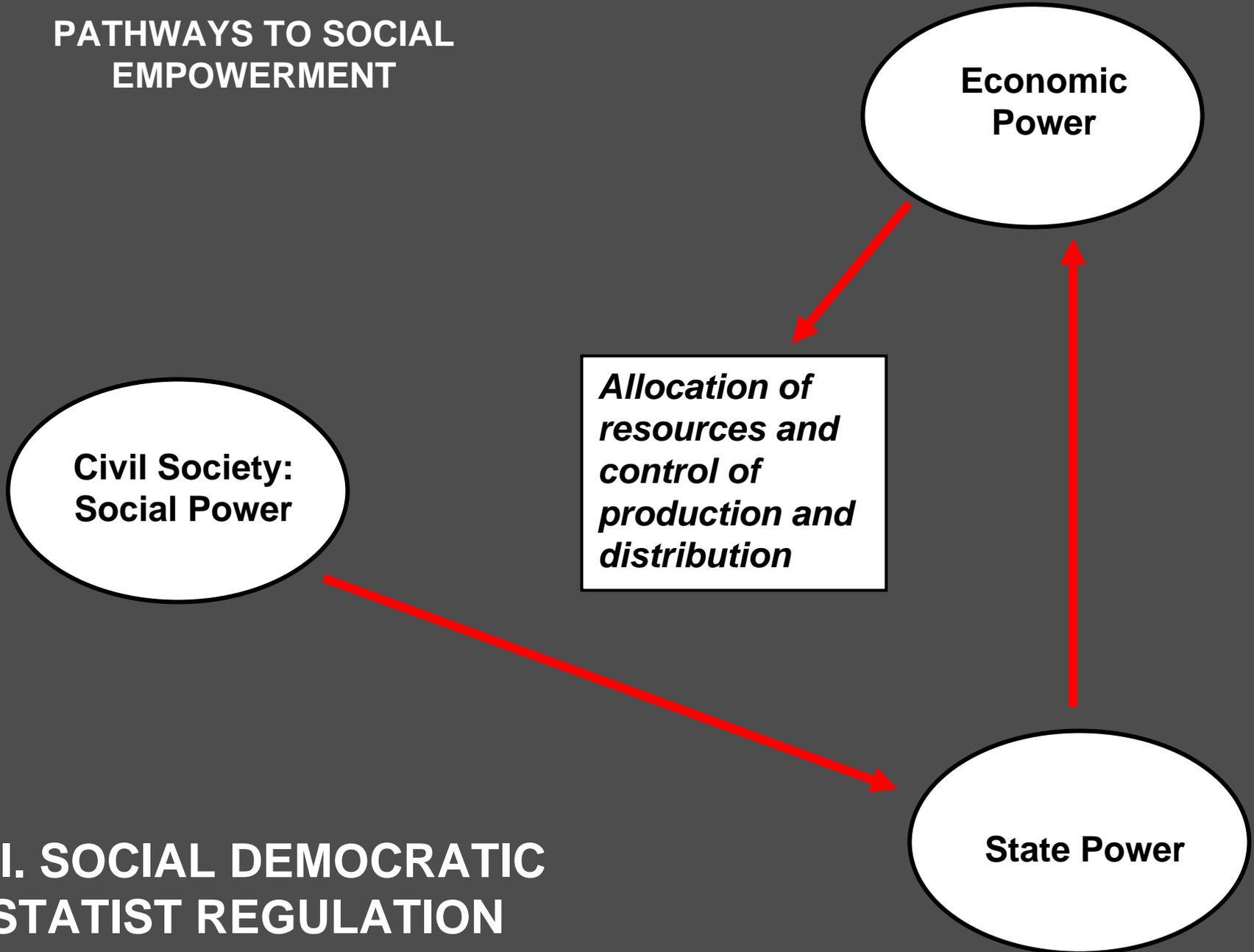
**Civil Society:
Social Power**

**Economic
Power**

*Allocation of
resources and
control of
production and
distribution*

State Power

**II. SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC
STATIST REGULATION**



**Civil Society:
Social Power**

*Allocation of
resources and
control of
production and
distribution*

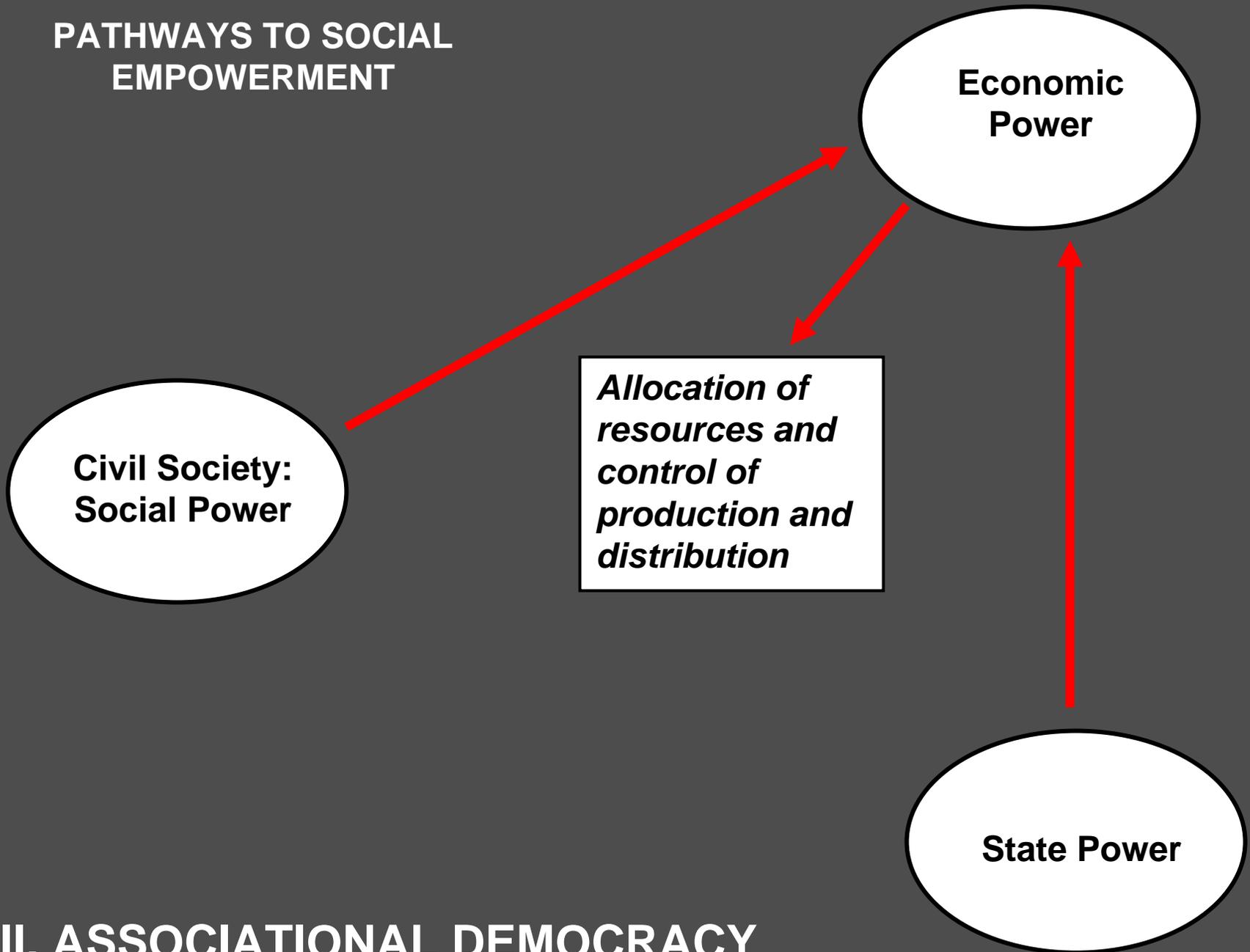
**Economic
Power**

State Power

**CAPITALIST STATIST
ECONOMIC REGULATION**

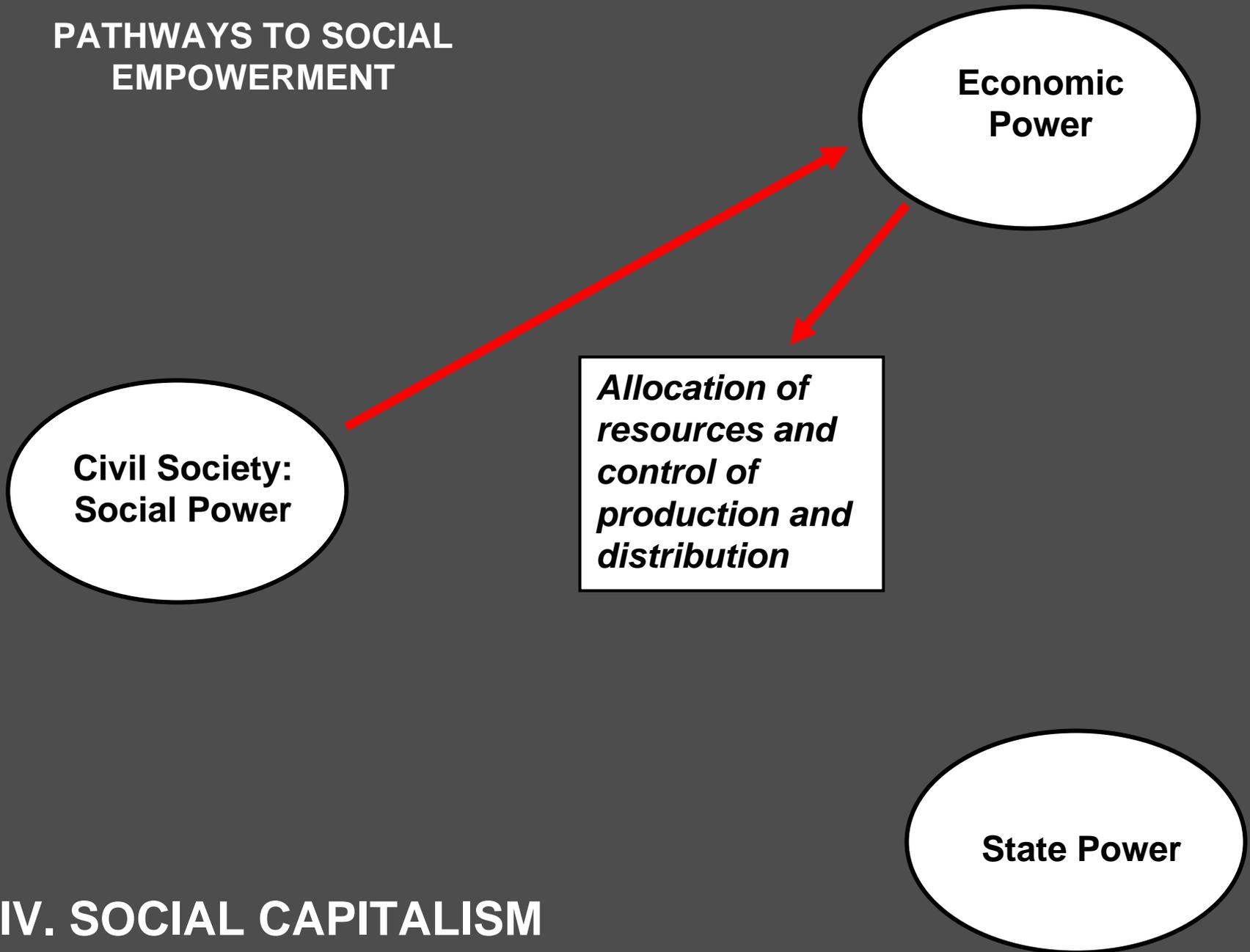


PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT



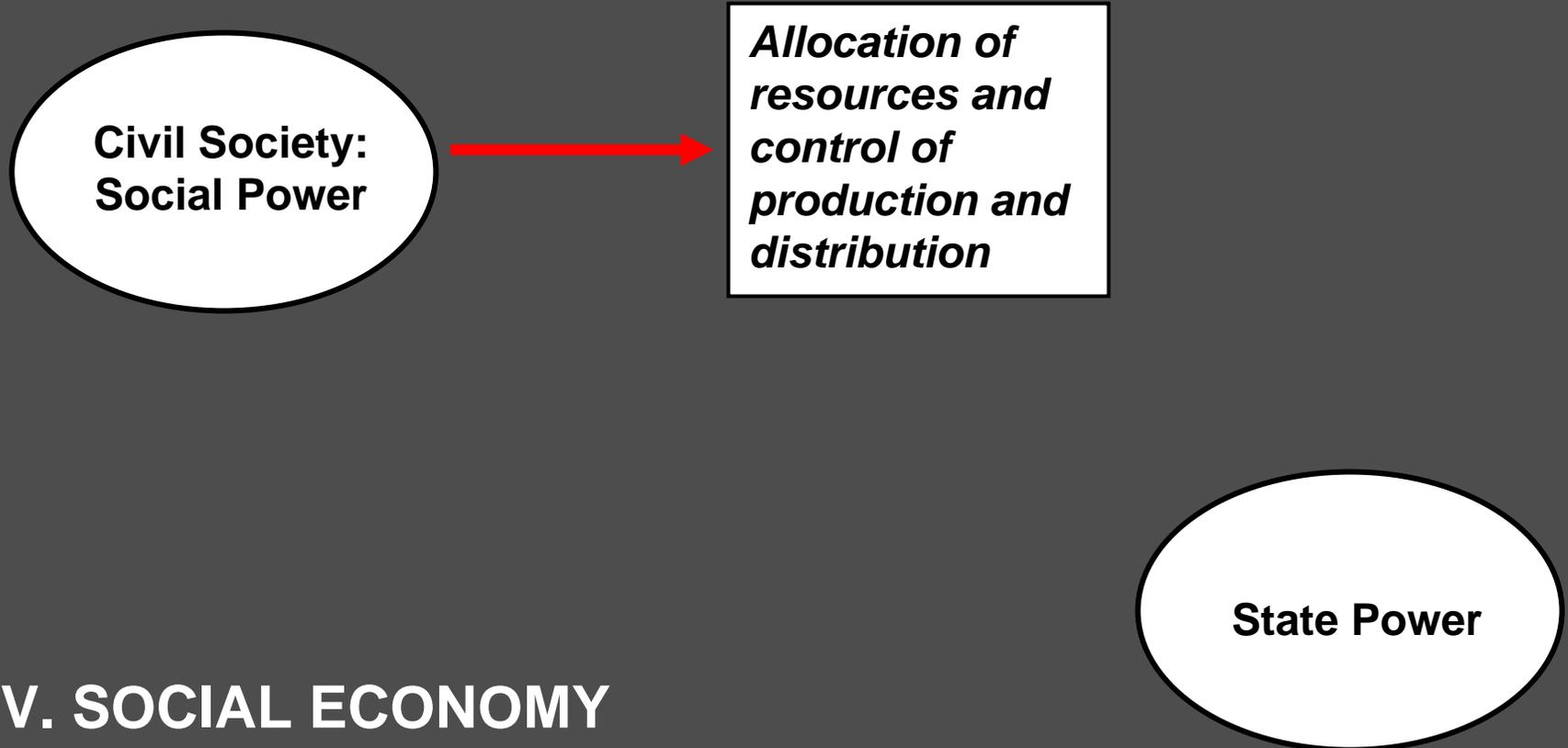
III. ASSOCIATIONAL DEMOCRACY

PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT



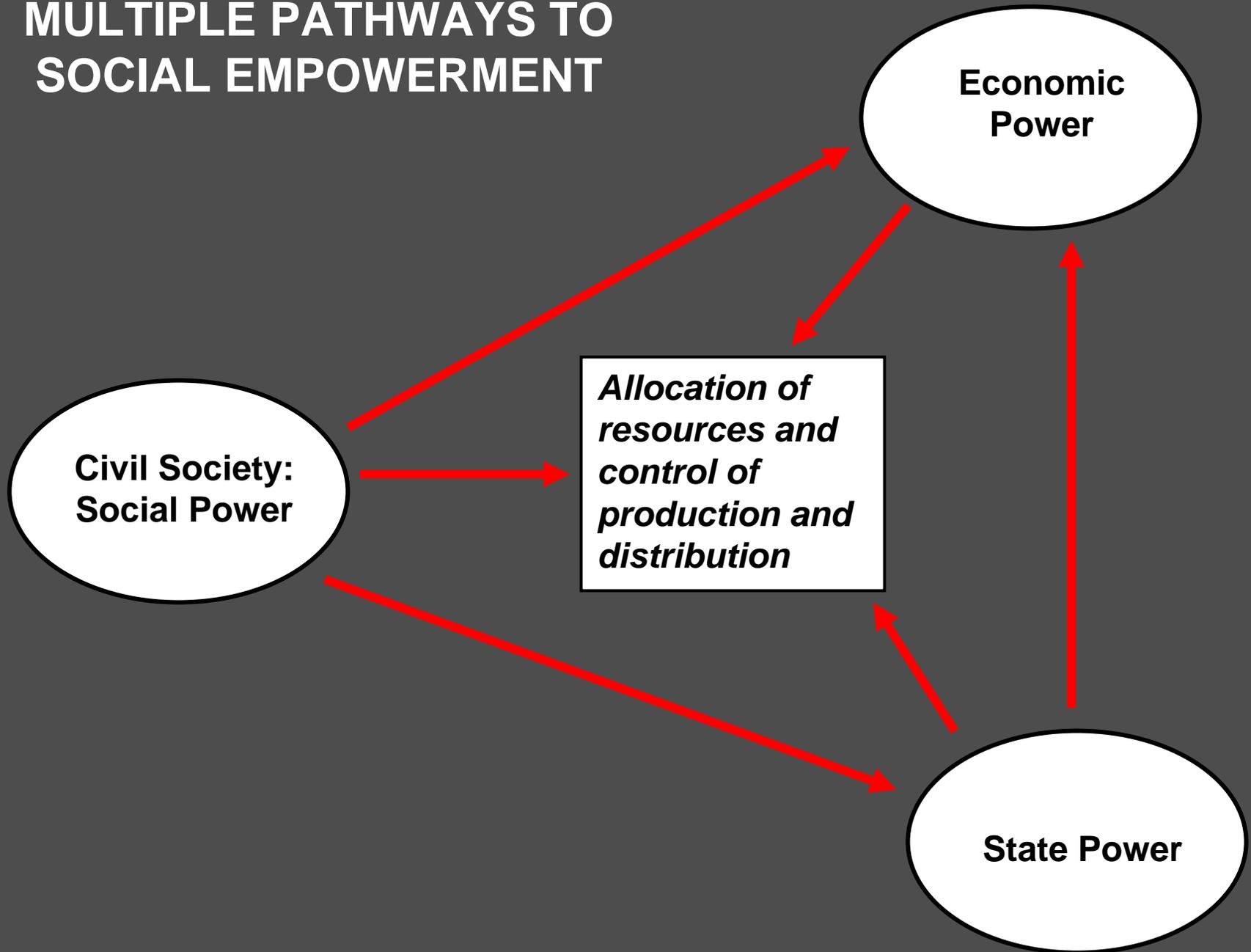
IV. SOCIAL CAPITALISM

PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT



V. SOCIAL ECONOMY

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT



Conclusions

Conclusions

- 1. Taken together, significant movement along these five pathways would cumulatively constitute a fundamental transformation of capitalist class relations.**

Conclusions

1. Taken together, significant movement along these five pathways would cumulatively constitute a fundamental transformation of capitalist class relations.
2. **Grand proposition: if we could move along these pathways towards a hybrid within which socialism was dominant, we would be in a better position to realize democratic egalitarian ideals of social justice.**

Conclusions

1. Taken together, significant movement along these five pathways would cumulatively constitute a fundamental transformation of capitalist class relations.
2. Grand proposition: if we could move along these pathways towards a hybrid within which socialism was dominant, we would be in a better position to realize democratic egalitarian ideals of social justice.
3. There are good reasons for skepticism.

Conclusions

1. Taken together, significant movement along these five pathways would cumulatively constitute a fundamental transformation of capitalist class relations
2. Grand proposition: if we could move along these pathways towards a hybrid within which socialism was dominant, we would be in a better position to realize democratic egalitarian ideals of social justice.
3. There are good reasons for skepticism.
4. But: skepticism is an essential feature of science, including emancipatory social science.

Conclusions

1. Taken together, significant movement along these five pathways would cumulatively constitute a fundamental transformation of capitalist class relations
2. Grand proposition: if we could move along these pathways towards a hybrid within which socialism was dominant, we would be in a better position to realize democratic egalitarian ideals of social justice.
3. There are good reasons for skepticism.
4. But: skepticism is an essential feature of science, including emancipatory social science.
5. Therefore our goal is to continually improve the answers to questions we ask as we engage the three tasks of diagnosis & critique, envisioning alternatives, and understanding transformation in order to get on with the messy business of changing the world rather than just interpreting it.

**The full text of book-in-progress,
Envisioning Real Utopias
can be found at:**

www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright