COERCION & CONSENT

STUDIES ON THE MODERN STATE

John A Hall

COERCION AND CONSENT

COERCION AND CONSENT:
Studies on the modern state

JOHN A. HALL

Polity Press

First published in 1994 by Polity Press
in association with Blackwell Publishers.

Editorial office:
Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Blackwell Publishers
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

238 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02142, USA

ISBN 0 7456 1194 X
ISBN 0 7456 1195 8 (pbk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

Typeset in 10 on 12 pt Sabon by TecSet Ltd, Wallington, Surrey
Printed in Great Britain by T.J. Press, Padstow, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper

To Patricia Crone
with
admiration and affection

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of five of these essays have been published previously. 'Capstones and Organisms' appeared in *Sociology*, vol. 19, 1985. A shortened version of 'State Power and Patterns of Late Development' appeared in vol. 28 of *Sociology* in 1994. 'Consolidations of Democracy' first appeared in David Held's *Prospects for Democracy*, published by Polity in 1992. 'Nationalism, classified and explained', reprinted by permission of *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is from the issue entitled 'Reconstructing Nations and States', summer 1993, vol. 122, no. 3. Please note that the comments made about post-communist societies in the last two essays mentioned have been revised, in line with the argument made in the third essay in this volume. 'Will the United States decline as did Britain?' first appeared in Michael Mann's *The Rise and Decline of the Nation State*, published by Blackwell in 1990. Further, the conclusion draws on some arguments made in 'Peace, Peace at Last?', which appeared in a *Festschrift* for Ernest Gellner, *Transition to Modernity*, edited by J. A. Hall and I. C. Jarvie and published by Cambridge University Press in 1992. I am grateful to all the various journals and publishers – and to Ding-xin Zhao, the co-author of the fourth essay – for permission to make use of this material.

I also wish to thank my colleagues, especially Michael Smith, at McGill for welcoming me so warmly to such an excellent department. Happily, I remain indebted to Michael Mann, Ernest Gellner, Anatoly Khazanov

and Nicos Mouzelis. Most importantly, I could not have finished this volume without the love of Linda Blair.

JOHN A. HALL

INTRODUCTION

Claude Lévi-Strauss may have been wrong to insist that human thought depends upon the capacity to make binary oppositions.[1] But social scientists do tend to think in either/or terms. Unfortunately, this style of reasoning brings error more often than enlightenment. Nowhere is this more true than in modern political sociology, and in particular in studies of the modern state. Background intellectual assumptions have led us to equate coercion with the strength of a state. Brutality is seen as power, and held to equal effectiveness. In similar vein, the necessity to seek consent is equated with the weakness of a state. To engage in the politics of give and take, to be checked and balanced, means, according to this view, a diminution of force and direction. These presumptions may well have their origins in the inter-war period; at the least, the experiences of those years added to a bias whose roots may be deeper still. Both fascism and communism had the capacity to decide where dull democracy dithered, supine in the face of challenges to its very existence.

This book has a central argument, variously addressed by essays dealing with a set of interrelated topics. If the matter is put negatively, the argument amounts to questioning the assumptions identified and the binary logic upon which they rest. In positive terms, the book insists that societies based on consent can generate great energies, including energies that allow them to coerce with mighty effectiveness. Just as importantly, coercion can weaken, by putting people's backs up and so leading them to resist or retreat in the face of initiatives from above. It

[1] C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966.

would be idle to deny that this view is based on a particular notion of power. If one definition of power stresses its zero-sum aspect, that is the ability to make somebody do what you wish, an equally important if neglected definition stresses that power is not a fixed sum – and that agreement can increase its very quantity. Underneath this latter view is a general metaphysic, clearly prescriptive but distinctively descriptive as well, that is highlighted in Oscar Wilde's observation that 'selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live'.[2] Differently put, societal energy is likely to be enhanced when social institutions are designed so that the contributions made by many can be synthesized and utilized.

A particularly striking attempt within social science to move beyond the binary division between coercion and consent was made in Michael Mann's important essay on the nature of state power.[3] Mann initially follows the traditional either/or view of state power in drawing a contrast between states that are more or less arbitrary – that is a distinction between despotic and more constitutional regimes. But his training as a historical sociologist naturally made him aware that there is a second dimension to state power, seen most clearly in the capacity to get things done. This sort of infrastructural power was very limited in classic agrarian circumstances but became much enhanced with the creation of modern systems of communication. A particular benefit of this appreciation of the logistics of power is that it clearly highlights the fact that classic agrarian empires were but puny leviathans, sitting on top of societies they could scarcely see, let alone penetrate and organize. The power of the state depends at all times upon its ability to raise taxes, and this was necessarily limited before the state could directly reach into one's pay packet.

But Mann's scheme is curiously static. Above all, what can be said about the comparative strength of constitutional and authoritarian regimes? The first chapter of this book suggests that even in pre-industrial circumstances constitutionalism – whose provenance is explained – enhanced state strength; a more particular point made against Mann is that the main change in human powers pioneered in European history, that is the triumph of capitalism, depended upon (and did at least something to enhance) constitutionalism. With the advantage of hindsight, it is all too easy to see that Mann overdid his insistence on the stability of

[2] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, in Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Writings*, Penguin, London, 1973, p. 49.

[3] M. Mann, 'The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results', *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 25, 1984.

authoritarian regimes in industrial circumstances. Germany would not have lost its pre-eminence for so long, chapter 7 annd 8 point out, had a more constitutional regime checked the foreign policy fantasies of its leaders; more striking still, the self-destruction of the Soviet Union, analysed in the chapter 3, demonstrates that vast edifices can be built on quicksand even in the industrial era.[4] A consideration of Tocqueville, whose insights form a leitmotiv of this book, encourages important generalizations at this point.

Tocqueville insisted that the strength of a state depended upon its legitimacy. One of the main discoveries of the *Old Regime and the French Revolution* was that French absolutism had begun the increase in state infrastructural reach through the creation of an official bureaucracy, manned by the *intendants*, that is by establishing a centrally directed official authority system, in charge of law and taxation, designed to reach into every corner of society. But Tocqueville's analytic point was that the French state remained very weak. He made this particularly clear in the important appendix dealing with Languedoc. In that region, the aristocracy had retained local liberties – which was to say that they had refused the offer, accepted by their peers, of tax exemption in return for the destruction of representative assemblies. Tocqueville found government in Languedoc to be efficient. The meeting of estates provided knowledge and pride, whilst the aristocracy was prepared to pay taxes to a government that it felt to be its own. And what was true of a province was true of modern societies as a whole. Tocqueville was well aware that the English state was more powerful than that of France. In this he was correct: the English won the War of the Atlantic because consent allowed military might to flourish on sound finances.[5]

It would be naive in the extreme to deny the contention, familiar to us from the Greeks, that constitutional regimes can become corrupt. No-holds-barred demands by everybody for immediate and total gratification must mean an absence of cohesion and an inability to act. Maximal

[4] This emphasis on the viability of authoritarianism is especially present in M. Mann, 'Ruling Class Strategies and Citizenship', *Sociology*, vol. 21, 1987.

[5] For modern demonstrations of England's greater fiscal strength, see, *inter alia*: P. O'Brien, 'The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1688–1815', *Economic History Review*, vol. 41, 1988; J. C. Riley, 'French Finances, 1727–1768', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 59, 1987; J. F. Bosher, *French Finances, 1770–1795*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970; P. Mathias and P. O'Brien, 'Taxation in England and France', *Journal of European Economic History*, vol. 5, 1976; J. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991; J. Brewer, *The Sinews of Power*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1989.

societal energy results not just from the recognition of functional specificity *per se;* as important is the ability of different power groups to work together in some sort of 'politics of reciprocal consent'.[6] It is at this point that Tocqueville makes his greatest contribution to the social sciences.

To say that he knew about the corruption of democracy would be to understate his concern severely. From his earliest days, he was obsessed with the problem of liberty in the modern era. His early work is based on assumptions that he shared with others of his generation. Roughly speaking, he felt that modern individualism would encourage social isolation and a destruction of public virtue. So he was surprised to discover that Americans could combine liberty with equality. He confided to his travel journal his contempt for the middle classes, noting, almost reluctantly, that 'in spite of their petty passions, their incomplete education and their vulgar manners, they clearly can provide practical intelligence'.[7] It is extremely important to realise that Tocqueville came to change these initial and basic presuppositions.[8] He moved away from a view based on modern social conditions to one that was far more state-centred: 'Almost all the vices, miscalculations and disastrous prejudices I have been describing owed their origin, their continuance, and their proliferation to a line of conduct practised by so many of our Kings, that of dividing men so as the better to rule them'.[9] The vices, miscalculations and prejudices to which Tocqueville is here referring boil down in essence to one: people so distrust each other that they cannot cooperate in liberty – yet the blame for this sorry condition is not their own but that of their rulers. Put differently, social atomization is less an emergent property of a new social order than the result of a particular style of domination.

The tremendous insight at work here is that the character of social action is determined massively by interaction with the state: in the second and sixth chapters this principle helps us make sense of working-class and nationalist movements. The principle can be looked at in a different way. Tocqueville is in effect arguing that it is normal *in*

[6] This happy expression is used by R. J. Samuels in *The Business of the Japanese State*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987 to describe the way in which state elites and business elites bargain with each other to a common end.

[7] A. de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. G. Lawrence, Doubleday, New York, 1971, p. 259, cited by R. Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987, p. 89.

[8] I make this argument at length in 'Trust in Tocqueville', *Policy Organisation and Society*, vol. 5, 1992.

[9] A. de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. S. Gilbert, Anchor Books, New York, 1955, p. 136.

conditions of political liberty for groups to work together and for cross-class coalitions to be formed. Political participation is held to take human beings out of themselves and thereby to increase their understanding: 'Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another.'[10] This insight lies at the back of the contention of chapter 2, namely that liberal regimes gain stability by diffusing conflict throughout society. As this might seem excessively optimistic, it makes sense to highlight the fact that Tocqueville's thought about the possibility of liberal regimes as a whole is deeply pessimistic. In a sense, he has no sociology of *transition*: France lost its liberty in the old regime and is held unlikely thereafter to regain it, whilst England's culture of liberty could be maintained within the era of equal social conditions.

This sense of historical constraint, indeed of historical determinism, is a salutary corrective to naive views, currently popular, suggesting that democracy is bound to spread throughout the globe, and it accordingly lies at the back of the treatment of democratization in chapter 5. It is as well to note, immediately, that this treatment goes some way past Tocqueville, most notably by demonstrating that trust has on particular occasions been created and by considering those features of social organization in addition to political culture that matter for the consolidation of democracy. All the same, I have great sympathy for the one activist principle that can be found in Tocqueville: the only long-term cure for political distrust and social conflict is the exercise of liberty. The people can be trusted to learn to cooperate – so that, in Sting's rather different formulation, 'if you love someone, set them free'. If that formulation is too grand for some, the same analytic point can be couched in more Machiavellian guise: the offer of participation coopts, thereby taming radicalism.

Further discussion of all these points can safely be left to the chapters themselves. But a final introductory remark about the nature of modernity can usefully underscore the nature of the argument as a whole. That discussions of modernity have tended to be exceedingly abstract is perhaps a pity, yet it is scarcely disastrous in itself. But the combination of abstraction with culturalism, that is the view – so massively present in the influential work of Talcott Parsons – that meaning makes the world go round, did lead to intellectual catastrophe. This perspective on modernity failed to give proper account to base forces of production and coercion, and understood ideology itself in an unhelpfully traditional manner. Such

[10] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. G. Lawrence, Anchor Books, New York, 1969, p. 515.

views did reflect and make some sense of the historical experience of the modern United States, but they were little use in understanding the twentieth century as a whole – for the brute reason that they failed to place the world wars at the centre of their attention.

The underlying assumption of the book is that modernity has structures. The most obvious of these for present purposes is that of the state. There is nothing complex about the definition of the state at work: the state has personnel who gain ascendancy by functional means – above all by seeking to monopolize violence, to encourage economic development and, in modern circumstances, to ensure normative integration. One point that is implicit in this definition can usefully be brought into the open: the state's emphasis on territorializing social relations means that it faces outwards as much as inwards. The most obvious consequence of this is that states are in opposition to each other, seeking security because they are fearful for their survival. But as important as existence within the larger society of state competition has become the ever more pressing need to swim inside capitalist society. There are complex relations between these two larger societies. If the first emergence of capitalism was allowed by European multipolarity, the dynamism of capitalism then had a major impact on the state: an increase in absolute wealth together with the ease of taxing moveable goods made it possible for states to penetrate their civil societies ever more effectively, and in consequence to wage more absolute war. By the end of the eighteenth century, this led to the politics of nationalism and of representation. Differently put, the 'modernization' of the state, as forgotten theorists understood,[11] has a neglected political dimension. This is not to discount the economic aspect, merely to note that it has been better appreciated by social science. This is scarcely surprising. After a single country had mysteriously, even accidentally pioneered new means of production, other states necessarily made it their business to force development.[12] The fourth chapter, which proposes a theory of the type of state most likely to achieve late development, makes it clear that this generalization holds as true today as it did in the recent past. Once competing states had their own industrial machines, wars between them became utterly ruinous, raising the

[11] H. Sidgwick, *The Development of the European Polity*, Macmillan, London, 1903; R. MacIver, *The Modern State*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1926.

[12] The classic statement remains A. Gershenkron, 'Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective', in B. Hoselitz, ed., *The Progress of Underdeveloped Areas*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1952. Cf. G. Sen, *The Military Origins of Industrialisation and International Trade Rivalry*, Frances Pinter, London, 1984.

question, discussed in some detail in chapters 7 and 8, as to whether the successful workings of capitalist society depend upon the leadership of a single great and liberal power.

But perhaps all these concerns are outdated. Currently influential post-modernist social theory, not just abstract and culturalist but scandalously relativist as well, makes much of the more general claim that nation states are withering away. Obsolescence has been caused, it is claimed, by a globalization of production that has at once made traditional geopolitical gain meaningless and effectively removed any hope of the national management of an economy. The conclusion considers this view, suggesting that it makes no sense of much of the contemporary world and but little of its advanced component.

1

CAPSTONES AND ORGANISMS

The state is once again at the forefront of our attention. Although this development is, given the importance of political coercion and military activity in history, much to be welcomed, it must be admitted that there are few solid results to show for considerable labours.[1] Two particular problems, especially manifest in Marxist attempts to come to terms with the state, spring to mind. Firstly discussions of the state have tended to be formal and abstract, as the merest glance at the writings of, say, Nicos Poulantzas on the capitalist state demonstrates. Underlying this is, one suspects, an attitude quite familiar from traditional political science which habitually considers that the state can be treated timelessly on the grounds that the problems and tasks of government must be met in any historical circumstance. Secondly, it is not clear whether marxists really do allow for the independent impact of politics, as talk about 'relative autonomies' of one sort or another indicates. It is worth while distinguishing three positions in this connection. Naive marxism denies the importance of the state altogether, whilst more sophisticated marxists take coercion seriously yet remain true to the commanding heights of

[1] This statement, written in 1984, needs immediate qualification. Happily, the formalism of much of the initial attention given to the state, most particularly by marxists, did not last long; it is now possible to point to considerable substantive achievements, many of which are noted and discussed in this book. None the less, I have not revised this chapter so as to remove references to marxism: the chapter was occasioned by and gains its force from debate about whether state forms had an autonomous impact on the rise of capitalism.

their ideology by insisting that the state's autonomy is only relative: that is that the laws of historical motion remain dependent upon class.

A third position, stating that marxism can remain marxism whilst admitting that political power, and not just economic exploitation by class, is an autonomous source of evil in human affairs, has never yet been spelt out. Frankly, I believe that this last position can *never* be created without the destruction of the conceptual apparatus and the promise of salvation inherent in marxism.[2]

It would be possible to present an account of recent attempts to grapple with the state at a conceptual level, but an entirely different tack is adopted here. An account of the relation between political forms and the triumph of capitalism, concentrating on a comparison between the West and China, is offered in order that some advance may be made beyond the impasses noted. For the sake of clarity, it is as well to spell out my attitude towards the problems that have been highlighted. Firstly, formalistic concern with the state seems to me misguided as different types of state are present in the historical record. Secondly, I shall argue that political forms matter. A strong line is thus being taken against existing marxist accounts, although something will be said in favour of the more sophisticated versions of that approach.

One final preliminary is in order. Discussion centres on two classic theories of the relation between state forms and economic development, both neglected recently to our loss. The first of these is that of Max Weber, who insisted that bureaucratic states in the pre-industrial epoch killed off capitalist development.[3] The second is Adam Smith's contention that, in the West, there was, to use the Weberian term, an 'elective affinity' between commerce and liberty.[4] These are interesting and powerful claims which deserve to be brought back into general discussion.

Empires in the Abstract

When we think of empires the image at the front of our minds is that of great strength. This is largely the result of the mental image created by the

[2] This judgement applies even to N. Mouzelis's *Back to Sociological Theory*, Macmillan, London, 1990. This does theorize the political successfully, but only at the cost of taking us from Marx to Weber.

[3] M. Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilisations*, New Left Books, London, 1978.

[4] A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1976, especially Book 3; D. Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978.

monuments and records of arbitrariness empires have left behind; this image has been formalized by Wittfogel, whose view of hydraulic empires stresses their total control of their societies.[5] A moment's reflection must make us doubt all this. It is always dangerous to take written records at face value, and this is especially true in pre-industrial empires where the demands of ideology and myth-making are great. We know that such empires could not have been so strong: economically they remained segmentary, unless there was water transport, since large-scale transportation over land was impossible, and this in turn logistically limited the means of military power.[6] All this is more than confirmed by what we know of limits to the powers of emperors themselves.[7] In the later Roman Empire, for example, the emperor was quite incapable of seeing every paper sent to him. He threatened all administrators who prepared or submitted illegal rescripts. But he openly admitted his impotence by declaring invalid in advance any special grants in contravention of the law, even if they bore his own signature.[8]

Those who have written about empires have tended to stress one or the other of these factors. In fact both were present: the paradox of empire is that its great strength – its monuments, its arbitrariness, its scorn for human life – is based upon and reflects social weakness. Put thus, this sounds a straightforward contradiction rather than a paradox, but that this is not so can be seen by identifying two distinct faces of power.

One view of power has always seen it in terms of command, of the ability to get people to do something against their will. But there is a different view, which has stressed that power is an enabling means, created by an agreement about what is to be accomplished. Something follows from this: social capacity is likely to be enhanced if agreement can be reached. The argument to be made is that a contrast can be drawn in terms of this dimension between a capstone state, strong in arbitrary power but weak in its ability to penetrate its society, and a more organic state, deprived of arbitrary power but far more capable of serving and controlling social relations within its territory. We can now turn to explaining this variation.

[5] K. A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1957.

[6] D. Engel, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978.

[7] S. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, Free Press, New York, 1969.

[8] A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1973, p. 410.

Splendours and Miseries of the Chinese Imperial State

Marx's theory of history posited that capitalism would follow feudalism. At first glance this theory receives decisive refutation from the Chinese case, for a long period of feudalism was ended in 221 BC when one border kingdom, that of the Chi'n, making use of large citizen armies and acting with a brutality of Assyrian intensity, united all China in an empire. It is important to note that despotism had little to do with water control of any sort: arbitrary rule of a military type came from the west of China, where no water control was needed: the empire was in place before much advantage was taken of the loess soils of the great river valleys; and, more generally, the bureaucracy *never* planned or managed irrigation works, for reasons to be noted.[9] Where does all this leave marxism? One commendably blunt retort is that given by Witold Rodinski in a recent history of China:

> The political structure of the Chou era clearly and unambiguously deserves to be referred to as feudal; confusion ensues when some historians, who restrict the meaning of this term to political phenomena, see in the creation of a centralised, absolute monarchy, beginning with Chi'n and Han, an end to feudalism in China. In reality, in its socioeconomic sense, it was to be present up to the middle of the twentieth century.[10]

This is a very bold statement indeed; it says, in effect, that the fact of empire made no real difference. And the same argument underlies the refusal to allow the military factor any real autonomy in Chinese history. It may well be that an army is not always exploitative: Michael Mann has argued that the creation of an empire, by establishing peace, allows for an expansion of regular economic activity, a process sometimes aided directly by the state.[11] But the marxist position does lead us to ask not just about the creation of empires (often, by means of booty, 'cost free') but about the continued maintenance of such military power. What were the relations between state and society? Did the former have any substantial autonomy over the social classes of the larger society?

There is no doubt that there is much to be said for the marxist-inspired scepticism about the power of the state. All pre-industrial regimes must

[9] I learnt much about this from a paper given by M. Elvin at LSE, 1982.
[10] W. Rodinski, *The Walled Kingdom*, Flamingo, London, 1983, p. 23.
[11] M. Mann, 'States, Ancient and Modern', *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 18, 1977.

tax through local notables, and China, despite having a historically large bureaucracy, was not different in this respect. We can see that Wittfogel's thesis of a state exercising 'total power' over its society is a fantasy by looking at simple figures. The first Ming emperor in 1371 sought to have but 5,488 mandarins in government service. This number did expand, yet in the sixteenth century, the last of the Ming dynasty, there were still only about 20,400 in the empire as a whole, although there were perhaps another 50,000 minor officials.[12] As a very large number of these were concentrated in Peking, an official in one of the 1,100 local districts might well have managed 500–1,000 square miles with the aid of only three assistants. Weber's comment remains apposite:

> The officials' short terms of office (three years), corresponding to similar Islamic institutions, allowed for intensive and rational influencing of the economy through the administration as such only in an intermittent and jerky way. This was the case in spite of the administration's theoretical omnipotence. It is astonishing how few permanent officials the administration believed to be sufficient. The figures alone make it perfectly obvious that as a rule things must have been permitted to take their own course, as long as the interests of the state power and of the treasury remained untouched . . . [13]

All in all, the Chinese state simply did not have the means by which to exercise the total control envisaged in Wittfogel's picture. Of course it sought, as did other imperial states, to gain such autonomy, and the use of eunuchs – supposedly biologically loyal to the state – is one index of this. Importantly, the mandarinate was always jealous of eunuchs, since it was aware that an increase in central power would be at its own expense. When the state was strong, most usually when it had just been founded, decentralizing tendencies were strongly counteracted. Land was shared out, taxes were collected and abuses corrected; at the accession of the Ming in 1371, over 100,000 members of the gentry were executed. Moreover, individual members of the gentry always had something to fear from the arbitrary exercise of state power; thus the making of a fortune in state service was best followed by a discreet withdrawal to the country, where profits could be enjoyed in peace. Nevertheless, arbitrary action against individuals was counterbalanced by a fundamental inability of the state to go against the gentry class as a whole. Reformer after reformer tried to establish a decent land registry as the basis for a proper taxation system, but all were defeated by landlord refusal to

[12] R. Huang, *1587*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1981, ch. 1.
[13] M. Weber, *The Religion of China*, Free Press, New York, 1964, p. 134.

cooperate. Chinese society thus witnessed a 'power stand-off' between state and society, a situation of stalemate that led to the inability to generate a large sum of societal energy.

The mechanism of this power stand-off can be seen at work in the dynamic process of Chinese history already noted, that is in the cyclical pattern, well known to the mandarins themselves, whereby disintegration of the empire was followed by imperial reconstitution. Naturally, each historical case had its peculiarities, but it is nevertheless possible to detect a habitual pattern. A newly established dynasty sought to create a healthy peasant base for both its tax and military potential. To this end, seeds were distributed and some attempt made, usually with striking success, to promote agricultural development, not least through the printing of agricultural handbooks. Yet even without internal or external pressures, the state tended to lose control of society. The local power of the gentry was transformed into the ability both to increase their estates and to avoid taxation. But pressures were in any case usually present. Internally, prosperity led to an expansion of population, by no means discouraged by the gentry, and this eventually caused land hunger and peasant rebellion.

Externally, the nomads on the borders found the empire more and more attractive as its prosperity waxed in front of their eyes. There is some scholarly debate as to whether such nomads invade of their own will, or whether they are forced into such action by mercantilist policies of the state itself, keen to keep its riches to itself and loath to treat with nomads for whom trade is virtually a necessity.[14] Whatever the case, nomads do not often, as Hollywood representations might suggest, come into empires intent on loot, rape and destruction – although these were precisely the aims of the Mongols. Barbarians wish to possess the benefits of civilization and prove increasingly capable of getting them. For barbarians are often employed as mercenaries by empires in their later days and, as a result, they learn military techniques that, when allied with their inherent military resource of great mobility, make them a formidable force.

In these circumstances, the imperial state is, of course, forced to increase taxation, and it is at this moment that the power stand-off between state and society proves to be important. Many landlords choose to shelter peasants who refuse to pay such increased taxation, and thereby increase their own local power. The combination of feudal-type disintegration and overpopulation led to a constant decrease in the number of taxpaying peasant smallholders. Rodinski cites as one

[14] I owe this point to O. Lattimore.

example of this process the census of 754, which showed that there were only 7.6 million taxpayers out of a population of 52.8 million.[15] In such circumstances the state is forced to tax even more heavily where it can, and is driven to arbitrary action of all types; this in its own turn fuels peasant unrest.

This situation of breakdown and division could, as noted, last for a long time, but a new dynasty was established in the long run, usually in one of two ways. Nomads succeeded in establishing only two dynasties that united all of China, namely those of the Mongols and the Manchu, although they ruled various segments of northern China on several occasions. Other dynasties resulted from peasant revolt. It is worth nothing that peasants were not able to link their laterally insulated communities horizontally, so that successful and non-local revolt often depended upon the help of *déclassé* mandarins, members of millenarian groups or discontented gentry. The leaders of such revolts, when they proved successful, eventually cooperated with the gentry and founded a new dynasty–which again began the cycle of Chinese history.

This has been a long description of the perpetual cycle of Chinese civilization, and certain points at issue in it need to be spelt out. In so far as nomad pressure ran according to its own logic, it is inappropriate to say that the whole cycle of Chinese history can be seen in internal class terms. The empire was, to borrow a famous description of the Fall of Rome, at least sometimes 'assassinated' from the outside. But sophisticated marxist analyses have important points to make, and these have been made, for a different empire, with marvellous acuity by Geoffrey de Ste Croix in his *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World.*[16] Such analyses powerfully draw our attention to the thoroughgoing class nature of the imperial state and to the extreme selfishness of the upper classes in refusing to place the situation of their civilization above their own personal liberties. Had this class domination been absent, it is argued, nomadic pressure could have been dealt with since, after all, a mere 10,000 nomads on one occasion overran the Chinese state. I think it is unlikely that this debate over the primacy of external military or internal class factors, whether in Rome or China, is ever going to be finally resolved, largely because both approaches do emphasize certain features of social reality. But even were some ultimate primacy to be given to class factors when considering the fall of empires, it remains the case that the classical marxist canon would remain badly dented.

[15] Rodinski, *The Walled Kingdom*, p. 78.
[16] Duckworth, London, 1981.