

# I

## Oppression, Resistance, and the State

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### An Introduction

**P**ick up any newspaper or tune in to any newscast on television and you will undoubtedly see or hear at least a few items concerning the advantages of some and the oppression of many in the United States: tax policy reform that enriches the powerful and affluent while not benefiting the working class or the poor significantly (or at all); the disproportionate representation of the poor and working class in the military deployed to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, in contrast to the absence in these troops of the wealthy; the disenfranchisement of thousands of voters of color in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections; and the struggle of women to preserve their reproductive rights. Clearly, relatively few people are advantaged by policy and practice, while the great majority is not. Sociologists often refer to this imbalance as an issue of *oppression*.

When sociologists use the term *oppression*, they are referring to “those attitudes, behaviors, and pervasive and systematic social arrangements by which members of one group are exploited and subordinated while members of another group are granted privileges” (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991, p. 155). Oppression is not simply about one or more groups’ deprivation or exploitation; it is a relationship. To speak of some people’s disadvantage is to imply others’ privilege. The relationship, then, is one of a power imbalance in which one group has the ability to secure and maintain its advantages relative

to those of others. To speak of the economic, political, and social disadvantages of women means to speak of the prerogatives of being male in a patriarchal society. To talk of the exploitation of the poor and the working class implies the relative privilege of the affluent. To discuss the oppression of people of color in a racialized society is to also discuss the advantaged position of whiteness. The power imbalances of oppression also mean that one group enjoys unearned privileges or undeserved enrichment and others unjust impoverishment and deprivation. Undeserved enrichment is “the unjust theft of labor or resources by one group . . . from another group . . .” (Feagin, 2001, p. 18). Unjust impoverishment is the inequitable deprivation suffered by the oppressed. The dominance of the affluent, whites, and men derives from their unjust enrichment over centuries of the exploitation of the labor of workers, people of color, and women.

The notion of oppression does not necessarily mean that those who are among the privileged are individually to blame for their advantage or that they themselves oppressed the disadvantaged for their own gain any more than the exploited are themselves to blame for their oppression. Rather, the point here is that the accidents of birth accorded each of us our various positions, which means that the advantages enjoyed by the privileged are not necessarily the result of their own hard work. Likewise, the disadvantages of the oppressed are not necessarily their own doing. Instead, it is important to understand the structure of power inequalities as a fundamental feature of oppression and to explore how society may be structured so as to privilege one group over the other, regardless of individual efforts. That said, we are not arguing that such structures are written in stone, forever inexorable and unchangeable. Rather, organized collective struggles in systems of oppression may affect those relationships in significant ways.

Systems of oppression are not isolated from one another. Systems of oppression intersect in significant ways, forming a complex *matrix of domination* (Collins, 1990). People do not experience, for example, their gendered oppression one moment, their racialized oppression at another, and their class oppression at yet another. Rather, people live in their respective statuses of oppression simultaneously. So, for example, an individual is not a woman at one time during the day, white at another, and later middle class; that individual lives as a white, middle-class woman every moment of every day. As such, the intersectionality of multiple systems of oppression forms status inconsistencies so that an individual may be advantaged on some dimensions of this complex matrix of domination but disadvantaged on others. In the case of the hypothetical person here, she is advantaged in the dimensions of her class and her racialized group membership but disadvantaged in the dimension of her gender.

The question of what shapes these systems of oppression, singly and as intersecting multiple oppressions, and the positions individuals occupy in them implies the concept of power: What is power? Where does it come from? Who has it? Who doesn't? What are the processes and structures that affect power? Is power absolute? What are the dimensions of power? We will explore these questions in Chapter 2.

Discussions of power and oppression often suggest avenues through which people may seek to affect power structures. In what we commonly refer to as "democratic" systems, one oft-cited characteristic mechanism is the right to vote. Indeed, pluralists emphasize the power of voting as the key to nonelite participation and the means by which people may hold elites accountable. If voting is such a crucial element of power to the people, how widespread is electoral participation? Is there a pattern to who votes and who doesn't? How effective is voting for nonelites' ability to hold leaders accountable or to confront and challenge systems of oppression? Chapter 3 examines these questions about voting.

Moreover, since it would seem that those who are among the oppressed would be resistant to embracing a system that clearly disadvantages them, how is it that mass rebellions are so rare? What makes people accept, often without question, such a system? We will pursue this issue in Chapter 4.

## **Systems of Oppression and the State**

As political sociologists, we stress the changing nature of power and politics; we therefore often see the polity and other institutions of power as arenas of conflict, not necessarily structures of cooperation and consensus. Since the state makes and enforces laws and budgetary decisions affecting the distribution of rewards, resources, and opportunities, the question of power also implies the relationship between the state and society: When the state makes policy, is there a pattern to whose interests get met and whose ignored? If there is, what is that pattern? What factors affect which interests get addressed and which get ignored? Is the state a neutral actor? Chapter 5 will examine these questions.

## **Structures of Oppression: Power, Politics, and the State**

Structures of oppression are patterned and formidable. This raises the questions of what those patterns look like and what might affect those patterns.

What is the role of the state in generating and reproducing or resisting and changing structured systems of oppression and inequality? Since oppression generates contrasts of privilege and power for some and the subordination of many, questions of how these imbalances are replicated bear examination. Structures of oppression may imply unfairness and thus invite rebellion; they therefore require ideological justifications to elicit widespread support for or at least tacit acceptance of them. Structures of oppression are thus institutionalized and appear as unchangeable, natural, or objective rather than ideological. Of interest to political sociologists is the identification of the dominant structures of oppression and the relationship of these to political processes. Political sociologists also pursue the question of how the state might participate in the reproduction of these structures of oppression.

## Political Economy

That economics appears to be a central feature to the patterns of inequality signals the need to examine that institution. However, the economy is not isolated from other institutions; there are important intersections between the economy and the state, which political sociologists call *political economy*. The institutions of the state and economy intersect and overlap, generating economic power differentials and systems of structured class inequality. These power differentials and systems of structured class inequality are in turn reinforced by the state. For example, *capitalism* is a political economy in which workers cooperate to produce wealth that is then privately appropriated by whoever hired the workers. Workers do not own the means of production; they only own their labor power, which they sell as a commodity to an employer who pays them a wage for the use of their labor. Capitalists own or control the means of production and therefore own the wealth that workers produce using these means (Marx, 1954).

The state in a capitalist political economy operates on the ideological assumption that it is the legitimate right of employers to own the wealth produced by workers. Inequality becomes based in part on whether one is an owner of the means of production or an owner only of labor power. This is the political economy that dominates the United States and most, if not all, of the industrialized Western nations.

Typically, sociologists suggest that capitalism stands in contrast to the political economy of *socialism*. In Marxist variants of socialism, the leading theory of socialism in most academic disciplines, production of goods and services in a socialist political economy may involve the social cooperation between workers to create wealth, as it does in capitalism. And workers may be paid a wage in exchange for their labor, just as they are in a capitalist

economy. But where the means of production in a capitalist political economy are privately owned, these are more likely to be owned or controlled by the state in a socialist political economy according to the Marxist model. In such models, the state becomes the owner and controller of the wealth produced and therefore has the power to determine its distribution. This does not mean there is no economic inequality or oppression in a socialist political economy. However, the state's role in the political economy becomes more apparent in a socialist system because it is more likely to actively moderate economic inequality by providing or subsidizing basic goods and services for all. In such a system, for example, the state often becomes a provider of health care, housing, food, and income support when employment is unavailable. Variations of the socialist political economy can be found in Cuba and in Sweden and Norway, where elements of both capitalism and socialism structure the political economy as "social democracies" or "mixed economies."

Worker cooperation in the production of goods and services is also a key feature in *communist* political economies; but here the means of production are collectively owned by the workers themselves. In this case, ownership of the means of production positions the workers to determine the distribution of the wealth they produce. This does not necessarily mean everyone is guaranteed an equal share of the wealth. The decision-making process of the distribution of wealth may stimulate the creation of structured systems of inequality as workers strive to develop criteria to determine who gets what. Karl Marx and many other radical social theorists envisioned a system in which individuals' wealth production and share of that wealth would not be directly linked. Instead, wealth would be created from each according to one's ability to produce for the group as a whole and distributed to each according to one's need regardless of ability to produce (although Marx was not specific about how to evaluate either ability or need). Israeli kibbutzim are small-scale examples of a communist political economy (though not internationalist in scope), where the distribution of the wealth produced by the kibbutz as a whole is determined in part by the amount of time commitment made by individual members to the collective: Those who have been living on the kibbutz longest receive the greatest benefits. Structured inequality in this instance becomes a function of longevity and loyalty to the collective. Likewise, experiments in communist political economies can historically be found in revolutionary Spain in the early 1900s, particularly in areas largely controlled by the Spanish anarchists.

These political economy types are ideal types rather than distinctively different types. Most political economies are more a hybrid of these types so that differences between political economies are more likely to be ones of

degree than of actual type. The United States, for example, is often cited as the prototype of the capitalist political economy; but the state has at various points in time taken an active role in subsidizing some basic needs for some people. Moreover, there are many worker-owned production facilities (such as Joseph Industries, Inc., a forklift parts manufacturer in Streetsboro, Ohio, that is entirely worker owned) and worker cooperatives (like Moosewood Inn in Ithaca, New York) in the United States. The former Soviet Union was also more of a hybrid than a pure communist political economy. The workers there did not own the means of production nor did they own or control the wealth they produced. Instead, the state owned the means of production, and workers were paid wages in exchange for their labor. The former Soviet Union's political economy was thus more one of "state capitalism" than pure communism.

The notion of political economy emphasizes that the economy is not necessarily a neutral institution. The interplay between the state and economic interests increases the likelihood that other factors will come into play in the functioning of the economy as well as in the production of state and economic policy. Think, for example, about market-based notions like supply and demand as the equation that affects wages and prices: The more demand there is for a product, and the scarcer its availability, the higher its price will be; similarly, the more demand there is for labor—and the fewer workers available—the higher wages will be. But is the equation this simple? What might affect the equation? Can the equation be manipulated?

Power and resource imbalances can alter how causal the connection between supply and demand is on one side and prices and wages on the other. It is possible to falsely create shortages or demand to boost prices, like spilling milk into the ocean or destroying cattle or crops; withholding supplies like oil to falsely create scarcity; or using advertising and credit cards to create demand that otherwise would not exist. Similarly, the equation of supply and demand can be manipulated to affect wages. It is possible to train too many workers for limited jobs to create a glut of workers and therefore depress wages, or, on the other hand, some (relatively powerful) workers may in fact *limit* the number of trained professionals so as to keep wages high (e.g., the American Medical Association [AMA] limits the number of medical school slots even though there is a severe shortage of physicians and health care workers in rural areas and in inner cities); organized workers can use collective bargaining and the fact that they are organized to force employers to boost wages and benefits in order to avert costly strikes and work slowdowns.

Note that policy making by legislators facilitates, enables, hinders, or makes illegal many of these activities to alter how straightforward the

“law” of supply and demand is. Examples may include the right to collective bargaining, closed-shop policies, recognition of professionalization standards (such as those used by the AMA) to facilitate higher wages; price supports and subsidies to keep prices of products like agricultural products high enough to satisfy farmers; and antitrust and industrial deregulation legislation to limit prices (on the assumption that competition will keep prices down).

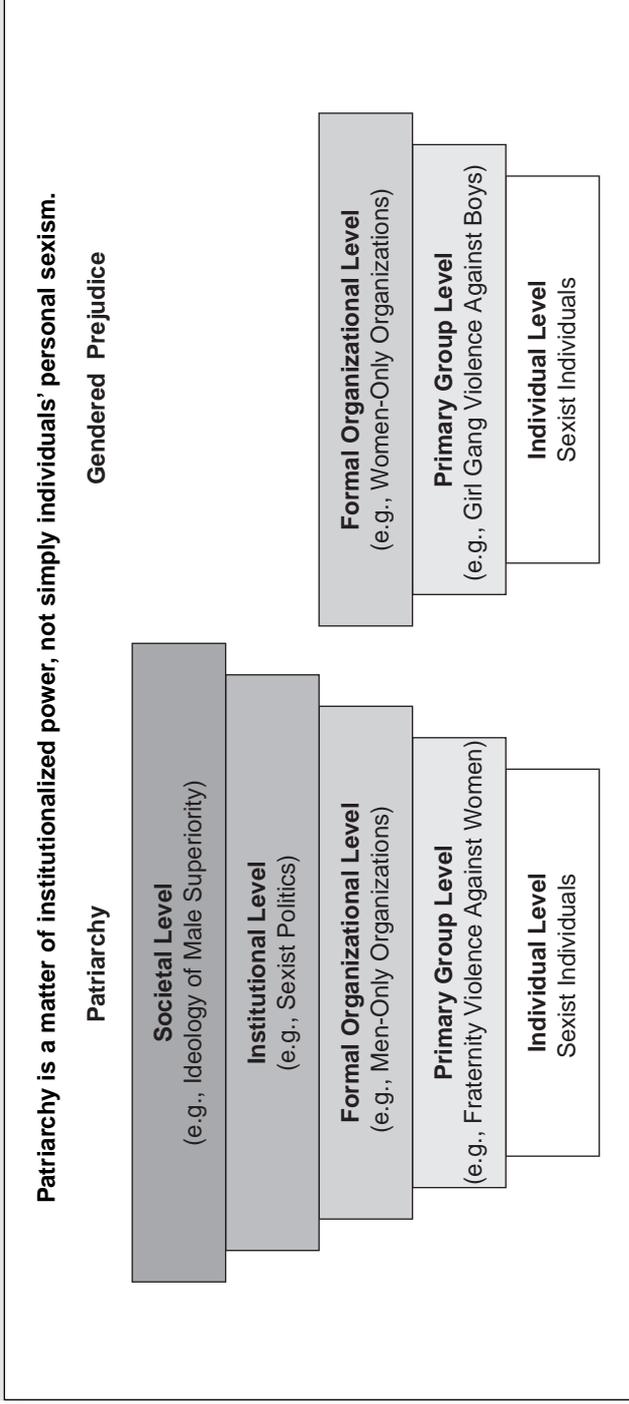
The political economic view of power and politics thus examines the relative roles of political and economic leaders in the power structure of society and in the production and reproduction of structured oppression. The intersection of the institutions of state and economy raise important questions about the distribution of rights, privileges, and opportunities. The ability of the state to collect revenues and to budget these for specific expenditures places state managers in a unique position to affect existing systems of inequality. Chapter 7 will pursue the question of how the state may shape the historical struggle between labor and capital as well as the struggle for gender and racial/ethnic rights.

## Patriarchy

In addition to systems of class inequality and oppression, most states, including the United States, also maintain systems of gendered inequality and oppression, most commonly organized as a *patriarchy* in which males are more valued and generally more privileged than women. In a patriarchy, male dominance is ideologically justified as a natural, inalienable right, thereby enforcing the inferiority and subordination of women. Such is the case in arguments emphasizing that “anatomy is destiny”: women’s childbearing role and their hormones arguably make them biologically unsuited for a wide range of activities requiring intellect, reason, authority, physical strength, and speed. This produces women’s restricted opportunities in education and labor force participation; lower wages for work; and relative economic, social, and political deprivation (Cubbins, 2001).

The significance of patriarchy lies less in sexist attitudes and discriminatory decisions individuals might make and more about social structures of institutionalized gendered power. As Figure 1.1 shows, both men and women are perfectly capable of being sexist individuals, engaging in discriminatory and hateful behavior based on others’ sex. At the primary group level of social structures, both men and women have exhibited a capacity to engage in peer group violence, as witnessed in gang behavior and fraternity and sorority hazing. And at the formal organization level,

Figure 1.1 Patriarchy Versus Gendered Prejudice



Source: Adapted from the lectures of Noel Cazenave, University of Connecticut.

there have historically been no shortages of men-only and women-only organizations. Examples of gender-exclusive clubs include the Augusta Country Club and Veterans of Foreign Wars for men and Daughters of the American Revolution and any number of ladies auxiliaries of men's clubs. Thus, individuals, primary groups, and formal organizations might certainly be sexist and discriminatory, but they do not have the power to make their prejudices matter to others in fundamental ways. Only when sexist prejudices and discriminatory behaviors become embedded in the institutions of society do they have the ability to affect the life chances and empowerment of women simply on the basis of their sex. And that is an element of power not structurally available to women in the United States.

At the institutional and societal levels of social structure, there cease to be comparative counterparts for both men and women: Sexist politics privilege males at the institutional level as holders of power and have historically excluded women until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote. Any empowerment of women at this level has required the endorsement of men in order to be included on the public agenda and to be given enough support to become policy. The same cannot be said of women, who have never controlled the political agenda or political structures and institutions in the United States. Such an arrangement has ensured that male privilege becomes embedded in the institutions so that it no longer requires individuals to be sexist in order to continue male privilege and dominance in the institutions. This gendered inequality and oppression are ideologically justified at the society level of social structure in which male superiority is buttressed by assertions that inequality based on sex is rooted in biological differences rather than by social constructions of difference and advantage.

Patriarchal systems of inequality and oppression thus historically institutionalized male privilege by denying women the right to political participation, thereby minimizing if not eliminating their opportunities to participate in the laws that circumscribe their existence. In extreme cases, the intersection of patriarchy as power and privilege and ideological conceptualizations of women as objects and possessions can often become institutionalized into a "rape culture" in which rape and other forms of violence against women are accepted as a common feature of society (Cuklanz, 2000; Feltey, 2001). For example, in the 1990s and into 2000, Serbs in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo used systematic rape of women as a standard strategy of war to punish and terrorize populations viewed as inferior. So, too, has rape been used as a common tactic of terror and warfare in Darfur, Sudan.

Since the state legislates rights and responsibilities, it raises the question of the role of the state in gendering processes.

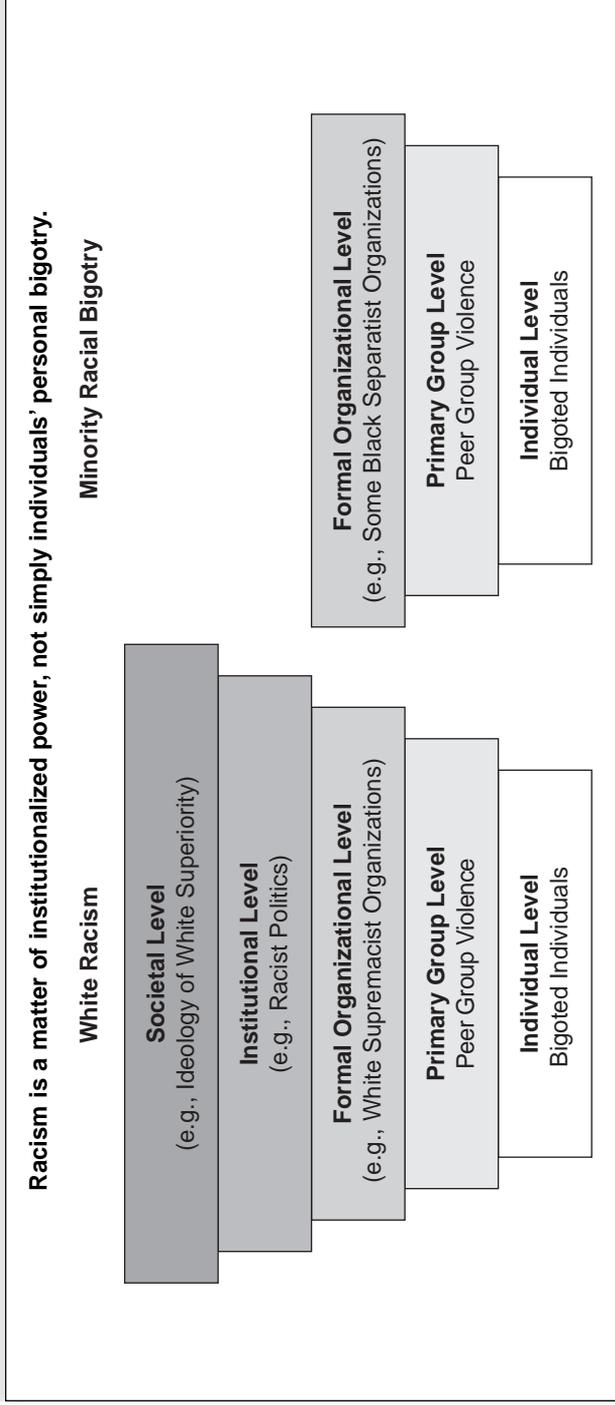
## Racism

Some observers argue that what appears to be racialized oppression or inequality is a reflection of individual effort that is determined by biology. They argue that whites are genetically superior to people of color (particularly African Americans) (see, e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). However, these analyses have been severely criticized for lack of irrefutable scientific support. Instead, critics argue that these arguments represent social constructions of the meaning of race, which are then ideologically justified and reinforced. Racism is a power structure of oppression.

Similar to structures of patriarchy, the significance of racism does not depend upon individuals' racist discriminatory decisions and actions; it derives from social structures of institutionalized racialized power. As Figure 1.2 shows, in the United States both whites and people of color can be racist as individuals who may discriminate against others and behave in hateful ways based on others' perceived race. At the primary group level of social structures, both whites and people of color may participate in peer group violence. As in patriarchy, one can see this occur in conflicts between racialized youth gangs and in fraternities and sororities that remain exclusively of one racialized group. At the formal organization level, there are many examples of racially exclusive organizations, such as whites-only country clubs and white-power neo-Nazi organizations, and black churches and black separatist organizations. While individuals, primary groups, and formal organizations might certainly be discriminatory, they do not have the power to make their prejudices matter to others in fundamental ways. It is only when prejudices and discriminatory behaviors become fully embedded in the institutions of society that they have the power to affect the life chances and privileges of whole groups of people based on their racial categories. And that is not structurally available to people of color in the United States.

Notice that there are no comparative counterparts for whites and people of color at the institutional and societal levels of social structure: Racist politics have and continue to privilege whites at the institutional level as the incumbents of power and have historically excluded people of color until African Americans were extended the right to vote. To address the interests of people of color in policy requires support of white voters who still outnumber people of color and of white legislators who continue to strongly dominate all branches of government. The same cannot be said of people of color, who have never controlled the political agenda or political structures

**Figure 1.2 White Racism Versus Minority Racial Bigotry**



Source: Adapted from the lectures of Noel Cazenave, University of Connecticut.

and institutions in the United States. This structural arrangement ensures that white-skin privilege is embedded in the institutions; as such, whites' dominance does not require individuals to be racist in order to reproduce white privilege and dominance. This racist inequality and oppression are ideologically justified at the societal level of social structure: White superiority is bolstered by assertions that inequality based on race is biologically determined and therefore immutable and unchangeable rather than socially constructed.

Since the state is in a unique position to legislate, it may affect the opportunity structures built on these social constructions. What, then, is the role of the state in racial formation processes and in gendering processes?

## Heteronormativity

As well as the advantages accrued to people because of their class, gender, and racial composition, people are likewise accorded privileges because of their sexual and/or gender *practices*. Indeed, since the 1800s, when scientists declared the existence of “the homosexual,” people have been split into various *sexual identities* (Foucault, 1978). As trans activists and people from the intersex movement have shown, this has also had deep effects on gender identity as well (Wilchins, 2004).

This has structured our social life in a number of ways, through the strict enforcement of *heteronormativity*—or the ways that society has built up normative expectations governing our sexual and gender practices. Some, for example, have pointed out that our society has enforced a system of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy, both through cultural norms and mores, as well as through the institutionalization of relationships in monogamous, heterosexual forms in marriage (Emens, 2004; Rich, 1980). Likewise, people who are gay, bisexual, lesbian, or transgender can suffer violent attacks, employment discrimination, and social ostracism.

This historical legacy has split people into three distinct identities or *sexual orientations*: homo, hetero, and bi. This split limits possibilities for organizing sexuality and invisibilizes people who do not fit neatly into these categories either because of desire (there is a range of sexual attractions sometimes not organized around gender at all and sometimes that does not fit neatly into those three premade boxes) or because of gender performance (this selection ignores that there are gender performances that defy our binary). Therefore, part of the task for creating a free society with a viable social existence for all includes the project of troubling and destabilizing these categories.

Again, the state has a place in institutionalizing the ways that we “do” gender and relationships. In what ways does the state limit and confine the possibilities for a viable social existence for all?

## Structures of Oppression and Resistance

This book assumes that people are both shaped by and in turn may shape social structures, relationships, and processes. That assumption leads us to ask in Chapter 6 how people resist, challenge, and perhaps alter the social structures, relationships, and processes that affect individuals’ access to opportunities and thus their life chances. This is commonly an important piece missing from most state theories.

The intention here is to develop a framework for integrating the important elements in the relationship between the state, society, and oppression identified by the various state theories, power structure theories, and social movement theories. Each of these emphasizes a useful dimension of the state but commonly suggests that this one dimension is the focal point of the relationship. We argue, instead, that each dimension is like a single piece of a large and complicated jigsaw puzzle, and our challenge is to develop a framework to put those pieces together. Moreover, much of state theory focuses on the relationship between the state and the economy and explores economic and labor policy as indicative of that relationship. We argue instead that the state is also a patriarchal and racialized state and that existing theories of the state are limited as tools to analyze those policies that are indicative of these relationships. We explore a framework in Chapter 7 that integrates multiple dimensions of the state as identified in the literature and that can offer more flexibility to include the various relationships of oppression and the intersections of multiple oppressions.

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