The State

The marriage between democracy and capitalism is over. — SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

A state is a self-governing political entity consisting of multiple communities and their surroundings with a centralized government that has exclusive rights within this territory to employ military force, collect taxes, and enforce order (Carneiro 1970, 733). The power and scope of the state, one of the primary carriers of bureaucracy, has been expanding rapidly in the modern era. Many early sociologists focused upon this growth, believing it to be caused by growth in population, the complexity of production processes, and the necessity to regulate proliferating groups and organizations in societies. Modern sociologists have posited that, in addition to these causes, the state has recently expanded to foster capital development, conduct war and project military power, and provide for limited redistribution in the form of welfare for those left out of the capitalist economy. In this chapter, we will look at the origin of the state as well as the modern state’s relation to capital, military power, and the prospects of democracy.
THE ORIGIN OF THE STATE

The state emerged as a separate institution about six thousand years ago. Unlike earlier chiefdoms, which were confined to small village societies and ruled through kinship ties, the state develops an elaborate bureaucracy and, along with it, the capacity to require obedience to its rule. Rulers are no longer constrained by strong kinship ties with those they rule; ever greater numbers of unrelated individuals can be exploited without mitigation. The state establishes a “monopoly of force” within its territorial control, as well as administrative structures to expropriate any surplus produced by its subjects. Early states, which generally consisted of several cities and their surrounding areas, acted to intensify the production activities of their subjects so as to increase this surplus to maximize the wealth of the rulers and to strengthen and extend their power. As states evolved, power became more and more centralized and the bureaucracies more elaborate. Power often became concentrated in the hands of a single individual, which most often evolved into a hereditary monarchy. Ideologies were fashioned to legitimize the monarch, with early states often using religion to justify the divine right of the monarch to rule. The geographic size of states is primarily limited by the features of its geographical location and the level of its communication and transportation technologies.

Marvin Harris (1977, 101–2) characterizes life before the evolution of the state as close to idyllic. Life in village societies, he writes, was a life of unparalleled political and economic freedom for the vast majority of men and women. Men could decide for themselves whether or not to work, and if they decided to work, they could choose the task and the way they would do it. Necessity and desire were the only spurs: there were no foremen or administrators to tell them how to work, to measure their productivity, or to take from their catch. Nor was there anyone to deny them access to the fields and forests that surrounded their village. Women, too, according to Harris, were relatively free. They had few routines and set their own schedules and pace of work. Their work was light, their necessities
readily available and communally owned. While their life was simple, they paid no taxes or tribute, no rent or mortgage. They lived in economic and political freedom.

With the evolution of the state, says Harris, this idyllic life was exchanged for life as a member of the servile class. Now access to needed resources had to be sought from rulers, and taxes and tribute paid for the privilege of this access:

The weapons and techniques of war and organized aggression were taken away from them and turned over to specialist-soldiers and policemen controlled by military, religious, and civil bureaucrats. For the first time there appeared on earth kings, dictators, high priests, emperors, prime ministers, presidents, governors, mayors, generals, admirals, police chiefes, judges, lawyers, and jailers, along with dungeons, jails, penitentiaries, and concentration camps. Under the tutelage of the state, human beings learned for the first time how to bow, grovel, kneel, and kowtow. In many ways the rise of the state was the descent of the world from freedom to slavery. (102)

Why would people give up their economic, social, and political freedom for a life of toil and drudgery at the behest of a small ruling class?

“Pristine states” are early states that evolved from village societies without contact with other state societies to act as a model or stimulus. Harris reports that archaeological evidence points to as many as eight such pristine state developments in the following areas: Mesopotamia, Peru, Mesoamerica, Egypt, the Indus Valley, the Yellow River Basin, and probably Crete and the Lake Region of East Africa (103). Many scholars see the growth of the state as part of a natural outgrowth of the development of agriculture and the creation of a surplus of food. These developments, it is hypothesized, freed an increasing number of people from direct agricultural production and allowed a division of labour of tool makers, potters, priests, and eventually soldiers and politicians. But Robert Carneiro (1970) claims that the development of agriculture does not automatically create a food surplus; while the technology for creating a surplus of
food was present in early agriculture, there was no social stimulus
to do so. Most early agriculturalists produced little surplus; states
evolve, Carneiro argues, only under specific environmental condi-
tions (733–34).

In addition to the natural development theory of the state, another
voluntaristic theory posits that several villages voluntarily banded
together, giving up their individual sovereignties in exchange for
security or for purposes of constructing irrigations systems. “This
and all other voluntaristic theories,” notes Carneiro (1970, 734),
“founder on the same rock: the demonstrated inability of autono-
mous political units to relinquish their sovereignty in the absence
of overriding external constraints. We see this inability manifested
again and again by political units ranging from tiny villages to great
empires.” Theories of such natural state development ignore the fact
that the vast majority of village societies did not make the transi-
tion to state level unless there are strong external pressures to do so.
Therefore, states are not simply a natural development; they are not
the result of a fortuitous accident, a voluntary surrender of village
autonomy, or a genius with an idea. Carneiro argues instead that
an identifiable evolutionary process of pristine state formation has
occurred in different places and times around the world when cer-
tain material conditions existed. What are these conditions?

Carneiro proposes a coercive theory of pristine state formation,
a theory based on military force and war as the evolutionary mecha-
nism by which autonomous villages were wielded into states. The
archaeological evidence is overwhelming that war was prevalent
during the formative period of all pristine state development. But
war cannot be the only factor, for war is fairly common among vil-
lage societies and yet pristine states have evolved only in a few areas.
There must be other specific conditions under which warfare gives
rise to the state. By comparing areas of the world in which pristine
states evolved and looking for common factors, Carneiro attempts to
identify these conditions. He finds that in all areas in which pristine
states evolved—“areas such as the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, and Indus
valleys in the Old World and the Valley of Mexico and the mountain
and coastal valleys of Peru in the New”—agricultural land was surrounded by mountains, seas, deserts, or other geographical features unsuitable for cultivation (1970, 734). In such “circumscribed” agricultural lands, warfare took on a different character from warfare between agrarian people in areas of open forests or savannah.

In most areas of the world, warfare among village societies was common for reasons of revenge, establishing prestige, or the taking of women. Where there is no shortage of arable land, there is no warfare over land. In such cases, when a village was defeated, the inhabitants were not driven from the land; they were not enslaved or forced to pay tribute. As Carneiro (1970, 735) notes, “This would have been difficult to accomplish in any case, since there was no effective way to prevent the losers from fleeing to a distant part of the forest. Indeed, defeated villages often chose to do just this, not so much to avoid subjugation as to avoid further attack.” In areas of circumscribed agriculture, this option disappears.

Under low population levels, circumscribed areas presented similar conditions as did open areas for village life. As populations grew, villages would split and multiply, spreading throughout the available area. Warfare was common, but it was of the type that predominates in village societies around the world. Once all of the available land was occupied, however, further population growth would lead to both more intensive use of the available land and warfare over that land. “And, as the causes of war became predominantly economic,” explains Carneiro (1970, 735), “the frequency, intensity, and importance of war increased.”

Under such conditions, a village that lost a war with a rival would face severe consequences: the villagers could be exterminated, enslaved, forced to pay tribute, or face outright incorporation into the rule of the conquerors. The need to pay tribute or taxes would be a sharp incentive to intensify agricultural production beyond subsistence levels; eventually, production would have to increase to such a degree as to support legions of tax collectors, warriors, and other administrators of the state. Through this process, the size of political units gradually increased from village society to chiefdoms of several
villages, with continued warfare eventually leading to political units of sufficient size and complexity to be called states. “How well does the theory of environmental circumscription and impaction accord with the evidence?” asks Marvin Harris (1977, 117). “The six most likely regions of pristine state development certainly do possess markedly circumscribed zones of production. As Malcolm Webb has pointed out, all of these regions contain fertile cores surrounded by zones of sharply reduced agricultural potential. They are, in fact, river valleys or lake systems surrounded by desert or at least very dry zones. . . . All of these regions present special difficulties to villages that might have sought to escape from the growing concentration of power in the hands of overly aggressive redistributor war chiefs.”

Harris also notes that these same areas were scenes of rapid population growth before the states emerged and that weaponry and fortifications consistent with wars of conquest predominated. Furthermore, in response to pristine state development, secondary states often formed in order to defend themselves against their technologically advanced and aggressive neighbours or as a means of preying upon existing states (121). As with most social evolutionary processes, such as the domestication of plants and animals or the Industrial Revolution, state formation is an unconscious process. “The participants in this enormous transformation seem not to have known what they were creating,” writes Harris. “By imperceptible shifts in the redistributive balance from one generation to the next, the human species bound itself over into a form of social life in which the many debased themselves on behalf of the exalted few” (122).

States arose, then, in response to specific demographic and environmental conditions, mainly population growth within a circumscribed fertile area. In such conditions, war over needed resources became likely: fertile land was scarce and villages that were unsuccessful at warfare had nowhere to relocate and were exterminated, enslaved, or incorporated into the new political unit. War became an economic tool to acquire land or, alternatively, tribute from conquered peoples. The military was central in state formation, and it retains this central role in the capitalist world-system of societies today.
The internal structure of states evolved along with their growth in size and territory, maintains Carneiro (1970, 736): “The expansion of successful states brought within their borders conquered peoples and territory which had to be administered. And it was the individuals who had distinguished themselves in war who were generally appointed to political office and assigned the task of carrying on this administration. Besides maintaining law and order and collecting taxes, the functions of this burgeoning class of administrators included mobilizing labor for building irrigation works, roads, fortresses, palaces, and temples. Thus, their functions helped to weld an assorted collection of petty states into a single integrated and centralized political unit.” And it was these people who became the elites in early states, gradually growing in number and in their demands on the lower classes. Conquered peoples became the slaves, serfs, servants, and beggars under the rule of these elites. Harsh treatment of conquered people was now possible because they had nowhere to run, nowhere else to live. In state societies, ever greater surpluses were demanded to support the elite in wealth and luxury, a situation that was not to be reversed until modern times. Whether that reversal is permanent is yet to be determined.

THE STATE AND CAPITAL

As we saw in the previous chapter, many social historians view the centralization and the extension of the power of the state, along with the weakening of primary groups, as one of the main factors behind the growth of capitalism. The literature is rife with arguments over the balance between capital and state power; many question the degree of independence the state has from economic interests. Some, such as Robert Nisbet, claim considerable independence, asserting that the state truly dominates sociocultural systems, sometimes to the detriment of capital. At the other extreme are those writing in the tradition of Marx, who claim that the collaboration between state and capital is so close that they are almost indistinguishable. Finally,
between these two extremes are followers of Weber, who posit that the state has some distinct interests that separate it from the interests of capital and that what happens when these interests collide is an empirical question.

The degree to which capital and the state operate independently varies from one society to another and, over time, within the same society. The independence of the state and capital depends largely upon two factors. Perhaps the most important factor is the scale and concentration of economic wealth within a society and in the world-system of which it is a part. Excessive wealth is often translated into political power. As we have seen, corporate wealth has grown tremendously since World War II and has become concentrated into large corporate entities. Since the dominant economic institutions in modern societies are private corporations, the institutions of government, even when not under the direct influence of corporations or their money, will often follow corporate interests. But it must also be noted that governments are often directly influenced by corporate interests.

A second factor determining the degree of corporate influence over the state is whether there exists within the state a constitutional and legal structure that severely restricts corporate power. In the United States, this structure is rapidly eroding. The money spent on federal elections (presidential and congressional) has risen dramatically in each election cycle since World War II. Looking at presidential years only, the total amount of money spent on federal elections in 2000 was slightly over $3 billion dollars. In 2004, it was a little over $4 billion, and, in 2008, $5 billion. In the 2012 presidential race alone, the Obama and Romney campaigns each spent well over a billion dollars.¹

But contributing to a campaign is not the only way for organizations and individuals to influence the state. Every year, corporations, labour unions, and other interest groups spend billions of dollars to lobby Congress and federal agencies. Some of these organizations have in-house personnel whose job it is to lobby members of government; others hire lobbying firms. The amount of money spent on
lobbying the US federal government has more than doubled since 1998, going from $1.44 billion to $3.47 billion in 2010. Table 1 presents the amount of money spent by each of thirteen broad sectors of influence monitored by the Center for Responsive Politics, a research group that tracks money in US politics and its impact on elections and public policy. As the table reveals, the bulk of lobbying money in American politics comes from corporate interests. The categories that represent non-business interests are Labour, Ideological and single-issue interests, and Other (which includes education, religious organizations, civil service, and non-profit institutions). These non-business groups together spent $473,511,054 on lobbying in 2010, or about 13.5 percent of the total spent by all groups on lobbying the federal government in that year; the rest came from corporate sources.

While funding for federal campaigns comes from many different sources, corporations and those who work for them are again the
major contributors by far. For example, the insurance industry was one of the biggest donors to federal campaigns in 2008, contributing over $46 million to federal parties and candidates. In the 2009–10 election cycle, the top insurance contributors to federal campaigns were New York Life Insurance (over $2 million), AFLAC ($1.8 million), and Blue Cross/Blue Shield ($1.8 million). Not surprisingly, as a group, insurance companies opposed the public option in the health care reform proposals of 2009–10 and supported mandates requiring individuals to buy health care coverage. In addition to providing campaign contributions to candidates, the industry also spends a tremendous amount of money to lobby Congress and federal agencies. In 2010 alone, the insurance lobby spent over $156 million on its lobbying efforts. Blue Cross/Blue Shield tops the client list, spending over $12 million dollars in 2010, followed by America’s Health Insurance Plans ($9.3 million) and Prudential Financial ($8.7 million).

The 2008 collapse of many commercial banks put the relationship between Wall Street and the state much in the news, particularly regarding the government’s bailout of these banks and the subsequent efforts at regulatory reform. In total, the banking industry gave almost $19 million to federal candidates in the 2010 campaign cycle, with the American Bankers Association topping the list (over $2.9 million), followed by JP Morgan Chase ($1.68 million) and Bank of America ($1.5 million). In addition to contributing directly and indirectly to campaigns, commercial banks spent over $56 million on lobbying in 2010, led by the American Bankers Association ($7.49 million), JP Morgan Chase ($7.41 million), Wells Fargo ($5.41 million), and Citigroup Inc. ($5.38 million).

What does this money buy? Under the headline “Sponsors of Anti-Consumer Amendments to U.S. House Financial Reform Bill Received $3.8 Million from Financial Sector in 2009,” Consumer Watchdog reported that the thirty-eight members of the House who offered amendments to weaken the consumer protections in the financial reform package received an average of $111,000 each from the financial sector for their campaigns in 2009.² They further
reported that the financial sector gave some $28 million to the campaigns of all members of the House in that year.

In the 2010 election cycle, the oil and gas industry—consisting of producers, refiners, pipeline companies, service stations, and fuel oil dealers—contributed $27.58 million to federal campaigns. Unlike most American industries, which contribute roughly equal amounts to Republicans and Democrats, 75 percent of oil and gas political contributions go to Republicans. (Labour union contributions go almost exclusively to Democrats.) After facing huge budget deficits for more than ten years, the House of Representatives, led by Republicans, pushed for large cuts in federal spending—mostly cuts to the social safety net—to begin to move toward a balanced budget. In March of 2011, a motion was made in the House to stop taxpayer-funded subsidies to large oil companies—the most profitable corporations in the world. These subsidies amount to billions of dollars every year. The motion was defeated by a vote of 176 to 249, with 236 Republicans and 13 Democrats voting against the motion. (The 176 “yes” votes all came from Democrats: see http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2011/roll153.xml.)

Top oil and gas campaign contributors in the 2010 cycle included Koch Industries ($1.91 million), Exxon Mobil ($1.33 million), and Chief Oil and Gas ($1.19 million). In addition to campaign contributions, the industry spent over $146 million on lobbying efforts in 2010, with ConocoPhillips topping the list at $19.62 million, followed by Chevron ($12.89 million) and Exxon Mobil ($12.40 million). British Petroleum, much in the news in 2010 for the oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, was sixth on the list with $7.3 million in lobbying. The industry as a whole lobbies for expansion of drilling offshore and in the Arctic and for tax breaks and subsidies for the industry; it lobbies against cap-and-trade and other climate change legislation.

The defence industry consists of defence aerospace and electronics firms, shipbuilders, arms manufacturers, military contractors, and research and development firms. Although the industry does not spend nearly as much on politics as many other sectors (it ranked ninth in terms of lobbying monies spent in 2010), it is widely
known as one of the most powerful lobbies in the United States, perhaps because the influence of the military in American life goes well beyond spending. Military power and its projection overseas are widely recognized to be in the broad interests of both business and government elites. Key military bases and defence plants located in a variety of states and congressional districts also assure support from senators and House representatives. Furthermore, a mixture of pride in their society’s military power and fear of the outside world has kept the American people as a whole receptive to exorbitant military spending.

In addition to lobbying, political action committees (PACs) and individuals associated with the defence industry contributed almost $24 million to political candidates in the 2008 election cycle. Contributions tend to go to whoever is in power. The industry is, of course, highly dependent upon American military spending and lobbies not only Congress but also the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. The industry spent a reported $138.7 million in lobbying Congress and various agencies of the executive branch in 2010. Over a thousand lobbyists (67.5 percent of whom are former government employees, many with the Pentagon) lobbied on behalf of 324 defence clients, often directly for a piece of the $700 billion defence budget. Top industries contributing to the lobbying effort included Boeing ($17.8 million), Northrop Grumman ($15.7 million), United Technologies ($14.5 million), Lockheed Martin ($12.7 million), and General Dynamics ($10.7 million).

On January 20, 2010, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in the Citizens United case that the federal government may not restrict political spending by corporations in elections. The five-to-four decision (along the conservative-liberal lines of the justices) was based on the First Amendment’s principle of free speech; the court ruled that the government cannot regulate the political speech of corporations, that it must treat corporate speech in the same way as that of human beings. The ruling held that while the US government can continue to restrict direct contributions to candidates, it cannot restrict independent expenditures for either candidates or
issues. In a White House press release issued the day after the ruling, President Obama called the decision “a major victory for big oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans.” He took the unprecedented step of directly criticizing the decision in his State of the Union (2010) message later that month: “With all due deference to separation of powers, last week the Supreme Court reversed a century of law that I believe will open the floodgates for special interests—including foreign corporations—to spend without limit in our elections. I don’t think American elections should be bankrolled by America’s most powerful interests, or worse, by foreign entities. They should be decided by the American people. And I’d urge Democrats and Republicans to pass a bill that helps to correct some of these problems.” Congress, however, did not act. Corporate influence over government has been a growing concern of many who believe that the state must act to counterbalance corporate power. The Citizens United decision further weakens the separation between corporations and the state.

In addition to the influence of corporate money in government, there is the issue of personal influence as represented by the revolving door between government service and industry lobbying. Individuals often go from government service to K Street lobbyist, and “former” lobbyists often take jobs at the White House or on Capitol Hill. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, in 2010 there were 348 former members of Congress (from both the House and Senate) who were actively engaged in lobbying their former colleagues. In addition, hundreds of former congressional staffers are employed by lobbying firms and interest groups, often to lobby the government on issues that they helped to shape. Finally, thousands of former employees of the various federal agencies of the executive branch are employed as lobbyists, capitalizing on their connections and expertise gained in public service. As the Center for Responsive Politics notes on its website, “An Environmental Protection Agency administrator may go on to lobby his former
colleagues on environmental issues, and a White House staffer can tap her West Wing connections when she starts a new job on K Street. The White House is traditionally the executive branch’s largest supplier of fresh lobbyists; the office of the president employs a large team of staffers of varying seniority. But public servants switching to careers as lobbyists (and back again) come from agencies as varied as the Department of Defense, NASA and the Smithsonian Institution.”5 Lobbying firms and interest groups can usually offer former government employees better salaries than those paid by the federal government; in return, they get employees who are knowledgeable about key issues and, more importantly, have personal connections to government officials.

There are numerous examples of how the modern state formulates social policies that benefit corporate America, often worsening (or creating) problems that the government then deplores. For example, agriculture is a sector dominated by large agribusinesses. While most US farms are family owned, agriculture is a highly concentrated business. Sociologist Gwen Sharp provides some figures: “In the U.S., the total number of farms has fallen from an all-time high of over 6.3 million to just over 2.2 million. Meanwhile, the average size per farm nearly tripled between 1900 and 2007, from 147 to 418 acres. . . . Small-scale family farms (defined as operator-owned farms with less than $250,000 in sales—which does not mean $250,000 in profit, of course) make up 88.3% of all farms in the U.S., while large-scale family farms (operator-owned farms with sales over $250,000) are 9.3%. . . . Large-scale family farms account for 66 percent of production.”6 These large-scale farms receive tens of billions of dollars in federal subsidies, allowing corporate agriculture to replace the small independent farmer at enormous taxpayer expense. It makes good political sense to fashion agricultural policy so as to benefit organizations with economic and political power. Even without direct contact with agribusiness elites, the state will follow corporate priorities in establishing farm policy. A similar corporate bias can be found in government policies concerning highways, energy, urban affairs, and housing.
According to Michael Harrington (1976), the state promotes the corporate economy through four actions. First, the state allows the formation of oligopolies, cartels, and multinationals to promote managerial planning and eliminate the vagaries of the market. Second, the government subsidizes technological innovation to create new needs and markets. Third, the government subsidizes many private industries through massive defence spending. And finally, the state engages in direct intervention in the economy to offset inflation and recession-depression.

Harrington is quick to point out that elites, even those in capitalist societies, do have some limits on their power. Certainly, the history and constitutional structure of a given society constrain, to some extent, the power of elites. But in a society dominated by large corporations, policies of the federal government cannot run counter to the interest of the corporate sector “unless they have the support of a determined mass movement willing to fight for structural change” (Harrington 1976, 223). At times, Harrington claims, when opposition is tightly organized, when the masses are sufficiently aroused, corporate elites must grant some reform. But the interest of the public is often fleeting, while the interest of capital endures. Also, since national governments are held accountable for the health of their economies, the modern state cannot consistently act counter to the fundamental interests of private corporations.

Three primary factors, then, are responsible for growing corporate influence over government: (1) economic wealth is ever greater and more concentrated; (2) constitutional structures restricting corporate power are eroding; and (3) techniques and technology of manipulation are constantly improving.

THE IRRATIONALITY FACTOR:
DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

After serving as Allied Commander in World War II, followed by eight years in the presidency, US president Dwight D. Eisenhower,
in his 1961 televised farewell address to the nation, warned his fellow Americans of the unwarranted influence of the military-industrial complex. Today, large segments of the US population consider it unpatriotic to criticize American militarism. If anything is sacred in the United States (an open question), it is the military. I quote extensively from Eisenhower’s speech here since it is a powerful warning:

A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction.

Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea. Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every Statehouse, every office of the federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel
The proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.7

The “military-industrial complex” that Eisenhower spoke of means that research universities and institutes, corporations, the military, and government leaders all have a vested interest in a large military, sophisticated weapons systems, and war. “War in our time is a war of machines,” wrote Weber ([1921] 1968, 981) four decades earlier, “and this makes centralized provisioning technically necessary, just as the dominance of the machine in industry promotes the concentration of the means of production and management.” In this section, we will examine the influence of the military-industrial complex on American policy since World War II.

Six social trends have skewed American policy toward militarism since Eisenhower’s warning: (1) perceived threats to the American way of life; (2) the consequent build-up of a huge military establishment that is instantly ready for war; (3) an economy increasingly dependent upon military spending; (4) increasing reliance upon volatile areas of the world for essential raw materials; (5) a government elite who lack moral vision, courage, and competence, and who simply rely upon military force in their foreign policy decisions; and (6) the apathy, “moral insensitivity,” and “suffocation of mind” of the American people, particularly on the part of intellectuals who have abdicated their role in democratic governance. Support for the last assertion comes from two opposite ends of the political spectrum: C. Wright Mills used the phrase “moral insensitivity,” while “suffocation of mind” is from Robert Nisbet (see Mills 1958, 85–87; Nisbet 1975, 147–53).

In C. Wright Mills’s time, the perceived threat was from communism, particularly by the Soviet Union. Like Mills before him, Robert Nisbet (1975) maintains that the military cast of mind increasingly dominates the US government. When Nisbet was writing in the 1970s, nearly two decades after Mills, the threat was still from the Soviet Union and China, but he perceived a new threat on the
horizon: “There is, on the sober judgment of scientists and officials alike, every reason to expect constant rises in the rate and incidence of terror in the modern world—with the exception of the military totalitarianism where, in effect, terror is monopolized by the government. Terror is now a way of life for certain groups in the world, and we may be certain their number will go up constantly” (1975, 63). In fact, Nisbet asserts that if terrorism continues to increase in the coming decades as rapidly as it had in the decade previous to his writing, he could not conceive of representative democracy surviving. It is not that he predicted that the terrorists would win but rather that the United States would feel compelled to abandon its Bill of Rights. In societies threatened by terror, he predicts, people will be attracted to military-style governments and will exchange their freedoms for security. “If terror, as manifested by such groups as the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization] and the IRA [Irish Republican Army], increases by the same rate during the next decade as it has during the past decade, it is impossible to conceive of liberal, representative democracy continuing, with its crippling processes of due process and its historic endowments of immunity before, or protection by, the legal process” (147). Nisbet’s predicted increase in the amount of terrorism is based on the centralization and enlargement of power in Western (and other) governments. Because of this centralization, revolution from disaffected groups is now virtually impossible. This makes it “probable that the vacuum left by receding revolutionary hope is being filled by mindless, purposeless terror as an end in itself” (63).

As further evidence for the rise of militarism, Nisbet points to the increased incidence and intensity of war in the twentieth century and the increase in the “size, reach, and sheer functional importance of the military” in modern times. To claim that such an institution growing rapidly in our midst has not had serious impacts on other parts of the sociocultural system is ludicrous. Indeed, Nisbet concludes that such a military establishment will necessarily have a significant and continuous effect upon the entire sociocultural system: “Given this immensity it is inconceivable that the military’s influence would not
mount steadily in all spheres—political, civil, cultural, and social as well as economic. To imagine that the military’s annual budget of just under a hundred billion dollars does not have significant effect upon the economy is of course absurd, and it may be assumed that with respect to the military as with any other institution, beginning with the family, what affects the economic sphere also affects in due time other spheres of life” (147–48). By 1988, Nisbet was calling the United States an “imperial power” similar to Great Britain in the eighteenth century. Like Mills before him, Nisbet sees the militarism of the American government as one of the greatest threats to freedom in both the US and abroad (1988, 1).

Nisbet (1975) cites a $100 billion figure for the US’s annual military budget. In 2010, many experts placed annual American military spending—the Defense Department budget, war supplemental, and the Department of Energy’s nuclear weapons program—at $722 billion. American defence spending grew by 67 percent between 2001 and 2010. In 2009, it accounted for 46.9 percent of the world’s total spending on defence; the closest competitor, China, spends 6.6 percent of the world’s share (Olson 2010). In terms of the federal budgets, defence spending ranks third behind Social Security and Medicare. And some argue that the US defence budget underestimates actual military spending since it excludes a host of defence-related expenses such as homeland security, FBI counter-terrorism, NASA satellites, veteran’s programs, and interest on debt incurred in past wars. These critics place the true annual cost of defence spending in the US at well over $1 trillion dollars. If this is true, then the United States spends more on defence than do all the rest of the nations of the world combined. No nation, Nisbet (1988, 39) warns, has ever managed to retain its “representative character” along with a massive military establishment; the United States will not be an exception.

One of the major effects of globalization is to make the economies of the world interdependent, reliant upon one another for trade in resources and goods. Several resources that are vital for the US economy can only be obtained in volatile regions of the world,
most infamous, of course, being oil. The vast majority of proven oil reserves are not in the hands of corporations but under the control of nation-states, and many of these are in the Middle East (US Energy Information Agency 2012). In January 1980, President Carter announced that the United States would use force, if necessary, to protect its vital interests in the Persian Gulf against outside force. President Reagan reaffirmed this commitment and added that the United States would also use force to combat internal threats to these interests, such as regional wars, revolutions, or terrorism. The US General Accounting Office estimated that between 1980 and 1990 the United States, in honouring these commitments, spent a total of $366 billion to protect the oil supplies in the Middle East (1991).9 Unfortunately, the American government has not given a more recent estimate of the military costs of oil; if, however, we add to the cost of maintaining security for the region even a portion of the costs of the first and second Gulf Wars and Afghanistan, as well as the costs of dealing with the resulting terrorism due in large part to US presence in the region, the military cost of securing supplies of oil is staggering—and it is a cost borne by American taxpayers rather than the oil companies themselves.

For corporate elites, the rise of the military state creates an enormous market for aerospace, electronics, munitions, military service contracts, and supplies for a large military establishment. As a massive subsidy to the American economy, heavy defence spending has become integral to the health of the economy and thus an essential concern of government. In addition, the projection of military power around the world has secured new markets for American goods and access to raw materials to feed the industrial machine of the US and other core countries. Some call it the “New Imperialism,” although others insist that it is simply the old imperialism in a new bottle. John Bellamy Foster (2006, 13–14) describes the imperialistic relationship between the core and the periphery:

The objective of the imperialist system of today as in the past is to open up peripheral economies to investment from the core capitalist
countries, thus ensuring both a continual supply of raw materials at low prices, and a net outflow of economic surplus from the periphery to the center of the world system. In addition, the third world is viewed as a source of cheap labor, constituting a global reserve army of labor. Economies of the periphery are structured to meet the external needs of the United States and the other core capitalist countries rather than their own internal needs. This has resulted (with a few notable exceptions) in conditions of unending dependency and debt peonage in the poorer regions of the world.

Most US citizens interpret the foreign policy of their nation through the eyes of a people committed to their image of themselves: a kind and generous people who love peace and economic and political freedom. Many around the world have a very different image.

In the realm of American politics, the existence of a powerful military establishment makes it far more likely that military solutions will be considered and implemented—that US military power will be used, either as an implied or overt threat or in actual conflict. The military cast of mind is partly responsible for the tremendous centralization of government and the economy, and it makes war far more likely (Nisbet 1975, 56, 154). It is irrational to single-mindedly pursue defence through military means. A great military machine cries out to be used.

Both Mills and Nisbet see the intellectual class as complicit in their support of the military state. Under Wilson and, later, Roosevelt, intellectuals were brought into US government service and gave their full support to the centralization of power in the federal government (and, increasingly, the executive branch) to address the economic inequalities of capitalism during the twentieth century; they have also supported the militarization of that power in world wars, the Cold War, and, more recently, the so-called war on terror. Aside from designing the programs, staffing the upper levels of the bureaucracies, creating the strategies, and setting foreign and domestic policies, the intellectual class creates the ideologies and slogans that motivate the citizenry, spin the moralizing and propaganda necessary
for war, and devise the policies and strategies to meet crises and conflict (Nisbet 1975, 190). Few intellectuals have the independence of mind or the will to oppose either state centralization or militarization. Confronted with threats at home and abroad, they lent support to the militarization of state power. The founders of sociology were all extremely skeptical of centralization of the state, but modern practitioners of the social sciences, almost without exception, look to the centralization and enlargement of the state as if it were part of the natural order of sociocultural systems (249). In addition, confronted with the growth in the reach and power of corporations, many intellectuals have lent support to the state in an effort to counterbalance that power and to provide a safety net for those exploited by the capitalist economy. But centralization and a large military establishment are antithetical to democracy. As early as 1787, James Madison, in his speech at the American Constitutional Convention, warned that “a standing military force, with an overgrown Executive will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defence against foreign danger have been always the instruments of tyranny at home.” A democracy that fosters militarism and centralization could serve as the very definition of irrationality.

**THE PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM**

Social evolutionary theory is not well known among the American people (nor, sadly, is biological evolution), but two social-evolutionary ideas are very popular in the West. One is the idea of material progress. Although the faith of many in the benefits of science and technology has been shaken of late, there is still a widespread belief that we can live better through chemistry, biology, and computer electronics. The other is the view of history as the unceasing march of humanity toward ever greater democracy and freedom from the constraints of the state. Aside from the frightening chord struck by George Orwell in *1984*, we almost take the march toward freedom for granted. With the bankruptcy of totalitarian regimes in Eastern
Europe and the recent Arab Spring, our faith in the march of democracy and freedom has been strengthened. But Marvin Harris (1977, 264) detects a very different evolutionary trend. “In anthropological perspective, the emergence of bourgeois parliamentary democracies in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe was a rare reversal of that descent from freedom to slavery which had been the main characteristic of the evolution of the state for 6,000 years.” Indeed, many social scientists believe that democracy and freedom are threatened by the continuing intensification of the industrial mode of production, population growth, and increasing militarism, and the consequent growth of public and private bureaucracy.

One of the chief reasons for the rise of bureaucratic control is the headlong rush toward industrial growth around the world. Industrialism, under the auspices of capital, is firmly committed to growth. Economic growth serves two main functions for the social system. First, it dramatically increases the wealth of elites, thereby rewarding those who dominate the system. Second, it provides a mechanism by which the income of the masses can be increased without seriously threatening the existing class system. With economic growth, there is no need for the government to play Robin Hood, taking from the rich to give to the poor; economic growth provides the necessary resources to keep the masses pacified. Growth is the mechanism by which capitalist society increases the absolute income to all classes with the possibility of leaving the relative shares undisturbed (although in the past thirty years, it seems the share of the elite has grown substantially in many industrial nations).

As we have seen, there is a strong relationship between economic growth and bureaucracy. Max Weber ([1946] 1958, 212–13) argues that bureaucracy necessarily grows with the complexity of the economy. This enlargement of bureaucratic administration by the state includes the management of public works, taxation, war, foreign relations, justice, and an increasingly complex economy. Economic growth also causes the expansion of private bureaucracies. Capitalism and the state, then, have acted in an alliance through which bureaucracy inexorably advances. Moreover, according to
Weber, as the economy and the state become increasingly interdependent and coordinated through bureaucratic organization, so, too, does the population come to rely on the smooth functioning of this bureaucracy:

The ruled, for their part, cannot dispense with or replace the bureaucratic apparatus of authority once it exists. For this bureaucracy rests upon expert training, a functional specialization of work, and an attitude set for habitual and virtuoso-like mastery of single yet methodically integrated functions. If the official stops working, or if his work is forcefully interrupted, chaos results, and it is difficult to improvise replacements from among the governed who are fit to master such chaos. *This holds for public administration as well as for private economic management. More and more the material fate of the masses depends upon the steady and correct functioning of the increasingly bureaucratic organizations of private capitalism.* The idea of eliminating these organizations becomes more and more utopian. (229; emphasis added)

Both state and capitalist bureaucracies become enlarged and centralized as the economy expands and population grows, becoming increasingly entangled as they grow in scope and power. There is also a strong relationship between the growth of the military and bureaucracy. Not only does war or threat of terrorism lead to tighter coordination of the economy and people under the name of national security, but the existence of a vast complex military machine consisting of industries, government bureaus, universities, research institutes, and think tanks necessitates bureaucratic growth.

These bureaucracies, as demonstrated by countless sociologists, are antithetical to democracy.¹³ By design, bureaucracy puts inordinate power in the hands of a few people at the top of the hierarchy; as a society becomes increasingly dominated by both public and private bureaucracies—economically, politically, socially—the masses of people necessarily lose power and voice. Beginning with military power, it is the state’s subsequent absorption of economic
and social welfare functions—in the name of the people but more often in the interests of elites—that has led to the decline of freedom and democracy.

Power in a bureaucratized society is largely based on manipulation rather than force. It becomes “invisible,” removed first from family and community to elected office and then increasingly placed in the hands of elites who coordinate social existence through private and public bureaucracies—government, politics, economy, educational institutions, medical facilities. This power has become invisible for two reasons. First, it is done in the name of humanitarian goals, with the government cast as protector and friend and the corporation as the provider of employment, products, and wealth. Nisbet (1975, 197), of course, focuses on the state: “In the name of education, welfare, taxation, safety, health, and the environment, to mention but a few of the laudable ends involved, the new despotism confronts us at every turn.” But this does not account for the influence of capital on the state. Increasingly in the United States, government power is but the public face of the corporate state. This is not to say that corporate interests completely control the US government, only that they have a controlling interest in the enterprise.\(^\text{14}\) The second reason for the invisibility of power is that modern techniques of manipulation have “softened” this power, placing the velvet glove over the iron fist of the state and making state and corporate power much more difficult to detect or oppose. The state and corporate bureaucracies manipulate the media, educational systems, even the smallest details of life so that the interests of the elite are made to seem the national interest and are consequently internalized by the lower classes. Nisbet (1975, 226–27) writes of the power of such manipulation: “The greatest power is that which shapes not merely individual conduct but also the mind behind the conduct. Power that can, through technological or other means, penetrate the recesses of culture, of the smaller unions of social life, and then of the mind itself, is manifestly more dangerous to human freedom than the kind of power that for all its physical brutality, reaches only the body.”
In the words of Marx and Engels ([1848] 1954, 13), “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.” Now more than ever, the rule of elites is no longer based on terror or external force, although the police powers of the state ultimately undergird its authority. Human organization that depends on the constant use of force and intimidation to discipline its members is inefficient and ultimately ineffective. A system based solely on force must expend too much energy policing its members; it stifles initiative and it provides an obvious target for rallying opposition. Rather, the rule of present-day elites is founded upon the ever more sophisticated methods of control given us by science (including social science) and technology: it is based on manipulation. Government power is much greater today than it ever was, but it is much more indirect and impersonal, and it is based on manipulation rather than brute force. Using technologies of mass media, advertising, and propaganda, the goal of the state is to control its population, to get them to mobilize, believe, buy, and act in accordance with the interests of the ruling classes. And these interests increasingly centre upon maximizing corporate profit (and thus personal wealth) through less government regulation, less taxation, and a robust military. Well-known journalist Chris Hedges (2009, 142) minces no words in describing the situation:

The words *consent of the governed* have become an empty phrase. Our textbooks on political science and economics are obsolete. Our nation has been hijacked by oligarchs, corporations, and a narrow, selfish, political, and economic elite, a small and privileged group that governs, and often steals, on behalf of moneyed interests. This elite, in the name of patriotism and democracy, in the name of all the values that were once part of the American system and defined the Protestant work ethic, has systematically destroyed our manufacturing sector, looted the treasury, corrupted our democracy, and trashed the financial system. During the plundering we remained passive, mesmerized by the enticing shadows on the wall, assured our tickets to success, prosperity, and happiness were waiting around the corner.
The quaint old forms and trappings of democracy—elections, Supreme Courts, Congress, and the Constitution—will continue to remain in place. The traditional names and slogans will continue to be called upon and broadcast; freedom and democracy will continue to be the theme of presidential speeches and media editorials. And certain freedoms will reign. “There are, after all,” writes Nisbet (1975, 229), “certain freedoms which are like circuses. Their very existence, so long as they are individual and enjoyed chiefly individually as by spectators, diverts men’s minds from the loss of other, more fundamental, social and economic and political rights.” But this is simply an illusion of freedom, yet another way of softening power. It is democracy and freedom in a trivial sense, unimportant and subject to the manipulation of the ruling classes. As in the past, political scientists and sociologists will continue to debate the existence of the power elite or the extent and influence of the military-industrial complex as the iron cage of bureaucracy slowly closes.

But this is not the end; all things must pass. In accordance with both human experience and evolutionary theory, environmental change and sociocultural adaptation are constant. It is worth repeating what Weber intimated at the close of *The Protestant Ethic*—that the entire sociocultural system rests on our infrastructural relationships to our environment: “This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt” ([1904] 1930, 181; emphasis added). After only two hundred years of ever intensifying industrialism, environmental limits are being reached. Peak oil is predicted sometime in the next thirty years or so; fresh water is already in short supply in many areas of the world, as is food; and as world population continues to climb and more people are integrated into consumer culture, demand on already stretched resources will certainly increase.

In addition, we are increasingly feeling the impact of pollution on our societies. The Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska (1989), the British
Petroleum oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico (2010), and the nuclear meltdowns in Japan (2011) are all signs that our present technologies cannot be sustained in the long term. Global climate change, mass extinctions, deforestation, and desertification are signs that the present configurations of corporate and state structures have their limits. As these environmental limits continue to exert their influence on the infrastructures of sociocultural systems, we can expect adaptation and change. In the short term, corporate and state entities may well exert increased military, economic, and political power to advance elite interests, but this world, like all others, is limited and ultimately, as the result of struggle between competing interests, new structures, ideas, and ideologies will evolve and become ascendant. What these structures, ideas, and ideologies will be is beyond the powers of social science to predict with any degree of accuracy.