

# **A2 Sociology**



**Revision Mapping**

**Power**  
**and**  
**Politics**

**The Role of the Modern State**

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## The Role of the Modern State

In the UK the State raises a range of taxes (from Income Tax and National Insurance, through VAT to Corporation tax on business profits). This revenue is used for a variety of purposes (from paying politicians and Civil servants to building prisons).

Modern states are, at various times, responsible for a range of public services (and private services paid-for by the State).

**Examples:** The State provides (compulsory) education and a National Health Service, employs social workers and traffic wardens (through local government) and so forth.

Revenue

Services

Indirect

Direct

**Examples** include something like those provided, until recently in the UK, by *Nationalised* (State-owned) industries (such as coal mines, car manufacturers and telecommunications).



The modern State creates and maintains order explicitly, through the police and armed forces, and implicitly by creating the conditions under which people can go about their lives in relative safety.

Order

The State defined by what it does.

Policy

**Example:** Laws that, in democratic societies, apply equally to all.

Practices

A set of *organisations* and *institutions* related to the function of government (how order is created and maintained).



Representation

Internal

Modern democratic States provide a system of political representation whereby people and their views are politically represented.

External

The various ways a State represents itself to other States - from Trade Agreements, through Treaties to wars.

Problems

Separate

Ambiguity

The State is ambiguous in terms of its:

Status

Integral

The State is an abstract concept - it has no distinctive empirical reality (we can't point to something concrete called "The State").

The State and "The Society" are not mutually exclusive entities.  
**Jessop:** The State is: "Peculiarly charged with responsibility for maintaining the integration and cohesion of the wider society".  
**Giddens** (1985): "The state is both part of and "over" society".

For Marxists: "The State becomes the committee for managing the common affairs of the... bourgeoisie". State institutions are dominated by a ruling class and, consequently, represent and favour that class (the behaviour of State is dependent on the behaviour of the ruling class).

Dependency

Autonomy

If the State can be studied "separately" from the rest of society (as an object in its own right) it can act *independently* of political, economic and ideological interest groups. The State, from this position, has *unique characteristics* in terms of its general role.

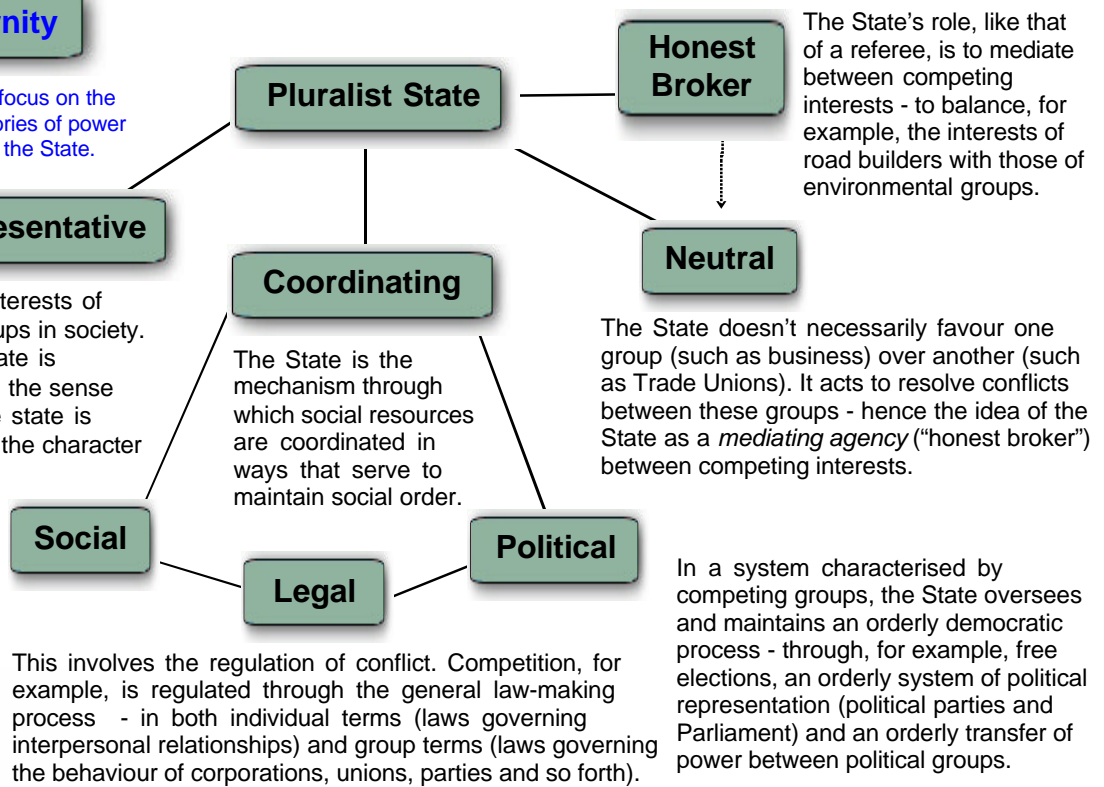


## Power in Modernity

Explanations in this section focus on the various ways modernist theories of power can be applied to the role of the State.

The State reflects the interests of different, competing, groups in society. **Eriksen** (2004): "The state is subordinate to society, in the sense that the character of the state is explained as an effect of the character of society".

The main objective is to create and maintain the conditions under which interest groups can successfully compete.



## The Elitist State

The (political and legal) machinery of the State are under the control of an elite group who are generally not accountable to the mass of the population.

### Monarchies

Characteristic of pre / early modern society, the "elite group" is the monarch and their trusted advisors. The monarch *is* the State in the sense they assume absolute power and control, through ideological - a "Divine Right" to rule, for example - political or military means.

### Dictatorships

**Example:** Hitler's Germany in the 1930's.

### Corporate State

A strong, centralised, State (where control of the machinery of government is in the hands of a small group who exercise absolute power) is used as an *instrument* for the reorganisation of society along whatever lines (usually repressive) are decided by the ruling dictatorship. "National unity" is promoted by variety of means:

### Oligarchies

A small group assumes control over an organisation. In political terms power is in the hands of a small group who control and direct the machinery of the State.

### Economic

The State is directly involved in the economy (normally those areas deemed vital to the "National Interest") and may influence and regulate the behaviour of private businesses and corporations (by force if necessary).

### Political

A ruling elite makes political decisions. Parties are normally banned or replaced by a single Party.

### Ideological

The State may take on a direct "information (propaganda) function" through public media ownership or it may be heavily involved in the regulation / censorship of private media.

### Iron-Law

**Michels** (1911): "Iron law of oligarchy" states that all organisations evolve to a point where an elite group eventually dominates. A political party, for example, is always an "...organisation which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors".

A softer form of *corporate state* occasionally develops in democratic societies when governments co-opt business (and occasionally labour) leaders into the machinery of government.

### Specialisation

The need for specialised staff to run bureaucracies creates hierarchical power structures.

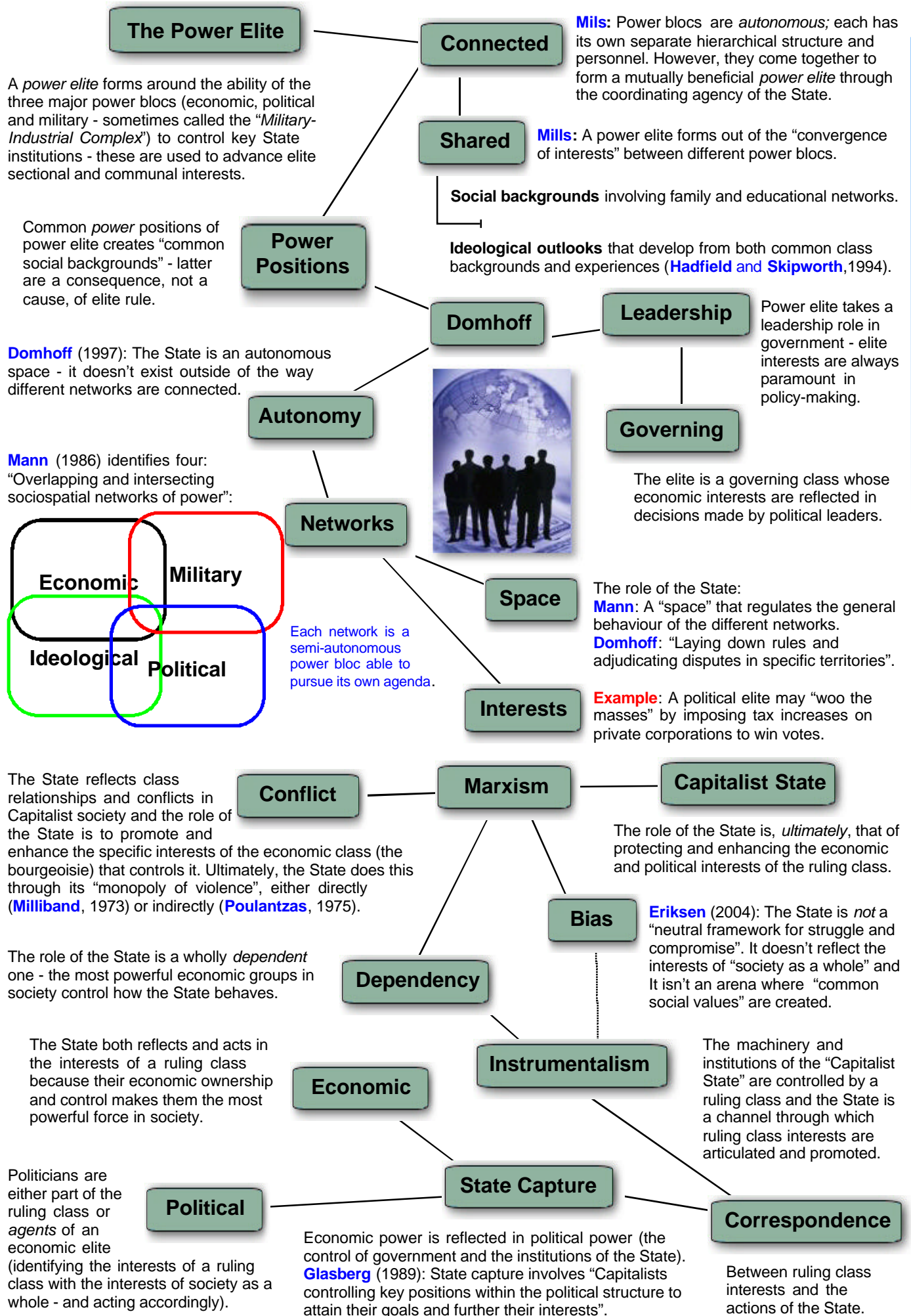
### Bureaucracy

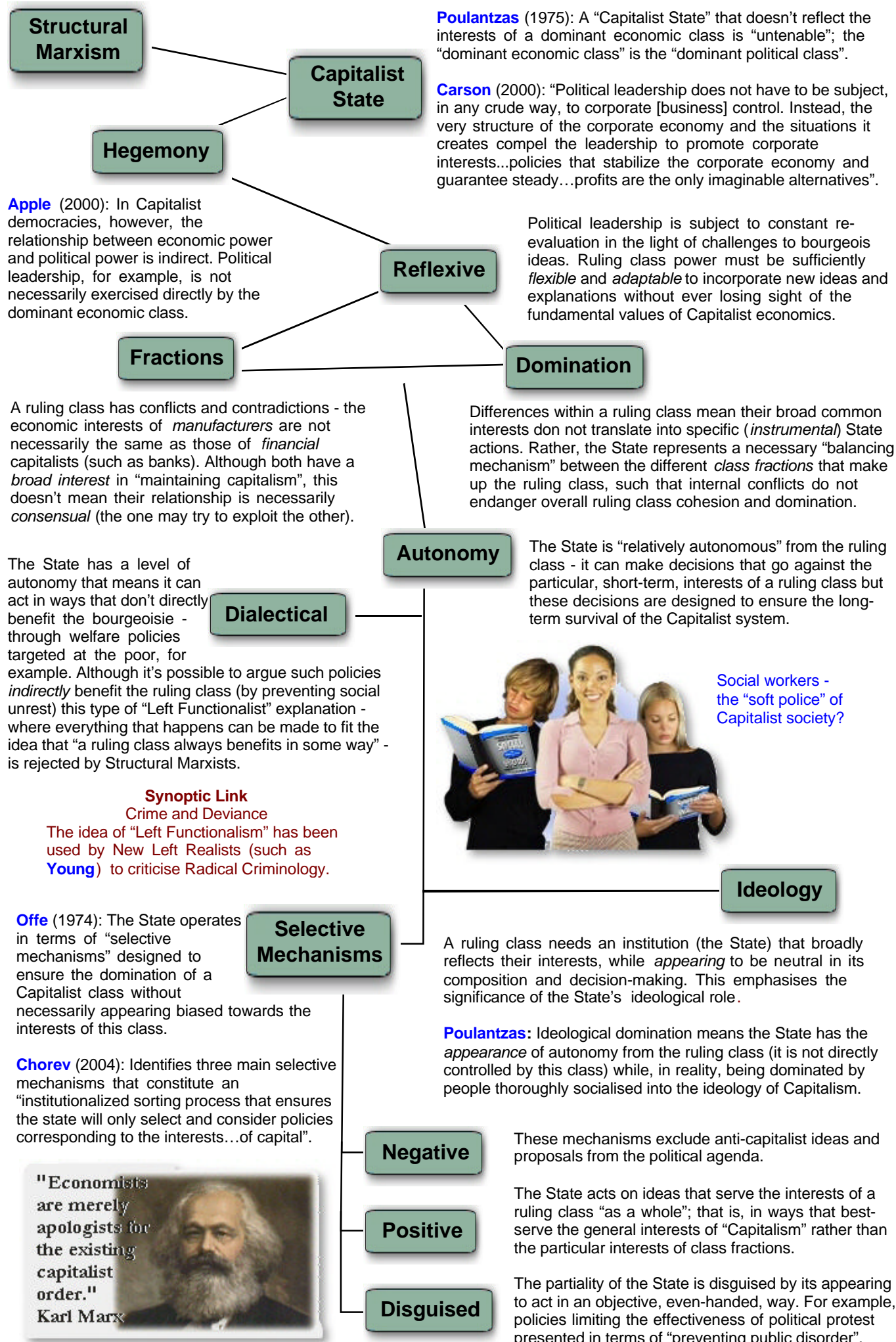
Large-scale organisations (such as governments) develop rules governing their day-to-day administration.

### Use

Elites control bureaucratic procedures and organisations to consolidate their grasp on power.







**Parsons** (1951): "Society" is a system founded on normative understanding and integration (people have to be socialised into the general norms of their society).

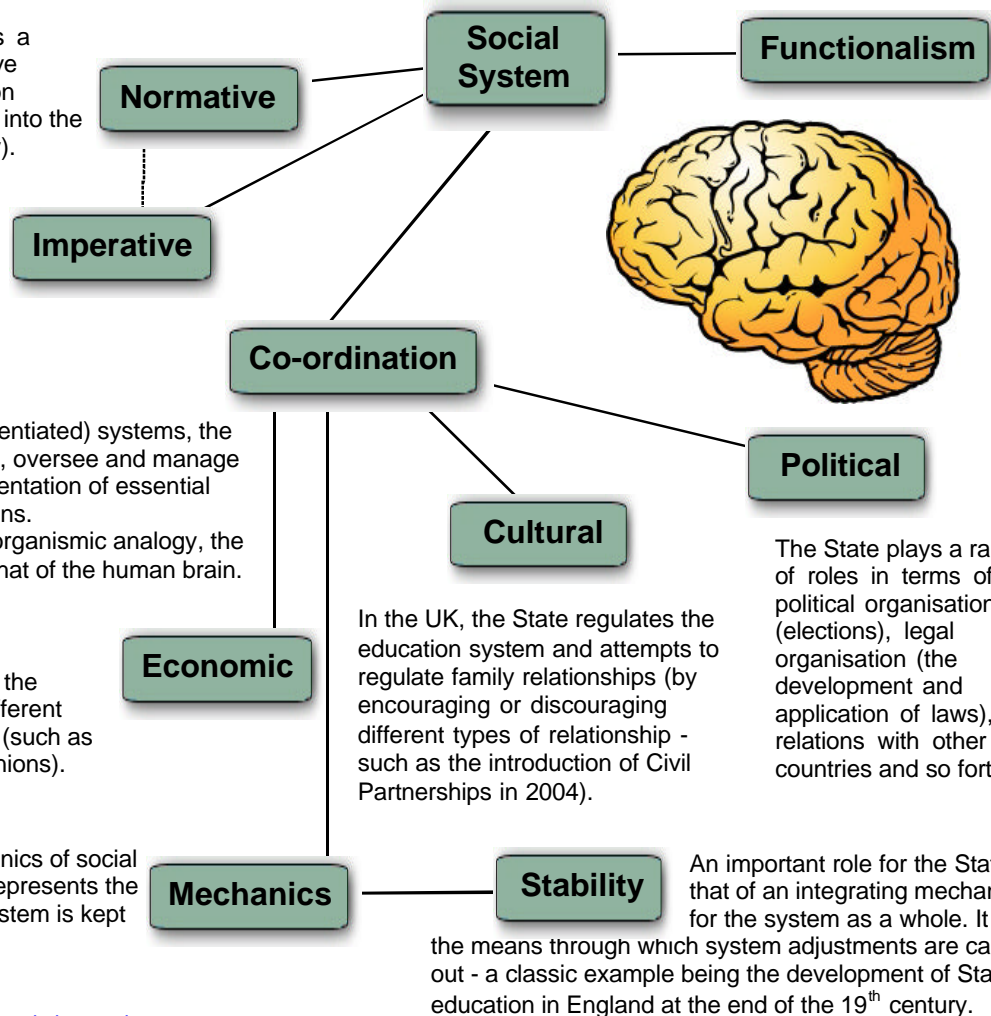
Social systems involve certain structural imperatives - things that must be performed (such as primary socialisation) if they are to survive.

In complex (functionally differentiated) systems, the State develops to co-ordinate, oversee and manage the development and implementation of essential system resources and functions.

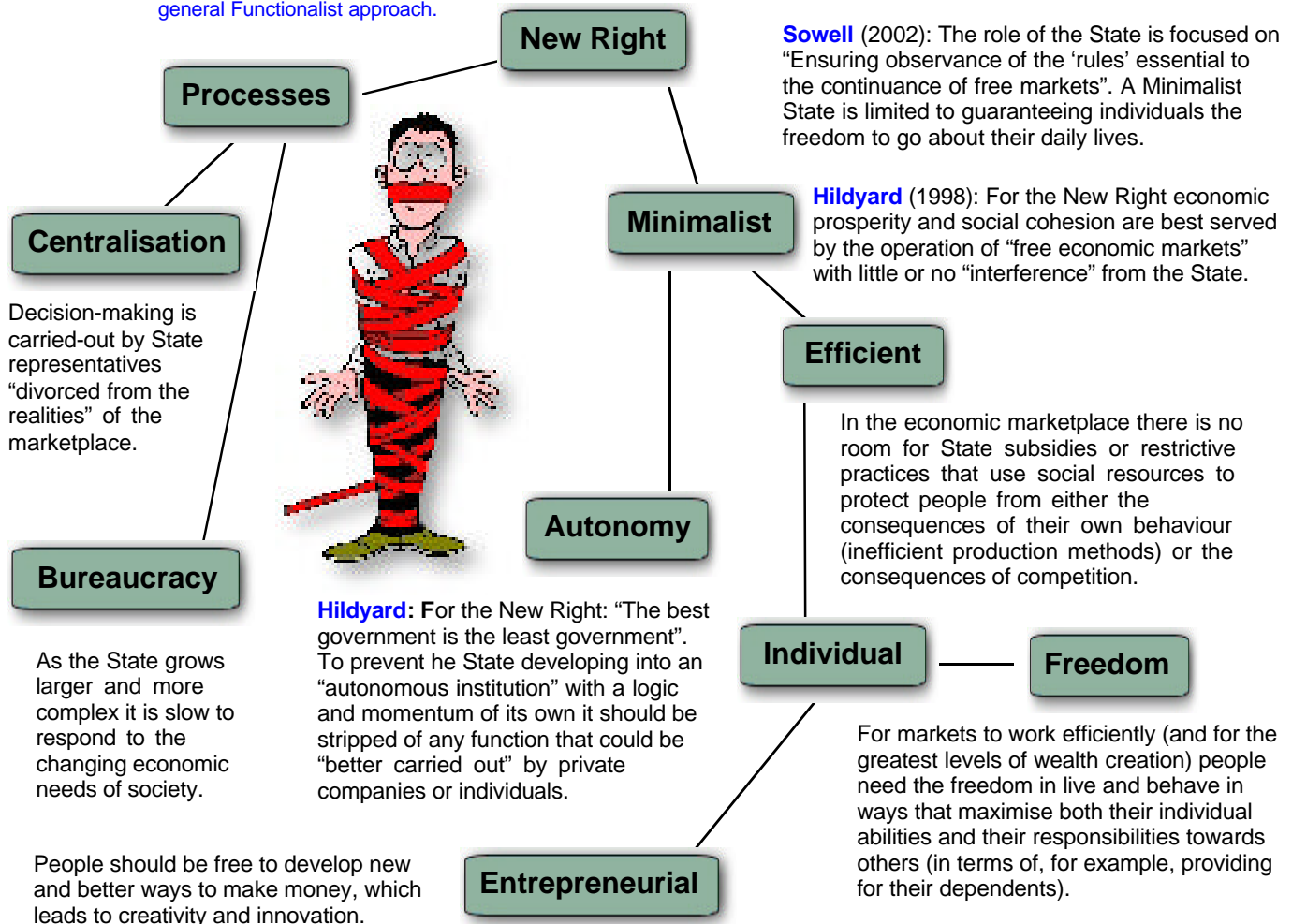
**Example:** Using the familiar organismic analogy, the role of the State is similar to that of the human brain.

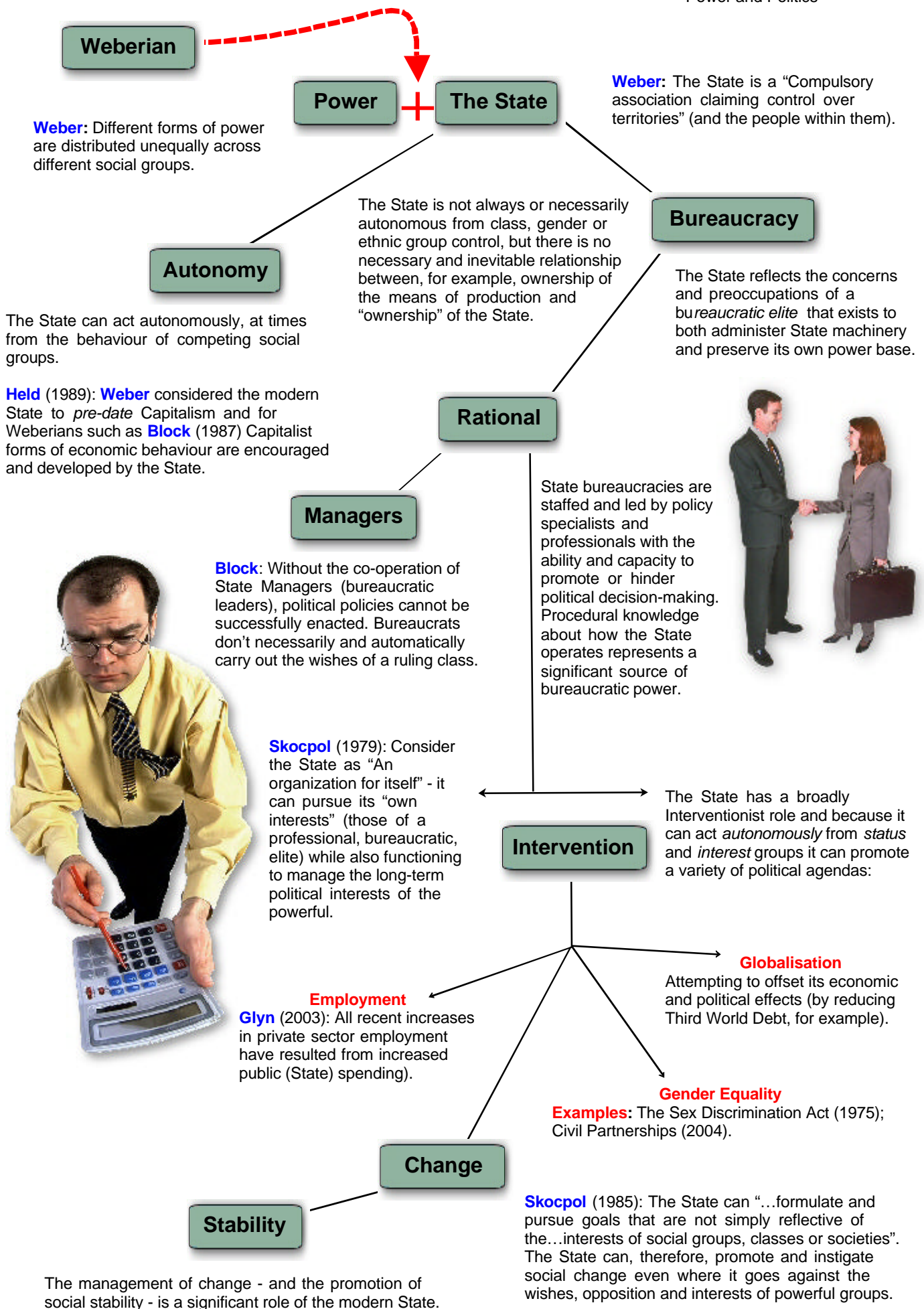
The State co-ordinates the relationship between different economic organisations (such as employers and Trade Unions).

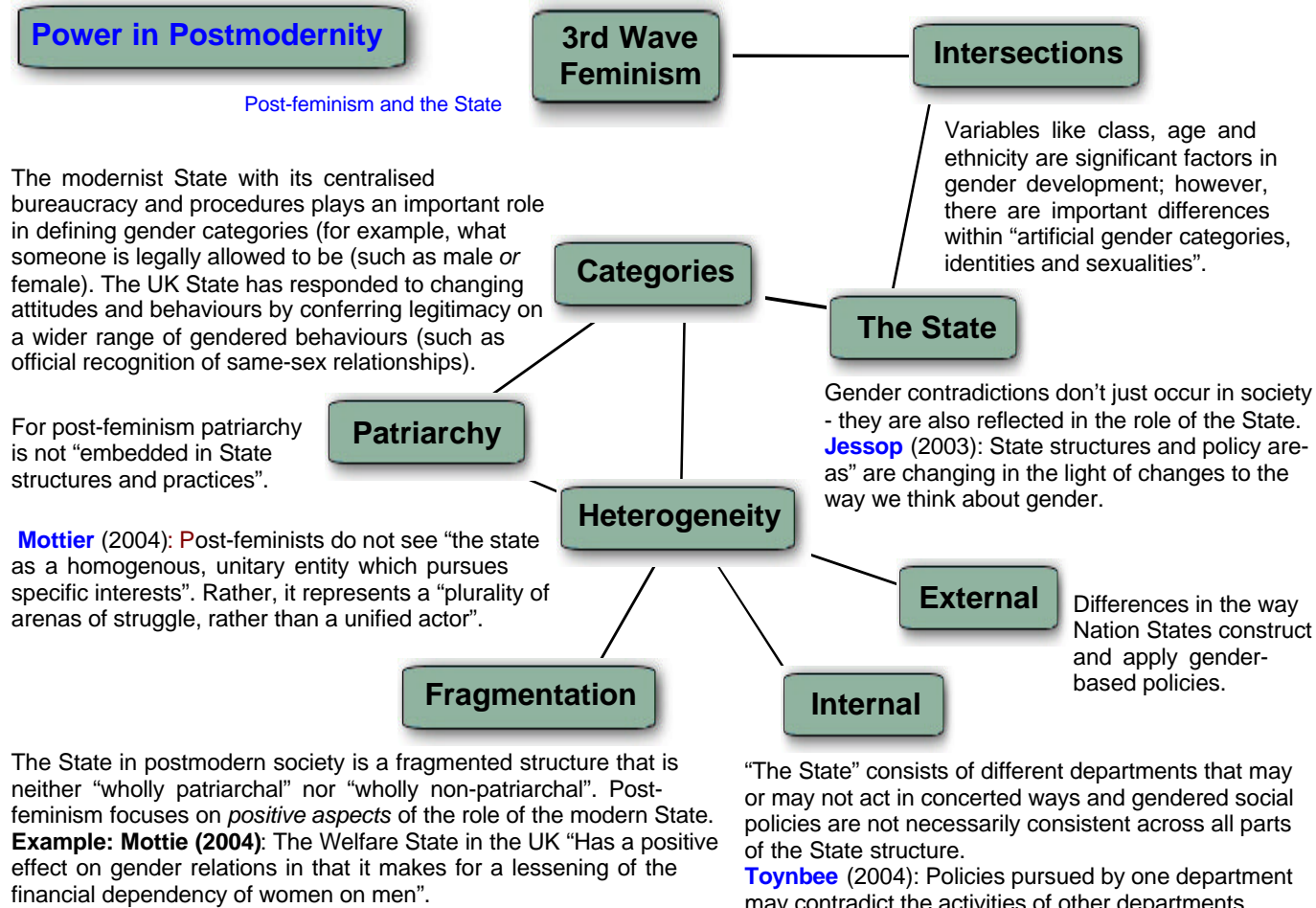
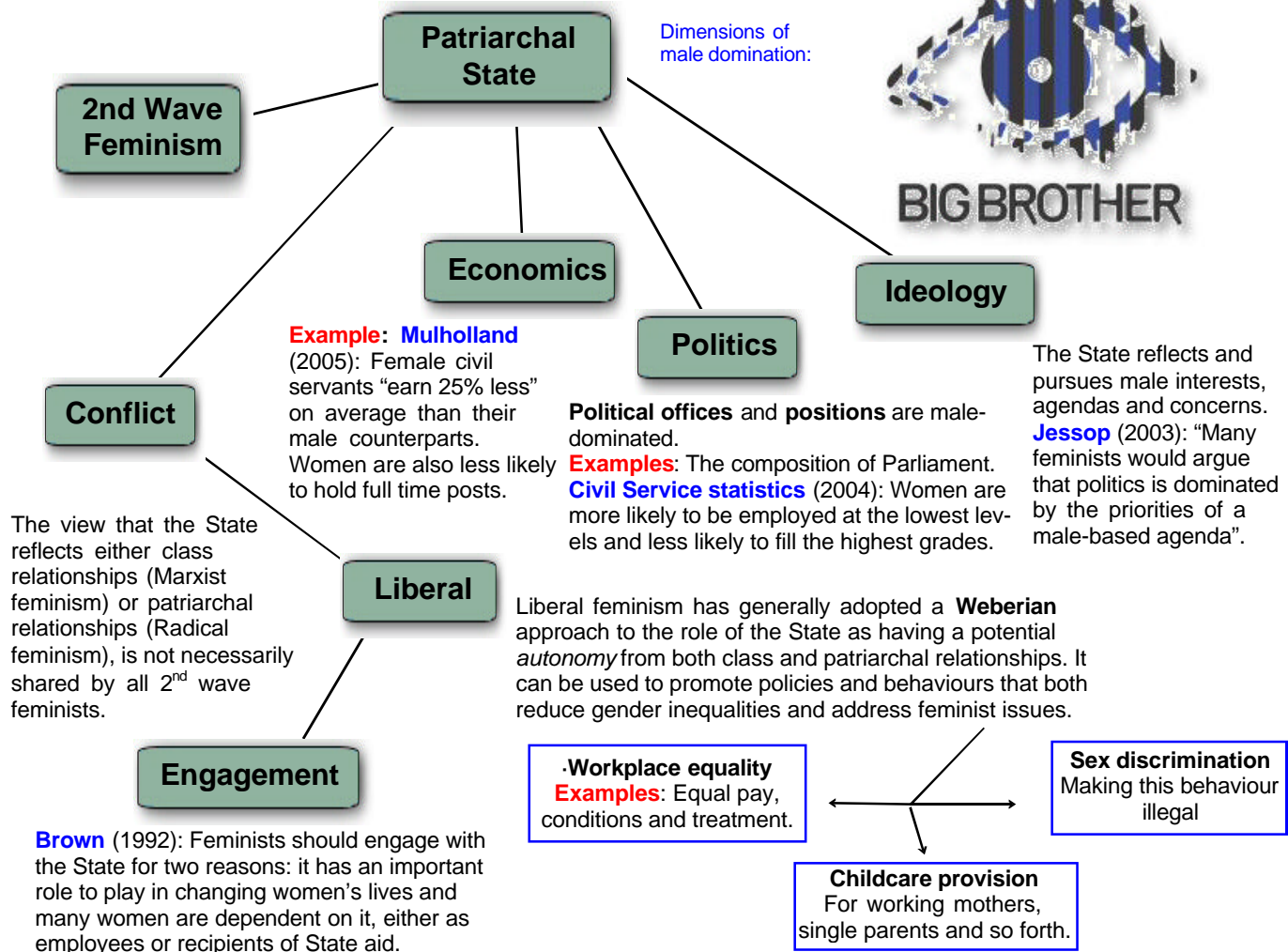
The State handles the mechanics of social (normative) organisation - it represents the means by which the social system is kept in broad equilibrium.

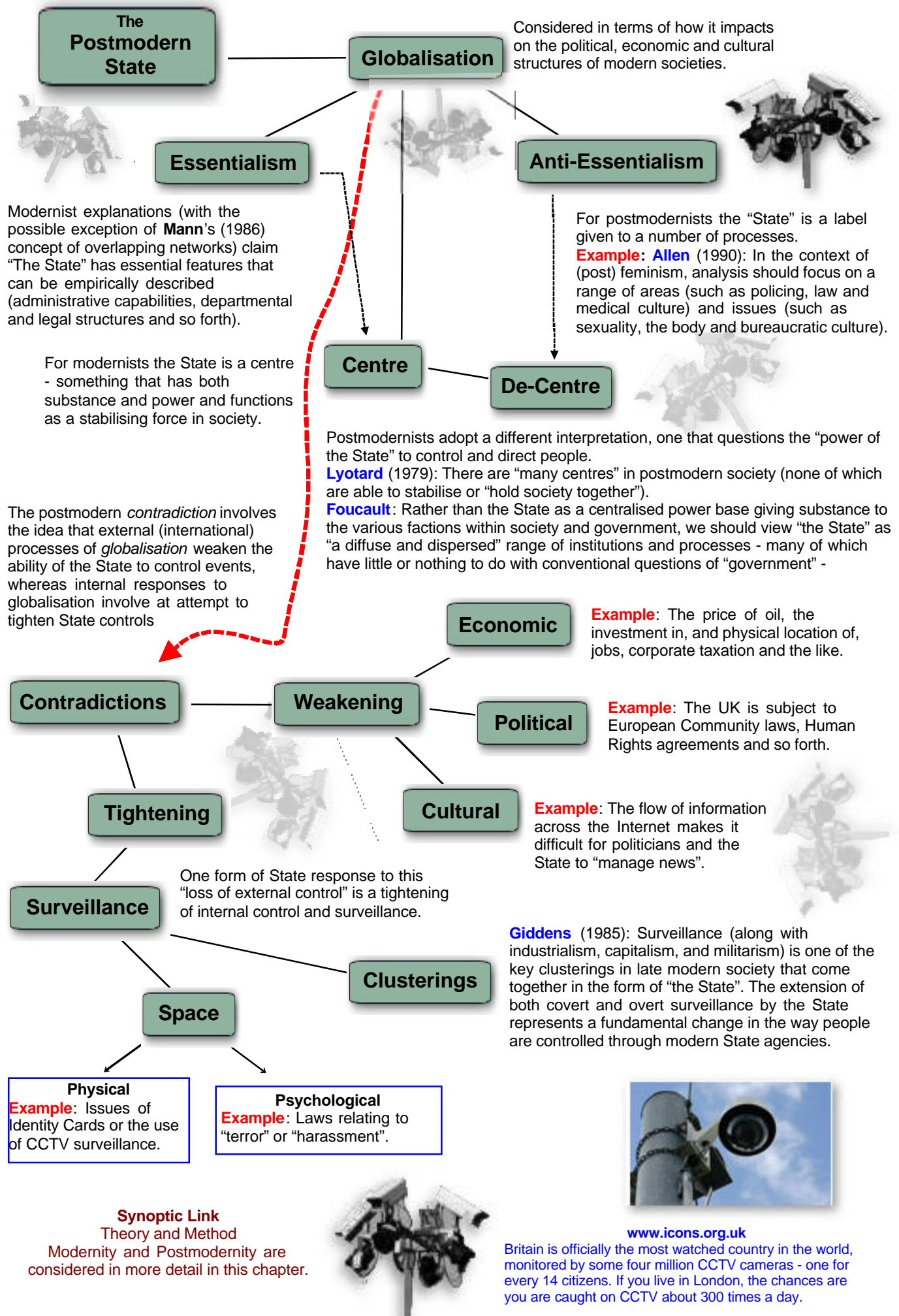


A contemporary variation on the general Functionalist approach.









## Exam Questions

### Item A

Some sociologists claim that the state is a neutral body acting equally on behalf of all of the population. However, Marxists argue that the state is not neutral, but is biased in favour of the ruling class, and that policies and decisions illustrate the domination of this class over the proletariat. Similarly, some feminists view the state as a patriarchal institution. From this perspective its main aim is seen as reinforcing male power in society and furthering the cause of male domination. It is thus clearly seen to serve the interests of men rather than women. Indeed, many feminists would argue that politics is dominated by the priorities of a male-based agenda.

**Source:** adapted from I. MORGAN, *Power and Politics* (Reproduced by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Educational Limited) 1999

#### 8 marks

Identify and briefly explain two examples of evidence put forward by sociologists which might be used to support the feminist view of the state expressed in Item A.

#### 12 marks

Using material from Item A and elsewhere, briefly examine some of the sociological arguments put forward by pluralist authors to challenge Marxist views on the role of the state expressed in Item A.

#### 40 marks

Assess the view that increasing globalisation is resulting in fundamental changes to the role and functions of the modern state.

