

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article185>



Marxist Theory

Foreword

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive - 1969: The Marxist Theory of the State -

Publication date: Tuesday 30 December 2003

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Every branch of knowledge has a central concept that expresses the fundamental feature or function of the sector of reality it investigate and deals with. The pivotal category of political science is the state.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/cops.jpg>]

The political thought of the various social classes and groupings throughout civilization is above all characterized by their attitude toward the state and their definition of its essential nature. Thus the ancient Greek aristocrat Aristotle conceived of the state - or, more precisely, the city-state of his time - as "an association for the good life", based on the family and village; excluded from the rights and benefits of citizenship, however, were labourers and artisans, women, foreigners, and slaves.

The bourgeois philosopher Hegel, like his idealist precursor Plato, asserted that the nation-state was a product of the Objective Mind, best governed by a constitutional monarchy.

Middle-class liberals nowadays - and the reformist socialists and Stalinists who trail in their wake and mimic their ideas - believe in the existence of a state that stands as an impartial arbiter above the selfish contention of classes and deals justly with the respective claims of diverse "interest groups". This exalted notion of a classless state presiding over a pure democracy, based on the consent of the people, rather than engaged in the defence of the property, rights of the ruling class, is the core of bourgeois-democratic ideology.

Historical materialism takes a more realistic view of the nature of the state. The state is the product of irreconcilable class conflict within the social structure, which it seeks to regulate on behalf of the ruling class. Every state is the organ of a given system of production based upon a predominant form of property ownership, which invests that state with a specific class bias and content. Every state is the organized political expression, the instrument, of the decisive class in the economy.

The principal factor in determining the character of the state is not its prevailing form of rule, which can vary greatly from time to time, but the type of property and productive relations that its institutions and prime beneficiaries protect and promote. In antiquity, monarchical, tyrannical, oligarchical, and democratic forms of the state rose upon the slave mode of production. The medieval feudal state in Western Europe passed through imperial-monarchical, clerical, absolute monarchical, plutocratic, and republican regimes.

In the course of its evolution, bourgeois society, rooted in the capitalist ownership of the means of production, has been headed and governed by various kinds of monarchical sovereignties (from the absolute to the constitutional), republican and parliamentary regimes, and military and fascist dictatorships.

The twelve workers' states in the postcapitalist societies, which have arisen from the socialist revolutions in the half century since the founding of the Soviet republic, have already exhibited two polar types of rule. One is more or less democratic in character, expressing the power, and guarding the welfare, of the workers and peasants. The other is despotic and bonapartist, bent on defending the privileged positions of a commanding caste of bureaucrats who have succeeded in usurping the decision-making powers from the masses.

At the dawn of the bourgeois era, long before Marx, Engels, and Lenin, that astute political scientist Machiavelli had expounded the view that the state was the supreme, organized, and legitimate expression of force. "Machiavelli's

theory," wrote the German historian Meineke, "was a sword which was plunged into the flank of the body politic of western humanity, causing it to shriek and rear up."

Similarly, the teaching of the Marxists, elaborated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, that the state was based upon the principle of force, has caused the whole of bourgeois society - to shriek and rear up - at its alleged cynicism and inhumanity. However, it would seem that the colossal arsenals used in two world wars and the preparations for a third, the destructiveness of the US military machine in Vietnam, as well as the barbarous reprisals taken by the bourgeois classes - from the Germany of 1933 to the Indonesia of 1965 - against their own citizens, should have amply validated that proposition by now.

Marxism added a deeper dimension to Machiavelli's observation by exposing and explaining the organic bond between the existence and exercise of state force and the property system that constituted the fabric of the socioeconomic structure. The coercion exercised by the state was the ultimate resort for maintaining the material interests of the strongest section of the exploiters.

It should not take much perspicacity to see that the industrialists and bankers, who own and operate most of the resources of the United States and control the major political parties, likewise direct the employment of the military machine and other repressive agencies of the federal government. The use of police, state guards, and federal troops to put down the ghetto uprisings testifies to the openly repressive function of the capitalist state apparatus. Yet liberal Americans find it difficult to generalize from these quite flagrant facts and thus to accept the sociological definition of state power offered by Marxism.

They are blinded or baffled by three misconceptions:

1. that there are no clearly defined class formations in American society;
2. that there are no serious or irreconcilable conflicts between classes; and
3. that the government is not "the executive committee" administering the general affairs and furthering the aims of the capitalist exploiters, but that it is - or can be made into - the supreme agency for taking care of the welfare of the whole people, rather than serving the interests of the minority rich.

The analysis of the evolution and essence of state power given by Ernest Mandel in these pages should do much to dispose of such false views. He is editor-in-chief of the Belgian weekly *La Gauche* and probably the most influential and authoritative exponent of the political economy of socialism in the West today. He has taken the lead in bringing the Marxist teachings in this field up to date through his masterful two-volume work entitled *Marxist Economic Theory*. This book, now available in English, has gone through three editions in France since it was first published in 1962 and has been translated into many languages, from German to Arabic.

[Next section](#)