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Marxist Theory

The Bourgeois State: the Face of Everyday Reality

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Through the struggle waged by the labour movement certain institutions of the bourgeois state become both more subtle and more complex. Universal suffrage was substituted for suffrage for property-owners only; military service has become compulsory; everybody pays taxes.

The class character of the state then becomes a little less transparent. The nature of the state as an instrument of class domination is less evident than at the time of the reign of the classical bourgeoisie, when the relationships between the different groups exercising state functions were just as transparent as in the feudal era. The analysis of the modern state, therefore, will also have to be a little more complex.

First, let us establish a hierarchy among the different functions of the state.

In this day and age, nobody but the most naive believes that parliament really does the governing, that parliament is master of the state based on universal suffrage. (That illusion is, however, more widespread in those countries in which parliament is a fairly recent institution.)

The power of the state is a permanent power. This power is exercised by a certain number of institutions that are isolated from and independent of so changeable and unstable an influence as universal suffrage. These are the institutions that must be analysed if we are to learn where the real power lies: Governments come and governments go, but the police and the administrators remain.

The state is, above all, these permanent institutions: the army (the permanent part of the army - the general staff, special troops) the police, special police, secret police, the top administrators of government departments (civil servants), the national security bodies, the judges, etc. - everything that is free of the influence of universal suffrage.

This executive power is constantly being reinforced. To the extent that universal suffrage appears and a certain democratisation, albeit completely formal, of certain representative institutions develops, it can be shown that real power slips from those institutions towards others that are more and more removed from the influence of parliament.

If the king and his functionaries lose a series of rights to parliament during the ascending phase of parliamentarism, on the contrary, with the decline of parliamentarism (which begins with the winning of universal suffrage), a continuous series of rights are lost by parliament and revert to the permanent and irremovable administrations of the state. This phenomenon is a general one throughout Western Europe. The present Fifth Republic in France is presently the most striking and most complete example of this phenomenon.

Should this turnabout, this reversal, be seen as a diabolical plot against universal suffrage by the wicked capitalists? A much deeper objective reality is involved: the real powers are transferred from the legislative to the executive; the power of the executive is reinforced in a permanent and continuous fashion as a result of changes that are also taking place within the capitalist class itself.

This process began at the time of World War 1 in most of the belligerent countries and has since continued without interruption. But the phenomenon often existed much earlier than that. Thus, in the German Empire this priority of the executive over the legislative appeared concomitantly with universal suffrage. Bismarck and the Junkers granted

universal suffrage in order to use the working class to a certain extent as a lever against the liberal bourgeoisie, thus assuring (in that already essentially capitalist society) the relative independence of the executive power exercised by the Prussian nobility.

This process shows full well that political equality is more apparent than real and that the right of the citizen-voter is nothing but the right to put a little piece of paper in a ballot box every four years. The right goes no farther, nor, above all, does it reach the real centres of decision-making and power.

The monopolies take over from parliament

The classical era of parliamentarism was the era of free competition. At that time the individual bourgeois, the industrialist, the banker, was very strong as an individual. He was very independent, very free within the limits of bourgeois freedom, and could risk his capital on the market in any he wished. In that atomized bourgeois society, parliament played a very useful, and even indispensable, objective role in the smooth functioning of everyday affairs.

Actually, it was only in parliament that the common denominator of the interests of the bourgeoisie could be determined. Dozens of separate capitalist groups could be listed, groups opposed to one another by a multitude of sectional, regional, and corporative interests. These groups could get together in an orderly fashion only in parliament. (It's true that they did meet on the market too, but there it was with knives, not words!) It was only in parliament that a middle line could be hammered out, a line that would express the interests of the capitalist class as a whole.

Because that was then the function of parliament: to serve as a common meeting place where the collective interests of the bourgeoisie could be formulated. Let us recall that in the heroic era of parliamentarism it was not only with words and votes that this collective interest was hammered out; fists and pistols were used, too. Didn't the Convention, that classical bourgeois parliament during the French Revolution, send people to the guillotine by the slimmest of majorities?

But capitalist society is not going to remain atomized. Little by little, it can be seen organizing itself and structuring itself in a more and more concentrated, more and more centralized way. Free competition fades away: it is replaced by monopolies, trusts, and other capitalist groupings.

Capitalist power is centralized outside parliament

Now a real centralization of finance capital, big banks and financial groups, takes place. If the Analytique [1] of parliament expressed the will of the Belgian bourgeoisie a century ago, today it is above all the annual report of the SociÃ©tÃ© GÃ©nÃ©rale [2] or of Brufina, [3] prepared for their stockholders' meetings, that must be studied to know the real opinions of the capitalists. These reports contain the opinions of the capitalists who really count, the big financial groups who dominate the life of the country.

Thus, capitalist power is concentrated outside parliament and outside the institutions born of universal suffrage. In the face of so high-powered a concentration (we need only remember that in Belgium a dozen financial groups control the economic life of the nation), the relationships between parliament and government officials, police commissioners and those multimillionaires is a relationship burdened very little by theory. It is a very immediate and practical relationship: and the connecting link is the payoff.

The bourgeoisie's visible golden chains - the national debt

Parliament and, even more, the government of a capitalist state, no matter how democratic it may appear to be, are tied to the bourgeoisie by golden chains. These golden chains have a name - the public debt.

No government could last more than a month without having to knock on the door of the banks in order to pay its current expenses. If the banks were to refuse, the government would go bankrupt. The origins of this phenomenon are twofold. Taxes don't enter the coffers every day; receipts are concentrated in one period of the year while expenses are continuous. That is how the short-term public debt arises. This problem could be solved by some technical gimmick. But there is another problem - a much more important one. All modern capitalist states spend more than they receive. That is the long-term public debt for which banks and other financial establishments can most easily advance money, at heavy interest. Therein lies a direct and immediate connection, a daily link, between the state and big business.

The hierarchy in the state apparatus ...

Other golden chains, invisible chains, make the state apparatus a tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie.

If we examine the method of recruiting civil service people, for example, we see that to become a junior clerk in a ministry, it is necessary to pass an examination. The rule seems very democratic indeed. On the other hand, not just anyone can take any examination at all for any level whatsoever. The examination is not the same for the position of secretary general of a ministry or chief of the army general staff as it is for junior clerk in a small government bureau. At first glance, this too would seem normal.

But - a big but - there's a progression in these examinations that gives them a selective character. You have to have certain degrees, you have to have taken certain courses, to apply for certain positions, especially important positions. Such a system excludes a huge number of people who were not able to get a university education or its equivalent, because equality of educational opportunity doesn't really exist. Even if the civil service examination system is democratic on the surface, it is also a selective instrument.

... mirror of the hierarchy in capitalist society

These invisible golden chains are also found in the remuneration received by members of the state apparatus.

All government agencies, the army included, develop this pyramidal aspect, this hierarchical structure, that characterizes bourgeois society. We are so influenced by and so imbued with the ideology of the ruling class that we tend to see nothing abnormal in the fact that a secretary general of a ministry receives a salary ten times higher than that of a junior clerk in the same ministry or that of the woman who cleans its offices. The physical effort of this charwoman is certainly greater; but the secretary general of the ministry, he thinks! - which, as everyone knows, is much more tiring. In the same way, the pay of the chief of the general staff (again, someone who thinks!) is much greater by far than that accorded to a second-class private.

This hierarchical structure of the state apparatus leads us to emphasize: In this apparatus there are secretaries general, generals of the army, bishops, etc., who have the same salary level, and therefore have the same standard of living, as the big bourgeoisie, so that they are part of the same social and ideological climate. Then come the middle functionaries, the middle officials, who are on the same social level and have the same income as the petty and middle bourgeoisie. And finally, the mass of employees without titles, charwomen, community workers, who very often earn less than factory workers. Their standard of living clearly corresponds to that of the proletariat.

The state apparatus is not a homogeneous instrument. It involves a structure that rather closely corresponds to the structure of bourgeois society, with a hierarchy of classes and identical differences between them.

This pyramidal structure corresponds to a real need of the bourgeoisie. They wish to have at their disposal an instrument they can manipulate at will. It is quite obvious why the bourgeoisie has been trying for a long time, and trying very hard, to deny public service workers the right to strike.

Is the state simply an arbiter?

This point is important in the very concept of the bourgeois state - regardless of whether it may be more or less "Eurosoedemocratic" in form - there is a fundamental premise, linked, moreover, to the very origin of the state: By its nature the state remains antagonistic, or rather nonadaptive, to the needs of the collectivity. The state is, by definition, a group of men who exercise the functions that in the beginning were exercised by all members of the collectivity. These men contribute no productive labour but are supported by the other members of society.

In normal times, there is not much need for watchdogs. Even in Moscow, for example, there is no one in charge of collecting fares on buses: passengers deposit their kopeck on boarding, whether or not anyone is watching them. In societies where the level of development of the productive forces is low, where everyone is in a constant struggle with everyone else to get enough to live on for himself out of a national income too small to go around, a large supervisory apparatus becomes necessary.

Thus, during the German occupation [of Belgium], a number of specialized supervisory services proliferated (special police in the railway stations, supervision of printshops, of rationing, etc.). In times like that, the area of conflict is such that an imposing supervisory apparatus proves indispensable.

If we think about the problem a bit, we can see that all who exercise state functions, who are part of the state apparatus, are - in one way or another - watchdogs. Special police and regular police are watchdogs, but so are tax collectors, judges, paper pushers in government offices, fare-collectors on buses, etc. In sum, all functions of the state apparatus are reduced to this: surveillance and control of the life of the society in the interests of the ruling class.

It is often said that the contemporary state plays the role of arbiter. This statement is quite close to what we have just said: "Eurosoesurveillance" and "Eurosoearbitrating" - aren't they basically the same thing?

Two comments are called for. First, the arbiter is not neutral. As we explained above, the top men in the state apparatus are part and parcel of the big bourgeoisie. Arbitration thus does not take place in a vacuum; it takes place in the framework of maintaining existing class society. Of course, concessions to the exploited can be made by arbitrators; that depends essentially on the relationship of forces. But the basic aim of arbitration is to maintain capitalist exploitation as such, if necessary by compromising a bit on secondary questions.

The watchdog-state, testimony to the poverty of society

Second, the state is an entity created by society for the surveillance of the everyday functioning of social life; it is at the service of the ruling class for the purpose of maintaining the domination of that class. There is an objective necessity for this watchdog organization, a necessity very closely linked to the degree of poverty, to the amount of social conflict that exists in the society.

In a more general, historical way, the exercise of state functions is intimately connected with the existence of social conflicts. In turn, these social conflicts are intimately connected with the existence of a certain scarcity of material goods, of wealth, of resources, of the necessary means for satisfaction of human needs. This fact should be emphasized: As long as the state exists, it will be proof of the fact that social conflicts (therefore the relative scarcity of goods and services as well) remain. With the disappearance of social conflicts, the watchdogs, rendered useless

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and parasitical, will disappear - but not before! Society, in effect, pays these men to exercise the functions of surveillance, as long as that is in the interests of part of society. But it is quite evident that from the moment no group in society has a stake in the watchdog function being exercised, the function will disappear along with its usefulness. At the same time, the state will disappear.

The very fact that the state survives proves that social conflicts remain, that the condition of relative scarcity of goods remains the hallmark of that vast period in human history between absolute poverty (the condition during primitive communism) and plenty (the condition of the future socialist society). As long as we are in this transitional period that covers ten thousand years of human history, a period that also includes the transition between capitalism and socialism, the state will survive, social conflicts will remain, and there will have to be people to arbitrate these conflicts in the interest of the ruling class.

If the bourgeois state remains fundamentally an instrument in the service of the ruling classes, does that mean that the workers should be indifferent to the particular form that this state takes parliamentary democracy, military dictatorship, fascist dictatorship? Not at all! The more freedom the workers have to organize themselves and defend their ideas, the more will the seeds of the future socialist democracy grow within capitalist society, and the more will the advent of socialism be historically facilitated. That is why, the workers must defend their democratic rights against any and every attempt to curtail them (antistrike laws, institution of a "Eurostrong state") or to crush them (fascism).

[Next section](#)

[1] Analytique. The equivalent in Belgium of the US Congressional Record.

[2] Soci t  G n rale. Belgium's most important capitalist grouping since its independence in 1830. Originally organized in the form of a merchant bank, the Soci t  G n rale was a forerunner of "Eurofinance capital", which became general in other capitalist countries only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This resulted from the Soci t 's early possession of controlling interests in many joint stock companies, especially in coal and steel. Later it controlled the famous Union Mini re du Haut Katanga, as well as other companies in the Congo. Today it has reorganised in the form of a central holding company that controls stock in many apparently independent companies, among them Belgium's main savings bank.

[3] Brufina. Belgium's second largest capitalist grouping, Brufina grew out of the Banque de Bruxelles, the second largest Belgian bank.