

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6734>



On the nature of the state

1980: Methodological problems in defining the class nature of the bourgeois state

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

Publication date: Sunday 19 July 2020

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

Historical materialism elevates the principle of the dialectic relationship between the particular and the general, which reveals the essence of phenomena, to the theoretical principle of dialectical historiography.

– Leo Kofler [1]

In recent years, discussion on the definition and explanation of the class nature of the bourgeois state has expanded considerably. Although still mainly conducted in the GDR, France, Great Britain and Italy, the ‘Stamocap’ theory and debates on the class nature of the ‘national democratic state’ (in some former colonies in Africa and Asia) make it a debate that is truly global. [3] We do not want to talk here so much about the specific content of the most important works on this subject that have appeared so far. Rather, our intention is to raise some general problems related to the application of the historical-materialist method to the problem of the class nature of the bourgeois state. Directly or indirectly such problems play an important role in this discussion.

1

The decisive category of materialist dialectics is that of the totality. This totality is driving and driven to change by inner contradictions. The forms of the movement itself are different (e.g. merely quantitative changes cannot be equated with qualitative changes). But the mobility of the structure is just as decisive as its character. For historical materialism there are no eternal, unchanging forms in any social phenomena.

The category of the totality, which is full of contradictions and therefore changing, assigns in Marxist research a privileged place to the investigation of the origins of phenomena of the social base and those of the social superstructure, of their laws of motion and the conditions under which they disappear. For historical materialism, the ‘being’ of all social phenomenon can be understood and recognized only through and as its ‘becoming’.

In this sense, it can be argued that any attempt to define the class character of the bourgeois state by abstracting from its historical origin, i.e. by excluding the genetic method, contradicts historical materialism. Any attempt to derive the character and essence of the bourgeois state directly from the categories of Marx’s *Capital* – either from ‘capital in general’ or from the exchange and trade relations on the surface of bourgeois society, or from the conditions of valorization of capital – overlooks the fact that the bourgeoisie itself did not make the state in the sense of a state machinery that is disconnected from society and elevated to the status of an autonomous institution.

The bourgeoisie limited itself to taking over the state as it existed before it came to power (i.e. the semi-feudal absolutist state), and transforming it according to its own class interests. The determination of the class character of the bourgeois state must therefore take as its starting point the answers to the following questions:

– Why did the modern bourgeoisie not overthrow the absolutist state machine but merely adapt it?

– How did this adaptation happen?

– For what purposes does it use the state machine that has been taken over and adapted, and for what functions does the bourgeois need it?

– How does the bourgeoisie succeed in using the state machine, despite its characteristic autonomy, for its own class purposes?

The criticism that such a methodical approach to the problem is characterized by an ambivalent eclecticism can immediately be rejected, because the activity of the State cannot be traced back to ‘purely economic conditions’. As a product of the social division of labour, the state machinery as such becomes autonomous. Only when the division of society into classes has already taken place do state functions become the function of special organs detached from society. In other words, the state functions are instruments of an existing class rule. Technical coercion or reified consciousness alone cannot explain why the majority of members of society are compelled to leave the exercise of certain functions to a minority. Behind the technical compulsion and reified consciousness are relationships between people, class relations and class struggle. Trying to derive any state, including the bourgeois state, from purely economic relations means either pegging on to a reified reflection of class relations or mechanically reducing class struggle to ‘pure economics’.

Conversely, the emergence and development of the bourgeois state cannot simply be traced back to the general need to use non-economic force against the class enemy of the bourgeoisie. The specific roots of such force must be linked to the specific forms of the capitalist mode of production, as a necessary complement to the rule of capital and not of any ruling class. If one separates the essence of the bourgeois state from the conditions for existence of the state in general, the specificity which distinguishes it from all other class states is lost rather than being incorporated into the general picture. Only an articulation of the specific functional conditions of the bourgeois state with the specificities of the capitalist mode of production and those of bourgeois ideology – which are jointly determined by the structure of bourgeois society and mutually determine each other – makes it possible to thoroughly pose and solve the problems related to the class nature of the bourgeois state.

It follows that every contemporary bourgeois state simultaneously displays general characteristics of the bourgeois state as well as peculiar characteristics that are closely related to the moment and the conditions of class struggle under which the bourgeoisie fought for the direct conquest of political power. We can think here of the level of development of capitalism, of the bourgeois class itself and of the proletariat, as well as the relationship of forces between bourgeoisie, nobility and plebeian, semi-proletarian, or fully proletarian workers. Not only the concrete organization of the state (more specifically: the form of state) but also the particular political tradition of each bourgeois nation and its prevailing political patterns of thought and ideologies are closely related such specific elements. Such factors also play a very important role in the creation and development of the modern labour movement. We can think of the creation of a constitutional monarchy in Great Britain and Sweden, as opposed to a republic in the USA and France.

2

It is important to strictly distinguish between that which is peculiar to bourgeois society and those specificities of the bourgeois state which correspond only to specific conjunctures of the relationship of forces between classes.

Several authors erroneously claim that the reproduction of capitalist social relations is more or less automatically guaranteed, because such relations fundamentally influence the consciousness of the producers in the proletariat. Because wage workers experience their exploitation as the result of an exchange, they will not question the exchange relations, or commodity production and the capitalist mode of production nor the accumulation of capital. It follows from this that the bourgeois state, unlike other class states, can content itself with ensuring formal equality before the law – separating the politico-legal relations between the people from the actual social production.

Here we have a three-layered confusion over terms. First of all, the fact that certain forms of reified thinking correspond to a certain mode of production does not mean that such forms of thinking are sufficient to ensure the

reproduction of certain social relations.

On the other hand, it has not been proven at all that thinking trapped in exchange relations is absolutely harmless to the reproduction of capitalist production relations. Even politically uneducated proletarians can provoke uprisings which are very dangerous for the survival of private property and bourgeois order. These uprisings certainly have little chance of a favourable outcome, but they can cause such serious damage to a capitalist class that it deems it necessary to maintain an expensive and parasitic state apparatus to prevent the danger of such an uprising.

And thirdly, this train of thought contains an economic reductionist error. The continued existence of commodity production and private property of the means of production does not automatically ensure a smooth capital valorization at all times and in all circumstances. A 'normal' valorization of capital requires, among other things, a distinctive distribution between wage and surplus value of the new value created by the labour force. Quantity in addition to quality therefore here plays a decisive role. In the capitalist mode of production there is a long-term tendency (mainly due to the growth of the industrial reserve army, as a result of declining capital accumulation) that prevents labour wages from rising to such a level that they would jeopardize capital valorization. But this long-term tendency is not continuous and uninterrupted. In spite of its 'subjugation to exchange rates', wage labour can, under certain conditions, demand and obtain wages that diminish the valorization of capital and briefly threaten it.

Furthermore, precisely because a wage worker (with false consciousness) experiences his exploitation essentially 'only' as the result of an exchange, he is driven to fight to preserve and increase the wage. The very same reified awareness can even lead him to the conclusion that such a wage struggle can only be successfully conducted through collective union and solidarity-based organization. Both contradictory aspects of the 'reified consciousness' (its resignation and its rebellion) are thus specific to the system, but they have very different consequences for potential threats to the system. From the tendency towards 'pure trade-union' organization thus emerges an elementary proletarian class consciousness, which is at least potentially periodically anti-capitalist. Through a less mechanical analysis of the connection between generalized commodity production, reified consciousness and the necessity of a state machine for the bourgeoisie, one arrives at a different result than many participants in the discussion do.

In contrast to slaves or peasant serfs, the wage labourer is a free worker. But this relationship, too, must be understood dialectically and as full of contradictions and not simply reduced to his separation from the means of production. It is precisely because the capitalist mode of production does not merely involve the generalization of commodity production and exchange relations between people that non-economic force is necessary for capital. The reification of elementary forms of thought is inevitable under these conditions but this is not sufficient to secure continuous, sustained capital valorization. In contrast to the private labour of producers in simple commodity production, the objective socialization and cooperation of labour in large industrial enterprises makes non-economic force indispensable for capital. It must guarantee the reproduction of the social relations of bourgeois society. The economic mechanism alone is not sufficient for this purpose.

The free wage worker has the potential to refuse, at least temporarily, the sale of his labour force under conditions that would favour capital valorization. The worker can do this all the more if he has access to a collective resistance fund and a collective organization of solidarity. Everywhere, capital has provoked such structures as a reaction against it, just as it has produced reified forms of consciousness! Ensuring the reproduction of social relations within bourgeois society thus requires force and violence on the part of capital in order to prohibit, obstruct and limit the collective refusal to sell the commodity that is labour force. Capital does this through for example limiting the free and unrestricted building of unions or by limiting the right to strike. The use of force to these ends runs like a thread through the entire history of bourgeois society.

In bourgeois society 'free wage labour' in reality (in substance) means forced labour. 'Freedom' and 'force'

are each other's necessary complement in the economic and individual spheres but also in the areas of 'law' and 'justice'. Without force to coerce the proletariat there is no freedom for the entrepreneur. Young Marx had already realized this when he wrote: "Security is the highest social concept of civil society, the concept of police, expressing the fact that the whole of society exists only in order to guarantee to each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property. It is in this sense that Hegel calls civil society "the state of need and reason (*den Not und Verstandestaat*)". [4] Indeed, without the police there is no private property and no guaranteed capital valorization. Without bourgeois state violence capital cannot be secure.

It follows that there is no possibility of a bourgeois state based on preserving 'equality before the law' or on ensuring 'the application of formal principles'. There has never been such a state, nor will there be one in the future. The bourgeois state, like any state, is and remains an instrument for maintaining the rule of a specific class, not only indirectly but also in the direct sense of the word. Without a permanent repressive apparatus the bourgeois state is inconceivable. Without it, the reproduction of capitalist relations of production would at the least become uncertain, and be periodically questioned. In times of crisis the 'hard core' of the state reduces itself to this apparatus, to 'a body of armed men', to use Friedrich Engels' words.

Paradoxically, the theory of many, especially German, participants in the discussion can be turned upside down. It can be argued that precisely because capitalist conditions of exploitation seem to be based only on exchange relations, as they are not based on direct, personal master and servant relations, there is for bourgeois society an immanent danger that the wage earner 'abuses his freedom' to endanger, if not completely overthrow, the existing social order. Moreover, the bourgeois state was born out of bourgeois revolutions, and revolutions, as we know, are dangerous schools for learning of the possibility of radical social changes. Thus, the bourgeoisie understood immediately after its conquest of political power that it needed a permanent non-economic coercive apparatus to force rebellious proletarians to sell the commodity labour force prices advantageous to capital valorization.

For the same reason, it is simply not true that the formal legal equality of all individuals in bourgeois society would be immanently linked to some tendency towards formal political-legal equality of all 'citizens' of the bourgeois state. Formal legal equality of capital and wage labour is necessary for the survival of the capitalist mode of production and the valorization of capital. But in order to neutralize the contradictory effects on the market of this formal legal equality, a tendency towards depriving the proletariat of political and legal rights is built into the bourgeois state. The idea that the bourgeois state, or the whole of bourgeois ideology, spontaneously and automatically tends towards equal electoral rights for all people is an assertion contradicted by the history of bourgeois society. To have shown this in detail is one of Leo Kofler's great achievements.

In the history of the bourgeois state, the period of universal, equal rights and the secret ballot, with freedom of political organization for the working class, forms an exception. In Western Europe, these rights only became generalized after the First World War, i.e. only after the beginning of the decline of capitalism and after the victory of the Russian October Revolution. In the rest of the capitalist world it is still rather the exception than the rule.

Even more significant is the fact that even this formal political legal and organizational equality of the working class was forced by other social classes on the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie certainly did not voluntarily grant this to the citizens. Under what conditions and with what limits the bourgeoisie succeeded in turning this political defeat into a temporary political victory is a question that does not change the importance of this historical fact. This is important to keep in mind, if only because in the almost sixty years that this alleged 'bourgeois achievement' has been a fact, it has often been disbanded by the bourgeoisie itself (Mussolini, Salazar, Hitler, Franco, Pétain, to name but a few of the most important Western European examples). There exists now once again a clear tendency to question it in Western European politics.

The form of the bourgeois state, an instrument of bourgeois class rule, is therefore determined by class interests. It

can only take on a form in accordance with its nature. Suggesting that a fundamental change in the form and function of the state is possible while the bourgeoisie has not lost its economic and social power – i.e. the right to dispose of the means of production and the social surplus product – means assuming that the ruling class would use its social surplus product not for its self-preservation but for its self-destruction. There is no historical precedent for such self-destruction by ruling social classes, either in the history of pre-capitalist class societies or in the history of bourgeois society.

Thus, the bourgeois state has the central task of providing, ensuring and reproducing the social conditions (the social framework) of the existing class domination, i.e. those conditions described by Friedrich Engels in the *Anti-Dühring* with the formula ‘external conditions of production’. The State is ‘an organization of the particular class, which is pro tempore the exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production, and, therefore, especially, for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited classes in the condition of oppression corresponding with the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wage-labour).’ [5] The form in which it fulfils this task determines the specificity of the capitalist mode of production and of its constituent social classes. It also determines the given, historically grown and, for each concrete form of bourgeois society, at each given stage of its development, specific relationship of force between classes. In order to fulfill this task, a repressive as well as an ideologically integrative instrument is necessary.

The formal legal equality of individuals in bourgeois society implies the absence of direct personal master and servant relations. This makes possible a much stronger legitimization of the bourgeois state in the eyes of the oppressed classes as a (false) representation of the whole of society than was the case in pre-capitalist states. Universal equal suffrage for all citizens, political freedom of organization for the labour movement and integration of the top figures of its mass organizations into the bourgeois state are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for this.

A definite decline in mass activity in the class struggle, as well as a low level (or decline) of the average class consciousness of the proletariat, due to historically explicable reasons, are simultaneously necessary. Whether this complicated interplay of objective and subjective factors really enables the bourgeoisie to camouflage its class dominance in the eyes of the exploited as the ‘result of popular sovereignty’ and of the ‘will of the people’ expressed by electoral results, can only be shown by a concrete, empirical socio-political analysis of each specific state in each specific period.

There is by no means any convincing evidence that the concrete forms of state – e.g. in Great Britain at the time of the Prince Regent and Queen Victoria, in France at the time of Louis Philippe or at the time of the Second Empire, in Germany at the time of Wilhelm I and Wilhelm II, in Belgium at the time of Leopold I and Leopold II, not to mention Mussolini’s Italy or Franco’s Spain – were seen by the working class of these countries as the legitimate representation of the whole of society. For US state during the Coolidge-Hoover period as well, one can legitimately doubt this.

3

However, the bourgeois state must ensure not only the external but also the social conditions of the capitalist mode of production. It must also create the general conditions for production proper, conditions which the individual ‘functioning capitalists’ are not able to produce themselves, both due to a lack of profitability and due to the prevailing competition between private capitals. [6]

The capitalist mode of production requires social production and social exchange. But capital by itself cannot produce ‘the social fabric of its existence’ as Altvater aptly put it. [7] The relationship between the state and bourgeois society cannot be reduced to the relationship between politics and economics; the bourgeois state is also a directly economically active institution of the capitalist mode of production.

This is most obvious in the problem of money. Generalized commodity production presupposes the independent existence of exchange value in a general equivalent: money. Similarly, a normal reproduction of total social capital requires its continuous separating into, and reconstituting as, productive commodity and money capital. And this would not, or at least would not fully, function without a state-insured and state-covered currency and credit system.

In the field of money and credit, one can also immediately see that without a bourgeois state there would not be a fully functioning capitalist mode of production.

But money and credit systems also point to other 'directly economic' functions of the bourgeois state. In the history of capitalism, competition has manifested itself in two ways: as competition between individual capitals and as competition between parts of world capital situated in territorial states. For this second form of competition, the bourgeois state fulfils a role of self-defence for 'national' capitals against their 'foreign' competitors, in terms of currency, tolls, trade policy, colonial policy, and so on. This role of the state is also, at least in the beginning, 'purely economic' and without it the concrete capitalist system would not, or not fully, function at certain times.

In his Grundrisse, Marx notes that the ideal conditions for the development of the capitalist mode of production are those in which private capitals can produce a maximum of the 'general conditions of production' themselves. However, it can also be empirically established that in the case of a third category of these 'general conditions of production', namely those relating to infrastructure and training expenditure, the main trend has been in the opposite direction since the generalization of modern large-scale industry. These functions have been increasingly – and later almost exclusively – fulfilled by the bourgeois state, because here there is too much tension between the interests of private capitalists, who would organize such matters for profit, and the common interests of the bourgeois class and the objective demands of capital valorization in general. A unified tax system links the money and credit system with the infrastructural tasks that have to be fulfilled. As a link between the 'external' (social) and the 'economic' (general) conditions of production, these state functions are covered by the term 'administration'. This includes not only the administration that ensures legal regulation and the protection of property, but also the police and military apparatus that protects the bourgeoisie from 'domestic' and 'foreign' enemies, as well as that part of the administration dealing with other public services, such as the infrastructure proper (e.g. a public health system which, given the poverty of the early proletariat in capitalist big cities, was indispensable in protecting the bourgeoisie from the danger of epidemics).

With the development of bourgeois society, the sum of these 'general conditions of production' to be provided by the state increases almost continuously. But for an analysis, this seemingly straightforward process should be examined in its different constituent moments.

In some areas there indeed exists something like a technical constraint as the logic of technology is driving towards ever greater centralisation. The bourgeoisie is forced to recognize the objective socialization of labour in these areas through genuine nationalization of these functions. This applies, for example, to railway construction and management, and later to air traffic control. Private organization in this field is so much below the threshold of 'partial rationality' that it threatens the entire system and bourgeois society, despite its absolute private interests, can no longer afford it.

The long-term continuation of laws of movement of capital implies among other factors the qualitative increase of the concentration and centralization of capital, and long-term difficulties for valorization of capital. There is an increasing number of productive areas where the required investments are so gigantic that the risk of losses prevents private capitals from investing.

In the interconnected complexity of the social division of labour, it is precisely these areas that can play an important or decisive role in either strengthening or harming the global competitiveness of a given capitalist class. The

nationalization of these activities, their growing subordination to the 'general conditions of production', does not therefore follow from a technical necessity but from the requirements of capital valorization under certain historical conditions. The nationalization of energy and steel production in Great Britain, of the raw materials industry in France and, in general, 'the nationalization of losses', of unprofitable industries which are necessary for the material reproduction of capital, as well as the nationalization of the gigantic increased costs in research and development costs, belong to this category.

Finally, there is also a tendency to extend the 'general conditions of production' to areas where neither technical coercion nor immediate valorization conditions are decisive. There, we encounter the tendency of late capitalism to control all the conditions of reproduction of the commodity labour power, i.e. to subordinate people and human needs directly to its valorization purposes. Nationalization of health, education or planning of land-use ultimately depends on the necessity to discipline people and not on technical necessity (which is most often purely economically powerless and increasingly irrational). In many such areas, the parasitic centralization that here clearly emerges could be systematically and systematically phased out immediately after the collapse of the political power of capital, to be replaced by an integrated system of self-management.

Thus emerges in the development of the bourgeois state a specific, contradictory relationship with the history of the state in general, congruent with an analogous relationship of capitalist industry (the capitalist forces of production) to the general development of the productive forces.

On the one hand, despite the historical tendency of the bourgeoisie to weaken the absolutist state, especially in the phase of imperialism (both during 'classical' monopoly capitalism and late capitalism), the bourgeois state leads to a hypertrophy of state functions of almost unprecedented degree in class society. The number of functions which through the division of labour split off from the original basic functions of production and accumulation and become independent, grows continuously at an accelerated pace. Undoubtedly, the numerical growth of personnel in the state apparatus, the growth in material wealth and the increasing complexity and specialization of administrative activities themselves should also be taken into account. But for the reasons stated earlier, those factors cannot be attributed the decisive role in this process that bourgeois ideology attributes to them.

At the same time, the average cultural level in large parts of society, including of members of the working class, grows. But this growth is increasingly less than is objectively possible or in accordance with the needs of the social individual. Thus, the objective possibility of radically halting and reducing the further hypertrophy of the state increases as soon as the social interests of the associated producers and not the interests of capital valorization determine the development of the state. Precisely because the proletariat, increasingly fused with the technical intelligentsia, in the development of the capitalist mode of production itself acquires this growing capacity for self-management, the proletarian state, after the fall of capitalism, can be a state tending towards generalized self-management in all areas of society. It can be a state which tends to 'wither away' right from the beginning, as Lenin put it so beautifully and so radically in *State and Revolution*. [8]

4

The specificity of the bourgeois state is not only determined by its special relations to the working class, but also by its origins in the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the semi-feudal nobility. This class struggle situation is closely linked to an essential distinction between bourgeois and pre-bourgeois class society and class rule, between the capitalist class and the pre-capitalist ruling classes, which must be taken into account when analysing the class nature of the bourgeois state. Pre-bourgeois ruling classes appropriate the social surplus product mainly for unproductive consumption purposes. The form of this appropriation can differ according to the prevailing mode of production but the purpose is generally the same. Although accumulation can of course not be entirely omitted from the history of pre-capitalist modes of production and pre-capitalist ruling classes, it plays here a smaller, subordinate

role compared to the capitalist mode of production.

The capitalist class is forced by generalized commodity production, by private ownership of the means of production and by the competition resulting from it, towards maximization of capital accumulation. This maximization is a tendency, not an unchanging, absolute given. The unbridled drive for enrichment (production of exchange value as an end in itself) is made possible by the generalized monetary form of the social surplus product. This, however, creates a contradiction between different investments of the social surplus product. This is a contradiction characteristic only of the capitalist mode of production although it is arguably potentially present in all societies that are partly based on money and commodity production. The contradiction is that an immanent tendency of capital to maximize the accumulation of capital (i.e. to maximize both the creation and realization of surplus value and the productive use of realized surplus value for the purpose of capitalization) clashes with the tendency to increase the waste of surplus value. This waste takes the form of unproductive consumption by the ruling class and by its employees as well as the growth of unproductive state expenditure.

It is well known that at least during the period of rising capitalism, capital tries to limit unproductive individual waste of surplus value to a supposedly 'normal' degree, according to 'the social status' of certain persons. We do not need to discuss this further. Historically, capital regards the unproductive expenditure of social surplus value as a waste of this value from the moment that such spending is organized by a power that is foreign and hostile to it. Consider for example its hostility to the semi-feudal absolute monarchy that distributed the social surplus value in favour of the parasitic court nobility and the higher clergy, who even enjoyed exemption from taxes.

The struggle of the rising bourgeoisie to maximize the accumulation of capital, or simply for the free development of this accumulation, is therefore a struggle against the unlimited power of the pre-bourgeois state to impose taxes. The struggle of the emerging bourgeoisie for the conquest of political power is fundamentally a struggle to be able to decide for itself what part of the surplus value is taken from the 'functioning capitalists' in the form of taxes. In other words, it is a struggle over what part of the immediate accumulation of capital will be to be objectively socialized. There is no doubt, nor can it be dismissed as 'pure empiricism', that all successful bourgeois revolutions between the 16th and 19th centuries were set off by taxation problems and that all modern parliaments arose from the bourgeoisie's struggle for control of state expenditure. The specific organizational form of bourgeois political power, with its complex array of informal political structures (parties, clubs, pressure groups and lobbies), professional associations representing specific economic interests in different fields (initially mainly, if not exclusively, tax issues), elections and elected parliaments, as well as a permanent administrative apparatus and an appropriate state ideology, including the doctrine of the 'separated powers', all this can for the most part be traced back to this conflict and these contradictions.

The fact that this is a real contradiction need not be explained here in detail. It is obvious that the bourgeoisie, after its victory over absolutism, does not demolish the state machine but transforms it. The bourgeoisie continues to pay to this state because it needs the state from the moment there is no longer a significant social surplus product other than surplus value appropriated by capital. As long as there is not yet an actively organized proletariat, 'political life' in bourgeois society is essentially limited to the following questions: how much of this surplus value should be withdrawn from direct accumulation of capital through taxes (direct socialization), at the expense of which fractions of the property-owning class should this be done, and to which concrete purposes and with what monetary benefit for which fractions of that class?

One can also look at the problem from a general point of view and consider the question of the direct material basis for the existence of the state apparatus. When defining the class nature of the bourgeois state, it is probably impolite to put the problems like this instead of limiting ourselves to abstract philosophical analysis. However, as long as the problems are not reduced to the level of the individual corruption of statesmen and senior civil servants, it is certainly not 'vulgar Marxism' to raise the macroeconomic (or macro-sociological) question: what is the material basis (in bourgeois society, the financial basis) of the state?

1980: Methodological problems in defining the class nature of the bourgeois state

In this sense, the basic Marxist formula that the social class that controls the social surplus product, and therefore also the state, remains the ultimate conclusion of a materialist investigation into the class nature of the bourgeois state.

The classical pre-capitalist state has an autonomous material basis. The Roman empire of the slave owner in its heyday maintained the army (and the slave market) through conquests abroad. The court in the old Asiatic mode of production lives from the plunder of its own producers and those living abroad, and not from gifts from the mandarins, priests or generals. The feudal king is initially the largest feudal lord and as such does not depend on material donations from other feudal lords. Only with the generalization of the money economy, which is closely linked to the victory of capital and its penetration into the sphere of production, does a form of state emerge, which has no autonomous sources of wealth apart from taxing the population (in the last instance, this means: socialization of part of the social surplus product).

The absolutist monarchy was very aware of this and for centuries (ideologically with the help of its judiciary) fought a tough battle to ensure its power to impose taxes.

In this battle it was sometimes allied with parts of the emerging bourgeoisie, but ultimately the monarchy lost. Its unlimited power to levy taxes was broken. Even the most 'autonomous' and most 'tyrannical' bourgeois state, such as Hitler's Third Reich, eventually failed to impose unacceptable taxes on the bourgeoisie. For it is clear that in bourgeois society the individual capitalist experiences every tax as an 'expropriation' of part of his capital gains, of his profits, of his income. No matter how much he considers these taxes to be inevitable under certain circumstances or even necessary for the 'community', this 'expropriation' is always a burden for him, an obstacle in way of the drive towards to maximum capital accumulation.

Because the bourgeois class cannot exist without capital, a real 'conflict of roles' exists within the bourgeoisie. It is a conflict inside the consciousness of each individual capitalist as both a 'citizen' of capitalist society and the personification of capital accumulation. In the capitalist's Faustian breast, two souls are constantly fighting. In different historical periods and different capitalist states this has led to very significant differences in the practical attitudes of individual capitalists, i.e. from normal obedience to tax laws to extreme tax evasion. These attitudes can be explained by partly conjectural and partly historical factors.

The conflict here is one between bourgeois private interests and bourgeois social interests—and not a conflict between the private interests of unspecified 'citizens' and similarly unspecified 'social interests' that would exist regardless from the class divide. In the (false, fetishized) consciousness of contemporaries as well, this conflict usually appeared in this particular form.

During the period of the property-based franchise, workers knew very well that they did not enjoy political equality. It is an anachronistic mistake to project late-capitalist ideologies onto early or triumphant capitalism without taking into account the specific forms of the state forms and political structures of these periods. For the self-aware citizens of the period from the 16th to the end of the 19th century, even at the beginning of the 20th century, it was self-evident that only the propertied citizen had full political rights. Only the taxpayer should have the full right to participate in decisions on state expenditure. Otherwise, unlimited taxation, i.e. the socialization of surplus value, would be limitless. An argument like this can be read in the words of not only many bourgeois ideologues, but also countless bourgeois politicians from the past.

Precisely for this reason, this contradiction between private interests and the social interests of the bourgeois class, based on the contradiction between the expenditure of the surplus value on the one hand for immediate accumulation and on the other hand for tasks which, at best, could only indirectly benefit this accumulation, remained limited.

Once, all (or the vast majority) of the value-added owners were perfectly willing to sacrifice a little in order to preserve most, i.e. there was a general awareness of jointly defending class and state interests. The struggle for the conquest of political power by the bourgeoisie is the historical process during which this shared bourgeois class consciousness is formed and articulated. On the other hand, the whole bourgeoisie (with the possible exception of the 'lumpen-bourgeoisie' who live directly from the looting of the state coffers, to borrow a concept of Andre Gunder Frank) had a social interest in only sacrificing a little, i.e. interest in a 'poor state'. This is not only because the entire bourgeois class was interested in maximum accumulation, but also because the permanent poverty of the state forms a solid material basis for the permanent rule of capital over the state apparatus. The 'golden chains' of national and international credit tie the bourgeois state, regardless of its hypertrophy and privatization, indissolubly to the rule of capital. Precisely because this dependency is distinct from the absolute size of the state budget—the financial crisis of the state can be greater with a budget that sucks up 40 per cent of the people's income than with a budget that socializes only 4 per cent of this income—it is a permanent structural dependency, without which the class nature of the bourgeois state can never be fully understood.

5

Since the specificity of the bourgeois state derives from the class struggle between bourgeoisie, proletariat and pre-capitalist classes, it is at the same time based on peculiarities of the bourgeois class itself. The conflict between the personal and common interests of the bourgeoisie, a conflict which revolves around the problem of direct private expenditure or social spending of surplus value, is closely linked to the problematic of the functional division of labour within the terrain of bourgeois society as raised by the specific organizational form of the bourgeois state.

Precisely as in pre-capitalist modes of production the state dispenses over a qualitatively broader independent material base than the bourgeois state, in the pre-capitalist state there is a much closer personal union between the top of the ruling class and the top of the state apparatus than in bourgeois society. In the Roman empire (already in the decadent republic of Julius Caesar) the ruler was the largest slave owner. In the feudal state the king was usually also the most important feudal landowner. In the absolute monarchy, all important offices of the aristocracy, central administration and diplomacy were in the hands of the most important families of the court aristocracy (and often of the court clergy). In bourgeois society, however, at least in the period of the emerging and then of the triumphant bourgeoisie, this is not possible because most of the capitalists, concerned with their private affairs, simply do not have time to specialize in matters of state. Insofar as state affairs were not left to the representatives of the decadent or bourgeois nobility (i.e. a rentier class), they were increasingly taken over by a branch of the bourgeois class, i.e. professional politicians and the emerging bureaucracy. Although the latter developed in parallel with the absolute monarchy, under half-feudal rule it could never exceed a certain threshold of leading positions, except through the detour of inclusion in the nobility (noblesse de robe).

This bureaucracy identifies itself strongly with the state 'as such', and this identification is most consistent with the ideology (i.e. false consciousness) of the state as the representative of the social interests of society (as opposed to the bourgeois awareness of the state as the representative of the propertied citizens). For its part, the relative credibility of this ideology depends on the degree of genuine although relative independence of the bourgeois state apparatus in relation to the 'functioning capitalists'.

This autonomy is, of course, only relative, but it is not just an illusion, insofar as it is based on the functional division of labour just described, and insofar as it is not necessarily a functional division of labour within the capitalist class, i.e. insofar as high-ranking civil servants can also come from the petty-bourgeoisie.

This division of labour is also structurally anchored in the very essence of capitalism, i.e. in competing private property. Private property and competitive pressure give rise to an objectively inevitable conflict within the bourgeoisie itself between private interests and class interests. A 'functioning capitalist' who systematically

sacrifices his private interests to the shared interests of the bourgeois class would be as bad a capitalist, i.e., a loser in the competition, as a 'functioning bourgeois politician' who systematically sacrifices the common interests of capital to his private affairs, would be a corrupt, i.e., bad and from a class point of view incompetent, politician.

Under 'normal' conditions of capital accumulation and valorization the bourgeois class can delegate the direct exercise of political power only to such professional politicians or leaders of the state bureaucracy who provide a minimum guarantee that they will subordinate their private affairs to the common interests of the class. This is normally not possible for the 'functioning capitalist'. If the professional politicians do not provide this guarantee, then the fate of a Nixon or a Tanaka awaits them. [9]

But the relative autonomy of the bourgeois state in regards to the 'functioning capitalist', shaped by private ownership and competition, should not be exaggerated. And above all, in order to avoid short-circuits and to prevent Poulantzas' abstract formulas about the 'structural dependency of the state on the bourgeoisie' from sinking into empty tautology or outspoken *petitio principii*, the following elements must be included in the analysis. [10]

It is a mechanistic mistake to reduce the bourgeois class to the 'functioning capitalist'. All owners of capital belong to this class, including rentiers, including people who could live on the interest of their capital and do receive this interest, regardless of whether they also have a profession or not. The high income of the top figures of the state apparatus and of members of the government, as well as the possibilities they have to access confidential information that guarantees successful speculation, ensures quasi-automatically the integration of top politicians and top civil servants in the bourgeois class. This happens regardless of their class origins, because they are allowed the accumulation of money capital – which indeed they do in the vast majority of cases. As capital holders, they thus have a vested interest in preserving the foundations of the bourgeois order.

There are not many top politicians and top civil servants in capitalist countries who at the end of a successful career, in addition to owning their 'own house', have not become owners of real estate, government stocks or asset portfolios. In a 'purely economic' sense they have become full members of the bourgeois class. Those who, for fear of falling into 'vulgar Marxism' or losing themselves in 'descriptive verbiage', eliminate this moment from the analysis of the structural character of bourgeois society, which inseparably links the state and the bourgeoisie, lose sight of an essential factor of this society, i.e. capital itself.

The universal drive for enrichment and a universal money economy are not 'external' side-effects grafted onto the capitalist mode of production: they are structural characteristic features of this society, from whose influences no group of people can in the long term liberate itself. This includes professional politicians or bureaucrats. Not individual corruption, but the inevitable consequences of a tendency peculiar to capitalism underlie this analysis. This is the tendency to turn every significant sum of money into a source of added value, i.e. to capitalize it. Only a state in which top politicians and top civil servants would not have an income higher than the average wage of a worker would be liberated from this direct, structural bind. It is no coincidence that Marx and Lenin set this requirement as an elementary condition for a real workers' power, and that this was never achieved in a civil state nor will it be.

A specific feature of the bourgeois state is also its hierarchical structure, which reflects the class structure of bourgeois society as if in a slightly distorted mirror. High civil servants are not elected by the low level civil servants (or by the people), just as entrepreneurs or factory directors are not elected by wage-earners, or army officers by their men. There is a structural link between this hierarchical structure on the one hand and the large differences in income on the other hand. This tie points to specific characteristics of bourgeois society. Competition, private enrichment and the assessment of personal 'success' according to the financial 'yield' cannot dominate all areas of society and then suddenly, inexplicably play no part in state affairs. Once again, the negative test can round off the analysis: there has never been, nor can there ever be, a the bourgeois state that has replaced the hierarchical principle with the principle of democratic election in all important areas (police, army, central administration). Only a

workers' state can realize such a radical revolution in the structure of the state.

A further characteristic of the bourgeois state is the selection process, which leads to the choice of top positions in politics and administration. This selection process relies less on the direct purchase of office, on nepotism, on inherited benefice, or on the reward of services to the Head of State than was the case in pre-capitalist states. Rather, it relies to a significant extent on performance and competition.

Of course, this cannot be separated from the competition and performance constraints that prevail in material production, rooted in the capitalist mode of production. It is important to underline, however, that in this selection process modes of behaviour and ways of thinking which successfully make bourgeois politicians and senior civil servants objectively into instruments of bourgeois class domination, must win. This is irrespective of the personal motivation or self-perception of such individuals.

The functional nature of the bureaucracy plays a decisive role here. It is not impossible to imagine a guard who occasionally helps a prisoner flee. But it is impossible to imagine that jailers who do this systematically would reach the top of the legal administration. One can have a pacifist lieutenant, there could even be a few hundred, but we have never seen a general staff consisting only of convinced pacifists.

Only those who perform the specific functions of the various parts of the bourgeois state apparatus can achieve top positions. Only those who adapt to (bourgeois) law, to the existing rules of the game and to the ruling ideology which both expresses and secures the existing society can successfully make a long-term career in the state apparatus in this social order.

The weakest point of all the reformist and neo-reformist (including the so-called Euro-communists) opinions on the 'democratic state' is the lack of understanding of this specific character of the bourgeois state apparatus which is inextricably linked to this bourgeois society. As an extreme hypothesis, one cannot rule out the possibility that a 'normal' parliament with an absolute majority could, at some point, with a vote, abolish the entire private property of the means of production.

What must be excluded, however, is the hypothesis that the Pinochets of this particular country would not regard this as a 'violation of the constitution', a 'affront to basic human rights' and as a 'terrorist attack on Christian civilization'. They would promptly respond like Pinochet, with mass murder of political opponents, torture and concentration camps. And, of course, they would be careful not to emphasize the abolition of all democratic freedoms. When everything is at stake, the 'eternal values' of bourgeois society are revealed to be limited to private property. The necessity to defend this property legitimizes any break with even the most formal popular sovereignty, any use of force and any declaration of war against one's own people (as has been expressed in purely formal terms by the Thiers, the Francos and the Pinochets in the course of history). In this sense it is a pure utopia to not only want to use the bourgeois state apparatus to abolish the capitalist mode of production, but also to assume that this apparatus could somehow be 'neutralized'. So that the economic and political power of capital can be abolished, this state apparatus needs first to be replaced by a substantially different apparatus.

Finally, the ongoing management of state affairs should not be confused with the exercise of political power at the highest level. The fact that numerous functions in a group are delegated to specialized managers does not mean that the management board and the major shareholders have lost control of the means of production and the workers. Nor does the fact that the high bourgeoisie increasingly leaves the exercise of day-to-day government affairs to professional bourgeois politicians or senior civil servants prove that big capital also leaves the important strategic and political decisions to them.

If one examines some of the most important decisions of the 20th century – such as, for example the decision to appoint Hitler Chancellor; the ‘yes’ to the Popular Front government in France, almost simultaneously with the ‘yes’ to Mola and Franco’s coup against the Popular Front government in Spain; the ‘green light’ for the start of the Second World War in Germany and Great Britain; the decision to orient America towards participation in the World War; the decision first to enter into and later to break the military alliance of the USA and Great Britain with the Soviet Union; the decision to reconstruct German and Japanese economic power after the war by the Western victorious powers – when examining such moments, one will easily discover that these decisions were not taken in parliaments, nor in ministerial offices, nor by technocrats, nor by ministers, but directly by the top figures of capital. When the survival itself of bourgeois society appears to be in jeopardy, then suddenly the decisive capital owners in the literal sense of the word usually govern. Then, even the semblance of a so-called real independence of the bourgeois state from capital completely disappears.

Engels’ statement that the bourgeois state is the ‘ideal-total capitalist’ because the real total capitalist can only include the sum of the sectional interests of the ‘many capitals’ and these never coincide with the total interests of the class, must be understood and interpreted dialectically. Once again, it is a matter of the dialectic of the general and the particular.

NOTES:

I

II

III Stamocap, short for State Monopoly Capitalism. Here specifically a reference to the theory developed in Communist Parties that the major capitalist monopoly-firms increasingly fused with the bourgeois state.

IV In this context, a reference to how the term was used by pro-USSR ideologues. A designation for underdeveloped states ruled by ‘revolutionary democratic’, pro-Soviet, nationalist governments. Through an alliance with the Soviet-Union such states could supposedly embark on a course of ‘non-capitalist development’ towards socialism. In practice, the theory was an ideological justification of geopolitical alliances of the Soviet-Union. At different times, Algeria, Indonesia, Yemen, Ethiopia, Egypt and Burma were labelled ‘national-democratic’ states.

V Karl Marx, On The Jewish Question (1844). Online at [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question>].

VI Frederick Engels, Anti-Dühring. Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science (1877), chapter 2 of part III, online at [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>].

VII Michael Lebowitz summarizes Marx as distinguishing between the money-capitalist, and the functioning capitalist, ‘the owner of capital and the functionary of capital, the juridical owner and the economic owner of capital. See: Michael A. Lebowitz, Following Marx: Method, Critique and Crisis (Leiden, 2009), p. 29. The development of capitalist production and in particular of the joint-stock company transforms ‘the actually functioning capitalist into a mere manager, administrator of other people’s capital, and of the owner of capital into a mere owner, a mere money-capitalist.’ (Marx, edited by Friedrich Engels (1894), Capital, vol. III, part V: ‘Division of Profit into Interest and Profit of Enterprise: Interest-Bearing Capital. Chapter 27, ‘The Role of Credit in Capitalist Production’, online at: [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch27.htm>].

VIII Elmar Altwater, 'Zu einigen Problemen des Staatsinterventionismus', PROKLA. Zeitschrift für Kritische Sozialwissenschaft (1972) 2(3), 1-54.

IX Lenin, State and Revolution (1918), chapter V, part 2: 'The Transition from Capitalism to Communism'. Online at [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch05.htm#s2>].

X A reference to Watergate and to Kakuei Tanaka, Prime Minister of Japan from 1972 to 1974. Tanaka was implicated in several high-profile cases of fraud, leading to his arrest in 1976.

XI According to Poulantzas, the capitalist state is 'the factor of cohesion of a social formation and the factor of reproduction of the conditions of production'. This happens through the constitution of the unity of the dominant class(es) and through the constitution of their political interests as representative of the general interest of the nation. See: Nicos Poulantzas, Political power and social classes (London, 1973), p. 137. For Poulantzas, the 'relation between the bourgeois class and the state is an objective relation. This means that if the function of the state in a determinate social formation and the interests of the dominant class coincide, it is by reason of the system itself: the direct participation of members of the ruling class in the state apparatus is not the cause but the effect.' (Nicos Poulantzas, Ralph Millband, 'The problem of the capitalist state', in: Blackburn (ed.) Ideology in social science. Readings in critical social theory (n.p., 1973), pp. 238-265, there p. 245. The reproduction of capitalist social relations, including the state, is made possible and necessary by the particular character of the capitalist state. (Political power and social classes, p. 137. In a debate with Poulantzas, Mandel criticized his kind of structuralism for excluding history from its analysis. See: Walter Euchner and Alfred Schmidt (eds) Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie heute. 100 Jahre 'Kapital' (Frankfurt a.M., 1972), p. 70.

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] Leo Kofler, *Geschichte und Dialektik. Zur methodenlehre der marxistischen Dialektik* (Oberaula, 1970), p. 196. Mandel's article was first published in a commemorative edited volume dedicated to Leo Kofler: Ernst Bloch (ed) *Marxismus und Anthropologie. Festschrift für Leo Kofler* (Bochum, 1980). Leo Kofler (1907 – 1995) was an independent Austrian-German theoretician who developed a humanist and historically oriented interpretation of Marxism. Of his work *Geschichte und Dialektik* (History and Dialectics), Mandel wrote to Kofler in a letter; 'your method of presenting the dialectic of historical materialism appears to me to be the only correct one, and this already makes your book an important contribution to the more recent Marxist literature.' Unfortunately, very little of Kofler's work has been translated.

[2] Translated from the Dutch version published in *Toestanden*, socialistisch theoretisch tijdschrift, jaargang 1, augustus 1981, nr. 3., available at the [Marxists Internet Archive](#). Translation and notes by Alex de Jong.

[3] Stamocap, short for State Monopoly Capitalism. Here specifically a reference to the theory developed in Communist Parties that the major capitalist monopoly-firms increasingly fused with the bourgeois state. In this context, a reference to how the term was used by pro-USSR ideologues. A designation for underdeveloped states ruled by 'revolutionary democratic', pro-Soviet, nationalist governments. Through an alliance with the Soviet-Union such states could supposedly embark on a course of 'non-capitalist development' towards socialism. In practice, the theory was an ideological justification of geopolitical alliances of the Soviet-Union. At different times, Algeria, Indonesia, Yemen, Ethiopia, Egypt and Burma were labelled 'national-democratic' states.

[4] Karl Marx, [On The Jewish Question \(1844\)](#).

[5] Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring. Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (1877), [chapter 2 of part III](#).

[6] Michael Lebowitz summarizes Marx as distinguishing between the money-capitalist, and the functioning capitalist, 'the owner of capital and the functionary of capital, the juridical owner and the economic owner of capital. See: Michael A. Lebowitz, *Following Marx: Method, Critique and Crisis* (Leiden, 2009), p. 29. The development of capitalist production and in particular of the joint-stock company transforms 'the actually functioning capitalist into a mere manager, administrator of other people's capital, and of the owner of capital into a mere owner, a mere money-capitalist.' (Marx, edited by Friedrich Engels (1894), *Capital*, vol. III, part V: 'Division of Profit into Interest and Profit of Enterprise: Interest-Bearing Capital. Chapter 27, 'The Role of Credit in Capitalist Production'.

[7] Elmar Altvater, 'Zu einigen Problemen des Staatsinterventionismus', *PROKLA. Zeitschrift für Kritische Sozialwissenschaft* (1972) 2(3), 1-54.

[8] Lenin, *State and Revolution* (1918), chapter V, part 2: [The Transition from Capitalism to Communism](#)'.

[9] A reference to Watergate, and to Kakuei Tanaka, Prime Minister of Japan from 1972 to 1974. Tanaka was implicated in several high-profile cases of fraud, leading to his arrest in 1976.

[10] According to Poulantzas, the capitalist state is 'the factor of cohesion of a social formation and the factor of reproduction of the conditions of production'. This happens through the constitution of the unity of the dominant class(es) and through the constitution of their political interests as representative of the general interest of the nation. See: Nicos Poulantzas, *Political power and social classes* (London, 1973), p. 137. For Poulantzas, the 'relation between the bourgeois class and the state is an objective relation. This means that if the function of the state in a determinate social formation and the interests of the dominant class coincide, it is by reason of the system itself: the direct participation of members of the ruling class in the state apparatus is not the cause but the effect.' (Nicos Poulantzas, Ralph Millband, 'The problem of the capitalist state', in: Blackburn (ed.) *Ideology in social science. Readings in critical social theory* (n.p., 1973), pp. 238-265, there p. 245. The reproduction of capitalist social relations, including the state, is made possible and necessary by the particular character of the capitalist state. (Political power and social classes, p. 137. In a debate with Poulantzas, Mandel criticized his kind of structuralism for excluding history from its analysis. See: Walter Euchner and Alfred Schmidt (eds) *Kritik der Politischen Ö-konomie heute. 100 Jahre 'Kapital'* (Frankfurt a.M., 1972), p. 70.