

An Anarchist View of the Class Theory of the State

A Libertarian Socialist Defense of the Class Theory of the State

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For anarchists and other radicals to really understand the Trump administration, and what is generally happening in U.S. politics, requires an analysis of the U.S. government. This, in turn, requires a theoretical understanding of the state, the basic framework of government. Yet, as Kristian Williams writes, in **Whither Anarchism?** “*For a group so fixated on countering...the state, it is surprising how rarely today’s anarchists have bothered to put forward a theory about [it]...The inability or unwillingness to develop a theory of the state (or more modestly, an analysis of states)...has repeatedly steered the anarchist movement into blind alleys.*” (Williams 2018; 26–7)

Of the theories which place the state within the context of the capitalist economy and all other oppressions (patriarchy, racism, ecological destruction, etc.), anarchism and Marxism stand out. Yet few Marxists know anything of the anarchist view of the state, and few anarchists know anything of Marxist state theory. (For that matter, as Williams implies, few anarchists know much of any state theory.) For example, most Marxists believe that anarchism denies that class factors are important for the state—and that it contradicts anarchism to believe that they are. They see anarchism as focused solely on the state, ignoring factors of class and political economy. Meanwhile, many anarchists believe that Marxists see the state as simply a reflex of the wishes of the capitalist ruling class, with no independent interests of its own and no reaction to other class and non-class forces.

I am going to review the classical anarchist and Marxist theories about the nature of the state and its relationship to classes and political economy. By “classical anarchism,” I mean essentially the views of J-P Proudhon, Michael Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin (and not the views of individualists, Stirnerites, or “post-left”/“post-anarchists”). By “classical Marxism,” I mean the views of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (and not the views of social democratic reformists or Stalinists).

When writing of “the state,” I do not include any and every means of social coordination, collective decision-making, settling of differences, or protection from anti-social aggression. Humans lived for tens of thousands of years in hunter-gatherer societies (also called “primitive communism”) and early agricultural villages. They provided themselves with social coordination, etc., through communal self-management. What they did not have were states. The state is a bureaucratic-military institution, dominating a territory through specialized armed forces (police and military) and bureaucratic layers of people who make decisions, ruling over—and separate from—the rest of the population.

“The State...not only includes the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a territorial concentration as well as the concentration in the hands of a few of many functions in the life of societies....A whole mechanism of legislation and of policing has to be developed...”

(Kropotkin 2014; 254) The state is a “*public force [which] consists not merely of armed men but also of material appendages, prisons, and coercive institutions of all kinds...organs of society standing above society...representatives of a power which estranges them from society...*” (Engels 1972; 230–1) This is the view of both Kropotkin and Engels. When speaking of the end of the state under socialism/communism, they did not mean the end of all collective decision-making, etc., but the end of this bureaucratic-military, socially-alienated, elite institution.

The Views of the Classical Anarchists

The first person to call himself an “anarchist,” Proudhon, wrote, “*In a society based on inequality of conditions, government, whatever it is, feudal, theocratic, bourgeois, imperial, is reduced, in*

last analysis, to a system of insurance for the class which exploits and owns against that which is exploited and owns nothing.” The state “finds itself inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat.” (Proudhon 2011; 18)

Bakunin, who as much as anyone initiated anarchism as a movement, wrote, “*The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class: the sacerdotal class, the nobility, the bourgeoisie—and finally...the class of bureaucracy...*” And “*Modern capitalist production and banking speculations demand for their full development a vast centralized State apparatus which alone is capable of subjecting the millions of toilers to their exploitation.*” (quoted in Morris 1993; 99)

Kropotkin elaborated anarchist theory: “*All legislation made within the State...always has been made with regard to the interests of the privileged classes....The State is an institution which was developed for the very purpose of establishing monopolies in favor of the slave and serf owners, the landed proprietors,...the merchant guilds and the moneylenders, the kings, the military commanders, the ‘noblemen,’ and finally, in the nineteenth century, the industrial capitalists, whom the State supplied with ‘hands’ driven from the land. Consequently, the State would be...a useless institution, once these [class] monopolies ceased to exist.*” (2014; 186–8)

In brief, the classical anarchists saw a direct connection between the state and exploitative class society, serving the various upper classes as they lived off the lower, working, classes. This is the “class theory” of the state, also called the “materialist” or “historical materialist” state theory.

The class theory of the state is frequently criticized as a “reductionist,” “instrumentalist,” theory, which crudely reduces all government activity to the desires of the capitalist class. It is criticized for allegedly ignoring conflicts within that class, the pressures of other classes (such as lobbying by unions), and non-class forces. Non-class forces include all subsystems of oppression: sexism, racism, sexual orientation, national oppression, etc.—each, in its own way, maintained by the state. There are other pressures on the state, such as by the churches. As an institution, with its personnel, the state has its own interests. Supposedly, the materialist or class state theory ignores all this. In my opinion, it is this criticism which is itself oversimplified, as I will try to show.

The Views of the Classical Marxists

As with the anarchists, the Marxist form of the class theory of the state has been accused of being class reductionist, oversimplified, and mechanical.

In the **Communist Manifesto**, Marx and Engels wrote, “*The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.*” (in Draper 1998; 111) Draper calls this sentence, “*the most succinctly aphoristic statement by Marx of his theory of the state.*” (same; 207)

This is often taken to mean that the state is merely a passive reflex of the capitalist class, with all the influence going from the bourgeoisie to the state. In fact, the sentence says that the state—or rather its executive branch—actively manages the interests of the bourgeoisie, as opposed to merely reflecting them. In any case, it is a brief and condensed (“*succinctly aphoristic*”) statement, by no means a whole exposition of a theory.

Over the years, Marx and Engels developed their analysis of the state (an excellent overview is in Draper 1977). Marx’s major work on the state appears in **The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte**. It was written in 1852 and covered French politics leading up to the elected

president, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (nephew of the Emperor Napoleon), seizing power and establishing his dictatorship (Marx 2002). Here and in other works he goes into the details of French politics. It become clear that Marx regards the state as full of conflicts among classes, fractions of classes, and agents of fractions of classes.

He uncovered the political-economic conflicts among the financial aristocracy (who supported one claimant to the monarchy), the large landowners (who supported another), the manufacturing bourgeoisie, the “republican” bourgeoisie (an ideological current within the bourgeoisie), the “democratic-republican” petty-bourgeoisie, and, below them all, the proletariat (mostly passive due to a recent major defeat), and the peasantry (who gave their support to the conman Louis-Napoleon, partially due to his name). There were splits within each of these forces. Marx also included the government officials and the army officers (all seeking money). He was clear that there were personal hostilities, ideological commitments, prejudices, and ambitions through which these conflicts worked themselves out.

Applying this approach to the current U.S. government would analyze the differing fractions of the capitalist class and its ideological and political agents and hangers-on, in their conflicting relations with each other and with sections of the middle and working classes.

The other main theme of Marx’s **Eighteenth Brumaire** is the increasing independence of the state from all classes, including all sections of the bourgeoisie. Balancing between conflicting class forces, the executive branch of the state tends to rise above them all. Marx called this “Bonapartism,” and it has been discussed as the “relative autonomy” of the state. With the dictator’s abolition of the legislature and its political parties, as well as censorship over political discussion, the bourgeoisie lost direct control over the government. The capitalists were made to focus on running their businesses and making money, while Louis Bonaparte ran the state (declaring himself the new “Emperor”). This he did through the state bureaucracy, the army, and a quasi-fascist-like mass movement, as well as with popular support from the peasants.

In Defense of the Class Theory of the State

So, there are many fractions of the capitalist class, other classes, and non-class forces all competing for state influence. And the state itself has its own interests and a degree of autonomy from even the bourgeoisie. Does this mean that the class theory of the state is wrong?

I do not think so. In itself, that there may be multiple determinants of something does not decide the relative weights or importance of each determinant. There are many influences on the state, all of which may have some effect. Still, the overall need of a capitalist society is to maintain the capitalist economy, the growth and accumulation of capital, the continued rule of the capitalist class. Without the surplus wealth pumped out of the working population, the state and the rest of the system cannot last. This is the primary need of the society and the primary task of the state. Even if the bourgeoisie has little or no direct control of the government (as under Bonapartism or fascist totalitarianism), the state must keep the capitalist system going, the capitalists driving the proletariat to work, and profits being produced. The extreme example of this was under Stalinist state capitalism (in the USSR, Maoist China, etc.). The stock-owning bourgeoisie was abolished, yet the collective state bureaucracy continued to manage the accumulation of capital through state exploitation of the working class. (That is, until it fell back into traditional capitalism.)

This has been elaborated by Wetherly (2002; 2005). The class theory “involves a claim that the capitalist class is able to wield more potent power resources over against pressure from below and the capacity for independent action on the part of the state itself....The political sway of the capitalist class [is] not **exclusive** but **predominant**.” (Wetherly 2002; 197) “It does not claim that the economic structure exclusively explains the character of the state, but it assigns these other influences a minor role....Economic causation plays a primary role in explaining state action to sustain accumulation as a general feature of capitalist society. The state normally sustains accumulation and this is largely explained by the nature of the economic structure.” (same; 204–5)

Others have theorized the interactions and overlapping of oppressions with each other and with class exploitation as “*social reproductive theory*” (Bhattacharya 2017). The different oppressions are not simply separate while occasionally intersecting; rather, they co-produce each other, within the overall drive of the whole system to reproduce and accumulate capital. For example, the oppression of women is directly related to the need for the system to reproduce the labor power of all workers (a necessity for capitalist production), which is done through the family. Similarly, Africans were enslaved to create a source of cheap labor. African-Americans remain racially oppressed in order to maintain a pool of cheap (super-exploited) labor, as well as to split and weaken the working class as a whole through white racism. (These factors are not the whole of sexism or racism, but are their essential overlap with capitalist exploitation.)

The state is not something added onto the capitalist economy, but a necessity if the capital/labor process is to go (relatively) smoothly—just as (reciprocally) the efficient functioning of the capitalist production process is necessary for the state to exist.

Primitive Accumulation and the State

The classical bourgeois economists, such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, had speculated that capitalism began by artisans and small merchants gradually building up their capital, until they had enough to hire employees. This was called “*primitive (or primary) accumulation*.” Marx rejected this fairy tale, showing how the state and other non-market forces played major roles in the early accumulation of wealth. There was state-supported dispossession of European peasants; slavery of Africans and Native Americans; looting of Ireland, India, and South America; piracy; and plunder of the natural environment. In **Capital**, Marx wrote of “*the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode....Force is...itself an economic power*.” (Marx 1906; 823–4)

Kropotkin criticized Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation—not because he disagreed that state coercion played a major role in the development of capitalism! He completely agreed with Marx on that point. Rather, Kropotkin insisted that state support for capitalism had never stopped; there was no distinct period of early accumulation, followed by a period of state non-intervention in the economy.

“*What, then, is the use of talking, with Marx, about the ‘primitive accumulation’—as if this ‘push’ given to capitalists were a thing of the past?...The State has always interfered in the economic life in favor of the capitalist exploiter. It has always granted him protection in robbery, given aid and support for further enrichment. And it could not be otherwise. To do so was one of the functions—the chief mission—of the State.*” (Kropotkin 2014; 193)

Similarly, the Marxist feminist Silvia Federici writes, “*The need of a gendered perspective on the history of capitalism...led me, among others, to rethink Marx’s account of primitive accumulation...Contrary to Marx’s anticipation, primitive accumulation has become a permanent process...*” (2017; 93)

However, Marx had expected that once capitalism had reached its final development, its epoch of decline, it would once again rely heavily on non-market and state forces. In his **Grundrisse**, he wrote, “*As soon as [capital] begins to sense itself as a barrier to development, it seeks refuge in forms which, by restricting free competition...are...the heralds of its dissolution*” (quoted in Price 2013; 69)

In any case, no one could deny today that government intervention is an essential part of the economy—from massive armaments expenditures to central banks to regulation of the stock exchange, etc. The key point is that the state is not an institution truly distinct from the capitalist economy. On the contrary, it is a central instrument in the creation, development, accumulation, and eventual decay of capitalism. “*Force is itself an economic power.*”

Disagreement between Anarchists and Marxists on the State

Revolutionary anarchists and Marxists agree that the working class and the rest of the exploited and oppressed should overturn the power of the capitalist class. The workers and their allies should dismantle the capitalist state, capitalist businesses, and other forms of oppression, and organize a new society based on freedom, equality, and cooperation.

But they draw different conclusions from the class theory of the state. Marxists say that since the state is the instrument for a class to carry out its interests, then the workers and their allies need their own state. They need it in order to overthrow the capitalists and create a new socialist society of freedom and solidarity. The new state will either be created by taking over the old state (perhaps by elections) and modifying it, or by overthrowing the old state (through revolution) and building a new one. Over time, Marxists say, the task of holding down the capitalists and their agents will become less important, as the new society is solidified. Then the state will gradually decline. There may still be a centralized public power for social coordination, but it will become benevolent and no longer have coercive powers.

However, anarchists have a different conclusion. Since the state is a bureaucratic-military elite machine for class domination, it cannot be used for liberation. Such a supposed “workers’ state,” however it comes into existence, would only result in a new ruling class of bureaucrats, exploiting the workers as if the state was a capitalist corporation or set of corporations. This was predicted by Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, way back in the beginning of the socialist movement. History has more than justified the prediction.

Instead, the anarchists propose that the workers and oppressed organize themselves through federations and networks of workplace assemblies, neighborhood councils, and voluntary associations. They should replace the police and military with a democratically-coordinated armed population (a militia), so long as this is still necessary. Such associations would provide all the coordination, decision-making, dispute-settling, economic planning, and self-defense necessary—without a state. It would not be a state, because it would not be a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated machine such as had served ruling minorities throughout history. Instead it would be the self-organization of the working people and formerly oppressed.

Conclusion

The class theory of the state claims that the bureaucratic-military social machine of the state exists primarily to develop and maintain capitalism, the capitalist upper class, and capital's drive to accumulate. There are also other influences on the state. These include factional conflicts within the capitalist class, demands by the working and middle classes, pressures to maintain other oppressions (race, gender, etc.) and resistance by these oppressed, other non-class forces, ideologies, and also the self-interest of the state itself and its personnel. Yet these myriad forces work out within the context of the need for capitalism to maintain itself and to expand. Therefore the political sway of the capitalist class is not exclusive but it is predominant. The fight against the state, against capitalism, and against all oppressions is one fight. It is a struggle for a society of freedom, individual self-development, the end of the state and of classes, self-determination and self-management in every area of living.

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