

# Unmasking the State

## Session 1 Commentary

Hello and welcome. I'm Paul Feldman and I'll be presenting Unmasking the State.

What is this thing called the state? This is a question seldom raised or asked. You're born and grow up within a state system that's been around a very long time. Most people take it for granted. It's a kind of given, a thing that seems to have existed forever – and always will. It's just there!

This course sets out to challenge these kind of common assumptions about the state and to reveal, or unmask, its true nature, its purpose, its role in society, how it relates to capitalism. We're doing this in the middle of a pandemic which has brought the role of the state into sharp relief.

Towards the end of the course, we'll discuss what needs to change in terms of the state so we can achieve a society which favours the many not the few. In the meantime, use the chat rooms and come to the real time Zoom meetings!

I assume you are here because you want to see a transformation of society, an end to corporate and financial power. A real democracy. What stands in the way of this transition, the course will try and show you, is the present state's power to shape and control our lives.

While many focus on the power and influence of corporations and banks, as the course develops, I will show how it is actually the state that maintains, sustains and reinforces capitalist economic and financial control. I will also argue that no number of elections or change of personnel can alter the essential nature of the state.

The key to creating a fairer, co-operative and democratic economic system lies in changing the way we are ruled.

As the unit will attempt to show, we can't transform society, achieving system change, without transforming the state and creating a real democracy. That's how we will end corporate power and all the misery, inequality and destruction of nature that comes with it.

To achieve this, it's vital we get really clear about what the state is all about before moving on to discuss the way forward and possible solutions.

The real nature of the state, its main purpose, is obscured. Its essential role is shrouded in a fog. This is not, I would hasten to say, a result of a conspiracy to keep the UK state's real role hidden. It's partly to do with the long, piecemeal evolution of the state since the revolutionary upheavals of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Crucially, the division in society between state, political and economic spheres makes it a challenge to reveal the actual processes that lay behind decision-making at state level. And the existence of a market economy that operates largely independent of the state helps to mystify the role of the state. We'll come back to this point.

So what do we actually mean by 'the state'? To be clear from the outset, this course is dealing with the state as the political entity of a country, the system for governing and ruling over a defined territory. So it's not about the UK as a recognised sovereign state. Nor is it simply about the government of the day. The state as a whole is bigger than government, although clearly governments are part of the state.

Getting to grips with the state is made more difficult by the fact that the state taken as a whole is not a material, concrete, touchable, object. You can't point to the state as a single entity. We are dealing with what is called a conceptual abstraction. Abstract terms refer to ideas or concepts that have no physical existence. Examples include love, success, freedom, good, moral, democracy. And the state.

That doesn't mean we can't get to understand the state – you just have to approach it in a distinct way, through its parts. And to set your mind at rest, that's what we'll be doing in the course!

What is the relation between the state and law, the state and politics, the state and civil society, the public and the private, state power and capitalism? Do states have institutional, or operational autonomy? These are some of the questions we will try to make sense of.

First, a little history. How did the state, or estado, état or Staat become the accepted term to describe a specific type of political rule? This process began with efforts to establish a political power within the population of a defined territory. Earliest examples include the Confucian state tradition in China and a distinct Indian tradition going back to 300 BCE.

The Greek and Roman innovations of assemblies, senates, codes of law, consuls and emperors are well known. Following the collapse of the Roman empire, several centuries elapsed in Europe before territorial monarchies came to dominate the continent. And it was not until the 17th century that the modern state began to take shape, accompanying the Reformation and the rise of capitalism.

The emergence of state institutions signified a break with the more personal style, for example, of an absolute monarchy. In such societies the political system, with the state at its centre, is disembedded from the wider society and the state takes the form of an impersonal power. The state is separate from those who exercise power in its name. Governments come and go. The state lives on. So the state is distinct from the parties or political alliances that form the government from time to time.

You can find a link to a more detailed history of the state in at the end of this session.

As you can see from Colin Hay and Michael Lister's summary, the modern state is ubiquitous or omnipresent. It is everywhere and always present. Think for a moment how it touches your life in so many different ways. When you were born, there was a legal obligation to register your birth – with the state. The same state requires you to attend school from a certain age and stay in education at least until you are 16. The curriculum framework is set out by the Department for Education so what gets taught is controlled by the state.

The state sets out when you can join the armed forces and at what age you can vote. Everyone who works is obliged to have a national insurance number and register for tax. Minimal working conditions are set out by a state-sponsored agency. You want to strike? Legislation sets out what you can and cannot do in a legal sense, including how many pickets are allowed and where they can stand. Want to go abroad? Get a passport first from, you guessed it, another state body.

The state relates to people in so many ways. It lays down the rules of the road, marriage and partnership laws, imprisonment, arrest and noise. State laws cover racial discrimination, building regulations, tenancy law, social care, pensions, infrastructure, Try living outside of the state and its tentacles and you will find very difficult indeed!

Hay and Lister describe in broader terms not just the concept of the state but the range of powers it possesses. As you can see, they assert that the state is fundamental to political analysis. We should also add that it is fundamental to political action too. But more on that later on in the course. The state's influence, as they point out, is pervasive. It's everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

It is greater than political power. As they say elsewhere, "While governments come and go, the state, as an institutional ensemble, persists as it evolves over time."

Definitions are helpful to start with and unfolding them adds to our knowledge. The three definitions that follow have much in common but there are also some key differences which I will try and unravel for you.

Graeme Gill's notion of the state opens up the question of what power is and how it is implemented. This specifically relates to the power of the state and not, for example, to the power say of the major corporations like Google and Amazon. Clearly they are related but they are not the same. How these different power centres connect with each other – often in a problematic and contradictory way – will be discussed in detail as the course progresses.

For Gill, the power is a public one. I don't think he means its people-centred or controlled in a transparent way. He is indicating that the process is part of society. Noticeably, he talks about the pursuit of 'its aims', the state's own aims. In other words, the state as an entity develops its own agenda, takes on a kind of life of its own. Hard to grasp this idea I know. But hopefully it will make more sense the deeper into the course you go.

Gill develops the view that the state's bureaucratic structure is characterised by specialisation and organisational differentiation from other bodies and institutions in society. He regards their projection of power and authority as 'essential'. He outlines how the state is connected to institutions such as political parties, pressure groups, non-governmental organisations or NGOs and business, and through these, to society as a whole. An important point here is that the different parts of the state do not exercise authority on their own behalf, but only that authority which flows to them as part of the state.

Max Weber, who was one of the founders of modern sociology, worked in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His characterisation was based on the early development of the German state, with its vast bureaucracy.

For Weber, the activities of the state were the result of legislation that had passed through the political system. Weber therefore defined the state in terms of its procedures and not its function. A key insight was his analysis that the state had a monopoly on the sanctioned use of force within society. He later qualified this by saying that states usually resort to non-violent means to secure their existence and maintain general political and social order. Weber's approach remains the building block for thinkers who came after him.

This view that the state possesses 'binding authority' and has a monopoly of the use of violence is developed by Bob Jessop. Professor of sociology at Lancaster University. Jessop's understanding is that the state is 'socially embedded' and has a 'core apparatus'.

Its main functions are 'socially accepted' by society at large. Its authority is acknowledged and accepted in a variety of ways, some through everyday practice and

others through legitimisation events like elections and referendums. From time to time, that authority breaks down. Think of some examples and let others know your thoughts.

Ruling 'in the name of the common interest', as Jessop puts it, implies that there are ideological sides to sustaining the state's authority. What is being suggested here is that the 'common interest' is somewhat manufactured to justify various policies and actions.

As Jessop says elsewhere, there 'is never a general interest that embraces all possible particular interests'. We'll come back to Jessop's definition later on in the course, unpacking his dense description. In the meantime, we can set out some key features of the state that apply pretty much universally.

Here I've brought together some key features of the modern state for you to think about.

By an ensemble of socially-constructed institutions we mean a group of key bodies that are relatively autonomous from each other like the judiciary, the armed forces, government and so on. But together they constitute a core apparatus of the state. We'll go into more detail about these different bodies in the next section, so this is by way of an introduction.

Another key characteristic is that state decisions are binding. They are not optional. Some people would like to withhold that proportion of tax that goes on funding nuclear and other weapons but that choice is not available. Failure to pay council tax can lead to eviction or having the bailiffs at your door. Power, or the authority to make decisions and enforce them, is dispersed and held by various sections of the state. We shall go deeper into all these characteristics as the unit develops.

The fact that the state holds a monopoly on the use of violence is self-evident. For example, the police and the army are authorised to use force in circumstances set out by the appropriate state body. Ordinary citizens cannot do the same without facing criminal charges. In 1984-5, thousands of miners were arrested for defying Tory laws on picketing while police violence went unpunished because it was sanctioned by the state. Thousands of Extinction Rebellion supporters have been arrested for civil disobedience actions.

While the state is rooted in society in the broadest sense, it is also separate from the wider community in terms of its organisation, personnel and functions. This is a paradox which in many ways creates an inherent weakness within the state,

It should be fairly obvious that the power of a state apparatus extends as far as a defined territory, usually marked by a border or in the case of an island like Britain by an imaginary line in the sea.

The question of social acceptance, as Jessop puts it, is crucially important. Were citizens over whom the state claims power declined to accept that authority, it's obvious that the state could not function. How this acceptance is achieved is presented later on in the course when we will talk about hegemony and the role of ideology in achieving – on a continuous basis – the 'acceptance' that Jessop refers to.

I hope you found this session thought-provoking. Here are some questions to think about. There are links to resources and further reading to be found elsewhere in this session. In the next session, we will talk about the core institutions of the UK state and how they relate to each other.