

# Unmasking the State

## Session 4 commentary

The state is the state, is the state. So why do we even need to talk about 'theories of the state'? There are good reasons to do so. If you want to make a fundamental change to the way we are ruled, we need to know what we are up against. Competing theories tell us different stories with distinct implications. Pluralism for example implies that reform of the political system is not only possible but necessary. Elitism rules out any significant change while Marxism opens the door to transitions.

And having a theoretical framework helps us understand why politicians and state actors' actions are conditional, dependent on structural and other constraints and contexts. Governments, for example, are not free agents. An election victory does not necessarily guarantee them the ability to bring about lasting economic and social change.

Theories of the state will also make it easier to decipher. As American political scientist Peter Bratsis wrote in an article called *Unthinking the State*, "The critical task of state theory is to explain and demystify the processes and practices that produce the social existence of the state and thus to negate the state's claim to universality and naturalness."

The theory of democratic pluralism has long provided the dominant ideal and description of politics in industrial societies with competing party systems, according to the eminent American political scientist William Connolly. The key word to bear in mind here is ideal.

In general, pluralism has a benign view of the existing state and sees it positively as a vehicle that can be moulded to improve democracy. It is the prevailing theory in both academic and mainstream political circles – helped by the fact, as we shall see, that it is essentially a validation of the status quo.

Pluralism is curiously non-theoretical. Although it is the dominant framework for analysis in the universities and is embraced by all mainstream political parties in the UK and elsewhere, it plays little attention to the nature of the state itself. Why, you might well ask? One explanation is because pluralism is rooted in the

philosophical traditions of US pragmatism and English empiricism. These approaches are more to do with 'what works' and experience of day-to-day activities than overarching and historical conceptions.

Pluralism, in general, is the view that in what are known as liberal democracies power is or - from an ideal standpoint should be - dispersed among a variety of autonomous economic and social groups. Power is not - or rather should not be - held by a single elite or group of elites. Pluralism assumes that diversity in and of itself is not only beneficial to society but is also the basis for achieving social cohesiveness. Or put another way, it is the framework for avoiding conflict.

Pluralist political theory identifies certain patterns of political preferences as promoting the "stability" of democratic political systems and others as threatening to such stability. For Martin Smith, former professor of politics at Sheffield University, pluralism's strength derives from the fact that much of it accords with received wisdom about how liberal democracy should work.

Pluralism's assumptions are

- Groups rather than individuals are crucial to understanding of politics
- The role of the state needs to be limited
- Groups can be an alternative to the state as a mechanism of collective organisation
- There is already a separation of economic and political power and between different spheres of government.
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Fundamental to pluralism is the notion that diversity is, as Martin Smith puts it, a social good that prevents the dominance of one particular idea. English pluralists see the state as unproblematic in itself and the way forward is the distribution of power through a myriad of groups and associations.

Pluralism as a political philosophy emerged strongly in England through key thinkers in what became the Labour Party in the early decades of the 20th century. They included Harold Laski, Richard Tawney, Samuel Hobson and G.D.H. Cole, the political theorist, economist and historian. Cole and others questioned the notion of state sovereignty by advocating that other forms of associational life should be recognized as legitimate sources of political power. In other words, power should be shared. Cole was the foremost British advocate of guild

socialism. Others argued for alternative forms of association to overcome the alienation that came with capitalism.

Pluralism as a political theory took new directions in the UK in the neoliberal era. Theorists developed concepts of governance. Others have suggested that we live in a 'centreless' society. Some pluralist thinkers have emphasised the idea of "social capital", the building of individual capacity and groups to influence the state. Social movement theorists [like the late David Graebner] also developed notions of bypassing the state apparatus while exerting pressure on the same. Others have pointed out that pluralism as an ideal system of representation falls apart when it's up against reality. Different groups have different resources. A global corporation can't be compared to a group fighting for migrant rights or the homeless.

In the United States in particular, the visible dominance of powerful lobby groups in Washington – speaking for big business and military interests – and a political system dominated by two pro-capitalist parties – has undermined pluralist theories.

Elitism is the belief that government by a small ruling group is desirable, more or less standard and even inevitable. In some respects, elitism is both an explanation and a justification for how states work and has a long history in political thought. Machiavelli's 16th century treatise *The Prince* called attention to the role of fraud, force and deception in gaining and governing states and to some extent justified it. His observations about the political process are clearly relevant for today when it comes to the Tory government, for example and the experience of the Trump presidency or the Putin regime!

Machiavelli is regarded as a political realist and as Dunleavy and O'Leary say in their 'Theories of the State', 'Political realists are characteristically pessimistic about human nature and contemptuous of those political theories which value the self-government of the masses.'

In more modern times, a theory of elite rule was developed in Italy by Gaetano Mosco and Vilfredo Pareto in the 19th century, largely but not entirely in a challenge to Marxism and its class-based approach. These classical elite theorists claimed to have established a scientific theory proving that government by a small elite over the rest of society is inevitable.

They explicitly rejected the Marxist view of class domination and also suggested that representative democracy would not make a fundamental difference. They insisted that the history of all societies past and future, is the history of its ruling classes ....there will always be a ruling class and exploitation.

The pioneering German sociologist Max Weber and the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter developed theories of democratic elitism. Weber argued that the will of parliamentary elites could be imposed on the bureaucracy of a modern state. This approach was developed by Schumpeter.

In the 20th century, another elite theorist Robert Michels developed the theory of the 'iron law of oligarchy' in political parties, including the powerful German Social Democratic Party. In his view, organisational structures led to elitism. His view was that the membership of the SDP, for example, was incapable of handling complex decisions. That had to be done for them by the leadership. He shared the view of some Marxists that liberal democracy was a sham, a façade, which masked the ascendancy of a new elite of industrial capitalists in Germany. In the face of his "iron law," Michels concluded, in evident despair, that "democracy is the end but not the means." The anti-Marxism and anti-representative democracy of Michels and his co-thinkers meant their theories could be championed by the fascists. Michels himself later became both an apologist for and a member of the Nazi Party.

In the period after World War Two, elitist theory took a different turn. Social scientists were critical of the claims that the US was an exemplary liberal democracy where entrepreneurship flourished and everything in the garden was rosy. James Burnham, who had been a Marxist, argued that corporate power had passed into the hands of an elite managerial group while shareholders had become inactive. His book 'The Managerial Revolution' became a best seller. In politics, power had passed into the hands of a new bureaucratic elite, which was faceless and impersonal.

Another significant social scientist C Wright Mills used empirical studies to show how business and social elites dominated local power structures in the US. He rejected the pluralist theory of the state which claimed government could be influenced by different groups at different times. They were writing at a time when the phrase "industrial-military complex" was already in common usage. President Eisenhower warned about its threats on leaving office.

Modern elitist theory holds that the rulers of society are engaged in an ongoing process of competitive elitism, have links with global elite networks and are closed off from the ruled, the governed. This chimes with the development of the world economy over the last 40 plus years. As Mark Evans writes in *The State, theories and issues*: "A process of external 'hollowing out' has occurred under globalisation. These processes have created the space for the emergence of new elites at the transnational, supranational and international institutions levels."

Whether these theories of an elitist state constitute a comprehensive overview of power structures is, in my view, doubtful. They don't place the state in a broader social relationship. However, they definitely zero in on essential aspects of the contemporary state and have more in common with the Marxist viewpoint than with pluralism.

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The contemporary Marxist approach to the state emphasises its contradictory relationship with capitalism. Marxist theoretician study how the state, for example, reinforces and reproduces capitalist social relations. They study the links among economic, political and ideological forms of class domination. Is there a single, accepted Marxist theory of the state? Perhaps this is the wrong question to ask. As we have seen, theories of pluralism and elitism have evolved over a long period of debate and dispute, leading to revisions and new directions. Looking for a explanation that stands the test of time is probably the wrong approach.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, it is accepted, didn't develop a comprehensive theory of the modern state. This was taking shape while they were active politically from the mid-19th century onwards. They made general observations in line with their unique historical materialist outlook. This emphasised contradictory economic relations, which took the form of class struggle, as the primary driving force for social development. They also reached some critical political conclusions about the state based on analysis of concrete events and experiences. We will return to these later in the course when we consider next steps.

Marx, in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, wrote that relations of production, what he called the "economic structure of society" was the "real foundation" on which rises a "legal and political superstructure" or the state. Moreover, he added, how production was organised determined the "general character of social, political, and intellectual processes of life".

In the *German Ideology*, published in 1845. Marx and Engels say that the state is 'nothing more than the form of organisation which the bourgeoisie necessarily adopt both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests'. In other words, the state is an instrument in the hands of the ruling class. In later writings, Marx and Engels qualified this view.

Engels, in his ground breaking work on anthropology, the *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, wrote that the state was a product of a society at a certain stage of its development. A key function of the state, he maintained, was to moderate conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'. Eventually this power, the state, alienated itself from society. Engels insisted that "as a rule", the state was effectively the state of the dominant economic class which in time became the politically dominant class." These thoughts indicated lines of inquiry and research rather than fully-worked theories.

Vladimir Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* on the eve of the 1917 revolution in Russia. He quoted Marx and Engels positively in a polemic against those who watered down their views. He suggested that "a democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism" and once capitalism had gained control of it, "it establishes its power so securely, so firmly, that no change of persons, institutions or parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic can shake it." We will return to this view later in the course.

Marxist state theory lay dormant for a long period, with activists content to quote Marx or Lenin without further ado or describe state actions to substantiate their views. As the post-1945 boom came to an end with an economic and political crisis, a renewed interest in a Marxist view of the state led to fierce disputes. On the one side was Greek sociologist Nicos Poulantzas and on the other Ralph Miliband, who taught at the London School of Economics.

Miliband contended that the state served the interests of the capitalist class because personnel from that class dominated institutions that wielded power. His book *The state in capitalist society* reflected a view that held that the state was neutral and was made capitalist by agency, or the actions of personnel. This in practice was a classic social democratic view of the state as a benign instrument in the wrong hands.

Poulantzas on the other hand, held what is known as a structuralist position. This contended that state structures were more important than the types of people who worked in its institutions. The structures determined that the state was capitalist in and of itself. This outlook has been criticised as vulgar materialism, where actors' beliefs are treated wholly as a function of their material circumstances.

Attempts to overcome this impasse have led to a more nuanced Marxist view, one which studies the relationships between structure and agency, the state and capitalism, the state and civil society in a concrete way. Bob Jessop is the most noteworthy advocate of this approach. He sees the state as a social relation – much like capitalism itself – a conclusion that Poulantzas eventually arrived at. This dialectical approach doesn't lead to a universal Marxist theory of the state which is good for all time. But it better helps us understand how what Jessop calls a capitalist type of state functions, its contradictions, strengths and weaknesses.

Jessop and his co-thinkers, for example, see the state as an institutionalised social compromise, requiring – but not always providing – concessions to the population at large and visions that can help secure social acceptance. Take some time to read a quote from him. His is a more dialectical view of the contradictory and complex relationships between structure and agency, which interact and change each other in this analytical framework. Demonstrating how and when the state is capitalist will be discussed further in the next session.

