

Unmasking the State

Commentary Session 10

What I hope you have taken from this course is that the present state system is a real block, an insurmountable barrier when it comes to taking society forward. The state uses its political and administrative power over the rest of society to uphold the economic status quo. The fate of the present state is, as we have seen, tied in innumerable ways to another powerful socially-embedded force – the capitalist economic system. Neither can free itself from the other's embrace. This has been the case for several centuries. Sure, the relationship has undergone changes as capitalism itself developed into a global system. But the fundamentals remain the same.

That's the reason why climate change and species loss remains a serious threat to our very existence. Where profit and competition comes first, no state is going to sign up to an effective agreement that undermines that. Output and consumption have to increase year on year or share values fall and profits decline, along with tax revenues. The fact that the process is destroying the planet is pushed to one side. This is not just short sightedness. It's a built-in madness which the capitalist state is powerless to deal with.

As more people become disillusioned with politics and take to the streets to try and influence governments and states, the shutters are coming down on dissent. As previous sessions have shown, authoritarian and populist rule is gripping many states. Democratic freedoms are disappearing. War between capitalist states is a growing danger. The old system is dying and it's up to us move history on and give democracy a new content and significance.

The system's decay, particularly during the neoliberal period, has had real life consequences. Some of the most critical ones are listed here.

Before the pandemic struck, there were an estimated 3.2 million people in insecure work in the UK, including those on zero hours contracts, agency work, and low paid self-employment. The numbers have undoubtedly risen during Covid. Research has found that this group of workers suffer from higher levels of anxiety and depression and more likely to find themselves out of work than those with permanent jobs.

Just as the pandemic struck, a devastating report revealed that health inequalities had grown sharply since 2010. This was the year when the coalition launched its deep austerity programme in which the most vulnerable were made to pay for the bail-out of the banks. The closure of children's centres, cuts in spending per pupil, reductions in adult social care combined with other factors to lead to a steep rise in poverty and inequality. In most regions north of London, life expectancy in the most deprived areas declined for both women and men, the report concluded.

In 2016, it was calculated that the richest 10% of households hold 44% of all wealth. The poorest 50%, by contrast, own just 9%. The top 0.1% saw their share of total wealth double between 1984 and 2013, reaching 9%. Meanwhile, in 1975 the share of national income related to wages and labour reached a post-war high of 71.8%. From 1975 it went into steep decline and now hovers just below 60%.

Race inequality in England has deepened. A 2021 report found that Black people are about 18 times more likely to be searched than their white counterparts; BME children make up over half of the child population in prison. This is an increase of 15% over the past decade. Had the white population experienced the same risk of death from Covid-19 as black groups, there would have been an estimated 58,000 additional deaths between March and May 2020.

In 2019, the United Nation's environmental outlook report concluded that unsustainable production and consumption patterns and trends and inequality were leading to a deterioration in planetary health at unprecedented rates. In February 2021, secretary-general Antonio Guterres warned that a climate change convention report was a "red alert" for the planet. He called on nations to raise their ambitions to limit climate change. In November, COP26 in Glasgow ended with no firm commitments.

So what do we want to achieve? What are our goals? I would argue that in broad terms we should set our sights way beyond our present social system. Surely it's time to create a vision of the future that we can work towards? A vision that is democratic in the real meaning of the word which brings people and power together. We would then create the opportunity to address the social and environmental challenges already discussed in a meaningful way.

We cannot be said to live in a functioning democracy where resources, including land, technology, and many formerly public services are in private ownership and run for profit. Where a handful of powerful corporations control the mainstream media and while the BBC most of the time acts as a mouthpiece for the state

It is a democracy in words only when inequality has reached unprecedented levels, with vast numbers relying on food banks and means-tested benefits to scrape a living. And trade unions have few rights to mount effective strikes without facing punitive court action.

When new generations are unable to obtain affordable housing because of exorbitant rents and soaring house prices, when the National Health Service is starved of resources and facing privatisation, it is a democracy that is for the few, not the many.

In a system where women, black and minority ethnic communities, migrants and people with disabilities are targets for abuse, discrimination and super-exploitation, we have to say that democracy is still out of reach for the vast majority.

So we should aim to create a non-hierarchical, non-elitist, genuinely democratic and accountable system at community, town, regional and national level. Let's move from representation without power to power with representation. That would give society the capacity to end capitalist ownership and control of the economy and create a democratically-run, not-for-profit sustainable system. There's more detail about what this could look like in the Let's Compost Capitalism course.

We don't have to, nor should we, start from scratch in creating a true democracy. We should keep what society has achieved through centuries of struggle. In general terms, the rule of law, according to a former Lord Chief Justice means that all persons and state authorities

should be bound by and entitled to the benefit of laws openly made and publicly administered in the courts. So when Boris Johnson declares that lockdown laws did not really apply to him, he is more than half way to dictatorship.

I don't mean that we should retain all the actual laws themselves. Laws blocking trade unions from effective action and curbs on the right to demonstrate would be abolished. A people's commission with expert help could consider what laws to keep and what needs to go.

Naturally, we should keep all the democratic rights we have achieved through struggle, including an unfettered right to vote. They should be considered a minimum. Later in the session we can look at extending our rights, in both a democratic and social setting.

Our common history is, as you know, deliberately neglected, in favour of a partial, one-sided account. This helps to mystify the origins of the state and play down the role of people in shaping society. So we need to bring out the history of the Levellers, Diggers, Chartists, Suffragettes and others to inspire us to a new chapter in the fight for democracy and social justice.

Transparency is a word bandied about but seldom – if ever - apparent when it comes to formulating policies. While there is a nominal process of consultation, responses are generally disregarded if they clash with already stated objectives. A whole region can oppose a hospital closure, for example, but the local health authority will simply press ahead. You don't want a new train line through your back garden. Sorry, it's happening anyway.

The present state is top-down, an alienating, impersonal power that seems to sit above society, looking down at us. A real democracy would turn that relationship upside down. There are some proposals for what this might look like further on in the session.

Obviously we would rid of repressive laws that see protesters ending up in jail. Eventually, we should abandon laws that enable owners of capital to exploit other people and planet for profit, and banks to speculate with other people's money. Again, this would be the task of a citizen's commission to investigate and make proposals.

There are two main options to consider:

1. try to make the existing system more democratic and responsive to the majority who are effectively excluded from power
2. build a real democracy with new, people-centred forms of governance that value and incorporate past achievements.

Many are rightly concerned that the gains we have already achieved down the centuries could be lost in an upheaval and may feel that Option 1, which would mean pressing for reforms, is preferable. But is it realistic? Is the capitalist type of state capable of being reformed and made into something that will work for the majority? Option 2 is obviously a huge undertaking. It will involve mass social participation and creative practice over a sustained period. It is undoubtedly the hard choice but in reality it almost certainly is the only practical path to a real democracy and avoid dictatorship.

A transition to real democracy is incompatible with a narrowly-based state that is predisposed towards capitalism. The present state cannot tame or control capital - even if it

wanted to - because the economy operates through markets which are by their nature beyond state control.

The existing state structures cannot become the servant of the people. Protest and pressure does not move or alter this fundamental conclusion. Neoliberalism, as we have seen, has intensified what has been described as “the evacuation of capitalist democracy”. That is why elections alone which leave the present state intact cannot provide the solution. The issues are too deep to be solved solely at the ballot box.

Self-preservation means the state will block with all the means at its disposal the merest hint of a transfer of power to the majority. That is a lesson from history we would be well advised to heed.

While it may be possible to reform certain superficial aspects of the state, like voting procedures, the fact remains that by its nature the state favours the status quo. A state that is alienated from its citizens cannot, therefore, be made to work for society as a whole. You cannot vote capitalism out of existence.

The existence of undemocratic bodies at the heart of society and government should be addressed by creating a new written, democratic constitution that places power in the hands of the people. Citizens-led conventions that reflect our diverse society and the different nations within the UK could be tasked with drawing this up, assisted by experts.

This constitution would have to be carried into effect by people organised in assemblies, creating a network of popular power that challenges the status quo and acts as a means of a transition to a real democracy. First past the post voting can never reflect diversity and encourage participation. The convention would have to come up with alternatives and suggest proposals for mass involvement in the new democratic process through digital technology.

Parliament, with its enormously rich history, could be made into a powerful body to reflect the new power of society in place of the poodle without bite that it has become. For example, a new kind of Parliament could bring together citizens elected by local and regional assemblies where members can be recalled and/or re-elected every year.

Take a long at the other proposals on this slide and let us know what you think.

Here are some ideas for building support for a democratic revolution. They are part educational, part campaigning. The audience is waiting. A survey published in January 2022 found that an astonishing one quarter of the British public cite a lack of faith in politicians as a big issue for the country. This is the highest level recorded since the survey began in 2016.

I don't want to pre-empt an open discussion that we need to have so I just wanted to make a few points to set the scene. Creating a transition from one political system to another is clearly an **historic event**. It's a break with the past – not necessarily a clean one – and the start of something new. These are essentially **revolutionary acts**. Liberal historians argue that in England, there was a kind of evolutionary transfer of power from monarchy to Parliament in 1688. Conveniently, they omit the civil war earlier in the century in which Parliament's army defeated Charles 1. The supremacy of Parliament had already been established long before the so-called Glorious Revolution later in the century.

So, while there was a certain degree of spontaneity at the beginning, ultimate success depended on plans and strategies. Parliament built the New Model Army. In America, the colonies called a Continental Congress to carry the fight for independence. The point here is moving from a capitalist state to a real or true democracy will require a strategy, a plan to succeed.

These are some of the lessons from history. There are others we should take onboard. As you know, the Russian Revolution that overthrew capitalism was rightly hailed as a key event of the 20th century. The idea of delegate-based soviets or councils as the institutions of a new anti-capitalist power fired the imagination around the world. The Soviet Union's subsequent decay, dictatorship and dissolution in 1991 was tragic but not inevitable. We need to know what happened and learn the lessons.

Finally, we will need some kind of organisational structure to co-ordinate and give perspective to the transition beyond the existing, oppressive state. What shape that might take should be decided by research, debate and discussion. I hope this course has convinced you to take part in this exciting project, not only to rethink our future but also remake it.