

thus untenable.

5 *Marxist theory of the nature of the state*

The Marxist theory of the nature of the state is the very opposite of the liberal-democratic theory which holds that the state is an organ of conciliation of interests of different classes in society. "The state", says Karl Marx, "is merely the **organised power of one class for the oppression of another**". It is, in the words of Lenin, the product and manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. It is **an organ of class rule**, an organ for the suppression of one class by another. It consists of a special category of persons who are solely or almost solely or mainly engaged in ruling over others and who in order to rule always possess a certain apparatus of coercion to subjugate the will of others by force: prisons, courts and special groups of armed men like police and soldiers. (As Marx puts it in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, "by the word 'state' is meant the government machine, or the state insofar as it forms a special organ separated from society through division of labour".) Set apart from society this special category of persons seeks to protect the interests of the economically dominant class in society against other classes.

(In a class-divided society the state is a political instrument, "a machine for maintaining the rule of one class over another", as Lenin called it. For the class dominating economically, i.e., possessing the means of social production, the state is a powerful weapon for keeping the non-possessing classes under subjection. When there were no classes in society a special group of people were not necessary to rule and dominate over the rest of society. According to Marx and Engels, when the primitive tribal communal society was divided into classes—slaves and the slave-owners—with opposed interests, one class owning the means of production and organising the labour power of the vast number of slaves, the state arose. The conflicts of interests between the classes made the setting up

of an organisation of the owning class for its protection against the non-owning class. The slave-owners had to institute an apparatus by which they could subjugate a vast number of slaves and subordinate them to certain laws and regulations.) Since the interests of the slave-owning class could not be objectively reconciled with the interests of the slaves, a public power of coercion became necessary and was set up to moderate the class conflict and maintain the slave system.

(When feudalism replaced the slave society, new classes, new forms of exploitation emerged. Consequently, the feudal state (the monarchy being the typical form) was nothing but a state of the feudal nobility which sought to maintain their rule over the peasant serfs and bondsmen and to preserve their power.) Modern capitalist society which arose from the ruins of feudal society has not abolished class antagonisms. It has substituted new classes: capitalists, the owners of the means of oppression (wage slavery). Consequently the special public power which arose with the emergence of class society still exists. The modern state is a state of the bourgeoisie. It is an instrument of exploitation of wage labour by capital. In his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels says that **every state in which private ownership of the land and other means of production exists, in which capital dominates, however democratic it may be, is a capitalist state**; it is a machine used by the capitalists to keep the working class and poor peasants in subjection.) Universal suffrage, a constituent assembly, a parliament are merely a form which does not alter the essence of the matter. Like all previous forms of state, the democratic republic in bourgeois society is nothing but a class dictatorship. It is, in the words of Marx, "**a camouflaged bourgeois dictatorship**".¹³ Its representative government and universal suffrage meant no more than the opportunity of "deciding once in three or six years which members of the ruling class were to misrepresent in the parliament".¹⁴ The modern bourgeois state is a political organisation of the bourgeoisie to maintain the bourgeois relations of production (i.e. bourgeois property relations) and to regulate social and economic life so as to protect the distribution of benefits and advantages that flow to the dominant class (i.e. the bourgeoisie) from the processes of production. This view found its classic summary in *The Communist Manifesto* with its statement that "**the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie**".

In short, the state historically arose as a special organisation of force, as a supreme defense mechanism of a social structure threatened by class conflicts. It is a weapon of class conflict, but a weapon which, in the hands of the economically dominant class, is employed to prevent the inherent

antagonism in the class-divided society from exploding into revolutionary violence.¹⁵ In the words of Lenin, the state is "organised and systematic violence",¹⁶ which is employed against the non-owning classes to protect the interest of the owning classes.

But the view of the state as an instrument of class domination is subject to subtle qualification in Marx's special analyses. Marx was aware that the state might be controlled by only part of a class or even by a class, such as the Whig aristocracy in England, who were acting in the interest of another class, or that, in countries such as India or China, such an analysis might be inapplicable since the absence of private property in land meant that the Oriental despot appeared as the father of all little communities. The complexity of Marx's approach is particularly evident in his two writings: *The Class Struggles in France* and the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he appeared to mean that, **occasionally the class struggle was so evenly balanced that the state could acquire some degree of independence, playing the role of a mediator between opposing classes.** Nevertheless, Marx insisted, that the state acted to protect the basic interests of a social class.

In short, whatever may be the form of a state, every state is a class state. Marx and Engels thought that the state would disappear in the higher phase of communist society where there would be no classes and no class exploitation. In a letter of 1852 to his friend Joseph Weydemeyer, Marx declared that "the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat". Like all previous forms of the state, the proletarian state established after the victorious socialist revolution is an instrument of class struggle, a means of "holding down" the bourgeoisie who had been overthrown from power. "This dictatorship itself constitutes only the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society". As mankind reach that stage they will throw away the state, in Marx's phrase, as "a useless lumber". Only then men will cease to govern men. The government of persons shall be replaced by the administration of things and the conduct of the process of production. Political power, properly so-called, ceases to exist, since political power is the official expression of class antagonisms in society. Once communism is fully established, says Lenin, "the state becomes absolutely unnecessary for there is no one to be suppressed—'no one' in the sense of a class, a definite section of the population". With the causes of exploitation of class by class removed, **with the abolition of classes, the state will therefore inevitably wither away. "The state is not abolished,"** says Engels, **"it dies out"**.

Criticisms

Critics like C. Wright Mills, Carew Hunt and Karl Popper point out that Marx's conception of the state as the coercive instrument of the owners of private property in class societies is true only in part and on occasion. But it is not an exhaustive explanation of the functions or interests served by the state in different advanced capitalist societies. There is an element of truth, critics recognise, in Marx's theory of the state, that is, his general conception of the powers of property. But, in their view, the power of property in capitalism are restricted by labour unions and by other forces which do countervail against the naked political and economic power of property. Moreover, they point out, to nationalise property does not necessarily eliminate "the powers of property". It may, in fact, increase the actual exploitation of man by man in all social spheres.

Hence Marx's conception of the state is believed to be inadequate as an explanation of the nature of the state. The source of his error, according to critics, is his neglect of political and military institutions as autonomous and playing a determining role in economics. If the state is defined as "a committee of the propertied classes" it is difficult to explain why quite different political systems can and do coexist with similar capitalist economic bases (e.g., the United States in 1920, Nazi Germany, Britain in 1940, Sweden today).

Secondly, the concept of "withering away of the state" is called utopia. The critics argue that in the former Soviet socialist society without propertied classes, without class conflicts, the state did not appear to wither away; on the contrary, the Soviet State was daily increasing in power and authority. In reply to this criticism the Soviet Marxists stated that so long as there was danger of aggression on the part of imperialist powers the organs of the socialist state must not be weakened. Besides, the state can wither away, as Lenin explained, only when full-scale communism is established, in which the antithesis between physical and mental labour, the antithesis between town and country disappear and society advances under the banner, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need".

Finally, the Marxist theory has been criticised on the ground that it glorifies class struggle. As a matter of fact, the doctrine of class struggle was put forward by the French bourgeois historians long before Marx. Marx only showed that the class struggle in capitalist society necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat which will establish a "classless society".