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Marxist Theory

Origin and Development of the State in the History of Societies

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A. Primitive society and the origins of the state

The state did not always exist.

Certain sociologists and other representatives of academic political science are in error when they speak of the state in primitive societies. What they are really doing is identifying the state with the community. In so doing, they strip the state of its special characteristic, i.e., the exercise of certain functions is removed from the community as a whole to become the exclusive prerogative of a tiny fraction of the members of this community.

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In other words, the emergence of the state is a product of the social division of labour.

So long as this social division of labour is only rudimentary, all members of the society in turn exercise practically all its functions. There is no state. There are no special state functions.

In connection with the Bushmen, Father Victor Ellenberger writes that this tribe knew neither private property nor courts, neither central authority nor special bodies of any kind. [1] Another author writes of this same tribe: "The band, and not the tribe, is the real political body among the Bushmen. Each band is autonomous, leading its own life independently of the others. Its affairs are as a rule regulated by the skilled hunters and the older, more experienced men in general." [2]

The same holds true for the peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia in remote antiquity: "The time is no more ripe for the patriarchal family with paternal authority than it is for a really centralized political grouping ... Active and passive obligations are collective in the regime of the totemic clan. Power and responsibility in this society still have an indivisible character. We are here in the presence of a communal and egalitarian society, within which participation in the same totem, the very essence of each individual and the basis for the cohesion of all, places all members of the clan on an equal footing." [3]

But to the extent that social division of labour develops and society is divided into classes, the State appears - and its nature is defined: The members of the collectivity as a whole are denied the exercise of a certain number of functions; a small minority, alone, takes over the exercise of these functions.

Two examples will illustrate this development, which consists in taking away from a majority of the members of the society certain functions they formerly exercised (collectively in the beginning) in order to arrogate these functions to a small group of individuals.

First example: **Arms**.

This is an important function. Engels said that the state is, in the final analysis, nothing other than a body of armed men. In the primitive collectivity, all male members of the group (and sometimes even all adults, male and female) are armed. In such a society the concept that the bearing of arms is the particular prerogative of some special institution called army, police, or constabulary, does not exist. Every adult male has the right to bear arms. (In certain

primitive societies, the ceremony of initiation, which marks coming of age, confers the right to bear arms.)

It is exactly the same in societies that are still primitive but already close to the stage of division into classes. For example, this holds true for the Germanic peoples at about the time they attacked the Roman Empire: all free men had the right to bear arms and they could use them to defend their person and their rights. The equality of rights among free men that we see in primitive Germanic societies is in fact equality among soldiers - which the anecdote of the Soissons vase illustrates so well. [4] In ancient Greece and Rome, the struggles between patricians and plebeians often revolved about this question of the right to bear arms.

Second example: **Justice**.

In general, writing is unknown to primitive society. Thus there are no written codes of law. Moreover, the exercise of justice is not the prerogative of particular individuals; this right belongs to the collectivity. Apart from quarrels decided by families or individuals themselves, only collective assemblies are empowered to render judgments. In primitive Germanic society, the president of the people's tribunal did not pass judgment: his function consisted in seeing that certain rules, certain forms, were observed. The idea that there could be certain men detached from the collectivity to whom would be reserved the right of dispensing justice, would seem to citizens of a society based on the collectivism of the clan or the tribe just as nonsensical as the reverse appears to most of our contemporaries.

To sum up: At a certain point in the development of society, before it is divided into social classes, certain functions such as the right to bear arms or to administer justice are exercised collectively - by all adult members of the community. It is only as this society develops further, to the point where social classes appear, that these functions are taken away from the collectivity to be reserved to a minority who exercise these functions in a special way.

What are the characteristics of this "special way"?

Let us examine our Western society at the period when the feudal system begins to be the dominant one. The independence (not formal, not juridical, but very real and almost total) of the great feudal estates can be shown by the fact that the feudal lord, and only he, exercises throughout his domain all the functions enumerated above, functions that had devolved on the adult collectivity in primitive societies.

This feudal lord is the absolute master of his realm. He is the only one who has the right to bear arms at all times; he is the only policeman, the only constable; he is the sole judge; he is the only one who has the right to coin money; he is the sole minister of finance. He exercises throughout his domain all the classic functions performed by a state as we know it today.

Later, an evolution will take place. As long as the estate remains fairly small, its population limited, the "state" functions of the lord rudimentary and not very complicated, and as long as exercising these functions takes only a little of the lord's time, he can handle the situation and exercise all these functions in person. But when the domain grows and the population increases, the functions for which the feudal lord is responsible become more and more complex and more and more detailed and burdensome. It becomes impossible for one man to exercise all these functions.

What does the feudal lord then do?

He partially delegates his powers to others - but not to free men, since the latter belong to a social class in opposition to the seignorial class. The feudal lord delegates part of his power to people completely under his control: serfs who

are part of his domestic staff. Their servile origin is reflected in many present-day titles: "constable" comes from comes stabuli, head serf of the stables; "minister" is the serf ministrable, i.e., the serf assigned by the lord to minister to his needs - to act as his attendant, servant, assistant, agent etc.; "marshal" is the serf who takes care of the carriages, the horses, etc. (from marah scalc, Old High German for keeper of the horses).

To the extent that these people, these non-free men, these domestics, are completely under his control, does the seigneur partially delegate his powers to them.

This example leads us to the following conclusion - which is the very foundation of the Marxist theory of the state:

– The state is a special organ that appears at a certain moment in the historical evolution of mankind and that is condemned to disappear in the course of this same evolution. It is born from the division of society into classes and will disappear at the same time that this division disappears. It is born as an instrument in the hands of the possessing class for the purpose of maintaining the domination of this class over society, and it will disappear along with this class domination.

Coming back to feudal society, it should be noted that state functions exercised by the ruling class do not only concern the most immediate areas of power, such as the army, justice, finances. Also under the seigneur's thumb are ideology, law, philosophy, science, art. Those who exercise these functions are poor people who, in order to live, have to sell their talents to a feudal lord who can take care of their needs. (Heads of the church have to be included in the class of feudal lords, inasmuch as the church was the proprietor of vast landed estates.) Under such conditions, at least as long as dependence is total, the development of ideology is controlled entirely by the ruling class: it alone orders "ideological production"; it alone is capable of subsidising the "ideologues".

These are the basic relationships that we have to keep constantly in mind, if we don't want to get lost in a tangle of complications and fine distinctions. Needless to say, in the course of the evolution of society, the function of the state becomes much more complex, with many more nuances, than it is in a feudal regime such as we have just very schematically described.

Nevertheless, we must start from this transparently clear and obvious situation in order to understand the logic of the evolution, the origin of this social division of labour that is brought about, and the process through which these different functions become more and more autonomous and begin to seem more and more independent of the ruling class.

B. The modern bourgeois state

Bourgeois origin of the modern state

Here, too, the situation is fairly clear. Modern parliamentarism finds its origin in the battle cry that the English bourgeoisie hurled at the king, "No taxation without representation!" In plain words this means: "Not a cent will you get from us as long as we have no say in how you spend it".

We can immediately see that this is not much more subtle than the relationship between the feudal lord and the serf assigned to the stables. And a Stuart king, Charles I, died on the scaffold for not having respected this principle, which became the golden rule all representatives, direct or indirect, of the state apparatus have had to obey since the appearance of modern bourgeois society.

The bourgeois State, a class State

This new society is no longer dominated by feudal lords but by capitalism, by modern capitalists. As we know, the monetary needs of the modern state - the new central power, more or less absolute monarchy - become greater and greater, from the fifteenth to sixteenth century onward. It is the money of the capitalists, of the merchant and commercial bankers, that in large part fills the coffers of the state.

Ever since that time, to the extent that the capitalists pay for the upkeep of the state, they will demand that the latter place itself completely at their service. They will make this quite clearly felt and understood by the very nature of the laws they enact and by the institutions they create.

Several institutions which today appear democratic in nature, for example the parliamentary institution, clearly reveal the class nature of the bourgeois state. Thus, in most of the countries in which parliamentarism was instituted, only the bourgeoisie had the right to vote. This state of affairs lasted in most Western countries until the end of the last century or even the beginning of the twentieth century. Universal suffrage is, as we can see, of relatively recent invention in the history of capitalism. How is this explained?

Easily enough. In the seventeenth century, when the English capitalists proclaimed "No taxation without representation". It was only, representation for the bourgeoisie that they had in mind; for the idea that people who owned nothing and paid no taxes could vote, seemed absurd and ridiculous to them. Isn't parliament created for the very purpose of controlling expenditures made with the taxpayers' money?

This argument, extremely valid from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, was taken up and developed by our Doctrinaire bourgeoisie at the time of the demand for universal suffrage. [5] For this bourgeoisie, the role of parliament consisted in controlling budgets and expenditures. And only those who pay taxes may validly exercise this control; because those who do not pay taxes would constantly have the tendency to increase expenditures, since they are not footing the bill.

Later on, the bourgeoisie regarded this problem in another way. Along with universal suffrage was born universal taxation, which weighs more and more heavily on the workers. In this way the bourgeoisie reestablished the inherent "justice" of the system. The parliamentary institution is a typical example of the very direct very mechanical bond that exists - even in the bourgeois state - between the domination of the ruling class and the exercise of state power.

There are other examples. Let us look at the jury in the judicial system. The jury appears to be an institution eminently democratic in character, especially when compared to the administration of justice by irremovable judges, all members of the ruling class over whom the people have no control.

But from what social layer were - and still in very large measure today, are - the members of a jury chosen? From the bourgeoisie. There were even special qualifications, comparable to property-holding requirements for voting, for being able to sit on a jury - a juror had to be a homeowner, pay a certain amount of taxes, etc. To illustrate this very direct link between the machinery of the state and the ruling class in the bourgeois era, we can also cite the famous Le Chapelier law, passed during the French Revolution, which, under pretext of establishing equality among all citizens, forbids both employers' organizations and workers' organisations. Thus, under pretext of banning employers' corporations - when industrial society has gone beyond the corporation stage - trade unions are outlawed. In this way the workers are rendered powerless against the bosses, since only working-class organization can, to a certain extent (a much too limited extent), serve as a counterweight to the wealth of the employers.

[Next section](#)

[1] La fin tragique des Bushmen, pp. 70-73 (Paris: Amiot-Dumont, 1953)

[2] I. Shapera, The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa, p. 76 (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1930)

[3] A. Moret and G. Davy, Des Clans aux Empires, p. 17 (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1923)

[4] Anecdote of the Soissons vase. Legendary account of an incident during the reign of King Clovis of the Franks, in the fifth century AD. (Clovis was the first Frankish king to embrace Christianity, and it was during his reign that most of what is now Belgium and France was united into a kingdom.) After a victorious battle at Soissons (486 AD), when the booty was to be divided equally among all the soldiers, Clovis wanted to keep a certain vase for himself. A soldier thereupon strode out of the ranks and smashed the vase with his sword, to indicate that no fighter had the right to any special privilege in sharing the booty.

[5] Doctrinaire. Members of the conservative wing of the Liberal Party in nineteenth century Belgium were called Doctrinaires. They were violently opposed to universal suffrage, whereas the so-called Progressives in the Liberal Party were ready to accept it.