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# Marxian Theory of State

## **Introduction to Marxian Theory of State:**

Marxian theory of the state is basically different from pluralist and elitist theories. According to the former there are manifold agencies and groups in society and the position of the state is just like a neutral agency whose function is to settle disputes neutrally. But it is wishful thinking that the state maintains neutrality among the different conflicting groups and classes.

Rather, it always acts in favour of economically dominant class. Marx and Engels reject this pluralist notion of state. The elitist theories hold the view that only a small group, called elite, having higher and better skill and ability, controls political power.

Engels has said that the minority group qualified and called to rule by the given degree of economic development. The power base, then, is the ownership and control of society's productive resources.

The elite group, that controls the forces of production, ultimately controls the political power. Marxism sees and interprets state from a quite different perspective which in final analysis is the rejection of both pluralist and elitist theories.

It views the state in the light of classes and class struggle and believes that a classless society will be the final goal of the struggle. The classic view of Marxian theory of state is to be found in Communist Manifesto.

## **Here Marx and Engels make the following observation:**

“The executive power of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”

## **Commenting on this view of Marx and Engels the writer of the article published in Bottomore edited A Dictionary of Marxist thought, writes:**

“This is a more complex statement than appears at first sight, but it is too summary, and lends itself to oversimplification – however it does represent the core proposition of Marxism on the subject of the state”.

It is to be noted here that what is popularly known as the Marxian theory of the state is nowhere clearly and elaborately stated by Marx. Only his life-long friend Engels has dealt with the matter in his the origin of Family, Private Property and State.

Later on, Lenin in his State and Revolution elaborates the contention of Marx and Engels. Besides, in numerous other works, Marx and Engels have made passing or cryptic remarks about state which provide potential sources or materials for building up a theory of state.

A few more words may be added to our present analysis. In fact, Marxist theory of state of the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century has been reformulated by the continental thinkers. So long Stalin was alive he did not allow any country or individual to commence research work about numerous aspects of Marx's and Engel's thought.

After his death in 1953 tremendous enthusiasm was shown by scholars throughout the globe. The tangible consequence is that the scholars of various countries have started to interpret various concepts of Marx and Engels in new light and perspective. Marxism, today, is not the property of few blunt-headed and less educated politicians.

From the extensive research work three views of state have come out. The state is the product of class divisions of society, the state is an instrument of class rule and finally when the society becomes classless there will be no need of state. It will wither away. These three assertions build up the whole fabric of Marxian theory of state. All these are connected with each other.

### **Definition of State:**

In the German Ideology Marx and Engels have made the following observation regarding state **“out of this very contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the community, the latter takes an independent form as the State, divorced from the real interests of individual and community.”**

In such a state there are conflicts and struggles, but all these are illusory, that they are not real. Mere mock fighting. No one is interested in setting up a true government or democracy and in abolishing class division.

They have further said in the same book that the state is the political form of class rule. In their own words “Since the state is the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests, and in which the whole civil society of an epoch is epitomized, it follows that all institutions are set up with the help of the state and are given a political form.”

There is an Introduction by Engels to *The Civil War in France* (1891) where he criticizes the philosophical theory of state elaborated by Hegel. The state is neither the “realization of the idea” nor March to the kingdom of God on earth.

It is absolutely a material conception devised by men to meet material needs. These needs, of course, belong to a particular class or group of people. Engels writes in this Introduction “In reality the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in monarchy; and at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after the victorious struggle for class supremacy”. The state, according to Marx and Engels, is a machine of class rule and it is also an evil.

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Marx points out that the state is a political or administrative unit consisting of bureaucracy and army. Elsewhere Marx and Engels have said three agencies combined together constitute a political form and this is called state.

These agencies are bureaucracy, army and police. In fact, these are the three arms of any modern bourgeois state. In *The Civil War in France* Marx has added judicial organ to the three arms of bourgeois state.

The Russian state, he said, was completely dependent on the police and army and with the help of these two the Prussian Government established autocratic rule.

In *Grundrisse* Marx has said that state is a complex synthesis of multiple determinations.

**In *Politics Ideology and the State* Sally Hibbin writes:**

**“One cannot take the state as an unproblematic given nor reduce it to one of its multiple determinations. The state is both the point of departure and the point of arrival in political analysis since it can only**

**be comprehended after a complex process of theoretical analysis and synthesis.”**

Of all these definitions, we think the most significant one is the state is a complex synthesis. The concept of state can never be confined within certain specific denominations. With the change of economic, political and situations or conditions the managers of the capitalist state change the methods of administration and attitudes to various issues.

It is because the sole purpose of the managers is to keep intact the supreme hold over the state.

### **Origin of State:**

Marx and Engels studied the views of the three contractualists and found their view unacceptable because the state could never be the product of any contract. From the study of history both Marx and Engels reached the conclusion that it was the product of class rule and the dominant class uses it to maintain its supremacy.

That is, the state is man-made and it was created to fulfill specific purposes. Marxian theory of the state is based on the foundation of historical materialism. It has nothing to do with contract. It is the product of class antagonism.

In *The Origin of Family, Private Property and State* Engels has surveyed the gradual development of state. It is man-made no doubt, but the artefact of the state is based on scientific reason and perfect logic. Here lies the novelty of their idea.

They have not imagined of any state of nature which according to Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau was either intolerable or inconvenient. On the contrary, Marx and Engels have shown the development of state from the primitive communal stage to the industrial period.

Only in the primitive period there was no state in modern sense because there were no classes and private property. To sum up, the state represents a particular class, used as a machine by that class and protects the interests of the economically dominant class. Both Marx and Engels have elaborated the rise and development of state as a political organisation in *The German Ideology*.

Summarizing the views of Marx and Engels in *Anti-Duhring*, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* Plamenatz says “The need for the state arises from the increasing size of the community and from the extended division of labour inside it. A close study of views expressed by Marx, Engels and Lenin in many of their works reveals that two factors are primarily responsible for the emergence of state. One is division of labour and the other is the class division of society. As the division of labour increases, the society divides itself into classes. With the increase of the size of the community the occupations within it became diverse and specialized. Complex rules and procedures were needed to control them. Complexity created ample room for varied disputes. Primitive way of settling the disputes proved its irrelevance and ineffectiveness. All these together needed an authority with controlling power. Maintenance became the primary function of state. The interests of the classes were irreconcilable.”

Following Engels we can admit that the form of the state depends on how the society is divided into classes but the class structure is dependent on division of labour and system of property Hence the institution of state has not emerged out of nothing. It is a reality and product of real situation.

**We quote here the famous observation of Engels:**

“The state is, therefore, by no means a power forced on society from without just as little is it “the reality of ethical idea”, the “image and reality of reason”, as Hegel maintains. Rather, it is a product of society at a certain stage of development, it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. A power above society became necessary”.

It therefore, appears that according to Marx and Engels the state is a reality and it is not an embodiment of Absolute Spirit. The state is the creation of men and it was created to meet certain specific demands of some people who formed a class which was economically most powerful.

The emergence of the state is characterized by the formation of a special group of people engaged only in government and using a special apparatus of coercion for this purpose.

“When there appears such a group of man occupied solely with government, and who in order to rule need a special apparatus of coercion to subjugate the will of others by force prisons, special contingents of men, armies etc. then there appears the state.”

Lenin has said that the appearance of class and the emergence of state as an institution are almost simultaneous. If there were no classes and private property, there would be no necessity of state. This point has been elaborated by Lenin in his small Pamphlet State. Of course Lenin's views are not different from those of Marx and specially Engels.

Engels in his noted work The Origin of Family, Private Property and State. Engels has elaborately analysed the rise, growth and other aspects of state.

The organs of the state appear partly as a result of the transformation of the previous organs of government that took shape within the tribal system, and partly by means of the elimination of the management organs of the tribal system and their replacement by the new organs.

Thus, the apparatus of the special public power of class society, the so-called state apparatus, gradually takes shape. Following Engels, Lenin has said that the origin of state can be traced to the emergence of economic classes in society and also to the creation of property system.

The organs of the capitalist state also existed in tribal and feudal systems though in different forms. Coercion was the characteristic feature of the tribal system of government and the bourgeois state system inherits that.

### **State and Irreconcilable Classes:**

It has been stressed by Engels that the state is the result of irreconcilability of class interests. Recent researchers have made attempts to show whether the irreconcilable class interests are exclusively responsible for the emergence of state or the state causes the interests of various classes irreconcilable. The issue is to be treated with all seriousness.

The persons having free access to political power can use it to augment the quantum of property or wealth and it is a quite natural tendency on their part. Besides political power they use other means.

However, political power is the chief source of accumulation of property. Accumulation of wealth enhances exploitation.

**Plamenatz writes:**

“The owners of property acquire, in various ways, rights of property in other people’s labour; they acquire slaves or serfs. Therefore, the exploitation of class by class arises, at least in great part, as a consequence of the emergence of state.”

There is a famous sentence in the Communist Manifesto – “Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another,” So far as the nature of bourgeois state is concerned this is a significant comment.

In this short sentence Marx and Engels have portrayed the real picture of capitalist state. Political power is used to oppress or exploit class or classes. It is well-organized and used by a class.

The economically powerful or dominant class creates access and avenues to the corridor of political power and subsequently uses it for the realization of its own sectorial interests. The appearance of classes, irreconcilability of interests and the inequality between the classes are no doubt responsible for the emergence of state.

Simultaneously the state is the cause of exploitation, oppression and aggravation of inequality. Mere existence of antagonistic classes cannot cause oppression. Or even if there is oppression it cannot assume alarming form.

In this connection we can remember the observation of Plamenatz “Where there is no apparatus of power controlled by one class to the detriment of others there cannot be much class oppression.”

There are two processes the appearance of state and appearance of unequal classes. Do these two processes overlap? Plamenatz says that these two processes do not overlap.

According to Engels the appearance of classes is the cause of the rise of state. But once the state appears and consolidates its power and position it



begins to act in favour of the powerful class and the political or state power is used to widen the inequality.

Plamenatz concludes "What Marx and Engels say about connections between two social processes does not accord with their actual description of these processes. They tell us that one process determines the other, when they come to describe one or other of the processes they admit that each has a powerful influence on the other the rise of the state is as much a cause as an effect of the emergence of classes".

### **State as an Instrument of Exploitation:**

The general and most popular formulation of Marxist theory of state is to be found in the Communist Manifesto. It is popularly known as the instrumentalist model or the state is an instrument of exploitation.

In numerous places Marx and Engels have expressed that the state is used as a weapon by the bourgeoisie to exploit the proletarians. Two famous remarks of Marx and Engels may be quoted here in support of the above view. These are from the Manifesto.

One is "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." This remark I have already quoted earlier in reference to the definition of state. The second we have quoted in the present analysis several times. This is "political power is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another." In the Socialist Register, 1968, Ralph Miliband says, "This is the classical Marxist view on the subject of the state and it is the only one which is to be found in Marxism-Leninism."

In regard to Marx himself, and this is also true to a certain extent of Engels as well, it only constitutes what might be called primary view of the state. But there is to be found another view of the state in his work. This is the relative autonomy model. This cannot claim equal status with the instrumentalist model. It is, nonetheless, of great importance.

The implication of the statement, the state is an instrument of exploitation of class rule is that if there were no unequal classes, with the superior among them needing to use force to maintain the social conditions of their superiority, there would be no state. Because of the unequal distribution of

property, one class having the largest share of property or wealth and the dominating class having free access to governmental affairs, the exploitation by the ruling class becomes the characteristic feature of society.

The instrumentalist model of Marxist theory of state emphasizes that the state is simply a weapon of class rule. It never thinks of neutrality among the various classes of society. Whenever there is a conflict between proletariat and capitalists the two most powerful classes of capitalist state, the authority or what may also be called the government always comes forward to protect the capitalists from all types of attack.

It is because the interests of state and capitalists fully coincide. The bourgeois state always fights for the interests of capitalists. This type of state sometimes gives some concessions to the proletarians but it is infinitesimal. The state does it to establish its so called neutrality.

We have earlier noted that The German Ideology and the Manifesto of Communist Party are the two primary sources of the instrumentalist model. Reference to Manifesto has already been made.

Now we shall turn to the German Ideology. "By the mere fact that it is a class and no longer an estate, the bourgeoisie is forced to organize itself no longer locally, but nationally and to give a general form to its average interests it is nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeois are compelled to adopt, both for internal and external purposes for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests."

Miliband says that this "general form" is nothing but state. The capitalists use this general form of organization to safeguard their property and other interests. It is simply due to the fact that army, bureaucracy and police the three pillars of bourgeois state are under the control of the authority of such state.

In the Poverty of Philosophy published in 1847, Marx again states that political conditions are only the official expression of civil society. The state is always subject to economic conditions. Legislation reflects the will of those who control the economic affairs.

If the state were not an instrument of exploitation there would never arise the necessity of class struggle that is, the struggle between the two dominant or powerful classes of capitalist state. Hence the instrumentalist model of state occupies the most important place in Marxian theory of state.

Why did Marx and Engels say that the political power is an instrument of exploitation? It is observed that in their time there were mature and powerful capitalist states Great Britain, France and USA. Of these three first two were European countries and when they were writing Manifesto both Britain and France established themselves as representative of powerful ruling class.

The persons manning the various branches of state administration were recruited only from the powerful sections of society. Even today this system has not lost its importance. The economic and cultural background of the persons managing the state affairs is the same.

Naturally these persons who are also called elites will make all efforts to use the state as a weapon of protecting the interests of the ruling class. Marx and Engels were so much convinced that they, in various ways, expressed the instrumentalist character of bourgeois state in Manifesto and The German Ideology.

In a developed capitalist economy the sources of production are in the complete control of the bourgeoisie and this control is intensified to consolidate the power and position of bourgeoisie.

By setting up giant industrial organisations the capitalists control the production and also the productive system.

In the capitalist controlled world small business holdings have no place. Both the internal and external markets are under the control of the bourgeois.

Particularly for establishing hegemony over the markets of other states the state machinery is used by the capitalists. The domains of politics and economy coincide. The capitalists form an organization to press their demand and these acts as a powerful pressure group.

Because of the structural constraints the state is called the instrument of exploitation. What do we mean by these structural constraints? If the economy, in all its manifestations, is under the full grip of the bourgeoisie, the state will be the complete reflection of this particular class.

Miliband has said that the state is the instrument of the ruling class because, given its insertion in capitalist mode of production, it cannot be anything else. The economic system or base will be capitalist and the superstructure will be socialist that peculiar situation cannot be imagined. Even it is un-Marxian. There shall be a correspondence between base and superstructure. Antagonism might also appear, but not always. A recent critic has defined the state as an instrument of ruling class.

He says, "The state is the institution or complex of institutions, which bases itself on the availability of forcible coercion by special agencies of society in order to maintain the dominance of a ruling class, preserve the existing property relations from basic change and keep all other classes in subjection."

This implies that the state consists of an increasingly complex apparatus of domination to defend the existing property relations. This comment of Hal Draper is nothing but the repetition of the view that the state in bourgeois system always acts to protect primarily the interests of the ruling class. Our point is the instrumentalist model of state is a widely accepted notion of Marxist theory of state.

### **Evaluation of Marxian Theory of State:**

The instrumentalist model of Marxian theory of state has been criticized from various angles. Bob Jessop, a recent critic, observes that there is uncertainty in the formulation of the instrumentalist approach. This approach is accompanied by 3 short message and rhetoric.

It suffers from objective analysis. The state, in all cases and in all epochs, is an instrument of the ruling class this is an oversimplification of the whole issue. Bob Jessop is of opinion that it is unjustified to brand the capitalist state as an instrument of exploitation.

It has other manifestations. It exploits and at the same time it performs welfare activities. Not a single bourgeois state has neglected the interests of the working class.

It is true that its main sympathy is for the capitalist class. But the parliamentary forms and political consciousness have alerted the state about its primary responsibility towards the teeming millions.

Sometimes the state plays the role of neutrality. It may be rare but it is a fact. In many political systems the bourgeoisie has not succeeded in controlling the politics and economic affairs up to its full satisfaction

In the second half of the nineteenth century the rise of middle class, modification of liberalism and propagation of Fabian Socialism curtailed the meteoric rise of capitalism. Particularly the Fabian socialists were determined to cut the capitalism to size.

The philosophers, intellectuals, politicians, statesmen and policy-makers could not keep them aloof from the growing misery and deprivation of the working class. They did not advocate for the introduction of Marxian socialism through class struggle and violent revolution, but they pleaded for state interference in the social and economic affairs of the state with the sole purpose of mitigating the misery.

Plamenatz has raised another objection against the instrumentalist approach. He says that in the Origin of Family, Private Property and State Engels says that the state arises to keep peace between the classes having irreconcilable interests. But the classes which exist when the state arises are not classes in the Marxian sense of the class, they are merely groups engaged in various occupations having divergent interests.

The interests of various classes will be irreconcilable when they will be classes in the strictest Marxian sense. So when there are no classes in the proper sense of the term how can their interests be irreconcilable?

In order to raise itself to the level of ruling class, it must be adequately powerful. Mere control of productive forces cannot make a class powerful. It must have sweeping control over politics, culture and other spheres of social life. These objections do not however make the instrumentalist model fully irrelevant.

We are of opinion that sometimes the state decisions go in favour of the working class and common people. It is to be remembered that the capitalist state adopts this neutralist approach simply to camouflage its real motive and the real motive is to safeguard the most vital interests of the capitalists.

This is not mere conjecture or fabricated allegation. History is replete with instances that in Marx's time and before him the state acted in favour of the ruling class.

### **A Critique of Marxian Theory of State:**

Our survey of Marxian theory of state has dealt with several aspects of the concept. In this section few points are required to be highlighted.

The discussion of this part is based on the essay Marx and The State by Ralph Miliband which was published in the Socialist Register 1965. In this essay Miliband has analysed the Marxian theory of state from historical and contemporary reality.

We think that this approach of Miliband is quite plausible because no thinker can overlook or ignore the influence of contemporary events. The events of contemporary Greek city states created an impact upon the political philosophy of Plato. Similarly Machiavelli or Hobbes or Locke kept in mind the prevailing incidents.

Ralph Miliband observes that Marx has not made any detailed analysis of the theory of state. Marxian theory of state is based on the "interpretations and adaptations made by the Marxists and supporters of Marxism and above all by Lenin. Miliband says that these interpretations and adaptations cannot be taken to constitute an adequate expression of Marx's own views. This is not because these theories bear no relation to Marx's views but rather that they emphasize some aspects of his thought to the detriment of others and thus distort by oversimplification."

Miliband has said that it was not possible for Marx to avoid the influence of contemporary events of the capitalist states of his time particularly of France and Britain. Marx wrote three important books The Class Struggle in France, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte and The Civil War in France. The Class Struggle in France was written by Marx in 1850.

The Eighteenth Brumaire was written between December 1851 to March 1852 and The Civil War in France in April-May 1871. So within a span of 21 years he wrote these three important books.

The critics of Marxian theory of state garner materials from these three books. The political, social and economic conditions of France during the second half of the 19th century are quite well-known to the students of history.

The authoritarian rule, political turmoil and instability in governmental affairs considerably influenced Marx's thought system. Miliband has emphasized that aspect.

According to Miliband, Marx had also studied the nature and function of states of Asia. He called the Asiatic states as despotic states where the political realm is nothing but the arbitrary will of a particular individual. Marx is quite right in his assessment about the nature of the Asiatic states. The administrative systems of Mughal emperors can be cited as illustrations.

The will of the Mughal emperor was final and new as the ultimate source of authority and sovereign power. The despotic nature of Indian emperors is also revealed in their flamboyant claims that they were representatives of God on earth.

Marx closely observed all these things.

**Miliband writes:**

"It is evident that Marx does view the state in the conditions of Asiatic despotism, as the dominant force in society, independent of and superior to all its members."

Miliband has dealt with Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat". In the letter to Weydemeyer in March 1852 he said that the only new thing he said is that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat. But unfortunately he has not defined the concept in any specific way. The concept dictatorship of the proletariat constitutes a basic aspect of Marxian theory of state.

So it is necessary to throw light on what Marx actually meant and Miliband had performed that job.

**In the words of Miliband:**

“The dictatorship of the proletariat is both a statement of the class character of the political power and a description of the political power itself; and that it is in fact the nature of the political power which it describes which guarantees its class character.”

The dictatorship of the proletariat would be the outcome of a socialist revolution. Marx pointed this out in the Critique of the Gotha Programme. Lichtheim in his Marxism, published in 1961, said that Marx’s theory of state is decidedly authoritarian doctrine.

According to Marx the state was to assume dictatorial powers. But Miliband does not agree with this view of Lichtheim. He is of opinion that Marxian theory of state is “decidedly authoritarian” in character is not based on facts or evidence.

Explaining Marx’s stand on the nature of state Lenin said “If the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms, if the workers set up this revolutionary dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, they commit the terrible crime of violating principles, for in order to satisfy their wretched, vulgar everyday needs, in order to crush the resistance of the bourgeoisie instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state, they give the state a revolutionary and transitory form”.

**Ralph Miliband concludes:**

“The fact is that, far from bearing any authoritarian imprint, the whole of Marx’s work on the state is pervaded by a powerful anti- authoritarian and anti-bureaucratic bias, not only in the relation to a distant communist society but also to the period of transition which is to precede it. True, the state is necessary in this period. But the only thing which, for Marx, makes it tolerable is popular participation and popular rule. If Marx is to be faulted, it is not for any authoritarian bias, but for greatly understating the difficulties of the libertarian position”.

All critics may not agree with Miliband’s views. But it is a fact that there is a difference between Marx’s words and his real intention. Particularly his term “dictatorship of the proletariat” has been misinterpreted and it has been source of all confusion. There is no doubt that Marx was democratic-minded out and out.



It is inconceivable that a man who wanted to abolish the supremacy of capitalists will ultimately support the supremacy of another class. If Marx were alive for another one or two decades he could give reply to many of the criticisms raised against his theory of state.