

# **The Marxist Theory of the State**

Ron Tabor

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Although Marx and Engels never put forward a unified presentation of the theory of the state, their conception of the state is a fundamental aspect of their outlook, and of what has since come to be called Marxism. In fact, theories of the state constitute critical facets of all totalitarian credos, not just the Marxian. After all, a given ideology may be overwhelmingly totalitarian in underlying logic, but if it lacks a focus on using the state as the means of transforming society—that is, of imposing its ideas—its totalitarianism will remain implicit. It is the same with Marxism. While Marxism contains many propositions that imply totalitarianism, it is Marx and Engels' view of the state that renders their theory totalitarian in practice. This is most evident in their argument that the state, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, is the chief weapon in the struggle to establish communism.

Unfortunately, the totalitarian nature of the Marxist view of the state is not so easily discerned. A glance at Marxist theory, and the practice of Marxist organizations, will reveal what appears to be a paradox. On the one hand, Marx and Engels and their followers claim to be vigorous opponents of the state, and insist that one of their most fundamental goals is the abolition of that institution. On the other hand, the vast majority of Marxist organizations have been, and continue to be, militant advocates of the drastic extension of the role of the state in society. When they've come to power through revolutions or military conquest, Marxists have created societies that have been almost totally dominated by states. Indeed, these states' power has been among the greatest in history. Even the wing of the Marxist movement that no longer aims at revolution, the social-democratic, promotes the systemic expansion of the role of the state in capitalist society.

The key to this apparent paradox is the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat: a state that is supposed to be the vehicle of abolishing the state. We intend to discuss the dictatorship of the proletariat in the next article, but to understand this idea, it is necessary to be aware of the broader Marxist theory of the state of which it forms a part.

Although Marx and Engels did not leave us with a single, elaborated presentation of their analysis of the state, they did have a coherent theory of it, and it is worth outlining. At the risk of omission and simplification, I would list its major points as follows:

1. The “material basis” of the state is “relative scarcity.” Relative scarcity is a condition in which the productivity of labor enables a group of people to produce a surplus, that is, an amount of goods—food, clothes, tools—that is more than enough to enable them to survive, yet not enough to allow everyone to live in true abundance. When productivity reaches such a point, society divides into classes: (a) the vast majority, who spend most of their time working, while receiving an amount of goods (or monetary equivalent) that barely enables them to live; and (b) a tiny minority who exploit the majority—that is, appropriate surplus and live in luxury without performing productive labor. The division of society into classes in turn gives rise to the state.

“(The state) 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. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in sterile struggle, a power seemingly standing above society became necessary for the purpose of moderating the conflict, of keeping it within the bounds of “order”; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and increasingly alienating

itself from it, is the state.” (Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, p. 280.)

2. In general, the state is controlled by the economically dominant class, enabling it to maintain its control over the exploited classes.

“As the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but as it arose, at the same time, in the midst of these classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class. Thus, the state of antiquity was above all the state of slave owners for the purpose of holding down the slaves, as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is an instrument of exploitation of wage labour by capital.” (Engels, *Origin*, p. 283.)

3. The state is part of the “superstructure” of society. Marx and Engels analyzed human society as divided into a material base (or basis), and a superstructure that rests on it. The base is made up of the instruments of production (machines, tools, raw materials), the social classes, chiefly the exploiting and laboring classes, of the particular society, and the relations between these classes. The superstructure consists of political and cultural institutions, including the state, churches, schools, etc., as well as corresponding ideational realms: politics, religion, science, art, etc. The state is a major, if not the major, element of this superstructure.

4. The nature of the material base of a given society, or what Marx and Engels called its “mode of production,” determines the nature of the superstructure. By extension, the development of the base determines the evolution of the state.

“I was led by my studies to the conclusion that legal relations as well as forms of the state...are rooted in the material conditions of life...in the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of the material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life.” (Karl Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Feuer, p. 43.)

5. Although the state is usually the instrument of the economically dominant class, sometimes conflicting classes balance each other such that the state becomes somewhat independent.

“By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both. Such was the absolute monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which held the balance between the nobility and the class of

burghers; such was the Bonapartism of the First, and still more of the Second French Empire, which played off the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.” (Engels. Origin, pp. 283–4.)

6. In most states in history, rights were allotted according to wealth.

“In most of the historical states, the rights of citizens are... apportioned according to their wealth, thus directly expressing the fact that the state is an organization of the possessing class for its protection against the non-possessing class.” (Engels, Origin, p. 284.)

7. The highest form of the state is the democratic republic, in which the capitalist class exercises its power indirectly.

“The highest form of the state, the democratic republic... officially knows nothing any more of property distinctions. In it wealth exercises its power indirectly, but all the more surely. On the one hand, in the form of direct corruption of officials... on the other hand, in the form of an alliance between government and Stock Exchange...and lastly, the possessing class rules directly through the medium of universal suffrage. As long as the oppressed class, in our case, therefore, the proletariat, is not yet ripe to emancipate itself, it will in its majority regard the existing order of society as the only possible one and, politically, will form the tail of the capitalist class, its extreme Left wing.” (Engels, Origin, pp. 285–6.)

8. “(T)he executive of the modern state is essentially a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, International Publishers, 1948, p. 11.)

9. As capitalism develops and the effects of its periodic crises make themselves felt, the state is compelled to take over and manage ever greater portions of the economy. In effect, the capitalist state expropriates the capitalists. By itself, this does not do away with capitalism, but sets the stage for this through the seizure of state power and the means of production by the working class.

“... (T)he official representative of capitalist society—the state—will ultimately have to undertake the direction of production... All the social functions of the capitalists are now produced by salaried employees... At first the capitalist mode of production forces out the workers. Now it forces out the capitalists...” (Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific”, Feuer, pp. 102–103.)

(From this point, I’ll sketch Marx and Engels’ views without citations, since this aspect of their theory will be the theme of the next installment.)

10. The chief strategic task of the working class in the proletarian revolution is to seize state power, to raise itself to the position of ruling class.
11. The working class smashes the capitalist state and builds its own, the dictatorship of the proletariat, in its place.
12. The dictatorship of the proletariat is not a state in the proper sense of the term. It is the proletariat organized as the ruling class. Unlike other states in history, whose role was

to enable minorities to suppress majorities, the dictatorship of the proletariat is the instrument of the vast majority to suppress the tiny exploiting minority; its establishment represents victory in the battle for democracy.

13. The main tasks of the dictatorship are to expropriate the capitalists (those whose property has not already been nationalized), suppress capitalist resistance, and develop the nationalized means of production as rapidly as possible in order to overcome relative scarcity and shorten the workday, thus allowing all workers to participate in the affairs of society.
14. As these tasks are fulfilled, the state will wither away.

Before we enter into a critique of this theory, it is worth noting that, compared to the other theories of the state that were dominant at the time, Marx and Engels' analysis was quite radical. Almost all contemporary theorists of the state considered it to be the embodiment of an ideal (e.g., God or Reason) and, as this suggests, did not contend that the state would or should be eliminated. (We are omitting those writing in the libertarian tradition.)

Seen against these views, the Marxist theory—particularly the analysis of the historical origin and economic basis of the state, the contention that the state is an instrument of an exploitative elite, and the idea that the state will at some point no longer be necessary—looks progressive. Yet, despite its apparently radical nature and plausibility, the Marxist theory of the state significantly distorts reality. Most important, it contains implications whose logic, when put into practice, points toward the establishment of totalitarian societies. While a discussion of all the problematic aspects of the Marxist theory is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth looking at four of them.

## **I. Relative Scarcity**

I believe that relative scarcity is one of the factors behind the emergence and continued existence of states in human society. But it is not the only one. Relative scarcity only makes the rise of the state possible; it doesn't by itself guarantee that it will occur. I think an additional piece of the answer has to be sought in the nature of human beings.

While relative scarcity makes possible the rise of the state, the state itself represents an embodiment, or reflection, of a facet of human personality and behavior. At the risk of simplification, I think it is fair to say that human beings have two basic aspects of their personalities and behavior. On the one hand, people are social and cooperative; they live in groups and cooperate to survive and reproduce. This sociability is accompanied by emotions and attitudes—love, a sense of solidarity and community—through which it is expressed. On the other hand, people are competitive, aggressive and hierarchical. One group fights against, competes with and tries to dominate others; even within a group, individuals vie for domination and status. This is most apparent in class societies, but even under the most “primitive” conditions, there are elements of competition, domination and subordination, leaving aside outright warfare between different groups.

These two facets can only be distinguished analytically. In reality, they are thoroughly intermeshed. In the most hierarchical situations, there is cooperation; while in the most cooperative circumstances, there are elements of competition and domination. The question is, which aspect dominates.

Under capitalism and other forms of class society, the competitive/hierarchical aspects of human behavior dominate the cooperative facets without eliminating them. In cooperative settings, non-hierarchical behavior does not do away with competition. A non-authoritarian society, among other things, is one in which people choose to make the cooperative, non-hierarchical side of their behavior predominate.

One of the problems with the Marxist notion that relative scarcity, by itself, is the material basis of the state, is that it tends to absolve the human species of its responsibility for that institution: in this view, the state arises, in a sense, outside human beings, through an external historical process, the development of relative scarcity.

By the same logic, the theory simplifies and distorts the process through which the state can be eliminated. It implies that if relative scarcity is overcome, this will lead to the elimination of the state, without an active dismantling of the state and without conscious efforts on the part of human beings to change their behavior. The chief task of the revolution then becomes fomenting economic growth (through the state), which will then automatically lead to changes in human behavior and the ultimate elimination of the state.

This is in fact how most Marxists who have seized state power have interpreted the Marxian program. Moreover, so determined have they been to increase economic growth that they have adopted the most brutal, authoritarian methods to do so.

When this is coupled to the idea that the state, in the form of the proletarian dictatorship, is the chief vehicle to carry out the socialist transformation, it becomes obvious why the state in Marxist-led societies has been turned into a gigantic machine whose goal is to foment economic development. The logic of this conception is not to abolish the state, but to defend and strengthen it.

In contrast, anarchists do not assume that the elimination of relative scarcity will automatically lead to the end of the state. They recognize that an anti-authoritarian revolution must entail both specific measures to dismantle the state as well as systemic efforts on the part of human beings to overcome or reduce those aspects of their behavior that gave rise to the state and reinforce it. In other words, anti-authoritarians advocate a mental, or spiritual, revolution that parallels and infuses the economic and political one.

## **II. The State as an Instrument of the Ruling Class**

The idea that the state is an instrument of a ruling class to maintain its control over the exploited classes is similarly problematical. Taken in its most basic sense, anarchists can well agree with it, but as a serious analysis of the state, it is significantly flawed.

Among other things, the notion implies the separation of the ruling class from the state: there's the ruling class on the one hand, the state, which it controls, on the other. In contrast, anarchists see the state as an essential element of the structure of class society, a kind of skeleton around which ruling class and society are organized. Ruling class and state (and a web of hierarchies) are thoroughly intertwined. What we call the state and what we call the ruling class are abstractions which can only be separated in thought. In reality, they are one more-or-less unified structure that dominates society. The state (with its related political processes) is the chief vehicle through which the different sections of the capitalist class communicate with each other, argue over, and come to agreement about their interests.

The problems with the idea that the state is an instrument of the ruling class are particularly apparent in Engels' discussion of the democratic republic. Here, he was at pains to demonstrate how the capitalists control the state when the workers can vote, speak out, and organize. As we've seen, he argued that the capitalists control the state indirectly, through the corruption of political officials and by the alliance of the government with the stock exchange (whatever that means.)

The closest Engels comes to a convincing explanation is the assertion that, in democratic republics, capitalist rule is assured by the workers' inability to conceive of an alternative.

But if we recognize that the state is a central component of both capitalist economy and society as a whole, the question Engels grappled with ceases to be a problem. The capitalist state is a capitalist institution: its assumptions, structure, procedures, and everything else about it imply, reinforce, and reproduce capitalist relations. The capitalist state doesn't need to be controlled, directly or indirectly, by the capitalist class because the state is at the crux of the entire system. Anyone who is elected to office or otherwise participates in the state must conform to its assumptions.

In addition to its flaws as an analytical proposition, the Marxist view that the state is an instrument of the ruling class implies that the state can be taken over by the working class and used for its own purposes. True enough, Marx and Engels insist in many places that "the proletariat cannot simply take over the existing state machine."

But this insistence does not flow logically from the theory; in fact, the alternative assumption, that the state CAN be taken over by the workers, is a more reasonable deduction. For if the state is an INSTRUMENT of the capitalist class rather than an intrinsic part of the class structure, it is at least conceivable that it could be seized by the workers and used to pursue their goals. Indeed, this is how the reformist interpreters of Marxism have argued, and in light of this theory, the emergence of reformism within the Marxist movement was not an aberration, but virtually inevitable.

If we recognize the state as a central component of capitalism, we can see why using it to overthrow capitalism and eliminate classes is problematical. Because of its origins, structure, and function, the modern state, capitalist or "proletarian," reinforces capitalist property relations and all other hierarchies that define the system. Even if such an apparatus is fully staffed by committed revolutionaries, these people will eventually be forced to conform their behavior to the needs of the state or be forced out or rendered powerless. In short, to use the state means to reproduce capitalism.

One implication of the idea that the state is an instrument of the ruling class is the idea that the state is passive, that it has few interests and little power or dynamic apart from the conscious volition of the ruling class. But even a cursory look at history or contemporary reality suggests that this isn't the case.

The state: (1) tends to perpetuate itself; (2) works to increase its power vis-a-vis the rest of society, including the ruling class; (3) often acts ahead of the conscious decisions of the ruling class, stepping in where action is necessary but before the ruling class can agree on a policy; and (4) occasionally dominates the majority of the ruling class, as in fascist and other types of dictatorships.

Like the other aspects of Marxist theory we've discussed, this view of the state has notable consequences when the Marxist program is put into practice. Because they believe the state has no internal dynamic apart from the class that controls it, Marxists construct an extremely

powerful state, supposedly controlled by the proletariat (or by people who represent it), and then assume that when its tasks are completed it will disappear of its own accord. So certain are they of their theory that they smash all who oppose them, and fail to set up safeguards against the possible abuses of such an apparatus.

Another corollary of the idea that the state is an instrument of the ruling class is the notion that the essence of the state resides in its explicitly repressive functions. Marx, for example, used the term “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” as a synonym for the capitalist state. While this may have been a useful corrective to the idea that the state is an embodiment of the “general interest” or “historical reason,” it distorts reality. Specifically, the theory downplays the less obvious ways the state maintains class society. As we know, state-run education inculcates ideas that justify the system. The structures of bourgeois democracy co-opt struggles and reinforce the belief in the justice and permanence of the system. Lastly, the state’s all-pervading presence creates modes of behavior and mental habits that sustain class society.

### **III. The State as an Element of the Superstructure**

The two aspects of the Marxist theory of the state that we have been discussing flow from the more fundamental conception of base and superstructure. It is tempting to discuss this concept, particularly the notion that the state is part of the superstructure of society, in some detail. But since the topic cannot be easily broached in a few paragraphs and since it will be covered in a later article in this series, I will limit myself to three points.

- A. If it is true, as Marxist theory contends, that the state is essential to maintaining the rule of an exploiting class, doesn’t this mean that the state is ESSENTIAL to the very existence of any and all exploitive modes of production? And if this is so, what does it mean to consider the state part of the superstructure of society, which, by definition, is a SECONDARY, derivative phenomenon? If the state is truly essential to exploitive modes of production, it should be considered part of the base of society, or at least part of both base and superstructure, not just the superstructure.
- B. Whatever plausibility the view that the state is part of the superstructure may have seems limited to traditional, “free market,” capitalism. The entire conception of base and superstructure entails a separation of economics and politics that is of very dubious validity. Indeed, it is only under capitalism that the notion of economics, as distinct from politics or other aspects of social life, has any meaning. In all other forms of class society, economics and politics—in fact, economic, political, gender, racial and other forms of hierarchy—have been obviously intertwined.

Under feudalism, for example, political power was inextricably bound up with economic power. The king granted, say, a duke the use of a tract of land in exchange for swearing loyalty and promising to join him on the battlefield with a given number of knights should he be threatened. The duke would make comparable arrangements with lesser nobles, who would do the same with yet lesser members of the nobility. At the bottom were serfs, land-bound peasants who worked the nobles’ land or paid rent in exchange for the right to farm tiny plots.

Where in this setup is the distinction economic and political power? There isn't any. In fact, it is almost impossible to discern the outlines of the state. Given this, where is the dividing line between economic base, which includes the ruling class, and the superstructure, which includes the state? The entire concept of base and superstructure, it seems to me, breaks down here.

- C. The concepts of base and superstructure have tended to blind Marxists to certain aspects of capitalist reality. In Marxist theory, social classes are defined primarily in economic terms, specifically their relationship to the means of production and the nature of the means of production themselves. Under feudalism, the ruling class owned or controlled the chief means of production, the land; the exploited class was bound to the land, etc. Under capitalism, the capitalist class is defined as the owner of capital, through which it exploits the working class. The workers are defined as a class that has been separated from the means of production and must sell its labor-power to the capitalists to survive.

One of the problems with this approach is that it has trouble analyzing social strata that can't be defined solely by their relation to the means of production. We refer here specifically to intellectuals, professionals, corporate managers and state functionaries. Except for the wealthiest layers, who manage large corporations and/or own large amounts of stock, these people are not part of the bourgeoisie. But they are also not proletarians or part of the petty bourgeoisie, as are small store-owners or businesspersons. Moreover, even where Marxists have fit these strata into a Marxist framework, the logic of Marxist theory is to deny that they can play an independent role.

Yet it has been the huge growth of these sectors that has been a major factor behind the economic, social and political stability the capitalist system has had, greatly expanding the size of the market, offering the workers an apparent way out of their class, and providing a social and political buffer between proletariat and bourgeoisie.

Moreover, this phenomenon has played a crucial role in the evolution of Marxism itself. We are referring to the emergence of Communism. In this development, sections of those very strata that Marx virtually overlooked, and which he denied could play an independent social role, built a new form of exploitive society and fashioned themselves into a new ruling class. This class, which I will call the "state class," exploits the working class, not through its direct ownership of the means of production, but through its control of the state, which owns the means of production.

For a theory that claims that it and only it represents the true, scientific understanding of history, this failure is particularly damning.

## **IV. The Tendency of the Capitalist State to Expropriate the Capitalists**

As we saw above, Engels believed that the development of capitalism, particularly the effects of its crises, would force the capitalist state to take over ever more sectors of the economy, in effect, expropriating the capitalists in the interests of defending the system as a whole.

As is the case with so much of Marxist theory, there is some truth in this idea. The capitalist state has clearly been forced to intervene in the economy in the interests of stabilizing the system. Yet, aside from the former and current Communist countries and some Third-World nations,

nowhere has the state carried out near the amount of nationalization that Engels described. Even in those European countries in which the state manages most of the public utilities, as well as large “welfare” programs, the bourgeoisie has been far from expropriated.

Engels’ thinking on this question is a reflection of a broader problem with Marxist theory. This is a tendency to identify certain trends within economic, social and historical reality, to isolate them from other factors, and to assume that they will be carried out to their logical conclusions. Marx and Engels assumed, for example, that the dynamics of capitalism would lead to the polarization of society between an ever larger mass of impoverished workers and an increasingly tiny class of capitalists, as the middle sectors of society and ruined capitalists are thrown into the ranks of the proletariat.

Yet many of the trends within capitalist society that Marx and Engels described, the so-called capitalist “laws of motion,” have been partially or completely offset by countervailing tendencies. Thus, the polarization between working class and capitalist class has been offset by the growth of the very middle sectors Marx and Engels believed would be eliminated.

The theoretical penchant of Marx and Engels that we have been discussing can be described as a tendency to elaborate a model of, say, social reality, and then to proceed as if this model actually determined the development of that reality, in other words, a tendency to believe that the model is more fundamental, more “real,” than the reality it is meant to explain. This is an example of the underlying Idealist nature of Marxist theory that we have discussed elsewhere.

If this problem—both the general theoretical tendency and the specific prediction that the capitalist state would, over time, expropriate the capitalists—were limited to the realm of ideas, it would be of little interest. But it has had significant consequences in the material world.

For one thing, it has led the vast majority of Marxists to support the intervention of the capitalist state in the economy, including and especially the nationalization of industries, and to view such intervention as historically progressive.

One reason for this is that for Marxists, a major problem with capitalism is its chaotic character, the fact that it operates through the market and generates periodic crises. To Marx and Engels, the opposite of, and answer to, this “anarchy of production” was what they called planning, the direct, conscious ordering of production and other economic activities, even (or especially) when carried out in a hierarchical manner. Thus, they considered the formation of monopolies and trusts, themselves the result of capitalist crises, to be steps away from the free market and toward planning:

“In the trusts freedom of competition changes into its very opposite—into monopoly; and the production without any definite plan of capitalistic society capitulates to the production upon a definite plan of the invading socialist society.” (Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific”, in Feuer, p. 102.)

Thus, despite their claims to be opponents of the capitalist state and advocates of the abolition of the state altogether, Marxists ACT on the belief that the capitalist state represents an element of planning and justice, a kind of socialist principle, within capitalist society.

## The Contradictions of the State

Having discussed certain facets of the Marxist theory of the state, we can now show how this theory leads to the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, through an analysis of what Marxists would call the “contradictions of the capitalist state.”

In the Marxist world view, all reality, “material” and “ideal,” natural and social, is in motion; it is always changing and evolving. Moreover, this change does not occur in a linear, mechanical fashion, but through a series of conflicts, or contradictions. In fact, these contradictions are embedded in—are the actual substructure of—the reality we see.

Thus, capitalism is based on (embodies) the contradiction between Capital and Labor. Labor represents human beings (the working class), who own nothing but their “labor-power,” their ability to work. Capital represents “dead labor,” products of labor (owned by the capitalists) that dominate and exploit living labor. Capitalism develops through the conflict between workers and capitalists, which ultimately leads to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a classless society.

The capitalist state participates in this conflict and has its own internal contradictions. Although Marx and Engels did not produce a unified description of them, it is possible to deduce one from what we have discussed.

The chief contradiction of the capitalist state is between its role as an instrument of the capitalist class and its tendency to become increasingly independent of that class. As we have seen, the chief role of the capitalist state is to maintain the capitalists as the ruling class and keep the working class in a state of subjection.

However, as capitalism develops, the working class gets larger and the class struggle gets more intense. At a certain point, the working class gets large enough, organized enough, and conscious enough to pose a threat to the system. At this point, the state becomes larger, more powerful, and consumes ever more resources. At times, the class struggle becomes so intense that the state becomes somewhat independent of the capitalist class, balancing, in Marx and Engels’ expression, between the warring classes, a phenomenon they called Bonapartism.

The tendency of the state to increase its intervention in the economy parallels this political development. Over time, the state expropriates individual capitalists in the interests of defending capitalism as a whole. The logical outcome of this process is the expropriation of the capitalist class by the state. Thus, the state, an instrument of the capitalists to maintain their own rule, destroys the capitalists themselves. This process both proves the social obsolescence of the capitalists and creates the technical conditions for the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by communism.

This contradiction has its reflection in the ideological realm. This is between the state’s claim to represent the interests of all society and its actual function as defender of the rule of an elite. As it takes over increasing sectors of the economy, the state’s new role poses the demand that it should truly act in the interests of all members of society, not just the capitalists. Since it can’t, it raises the need to overthrow it and replace it with a state that will.

That state is, in Marxist theory, the dictatorship of the proletariat, which both resolves and abolishes the contradictions of the capitalist state and the system as a whole. How it is supposed to do this and why it doesn’t will be the topic of our next installment.

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