Most people understand what is meant by the term “government”. This is made up of men and women who are said to govern the country. Yet the prime minister and ministers are part of a wider, much more significant body – the state. Governments come and go but the state itself not only lives on but evolves and adapts to new circumstances expressed through the actions of government.

So if you want to know how Britain is really ruled, as opposed to governed, you have to dig deeper, down into the recesses of the state. For the state is how and where real power – backed up by force and coercion – is exercised over people’s lives. In Britain, the state is shrouded in mystery and mystique and appears as something natural, timeless and universal. So demystifying the state, bringing it out into the light of day, should help us answer some of the following questions in the course of this book:

► what is the relationship between the state and capitalism?
► how are the powers of the state exercised?
► are the powers of the state legitimately held? Can they be challenged?
what is the relationship between democracy and the state?
are the majority powerless or does the vote give ordinary people power?
what rights, if any, do we have in relation to the state?
is the modern state the last word on democracy?
do we require new state forms to make a transition from a capitalist society to one based on co-operation and production for need?
would change have to take a revolutionary form or can it be achieved through reform?

So what constitutes the state? The Chambers dictionary, for example, offers a variety of answers. One definition is that the state is a territory governed by a single political body. There is also reference to the “nation state” – which is described as an independent state with a population that broadly shares a common descent, language and culture. What concerns us here, however, is a further definition of the state as the political entity of a nation “including the government and all its apparatus, eg the civil service and the armed forces”. In Britain, this also embraces the monarchy, Parliament, the judiciary, laws and the legal system, police and prisons, spy agencies MI5 and MI6, local government, a range of semi-government bodies and agencies and the established Church of England. Taken together, they constitute the modern British state. In turn, many national agencies now have global and regional relationships with bodies like the World Trade Organisation and the European Union, to which they have ceded substantial powers once reserved to the British state.

State bodies operate in a complex, often contradictory relationship with each other. Each branch of the state has its own particular history

Well concealed

The state is, then, in every sense of the word a triumph of concealment. It conceals the real history and relations of subjection behind an ahistorical mask of legitimating illusion; contrives to deny the existence of connections and conflicts which would if recognised be incompatible with the claimed autonomy and integration of the state.

Philip Abrams, Notes on the difficulty of studying the state. Journal of Historical Sociology 1988
and development. This adds to the abstract, elusive nature of the concept of the state, particularly in Britain which is distinguished by the absence of a single, written constitutional document. Nevertheless, the general rules and regulations that govern the connections with each branch of the state are contained in a series of rules, regulations, precedents, conventions and laws that often operate in the background. For example, the fact that the victorious party at an election provides the prime minister, who in turn appoints members of the government without further reference to Parliament, is not explicitly stated in any document – but it happens.

A theory of the state
A study of these constitutional rules, precedents and conventions will tell us how the state operates on a day-to-day basis. But they will not in themselves reveal how the state came into being or what its overall social purpose and role is. What is important in this regard is to see the state in its interconnections with the rest of society, as a social, historically developing phenomenon. A World to Win’s starting point is that the state has an objective existence. It exists independently of our consciousness and views about it. We may not recognise the state but the state certainly recognises us. Secondly, the state exists only in relationship to other parts of society. It can only be understood, for example, in its connection to economic relations, both national and global. In other words, the state is part of a greater whole. Thirdly, the state, as all other phenomena, has internal and external contradictions. For example, its role under capitalism limits its capacities and powers in relation to the economy. The need for popular approval and legitimacy is undermined by the state’s alienated existence. Fourthly, the state is studied in its development, both in terms of its historic origins and how it is changing in the present.

A pioneering study into the origins of the state in society was made by Frederick Engels, the close collaborator of Karl Marx. In his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Engels showed through an anthropological study of ancient, primitive societies – where no state existed – that the state was a product of society at a particular stage of historical development. This stage, he argued, marked the end of communal property and the beginning of private ownership.
Engels explained that the emergence of the state

is the admission that this society has involved itself in insoluble self-contradiction and is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to exorcise. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict and keep 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 also argued that, as a rule, it is the “state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class” [emphasis added]. So state power in any society has to be closely related to the dominant social classes in society. If it is not, then the state cannot function or establish legitimacy and authority and becomes vulnerable. Economic power in a class-based society requires political power for social stability and in order to reproduce, as well as develop, the best conditions for production. In this sense, the state represents a division of labour. Capitalists go on doing what they do best – producing commodities, exploiting labour and making profits. Politics is left to the state, to professional groups of administrators, politicians, civil servants, judges, prison officers, police and the armed forces. Capitalists are a diverse class with competing interests which is one crucial reason why they cannot rule directly. The state creates and then develops a framework within which the capitalist system of production is able to function.

In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx explained the relationship between the “political superstructure” and the “economic structure” of society. He described how political relations arise on the base of economic foundations and ultimately reflect the interests of the dominant class in society and that:

In the social production of their life, human beings enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real
The ‘mystery’ of the state

foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure [emphasis added] and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Over time, specialists in ruling like top civil servants, generals and judges have come to dominate affairs and have given the state a certain operational but relative autonomy. In this way, the state, rather than serving society, stands above and aloof from the population and is insulated from popular pressures. This adds to the impression that the existing state system is independent, neutral, normal and, above all, irreplaceable. This alienation is itself a reflection at a political level of the fact that people, both individually and socially, are deprived of the result of their own labour and the wealth produced by society as a whole.

While we are free to sell our labour power to an employer in return for a wage, once bought it becomes a good for use by the capitalist alone. The value added by labour belongs to – or is appropriated by – the employer and is the source of profit. Marx discovered that “this fact simply means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer”. He described this process as “a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation

A division of labour

State power is exercised through the state apparatus, or more precisely, through a system of state apparatuses. The separate existence of the state is part of a specific division of labour within society. Its internal organisation thus reflects in a particular way the social division of labour and the prevailing social class relations, contributing to their reproduction in the ever-ongoing social process. In the historical course of the class struggle, the state apparatuses come to crystallise determinate social relations and thus assume a material existence, efficacy and inertia which are to a certain extent independent of current state policies and class relations.

Göran Therborn, What does the state do when it rules? Verso 1978
as estrangement, as alienation”. This alienated existence also confronts people in a hostile way through state institutions and bureaucracies. The overwhelming majority of the population have no direct control, access to or involvement in the running of the state. Occasionally we are consulted through a general or local election. We have the right to choose our rulers – but not the right to rule. The state's key functions include:

- maintaining the degree of social and institutional stability necessary for production, commerce and trade
- developing a legal framework that guarantees private property rights and contract law
- establishing a universal monetary system
- managing external/foreign relations, organising defence and conducting war
- maintaining border controls and regulating immigration
- regulating the terms and conditions of capital-labour relations
- ensuring the supply of new generations of trained and educated workers for the labour market
- dealing with the consequences of economic crisis
- providing services that capitalists cannot carry out but require such as education, health, transport infrastructure etc
- enforcing deductions from people’s wages and profits to finance state expenditure.

The state also plays a key ideological role in conveying notions that, for example, capitalism is really all about “individual freedom” and “consumer choice”, that the state governs in the “national interest”,

---

**An intrinsic unity**

A state apparatus operates simultaneously as an expression of class domination... and as the execution of the supreme rule-making, rule-applying, rule-adjudicating, rule-enforcing and rule-defending tasks of society. These two aspects constitute an intrinsic unity: execution of these tasks is class domination and class political domination is the execution of these tasks.

Göran Therborn, *What does the state do when it rules?* Verso 1978
or encouraging prejudices such as that socialism “destroys initiative” while capitalism “promotes enterprise”. Established mainstream political parties, the mass media, employers and the education system all lend support to the status quo with a stream of propaganda and assumptions.

At the heart of the state lies a mailed fist – the use of force, compulsion and punishment for those who refuse or decline to acknowledge the decisions of the state. The power of coercion, which in ancient times rested within communities, was long ago appropriated by the state. Payment of income tax or council tax, for example, is a legal obligation backed by the threat of a fine and/or jail. Occupy a property and the owners will assert their “rights” – and the police will turn up to remove the occupiers by physical force if necessary. Have more than six pickets outside a factory and the police will arrest trade unionists for a breach of the law. Engage in solidarity action and the courts will enforce the law that declares this activity illegal. The state will tap your phone and intercept your emails, and infiltrate your organisation if it is considered “subversive” – and you can do little about it except protest.

In times of self-declared national emergency, the state has since the early 1920s had power to dispense with democratic rights altogether and effectively put the country under military rule by decree. States of emergency have been declared on several occasions during major strikes. The New Labour government opted out of the European Convention on Human Rights on the grounds that a state of emergency existed (and continues to exist on a permanent basis) because of the alleged threat of terrorist attacks and the need to suspend civil liberties to deal with it.

In her book *Democracy Against Capitalism*, Ellen Meiskens Wood explains how the capitalist state is unique in its separation or division into economic and political spheres. In previous epochs, the state was a unified expression of economic power. She adds:

If we are to understand the unique development of capitalism, then, we must understand how property and class relations, as well as the functions of surplus appropriation and distribution, so to speak liberate themselves from – and yet are served by – the coercive institutions that constitute the state, and develop autonomously... At the same time, these developments had as their necessary condition a new and stronger form of centralised public power. The state divested the
appropriating class of direct political powers and duties not immediately
concerned with production and appropriation, leaving them with
private exploitative powers purified of public, social functions.

The making of the state
There is nothing permanent or fixed about the forms that the state
takes. Clearly the 21st century British state bears little comparison with
that of medieval or feudal England, although some remnants of the
past like the Royal Family, the Privy Council and the House of Lords,
endure to this day. In recent decades, the state has altered its form to
accommodate the emergence of globalised capitalism at the expense of
workers in Britain and other countries (see chapter 4). An overview of
the evolution of the British state, through a long and frequently bloody
collision between social classes, shows how it came eventually to assume
a capitalist form.

The first decisive political move in the direction of the modern state
was the execution of King Charles I in 1649 by Cromwell’s revolutionary
forces after an historic trial for waging war on his own people. When
Charles I was led to out to the scaffold in Whitehall and laid his head on
the executioner’s block, it marked the definitive end of feudal absolutism
and the monarchy’s claim to rule as God’s divine power in England. The
English Revolution – the country was a republic for 11 years – opened
the door to a further revolution in ideas, science and the expansion of
trade by merchants and investors freed from the tyranny of arbitrary
rule. The removal of James II by Parliament in 1688 and its invitation
to William of Orange to take the throne, reaffirmed and extended this
transfer of political power from the court to the Commons. The Act of
Settlement of 1701 affirming the independence of the judiciary owed
everything to the desire to be free from arbitrary pressures and unilateral
decisions imposed by the monarchy.

What character did the new state assume, in the sense of what class
interests did it come to reflect? The merchants and landowners/farmers
were the new, unchallenged power in the land. America, Ireland, Jamaica
and Barbados were already colonial possessions and the English fleet
was the most powerful in Europe after defeating the Dutch. After the
so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, the mechanisms were put in
place for the rapid expansion of economic activity. In 1694, the Bank
of England was created as a lender to the government and the issuer of bank notes. A system of national finance and national debt was created for the first time. With commodity circulation beginning to increase under the emerging capitalist form of production, paper money was vital as a mean of exchange. Institutions evolved for the buying and selling of government stocks, and for providing credit for a variety of government enterprises, mainly overseas.

A bankrupt Scotland was linked with England in 1707 in an Act of Union, which opened the way for Scotland to develop as an industrial country and for its scientists to play a vital role in developing new technologies. The ruling classes’ ambitions were facilitated by a more powerful, interventionist state. While ministers nominally remained representatives of the crown in parliament, they began to assert their independence from the monarch. Control of the powerful fleet now rested with the government and not the monarchy. By 1724, Sir Robert Walpole had effectively established himself as Britain’s first prime minister and conducted foreign policy directed towards an expansion of trade and colonial possessions. The Seven Years’ War, which began in 1756, was the first conflict waged on a global scale, and was fought in Europe, India, North America, the Caribbean, the Philippines and coastal Africa. Britain’s victory over France enabled the East India Company to transform itself from a commercial into a military and territorial power. The company took control of Bengal in 1757 and went on to acquire further areas of India and other parts of Asia. Indian policy was until 1773 influenced by shareholders’ meetings. This led to state intervention. The Regulating Act (1773) and Pitt’s India Act (1784) established government control of political policy through a regulatory board responsible to Parliament.

The beginnings of the agricultural revolution, with new machinery and crops, spurred on the enclosure of common land and the ending of the open field system. Between 1760-1793, there were no fewer than 1,355 Parliamentary Acts which applied to the enclosure of specific estates and parishes. Land was brought together to the advantage of the richer landlords. Smaller holders often had no legal title but depended on custom and tradition. These were routinely ignored by the commissioners appointed to oversee enclosure. Small farmers, who lost their grazing rights, joined the swelling numbers of landless labourers driven into the towns.
As John Saville notes in his book, *The consolidation of the capitalist state 1800-1850*:

Throughout the 18th century and down to 1832, the landed aristocracy in the House of Lords, and their sons and relatives and the gentry in the Commons, gathered to themselves all the political and administrative offices of government and the country in general. This assembly of power and positions included a massive trawl of government finances for their own benefit and for use in widespread patronage, not least among their own relatives.

During the last quarter of the 18th century, another powerful social force began to appear which would soon challenge this order. The Industrial Revolution, linked closely with inventions in cotton spinning, steam power and iron smelting, accelerated the growth of the capitalist system of production. With it came new classes – the manufacturers and the working class. Each in its own way would contest the power of the state itself.

Agitation for the reform of a corrupt Parliament gathered pace after the end of the war with France in 1815. An alliance of the rising bourgeoisie and workers demanded the vote. They were accompanied by mass assemblies and serious rioting against which the state could do little. By 1832, England seemed on the verge of a revolution against the landed classes. They gave way just in time and extended the franchise – but only to the manufacturers and rising middle class. Workers who had provided the backbone for the movement for reform were abandoned. Free trade and free markets became the mantra alongside the creation of state forces that would put down disorder and resistance. These were aimed at the new working class, who were fighting for free

---

**Masters and servants**

The voice of the manufacturers made itself heard in the Master and Servant Law of 1823. This gave employers remedies for breach of contract over their workers and remained in force until the last quarter of the 19th century. A worker who broke a contract could be summarily sentenced by a local magistrate to jail and hard labour for up to three months - and required to resume his contract after coming out of prison!
trade unions, social justice and, above all, the right to vote and change society (see chapter 2). The first acts of the reformed Parliament were to impose a discipline on trade unions and the workers drawn into the towns by industrialisation. In 1834 six Dorset agricultural workers were convicted of taking an illegal oath when they formed a union branch and were sentenced to transportation. Unions were not to obtain full legal independence until 1875. In the same year as Tolpuddle, the Elizabethan poor law – which provided parish relief to the destitute – was replaced by the hated workhouse in the New Poor Law of 1834.

In Saville’s view

In the medium and long term, the New Poor Law of 1834 was perhaps the most important piece of social legislation passed during the 19th century. Its influence was far-reaching, both in daily practice and in the evolution of social consciousness. It confirmed the general belief in self-help which the middle classes preached daily, and over time it entered at least in part into the thinking of working people. Acceptance of parish relief became an article of shame for many sections of the working population – to have a pauper’s funeral was an unthinkable disgrace – and in these ways the social stigma and fear of the workhouse went some way towards creating the ethos and ideas which industrial capitalism required of its working force.

The new state set about creating the means to enforce its rule. During the 1830s and 1840s, the first professional police force in the world was established, first in London and then throughout the country. A

---

**Landed interests**

The Reform Act [1832] left political power in the hands of the traditional ruling class, the landed interests. They dominated the two Houses of Parliament; they continued to provide the membership of Cabinets of both Whig and Tory governments; they still controlled the patronage of the administration in Whitehall; and the established Church and the armed forces remained untouched. Economic, social and administrative changes were, however, already in train and would lead society to adapt to the political and social requirements of the developing capitalist order.

*John Saville, The consolidation of the capitalist state 1800-1850. Pluto 1994*
professional army was also created with its own barracks in the major industrial towns. Before this, soldiers had been recruited exclusively to fight foreign wars and had been billeted in ordinary people's homes. They were now removed from civilian influence as the state took on a more impersonal and alienated character, removing itself from the population as a whole. The Royal Commission on the Police of 1839 reported that the creation of a force throughout the country would avoid the “painful conflict”, of “neighbour versus neighbour” or “master against servant”. There was a strong case, it argued, for a “trained and independent force for action in such emergencies” and in this way “the constitutional authority of the supreme executive is thus emphatically asserted” [emphasis added]. The police were given distinctive blue uniforms to distinguish them from the military in a bid to make them seem more “independent” along the lines advocated by the Royal Commission.

The development of capitalism also made it possible to levy taxes in a more comprehensive way than before, when excise duty was the only source of state revenue. First introduced in 1799 by William Pitt to finance the war against France, income tax was abolished in 1816 when the conflict ended. The Tories reintroduced income tax in 1842 as a growing budget deficit required a new source of funds and it has remained in being ever since. The 1835 Municipal Corporations Act made over to the wealthier sections of the middle classes the political control of their towns. Before then, the towns had been the private fiefdoms of “freemen”, whose number could range from a dozen to 5,000. The unreformed boroughs were generally regarded as a licence to print money and the great majority were dens of corruption, nepotism and indifference to their populations. In 1846, the Corn Laws, which kept domestic prices artificially high, were abolished after a long campaign and confirmed that real power now lay in the hands of the free trade manufacturers and not the landowners. The notion of shareholders and limited liability for directors was introduced in 1856 to help with the raising of capital by industry. A Patent Office was established in 1852 to amend laws unchanged since the early 17th century.

So by the mid-1850s, the unfettered power of the landed aristocracy had been overcome and the new capitalist class had achieved political power. Ordinary working people still did not have the right to vote, despite the best efforts of the Chartists. By 1867 – when the urban
The ‘mystery’ of the state working class finally achieved the vote – the capitalist state had been well and truly consolidated.

The scene was set for the rapid expansion of the British colonial empire, which until the 19th century had been formed of self-managing enterprises and acquisitions as a result of wars with France. Wealth accumulated from the slave trade between Africa and the Caribbean colonies accelerated the development of capitalism in Britain. The restless expansion of capital changed the nature of the state, turning it outward in search of raw materials to support domestic production and foreign markets for the resulting commodities. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 led to new forms of exploitation of human labour and resources through empire. From 1838, the East India Company became a managing agency for the British government in India and lost even this role after the Indian Mutiny of 1857. From then on, India was the jewel in the crown of empire. Until the 1850s, the Colonial Office had been part of the Home Office. Now it had its own department and staff. British control was extended to Fiji, Tonga, Papua, and other islands in the Pacific Ocean, and Britain’s acquisition of Burma was completed in 1886. Its conquest of the Punjab and of Balochistan provided substantial new territory in the Indian subcontinent itself.

Elsewhere, British influence in the Far East expanded with the development of the Straits Settlements and the federated Malay states, and in the 1880s protectorates were formed over Brunei and Sarawak. Hong Kong island became British in 1841, and an “informal empire” operated in China by way of British treaty ports and the great trading city of Shanghai. The greatest 19th century extension of British power took place in Africa, however. During the last quarter of the century, Britain took control of Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and The Gambia. What are now Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi became colonies. Britain sent 500,000 soldiers to the Boer War of 1899-1902 and its costly victory enabled it to create the Union of South Africa in 1910. By the end of the 19th century, the British Empire comprised nearly one-quarter of the world’s land surface and more than one-quarter of its total population. These possessions were protected by the mightiest navy in the world and vast armies. A huge bureaucracy co-ordinated the military and civil aspects of empire, ruling over hundreds of millions of people.