

The state

Presentation by Paul Feldman

Definitions from Chambers

- a territory governed by a single political body
- the political entity of a nation, including the government and all its apparatus, eg civil service and armed forces

Nation state

- an independent state with a population that broadly shares a common descent, language and culture

Concentrating on the second – a political entity of a nation

1. Why? Because it is through the state that capitalism actually rules, exercises its power over us
2. The modern state is a complex of political, social and ideological interdependent structures and processes.
3. In Britain, these institutions include the monarchy, the cabinet, parliament, civil service, local government, quangos, executive agencies, armed forces, spy agencies, police, prisons and the legal system. And the education system. Together, these institutions constitute and hold what we could call state power
4. May not agree with each other all the time – and each has its own particular interests and evolution – but they have and use power. In the last instance, by force.
5. What is state power – the ability to pass laws, compel people to pay taxes, jail people, declare war and regulate a whole range of activities – from casinos, driving to conditions at work
6. The British state is a product of a long evolution and struggle between classes. Decisive political moments in the last 350 years include the execution of Charles 1 in 1649, the ousting of Charles II in 1688, the union with Scotland in 1707, the reform acts of 1834, 1867 and 1884.
7. Social processes include the civil war, the radical reform movement, the chartists, the rise of the mass trade unions and the Labour Party
8. So the state is 'A material concentration of class forces'
9. Characteristics of the state to date: alienated from society, a power standing above and over it. Abstract and impersonal power. Adds to the sense that it is untouchable. Also to the standpoint that it is a neutral, umpire.

The British state as an instrument of the ruling classes

10. Capitalism does not rule directly. It cannot because the capitalists are a disparate group whose main concern is production for profit and defeating their competitors. Capitalism actually rules through the state which has evolved alongside it over the past 200 years.
11. Engels in *Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* argues: "Because the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but because it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict 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*." [emphasis added]
12. There a division of labour between economic and political power. While capitalists hold economic and financial power through their corporations, shares and institutions, the exercise of political power is through the state.
13. There are functions that capitalists cannot carry out but require: education, health, transport infrastructure, roads, social stability, currency regulation etc. Deduction from people's wages.
14. These change in relation to the needs of the economy.
15. The primary function of the state is to protect and enhance the power of what Engels calls the "most powerful, economically dominant class".
16. In terms of law, it is quite clear: company law, private property law. As any squatter finds out quickly, or any group occupying a factory. The property is vested in an owner, who has rights over those who challenge it.
17. Each day in thousands of ways, the state interacts with business, financial and commercial interests.
18. The precise nature of its role changes through history: from laissez-faire of early 19th century, to imperialism, to regulation, welfare state and today – a seeming return to a market state?
19. But the essential aim is to maintain status quo and ensure that the challenge to capital is contained, limited and incorporated.
20. A state alienated from society as a whole – elitist, bureaucratic, oppressive
21. The government: carries the sovereign power of the state. It is not itself the state.

The capitalist state as a contradiction

22. A state that is forced to seek popular legitimacy and authority

In *State and Revolution*, Lenin writes:

"A democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism, and, therefore, once capital has gained possession of this very best shell... it establishes its power so securely, so

firmly, that *no change of persons, institutions or parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic can shake it.*" [emphasis added]

23. A state contested by the masses excluded from exercising power. Changing relationship – eg trade unions over 200 years. From illegality in Pitt's time, to legalisation after the Napoleonic War, to suppressions in the 1830s to full status in the 1880s, to loss of status in early 1900s, to restoration by 1906 until Tory Acts of 1980s took away their legal immunities. Still the position today.
24. The struggle to exact reforms from the state: health, education, welfare, housing etc. Done through Labour Party or threat of revolutionary action. Tories actually built more council housing than Labour.
25. Through governments, the state claims legitimacy and to be exercising the popular will. This is an important ideological role. Which is why Blair, Brown and Bush are always banging on about democracy.
26. The emphasis is on personal freedom and equality while the inequality of the domination of capital and finance over labour is obscured/unacknowledged etc.
27. So the state apparatus feeds back into a society its contribution to the regeneration of class relations that formed it. It reproduces these relations for succeeding generations.
28. But democracy actually poses a threat to the underlying structures of the state.

The state under globalisation

29. Compelled to abandon the democratic shell in favour of a partisan approach in favour of global capitalism and the market economy.
30. Moved in Britain from a welfare state to a market state
31. Transferred powers to supra-national bodies – EU, WTO
32. Merged with business interests to create a corporate/market state
33. In doing so, created an historic crisis of the parliamentary state – eco-crisis, terrorism, disenfranchisement, authoritarian. People not voting, cynicism, rejection of authority
34. The crisis of the state comes from the contradictions within itself and its relation to the global economy
35. Created divisions within the state – army against government, judges ruling against the executive, prison officers walking out etc.
36. In addition the state (reinforced by its nationally-based outlook and structures) cannot deal with the global issues of climate change, terrorism etc.

A way forward

- The parliamentary state has outlived its purpose and usefulness to society
- All major issues come up against the state and immediately raise the question of who owns and controls the economy and who makes political decisions
- the existing state structures cannot become the servant of the people
- protest/pressure does not move/alter the state/status quo
- The aim is to dismantle the governmental, administrative, judicial and repressive apparatus of the bourgeois state.
- That means everything from the police to the prisons, from parliament to the monarchy
- To create its opposite – a non-hierarchical, non-elitist, genuinely democratic and accountable state at community, town, regional and national level
- Bodies that represent our diverse society, not just constituencies but women, minorities, young people,
- A state with real control over the resources in society
- From representation without power to power with representation
- Expressing new economic relations – a not-for-profit society
- A new chapter in the long struggle for democracy. Extending democracy to workplace ownership and control, to schools and colleges, to public services and transport
- The long-term aim must be to deploy technology and the principles of self-governance to the point where there is no longer a need for a state in the form we now understand
- But at this moment, we have to focus on how to mobilise for the taking of state power out of the hands of the ruling elites. This is the key to legitimising parallel structures that Pete talks of.
- The key to removing corporate power is actually the taking and remaking of state political power. We ignore that at our peril.