

There have been a number of rival theories of the state offered throughout history, according to Marshall (1998) "The state is a distinct set of institutions that has the authority to make the rules which govern society" (p.635). However, Marx and Weber had their own theories and this essay aims to critically compare their theories on the role of the state in capitalist society.

The state refers to all the institutions, agencies and agents that operate within a given territorial space, have legitimate power and authority over its citizens and can utilise force as the ultimate sanction if we fail to accept its laws and orders. This characteristic of the state as the sole legitimate user of force is a common theme among theorists and academics. In addition to the possession of the power and authority to employ violence legitimately, the state can be characterised as consisting of a number of agents and offices, for example; government ministers, police, army and local governments. However it is important to note the difference between the government and the state, the state fulfils its role over time and is more permanent than the government which is only an element within a much larger and more powerful entity (Heywood, 1999, p.74).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were the founders of Marxism, it was they who formulated the ideas central to it. The simplest expression of what Marx and Engels thought of the state is contained within the "The Communist Manifesto". In this they state:

"...the bourgeoisie, has at last, since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." (Marx, 1978)

For Marx and Engels the state was not an "honest broker", the interests of the two classes: the dominant and subject class, were not equally reflected in the legislation and decisions that flowed from the state. Marx referred to democracy as "bourgeois democracy", it was a fraud behind which the capitalist class governed or ruled.

Marx's theory of the state concentrated solely on a capitalist society and consisted of a number of political institutions such as government, the education system, the monarchy, the legal system and also religion, in which he referred to as 'the opiate of the people'. These institutions, in turn, acted as an instrument of class rule therefore the state and its institutions promote, protect and maintain the interests of the dominant economic and political class. Marx believed "for the individual and society alike the very business of getting a living-production, consumption, exchange and distribution- is the structure within which personal and national politics are played out and the way in which these economic activities are organised is itself political, malleable and contentious" (Redhead, 1995, p.160). Therefore, Marx claimed that the state oppressed the people that it was meant to represent and that it reinforced the nature of class divisions within society.

Marx identified the theory of 'Historical Materialism', this was the explanation of how societies have developed throughout time, the developmental stages and the forces that have brought about one revolutionary change from one stage to the next. In Marxist theory, the foundation of society was materialism and the economic system was the basis of society therefore he identified the factor that determined any particular stage in societal development was the mode of production, which consisted

of two forces; the means of production and the relations of production (Heywood, 1997, p.51). The means of production being the raw materials and machinery used to produce goods and the relations of production being the social classes consisting of the owners of these materials and machinery and those who worked for the owners to produce the goods. Marx viewed the owners as the exploiters and the workers as the exploited. He identified history as consisting of a number of 'epochs' which were characterised by a particular mode of production. He believes that through revolution a capitalist society will lead to a communist society and when this communism is reached there will be no longer any social classes left and there will be no need for a state. Thus the state will 'wither away'.

As each stage of the mode of production arises an economic base and infrastructure is created which corresponds directly to that mode of production. For Marx, this break between base and superstructure marks a period of crisis and revolutionary change. From this perspective Marx identified the economic infrastructure as the source of power.

Through historical materialism, Marx would have considered the state part of the 'superstructure' of society, and thus as a part of the relations of production. Marx considered 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 labouring 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. Marx considered the state an essentially conservative force, acting to preserve the status quo and defending the existing community as if fundamental differences of interest did not divide and define the civil society. The state is a major, if not the major, element of this superstructure (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000, p.11).

As with much of Marx's published writings, internal contradictions can be found. Held & Krieger claim to have refined Marx's two main positions on the state. The first position considers the state and its bureaucracy as a distinct sphere, existing in a variety of forms, wielding power that is not linked to interests or under the control of the dominant classes. The second position holds a view that is more commonly ascribed to Marx and used more commonly by neo-Marxists and explains that the state and its bureaucratic machinery are class instruments, which coordinate a divided society in the interests of the ruling class (Held & Krieger, 1984). Supporting the latter position, and perhaps in part explaining its popularity is the famous quote from the communist manifesto, "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie"(Marx, 1978).

The writings of Max Weber have been very influential in the formulation of many perspectives on the state, not only due to his discussions of the state, but his contribution to the discussions of bureaucracy, authority, and legitimacy.

Weber defined the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force, within a given territory" (Haralambos & Holborn, 2002, p.590). This identifies that the state consists of the government or legislature which passes laws, the bureaucracy or civil service which implements government decisions, the police who are responsible for law enforcement and the armed forces whose job it is to protect the state from external

threats (REFERENCE). Weber, like Marx, identified society as being characterised by conflicts over power and resources. Yet where Marx saw polarised class relations and economic issues at the centre of all social conflict, Weber developed a more complex, multi-dimensional view of society. Weber identified two factors associated with social stratification that Marx failed to recognise. Marx identified class but Weber put emphasis on status and party. By overlapping these three components Weber showed that there is a greater number of positions within society rather than the rigid, bi-polar model that Marx proposed.

Weber characterized the state as a structure based on the legitimized monopoly of physical coercion; a mixture of legal authority and bureaucracy. He argued that states are compulsory associations claiming control over territories and the people within them (Weber, 1972). Stepan (1978) offers this quick summation of Weber's view on the state: "The state must be considered as more than 'the government'. It is the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive systems that attempt not only to structure relationships between civil society and public authority in a polity but also to structure many crucial relationships within civil society as well."