

How the state arose

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When Marxists speak of the state it is not in the sense that many in the U.S. are accustomed to; it is not in reference to, for instance, the state of New York, Ohio or California. What is meant is the repressive apparatus of the government.

Some may even confuse the government with the state, but the state is wielded by the government — which is part of the superstructure of capitalist or bourgeois society.

The state, simply, is the repressive apparatus of the government — the courts, the prisons, the police, and the military — stands to maintain the social relations as they are, to protect the owning and possessing few from the exploited and oppressed masses.

Has the state always existed? This question can partly be answered by posing another: Have there always been classes?

Examining history through the science of materialism is required to see the basis for the need of the state.

Human beings have existed on the Earth for hundreds of thousands of years, but the rule of the state has been for about the last 3,500 years or so. If one were to measure history by a yardstick, then the period of history where the state has existed would account for less than an inch.

For hundreds of thousands of years human beings lived in societies that had no state — no cops, no jails, no armies. This was the paleolithic era. Disputes were handled through social mediation and pressure. What conditions then produced the state?

How did the state arise from the older stateless societies?

The state first came into existence around 1550 BCE. Before that, societies existed communally, sharing as necessary because of scarcity. As production capability began to change, a surplus beyond what was necessary to survive from one day to the next was produced.

The surplus was hoarded and made the private property of a few, while the majority had no property. From this came the split of humanity into classes: the propertied and those who possessed no property.

An apparatus, the state, grew from antagonisms between the propertied and the non-propertied. The state existed then, in its earlier forms, as it does now — as specially trained and armed people who protect the interests of the few owners of wealth from the great majority who are impoverished.

It is from these early conditions that ancient slave society emerged, where human beings became property of the wealthy.

[su_quote cite="Frederick Engels" url="https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch09.htm"]The increase of production in all branches - cattle-raising, agriculture, domestic handicrafts - gave human labor-power the capacity to produce a larger product than was necessary for its maintenance. ... prisoners of war were turned into slaves. With its increase of the productivity of labor, and therefore of wealth, and its extension of the field of production, the first great social division of labor was bound, in the general historical conditions prevailing, to bring slavery in its train. From the first great social division of labor arose the first great cleavage of society into two classes: masters and slaves, exploiters and exploited.[/su_quote]

The state consisted then, as it basically does now, of groups of specially trained and

armed men, and was needed to protect the property and wealth of the few against the many who lived in poverty.

Even people themselves became property in the ancient slave societies. The Roman Empire of 2,000 years ago was a slave society. With a population of 100 million, 50 million were slaves. The slave-owning ruling class of Rome needed an army of thousands of soldiers whose primary tasks were to put down slave rebellions, like the famous rebellion led by Spartacus, and to conquer more territory.

The Roman Empire, a typical slave state, collapsed in Europe around 1,500 years ago. It was eventually replaced by the feudal state, where serfs toiled on land owned by feudal lords. Wealth was derived from serfs paying the great majority of what they produced to the feudal lords, keeping only a meager portion with which they could sustain themselves and their families. The armies of feudal society were kept and paid by the lords, who used them to suppress the serf uprisings.

Serfs were tried in the castle courtyard. We still use the word court today as a place for trial.

About 400 years ago, another class began to challenge the feudalists for power. This attack on the landed aristocrats came from the capitalist class, whose wealth was not based on land but on commerce and trade (and later on industry and banking). In one country after another, the capitalists overthrew the feudal states all over Europe in bloody civil wars. They set up states that served their needs in a way the feudal states could not.

The capitalist states that arose in Europe and later in the U.S. used vast armies to subdue the people of Asia, Africa, and the Americas in order to exploit them and their natural resources. By the beginning of the 20th Century, all the capitalist states had become imperialist.

Most people around the world had lived in societies with earlier formations of the state or where there existed no state at all, such as many of the peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean.

The imperialist nations of Europe and the U.S. have developed the state to huge proportions, building vast armies with enormous budgets and high-tech weaponry that can destroy whole cities.

The state and its reason for existence is more apparent as more and more oppressed and exploited people in the U.S. and around the world fight back against the conditions imposed upon them.

Additional reading

- [The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#) - by Frederick Engels

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- Return to [What is Marxism?](#)