

Brooklyn Institute for Social Research
Spring 2019
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Marxism and the State

Although Karl Marx never formulated a systematic theory of the state to accompany his analysis of social relations under capitalism, the question of political power has been at the forefront of Marxism. Indeed, some of the major controversies in the history of Marxist thought have been about how the state and its role in capitalist societies can best be understood. In this course, we will investigate a number of attempts to develop a distinctly Marxist political theory of the state. Among the texts we'll examine are contributions by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Althusser, Miliband, Balibar, and Poulantzas. Along the way, we will consider questions such as: How do material social relations influence the forms taken by political institutions? What role do law and ideological institutions play in the reproduction of capitalism? How does the state affect revolutionary and reformist political strategies? What is the dictatorship of the proletariat and how does it figure in the transition from capitalism to socialism and communism? Examining these questions through one of the most influential traditions of modern social thought will shed light on the relationship between political power, social power, and political economy, which remains a pressing topic to this day.

Format and Requirements

This course is a seminar! The only basic requirements are completing the reading assignments, coming to our meetings, and participating in our discussion.

I have assigned a set of readings intended to be manageable for people who are not full-time students, aiming for less than 100 pages per week. Some of them will be more difficult than others; if you have trouble with something, make a note and post your thoughts and questions on our Google Group and we will work through these parts together in class. I will direct the discussion, and do my best to answer your questions, but this class is a collaborative effort and it will only benefit from your ongoing participation and engagement.

All readings can be downloaded from Dropbox.

I have set up a class Google group that we can use for communication. Each week, I will use this feature to post questions and things to pay attention to in the readings. These will be meant as reading guides, and you do not have to respond to any of the questions I pose. But don't shy away from posting your own excerpts from the readings—anything you find interesting, problematic, or just difficult to wrap your mind around. You should also feel free to ask questions and to respond to each other's posts. During our meetings, we will use these conversations as launching points or incorporate them into our discussion.

Feel free to email me if you would like to share any thoughts, comments, questions, or would like suggestions for additional readings.

March 19

- Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, p. 1-27
- Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Sections I, III, IV, VII: p. 31-40, 52-76, 111-122
- Marx, *The Civil War in France*, p. 23-31; Engels' 1891 Postscript, p. 40-43
- Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Ch. 31 "The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist" p. 533-540

March 26

- Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Ch. 9, p. 202-217
- Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*, Ch. 4 "Capitalism and the State", Ch. 8 "Conquest of Political Power"
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/index.htm>
- Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, Ch. 1 "Class Society and the State", Ch. 5 "The Economic Basis of the Withering Away of the State"
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>

April 2

- Gramsci, "State and Civil Society" (In *Prison Notebooks*) p. 229-239, 242-247, 257-264, 267-270
- Gramsci, "The Modern Prince" (In *Prison Notebooks*) p. 147-157, 175-190
- Althusser, "The State" (in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*) p. 70-93

April 9

- Miliband, *Marxism and Politics*, p. 66-117
- Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, p. 66-77
- Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, p. 127-145, 251-265
- Miliband, "Marx and the State", p. 278-297 (optional)