



Debates and Reflections on the Nature of the State: An Exploration Based on Marxist Theory of the State

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Abstract. The traditional Marxist theory of the nature of the state holds that the state is a tool of class domination. With the development of capitalist and socialist countries, Western scholars have questioned the Marxist theory of the state's nature, arguing that the nature of the state can be supra-class. In China, some scholars have also reflected on and reinterpreted the Marxist theory of the state's nature, suggesting that the state's essence is a public power that transcends society. This paper aims to engage in a discussion with the supra-class theory through literature analysis and historical research, combining the traditional Marxist theory of the state's nature with the emerging theory of public power, in order to explore a new interpretation of the concept of the nature of the state in the new stage of human social historical development.

Keywords: Nature of the State; Marxism; Public Power; Class Rule

1 Introduction

In traditional Marxist theory of the state, the state arises from class struggle and exists and develops as a tool of class domination. In contrast, some Western scholars argue that the nature of the state is a supra-class social organization, a "proxy" for the entire society's interests. Even if the state does not possess a supra-class nature at its inception, with the expansion and strengthening of public power, the state's independence will inevitably increase, ultimately becoming a supra-class entity. In response to this new debate, some scholars in China have also reflected on and reinterpreted the traditional Marxist theory of the state, proposing that in contemporary socialist states, the nature of the state is no longer a machine for class oppression, but rather a public power that transcends society.

In the new historical stage, it is both possible and necessary to innovate and develop the traditional Marxist theory of the nature of the state in a way that aligns with reality. Therefore, this paper primarily relies on literature review and historical research methods to summarize and compare several mainstream viewpoints in both Chinese and Western academic circles. By integrating the historical practice and current situation of state development, the paper attempts to combine the traditional Marxist theory of the nature of the state with the emerging theory of public power, responding to the ongoing

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debate on the nature of the state. As a result, the nature of the state is no longer confined to the political realm but is a unity of politics and society, a dialectical unity of a tool of class domination and independent public power.

2 The Mainstream Understanding in Marxist Theoretical Circles

Regarding the origin of the state, the mainstream understanding in Marxist theoretical circles in China inherits the relevant theories of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. It asserts that the emergence, development, and demise of the state are always linked to class struggle. From the perspective of class analysis, the essence of the state is the tool of class rule.

Engels, in his discussion on the origin of the state, proposed that when society's irresolvable internal contradictions split into irreconcilable opposites, forming classes that cannot overcome class contradictions, there arises "a power that ostensibly stands above society"[1] to establish regulations and mediate conflicts, thus forming the state. Lenin, inheriting Engels' theory, argued that "the state is the product of irreconcilable class contradictions"[2], and that "the state is the tool of the exploiting and oppressed classes"[2]. In *On the State*, Lenin further stated: "The state is the machine that maintains one class's domination over another"[3].

"Up until now, every society in which class struggle is in motion has required the state, that is, an organization of the exploiting class to maintain its external conditions of production, especially through the use of violence to keep the exploited class under the oppressive conditions dictated by the existing mode of production"[2]. The state originates from the need to intensify class contradictions and plays the role of maintaining the ruling class's dominant position and exploiting the subordinate class in class societies.

Based on this, although the specific expressions in the works or textbooks of mainstream scholars in China may differ, the core ideas are essentially consistent with Lenin's doctrine.

Scholars such as Xiao Qian and others, in *Principles of Materialist Dialectics*, state: "In essence, the state is always the tool of class rule and class oppression, a violent machine by which one class suppresses another"[4]. Liu Yue'e and other scholars argue: "The essence of the state is the political tool by which the economically dominant class imposes its will as the state will and demands absolute obedience from other classes"[5]. In scholarly research also stated that "the essence of the state is the organ of class rule"[6].

It is evident that in the mainstream theory, the essence of the state originates from its political nature, closely linked to class struggle and class contradictions. The state is a tool for class rule and class oppression.

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3 Doubts and New Reflections on Traditional Theories of the State's Essence

3.1 Criticism of the Traditional Marxist Theory of the State's Essence by Western Scholars

3.1.1 The State May Become an Independent Ruling Power, Unaffected by Any Class.

In his discussion on the nature of the state, Engels mentioned that the state is "a power that ostensibly stands above society"[1]. As a tool of class rule, the state holds the power to manage public affairs. This public power does not belong to any individual or group, yet its scope covers the entire society.

However, American scholar Robert Daniels, critiquing Lenin's *State and Revolution*, raised doubts about the assertion that "the state is a tool of class rule." Daniels argued that while the ruling class can initially use the state as a tool to oppress the subordinate class, as class struggle intensifies and repression escalates, the power of the state continuously increases. With the development of external wars, the state's independence grows, eventually reaching a point "sufficient to engulf the entire society," meaning that state power will no longer be influenced by any class, including the ruling class[7].

French philosopher Jacques Texier, on the other hand, argued that in relation to society as a whole, the state remains subordinate and its power will not, in turn, engulf the entire society. However, in relation to the classes, when the forces of different classes are evenly matched, the state may truly become independent from all classes, with its power no longer controlled or influenced by any particular class[8]. In other words, to some extent, both Texier and Daniels raised a shared criticism: under certain conditions, the power of the state may be unaffected by any class, thereby challenging the notion that "the state is a tool of class rule."

3.1.2 The Essence of the State Is Supraclass.

Some Western scholars directly overturn the traditional Marxist theory of the state's essence, proposing that the essence of the state is a supraclass social organization.

Former British Labour Party Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald argued that "the state is a political entity formed by various independent nations, a social organization that achieves the common will through political means... Therefore, the state must be seen as an organism"[9]. Bernstein further pointed out that the state is a "proxy," "a form of collective living, an administrative body whose social-political nature changes as its social content changes"[9]. After universal suffrage was achieved, he introduced the concept of the "people's state" to argue for the supraclass nature of the state, asserting that "the people's state is not a tool of the upper classes, but one that acquires its own nature due to the majority of people having equal voting rights"[9].

3.2 New Reflections on the Traditional Theory of the State's Essence in Domestic Theoretical Circles

3.2.1 The Essence of the State Is Public Power That Stands Above Society.

Some scholars argue that the essence of the socialist state is no longer a machine of class oppression, but public power that stands above society[10]. This argument is based on the changes in social history, suggesting that Marx and Engels' theory on the essence of the state is incomplete and should be developed in light of current circumstances.

Scholar Chen Qing believes that when Marx, Engels, and Lenin discussed the "state as a machine of oppression," their definition of the "state" was clearly targeted and limited. In his later years, Engels further stated: "No matter how good the state is, it is merely a scourge inherited by the proletariat after winning in the struggle for class rule", implying that the state, relative to the proletariat, is a "scourge," meaning that certain aspects of the state are incompatible with the development needs of the proletariat. Lenin clarified further, stating, "What exists under capitalism is the state in its original sense, a special machine for suppressing one class by another, a machine for the few to oppress the majority"[2], and "The state is based on private ownership"[3]. Thus, "the state in its original sense" refers primarily to "the exploiting class state built on the foundation of private property"[11], which does not include states like today's China, which is based on public ownership. Even though the Paris Commune established a new type of state that abolished the exploiting class, Lenin saw this proletarian state as a temporary entity. Once socialism is achieved and there are no class forces to suppress, the political nature of the state would cease to exist, and the state as an instrument of oppression would become redundant and fade away.

However, in the current new historical development stage, China, as a socialist state based on public ownership, continues to exist stably and will remain stable for the long term, thus breaking through the two traditional definitions of the state. From the perspective of China's reality, the state's repressive functions have shifted to a secondary role, subordinated to economic development, and the function of dictatorship no longer reflects the essential attributes of the state. Therefore, other factors should permeate the entire process of the state's emergence, development, and demise, representing the true essence of the state. Some scholars believe this factor should be "public power that stands above society."

Engels once stated: "Society establishes an institution to protect its common interests from internal and external infringements. This institution is the state power" [12]. It is precisely because of the process by which public power arises and stands above society that this public power gradually acquires various functions, including social management duties as well as political functions such as internal class repression, external aggression, and defense. Therefore, the class nature of the state and its repressive nature are gradually formed on the basis of public power. It is public power, rather than class repression, that exists throughout all historical processes of every state.

Additionally, since public power alone cannot distinguish the state from the clan, Engels pointed out that one important difference between the state and the old clan organization is that the state's public power "is no longer directly the residents

organized as armed forces", meaning that the public power of the state is no longer owned by the organized residents, but is separated from the people, "independent from and standing above society"[12].

Thus, the essence of the state is public power that stands above society.

3.2.2 The Essence of the State Is the Unity of Class Rule and Public Power.

Some scholars advocate combining the traditional Marxist theory of the state's essence with the theory that the essence of the state is public power that stands above society. They argue that class rule and public power independent of society are two aspects of the state's essence and are dialectically unified.

Firstly, scholars emphasize the importance of independent public power to the essence of the state. "The state is the formal representative of the entire society, the concentrated expression of society in a tangible organization"[13]. If the state's nature as holding public power is ignored, it becomes impossible to explain how the state exercises class oppression and how it realistically becomes a tool of class rule.

At the same time, they argue that viewing independent public power as the essence of the state tends to lean toward a supraclass nature, neglecting the relativity of public power's "independence." Marx once wrote, "The state's apparently supreme and independent existence is, after all, only superficial"[14]. Independent public power is relative to all members of society; it stands apart from individuals and covers the entire social body, appearing to stand above society. However, from a class perspective, the emergence and operation of state power still rely on a certain section of the population, and in class society, it manifests as the state using public power to maintain social production and life in a manner that benefits the ruling class, rather than equally representing the interests of all classes. Even in today's China, where public power operates on behalf of the broad masses, it still maintains a dictatorship over certain enemies. Therefore, the essence of the state is not a supraclass entity.

Thus, in the state, "sociality and class nature are dialectically unified"[15].

4 The Nature of the State Is the Unity of Class Domination and Public Power

Firstly, in response to the doubts raised by Western scholars, the author concludes several rebuttals after reflection: ①Daniels and Texier argue that, under certain circumstances, the state may become an independent ruling force, unaffected by any class influence. This assertion has an obvious flaw, which is the neglect of the fact that state power always relies on a certain group. The operation of state power is based on the interests of the ruling class and is always controlled by and serves the ruling class. Daniels' statement that "as class struggle and governmental wars progress, state power will gradually be cultivated to the point of engulfing society" fails to recognize the fundamental reason behind the state's internal class repression and external wars, which lies in the ruling class using state functions to serve its own interests. Therefore, what is "engulfed" is not society as a whole, but only the exploited class, which is further oppressed and enslaved[16]. Even in a situation where the two classes are evenly

matched, state power may seem independent of both, but due to the stalemate in class struggle, state power will not expand enough to engulf society. Eventually, one class will prevail, and state power will once again depend on that class. ②As for the assertion that "the essence of the state is supra-class," one can observe a conceptual sleight of hand in the arguments of its proponents, particularly among bourgeois politicians. Universal suffrage is a fundamental right of the people, and the realization of universal suffrage does not mean that all state power operates equally to benefit each individual. If it cannot equally represent the interests of all classes, then the idea of a supra-class "people's state" is naturally an empty talk.

As for the debate in the domestic academic community, the author believes that, in the new social and historical stage, facing new realities, the traditional Marxist theory of the state's essence needs to be innovated in conjunction with actual conditions to better guide the proletarian cause in China and the world[17][18].

However, the author believes that simply viewing independent public power as the essence of the state is also one-sided. Most scholars who put forward this viewpoint base it on the reality of China, pointing out that China's current central task is economic development, rather than politically driven class repression. Therefore, the political function of class repression is no longer a determining factor in the essence of the state. But the author argues that acknowledging the current focus on economic development in China, where society is centered on harmony and social production and life are developing healthily, does not mean that class rule no longer exists in China. Even though the Communist Party represents the interests of the working class and the broadest masses, it cannot replace the interests of the working class with an abstract "national interest." Denying that class repression is a component of the state's essence would be to deny the existence of class rule in Chinese society, making the Communist Party a "party of all people," which deviates from the social reality.

Therefore, the correct enrichment of Marxist theory on the essence of the state lies in combining the state's political nature with its social nature, and dialectically uniting class repression with independent public power.

5 Conclusion

After a thorough analysis and discussion of the traditional Marxist theory of the nature of the state, as well as the modern supra-class theory and public power theory, the author believes that the nature of the state is the dialectical unity of class domination and public power. In the current new stage of historical development, taking China as an example, the functions of the state have undergone a transformation. The repressive function can no longer independently and comprehensively reflect the nature of the state, but rather is subordinate to the central task of economic construction. The state exists and develops beyond the need for class repression. However, this does not mean that the political and class nature of the state has disappeared. On the contrary, the class nature and the nature of public power are interdependent and interact with each other. The public power function of the state plays an important role in maintaining social order and promoting economic development, while class domination is reflected in the

operation and decision-making of state power, which consistently safeguards the interests of the ruling class.

In the complex process of human social history, the development of the state at different historical stages is equally complex and dynamic. Therefore, the nature of the state should not continue to be simplified as a single tool of class domination or supra-class public power, but rather as an organic combination of both. Only with such an understanding can we better grasp the nature of the state and its development, thereby providing new insights for the state and society building endeavors in China and the world.

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