

Rob Hunter, Rafael Khachaturian and Eva Nanopoulos (eds), *Marxism and the Capitalist State: Towards a New Debate*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. ISBN: 978-3-031-36166-1 (cloth); ISBN: 978-3-031-36169-2 (paper); ISBN: 978-3-031-36167-8

Criticism of the state has evolved in waves since Marx's scattered writings commenced a tradition of commentary on the political form of capitalist social relations. The French and Haitian Revolutions, 1848's Springtime of the Peoples, Bonapartism, the Paris Commune, European nation-states' emergence from the tatters of Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires, communism in one country, fascism's peculiar relation to state and capital, decolonization and revolutionary nationalism, post-colonial developmentalism and delinking, European unification, monetarism—each world-historical process has provoked vibrant debate over the essence, appearance, form, necessity, contingency, and (relative) autonomy of the capitalist state. Marx's own writings on the subject, as many a Marxologist has made clear, are partial at best and unevenly posed across political and journalistic writings like the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Civil War in France*, and his journalistic writings and letters on the American Civil War.

Marx famously intended to write a book on the state once he was through with *Capital*; yet the six-part series, which would have included works on landed property and wage labor, never came to be. Instead, generation after generation of Marxists have attempted to derive the logic, shape, or function of the state from Marx's unfinished writings or, in a parallel move, abandoned Marx to develop a *Marxish* theory of the state unburdened by his unfinished thought.

Marxism and the Capitalist State: Towards a New Debate, edited by Rob Hunter, Rafael Khachaturian and Eva Nanopoulos, takes up critique of the capitalist state with an eye towards producing theory apt for our moment of crisis. It builds on Marx's unfinished writings on the state and takes a catholic approach to debates that have ensued since. Contributors include sociologists, political theorists, legal scholars, historians, and economists, yet as the title denotes, the collection is written and organized from the refreshingly anti-disciplinary perspective of a critical Marxism. It is, likewise, written from the perspective of the abolition of both state and

capital, or as Chris O’Kane argues in its penultimate chapter, the “critique of the perpetuation of capitalist society as permanent class struggle” (p.248).

Hunter, Khachaturian and Nanopoulos identify two distinct approaches to Marxist state theory—loosely grouped as the “relative autonomy” and “social form” schools—but the collection moves fluidly through Marx’s own writings, those of Engels, and a number of both Marxian and quasi-Marxian analytics. “Rather than a comprehensive survey of the capitalist state in all of its determinations and contradictions,” the editors write, “this volume is both a provocation and an invitation—to debate, to re-examinations, and to the production and refinement of Marxist state theory and social theory more broadly” (p.3). The collection is, accordingly, less a sequel to *State and Capital: A Marxist Debate* (Holloway and Picciotto 1978), *The State Debate* (Clarke 1991), or *Paradigm Lost: State Theory Reconsidered* (Aronowitz and Bratsis 2002) than it is an immanent critique of prior debates aimed at the contemporary interregnum.

Our present crisis is recognized in a range of processes: “inter-state violence, war, and the bloody hardening of borders for persons (but not capital); global economic turmoil and cascading financial shocks; and globally-but-unevenly distributed environmental devastation and ecological breakdown” (p.1-2). The volume’s editors argue that the state is undertheorized in extant considerations on these processes but that, on the other hand, a renewal of Marxist theory and praxis provides a font of critical heuristics to address this aporia. It is thus an “age of disaster” that *Marxism and the Capitalist State* addresses, yet one with a latent potential to grasp the “state as an essential feature of capitalist society” (p.2).

The 12 contributors to the volume address this couplet of theory and crisis from an impressive range of disciplinary, theoretical, and political positions. The “relative autonomy” / “social form” cleavage structures certain aspects of the debate, yet unlike the previously mentioned collected volumes, *Marxism and the Capitalist State* is not in-and-of-itself concerned with the development, derivation, or reconstruction of a Marxist state theory. This is an odd judgment for a volume so evidently about Marxism *and* the state, yet its bulk, whether on its own terms or not, succeeds more as a polymorphic unraveling of difference, violence, domination, social in(cohesion), and crisis than as a sequel to prior state debates.

With the exception of contributions from Hunter and O’Kane—grouped at the end of the volume—questions central to prior state debates are approached only obliquely in *Marxism and the Capitalist State*. These include the question of why class domination does not appear as the direct subordination of one part of the population by another but rather takes on the “form of official class domination” (Pashukanis 2002 [1924]); how different states can be understood as a unity of the separate, separate instances of a unity, or as a multiplicity (Holloway 1994); and whether the reproduction of capital necessitates a state or, on the other hand, if it is in principle self-reproducing (Clarke 1991). While addressed in the context of contemporary states, the bulk of *Marxism and the Capitalist State* does not consciously seek to develop these questions at a hermeneutic level.

Instead, this latest iteration of state theory takes up a series of knotty problematics: the capacity, willingness, and possibility of state action to address climate change (Alyssa Battistoni); the dissolution of the state’s popular-reproductive role in mediating accumulation (Khachaturian); the potential in, and non-contiguity of, productive forces and bourgeois institutional state forms (Dimitrios Kivotidis); the relative autonomy of monetary policy qua executive power (Stephen Maher and Scott M. Aquanno); the military’s role in the capitalist state and the contradictory class content of soldiers (Jasmine Chorley-Schultz); the tactical possibilities of a “war-emergency paradigm” for revolutionary politics (Nanopoulos); the place of professional women in repressive state institutions (Kirstin Munro); and the “social murder” immanent to capital’s quotidian reproduction (Nate Holdren). These incisive critiques are by-and-large concerned with the United States and its sphere of influence—all contributors live and teach in the US, Canada, or the United Kingdom—yet address a plethora of issues regarding the reproduction of capitalist society writ large.

Particularly fruitful are three essays at the center of *Marxism and the Capitalist State* that conceptualize how the state mediates coercion—compulsion, violence, and ideology. Munro, an economist who has developed a comprehensive critique of social reproduction theory (SRT) in recent years, contests the notion that gendered labor amounts to a “life-making” activity in surplus of capital’s accumulative imperative. Instead, Munro locates a gendered administration of the state wherein those in “occupations related to the reproduction of labour power—

disproportionately women—are tasked with carrying out the commands of the state and enforcing its rules” (p.175). “They decide,” Munro continues, “who receives healthcare and who is dismissed as a malingerer or drug-seeker; who is prioritized for housing, food, and cash benefits, and who has their children seized by the state; who is provided with educational support services for learning difficulties and who is punished with detention, expulsion from school, or even arrest by a ‘School Resource Officer’.” The state’s “social provisioning functions”, it follows, cannot possibly be disarticulated from its violent and repressive functions.

Quotidian aspects of capital’s day-to-day reproduction are also taken up by Holdren. In its striving to ascertain the general conditions of accumulation, capital produces, and subsequently seeks to contain, a scourge of what Engels coined as “social murder”. Outside of the workplace, “social murder” is manifest in dilapidated housing, polluted air, substandard food, and non-existent public health infrastructure; inside waged environs, it is the accidents, hazards, and occupational illnesses that are its primary medium. Like those over the wage, “conflicts over social murder are generally likely to be either compatible with the existing set of forms of institutionalized class domination or to become struggles for a reorganization of the current forms of institutionalized class domination” (p.204). Because “capitalism kills”, and the state is “a force for the organization, reorganization, and persistence of social murder” (p.205), a revolutionary politics must situate social murder within the totality of capitalism’s relations of class domination.

Chorley-Schulz takes up the topic of soldiers and the military through a novel reading of “cooperation” in Marx. For Chorley-Schulz, soldiers are not productive of surplus value, yet like the capitalist mode of production writ large, the military “requires a mass of people working cooperatively ... alienated from their means of production” (p.128). Soldiers tend to be recruited from peasant and proletarian class fractions as “human material”, a notion also derived from Engels, at which point they are socially formed into an organized mass. Military work can, accordingly, be framed as a quasi-service labor and, while not productive in-itself, does reproduce logics of cooperation and, in conjunction with tendential capitalist crises, “can act as a sponge to absorb, for a time, lumpen elements of the economy” (p.133). What this means for communist strategy remains unclear; but Chorley-Schulz demystifies and historicizes the

processes that foment, and potentially decompose, the military as an organized force of state power.

All three scholars approach what Holloway and Picciotto (1977: 95) suggested, in a previous instance of state debate, as the “form of capital’s crisis-ridden struggle to accumulate”. The contradiction-laden character masks of gendered administration, management of social murder, and military labor are all instances of the capitalist state’s “concentrated force of social order” (Bonefeld 2016: 184), a social order reproduced as much through top-down violence and compulsion as the naturalization of everyday injury. Holdren doesn’t waste words in arguing that, when apprehended solely through one lens or mode of struggle, “conflicts over social murder are generally likely to be either compatible with the existing set of forms of institutionalized class domination or to become struggles for a reorganization of the current forms of institutionalized class domination” (p.204). At its strongest point, then, *Marxism and the Capitalist State* insists on a critical theory of capitalist totality and, specifically, the state as mediation of violent, ideological, and impersonal domination.

What, then, are we to make of the volume’s two contributions that fit more snugly in the highly abstract mode of past debates? Or rather, those that urge a critical theory of capitalist totality and its moving contradiction? Hunter frames the state as an “essential moment of a contradictory totality of historically specific categories—categories that appear to be natural and universal but are actually non-identical with the reality upon which those categories are imposed” (p.254). His answer to Pashukanis’ question regarding the mediation of class domination is lucid: the state reproduces a “double freedom” of direct producers, not merely the formal reproduction of primitive accumulation’s originary separation, but also the formal equality of buyer and seller in the marketplace. Society is doubled and separated into the formal equalities of “free” labor and competition; yet, for Hunter, it is the apparent distinction of state and civil society that is necessary to reproduce class and abstract social domination. The state shares a “mutuality” with capitalism’s other social forms, and is neither part of nor wholly subsumed by capital, yet it is a mistake to understand it as an autonomous, relative or otherwise, site of political struggle.

The non-identity of capitalist categories and social life are also taken up by O’Kane in a “negative-dialectical critique of the state’s role in the reproduction of the negative totality of capitalist society” (p.232). Two extant conceptions of the state—revolutionary crisis theories associated with Paul Mattick Sr. and Robert Brenner, and democratic socialist theories derived from Luxemburg, Gramsci, Poulantzas, and others—are critiqued for their transhistorical conception of “needs” and the faulty emancipatory strategies they thus employ. These two theories are opposite sides of the same coin: “the immediate revolutionary self-abolition of the proletariat and the communization of society is opposed by a theory of building class power and the long march through institutions” (p.235). O’Kane contends instead that “needs” are constituted alongside economy, state, and class as aspects of the contradictory reproduction of capitalist society. Depoliticization, absorption, incorporation, counter-insurgency, and what Johannes Agnoli dubbed “stratification” are not contingent or epiphenomenal to class struggle over the state but its essential modes; it follows that critique must be strictly negative, neither a location of needs, a particular field of struggle, nor a historical subject fit for emancipation.

For O’Kane, this “negative emancipatory approach is already mirrored in constellations of movements and moments that reject the reified authority of capitalist society” (p.249); yet this “constellation of movements” remains opaque. How are they constituted through the negative totality of capitalist domination? Do the particular valences of uneven development, racialization, and climate disaster mediate, or inhibit, the “awakening of a global subject” evoked by O’Kane? Hunter, likewise, dispenses with the notion that the state can be a counterbalance or refuge from the misery of capitalist society and notes that struggle reduced to parliamentary politics is nothing but a shell game of depoliticization. Rather than a “constellation of movements”, Hunter evokes collective decision-making, production validated through planning instead of exchange, and an individual freedom premised in the freedom of all (p.270-271). Purposive, collective planning is thus contrasted to the “affirmation of fetishized conceptions of law or the state” found in democratic socialist movements (p.270); even so, how does “planning” negate the seriality of the state–civil society divide and the multitudinous organizational forms that trod zombie-like out of the 20th century? Or rather, how does “planning” overcome the

partiality and depoliticization of point-of-production struggles on the one hand, and struggles over the state on the other?

Despite the seemingly aporetic aspects of struggle these approaches suggest, both O’Kane and Hunter grasp the necessary object of critique: capitalist society in its totality. This dovetails with the analyses levered by Munro, Holdren, and Chorley-Schultz who neither exceptionalize nor ignore the quotidian reproduction of workplace, urban form, family, civil administration, and military. The answer to Pashukanis’ agenda-setting question is thus clear: direct class domination is sublated in the mutely compelled, ideological, and violent social forms that reproduce the originary separation of primitive accumulation and subtend the contradictory reproduction of capitalist totality. On the other hand, the “concrete implications for our theory of the state and its role in transition to socialism” (p.25), sought by the editors of *Marxism and the Capitalist State*, remains an open question that can’t merely be resolved by moving from its negative/abstract form to explication of its positive/concrete functions or institutions. Critique of the capitalist state as an instance of the generalized form of class domination requires attention to why movements against the state—whether the George Floyd Rebellion, waves of public sector strikes in the United States, or the subway fare protests that broke out in Chile in 2019—appear as such despite the limits of their state-locus. Only then can the work of translation between “constellations of movements and moments” and the purposive activity of “planning” commence.

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