

The Idea of State: Understanding the Liberal and Marxist Perspective

Dr. Gautam Chandra Roy

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

B. N. College (Autonomous), Dhubri, Assam

Abstract

State is a political institution. Since the period of Greek city-states and the Roman Republics, state has remained been one of the core areas in traditional political theory. As a result of the emergence of liberalism and subsequently the Marxist political philosophy in Europe, the study on state received renewed interests among scholars. The liberals and the Marxists tried to explain state in their own perspectives. In this context, this article seeks to understand the concept of state considering the liberal and Marxist perspective. It further intends to explore how the two perspectives have impacted the understanding of state.

Date of Submission: 13-02-2025

Date of acceptance: 28-02-2025

I. Introduction

State is a form of political association within a particular territory. It refers to a politically organised community under one independent government within a definite territory and subject to no outside control' (). The primary objective of state is to ensure social, political, economic and cultural security of its population. One of the important functions of the state, therefore, is to address socio-economic backwardness like poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, under-development etc. Considering its paramount importance in one's life, Leon Trotsky has opined that, "you may not be interested in the state, but the state is certainly interested in you" (Das 2012: 171 in Bhargava and Acharya (ed.).

State has remained been one of the primary areas of discussion in traditional political theory since the period of ancient Greek city-states and the Roman Republics. However, renewed interests grew up among scholars as a result of the emergence of liberalism in Europe since 16th century. In needs to be pointed here out that, the contemporary concept of state owes its origin to Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). In his book – *The Prince* published in 1513, he put forwarded the idea of "the power which has authority over men" which established that power is an essential element of state. In addition, the Marxist political philosophy which emerged during 19th century as a response to the liberalism and the principle of *laissez-faire* gave a new direction by highlighting class perspective in understanding state. In this context, this article seeks to understand the concept of state considering the liberal and Marxist perspective. It further intends to explore how the two perspectives have impacted the understanding of state.

Understanding State

State has often been considered as a very confusing concept. It is due to synonymous use of state with other concepts like government, nation-state or country. In some cases, state is compared with political regime or economic system. Moreover, over the years, the concept, nature and functions of state have undergone considerable changes due to numerous politico-historical developments. Therefore, a precise understanding of state is very necessary before we delve into its different perspectives.

Since the period of ancient Greek city-states, scholars have tried to define state in different ways. Father of Political Science, Aristotle (384-322 BC) defined state as a "union of families and villages having for its end perfect and self-sufficient life". His definition of state corroborates to idea and functioning of the Greek city-states which was small in size. The English political theorist and economist, Harold J. Laski (1893-1950) in his book – *An Introduction to Politics* defines state as a "territorial society divided into government and subjects claiming, within its allotted physical area, supremacy over all other institutions". R. M. MacIver (1882-1970), in his work *The Modern State* (1926), sought to distinguish the state from other kinds of associations. According to him, state embraces the whole of people in a specific territory and it has the special function of maintaining social order. It performs this function through its agent, the government "which speaks with the voice of law". Apart from these, there are numerous definitions of state put forwarded by different scholars.

Emergence of the liberalism and the Marxian political philosophy was marked by renewed interests in the study of state. John Locke (1632-1704) who was considered as the father of liberalism advocated the social contract theory of state which was a departure from the medieval notion of Divine origin theory. Subsequently, the Marxist theory described state from class perspective which brought revolutionary changes. According to Marxism, state is an instrument of exploitation controlled by the ruling class in a capitalist mode of production. Therefore, different schools of thought emerged over the years to understand how state as an institution developed. In this regard, we can refer to C. L. Wayper (1977) who has classified three broad groups. These include – state as a machine (Hobbes and Locke), state as an organism (Rousseau, Hegel and Green) and state as a class (Marx and Lenin) (Ramaswamy 2013: 92). Here, let us briefly discuss the liberal and Marxist perspectives.

Liberal Perspective of State

The liberal perspective which is based on the principles of liberalism has been one of the most discussed concepts to study the nature of state. It is also known as liberal-individualist approach. As mentioned earlier, the idea of liberalism was advocated by John Locke, the 17th century English political philosopher. Locke put forward three principles of liberalism – right to life, liberty and private property which were considered as natural rights. The liberal philosophy is based on the principles of individual freedom, freedom of choice, non-interference and limited power of the state. According to the liberal perspective, consent should be the basis of state not force. Locke opposed the Hobbesian conception of state and rejected his idea of ‘political absolutism’ – an offshoot of the Divine Right theory. Locke also questioned the indivisible sovereign public power of state. However, it needs to be pointed out that, the foundation stone of the liberal theory was laid down by Hobbes. But, his liberal philosophy, critics suggest, contains some illiberal elements (in Ramaswamy 2013: 93).

Since its emergence, the liberal philosophy underwent various changes due to the socio-political developments which took place in Europe. Moreover, contradictions within liberalism in relation to the nature of state led to its two broad divisions – classical and modern liberalism. While the classical liberals argued about non-interference of state; the modern liberals allowed the state to intervene. The idea of classical liberalism originated from the writings of the social contractualists – Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the utilitarians – Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, the social biologists – Herbert Spencer, and the classical Economists – Adam Smith (Sarmah 2011: 174 in Dutta (ed).

The classical liberalism examined the state from ‘mechanistic’ point of view which was the result of a ‘contract’. The mechanistic theory regarded the state as an ‘artificial contrivance’ or ‘instrument invented by men for their mutual benefit. According to them, state is not a natural institution. It is a product of the ‘will of society’ or ‘expression of common will’ (Gaubha 2009: 208). Apart from that, the policy of *laissez-faire* which implies ‘allow to do’ or ‘let people do as they choose’ was advocated by Adam Smith (1723-1790). It was an ‘individualistic ideology’ based on the policy of ‘non-intervention’ by the state in the economic activities of an individual. The French phrase *laissez-faire* considers the right to property of individuals as a precondition of liberty. It negates government’s intervention in individual’s life and considers the state as ‘necessary evil’. The policy restricted state’s presence only in terms of maintaining law and order, protection and preservation of individual rights. According to the classical liberals, “the state came into existence as a result of a contract for the sole purpose of preserving and protecting the natural rights of an individual’s life, liberty and property” (Mahajan 2009: 620). Therefore, state’s role should be minimal. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), James Mill (1773-1836) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1930) were other exponents of the *laissez-faire* policy.

On the other hand, the modern liberalism, a departure from the classical liberalism emphasises on the role of state in individual’s life. It emerged during the middle of the nineteenth century in Europe. The period was marked by acute poverty and severe economic inequality because of the concentration of the wealth in the hands of a few. It was during the turbulent period, intervention of the state was felt in order to address the issues of inequality and deprivation. In this regard, J. S. Mill (1806-1873), one of the most influential English philosopher and economist, redefined the nature of the state. Mill, the utilitarian, made a major departure from the classical liberals and divided the political and economic activities of the state. Mill is also known for the idea of constitutional and representative government. Based on socialist ideology, he advocated the concept of welfare state and argues that, “it was the duty of the state to take positive steps for the well-being of the poor. Compulsory education, limiting the right of inheritance, factory legislation, control of monopolies by the state etc. were some of the steps that the state can initiate in order to establish a welfare state” (ibid: 624-625). Apart from Mill, T.H. Green (1836-1882) and H. J. Laski (1893-1950) also advocated the principle of modern liberalism. However, the liberal perspective has been vehemently criticised by the Marxian scholars.

Marxist Perspective of State

The Marxist perspective, an offshoot of Marxism, has been one of the most discussed and debated concept in academic discourse. Marxism is a set of political and economic principles based on the philosophy of Karl Marx (1818-1884), the German born political philosopher and his friend Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). It emerged as a response to the classical liberal ideas or doctrine of *laissez-faire* and free market economy that created a tiny section of privileged class at the expense of huge number of working class resulting inequality and injustice. The Marxian scholars critically examines role of state. In contrast to liberal perspective, they consider state not as a natural entity but as a product of societal transformations, serving the interests of the ruling class. They consider the state as the ‘embodiment of social injustice’ which fulfill the interests of the bourgeois class. Therefore, they wanted to establish communism – a class less society by overthrowing the state. The Marxists advocated for a classless society through revolution by the proletariat class in order to end the oppressive conditions created by the capitalist mode of production.

According to the Marxian perspective, state is an instrument of exploitation controlled by the capitalist class. It explains the nature of state from class perspective and tried to provide an alternative view. According to the Marxian perspective, there are two classes of people in a society i.e. bourgeoisie and the proletariat or rich and the poor or have and the have-nots. The two classes are divided on the principle of who owns the means of production. While the former is small in number, the later is a large group of working people. Although small in number, the former is a dominant class and controls both political and economic resources. The Marxian perspective contends that, “the state is neither an expression of superior reason as the idealist believed, nor a manifestation of superior will as the liberal hold, but an instrument of class-power designed to sub-serve the interests of the dominant class at the expense of the dependent class” (Gaubia 2009: 242-244). In his book *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx perceived the state as a product serving the interests of the bourgeoisie. Similarly, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) which was published two years later, Marx and Engels observed that ‘modern state’s executive functions as a committee to oversee the collective interests of the bourgeoisie, representing the ruling capitalist class (in Debnath and Saha 2024: 1-2).

The Marxian perspective questions the mechanistic and organic view of state. According to the Marxian philosophy, “human history progresses through contradictions or dialects at the level of production of goods in society which they described as historical materialism or materialist conception of history” (Das 2012: 179 in Bhargava and Acharya (ed.). In contrast to the liberal ideas, therefore, the Marxist perspective put forwarded a different view point on the role and nature of state. The Marxian scholars refer state as a power structure destined to ensure order or the prevailing class system in society. The state, according to them, is a political structure, an organized power that permits the economically dominant class to be politically dominant and thereby guarantee the appropriation of the surplus.

The Marxian perspective on state, however, is not free from contestations. Scholars across disciplines have criticised the Marxian thought in later stages. Their argument on state as an instrument of exploitation of the ruling class has been criticised by liberal scholars. It needs to be pointed here out that, emergence of state as a modern political institution has been a complex process and witnessed numerous changes at different historical phases. Therefore, merely linking the origin of state with private property and instrument of dominant class seems problematic. Moreover, with the capitalist state assuming welfare characteristics, the class character of state has undergone major changes. Therefore, strict division of a society on the basis of two antagonistic classes on the basis of ownership of private property becomes irrelevant. Moreover, the Marxists have completely ignored the middle class – a formidable section of society. In addition, establishment of a classless society by withering away of the state seems to be a utopian idea since over the years state has become stronger than ever. Due to the limitations and internal contradictions within Marxian thought, neo-Marxism – a departure from the classical Marxian thought emerged in the later part of nineteenth century.

II. In Conclusion

Referring to the importance of state, Aristotle once observed that, state is necessary because it comes into existence originating in the bare needs of life and continuing in existence for the sake of good life. Therefore, state has been one of the most important concepts in political theory and the liberal and the Marxist perspective made significant contributions in understanding nature of the state. Here, it needs to mention that, the idea of state has undergone several changes since the period of the Greek city-states and the Roman Republics. As a result, it has become difficult to precisely understand the nature of state. Over the years, therefore, new perspectives like pluralistic theory, feminist theory, post-modern theory etc. have emerged in understanding the nature of state.

References

- [1]. Das, Swaha (2012): The State, in Bhargava & Ashok. (ed.). *Political Theory: An Introduction*, Pearson: New Delhi.
- [2]. Debnath, Kunal and Saha, Tanmoy (2024): The Marxist Perspective of State, *SSRN Electronic Journal*, DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4711122.
- [3]. Gauba, O. P. (2009). *An Introduction to Political Theory*, Macmillan: New Delhi.
- [4]. Mahajan, V. D. (2009). *Political Theory: Principles of Political Science*, S Chand & Company: New Delhi.
- [5]. Ramaswamy, Sushila. (2013), *Political Theory: Issues & Concepts*, Macmillan: Delhi
- [6]. Sarmah, Barnali (2011): State and Political Theory, in Dutta, Akhil, Ranjan. (ed.) *Political Theory: Issues, Concepts and Debates*, Arun Prakashan: Guwahati.