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Assess Marx's claim that the capitalist state is 'but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'.

In this essay, I argue that the capitalist state is **not** 'but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. Instead, I will argue that the 'cockpit is empty': there is no all-powerful elite consciously directing the state exclusively in favour of the bourgeoisie. Although I concede that modern democracies remain structurally biased towards capitalist interests – through mechanisms such as lobbying or campaign donations – they also serve and respond to the interests of the proletariat. First, I will explain Marx's claim that the state is only an institution to further the interests of the bourgeoisie by using his theory of historical materialism. Then I will argue that, while there is some truth to the structural bias Marx identifies, the modern democratic state also protects and promotes the interests of the proletariat through institutions such as welfare programs, trade unions, labour law, and progressive taxation. In doing so, I argue that the state functions more as an arena of contestation between class interests than as a mere tool of one class. Finally, I will address the counterargument that these institutions merely serve to conceal the state's allegiance to capital, and I will argue that this view is too conspiratorial and underestimates the complexity and pluralism of modern state institutions – that the 'cockpit is empty'.

The Bourgeois State

Marx's theory of historical materialism holds that the productive forces (e.g. labour and technology) determine economic structures and the legal and political superstructure. The capitalist state is the result of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, caused by changes in productive forces. Under feudalism, the dominant class was the aristocracy, and the state was organized to protect their interests with land ownership and hereditary privileges. But, as capitalist productive forces developed, the bourgeoisie emerged, challenging the aristocracy. And through bourgeois revolutions, modern liberal states replaced aristocratic states. The liberal-democratic state, with its emphasis on private property, legal equality, and market freedoms, arose to protect and institutionalize the interests of capital.

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1888), Marx argues that 'the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.' The state solves the collective action problem of the bourgeoisie (Jon Elster 1986, 143–53). It prevents the prisoner's dilemma faced by the bourgeoisie by maintaining the conditions necessary for capitalist production. Private property, contract law, and legal rights protect the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Met opmerkingen [OB1]: Fun essay, but not good for the exams.

For prelims, explain the Marxian ideas more: historical materialism etc.

This view is supported by empirical evidence showing how modern states favour the interests of the wealthy. Big corporations and economic elites have disproportionate influence over public policy, especially in systems with weak campaign finance regulations. In the United States, for example, vast sums of money are poured into elections by corporate donors, which results in tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation, and policies that favour capital accumulation. Foster (2025) argues that the US ruling class now functions as a cohesive governing bloc. With billionaire capitalists directly occupying key positions in the Trump cabinet.

Institutions that serve the proletariat

However, is it really true that law and politics are in the service of big capital? Then why are trade unions allowed, or why do multinationals not win all their court cases? Why are there redistributive welfare programs, progressive taxation, or worker protections? Especially in modern democracies, the people elect their representatives so if their interests are not protected, they can always vote for someone else.

One response could be that these concessions were forced onto the state by organized labour and political movements. However, this would undermine Marx's idea that the state is structurally unable to respond to proletarian interests, unless it also serves the capitalists. The fact that working-class mobilization can result in institutional changes suggests that the state is not just a tool of bourgeois rule but an arena in which different interests struggle for influence.

This pluralist idea that the state is an arena of competing interests seems to be true to at least a certain extent. While capitalists certainly have greater resources to influence the state, this does not mean the state is wholly subservient to their interests. The recent rise of European populism, for instance, can serve as an example of this. This has been somewhat of a democratizing force, getting more working-class people to vote (voter turnout has not been as high as it was in the last election in the Netherlands for a while). This shows that democracy allows for the competition of different interests from different parts of society.

As I said in the introduction, the 'cockpit is empty'. There is no 'deep state' which controls the government to benefit the interests of the wealthy. Instead, I think that most politicians *at least try* to do what is best for their country and the people, not just for the wealthy. However, this also means that the discrepancy between the influence of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat on politicians causes a structural bias towards the interests of the capitalists.

Against the conspiratorial view of the state

Some Marxist theorists have attempted to reconcile the state's apparent autonomy with Marx's view of class dominance. They argued that it is not in the interest of the elite for it to be too widely known that the state serves their interest and that this is why capitalists do not win all the court cases etcetera (Jonathan Wolff 2002, 58–61). The state needs at least the illusion of being neutral.

However, this interpretation borders on conspiracy. It implies a level of coherence and foresight among ruling elites which I do not think is realistic. The idea that capitalist elites strategically allow workers certain rights to conceal their dominance presupposes a degree of coordination and intentionality which seems incredibly unlikely. The metaphor of the 'empty cockpit' better captures this idea: rather than being steered by a conspiratorial elite, the state is shaped by structural forces and the interaction of various societal interests.

Marx himself also pointed out that there are situations where the capitalists do not rule the state directly, allowing for autonomous rule, as long as this does not interfere with the interests of the capitalists. This would make Marx's argument also compatible with the fact that the state also makes decisions on many other aspects of life such as cultural values like LGBTQ-rights. However, his theory that the state is just a tool for the bourgeoisie is insufficient for explaining the complexity and pluralism of modern governance.

In conclusion, while Marx was right to identify that the state has historically served the interests of the dominant class, it is too reductive to claim that the modern capitalist state is simply 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.' Historical materialism helps us understand how the state emerged in its current form, and why it tends to favour capital. Yet this does not entail that the state is wholly or necessarily an instrument of bourgeois rule. Modern democracies are shaped by competing interests, institutional constraints, and public participation. While the state often reflects structural biases that benefit the bourgeoisie, it also protects and advances working-class interests. The cockpit is not occupied by a singular elite. It is empty, or rather, it is filled with many competing hands, each trying to steer the state in a different direction.

Bibliography

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