Human nature and political organisation: Marxism

COMPETING VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE AND OF THE PURPOSE OF THE STATE

On ideology
Political ideologies, such as ‘liberalism’, ‘conservatism’, ‘Marxism’ and ‘anarchism’ can be studied and classified, mostly along the left-right spectrum, as providing plans of action for the creation of public political institutions, of seeking to justify various political arrangements, and as binding individuals to society. And for this reason, they are inevitably associated with power. Ideologies tend to be attached to social groups (but not necessarily classes). They provide a picture of society, one that simplifies the complexities of social reality, but this is necessary in order to provide guidance in making political decisions. Michael Freeden (Ideologies and Political Theory) argues that ideologies are different organizations of political concepts that give them particular meanings.

Political concepts have, through historical usage, become complex. Each has a number of components, e.g. ‘liberty’ includes ideas of absence of coercion, freedom from interference, opportunity, autonomy, rational choice, self-determination, and so on. Different societies have understood and used the concept of liberty in these different ways. There isn’t one ‘right’ interpretation of the concept of liberty, or even of each component. Philosophers and politicians will emphasize those aspects of liberty they feel are important.

This is part of the idea of ‘essential contestability’. Political concepts are essentially (not accidentally) ones that people disagree over for two reasons. First, because political concepts (e.g. equality, liberty, democracy, justice) are evaluative concepts, and people disagree over values. Second, because of the component structure. Each component has different possible descriptions, and people also disagree over which components the concept ‘ought’ to have.

Ideologies, then, are groups of such concepts, organized and understood in such a way as to make the interpretation of each concept support the others. Different ideologies make different political concepts central, e.g. liberalism starts from liberty, socialism from community. Each ideology ‘decontests’ concepts, which provides them with more specific meanings, which allows them to be used in guiding political decisions. It is difficult to know what to do on the basis that liberty is absence of constraint; but if you understand the type of constraint that should be absent as physical coercion by others rather than, say, individual addictions, this provides more guidance on the type of policies to pursue.

Ideologies often use theories of human nature to decontest political concepts. The particular interpretation of liberty or rights appeals to aspects of what it is to be human – which of our faculties and what aspects of our situation are important. What these arguments are and how they work is best seen through the examples we turn to now.
MARXISM

Theory of history
To understand Marx’s view of the state, we need to start at the beginning. First, we are alive, so we need material goods, such as food and shelter. But unlike other animals, we produce our ‘means of subsistence’. So, second, historically, the satisfaction of our original needs – how this is done and what it required, e.g. tools – leads to new needs, e.g. the means to produce those tools. Third, people create more people, they reproduce; and again, this occurs in particular ways, depending on circumstances. Finally, both production and reproduction are not only natural but also social activities, i.e. they involve certain ways, arrangements, ‘modes’ of co-operating with others.

Marx argues that the different modes of production and modes of co-operation, which he called the economic ‘sub-structure’, determine the nature of each society. These modes develop as society evolves, in particular, involving the division of labour, within the family, between mental and physical labour, between agriculture, commercial and industrial activity. These divisions of labour, and the corresponding modes of co-operation are basic facts. Social customs, laws, education, religion, culture, and the institutions of state, Marx called the ‘superstructure’. It constant evolves out of how people live their lives. To understand the state, we must understand how it is related to the modes of production in society.

The state, at any time, is based on the power relations between classes within society. The modern state is based on capitalism, with an inequality of power between the capitalists – those who own the means of production – and the workers. The workers get paid a salary by the capitalists, but they don’t own what they produce, and the capitalists keep the profit made by selling what is produced.

The power of the dominant class is supported in two ways: through the state as a set of institutions and through an ‘ideology’, a set of ideas about the state and society. Both protect the interests of the dominant class and seek to justify the distribution of power. First, in capitalism, those with capital have political influence. The state is biased, not a neutral umpire, nor an embodiment of inherited wisdom. Second, the ideas we have are historical products, determined by the economic sub-structure; they are not the products of ‘pure reason’ or any such thing. Political theories (such as liberalism and conservatism) that defend capitalism and its liberal democratic state protect the interests of capitalists.

Oppression and emancipation
The state supports and justifies a mode of production which oppresses the workers. In capitalism, the worker suffers from ‘alienation’, a kind of estrangement resulting in a loss.

The worker is alienated, first, from the products of his labour, which are taken away by the capitalist. Second, Marx argues that meaningful, creative work is central to a flourishing life; but the worker’s activity is meaningless and repetitive – so he is alienated from his work. Third, this meaningless production also alienates him from his ‘species-being’, Marx’s term for true human nature – our powers and needs. Fourth, capitalism alienates people from each other, because the aim is to create things to be sold not things that will satisfy our mutual needs.

Someone who is alienated may not realize this, and may not consciously feel their loss. However, under different arrangements, their lives would be more fulfilled. Work which is not alienated would involve the worker enjoying both his work and its product,
expressing his creative powers, and would involve producing things that aimed to meet the needs of ourselves and others.

This situation cannot be remedied by liberal ‘political emancipation’. Liberal ideas of rights and justice as themselves alienating, based on the thought that the individual needs protecting from harm by others, and freedom is freedom from interference. This conflicts with the fundamental nature of human beings as communal. We find freedom not in being separate from each other, but in positive relations with each other. Liberal rights undermine these relations, so cannot solve oppression.

A second way the state is oppressive is through the illusion of community, ‘equal before the law’. This idea glosses over the very real power difference between classes. If a genuine community of equals came into existence, which Marx called a ‘communist revolution’, then the state would cease to exist.

Freeden identifies five core concepts in Marx’s theory:

1. equality, which he understands in terms of people’s needs being met equally, which is quite different from liberalism’s moral equality or equality of opportunity;
2. welfare, fulfilling our ‘species being’, the importance of which is shown by the analysis of alienation;
3. the importance of meaningful creative work;
4. community, as our network of relations with others determines how our lives go;
5. history, the historical development of modes of production and co-operation and of political ideas.

**Marx on justice**

Despite his analysis of the role of the state in oppressing the worker, Marx doesn’t call capitalism unjust. Yet surely oppression, by definition, is unjust. This puzzle can be explained by three things.

First, Marx did not want to use liberal conceptions of justice as upholding rights in cases of conflict. The communist society would be ‘beyond’ justice, not having the kinds of disputes justice is needed to resolve. Each person would contribute to the community according to their ability and receive according to their need. (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*)

Second, Marx believed that the evolution of societies occurred according to historical developments in the economic substructure. For this reason, he argued that capitalism is a necessary stage we must pass through in order to develop the communist society.

Third, his arguments were based not on an appeal to moral ideas, but an analysis of these historical developments in the means of production. Social change will be drive by changes in material circumstances (substructure) rather than changes in ideas (superstructure).

**Objections**

Marx’s view of the state as oppressor has been strongly challenged, both by other political thinkers and by changes in society in the last 150 years. First, the one-way relation between substructure and superstructure has been roundly rejected. Social reality certainly has an influence on ideas, at least ideas about society, but as many Marxists
quickly accepted, ideas can also influence social reality. The state, then, is not necessarily determined by the capitalist substructure, but can be independent of it and even affect it.

And, second, this is what has happened. Marx’s prediction of a communist society has turned out false, while capitalism has changed greatly, for instance in the creation of the welfare state and in the evolution of classes. Workers own shares in companies and work has shifted from industry to information technology, services and leisure. In this evolution in society, the state has played a part. Marx may respond that this has not led to emancipation, that the state continues to support a means of production that is alienating.

Other theories will also challenge Marx’s very strong conception of human nature and theory of alienation. Is Marx right that we can make an objective judgment about people being alienated without taking into account their personal view on the matter? For human happiness to increase, is revolution required or only, as Mill argues, education? If we are not alienated, perhaps the state is not necessarily oppressive.

Finally, even if we agree that Marx is largely right, can we also agree that there is an alternative to the state? Is a stateless, communist society of equals humanly possible?