



# Rethinking Marxism

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## The Future of the State

edited by Artemy Magun. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020.

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**Key Words:** Antistatistism, Capitalism, Globalism, Leftist Theory, Neoliberal State

Interest in the state is once again growing in contemporary critical theory, prompted by changes in state power in the neoliberal period and by decentralized social movements' inability to either meaningfully impact state policy or carve out autonomous spaces beyond the state's reach. Noting this long period of reflexive antistatistism since the turn of the millennium, the edited volume *The Future of the State* rests on two key premises: first, that the crisis we are undergoing is not just one of the neoliberal state but of the very *concept* of the state; and second, that the radical Left lacks an affirmative theory of state power and how to exercise it. In the introduction, volume editor Artemy Magun thus points to a project of reviving a theory of the democratic polity and of a possible "state of the future."

The goal of recovering the positive aspects of the state distinguishes this volume in today's context. It is framed as moving beyond both neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist approaches to the state, which share a suspicion of the Hegelian dialectical perspective that the volume seeks to advance. As Magun writes, the latter entails returning to a notion of "the state as a vertical apparatus of power by reintroducing the democratic negativity and even anarchy" back into its framework and reconciling the two through new institutional and juridical relations (9). Such a dialectical theory of the state would thus represent "an ideal constitution, combining both a strong authority and powerful popular participation" (19).

One of the upsides of the volume is its breadth of perspectives, which illustrate the ambiguous and contested nature of the state as a concept. Another is its

international scope, by which it expands discussions of state theory beyond the current North American revival. Here, the problem of rethinking the nature and goal of the state is tackled through a variety of intellectual positions, including Frankfurt School critical theory, post-Lacanian Hegelianism, neo-Marxism and Leninism, and contemporary radical democracy. The subjects covered include popular sovereignty and constituent power, the relationship between the state and social movements, the international dimensions of the state, and the possibilities for a democratic “state” or communism. And while it is impossible to systematically discuss every contribution, three observations represent fruitful starting points for future debates: the state/society binary, the political subject, and the possible transformation or overcoming of the state.

First, as several of the essays note, the neoliberal era has increasingly strained the dichotomy of state and society. The tension between these concepts has been one of the hallmarks of modern political theory, with each concept deriving its own fixed meaning and stability through opposition to the other. However, the representation of the state as an impersonal public power is an ideological construct, and the line between it and society has always been based on the balance of social forces and thus subject to contestation. If one of the products of neoliberalism has been, as Ajay Singh Chaudhary puts it, a “global Behemoth” characterized by waning state sovereignty and instrumentalization by global capital (153), then we must reflect on how to possibly reassert and expose the state’s underlying complicity (per Maria Kochkina) in perpetuating this order. “Exposing” the state in this manner may be an important step in reasserting it as *the* site of political conflict and struggle.

Second, the volume’s contributions largely share the assumption that the development of contemporary capitalism on a global scale has problematized traditional class categories, far outpacing the process of revolutionary subject formation. Even if its contours are “reextracted” from the global society of the neoliberal order, we cannot assume as a given the immanence of a revolutionary class able to seize the state. Instead, we must reimagine what it means to claim the mantle of popular power today, not simply against the state but through and over it. The volume’s responses to this dilemma span from Olga Bashkina’s reexamination of French theories of constituent power to Christian Sorace’s argument for the demystification of parliamentary democracy to Panagiotis Sotiris’s case for reimagining dual power as new experiments in popular power and workers’ self-management and control. In all cases the challenge is to grasp in materialist terms the ambiguous role of the state in the project of constructing a new Modern Prince understood as what Sotiris describes as “the entire complex of the theoretical and practical activities that emerge out of the subaltern classes in their struggle for integral autonomy and hegemony” (106).

And third is global capitalism’s disruption of teleological and stageist understandings of transitions from capitalism to socialism and communism, in which the matter of transforming or overcoming the state remains an open question.

The dialectical approach invoked by some of the volume's contributors demonstrates the possibility of a future communist state, whether this is read through Lenin (Lorenzo Chiesa) or through Hegel and Žižek (Agon Hamza). Yet a broader consensus remains, beyond these specific arguments, about the persistence of some form of state—a set of administrative institutions, reorganized in a dramatically different fashion—that no longer purports to stand as a public power over and against society but is rather integrated (or sublated) into a polity, a truly democratic state. In this transitional phase, perhaps the orienting antagonism would no longer be public versus *private* but the public versus *the common*.

As its title suggests, *The Future of the State* does less to resolve these questions than to pose them in open-ended ways. In doing so, it encourages us to grapple with how the state has persisted as a liminal concept throughout modernity: for Magun, the “very cleavage, or juncture,” between abstract notions, such as sovereignty or nation, and the specific apparatuses and offices that exercise power in the name of these ideologies (11). Such “state projects,” to use Bob Jessop’s term, justify the reproduction and use of these apparatuses and, in turn, are generated as their effects. It remains to be seen whether the neoliberal hegemonic project has decisively reconfigured this cycle, and a materialist account must ultimately begin with concrete analyses of concrete situations. In that respect, *The Future of the State* represents a timely intervention for thinking about the state once again.