

What We Mean When We Talk About Capitalism and the Left

It is impossible to study the left without seeing it in relation to capitalism. Capitalism, with its practices, ideas, power relations, and modes of operation, is vast, having insinuated itself into almost all parts of modern liberal societies. It provides the context for military adventures, the environmental movement, human-rights crusades, family relations, and recreational activities. Capitalist arrangements structure relations between companies, between individuals within a society, and even between countries. It has shown a great ability to reproduce itself over generations, responding adeptly to changing circumstances. It is supported by and enmeshed in a set of values, institutions, and practices that may differ in different cultural contexts, but remain committed to the perpetuation of the dominance of capitalist interests, the development of new products, the creation of new wants, and the satisfaction of new demands in order to increase personal and corporate wealth. Its achievements are many. It has harnessed creativity and imposed a discipline that has facilitated the production of a vast array of material goods, improved health care, generated new forms of entertainment, and shrunk the distance between human beings by generating new forms of communication and transportation. For the left, capitalism is a formidable foe.

To point out the reach of capitalism in the modern world is not to say that economic factors alone determine social, cultural, and political life, or that an understanding of capitalism unlocks the meaning of all other dimensions of human existence. It does mean, though, that capitalism is important, that it plays a significant role in structuring social,

cultural, and political relations, as well as individual identities and decisions. In our liberal-capitalist world, much intellectual energy is spent sorting out approaches to gender, race, human rights, democratic processes, and environmental change, but the existing framework of the economy is largely accepted as a given, a ground in which modern history unfolds. To be sure, there is much debate about stimulus versus austerity, the need for research and development, the necessity of higher or lower interest rates to stimulate demand and/or lower unemployment rates, and the immorality of some business leaders and the possibilities of an ethical capitalism; however, these are all about different ways to manage existing capitalism, and not about its underlying framework. Modern economics is about fine-tuning the existing programme. It is not about overhauling the operating system itself, or more radically, installing a totally different operating system, one that runs completely new and different programmes.

A major role of the left has been to assess capitalism critically. Indeed, this is at the core of the work of Karl Marx, who spent much more time analysing capitalism than in developing alternatives. The point of this book is not to elaborate a detailed description of the operation of modern capitalism; rather, it is to locate a left that is embedded in modern capitalism. To do so, we need a working understanding of capitalism. In everyday right-wing parlance, capitalism is often portrayed as synonymous with freedom, or democracy, or the market, or free enterprise. On the left, capitalism is derided as exploitation, anti-ecology, the economic incarnation of greed, and a system run by a small group that holds meetings and sets out the agenda of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Recently the critique of capitalism has been collapsed into an attack on large corporations, the modern bearers of the evils of capitalism.

Yet while the left engages in important skirmishes with many manifestations of capitalist activity, it often loses sight of the fundamental features intertwined at the core of capitalism. Capitalism is a system that relies on the private ownership of productive resources, whether in individual or corporate hands. Capitalist organizations produce goods and services that are exchanged in markets. In the arena of exchange, capitalist organizations are in competition with each other. Capital itself is defined as something that is used to create a greater amount of capital, whether it exists in the form of money, financial

assets, factories, research and development facilities, or movie production centres. Capitalism is inherently expansionary, relying on economic growth to fuel its operation. Capitalists and their organizations play the major role shaping economic, political, and social policies in liberal-capitalist societies. Also crucial to capitalism is the workforce that depends on wages and salaries for survival. Workers are employed and their labours produce the goods and services that are exchanged for profits, transactions in which the successful owners—capitalists—extract a large share of the rewards.

Modern capitalism is a historical event that emerged in conjunction with industrialization in the late 1700s, building on earlier developments in trade, property rights, global exploration, and technological innovation. The fact that capitalism is a historical creation, brought into being by the actions of humans, is the beginning point for left critiques. Capitalism is not natural or beyond history, it is a social creation, and as such it can be transformed or even eradicated and replaced by human action. For the left, the historicity of capitalism means that change is possible. The list of indictments against contemporary is long. Here are some examples. Capitalism is inherently unstable, prone to periodic busts that lead to insecurity and distress for workers and their families. Capitalist competition between firms, regions, and states drives down wages, leads to poor safety practices, intensifies resource exploitation, and causes international conflict. By its nature capitalism as a system is driven to lower costs by introducing new technologies that replace human workers, leading to higher levels of unemployment and less satisfying jobs. It is the operation of capitalism that is accelerating environmental degradation and climate change. The spread of capitalism is geographically uneven, and while some countries and regions ride a wave of prosperity, others languish and suffer. There is a growing disparity between the wealthy few and the impoverished many in developed societies. The well-off are able to manage the nation and international economic systems to serve their interests. In capitalism, greed and self-interest are necessary to keep the system operating.

Other criticisms focus on the inherently expansionary nature of capitalism. The education, health care, social welfare, and prison sectors are increasingly operated for profit, to the detriment of society as a whole. Leisure that was once self-created and self-directed is now a commodity; sports, movies, sit-coms, and reading material are packaged by capitalists and sold for profits. Meals are increasingly purchased in restaurants

or purchased in pre-packaged forms that have been produced off-site, ready to be heated. The drive for profit is also remaking the human body and the human mind. An array of products is available to change appearances. Technological advances, driven by the capitalist impulse, make it possible to enhance and extend sex lives. Pills are manufactured to control depression and sadness. Products and regimens are available on the market to lower body weight and remove unsightly hair and body fat.

In modern capitalism wants and desires are created. Mass advertising encourages adults and children to yearn for particular goods. In capitalist societies, consumption levels and purchasing decisions create lifestyles, define individual identities, and shape personalities. Consumerism and consumer goods serve as the defining features of the good life. Overall, the capitalist agenda is setting the boundaries of desires, driving the choices that individuals make, and remaking human nature. It is taking humans down a road fraught with perils.

Apologists for capitalism are hardly defenceless in the face of these criticisms. Capitalism has brought a higher standard of living, they argue, a raft of material goods, longer lives, an expansion of individual rights, less drudgery, more excitement, greater freedom of choice, and sovereignty for consumers. Economic instability is the sign of progress and advancement, as new developments make earlier achievements redundant, causing temporary setbacks, but a better life in the long run, the famous process of “creative destruction.” New technologies create short-term dislocations, but will eventually create more jobs, and indeed jobs that are more interesting. Business competition encourages greater efficiencies, lower prices for consumers, and a better world.

Defenders also argue that human nature is reflected in the values of capitalism, and as such the institutions and relations of capitalism are the best for human societies. Consumers create demands satisfied by capitalist production, they say. Don’t you want to be healthier, live longer, be skinny, be happy, have a satisfying lifestyle? Is economic inequality really a problem, when striving to get more leads to advances in production and an enhancement of the general wealth of a society, raising the standard of living of all? Parts of the globe and internal minorities may still not be receiving the full benefits of capitalism, but it is only a matter of time.

Liberal capitalism sustains vigorous debates about the future of society. For example, witness the political debate between those who stress that the good life is best achieved with increased recourse to the

mechanisms of the market to manage the productions of goods and services and others who desire a greater role for the government to monitor the activities of corporations, run education and health insurance systems, encourage workers to associate, and manage economic activities for the good of the people. The left participates in the swirl of these debates, but some important notions that informed left positions in past public discussions seem to have been thrown overboard in contemporary times. Notably missing are class and class conflict, both of which remain important in any meaningful understanding of the left and of present circumstances. As concepts and lived realities, they are key entrees into the realms of capitalism, the left, and historical change.

For many contemporary theorists, the traditional understanding of class has waned in importance. It is a relic from the past, a wrong turn, a spent force. In recent decades the word has largely been expunged from political debate, except when used to describe potential voters as part of the vague middle class. If the notion of class makes its way into public debates, mainstream newspapers decry the appeal to class as divisive and confrontational, undermining a common search for solutions to pressing social and economic problems. This contrasts with much of the twentieth century, when class was front and centre, and the left was about representing the working class. The working class, through its unions and political associations, was seen as the vehicle for achieving social and economic change.

Modern progressives, too, have given up on the working class, arguing that the old industrial working class of the nineteenth and a large chunk of the twentieth century has shrunk and waned in importance in developed economies. Jobs for blue-collar workers and factory workers have disappeared. Now workers are educated, computer savvy, and engaged in largely mental pursuits. The new workplaces, restructured by technological change and the mobility of capital, furthermore, are not conducive to organization and protest in the same way as large factories that concentrated workers into one setting, where workers understood each other's concerns and mobilized on that basis. New worksites are smaller, jobs are often temporary, and workers are mobile, undermining any sense of solidarity either on the job or in neighbourhoods. Moreover, the most dynamic vehicles for protest nowadays do not come from traditional working-class organizations, such as trade unions and left political parties, but rather the so-called new social movements committed to environmental protection and human-rights advancement.

There is more. The remnants of the old working class are seen as conservative reactionaries, drawn to right-wing populist organizations fighting modernity and progressive visions. Economists see workers as consumers rather than producers, minimizing the contribution of workers to the production of goods and services in a society. Others argue that improved material changes in the conditions of workers over the course of the twentieth century have destroyed any sense of the working class. Consumerism has tamed the working class. The wealth of post-World War II developed countries has pacified workers; the ability to purchase automobiles, mass entertainment, and computer games has salved any sense of grievance. The working class, even for many with leftist inclinations, is dead as a doornail. As André Gorz declared in 1980, "Farewell to the Working Class."¹ Change, it seems, will come from intellectuals and students, or those such as lawyers and doctors in the professional class, or perhaps people on the edges such as Indigenous activists or a mobilized urban underclass, the product of rapid technological change. Others focus on the debt divide that separates the people who are in debt from those controlling the debt, arguing that the situation, notable among university graduates in hock for their years of schooling, is deteriorating and poised to foment increasing protest and eventual social and economic change.²

These critical perspectives on class in the modern age are not without some merit. However, if the left is dedicated to transforming or overthrowing capitalism, whether through major reforms of economic and social relations or complete replacement of the system, workers, defined fundamentally by their place in the production system, will play a major role. Not only are they necessary for change, workers and their families will be the main beneficiaries of change. This does not mean that other identities—ethnicity, race, gender and nationality, for example—are unimportant or even secondary, but it does mean that in making some sense of the larger social and economic whole, class is a legitimate and pivotal point of entry. In modern times, it is also the least appreciated and the least investigated.

Coming up with a contemporary definition of class is difficult. The term has been bandied about in the social sciences and invested with various forms of political content over the past century and a half. Here, I have neither the goal nor the desire to rehearse these debates, but merely wish to offer a useable, if fuzzy, notion of class. At one level, class is about organizing things into groups, an exercise

in taxonomy. People can be divided into classes according to physical characteristics, age, gender, or musical taste. We can also divide them according to income, wealth, education, and status levels. Then we can also link musical taste to education or gender to income, thus creating new classifications or refining the original classifications. This is interesting, and the data, when mixed with activism, can be used to devise policies to help needy groups, shape educational strategies, and advance progressive tax policies.

Beyond seeing class as a form of categorization, it can also be seen as a lived experience. People in different classes have different opportunities, are treated differently by authorities and those in the helping professions, live in different geographic areas, have access to different medical and educational services, and enjoy different leisure pursuits. Class structures everyday lives. For the left, the fortunes of the working class are of special interest. This is the group of people that works for wages and sometimes salaries, as well as their families.

A focus on the working class forefronts the importance of work, an essential activity in the sustenance and reproduction of society. As class has disappeared as an engaging, useful way to understand the world, so too have serious discussions of work. In the 1970s and 1980s, the workplace, social relations on the job, the impact of technological change, job action, and the rewards of labour were considered seriously. The worksite was the portal for a broader discussion of liberal capitalism. The workplace was the site where the exploitation fundamental to capitalism took place, and from this interaction flowed the economic, political, social, and cultural power of the elite. The workplace was also a key in understanding the politics, values, culture, and family life of the working class.

It is important to realize that the working class, as well as the discussion of class, has a history. More married women entered the paid labour force after the middle of the twentieth century, and in the same era more jobs were found in government service, and young people spent more time in school before entering the paid workforce. Because of immigration, the cultural and racial backgrounds of workers changed, as did the response to these workers by employers and the larger society. Technology transformed worksites, too. The internal combustion engine, developments in hydraulics, computer systems, and robotics changed what workers did and how they were situated in relation to each other. Moreover, the role of the state in supervising worksites was different in different eras.

In many minds, the industrial working class that developed between the middle of the nineteenth century through the 1960s was *the* working class. These blue-collar workers, factory workers, unskilled workers, and semi-skilled workers—the storied lunch-bucket brigade—then became less important in the workforce overall, and, it is believed, thus ended the history and importance of the working class. However, this formulation is ahistorical and based on a sketchy view of class. Some point to the great diversity of jobs and workers in modern times, arguing that the diversity is too great to conceive of any sense of a class. This ignores the fact that the working class has always been divided. Skilled, white carpenters in the 1880s did not identify with immigrant, migrant pick-and-shovel workers, just as today educated teachers in the public school system or nurses see themselves as distinct from workers in a retail shop, or chambermaids, or staff in the kitchen of a city hospital. The working class is a product of capitalism and capitalism is dynamic. It is to be expected that the working class should be dynamic, too, changing over time as a result of its own initiatives as well as the more important initiatives of capital.

The left—itself internally and geographically divided—at times, such as the 1880s, the late 1910s, and the 1930s and 1940s in North America, successfully attracted workers, shaped their institutions, and challenged the status quo. The make-up of the working class has changed and the working-class identity has waned—we are apparently almost all middle class now—but why this is the case demands much more attention from leftists as does the revival of this identity and the reconstitution of the working class as a political force.

Many are prepared to accept a rather banal vision of class difference, based loosely on income and education, but the notion of class conflict or class struggle makes no sense to them. Most workers in modern developed societies, they know, are not engaged in an overt daily battle with their employers, strikes are rare, talk of revolution pretty much non-existent, and workers often vote for non-leftist parties. However, class without class struggle is bereft of political content, and if we take capitalism and its creation of classes seriously, there is no avoiding class conflict and class struggle. It is too early to consign these notions to the dust-bin of history. In effecting broad change, of course, the working class will have to work in concert with other groups and on behalf of other groups, but any sense of an anti-capitalist movement without a working-class component at its core is dubious.

If infusing “class” with historical relevance and meaning is problematic in the current era, even trickier is defending the notion of class conflict or class struggle as a positive attribute in the left. In the popular mind, these words conjure up visions of barricades, armed conflict, the Russian Revolution, Leninism, and the adjurations of an earnest protester handing out leaflets. Conservatives and neoliberals snort in derision at the notion of class conflict. After all, everyone, though different in individual circumstances, has the opportunity to be wealthy, happy, or both. Many Greens and Liberals plead that class-struggle talk leads to conflict and unnecessary social division, undermining responsible economic, environmental, and political solutions. Union organizers fear that the use of such language will drive away possible supporters. Reformist liberals and many social democrats squirm at the idea, and most anti-racist, environmental, and human-rights activists are uninterested.

In recent years, what was once known as class conflict has morphed into anti-globalization, anti-capitalism, and especially anti-corporation struggles. Instead of the working class, the mobilized force is a broad notion of “the people,” a group sharing impulses and goals that are thwarted by the undue influence of corporations on economics, especially trade, and domestic and international politics. The villains in the piece are large transnational corporations that have undue influence on governments around the world and that ignore social and environmental interests in the pursuit of profits. One analysis, Joel Bakan’s *The Corporation*, uses a psychological model, portraying corporations as psychopaths.³ Short-lived protest movements have been constructed around these themes, and from a leftist perspective there is much to admire in the broad-based challenges that mobilized diverse interests, extolled democracy and equality, and boldly stated that alternatives are imperative.

However, while this is a legitimate entree into the world of capitalism, it neglects the political relevancy of the working class, as well as the class conflict at the heart of capitalism. Class as a concept or as lived experience is too difficult, too fuzzy. As Slavoj Žižek comments, “Leftists usually bemoan the fact that the line of division in the class struggle is as a rule blurred, displaced, falsified—most blatantly in the case of rightist populism, which presents itself as speaking on behalf of the people, while in fact advocating the interests of those who rule. However, this constant displacement and ‘falsification’ of the line of (class) division *is* the ‘class struggle’....”⁴ For the left, this

means engaging in the political act of reinserting class and class struggle, properly understood, back into political debate.

With notions of capitalism, class, and class conflict in our quiver, it is time to take aim at the commonplace understanding of the political spectrum. In this understanding, the logical antagonist to “the left” should be “the right.” However, this pairing obscures and misrepresents. Like the term “the left,” its linguistic opposite “the right” is a living signifier, a set of understandings, orientations, and behaviour that are active in the contemporary world. A notion of “the right” conjures up greedy capitalists, wealthy political wire-pullers like the Koch brothers in the United States, religious Christian fundamentalists with unprogressive views on LGBTQ rights and abortion, racists and anti-immigrant advocates in populist parties in Europe, and military adventurers. For progressives, including the left, these are nasty people indeed, often hissed at and booed when they are mentioned in political and social gatherings. However, in this left–right binary, one group gets a free ride, the progressive-liberal centre. These supporters of progressive social and cultural causes, such as LGBTQ rights, anti-racism, environmentalism, and the women’s movement, include many, though hardly all wealthy Hollywood movie stars, as well as “good” capitalists. Many progressives, too, even support the rights of workers to unionize, government stimulus policies to stabilize the economy, and social spending when possible. They are the Goldilocks of politics, existing in a place that is not too hard or too soft, too hot or too cold, too radical or too conservative. They constitute the centre that can decry the excesses on the right and the so-called impractical nature of the left, portraying themselves as practical, realistic, and non-ideological in managing the economy for the good of all.

However, from a leftist perspective, defined in terms of a critical engagement with capitalism, it is more accurate to link the liberal centre with the right because from an economic standpoint the liberal centre and what is usually defined as the right merely offer two ways of managing capitalist societies. One is more benign, to be sure, offering kindness and touting equal opportunity within capitalism, but the goal remains the smooth operation of an unequal society based on the exploitation of one group by another. The term “the right” does not easily capture the commonality of progressive liberals and what is commonly understood as “the right.” The term “liberal capitalism” works more effectively. In broad politics, then, the left is pitted against liberal capitalism. In the

contemporary western world, liberalism is intertwined with capitalism, and often they are both seen as being necessary underpinnings of the modern world.

The meaning of liberalism, “is notoriously elusive and variable,” as Ellen Meiksins Wood notes.⁵ John Gray, too, recognizes the complexities of liberalism past and present: “It is a basic error to search for the essence of something as heterogeneous and discontinuous as *the* liberal tradition. Liberalism is not the kind of thing that has an essence.”⁶ To make things more complicated, liberalism is too often seen as the equivalent of democracy. Still, as a rough guide that leads us into the thicket of liberalism, there are a number of markers that inhabit the liberal tradition, such as the values of individualism, self-development, liberty, democracy, equality before the law, personal growth, reason, toleration and pluralism, and protection of the private sphere from undue intrusion by the state.⁷ These principles in the modern world are usually seen as central to the functioning of a healthy capitalism, and, in turn, a healthy capitalism is seen as crucial to sustain these values and ideals.

The term “liberal capitalism,” rather than “liberalism” or “capitalism” alone, reminds us of the interconnection of the two realms in daily life. Liberals take their values as unique to themselves, effectively portraying leftists as collectivists who suppress individual rights and democratic freedom in favour of a more important social, communal whole. However, in contemporary liberal democracies, leftists share many of the values of liberalism, albeit in re-shaped versions. The term “liberal capitalism” reminds us that in the modern western world, liberalism is part and parcel of the existing capitalist order.

The term “liberal capitalism” also suggests the possibility of alternatives, perhaps a “liberal socialism” or a “liberal communism,” that is a non-capitalist society that still adheres to and perhaps perfects many liberal ideals. Some see a better future through the vehicle of a vibrant, radical liberalism, where liberalism trumps capitalism. As political philosopher C.B. Macpherson wrote in 1976, “what I have been trying to do all along (and am still trying to do)... is to work out a revision of liberal-democratic theory, a theory which clearly owes a good deal to Marx, in the hope of making that theory more democratic while rescuing that valuable part of the liberal tradition that is submerged when liberalism is identified with capitalist relations.”⁸ His project was to take liberalism beyond the assumptions of capitalism: “I shall suggest that the continuance of anything that can properly be called liberal democracy depends

on a downgrading of the market assumptions and an upgrading of the equal right to self-development.”⁹ Conversely, using the term “liberal capitalism” also allows the possibility of authoritarian capitalism, that is, a capitalism that operates in the context of non-democratic institutions.

This juxtaposition of the left to liberal capitalism runs counter to contemporary understandings, but in sorting out the left and its relation to capitalism, these designations help to distinguish social and cultural progressivism from the left, which is rooted in understanding and changing the modern economic relations that shape politics, government, families, entertainment, leisure, individual bodies, and individual lives. And just as the left is a big tent, incorporating communist parties, anarchist protests, Christian socialists, social democrats, the union movement, and the British Labour Party, its counterpart liberal capitalism is also a big tent, including progressive liberals, libertarians, both big and small government advocates, the American Democrat and Republican parties, and conservative think tanks.

At this point, some leftists are squirming: how can social democrats be included in any notion of the left? Surely, social democracy is just a brand of progressive liberalism, offering mere reforms, and at times even adopting neoliberal policies when in government? The fuzziness at the intersection of social democracy and progressive liberalism in modern times is real, so seeing social democrats and social democracy as part of the left is to think historically, to go beyond mere policy comparisons between progressive-liberal parties and social-democratic parties. It is to recognize that social democracy was a response to the predicament of the working class in the emerging industrial capitalist order, a vehicle to represent and speak specifically for ordinary people, not the capitalists or the interests. It is also to appreciate changing historical contexts in which the left existed, its different guises in the late nineteenth century, in the inter-war years, and in the years after the 1970s, guises that were shaped in the ongoing historical struggle to direct the trajectory of history. In the years from 1918 to 1945, versions of transformative socialism and communism had much impact, while in recent decades the public face of the left, the version with some impact on real affairs, has been a reformist social democracy.

The question of the location of modern social democracy on the political spectrum leads to the conclusion that the distinction between the left and some other positions on the political spectrum is

unclear. There is overlap. Such is the complexity of life. More importantly, it reminds us that “the left” is a living political concept, an active thing being shaped and re-shaped in the world of action, a contested notion that is fought over and used by different groups for different purposes.

In the left’s project of critiquing capitalism and effecting change, there is one institution that is of special interest and in need of a brief discussion. This institution is the state, and the problem for the left is locating its place in politics and in society generally. In everyday parlance, the words “government” and “state” are loosely used interchangeably. Politics is usually portrayed like this: citizens vote, elect candidates and parties, and then the victors run the government, telling the civil servants what to do. In liberal understandings of democracy, the state, broadly conceived, should function as an impartial umpire, standing above the various interest groups and making decisions for the overall good of the people. This view of the state, which ignores class divisions and class conflict, is the dominant view in democratic societies and is based on distinct divisions between the state, the economy, and the rest of society. In this widely accepted version of politics, the section of life that is political is very clear and very narrow.

On the left, a debate on the state flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, with Marxists trying to fill gaps regarding a topic that Marx himself had not pursued in depth. In this conversation, the nature of the function and role of the state began with Marx’s statement in the *Communist Manifesto*: “The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” In this nineteenth-century view, the state was the handmaiden of the business class, representing the overall interests of competing businesses in furthering the advancement of capitalism in a nation. Fleshing out the relationship between the state, the business class, and the rest of society, however, seemed necessary in the middle of the twentieth century, when democracy ruled, interest groups were more diverse, and the state had become a much larger and more significant institution in society. How did business influence the state? Was it through personal connections? Or did business people and political people just share the same philosophy? Were organized labour and other interests now equally influential within the state? Intellectuals who participated in this discussion spoke from a number of perspectives. To some, the state was still a direct arm of business, while to others the modern state had a degree of autonomy from business interests, able within limits to act on its own account.

Left activists hold a number of positions on the state. Some revolutionary socialists stress the importance of smashing the liberal-capitalist state prior to constructing a new socialist order, one that will build a new socialist state. The anarchist position is critical of states, whether they be capitalist or socialist. Social democrats look to using the state to create a more humane and just society. The state is important in the modern world and working out the function and make-up of the state is crucial to political action.

Here is one view of the state in liberal-capitalist societies. At a basic level, the state is more than just a neutral institution, beholden to the electorate, and to some extent it also has its own agenda and independence. However, it is embedded in a broader milieu, and to exist in a liberal-capitalist society must reflect the values and goals of that society. So the state is shot through and through with liberal-capitalist values and inhabited by personnel who subscribe to these perspectives. This leads to the extremely important point that broad-based social and economic change is about more than changing governments and reforming the bureaucracy. Transforming the state will only come about in concert with broader cultural change.

The state is also active in reproducing the society of which it is a part. In the economy, reflecting its immersion in a capitalist milieu, the liberal-capitalist state works to enhance the ability of business to expand by enforcing private property rights, ensuring adherence to contracts, facilitating stable financial institutions, and educating future workers, as well as defending the legitimacy of the state itself and liberal capitalism.¹⁰ This is not to say that there are no divisions within the state, for liberal capitalism is complex. At a fundamental level, too, the state, as Max Weber noted, is the only social institution that has the monopoly on the legal exercise of force. The state also has the authority to define who belongs to the society—those who are legitimate, full rights-bearing citizens, and those who do not have the enjoyment of full participation in the social and economic order. It also protects the safety of citizens and can play an important role in social reform, such as in furthering the rights of women, LGBTQ, and minority groups.

Having introduced key concepts that have long been part of the left, namely capitalism, class, class conflict, and the state, it is now time to draw on recent postmodern ideas to enrich and clarify ways of thinking about the left.

NOTES

1. André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*, tr. Michael Sonenscher (Boston: South End Press, 1982) (Gorz 1982).
2. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011) (Graeber 2011).
3. Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004) (Bakan 2004).
4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 186–187 (Žižek 1999).
5. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 228–229n (Wood 1995).
6. John Gray, “*Modus vivendi*,” (2000) in John Gray, *Gray’s Anatomy: Selected Writings*, (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2009), 44 (Gray 2000).
7. For a historical definition of liberalism in Canada, see Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 374–375 (McKay 2008).
8. Quoted in Leo Panitch, *Renewing Socialism: Transforming Democracy, Strategy and Imagination* (Pontypool, Wales: Merlin Press, 2008), 73. See too, Chantal Mouffe, “Towards a Liberal Socialism,” in Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), Chap. 5 (Panitch 2008; Mouffe 2005).
9. C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 2 (Macpherson 1977).
10. Leo Panitch, “The Role and Nature of the Canadian State,” in *The Canadian State: Political Economy and Political Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 3–27. See too, Martin Carnoy, *The State and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, (London: Quartet Books, 1973); Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power & Social Classes*, tr. Timothy O’Hagan (London: Verso, 1978) (Panitch 1977; Carnoy 1984; Miliband 1973; Poulantzas 1978).

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