

# Historical Materialism Annual Conference Online 2021

The Return of the State? Anticapitalist Politics in a New Ecological Landscape

Thursday 4th November – Sunday 14th November 2021

## Call for Papers

**Deadline for abstracts: Monday 6th. September 2021**

Over the past decade, announcements of the ‘death of neoliberalism’ have recurred with alarming frequency. Each time, however, neoliberalism has returned from the grave. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore, is unlikely to have killed neoliberalism, things do seem to have changed. In the advanced capitalist world, the supposedly weakened state has intervened directly and dramatically into the capitalist system: ‘locking down’ economies and subsidising both capital and workers throughout the pandemic. At the same time, the state has overseen a rapid and comprehensive vaccination programme.

More surprisingly, it seems that this intervention may not just be confined to the pandemic period itself. US President Joe Biden, hardly a radical firebrand, is currently presiding over a massive economic stimulus, and the rhetoric of state investment reappearing in the language of the right. Neoliberalism may not be dead, but we do appear to be witnessing a certain ‘return of the state’.

Of course, for Marxists, this return is greatly exaggerated. Neoliberalism – as a social and political paradigm – has long deployed the disciplinary and coercive functions of the state and relied on state intervention to ‘create’ markets and transform the public into private. Nevertheless, there remains a hegemonic consensus that somehow the state has returned to reclaim a lost power and status, a consensus it is creating to assure itself a renewed and much needed legitimacy in the face of growing protests and new coalitions.

Needless to say, this ‘return’ has not been smooth and even, and needs to be understood in the context of contemporary imperialism and settler colonialism. Moreover, the state is constantly working to appropriate, institutionalise, and therefore render lame the growing movements of contestation. The ability of the state to ‘return’ and the form in which this return has occurred has thus been framed through racialised and gendered antagonisms and uneven global capitalist development. It is precisely for this reason that this ‘return of the state’ has been matched by movements seeking to contest the repressive power of the capitalist state. Indeed, some of these debates – on both left and right – have been directly

concerned with the increased role of the state during lockdowns.

The strategic question of the state thus looms large once again. But, whereas, even a few years ago, questions of state power were conceived of in relation to the possibility of left reformist governments, this possibility seems closed for the moment. At the same time, the socialist tradition was never about simply defending the state or asking for the return or a 'Strong State', even when we defend public education and health, oppose the 'lesser state' of neoliberalism, and struggle for the expansion of the public sector. The socialist tradition has also been about expanding forms of democratic participation, workers' control, giving space and voice to social movements.

What does this return of the state mean for neoliberalism, and for the realignment of class politics? How has this experience of the return of the state been inflected by race, gender and ability? How should the left respond to interventions of the state into capital accumulation? Is it possible to criticise the expansion of the repressive state apparatus whilst also arguing for greater socialisation of the economy?

To truly get to grips with these kinds of questions requires a serious Marxist analysis. This year's Historical Materialism online conference seeks to provide a forum for this analysis. To this end, we seek proposals for papers and panels on the following area:

- the impact of the pandemic on the right to protest
- the rise of social movements against the state and state institutions
- the relation between the pandemic and the ecological crisis
- the relationship between the state and contemporary configurations of class power
- the relationship between state power, racism and anti-racist contestations
- Marxist-feminist approaches to the state
- the role of the state in the reconfiguration of neoliberalism
- the relationship between state power, pandemic/post-pandemic politics and gender, sexuality and disability
- populist politics, right politics, and the state

As always, paper and panel proposals on other debates and issues of scholarship in Marxist theory are welcome.

Given the continuing uncertainty over Covid-19 and the necessity for continued social distancing within British universities, the 2021 Historical Materialism conference will be held online in a similar format to the two weeks series of events for HM Online in November 2020. We hope to return to our in-person conference in 2022. Please note therefore that:

- The conference will comprise a much smaller number of papers and panels than our in-person conference. The Editorial Board will select papers and panels for topic and thematic coherence, but we know that there will be many excellent papers and panels that we will be unable to host.
- There will be no explicit streams, though we will try to represent the range of thematic concerns at the conference
- Given the lack of space for sessions, we will have less space for non-HM Book

launches/discussions

- The conference website will open on Tuesday 20th July 2021 and close at 12.00 BST Monday 6th. September 2021. It can be accessed here – <https://conference.historicalmaterialism.org/e/hm2021>
- Acceptances or rejections will be mailed early in the week of September 20th 2021
- Any conference queries should be addressed to [historicalmaterialism@soas.ac.uk](mailto:historicalmaterialism@soas.ac.uk)