

The Family and the State Definitions and Concepts

There are some definitions and concepts that you need to know to really understand what is being said in the video. Mostly, you need to understand how sociologists talk about politics. Namely, for sociologists, there's a difference between "government" and "the state". Laypeople usually reference the government and the state as synonymous, but sociologists do not.

Government = A general description of how power is distributed and how the rules are decided.

Monarchy: Government by a king or royal dynasty

Aristocracy: Government by a noble class

Oligarchy: Government by the economic elite

Republic: Government without a noble class or monarchy

Democracy: Government by the Demos or "the people"

So the U.S. is a Representative Democratic Republic: in other words, the Demos elect representatives from among themselves to make decisions in their interests. The United Kingdom is a Constitutional Monarchy, in which the head of state is the Queen, but she is limited by law as to what she can do. There is a House of Lords that represents royal interests and a House of Commons, that represents common interests. The United Kingdom is not, technically, a Republic. In Star Wars, Naboo is a Democratic Monarchy in which the people democratically elect the nobility.

The State = the institution that does the work of government. So in the United States we have a legislature that passes laws, an executive that executes the laws and a judiciary that applies the laws. But more importantly, we also have a huge bureaucracy that serves all three. The bureaucracy serves the larger government by providing it with information with which to make its decisions and by enlisting experts at all levels to see that any laws or decisions are put into place. So we have a state department in charge of foreign affairs and treasury in charge of the nation's finances and a health department and interior department. These break down into other departments like the diplomatic corps and the CDC and the FBI and the IRS, etc. Each department then has people whose job it is to interact with the rest of us.

One further element to defining the state comes from our friend Max Weber. Weber defined the state as the institutions with the legitimate power to commit violence against its own people. Think about it. Sometimes, in order to make sure the laws and rules are followed, coercion must be used. You could be arrested for not following the rules. If you resist arrest, violence could be used, even to the point of lethal force, to satisfy the arrest. Only the state can do that. We wouldn't let our pastor taze us if we stepped out of line, but representatives of the state can do exactly that.

Political Economy = The overlap between the state and the economy. Sociologists recognize that the biggest function of the state is to serve the interests of the larger economy. Obviously, functionalists have a different understanding of the political economy than, say, Marxists. Functionalists see the state as instrumental in providing stability so the economy can function properly. Marxists and other conflict theorists see the state as largely representing the interests of the economic elite even at the expense of everybody else. That strikes us as strange because when we think of Marx, we are taught to think of the massive state apparatus created by Stalin in the Soviet Union. In fact, Marxist ideology is based on the premise that the state must be dismantled if we are to overthrow capitalism and have a true communist society. But that's another lecture.

Before we left for break we talked about the family as an institution.

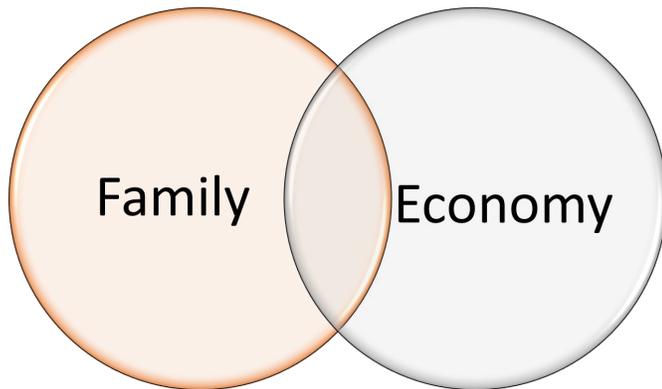
Institution = A patterned and predictable set of behaviors, roles and statuses by which individuals within a society meet their needs.

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We then talked about how family as an institution overlaps with the economy as an institution

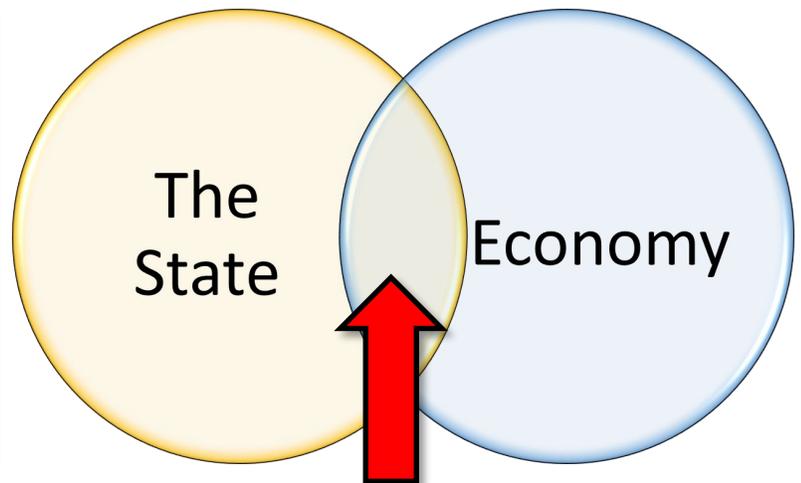
Family as an Institution = Institution through which sex is legitimized and within which children are born and socialized into the larger society.

Economics as an Institution = Institution within which resources are produced and distributed within the larger society.

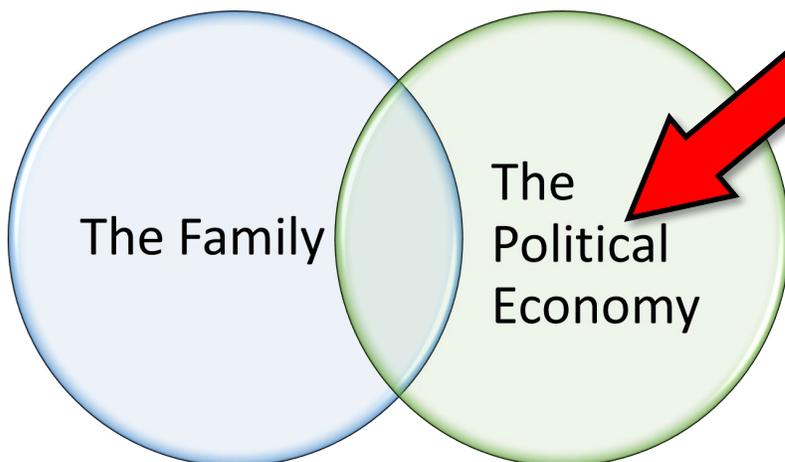


So, we looked at how family overlaps with the economy. For instance, families consume goods and services provided by the larger economy in order to satisfy the needs of the individuals in the family. The family also provides, supports and maintains the workers and the investors who compose the productive levels of the economy. So the family is a source of both economic production and economic consumption.

We can also look at how The State overlaps with the Economy. For instance, The State creates rules by which the economy is governed. Since economic elites have an interest in a stable, predictable economy, they put a lot of investment into the state. Top economic leaders support and even finance state officials. Our top state bureaucrats are often pulled from the economic elite. In fact, sociologists see the overlap between The State and the Economy as so comprehensive that we often use the term Political Economy to describe it.



Political Economy



So this lecture will focus on the areas in which the family and the Political Economy, or what we can refer to as The State overlap. Think of all the ways the State, by imposing and enforcing rules, influences you through your family. How did this happen? This lecture we will learn about the evolution of the State overlap with the family.