

## LENIN'S *THE STATE AND REVOLUTION*\*

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*The State and Revolution* is rightly regarded as one of Lenin's most important works. It addresses itself to questions of the utmost importance for socialist theory and practice, none of which have lost any of their relevance—rather the reverse. And as a statement of the Marxist theory of the state, both before and particularly after the conquest of power, it has, because it was written by Lenin, enjoyed an exceptionally authoritative status for successive generations of socialists, never more so than in recent years, since its spirit and substance can so readily be invoked against the hyper-bureaucratic experience of Russian-type régimes, and against official Communist parties as well. In short, here, for intrinsic and circumstantial reasons, is indeed one of the "sacred texts" of Marxist thought.

"Sacred texts", however, are alien to the spirit of Marxism, or at least should be; and this is itself sufficient reason for submitting *The State and Revolution* to critical analysis. But there is also another and more specific reason for undertaking such an analysis, namely that this work of Lenin is commonly held, within the Marxist tradition, to provide a theoretical and indeed a practical solution to the all-important question of the socialist exercise of power. My own reading of it suggests, for what it is worth, a rather different conclusion: this is that *The State and Revolution*, far from resolving the problems with which it is concerned, only serves to underline their complexity, and to emphasize something which the experience of more than half a century has in any case richly—and tragically—served to confirm, namely that the exercise of socialist power remains the Achilles' heel of Marxism. This is why, in a year which will witness so much legitimate celebration of Lenin's genius and achievements, a critical appraisal of *The State and Revolution* may not come amiss. For it is only by probing the gaps in the argument which it puts forward that the discussion of issues which are fundamental to the socialist project may be advanced.

The basic point upon which the whole of Lenin's argument rests, and to which he returns again and again, derives from Marx and Engels. This is that while all previous revolutions have "perfected" (i.e. reinforced) the state machine, "the working class cannot simply lay

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hold of the state machinery and wield it for its own purposes"; and that it must instead smash, break, destroy that machinery. The cardinal importance which Lenin attaches to this idea has often been taken to mean that the purpose of *The State and Revolution* is to counterpose violent revolution to "peaceful transition". This is not so. The contraposition is certainly important and Lenin did believe (much more categorically than Marx, incidentally) that the proletarian revolution could not be achieved save by violent means. But as the Italian Marxist Lucio Colletti has recently noted, "Lenin's polemic is not directed against those who do not wish for the seizure of power. The object of his attack is not *reformism*. On the contrary, it is directed against those who wish for the seizure of power but not for the destruction of the old State as well".<sup>1</sup> "On the contrary" in the above quotation is too strong: Lenin is *also* arguing against reformism. But it is perfectly true that his main concern in *The State and Revolution* is to attack and reject any concept of revolution which does not take literally Marx's views that the bourgeois state must be smashed.

The obvious and crucial question which this raises is what kind of post-revolutionary state is to succeed the smashed bourgeois state. For it is of course one of the basic tenets of Marxism, and one of its basic **differences** with anarchism, that while the proletarian revolution must smash the old state, it does not abolish the state itself: a state remains in being, and even endures for a long time to come, even though it begins immediately to "wither away". What is most remarkable about the answer which Lenin gives to the question of the nature of the post-revolutionary state is how far he takes the concept of the "withering away" of the state in *The State and Revolution*: so far, in fact, that the state, on the morrow of the revolution, has not only *begun* to wither away, but *is already at an advanced stage of decomposition*.

This, it must be noted at once, does not mean that the revolutionary *power* is to be weak. On the contrary, Lenin never fails to insist that it must be very strong indeed, and that it must remain strong over an extended period of time. What it does mean is that this power is not exercised by the state in the common meaning of that word, i.e. as a separate and distinct organ of power, however "democratic"; but that "the state" has been turned from "a state of bureaucrats" into "a state of armed workers" (p. 334).\* This, Lenin notes, is "a state machine nevertheless", but "in the shape of armed workers who proceed to form a militia involving the entire population" (p. 336). Again, "all citizens are transformed into hired employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers" (p. 336); and again, "the state, that

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is the proletariat armed and organized as the ruling class" (p. 308). Identical or similar formulations occur throughout the work.

In *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, written after the Bolshevik seizure of power, Lenin fiercely rejected Kautsky's view that a class "can only dominate but not govern": "It is altogether wrong, also", Lenin wrote, "to say that a class cannot govern. Such an absurdity can only be uttered by a parliamentary *cretin* who sees nothing but bourgeois parliaments, who has noticed nothing but 'ruling parties.'<sup>12</sup> *The State and Revolution* is precisely based on the notion that the proletariat *can* "govern", and not only "dominate", and that it must do so if the dictatorship of the proletariat is to be more than a slogan. "Revolution," Lenin also writes "consists not in the new class commanding, governing with the aid of the *old* state machine, but in this class *smashing* this machine and commanding, governing with the aid of a *new* machine. Kautsky blurs over this *basic* idea of Marxism, or he does not understand it at all" (p. 347). This new "machine", as it appears in *The State and Revolution* is the state of the armed workers. What is involved here, to all appearances, is *unmediated* class rule, a notion much more closely associated with anarchism than with Marxism.

This needs to be qualified. But what is so striking about *The State and Revolution* is *how little* it needs to be qualified, as I propose to show.

Lenin strongly attacks the anarchists, and insists on the need to retain the state in the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. "We are not utopians," he writes, "we do not 'dream' of dispensing *at once* with all administration, with all subordination" (p. 298). But he then goes on: "The subordination, however, must be *to* the armed vanguard of all the exploited and working people, *i.e. to the proletariat* (my italics). A beginning can and must be made at once, overnight, to replace the specific 'bossing' of state officials by the simple functions of 'foremen and accountants', functions which are already fully within the ability of the average town dweller and can well be performed for workmen's wages. *We*, the workers, shall organize large-scale production on the basis of what capitalism has already created, relying on our own experience as workers, establishing strict, iron discipline backed by the state of the armed workers. We shall reduce the role of state officials to that of simply carrying out our instructions as responsible, revocable, moderately paid 'foremen and accountants' (of course, with the aid of technicians of all sorts, types, and degrees" (p. 298).

Clearly, some kind of officialdom continues to exist, but equally clearly, it functions under the strictest and continuous supervision and

control of the armed workers; and officials are, as Lenin notes repeatedly, revocable at any time. "Bureaucrats", on this view, have not been altogether abolished; but they have been reduced to the role of utterly subordinate executants of the popular will, as expressed by the armed workers.

As for a second main institution of the old state, the standing army, it has been replaced, in the words quoted earlier, by armed workers who proceed to form a militia involving the whole population.

Thus, two institutions which Lenin views as "most characteristic" (p. 283) of the bourgeois state machine have been radically dealt with: one of them, the bureaucracy, has been drastically reduced in size and what remains of it has been utterly subdued by direct popular supervision, backed by the power of instant revocability; while the other, the standing army, has actually been abolished.

Even so, Lenin stresses, the centralized state has *not* been abolished. But it takes the form of "voluntary centralism, of the voluntary amalgamation of the communes into a nation, of the voluntary fusion of the proletarian communes, for the purpose of destroying bourgeois rule and the bourgeois state machine" (p. 301).

Here too, the obvious question concerns the *institutions* through which the dictatorship of the proletariat may be expressed. For Lenin does speak in *The State and Revolution* "of a gigantic replacement of certain institutions by other institutions of a fundamentally different type" (p. 293). But *The State and Revolution* has actually very little to say about institutions, save for some very brief references to the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

Lenin reserves some of his choicest epithets for one form of representative institution, namely "the venal and rotten parliamentarism of bourgeois society" (p. 297). However, "the way out of parliamentarism is not, of course, the abolition of representative institutions and the elective principle, but the conversion of the representative institutions from talking shops into 'working bodies'" (p. 296). The institutions which embody this principle are, as noted, the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. On one occasion, Lenin speaks of "the simple *organization* of the armed people (such as the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. . .)" (p. 329); on another, of "the conversion of *all* citizens into workers and other employees of *one* huge 'syndicate—the whole state—and the complete subordination of the entire work of this syndicate to a genuinely democratic state, the state of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies" (p. 334); and the third such reference is in the form of a question: "Kautsky develops a 'superstitious reverence' for 'ministries'; but why can they not be replaced, say, by committees of specialists working under sovereign, all-powerful Soviets and Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies?" (p. 346). It must be noted, how-

ever, that the Soviets are "sovereign and all-powerful" in relation to the "committee" of which Lenin speaks. In regard to their constituents, the deputies are of course subject to recall at any time: "representation" must here be conceived as operating within the narrow limits determined by popular rule.

The "state" of which Lenin speaks in *The State and Revolution* is therefore one in which the standing army has ceased to exist; where what remains of officialdom has come to be completely subordinated to the armed workers; and where the representatives of these armed workers are similarly subordinated to them. It is this "model" which would seem to justify the contention, advanced earlier, that the "state" which expresses the dictatorship of the proletariat is, already on the morrow of the revolution, at a stage of advanced decomposition.

The problems which this raises are legion; and the fact that they are altogether ignored in *The State and Revolution* cannot be left out of account in a realistic assessment of it.

The first of these problems is that of the *political mediation* of the revolutionary power. By this I mean that the dictatorship of the proletariat is obviously inconceivable without *some* degree at least of political articulation and leadership, which implies political organization. But the extraordinary fact, given the whole cast of Lenin's mind, is that the political element which otherwise occupies so crucial a place in his thought, namely the party, receives such scant attention in *The State and Revolution*.

There are three references to the party in the work, two of which have no direct bearing on the issue of the dictatorship of the proletariat. One of these is an incidental remark concerning the need for the party to engage in the struggle "against religion which stupifies the people" (p. 318); the second, equally incidental, notes that "in revising the programme of our Party, we must by all means take the advice of Engels and Marx into consideration, in order to come nearer the truth, to restore Marxism by ridding it of its distortions, to guide the struggle of the working class for its emancipation more correctly" (p. 310). The third and most relevant reference goes as follows: "By educating the workers' party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat, capable of assuming power and *leading the whole people* to socialism, of directing and organizing the new system, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people in organizing their social life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie" (p. 281).

It is not entirely clear from this passage whether it is the *proletariat* which is capable of assuming power, leading, directing, organizing, etc.; or whether it is the *vanguard* of the proletariat, i.e. the

workers' party, which is here designated. Both interpretations are possible. On the first, the question of political leadership is left altogether in abeyance. It may be recalled that it was so left by Marx in his considerations on the Paris Commune and on the dictatorship of the proletariat. But it is not something which can, it seems to me, be left in abeyance in the discussion of revolutionary rule—save in terms of a theory of spontaneity which constitutes an avoidance of the problem rather than its resolution. On the other hand, the second interpretation, which fits in better with everything we know of Lenin's appraisal of the importance of the party, only serves to raise the question without tackling it. That question is of course absolutely paramount to the whole meaning of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat: what is the relationship between the proletariat whose dictatorship the revolution is deemed to establish, and the party which educates, leads, directs, organizes, etc? It is only on the basis of an assumption of a symbiotic, organic relationship between the two, that the question vanishes altogether; but while such a relationship may well have existed between the Bolshevik Party and the Russian proletariat in the months preceding the October Revolution, i.e. when Lenin wrote *The State and Revolution*, the assumption that this kind of relationship can ever be taken as an automatic and permanent fact belongs to the rhetoric of power, not to its reality.

Whether it is the party or the proletariat which is, in the passage above, designated as leading the whole people to socialism, the fact is that Lenin did of course assert the former's central role after the Bolsheviks had seized power. Indeed, he was by 1919 asserting its exclusive political guidance. "Yes, the dictatorship of one party!" he said then: "we stand upon it and cannot depart from this ground, since this is the party which in the course of decades has won for itself the position of vanguard of the whole factory and industrial proletariat". In fact, "the dictatorship of the working class is carried into effect by the party of the Bolsheviks which since 1905 or earlier has been united with the whole revolutionary proletariat".<sup>3</sup> Later on, as E. H. Carr also notes, he described the attempt to distinguish between the dictatorship of the class and the dictatorship of the party as proof of an "unbelievable and inextricable confusion of thought";<sup>4</sup> and in 1921, he was bluntly asserting against the criticisms of the Workers' Opposition that "... the dictatorship of the proletariat is impossible except through the Communist Party".<sup>5</sup>

This may well have been the case, but it must be obvious that this is an altogether different "model" of the exercise of revolutionary power from that presented in *The State and Revolution*, and that it radically transforms the meaning to be attached to the "dictatorship of the proletariat". At the very least, it brings into the sharpest possible forms

the question of the relation between the ruling party and the proletariat. Nor even is it the *party* which is here in question, but rather the party leadership, in accordance with that *grim* dynamic which Trotsky had prophetically outlined after the split of Russian Social Democracy between Bolshevik and Mensheviks, namely that "the party organization [the caucus] at first substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organization; and finally a single 'dictator' substitutes itself for the Central Committee. . . ."

For a time after the Revolution, Lenin was able to believe and claim that there was no conflict between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of the party; and Stalin was to make that claim the basis and legitimation of his own total rule. In the case of Lenin, very few things are as significant a measure of his greatness than that he should have come, while in power, to question that identification, and to be obsessed by the thought that it could not simply be taken for granted. He might well, as his successors were to do, have tried to conceal from himself the extent of the gulf between the claim and the reality: that he did not and that he died a deeply troubled man<sup>7</sup> is not the least important part of his legacy, though it is not the part of his legacy which is likely to be evoked, let alone celebrated, in the country of the Bolshevik Revolution.

It is of course very tempting to attribute the transformation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as presented in *The State and Revolution* into the dictatorship of the party, or rather of its leaders, to the particular circumstances of Russia after 1917—to backwardness, civil war, foreign intervention, devastation, massive deprivation, popular disaffection, and the failure of other countries to heed the call of revolution.

The temptation, it seems to me, ought to be resisted. Of course, the adverse circumstances with which the Bolsheviks had to cope were real and oppressive enough. But I would argue that these circumstances only aggravated, though certainly to an extreme degree, a problem which is in any case inherent in the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The problem arises because that dictatorship, even in the most favourable circumstances, is unrealizable without political mediation; and because the necessary introduction of the notion of political mediation into the "model" considerably affects the latter's character, to say the least. This is particularly the case if political mediation is conceived in terms of single party rule. For such rule, even if "democratic centralism" is much more flexibly applied than has ever been the case, makes much more difficult, and may preclude, the institutionalization of what may loosely be called socialist

pluralism. This is exceptionally difficult to achieve and may even be impossible in most revolutionary situations. But it is just as well to recognize that unless adequate provision is made for *alternative* channels of expression and political articulation, which the concept of single party rule excludes by definition, any talk of socialist democracy is so much hot air. Single party rule postulates an undivided, revolutionary proletarian will of which it is the natural expression. But this is not a reasonable postulate upon which to rest the "dictatorship of proletariat": in no society, however constituted, is there an undivided, single popular will. This is precisely why the problem of political mediation arises. The problem need not be thought insuperable. But its resolution requires, for a start, that it should at least be *recognized*.

The question of the party, however, brings one back to the question of the state. When Lenin said, in the case of Russia, that the dictatorship of the proletariat was impossible except through the Communist Party, what he also implied was that the Party must infuse its will into and assure its domination over the institutions which had, in *The State and Revolution* been designated as representing the armed workers. In 1921 he noted that "as the governing party we could not help fusing the Soviet 'authorities' with the party 'authorities' — with us they are fused and they will be";<sup>8</sup> and in one of his last articles in *Pravda*, written in early 1923, he also suggested that "the flexible union of Soviet with party element", which had been a "source of enormous strength" in external policy "will be at least equally in place (I think, far more in place) if applied to our whole state apparatus".<sup>9</sup> But this means that if the party must be strong, so must the state which serves as its organ of rule. And indeed, as early as March 1918, Lenin was saying that "for the present we stand unconditionally for the state"; and to the question which he himself put: "When will the state begin to die away?" he gave the answer: "We shall have time to hold more than two congresses before we can say, See how our state is dying away. Till then it is too soon. To proclaim in advance the dying away of the state will be a violation of historical perspective".<sup>10</sup>

There is one sense in which this is perfectly consistent with *The State and Revolution*; and another, more important sense, in which it is not. It is consistent in the sense that Lenin always envisaged a strong power to exist after the revolution had been achieved. But it is inconsistent in the sense that he also, in *The State and Revolution* envisaged this power to be exercised, not by the state as commonly understood, but by a "state" of armed workers. Certain it is that the state of which he was speaking after the revolution was not the state of which he was speaking when he wrote *The State and Revolution*.

Here too, I believe that simply to attribute the inconsistency to the

particular Russian conditions which faced the Bolsheviks is insufficient. For it seems to me that the kind of all-but unmediated popular rule which Lenin describes in the work belongs in fact, whatever the circumstances in which revolution occurs, to a fairly distant future, in which, as Lenin himself put it, "the need for violence against people in general, for the *subordination* of one man to another, and of one section of the population to another, will vanish altogether since people will become accustomed to observing the elementary conditions of social life *without violence* and *without subordination*" (p. 328). Until that time, a state does endure, but it is not likely to be of the kind of state of which Lenin speaks in *The State and Revolution*: it is a state about which it is not necessary to use inverted commas.

In Lenin's handling of the matter, at least in *The State and Revolution*, two "models" of the state are contraposed in the sharpest possible way: *either* there is the "old state", with its repressive, military-bureaucratic apparatus, i.e. the bourgeois state; *or* there is the "transitional" type of state of the dictatorship of the proletariat which, as I have argued, is scarcely a state at all. But if, as I believe, this latter type of "state" represents, on the morrow of a revolution and for a long time after, a short cut which real life does not allow," Lenin's formulations serve to avoid rather than to meet the fundamental question, which is at the centre of the socialist project, namely the kind of state, without inverted commas, which is congruent with the exercise of socialist power.

In this respect, it needs to be said that the legacy of Marx and Engels is rather more uncertain than Lenin allows. Both men undoubtedly conceived it as one of the main tasks, indeed *the* main task of the proletarian revolution to "smash" the old state; and it is also perfectly true that Marx did say about the Commune that it was "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour"<sup>11</sup> But it is not irrelevant to note that, ten years after the Commune, Marx also wrote that "quite apart from the fact that this [i.e. the Commune] was merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could be".<sup>12</sup> Nor of course did Marx ever describe the Commune as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only Engels did so, in the 1891 Preface to *The Civil War in France*: "Of late, the Social-Democratic Philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentle-

\* This may need qualification in the following sense: *on the morrow of revolution, the problem does often appear to have vanished. The real problems begin to emerge the day after, and the day after that, when the initial impetus and enthusiasm begin to wane and vast new problems and dangers have to be confronted.*

men, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat".<sup>13</sup> But in the same year 1891, Engels also said, in his Critique of the Draft of the Erfurt Programme of the German Social Democratic Party, that "if one thing is certain it is that our party and the working class can only come to power in the form of the democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown. . . ." (Quoted by Lenin in *The State and Revolution*, p. 314). Commenting on this, Lenin states that "Engels repeated here in a particularly striking form the fundamental idea which runs through all of Marx's works, namely that the democratic republic is the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat" (p. 314). But the "nearest approach" is not "the specific form"; and it may be doubted that the notion of the democratic republic as the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat, is a fundamental idea which runs through all of Marx's works. Also, in the Preface to *The Civil War in France*, Engels said of the state that "at best it is an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the victorious proletariat will have to lop off as speedily as possible, just as the Commune had to, until a generation reared in new, free social conditions is able to discard the entire lumber of the state" (Quoted by Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, p. 320. My italics).

It is on the basis of such passages that the Menshevik leader, Julius Martov, following Kautsky, wrote after the Bolshevik revolution that in speaking of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Engels is not employing the term "to indicate a form of government, but to designate the social structure of the State power".<sup>14</sup>

This seems to me to be a misreading of Engels, and also of Marx. For both men certainly thought that the dictatorship of the proletariat meant not only "the social structure of the State power" but also and quite emphatically "a form of government"; and Lenin is much closer to them when he speaks in *The State and Revolution* of "a gigantic replacement of certain institutions by institutions of a fundamentally different type" (p. 293).

The point, however, is that, even taking full account of what Marx and Engels have to say about the Commune, they left these institutions of a fundamentally different type to be worked out by later generations; and so, notwithstanding *The State and Revolution*, did Lenin.

This, however, does not detract from the importance of the work. Despite all the questions which it leaves unresolved, it carries a message whose importance the passage of time has only served to demonstrate :

this is that the socialist project is an anti-bureaucratic project, and that at its core is the vision of a society in which "for the first time in the history of civilized society, the *mass* of the population will rise to take an *independent* part, not only in voting and elections, but *also in the everyday administration of the state*. Under socialism *all* will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing" (p. 348). This was also Marx's vision; and one of the historic merits of *The State and Revolution* is to have brought it back to the position it deserves on the socialist agenda. Its second historic merit is to have insisted that this must not be allowed to remain a far-distant, shimmering hope that could safely be disregarded in the present; but that its actualization must be considered as an immediate part of revolutionary theory and practice. I have argued here that Lenin greatly over-estimated in *The State and Revolution* how far the state could be made to "wither away" in any conceivable post-revolutionary situation. But it may well be that the integration of this kind of over-estimation into socialist thinking is the necessary condition for the transcendence of the grey and bureaucratic "practicality" which has so deeply infected the socialist experience of the last half-century.

## NOTES

Lucio Colletti, "Power and Democracy in Socialist Society" in *New Left Review*, No. 56, July-August 1969, p. 19. For another interesting assessment of *The State and Revolution*, see L. Magri, "L'Etat et la Révolution" Aujourd'hui" in *Les Temps Modernes*, August-September 1968, No. 266-267.

V. I. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (London, 1941), p. 24. Italics in text.

E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923* (London, 1950), Vol. I, p. 230.

4. *Zbid.*, p. 230.

5. Robert V. Daniels, "The State and Revolution: A Case Study in the Genesis and Transformation of Communist Ideology", in *The American Slavic and East European Review* (February, 1953), Vol. XII, No. 1, p. 24. I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed. Trotsky: 1879-1921* (London, 1954), p. 90.

7. See, e.g. M. Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (London, 1969).

8. Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

11. K. Marx, "The Civil War in France", in *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1950), Vol. I, p. 473.

12. K. Marx to F. Domela-Nieuwenhuis, February 22, 1881, in *K. Marx and F. Engels. Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1953), p. 410.

13. *Selected Works, op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 440.

14. J. Martov, *The State and the Socialist Revolution* (New York, 1938), p. 41.