

MARX AND THE STATE

Ralph Miliband

I

As in the case of so many other aspects of Marx's work, what he thought about the state has more often than not come to be seen through the prism of later interpretations and adaptations. These have long congealed into the Marxist theory of the state, or into the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state, but they cannot be taken to constitute an adequate expression of Marx's own views. This is not because these theories bear no relation to Marx's views but rather that they emphasize some aspects of his thought to the detriment of others, and thus distort by over-simplification an extremely complex and by no means unambiguous body of ideas; and also that they altogether ignore certain strands in Marx's thought which are of considerable interest and importance. This does not, in itself, make later views better or worse than Marx's own: to decide this, what needs to be compared is not text with text, but text with historical or contemporary reality itself. This can hardly be done within the compass of an essay. But Marx is so inescapably bound up with contemporary politics, his thought is so deeply buried inside the shell of official Marxism and his name is so often invoked in ignorance by enemies and partisans alike, that it is worth asking again what he, rather than Engels, or Lenin or any other of his followers, disciples or critics, actually said and appeared to think about the state. This is the purpose of the present essay.

Marx himself never attempted to set out a comprehensive and systematic theory of the state. In the late 1850s he wrote that he intended, as part of a vast scheme of projected work, of which Capital was only to be the first part, to subject the state to systematic study.' But of this scheme, only one part of Capital was in fact completed. His ideas on the state must therefore be taken from such historical *pièces de circonstance* as The Class Struggles in France, the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte and The Civil War in France, and from his incidental remarks on the subject in his other works. On the other hand, the crucial importance of the state in his scheme of analysis is well shown by his constantly recurring references to it in almost all of his writings; and the state was also a central preoccupation of the "young Marx": his early work from the late 1830s to 1844 was largely concerned with the nature of the state and its relation to society. His most sustained piece of work until the 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, apart

from his doctoral dissertation, was his *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*, of which only the *Introduction*, actually written after the *Critique* itself, has so far appeared in English.⁹ It is in fact largely through his critique of Hegel's view of the state that Marx completed his emancipation from the Hegelian system. This early work of Marx on the state is of great interest; for, while he soon moved beyond the views and positions he had set out there, some of the questions he had encountered in his examination of Hegel's philosophy recur again and again in his later writings.

II

Marx's earliest views on the state bear a clear Hegelian imprint. In the articles which he wrote for the *Rheinische Zeitung* from May 1842 to March 1843, he repeatedly spoke of the state as the guardian of the general interest of society and of law as the embodiment of freedom. Modern philosophy, he writes in July 1842, "considers the state as the great organism in which must be realized juridical, moral and political freedom and where the individual citizen, in obeying the laws of the state only obeys the natural laws of his own reason, of human reason."¹⁰

On the other hand, he also shows himself well aware that this exalted view of the state is in contradiction with the real state's actual behaviour: "a state which is not the realization of rational freedom is a bad state," he writes, "and in his article on the Rhineland Diet's repressive legislation against the pilfering of forest wood, he eloquently denounces the Diet's denial of the customary rights of the poor and condemns the assignation to the state of the rôle of servant of the rich against the poor. This, he holds, is a perversion of the state's true purpose and mission; private property may wish to degrade the state to its own level of concern, but any modern state, in so far as it remains true to its own meaning, must, confronted by such pretensions, cry out "your ways are not my ways, and your ideas are not my ideas."¹¹

More and more, however, Marx found himself driven to emphasize the external pressures upon the state's actions. Writing in January 1843 on the plight of the wine growers of the Moselle, he remarks that "in the examination of the institutions of the state, one is too easily tempted to overlook the concrete nature of circumstances ("*die sachliche Natur der Verhältnisse*") and to explain everything by the will of those empowered to act."¹²

It is this same insistence on the need to consider the "concrete nature of circumstances" which lies at the core of the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which Marx wrote in the spring and summer of 1843, after the *Rheinische Zeitung* had been closed down. By then, his horizons had widened to the point where he spoke confidently of a "break" in the existing society, to which "the system of acquisition and commerce, of ownership and of exploitation of man is leading even more rapidly than the increase in population."¹³ Hegel's "absurdity," he

also writes in the *Critique*, is that he views the affairs and the activities of the state in an abstract fashion; he forgets that the activities of the state are human functions: "the affairs of the state, etc., are nothing but the modes of existence and activity of the social qualities of men."⁸

The burden of Marx's critique of Hegel's concept of the state is that Hegel, while rightly acknowledging the separation of civil society from the state, asserts their reconciliation in the state itself. In his system, the "contradiction" between the state and society is resolved in the supposed representation in the state of society's true meaning and reality; the alienation of the individual from the state, the contradiction between man as a private member of society, concerned with his own private interests, and as a citizen of the state finds resolution in the state as the expression of society's ultimate reality.

But this, says Marx, is not a resolution but a mystification. The contradiction between the state and society is real enough. Indeed, the political alienation which it entails is the central fact of modern, bourgeois society, since man's political significance is detached from his real private condition, while it is in fact this condition which determines him as a social being, all other determinations appearing to him as external and inessential: "real man is the private man of the present constitution of the state."⁹

But the mediating elements which are supposed, in Hegel's system, to ensure the resolution of this contradiction—the sovereign, the bureaucracy, the middle classes, the legislature—are not in the least capable, says Marx, of doing so. Ultimately, Hegel's state, far from being above private interests and from representing the general interest, is in fact subordinate to private property. What, asks Marx, is the power of the state over private property? The state has only the illusion of being determinant, whereas it is in fact determined; it does, in time, subdue private and social wills, but only to give substance to the will of private property and to acknowledge its reality as the highest reality of the political state, as the highest moral reality.¹⁰

In the *Critique*, Marx's own resolution of political alienation and of the contradiction between the state and society is still envisaged in mainly political terms, i.e. in the framework of "true democracy." "Democracy is the solution to the riddle of all constitutions"; in it, "the constitution appears in its true reality, as the free product of man." "All other political systems are specific, definite, particular political forms. In democracy, the formal principle is also the material principle." It constitutes, therefore, the real unity of the universal and the particular.¹¹ Marx also writes: "In all states which differ from democracy, the state, the law, the constitution are sovereign without being properly dominant, that is to say without materially affecting the other non-political spheres. In democracy, the constitution, the law, the state itself are only the people's self-determination, a specific aspect of it, in so far as that aspect has a political constitution."¹²

Democracy is here intended to mean more than a specific political form, but Marx does not yet define what else it entails. The struggle between monarchy and republic, he notes, is still a struggle within the framework of what he calls the "abstract state," i.e. the state alienated from society; the abstract political form of democracy is the republic. "Property and all that makes up the content of law and the state is, with some modifications, the same in the United States as in Prussia; the republic in America is thus only a purely political form as is the monarchy in Prussia."¹³ In a real democracy, however, the constitution ceases to be purely political; indeed Marx quotes the opinion of "some modern Frenchmen" to the effect that "in a real democracy the political state disappears."¹⁴ But the concrete content of "true democracy" remains here undefined.

The *Critique* already suggests the belief that political emancipation is not synonymous with human emancipation. The point, which is, of course, central to Marx's whole system, was made explicit in the two articles which he wrote for the *Franco-German Annals*, namely the *Jewish Question*, and the *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

In the first essay, Marx criticizes Bruno Bauer for confusing political and human emancipation, and notes that "the limit of political emancipation is immediately apparent in the fact that the *state* may well free itself from some constraint, without man himself being *really* freed from it, and that the state may be a *free state*, without *man* being *free*."¹⁵ Even so, political emancipation is a great advance; it is not the last form of human emancipation, but it is the last form of human emancipation within the framework of the existing social order.¹⁶ Human emancipation, on the other hand, can only be realized by transcending bourgeois society, "which has torn up all genuine bonds between men and replaced them by selfishness, selfish need, and dissolved the world of men into a world of atomized individuals, hostile towards each other."¹⁷ The more specific meaning of that emancipation is defined in the *Jewish Question*, in Marx's strictures against "Judaism," here deemed synonymous with trade, money and the commercial spirit which has come to affect all human relations. On this view, the political emancipation of the Jews, which Marx *defends*,¹⁸ does not produce their social emancipation; this is only possible in a new society, in which practical need has been humanized and the commercial spirit abolished.¹⁹

In the *Introduction*, which he wrote in Paris at the end of 1843 and the beginning of 1844, Marx now spoke of "the doctrine; that man is for man the supreme being" and of the "categorical imperative" which required the overthrow of all conditions in which "man is a degraded, enslaved, abandoned and contemptible being."²⁰ But he also added another element to the system he was constructing, namely the proletariat as the agent of the dissolution of the existing social order;²¹

as we shall see, this view of the proletariat is not only crucial for Marx's concept of revolution but also for his view of the state.

By this time, Marx had already made an assessment of the relative importance of the political realm from which he was never to depart and which also had some major consequence for his later thought. On the one hand, he does not wish to underestimate the importance of "political emancipation," i.e. of political reforms tending to make politics and the state more liberal and democratic. Thus, in *The Holy Family*, which he wrote in 1844 in collaboration with Engels, Marx describes the "democratic representative state" as "the perfect modern state,"²⁵ meaning the perfect modern *bourgeois* state, its perfection arising from the fact that "the public system is *not* faced with any privileged exclusivity,"²⁶ i.e. economic and political life are free from feudal encumbrances and constraints.

But there is also, on the other hand, a clear view that political emancipation is not enough, and that society can only be made truly human by the abolition of private property. "It is natural necessity, essential human properties, however alienated they may seem to be, and interest that holds the members of civil society together; civil, not political life is their *real* tie. It is therefore not the state that holds the atoms of civil society together... only political superstition today imagines that social life must be held together by the state, whereas in reality the state is held together by civil life."²⁷ The modern democratic state "is based on emancipated slavery, on bourgeois society. . . the society of industry, of universal competition, of private interest freely following its aims, of anarchy, of the self-alienated natural and spiritual individuality. . ."²⁸ the "essence" of the modern state is that "it is based on the unhampered development of bourgeois society, on the free movement of private interest."²⁹

A year later, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels defined further the relation of the state to bourgeois society. "By the mere fact that it is a class and no longer an estate," they wrote, "the bourgeoisie is forced to organize itself no longer locally but nationally, and to give a general form to its mean average interest"; this "general form" is the state, defined as "nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeoisie necessarily adopt both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interest."²⁷ This same view is confirmed in the *Poverty of Philosophy* of 1847, where Marx again states that "political conditions are only the official expression of civil society" and goes on: "It is the sovereigns who in all ages have been subject to economic conditions, but it is never they who have dictated laws to them. Legislation, whether political or civil, never does more than proclaim, express in words, the will of economic relations."³⁰

This whole trend of thought on the subject of the state finds its most explicit expression in the famous formulation of the *Communist Manifesto*: "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for

managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie";²² and political power is "merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another."²³ This is the classical Marxist view on the subject of the state, and it is the only one which is to be found in Marxism-Leninism. In regard to Marx himself, however, and this is also true to a certain extent of Engels as well, it only constitutes what might be called a primary view of the state. For, as has occasionally been noted in discussions of Marx and the state,²⁴ there is to be found another view of the state in his work, which it is inaccurate to hold up as of similar status with the first,²⁵ but which is none the less of great interest, not least because it serves to illuminate, and indeed provides an essential context for, certain major elements in Marx's system, notably the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This secondary view is that of the state as independent from and superior to all social classes, as being the dominant force in society rather than the instrument of a dominant class.

III

It may be useful, for a start, to note some qualifications which Marx made even to his primary view of the state. For in relation to the two most advanced capitalist countries of the day, England and France, he often makes the point that, at one time or another, it is not the ruling class as a whole, but a fraction of it, which controls the state;²⁶ and that those who actually run the state may well belong to a class which is not the economically dominant class.²⁷ Marx does not suggest that this *fundamentally* affects the state's class character and its rôle of guardian and defender of the interests of property; but it obviously does introduce an element of flexibility in his view of the operation of the state's bias, not least because the competition between different factions of the ruling class may well make easier the passage of measures favourable to labour, such as the Ten Hours Bill.²⁸

The extreme manifestation of the state's independent rôle is, however, to be found in authoritarian personal rule, Bonapartism. Marx's most extensive discussion of this phenomenon occurs in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which was written between December 1851 and March 1852. In this historical study, Marx sought very hard to pin down the precise nature of the rule which Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état* had established.

The *coup d'état*, he wrote, was "the victory of Bonaparte over parliament, of the executive power over the legislative power"; in parliament, "the nation made its general will the law, that is, made the law of the ruling class its general will"; in contrast, "before the executive power it renounces all will of its own and submits to the superior command of an alien will, to authority"; "France, therefore, seems to have escaped the despotism of a class only to fall back beneath the despotism of an individual and, what is more, beneath the authority of an individual

without authority. The struggle seems to be settled in such a way that all classes, equally impotent and equally mute, fall on their knees before the rifle butt.¹³³

Marx then goes on to speak of "this executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organization, with its ingenious state machinery, embracing wide strata, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores."¹³⁴ This bureaucratic power, which sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy, had, he wrote, first been "the means of preparing the class rule of the bourgeoisie," while "under the Restoration, under Louis Phillipe, under the parliamentary Republic, it was the instrument of the ruling class, however much it strove for power of its own."¹³⁵ But the coup *d'état* had seemingly changed its rôle: "only under the second Bonaparte does the state seem to have made itself completely independent"; "as against civil society, the state machine has consolidated its position so thoroughly that the chief of the Society of December 10 [i.e. Louis Bonaparte] suffices for its head. . . ."¹³⁶

This appears to commit Marx to the view of the Bonapartist state as independent of any specific class and as superior to society. But he then goes on to say, in an often quoted phrase: "And yet the state power is not suspended in mid-air. Bonaparte represents a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, the small-holding peasants."¹³⁷ However, their lack of cohesion makes these "incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name whether through a parliament or a convention";¹³⁸ they therefore require a representative who "must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself."¹³⁹

"Represent" is here a confusing word. In the context, the only meaning that may be attached to it is that the small-holding peasants hoped to have their interests represented by Louis Bonaparte. But this does not turn Louis Bonaparte or the state into the mere instrument of their will; at the most, it may limit the executive's freedom of action somewhat. Marx also writes that "as the executive authority which has made itself an independent power, Bonaparte feels it his mission to safeguard 'bourgeois order.' But the strength of this bourgeois order lies in the middle class. He looks on himself, therefore, as the representative of the middle class and issues decrees in this sense. Nevertheless, he is somebody solely due to the fact that he has broken the political power of this middle class and daily breaks it anew"; and again, "as against the bourgeoisie, Bonaparte looks on himself, at the same time, as the representative of the peasants and of the people in general, who wants to make the lower classes of the people happy within the

frame of bourgeois society. . . . But, above all, Bonaparte looks on himself as the chief of the Society of 10 December, as the representative of the *lumpenproletariat* to which he himself, his *entourage*, his government and his army belong. . . .¹³⁴

On this basis, Louis Napoleon may "represent" this or that class (and Marx stresses the "contradictory task" of the man and the "contradictions of his government, the confused groping about which seeks now to win, now to humiliate first one class and then another and arrays all of them uniformly against him. . . ."¹³⁵); but his power of initiative remains very largely unimpaired by the specific wishes and demands of any one class or fraction of a class.

On the other hand, this does *not* mean that Bonapartism, for Marx, is in any sense neutral as between contending classes. It may *claim* to represent all classes and to be the embodiment of the whole of society. But it does in fact exist, and has been called into being, for the purpose of maintaining and strengthening the existing social order and the domination of capital over labour. Bonapartism and the Empire, Marx wrote much later in *The Civil War in France*, had succeeded the bourgeois Republic precisely because "it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation."¹³⁶ It was precisely under its sway that "bourgeois society, freed from political cares, attained a development unexpected even by itself."¹³⁷ Finally, Marx then characterizes what he calls "imperialism," by which he means Napoleon's imperial *régime*, as "at the same time, the most prostitute and the ultimate form of the State power which nascent middle-class society had commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism, and which full-grown bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labour by capital."¹³⁸

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, written a year after Marx's death, Engels also notes: "By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both."¹³⁹ But the independence of which he speaks would seem to go much further than anything Marx had in mind; thus Engels refers to the Second Empire, "which played off the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie against the proletariat" and to Bismarck's German Empire, where "capitalists and workers are balanced against each other and equally cheated for the benefit of the impoverished Prussian cabbage *junkers*."¹⁴⁰

For Marx, the Bonapartist state, however independent it may have been *politically* from any given class, remains, and cannot in a class society but remain, the protector of an economically and socially dominant class.

IV

In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx had devoted a long and involved passage to the bureaucratic element in the state, and to its attempt "to transform the purpose of the state into the purpose of the bureaucracy and the purpose of the bureaucracy into the purpose of the state."⁴⁹ But it was only in the early 'fifties that he began to look closely at a type of society where the state appeared to be genuinely "above society," namely societies based on the "Asiatic mode of production," whose place in Marx's thought has recently attracted much attention.⁵⁰ What had, in the *Critique*, been a passing reference to the "despotic states of Asia, where the political realm is nothing but the arbitrary will of a particular individual, where the political realm, like the material, is enslaved,"⁵¹ had, by 1859, become one of Marx's four main stages of history: "In broad outlines," he wrote in the famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of

The countries Marx was mainly concerned with in this connection were India and China, and also Russia as a "semi-Asiatic" or "semi-Eastern" state. The Asiatic mode of production, for Marx and Engels, has one outstanding characteristic, namely the absence of private property in land: "this," Marx wrote to Engels in 1853, "is the real key, even to the Oriental heaven. . . ."⁵² "In the Asiatic form (or at least predominantly so)," he noted, "there is no property, but individual possession; the community is properly speaking the real proprietor";⁵³ in Asiatic production, he also remarked, it is the state which is the "real landlord."⁵⁴ In this system, he also wrote later, the direct producers are not "confronted by a private landowner but rather, as in Asia, [are] under direct subordination to a state which stands over them as their landlord and simultaneously as sovereign"; "the state," he went on, "is then the supreme lord. Sovereignty here consists in the ownership of land concentrated on a national scale. But, on the other hand, no private ownership of land exists, although there is both private and common possession and use of land."⁵⁵

A prime necessity of the Asiatic mode of production, imposed by climate and territorial conditions, was artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks; indeed, Marx wrote, this was "the basis of Oriental agriculture." In countries like Flanders and Italy the need of an economical and common use of water drove private enterprise into voluntary association; but it required "in the Orient, where civilization was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary associations, the interference of the centralized power of Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic governments, the functions of providing public works."⁵⁶

Finally, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx speaks of "the despotic government which is poised above the lesser communities,"¹⁰ and describes that government as the "*all-embracing unity* which stands above all these small common bodies . . . since the *unity* is the real owner, and the real pre-condition of common ownership, it is perfectly possible for it to appear as something separate and superior to the numerous real, particular communities . . . the despot here appears as the father of all the numerous lesser communities, thus realizing the common unity of all."¹¹

It is therefore evident that Marx does view the state, in the conditions of Asiatic despotism, as the dominant force in society, independent of and superior to all its members, and that those who control its administration are society's authentic rulers. Karl Wittfogel has noted that Marx did not pursue this theme after the 1850s and that "in the writings of the later period he emphasized the technical side of large-scale waterworks, where previously he had emphasized their political setting."¹² The reason for this, Professor Wittfogel suggests, is that "obviously the concept of Oriental despotism contained elements that paralysed his search for truth";¹³ hence his "retrogressions" on the subject. But the explanation for Marx's lack of concern for the topic would seem much simpler and much less sinister; it is that he was, in the 'sixties and the early 'seventies, primarily concerned with Western capitalism. Furthermore, the notion of bureaucratic despotism can hardly have held any great terror for him since he had, in fact, worked through its nearest equivalent in capitalist society, namely Bonapartism, and had analysed it as an altogether different phenomenon from the despotism encountered in Asiatic society. Nor is it accurate to suggest, as does Mr. Lichtheim, that "Marx for some reason shirked the problem of the bureaucracy" in post-capitalist society.¹⁴ On the contrary, this may be said to be a crucial element in Marx's thought in the late 'sixties and in the early 'seventies. His concern with the question, and with the state, finds expression in this period in his discussion of the nature of political power in post-capitalist societies, and particularly in his view of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This theme had last occupied Marx in 1851-2; after almost twenty years it was again brought to the fore by the Paris Commune, by his struggles with anarchism in the First International and by the programmatic pronouncement of German Social Democracy. It is to this, one of the most important and the most misunderstood aspects of Marx's work on the state, that we must now turn.



It is first of all necessary to go back to the democratic and representative republic, which must be clearly distinguished from the dictatorship of the proletariat: for Marx, the two concepts have nothing

in common. An element of confusion arises from the fact that Marx bitterly denounced the class character of the democratic republic, yet supported its coming into being. The contradiction is only apparent; Marx saw the democratic republic as the most advanced type of political regime in *bourgeois society*, and wished to see it prevail over more backward and "feudal" political systems. But it remained for him a system of class rule, indeed the system in which the bourgeoisie rules most directly.

The limitations of the democratic republic, from Marx's point of view, are made particularly clear in the *Address of the Central Committee of the Communist League* which he and Engels wrote in March 1850. "Far from desiring to revolutionize all society for the revolutionary proletarians," they wrote, "the democratic petty bourgeois strive for a change in social conditions by means of which existing society will be made as tolerable and comfortable as possible for them." They would therefore demand such measures as "the diminution of state expenditure by a curtailment of the bureaucracy and shifting the chief taxes on to the big landowners and bourgeois... the abolition of the pressure of big capital on small, through public credit institutions and laws against usury... the establishment of bourgeois property relations in the countryside by the complete abolition of feudalism." But in order to achieve their purpose they would need "a democratic state structure, either constitutional or republican, that will give them and their allies, the peasants, a majority; also a democratic communal structure that will give them direct control over communal property and over a series of functions now performed by the bureaucrats."⁴⁴ However, they added, "as far as the workers are concerned, it remains certain that they are to remain wage workers as before; the democratic petty-bourgeois only desire better wages and a more secure existence for the workers... they hope to bribe the workers by more or less concealed alms and to break their revolutionary potency by making their position tolerable for the moment."⁴⁵

But, Marx and Engels go on, "these demands can in no wise suffice for the party of the proletariat"; while the petty-bourgeois democrats would seek to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible, "it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, until the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far that competition among the proletarians of these countries has ceased and that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians. For us the issue cannot be the alteration of private property but only its annihilation, not the smoothing over of class antagonisms but the abolition of classes, not the improvement of existing society but the foundation of a new one."⁴⁶

At the same time, while the demands and aims of the proletarian party went far beyond anything which even the most advanced and radical petty-bourgeois democrats would accept, the revolutionaries must give them qualified support and seek to push the democratic movement into even more radical directions.⁶⁹ It was, incidentally, precisely the same strategy which dictated Marx's later attitude to all movements of radical reform, and which led him, as in the *Inaugural Address* of the First International in 1864, to acclaim the Ten Hours Act or the advances of the co-operative movement as the victories of "the political economy of labour over the political economy of property."⁷⁰

In 1850, Marx and Engels had also suggested that one essential task of the proletarian revolutionaries would be to oppose the decentralizing tendencies of the petty-bourgeois revolutionaries. On the contrary, "the workers must not only strive for a single and indivisible German republic, but also within this republic for the most determined centralization of power in the hands of the state authority. . . ."⁷¹

This is not only the most extreme "statist" prescription in Marx's (and Engels's) work—it is the only one of its kind, leaving aside Marx's first "Hegelian" pronouncements on the subject. More important is the fact that the prescription is intended *not* for the proletarian but for the bourgeois democratic revolution.⁷² In 1850, Marx and Engels believed, and said in the *Address*, that the German workers would not be able "to attain power and achieve their own class interest without completely going through a lengthy revolutionary development."⁷³ The proletarian revolution would see the coming into being of an altogether different form of rule than the democratic republic, namely the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In a famous letter to J. Wedemeyer in March 1852, Marx had revealed the cardinal importance he attached to this concept by saying that, while no credit was due to him for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggles between them, "what I did that was new was to prove (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*, (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*."⁷⁴

Unfortunately, Marx did not define in any specific way *what* the dictatorship of the proletariat actually entailed, and more particularly what was its relation to the state. It has been argued by Mr. Hal Draper in an extremely well documented article that it is a "social description, a statement of the class character of the political power. It is not a statement about the forms of the government machinery."⁷⁵ My own view, on the contrary, is that, for Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat is *both* a statement of the class character of the political power *and* a description of the political power itself; and that it is in fact the

nature of the political power which it describes which guarantees its class character.

In the *18th Brumaire*, Marx had made a point which constitutes a main theme of his thought, namely that all previous revolutions had "perfected this [state] machine instead of smashing it. The parties that contended in turn for domination regarded the possession of this huge state edifice as the principal spoils of the victors."¹⁷⁸ Nearly twenty years later, in *The Civil War in France*, he again stressed how every previous revolution had consolidated "the centralized State power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy and judicature"; and he also stressed how the political character of the state had changed "simultaneously with the economic changes of society. At the same pace at which the progress of modern history developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labour, the State power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism. After every revolution marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the State power stands out in bolder and bolder relief."¹⁷⁹

As Mr. Draper notes, Marx had made no reference to the dictatorship of the proletariat in all the intervening years. Nor indeed did he so describe the Paris Commune. But what he acclaims above all in the Commune is that, in contrast to previous social convulsions, it sought not the further consolidation of the state power but its destruction. What it wanted, he said, was to have "restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society."¹⁸⁰ Marx also lays stress on the Commune's popular, democratic and egalitarian character, and on the manner in which "not only municipal administration but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the State was laid into the hands of the Commune."¹⁸¹ Moreover, while the communal form of government was to apply even to the "smallest country hamlet," "the unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by the Communal Constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the State power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence."¹⁸²

In notes which he wrote for *The Civil War in France*, Marx makes even clearer than in the published text the significance which he attached to the Commune's dismantling of the state power. As contributing evidence of his approach to the whole question, the following passage from the Notes is extremely revealing: "This [i.e. the Commune] was," he wrote, "a Revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or Imperialist form of State power. It was a Revolution against the *State* itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life.

It was not a revolution to transfer it from one fraction of the ruling class to the other but a Revolution to break down this horrid machinery of Classdomination [*sic*] itself. . . the Second Empire was the final form (?) [*sic*] of this State usurpation. The Commune was its definite negation, and, therefore, the initiation of the social Revolution of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ It is in the light of such views that Marx's verdict on the Commune takes on its full meaning: this "essentially working-class government," he wrote, was "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour."⁸¹

It is of course true that, while Engels, long after Marx's death, did describe the Paris Commune as the dictatorship of the proletariat,⁸¹ Marx himself did not do so. The reason for this would seem fairly obvious, namely that, for Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the outcome of a socialist revolution on a national scale; the Commune, as he wrote in 1881, was "merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions," while "the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could it be."⁸² Even so, it may justifiably be thought that the Commune, in its de-institutionalization of political power, did embody, for Marx, the essential elements of his concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Precisely the opposite view has very generally come to be taken for granted; the following statement in Mr. Lichtheim's *Marxism* is a typical example of a wide consensus: "His (Marx's) hostility to the state was held in check by a decidedly authoritarian doctrine of political rule during the transition period: prior to being consigned to the dustbin of history, the state was to assume dictatorial powers. In different terms, authority would inaugurate freedom—a typically Hegelian paradox which did not worry Marx though it alarmed Proudhon and Bakunin.

. . . ⁸³

The trouble with the view that Marx had a "decidedly authoritarian doctrine" is that it is unsupported by any convincing evidence from Marx himself; and that there is so much evidence which directly runs counter to it.

Marx was undoubtedly the chief opponent of the anarchists in the International. But it is worth remembering that his central quarrel with them concerned above all the manner in which the struggle for a socialist revolution ought to be prosecuted, with Marx insisting on the need for political involvement within the existing political framework, against the anarchists' all or nothing rejection of mere politics; and the quarrel also concerned the question of the type of organization required by the international workers' movement, with Marx insisting on a *degree* of control by the General Council of the International over its affiliated organizations.

As for the rôle of the state in the period of transition, there is the well-known passage in the "private circular" against the anarchists issued by the General Council in 1872, *Les Préten dues Scissions dam*

l'Internationale, and most probably written by Marx: "What all socialists understand by anarchism is this: as soon as the goal of the proletarian movement, the abolition of class, shall have been reached, the power of the state, whose function it is to keep the great majority of the producers beneath the yoke of a small minority of exploiters, will disappear, and governmental functions will be transformed into simple administrative functions. The Alliance [i.e. Bakunin's Alliance of Socialist Democracy] turns the thing upside down. It declares anarchism in the ranks of the workers to be an infallible means for disrupting the powerful concentration of social and political forms in the hands of the exploiters. Under this pretext, it asks the International, when the old world is endeavouring to crush our organization, to replace organization by anarchism. The international police could ask for nothing better.. ."¹⁷⁸

This can hardly be construed as an authoritarian text; nor certainly is Marx's plaintive remark in January 1873 quoted by Lenin in *State and Revolution* that "if the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms, if the workers set up this revolutionary dictatorship in place of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, they commit the terrible crime of violating principles, for in order to satisfy their wretched, vulgar, everyday needs, in order to crush the resistance of the bourgeoisie, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state, they give the state a revolutionary and transitory form.. ."¹⁷⁹

Nor is there much evidence of Marx's "decidedly authoritarian doctrine" in his marginal notes of 1875 on the *Gotha Programme* of the German Social-Democratic Party. In these notes, Marx bitterly attacked the programme's references to "the free state" ("free state—what is this?") and this is well in line with his belief that the "free state" is a contradiction in terms; and he then asked: "What transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present functions of the state?" Marx, however, did not answer the question but merely said that it could only be answered "scientifically" and that "one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousandfold combination of the word people with the word state."¹⁸⁰ He then goes on: "Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. There corresponds to this also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*."¹⁸¹

This does not advance matters much, but neither does it suggest the slightest "authoritarian" impulse. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx as always before, made a sharp distinction between the democratic republic and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Engels was clearly mistaken when he wrote in 1891 that the democratic republic was "even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat."¹⁸² On the contrary, Marx's critical attitude towards the democratic

republic in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* shows that he continued to think of the dictatorship of the proletariat as an altogether different and immeasurably freer form of political power. "Freedom," he wrote in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, "consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinated to it. . . ."¹ This would seem a good description of Marx's view of the state in the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. No doubt, he would have endorsed Engels's view, expressed a few weeks after Marx's death, that "the proletarian class will first have to possess itself of the organized political force of the state and with this aid stamp out the resistance of the capitalist class and reorganize society."² But it is of some significance that, with the possible exception of his remark of January 1873, referred to earlier, Marx himself always chose to emphasize the liberating rather than the repressive aspects of post-capitalist political power; and it is also of some interest that, in the notes he made for *The Civil War in France*, and which were not of course intended for publication, he should have warned the working class that the "work of regeneration" would be "again and again relented [sic] and impeded by the resistance of vested interests and class egotisms," but that he should have failed to make any reference to the State as an agent of repression. What he did say was that "great strides may be [made] at once through the communal form of political organization" and that "the time has come to begin that movement for themselves and mankind."³

The fact is that, far from bearing any authoritarian imprint, the whole of Marx's work on the state is pervaded by a powerful anti-authoritarian and anti-bureaucratic bias, not only in relation to a distant communist society but also to the period of transition which is to precede it. True, the state is necessary in this period. But the only thing which, for Marx, makes it tolerable is popular participation and popular rule. If Marx is to be faulted, it is not for any authoritarian bias, but for greatly understating the difficulties of the libertarian position. However, in the light of the experience of socialist movements since Marx wrote, this may perhaps be judged a rather less serious fault than its bureaucratic obverse.

NOTES

1. K. Marx to F. Lassalle, 22 February 1858, and K. Marx to F. Engels, 2 April 1858 (*Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, n.d.), pp. 125, 126.
2. For the *Critique*, see *Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) (Moscow, 1927), I, 1/1, pp. 403-553; for the *Introduction*, first published in the *Franco-German Annals of 1844*, *ibid.*, I, 1/1, pp. 607-21, and T. B. Bottomore, Ed., *K. Marx, Early Writings* (London, 1963).
3. MEGA, *ibid.*, p. 249.
4. *ibid.*, p. 248.
5. *ibid.*, p. 283.

6. *ibid.*, p. 360. Note also his contemptuous reference in an article of May 1842 on the freedom of the Press to "the inconsistent, nebulous and timorous reasoning of German liberals, who claim to honour freedom by setting it up in an imaginary firmament, rather than on the solid ground of reality" (*ibid.*, p. 220; A. Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels. Leur Vie et leur Oeuvre* (Paris, 1958), II, p. 17).
7. K. Marx to A. Ruge, May 1843, MEGA, p. 565; see also K. Marx to A. Ruge, March 1843, *Sel. Cor., op. cit.*, p. 25.
8. MEGA, *ibid.*, p. 424.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 498-9. See also J. Hyppolite, *Etudes sur Marx et Hegel* (Paris, 1955), pp. 123 ff., and M. Rubel, *K. Marx. Essai de Biographie Intellectuelle* (Paris, 1957), pp. 58 ff.
10. MEGA, *ibid.*, p. 519.
11. *ibid.*, pp. 434-5.
12. *ibid.*, p. 435.
13. *ibid.*, p. 436.
14. *ibid.*, p. 435.
15. *ibid.*, p. 582. Italics in original.
16. *ibid.*, p. 585.
17. *ibid.*, p. 605.
18. See S. Avineri, "Marx and Jewish Emancipation" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. XXV (July-September 1964), pp. 445-50.
19. MEGA, *op. cit.*, p. 606.
20. *ibid.*, p. 615.
21. *ibid.*, pp. 619 ff.
22. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Holy Family* (Moscow, 1956), p. 154.
23. *ibid.*, p. 157. Italics in original.
24. *ibid.*, p. 163. Italics in original.
25. *ibid.*, p. 164.
26. *ibid.*, p. 166.
27. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York, 1939), p. 59. Italics in original.
28. K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (London, 1904), p. 70.
29. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, hereafter noted as *S.W.* (Moscow, 1950), I, p. 35.
30. *ibid.*, p. 31.
31. See, e.g. J. Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (London, 1954), pp. 144 ff.; J. Sanderson, "Marx and Engels on the State" in the *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. XVI, no. 4 (December 1963), pp. 946-55.
32. As is suggested by the two authors cited above.
33. See, e.g. *The Class Struggles in France, passim, The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, passim.*
34. See, e.g. "The Elections in Britain" in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Britain* (Moscow, 1953), pp. 353 ff. "The Whigs are the aristocratic representatives of the bourgeoisie. of the industrial and commercial middle class. Under the condition that the bourgeoisie should abandon to them, to an oligarchy of aristocratic families, the monopoly of government and the exclusive possession of office, they make to the middle class, and assist it in conquering, all those concessions, which in the course of social and political developments have shown themselves to have become unavoidable and undelayable." (*ibid.*, p. 353. Italics in original.)
35. *ibid.*, p. 368.
36. *S.W.*, I, p. 300.
37. *ibid.*, p. 301.
38. *ibid.*, p. 302.
39. *ibid.*, p. 302.
40. *ibid.*, p. 302. Italics in original.
41. Marx also notes that the identity of interest of the smallholding peasants "begets

- no community, no national bond and no political organization among them," so that "they do not form a class" (*ibid.*, p. 302). For an interesting discussion of Marx's concept of class, see S. Ossowski, *Class Structure in the Class Consciousness* (London, 1963), ch. V.
42. *S.W.*, I, p. 303.
 43. *ibid.*, pp. 308-9.
 44. *ibid.*, p. 309.
 45. K. Marx, *The Civil War in France*, *S.W.*, I, p. 470.
 46. *ibid.*, p. 470.
 47. *ibid.*, p. 470.
 48. F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, *S.W.* II, p. 290.
 49. *ibid.*, pp. 290-1. For further comments on the subject from Engels, see also his letter to C. Schmidt, 27 October 1890, in *S.W.*, II, pp. 446-7.
 50. MEGA, *op. cit.*, I, 1/1, p. 456.
 51. See, e.g. K. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (Yale, 1957), ch. IX; G. Lichtheim, "Marx and the 'Asiatic Mode of Production'" in *St. Antony's Papers*, no. 14, Far Eastern Affairs (London, 1963). Also K. Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, with an introduction by E. J. Hobsbawm (London, 1964). This is a translation of a section of Marx's *Grundrisse Der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie (Rohentwurf)* (Berlin, 1953).
 52. MEGA, I, 1/1, p. 438.
 53. *S.W.*, I, p. 329.
 54. K. Marx to F. Engels, 2 June 1853, *Sel. Cor.*, p. 99.
 55. K. Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Formations*, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
 56. *New York Daily Tribune*, 5 August 1853, in Lichtheim, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
 57. K. Marx, *Capital* (Moscow, 1962), III, pp. 771-2.
 58. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence (1857-9)* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 16. In *Capital* (Moscow, 1959), I, p. 514, ft. 2, Marx also notes that "one of the material bases of the power of the State over the small disconnected producing organisms in India, was the regulation of the water supply"; also, "the necessity for predicting the rise and fall of the Nile created Egyptian astronomy, and with it the dominion of the priests, as directors of agriculture" (*ibid.*, p. 514, ft. 1); for some further elaborations on the same theme, see also F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow, 1962), p. 248.
 59. K. Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
 60. *ibid.*, p. 69. Italics in original.
 61. K. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
 62. *ibid.*, p. 387.
 63. Lichtheim, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
 64. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*, *S.W.*, I, p. 101.
 65. *ibid.*, p. 101.
 66. *ibid.*, p. 102.
 67. *ibid.*, p. 101.
 68. *ibid.*, pp. 307-9.
 69. *ibid.*, p. 106.
 70. It is, in this connection, of some interest that Engels should have thought it necessary to add a Note to the 1885 edition of the Address, explaining that this passage was based on a "misunderstanding" of French revolutionary experience and that "local and provincial self-government" were not in contradiction with "national centralization." (*ibid.*, p. 107.)
 71. *ibid.*, p. 108.
 72. K. Marx to J. Wedemeyer, 5 March 1852, *Sel. Cor.*, p. 86. Italics in original.
 73. H. Draper, "Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" in *New Politics*, vol. I, no. 4, p. 102. Italics in original.

74. *S.W.*, I, p. 301.
75. *ibid.*, pp. 468-9.
76. *ibid.*, p. 473.
77. *ibid.*, p. 471.
78. *ibid.*, p. 472.
79. *Marx-Engels Archives* (Moscow, 1934), vol. III (VIII), p. 324. Italics in original. I am grateful to Mr. M. Johnstone for drawing my attention to these Notes. Note also, e.g. the following: "Only the Proletarians, fired by a new social task to accomplish by them for all society, to do away with all classes and class rule, were the men to break the instrument of that class rule—the State, the centralized and organized governmental power usurping to be the master instead of the servant of society. . . It had sprung into life against them. By them it was broken, not as a peculiar form of governmental (centralized) power, but as its most powerful, elaborated into seeming independence from society expression and, therefore, also its most prostitute reality, covered by infamy from top to bottom, having centred in absolute corruption at home and absolute powerlessness abroad" (*ibid.*, p. 326). The peculiar English syntax of such passages is obviously due to the fact that they are only notes, not intended for publication.
80. *S.W.*, I, p. 473.
81. "Of late," Engels wrote in an Introduction to the 1891 edition of *The Civil War in France*, "the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." (*S.W.*, I, p. 440.)
82. K. Marx to F. Domela-Nienwenhuis, 22 February 1881, in *Sel. Cor.*, p. 410.
83. G. Lichtheim, *Marxism* (London, 1961), p. 374.
84. G. M. Stekloff, *History of the First International* (London, 1928), pp. 179-80, and J. Freymond, ed., *La Première Internationale* (Geneva, 1962), II, p. 295.
85. V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (London, 1933), p. 54.
86. K. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, *S.W.*, II, p. 30.
87. *ibid.*, p. 30. Italics in original.
88. Quoted in Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, p. 54. Lenin's own comment is also misleading: "Engels," he writes, "repeats here in a particularly striking manner the fundamental idea which runs like a red thread through all of Marx's works, namely, that the democratic republic is the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat" (*ibid.*, p. 54). Engels's phrase does not bear this interpretation; and whatever may be said for the view that the democratic republic is the nearest approach to the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is not so in Marx.
89. *S.W.*, II, p. 29.
90. F. Engels to P. Van Patten, 18 April 1883, *Sel. Cor.*, *op. cit.*, p. 437.
91. *Marx-Engels Archives*, *op. cit.*, p. 334.