

Modes of Politics at a Distance from the State

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The Rise and Fall of the “Enabling State”

For much of the last hundred years, the dominant parts of anti-systemic movements focused on winning state power, seeing an “enabling state” as the essential means for social transformation. The idea that radical social transformation meant wielding state power was shared by ever-increasing sectors of the anti-capitalist left, of workers’ movements, and of national liberation forces.

However, by the 1990s, state-centric models, whether social democratic, Soviet-Marxist or anti-imperialist nationalist, were in crisis. By the 1970s already, they had become marked by economic failures, non-achievement of many of their stated goals, and the inability to sustain themselves in the face of an increasingly internationalised capitalism, a deep global economic crisis and a shifting geopolitical order. Further, marked by endemic inequality, they all faced popular unrest and dissatisfaction with their top-down, bureaucratic and statist approaches, much of this from labour and the left. For example, workers in Tanzania occupied factories in the early 1970s, in defiance of a government calling itself “African socialist,” while workers’ movements toppled African governments across the continent in the 1980s and early 1990s; workers rebelled across the Marxist world in the 1960s, and again, the 1980s; massive strikes shook the West, most famously in France in 1968, as ordinary people demanded deep changes in the workplace and the larger society.

Neoliberalism does not weaken the State

As the old systems of state-led capitalism crumbled – import-substitution-industrialisation in the south, Marxist-Leninist central planning in the east, the Keynesian welfare state in the west – the door was opened to the victory of global neoliberalism. This was a new phase of capitalism, not a mere change in a few policies that could easily be undone with better policies.

Neoliberalism marked the end of the era of state-led models of capitalism, but did not mark the end of the capitalist state, or even the involvement of the state in capitalism. Neoliberalism centres on free markets, but it does not remove the state, nor weaken it – the state is not gone, but is manifestly an agency for massive interventions to subsidise capital, expand commodification and discipline the popular classes.

States are not victims of a neoliberalism that somehow appears from somewhere else, external to the state, but its key authors. The major multilateral organisations that drive neoliberalism, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO, formerly the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, GATT) are not, as some believe, private banks or organisations of multi-national corporations (MNCs) – their members and shareholders for the first two, and their members for the latter, are states.

The expansion of MNCs, and their ability to move capital around the planet with ease, is not something that happened to states. It was only made possible in the first place by states liberalising their controls of over capital movements and currencies, to allow such movement, and the role of states in creating an international infrastructure for such activities, which enables such movement. Naturally, different states have different agendas in allowing these changes: for poorer countries like

China in the 1980s, for example, this was a means of attracting investment; for richer countries like the USA in that time, this was a means of accessing cheaper labour, skipping unions and dodging environmental laws.

States disable Movements

The end of the supposedly “enabling state” disabled anti-systemic movements enamoured of states. I do not mean, and do not want to be misunderstood as saying, that the old models of labour and left politics are dead. On the contrary, these retain enormous attraction, and continue to attract substantial support. Globally, there has been some revival in the fortunes of left-of-centre parties, like the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany and the Workers’ Party (PT) in Brazil, as well as the formation of various new left parties during the

2000s, including in South Africa. We can also note the excitement with which many greeted the Venezuela government under Hugo Chavez, the interest in Bernie Sanders in the USA and in Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, and the push to form new left parties in South Africa.

I am suggesting, instead, that these models are no longer workable. Not only did they collapse after nearly fifty years in crises, but they also operated in a very different global context. The Keynesian welfare state in the West, for example, assumed class compromises based within specific nation-states, in which a business class largely focused on the national market was willing and able to make significant compromises with the national working class, and in which that class could exert enormous power and threat, in the context of massive economic growth that could fund substantial improvements in popular conditions without threatening capitalism. None of these conditions apply anymore.

The dominant section of private capitalists is organised in MNCs which have no interest in national level pacts, seeking instead advantages and markets across the globe; working class movements are weak, even if still very large (and in fact growing); there is almost nowhere in the world where ruling classes experience the working class as a deadly threat or expect a socialist revolution from below, a situation dramatically different from the 150 years that ended in the 1990s, with the rise of various forms of socialism from the 1840s; and low growth and recurrent crises since the 1970s have reduced the money available for redistribution to the popular classes and pressured capitalists to roll back the gains made in the past by working people, and redistribute wealth and power upwards. If the 1940s to the 1970s saw falling inequality, the 1990s onwards has seen inequality skyrocket.

So, the problem is not just that neoliberalism has come to dominate, but that the main alternatives that were presented in much of the twentieth century *are no longer feasible*, even if they were ever desirable. As SYRIZA found in Greece, as the ANC found in South Africa, and as the PT found in Brazil, neoliberalism is the name of today’s game. Even Venezuela’s “Bolivarian” model was premised not on a sharp break with the neoliberal order, but simply a boom in oil revenues driven by neoliberal capitalism elsewhere that allowed, for a time, some booms in welfare. Beyond this, the Venezuelan economy was in crisis well before the recent US sanctions, and, when the oil price fell, the model fell apart.

The victory of neoliberalism, then, was partly due to the absence of a clear labour and left alternative at the time that which could be championed by the working class. But this was

because the working-class movement faced the crisis, failure and passing away of the main statist models. It could either pose these as an alternative again, and fail; or seeing the failure, be demoralised and accept neoliberalism or defeat; or they could seek a third option, beyond the state.

The Return to “Politics at a distance from the State”

This situation has led directly to a crisis of the dominant currents in left and working-class politics, but it has also opened space for the *rediscovery* of society-centred, anti-capitalist modes of bottom up change, labelled as “at a distance” politics. These had always existed, and had been very influential into the 1940s, but were supplanted from 1945 worldwide by statism. In recent years too, “at a distance” politics have registered important successes in practice, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico.

These society-centred positions involve a politics of anti-capitalist transformation that question fundamentally state-centred change. In place of statist and hierarchical models, “at a distance” politics stress possibilities for more democratic, bottom-up and radical models of transformation – previously often effaced by state-centric struggles and the project of capturing state power, but now increasingly rediscovered.¹ For example, within anti-apartheid organisations of the 1970s and 1980s, there was also an implicitly anti-statist tendency which sought to build a different form of politics, often consciously opposed to the top-down logic of state hierarchies and governance. For instance, the declared aim of the United Democratic Front (UDF, formed in 1983) of constructing “people’s power” and the stress by many black-centred trade unions, notably those in the “workerist” tradition of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU, formed in 1979) on “workers’ control,” were indicative of a vision of an incipient politics of transformation that – despite ambiguities, contradictions and limitations – did *not* centre on using the state for liberation.

A “politics of emancipation” that is at a “distance from the state,” and not centred on the capture of state power, is not a monolithic project.² This is not because “at a distance” politics inevitably rejects unity or makes a virtue of disagreement and incoherence, but simply because there is no single “at a distance” model.” Politics at a distance from the state” actually describes **a range of approaches** that are grouped together more because of their scepticism about state-centred change – *such a politics does not even have to be anti-statist*.

It is possible to distinguish, analytically, at least three modes of “at a distance” politics: “outside-but-with” the state; “outside-and-despite” the state and “outside-and-against” the state.³ These are not necessarily the labels these three broad modes of “at a distance” politics themselves use, but they serve as a useful way of dividing up the types, the better to understand them.

¹ Helliker, K. and L. van der Walt. 2018. “Politics at a Distance from the State: Radical, South African and Zimbabwean praxis today.” In K. Helliker and L. van der Walt. (eds.). *Politics at a Distance from the State: Radical and African perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge.

² Badiou, A., F. Del Lucchese, and J. Del Smith. 2008. “‘We Need a Popular Discipline’: Contemporary politics and the crisis of the negative.” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 34 (4): 47, 649-650.

³ Helliker and van der Walt, “Politics at a Distance from the State.”

Mode 1: “Outside-but-with” the State

This holds that radical change should not centre on the state. Rather, popular initiatives, movements and autonomy should have maximum scope, but should be combined with transforming and democratising the state. In place of a statism that supplants popular self-activity, and a politics that rejects the state in all instances, this mode involves a synergy (or at least a creative tension). It seeks to move beyond the traditional social democratic stress on parliament and corporatism, by complementing these with popular mobilisation.⁴ Although often presented as new, these ideas had earlier incarnations in, for example, Guild Socialism.

This is certainly “politics at a distance from the state,” since it neither reduces politics to the state, nor seeks to subsume popular struggles into the state apparatus, yet it is also not anti-statist – it is a “politics at a distance” that is “outside-but-with” the state. There have been a wide range of efforts to implement it, and a range of possible modalities for its operation. For Murphy Morobe in 1987, for instance, the anti-apartheid coalition the United Democratic Front (UDF), in which he was a leader, built “active, mass-based democratic organisations and democratic practices within these organisations” to fight the apartheid state, but the idea was that, after apartheid, these would exist alongside parliament.⁵ As noted later, in **Chapter 6.3**, (See the book *Strategy: Debating Politics Within and at a Distance from the State* – Eds. John Reynolds & Lucien van der Walt) one strand in the “workerist” tradition of Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) also fits: it aimed at building workers power and a radical working-class movement, but it was also willing to participate in state institutions, including the courts and the statutory bargaining machinery, even under the apartheid state.

The politics of “outside-but-with” the state is based on the idea that the state is a contested terrain, susceptible to popular demands and anti-capitalist policies. The state acting against people is seen as due to the state being temporarily captured by the wrong groups. Pressure on the state, from outside, and work within the state, as well as alliances between states and movements, are seen as ways of transforming the state, and of pushing back capitalism. There is, according to this view, no built-in relationship between capitalism and the state; the state can be delinked from capitalism, either to remove it or to place it under some sort of regulation that benefits the popular classes. Very often this view looks optimistically at the past, speaking in terms of a golden age before neoliberalism, in which, supposedly, states were truly democratic.

A Critical Assessment

The problem here is that this does not consider that states are closely linked to capitalism, if for no other reason than that they are funded by capitalism: taxes on profits, taxes on incomes, taxes on sales, and loans from banks. This immediately limits what states are able to do; in a context where capitalism is neoliberal and crisis-ridden, it seems most unlikely that states will take sides with the people against capitalism. In other words, states can vary in what they do, and states are certainly shaped by popular struggles, but there are *absolute* limits on what states can or will do.

⁴ Wainwright, H. November 2004. “Change the World by Transforming Power, including State Power!” *Red Pepper*.

⁵ Morobe, M. 1987. “Towards a People’s Democracy: The UDF view.” *Review of African Political Economy*, 40: 81-88.

States are also centralised, disempowering and top-down institutions, and, as such, provide little scope for popular involvement. If the state is centralised, as all states are, how exactly can the majority of people participate in any meaningful ongoing way?

And if states have institutional imperatives of their own – survival in a competitive interstate system, the need to maintain capitalist accumulation, the reproduction of their control over territories etc. – will these not reshape *popular* movements, on the pattern of the state? To put it another way, if the state is top-down and works on its own agenda, it can only include popular movements in ways that will in turn, make those movements more centralised and more compatible with state structures.

There is, in other words, a contradiction between the top-down logic of the state (and of the capitalist corporation) and the bottom-up logic of democratic, popular movements – the two could not be reconciled in the manner “outside-but-with” proposals suggested.

Mode 2: “Outside-and-despite” the State

This position is often identified with a strand of unorthodox Marxism promoted by the autonomist John Holloway, but it is far from unique to that Marxism. The core idea is that ordinary people can build a new society outside of the state, and capitalism. For Holloway, the state is nothing but a reflection of capitalism, so it is pointless to use it. But since that means you cannot capture the state peacefully (as in social democracy) or by force (as in Marxism-Leninism), what should you do?

Holloway suggests that the first step is to refuse to participate in the system, which is created and recreated daily by our actions.⁶ We should rather build alternatives in the cracks of the system, and where there are enough cracks that are widened enough, the system will start to crumble. Since there is no party with a unified project, and no central aim, like winning state power, the argument continues, there is no single project. There is a stress on open-ended and indeterminate processes, and scepticism towards grand programmes and revolutionary schemas. In fact, to create any such unified project risks seems bring back the state and the party. Rather, an experimental and evolving communism will somehow emerge in these alternative spaces. Everyday practices that reject the imposed system and its way of thinking widen the cracks to the point where the system is broken.

Although Holloway claims not to have a formula, we can infer one from his writings: the alternatives should be based on horizontal relations, acceptance of difference, a stress on the *process* of making change as more important than the ultimate change itself, a rejection of moving power away from people, and a fairly straightforward schema for change where people do more and more, until it is enough.

A Critical Assessment

Holloway’s examples of “building ways of living that don’t depend on wage labour”⁷ are extremely modest: meetings in squares, the re-opening of closed factories, and “community gardens.”⁸ However, as ruling classes *already* have a virtual monopoly on administrative, economic

⁶ Holloway, J. 2005. *Change the World without Taking Power: The meaning of revolution today*. Revised edn.. London: Pluto Press; Holloway, J. 2010. *Crack Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.

⁷ Holloway, J. 29 September 2014. “John Holloway: Cracking capitalism vs. the state option.” *ROAR Magazine*.

⁸ Bonefeld, W. and J. Holloway. 2014. “Commune, Movement, Negation: Notes from tomorrow.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol 113 (2): 214–215.

and military resources, how will those resources be moved over? If they are not, these tiny islands will operate within a capitalist sea and be eroded by it, rather than change society as a whole.

This raises questions of how the means of production, for example, will be placed under popular control on a meaningful scale, and how the armed might of the state will be fended off. If popular movements did move into direct confrontations on the terrains controlled by ruling classes, by for example, seizing open factories, this would mean open conflict, war from above by powerful elites, who would not simply wither away.

At its core, the system is not based on agreement, or a majority vote. It is difficult to see how a series of projects, lacking a clear programme and ideology, will be able to tackle highly organised and centralised ruling classes.

Dodging such issues – with references to the need to avoid dogma and so on – is extremely dangerous and avoids a key discussion. At the end of the day there is a need for a clear strategy, and a clear debate on strategy. While claiming not to have a strategy, and to be open and experimental, the “outside-and-despite” approach, in effect, advocates a very narrow strategy and closes down debates on strategy.

Finally, there is also really nothing that makes alternative institutions, relations and struggles automatically lead to a new egalitarian, “communism” – the transition in South Africa, born out of struggles from below, but ending in neoliberal capitalism, surely shows this. This means the battle of ideas does matter, and that raises the question of how to wage it.

Mode 3: “Outside-and-against” the State

The third mode – often associated with anarchism/syndicalism – argued that states were centralised institutions of class rule: they were centralised organisations that existed to allow small ruling classes to rule. They did this by concentrating in a few hands the major means of administration and coercion – centralisation allowed a few to wield these resources – and they ensured class exploitation continued – which also required that major means of production were owned and controlled by a few, either in a state or private corporations.

This meant that states could not be used for radical change by the working class – first, because they were designed for the opposite purpose, second, because their centralised structure prevented the mass of people participating in them, and, third, because the price of participation was the centralisation and corruption of movements that participated.

So, the alternative was then not to build a political party to take state power, or to participate in the state, but to build, firstly, bottom-up, democratic organs of “**counter-power**” that could empower people to *resist* the ruling class, fight against all forms of oppression and exploitation as a means of unifying the popular classes and forging an egalitarian movement, thereby creating the *nucleus* of a future, self-governed socialist system. This would mean taking over means of administration, coercion and production directly and placing these under the control, of the organs of counter-power.⁹

⁹ Van der Walt, L. 2018, “Back to the Future: Revival, relevance and route of an anarchist/ syndicalist approach to 21st century left, labour and national liberation movements.” In K. Helliker and L. van der Walt. (eds.). *Politics at a Distance from the State: Radical and African perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge.

The alternative would involve, secondly, a project of promoting a revolutionary “**counter-culture**,” or alternative worldview/**counter-hegemony**, that would provide a critique of the existing world, embody alternative values and outline the framework of, and strategy for, a new world. There was just no automatic move from struggle to revolutionary change. The battle of ideas was needed.

In an example of this approach, unions could be repositioned to agitate, educate and organise, building capacity to seize and self-manage the means of production.

So, basically, there is a stress on building a new society from outside the state, based on people being active; this approach rejects the use of political parties to capture state power. Although some form of political organisation could play a role in building counter-power and counter-hegemony, it cannot itself take power. You can win reforms – but through protest and pressure outside the state. Reforms are possible, but not enough, and ultimately the state – the existing state – must be replaced with a democracy from below.

A Critical Assessment

One of the common criticisms of this approach is the claim that the revolutionary changes that it envisages are risky. Obviously, the ultimate outcome of this project would be a showdown between the mass of the people and the state – and with it, the ruling classes – which also means a confrontation with the armed forces of the state. This would be very destabilising, may not result in a successful revolution, and might even lead to a degeneration of the revolution, in that the need to win the battle might lead to a destruction of the democratic core of the revolutionary project. The danger is that there are no checks and balances – like Chapter 9 institutions – and therefore, the worst outcome would be a worse system.

Another criticism is that the project is a bit unrealistic – it basically assumes that there will be a steady accumulation of power by the people, but will this be permitted? Such a revolutionary project could face repression, but will anyway be threatened by continual changes in the capitalist system, e.g. economic crisis, the fourth industrial revolution. If the revolution is disrupted, then either it will have to take place where people are not ready – the counter-power is weak and limited in coverage, and the counter-hegemony is weak – which would mean a high risk of failure; or the process of building counter-power must take time to recover. However, if the process keeps getting pushed back like this, then will the revolution ever happen? If not, what is the point of the project?

This would lead to a third criticism: the scope for revolution is exaggerated, so the focus should be on small realistic changes. These are more feasible, and in any case, the pessimistic (negative) view of the state here maybe ignores how much change is possible *within* the existing system.

Conclusions

How we think about the state is crucial to what we think works best – there is a different *theory* about the nature of the state at work in each approach, which also links to a view of how society works. Is society, and is societal change, based upon endless class struggles? Are the differences in society something that can be effectively and peacefully resolved? Another issue to be aware of here is that there are different views of what type of political practice is *better* – top-down, bottom-up, plans, no plans, struggle, peaceful change? This leads to quite different views of

movement-building, e.g. should it involve parties, parliaments, use of courts, and use of state grants; should it have leaders and, if so, of what type?

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This pamphlet is an extract from the book *Strategy: Debating Politics Within and at a Distance from the State* – Eds. John Reynolds & Lucien van der Walt published by the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU), Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa

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