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Review of “State and Revolution” by Vladimir Lenin

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This is Fabbri’s review of Lenin’s “State and Revolution”, published on the Italian anarchist newspaper Umanità Nova (26/1/1921). Although previously translated from a Spanish version, with help from Zoe Baker, now that the original Italian version has been found I have radically revised the translation accordingly. — João Black

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A book by Lenin, written after the revolution, has recently been published by *Avanti!*, whose title promised an exhaustive treatment of the problem of the relations between revolution and state. But we confess that we have felt a strong disappointment.

Lenin’s personality will remain engraved in history with fiery letters. These three years alone, since he and his party settled in power, over a nation of three hundred million inhabitants, would be enough to testify to the moral and material energy of this man, who will one day figure alongside the most famous historical names.

But where it seems to us that his apologists have hitherto erred, about the exaltation of their master, is when they present him as a “great theorist of socialism.” Unless there is an allusion to previous works published only in Russian, and not yet translated into Italian or French, everything that has been published [in Italian or French] up to now demonstrates that Lenin is a

strong polemicist, one who knows how to handle the texts of Marxism to make them say whatever he likes, a writer who does not mince words, as skilled in argumentation as in invective; but without his own ideas, without a brilliant overall vision, and arid, without that inner fire that always makes the writings of Marx, Mazzini and Bakunin come alive. Also his historical and sociological culture (at least in what we have read so far) appears vast and profound, sure, but only for what concerns Marxism. Everything else seems not to exist for him.

Some have wanted to see him as a continuer of Marx. What a mistake! Of Marx he has only the less pleasant aspects, the ferocious exclusivism, the resentment for anyone who does not think like him, the roughness of language, the tendency to overcome the opponent with irony and sarcasm, the intolerance of all opposition. As a man of action, or rather as a guide and leader of men of action, Lenin is certainly a personality that has no equal in the history of socialism; and Marx himself could not be compared to him, since he [Marx] was much more a man of thought than of action. But as a theorist, he adds absolutely nothing to Marx, of whose texts he is simply an exegete, a commentator, an interpreter—when he is not a sophisticator [*stiracchiatore*].

This conviction was strengthened by the reading of the last book on “State and Revolution,” on which we launched ourselves eagerly, as it promised to address the problem that most interest us: that is, if the State can actually be an instrument of the revolution, or if it is rather an obstacle, a hindrance, a continuous pitfall for its development, to be continually fought, trying to destroy it or diminish its power with constant and ardent opposition.

Instead, we found in the book only a treatise *for the internal use* of the socialist party. Lenin demonstrates, or seeks

to demonstrate, that the system of dictatorship is in harmony with the Marxist doctrine, and nothing else. He does not seem to suspect at all that one can be a socialist without being a Marxist, and that the revolution cannot be adjusted, without crippling it, to the Procrustean bed of a especial doctrinal and unilateral school.

Lenin's demonstration does not persuade us even from the point of view of Marxism. Despite certain [Marx's] expressions, used more to strengthen the enunciation of his own thought than to express their literal meaning, Karl Marx conceived for the revolution a worker-democratic process, not a dictatorial one. That is, he wanted a democratic socialist government, which would use an iron fist, sure, against the bourgeoisie, but leave to the proletariat and the various socialist forces and currents those freedoms that are usually called democratic (vote, press, assembly, association, local autonomies, etc.) as they are based on the prevalence of majorities through the system of representations.

We anarchists are also opposed to this system, as we do not even recognize the right of majorities to oppress minorities, and as we believe the freedoms promised by the representative system to be illusory and incomplete. In this sense we are anti-democratic. But for the same reason, and even with greater hostility, we oppose the dictatorship, which would even deny us the few and illusory freedoms of the representative system, and which would give the minority, indeed a few men, the right to oppress, to govern by force, the majorities. If we don't want majorities to oppress minorities, much less do we want the latter to oppress the former.

But even if the system of the proletarian dictatorship was actually in conformity with the Marxist "sacred texts", it would still be necessary to demonstrate that such a rigidly statist orientation is the most appropriate, as propaganda, to bring the revolution closer, and, in practical implementation, to develop the revolution so as to free the proletariat from economic and

political slavery, from state and property servitude. We have searched in vain for this demonstration in Lenin's latest book "State and Revolution."

Lenin's book is above all a polemic with the social-democrats and reformists. That is why we said that it was rather a writing for the internal use of the socialist party. There is an enormous abundance of quotations from Marx and Engels—actually more from Engels than from Marx—so much so that if the many pages of quotations were removed, the whole book would be reduced to a rather modest booklet.

Of course, we can't help but subscribe to the entire first part of the book which highlights the bourgeois and democratic hypocrisy, according to which the State would be the representative of the interests of all citizens, while in reality it is a weapon of the ruling class for the exploitation of the oppressed classes. But then Lenin falls into the Marxist (or rather Engelsian) error according to which the proletariat, by seizing state authority and transforming the means of production into *State property*, manages to make the State itself disappear. If the State also becomes the property owner, we will have State capitalism, not socialism, much less the abolition of the State or anarchy!

A curious way to abolish an organism would be to increase its functions and give it new means of power!

With the proprietary State, all proletarians would become wage earners of the State, instead of wage earners of the private capitalists. The State would be the exploiter; that is to say, the infinite congeries of high and low rulers, and all the bureaucracy in all its hierarchical levels, would form the new ruling and exploiting class. It seems that something similar is taking shape in Russia, at least in the big cities and in the field of large industry.

But if Lenin recognizes that the usual critique of anarchism, made by social-democrats of the kind of Plekhanov, resorts to petty bourgeois trivia, his arguments are no more conclusive, since he too targets an anarchism of his own special fabrication, which does not exist in reality. He repeats Engels's criticisms of the Proudhonists, attributes to the anarchists the illusion of being able to abolish the State overnight, without any idea of what the proletariat should replace it with, etc.

But to show how Lenin did not understand at all what anarchists actually want and how they intend to act, we would have to write at least as much as we have already done so far. Which we will do another time... if there is time!

Luigi Fabbri.

Here is the serious Marxist error, as far as the State is concerned: to conceive it as a simple effect of class division, while it is also a cause of it. The State is not only a servant of capitalism, reinforcing the economic privilege of the bourgeoisie, etc., but it is itself a source of privileges, it constitutes a class or caste of privileged people, it feeds the ruling class by always providing it with new elements; and all the more so if, in addition to political strength, it also had the economic strength, that is to say all social wealth, as the sole owner.

Lenin says that the dictatorship will be "the proletariat organized as a ruling class." But this is a contradiction in terms! If the proletariat has become the ruling class, it is no longer a proletariat, it is no longer propertyless. It means that it has become the boss. Furthermore, if there is a ruling class, it means that there are ruled classes; that is, classes that have remained or have become proletarian. The class division would continue to exist. And the only explanation for this riddle is that the ruling class will be constituted by a minority of the proletariat, which will have dispossessed the present bourgeois minority, and which will dominate politically and exploit economically all the rest of the population, that is, the old classes dispossessed and the majority of the proletarians who will remain as such and will remain in subjection.

If this terrible mistake comes true, once again humanity will have been blood-stained for nothing. It will have done nothing but turn to another side in its bed of pain and injustice!

Mikhail Bakunin predicted, forty-five years ago, these consequences of the application of Marxism: the government of the more advanced workers' and industrial groups of the big cities, to the detriment of the majority of workers of the countryside, of the small towns, of the unskilled trades, etc.

Lenin, under the escort of Marx and Engels, appeals to the example of the French revolutions of 1848 and 1871. But it was precisely from the experience of these revolutions that *anarchism as a libertarian conception of the revolution* was born, as all revolutionary theorists who saw these two revolutions closely noted the damage of the statist or dictatorial course of the revolution. Marx himself is wrongly cited [by Lenin] in this regard, since in writing about the Paris Commune he does not praise centralism at all (as Lenin claims), but precisely the system of communal autonomies.

Lenin constantly speaks of the destruction of the state mechanism; but he wants to destroy the bourgeois state mechanism to replace it with another, equally bureaucratic and cumbersome, of the communist party. In this change, only those who make up the personnel of the new State, of the new bureaucracy, will benefit. In this regard, the ancient fable comes to mind of the wounded horse covered with flies, who refused the help from those who wanted to take the flies away, "because," he said, "the ones I have on me are already full, whereas without them others would come more hungry and voracious."

This centralist prejudice of Lenin is also revealed in a reference he makes to anarchists, "because they do not want an administration." We do not know who told Lenin that anarchists do not want administration. But his error stems from the fact that he does not see as possible an administration without bureaucratic centralization, without authority, that is, without a State; and since anarchists do not want authority, State and bureaucratic centralization, he believes that we do not want administration. But that is a fantasy [*fisima*]. In reality, the best administration, like the best organization, the one that truly deserves this name, is the least centralized and the least authoritarian possible.

When Lenin says, quoting Engels, that he wants to achieve the elimination of the State, he is stating a pious intention with-

out practical results, since the way he chose leads instead to the strengthening of the state institution, which simply passes from the dominion of one class to that of another in process of formation.

In an anarchist newspaper, we cannot ignore what Lenin says in this book about anarchists and anarchism.

We have mentioned some of it above. But we must not hide the effort that Lenin makes to be fair with anarchists, perhaps because he knows from experience how their collaboration can be worth. He does not always achieve this, for example when he says that anarchists have not made any contribution on the concrete questions about the need to destroy the state mechanism and the way to replace it. All anarchist literature is just the proof of the opposite!

But Lenin renders anarchists this justice, after about thirty years, of recognizing that Plekhanov's libel, *Anarchism and Socialism*, which together with a stupid pamphlet by Deville constitutes the only socialist treatment on the subject, is very bad.

According to Lenin, Plekhanov addressed the topic "avoiding what was most current and politically essential, namely, the attitude of the revolution towards the State." In Plekhanov's booklet, together with a historical-literary part quite supplied with material on the ideas of Stirner, Proudhon and others (still according to Lenin), there is another part "*of philistine and vulgar considerations*, intended to demonstrate that an anarchist can hardly be distinguished from a bandit." Lenin attributes this way of treating anarchists to the opportunist policy of Plekhanov, who in politics wanted to "walk in the leading-strings of the bourgeoisie."

Needless to say, Plekhanov's vulgar and philistine libel has been reprinted right in these days, who knows why, by the bookshop of the same Bolshevik and Leninist *Avanti!*