

Wither the State

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The proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production in the first instance into state property. But, in doing this, it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, abolishes also the state as a state. Society thus far, based upon class antagonisms, had need of the state, that is, of an organisation of the particular class, which was *pro tempore* the exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production, and, therefore, especially, for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited classes in the condition of oppression... When at last it becomes the real representative of the whole of society, it renders itself unnecessary. As soon as there is no longer any social class to be held in subjection; as soon as class rule, and the individual struggle for existence based upon our present anarchy in production, with the collisions and excesses arising from these, are removed, nothing more remains to be repressed, and a special repressive force, a state, is no longer necessary. The first act by virtue of which the state really constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society – the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society – this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies out of itself; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not “abolished.” *It withers away.*

–Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (1878)

Recent years have seen a burgeoning convergence among revolutionaries from the Marxist and anarchist traditions, especially around the nuts and bolts of working-class movement-building. Most excitingly, this has meant a shared, renewed emphasis on base-building and dual power to guide our organizing. We often work together on shared political projects and read each other’s literature. In many cases, we share the same goal of a stateless, classless society free of all domination. Yet serious theoretical and strategic differences remain, especially in regard to how power should be wielded to transition between capitalism and that liberated future. This question remains essential; in the words of the British Marxist Ralph Milliband, “the exercise of *socialist* power remains the Achilles’ heel of Marxism.”¹ With a focus on the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ this essay will attempt to think through this question by bringing the Marxist idea of the “withering away” of the state into conversation with the political theory of social ecology. I will attempt to recenter a matter often skirted by Marxists and anarchists alike: the role of direct democracy in the governance of a revolutionary society.

Though not myself a Marxist (nor for that matter an anarchist), I have worked to engage with the core Marxist literature on the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in a manner which, while critical, I intend to be comradely and in good faith. I have little patience for polemic and do not wish to reproduce the variety of hostility that has characterized almost all writing by social ecologists on Marxism. I do not believe it has been effective at connecting with the democratic spirit that many Marxists hold close at heart. With that in mind, I will rely on extended quotes from Marx, Engels, and Lenin to allow them to speak for themselves, with the aim that any necessary paraphrasing be light-handed.

¹ Ralph Milliband, “Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*” (*The Socialist Register*, 1970). <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/08/lenin-state-and-revolution-miliband>.

Most of all, however, this exchange between Marxism and the radical democratic tradition is intended to be *constructive*, a contribution I hope might be genuinely useful for Marxists and libertarian socialists alike in thinking through the problems of our politics. There are thorny questions to be unpacked, answers to which do not spring cleanly from the revolutionary socialist canon. The stakes of such dialogues and debates are high, and if we take our politics seriously, we need to be willing to look these theoretical problems squarely in the face. I look forward to a thoughtful and impassioned dialogue about them.

When Withers the State?: The Problem of Authoritarianism

Friedrich Engels, chief intellectual partner to Karl Marx, articulates across his written work an elegant hypothesis for how a workers' state brings about the stateless society of communism: "Society thus far, based upon class antagonisms, had need of the state...for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited classes in the condition of oppression." Thus for Engels, the state exists to manage class conflict while upholding the power of the ruling class. But when the state, through the overwhelming power of the working class, "takes possession of the means of production in the name of society," it "constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society." Through this act of expropriation, classes and their resulting antagonisms cease to exist. With "no longer any social class to be held in subjection," the state thereby "render[s] itself unnecessary." Having no purpose to repress and no one to repress, the state necessarily fades and disappears. It "is not 'abolished,' it withers away."²

This idea's persuasive power comes from the simplicity and directness of its internal logic. The conclusion—that the expansion of the state sets it on a course of self-abolition—is counterintuitive, but flows clearly from one step to another from its premises. It has a formulaic quality that is predictive without speculation: what many Marxists might call "scientific." Committed readers of the Marxist canon may simply leave it at that, concluding that this is therefore the road to communism. But the heart of science is testing such ideas up against what we can observe in the world—and unlike Marx, Engels, and Lenin, we have now a full century of dozens of socialist or communist states ruled by workers' parties that have sought to put this into practice, in one form or another. The unfortunate fact we must grapple with is that this simple prediction, that state ownership of the economy leads the state to wither away, has never once occurred. Socialists have put forward a number of attempted explanations for this.

Chief among them is the problem of imperialism. In addition to controlling an exploited subject class, the other classical function of a state is to defend against external threats, which for socialist states have been abundant. By this line of thinking, one would expect that socialist states would, pending international revolution, maintain strong militaries and border controls but absent the class conflict that necessitates state repression, foster free and open societies within. Yet this has not been a feature of actually-existing socialism either, where the state's repressive apparatus has continued apace. Indeed, in some cases that domestic repressive apparatus instead aggressively *expanded* under self-identified socialist states.

Another possibility is one anticipated by Marx: the need for socialist states to first develop the productive forces of society so that the material conditions of real social freedom—fulfillment

² Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring/Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (New York, International, 1939), 306–307. All quoted words in this paragraph are pulled from the epigraph from above.

of basic needs, freedom from toil, the leisure to participate in the collective decision-making of society—are first in place.³ For instance, the Soviet Union was established in an essentially feudal agrarian society, and carried out a program of breakneck industrialization at incalculable human and ecological cost, becoming in only a few decades the first country in history to send a person into space. Yet, despite reaching a degree of industrial development comparable to the West in which meeting the needs of all while reducing working hours was possible, this never resulted in free democratic participation by the whole working class, nor through this deeper democratization a withering of the state.⁴

A rather more disturbing rationalization suggests that, despite successful expropriation of the capitalist class, “bourgeois elements” were not *yet* sufficiently suppressed. What this argument sets in motion is the specter of the eternal but poorly defined enemy within, a fifth column whose extermination must come before the working class may actually take the reins through free democratic deliberation. During Stalin’s rule in the Soviet Union, the bugbear that could explain any failure and justify any repression was the “Trotskyite wrecker” who exploited the trust of faithful comrades to sabotage the revolution; in China under Mao, it was the “capitalist roader” who secretly sought the restoration of capitalism.⁵ In his March 1937 report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Stalin wrote,

Present-day Trotskyism is not a political trend in the working class but a gang without principle, without ideas, of wreckers, diversionists, intelligence service agents, spies, murderers, a gang of sworn enemies of the working class, working in the pay of the intelligence services of foreign states... We must bring about a situation where there is not a single Trotskyite wrecker left in our ranks.⁶

Similarly, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China kicked off the Cultural Revolution with the following communiqué:

³ In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), Marx distinguished between the first, or “lower,” stage of communism, in which the working class has full command of the economy but where access to what is produced is still conditional on how much one works, and the second, or “higher,” stage of communism, in which all inequality and injustice has been fully eradicated and society is at last organized around the principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.” In the transition from the lower stage to the higher stage, the workers’ state brings society’s productive forces to maturity and steadily sheds the lingering elements of capitalism. It is here that we may note an inkling of doubt in Engels’s formula, with suggestion that transition to statelessness might not be so immediate after all, that a state may persist under “lower stage communism” for an indefinite period. It should also be noted that in the industrialized world and arguably in most “developing” countries as well, we are now *currently* technologically capable of providing for the needs of all while working far less. Reducing working hours indeed appears to be an urgent ecological necessity.

⁴ It is also unclear why technological development is presumed to be only a capitalist- or state-driven possibility, such that this could never be carried out by the association of free producers. See, for example, how self-directed collectivization of enterprise during the Spanish Civil War increased output by 20% in a six-month period (Ronald Fraser, *The Blood of Spain*, London, Pimlico, 370). But that is a discussion for another time.

⁵ During the Stalin era, “wrecking” was a specific criminal charge for any acts serving to undermine the Soviet economy, including complaining about one’s working conditions (which allegedly damaged workers’ morale). The label of “wrecker” was used to enforce labor discipline and absolute obedience to Party directives, while casting a wide net for repression of political opponents. “Capitalist roaders,” according to Mao, were those of the capitalist class who sought the restoration of capitalism from within the Communist Party itself. Mao condemned Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, as a capitalist roader.

⁶ Joseph Stalin, *Mastering Bolshevism*, Marxist Pamphlets No. 1 (New York, New Century Publishers, 1937), 12, 27. <http://collections.mun.ca/PDFs/radical/MasteringBolshevism.pdf>.

Those representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the party, the government, the army, and various cultural circles are a bunch of counter-revolutionary revisionists. Once conditions are ripe, they will seize political power and turn the dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Some of them we have already seen through, others we have not. Some are still trusted by us and are being trained as our successors, persons like Khrushchev, for example, who are still nestling beside us.⁷

The defense that dissent within the ranks is grounds for setting democracy aside becomes, in effect, an admission that communism can never be achieved, as dissent in one form or another is inextinguishable. Such a politics renders “communism” a horizon where every step in its direction requires greater political repression—a horizon which only retreats a step in turn. As with Robespierre’s “republic of virtue” and the mountain of severed heads that rose ever-higher behind him, one cannot purge, repress, or exterminate their way to a stateless and classless society.⁸ Better explanations—and better politics—are needed.

I would like to suggest a different approach to this problem. Rather than only seeking out forces that inhibit this expected withering of the state under socialism, i.e., taking the “wither away” formula as a given, I believe we also need to interrogate the formula itself, to dissect it and reexamine its assumptions. By bringing some of the critical insights of social ecology about direct democracy and the state into this discussion, I think we can zero in on just what is wrong with the Marxist prediction about the withering of the state and place ourselves on firmer theoretical footing for achieving a democratic communist future.

The State in Marxist Theory

The origins and nature of the state in Marxist theory are interwoven with the origins of class. The state’s development and basis for existence is understood as a *consequence* of class society. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels writes:

[The state] is the product of a society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in sterile struggle, a power seemingly standing above society became necessary for the purpose of moderating the conflict, of keeping it within the bounds of ‘order’; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it, and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the state.⁹

Despite its appearance as standing above society and its internal conflicts, in Marxist theory the state is rather an implement of the ruling class to preserve its power. Marx and Engels

⁷ “Circular of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Great Proletarian Political Revolution” (1966). https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/cc_gpccr.htm.

⁸ One may note that the Communards of Paris, the architects of that first dictatorship of the proletariat, in fact smashed the guillotine into pieces and burned that symbol of state terror before an enormous cheering crowd. Such should be all revolutionaries’ feelings towards the terror.

⁹ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), 280.

therefore see the exercise of state power as an extension of class conflict and broadly reducible to such. This leads to a view of the state as passive, lacking any internal dynamics independent of the interests or goals of the class that wields it.

Between each past successive class society, upheavals or political revolutions transformed the structure of the state, which cleared the remnants of the previous social order and ushered into being the new. Marx imagined that the transition out of capitalism would be similar. The workers' struggles would necessarily escalate towards their winning political power as a class, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

First-time readers of Marx may be confused or shocked (or worse, excited) by the use of the word *dictatorship*, a term whose meaning took on new dimensions through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Marx deploys "dictatorship" as a more neutral term, referring to political power and the exercise thereof. Before adopting the terminology of "dictatorship of the proletariat" (not his own coinage), he variously referred to this idea as "rule of the proletariat," "political power of the working class," and other such phrases that ring more democratically to twenty-first century ears. In *The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" from Marx to Lenin*, Hal Draper argues that Marx's meaning was nothing like the Blanquist idea of dictatorship; not rule by a tyrannical elite but collective governance by the masses of working people directly.¹⁰ Draper writes:

To understand this, the reader must put aside the modern aura that makes 'dictatorship' a dirty word for us; for this aura did not yet exist. How do you counteract the primitive notion of dictatorship that was so common precisely among the people who wanted to be good revolutionaries? You tell them: *Dictatorship? That means rule. Yes, we want the rule of the proletariat; but that does not mean the rule of a man or a clique or a band or a party; it means the rule of a class. Class rule means class dictatorship.*¹¹

It must also be kept in mind that Marx was convinced that capitalism would soon convert the vast majority of humanity into wage laborers, such that rule by the working class to his mind meant something rather like "political power to the 99%." Working-class rule was therefore understood as both radically democratic and embodying the true general social interest, echoing core goals of social ecology.

While Marx and Engels's perspectives on the specifics of how the working class were to achieve political power shifted over the course of their lifetimes—at some points favoring an insurrection to overthrow the capitalist state, at others for winning the "battle of democracy" via working-class parties absorbing the majority of the voting population—the idea that the road to communism runs only through the dictatorship of the proletariat was constant throughout their political lives. Marx did have some specific ideas about what this political supremacy of the working class would accomplish. If a constitutional democratic republic did not yet exist, the workers would establish one. They would nationalize industry, and with state control over the

¹⁰ Louis Auguste Blanqui was a French revolutionary socialist and contemporary of Marx's (1805–1881). Unlike most socialists, Blanqui did not believe in the importance of mass movements, but rather thought the revolution should be carried out by a small band of conspirators, who would establish a temporary, autocratic dictatorship (in the common contemporary sense of the term) to redistribute society's wealth.

¹¹ Hal Draper, *The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' from Marx to Lenin* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1987). <https://www.marxists.org/subject/marxmyths/hal-draper/article2.htm>.

economy, they would begin to plan production to be more efficient while pushing forward rapid technological advances. These would allow the workers' state to shorten the workday, freeing more time for ordinary working men and women to participate in governing the socialist society. They would abolish the standing army and redistribute their weapons to militias of the working class. Armed to defend their new society and expropriate the expropriators, the people themselves would replace any "special force" for repression in the form of a professionalized army and police force. This dictatorship of the proletariat marks the disappearance of the state as a "power, arisen out of society, but...plac[ed] above it...alienat[ed] from it."¹² The people armed and assembled, in this view, are the state.

The Contested Legacy of Revolutionary Governance in the Paris Commune

In the spring of 1871, Parisians who were resisting the disarmament of their citizen militias cast out the national government of France. The new system these ordinary men and women devised to replace it was a government of participatory democracy and worker control, with decisions made through popular assemblies and recallable delegates. The working class was in the saddle, guiding the transformation of a city of nearly two million people. This was in many ways dramatically different from Marx's political vision of nationalized industry, universal national programs, and state-driven technological development. As the Commune was embraced by the First International, Marx came to accept that the reality of emerging revolutionary movements was even more transformative than he had previously envisioned, calling it "the political form at last discovered" for the emancipation of the working class.¹³ The Commune became the living example of socialist revolution that many communists, Marx and Engels included, would continually refer to, long after its defeat. As Engels wrote twenty years later, "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."¹⁴

Lenin too looked to the Paris Commune as the model of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In his most important work, *The State and Revolution*, Lenin makes his case for why the working class cannot take hold of the state as it exists, but must instead overthrow it and erect in its place a fundamentally different sort of government. To that end, he quotes at length from Marx's pamphlet on the Commune, *The Civil War in France*. Detailing the many ways the Paris Commune fully democratized public life, Lenin writes:

Thus the Commune appears to have substituted "only" fuller democracy for the smashed state machine: abolition of the standing army; all officials to be elected

¹² Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 280.

¹³ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (1871), 26. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/civil_war_france.pdf.

¹⁴ Friedrich Engels, 1891 Introduction to *The Civil War in France* by Karl Marx (1871). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/postscript.htm>. In addition to *The Civil War in France*, other important sources on the Paris Commune are Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London and New York, Verso Books, 2015), Murray Bookchin, *The Third Revolution: Popular Movements in the Revolutionary Era, Volume 2* (London and New York, Cassell, 1998), and Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2004).

and subject to recall. But as a matter of fact this “only” signifies the very important substitution of one type of institution for others of a fundamentally different order. This is a case of “quantity becoming transformed into quality”: democracy, introduced as fully and consistently as is generally conceivable, is transformed from bourgeois democracy into proletarian democracy; from the state (*i.e.*, a special force for the suppression of a particular class) into something which is no longer really a state.¹⁵

He argues that these changes in the functioning of democracy amount to not a difference in degree, but in kind. The matter of direct recall upends the relationship of power between public officials and the people, turning those officials from representatives handed independent decision-making power into mere delegates who may only carry forward the decisions of ongoing popular assemblies. The abolition of the standing army and the armament of popular militias in their stead reflects and upholds this reversal. The qualitative transformations wrought by the Paris Commune were so total that Lenin regarded the new system as “no longer really a state.”

In 1875, in a letter to August Bebel criticizing the Gotha Program, Engels likewise wrote that the Paris Commune “had ceased to be a state in the true sense of the term.”¹⁶ Lenin, responding to this some decades later, regards this claim as Engels’s “most important theoretical statement!”¹⁷ If the Paris Commune—the shining example of the dictatorship of the proletariat—was not really a state, then what was it?¹⁸ Is the dictatorship of the proletariat also then not a state? And if this is so unclear, what is a state?

In their many debates with anarchists over the years, Marxists argued vigorously that the state should be abolished, but not overnight. They offered instead a political program of abolishing privileged rule in favor of the direct governance of society by the vast majority. Lenin’s central argument in *The State and Revolution* is that the proletariat cannot lay its hands on the ready-made machinery of the state, but instead must *destroy* the state and build something else in its place that is not a state. To anarchist ears, that *is* doing away with the state overnight.¹⁹

Mikhail Bakunin, Pyotr Kropotkin, Murray Bookchin, and others in the libertarian socialist tradition have advocated the replacement of states by federations of free communes, governed

¹⁵ Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917) in *Essential Works of Lenin: “What Is to Be Done?” and Other Writings*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York, Dover Publications, 1987), 301.

¹⁶ Letter from Engels to Bebel (March 18–25, 1875), first published by Bebel in Volume II of his memoirs (*Aus meiner Leben*) in 1911. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75_03_18.htm.

¹⁷ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 320.

¹⁸ The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin similarly described the Paris Commune as “a bold and outspoken negation of the State” (“The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State,” 1871).

¹⁹ Indeed, according to Nicolai Sukhanov’s eyewitness account (*The Russian Revolution, 1917: A Personal Record*, trans. Joel Carmichael, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1984, 269–285), Lenin’s first stop after getting off the train at the Finland Station was Bolshevik headquarters, to give a two-hour speech to Party leaders laying out the ideas of *The State and Revolution*, shocking the orthodox Marxists with his heretical “purely anarchist schema” (Sukhanov, *The Russian Revolution*, 282). As a result, a significant number of Russian anarchists (most famously Victor Serge) actually joined the Bolshevik Party, with the rationale that the most radical Bolsheviks were by that point effectively anarchists. In “Listen, Marxist!” (1969, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bookchin/1969/listen-marxist.htm>), Murray Bookchin writes, “Indeed, much that passes for ‘Marxism’ in *State and Revolution* is pure anarchism—for example, the substitution of revolutionary militias for professional armed bodies and the substitution of organs of self-management for parliamentary bodies. What is authentically Marxist in Lenin’s pamphlet is the demand for ‘strict centralism,’ the acceptance of a ‘new’ bureaucracy, and the identification of soviets with a state.”

directly by ordinary people without mediation through ruling elites—in short, the Paris Commune to scale.²⁰ What then distinguishes this from the dictatorship of the proletariat which is “no longer really a state” wherein the “functions of state power devolve upon the people generally”?²¹ What are we to make of the fact that the desired political system of those who do not want a state, transitional or otherwise, aligns closely with the Marxist vision of a “workers’ state”? Are these merely definitional challenges, or something more fundamental?²² I do not mean to suggest the differences between Marxism and anarchism are merely semantic, but clearly we must think through the word “state” with more precision.

On this topic, Marx, Engels, and Lenin are all guilty of category muddling. Much of the theoretical verbiage in their relevant passages masks, rather than clarifies, the underlying ideas. The fundamental problem underlying Engels and Lenin’s ambiguity—the dictatorship of the proletariat being *not quite* a state—is that there are two core characteristics that make something a state, and as a result they are struggling to describe a social order in which one but not the other is present.

The first characteristic is the control over the means of organized violence, to defend or repress. It is in terms of this characteristic that Marx and Lenin define the state. Lenin writes, “The state is a special organization of force; it is an organization of violence for the suppression of some class.”²³ Both Marx and Lenin denounce the foolish intent of anarchists to abolish the state as “laying down their arms,” leaving the revolution exposed to bourgeois reaction.²⁴ Contemporary political scientists also tend to define the state as the institution with a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.

The second characteristic, which Engels and Lenin recognize (sometimes implicitly, other times explicitly) as a key feature of states is that they are structures of elite rule. States are organized according to command and control, through which a small group of rulers can impose its authority upon the rest. The state, as Engels notes, is *above* society, being inherently a form

²⁰ So central was the Commune to Bookchin’s political thought that he dubbed his mature politics “Communalism.”

²¹ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 301. Lenin also writes that “we [the workers as a whole] shall reduce the role of state officials to that of simply carrying out our instructions” (ibid 307). This is functionally identical to Bookchin’s views on the distinction between policy-making (the deciding authority of the assembly) and administration (which may be delegated to select recallable individuals).

²² In fact, in that previously cited letter to Bebel (footnote 16), Engels suggested banishing the word “state” altogether, as a term whose usage sowed more confusion than it illuminated, to be replaced with *Gemeinwesen*, a German word that can mean “community,” “commonality,” or “commune.” It seems that my frustrations about antagonistic discourses talking past each other may have been shared.

²³ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 287.

²⁴ Anarchist pacifists notwithstanding, this is of course not at all what anarchists take “abolish the state” to mean. As Bookchin responds in “Listen, Marxist!,” “Nor did the anarchists of the last century believe that the abolition of the state involved ‘laying down arms’ immediately after the revolution, to use Marx’s obscurantist words, thoughtlessly repeated by Lenin in *State and Revolution*.” An unfortunate quality of Marxist critiques of anarchism is persistent misrepresentation. Despite its brilliance in other ways, *The State and Revolution* is frequently quite shameless in this regard. By way of illustrative example, Lenin spends paragraphs battling the “federalism of Proudhon” as a political form inferior to Marxism’s centralism. Some pages later, as if to pretend that his extended discussion of the political forms put forward by anarchists never took place, Lenin claims, “The utopians busied themselves with ‘discovering’ political forms under which the socialist transformation of society was to take place. The anarchists dismissed the question of political forms altogether” (*The State and Revolution*, 312). These displays of intellectual dishonesty only muddy our theoretical waters still further.

of minority rule. Lenin writes that “The Commune *ceased* to be a state” in so far as it no longer repressed the majority of the population.²⁵

These two defining characteristics are closely related, of course, as the function of the first (the monopoly on “legitimate” violence) is to preserve and enforce the second (minority rule). But they are not the same thing. In a generous interpretation of Marx and Engels, the dictatorship of the proletariat is a new sort of governance in which the second characteristic has been overthrown and no longer applies, with the powers of decision-making and the means of violence to enforce them having been devolved to the whole society of working people. This, it seems, is what Engels means in saying that the Paris Commune—and by extension the dictatorship of the proletariat—is “no longer a state in the proper sense of the word,” as one of the defining features of the state has been abolished.²⁶

Even as these two aspects of states are connected, distinguishing them as distinct features is the only way to gain theoretical clarity on the state and the problem before us. Some of the insights of Bookchin and social ecology more broadly are particularly helpful here. In his essay “Anarchism, Power, and Government,” he writes:

[J]ust as elsewhere I have distinguished between politics and statecraft, I must now also point out the distinction between governments and states... All states are governments, but not all governments are states. A government is a set of organized and responsible institutions that are minimally an active system of social and economic administration. They handle the problems of living in an orderly fashion. A government may be a dictatorship; it may be a monarchy or a republican state; but it may also be a libertarian formation of some kind...

What kinds of governments, then, are not states? Tribal councils, town meetings, workers’ committees, soviets (in the original sense of the word), popular assemblies and the like are governments, and no amount of juggling with words can conceal that fact...

A state, by contrast, is a government that is organized to serve the interests of a privileged and often propertied class at the expense of the majority. This historic rise of the state transformed governance into a malignant force for social development. When a government becomes a state—that is, a coercive mechanism for perpetuating class rule for exploitative purposes—it invariably acquires different institutional characteristics. First, its members are professionalized to one degree or another, in order to separate them from the mass of the population and thereby impart to them an extraordinary status, which in turn renders them the full-time protectors of a

²⁵ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 320.

²⁶ We should keep in mind that the means of violence have also been fundamentally transformed. The abolition of standing armies and the redistribution of arms to democratic militias is a category shift, a change in kind; it may not be quite correct to say that one aspect of state-ness is abolished in the dictatorship of the proletariat while the other endures intact. And indeed, according to Lenin, the supersession of elite rule by direct self-governance of the working class sets society on the path to abolishing organized violence as such. As a directly democratic society dissolves class distinctions, the means of violence, such as they are, become increasingly obsolete and may eventually be set aside.

ruling class. Second, the state, aided by military and police functionaries, enjoys a monopoly over the means of violence.²⁷

Bookchin argues that a government only becomes a state when it structures itself as an institution of elite rule to assert their power over the rest of the population. His vision of a stateless society is one where power lies with the people as a whole instead of a small group of governing officials—not one lacking the organized use of force. In fact, in *Urbanization Without Cities*, he writes, “A true civicism that tries to create an authentic politics, an empowered citizenry, and a municipalized economy would be a vulnerable project indeed if it failed to replace the police, the professional army... with an authentic militia... for dealing with external dangers to freedom.”²⁸

When it comes to the necessity of force in overthrowing the present system and defending the new socialist government, Bookchin is on the same page as the Marxists. So too are the classical anarchists like Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta. The question of force is not what separates them. It ought not be where we draw the lines of debate about the state.

If we are to adopt Bookchin’s distinction between states and governments, then an institution or set of institutions is therefore only a state if it meets *both* of our criteria. If it meets the first (organized violence) but not the second (elite rule), it is some popular system of government that is not a state. If it meets the second but not the first, it cannot last (or exist at all), as elite rule relies on force and coercion. We may also imagine into the future forms of communal government that meet neither requirement, where hierarchy and force have both been banished; this is what Marx would term the higher stage of communism.

David Harvey, one of the few Marxists to genuinely engage with Bookchin’s work, lays out a somewhat different perspective in “Listen, Anarchist!,” a playful reference to Bookchin’s own 1969 pamphlet “Listen, Marxist!” Harvey frames the issue as a matter of serious anarchists coming to recognize the necessity of state-building in some fashion, but acknowledges that much of this comes down to defining terminology:

The odd thing here is that the more autonomistas and anarchists grapple with the necessity to build organizations that have the capacity to ward off bourgeois power and to build the requisite large-scale infrastructures for revolutionary transformation, the more they end up constructing something that looks like some kind of state... Bookchin’s position on all of this is interesting... Opposition to the state must not carry over to opposition to government... Consensus decision making, he says, “threatens to abolish society as such.” Simple majority voting suffices. There must also be a “serious commitment” to a “formal constitution and appropriate by-laws” because “without a democratically formulated and approved institutional framework whose members and leaders can be held accountable, clearly articulated standards of responsibility cease to exist... Freedom from authoritarianism can best be assured only by the clear, concise and detailed allocation of power”...All of this looks to me like a reconstruction of a certain kind of state (but this may be nothing more than semantics).²⁹

²⁷ Murray Bookchin, “Anarchism, Power, and Government.” <http://new-compass.net/articles/anarchism-power-and-government>.

²⁸ Murray Bookchin, *Urbanization Without Cities* (Montreal and New York, Black Rose Books, 1992), 285.

²⁹ David Harvey, “Listen, Anarchist!: A personal response to Simon Springer’s ‘Why a radical geography must be anarchist’” (2015). <http://davidharvey.org/2015/06/listen-anarchist-by-david-harvey/>. Harvey here quotes from

In essence, if it looks like a state and quacks like a state, shouldn't we call it a state? I do not particularly want to push back on Harvey here to argue about what is and is not a state; the meaning of the word is not a fact of the universe floating in the world outside language or theory. What *does* matter is that whatever categories we use encompass and reflect real distinctions in our social world. This may mean we take "state" to mean the same thing as "government," as Harvey suggests, while clearly distinguishing between governments where decisions come from on high (the political order we as revolutionaries aim to overthrow) and those where decisions flow from below (the system of radically democratic popular self-rule that we strive to establish). Or it could mean we distinguish the broader, arguably neutral categories of government and governance from "the state," a more particular form of government organized around elite domination through the implements of violence, as Bookchin does. I believe the second option results in considerably more clarity, but it is inessential to my argument.

Crucially, as thinkers and organizers we must recognize that this consensus of meaning within a shared leftist discourse has *not* yet been achieved. This is a source of dispute and confusion that must be consciously navigated while communicating these ideas both within and beyond our movements. Sloganeering will not suffice; simply asking "abolish the state, yes or no?" is not good enough either. Yet we nevertheless require firmer answers than "Well, sort of." Semantics undergird this problem, but it is not *merely* semantic. The confused way we talk about states also garbles our thinking about essential questions for revolutionaries.

Prevailing Marxist notions of what is and is not a state consider the Paris Commune and a Marxist-Leninist one-party dictatorship to be the same sort of political order, both dictatorships of the proletariat, but also consider the Paris Commune to be *categorically* different from anarchist polities like the Ukrainian Free Territory or the Shinmin Prefecture despite their clear similarities in form.³⁰ The lines of this debate about abolishing the state are drawn artificially, with a certain sectarian shallowness. This serves to confuse and obscure the deeper debate between those who advocate a socialism from below through the direct popular self-governance of the working class and those who merely desire another form of elite rule. In short, the manner and the terms in which both anarchists and Marxists have discussed these questions have actively impeded the revolutionary left's ability to think about them clearly.

This confusion creates fertile ground for polemical distortion and misrepresentation. More dangerously, it opens space for groups to co-opt the moral force of 'all power to the people' even as they do not value democracy and undermine it as it suits them. Lenin himself was guilty of all the above, both in his writings and political life. He straddled the imprecision that we need now to overcome, riding soviet democracy into power while preparing justifications for its replacement by the party apparatus. As he writes in *The State and Revolution*, "Democracy is of great importance for the working class in its struggle for freedom against the capitalists. But democracy is by no means a boundary that must not be overstepped; it is only one of the stages in the process of development from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to communism."³¹

Bookchin's essay "The Communalist Project," published in *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (London and New York, Verso, 2015).

³⁰ I should note that with closer examination this distinction falls apart on its own terms, at least for the case of the Free Territory (also known as Makhnovia), which was defended through organized violence by the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine.

³¹ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 346.

But democracy is not a stage, nor a boundary; it is the masses in power. To “overstep” democracy can only mean to roll back that popular power.

The question we must always ask is this: does the working class as a whole govern the socialist society, or does a segment of society govern the working class? Lenin cannot, or will not, provide a consistent answer. Mere paragraphs away from the most radically democratic assertions of his entire *corpus*, he dismisses the notion that workers can function without being under the control of state managers as “anarchist dreams.”³²

Here, the state-as-elite-rule makes a hasty return. Leninism has quietly snuck undemocratic governance into the back door of the dictatorship of the proletariat, unseen because he defines the new regime in terms of whether the workers hold guns—not who commands them. Even if the people are armed, who directs their activity? Are they participants in collective decision-making or recipients of orders? Weapons or no weapons, it was never the legionaries, conscripts, or knights who ruled the states of class societies present and past, but the senators, ministers, and kings. There may be rule by the whole working class, or there may be rule by a special stratum of decision-makers, but not both.

And once Lenin is firmly in power, these ambiguities immediately give way. In a practical essay written in 1918 for the purpose of orienting his new government, he writes, the “revolution demands—precisely in the interests of its development and consolidation, precisely in the interests of socialism—that the people *unquestioningly obey the single will* of the leaders of labour.”³³ In the same passage Lenin states, “Given ideal class-consciousness and discipline on the part of those participating in the common work, this subordination would be something like the mild leadership of a conductor of an orchestra.” Yet he goes on to add, “It may assume the sharp forms of a dictatorship if ideal discipline and class-consciousness are lacking.” Lenin, of course, leaves it up to his own discretion how “mild” his one-man rule is going to be, saying it depends upon whether or not the people are sufficiently “disciplined.”³⁴ We’ve moved a long way from the rule of all over all.³⁵

The Bug in the Dialectic

So, let us take up again the initial question: why have we not seen the state wither away? Reconsider Engels’s formula: The state exists to control class conflict. If by the power of the workers

³² *ibid*, 307.

³³ Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,” April 28, 1918. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/x03.htm>. Here, Lenin invokes Engels, from his short essay “On Authority” (1872). Engels wrote, “But the necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that, will nowhere be found more evident than on board a ship on the high seas. There, in time of danger, the lives of all depend on the instantaneous and absolute obedience of all to the will of one.”

³⁴ *ibid*.

³⁵ It should furthermore be noted that despite the enduring legacy of Leninism as being for the destruction of the bourgeois state’s bureaucracy, it is not actually clear that anything resembling this took place in Russia. In *Lenin’s Government: Sovmarkom 1917–1922* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979, 51), T.H. Rigby argues that there was “high level of continuity in the central administrative machine of the Russian state” such that administrative changes brought by the Bolsheviks “were scarcely greater than those sometimes accompanying changes of government in Western parliamentary systems.” The commissariats of the new state were in almost all cases simply renamed ministries from the Tsarist regime, staffed by the same bureaucrats but now headed by Bolshevik Party leaders. In practice, this was in fact a matter of (to use Marx’s phrase) “lay[ing] hold of the ready-made state machinery.”

the state seizes all property, then all is held in common and classes cease to exist—and therefore the state’s architecture of coercion no longer serves any purpose.

Here is the flaw in the formula—the bug in the dialectic. *If by the power of workers, the state seizes all property, then all is held in common and classes cease to exist.* Unless the structure of the state is fundamentally transformed, such that the people rule directly through a system of radical democracy, with no special strata to make decisions on their behalf, state ownership of the entire economy *isn’t* common ownership of the economy. It is just ownership by those who control the state. *Then all is held in common* simply does not follow from a program of nationalizing industry. If the state does not cease to be a state, there remains an elite class who command the labor power of others, and class conflict proceeds apace.³⁶

“Class,” after all, means the existence of different and opposing relationships to the means of production. State ownership of the means of production is not the abolition of class, because most people work *for* the state while a smaller group commands their labor by wielding state authority. Even if they call themselves workers, these new elites are set apart with their own particular class interests: the privileges of their status, their vantage point removed from the experience of the workers they command, and most fundamentally their authority over the labor of others.

This managerial class not only has distinct interests in direct conflict with a transition to communism, which would require them to relinquish their special status; they also hold the power to defend those interests against agitation from below. When conflicts between workers and party leaders arise, the latter can simply rely on state repression to uphold their decisions and their social position. As this is not a classless society, neither is it to be a stateless one.

No less a Leninist than Leon Trotsky, long beholden to the idea that “nationalized property equals socialism,” later warned in *The Revolution Betrayed* of this tension between state ownership and the people:

The new constitution – wholly founded, as we shall see, upon an identification of the bureaucracy with the state, and the state with the people – says: “... the state property – that is, the possessions of the whole people.” This identification... becomes the source of crude mistakes, and of downright deceit, when applied to the first and still unassured stages of the development of a new society...

State property becomes the property of “the whole people” only to the degree that social privilege and differentiation disappear, and therewith the necessity of the state. In other words: state property is converted into socialist property in proportion as it ceases to be state property. And the contrary is true: the higher the Soviet state rises above the people, and the more fiercely it opposes itself as the guardian of property

³⁶ There is an extensive literature on the class society of the Soviet Union and other regimes led by Communist Parties. See, for instance, Michael Albert’s discussion of the “coordinator class” who rule over workers in a centrally planned economy (Albert, “Beyond Class Rule Is Parecon,” 2012); Paul Mattick’s introduction to *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (1978), which argues that state ownership under Communist rule constituted a “modified capitalist system” (“[S]tate-control of the economy...exercised by a privileged social layer as a newly emerging ruling class, has perpetuated for the...labouring classes the conditions of exploitation and oppression”); and the broader literature of the International Left Opposition, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, et. al., which broke from Trotsky to diagnose the Soviet Union as “state capitalism.”

to the people as its squanderer, the more obviously does it testify against the socialist character of this state property.³⁷

If only Trotsky—the butcher of Kronstadt himself—had internalized this lesson sooner.

These problems are, at least in part, a consequence of the fact that Marxism lacks a clear political theory. The state is seen as but an empty stage, upon which the agents of the class struggle may speak their lines and advance the plot. As a result, what many Marxists call dialectical materialism is instead a variety of idealism—a belief that so long as they have the correct ideas, the leaders of a dictatorship will take the correct path. But what of the interests and antagonisms built into the state form, structured by who commands whose labor and who benefits from it? The stage is no empty vessel; its shape shapes the story. Like the feudal manor, slave plantation, private firm, or any other institution of hierarchy, the state has a logic unto itself.

No structure of minority rule can be a container for rule by the whole of society; this circle cannot be squared. Too often Marxist discourse shrouds this dilemma of the “workers’ state” with tenuously stacked layers of political representation: the class speaks for the whole of society, the party speaks for the class, the central committee speaks for the party, and the party leader speaks for the central committee. Each degree of separation is held together by dubious democratic accountability, or in most cases by rhetoric alone. Such farcical “representation” serves only to disempower working people.

The arrival of socialists to power, even those with the most noble democratic intentions, does not ensure that the working class will govern society, for *the working class is not itself in power*. To return to Hal Draper, “Yes, we want the rule of the proletariat; but that does not mean the rule of a man or a clique or a band or a party; it means the rule of a class.”³⁸ It is of course the central thrust of the politics of social ecology that this quandary cannot be overcome without revolutionizing the structures of public governance, abolishing representative rule itself in favor of confederal direct democracy. Without direct democracy, these contradictions can never be unraveled.³⁹

³⁷ Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going*, trans. Max Eastman, 1936. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch09.htm>.

³⁸ Draper, *The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”*

³⁹ There is a vast literature on competing visions of how specifically the principles of direct democracy are to be institutionalized in (and on the way to) a liberated society, which are beyond the scope of this essay to discuss in any detail. The traditions of anarcho-syndicalism and council communism both maintain that all economic decisions should be made by the workers of those industries, coordinated through cooperative federations. Little emphasis is placed on the political sphere outside of production. Murray Bookchin and others have instead advocated for bringing production into politics, placing economic decisions under the control of the community as a whole. Hybrids of these two basic models abound. For an overview of anarcho-syndicalism, see Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1938). For reflections on council communism, see Paul Mattick, “Council Communism” (1939), <http://libcom.org/library/council-communism-mattick>, and Anton Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils* (Oakland, AK Press, 2002). For an in-depth discussion of worker control versus community control, see Howard Hawkins, “Community Control, Workers’ Control, and the Cooperative Commonwealth” (*Society and Nature*, 1993). Existing models of direct democracy to scale should also be considered, which include (among others) democratic confederalism’s council system in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the *caracoles* and *juntas de buen gobierno* in Zapatista-controlled territory in Chiapas, and the *grama sabha* in Kerala’s system of People’s Planning.

The Road to Communism Is Direct Democracy

The question of nationalizing industry—as opposed to municipalizing, cooperatizing, or other forms of democratic social control—is a debate to be had within the movement. But it must be recognized that state ownership and central planning are not in themselves socialism; they are not the road to communism. It is *direct democracy* that is the fundamental ingredient, the “form of freedom” that opens the door to a classless future. There can be no revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat without power being vested in forms of deliberation and decision-making resting with the people themselves. Direct democracy is what separates the stagnation of proclaimed workers’ states, whether Marxist-Leninist or social-democratic, from a transition to communism.⁴⁰

In part, we can attribute this theoretical weakness on the part of Marx and Engels to their scientism and consequent love affair with *necessity*. Newtonian physics shows us that objects in motion have no say in the matter: the outcomes of their paths are determined by necessity. Marx and Engels too thought in terms of laws of motion, and believed they had discovered those of history. The following century, Hannah Arendt noted that the very language of “revolution” itself is of mechanistic, astronomical origin, and chastised viewing society’s progression through this “notion of irresistibility, the fact that the revolving motion of the stars follows a preordained path and is removed from all influence of human power.”⁴¹ It was never enough for Marx and Engels to project forward what we—as revolutionaries, as the working class, as human beings—*should* do, to bring about this better future. The earnest moral outrage of the young Marx aside, the lasting framework of Marx’s philosophy of history casts all in terms of what *will*, what *must* come to pass. Thus in the Marxist story of the future, the state is not *abolished*, it *withers away*.

But replacing the state with radical democracy is not an assured, necessary outgrowth of the development of capitalism. It is what Bookchin terms a *potentiality*, the seeds of which are planted in the human soil, in need of protection and nurturing. It will require deliberate, conscious action on the part of organized masses, which may be redirected into mistakes of the past or into dead ends not yet encountered. Lenin stated that when “the majority of the people *itself*” is armed, a “special force for suppression” becomes unnecessary. But this is not what occurred in Paris in 1871, nor in similar popular revolutions since. Standing armies weren’t suddenly superfluous; they had to be actively *disarmed*. The organized power of ordinary people, cradling dreams of a freer tomorrow, dissolved the authority of the state into their own organs of radical democracy. Whether such a democratization is the cumulation of an extended, steady struggle to wrest power from elites or a dramatic clash that at last boils over between the people and their rulers, it must be the work of our own hands. There is, simply put, no mechanism nor precedent for the state to just wither away—it is we who must wither the state.

⁴⁰ In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin notes, “The more complete democracy becomes...the more rapidly does *the state* begin to wither away” (349).

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 1963, p. 47. Penguin Books, London and New York.

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