

Interpreting Marx's Theory of the State and Opposition to Anarchism

Marxism, Anarchism, and the State

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Though Marx intended to dedicate a volume of Capital to the question of ‘the State,’ he died before he could even begin that work. We are, therefore, left to reconstruct the ‘Marxist theory of the state’ from scattered references littered throughout Marx and Engels’ collected works. My analysis investigates the shifts and contradictions in their thought, as well as the utility these contradictions served in misrepresenting the anarchist alternative.

“... no state, howsoever democratic its forms, not even the reddest political republic... is capable of giving the people what they need: the free organisation of their own interests from below upward...”

– Mikhail Bakunin, Statism and Anarchy, p. 24

“[With the abolition of classes] the power of the State, which serves to keep the great majority of the producers under the yoke of the numerically small exploiting minority, disappears, and the functions of government are transformed into simple administrative functions. [The anarchists] put matters the other way round...”

– Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, Fictitious Splits in the International, p. 74.¹

Marxism, Anarchism, and the State

The purpose of this essay is to reassess the views of Karl Marx, his close partner Friedrich Engels, and their anarchist contemporaries on the crucial question of ‘the State’.² Specifically, I contend that dominant interpretations of Marx have unsatisfactorily addressed his varied and contradictory analysis of the State; its role (if any) in the construction of a socialist society; and the ways in which this has both overlapped and come into conflict with the anarchist view. My analysis is divided into three parts: In Section I, I discuss the Marx of the *Communist Manifesto* and other earlier works, arguing that it is in this material³ that we find the clearest indication of a centralised, statist praxis.⁴ Section II concerns the Marx of the International Workingmen’s Association,⁵ responsible for *The Civil War in France* and various lesser known writings. I argue that this later work demonstrates contradictory shifts in his thought and document discrepancies

¹ As cited within Marx, K., Engels, F., & Lenin, V.I. (ed. Kolpinsky, N. Y.). 1972. Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism. Progress Publishers: Moscow.

² Primarily Mikhail Bakunin, who (though not the first anarchist) is widely considered to be the first theorist of anarchism as a fully developed tendency and mass movement. He was the intellectual leader of the libertarian opposition to Marx’s faction within the International Workingmen’s Association.

³ Along with Engels’ consistently less sophisticated analysis. See note 14 for further comments.

⁴ Contributions which, particularly when selectively quoted, have been used to justify the behaviour of authoritarian currents that developed within the movement – i.e., the Leninist and post-Leninist variations. Interestingly, however, Lenin’s most famous work on the State, ‘State and Revolution’ (1917) is also his most libertarian, and essentially reproduces the obscurantist, threefold use of the term ‘state’ explored in Section III of this essay. He, likewise, takes advantage of the resulting confusion to the same ends.

⁵ Henceforth referred to as either the ‘First International’ or ‘International.’ Here I am not only concerned with Marx as a theorist but also Marx as an organiser. His efforts at centralisation within the International allow us to better interpret ambiguities in his theoretical work.

with both the ‘Orthodox’ and ‘Libertarian’⁶ readings of this period.⁷ Finally, in Section III, the incoherent nature of Marx’s final analysis is compared with the anarchist position. I argue that Marx and Engels developed an ever-shifting conception of the State, which – whether cynically or out of mere ignorance – both they and their followers have long used to misrepresent and discredit the major alternative to their theoretical framework and movement.

I. Marx & State-Socialism: Wielding the Governmental Apparatus, Prior to Abolition

Though it remained unpublished until 1932, Engels described *The German Ideology* (1845) as the point of departure for understanding Marx’s theory of the State.⁸

In that text, as with many radicals before them, Marx and Engels located the State’s origins in “the emancipation of private property from the community,” which is to say, the separation of society into classes.⁹ This established the State as a concrete apparatus of government; a “separate entity, alongside and outside civil society,” serving as “nothing more than the form of organisation which the bourgeois are compelled to adopt, both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests.” *The German Ideology* repeatedly refers to ‘the State’ as such a governmental model of social organisation, wherein “all common institu-

⁶ The word ‘libertarian’ is used throughout this essay in its original form. Though now associated in some countries (most obviously, the United States) with ‘laissez-faire’ capitalism, this is a recent distortion (and an intentional one). Libertarianism historically indicated a general philosophical tendency toward free action and the first political use of the term was by the anarchist communist Joseph Dejacque in 1857. From that point on it became synonymous with the word anarchist. This usage has been retained throughout much of the world, though with the development of a Libertarian-Marxism it has since become an umbrella term for all anti-state socialists. Classic libertarians contend that the right-wing appropriation is actually authoritarian, given its support for the inherently hierarchical and exploitative social relations produced by capitalism.

⁷ Particularly when the authoritarian organisational model pursued within the International is considered.

⁸ Marx and Engels’ earliest work feature previous references to ‘the State’ and often employ more radical rhetoric concerning the need for its ‘abolition.’ This was, however, later dismissed by Engels as “boyhood” philosophy. See, Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism. Ibid. p. 48

Similarly, in his ‘Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State’ (1843) – which contains an extended critique of bourgeois government – Marx appears to clearly reject any notion of ‘representation,’ despite views he would later express: “The separation of the political state from civil society appears as the separation of the deputies from their mandators. Society delegates only elements from itself to its political mode of being... delegates of civil society form a society which is not linked with those who commission them by the form of the “instruction,” the mandate. Formally they are commissioned, but once they are actually commissioned they are no longer mandatories. They are supposed to be delegates, and they are not.” (Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 3: Karl Marx March 1843-August 1844. Lawrence and Wishart: London. p. 123)

⁹ For a pre-capitalist example, see: Rousseau, J.J. 2009. Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men. Dodo Press: Gloucester.

tions... are given a political form” for the purposes of maintaining existing property relations.¹⁰ Therefore, Marx and Engels concluded that,

[Whereas] previous revolutions within the framework of [class-society] were bound to lead to new political institutions;¹¹ it likewise follows that the communist revolution, which [abolishes class-society], ultimately abolishes political institutions.¹²¹³

This formula, to which the word “ultimately” is crucial, set the foundations for the Marxist view of the State’s role in social revolution and continues to inform most contemporary interpretations. The approach was neatly summarised by Engels in an article for *Der Sozialdemokrat* (1883) following Marx’s death (initiating the cultivation of an ‘Orthodox Marxism’).¹⁴ Citing both *The German Ideology* and *Communist Manifesto* (1848), he identified their *shared* position as one which holds that the abolition of the State cannot be accomplished during the process of social revolution itself. Instead,

the proletarian class will first have to possess itself of the organised political force of the State and with this aid stamp out the resistance of the Capitalist class and re-organise society... without which the whole victory must end in a defeat and in a massacre of the working class like that after the Paris Commune.¹⁵

¹⁰ Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 5: Marx and Engels 1845–47*. Lawrence and Wishart: London. p. 90

Engels appears to maintain this definition as late as ‘The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State’ (1884):

“the state, first, divides its subjects according to territory... The second distinguishing feature is the establishment of a public authority which no longer directly coincides with the population organising itself as an armed force. This special public authority is necessary because a self-acting armed organisation of the population has become impossible since the split into classes... This public authority exists in every state; it consists not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds... Having public authority and the right to levy taxes, the officials now stand, as organs of society, above society.” (Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 26: Engels 1882–89*. Lawrence and Wishart: London. pp. 269–270)

¹¹ i.e., new manifestations of the State.

¹² i.e., the State itself.

¹³ All quotes, *Ibid.* p. 380

¹⁴ Following Marx’s death, Engels (and then, following his own, Karl Kautsky) continued to edit and publish his work, ensuring that accessible material, attributable to one of the movement’s most admired theorists and revolutionaries, reflected their own critique of political economy and vision of a socialist project. The result would become the standard interpretation of Marx, though it would soon give way to its own internal contradictions.

It should be said, however, that this does not necessarily imply a fundamental split between Marx and Engels (though a close reading does indicate noteworthy differences between the two thinkers, with Engels often exaggerating the weakest elements of Marx’s work). It is worth quoting the anarchist writer Wayne Price on this issue:

“There are those, particularly among libertarian Marxists, who criticize Engels as the first of the “post-Marx Marxists” who led the Marxist movement in the wrong direction. Rather than criticize Marx for things about the historical Marxist movement which they dislike, they blame Engels. They claim to understand Marx better than did his long-time political partner and dearest friend! If true, this should raise questions about Marx; how come he could not explain his ideas even to Engels?... [For instance,] Marx is known to have read over *Anti-Duhring* and discussed all of it with Engels before its publication. Marx contributed a chapter to it – which he would hardly have done if he disagreed with major parts of it.” (Price, W. 2012. *Marx’s Economics for Anarchists*. Zabalaza Books: Johannesburg. pp. 50–51)

¹⁵ Marx, Engels, Lenin: *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. *Ibid.* p. 172

This is due to the fact that,

... after the victory of the Proletariat, the only organisation the victorious working class finds ready-made for use is that of the State. It may require adaptation to the new functions. But to destroy that at such a moment, would be to destroy the only organism by means of which the victorious working class can exert its newly conquered power...¹⁶

This clear, statist analysis appears to be consistent with the program proposed in the *Manifesto*, specifically Section II and its policy platform of progressive taxation, universal social services, the abolition of inheritance, the formation of “industrial armies,” the ‘necessary’ development of productive forces, and the gradual centralisation of all means of production “in the hands of the State.” This is, the authors declare, merely “the first step in the revolution,” wherein “the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.”¹⁷

However, with this call by the *Manifesto* to ‘win the battle of democracy’ a key contradiction begins to emerge more clearly. Having in *The German Ideology* also referred to ‘the State’ as “the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests,” Marx and Engels now define their ‘revolutionary state’ as a *condition* (i.e., a ‘state’ of affairs)¹⁸ in which the proletariat has succeeded in reconstituting itself as ‘the new ruling class.’¹⁹ This seemingly conflicts with the nature of the reforms proposed in Section II, as well as other rather vague and confused attempts to describe the ‘transitional form’ taken by the working class as it carries out this process.²⁰ For instance, we are told that the proletariat ‘raised to the position of the ruling class’ is simultaneously both “a vast association of the whole nation” and a “public power,” which – until the final abolition of class distinctions – maintains its “political character.”²¹ Similar contradictions can be seen in Marx’s description of the ‘state machinery’ in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Here the State is an alienated, centralising apparatus of “governmental power,” defined by the development of infrastructure and public institutions, as well as the expropriation and management of property relations. Notably, however, Marx laments that all previous revolutions had “perfected this machine instead of breaking it,” with the respective par-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 6: Marx and Engels 1845–48. Lawrence and Wishart: London. pp. 497–506

¹⁸ A common use of the term in the 19th century (Marx and Engels refer to this definition in *The German Ideology*). In the earliest years of the movement anarchists would sometimes refer to an ‘anarchist state’ in exactly this sense. This was, however, soon abandoned given the impracticality and confusion caused by its multiple interpretations. The foremost anarchist communist theorist, Peter Kropotkin, noted as late as 1896 that “There is, as is well-known, the German school [associated with Marx and state socialism more generally] which likes to confuse the State with Society.” (Kropotkin, P. 2018. *Modern Science and Anarchy*. AK Press: Chico, Oakland, Edinburgh, & Baltimore. p. 234)

¹⁹ Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 6. Ibid. p. 504

²⁰ A reference to Marx’s defence of the revolutionary state against anarchist critiques, wherein he stated that, “If the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms, if the workers substitute their revolutionary dictatorship for the dictatorship of the bourgeois class... to satisfy their own base everyday needs and crush the resistance of the bourgeoisie, instead of laying down arms and abolishing the State they are giving it a revolutionary and transient form.” (Marx, Engels, Lenin: *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. Ibid. p. 95)

See notes 42 and 51 for more on the Marxist assertion that abolishing the State implies ‘laying down arms.’

²¹ Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 6. Ibid. p. 505

ties having “contended in turn for domination regarded[ing] the possession of this huge state edifice as the principal spoils of the victor.”²²

Further complicating this already convoluted picture is the fact that, following the experience of the Paris Commune, Marx and Engels essentially disowned the prescriptions outlined in Section II of the *Manifesto*. In a Preface to the 1872 German Edition, they claim that these passages “would, in many respects, be very differently worded today” given the lessons provided by successive revolutionary experiments and the further development of productive forces.²³ Though this joint declaration begs the question as to why Engels would continue to cite Section II’s analysis of the State,²⁴ it, nevertheless, appears to constitute an important break by Marx with those who continue to draw from the *Manifesto*’s program and underlying theoretical logic.

II. Marx & the Commune: Reassessments & Libertarian Contradictions

What, then, were the lessons of the Paris Commune – and how did they influence the development of Marxism? The *Manifesto*’s reflective 1872 Preface has Marx reiterate one of his most famous lines from *The Civil War in France* (1871), stating that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”²⁵ Not only is this distinct from previous appeals to the pursuit of political power (whether it be via electoral or insurrectionary means),²⁶ it explicitly contradicts Engels’ *post-Commune* assertion regarding

²² Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 11: Marx and Engels 1851–53*. Lawrence and Wishart: London. p. 186

²³ Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 23: Marx and Engels 1871–74*. Lawrence and Wishart: London. pp. 174–175

²⁴ Engels specifically refers to Section II as descriptive of his and (the recently deceased) Marx’s view. See, *Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. Ibid. p. 172

²⁵ Ibid. p. 175. For the original usage see, Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 22: Marx and Engels 1870–71*. Lawrence and Wishart: London. p. 328

Unpublished drafts go further. The Second Draft, for instance, refers to the State as,

“That huge governmental machinery, entailing like a boa constrictor the real social body in the ubiquitous meshes of a standing army, a hierarchical bureaucracy, an obedient police, clergy and a servile magistrature.” (Ibid. p. 533)

Furthermore, he claims that,

“the proletariat cannot, as the ruling classes and their different rival factions have done in the successive hours of their triumph, simply lay hold of the existent state body and wield this ready-made agency for their own purpose... The political instrument of their enslavement cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation.” (Ibid.)

This echoes Bakunin’s critique of Marx himself (and state socialism more generally), as seen in ‘Statism and Anarchy’:

“They say that this state yoke, this dictatorship, is a necessary transitional device for achieving the total liberation of the people: anarchy, or freedom, is the goal, and the state, or dictatorship, the means. Thus, for the masses to be liberated they must first be enslaved.” (Bakunin, M. 1990. *Statism and Anarchy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. p. 179)

²⁶ Appeals which would, nevertheless, continue to the end of his life. Following Bakunin’s gerrymandered expulsion from the International in 1872, Marx delivered a short speech about the necessity of such political power and the dangers of anarchist abstentionism:

“A group had formed in our midst advocating the workers’ abstention from politics... The worker will some day have to win political supremacy in order to organise labour along new lines; he will have to defeat the old policy supporting old institutions, under penalty... of never seeing their kingdom on earth... we do not deny that there are

the necessity of wielding the State as “ready-made” machinery, given it is the ‘*only* instrument available to workers.’²⁷

Marx’s analysis of the Paris insurrection exalts the worker’s substitution of both the standing army and police with “the armed people,” as well as the replacement of traditional constitutional government (legislatures, executives, judiciaries, etc.) with a single democratic assembly, comprised of working-class representatives’ subject to immediate recall.²⁸ He similarly praises the implementation of a “workman’s wage” for all elected officials (now to include those carrying out judicial functions), the elimination of church authority, the creation of an autonomous educational system, the seizing of means of production by various workers associations,²⁹ and a proposed vision of the revolutions future development, wherein,

countries [such as America, England, and perhaps Holland] where the working people may achieve their goal by peaceful means... we must also recognize that in most of the continental countries it is force that will have to be the lever of our revolutions...” (Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism. Ibid. pp. 84–85)

For an example of Marx’s argument against what he perceived to be ‘Indifference to Politics’ (an argument one could make against Proudhon’s gradualism and ambivalence toward confrontation – but could hardly be said to apply to the anarchist movement which followed), see the article of that name (1873) in Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism. Ibid. pp. 94–99.

Given Bakunin’s clear support for revolutionary direct action, one can only draw the conclusion that Marx views contesting electoral power and statecraft as the only meaningful definition of ‘political struggle’ – an important fact given his campaign to establish ‘political power’ as the ends to which all of the Internationals efforts were to be ‘subordinated.’ For details surrounding these arguments see, Graham, R. 2015. *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement*. AK Press: Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore. pp.126–127

²⁷ See note 16.

²⁸ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon advocated the use of “imperative mandate... and permanent revocability” (i.e., the use of bound delegates rather than elected representatives) as a libertarian alternative to statist centralisation long before Marx publicly indicated any support for it. In fact, as historian Robert Graham notes,

“The use of revocable delegates with imperative mandates was continued by Proudhon’s followers and other antiauthoritarians in the International [while] Marx and his allies favoured the use of representatives who were free to support policy positions contrary to the views of the people they were claiming to represent.” (*We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It*. Ibid. pp. 35–36)

This is representative of the larger fight which would tear the International apart. The anarchists believed (in keeping with Bakunin’s theoretical insights) that the means of struggle must prefigure the desired ends, lest the social relations of the State (and, therefore, the instrument maintaining class society) be replicated and substituted by those seeking their abolition. For more details on this – and the Marxists alternative of centralising power in the General Council – see, *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It*. Ibid. pp. 145–146, 168–194

Engels provides the most explicit rejection of such prefigurative politics in an 1872 response to Bakunin in *Der Volksstaat*:

“We Germans have earned a bad name for our mysticism, but we have never gone the length of such mysticism. The International is to be the prototype of a future society in which there will be no executions a la Versailles, no courts martial, no standing armies, no inspection of private correspondence, and no Brunswick criminal court! Just now, when we have to defend ourselves with all the means at our disposal, the proletariat is told to organise not in accordance with the requirements of the struggle... but according to the vague notions of a future society entertained by some dreamers.” (Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism. Ibid. pp. 62–63)

He and Marx also ridiculed the notion of those fighting the revolution being capable of engaging in self-governance:

“... odd barricades, these barricades of the [anarchists], where instead of fighting they spend their time writing mandates...” (Ibid. p. 110)

²⁹ As Graham notes, the most radical Communards sought to make this the basis of revolutionary self-organisation and constituted a ‘mutualist and proto-syndicalist’ tendency, influenced by (or explicitly following) the work of Proudhon. – *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It*. Ibid. p. 153

common affairs [would be administered] by an assembly of delegates in the central town, and these district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents.³⁰

Given that Marx had not rebuked his call to seize state power, his admiration for the Paris Commune³¹ and apparent condemnation of those features typically understood to define the State implies a mere problem of semantics. ‘The State’ now seemingly referred *exclusively* to ‘the proletariat raising itself to the position of the ruling class’ – i.e., the *act* of revolution itself. Those making the case for Marx’s libertarian credentials cite such passages as indicative of a general theoretical shift which would define the philosopher’s final years, particularly in material which remained hidden away in notebooks, if not actively suppressed by the leading figures of the Marxist movement.³²

However, as with the *Manifesto*, other comments appear to contradict this reading. In fact, private letters from the period clarify that Marx and Engels had not abandoned their preference for centralism or view of its necessity in social revolution.³³ As Robert Graham notes in his history

³⁰ Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 22. Ibid. pp. 331–332

³¹ Particularly its most radical aspirations, the lauding of which was ridiculed by Bakunin:

“[The Commune’s] general effect was so striking that the Marxists themselves, who saw all their ideas upset by the uprising, found themselves compelled to take their hats off to it. They went even further, and proclaimed that its programme and purpose were their own, in face of the simplest logic and their own true sentiments. This was a truly farcical change of costume, but they were bound to make it, for fear of being overtaken and left behind in the wave of feeling which the rising produced throughout the world.” (Bakunin, M. (ed. Lehning, A.) 1973. Mikhail Bakunin: Selected Writings. Jonathan Cape: London. p. 261)

The German Marxist Karl Korsch would later agree with this assessment, stating in *Die Aktion* (1929):

“In fact, if we analyze more exactly the political program and goals to be attained as proposed by the two founders of scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, not only in the time before the Paris Commune insurrection, but also afterwards, the assertion cannot be maintained that the form of proletarian dictatorship realized by the Paris Commune of 1871 would in any particular sense be in unison with those political theories. Indeed, Marx’s great opponent in the First International, Mikhail Bakunin, had on this point the historical truth on his side when he sarcastically commented on Marx’s having annexed the Paris Commune retrospectively... The revolutionary ideas of the Paris communardes of 1871 are partly derived from the federalistic program of Bakunin and Proudhon, partly from the circle of ideas of the revolutionary Jacobins surviving in Blanquism, and only to a very small degree in Marxism.” (Korsch, K. (ed. Kellner, D.) 1974. Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory. University of Texas Press: Austin. p. 207)

³² Anti-reformist work such as *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875) and Marx’s analysis * of revolutionary potential among the Russian peasantry (which, even in its most conservative draft stood in stark contrast to an economically deterministic orthodoxy) were originally written as private letters and subsequently suppressed by either their recipients or leading ‘authorities’ within the movement.

The rather short final draft of the Letter to Vera Zasulich (1881) has been used by Libertarian Marxists to suggest a break with a prior insistence on the development of productive forces (and ideally the formation of a liberal-democratic state) as a necessary precondition to revolution (i.e., that a society must first pass through capitalist development to reach socialism – a major justification for Bolshevik industrialisation policies and the brutal treatment of the peasantry, among other reactionary Marxist positions). However, prior drafts suggest that Marx – at least initially – believed this to be possible in Russia purely due to the level of international development. As such, only a global revolution could spare Russia the fate of undergoing a capitalist phase. For details, see: Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 24: Marx and Engels 1874–83. Lawrence and Wishart: London. pp. 346–371

³³ For instance, Marx wrote to his friend Louis Kugelmann on April 12 (prior to the Commune’s defeat) stating that the National Guard’s “Central Committee surrendered its power too soon, to make way for the Commune.” (Marx, K. & Engels, F. 2010. Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 44: Letters 1870–73. Lawrence and Wishart: London. p. 132)

of the First International, while Marx's language in *The Civil War* repeatedly indicates a belief in the need to *smash* the 'ready-made state machinery,' it also suggests that the workers replace it with a *new* (albeit, democratic) state – in the sense of a *governmental apparatus existing above society*. To Marx, it was the *Communal administration* (which, decentralized as it initially was, remained a governmental apparatus)³⁴ that would “serve as a lever” in the abolition of class society.³⁵ No such responsibility is given to the workers themselves,³⁶ who in Paris were beginning to engage in direct action at the point of production and combine into free associations.³⁷ Furthermore, Marx directly states that the “few important functions which still would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed... but were to be discharged by Communal, and therefore strictly responsible agents.”³⁸ We, therefore, appear to have a contradictory picture of Marx's view of the State, both over time and within specific works. Indeed, a year later Marx and Engels would circulate a scathing attack on Bakunin and the anarchists, accusing them of engaging in either ludicrous fantasies or dishonest semantics. Marx and Engels asserted that they were no more 'statist' than the anarchists and that, so far as the anarchists believed in the forceful overthrow of capitalism, they were likewise 'authoritarian' (rendering it a meaningless slur when used in the derogatory sense).³⁹ It is worth comparing Marx's widely read ode to the Paris Commune with their derisive summary of the anarchist vision:

[The anarchistic commune] invites [others] to reorganise themselves in a revolutionary way and then to send their responsible and recallable deputies, vested with their imperative mandates, to an agreed place where they will set up a federation of insurgent associations... a revolutionary *force* capable of triumphing over reaction... Thus in this anarchistic organisation... we have first the Council of the Commune,

Similarly, in a letter to Carlo Terzaghi (drafted January 6, 1872), Engels would argue:

“If there had been a little more authority and centralisation in the Paris Commune, it would have triumphed over the bourgeois. After the victory we can organise ourselves as we like, but for the struggle it seems to me necessary to collect all our forces into a single band and direct them on the same point of attack. And when people tell me that this cannot be done without authority and centralisation, and that these are two things to be condemned outright, it seems to me that those who talk like this either do not know what a revolution is, or are revolutionaries in name only.: (Ibid. p. 293)

³⁴ One which would gradually consolidate in the hands of the more authoritarian factions, under the name of the – appropriately named – Committee of Public Safety. In stark contrast to even Marx's position (either in *The Civil War* or as seen in note 33), anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin criticised the Communal administration for not constituting a full break with the state-form. For details, see: Bakunin, M., Kropotkin, P., & Marx, K. 2008. *Writings on the Paris Commune*. Red and Black Publishers: St Petersburg.

³⁵ *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It*. Ibid. pp. 153–154

³⁶ These words recall Marx's libertarian insistence that the proletariat's liberation would be an act of self-emancipation, carried out by 'the workers themselves.' This was first articulated by Marx in *General Rules of the International* (1864), later adapted in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), and included by Engels in the 1888 and 1890 prefaces to the *Communist Manifesto*. For details, see Draper, H. 1971. 'The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels.' *The Socialist Register*, 1971. 81–109

³⁷ As Marx himself notes. *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Volume 22. Ibid. p. 339

³⁸ Ibid. p. 332

³⁹ The most infamous use of this argument – which essentially replicates the Marxist analysis of the State – can be found in Engels' *On Authority* (1872), where authority is both equated with force (which anarchists support, viewing it as an act of liberation from authoritarian social relations) and justified within political – and even economic – institutions (which anarchists oppose). Conflating the two, we again find the accusation that anarchists are either indistinguishable from the state socialists or believe that social revolution can be accomplished without confronting capital or the State. For a brief summary of the conflicting definitions of 'authority,' see: Eckhardt, W. 2016. *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin Vs. Marx in the International Workingmen's Association*. PM Press: Oakland. pp. 142–145

then the executive committees which, to be able to do anything at all, must be vested with some power and supported by a police force; this is to be followed by nothing short of a federal *parliament*... Like the Commune Council, this parliament will have to assign *executive power* to one or more *committees* which by this act alone will be given an authoritarian character that the demands of the struggle will increasingly accentuate.⁴⁰

As a result, they assert that the anarchist alternative to state-socialism constitutes,

a perfect reconstruction of all the elements of the “authoritarian State”; and the fact that we call this machine a “revolutionary Commune organised from bottom to top,” makes little difference.⁴¹

Thus, *The Civil War in France*'s appraisal of the Commune as an alternative to the ‘political state’ appears to be almost entirely negated. At the same time, Marx and Engels suggest that the anarchist’s ‘statism’ was evident in the fact that any proposed federation of free associations would require force to achieve its ends and that their combination would inevitably lead to the exercise of power by a central ‘authority.’

III. Marxism & the Anarchist Challenge: Definitions and Obfuscation

A close reading of the material thus far reviewed demonstrates a fluid, threefold use of the word ‘state’:

- a. As a mere synonym for ‘society’; a ‘state’ of affairs. (e.g. a capitalist state or society as opposed to a communist state or society).
- b. Referring to the organisation of class rule. In a socialist context this amounts to *the act of revolution itself*; an armed populace actively carrying out a transformation of social relations by expropriating the means of production, supposedly establishing the proletariat as ‘the new ruling class.’
- c. To indicate the specific governmental apparatus situated above society which maintains class relations through its various instruments of coercion: the legislature, executive, judiciary, army, police, prisons, channels of information, schools, etc.

Applying the same term to three wildly different concepts became extremely useful, even central, to combating accusations of ‘authoritarianism’ (i.e., utilising ‘top-down,’ statist methods)

⁴⁰ Marx, Engels, Lenin: *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. Ibid. pp. 110–111. Emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 111. These extracts are taken from *The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men’s Association: Report and Documents Published by Decision of the Hague Congress of the International (1873)*, a factional pamphlet written in collaboration with Marx’s son in law, Paul Lafargue. I have included here the most relevant passages, as much of the critique is mistakenly directed at works falsely attributed to Bakunin. For details regarding their authorship, see: Leier, M. 2006. *Bakunin: The Creative Passion*. St Martin’s Press: New York. pp. 206–210

whilst simultaneously discrediting anarchism as either dishonest or counter-revolutionary in the eyes of the workers movement.⁴² One of the most concise articulations of this incoherent analysis can be found in Marx's *Conspectus of Bakunin's Statism and Anarchy* (1874), a series of private notes written in response to Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy* (1873). In that work Bakunin considered Marx and Engels' argument that the revolutionary state "[would] be nothing other than 'the proletariat raised to the level of a ruling class.'" In response he asked, "If the proletariat is to be the ruling class... then whom will it rule?":

There must be yet a new proletariat which will be subject to this new rule, this new state... What does it mean, "the proletariat raised to a governing class?" Will the entire proletariat head the government? The Germans number about 40 million. Will all 40 million be members of the government? The entire nation will rule, but no one will be ruled. Then there will be no government; there will be no state...⁴³

Marx dismissed Bakunin's anarchist critique with considerable contempt, declaring it to be filled with "Schoolboy nonsense!"⁴⁴ In expanding upon his conception of 'the proletariat as the ruling class' he first claims that this refers solely to the collective 'use of force' (the '*employment of coercive, meaning governmental, measures*') against "enemies and the old organisation of society," which would "not vanish as a result of [the proletariat] coming to power."⁴⁵ Simply put, the 'proletarian state' is manifested in any instance where the proletariat "has gained sufficient strength and is sufficiently well organised to employ general means of compulsion" in the suppression of their former masters.⁴⁶ It is this, rather than any specific form of social organisation,

⁴² This is also true of Lenin's *State and Revolution*, where, echoing Marx's critique of the anarchists, he asks:

"After overthrowing the yoke of the capitalists, should the workers "lay down their arms," or use them against the capitalists in order to crush their resistance? But what is the systematic use of arms by one class against another if not a "transient form" of state?" (Lenin, V.I. 1975. V.I. Lenin: Selected Works in Three Volumes, Volume 2. Progress Publishers: Moscow. p. 281)

The anarchist reply would be that this does not constitute a 'transient form of state.' Rather, it is a libertarian use of force and not a specific, alienated apparatus which exists to manage the antagonisms of class society. Given the trajectory of the Russian Revolution as well as references within *State and Revolution* to the 'transitional' need for 'representative institutions,' 'subordination,' and 'bureaucracy,' anarchists cannot simply dismiss this as a semantic issue. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the 'proletarian vanguard' would have necessarily – as Bakunin correctly noted – constituted a minority throughout much of the world, even at the time of the Russian Revolution (and certainly within Russia itself).

⁴³ *Statism and Anarchy*. Ibid. pp. 177–178

This follows the analysis presented by Proudhon, who in *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (1851) stated,

"Government implies as a correlative somebody to be governed... if the whole people, claiming sovereignty, assumes Government, one seeks in vain where the governed will be... where will the producers be...? We must come to the last hypothesis, that wherein the People enters into Government in the mass, and wields all the branches of Power; in which they are always unanimous, and have above them neither president, nor representatives, nor deputies, nor law-made country, nor majority... if the People, thus organised for Power, have nothing above them, what, I ask, have they below?... where are the labourers? Will you answer that the People are everything at once, that they produce and legislate at the same time, that Labour and Government are united in them? It is impossible... the reason for the existence of government is the divergence of interests... When the mass of the People becomes the State, the State has no longer any reason to exist, since there is no longer any People, the governmental equation reduces to zero." (Proudhon, P. J. 1989. *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. Pluto Press: London. pp. 158–161)

⁴⁴ Marx, Engels, Lenin: *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. Ibid. p. 148

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 147

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 149

which would naturally ‘wither away’ following the disappearance of class struggle (i.e., the victory of that revolution).⁴⁷ Furthermore, in responding to Bakunin’s question about ‘all 40 million Germans being members of the government,’ Marx replies that this is “Certainly” the case, “for the thing begins with the self-government of the commune.”⁴⁸ As for the ‘head of government,’ Marx retorts:

And will everybody be at the top in Bakunin’s construction built from the bottom upwards? There will in fact be no below then.⁴⁹

This notion of the State – though unhelpfully referred to as such – appears to be entirely in line with the anarchist conception of revolution, though we are once again faced with complications when Marx introduces references to elected managers and trade union executive committees.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, if we are to take Marx at his word, this raises the question as to what the Marxist critique of anarchism *actually is*. If the commune is a self-managed assembly, in which no one is governed by anyone else and ‘the State’ merely refers to the coordinated (or ‘centralised’) efforts of the communes to expropriate the means of production and defend this transformation of social relations, we are forced to conclude that Marx and Bakunin were simultaneously *both anarchists and statists*. The accuracy of either description simply depends on which definition of ‘the State’ is applied. It is only in projecting his own chosen definition of the State on to anarchist theory that Marx is able to assert that,

[In refusing to] employ means which will be discarded after the liberation [Mr. Bakunin] concludes that the proletariat should rather do nothing at all and wait for the day of universal liquidation.⁵¹

It is left to the reader to determine if intellectuals as serious as Marx and Engels could have genuinely misinterpreted the anarchist literature so severely. A key comment within the *Con-*

⁴⁷ ‘Withers away’ is one of two popular translations from Engels’ famous text, *Anti-Duhring* (1878) (the other being ‘dies out’). The full text (here, the ‘withers away’ version) is worth quoting at length, as it encapsulates many of the contradictions and misrepresentations explored in this essay:

“The first act in which the state really comes forward as the representative of the society as a whole – the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society – is at the same time its last independent act as a state. The interference of the state power in social relations becomes superfluous in one sphere after another, and then ceases of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things and the direction of the process of production. The state is not “abolished,” it withers away. It is from this standpoint that we must appraise the phrase “free people’s state” – both its justification at times for agitational purposes, and its ultimate scientific inadequacy – and also the demand of the so-called anarchists that the state should be abolished overnight.” (Engels, F. 1939. *Marxist Library: Works of Marxism – Leninism Volume XVIII: Herr Eugen Duhring’s Revolution in Science (Anti-Duhring)*. New York International Publishers: New York. p. 315)

⁴⁸ Marx, Engels, Lenin: *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. *Ibid.* p. 150

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 149

⁵⁰ Marx does not clearly define what he is referring to here, however, similar references throughout his work (and the transformation of the International’s General Council into an elected – though centralised – body) indicate a major point of difference with Bakunin’s conception of anti-bureaucratic organisation, elected or otherwise. See note 28.

⁵¹ Or, as he and Engels repeatedly put it, the anarchists “[either do not] know what they are talking about” or they do and are instead explicitly calling for the workers to ‘lay down their arms,’ rather than fight. – Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 23. *Ibid.* p. 425.

spectus, it should be noted, indicates no misunderstanding, suggesting other motives.⁵² Since Proudhon, the first to call himself an anarchist, the movement's major theorists and political organisations were clear in accepting only the third of Marx and Engels' definitions.⁵³ Lacking in a sufficiently materialist analysis of the state-form, Marx interprets Bakunin's rejection of all States as the rejection of an 'abstraction.'⁵⁴ However, for anarchists, the State has never been understood in such terms. Instead, the movement has merely taken the common, socialist understanding of the State's origin and historical function seriously and, as a result, reasoned that it cannot be the vehicle through which capitalist social relations are overthrown. For Marx and Engels, class distinctions would have to be abolished before their vaguely defined state could be disposed of. However, at the same time, they also appear to agree that the State exists to regulate the social relations and process of accumulation produced by class society, and that its continued existence presupposes the perpetuation of class distinctions within the mode of production. This analysis led Bakunin to note that any revolutionary state purporting to consist of 'workmen' will instead consist of "former workmen." This, in turn, prompted Marx's reply that a worker-turned-representative no more ceases to be a workman than "a manufacturer cease[s] to be a capitalist on becoming a town-councillor."⁵⁵

Here, and throughout their collected works, Marx and Engels appear to forget that the proletariat is defined by its class position in the existing mode of production and that the State is not a neutral instrument within that arrangement. In taking hold of any part of the State machinery the manufacturer, indeed, continues to occupy a structural position within the management of capital. This is, however, a position that the proletariat, by definition, lacks. It is clear, then, that Bakunin's observation logically follows; that a worker is tasked with the management and perpetuation of class society upon entering an apparatus designed for that purpose. As such, Proudhon concluded in *System of Economic Contradictions* (1846) that the modern state, "[created] to serve as a mediator between labor and privilege, finds itself inevitably enchained to

⁵² Marx 'corrects' Bakunin's assertion that the Marxists understood a revolutionary government to consist of "governing the people by means of a small number of representatives elected by the people" by claiming that this was Bakunin's view as opposed to his own. He proceeds to explain that "the nature of elections" would change with the transformation of their "economic basis." As a result, he claimed that in such circumstances, "(1) government functions no longer exist; (2) the distribution of general functions becomes a routine matter and does not entail any domination; (3) elections completely lose their present political character." – *Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. Ibid. p. 150

⁵³ Anticipating Weber, the State was clearly understood as a concrete, territorial array of institutions claiming the sole legitimate right to exercise coercion. In discussing the "governmental system" of the State, Proudhon refers to the investment of authority in "Administrative centralization" and the exercise of that authority via "Judicial hierarchy [and] police." For "countries in which the democratic principle has become predominant" one could also expect a constitutional system of shared powers – populated by elected representatives responsible for enacting laws (typically through majority rule) – and a bureaucracy overseeing the collection of taxes. – *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. Ibid. p 242

Kropotkin summarised the analysis thusly in 'The State: Its Historic Role' (1896), later collected in 'Modern Science and Anarchy' (1914):

"[The State] not only includes the existence of a power placed above society, but also of a territorial concentration and a concentration of many functions in the life of societies in the hands of a few. It implies some new relationships which did not exist before the formation of the State. A whole mechanism of legislation and of policing is developed to subject some classes to the domination of other classes." (*Modern Science and Anarchy*. Ibid. p. 234)

⁵⁴ "Thus it is not the Bonapartist State, the Prussian or Russian State that has to be overthrown, but an abstract State, the State as such, a State that nowhere exists." (*Marx, Engels, Lenin: Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*. Ibid. p. 108)

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 151

capital and directed against the proletariat,”⁵⁶ the recognition of which led Bakunin to declare that,

by its very nature and under the threat of self-destruction [the State] must inexorably and at all costs strive for the realization of its objectives regardless of or even against the will of [those] wielding it.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Though Marx intended to dedicate an entire volume of *Capital* to developing his analysis of the State,⁵⁸ only the first volume was completed in his lifetime, with the remaining two⁵⁹ being posthumously assembled by Engels from various notebooks. We are, as a result, left with scattered references to the subject which reveal a contradictory and shifting conception of its definition, function within capitalism, and role within the process of social revolution. In this essay I have argued that the early Marx’s conception of revolution was fundamentally statist. However, this was later complicated by more radical statements, many of which appear to have a more libertarian character, either reframing the State as an abstract concept or advocating for the construction of a new kind of ‘State.’⁶⁰ Though the description of this ‘transitional’ form was often vague and contradictory, the democratic statism of Marx and Engels remained fundamentally different to the distortions most ‘Marxists’ across the world would come to advocate.⁶¹ The statism of even this later period has also been transcended entirely by various anti-authoritarian currents within the Marxist tradition, who drew upon Marx’s more ‘anarchistic’ writings.⁶²

Libertarian developments aside, Marx and Engels remained hostile to anarchism throughout their lives and organised the International in a hierarchical fashion to combat its influence within the movement. Marx and Engels alternated between dismissing anarchist accusations of ‘authoritarianism’ as unfounded and misrepresenting anarchist theory in such a way as to obscure the differences between the two movements. The utility of such an approach is clear, as an accurate representation of the anarchist position clarifies the central contradiction within Marx’s ever-evolving (and ultimately unrefined) theory of the State: In the final analysis, the Marxist position either becomes virtually identical in substance to the very ideology being denounced, or the anarchist critique must be accepted as legitimate – and the seizure of the government apparatus defended on its merits.

⁵⁶ Proudhon, P. J. 2019. *System of Economic Contradictions: Or, The Philosophy of Misery*. Anodos Books: Whithorn. p. 189

⁵⁷ Statism and Anarchy. Ibid. p. 195

⁵⁸ Marx’s notes indicate that an unwritten volume of *Capital* was intended to be dedicated entirely to an analysis of the state. Cited in Marx, K. 1990. ‘Introduction by Ernest Mandel,’ chapter in *Capital: Volume I*. Penguin Classics: London. p. 28

⁵⁹ Three including *Theories of Surplus Value*, edited by Karl Kautsky.

⁶⁰ Or as Marx and Engels sometimes put it, ‘a State which is not a State’ in the conventional sense.

⁶¹ For instance, on the question of dictatorship and Marx’s use of the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ see: Draper, H. 1987. *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ from Marx to Lenin*. Monthly Review Press: New York. Draper convincingly demonstrates that the term is used in a manner similar to Marx’s second definition of ‘the State’ (i.e., as a reference to the use of revolutionary force).

⁶² Libertarian or ‘left’ Marxism encompasses the likes of council communism, autonomism, the so-called ‘ultra-leftists,’ much of Situationism, elements of critical theory, and various other tendencies of thought.

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