

A Fundamental Thesis of Revolution and the State

Can Radicals Use the State?

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Now that the 2020 U.S. national elections are past, I think it may be time to go over a fundamental thesis which all varieties of revolutionary socialists and anarchists once generally accepted: this state cannot be used to create socialism (communism or anarchism).

But first a comment on the presidential election. As I wrote before the votes, “While it will be good to see the back of the vile Donald Trump, electing Joe Biden will not really solve ‘the problem.’” (Price 2020.) Not any of the problems of capitalist-industrial society, which led to Trump in the first place.

Assume that we think that a new, post-capitalist, society is desired, that we are not satisfied with just trying to improve the current social system. This may be for moral reasons, because we think that this capitalist society is oppressive and prevents the full, free, and equal development of all humans. Or perhaps for a belief in necessity, that unless this society is replaced it will result in economic collapse, wars leading to nuclear war, and deadly ecological catastrophes including pandemics and global warming. For either or both of these reasons, we want a new social system, what has been referred to as socialism or communism (with a lower-case “c”) or anarchism. (I am not going to argue this assumption at this time.)

I am asserting here a fundamental thesis of revolution and the state (the basic structure of government): **The state—the existing, capitalist, patriarchal, imperialist, state—cannot be used to create a socialist society. If socialism is to be achieved, this state must be overturned and dismantled and must be replaced with different structures**. In older language, there is no parliamentary (electoral) road to socialism.

By “state” I am not referring to every possible form of social coordination, conflict resolution, and social protection. The state is the bureaucratic-military-police institution of our capitalist society, which stands above society, alienated from the mass of people, and maintains the hierarchical structure of “law and order.” Such a system has existed through all forms of class society, including slavery and feudalism. It has been perfected under industrial capitalism. It is an institution for maintaining the rule of the few, who drain wealth from the labor of the many. It cannot be used otherwise. (For discussion of the nature of the state, see Price July 2018; Sept. 2018.)

This is not to deny that reforms may be won from the state. Especially in times of prosperity, workers and others may pressure the state to grant improvements in their lives, higher wages, less discrimination, an end to specific wars, a slow down to climate change, etc. It is to say that **fundamental** change from capitalism to a new, more humane, society is not possible through taking over this state.

In an 1872 Preface to the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote that (contrary to their original opinion in 1848), “*One thing especially was proved by the [1871 Paris] Commune, viz., that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.’*” (Bender 2013; 48)

The Reformist Objection to the Fundamental Thesis

The objection to this thesis is that the state is not monolithic. It has conflicting parts and sub-systems; these reflect clashes in the rest of society. Liberals and reform socialists argue that the working class and oppressed can use these internal contradictions to advance their interests. This is especially true, supposedly, under the system of representative democracy. The

people can use their numerical strength to vote in representatives and policies which they want. Using their numbers, they can vote for changes which move in the direction of socialism. In fact, governments have (under popular pressure) granted reforms to the working classes and the oppressed—as I have admitted it can. Does this show that the working class **can** wield the ready-made state machinery for its own purposes?

In response, it may be pointed out that the management of any capitalist corporation has internal conflicts. These include differences among the top managers about how to treat their workers. If the workers make demands, say, for better pay or conditions, some managers may be willing to grant concessions. Others will be inclined to fight against them, tooth and nail. The workers can put pressure on the bosses, by strikes, boycotts, or other means. At times the workers may be successful in gaining their demands. This does not make the management any less an agent of capital and the enemy of the workers. The state should be seen as the collective capitalist management of society—not as neutral between the workers and the corporate rich.

Meanwhile those who attempt to change the state from within, by running in elections and by serving in government positions, will be affected by it—corrupted by it. Just running to win in elections means that a clear revolutionary program cannot be raised. Attempting to win a majority of the voters requires appealing to people who are still under the influence of capitalist propaganda and ideology (except during an actual revolutionary situation). The revolutionary program will have to be modified and compromised. And once elected to power, the revolutionaries would have to run a capitalist state and manage a capitalist economy. How could they do this without compromising their actual program?

Even the most democratic, popularly-controlled, state (which is not the U.S.A.!) exists in the context of a capitalist economy. This economy is not at all democratic nor does it claim to be (its ideological rationalization is that it expresses “freedom”). From the smallest shops to the semi-monopolistic, multinational, corporations, these are top-down institutions, with controls coming solely from above. Employees follow orders. The people may elect anyone they like to the government, but they have no real control over the decisions made by the auto industry, the steel makers, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, computer makers, the airlines, agribusiness, etc., etc. These in turn may be said to be dominated by the market, which no one controls.

The U.S.’s two parties run on rivers of money. Without money they cannot make “democratic” appeals to the voters. To imagine that even the most “progressive” politician could run for high office without oodles of boodle, from big donors (along with whatever they could get from little donors) is absurd. These big donors might be from the more “progressive” wing of the capitalist class (for abortion rights and a reasonable immigration program, for example) but they are still for...capitalism and won’t support a program for expropriating themselves.

But suppose a party rejects all big donors and manages to get elected anyway (as has happened in other countries with Socialist Parties)? Once elected, they have the job of managing a state in a capitalist economy. If they are too benevolent to the working class, the capitalists will object. Not only will they pour money into the coffers of the conservative parties, but they will go on a “capital strike.” They will stop investing, send their money overseas, fire large numbers of workers, and otherwise sabotage the economy. Large parts of the state will be on the side of big capital: bureaucrats, civil servants, intelligence agencies, police forces, and the military. These will also sabotage the Socialists’ policies.

Then the elected Socialist government will be in a quandary. If they go ahead with their reform socialist program, capitalists will cause the economy to tank. Then the voters will turn against

them, not only middle class people but even workers. They could go further and socialize private corporations, but this is to go into revolutionary policies which they are not prepared for. They may be voted out of office at the next election. Or they may back down, faced with such obstruction. If they stick to their guns, the capitalists may feel impelled to get rid of representative democracy for a time: build up fascist gangs, whip up mass hysteria on sexual or racial or nativist grounds, cancel elections and shut down the socialist media. Finally they may call on some combination of the fascists and the military to stage a coup.

Is this all my own imagination? All these things have been done and done again, from the founding of the socialist movement to now. It is astonishing to me how often I read socialist theorists (not new activists but long-time radicals) who do not seem to have considered the history of socialist reformism.

Even in the most recent period, there was the 1981 election of Mitterand's Socialists in France. This ended after the capitalists went on a "strike," forcing the government to adopt an austerity program—and eventually to be voted out of office without creating "socialism". Or consider the 1970 Popular Unity government of Allende in Chile. With the help of U.S. imperialism, the military overthrew and killed Allende, setting up a terroristic dictatorship. Or the 2003 election of the Workers Party of Lula in Brazil, which was eventually forced out of office through the judiciary and elections. Or the SYRIZA government in Greece of 2015, which was going to avoid all the mistakes of the social democratic reformists. It ended up overwhelmed by the European banks and governments, until it capitulated to the right and then lost elections. I could give many more examples. In one way or another, attempts by socialist parties to get elected to manage capitalist governments and economies have not worked out.

Running in Elections?

From the fundamental thesis, the anarchists draw the logical conclusion not to participate in elections. In 1910, Peter Kropotkin wrote, "*The anarchists refuse to be a party to the present state organization and to support it by infusing fresh blood into it. They do not seek to constitute, and invite the working men not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments. Accordingly...they have endeavored to promote their ideas directly among the labor organizations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital...*" (Kropotkin 2014; 165)

This was not Marx's conclusion. After the 1871 Paris Commune (and the quotation about the state cited earlier), Marx and Engels redoubled their efforts to get the First International to form workers' parties in every European country, to run in elections and try to take over their governments. In fact, the split in the First International, between Marx and Michael Bakunin's anarchists, was over this issue.

Apparently Marx did not expect these workers' parties to peacefully and legally take over most of the European capitalist states (which in those days were also semi-feudal). But he thought that they would be able to make revolutionary propaganda and build up the strength of the organized workers and their allies. The problem was that it was impossible **in practice** to keep separate these two perspectives: building electoral parties with the aim of taking over the capitalist states vs. building electoral parties with the aim of overthrowing these states.

In fact, Marx and Engels speculated that workers' parties might legally take over some states, particularly Britain and the U.S. They usually added that they expected this to be followed by

attempted counterrevolutions by the capitalists—similar to what had happened in the U.S., when Lincoln was elected and the slaveholders had revolted, setting off a vicious civil war. Such beliefs made it hard to distinguish between “revolutionary” and reformist electoralism.

The Marxist David Fernbach writes, “...*Revolutionary Marxists and ‘political’ reformists were united by agreement on the immediate tactical priority—the need to build up the workers’ movement in the electoral arena. The label of ‘Social Democracy’ thus concealed from the start the crucial question that divided revolutionaries from reformists, and neither Marx nor Engels ever fully realized the nature of the parties to which they gave their blessing.*” (Fernbach1992; 58)

As we know, the social democratic parties which were inspired by Marx and Engels were to become bureaucratic and reformist, mostly supporting “their own” imperialist governments in World War I, opposing the Russian and German revolutions afterwards, failing to resist the rise of fascism, and supporting the Western imperialists in the Cold War. After World War II they abandoned all claims to be advocating a new society called “socialism.” (Similar paths may be traced for the Eurocommunist parties and also for Green parties.)

What Would Replace This State?

Implicit in the fundamental thesis about the state and revolution is the issue of what would replace the state. What would be the “alternate institutions” which a revolution would establish when overthrowing the capitalist state?

Of those who see themselves as revolutionary Marxists today, the alternate they usually advocate is a **new state** supposedly representing the rule of the working class. This would be a centralized, bureaucratic, top-down regime, with specialized police and military. It would be managed by a single centralized, top-down, political party whose ideology would become the official ideas of all society. This centralized state would own the main parts of commerce, industry, and land. Whatever their subjective intentions, in practice the leadership would become a new ruling class and the economy would be best described as state-capitalist. I doubt that this is what Marx had intended. But it has been the result of every successful Marxist revolution so far (until the state-capitalisms have collapsed back into traditional capitalist forms).

Anarchists want to replace the state with a federation of workplace councils, community assemblies, self-managed industries, and other voluntary associations. There would be an armed population (the original meaning of “militia”) so long as one is needed. Certain Marxists of a libertarian and humanistic trend also propose a system similar to the extremely democratic Paris Commune or the original soviets (councils) of the Russian revolution. In any case, time and again revolutions have thrown up such working class and popular forms of direct democracy and associated them as alternatives to the state.

“From the largely medieval peasant wars of the sixteenth century Reformation to the modern uprisings of industrial workers and peasants, oppressed peoples have created their own popular forms of community association—potentially the popular infrastructure of a new society—to replace the oppressive states that have ruled over them...During the course of the revolutions, these associations took the institutional form of local assemblies, much like town meetings, or representative councils of mandated recallable deputies...[based in] committee networks and assemblies...” (Bookchin 1996; 4–5)

Anarchist Reformism

All anarchists reject using the state to try to create a new society. They want the state gone and a new system of voluntary association in its place. But many anarchists may still be considered “reformist.” (I am describing, not name-calling.) They do not accept all of the fundamental thesis. **They do not believe that a main aim of anarchist strategy must be to overthrow, smash, and actively get rid of the state;** that this requires a revolutionary clash—at some point in time—with the forces of the state.

For example, the anarchist Kevin Carson writes, “ *We want to build a counter-economy...leaving the corporations to die on the vine along with the state....The solution is not to seize the state, to seize control of the heirarchies...nor to displace the existing ruling class....The only solution is to secede from their rule, to bypass them,...to build a new society in which they are no longer needed.*” (Mas-simino & Tuttle 2020; i-ii) There is also a trend among certain libertarian-autonomist Marxists for a strategy of “exodus.” This is a similar proposal to “withdraw” from capitalist, statist, society and create a new world.

Carson and other such libertarian socialists have offered valuable insights into capitalist-industrial society and what might replace it. But they underestimate the extent to which the state and the capitalist economy are intertwined. They know that they cannot take over the state, even the most democratic one. It is an institution of the capitalist system and deeply rooted in it. But they think that they can organize within the existing market, build a “counter-economy,” and “bypass” the corporate economy. Alas, the marketplace is also a capitalist institution (!). It has many ways to make small alternate enterprises “wither on the vine.” Even more, it has many ways to co-opt alternate businesses and to integrate successful ones into the existing economy. This has been repeatedly done with producer and consumer coops, which have been brought into the system—but at the margins. They are never threats to big business. And if they were, the state would intervene, outlawing “dangerous” businesses, perhaps just adding new regulations and taxes to crush them. I am not against community organizing, nor against building cooperatives and alternate activities—these may be good in themselves and do not need to be justified. But as a strategy for “building a new society” by itself, it is a fantasy. No, we do not want to “seize the state” but to overturn and dismantle it. There is no alternative to revolution.

(Advocating revolution is not a call for violence and bloodshed, as is often charged. How violent or nonviolent a revolution has been—or will be—depends on many factors. It would be less violent if the majority of the population is united and committed, if the ranks of the armed forces—daughters and sons of the people—are won over, if the ruling minority is isolated, and if it is demoralized—by successful revolutions elsewhere—and prone to give up.)

Conclusion

What I have called a fundamental thesis is, to repeat, that this capitalist state cannot be used by the exploited and oppressed people to create a new, non-capitalist, society. It must be overthrown and destroyed, and replaced by alternate institutions.

In some version, this thesis was central to the programs of the revolutionary anarchists, from Bakunin and Kropotkin to the communist-anarchists and anarchist-syndicalists. It was held by

Marx and the early Marxists, and raised by V.I. Lenin (especially in his *State and Revolution*) as well as Leon Trotsky. It was believed by libertarian-humanist-autonomist Marxists (who rejected Lenin's electoralism).

Of course, liberals do not accept the thesis, since they do not believe that a totally new society is needed. They are happy attempting to use the state to improve the people's conditions—which is getting more difficult as the capitalism continues its long-term decline. Social democrats (or “democratic socialists”—more accurately reformist state socialists) also do not accept the thesis. They believe that the existing state may be turned into an instrument of the working class and oppressed—despite the repeated failures of such attempts. Various anarchists, from Proudhon to now, have also rejected the need to eventually confront and overthrow the state. They think that they can create a counter-society which can peacefully and gradually replace capitalism and the state. They underestimate the state's ubiquity in society.

What is stranger is the way that militants calling themselves revolutionary socialists (Marxists, Leninists, Maoists, or Trotskyists) “forget” the thesis as soon as some radicals get elected to a government. They jump up for SYRIZA in Greece, insisting that it is not like social democratic parties. They went wild for Hugo Chavez's Venezuelan regime, even though it was managing a capitalist state with its unreformed armed forces (which is not to deny the need to defend the Venezuelan people from U.S. aggression). When U.S. “democratic socialists” have successes in the Democratic Party and the national government (Bernie Sanders, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, and others), they became foot soldiers for the capitalist Democratic Party. They get involved in the internal organizing of one of the two parties of U.S. imperialism.

Their main motivation is a lack of belief in the working class—in the possibility of a revolution by the working class and other oppressed people. Such skepticism is understandable, especially in the conservative U.S. However there was rarely a time when society was more unstable, when accepted political beliefs were being so questioned, and when the population was less quiescent. People of Color, working class people, women, young people, LGBTQ people, and many others are dissatisfied and looking for answers. It does them no favor to promote the lie that elections to this state can lead to a better society.

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