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The Abolition and Extinction of the State

Camillo Berneri

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Whereas we anarchists desire the extinction of the state through the social revolution and the constitution of an autonomist federal order, the Leninists desire the destruction of the bourgeois state and moreover the conquest of the state by the 'proletariat.' The 'proletarian' state, they say, is a semi-state since the complete state is the bourgeois one destroyed by the social revolution. And even this semi-state would die, according to the Marxists, a natural death.

This theory of the extinction of the state which is the basis of Lenin's book 'State and Revolution' has been derived by him from Engels who in 'Anti-Duhring' says,

"The proletariat seizes the power of the state and first of all transforms the means of production into the property of the state. But by achieving this it does away with itself as proletariat, it does away with all class differences and all class antagonisms and consequently also with the state as the state.

Society as it was and as it is at present which is actuated by the antagonisms between the classes, needed the state, that is to say an organisation of the exploiting class with a view to maintaining the outward conditions of production, more particularly with a view to maintaining by force the exploited class in the oppressive conditions demanded by the existing mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wage labour). The state was the official representative of the entire society, its synthesis in visible form, but it was only this to the extent that it was the state of the class which itself represented in its time the entire society: the state of citizens who owned slaves in antiquity, the state of the feudal nobility in the Middle Ages, the state of the bourgeoisie in our time. But by becoming at last the true representative of the whole society, it renders itself superfluous. As soon as there is no longer a social class to maintain in oppression; as soon as the clashes of interest and the excesses are abolished at the same time as class domination and the struggle for individual existence which is founded in the old anarchy of production from which they result, there is nothing more to repress, and a special force for repression, the state, ceases to be necessary. The first act by which the state confirms itself in reality as the representative of the entire society — taking possession of the means of production in the name of society — is at the same time the last proper act of the state. The intervention of the power of the state in social relations becomes superfluous in one area after another, and eventually dies away of its own accord. Government of people is replaced by administration of things and control of the process of production. The state is not 'abolished';

Leninists, Trotskyists, Bordighists, Centrists are only divided by different tactical ideas. All Bolsheviks, to whatever stream or faction they belong are supporters of political dictatorship and State Socialism. All are united by the formula: 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' an ambiguous phrase which corresponds to 'The People Sovereign' of Jacobinism. Whatever Jacobinism is, it is certain to cause the Social Revolution to deviate. And when it deviates, 'the shadow of a Bonaparte' is cast across it.

One would have to be blind not to see that the Bonapartism of Stalin is merely the horrible and living shadow of Leninist Dictatorialism.

it withers away. It is from this point of view that one must appraise the expression: 'a free popular state' as much for its short-lived interest for discussion as for its definitive scientific inadequacy; from this point of view also must the claims of those who are called anarchists and who desire that the state should be abolished overnight be appraised."

Between the State — Today and the Anarchy — Tomorrow there would be the semi-state. The state which dies is the 'state as the state' that is to say, the bourgeois state. It is in this sense that one must take the phrase which at first sight seems to contradict the proposition of the socialist state. "The first act by which the state confirms itself in reality as the representative of the entire society — taking possession of the means of production in the name of society — is at the same time the last proper act of the state." Taken literally and out of context, this phrase would signify the temporal simultaneity of economic socialisation and the extinction of the state. In the same way also, taken literally and out of context, the phrases relating to the proletariat destroying itself as proletariat in the act of seizing the power of the state would indicate the lack of need for the 'Proletarian State.' In reality, Engels under the influence of 'didactic style' expresses himself in an unfortunate manner. Between the bourgeois state today and the socialist-anarchist tomorrow, Engels recognises a chain of successive eras during which the state and the proletariat remain. It is to throw some light on the dialectical obscurity that he adds the final allusion to the anarchists "who desire that the state should be abolished overnight" that is to say, who do not allow the transitory period as regards the state, whose intervention according to Engels becomes superfluous, "in one area after another" that is to say, gradually.

It seems to me that the Leninist position on the problem of the state coincides exactly with that taken by Marx and Engels when

one interprets the spirit of the writings of these latter without letting oneself be deceived by the ambiguity of certain turns of phrase.

The state is, in Marxist – Leninist political thought, the temporary political instrument of socialisation, temporary in the very essence of the state, which is that of an organism for the domination of one class by another. The socialist state, by abolishing classes, commits suicide. Marx and Engels were metaphysicians who frequently came to schematise historical processes from love of system.

‘The Proletariat’ which seizes the state, bestowing on it the complete ownership of the means of production and destroying itself as proletariat and the state ‘as the state’ is a metaphysical fantasy, a political hypothesis of social abstractions.¹

It is not the Russian proletariat that has seized the power of the state, but rather the Bolshevik Party which has not destroyed the proletariat at all and which has on the other hand created a State Capitalism, a new bourgeois class, a set of interests bound to the Bolshevik state which tend to preserve themselves by preserving the state.

The extinction of the state is further away than ever in the USSR where static interventionism is ever more immense and oppressive, and where classes are not disappearing.

The Leninist programme for 1917 included these points: the discontinuance of the police and the standing army, abolition of the professional bureaucracy, elections for all public positions and offices, revocability of all officials, equality of bureaucratic wages with workers’ wages, the maximum of democracy, peaceful competition among the parties within the soviets, abolition of the death penalty. Not a single one of the points in this programme has been achieved.

¹ Hypostasis: in theology this word is equivalent to ‘nuance,’ thus the father, son and holy ghost are three hypostases of a single divine substance Here the proletariat’s act of seizing power is a hypostasis which contains several magic processes: destruction of the state and the proletariat.

We have the USSR a government, a dictatorial oligarchy. The Central Committee (19 members) dominates the Russian Communist Party which in turn dominates the USSR.

All those who are not ‘loyal subjects’ are charged with being counter-revolutionaries. The Bolshevik revolution has engendered a saturnal² government, which deports Riazano founder of the Marx Engels institute, at the time when he is preparing the complete and original edition of ‘Des Kapital;’ which condemns to death Zinonev, president of the Communist International, Kamenev and many others among the best propagators of Leninism, which excludes from the party, then exiles, then expels from the USSR a ‘duce’ like Trotsky, which in short is dead set against 80% of the supporters of Leninism.

In 1920 Lenin was speaking very highly of self-criticism within the lap of the Communist Party and spoke of ‘mistakes’ recognised by the ‘Party’ and not of the right of the citizen to denounce these mistakes, or those things which seemed to him to be such of the party in government. When Lenin was dictator, whoever caused a stir in denouncing the same mistakes which Lenin himself recognised in retrospect risked or underwent ostracism, prison or death. Bolshevik Sovietism was an atrocious joke even for Lenin who vaunted the god-like power of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party over all the USSR in saying: “No important question be it one of political discipline or relating to organisation, is decided on by a state institution in our Republic without a directive emanating from the Central Committee of the Party.”

Whoever says ‘proletarian State’ says ‘State Capitalism’ whoever says ‘dictatorship of the Proletariat’ says ‘Dictatorship of the Communist Party;’ whoever says ‘strong government’ says ‘Tsarist oligarchy of politicians.’

² Saturnal: an allusion to the myth of Saturn who ate his own children. The Party devoured, Trotsky, then Stalin, then Krushchev etc.