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Commentary on "State and Revolution"

Black Flag Sydney

June 3rd, 2022

State and Revolution is something of an odd work, a product of the circumstances in which it was written. The book, stridently polemical, is largely aimed at other Marxists. The Marxists explicitly criticised are largely those of the Second International, such as the "Orthodox" Kautsky and Plekhanov, as well as revisionists like Bernstein. In that sense, the book represents one of the origins of modern communism, out of the ashes of the old social-democracy.

Kautsky, Plekhanov, and Bernstein are the ones hammered explicitly, but implicitly targeted in the work are Lenin's opponents within the Bolshevik faction itself. The organisation was riddled with internal power struggles, and the political line that would later lead the Bolsheviks to power was not one adhered to unanimously. *State and Revolution*, as well as the April Theses, were weapons in Lenin's struggle against "moderates" in his own party – the ones that supported things like the Democratic Conference with Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and others. It was in response to this situation that Lenin would even go so far as to tender his resignation from the Bolshevik

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Retrieved on June 5th, 2022 from
<https://blackflagsydney.com/article/60>.

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central committee, so as to be able to freely propagandise his views among the party's rank-and-file.

Hence, *State and Revolution* is fixated on proving the Marxist bonafides of an insurrectionary position, one that would involve the forcible seizure of power by the communist party and the institution not of a democratic republic – the main intermediary goal of all previous social-democrats – but a full, unambiguous dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin frames his presentation of Marx and Engels as a “recovery” of what are allegedly the true positions of the current, that had been buried by years of social-democratic opportunism.

This anti-state position, in a way, places Lenin in the company of the anarchists. Much of the time, he restates basic anarchist positions: the state as an inherently oppressive force, the product of class relations, universal suffrage as an instrument of bourgeois rule, the necessity of a violent revolution, and the democratic republic as the “best possible political shell” for capitalism. All standard anarchist positions! The last was a particular fixation of Bakunin, whose stress on opposing the democratic republic was one of the things that set him apart from Marx and Engels, who consistently stressed the political importance of universal suffrage for workers.

Lenin was acutely aware of all of this; it was commonplace for his Marxist critics to accuse him of a kind of Bakuninism or Blanquism. This explains the rather fragmented and off-handed nature of his scattered remarks on anarchism; it consists of fairly basic and easily refuted notions, like that of the anarchists wanting to abolish the state overnight. His intention in dealing with anarchist arguments is not to reply to us as a proper engagement, but as a means of disassociating himself from us, so he can position himself as being squarely in the tradition of Marx and Engels. This raises the obvious question: is he actually?

A full answer to this question is not the scope of this article, but the way the “Marxist theory of the state” is only really

elaborated by Marx and Engels in scattered quotations from different texts over different periods should give some indication that this is more a Leninist position rather than a Marxist one. Marx did not have a protracted, coherent “theory of the state” in the way other socialists like Proudhon did. Often, to find Marx’s thoughts on the state, we have to turn to obscure documents, like his marginal notes on Bakunin’s *Statism and Anarchy*.

Answering this question also involves reckoning not just with Marx and Engels’ secondary commentary, but also with the political strategies that they actively endorsed and pushed, from their early days in the Communist League to their later struggles in the International Workingmen’s Association. In the vast majority of instances, their position was more parliamentary than revolutionary. Their insistence on working-class participation in parliamentary politics was one of the key factors in the schism in the International, as they attempted to force it as a strategy on the International as a whole. In this period, the revolutionaries were the collectivists around Bakunin; the “politicos” were the social-democrats around Marx.

Though Marx and Engels were privately very critical of German social-democracy, they were nonetheless supporters of its general trajectory. Neither did their line of criticism always run parallel to the thoughts later expressed by Lenin: in a letter to August Bebel from the 13th of October 1891, Engels speculated on the strategy the German social-democrats might deploy during a war with Russia. Rather than taking an intransigent, defeatist position against such a war, using the party’s considerable leverage to sabotage the war effort, Engels in fact writes that the SDP could “tell the government that we should be prepared [...] to support them against a foreign enemy, provided they prosecuted the war ruthlessly and with all available means, including revolutionary ones”.

It’s telling that one of the main historical reference points Lenin analyses in *State and Revolution* is the Paris Commune,

projected through the filter of Marx's *Civil War in France*. In a way, there's an echo between *Civil War in France* and *State and Revolution*: both are libertarian-ish texts stressing the value of violent revolution, and both are pretty unlike most of the authors' other texts written prior and after. They elaborate how the proletariat, in the course of a revolution, must develop new political forms distinct from those of the bourgeois state. However, even in *Civil War in France*, one sees Marx's democratic moderation: "any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly. The French workmen must perform their duties as citizens..." If France's workers had followed this advice, there would have been no Paris Commune!

The politically opportunist nature of these texts should not be minimised. In Marx's case, it was important to play for the sympathy of the important Communard exiles – an attempt that largely ended in failure, as Marx acknowledged:

A section of the International, *Section française de 1871* (about 24 strong), has been formed here among the French refugees, which immediately clashed with the General Council because we demanded changes in its rules. It will probably result in a split. These people are working together with some of the French refugees in Switzerland, who in turn are intriguing with the men of the *Alliance de la démocratie socialiste* (Bakunin), which we dissolved. The object of their attack is not the governments and ruling classes of Europe, allied against us, but the General Council of London, and particularly my humble self. This is their gratitude for my having spent nearly 5 months

did so with a coherent sense of strategy or political unity: few stable organisations formed, and the job of hammering out a distinct perspective and putting it into practice was left to relatively small but heroic groupings, like those around the syndicalist newspaper *Golos Truda*. In many respects, organised anarchists came to the scene too late. It was this situation that provoked Makhno and his comrades to write their draft platform, and it's in this tradition that we in Black Flag situate ourselves.

We've suffered too much from the results of our past errors; our cause is too important to be the victim of the same mistakes once again. Simply put, we can't let serious political strategising be the exclusive territory of other tendencies. We believe that a proper engagement with the working-class, its organisations, and its popular causes is what is needed most right now – and that groups like Black Flag provide the best means of doing so.

Anarchism isn't some abstract doctrine cooked up by a few philosophers, but something that arose directly out of workers' struggles in previous decades. Our activity is directed towards establishing the link between working-class consciousness and anarchism as a practical manifestation of working-class liberation. In this endeavour, we are always in need of friends and comrades – if you are interested in socialism-from-below, beyond the shallow promises of some Leninists, please get in touch.

A tendency that combines revolutionary rhetoric with electoralist, state-centred strategies and centralised organisation: why be surprised when it abandons even a paper commitment to revolution? The Bolsheviks themselves would not be immune to this same trajectory – hence the transformation of the revolutionary party, through mass repression and bloodshed, into one of the most savage capitalist political apparatuses that would ever exist.

The dictatorial Soviet state was undeniably formed under the pressures of global counter-reaction, and the inherent limitations of the Russian economy. However, when the new revolutionary state acts clearly against workers, arresting strikers, repressing socialist factions and rigging votes in working-class institutions, it is not in any sense revolutionary. In such circumstances, it is an agent of that counter-revolution of which it claims to be a victim.

The ascension to power of Stalin and his coterie – the final victory of the counter-revolution – was not simply the result of an immense political counter-revolution, but of bureaucratic machinations internal to the Soviet state and the communist party. Some of the methods Stalin used to repress his opponents were earlier used by Lenin against his own opponents, like the grouping around Miasnikov, or the union opposition around Shliapnikov and Kollontai. This fact alone is enough to warrant skepticism over the strategy of the Bolsheviks and the value of the revolutionary state.

In *State and Revolution*, you can see what appeals to people about Lenin: a clear sense of strategy, the elaboration of a framework for intervention, and the possession of a coherent body of theory, even if this body of theory is mechanical and dogmatic.

These are all things that, by and large, were missing in the anarchist movement of the era. They're also missing in much of the anarchist movement at present. Though countless anarchists participated in the Russian revolution, relatively few

working for the refugees and having acted as their vindicator through the *Address on the Civil War*.¹

In Lenin's case, it was necessary to play for the sympathy of the countless militant workers that would make the October Revolution. This attempt was more successful, as the Bolsheviks used their significant support among the workers to overturn the Provisional Government on the eve of the Second Congress of Soviets and dissolve the Constituent Assembly.

Leninism in practice was odious. One would have to only read *State and Revolution* to miss this. Remember Lenin in 1904:

Bureaucracy versus democracy is in fact centralism versus autonomism; it is the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy as opposed to the organisational principle of opportunist Social-Democracy. The latter strives to proceed from the bottom upward, and, therefore, wherever possible and as far as possible, upholds autonomism and "democracy", carried (by the overzealous) to the point of anarchism. The former strives to proceed from the top downward, and upholds an extension of the rights and powers of the centre in relation to the parts.²

Iain McKay has done a great job comparing the promises of *State and Revolution*, about revocable delegates and functionaries being paid workers' wages, with the reality of Russia under the Bolsheviks: state authoritarianism, the preservation and extension of capitalism, and the repression of rebel workers. A wider look at the literature of pre-war social democracy also reveals that Lenin was far from the first Marxist to emphasise

¹ Marx to Sorge, 9th of November, 1871.

² From section Q of "One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back", available here.

being anti-state, and that many of his “libertarian” proposals about the character of the new workers’ government “which is no longer the state proper” were in fact commonplace within the social-democratic movement.

For one, you have August Bebel writing in *Woman and Socialism* (1879) that the new workers’ administration would feature direct election of all officials; a central elected body with simple executive, not governmental powers; purely temporary terms of office, with no hierarchy, meaning that one can’t make a career out of being elected; and so on; “this thoroughly democratic administration is very different from the present”.³ This text was not unknown either; it was one of the most widely distributed social-democratic texts of the era, and most communists would have been familiar with it.

Neither did Kautsky avoid such declarations. In 1905’s *The Republic and Social-Democracy in France*, he states that:

The conquest of state power by the proletariat therefore does not simply mean the conquest of the government ministries, which then, without further ado, administers the previous means of rule – an established state church, the bureaucracy and the officer corps – in a socialist manner. Rather, it means the dissolution of these institutions.

And that:

Russian bureaucratic corruption or American republican corruption: these are the two extremes between which the life and being of all large capitalist states moves and must move. Only socialism can put an end to this by means of an order such as the one the Paris Commune started to create: that

³ From chapter 11, section 1 of “Women and Socialism”, available here.

is, by means of the most comprehensive expansion of self-government, the popular election of all officials and the subordination of all members of representative bodies to the control and discipline of the organised people.⁴

Appeals for a super-democratic workers’ state on the ashes of the smashed (or “dissolved”) bourgeois state were commonplace among the more radical pre-war social-democrats. The relevance of this to the actual practice of the social-democrats – bureaucratic, parliamentarian, politically opportunist – was close to nil, and it is precisely for this reason we have anarchists on one side, and Marxists on the other. It was the libertarians of the Jura Federation who stated our perspective clearly, against the manoeuvres of the early social-democrats in the First International:

Future society should be nothing other than the universalisation of the organisation that the International has provided for itself. We should therefore take care to make our organisation come as close to our ideals – as much as it may be possible. How could one hope to have a free and equal society emerge out of an authoritarian body? It is impossible. The International, as the embryo of future human society, is bound to be, from the present, the faithful image of our principles of federation and freedom and should expel from its midst any principles that might tend to dictatorship and authority.⁵

⁴ Translation by Ben Lewis, from the volume he edited for Brill entitled “Karl Kautsky on Democracy and Republicanism”.

⁵ Circular from the Congress of Sonvilier, 12th of November 1871; as cited in Zurbrugg’s “Bakunin: Selected Texts, 1868-1875”.