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Marxism and the Extinction of the State

Camillo Berneri

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For some time now, it has happened frequently in the field of anti-fascist Italian emigration, both in public meetings and in friendly discussions, to hear anarchists attribute a statolater [*statolatra*] tendency to Marxism, which is actually found in certain currents of social democracy that refer to Marxism, but which cannot be ascertained when one goes directly back to Marxist socialism.

The disappearance of the State is clearly prophesied by Marx and Engels and this explains the possibility that there has been, within the 1st International, of a political coexistence between Marxist socialists and Bakuninist socialists, a coexistence that would not have been possible without that theoretical coincidence.

Marx wrote, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

The working class, in the course of its development, will replace the ancient civil society with an association that will exclude classes and their antagonisms, and there will no longer be political power as such.

Engels, in turn, stated in *Anti-Dühring* [*La scienza sovvertita dal signor Eugenio Dühring*]:

The State will inevitably disappear, along with the classes. Society, which reorganizes production on the basis of the free association of all producers, on an equal footing, will relegate the government machine to the place that suits it: the museum of antiquities, alongside the spinning wheel and the bronze ax.

And Engels did not postpone the extinction of the State to a final phase of civilization, but presented it as strictly connected to the social revolution and inevitably deriving from it. In fact, he wrote in an article in 1847:

All socialists agree that the State and, with it, political authority will disappear as a result of the future social revolution; this means that public functions will lose their political character and will be transformed into simple administrative functions, of surveillance of local interests.

The State is identified by Marxists with the government, and before the former they place *a system in which the government of men gives way to the administration of things*, a system which, for Proudhon, constitutes anarchy.

Lenin in *State and Revolution* (1917) reconfirms the concept of the extinction of the State, by stating: *As for the suppression of the state as a goal, we are not at all detached from the anarchists.*

It is difficult to discriminate the bias from the tendency of the aforementioned affirmations, given that Marx and Engels had to struggle with the strong Proudhonian and Bakuninist currents and that Lenin, in 1917, saw the political need for an alliance between the Bolsheviks, the left revolutionary socialists, influenced by *maximalism*, and the anarchists. It seems

Arturo Labriola, in the book cited above, observes in turn:

If the State is a conservative power with respect to the class that dominates it, it is not the disappearance of this class that makes the State disappear, but it is the disappearance of the State that makes the class disappear, which is all the anarchist critique, which from this point of view is much more exact than the Marxist critique. As long as the State conserves the class, the class does not disappear. The stronger the State becomes, the stronger does the class protected by it become, that is to say, the more powerful its vital energy and the more secure its existence. Now, a strong class is a class that is more strongly differentiated from the others. To the extent that the existence of the State depends on the existence of classes, the very fact of the State — if the Engelsian theory is true — determines the indefinite existence of classes and therefore of itself as a State.

A great, decisive confirmation of the accuracy of our thesis about the State as *generator of capitalism* is offered by the U.S.S.R., in which state socialism favors the emergence of new classes.

anarchist theses on the abolition of the State. And yet: Indeed, the extinction of capitalism as a result of the extinction of the State seems much more probable than the extinction of the State as a result of the extinction of capitalism.

This appears from the studies of Marxists themselves, when it comes to serious studies, such as that of Paul Louis, *Le travail dans le monde romain* [*Labor in the Roman world*] (Paris 1912). From this book it is clear that the Roman capitalist rank was formed as a parasite of the State and as protected by the State. From marauding generals to governors, from tax agents to the families of the *Argentari*, from customs employees to army suppliers, the Roman bourgeoisie was created through war, state interventionism in the economy, state taxation, etc., much more than otherwise. And if we examine the interdependence between the state and capitalism, we see that the latter has largely profited from the former for state interests, and not distinctly capitalistic interests. This is so true that the development of the state precedes the development of capitalism. The Roman Empire was already a vast and complex organism when Roman capitalism was still family run. Paul Louis does not hesitate to proclaim: "Ancient capitalism was born of war." The first capitalists were, in fact, the generals and the tax collectors [*publicani*]. The whole history of the formation of wealth [*fortune*] is history in which the State is present. It is from this conviction that the State was and is the father of capitalism, and not only its natural ally, that we derive the conviction that the destruction of the State is the *conditio sine qua non* of the disappearance of classes and their non-rebirth.

In his essay on *The Modern State*, Kropotkin observes:

Asking an institution that represents a historical development that it destroys the privileges it had to develop, is like recognizing oneself unable to understand what historical development means in the life of societies. It is like ignoring this general rule of organic nature: new functions require new organs elaborated by the functions themselves.

certain to me, however, that while not excluding the bias in the manner and moment of those formulations, they responded to real tendencies. The affirmation of the extinction of the State is too intimately connected, too necessarily derivable from the Marxist conception of the nature and origins of the State, to be given an absolutely opportunistic character.

What is the State for Marx and Engels? It is a political power with the function of preserving social privileges and economic exploitation.

In the preface to the 3rd edition of Marx's work, *The Civil War in France*, Engels wrote:

According to Hegelian philosophy, the State is the realization of the Idea, that is, in philosophical language, the kingdom of God on earth, the domain in which eternal truth and eternal justice are realized or must be realized. Hence that superstitious respect for the State and for everything that refers to the State, a respect that is all the more easily installed in the minds since one is accustomed from the cradle to imagining that the general affairs and interests of the whole society could not be regulated in a different way from what has been done up to now, that is, by the State and its suborders duly installed and functioning. And it is believed that one has already made really audacious progress when one has freed oneself from the belief in hereditary monarchy, to swear by the Democratic Republic. But in reality the State is nothing more than a machine of oppression of one class by another, whether in a democratic republic or in a monarchy, and the least that can be said about it is that it is a scourge that the proletariat inherits in its struggle to achieve its class rule, but of which it will have to, as the Commune did, and as far as possible, mitigate the most annoying effects,

until the day when a generation grown up in a society of free and equal men will be able to get rid of any burden of government.

Marx (in *The Poverty of Philosophy*) says that, once the abolition of classes has been achieved, *there will no longer be real political power, since political power is precisely the official expression of the existing antagonism in bourgeois society.*

That the state is reduced to *repressive* power over the proletariat and *conservative* power with respect to the bourgeoisie is a partial thesis, whether one examines the State anatomically or physiologically. In the State, the administration of things is associated with the government of men; and it is this second activity that ensures its permanence. Governments change. The State remains. And the State is not always in function of bourgeois power: as when it imposes laws, promotes reforms or creates institutions in contrast with the interests of the privileged classes and corresponding, instead, to the interests of the proletariat. Furthermore, the State is not only the gendarme, the judge, the minister. It is also the bureaucracy, as powerful as, and sometimes more, than the government. The fascist state in Italy today is something more complex than a police body and a curator of bourgeois interests, because it is linked by an umbilical cord to a set of political and corporate cadres with interests of their own that are not always, and never entirely, coincident with the class that brought fascism to power and of which the fascist dictatorship serves to maintain the power.

Marx and Engels had before them the bourgeois phase of the State and Lenin had before him the Russian State in which the game of democracy was minimal. All Marxist definitions of the State give an impression of partiality; the framework of the contemporary State cannot enter the framework of traditional definitions.

Also partial is the theory formulated by Marx and Engels on the origin of the State. Exposed in the words of Engels, it

sounds like this: *At a certain point of the economic development, which was necessarily linked to the division of society into classes, the appearance of the classes made the State a necessity. We are fast approaching a stage of the development of production where not only the existence of these classes has ceased to be a necessity, but where they become a positive obstacle to production. The classes will disappear just as easily as they arose. And with them the State will inexorably sink. (The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State).*

Engels returns to Hobbes' philosophy of the natural law, of which he adopts the terminology, merely replacing the need to tame the *homo homini lupus* with the need to regulate the conflict between classes. The State would have arisen, according to Marx and according to Engels, when the classes were already formed, and it would have arisen as a class body. Arturo Labriola (*Beyond capitalism and socialism*, Paris 1931) says in this regard:

These problems about the "origins" are always very complicated. Common sense would advise us to throw some light on them and to track down the materials that concern them, without deluding ourselves that we will ever be able to understand them. The idea of having a theory of the "origins" of the State is novelistic. All we can claim is that it is possible to indicate some elements which in the historical order are very likely to have contributed to generating the fact. Now, that the rise of classes and the rise of the State must have a relationship between them is evident, especially when one remembers the predominant function that the state played in the rise of Capitalism.

According to Labriola, the scientific study of the genesis of capitalism *confers a character of truly unsuspected realism to the*