

The Death of the State in Marx and Engels

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The aim of this essay is to survey the thinking of Marx and Engels on the “dying-away” of the state¹ in socialist (communist) society. By passing in review what they wrote on the subject, to the extent practical without getting into ramifying issues, we will also consider how their understanding of the question developed through three fairly distinct periods.

Marx did not begin by deducing the end of the state from any theory of his own. In point of fact, he found this concept ready-made. Its relation to Marxism will be clarified by a glance at its pre-Marxian background.

1. Anti-statism as Aspiration

The “abolition of the state” is one of the oldest ideas in the history of social dissent, older and more primitive than either socialism or anarchism as ideology or movement. An obvious speculation is that anti-statism would naturally arise with the beginnings of the state itself, in reaction to its new pressures, and that it would long survive as a reminiscence of a Golden Age. In any case, it is already found at least in ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy.

All through the history of class society, from the angle of the little man on bottom, the state appears mainly as a grasping, oppressing force. To the tiller of the soil, the state takes form in the person of the tax collector, or tribute-gatherer, with armed men at his back. “When the French peasant paints the devil, he paints him in the guise of a tax collector,” wrote Marx.⁽¹⁾ The peasant sees the wealth of society, as he knows it, produced out of the act of his labour on the breast of nature; what he sees about the state is that, after he has produced the wealth, there comes this outstretched hand from the outside to take it away.

Anti-statism in general (like the later anarchism) has flourished best among individual and isolated producers, like peasants and handicraftsmen and home workers, who do not readily see the connections between their own personal labour and the work of society. In this limited framework, the state is only an alien intruder. By the same token, the hoped-for “abolition of the state” appears to be a matter only of will and force: one flourish of the knife and the useless cancer is lopped off the body of productive society.

In this way, the aspiration for the “abolition of the state”, which appears to most men today as one of the wildest of all fantasies, arose as a simple, direct, easily grasped, commonsense idea. (For Marxism, it is neither fantastic nor simple).

Anti-statism appears also in less generalized form as blanket hatred and distrust of laws (even more of lawyers and law-men) and of officialdom, the representatives of the alien state. Away with laws, down with officials, abolish the state – these are the oldest slogans in the class struggle.

¹ More usually labelled the “withering-away” of the state, in English. The reader will be able to choose his own favourite term, since we shall note the original phrase used by Marx and Engels as we go along.

⁽¹⁾ **Class Struggles in France 1848–1850** in ME:SW1:213.

Wherever possible, passages from Marx and Engels are cited in English translation from the following collections: Marx-Engels: **Selected Works in Two Volumes**, Moscow, Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1955. (Abbrev. ME:SW.)

Marx-Engels: **Selected Correspondence**, Moscow, F.L.P.H., n.d. (Abbrev. ME:SC:.)

Where no suitable English translation exists, translations from the German are based on: Marx-Engels: **Werke**, Berlin, Dietz, 1961–68. (Abbrev. ME:W.)

In all other cases, the edition used for citation is given the first time the reference occurs. Volume and page number have often been abbreviated; thus 2:363 = Vol.2, p.363.

While many states have been overthrown, the state has never been “abolished”. From the Marxist viewpoint, the reason is clear: the state has been a social necessity. Primitive discontent is unable to offer any substitute for the state’s indispensable positive functions, no matter how strong a mass movement it gathers or how often it wins. The state conquers its conquerors as long as society cannot do without it. (The so-called “iron law of oligarchy” is a statement about most of the past; it has nothing to say about the future).

As soon as primitive anti-statism ceases to be merely negative, as soon as it even raises the question of what is to replace the state, it has always been obvious that the state, “abolished” in fancy, has to be reintroduced in some other form. It is sometimes amusing and always instructive to see how true this is even of “anarchist” utopias, where the pointed ears of a very authoritarian state poke out as soon as there is a hint about the positive organization of society.”

The same was true to a degree of the early socialists. A deep animus against the state as such was common among them, as a part of the oldest radical tradition; and therefore even Fourier and Saint-Simon are described by some modern writers as “anarchist”. Yet they envision thoroughly authoritarian states (without the label) when they get down to their own alternatives.² Thus, in a saying often quoted by both anarchist and Marxists, Saint-Simon looked forward to the replacement of the government of men by the administration of things. This is usually taken to be a laudable sentiment meaning the abolition of the rule of man over man; but in fact Saint Simon’s highly despotic schemes showed him to mean, in his governments, something quite different: the administration of men as if they were things. Thus when Marx and Engels first became aware of socialism and communism in the 1840s, the notion of the “abolition of the state” was the veriest commonplace of radicalism, even of pink radicalism. Proudhon’s **What Is Property?** (1840) had just given this ancient idea a new tag: “anarchy”. Wilhelm Weitling, the first widely known German communist of the period, advocated both a messianic dictatorship of his own and “abolition of the state”, without conscious contradiction. “Abolition of the state” was being drawn as a “logical” consequence of the dominant Hegelian school of German philosophy even by thinkers who accepted the bourgeois social order. In fact, it was true more often than not that this anti-statism did not entail anti-capitalism.³

2. Marx and Engels’ Early Anti-Statism

Marx and Engels went through this development before they had much idea about “Marxism”. As Engels reminisced in a later letter:

... “the abolition [*abolizione*] of the state” is an old German philosophic phrase, of which we were making use when we were simple youngsters.⁽²⁾

² The interested reader can try this law out on the specimens of anti-state utopias recommended by the anarchist writer Marie Louise Berneri (**Journey Through Utopia** – for example, that of De Foigny; but it is necessary to go to De Foigny, not to Berneri’s laundered summary.

³ This applies in the last analysis even to Proudhon, whose ideal was pettybourgeois property. It certainly applies to the Hegelian referred to above, Max Stirner (**The Ego and His Own**), who is the herald of that school of pro-capitalist anarchism which became most prominent in the US (Benjamin Tucker, Josiah Warren) and whose spirit still hovers over a wing of Republican conservatism and the University of Chicago. The later anarchist movement saw a grafting of anti-capitalism and anti-statism to form the hybrid “anarcho-communism”.

⁽²⁾ Letter to Carlo Cafiero, 1 July, 1871, in Marx-Engels, **Corrispondenza di Marx e Engels con italiani 1848–1895**

However, Marx did not make use of it while he was still a leftliberal democrat associated with the *Rheinische Zeitung*. It was Moses Hess among the left-Hegelians who, in the *Rheinische Zeitung* itself, raised the question of the disappearance and decentralization of the state; and in May, 1842 Marx started writing what was obviously to be a polemic against this viewpoint. He did not get far with the manuscript before breaking it off, and the fragment is too short to make clear what his line of argument was going to be.⁽³⁾

But when Marx becomes a socialist in 1843, the idea of the disappearance of the state is taken for granted as a staple idea. It is found already in Marx's 1843 manuscript notes criticizing Hegel's theory of the state.⁽⁴⁾

Engels indeed was converted to socialism (communism) by Moses Hess, who combined sentimental "True Socialism", essentially reformist, with advocacy of a Proudhonist anti-statism. (He ended life as a Lassallean state-socialist). In 1843 the dewy-eyed convert Engels was writing an article singling out Proudhon's "anarchy" as an example for socialists – the socialists being philosophical intellectuals from the "educated classes", recruited "from the universities and from the commercial class", who join because of their "love of abstract principle" and "disregard of reality".⁽⁴⁾

Even in mid-1844 Marx was still making no distinction between transformation in society and elimination of the state. He complains:

Far from perceiving the source of social defects in the principle of the state, the heroes of the French Revolution rather saw the source of political evils in social defects.⁽⁵⁾

This primacy of "the principle of the state", however, is accompanied by recognition that a political revolution must have a "social soul". We get the following transitional formulation:

Revolution in general – the overthrow of the existing ruling power and the dissolution of the old conditions – is a political act. Without revolution, however, socialism cannot come about. It requires this political act so far as it needs overthrow and dissolution. But where its organizing activity begins, where its own aim and spirit emerge, there socialism throws the political hull away.⁽⁶⁾

⁴ See Marx's manuscript *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State*, in *Writings of the Young Marx* (ed. Easton & Guddat), esp. pp. 174–75, 202. Associated with both passages is a reference to the "French", meaning Proudhon and (probably) Fourier. At this point Marx is still far from a revolutionary theory of the state. He thinks the state "disappears [*untergehe*] in true democracy", and that democratic electoral reform (unlimited universal suffrage) "is the demand for the dissolution [*Auflösung*] of this state, but likewise for the dissolution of civil society". In a notebook from about January 1845 Marx's brief outline for a work on the state ends with this point: "Suffrage, the fight for the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of the State, and of bourgeois society." (*German Ideology*, Moscow, 1964, p.655). This suggests that Marx still regarded universal suffrage as necessarily anti-state, a typical bourgeois-radical view of the time. The identification of the concept "state" only with the *despotic* state runs through anarchist ideology, and can be found even in Bakunin (see his *Statism and Anarchy*, and Marx's notes on this work in ME:W18, esp. p.610). It is an important link between the anarchist and the reformist view of the state.

(Milan, Feltrinelli, 1964), p.21.

⁽³⁾ *The Centralisation Question* in *Writings of the Young Marx on philosophy and society*, ed. Easton and Guddat (Garden City, Doubleday, 1967), pp.106–108.

⁽⁴⁾ *Progress of Social Reform on the Continent*, *New Moral World* (London), 4 November, 1843, in Marx-Engels, *Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), I. v.2, p.435ff., esp. pp.436, 442,449.

⁽⁵⁾ *Critical Notes on The King of Prussia and Social Reform* in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Easton & Guddat, p.350; see also pp.348–49 for other statements indicating the primacy of the state.

⁽⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p.357.

In other words, both Marx and Engels, independently, absorbed this “anarchist” anti-statism from their first acquaintanceship with socialism, and briefly accepted it until they had worked out their own historical method of understanding society.

By the autumn of 1844 they had just begun to understand, as they wrote in **The Holy Family**, that it is not the state which creates the social order but the social order which underlies the state.⁽⁷⁾

In **The German Ideology** (1845–46) they ridicule “the old idea that the State collapses of itself as soon as all its members leave it” ... “this proposition reveals all the fantasy and impotence of pious desire”. Rather, “the communist revolution, which removes the division of labour, ultimately abolishes [*beseitigt*, removes] political institutions”.⁽⁸⁾

This is their first clear statement of a break with primitive antistatism (which later congealed into anarchism), and its replacement by a specific anti-state theory of their own. The key word here is “ultimately”. “Abolition of the state” is no longer the first word of the revolution but one of its last. This should be linked with the fact that it is in this work that Marx and Engels first clearly enunciated the thesis that the revolutionary proletariat must seek to conquer political power, i.e. establish its own workers’ state.

When, many years later, they met the “abolition of the state” notion in its late Bakuninist incarnation, it was not news for them.

3. The Second Period: 1847–1851

From the beginning, then, the “workers’ state” theory of Marx and Engels – conquest of political power by the working class as the first stage of the revolution – developed as much in conflict with primitive anarchism as with bourgeois-democratic liberalism. Indeed, the two latter were not then as distinct from each other as they usually are now. After **The German Ideology**, statements of this view appeared in the two major works they wrote just before the 1848 revolution.

Marx’s **The Poverty of Philosophy** (a critique of Proudhon, 1847) ends on this note, after invoking the principle that “The emancipation of the oppressed class thus implies necessarily the creation of a new society”:

Does this mean that after the fall of the old society, there will be a new class domination culminating in a new political power? No.

The condition for the emancipation of the working class is the abolition of every class, just as the condition for the liberation of the third estate, of the bourgeois order, was the abolition of all estates and orders.

The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society.⁽⁹⁾

⁽⁷⁾ Marx-Engels, **The Holy Family** (Moscow, F.L.P.H., 1956), p.163.

⁽⁸⁾ Marx-Engels, **The German Ideology** (Moscow, Progress Pub.), 1964, pp.414, 416.

⁽⁹⁾ Marx, **The Poverty of Philosophy** (Moscow, F.L.P.H.), n.d., p.174.

Although Marx was later to refer back to this more than once as being identical with his “workers state” view, it is obviously still ambivalent. The idea which in **The German Ideology** had been carried by the word “ultimately” is here represented by the qualification “in the course of its development”. It is not even entirely clear that this means “in the course of its development” after the revolution; but it happens that precisely the same phrase is used in the corresponding passage in the **Communist Manifesto**, this time in a clear context.

This passage comes right after the Manifesto’s ten-point programme, discussing how “the proletariat will use its political supremacy”:

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class; if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished [*hebt auf* (*aufheben*)] its own supremacy [*Herrschaft*, rule] as a class.

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.⁽¹⁰⁾

“Abolition of the state” is no longer a *slogan*; it is, and will continue to be, posed as an ultimate aim of the social revolution. Then, in the course of the revolution of 1848, Marx’s emphasis is more immediate: shattering the existing reactionary state and establishing by revolution a new democratic political power.

In his 1850 summary of the revolution in France, **Class Struggles in France 1848–1850**,⁵ he returns to the connection between the immediate and the ultimate aim. Revolutionary socialism means –

the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations.⁽¹¹⁾

⁵ This work of Marx’s was reviewed the same year by one Otto Lüning, editor of the *Neue Deutsche Zeitung*, from the standpoint of the sentimental “True Socialist” ideology of the day. Lüning, referring to this passage, complained that Marx spoke of the class *rule* of the proletariat rather than the *abolition* of all classes. In a published reply Marx wrote, “I do not understand this correction, “and pointed out that the very sentence discussed also included the abolition of classes; he also quoted the passages from **The Poverty of Philosophy** and the **Communist Manifesto** which we have given above.” “Abolition of the state” as such did not figure in this exchange either.

⁽¹⁰⁾ In ME:SW1:54.

⁽¹¹⁾ In ME:SW1:223.

This summary look into the future includes abolition of classes but does not specifically mention elimination of the state.⁽¹²⁾

However, at just about the same time Marx published an interesting article on a contemporary variety of bourgeois anti-statism, in which he discussed both the nature of the capitalist state and the perspective of abolishing the state. It reviewed a book on socialism and taxation by Emile de Girardin, an early French Hearst then going through a “socialistic” period.

Girardin proposed a scheme for solving the social question by allegedly abolishing taxation *and* the state, through a “mutual insurance” scheme. We have pointed out the historic link between the aspiration to abolish the tax-collector and to abolish the state. Girardin represented this link between primitive-anarchism and *bourgeoisradicalism* very plainly. He recommends his scheme because it means “the revolution without the revolutionary”, and abolishes the state not only “without any shock” but also without abolishing the social relations of capitalism. He is all for “the harmony of labour and capital”. Marx comments:

Tax reform is the hobbyhorse of all radical bourgeois, the specific element of all bourgeois-economic reforms. From the oldest medieval philistines to the modern free-traders, the main fight revolves around taxes ...

Reduction, or fair assessment etc. etc. of taxes-this is ordinary *bourgeois reform*. Abolition of taxesthis is *bourgeois socialism*.⁽¹³⁾

It is also an aspect of bourgeois anarchism. By “abolishing” taxes (Marx shows the scheme amounts to a single-tax capital levy) Girardin thinks he abolishes the state too, for his scheme replaces the state power with an “administrative commission”. It is the usual replacement of the state with a mere label, while the real state returns by the back door.

In the following passage, Marx goes from the present nature of the capitalist state to the morrow’s elimination of the state, and in-between shows how Girardin has reintroduced the state under another name:

“The bourgeois state is nothing else than a mutual insurance⁶ for the bourgeois class against its own individual members as well as against the exploited class, an insurance which must become more and more expensive and apparently more and more autonomous with respect to bourgeois society, since the suppression of the exploited class becomes more and more difficult. Changing the names changes not the least bit in the terms of this insurance. The apparent autonomy which Mr. Girardin momentarily ascribes to the individual with respect to the insurance he must himself immediately abandon. [*The following now refers to Girardin’s plan:*] Whoever evaluates his wealth at too low a figure incurs a penalty: The insurance office [*Girardin’s state-substitute*] buys out his property at the value set, and even invites denunciations by offering rewards. More: whoever prefers not to insure his wealth takes a

⁶ The “mutual insurance” metaphor here is, of course, taken from Girardin’s scheme. Girardin proposes mutual insurance *instead* of a state. Marx answers: the state is *now* the bourgeoisie’s mode of “mutual insurance”.

⁽¹²⁾ For the documents and references, see my article “Marx and the dictatorship of the proletariat”, in *Études de Marxologie* (Paris), No.6, September, 1962, pp.38–41.

⁽¹³⁾ Marx, [*Review of*] *Le socialisme et l’impôt par Emile de Girardin, Paris 1850*, in ME:W7:285–86.

place outside the society and is directly declared an outlaw. Society can naturally not tolerate that a class should form within it which rebels against its conditions of existence. Coercion, authority, bureaucratic intervention, which Girardin wants to eliminate, get back into society. If he has abstracted himself momentarily from the conditions of bourgeois society, it has happened only in order to come back to it by a detour.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Marx then adds:

Behind the abolition of taxation is concealed the abolition [*Abschaffung*] of the state. The abolition of the state has only one meaning to the Communists, as the necessary result of the abolition of classes, whereupon of itself the need for the organized power of one class for the suppression of another ceases to exist.

In this formulation, then, the state eventually “of itself ... ceases to exist” [*von selbst ... wegfällt*, lit., falls away].”⁷

Marx and Engels had now arrived at a new approach to the old “abolition of the state”. That they themselves considered it distinctive is evidenced by a letter of Engels to Marx in 1851, commenting on the new book by Proudhon, **General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century**. Although Proudhon had already brought up the general idea of “anarchy” in 1840, the social theory behind it was left vague. In the new book Engels found a more sophisticated theory and he thought he knew where it came from:

... I am convinced that Herr Ewerbeck has furnished him [Proudhon] with his translation [into French] of the **Manifesto** and perhaps also, privately, translations of your articles in the **Revue**.⁸ A number of points are unquestionably stolen from there – for example, that the government is nothing but the power of one class for the suppression of the other, and disappears [*verschwindet*] along with the disappearance of class antagonisms.⁽¹⁵⁾

⁷ On the same page Marx has an interesting discussion of the specifically bourgeois character of this anarchism, along the lines we have already expounded. – Later the same year Engels started an article (never finished) on the latest German representatives of this trend. It begins with the above-quoted passage from Marx on Girardin, and continues: “The abolition [*Abschaffung*] of the state, anarchy, has in the meantime become a general catchword in Germany.” Various writers, whom he mentions, “have, each in his own way, made this apparently wild catchword their own. All these tendencies are in agreement on the preservation of the existing bourgeois society ...” He then starts on Stirner, the Ego-anarchist philosopher. (ME:W7:417–18).

⁸ **The Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Politisch-ökonomische Revue**, the London magazine edited by Marx in 1850 carried his **Class Struggles in France** and also his review of Girardin. The formulations on the state which Engels mentions here did not appear in the former work but only in the Girardin piece, as well as in the **Communist Manifesto**. – Apropos of this theory of Engels’, which may or may not have been true in 1851, it is relevant to note that at least by 1863 Proudhon was thinking that anarchy (as distinct from a more immediate goal like federal government) was merely an “ideal” that might not be attained for “centuries”, while law “is to go in that direction, to grow unceasingly nearer to that end”. (G. Woodcock, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**, p.249). This would seem to make anarchy only an ultimate goal, as Marx believed. But Proudhon is so filled with contradictory sentiments that it is risky to draw conclusions.

⁽¹⁴⁾ **Ibid.**, 7:288. The bracketed italics are added by me.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Letter, Engels to Marx, 21 August, 1851, in ME:W27:318.

This is, I think, the last mention of the “abolition of the state” idea for two decades,⁹ that is, till the Paris Commune and its aftermath raised the whole question again. As it happens, this is just about the same hiatus as is encountered with the “dictatorship of the proletariat” formula-in part for the same reason, viz. disinclination to speculate about future states until experience set the agenda.

4. The Third Period: Impact of the Paris Commune and Anarchism

The Paris Commune re-raised all the questions about the state in theory because it raised them in practice. Furthermore, about the same time and a little before, the Russian agitator Michael Bakunin put together the three ingredients which went to make the modern anarchist movement (which starts with Bakunin and peters out by the First World War).

These three ingredients, loosely and not always consistently mixed, were:

1. the anarchist social theory suggested in Proudhon, with a dash of Stirner;
2. an economic programme, a version of anti-capitalist collectivism taken over from socialism, with eclectic borrowings from Marxism; and
3. in political strategy, the conspiratorial putschism of the left-Jacobin tradition plus a Russian-accented terroristic nihilism.

In any case, the old slogan of immediate “abolition of the state” had just taken on a new lease of life when Marx and Engels recurred to it from 1871 on.¹⁰ It was, then, in their most mature period that they refined their conceptions on the “abolition of the state”.

No theoretical shift can be claimed; but, pushed into a closer examination of the question and confronted by a more definite anarchist theory and practice, they came up with some new aspects and emphases. We take these up in the next sections:

1. The relation between the state and any “authority”.
2. Instant abolition or Workers State? First act of the revolution or ultimate end?
3. What is left after the state disappears?

⁹ There is no clear reference to the idea in **The Eighteenth Brumaire** (1852) but it may be involved in a couple of passages; cf. ME:SW1:332 and 340 fn.2.

¹⁰ 1871 refers to Engels’ letter to Cafiero quoted above (ref. note 2), since it is the first specific mention of the question since 1851, as far as I know (outside of the incidental mention in Marx’s letter to Beesly of 19 October, 1870, noted below). In the passages from Engels from here on, note that Engels often treats the question as an old and long-held view which merely needs repeating. E.g.: his passing reference in **The Housing Question** (written in early 1873) to “the views of German scientific socialism on the necessity of political action by the proletariat and of its dictatorship as the transition to the abolition [*Abschaffung*] of classes and with them of the state-views such as had already been expressed in the **Communist Manifesto** and since then on innumerable occasions”.⁽¹⁶⁾

⁽¹⁶⁾ Engels, **The Housing Question** in ME:SW1:612.

Just as anarchism was theoretically hostile to any “authority” in revolution, even more basically it rejected any “authority” in society after the revolution. Rejection of the state is, after all, only a special case of the anarchist total rejection of authority as such, in principle. This rejection extends also – even especially – to the most genuinely democratic authority that can be conceived. In spite of standard rhetoric about “control from below”, anarchism is as opposed on principle to the authority of a government *which is democratically controlled from below however ideally* as it is to a despotic government.

That the root question was not anti-statism but “authority” became quite clear only with the Bakuninist period of anarchism.¹¹ Therefore Marx and Engels had to consider the same distinction. On the positive side, the impact will appear in their discussion of “What is left after the state disappears?”

On the negative side, the theoretical destruction of the anarchist position on “authority” was not difficult. Engels gave it compactly first in a letter:

In this society [the Bakuninist ideal future society] there will above all be no authority, for authority = state = absolute evil. (How these people propose to run a factory, operate a railway or steer a ship without a will that decides in the last resort, without a single management, they of course do not tell us). The authority of the majority over the minority also ceases. Every individual and every community is autonomous; but as to how a society of even only two people is possible unless each gives up some of his autonomy, Bakunin again maintains silence.⁽¹⁷⁾

So the anarchist rejection of all “authority” not only makes society unviable but democracy impossible.

Later the same year (1872) Engels wrote a brief article *On Authority*, which definitively disposed of the anarchist conception of the question. It would be fitting, though impractical, to quote the whole of it here. One passage, however, is directly concerned with the elimination of the state:

Why do the anti-authoritarians not confine themselves to crying out against political authority, the state? All Socialists are agreed that the political state,¹² and with it political authority, will disappear [scompariranno] as a result of the coming social revolution, that is, that public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society. But the anti-authoritarians demand that the authoritarian political state be abolished [*abolito*] at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed. They demand that the first act of the social revolution shall be the abolition of authority. Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution?⁽¹⁸⁾

¹¹ To be sure, this conception is definitely present in Proudhon, Godwin and Stirner, but it had to be rediscovered by the later anarchists. Bakunin did not have to originate the idea; he made it the theory of a movement.

¹² The term “political state”, taken literally, is a redundancy from the Marxist standpoint; but it was a commonplace among all kinds of socialists and most especially in anarchist propaganda. Engel’s use of it does not demand intervention of a theory about some future non-political state.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Letter, Engels to T. Cuno, 24 January, 1872, in ME:SC:336.

⁽¹⁸⁾ In ME:SW1:638; Italian text in *Marx-Engels Scritti italiani* (Milan-Rome, Ed. Avanti, 1955), p.97.

5. “Instant Abolition” in Theory and Practice

To Engels’ rhetorical question, “Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution?” one answer was not only that Bakunin had “seen” the revolutions of 1848 and 1871 but also that in 1870 he had personally “made” a revolution. To be sure he was not likely to boast of it; on the contrary it was Marx and Engels who brought it up as often as possible, since it offered them a textbook illustration in anarchist-style revolutionism. This was the “Fiasco at Lyons” of 28 September, 1870.¹³

On the fall of Napoleon III, a genuine popular uprising had taken place in working-class Lyons. Thereupon Bakunin rushed over to take personal command of his small group in the city. The day he arrived, a new city council was being elected under the auspices of the “Committee of Public Safety”, but no one really knew what to do with their control of city hall. Except Bakunin (as Marx and Engels explained) –

Bakunin installed himself there [in city hall]; then came the critical moment, the moment awaited for many years, when Bakunin could carry out the most revolutionary act the world has ever seen—he decreed the *Abolition of the State*. But the state, in the form and nature of two companies of bourgeois National Guards, swept the hall, and set Bakunin hurrying back on the road to Geneva.⁽¹⁹⁾

The first sentence of Bakunin’s decree was: “The administrative and governmental machine of the state, having become impotent, is abolished.” This was a non-sequitur from a false premise: it was not the state that was impotent, but rather the abolitionists who suffered from “the fantasy and impotence of pious desire”.

This world-historic decree of the abolition of the state, as issued by Bakunin, was signed by twenty of his friends, was read to an enthusiastic meeting that never imagined Bakunin took it literally, and was placarded on the walls. But even Bakunin’s own little group voted against the putsch two days before it was pulled off on a day of demonstrations and confusions, with the proclamation from the standard balcony. In any case, the servitors of the “impotent” state not only brushed the “revolution” away but – worst insult of all – did not take it seriously enough to jail the leader securely, after rifling his pockets of 165 francs. Thus ended the first experiment in instant abolition of the state.

No doubt it was the comic-opera aspect that explains why Marx and Engels referred to this incident at least six times in letters and publications,¹⁴ but there were serious conclusions to be drawn for anyone who took Bakunin seriously. Marx and Engels pointed out, about the anarchist programme :

¹³ *Fiasco at Lyons* is the chapter title in E.H. Carr’s biography **Michael Bakunin**. Carr’s account of the episode (pp.417–22) is somewhat more complicated than Marx’s and differs in minor details, but it is no less comic-opera stuff.

¹⁴ First in Marx’s letter to Beesly, 19 October 1870 (ME:SC: 304); then Engels’ letter to Cafiero, 1 July 1871 (M. & E.: **Corr. con Ital.**, 20); in *Les Prétendues Scissions*, p.17; and three times in *L’Alliance de la Dem. Soc.*, pp.12, 13, 21. In addition, Marx gave an oral report on the affair at the 11 October 1870 meeting of the General Council of the International.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Engels, Lafargue & Marx, *L’Alliance de la De’mocratie Socialiste et l’Association Internationale des Travailleurs* (London, Darson; Hamburg, Meissner, 1873), p.21. (Actually, Bakunin sneaked out of town to Marseilles, not Geneva).

The first act of the revolution must then be to decree the abolition of the state, as Bakunin had done on September 28 at Lyons, even though this abolition of the state is necessarily an authoritarian act.⁽²⁰⁾

It was “authoritarian” in both the anarchist and non-anarchist sense. From the latter viewpoint, one must remember that his putsch by a handful of Bakunin’s anti-authoritarians was directed not against the old imperial government but against the government of the uprising that had overthrown the old state. However, the anarchist consistently objects not only to being bound by the “authority” of the people but also the “authority” even of his own organization. If Engels had wondered “how a society of even only two people is possible” under consistent anarchism, Bakunin consistently proved that not even two people could get together for a putsch unless everyone instantaneously agreed to follow the same “authority”, which naturally had to be his own.

Instant abolition of the state, therefore, is counterposed to the perspective of establishing a workers’ state, not only with respect to the question “Defence of the revolution”, but also to: “Defence of *whose* revolution?”

The insistence of anarchism that the abolition of the state had to be the *first act* of the revolution was also based on its unhistorical view of the relation between the state and the social order. (This is the same view that Marx had held in mid-1844, as we saw). Although the anarchists had no trouble repeating after Marx that the state is the executive committee of the ruling class and similar formulas, their theory of the state was the very reverse of Marxism in a basic respect – as Engels explained in a letter:

Bakunin has a peculiar theory of his own, a medley of Proudhonism and communism. The chief point concerning the former is that he does not regard capital, i.e. the class antagonism between capitalists and wage workers which has arisen through social development, but the *state* as the main evil to be abolished. While the great mass of the Social-Democratic workers hold our view that state power is nothing more than the organization which the ruling classes-landowners and capitalists-have provided for themselves in order to protect their social privileges, Bakunin maintains that it is the *state* which has created capital, that the capitalist has his capital *only by the grace of the state*. As, therefore, the state is the chief evil, it is above all the state which must be done away with and then capitalism will go to blazes of itself. We, on the contrary, say: Do away with capital, the concentration of all means of production in the hands of the few, and the state will fall of itself [*fällt von selbst*]. The difference is an essential one: Without a previous social revolution the abolition [*Abschaffung*] of the state is nonsense; the abolition of capital *is* precisely the social revolution and involves a change in the whole mode of production. Now then, inasmuch as to Bakunin the state is the main evil, nothing must be done which can keep the state—that is, any state, whether it be a republic, a monarchy or anything else-alive. Hence *complete abstention from all politics*. To commit a political act, especially to take part in an election, would be a betrayal of principal.⁽²¹⁾

⁽²⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁽²¹⁾ Letter, Engels to T. Cuno, 24 January, 1872, in ME:SC:334–35.

Engels stated the same line of thought, summarily, in a later letter, written in English to an American correspondent:

Marx and I, ever since 1845¹⁵, have held the view that *one* of the final results of the future proletarian revolution will be the gradual dissolution and ultimate disappearance of that political organization called *the State*; an organization the main object of which has ever been to secure, by armed force, the economical subjection of the working majority to the wealthy minority. With the disappearance of a wealthy minority the necessity for an armed repressive State-force disappears also.

The proletariat must first take state power itself, he continues. Yet:

The Anarchists reverse the matter. They say, that the Proletarian revolution has to *begin* by abolishing the political organization of the State.⁽²²⁾

Anarchism not only reverses the conclusion, but it does so because its underlying social theory on the relation between state and society is the reverse of Marxism.

6. What is Left After the State Disappears?

Engels' "On Authority" already mentioned in passing that, as the state disappeared, "public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society". The same idea appeared just as incidentally in another work of that year (1872):

Anarchy: that is the great war-horse of their master Bakunin, who has taken from the socialist systems only the labels. All socialists understand this by Anarchy: once the aim of the proletarian movement, the abolition of classes, has been attained, the state power which serves to keep the great productive majority under the yoke of an exploiting minority small in numbers, disappears [*disparait*], and the governmental functions are transformed into simple administrative functions. The [Bakuninist] Alliance turns the thing upside-down.⁽²³⁾

This recalls Saint-Simon's saying about replacing the state with the "administration of things".¹⁶ The state would lose its "political character", that is, its repressive and coercive character, especially in terms of class repression and coercion, but there would still be "public functions" to be organized. What type of (non-state) social organism will still be needed to organize these "public functions"?

¹⁵ By "1845" Engels is probably referring to the writing of **The German Ideology**.

¹⁶ The idea had also been foreshadowed in the **Communist Manifesto**, precisely in connection with the Utopians : their valuable positive side included the proposal for "the conversion of the functions of the State into a mere superintendence of production". [ME:SW1:631]

⁽²²⁾ Letter, Engels to Van Patten, 18 April, 1883, in ME:SC:437.

⁽²³⁾ Marx-Engels, **Les prétendues scissions dans l'Internationale** (Geneva, 1872); here cited from the reprint in **Le Mouvement Socialiste** (Paris, July-August, 1913), pp.49–50.

The question is further highlighted as soon as the state concept is separated from the wider concept of authority as such—a separation brought to the fore by the controversy with anarchism. For this means that the disappearance of the state does not yet imply the disappearance of all exercise of authority in society. This in turn implies the continued existence of limited organs of authority of some kind.

Obviously this invites the kind of semi-fictional speculation about the future which Marx and Engels resolutely refused to carry on, and still less were they willing to work out prescriptions for that future. Still, there are two other things to do: discuss the possible general *direction* of a future development insofar as such a direction can be deduced from real experience; and at least try to pose the question itself clearly.

The latter is what Marx did cursorily in his **Critique of the Gotha Programme**. His suggestion on how to formulate the question itself is a guide for speculation.

The question then arises: what transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present-day functions of the state?⁽²⁴⁾

Marx makes clear he does not intend to answer the question. (This passage leads right into his reference to the “dictatorship of the proletariat” instead). But let us be sure we understand what question he is posing.

In the first place, remember that Marx is explicitly *not* using the term “communist society” to mean some very advanced stage of the future social order. He had already referred to “communist society ... just as it *emerges* from capitalist society”. When, therefore, he mentions “the future state of communist society”, there is no reason to be puzzled. It is simply a question of the workers’ state that replaces the capitalist state.

But it is a state which is in the course of “gradual dissolution”. In this connection, the traditional talk of stages (socialist, communist) can be misleading if interpreted as compartmentalized periods opening and closing according to some set criteria. It is a gradual process, though gradualness does not exclude jumps.

In this “gradual dissolution”, it is clear what is dissolving out: the coercive and repressive class function (“political function”). What is left behind? “Social functions” that are “analogous to present-day functions of the state”.

Marx had said something like this before. In **The Civil War in France**, he had made a similar remark about the new type of state represented by the Paris Commune.

While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of Society.⁽²⁵⁾

Here Marx (as more than once in that work) was leaping ahead from the immediate experience to the ultimate goal, leaving out the transitional complications. After the “merely repressive organs” of the state had disappeared, there were “legitimate functions” still left which had to be

⁽²⁴⁾ In ME:SW2:32.

⁽²⁵⁾ In ME:SW1:520.

exercised by “the responsible agents of society”. We can identify these with the “social functions” that are “analogous to present-day functions of the state”.

We have, then, non-political functions – which are still social necessities – of an organizing authority, which is still needed after the dissolution of all state functions, in an advanced form of socialist/communist society where coercion and repression on a social scale have withered away.

A little before writing the **Critique of the Gotha Programme** – in 1874 or possibly the beginning of 1875 – Marx had set down these ideas in a rather cryptic form, which we can now understand more easily. This was in the privacy of his own notebook and for his own eyes only, as he worked out a long “conspectus” (summaries, paraphrases, quotations) of Bakunin’s 1873 book **Statism and Anarchy**.

Toward the end he began interpolating some acid comments of his own. Following is the most relevant section of his notes.⁽²⁶⁾ (Bakunin’s part of the “dialogue” is in italics).

BAK.: *“What does it mean – ‘the proletariat organized as ruling class’?”*

MARX: It means that the proletariat, instead of struggling against the economically privileged classes as individuals, has gained enough strength and organization to employ general means of coercion in the struggle against them; but it can employ only economic means that abolish its own character as a *salariat* [wage-earners] and hence as a class; therefore, with its complete victory its own rule is ended too, since its class character has disappeared.

BAK.: *“Will perhaps the whole proletariat stand at the head of the government?”*

MARX: For example, in a trade-union does the whole union form its executive committee? Will all division of labour in the factory cease, and [also] the various functions which arise from it? And in the Bakuninist structure, “from below to above”, will everyone be “above”? Then there is no “below”. Will all members of the Commune likewise administer the common interests of the Region? In this case, no difference between Commune and Region.

BAK.: *“The Germans number about 40 million. Will all 40 million, for example, be members of the government?”*

MARX : Certainly! Since the thing begins with the self-government of the Commune.
[...]

BAK.: *“Then there will be no government, no state, but if there will be a state, then there will also be people who are governed, and slaves.”*

MARX: This simply means: if class rule has disappeared, and there will be no state in the present political sense.

BAK.: *“In the theory of the Marxists, this dilemma is solved simply. By a people’s government they”*

MARX: – that is, Bakunin –

BAK.: *“understand the government of the people establishes a small number of administrators selected (elected) by the people.”*

⁽²⁶⁾ In ME:W18:634–36.

MARX: YOU ass! This [would be] democratic rigmarole, political drivel ! Election – a political form, in the smallest Russian commune and in the artel. The character of an election does not depend on this name but on the economic foundations, on the economic interrelations of the voters; and as soon as the functions have ceased to be political, there exists (1) no governmental function; (2) the distribution of general functions has become a businesslike matter entailing no rule; (3) the election has none of its present political character.

In response to Bakunin's argument that a worker, once elected to a post, ceases to be a worker and becomes only a bureaucrat seeking his own aggrandizement, Marx refers to "the position of a manager in a workers' cooperative factory", which should rid him of his nightmares about the dangers of such an election. In the context, Marx is plainly assuming a situation where the workers in this cooperative factory elect and depose administrators by their votes. Further down, Marx adds:

MARX: He should have asked himself: what form can the administrative functions take on the basis of this workers' state [*Arbeiterstaat*], if one wants to call it that?

It seems to me clear that Marx is not using "workers' state" with its later connotation, but as a possible term for this administrative authority which has lost its political character: hence his qualification, "if one wants to call it" a state at all. He refuses to argue about the word.

Then Marx goes on to say that the class rule of the workers "can last only as long as the economic basis of the existence of classes had not been destroyed." He adds:

MARX: Since, during the period of struggle for the overthrow of the old society, the proletariat still acts on the basis of the old society, and hence still operates in political forms which belong to it [the old society] more or less, it has not yet attained its final structure during this period of struggle, and employs means for its emancipation which pass away [*wegfallen*] after its emancipation.

From all this, we see the following. Marx is thinking about the administration of social functions when "there will be no state in the present political sense". Once again, there is no use inventing a "state" with some non-political sense in order to account for his language. As he puts it, one can call it an *Arbeiterstaat* if one insists, provided it is understood that this social authority has transcended the political forms of the old society, viz. class rule and coercion. But he himself continues to use the formulation that there will be "no governmental function", no "political character" to the administration.

It is especially clear in these notes that the disappearance of the "state in the present political sense", of the "governmental function", of the "political character" of the administration of social functions this disappearance does not at all entail the disappearance of elections. Why should it? To be sure, elections and any other modes of distributing social functions in general will not have their "present political character" as forms of rule and coercion; in fact, their social role will be far simpler – "businesslike". If the workers in a factory elect one or some of their number to perform administrative functions at a given time in the "co-operative factory" which Marx takes as his example then, in a suitable societal context, you have an election which does not entail rule, therefore an election which "has none of its present political character".

Perhaps most unexpected is Marx's response to Bakunin's loaded question: can 40 million people all be "members of the government" "Certainly!" says Marx (in English, by the way). Just before this, he had already pointed out that not every member of a body can or need be on its executive committee, that is, a member of its administrative organism. He is making the point that the "40 million" participate in the "government" (or governance) of the community in the sense that they participate in the "self-government of the Commune" which lies at the bottom, at the beginning, of the new structure of society. The "final structure" begins with control from below as its governance, having transcended government from the top down.

7. Comparison: Primitive Statelessness

This way of posing the question ties up directly with the analysis – which Engels was going to put forward particularly in *Anti-Dühring*, perhaps as a result of this period – of another kind of stateless society, the one at the other end of the historical scale. This is the primitive type of stateless community which precedes the first class society.

In *Anti-Dühring* Engels stresses strongly enough that the basic and determining function of the state is its class-determined function of coercion and repression. But he also makes clear that it does not arise simply out of a "plot" by the ruling class to suppress the working majority. It does not appear out of nothing, with its "special" bodies of armed men", etc. Its beginnings lie in indispensable functions of society.

A few years after *Anti-Dühring*, he made this point compactly in a letter:

Society gives rise to certain common functions which it cannot dispense with. The persons appointed for this purpose form a new branch of the division of labour *within society*. This gives them particular interests, distinct, too, from the interests of those who empowered them; they make themselves independent of the latter and the state is in being.¹⁷

The state, then, arises out of a previous division of labour in society. It arises, of course, only after the division of society into classes, and because of this division; but it does not arise out of the whole cloth. It has its roots in activities and offices in non-class society:

In each such [primitive] community there were from the beginning certain common interests the safeguarding of which had to be handed over to individuals, true, under the control of the community as a whole: adjudication of disputes; repression of abuse of authority by individuals; control of water supplies, especially in hot countries; and finally, when conditions were still absolutely primitive, religious functions. Such offices are found in aboriginal communities of every period-in the oldest German marks and even today in India. They are naturally endowed with a certain measure of authority and are the beginnings of state power.⁽²⁷⁾

More accurately, perhaps, they are the roots of state power.

¹⁷ This phrase reads: *den ganzen Staatsplunder von sich abzutun*, lit., get rid of all the state-junk (or old lumber).

⁽²⁷⁾ Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow, F.L.P.H.), 1959, 2nd ed., p.247.

In the first place, all political power is originally based on an economic, social function, and increases in proportion as the members of society, through the dissolution of the primitive community, become transformed into private producers, and thus become more and more divorced from the administrators of the common functions of society. Secondly, after the political force has made itself independent in relation to society, and has transformed itself from its servant into its master, it can work in two different directions. [*I.e. either for or against economic development – this leads to a different question*].⁽²⁸⁾

We see that already in the primitive stateless community there are “common interests” and “common functions” (economic and social functions) of the society as a whole that have to be taken care of by a central authority. Elsewhere we have called this a “proto-political” authority (since Marx and Engels regularly identify the term “political” with the state). Here Engels writes that “the political force”¹⁸ makes itself independent of society with the coming of class divisions, and transforms itself “from its servant into its master”. The proto-political authority was a servant of the community; the state comes forward as the master of society.

In another discussion, Engels begins with a strong statement of the original need for class divisions from the standpoint of free time as an over-all social need. There “arises a class freed from directly productive labour, which looks after the general affairs of society: the direction of labour, state business, law, science, art, etc.” These are “the general affairs of society” even though they can be performed as yet only by a ruling class. But –

But this does not prevent this division into classes from being carried out by means of violence and robbery, trickery and fraud. It does not prevent the ruling class, once having the upper hand, from consolidating its power at the expense of the working class, from turning its social leadership into exploitation of the masses.⁽²⁹⁾

Even before the state, therefore, there was the common need for “social leadership”. In class society, that need can be filled only by the state. But the need exists even where there is no state.

The legitimate social functions, then, precede the existence of the state. As long as the state exists, they are carried out in a class-deformed fashion which is integrated into the state’s specific class role. For Marx, these functions have to be freed from the deformations imposed by the state.¹⁹

¹⁸ Formally this is a slip by Engels, since it seems to imply that this “political force” already existed as such before class divisions made it “independent”. But the line of thought is so obvious that it would be quibbling to make anything out of this lack of rigour in Engels’ language. Still, there has been no lack of quibbling, especially on Engels’ even more apparent slip in *Anti-Dühring*, where he clearly uses the term “state” for the organism “which the primitive groups of communities of the same tribe had at first arrived at only in order to safeguard their common interests (e.g. irrigation in the East) and for protection against external enemies”.⁽³⁰⁾ In the context, where this is a transitional clause introducing the state function of class domination, he obviously means the organized authority out of which the state arises.

¹⁹ This also spells out the content of the earlier phrase in the *Communist Manifesto*, already quoted: “the public power will lose its political character”. Which means there will still be a public power.

⁽²⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p.252.

⁽²⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p.388.

⁽³⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p.205.

Thus there is a symmetry between the way Engels analyzed the “proto-political” function in pre-state communities, and the way Marx posed the question of the “analogous” social functions in post-state communities. At both ends of the historical scale, the limitations of the state concept become apparent.

8. The State Which is No Longer a State

About the same time that Marx wrote his **Critique of the Gotha Programme**, Engels picked up the idea and carried it somewhat further with his characteristic élan. This was in a letter to the leader of the Gennan party, previewing the case against the Lassalleanism of the Gotha programme.²⁰ Like Marx, Engels polemized against the Lassallean formula of “the free state”, and his first sentence makes the same argument:

Taken in its grammatical sense, a free state is one where the state is free in relation to its citizens, hence a state with a despotic government. The whole talk about the state should be dropped, especially since the Commune, which was no longer a state in the proper sense of the word. The [Lassallean formula] “people’s state” has been thrown in our faces by the Anarchists to the point of disgust, although already Marx’s book against Proudhon [**The Poverty of Philosophy**] and later the **Communist Manifesto** directly declare that with the introduction of the socialist order of society that state will dissolve of itself and disappear [*sich von selbst auflöst und verschwindet*]. As, therefore, the state is only a transitional institution which is used in the struggle, in the revolution, to hold down one’s adversaries by force, it is pure nonsense to talk of a free people’s state: so long as the proletariat still *uses* the state, it does not use it in the interests of freedom but in order to hold down its adversaries, and as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom the state as such ceases to exist [*hört auf zu bestehen*]. We would therefore propose to replace *state* everywhere by *Gemeinwesen*, a good old German word which can very well convey the meaning of the French word “*commune*”.⁽³¹⁾

If the obvious polemical exaggeration about “freedom” is taken with moderation²¹, Engels is here spelling out in a large hand what Marx did not set down in so many words. It is already

²⁰ Although the letter is signed by Engels alone, and no doubt its exact formulations are his, it is explicitly written in terms of “we” (Marx and Engels) and replies to Bebel’s inquiry for the opinion of the two of them (“You ask me what we think ...”). It was doubtlessly the outcome of their joint discussion, as would be indicated anyway by its close correspondence to the **Critique** signed by Marx. A characteristic difference between the two men is evident in the two documents: on the speculative aspects, Marx is more cautious and restrained, even cryptic; Engels is more bold and sweeping in his strokes, giving a more vivid picture at the cost of some carelessness in formulation.

²¹ Engels’ exaggeration, due to his disgust with the Lassallean hocus-pocus on “free” is putting the matter as if there are only two possible conditions: freedom either exists or it does not exist. But this is a wooden and mechanical formulation, which moreover is gainsaid in dozens of passages in Marx and Engels. Whatever one means by freedom, it manifests itself historically and concretely in *degrees* of freedom: greater freedom or less freedom in a given time, place or condition. Freedom does not suddenly pop into existence at the point where the state “ceases to exist” and not before. Obviously, as the state “gradually dissolves”, freedom gradually increases. Furthermore, if we apply as sensitive a linguistic critique as Engels does to Lassallean language, it is “pure nonsense” to flatly *counterpose* the use

⁽³¹⁾ Letter, Engels to Bebel, 18–28 March, 1875, in ME:SC:356–57.

implicitly contained in the idea that the Commune state, any genuine workers' state, is not merely a state with a different class rule but *a new type of state* altogether. Although the point has been made before, let us draw it out a little. Consider the following two propositions:

- a. *A state represents the rule of one class over others. In the past there have been states ruled by slave-owners, the feudal lords, and the capitalists, which repressed the working class. "We" will establish a state ruled by the working class, which will repress the exploiters. This (workers') state is a class rule, just like every other state-only the guns are turned the other way. (However, one day this state will disappear).*
- b. *Every statement in the above proposition is true if taken by itself; but the whole adds up to a false view of the workers' state, because it leaves out a vital principle. The workers' state is not simply one in a series of class-rule machines-one that is "good" rather than "bad". It breaks out of the series. Not simply "one day" but immediately there is a qualitative difference between this type of state and all previous states. What happens immediately is not the anarchist "abolition of the state" but the qualitative change in the type of state.²²*

This distinguishes Marxism not only from anarchism but also from the various types of "Marxism" which limit themselves to repeating the contents of proposition (a).

This is the positive content of the suggestion which Engels tosses in: in order to designate this new type of state even at the very beginning of its existence, the word "state" should be dropped, in favour of "commune".²³ The suggestion was probably influenced by the urge to undercut anarchist demagoguery about "statism". He never followed the suggestion himself, as we shall see; and there is no use quibbling over it. The terminological change would probably have caused as much new confusion as it saved.

For the new workers' power is a type of state. It is *a state-which-is-in-process-of-becoming-a-non-state*. There is really no reason to expect the old language to have a ready-made term for this dialectical conception. That the Paris Commune "was no longer a state in the proper sense of the word" means, concretely, that it was no longer a state in the same sense that all previous states

of the state "in the interests of freedom" against its use "to hold down its adversaries". For clearly Engels would have to agree that, from his viewpoint, the state must be used "to hold down its adversaries" *precisely only* "in the interests of freedom". Far from being counterposed as incompatibilities, the former is justifiable only as the necessary means to the latter, and the latter is the precondition for the socialist meaning of the former. In fact, this is the main point of the rest of Engels' passage; it is only obscured and confused by the exaggerated reaction to Lassalle's verbiage.

²² Lenin put this in *State and Revolution*: "In the first place, according to Marx, the proletariat needs only a state which is withering away, i.e. a state so constituted that it begins to wither away immediately, and cannot but wither away."⁽³²⁾ The question of what this constitution is can be concretized in three ways: (1) by studying Marx and Engels on the Commune state; (2) in *State and Revolution*, whose great contribution is its elaboration – exegesis, if you will – of this question; (3) last but not least, on matters like these: "everyone his own theoretician" – the present-day analogue of "every cook a statesman". Here we have the "revolutionary soul" of *State and Revolution* which "they omit, obscure or distort", as Lenin says of Marx's thought.

²³ Engels is very clear that his candidate is the French word *commune*, and so it is idle to speculate about the exact force of his suggested German equivalent. *Gemeinwesen* can be a community-complex or "commonwealth"; but it happens that the English word "commune" is an even clearer translation of Engels' thought than the original French *commune*; for in France a commune is also an ordinary bourgeois municipality. Engels, of course, is thinking of the revolutionary commune of 1871.

⁽³²⁾ In Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol.25 (Moscow, Progress Pub.), 1964, p.402.

were in the past; that it was no longer merely just another kind of state but already on the way to turning into something else.

Three years later, Engels published his most ambitious summary of the Marxist theoretical system, closely reviewed by Marx, **Anti-Dühring**. Its main passage on this subject is clearly a continuation of the 1875 discussion, and cannot otherwise be understood.

It is introduced by the statement that the proletariat seizes political power and “turns the means of production in the first instance into state property”. The ensuing passage, which we give complete in spite of its length, begins and ends with the “abolition” of the state. It begins with this statement:

But, in doing this, it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, abolishes also the state as state.²⁴

What is it that “abolishes the state as state”? Only the fact that a workers’ state takes over the means of production, according to this. Not a very advanced phase of socialism! And Engels soon makes clear that he does not mean that the state has already died out. The meaning, therefore, is simply the same as the 1875 explanation which we have already discussed: it is “no longer a state in the proper [past] sense of the word”, etc.

The rest continues, at first with a review of the general theory of the state:

Society thus far, based upon class antagonisms, had need of the state, that is, of an organization of the particular class, which was *pro tempore* the exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production,²⁵ and therefore, especially, for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited classes in the condition of oppression corresponding with the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wage-labour). The state was the official representative of society as a whole; the gathering of it together into a visible embodiment. But it was this only insofar as it was the state of that class which itself represented, for the time being, society as a whole: in ancient times, the state of slave-owning citizens; in the Middle Ages, the feudal lords; in our own time, the bourgeoisie. When at last it becomes the real representative of the whole of society, it renders itself unnecessary [*überflüssig*, superfluous]. As soon as there is no longer any social class to be held in subjection; as soon as class rule, and the individual struggle for existence based upon our present anarchy in production, with the collisions and excesses arising from these, are removed, nothing more remains to be repressed, and a special repressive force, a state, is no longer necessary. The first act by virtue of which the state really constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society—the taking possession of the means of production in the name

²⁴ “Abolishes” in this sentence translates *aufheben*. Of the various German verbs that can mean “abolish” (we previously met *abschaffen*) *aufheben* was specially burdened by Hegel with a technical connotation. The Hegelian sense is: not annihilate or destroy, but transcend, even while content is preserved in a new and higher form. This connotation is useful to express only one side of the Marxist idea; it does not convey the gradualness of the process as distinct from any act of “abolition”. Of course, in using it at this point Engels himself is sensitive to its Hegelian connotation; but it must be remembered that he was not writing for philosophy students; that Hegelianism was dead in 1878; and that the ordinary workaday meaning conveyed by *aufheben* is just plain “abolition”.

²⁵ In **Socialism Utopian and Scientific** this phrase was revised to read: “for the purpose of preventing any interference from without with the existing conditions of production”.

of the state—this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then withers away of itself [*schläft von selbst ein*, lit., goes to sleep of itself]; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not “abolished” [*abgeschafft*]. *It withers away* [*stirbt ab*, lit., dies away, dies off]. This gives the measure of the value of the phrase “a free people’s state”, both as to its ultimate scientific insufficiency; and also of the demands of the so-called anarchists for the abolition of the state out of hand.²⁶⁽³³⁾

When this section of **Anti-Dühring** was revised as **Socialism Utopian and Scientific**, Engels added an end-summary which included this:

Socialized production upon a predetermined plan becomes henceforth possible. The development of production makes the existence of different classes of society thenceforth an anachronism. In proportion as anarchy in social production vanishes, the political authority of the state dies out [*schläft ein*, lit., goes to sleep]. Man, at last the master of his own form of social organization, becomes at the same time the lord over nature, his own master – free.⁽³⁴⁾

“This act of universal emancipation” is the death of the state. It is not necessary to puzzle over Engels’ statement that “the *political* authority of the state” is what dies out, as if he intended to say there is something left of the state after its political authority is gone. Nothing more is involved here than the distinction already seen between the political functions and the “analogous”, “legitimate” social functions.²⁷

9. Engels’ Last Formulations

No really new aspect of the question was developed in Engels’ writings after the death of Marx. There is a peroratorical paragraph in his **Origin of the Family** (1884):

The state, then, has not existed from all eternity. There have been societies that did without it, that had no conception of the state and state power. At a certain stage of economic development, which was necessarily bound up with the cleavage of society into classes, the state became a necessity owing to this cleavage. We are now rapidly approaching a stage in the development of production at which the existence of these classes not only will have ceased to be a necessity, but will become a positive hindrance to production. They will fall as inevitably as they arose at an earlier stage. Along with them the state will inevitably fall [*fällt*]. The society that will organize production on the basis of a free and equal association of the producers will put the

²⁶ More literally: demands that the state should be abolished [*abgeschafft*] by tomorrow.

²⁷ There is another general and passing reference in **Anti-Dühring** to the ending of “political domination”, pp.388–89; and also to Saint-Simon’s old saying, which Engels then equates with “the ‘abolition of the state’, about which recently there has been so much noise” (p.356).

⁽³³⁾ **Anti-Dühring**, pp.386–87.

⁽³⁴⁾ **Ibid.**, p.393.

whole machinery of state where it will then belong: into the Museum of Antiquities, by the side of the spinning wheel and the bronze axe.⁽³⁵⁾

Here Engels sets side by side, symmetrically, the stateless societies of yesterday and tomorrow, as we did earlier.

There is a cursory passage in Engels' 1891 introduction to **The Civil War in France**:

... In reality, however, the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy; and at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the victorious proletariat, just like the [Paris] Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at once as much as possible until such time as a generation reared in new, free social conditions is able to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap heap.²⁸⁽³⁶⁾

This usefully re-emphasizes that (a) even a workers' state is an "evil", albeit a necessary evil – a salutary reminder; (b) that the revolution must begin to denature the state "at once", by destroying its "worst sides" immediately and without waiting for the beautiful day of the Museum of Antiquities; (c) that the final, complete junking of the state must not only await new generations (send not to ask how many) but will be possible only by a generation that has *already* been shaped in "new, free social conditions".

There is a contrast: the ultimate aim is quite a distance off, but there are drastic steps to be taken "at once".

Marx did not believe in trying to compose the "music of the future",²⁹ and this much at least is not controversial: any attempt to grasp the quality of life in stateless society even fictionally (as by William Morris in **News from Nowhere**) is tainted by being conceived in the present by men who are reacting to past deformations and not to a habituated internalization of "new, free social conditions". It is an unthinkable social transformation, just as all the greatest social transformations in the history of the world had been unthinkable before being merely "impossible".

The crux of this unthinkableness, despite all the beautiful thoughts suggested by the literature of utopia, is the problem of how a complex society coordinates itself and its decision-making – or what it substitutes for complexity, coordination and decision-making – without any form of social rule, not even the rule of a sovereign people in an ultimate democracy. It is in the Critique of the Gotha Programme that Marx reminds us that *demokratisch* translates into German as *volksherrschaftlich*⁽³⁷⁾ – democracy is the rule of the people, but it is a rule. Engels' last mention of the problem strikes the same note. It occurs incidentally: he is explaining in 1894 why

²⁸ This phrase reads: *den ganzen Staatsplunder von sich abzutun*, lit., get rid of all the state-junk (or old lumber).

²⁹ Nor did Engels, usually. But apparently in connection with writing **The Origin of the Family**, in 1884, he left a fragment which might or might not be the beginning of a discussion of the social organization of the future. (The title *Über die Assoziation der Zukunft* is conferred on it by the editors of **ME:W** – 21:391). Its few lines end with the point that "the association of the future" will combine the sober reasonableness [*Nüchternheit*] of the bourgeois era with the "care for the common social welfare" which characterized previous societies.

⁽³⁵⁾ In **ME:SW**2:321.

⁽³⁶⁾ In **ME:SW**1:485.

⁽³⁷⁾ In **ME:SW**2:31.

“social-democrat” is an unsuitable political label even though it must be tolerated under the circumstances. Actually he devotes most attention to the unsavoury past history of the label; but he also adds a two-part remark about its relation to the ultimate aims of the future:

... it [the term “social-democrat”] remains unsuitable for a party whose economic programme is not simply socialist in general, but directly communist ...

Here “communist” undoubtedly implies to him the ultimate distributive principle: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”

... and whose ultimate political aim is the overcoming³⁰ of the whole state, hence also of democracy.⁽³⁸⁾

Hence also of any form of rule, of socially organized coercion. This is the “anarchy” of the future stateless society which Marx and Engels had accepted in 1872. Man becomes “his own master – free”. The first condition for this full-fledged freedom is: freedom *from* the state, not of the state, nor merely in the state. As far as Marx’s eye could see, the state is not the guarantor of freedom, even while it is still a necessary evil, Its function is to set the conditions under which a new type of freedom can develop.

In 1894 Engels received a peculiar request from an Italian comrade who wanted a motto from Marx for a newly established socialist periodical—a motto that would concisely counterpose the spirit of the new socialist era against the aphorism of Dante’s about the old world, that some rule and others suffer.⁽³⁹⁾ The motto that Engels suggested was the statement in the **Communist Manifesto** about the consequence of the death of the state:

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

³⁰ *Überwindung*, i.e. surmounting, outmoding; the meaning can reach to “dying-off”, but “abolition” would be misleading.

⁽³⁸⁾ Engels, *Foreword to the pamphlet Internationales aus dem Volksstaat (1871–75)*, in ME:W22:416.

⁽³⁹⁾ Letter, Engels to G. Canepa, 9 January, 1894, in ME:W39:194.

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Socialist Register 1970, pp.281–307. www.marxists.org
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