

State and Revolution (On Lenin's Book)

Luigi Fabbri

1920 or 1921

A book by Lenin was recently published by "Avanti!", written after the revolution, which according to the title promised to be a treatise that would exhaust the question of relations between the revolution and the State. But, we confess to having experienced a strong disappointment.

Lenin's personality will be carved into history with characters of fire. Only these three years, since he and his party settled in power in a country of three hundred million inhabitants, would be enough to witness the powerful moral and material energy of this man who will one day appear among the most famous names in history.

But where it seems that his apologists have so far gone wrong in the exaltation of their master is when they present him as a "great theorist of socialism". Unless reference is made to previous works published only in Russian and not yet translated into Italian or French, everything that has been published so far demonstrates that Lenin is a strong polemicist, who knows how to handle the texts of Marxism to make them say everything that pleases him, a writer who does not mince words, skilled in argumentation and invective; but without ideas of his own, without a genius vision of the whole, and arid, without that inner fire that always makes the writings of Marx, Mazzini, Bakunin alive. His historical and sociological culture (at least in what we have read so far) also certainly seems vast and profound, but only with regard to Marxism. Everything else seems like it does not exist for him.

Some wanted to see him as a continuator of Marx. What a mistake! Of Marx he has nothing but the less sympathetic aspects, the ferocious exclusivism, the spite for whoever does not think like him, the roughness of language, the tendency to overcome the adversary with irony and sarcasm, the intolerance to all opposition. As a man of action, or rather, as a guide and leader of men of action, Lenin is certainly a personality that has no equal in the history of socialism; and even Marx cannot be compared to him, since he was much more a man of thought than action. But as a theorist, he does not add anything to Marx, of whose texts he is simply an exegete, a commentator, an interpreter — when he is not a sophisticator.

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This conviction was reinforced by the reading of the last book, "State and Revolution", on which we eagerly launched ourselves, since it promised to address the problem that most interest us: if the State can effectively be an instrument of the revolution, or if it is rather an obstacle, an

embarrassment, a continuous trap for its development, which must be continually combated, seeking to destroy it and diminish its power with constant and ardent opposition.

Instead, we find in the book only a treatise for the “internal use” of the socialist party. Lenin demonstrates to them, or seeks to demonstrate, that the dictatorship system is in harmony with Marxist doctrine, and nothing more. It seems that he is absolutely not assailed by the doubt that one can be a socialist without being a Marxist and that the revolution cannot be adapted, without being mutilated, to the Procrustean bed of a certain doctrinal and unilateral school.

Lenin’s demonstration does not persuade us even from the point of view of Marxism. Despite certain expressions, employed more to give strength to the enunciation of his thought than to be understood in its literal meaning, Karl Marx conceived for the revolution a democratic-workers’ process, not a dictatorial one. That is to say, he wanted a democratic socialist government that would use the iron fist, certainly, against the bourgeoisie, but that would leave to the proletariat and the various socialist forces and currents those freedoms that are usually called democratic (vote, press, assembly, association, local autonomies, etc.) as they are based on the prevalence of majorities through the system of representation.

We anarchists are also opposed to this system, insofar as we also do not recognize the right of majorities to oppress minorities, and insofar as we believe the freedoms promised by the representative system to be illusory and incomplete. In this sense, we are anti-democratic. But for the same reason, and with even greater hostility, we are opponents of the dictatorship, which would deny us even the few and illusory freedoms of the representative system, which gives the minority, or indeed a few men, the right to oppress, to govern by force, the majorities; if we do not want the majorities to oppress minorities, so much less do we want the later to oppress the former.

Furthermore, even if the system of the proletarian dictatorship was in fact in conformity with the Marxist “sacred texts”, it would still be necessary to demonstrate that such a strictly statist orientation was the most appropriate to bring the revolution closer, as propaganda; and, in practical realization, to develop the revolution in such a way that it takes the proletariat out of economic and political slavery, from state and proprietary servitude. In vain do we look for such a demonstration in Lenin’s last book, “State and Revolution”.

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Lenin’s book is mainly a controversy with Social Democrats and reformists. That is why we said it was instead written for the internal use of the socialist party. There is an enormous abundance of quotations from Marx and Engels — to tell the truth, more Engels than Marx — so much so that if the many pages of quotations were taken from it, the whole book would be reduced to a rather modest booklet.

Of course, we can only subscribe to the entire first part of the book, which brings to light all the bourgeois and democratic hypocrisy, according to which the State would be the representative of the interests of all citizens, while in reality it is a weapon of the ruling class for the exploitation of the oppressed classes. But then Lenin falls into the Marxist (or rather Engelsian) error that the proletariat, by seizing state authority and making the means of production the property of the State, succeeds in making the state itself disappear. If the State also becomes the property owner, we will have state capitalism, not socialism, let alone state abolition or anarchy!

It would be a curious system to abolish an organism by multiplying its functions and giving it new means of power!

With the State as the property owner, all proletarians would become wage earners of the state, instead of wage earners of the private capitalist. The State would be the exploiter, that is to say, the infinite pile of the high and low rulers, and the whole bureaucracy in all its hierarchical degrees, would come to constitute the new dominant and exploiting class. It seems that something similar is taking shape in Russia, at least in big cities and in the area of big industry.

Here is the great Marxist error with regard to the State: conceiving of it as a simple effect of class division, when it is also a cause. The State is not only a servant of capitalism, which reinforces the economic privilege of the bourgeoisie, etc., but it is itself a source of privileges, it constitutes a class or caste of privileged people, it feeds the ruling class by always providing it with new elements; and all the more so if, in addition to political strength, it also had economic strength, that is to say, all social wealth, as the sole owner.

Lenin says that the dictatorship will be “the proletariat organized as a ruling class”. But this is a contradiction in terms! If the proletariat has become a ruling class, it is no longer a proletariat, it is no longer a non-possessor. It means it has become the boss. Furthermore, if there is a ruling class, it means that there are dominated classes; that is, classes that remained or became proletarian. The class division would continue to exist. And the only explanation for this riddle is that the ruling class will be constituted by a minority of the proletariat, which will have dispossessed and subjugated the current bourgeois minority, politically dominating and economically exploiting all the rest of the population, that is, the old dispossessed and the majority of the proletarians who will remain as such and will remain in subjection.

If this tremendous error were carried out, humanity would have been once again bloodstained in vain. She would have done no more than turn around in her bed of pain and injustice!

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Mikhail Bakunin predicted these consequences of the application of Marxism forty-five years ago: the government of the most progressive workers and industrial groups, of the big cities, to the detriment of the majority workers of the fields, of the small centers, of the qualified trades, etc.

Lenin, under the guidance of Marx and Engels, appeals to the example of the French revolutions of 1848 and 1871. But it was precisely from the experience of these revolutions that anarchism was born as a libertarian conception of the revolution, insofar as all revolutionary theorists who saw these two revolutions closely observed the damage caused by the revolution’s state or dictatorial orientation. In this regard even Marx is cited without reason, since in writing about the Paris Commune he does not in any way exalt centralism (as Lenin claims) but precisely the system of communal autonomies.

Lenin speaks continuously about the destruction of the state mechanism, but he wants to destroy the bourgeois state mechanism in order to replace it with another one, which is bureaucratic and numbing, that of the communist party. Instead, only those who constitute the staff of the new State, of the new bureaucracy, will win. It comes to my mind, in this regard, the old fable of the horse wounded and covered in flies, which refused the help of those who wanted to shoo the flies away, “because — he said — the ones I have on top are already full, while without them others will come more hungry and voracious”.

This centralist prejudice by Lenin is also revealed in a warning he gives to anarchists, “because they do not want an administration”. Who told Lenin that anarchists do not want administration,

we do not know. But his mistake stems from the fact that he does not see as possible an administration without bureaucratic concentration, without authority, that is, without the State; and since anarchists do not want authority, State and concentration, he believes that they do not want administration. But it is an extravagance. In reality, the best administration, as well as the best organization, the one truly deserving of that name, is the least centralized and least authoritarian possible.

When Lenin says, quoting Engels, that he wants to achieve the elimination of the State, he states a pious intention without practical results, since the way he chose leads, instead, to the reinforcement of the state institution, passed simply from the domain of one class to that of another in the process of formation.

In an anarchist publication, what Lenin says about anarchists and anarchism in this book cannot be passed over in silence.

Some of it was noted above. But we must not hide the effort that Lenin makes to be fair to anarchists, perhaps because he knows from experience how valuable their collaboration can be. He does not always achieve this, as for example when he says that anarchists have made no contribution to concrete questions about the need to destroy the state mechanism and the way to replace it. All anarchist literature shows just the opposite!

But Lenin renders this justice to anarchists, some thirty years later, of recognizing that Plekhanov's libel "Anarchism and Socialism" — which, together with a tiny booklet by Deville, is the only socialist tract on the subject — is a lousy thing.

According to Lenin, Plekhanov addressed the topic "avoiding what was most current and politically essential in it: the conduct of the revolution towards the State". In Plekhanov's pamphlet, along with a historical-literary section with plenty of material on the ideas of Stirner, Proudhon and others (according to Lenin), there is a section of "philistine and vulgar considerations intended to demonstrate that an anarchist can hardly be distinguished from a bandit". This way in which Plekhanov treated anarchists in his controversy, Lenin attributes it to his opportunist policy, by which he wanted in politics to "ride on the stirrups of the bourgeoisie".

But if Lenin recognizes that the usual critique of anarchism, made by Plekhanov-type social democrats, resorts to petty-bourgeois trivia, his arguments are no more conclusive, since he too takes aim at an anarchism of his special fabrication that doesn't exist in reality. He repeats Engels' criticisms of the Proudhonians, attributes to the anarchists the illusion of being able to abolish the State from today to tomorrow, without any idea of what should replace it within the proletariat, etc.

But to demonstrate how Lenin did not fully understand what anarchists really want and how they intend to operate, it would be necessary to write at least as much as we have done so far. Which we will do another time... if we have the time.¹

¹ We don't know whether Fabbri actually wrote such a specific article. However, his book "*Dittatura e Rivoluzione*" [Dictatorship and Revolution] (available here: www.liberliber.it) can be considered as his extensive response to Lenin's "State and Revolution". (Translator)

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Translation by João Black from Spanish in www.bfscollezionidigitali.org (page 17), revised by
Zoe Baker for English correctness

Although this translation is from a brochure/booklet in Spanish, "*La Crisis del Anarquismo*" (see
here: www.bfscollezionidigitali.org), published in Buenos Aires in 1921, the article was
probably published originally in Italian, in the Ancona newspaper "*Volontá*", by the time when
"*Avanti!*" editions published Lenin's "State and Revolution", which was in 1920 according to
Fabbri's "*Dittatura e Rivoluzione*" (www.liberliber.it) (page 262, footnote).

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