

Istvan Meszaros and the “Withering Away of the State”

Review of Istvan Meszaros, “The Necessity of Social Control”

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Anarchist review of Meszaros concept of "Withering Away of the State"

Istvan Meszaros, a well-known Marxist theorist, has material which can be interesting to anarchists. He has an insightful analysis of the current stage of capitalism and the state. He makes Marx's "withering away of the state" central to his program, and he rejects electoral party politics. But paradoxically, he also supports the late Hugo Chavez's attempted use of the Venezuelan state to move to socialism. How can we understand this and respond to it?

Istvan Meszaros is an internationally known Marxist theorist, whose work may also interest anarchists. In this book's Foreword, John Bellamy Foster (editor of *Monthly Review* magazine) claims, "Istvan Meszaros is one of the greatest philosophers that the historical materialist tradition [by which he means Marxism—WP] has yet produced....Few, if any, thinkers have contributed as much to the understanding of the accelerating global contradictions of capital..." (In Meszaros 2015; 9 & 17)

Of special interest to anarchists is that Meszaros makes Marx's "withering away of the state" central to his program. And, unlike the reform socialists, he proposes building a nonelectoral and "extra-parliamentary" working class movement. But paradoxically, he supported the late Hugo Chavez's attempted use of the Venezuelan state to change society. So, for anarchists, there is an apparent contradiction in Meszaros' work, having both anti-statist and statist aspects.

This collection of essays may serve as an introduction to Meszaros. Notorious for his turgid prose, Meszaros is "not easy to read," writes Michael Lebowitz (in a—favorable—blurb on the book's back cover). Foster claims to have persuaded Meszaros to produce this book to fulfill "the need for an easily accessible work that would provide a way into his thinking for the uninitiated." (9) In addition, Foster (who does write clearly) wrote a Foreword to clarify "some of the distinctive concepts governing his analysis." (9)

The Systematic Structural Crisis of Capital

One of Meszaros' central points is that present-day capitalism is in "its descending phase of historical development...capable of sustaining itself only in an ever more destructive and therefore ultimately self-destructive way..." (224) "The fundamental defining characteristic of our present epoch, in contrast to the earlier phases of capitalistic developments, is that we live under the perilous conditions of the structural crisis of capital as a whole." (135) This is not just a temporary, conjunctural, crisis, but a long-term decline of the total system. Meszaros states that the fundamental structural decline began after World War II (I would have said about the beginning of the 20th century). But the crisis was postponed during the post-war prosperity by countervailing processes (a reorganization of imperialism, expanded arms spending, looting the environment, etc.). The basic crisis re-emerged around 1970, after the countervailing processes had reached their limits. It appears as a series of recessions which might collapse into a deep depression, but will at least continue to be essentially stagnant. It will remain in an overall "depressed continuum," (52) despite occasional limited improvements or lopsided development in this country or that.

Methods which capitalism formerly used to get out of periodic crises will no longer work. For example, permitting a large depression, in which debts and inefficient firms could be wiped out cannot be permitted; major firms are “too big to (be allowed to) fail” without taking down the whole economy. Seizing wealth from new territories (imperialism) is impossible, since the whole world has already been integrated into capitalism. In the past, big wars have jacked up the economy, but another world war is out of the question, unless the system is prepared to commit nuclear suicide. Pulling the disordered international capital system together under one hegemonic imperial power (the US state) cannot be done, due to the weakness of the US and the complexity of the world. Continuing to build up wealth by draining the environment is also leading to systemic suicide (through climate change, pollution, etc.). The ruling class may thrash about and shut its eyes to reality, but it is caught in a deadly trap. Over time, this will only get worse.

“The ever-increasing frequency with which ‘temporary disturbances and dysfunctions’ appear in all spheres of our social existence, and the utter failure of manipulative measures and instruments devised to cope with them, are clear evidence that the structural crisis of the capitalist mode of social control has assumed all-embracing proportions.” (47)

As an anarchist who is influenced by aspects of Marxism, I completely agree with this view. That is so, even though I do not accept all of the theoretical underpinnings of Meszaros’ analysis, which is based on the Monthly Review school of underconsumptionist Marxism. (See Price, 2012.)

The Crisis of the State

There is a crisis of the total capital system. That includes not only the class relations of the economy (the “metabolic” process of production and reproduction), but also the state structure. “...The state cannot exempt itself from the unfolding structural crisis of the capital system as a whole.” (284) The state is the controlling system which holds together the increasingly fracturing elements of capitalism. In Meszaros’ view, the state was essential for the original development of capitalism, for its lasting existence, and now for maintaining it in its decline. The state is desperately committed to keeping up the rule of capital against the workers.

This indicates to Meszaros that the state cannot be used to reform capitalism in the interests of the working class and the oppressed. Instead, the capitalist class is using the state to attack the workers, to take back gains won during the last period of prosperity, to lower the working class’ standard of living, to weaken the unions, and to roll back social benefits. This is true in the wealthier imperialist countries of North America and Western Europe, as well as in the poorer, oppressed nations (the “Third World”). This is now “the potentially deadliest phase of imperialism.” (97)

Meszaros believes that the revolutionary subject must be the working class (which does not rule out alliances with other oppressed groupings). “The only force which can introduce this change and make it work is society’s producers....The only agency which can rectify this situation...is the working class.” (59) But he concludes that the reformist programs of the “workers’ parties” (Socialist and Communist) are no longer viable. The system simply cannot afford any large-scale improvements for working people. Certainly reforms and limited gains can and must be fought for, but only in the context of a revolutionary goal, the aim of a new society without states or classes.

“...Capital [has] reached a stage when even the past concessions had to be taken back by the ruling order, with the help of ruthless anti-labor parliamentary legislation (actively supported by reformist social democracy), because they could no longer fulfill their erstwhile expansionary function. [This means] the virtual demise of the ‘welfare state’...Realization of even the most limited ‘immediate objectives’ becomes feasible only as an integral and subsidiary part of the socialist movement’s hegemonic alternative to the established order.” (158-159)

For this reason, Meszaros rejects the program of radicalizing the existing left mass parties or of creating new ones. He is apparently not for trying to get elected to parliaments (or Congress in the US) in order to attempt to pass pro-working class laws. Instead he advocates “the radical alternative of gaining strength by the forces of the working class through organizing and asserting themselves outside parliament...The need for sustainable extra-parliamentary action is absolutely vital for the future of a radically rearticulated socialist movement.” (190) This might mean mass demonstrations, strikes, general strikes, sit-ins, boycotts, popular civil disobedience, occupations, and so on.

He does modify this by remarks that such independent movements may shore up the parliamentary left parties. “...The traditional forms of labor’s...political organizations...badly need the radicalizing pressure and support of such extra-parliamentary forces...” (195) That aside, anarchists agree with his opposition to electoral party-building, his rejection of reformism, and his advocacy of building non-electoral, autonomous, working class movements.

“...The anarchists refuse to be party to the present State organization and to support it by infusing fresh blood into it. They do not seek to constitute, and invite the workingmen not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments. Accordingly...they have endeavored to promote their ideas directly among the labor organizations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.” (Kropotkin [1910] 1975; 110)

Capital and Capitalism

Meszaros makes a distinction between “capital” and “capitalism.” By “capitalism,” he means the system of independent firms, competing in the marketplace, and owned by stock-holding private capitalists (the bourgeoisie). By “capital,” he means, essentially, the capital/labor relationship, by which those in control of industry (whether or not they are private capitalists) squeeze surplus labor out of the workers.

The positive value of this distinction is to say that it is not enough to overthrow the traditional capitalists, to take away their ownership of industries, and to collectivize the economy. This is necessary but not sufficient. To place industrial production and distribution in the hands of state officials would just continue the capital/labor relationship. “To imagine that the state—any kind of state—can successfully take upon itself the direct control of all of the particular reproductive functions of society is a great illusion.” (138) It would keep the workers on the shop floor or office, taking orders from bosses, still being exploited. “...The Soviet solution could not eradicate capital from the post-capitalist system of social metabolic reproduction.” (137)

To Meszaros, the USSR was not capitalist but was like capitalism. “The Soviet Union was not capitalist, not even state capitalist. But the Soviet system was very much dominated by the power of capital; ... the hierarchical command structure of capital remained....[It was] accumulation-

oriented... The bureaucracy is a function of this command structure...in the absence of the private capitalist.” (55)

For a total end to capital, he believes, it is necessary to completely transform the relationships and processes of production and related activities. Working people must democratically control production and every aspect of the economy, from the bottom up. “...In the last few years the idea of workers’ control has been gaining in importance in many parts of the world.” (32) “...The sustainability of a global order of social metabolic reproduction is inconceivable without a proper system of planning, managed on the basis of substantive democracy by the freely associated producers.” (167) Anarchists can agree with this perspective.

However, there is another side to this distinction between “capital” and “capitalism.” It permits Meszaros to present the Soviet Union as somehow more progressive (better) than capitalism—a “post-capitalist system,” (137) as he calls it. He even uses the phrase, “‘actually existing socialism.’” (145) This lends itself to a possibly favorable view of authoritarian states and authoritarian leaders. (For an analysis of the Soviet Union as having been “state capitalist,” see Price 2010.)

The “Withering Away of the State”

Meszaros makes Marx’s phrase, “the withering away of the state,” central to his program (“withering away” being equivalent to “dying out”). “...The continued historical significance of the Marxian theoretical framework hinges on the realizability (or not) of his concern with the withering away of the state.” (245) Meszaros believes that the workers’ goal should not be a new, better, state, but the end of the state.

Further, he may be said to improve on Marx’s conception in one way: Marx implied that the “withering” would be essentially an automatic historical process (as productivity and leisure time increased). But Meszaros indicates that the “withering away” of all the remnants of the state should be a conscious, collective, process, deliberately planned-for and carried out. “...When we consider the historic task of making real ‘the withering away of the state,’ self-management through full participation and the permanently sustainable overcoming of parliamentarism by a positive form of substantive decision-making...are inseparable.” (180) This is a perspective of “making real” the “withering away” through deliberate “self-management” and “substantive decision-making.” That much is consistent with an anti-statist, libertarian-socialist, perspective.

However, one problem with the “withering” formula is that it means that the working class must begin with a state, the state that will “wither.” Meszaros claims that Marx believed in “a feasible transitional state formation...the transitory dictatorship of the proletariat...while forcefully stressing the necessary withering away of the state.” (254) So much is true. But Meszaros interprets this to mean that the workers do not start by smashing the state, but by somehow capturing it, taking it over, and—only then—beginning the “withering away” process.

Marx and Engels had a different perspective, at least after observing the 1871 Paris Commune. In their 1872 new introduction to the Communist Manifesto, they quoted from Marx’s own writings on the Parisian workers’ rebellion: “One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’.” (Marx & Engels 1955; 6)

That is, the existing, bureaucratic-military-capitalist state machinery must be overthrown, smashed, dismantled, through a revolution. For Marx, a new state of the working class would

replace it. Apparently Marx believed this would be a state of an extremely democratic sort, similar to the Paris Commune (later Marxists had much more authoritarian interpretations of a “workers’ state”!). It would be THIS new state which would gradually “wither away.” (But see NOTE.)

In his *State and Revolution*, Lenin summarized Marx and Engels’ views: “The supersession of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution. The abolition of the proletarian state, i.e., of the state in general, is impossible except through the process of ‘withering away’.” (Lenin 1970; 301-302)

Anarchists do not believe in the creation of a “proletarian state” (whatever that means). Preceding revolutions needed a new state because a new ruling elite was being brought to power. The new ruling minority needed a state, not only to hold down the old rulers, but to control the workers and peasants, the big majority. The socialist-anarchist revolution empowers the big majority itself. To hold down the minority of capitalists and their hangers-on, what is needed is not a state but the self-organization of the (armed) workers and oppressed. Anarchists have always argued that even Marx’s advocacy of an extremely democratic Commune-like state opens the door to all sorts of states, to authoritarian—even totalitarian— “proletarian states” (as history has shown).

But revolutionary anarchists do want the bourgeois state to be overthrown (how “violent” the revolution would be depends on the extent of resistance by the capitalists). They want it replaced by non-state alternate institutions—federations and networks of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, agro-industrial communes, and democratic militias. Presumably, there would be a continuing decline (“withering away” if you like) of left-over influences of capitalism and the state. (For a presentation of the anarchist and Marxist perspectives on the end of the state, see Price 2007.)

Meszaros makes occasional dismissive remarks about anarchism. He denies advocating “‘utopian lawless anarchy’.” (232) He writes that Marx “made it abundantly clear that to envisage the state’s abolition by any form of conspiracy...could only be a voluntaristic pipe dream...The state...could not be simply wished out of existence, contrary to...his primarily anarchist opponents...” (246-247) These comments are not a serious discussion of anarchist ideas. Nor does he consider the views on the state of libertarian Marxists (such as William Morris, C.L.R. James, Paul Mattick, or even Rosa Luxemburg).

So, contrary to Marx and Engels, to Lenin, to the libertarian Marxists, and (of course) to revolutionary anarchists, Meszaros believes that it is possible to use the existing (capitalist) state to evolve toward a non-statist society. This also seems to contradict some of his own statements on the limitations of the capitalist state. Of course, just because Marx, Luxemburg, and Lenin (and Bakunin) say something does not make it true. But if, like Meszaros, you claim to be a Marxist, and if you center your program around a phrase of Marx’s, then it would be expected that you will discuss why you disagree with the rest of Marx’s approach to the state. Especially since the concept that the existing state must be overthrown is based on study of (and experience in) many revolutions, by Marxists and anarchists. It is also based on study of many attempts by reform socialists to use the capitalist state to implement socialism—none of which have worked out well for the socialists.

Instead of a perspective of revolution, Meszaros proposes to transform the capitalist-bureaucratic-military state into a stateless, classless, system, through step-by-step changes. This is “the hard work of a radical restructuring of the existing order.” (156) He compares this to completely rebuilding a house floor by floor without tearing it down all at once—while

continuing to live in the building. In his Foreword, John Bellamy Foster summarizes Meszaros' view: "...A genuine movement toward socialism [is] strategically viable within capitalist boundaries (without a 'storming of the Winter Palace')...[through] the progressive substitution of an alternate organic mode of social control within the pores of the existing society." (14)

This gradualist approach is left-reformist and not revolutionary. This clarifies Meszaros' support for Hugo Chavez.

Meszaros and the "Bolivarian Revolution" of Chavez

Even when Hugo Chavez was in prison, Meszaros had been impressed by a pamphlet he had written. Meszaros continued to praise "the dramatic and far-reaching historical developments in Venezuela under the presidency of Hugo Chavez Frias in the last thirteen years." (282) And Chavez became inspired by Meszaros, reading his books and quoting from them in speeches. Chavez had expressed his admiration for Meszaros by calling him the "Pathfinder" (Senalador de caminos) because of his perspective on the transition to socialism. (299) They met and consulted. One of the chapters in this book, Meszaros writes, "was originally a discussion paper drafted in 2010 after a long discussion with President Hugo Chavez and was written at his request." (314) (For a favorable discussion of Meszaros' influence on Chavez' policies, see Foster 2015.)

This is not the place for an anarchist and libertarian socialist analysis of Chavez' policies. (Torres 2010 provides an excellent overview.) Briefly: Chavez ruled (and his successor Maduras rules) a capitalist state. Its structures are formally democratic ("parliamentary"). Chavez had been repeatedly elected (he was not a dictator, despite his friendship with Fidel Castro). The state continued to have a large bureaucracy as well as a big military force (a major base for Chavez). For all his talk of "21st century socialism," the economy was and remains mainly in the hands of private capitalists and landlords. The wealth of the country was based in the oil industry (state-owned, as it had been under the previous right-wing government). During the years of the oil boom, Chavez used the huge profits to underwrite benefits for the poorest section of the Venezuelan population. He tried to initiate popular organs of self-government, which were to support his government. All these reforms were top-down, a classical case of "Socialism (or Something)-from-Above." The reforms did not challenge the class structure of Venezuela. His government also broke strikes and interfered in union elections, to keep organized labor subservient. Since his death in 2013, world oil prices have dropped, which has weakened the policies he initiated.

Of course, anarchists should defend the Venezuelan people from US aggression and from right-wing efforts to overturn even the limited freedoms of bourgeois democracy (as in the 2002 US-backed coup attempt). And they should defend the benefits which the Chavez regime provided for the poor and the workers. But they should tell the truth, which is that reforms granted from the top down are no road to popular self-government. That relying on selling oil on the world market is at best a temporary solution. That oil production is actually leading in the not-so-long-run to the global catastrophe of climate change. It would only be justified, if at all, as a temporary part of a plan for energy self-sufficiency and revolutionary social transformation.

Chavez referred to his program as the "Bolivarian revolution." Meszaros writes, "the inspirer of President Chavez was El Libertador Simon Bolivar who...defeated the army of the Spanish Empire in Latin America...a great historic figure." (281-282) But Karl Marx held "an extremely hostile view of Bolivar's authoritarianism." (Draper 1992; 38) In an article on Bolivar written for

an encyclopedia, Marx stated, “What he really aimed at was the erection of the whole of Latin America into one federative republic, with himself as its dictator.” (Quoted in Draper 1992; 38) Hardly a model for developing Marx’s goal of “withering away of the state.”

Conclusion

Meszaros has certain valuable ideas. He bases his views on the long-term, deep, structural crisis of modern capitalism, including its effects on the state. This leads him to reject the reformist electoralism of the main Socialist and Communist parties. Instead he advocates a non-electoral, “extra-parliamentary,” working class movement. He makes ending the state (through its deliberate “withering away”) a major goal of the socialist movement, as opposed to those who advocate a new, improved, “proletarian state.” These views are mostly consistent with revolutionary anarchism and other varieties of libertarian socialism.

At the very same time, Meszaros appears to reject the very idea of a revolutionary insurrection, in favor of a left-reformist program of gradual changes through the state and capitalism. He encouraged the policies of Hugo Chavez. Chavez supposedly began the process of expanding local workers’ democracy and “withering away the state” by using the capitalist-bureaucratic-military state.

In the Foreword to this book, Foster had declared that “Istvan Meszaros is one of the greatest philosophers that the historical materialist tradition has yet produced.” (9) Without agreeing, I do think that there are some very worthwhile things which Meszaros has written about the limits of reforming capitalism in its epoch of decline—particularly about the folly of using the state. It is a shame that Meszaros contradicts some of his best insights by endorsing statist and electoral policies in South America. In Venezuela, as in the US, Europe, and the rest of the world, really independent mass movements (with at least a minority fighting for revolution) are still what is needed.

(NOTE: At times, Marx did say that the British workers might be an exception, able to take over their state through the vote. This seems to be in contradiction to his other views on the state. Engels commented about such statements by Marx, “He certainly never forgot to add that he hardly expected the English ruling class to submit, without a ‘proslavery rebellion,’ to this peaceful and legal revolution.” [Quoted in Hook 2002; 292] In other words, Marx expected that a “peaceful and legal revolution” would set off an attempted right-wing counter-revolution, the way the U.S. slavemasters rebelled after Lincoln was legally elected. It does seem unlikely that the corporate rich would passively permit their wealth and power to be taken away merely because a majority voted to do so! So, in actuality, even an —improbable—“legal” revolution would not be all that peaceful and probably require a political transformation. Lenin wrote that he thought Marx’s electability exception for Britain no longer applied. Anarchists had never believed in this British exception.)

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