

# Lenin and the State of the Revolution

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**Abstract:** A detailed and unbiased reading of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* leads us to an unequivocal conclusion: the proletarian revolution that almost instantaneously dissolves the bourgeois state is accompanied by the establishment of a *transitional* socialist state that paves the way for communism. The socialist state is closely associated with the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat as a gradual *withering away* of the State as such. The socialist state dialectically undoes itself precisely through its consolidation. However, it also seems always to survive in some residual and thoroughly reconfigured form. Contrary to the allegations of contemporary communist thinkers such as Alain Badiou, for Lenin, “communism” and “state” are far from being incompatible concepts. Their juxtaposition is instead a necessary presupposition for the construction of communism. This article aims at analysing the theory of the socialist-communist transitional state as envisioned by Lenin, and at introducing an assessment of the political, economical, and anthropological temporality of this transition. I will mostly focus on *The State and Revolution*, which predates of a few months the revolution of October 1917, stressing its general consonance with Marx's ideas as exposed especially in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875). My working hypothesis is that this however ambitious manifesto cannot simply be labelled as “utopian”, in the sense that it would promptly be refuted by Lenin's subsequent course of action.

Keywords: Lenin; revolution; state; transition; socialism; communism; Marx; Engels

“There is not only a struggle *against* the state; the state itself is exposed as a *weapon of class struggle* [...] a proletarian weapon in the struggle for socialism and for the suppression of the bourgeoisie”  
(Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*)

“Genuine revolutionaries have most often broken their necks when they began to write ‘revolution’ with a capital R, to elevate ‘revolution’ to something almost divine”  
(Lenin, “The Importance of Gold”)

## 1. Introduction

A detailed and unbiased reading of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* leads us to an unequivocal conclusion: the proletarian revolution that almost instantaneously dissolves the bourgeois state – but not the bourgeoisie as a class – is accompanied by the establishment of a *transitional* socialist state that paves the way for communism. The socialist state is closely associated with the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat as a gradual – and on close inspection perhaps asymptotic – *withering away* of the State as such. The socialist state dialectically undoes itself precisely through its consolidation. However, it also seems always to survive in some residual and thoroughly reconfigured form. Contrary to the allegations of contemporary communist thinkers such as Alain Badiou,<sup>1</sup> for Lenin, “communism” and “state” are far from being incompatible concepts. Their juxtaposition is instead a necessary presupposition for the construction of communism.

This article aims at analysing the theory of the socialist-communist transitional state as envisioned by Lenin, and at introducing an assessment of the political, economical, and anthropological temporality of this transition. I will mostly focus on *The State and Revolution*, which predates of a few months the revolution of October 1917, stressing its general consonance with Marx's ideas as exposed especially in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875). In the near future, I also intend to scrutinise from the same perspective Lenin's writings and speeches subsequent to the October Revolution, which most often concern pressing military, economical, and administrative matters. Building on the present article, it will be a matter of showing how, in spite of a number of complications, “zigzags”, “retreats”, and counter-retreats<sup>2</sup> – as well as some sheer contradictions – mostly due to the capitalist reaction to the Bolshevik's seizure of power, they overall consistently adhere to the theory of the state advanced in *The State and Revolution*. Contrary to a wide consensus prevalent even among sympathetic readers – ranging from Edward Hallett Carr to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek<sup>3</sup> – my working hypothesis is therefore that this however ambitious manifesto cannot simply be labelled as “utopian”, in the sense that it would promptly be refuted by Lenin's subsequent course of action.

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1 See for instance A. Badiou, 2009, p. 28; A. Badiou and Gauchet, 2014, p. 50. I discussed this in detail in Chiesa 2017, pp. 127-150.

2 See for instance Lenin 1937c, p. 228, p. 281, p. 316, p. 340, p. 376; Lenin 1938, p. 138.

3 Carr refers to *The State and Revolution* as “the most Utopian of [Lenin's] writings” (Carr 1979, p. 4); Žižek claims that in his later writings Lenin “renounced the utopia of his *State and Revolution*” (Žižek 2001, p. 9); Jameson maintains that “there are wonderful utopian passages in *The State and Revolution*” (Jameson 2007, p. 64).

## 2. The State As Revolution

As made sufficiently clear by its subtitle, “The Marxist Doctrine of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution”, *The State and Revolution* does not simply oppose “state” and “revolution” as antithetical terms, whereby the latter would be deemed to constructively replace the former as a mere negative reference. “State” and “revolution” need to be articulated dialectically. Against Badiou's insistent claims (“Marx has never imagined a Marxist state”; the phrase “State of Communism” is a terroristic and disastrous oxymoron invented by Stalin<sup>4</sup>), for Lenin, there most definitely is a Marxist – and Marxian – doctrine of the state. In Lenin's own words, “our first task is to *restore* the true doctrine of Marx on the state”.<sup>5</sup>

In approaching *The State and Revolution*, the first methodological tenet to bear in mind is thus that this text primarily and intentionally amounts to a close reading of Marx and Engels. Lenin is here returning to the revolutionary kernel of their teachings in order to counter the reactionary readings of the “opportunists” and “former Marxists”, as he calls them (in short, Kautsky and the Second International, on the one hand, and the Mensheviks, on the other – who were at the time in power in Russia).

Theoretically, the crucial point is that, for Lenin, the violent “destruction” or “smashing” of the *bourgeois* state,<sup>6</sup> which he unrepentantly advocates against the revisionists, goes together with the emergence of a *socialist* state – roughly corresponding to the dictatorship of the proletariat as the *first* stage of communism – with which the “withering away” of the State in general only *commences*. To the extent that the State cannot simply be regarded as a bourgeois institution, since it is more deeply rooted in class difference, Lenin *does* positively theorize it in an innovative way precisely insofar as he privileges its gradual withering away over its direct destruction (which is simply an impossible anarchic and “left-communist” dream).

Or better, the *real* destruction of the State can be achieved only by means of a state that increasingly withers away *thanks to* its strengthening. Consequently, the immediate revolutionary destruction of the bourgeois state accomplished in October 1917 ultimately stands for nothing more than the preliminary, or at best initial, stage of a long-term process. In other words, only a new socialist state can *perpetuate* the revolution against the State. Only a new socialist state can rightly

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4 Badiou and Gauchet 2014, p. 50; Badiou 2015, p. 122.

5 Lenin 2009, p. 272.

6 See for instance *ibid.*, p. 274, pp. 292-293, p. 298, p. 309, p. 312, p. 358.

assess the dialectical *state of the revolution* and direct it against itself and the State as such. As Lenin puts it in a text of November 1918, which he pertinently introduces as an addendum to what he already formulated in *State and Revolution* (itself published as a pamphlet only in 1918), “revolution is a continuous desperate struggle”.<sup>7</sup> Revolution begins to take place as a – at first sight rather modest and uninspiring – passage from one kind of state to another: “The transitional stage between the state as an organ of the rule of the capitalist class and the state as an organ of the rule of the proletariat is *revolution*”.<sup>8</sup>

Let us analyse *The State and Revolution*’s key arguments more closely. For Lenin, the state is clearly *not* a necessary political formation. It is rather the product of the “irreconcilability of class antagonisms”.<sup>9</sup> The conciliation of classes – and hence the elimination of antagonistic class violence – would eliminate the state. More to the point, the state is an organ of the ruling class (currently, the bourgeoisie), i.e., a dictatorial instrument of the exploitation of the oppressed class (currently, the proletariat), that “stands above” society. Marxism thus aims at the destruction of the bourgeois state, which can only be achieved, following the concluding passages of *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The Communist Manifesto*, by means of a violent revolution (“the substitution of the proletarian state for the bourgeois state is impossible without a violent revolution”<sup>10</sup>). In other words, there is a basic irreconcilability between Marxism and Western parliamentary democracy.<sup>11</sup>

But if this is the case – if the *dictatorship* of the bourgeoisie as a state apparatus can be dealt with violently once and for all – how should we then understand Engels’s claim that “the state is not ‘abolished’, *it withers away*”?<sup>12</sup> Certainly not in the way in which the “opportunists” understand it, that is, by claiming that the state will gradually disappear once the socialist parties seize power through parliamentary elections – i.e. without a violent revolution. For Lenin – and this is an extremely important citation – “Engels speaks here of the ‘abolition’ of the *bourgeois*

7 Lenin 1937a, p. 117, p. 159.

8 Ibid., p. 215 (my emphasis).

9 Lenin 2009, p. 272.

10 Ibid., p. 285.

11 Žižek rightly highlights this point: “The key premiss of *State and Revolution* is that you cannot fully ‘democratize’ the State; that the State ‘as such’, in its very notion, is a dictatorship of one class over another; the logical conclusion from this premiss is that, *in so far as we still dwell within the domain of the State*, we are legitimately entitled to exercise full violent terror, since, within this domain, every democracy is a fake”, Žižek 2001, p. 192.

12 Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 281.

state by the proletarian revolution, while the words about its withering away refer to the remnants of the *proletarian state after* the socialist revolution”.<sup>13</sup>

*The State and Revolution* entirely revolves around Lenin’s dialectical explanation of the way in which the violent (as insurrectional) abolition of the bourgeois state establishes a proletarian state that as such, i.e. as a *state*, commences its own withering away (in this sense, it is always already a “remnant”) and that of the State in general. First, in violently seizing power and control over the means of production, as well as in eliminating the structural violence of the army and the police as instruments of state power, the self-acting armed organization of the population destroys the pre-existing state. Second, the proletariat nevertheless needs state power and violence to crush the resistance of the bourgeois exploiters; this is the preeminent function of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a, in Lenin’s words, “repressive force”.<sup>14</sup> But, third, this very state power and violence, which cannot simply hold to the ready-made bourgeois state, “immediately” begins to wither away.<sup>15</sup> The “essence of Marx’s doctrine of the state”<sup>16</sup> is therefore, for Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transition to a stateless society that will no longer know violence. Peaceful statelessness can be achieved only in “*complete communism*”.<sup>17</sup> But consequently, for the time being, “a Marxist is one who *extends* the acceptance of the class struggle to the acceptance of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. This is where the profound difference lies between a Marxist and an ordinary petty (and even big bourgeois)”.<sup>18</sup>

Lenin then asks the question: what is more concretely the proletarian state that replaces the bourgeois state? What does it mean to supersede the smashed state machine with a “new state machine” – as overall identifiable with the dictatorship of the proletariat, in spite of the fact that, in the course of the transition, the latter will include “an abundance of political forms”?<sup>19</sup> Lenin believes that Marx himself

13 Lenin 2009, pp. 281-282.

14 Ibid., p. 282. György Lukács praises Lenin for fully assuming it in no uncertain terms: “*The proletarian state is the first class state in history which acknowledges quite openly and un-hypocritically that it is a class state, a repressive apparatus, and an instrument of class struggle*” (Lukács 2009, p. 66).

15 Lenin 2009, p. 286.

16 Ibid., p. 294.

17 Ibid., p. 343 (my emphasis).

18 Ibid., p. 294.

19 Ibid., p. 299, p. 360, p. 295.

developed a cogent answer following the Paris Commune, which he saw as a gigantic historical experiment. In addition to the already mentioned substitution of the standing army with the armed people, in *The Civil War in France*, Marx – and Lenin agrees with him – singles out as crucial the maintenance of political representation, which should however be made easily revocable (on the one hand, “the way out of parliamentarianism is not the abolition of the representative institutions [...]”, but their conversion from “‘talking shops’ into working bodies”; on the other hand, “all officials [must] be elected and subject to recall”<sup>20</sup>). Marx and Lenin also stress the importance of the imposition of workmen’s wages for all public servants. In this way, what Lenin can explicitly describe as “the socialist reconstruction of the state” dialectically amounts at the same time to “something which is no longer really a state”.<sup>21</sup> To put it simply, the new state machine no longer merely stands “above” society as something “special”.<sup>22</sup>

Lenin initially spells this out with regard to the armed people: “it is still necessary to suppress the bourgeoisie and crush its resistance [...] but the organ of suppression is now the majority of the population, and not the minority, as was always the case under slavery, serfdom, and wage-slavery. And since the majority of the people *itself* suppresses its oppressors, a ‘special force’ for suppression is *no longer necessary*. In this sense the state *begins to wither away*”.<sup>23</sup> In short, some form of the state as an organ of the class rule of the proletariat is still needed, yet, at the same time and with the same movement, for the majority of the people (including not only the proletariat but also the mass of toilers it leads) the state is no longer alienated from society, and in this sense, it is no longer really a state.

### 3. Of Socialist Managers, Strictest Control, Equal Inequality, and the State of Democracy

In the rest of *The State and Revolution*, Lenin proceeds to provide a quite detailed discussion of both the socialist “reconstruction of the state” and its concomitant withering away. We can summarize here some of his main arguments and see how the same dialectic holds for different aspects of socialist society – as the first phase of communism – under the banner

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20 Ibid., p. 304, p. 301.

21 Ibid., p. 301, p. 303.

22 Ibid., pp. 275-77.

23 Ibid., p. 301. See also p. 320.

that socialism “simplifies” the state as an “inherited evil”:<sup>24</sup>

1. *Administration*. The socialist revolution does not give way to the disposal of what Lenin calls “managers”.<sup>25</sup> That is a vain “anarchist dream”.<sup>26</sup> But, the function of “accounting” will be performed in the socialist state “by each in turn” and, as such, will increasingly die out as “the *special* functions of a special stratum of the population” along with its associated grandeur.<sup>27</sup> This generalization of management is made possible by capitalism itself, which has greatly simplified administrative tasks thanks to technological innovations (Lenin speaks of the railways, the postal services, and the telephone); administration can already be reduced to “such simple operation of registration, filing, and checking”, and in this way it can be carried out by “every literate person” for a workman’s wage.<sup>28</sup> Lenin can thus speak, without contradiction, of the socialist state as one in which “the whole of society will have become a single office”, yet, at the same time, in such a state no one is a bureaucrat, because of the “equality of work and equality of pay”.<sup>29</sup> To put it simply, transitional universal bureaucracy is the only way out of bureaucracy. If the “essence of bureaucracy” lies in the fact that “privileged persons [are] divorced from the masses and *superior to* the masses”, then for the withering away of the state to take place “*all* shall become ‘bureaucrats’ for a time [...] so that, therefore, *no one* can become a ‘bureaucrat’”.<sup>30</sup>

2. *The economy*. The socialist revolution expropriates the capitalists and thus assumes control of production and

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24 Ibid., p. 306, p. 330.

25 Ibid., p. 307.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 302.

29 Ibid., p. 348.

30 Ibid., p. 355, p. 360. It is very tempting to read the recent neo-liberalist and austerity-driven “restructuring” of labour in Western economies, especially in sectors still partly controlled by the state (e.g. education and the health services), as a perversion of this Leninist programme: *everybody* must *become* bureaucrats (forced to micromanage useless tasks for an increasing amount of often non-remunerated time) so that *somebody* can forever *remain* a bureaucrat (as “privileged persons” who economically profit from managing precisely the imposition of micromanaging).

distribution. In this sense, the economy belongs to the whole of the working-people; bourgeois exploitation is terminated. Lenin claims that, after the proletarian insurrection, it is “quite possible” to bring about such a process “immediately, overnight”.<sup>31</sup> But, again, it would be a great mistake to think that this will also entail an overnight abolishment of the function of the state in the economy. This is where communism profoundly differs from anarchism. To begin with, in the socialist state as the first phase of communism “all citizens are transformed into the salaried employees of the state, which consists of the armed workers”.<sup>32</sup> In economic matters, the dictatorship of the proletariat as the state of the armed workers is also reflexively exercised over the same workers as employees of the state – surprisingly, here Lenin does not evoke any vanguard or party as separate from them.<sup>33</sup> As already outlined by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, the most urgent task for the defence of the revolution and the establishment of a truly classless society is indeed a rapid increase in the productive forces, which is certainly possible but can be achieved only by, in Marx and Engels’s words, “centraliz[ing] all instruments of production in the hands of the state”.<sup>34</sup> So, for Lenin, the fact that the working-people immediately become collective owners should be matched in the transition to the abolition of the state by “the strictest control, by society and by the state, of the amount of labor and the amount of consumption”.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. *Political representation and the question of democracy.*

As shown by the historical example of the Commune, the proletarian revolution entails a certain “reversion”

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31 Ibid., p. 348.

32 Ibid.

33 Daniel Bensaïd argues that “in *The State and Revolution* parties do indeed lose their function in favor of direct democracy, which is not supposed to be entirely a separate state” (Bensaïd 2007 p.156). I fully agree that the Bolshevik party has a marginal – or at best implicit – function in this pamphlet. Yet Lenin does not replace it with direct democracy (I will soon return to this question). Or better, direct democracy is central only to the extent that that the socialist state is indeed *partly* a non-separate state, or state that is no longer really a state (as the immanent dictatorship of the armed workers). However, the socialist state also remains separate – here as the employer of the same workers as salaried employees – and the party still looms in the background.

34 Marx and Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 286.

35 Lenin 2009, p. 345.

to – and renewal of – “primitive”, or direct, democracy.<sup>36</sup> However, the latter does not involve an anarchic abolition of political representation, but its conversion into what Marx called “working bodies”, through which, as Lenin specifies, parliamentarians are “directly responsible to their constituents”.<sup>37</sup> Here we should talk of “democracy without parliamentarianism”, in the sense that parliamentarianism is smashed as a “special system”<sup>38</sup> (especially because the representatives are easily recalled). Yet – and this is crucial – democracy, including proletarian democracy, is still for Lenin undoubtedly a *state*, i.e., as seen, a violent organ of class rule. As he spells out, “democracy is *not* identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a *state* which recognizes the subordination of the minority to the majority, *i.e.*, an organization for the systematic use of *violence* by one class against another”.<sup>39</sup> If democracy – including proletarian democracy – is necessarily a state, then it is in itself intrinsically violent. So much so that the proletarian democratic state (i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat as supported by a non-parliamentarian form of political representation) is one in which an “immense expansion of democracy” involving for the first time “the poor” – whereby the state begins in this sense to wither away – simultaneously imposes a “series of restrictions” on the former capitalist exploiters aimed at crushing their resistance against the revolution.<sup>40</sup> Lenin recalls and endorses Engels’s claim that “a revolution is the most authoritarian thing there is” and that “the victorious party, if it does not wish to have fought in vain, must maintain its rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries”.<sup>41</sup>

.....  
36 Ibid., p. 302.

37 Ibid., pp. 304-306.

38 Ibid., p. 306.

39 Ibid., p. 332.

40 Ibid., p. 337.

41 Ibid., p. 317.

It is here important to stress how Lenin counters the – today more than ever topical – “opportunists’” accusation that, on the basis of what we have just explained, the dictatorship of the proletariat would contradict democracy<sup>42</sup> (in spite of its expansion), and turns it against them. *Both* the dictatorship of the proletariat and *democracy* are nothing but an expression of the remnants of the state. With the withering away of the state, which is started precisely by the establishment of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat, *both* the dictatorship of the proletariat and *democracy* wither away.<sup>43</sup> What also withers away with them is, more generally, *politics* as such, at least as it has been conceived so far – and this in accordance with Marx’s view in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that “there will be no more political power properly so-called” in the classless society.<sup>44</sup>

The other vital, and usually underestimated, aspect we should emphasize in Lenin’s argument is that the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat as an inevitable transition to a classless society is not only a violent – and even terroristic, if needed – limitation of the freedom of the minority (i.e. the former exploiters) but also the last remaining obstacle to the equality of the *non-bourgeois majority* itself. In short, the first – socialist – phase of communism as the end of bourgeois exploitation and the establishment of “equal right” still presupposes *inequality*. Lenin draws here from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* and expands on it. Why would equal right equate with inequality? Because “every right is an application of the *same* measure to *different* people who, in fact, are not the same and are not equal to one another”.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, the socialist realization of “an equal amount of labor for an equal quantity of products” is quite bluntly, as Lenin concedes, “not yet communism”.<sup>46</sup> As Marx has it, to achieve complete communism, “right, instead of being equal, would have to be unequal”.<sup>47</sup> In other words – and this is important – right as such is at bottom “bourgeois right”.<sup>48</sup> From a legal perspective, socialism is then simply bourgeois right without the bourgeoisie – or, we may add, equal inequality. Lenin does not speak here of a violence of the democratic

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42 See *ibid.*, p. 364.

43 See *ibid.*, p. 282, p. 338.

44 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 286.

45 Lenin 2009, p. 341.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 342.

47 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 341.

48 *Ibid.* As Negri points out with regard to Pashukanis’s Leninist theory of law, strictly speaking, “there is no proletarian law” (Negri 2017).

dictatorship of the proletariat towards the proletariat itself, yet he describes this states of affairs as a “violation”<sup>49</sup> that basically entails injustice. To conclude, the first phase of communism – i.e. socialism – is thus necessarily violent towards the former exploiters and necessarily unjust towards the proletariat who, as armed people, limit the freedom of the former exploiters.

At this stage the inevitable question to be asked is: How does the *second* phase of communism (“complete communism”) differ from its socialist, and far from ideal, state-phase and its lingering violence and injustice? When can it be achieved? In terms of right and justice, which are as such inextricable from economic considerations, Lenin’s answer is straightforward: we need to move from “formal” to “real” equality.<sup>50</sup> Following once again Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* closely, this can more practically be grasped under the banner of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.<sup>51</sup> For this higher phase of communism to be reached two basic interrelated preconditions must be satisfied: first, the overcoming of the division of labour, primarily in terms of the antithesis between intellectual and manual labour (which cannot immediately be solved by the socialist state); second, on a more anthropological-ontological level, the realization that, at the level of the life of our species, labour is not merely a means to live but a “primary necessity of life” (this is a realization that by “developing” the “individual” would also at the same time enhance the productive forces).<sup>52</sup>

Lenin is convinced that socialism, as well as its remaining violence against the former oppressors and concomitant injustice towards the former oppressed, will eventually give way to complete communism. He is also adamant that, in communism, “the need for violence against people in general”, including the proletarian subjection of the minority to the majority, will “vanish”.<sup>53</sup> However, to achieve complete communism – and the dissolution of the *socialist* state – people will have to “*become accustomed* to observing the elementary conditions of social life *without force* and *without subordination*”.<sup>54</sup> In the end, what is at stake is an “element of habit” – whose acquisition may require “severe

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49 Lenin 2009, p. 341.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

51 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 343.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Lenin 2009, p. 333.

54 *Ibid.*

punishment”.<sup>55</sup> Lenin remains somewhat hesitant and vague with regard to the duration of this demanding process. On the one hand, he insists that complete communism is no utopia – precisely insofar as it is born out of the concrete historical existence of capitalism and the critique of it. Following Engels, he suggests that a “new generation” will suffice.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, he nevertheless speaks of a “rather lengthy”, or elsewhere “protracted”, transition.<sup>57</sup> We can be certain about the “gradual and spontaneous” socialist withering away of the state – for it is possible to anticipate it from within capitalism – but we are in no position to define “the exact moment” of the overcoming of socialism itself – for “no material is [yet] available”.<sup>58</sup>

#### 4. Marx’s “Little Word” and the Withering Away of the State

In *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918), Lenin is understandably outraged by Kautsky’s accusation that his theory of the state, as exposed in *The State and Revolution*, “rests upon a single word of Marx” – a passage from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in which he maintains that “between capitalist and communist society” lies “a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the *revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*”.<sup>59</sup> Lenin retorts that Marx and Engels “repeatedly spoke about the dictatorship of the proletariat, both before and after the Paris Commune” – they spoke about it “for forty years between 1852 and 1891”.<sup>60</sup>

While polemical statements like these are undoubtedly correct at face value, we should also bear in mind that Stalinism later used them to untenably justify an alleged seamless and “scientific” continuity between the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, *The State and Revolution*, and the

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55 Ibid., p. 333, p. 349.

56 Ibid., p. 333.

57 Ibid., p. 334, p. 344.

58 Ibid., p. 334, p. 338, p. 344. In an early essay on Stalin, Žižek proposes an anti-Stalinist resumption of the two phases of communism, which seems to be fundamentally in line with Lenin’s original arguments. “We could nonetheless make the formula about ‘the two phases of communism’ ours, on condition of introducing a supplementary opposition. The ‘first phase’ is the negation of capitalism ‘on its own level’, the negation of the capitalist position *in the field of common presuppositions*, hence its *specular* negation [...] On the other hand, the ‘second phase’ is the ‘negation of negation’; it is not an opposition that is specular to the starting point, but the negation of the *presuppositions* shared by the thesis and the antithesis: not only the negation of *alienated* production, but the subversion of productive economy *as such*” (Žižek 1977).

59 Marx 1933, pp. 44–45.

60 Lenin 1937a, pp. 119–120 (my emphases).

implementation of the Five-Year Plans – to which Lenin himself would have objected. As the editors of the 1932 English edition of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* write in their introduction, “it was precisely on the basis of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* that Lenin, in [...] *The State and Revolution* [...] developed that brilliant picture – based on real scientific insight – of the transition through Socialism to Communism, which the Seventeenth Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union laid down as the basis for [...] the building of a Socialist society in the Second Five-Year Plan”.<sup>61</sup>

Here I think it is vital to endorse an important specification Lukács made as early as 1924. On the one hand, Lenin not only “revived” Marx’s theory of the state, but he was alone in regaining the latter’s “theoretical heights”,<sup>62</sup> precisely insofar as he understood that the proletarian revolutionary attitude towards the state should *not* be confined to a “left-wing” struggle *against* the State (or, worse, a revisionist acceptance of and connivance with the bourgeois state). Yet, on the other hand, this revival did not primarily amount to “a philological rediscovery of the original teaching, nor a philosophical systematization of its genuine principle”<sup>63</sup> – however pressing these also were in Lenin’s declared intention (“our first task is to *restore* the true doctrine of Marx on the state” against renegades, opportunists, and anarcho-syndicalists).

According to Lukács, first and foremost, Lenin realised that, given the historical situation of Russia and the imperialist development of capitalism since Marx’s death, the question of Marx’s *theory* of the state – as the dictatorship of the proletariat – had to be extended to “its concretisation in everyday *practice*”.<sup>64</sup> More specifically, acknowledging the real actuality of the revolution (and this was his major contribution to Marxism; “the actuality of the proletarian revolution is no longer only a world historical horizon arching above the self-liberating working class, *but [...] revolution is already on its agenda*”<sup>65</sup>), Lenin also grasped the actuality of the problem of the *state* of the proletariat as an *immediate task*. Again, state and revolution are dialectically inextricable; the former is not simply replaced by the latter; and this awareness honestly, intelligently, and in part successfully translated into Lenin’s practical directives after the seizure of power in October 1917 (one somehow always tends to forget

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61 Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, “Introduction”, in Marx 1933, p. 18.

62 Lukács 2009, p. 59.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., p. 12.

that, shortly after writing *The State and Revolution*, he became a head of state...).

Going beyond Lukács, we should add that what Kautsky contemptuously regards as Marx's isolated "little word"<sup>66</sup> on the state already emphasises such an indissoluble link between revolution and the state. According to Marx, the transition period in which the state can be nothing but the dictatorship of the proletariat "*corresponds*" to the "period of the *revolutionary* transformation" of capitalist into communist society. However, it is also fair to admit that Marx did not systematise his insight – neither in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* nor elsewhere. Lenin can thus rightly claim that Marx spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat for forty years, but as proved by the very references he uses in *The State and Revolution*, Marx's remarks remain indeed scattered across a long period of time and may consistently and convincingly be interpreted together only with hindsight – that is, moving from the timely assumption that revolution is now really on the agenda – as well as by integrating them with Engels's (not always fully compatible) own pronouncements.

If we submit these references to a close textual reading, it is adamant that Lenin mostly derives the key idea of the gradual "withering away" of the socialist state, as distinct from yet dialectically correlated with the immediate abolition of the bourgeois state, from Engels. Yet Engels seems to be putting forward a different and quite utopian argument. In *The Origin of Family, Private Property and State* (1884) he first contends that, in its contemporary and parliamentary ("representative") form, the state duly amounts to an "instrument of exploitation of wage-labour by capital".<sup>67</sup> He then adds that the State "has not existed from all eternity",<sup>68</sup> whether as the dictatorship of the "democratic" bourgeoisie or as some other previous form of exploitative class rule. As we have seen, Lenin fully adopts these two points without modifying them.

But Engels also argues that, in bourgeois society, we are "rapidly approaching" a stage at which, due precisely to the contradictions internal to the development of capitalist production (in short, the growing centrality of the proletariat in it), the State as an expression of class rule will as such "inevitably fall".<sup>69</sup> More to the point, as further specified in *Anti-Dühring* (1878) in what Lenin himself deems to be a crucial passage, Engels clearly *equates* the proletarian seizure of "state

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66 Lenin 1937a, p. 119.

67 Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 278.

68 Ibid., p. 279.

69 Ibid., p. 280.

power" (i.e., the transformation of the means of production into "state property") with the "*end* [of] all class differences and class antagonisms" (whereby, significantly, the proletariat also "puts an end to itself").<sup>70</sup> Lenin's reasoning – implicitly but decidedly – always disputes this. For him, the proletarian seizure of the state only *intensifies* class differences and antagonisms; the bourgeoisie's resistance is organised *after* the overthrow of its dictatorship; and the most immediate task of the dictatorship of the proletariat as state power is therefore repressing the resistance of the former repressors.

Let me spell out this point from a slightly different perspective, since it is vital to understand Lenin's subtle, understated, and yet fundamental departure from Engels. For Engels, the proletarian state as the withering away of the state begins not only with the immediate abolition of the bourgeois state (which Lenin endorses in contrast to the revisionist stance), but also with the instantaneous abolition of *classes*. The beginning of the *proletarian* state thus amounts to its very conclusion. Engels could not be more explicit: the "first act" of the proletarian state (i.e., "the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society") is concomitantly "its last independent act as a state".<sup>71</sup> Although – as we will later discuss – this claim can be problematized, if not contradicted, by other passages from his work, strictly speaking, for Engels there is here no translational *state* that, in Lenin's words, somehow still "stands above society".<sup>72</sup> There is just the withering away, since, in overcoming class differences overnight, revolution also eliminates the basic presupposition for the State as such. The question to ask Engels would then be: *what* is it precisely that withers away in a supposedly already classless society?

Contrary to this stance, for Lenin, the first act of the proletarian state as the last act of the state as we have known it so far should *at the same time* be understood as the *first* act of a new *socialist state*, *within which* alone the *withering away* of the State can take place. According to Lenin, the first act of the socialist state (in his opinion, seizing political power) is to be followed by a series of other specific acts. These are indeed meant to be self-refuting in retrospect, since they are ultimately aimed at the abolition of classes, or statelessness, but the latter can be achieved only dialectically, that is, by *also* preserving the independence

.....  
70 Ibid. (my emphasis).

71 Ibid., p. 281.

72 Lenin 2009, p. 274. In a footnote to his excellent and greatly underestimated *Soviet Marxism*, Herbert Marcuse points this out in passing: "The continuation of the state in the first period of socialism is implied in the original Marxian conception" and also by Engels "as early as 1847". Yet, "Engels's statement in *Anti-Dühring* [...] seems to contradict this notion", Marcuse, 1958, pp. 87-88.

of the state as an agent. The expansion of democracy leading to its transformation into real equality requires the violent suppression of democratic parliamentarianism; the overcoming of bureaucracy demands the relentless imposition of universal accounting; mass control over the means of production necessitates the strictest organisational supervision.

Moreover, we would be mistaken – i.e. non-dialectical – if we regarded Lenin’s withering away of the state as a simple step-by-step process of *weakening* of the state after revolution (let us tentatively call this naïve option “revolutionary-progressive socialism”). The withering away of the state instead *concentrates* power in the new state’s hands, and consequently somehow also strengthens it. This is the case not simply in the sense that the dictatorship of the proletariat promptly needs state power to counter the always more circumscribed, desperate, and thus more resilient resistance of the former bourgeois oppressors (in the fields of politics, administration, and the economy alike), but also because, in parallel, the dictatorship of the proletariat as a state must be able to effectively turn its power *against itself* – and the party in particular. It is the socialist state that now stands above society.

As becomes always more evident in Lenin’s later writings, in the socialist state the protracted war against internal and external imperialists goes together with the purging of bureaucratic (i.e., basically inefficient, if not corrupt) party officials as sheer *state* directives. Yet at the same time, and without solution of continuity, these very actions dialectically enable the state to wither *itself* away. Eloquently, protecting “our state” means nothing other than “protecting the workers from their own state”.<sup>73</sup> And it is no coincidence if in the very period of so-called “war communism” (involving the hyper-centralised fight against the Whites as well as at least seven capitalist countries) and shortly before the first purges against “the Communists who *imagine* that they are administrators”<sup>74</sup> (of which he was the main initiator), Lenin pays an incredible amount of attention to the emergence of the *subbotnik* phenomenon.

The *subbotniks* are vanguard volunteers who, “having become *accustomed* to public duties”, work for free on Saturdays in the name of the “general good”.<sup>75</sup> Lenin reproaches those who abuse the word “communist”, since the expropriation of capitalists and the ensuing building up of socialism (as the withering away of the state) presents

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73 Lenin, 1937c, pp. 9-10.

74 Ibid., p. 319 (my emphasis).

75 Lenin, 1937b, p. 239 (my emphasis).

“nothing communistic yet”.<sup>76</sup> Only in the case of the *subbotniks* can we already appropriately speak of a “communism in fact”.<sup>77</sup> That is, they practically demonstrate that communism, as the “complete triumph” of socialism,<sup>78</sup> and the final *dissolution* of the State that accompanies it are indeed possible. Lenin also significantly specifies that the unpaid work of the *subbotniks* should nonetheless still dialectically be regarded as satisfying the “needs of the *state*” – since the universalization of the superseding of entrenched anti-social behaviours is a “work of decades”.<sup>79</sup>

We may thus conclude that the *state* that withers *itself* away after the political revolution carried out by the proletariat all in all amounts to a – in Lenin’s own words – “*cultural* revolution”<sup>80</sup> that anthropologically manages to change the capitalist, and more generally class-related, “habits” acquired by our species.

### 5. A Communist Future State?

In light of these considerations, Lenin has a strong point when, in his notebook of January-February 1917 entitled *Marxism on the State* (then largely incorporated in *The State and Revolution*), going against the grain of what has by now become an almost indisputable assumption, he notices that in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* “Marx looks much more ‘statesmanlike’ – if it is permissible to use this insipid expression of our enemies – than Engels”.<sup>81</sup>

In *The State and Revolution* Lenin tends to approach Marx’s theory of the state chronologically and aims at showing how it more and more calls for the dictatorship of the *proletariat* as a separate *class* (whose rule leads to the abolition of classes). Assessing and temporally complicating Lenin’s interpretation, which is very plausible but presented in a too linear fashion that runs the risk of glossing over some Marxian oscillations, we may say that it revolves around four main issues.

.....  
76 Ibid., p. 240.

77 Ibid., p. 241. More specifically, the “communist Saturdays” are – in line with Marx’s remarks in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* – a “communism in fact” since, as Robert Linhart observes, they advance a concrete overcoming of the distinction between intellectual and manual labour. They keep “the old proletariat that had passed to the army and the administration in contact with productive work”. Linhart’s Maoist reading interestingly also dwells on the most evident limit of this phenomenon; while “intellectual workers promptly became closer to manual work”, “there was no effort to elevate the intellectual content of manual work” (Linhart, 1976, p. 183, p. 189).

78 Lenin, 1937b, p. 241.

79 Ibid., p. 245 (my emphasis).

80 Lenin, 1937c, p. 408 (my emphasis).

81 Lenin, “Lenin on the Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in Marx 1933, p. 83.

First, Lenin treats what seems to him – and should be – uncontroversial: from *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) to the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), passing through *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), *The Civil War in France* (1871), and his 1871 letter to Kugelmann, Marx always advocated the inevitability of a violent revolution as a – in his words – “forcible overthrow”<sup>82</sup> of the bourgeois state.

Second, Lenin brings into play what, in opposition to his narrative, we should frankly regard as a tension in Marx’s pronouncements concerning the aftermaths of the proletarian revolution. On the one hand, as argued in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), in the place of the bourgeois state, the working class will install “an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism”.<sup>83</sup> The proletarian revolution engenders a classless society; “political power” as an “expression of antagonism” is in turn superseded;<sup>84</sup> and if this is the case, there are good reasons not to mention any kind of state. Yet on the other hand, in the contemporary *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx also unequivocally speaks of a “state, i.e., [...] the proletariat organised as the ruling class”.<sup>85</sup> Here the proletariat retains “political supremacy” and uses it “to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state”.<sup>86</sup>

I think we need to conclude that these two sets of statements remain irreconcilable, unless, of course, one tacitly identifies – as Lenin appears to be doing – the “association” that *will* exclude classes with the proletarian state in the course of its withering away. But such a reading seems forced and unsubstantiated by the sources under consideration. To say the least, why would then Marx adopt two distinct terms – “association” and “state” – instead of proposing a dialectical mediation between them, such as “state that is no longer really a state”? In my opinion, these relatively early texts present alternative options that can be merged only in retrospect when one articulates together the *different* stages of communism moving from the actuality of the revolution.

Third, Lenin does however concede that in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), after learning the practical lesson imparted by the failed revolution of 1848-51, Marx is hardly trying to elaborate some new form of proletarian *state* that replaces the bourgeois state. We should

82 Marx & Engels 2002, p. 258.

83 Marx in Lenin 2009, pp. 285-286.

84 Ibid., p. 286.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

thus infer, against Lenin, that the optimistic option ventilated in *The Poverty of Philosophy* – in short, direct classless communism – was left aside. But, for Lenin himself, Marx now also realises that this replacement is far more complicated, and drastic, than expected. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx would manage to come up with the “how” but not yet the “what” of the new state.<sup>87</sup>

With regard to the concrete “how”, beyond the “extremely abstract” argument made in the first edition of the *Communist Manifesto*,<sup>88</sup> the question in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is no longer simply the forcible overthrow of the bourgeois state, but – in Marx’s words – its definitive “smashing”.<sup>89</sup> In Lenin’s view, this smashing is most conclusively, and not coincidentally, expressed in Marx’s last preface to *The Communist Manifesto* (1872), which, following the Paris Commune, he thought should make his view on the matter absolutely clear and easily accessible: “*The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes*”.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the elimination of the bourgeois state is *final*, and there is no possibility for the proletariat to appropriate its apparatus in order to modify it.

Most importantly, Lenin takes notice of the fact that, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, the destruction of the state is to be *continued* after the seizure of power in a way that is, however, *far from straightforwardly negative*. According to Marx, Louis Bonaparte’s reactionary coup d’état already “*perfected* the parliamentary power, in order to be able to overthrow it”<sup>91</sup> – to the benefit of the *bourgeoisie*’s power, which was eventually reinforced. What the proletariat revolution must do is take one unprecedented step further, namely, “*perfect the executive power, reduce it to its purest expression, isolate it, set it up against itself as the sole target, in order to concentrate all its [revolution’s] forces of destruction against it [executive power]*”.<sup>92</sup> Lenin is unsurprisingly excited by this passage. Although Marx does not seem to grasp that the executive power to be perfected so that it can be destroyed is, at this stage, nothing other than the *revolutionary* executive power (revolution as the new state) that destroys *itself*, here state and revolution are already dialectical concepts. “Perfecting the executive power” (Marx) coincides by now with the

87 Lenin 2009, p. 290, p. 292.

88 Ibid., p. 289.

89 Ibid., pp. 289-292.

90 Marx & Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 297.

91 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 289 (my emphasis).

92 Ibid.

irreversible renunciation of “perfecting the state machine” (Lenin).

Fourth, Lenin finally singles out those passages in which Marx indeed opens the question of the proletarian state as, more specifically, the dictatorship of the proletariat’s *transition* to a classless society – which is in Lenin’s opinion the “what” of the new state. He gives great prominence to a letter to Weydemeyer (1852) and to *The Civil War in France* (1871). The former concisely formulates for Lenin “the essence of Marx’s doctrine of state”; in Marx’s words, “the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat” and “this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society”.<sup>93</sup> The latter describes in detail the new transitional state along the specific lines we already treated; moving from the concrete experience of the Paris Commune, the dictatorship of the proletariat should basically involve the replacement of the standing army with the armed people, the equal remuneration of public service at workmen’s wages, and the revocable election of public servants.

For Lenin, there is no doubt that Marx always remained a “centralist”, and that his post-revolutionary agenda does not in the least contradict his promotion of “national unity” – against anarchic federalism.<sup>94</sup> What Marx was still not able to convey is rather the “political forms” of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transitional state that is “bound to disappear”.<sup>95</sup> We may thus conclude that, according to Lenin, in Marx’s work we move from the question of the “how” of the proletarian state (the violent *smashing* of the bourgeois state already in part conceived as a dialectic between revolution and the state) to that of the “what” (the proletarian state’s *transition* to a classless and stateless society), and that the Bolshevik’s primary task is giving “political form” to the “what” at stake. This form cannot but be the *party* as a self-dissolving vanguard of the proletariat – although, in line with the marginalisation of the party in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin does not mention it explicitly.

Discussing the “what” of the proletarian state in Marx, Lenin also returns to Engels. In spite of his initial doubts in *Marxism on the State*, Lenin’s efforts are here aimed at demonstrating that, in the end, Marx and Engels held “identical” views on the matter.<sup>96</sup> I think we should contest this – even by just dwelling on the passages from their works cited by Lenin. In line with Marx, Engels does indeed speak of “the dictatorship

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93 Marx in Lenin 2009, p. 294.

94 Lenin 2009, p. 310.

95 Ibid., p. 312 (my emphasis).

96 Ibid., p. 334.

of the proletariat as the *transitional* stage to the abolition of classes and, with them, of the state” (in *The Housing Question* of 1872); of “the state as a *transitional* institution [...] with which the proletariat holds down adversaries” (in the letter to Bebel of 1875); and of the proletariat’s need for the state “after its victorious struggle for class supremacy” (in the introduction to *The Civil War in France* of 1891).<sup>97</sup> But Lenin does not acknowledge that these statements blatantly challenge the very passage from *Anti-Dühring* (1878) that introduces the – for him crucial – theme of the withering away. While, as seen, in the *Anti-Dühring*, Engels problematically identifies the proletarian seizure of power with the elimination of class struggle and differences, these other passages unquestionably presuppose their continuation and intensification – the abolition of classes first requires a transition; the *proletariat* has to hold down adversaries; the revolution installs proletarian *class* supremacy.

Lenin senses a contradiction in Engels’s argument but, instead of unravelling it, prefers to launch into a rather misleading tirade against “hair splitting criticism”.<sup>98</sup> He shows that there is no contradiction between the abolition of the state *advocated* in *The Housing Question* and its “overnight” abolition *opposed* in *Anti-Dühring*. One could not be more in agreement with Lenin on this point, but he misses the fact that the real deadlock in Engels’s outline concerns the abolition of classes, and not that of the state. In short, Lenin does not appreciate that it is as if in the late Engels there still persists the same tension we flagged up with regard to *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The Communist Manifesto*: can *classes* be abolished overnight by the revolution? If so, why would do we still need the *proletariat* organised as a ruling class?

The second and related issue to be problematized in the conclusion of *The State and Revolution* pertains to Lenin’s reading of *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* – which he rightly considers as Marx’s definitive text on the question of the proletarian state. As already discussed, beyond all his previous texts (including *The Civil War in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire*), in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx fully assumes the dialectical character of the state and revolution; again, the “revolutionary transformation” leading from capitalism to communism exactly “corresponds” to a “transition” during which “the *state* can be nothing else than the *revolutionary* dictatorship of the proletariat”.

This prompts Marx to explicitly speak here of two phases of communism, the first of which he calls “socialism” and vehemently

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97 Engels in Lenin 2009, p. 315, p. 319, p. 330 (my emphases).

98 Lenin 2009, p. 315.

disassociates from any kind of “free state”.<sup>99</sup> Not only, as also spelled out by Lenin, does Marx’s socialist state impose equal right as the right of *inequality* (for Marx, this is “unavoidable in the first phase of communist society”), but, perhaps even less idealistically, its concomitant task is distributing *poverty* “equally over the whole surface of society”.<sup>100</sup> Most importantly, although the socialist state is already no longer really an “entity” standing above society – and the ultimate objective of communism “consists in converting the state from an organ controlling society to one completely controlled by it” – this very society nonetheless amounts to nothing other than the “foundation of *the future state*”.<sup>101</sup> Marx also adds that the latter “applies to *any* future society”.<sup>102</sup> Hence we have to assume that it will still apply to the society that “completely controls” the state. If this were not enough, he then bluntly asks: “What change will the form of the state undergo in *communist society*?”<sup>103</sup>

Lenin does not overlook this question. It gives him a serious headache. In the notebook *Marxism on the State*, he observes: “Is there not a contradiction in this?”.<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, “it is clear” that the dictatorship of the proletariat, “the State of this period”, is a “transition from the State to no State”; on the other hand, “further on Marx speaks of ‘the future State of Communist society’!! Thus, even in ‘*Communist society*’ the State will exist!!”.<sup>105</sup>

In spite of such an abundance of question and exclamation marks, Lenin concludes that there is ultimately no contradiction in Marx. He proposes a linear threefold sequence that would allegedly solve the apparent contrast, which is then repeated much more quickly in *The State and Revolution* – where he also speaks in passing of Marx’s apparent recognition of “the need for a state even under communism”, yet “such a view would be fundamentally wrong”.<sup>106</sup> According to Lenin, what Marx really means is that we have, first, in capitalist society, a “State in the proper sense of the word”; second, during the transition – i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat – a “State of the transitional type (not a

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99 Marx 1933, p. 40, p. 43.

100 Ibid., p. 31, p. 40.

101 Ibid., pp. 43-44 (my emphasis).

102 Ibid., p. 44 (my emphasis).

103 Ibid. (my emphasis).

104 Lenin, “Lenin on the Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in Marx 1933, p. 86.

105 Ibid.

106 Lenin 2009, p. 334.

State in the proper sense of the word)”; finally, in communist society, “the *withering away of the State*”.<sup>107</sup>

I think this schema does not work at all. Lenin is here compromising his otherwise extremely persuasive understanding of the passage from capitalism to communism in terms of revolution and the state as *dialectical* notions. With some hermeneutic forcing, but not unfairly given the succinctness of Marx’s remarks, one could read his communist “future state” as the *socialist* state – since, after all, Marx is speaking from the standpoint of capitalist society, and, as Lenin reminds us, “the word ‘communism’ is also applicable to [socialism], providing we do not forget that it is *not* complete communism”.<sup>108</sup> But Lenin is not proposing this hypothesis – which would still have to account for the fact that the “foundation of the future state” applies to “*any* future society”. As made clear in *The State and Revolution*, for Lenin, Marx’s “future state in communist society” is instead “completely identical” to Engels’s *withering away of the state* as, however, referring here to a *post-socialist* phase – or at any rate one that is *subsequent* to the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>109</sup>

In other words, the main problem with Lenin’s attempt at systematising Marx’s – inspiring yet enigmatic – remarks is that, against all his other efforts, he is here compelled to neatly *distinguish the transitional state from the withering away of the state* (which evidently transpires from the threefold sequence reported above). And this leaves him exposed to a – by all means serious – political objection; a proletarian state of the “transitional type” that does not immediately begin to wither itself away actually still remains a state “in the proper sense of the word” – that is, identical, at least in form, to the capitalist state.

Paradoxically – yet, unbeknownst to him, also dialectically – the more Lenin tries to mitigate Marx’s “statesmanlike” indications for the sake of a supposedly perfect consistency with Engels’s much weaker (and, as seen, already as such puzzling) notion of the state, the more he *isolates* a second dictatorial phase from a yet to come third phase in which “the State is not necessary”. Obviously, the unintended consequence of such a highly abstract mistake is paving the way to a hyper pragmatic, and cynical, Stalinist appropriation of these debates, which is distant from Lenin’s intentions yet – one should also admit – not devoid of textual corroboration.<sup>110</sup>

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107 Lenin, “Lenin on the Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in Marx 1933, pp. 86-87.

108 Lenin 2009, p. 346.

109 Ibid., p. 334.

110 Stalin’s stance here does not so much correspond to an indefinite postponement of the passage from socialism to communism as to one for which, in Marcuse’s words, “communism will be introduced

I also believe Marx remains ambiguous. But he may well not be contradicting himself – although not in the way exposed by Lenin. In the sentence that immediately follows his most lucid formulation of the dialectic between the state and revolution we repeatedly quoted, Marx adds that the Gotha programme (which Lenin correctly identifies with an anticipation of Kautsky’s renegade revisionism) “has nothing to say” about the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat “nor yet about the future forms of the state in communist society”.<sup>111</sup> This seems to me a quite robust – albeit fragmentary – hint at the fact that the state as an “organ” is to be preserved in some thoroughly reconfigured yet never fully disposable form even when society has “complete control over it”. Arguably, Marx is here referring to a “higher phase” of (post-socialist) communism in which, among other things, the distinction between manual and intellectual labour has disappeared thanks to a “all round development of the individual” that changes his basic habits.<sup>112</sup>

Marx does not say anything else on the matter. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin limits himself to fleetingly pointing at the fact that, although complete “communism makes the state absolutely unnecessary”, one should not deny “the possibility and inevitability of excesses on the part of *individual persons*, or the need to repress *such excesses*”.<sup>113</sup> Beyond this shareable pessimism, I think the “future state of *Communist society*” will increasingly become for him a most pressing issue after the seizure of power of October 1917, and not merely for its residual repressive function. After all, the statesman Lenin has a profound awareness of how protecting the *state* amounts to protecting the *people* from their own state. This certainly applies for him to the dictatorship of the proletariat, but – against any remaining utopianism – it might well be extended to a classless society that, however tangibly glimpsed already on the day after the revolution, also continues to remain an asymptotic achievement. As Lukács conclusively puts it, Lenin’s revolution is a “revolutionary *Realpolitik*”; “in Lenin’s writings and speeches – as, incidentally, also in Marx – there is little about *socialism as a completed condition*. There is all the more, however, about the *steps* which can lead to its establishment”.<sup>114</sup>

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as a [state] administrative measure” (Marcuse 1958, p. 139).

111 Marx 1933, p. 45 (my emphasis).

112 Ibid., p. 31.

113 Lenin 2009, p. 339.

114 Lukács 2009, pp. 70-71.

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