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# On the occasion of its 100th anniversary, Explorations in the Russian Revolution

Part IV – Lenin’s Vision of the Bolshevik State

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aimed to establish the “strictest accounting and control” over the entire Russian economy and also, as the logical implication of his conception, to impose “iron discipline” over the entire population of the country. This was a vision of a mass, and highly disciplined, proletarian army, with Lenin, the only correct interpreter of Marxism and hence the embodiment of true “proletarian consciousness”, as commander-in-chief. Even under the best of circumstances, this would have been a blueprint for a bureaucratic nightmare: a state capitalist monstrosity presenting itself as “proletarian.” In the concrete circumstances of Russia at the time, that is, over three years of war; a collapsing economy (factories idle, people fleeing the cities, millions on the road trying to survive as best they could); the breakdown of social life (an explosion of crime, rampant vigilantism, an orgy of alcoholism); and looming famine – Lenin’s vision was a recipe for disaster.

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(\*Some statistics: In 1917, the population of Russia was 182 million, 85% of whom lived in rural areas. The total number of workers employed in industry and mining was 3.4 million. The population of Petrograd, the capital and the country's largest city, was 2.4 million, of whom roughly 400,000 were industrial workers. Source: S. A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917- 1918*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.)

## Conclusion

It has been my purpose that show that Lenin's conception of the state the Bolsheviks intended to establish once they had seized state power does not represent the libertarian proletarian vision that it has often been claimed to be. It is not a state in the process of "withering away." It is not a state that is "no longer a state in the proper sense of the term." It is not a vision of a flexible, de-centralized, truly democratic political arrangement that might have enabled the Russian workers, peasants, and people of Russia to cooperatively manage the economy and all of society. Instead, basing himself on Marx' and Engels' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, particularly their insistence that this required the centralization of all the means of production in the hands of the state, and his belief in the scientific nature - and hence, certainty - of Marxism, Lenin envisioned building a massive, nation-wide bureaucratic apparatus. This "bureaucratic machinery", built around the soviets and other popular organizations and supposedly controlled from below, would be organized on militaristic principles - "strict subordination" and "iron discipline" - with the workers as shock troops, and would manage a completely centralized state-owned economy: all citizens reduced to employees of one national syndicate, organized along the lines of a state-capitalist monopoly. With this apparatus as an organizational extension of the Bolshevik Party and based on the principle of "democratic centralism", Lenin

Yet, in putting forth this daring strategy, Lenin was proposing, in fact, to establish, even if only temporarily, a revolutionary dictatorship of a small minority of the population of Russia over the rest of the Russian people. This undemocratic situation was to be mitigated by Lenin's belief that the proletarian dictatorship would be able to count on the at-least passive support of the majority of the peasants, who constituted over 80% of Russia's population. Yet, Lenin knew that this support, already tenuous, would be temporary, because he recognized that the peasants, deeply attached to the land that they and their families had farmed for generations, were likely to be militant opponents of the Bolsheviks' (and in fact all Marxists') conception of socialism – the complete and total ownership and control of the economy, down to the “last pood of grain”, by the state. (Although in 1917, Lenin did promise not to expropriate the small peasants, in light of the long-standing Marxist commitment to the complete centralization of the means of production in the hands of the state, the peasants might have had good reasons to be suspicious.) To make matters worse, the Russian working class did not even constitute a majority of the population in the cities.\* So, right from the beginning, even under the most ideal circumstances, that is, the entire working class united behind the Bolshevik strategy (which was never in fact the case), establishing the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in Russia meant constructing a dictatorship of a tiny minority over the majority of the urban population and the even larger majority of the peasants, in other words, over the vast majority of the people of the country. This was to be justified by the Marxist proposition that the proletariat is the only consistently revolutionary class, that it is a class that is destined, by its position within capitalist society and by the “laws of motion” of that system, to overthrow capitalism and establish international socialism. In Lenin's view, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, even in circumstances in which it did not constitute the majority of the population, meant, by definition, the “establishment of democracy.”

When the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in Russia and seized state power on October 25, 1917, they established what they variously called a “Workers' and Peasants' Government”, a “Government of the Workers and Poor Peasants”, and a “Government of the Workers and Laboring Peasants.” In theoretical terms, they considered it to be the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”

Revolutionary Marxists of various kinds consider the early Bolshevik regime to have been a “workers' democracy” which, had it not had to contend with the counterrevolutionary and imperialist forces arrayed against it and had proletarian revolutions broken out in Europe as the Bolsheviks predicted, would have led Russia to become a truly democratic socialist society. This assessment is based, to a considerable degree, on their interpretation of Lenin's conception of the state the Bolsheviks aimed to establish, as laid out in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*, and in other writings written in the summer and fall of 1917.

It is my contention, however, that, even had events evolved as Lenin and the other Bolsheviks expected, the outcome would not have been a democratic workers' government but instead a bureaucratic, authoritarian, even totalitarian, regime similar to the one that actually emerged. This is because I believe that Lenin's conception of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is itself bureaucratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian. To see this, it will be necessary to look closely at *The State and Revolution* and at the other works in which Lenin laid out his plan. However, to make sense of them, we first need to look at the theoretical background in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that served as Lenin's point of departure and on which he based his own conception.

## The Dictatorship of the Proletariat – Marx’ and Engels’ View

As many people know, both the term and the concept of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” were coined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The notion was central to their revolutionary program and strategy, and clearly differentiated their views from those of other socialist thinkers, particularly, the anarchists.

Marx’ and Engels’ conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat evolved over time. However, two major phases can be identified, divided by the Paris Commune of 1871. In the first period (from late 1847 to early 1871), while Marx and Engels insisted that the proletariat/working class should seize political power, they left vague the actions the workers needed to take vis a vis the existing, capitalist, state; specifically, they left open the idea that the workers might be able to take over the capitalist state and use it for their own purposes. In the aftermath of the Commune, however, their views on this and related questions became much more defined. (This pertained to the countries of continental Europe. Marx and Engels continued to believe that in England and the United States, where, in their view, there were no militarist cliques and the state bureaucracies were small, the workers might be able to come to power peacefully, through the electoral process). So important was the Commune to the development of their position that Marx and Engels saw fit to make a correction to *The Communist Manifesto*, written 25 years before. In what Lenin described as the “last preface to the new German edition of the Manifesto, dated June 24, 1872”, Marx and Engels wrote: “...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’...” (*The State and Revolution*, Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 25, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964, p. 414.) The words in single quotation marks are from Marx’s book on the Commune, *The*

steeled in the class struggle that would lead up to the proletarian socialist revolution. Eventually, on a state-by-state basis, the international capitalist system would be overthrown and communism established on a world scale. This orthodox perspective suggests that the workers in countries in which capitalism is not fully developed should not attempt to carry out socialist revolutions but should instead seek to support bourgeois revolutions in which the capitalist class would seize power, establish bourgeois states, and create the conditions for the freest and fullest development of capitalism. Only after a considerable period of time, during which capitalist production would create the economic prerequisites for establishing socialism, should the workers in these countries attempt to carry out socialist revolutions and seize power for themselves. (This was the perspective of the Mensheviks.)

Lenin’s strategy was a radical (it would probably be more accurate to say “revolutionary”) break with this perspective. (In fact, Lenin’s approach, in broad outline, was first raised by Leon Trotsky and Parvus [Alexander Helphand], at the time of the 1905 revolution, under the term “the permanent revolution.”) Lenin based his new perspective on his analysis of the capitalism of his day, as laid out in his pamphlet, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in 1916. Without going into details, it is sufficient to say that Lenin believed that, beginning with (and as exemplified by) World War I, the capitalist system had entered into a profound, systemic, international crisis. Such a crisis would make possible, not gradual, state-by-state proletarian revolutions, but more or less simultaneous revolutions in a number of countries and eventually on a world scale. In this context and because of the unique political circumstances in Russia, Lenin saw the Russian workers as leading the way politically, seizing state power and establishing their dictatorship, and seeking to hold on until proletarian revolutions broke out in Germany and in other advanced capitalist countries, eventually leading to a truly international revolutionary transformation of society.

Bolshevik leaders, this apparatus would be used not only against the capitalists, the landlords, and their allies and hangers-on, but also against those members of the oppressed classes, the peasants and even the working class itself, who do not agree to subordinate themselves to the “iron discipline” of the leaders, who do not agree to obediently follow the policies, decrees, and orders of the supposedly “proletarian” leadership?

Finally, Lenin’s insistence that the Russian workers had to seize power in Russia, a semi-medieval society whose capitalist economy was still in its infancy, represented a substantial departure from what was then Marxist orthodoxy, specifically, the conception adopted by the Second (or “Socialist”) International under Engels’ intellectual leadership. This position was that the proletarian revolution would and had to occur first in the advanced capitalist countries in which the economic, social, and political conditions were ripe for the establishment of socialist society. These conditions were, first, the existence of modern industry based on the most advanced technology, in which the process of the concentration and centralization of capital was highly advanced, and in which the trusts and the state had already introduced elements of economic planning. Only in such economies would it be feasible to nationalize the means of production and move to a centrally planned economy. Only this, in turn, would make possible the rapid development of the means of production that would eventually eliminate relative scarcity, the material basis for the competitive, dog-eat-dog, social relations that characterize capitalism. And only this would make possible overcoming the divisions between mental and manual labor and between town and country, and thus lay the basis for a planned, cooperative, communist society. The second condition necessary for the establishment of socialism was implied by the first, specifically, the existence of an industrial working class that would constitute the majority, or close to a majority, of society, and which would be disciplined by working cooperatively in large industrial enterprises and politically educated and

*Civil War in France*. (Note: In the interests of convenience, throughout this article, I have eliminated the emphases, printed in italics, that Marx, Engels, and Lenin often utilized in their writings.)

In what follows, I will present and analyze what I consider to be Marx’ and Engels’ mature, post-Commune, position, since this is the one on which Lenin based his own conception.

Marx and Engels believed that the fundamental strategic task of the working class in any given country is to seize state power, smash the capitalist state (particularly its bureaucratic and military apparatuses), and replace it with a state of its own, what they called the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” Although Marx and Engels did not describe this proletarian state in great detail, they did make their overall notion of it clear. At the risk of simplification, I will list its central characteristics:

1. The establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat is inevitable; it is the logical and necessary outcome of the class struggle under capitalism (and all history). Or, as Marx wrote: “... the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat...” (Marx, letter to Weydemeyer, *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 411.)
2. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a state. Although four years after the Paris Commune, Engels proposed, in a private letter to August Bebel, the leader of German Social Democrats, that was only made public in 1911 (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 440.), that he, Marx, and their followers refer to the post-revolutionary state as a “community”, Marx and Engels publicly remained loyal to their previous terminology: the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is (and has to be) a state.
3. The principal tasks of this dictatorship are to suppress the capitalists (and, where they still exist, the other oppressing

classes), nationalize the means of production, and proceed to construct the class-less and state-less communist society.

4. The dictatorship of the proletariat is centralized, based on the nationalization of the means of production. Under it, the workers are to move toward the establishment of a planned economy (although Marx and Engels never clarified their views about who is to do the planning and according to what principles such planning is to occur).
5. The dictatorship of the proletariat is democratic. It represents, in Marx' and Engels' various phrases, a "state of the armed workers", the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", and the "establishment of democracy." Its establishment means to "win the battle of democracy." (*The Communist Manifesto*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 402.) Because of this, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not a state "in the proper sense of the term." All previous states were instruments of tiny minorities which ruled over, oppressed, and exploited the vast majority. In contrast, the dictatorship of the proletariat is an instrument of the vast majority, who will use it to suppress the former ruling minority and to establish the conditions for the emergence of communism.
6. The dictatorship of the proletariat is not only democratic in this general sense; it also entails democratic decision-making by the workers themselves.
7. Marx and Engels based their mature conception of the proletarian dictatorship on the experience of the Paris Commune. The Commune was established in the aftermath of the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and in the context of the political and economic disarray the conflict brought in its wake. Facing starvation, in March 1871 the workers and other plebian elements of Paris, led by the Cen-

begin and end work, at precise times and by the need to subordinate their labor to the "iron" rhythms of assembly lines and other production mechanisms. Yet, discipline is a double-edged concept. To be more precise, self-discipline (or voluntary discipline) is one thing; discipline that is externally imposed is quite another. What might start out as self-discipline, can, under certain circumstances, morph into something else, namely, the tyranny of those at the top of a political and economic hierarchy over those beneath them, and especially over those at the bottom.

Fifth, Lenin's belief that the transition from capitalism to the classless society of communism would take an entire historical period, which he elsewhere described as an "epoch of wars and revolutions", implies that, in his view, the dictatorship of the proletariat, in Russia and in other countries, would last for a long period of time, indeed, for an entire historical epoch. If so, then the dictatorship, based on the new "bureaucratic machinery", that the armed workers are to create and control, would not be the temporary, almost fleeting, phenomenon that seems to be implied by some of Marx' and Engels' (and even Lenin's) vague and ambiguous formulations – a state that is "not a state in the proper sense of the term", a state that is in the process of "withering away" – but a long-standing, bureaucratic state apparatus, a kind of mass, hierarchical, combat organization, that, Lenin believed, the proletariat would wield in its fateful struggle against the capitalists and the other oppressing classes. Can anyone but a confirmed (and dogmatically-blinded) Leninist seriously believe that such a militaristic apparatus, based on "democratic centralism", "iron discipline", and strict subordination, could actually be controlled by the broad layers of the workers, that is, by the working class as a whole? Isn't it much more likely to be controlled by those who sit at the top of this enormous, nation-wide, "bureaucratic machinery", specifically, in the case of Russia, the Bolshevik Party, and in fact, by the leaders of the party? And isn't it possible, even likely, that if political and economic developments did not proceed as envisioned by the



ants, but eventually, such individuals would become, in their lifestyle and their social attitudes, not workers at the bench or peasants tilling their fields, but full-time bureaucrats. In fact, such a “proletarian” and “peasant” bureaucracy did emerge in Russia. It was to provide the mass base for Stalin and his regime.) And, I would argue, this would be the case even if proletarian revolutions did break out in Western Europe and were both able and willing to provide substantial economic aid to economically underdeveloped Russia. Moreover, establishing the “strictest accounting and control” would require not merely keeping track of all economic products (down to the last pood of grain), but also keeping tabs on all the human beings involved in the production, distribution, and sale of these products. It would thus be a logical, and short, step to the establishment of internal passports, workbooks, and other measures designed to restrict the independent movement of the population, including the workers and peasants themselves.

Fourth, Lenin believed that for the revolution to succeed, the workers would require “iron discipline.” In the immediate aftermath of the October seizure of power, Lenin praised the workers for the unity, solidarity, and discipline they had displayed in carrying out the revolution. Like his insistence on the need to establish the “strictest accounting and control,” this was a theme Lenin kept returning to in the months after October. And it, too, was a reasonable deduction from the writings of Marx and Engels. One of the chief reasons why Marx and Engels considered the proletariat to be the only consistently revolutionary class, the only class capable of overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism, is that they believed that the working class, in contrast to the peasants and other non-proletarian classes, would be trained in collective action and disciplined by the capitalist production process itself, which they saw as moving toward the formation of ever-larger industrial establishments employing ever-larger armies of workers. Such “proletarian discipline” would be instilled, for example, by the requirement that the workers be at their work stations, and

tral Committee of the National Guard, rose up, seized control of the city, and ruled it for over two months (March 18-May 28). Eventually, the city was invaded by the French army, and in extremely brutal fighting, the Commune was overthrown and the Communards massacred. (One recent estimate is that 10,000 were killed: *La Commune de 1871*, by Jacques Rougerie, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2014). While it lasted, the Commune consisted of municipal councilors elected by universal (male) suffrage from the various wards of Paris. It was a working, not a parliamentary, body, handling both legislative and executive tasks, thus eliminating a professional state bureaucracy. All its members were workers or what Marx called “acknowledged representatives of the working class.” Various “commissions” were established to manage the affairs of the city. All officials, including the councilors and the judicial and educational functionaries, were paid no more than an average worker’s salary; they were all elected, responsible, and subject to immediate recall. The Commune passed decrees abolishing the standing army and the police. All male residents of Paris were required to join the National Guard, thus establishing a workers’ militia. The Commune took other radical steps, such as the complete separation of church and state, the abolition of the death penalty, the establishment of a 10-hour workday, and the abolition of night work for bakers.

8. Seen in the context of this history, the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” to describe the proletarian state has a somewhat metaphoric and essentialist character. Since, according to Marxist theory, all states are, at bottom (that is, in their essence), dictatorships of one class to rule over others, the state the workers establish is (essentially) a dictatorship. Thus, Marx and Engels’ use of the term “dictatorship of the

proletariat” did not mean that, in their view, the proletarian state was to be a dictatorship of one party or one person.

9. According to Marx’ and Engels’ projection, in the first stage of communist society, the workers (and everybody else, who, because of the nationalization of the means of production, have become workers) are to be paid according to the principle: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his work.” In other words, all members of society are to receive salaries that are proportionate to how much they produce. This principle (basically, piece-work) is a carryover from and a legacy of capitalist society; it is a form of what Marx and Engels called “bourgeois right.” (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 465.) Although on a formal level, the principle represents equality and, hence, justice, on a more concrete level, it is unfair and unjust, since people’s abilities and needs differ. Moreover, according to Marx and Engels, for as long as the workers need to enforce this principle, they require a state to do so.
10. Eventually, as the collective and planned economy becomes increasingly productive, as relative scarcity and the division between mental and manual labor are overcome, and as the habits of collective and cooperative life become ingrained in the population, society moves toward the establishment of full communism. This class-less and state-less society will be based on the principle: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”
11. As this occurs, the proletarian state “withers away.” The state is not dismantled or abolished, it dies of its own accord.

view, would be under the direct control of the soviets and the other mass democratic organizations of the workers and the peasants.

The need to establish the “strictest accounting and control” over the production, distribution, and sale of all goods, “down to the last pood (36.11 lbs.) of grain”, was a constant refrain of Lenin’s in the period leading up to and after the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power. But imagine what this means! Russia at that time was (and still is today) an enormous country, by far, the largest in the world. From north to south, it covers five distinct geographic belts (for those who are interested: tundra, taiga, forest, steppe, and desert) and, at the time of the revolution, 11 time zones. (In contrast, the continental United States has four.) To establish the “strictest accounting and control” over the production, distribution, and sale of all goods (down to the last pood of grain) in a country as large as this would require a bureaucratic apparatus of enormous proportions, far larger than the Tsarist state bureaucracy Lenin pledged to smash, one staffed by tens of thousands of people who would have to handle (fill out and sign) enormous quantities of paper forms. Lenin argued that, under the control of the soviets, the job of ensuring the “strictest accounting and control” could be reduced to such simple tasks that even an ordinary worker could perform them. But in this he was either delusional or dishonest. As he well knew, many workers (and a majority of the peasants) were neither literate nor numerate, and many of those who were literate and numerate were barely so. Also, establishing and maintaining the “strictest accounting and control” over the production, distribution, and sale of goods would require, not part-time workers, splitting their time between their regular jobs and their soviet tasks (and subject to immediate recall), as Lenin described, but full-time state officials (that is, bureaucrats), many if not most of whom, at least in the early stages of the revolutionary regime, would be former Tsarist office-holders or members of the intelligentsia. (Of course, after some period of time, during which the new government would educate the population, such officials might well be recruited from among the workers and even the peas-

machinery.” However, in light of Marx’ and Engels’ discussions of the continued existence of the state after the workers’ insurrection and, in particular, their insistence that the workers need a state to enforce the “bourgeois right” of being paid according to one’s work, this was, I believe, a reasonable deduction on Lenin’s part.

Third, Lenin’s conviction that one of the main tasks of the “bureaucratic machinery” that the workers, upon their seizure of power, needed to set up was to establish the strictest “accounting and control” of the economy, was also a logical deduction of Marx’ and Engels’ conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In Marx’ and Engels’ view, one of the advantages of socialism, as they conceived it, was that under such a system, the economy could be planned. Specifically, establishing a centrally-planned economy was the main way that society, under the rule of the working class, would eliminate the “anarchy of production” that was characteristic of capitalism and which was one of the chief causes of the periodic, and extremely destructive, crises that plagued the system. In fact, Lenin had a fairly specific conception of what this “bureaucratic machinery” would look like. In his pamphlet, *The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, which was written after *The State and Revolution* but before the October Insurrection, Lenin laid out his main ideas. These included a series of compulsory measures directed not only against the capitalists and the bankers, such as the nationalization of the banks and the compulsory formation of industrial syndicates which were to be united in one national syndicate, but also against all other classes, including the peasants and workers. Among these latter measures were: the compulsory unionization of all members of society; the compulsory organization of all members of society into consumer cooperatives; the insistence that all members of society be subject to compulsory labor, or what Lenin called “universal labor conscription.” (*The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 25, op. cit., p. 359.) The result would be the formation of a nation-wide administrative/bureaucratic apparatus that, in Lenin’s

## Critical Remarks on Marx’ and Engels’ Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

From an anarchist point of view, there are serious problems with Marx’ and Engels’ perspective. The most obvious one is this: Marxists insist that the only way to abolish the state (in general) is by smashing the existing (capitalist) state and replacing it with a new, proletarian, one. Moreover, this new state is to be extremely centralized and powerful, since it will be based on the nationalization of the entirety of society’s means of production and on the fact that, as a revolutionary dictatorship, it will not be bound by any legal norms. Once established and the old ruling classes eliminated, this revolutionary dictatorship will, according to Marx’ and Engels’ theory, eventually “wither away.” Those of us who do not subscribe to the Marxist variant of Hegelian dialectics might be permitted to be skeptical. And, so it seems to me, the results of history bear out this skepticism. The outcomes of all Marxist-led revolutions have not been the elimination of the state, one of the proclaimed goals of Marxists, but the establishment of monstrous state-dominated regimes that attempted not only to manage all the economic, social, and political affairs of society but also to control the thought processes of each and every one of their citizens. To begin to grasp why and how this happened, it is worth looking at Marx’ and Engels’ notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat in more detail.

First, Marx’ and Engels’ attempt to appropriate the legacy of the Paris Commune is questionable, on several grounds.

1. The uprising that created the Commune was not carried out by the “proletariat”, in the Marxist sense of the term. Such a proletariat, that is, an army of mostly unskilled laborers employed in large industrial establishments, hardly existed in France at the time and was not to exist on any significant scale for at least two decades. Instead, the vast majority of Parisian workers were skilled, semi-skilled, and un-

skilled workers working in small workshops, work crews, or as individual artisans. Moreover, in carrying out the insurrection, such workers were joined by other lower-class elements, including small businesspersons. Among the leaders of the Commune were intellectuals of a variety of ideological persuasions, including radical republicans, reformist and revolutionary socialists, and different types of anarchists; very few, if any, of these figures were Marxists.

2. The Commune did not, in fact, smash the bourgeois state (although, judging from its own structure, it is reasonable to assume that it would have if it could have). During the course of the war, the French government had abandoned Paris and established itself first in Bordeaux, in the southwest of the country, and then in Versailles, the residence of the French monarchs from the time of Louis XIV, located about 20 miles northwest of Paris. The government continued to rule the part of the country that was not under occupation by the Prussian army through the centralized bureaucratic apparatus that remained intact. Most important, the government retained full control of the army, which would eventually, under the watchful eyes of the Prussian army that surrounded most of Paris, invade the city and overthrow the Commune.
3. The Commune did not nationalize the means of production. It had no power outside of Paris, and even within the city, it left economic establishments in the hands of their owners. The closest it came to nationalizing property was to authorize workers in enterprises that had been abandoned by their owners to take over and run them cooperatively.
4. The political vision of the Commune, to the degree that it had time to elaborate one, was decidedly decentralist, specifically, a network of regional and local communes, down to the level of the villages, each of which was to have maximum

3. Finally, Lenin argued that the Russian working class, even though it represented only a tiny minority of the population of the country, could and had to seize power and establish its revolutionary dictatorship, as the first stage of an international socialist revolution. In his conception, the workers in Russia, where political conditions were ripe, would start the revolution, which would, as political conditions matured elsewhere, shortly be followed by revolutions in Germany and other countries of Western Europe.

## **Critical Remarks on Lenin's Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat**

First, although the soviets have often been touted by Marxists as an intrinsically democratic and proletarian structure, this is not quite the case. As I discussed in earlier articles, the soviets were not the purely spontaneous creations of the workers, soldiers, and peasants; they were also, at the least, semi-hierarchical in structure. While, under certain circumstances, they might have served as the basis for a truly worker- and peasant-run society, they might also, under other circumstances, have served as the basis for the establishment of the rule of revolutionary intellectuals and bureaucrats over the workers, peasants, and other members of society. A great deal depended on whether the soviets retained the fluid and highly de-centralized structure they had in the period between the February Revolution and the October Insurrection or whether they were centralized and thus turned into an organizational apparatus under the control of the Bolshevik Party. And, as we have seen, the Bolsheviks were fervent advocates of centralization.

Second, although Marx and Engels insisted that the working class, in the aftermath of a successful proletarian revolution, needed to establish a state, they did not, to my knowledge, ever explicitly state that the workers should create a new "bureaucratic

9. Lenin recognized that the state that continues to exist during the first phase of communism (socialism) and that enforces “bourgeois right” in the distribution of consumer goods is, in fact, a bourgeois state. “Of course, bourgeois right in regard to the distribution of consumer goods inevitably presupposes the existence of the bourgeois state, for right is nothing without an apparatus capable of enforcing the observance of the standards of right.

“It follows that under communism there remains for a time not only bourgeois right, but even the bourgeois state, without the bourgeoisie!” (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 471.) In other words, the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, in Lenin’s conception, is a bourgeois state, although one controlled by the armed workers.

1. Lenin argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat and the bureaucratic machinery through which it manages the economy can be controlled from below by the workers and peasants, not only through the soviets, but also through the other mass democratic organizations, such as the trade unions, and through periodic conferences of the employees of the various enterprises where they worked. Such rank and file control would also be made effective by the fact that all functionaries would be paid no more than an average worker’s salary and be subject to immediate recall.
2. Lenin believed that the dictatorship of the proletariat would last for the “entire historical period which separates capitalism from ‘classless society’, from communism.” (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 413.) This period will be one of “unprecedentedly violent class struggle in unprecedentedly acute forms.” (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 412.) Consistent with this, Lenin admits that the “withering away” of the state “will obviously be a lengthy process.” (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 457.)

local autonomy. This reflected the fact that key leaders of the Commune were followers of the mutualist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and other anarchists, who advocated this type of decentralized social structure. In contrast, Marx and Engels were militant centralists, reflecting their view that the logic of capitalist development was to concentrate and centralize the means of production in ever fewer hands and eventually under the control of the state. In their writings on the Commune, Marx and Engels fudged this crucial issue. Although they admitted that, in the Communards’ sketch of their plan for the political structure of the country, “very few” tasks were to be left to the central government, they simply asserted that this was consistent with centralism because “national unity was not to be broken.” (Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 427.)

5. All this suggests that, despite Marx’ and Engels’ claims, the Commune was not quite the model of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, as they conceived it.

Second, the notion that the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat (or, in fact, any other event in history) is inevitable is absurd. It reflects an archaic conception of science that, in light of the development of quantum mechanics, modern genetics, and other scientific developments, can no longer be reasonably sustained. It is also (as I discuss in my book, *The Tyranny of Theory, A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism*) one of the main sources of the authoritarianism and totalitarianism that characterizes Marxist ideology and the Marxist movement as a whole.

Third, the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a state that embodies the direct and democratic rule of the entire working class is a contradiction in terms. As a centralized apparatus, particularly one that is as centralized as the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in Marx’ and Engels’ conception, the state can only be

controlled by a minority. The state represents - indeed, is the very embodiment of - the existence of a political division of labor in society, that between a minority which rules and a majority which is ruled. As a result, to the degree that the proletarian dictatorship is a state is the degree to which it does not and cannot embody the rule of the entire working class; and to the degree that it does embody the rule of the entire working class is the degree to which it is not a state. Thus, a "dictatorship of the proletariat" that is a state can, at best, represent the rule of a minority of the working class, or more likely, a party that claims to represent the working class - supported, perhaps, by a layer of the working class - over the majority of that class.

Fourth, even if we (temporarily) disregard this point, Marx' and Engels' notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat rests on a problematic conception of democracy. In fact, it rests on two contradictory conceptions of democracy that are never made explicit and are never clearly separated. On the one hand, Marx and Engels appear to accept what is perhaps the most basic notion of the term, that is, that all members of a given society have an equal right to control the political and other processes of that society. On the other hand, Marx and Engels seem to argue that, by virtue of its historic destiny (the notion that the working class is ordained, by the dynamics of capitalism and, more broadly, by the laws of history, to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat), the working class is the historic embodiment of social progress, and therefore the very establishment of working-class rule, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, necessarily establishes democracy. The contradiction between these two conceptions is blurred by the fact that, in Marx' and Engels' view, the dynamics of capitalism will eventually turn the vast majority of people of a given society into proletarians, members of the working class. As this process develops, the two notions of democracy will tend to converge, thus eliminating, or appearing to eliminate, the contradiction between them. In other words, as the working class becomes the overwhelming majority of

exploited and working people, i.e., to the proletariat." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 425-6.)

6. Lenin's model for how he proposes to organize the Russian economy under the dictatorship of the proletariat was the German postal service, which he described as a "business organized along the lines of a state capitalist monopoly." "To organize the whole economy on the lines of the postal service so that all technicians, foremen and accountants, as well as all officials, shall receive salaries no higher than a workman's wage, all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat - this is our immediate aim." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 426-7.) Elsewhere, he writes: "[T]he vital and burning question of present-day politics" is "the expropriation of the capitalists, the conversion of all citizens into workers and other employees of one huge 'syndicate' - the whole state -and the complete subordination of the entire work of this syndicate to a genuinely democratic state, the state of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 470.)
7. Lenin contended that one of the main purposes of this "bureaucratic machinery" would be the establishment of the "strictest accounting and control" over the production, distribution, and consumption of economic goods. This, in turn, would require the centralized and compulsory organization of all economic life in Russia. Lenin believed that the combined political, economic, and organizational structure of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia would be the embodiment of the "most consistent democratic centralism and, moreover, proletarian centralism." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 429-430.)
8. Lenin claimed that the dictatorship of the proletariat" would be based on "iron discipline."

the position advanced by Marx and Engels in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. However, he does elaborate on Marx' and Engels' views and extends them to what I see as their logical conclusions. Here is my attempt at a summary:

1. Lenin insisted that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is the fundamental concept of Marxism: “A Marxist is solely someone who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 412.)
2. Lenin noted that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is the dictatorship of a “single class.”
3. Lenin proposed that, in the context of the conditions prevailing in Russia at the time (1917), the soviet, rather than the commune, should be the fundamental organizational form of the proletarian dictatorship in Russia, specifically, that the national network of soviets constitute the basic structure of the Bolshevik state.
4. Like Marx and Engels, Lenin argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia would do away with a standing army and a separate police force, both of which would be replaced by the “armed workers.”
5. Lenin claimed that after the workers smash the old bureaucratic machine, they need to construct a new “bureaucratic machinery”, which will, he believed, make possible the gradual abolition of all bureaucracy. By way of explanation, Lenin wrote, “We are not utopians, we do not ‘dream’ of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination.... No, we want the socialist revolution with people as they are now, with people who cannot dispense with subordination, control, and ‘foremen’ and accountants. This subordination, however, must be to the armed vanguard of all the

society, establishing the “dictatorship of the proletariat” means the “establishment of democracy” in the traditional sense of the term.

But this raises several questions: What happens in countries in which the majority of the people are not workers? Does the establishment of the dictatorship of proletariat in those societies still represent “establishing (or winning the battle of) democracy”? Does the working class in such countries have the right, by virtue of its historic destiny, to establish its dictatorship over the rest (the majority) of the population, even if that majority does not want to be ruled by the proletariat? Also, is the establishment of such a dictatorship justified on the grounds that it represent a “higher form” of democracy than the conception of democracy as “one person one vote”? At the time Marx and Engels wrote, the proletariat was a small minority of the world’s population, concentrated mostly in the countries of northwestern Europe, in fact, mostly in one, Great Britain. The majority of the world’s population were then peasants, that is, small farmers. (It has only been relatively recently that the majority of the global population has become proletarian, even in a very broad sense of the term.) Yet, Marx and Engels called for an international socialist revolution. Does this entail the establishment of the international rule of the proletarian minority over the peasants and other members of the non-proletarian majority? And is this to be justified by the Marxian claim that Marxism is scientific, that the establishment of international communism is inevitable, and that the working class is the historical embodiment of social progress? Marx and Engels believed that the peasants are incapable of leading themselves and must inevitably come under the tutelage of an urban class, either the capitalists or the workers. In his writings on the Commune, Marx wrote that “The Communal Constitution would have brought the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts, and there secured to them, in the town working men, the natural trustees of their interests.” (*The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 431.) Elsewhere, Marx and Engels argued that the workers, once in

power, would lead the peasants toward socialism by demonstrating the economic advantages of modern agriculture, based on the latest agronomic techniques and machine technology, that socialism, with its large-scale collective means of production, would make possible. But what if the peasants do not wish to come under the “intellectual lead” of the workers and/or otherwise be “led” toward socialism, or at least not toward the form of socialism advocated by Marxists, specifically, one in which all property would be owned and controlled by the state?

Fifth, Marx’ and Engels’ phraseology concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat is extremely vague and ambiguous, at times even contradictory. This ambiguity centers on two interrelated issues: First, is the “dictatorship of the proletariat” a state or isn’t it? On the one hand, Marx and Engels insisted throughout their political careers that the workers have to seize political power and take control over or establish a state. (This was one of the main points of contention in their disputes with Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and other anarchists that ultimately led to a split in and the eventual demise of the First International and continued beyond that.) On the other hand, Marx and Engels claimed that this state is not a state in the “proper sense of the term”; it is a state that is in the process of becoming a non-state, a state that is “withering away.” Second, when, precisely, does the “dictatorship of the proletariat” start to “wither away” and how long does such “withering” take? Some of Marx’ and Engels’ formulations imply that the process begins immediately upon the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship and proceeds rather rapidly. Elsewhere, their phrasing implies that they believe the state will linger on for a considerable period of time. In one place, Engels suggests that it will take an indefinite period, requiring a “generation reared in new, free social conditions”, before the state will completely disappear. (Preface, dated March 18, 1891, to the third edition of *The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 453.) In fact, in

## Lenin’s Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

V. I. Lenin, the founder and leader of the Bolshevik Party, saw himself, and always tried to present himself, as the faithful follower of Marx and Engels. In fact, where he differed from other Marxists, he insisted that he, and only he, was the true interpreter of Marxism and that everyone else was a “renegade”, in fact, a promoter of “petty bourgeois ideology.” This was certainly the case with his conception of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Lenin’s views on this and related questions were most concisely expressed in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*. This work was written during July and early-August of 1917, while Lenin was in hiding after the semi-insurrectional July Days and the government repression that followed it; it was published in early 1918, after the Bolsheviks had seized power. Lenin’s concern in writing *The State and Revolution* was to establish the Marxist *bona fides* of the Bolshevik strategy of overthrowing the Provisional Government, smashing the existing (Tsarist/bourgeois) state, and building a new, proletarian, state based on the soviets. In other words, Lenin wrote *The State and Revolution* to demonstrate that the Bolshevik-led revolution was to be a true proletarian socialist revolution and, in fact, the fulfillment of Marxism.

Consistent with this, *The State and Revolution* has two interrelated polemical thrusts. The most important was to debunk the Mensheviks’ claim, which they based on Marx’ and Engels’ early, and vague, formulations on the state, that their policy of supporting and taking positions in the Provisional Government was the correct interpretation of the Marxian strategy. The other was to differentiate the Bolsheviks’ views from those of the anarchists, who demanded the immediate abolition of the state.

In its outlines, the conception Lenin lays out in *The State and Revolution* and in his other writings of the period is consistent with



sires, they will continue to be paid according to bourgeois norms, norms that will be enforced by a state. In this conception, even after the socialist revolution, which one would think (and hope) should be an act of consummate freedom, the workers are not free; they are governed by – indeed, are the mindless playthings of – historical necessity. It seems that only at the very end of this long, historically-ordained process are the workers to be free. In this conception, then, freedom is determined. But how can freedom be the result of determinism? In a world that is determined, there is not, cannot be, and never will be, true freedom. Is it any wonder that when people who hold to such views come to power and seize control of a state, moreover, a state that controls all of society's means of production, what they will build will not be a free society, but instead a totalitarian nightmare? (You don't understand comrade, it's dialectical.)

Finally, to return to my initial point, why on Earth would a state, a revolutionary dictatorship that owns and controls all of society's means of production, "wither away"? Even at their most minimal, states are ramified organizational apparatuses that are staffed by real people. Isn't it possible, even rather probable, that, once in power, the people who occupy positions in the state would struggle to hold onto these positions and seek to concentrate even more power in their hands? Wouldn't this be even more likely the more centralized, and hence the more powerful, the state apparatus is? And isn't this what happened in Russia in the aftermath of the October Revolution?

With all this as background, we can now proceed to an examination of Lenin's views.

Engels' book, *Herr Duhring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Duhring)*, such ambiguities seem to occur in the very same passage:

"The proletariat seizes state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions, and abolishes also the state as state."

But:

"The first act by which the state really comes forward as the representative of the whole of society – the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society – is also its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies down of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not 'abolished'. It withers away." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 395-6)

This kind of vague, ambiguous, and contradictory terminology can be found throughout Marx' and Engels' writings; it is, in fact, a crucial, though unacknowledged, characteristic of their thinking. For example, they insisted that "social being determines social consciousness"; but they also contended that consciousness is not merely a passive reflex of social development but reacts back upon that process. Similarly, they argued that while the economic base determines the superstructure, the superstructure reacts upon the base; as Engels once put it, the economic base determines the superstructure (and hence the evolution of the entire society) only in the "last analysis." On a more philosophical level, Marx and Engels imply that history is simultaneously contingent, and therefore open and unpredictable, and determined, and therefore predictable. On these and other questions, Marx and Engels want to "have their cake and eat it, too", or to put it differently, to walk on both sides of the street at the same time.

All this reflects the Hegelian background and substratum of Marx' and Engels' world view. The essence of Hegel's philosophical

project was to synthesize freedom and necessity. And, in fact, Marx and Engels claimed to have done the same thing, but on a materialist and therefore scientific basis, in contrast to Hegel's avowed idealism. Engels, quoting Hegel's dictum, described freedom as the "recognition (or appreciation) of necessity." At the least, these vague, ambiguous, and contradictory concepts reflect Marx' and Engels' intellectual sloppiness and irresponsibility (some might call it dishonesty). But such ambiguities serve a crucial purpose, one that has been revealed throughout the history of Marxism. The libertarian-sounding phrases serve as ideological cover for a profoundly authoritarian, even totalitarian, content, specifically, Marx' and Engels' claim that their conception of socialism is scientific; that their views represent the "true" consciousness of the proletariat, and therefore that all other conceptions of socialism represent mere ideologies - "false" or "petit bourgeois" consciousness - and are therefore wrong. Beyond serving as ideological cover, Marx' and Engels' vague, ambiguous, and contradictory phraseology also enables Marxists to refuse to accept responsibility for both Marxian theory and the historical results of Marxists' practice. When critics point to the many examples of Marx' and Engels' determinist terminology (for example, their frequent use of the terms "inevitably", "inexorably", and "necessarily"), Marxist apologists can always point to the (far fewer) phrases that imply the opposite. Likewise, when critics argue that Marxism must take responsibility for the horrors that have been wrought by Marxists, the apologists generally place the blame elsewhere, usually on "objective conditions."

Most relevant to our discussion, Marx' and Engels' ambiguous formulations concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat lead to the paradox that while Marxists insist that they are militant opponents of the state (after all, one of their proclaimed long-term goals is to eliminate it entirely), in the short and medium run, they advocate building up the state, both under capitalism, and even more so, after the proletarian revolution. In this way, Marx' and Engels'

claim that, after the dictatorship of the proletariat is established, the state will automatically "wither away" serves to obscure what is a profoundly statist theory and practice. While in theory, Marxists are against the state and call for its elimination, in practice, they are militantly pro-state. This is not conscious deception. Marxists truly believe that the more thoroughly they build up the state, and the sooner that state eliminates the capitalists and the other oppressing class, takes over all property, and crushes all resistance, the sooner the state will disappear. (We're still waiting.)

Sixth, the determinist character of Marxist theory is revealed in Marx' and Engels' insistence that, during what they called the first stage of communism ("socialism"), the workers will be paid according to the principle, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work." But, one might ask: Who says so? How do Marx and Engels know this? Who and/or what decides that this is what will happen? Is this, too, inevitable? Yet, if the dictatorship of the proletariat is really the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", if it really means the "establishment of democracy", why can't the workers decide, collectively and democratically, how they will be paid, or, better said, according to what principle they will pay themselves? Why are they obligated to be paid according to what Marx and Engels explicitly claim is a bourgeois principle? Moreover, why do they need a state to enforce this? And who is to control this state and enforce this principle? From the standpoint of Marxism, the basis for Marx's assertions on these (and on other) questions is that all this is the expression of the "laws" of history as they will be expressed in the transition from capitalism to socialism, with socialism bearing the scars of its origins. Consequently, in this view, even after the socialist revolution, even after the establishment of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" (the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", the "establishment of democracy", winning "the battle of democracy"), history is still determined. In other words, social development is still governed by historical laws that guarantee that, regardless of the workers' consciousness or de-