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THE MARXIST THEORY OF THE STATE

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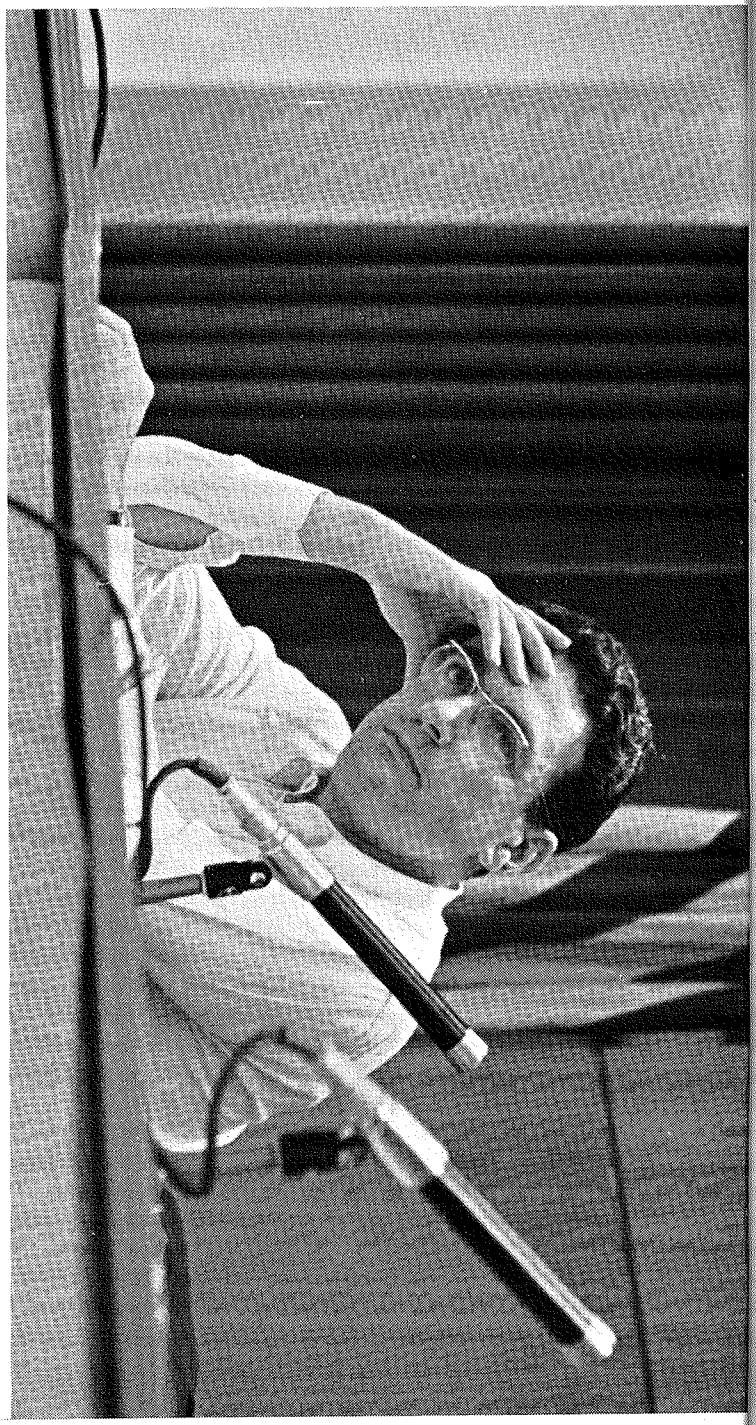
CONTENTS



Ernest Mandel during question and discussion period at Socialist Scholars Conference, Rutgers University, September 7, 1968.

Photo by Brian Shannon

FOREWORD

Every branch of knowledge has a central concept that expresses the fundamental feature or function of the sector of reality it investigates and deals with. The pivotal category of political science is the state.

The political thought of the various social classes and groupings throughout civilization is above all characterized by their attitude toward the state and their definition of its essential nature. Thus the ancient Greek aristocrat Aristotle conceived of the state—or, more precisely, the city-state of his time—as "an association for the good life," based on the family and village; excluded from the rights and benefits of citizenship, however, were laborers and artisans, women, foreigners, and slaves.

The bourgeois philosopher Hegel, like his idealist precursor Plato, asserted that the nation-state was a product of the Objective Mind, best governed by a constitutional monarchy.

Middle-class liberals nowadays—and the reformist socialists and Stalinists who trail in their wake and mimic their ideas—believe in the existence of a state that stands as an impartial arbiter above the selfish contention of classes and deals justly with the respective claims of diverse "interest groups." This exalted notion of a classless state presiding over a pure democracy based on the consent of the people, rather than engaged in the defense of the property rights of the ruling class, is the core of bourgeois-democratic ideology.

Historical materialism takes a more realistic view of the nature of the state. The state is the product of irreconcilable class conflict within the social structure, which it seeks to regulate on behalf of the ruling class. Every state is the organ of a given system of production based upon a predominant form of property ownership, which invests that state with a specific class bias and content. Every state is the organized political expression, the instrument, of the decisive class in the economy.

The principal factor in determining the character of the state is not its prevailing form of rule, which can vary greatly from time to time, but the type of property and productive relations that its institutions and prime beneficiaries protect and promote.

In antiquity, monarchical, tyrannical, oligarchical, and democratic forms of the state rose upon the slave mode of production. The medieval feudal state in Western Europe passed through imperial-monarchical, clerical, absolute monarchical, plutocratic, and republican regimes.

In the course of its evolution, bourgeois society, rooted in the capitalist ownership of the means of production, has been headed and governed by various kinds of monarchical sovereignties (from the absolute to the constitutional), republican and parliamentary regimes, and military and fascist dictatorships.

The twelve workers' states in the postcapitalist societies, which have arisen from the socialist revolutions in the half-century since the founding of the Soviet republic, have already exhibited two polar types of rule. One is more or less democratic in character, expressing the power, and guarding the welfare, of the workers and peasants. The other is despotic and bonapartist, bent on defending the privileged positions of a commanding caste of bureaucrats who have succeeded in usurping the decision-making powers from the masses.

At the dawn of the bourgeois era, long before Marx, Engels, and Lenin, that astute political scientist Machiavelli had expounded the view that the state was the supreme, organized, and legitimate expression of force. "Machiavelli's theory," wrote the German historian Meineke, "was a sword which was plunged into the flank of the body politic of western humanity, causing it to shriek and rear up."

Similarly, the teaching of the Marxists, elaborated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, that the state was based upon the principle of force, has caused the whole of bourgeois society "to shriek and rear up" at its alleged cynicism and inhumanity. However, it would seem that the colossal arsenals used in two world wars and the preparations for a third, the destructiveness of the U. S. military machine in Vietnam, as well as the barbarous reprisals taken by the bourgeois classes—from the Germany of 1933 to the Indonesia of 1965—against their own citizens, should have amply validated that proposition by now.

Marxism added a deeper dimension to Machiavelli's observation by exposing and explaining the organic bond between the existence and exercise of state force and the property system that constituted the fabric of the socioeconomic structure. The coercion exercised by the state was the ultimate resort for maintaining the material interests of the strongest section of the exploiters.

It should not take much perspicacity to see that the industrialists and bankers, who own and operate most of the resources of the United States and control the major political parties, likewise direct the employment of the military machine and other repressive agencies of the federal government. The use of police, state guards, and federal troops to put down the ghetto uprisings testifies to the

openly repressive function of the capitalist state apparatus. Yet liberal Americans find it difficult to generalize from these quite flagrant facts and thus to accept the sociological definition of state power offered by Marxism.

They are blinded or baffled by three misconceptions: (1) that there are no clearly defined class formations in American society; (2) that there are no serious or irreconcilable conflicts between classes; and (3) that the government is not "the executive committee" administering the general affairs and furthering the aims of the capitalist exploiters, but that it is—or can be made into—the supreme agency for taking care of the welfare of the whole people, rather than serving the interests of the minority rich.

The analysis of the evolution and essence of state power given by Ernest Mandel in these pages should do much to dispose of such false views. He is editor-in-chief of the Belgian weekly **La Gauche** and probably the most influential and authoritative exponent of the political economy of socialism in the West today. He has taken the lead in bringing the Marxist teachings in this field up to date through his masterful two-volume work entitled **Marxist Economic Theory**. This book, now available in English, has gone through three editions in France since it was first published in 1962 and has been translated into many languages, from German to Arabic.

Mandel has contributed many articles on a broad range of subjects to periodicals throughout the world and has spoken at leading universities in the United States and Canada.

On the hundredth anniversary of the publication of **Das Kapital**, Mandel's **The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx: 1843-1863** was brought out by the French publishing house of Maspero. His volume analyzing the Common Market and the penetration of American capital into Western Europe, written in answer to J. J. Servan-Schreiber's **The American Challenge**, was recently a best seller in Germany. It will soon be issued in English translation.

Mandel's pamphlet **An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory** is now in its fourth English printing and is widely used by teachers and students in courses throughout the country. The present pamphlet on the Marxist theory of the state serves as a valuable complement to that popular exposition of the dynamics of the capitalist system.

October 1, 1969 George Novack

Part I

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE STATE IN THE HISTORY OF SOCIETIES

A. PRIMITIVE SOCIETY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE STATE

The State did not always exist.

Certain sociologists and other representatives of academic political science are in error when they speak of the State in primitive societies. What they are really doing is identifying the State with the community. In so doing, they strip the State of its special characteristic, i.e., the exercise of certain functions is removed from the community as a whole to become the exclusive prerogative of a tiny fraction of the members of this community.

In other words, **the emergence of the State is a product of the social division of labor.**

So long as this social division of labor is only rudimentary, all members of the society in turn exercise practically all its functions. There is no State. There are no special State functions.

In connection with the Bushmen, Father Victor Ellenberger writes that this tribe knew neither private property nor courts, neither central authority nor special bodies of any kind. (**La fin tragique des Bushmen**, pp. 70-73; Paris, Amiot-Dumont, 1953.) Another author writes of this same tribe: "The band, and not the tribe, is the real political body among the Bushmen. Each band is autonomous, leading its own life independently of the others. Its affairs are as a rule regulated by the skilled hunters and the older, more experienced men in general." (I. Shapera, **The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa**, p. 76; London, George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1930.)

The same holds true for the peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia in remote antiquity: "The time is no more ripe for the patriarchal family with paternal authority than it is for a really centralized political grouping. . . . Active and passive obligations are collective in the regime of the totemic clan. Power and responsibility in this society still have an indivisible character. We are here in the presence of a communal and egalitarian society, within which

participation in the same totem, the very essence of each individual and the basis for the cohesion of all, places all members of the clan on an equal footing." (A. Moret and G. Davy, **Des Clans aux Empires**, p. 17; Paris, La Renaissance du Livre, 1923.)

But to the extent that social division of labor develops and society is divided into classes, the State appears—and its nature is defined: The members of the collectivity as a whole are denied the exercise of a certain number of functions; a small minority, alone, takes over the exercise of these functions.

Two examples will illustrate this development, which consists in taking away from a majority of the members of the society certain functions they formerly exercised (collectively in the beginning) in order to arrogate these functions to a small group of individuals.

First example: **Arms**

This is an important function. Engels said that the State is, in the final analysis, nothing other than a body of armed men.

In the primitive collectivity, all male members of the group (and sometimes even all adults, male and female) are armed.

In such a society the concept that the bearing of arms is the particular prerogative of some special institution called **army, police, or constabulary**, does not exist. Every adult male has the right to bear arms. (In certain primitive societies, the ceremony of initiation, which marks coming of age, confers the right to bear arms.)

It is exactly the same in societies that are still primitive but already close to the stage of division into classes. For example, this holds true for the Germanic peoples at about the time they attacked the Roman Empire: all free men had the right to bear arms and they could use them to defend their person and their rights. The equality of rights among free men that we see in primitive Germanic societies is in fact equality among soldiers—which the anecdote of the Soissons vase[1] illustrates so well.

In ancient Greece and Rome, the struggles between patricians and plebeians often revolved about this question of the right to bear arms.

Second example: **Justice**

In general, writing is unknown to primitive society. Thus there are no written codes of law. Moreover, the exercise of justice is not the prerogative of particular individuals; this right belongs to the collectivity. Apart from quarrels decided by families or individuals themselves, only collective assemblies are empowered to

render judgments. In primitive Germanic society, the president of the people's tribunal did not pass judgment: his function consisted in seeing that certain rules, certain forms, were observed.

The idea that there could be certain men detached from the collectivity to whom would be reserved the right of dispensing justice, would seem to citizens of a society based on the collectivism of the clan or the tribe just as nonsensical as the reverse appears to most of our contemporaries.

To sum up: At a certain point in the development of society, before it is divided into social classes, certain functions such as the right to bear arms or to administer justice are exercised collectively—by all adult members of the community. It is only as this society develops further, to the point where social classes appear, that these functions are taken away from the collectivity to be reserved to a minority who exercise these functions in a special way.

What are the characteristics of this "special way"?

Let us examine our Western society at the period when the feudal system begins to be the dominant one.

The independence (not formal, not juridical, but very real and almost total) of the great feudal estates can be shown by the fact that the feudal lord, and only he, exercises throughout his domain all the functions enumerated above, functions that had devolved on the adult collectivity in primitive societies.

This feudal lord is the absolute master of his realm. He is the only one who has the right to bear arms at all times; he is the only policeman, the only constable; he is the sole judge; he is the only one who has the right to coin money; he is the sole minister of finance. He exercises throughout his domain all the classic functions performed by a State as we know it today.

Later, an evolution will take place. As long as the estate remains fairly small, its population limited, the "State" functions of the lord rudimentary and not very complicated, and as long as exercising these functions takes only a little of the lord's time, he can handle the situation and exercise all these functions in person.

But when the domain grows and the population increases, the functions for which the feudal lord is responsible become more and more complex and more and more detailed and burdensome. It becomes impossible for one man to exercise all these functions.

What does the feudal lord then do?

He partially delegates his powers to others—but not to free men,

since the latter belong to a social class in opposition to the seignorial class.

The feudal lord delegates part of his power to people completely under his control: serfs who are part of his domestic staff. Their servile origin is reflected in many present-day titles: "constable" comes from **comes stabuli**, head serf of the stables; "minister" is the **serf ministrable**, i.e., the serf assigned by the lord to minister to his needs—to act as his attendant, servant, assistant, agent, etc.; "marshal" is the serf who takes care of the carriages, the horses, etc. (from **marah scalc**, Old High German for keeper of the horses).

To the extent that these people, these non-free men, these domestics, are completely under his control, does the seigneur partially delegate his powers to them.

This example leads us to the following conclusion—which is the very foundation of the Marxist theory of the State:

The State is a special organ that appears at a certain moment in the historical evolution of mankind and that is condemned to disappear in the course of this same evolution. It is born from the division of society into classes and will disappear at the same time that this division disappears. It is born as an instrument in the hands of the possessing class for the purpose of maintaining the domination of this class over society, and it will disappear along with this class domination.

Coming back to feudal society, it should be noted that State functions exercised by the ruling class do not only concern the most immediate areas of power, such as the army, justice, finances. Also under the seigneur's thumb are ideology, law, philosophy, science, art. Those who exercise these functions are poor people who, in order to live, have to sell their talents to a feudal lord who can take care of their needs. (Heads of the Church have to be included in the class of feudal lords, inasmuch as the Church was the proprietor of vast landed estates.) Under such conditions, at least as long as dependence is total, the development of ideology is controlled entirely by the ruling class: it alone orders "ideological production"; it alone is capable of subsidizing the "ideologues."

These are the basic relationships that we have to keep constantly in mind, if we don't want to get lost in a tangle of complications and fine distinctions. Needless to say, in the course of the evolution of society, the function of the State becomes much more complex, with many more nuances, than it is in a feudal regime such as we have just very schematically described.

Nevertheless, we must start from this transparently clear and

obvious situation in order to understand the logic of the evolution, the origin of this social division of labor that is brought about, and the process through which these different functions become more and more autonomous and begin to seem more and more independent of the ruling class.

B. THE MODERN BOURGEOIS STATE

Bourgeois origin of the modern State

Here, too, the situation is fairly clear. Modern parliamentarism finds its origin in the battle cry that the English bourgeoisie hurled at the king, "No taxation without representation!" In plain words this means: "Not a cent will you get from us as long as we have no say in how you spend it."

We can immediately see that this is not much more subtle than the relationship between the feudal lord and the serf assigned to the stables. And a Stuart king, Charles I, died on the scaffold for not having respected this principle, which became the golden rule all representatives, direct or indirect, of the State apparatus have had to obey since the appearance of modern bourgeois society.

The bourgeois State, a class State

This new society is no longer dominated by feudal lords but by capitalism, by modern capitalists. As we know, the monetary needs of the modern State—the new central power, more or less absolute monarchy—become greater and greater, from the fifteenth to sixteenth century onward. It is the money of the capitalists, of the merchant and commercial bankers, that in large part fills the coffers of the state. Ever since that time, to the extent that the capitalists pay for the upkeep of the State, they will demand that the latter place itself completely at their service. They will make this quite clearly felt and understood by the very nature of the laws they enact and by the institutions they create.

Several institutions which today appear democratic in nature, for example the **parliamentary institution**, clearly reveal the class nature of the bourgeois State. Thus, in most of the countries in which parliamentarism was instituted, only the bourgeoisie had the right to vote. This state of affairs lasted in most Western countries until the end of the last century or even the beginning of the twentieth century. Universal suffrage is, as we can see, of relatively recent invention in the history of capitalism. How is this explained?

Easily enough. In the seventeenth century, when the English

capitalists proclaimed "No taxation without representation," it was only representation **for the bourgeoisie** that they had in mind; for the idea that people who owned nothing and paid no taxes could vote, seemed absurd and ridiculous to them. Isn't parliament created for the very purpose of controlling expenditures made with the taxpayers' money?

This argument, extremely valid from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, was taken up and developed by our Doctrinaire[2] bourgeoisie at the time of the demand for universal suffrage. For this bourgeoisie, the role of parliament consisted in controlling budgets and expenditures. And only those who pay taxes may validly exercise this control; because those who do not pay taxes would constantly have the tendency to increase expenditures, since they are not footing the bill.

Later on, the bourgeoisie regarded this problem in another way. Along with universal suffrage was born universal taxation, which weighs more and more heavily on the workers. In this way the bourgeoisie reestablished the inherent "justice" of the system.

The parliamentary institution is a typical example of the very direct, very mechanical bond that exists—even in the bourgeois State—between the domination of the ruling class and the exercise of State power.

There are other examples. Let us look at the **jury**, in the judicial system. The jury appears to be an institution eminently democratic in character, especially when compared to the administration of justice by irremovable judges, all members of the ruling class over whom the people have no control.

But from what social layer were—and still in very large measure today, are—the members of a jury chosen? From the bourgeoisie. There were even special qualifications, comparable to property-holding requirements for voting, for being able to sit on a jury—a juror had to be a home-owner, pay a certain amount of taxes, etc. To illustrate this very direct link between the machinery of the State and the ruling class in the bourgeois era, we can also cite the famous Le Chapelier law, passed during the French Revolution, which, under pretext of establishing equality among all citizens, forbids both employers' organizations and workers' organizations. Thus, under pretext of banning employers' corporations—when industrial society has gone beyond the corporation stage—trade unions are outlawed. In this way the workers are rendered powerless against the bosses, since only working-class **organization** can, to a certain extent (a much too limited extent), serve as a counterweight to the **wealth** of the employers.

Part II

THE BOURGEOIS STATE: THE FACE OF EVERYDAY REALITY

Through the struggle waged by the labor movement, certain institutions of the bourgeois State become both more subtle and more complex. Universal suffrage was substituted for suffrage for property-owners only; military service has become compulsory; everybody pays taxes. The class character of the State then becomes a little less transparent. The nature of the State as an instrument of class domination is less evident than at the time of the reign of the classical bourgeoisie, when the relationships between the different groups exercising State functions were just as transparent as in the feudal era. The analysis of the modern State, therefore, will also have to be a little more complex.

First, let us establish a hierarchy among the different functions of the State.

In this day and age, nobody but the most naïve believes that **parliament really does the governing**, that parliament is master of the State based on universal suffrage. (That illusion is, however, more widespread in those countries in which parliament is a fairly recent institution.)

The power of the State is a permanent power. This power is exercised by a certain number of institutions that are isolated from and independent of so changeable and unstable an influence as universal suffrage. These are the institutions that must be analyzed if we are to learn where the real power lies: "Governments come and governments go, but the police and the administrators remain."

The State is, above all, these permanent institutions: the army (the permanent part of the army — the general staff, special troops), the police, special police, secret police, the top administrators of government departments ("key" civil servants), the national security bodies, the judges, etc. — everything that is "free" of the influence of universal suffrage.

This executive power is constantly being reinforced. To the extent that universal suffrage appears and a certain democratization, albeit completely formal, of certain representative institutions develops, it can be shown that real power slips from those institutions towards others that are more and more removed from the influence of parliament.

If the king and his functionaries lose a series of rights to parliament during the ascending phase of parliamentarism, on the contrary, with the decline of parliamentarism (which begins with the winning of universal suffrage), a continuous series of rights are lost by parliament and revert to the permanent and irremovable administrations of the State. This phenomenon is a general one throughout Western Europe. The present Fifth Republic in France is presently the most striking and most complete example of this phenomenon.

Should this turnabout, this reversal, be seen as a diabolical plot against universal suffrage by the wicked capitalists? A much deeper objective reality is involved: the real powers are transferred from the legislative to the executive; the power of the executive is reinforced in a permanent and continuous fashion as a result of changes that are also taking place within the capitalist class itself.

This process began at the time of World War I in most of the belligerent countries and has since continued without interruption. But the phenomenon often existed much earlier than that. Thus, in the German Empire this priority of the executive over the legislative appeared concomitantly with universal suffrage. Bismarck and the Junkers granted universal suffrage in order to use the working class to a certain extent as a lever against the liberal bourgeoisie, thus assuring (in that already essentially capitalist society) the relative independence of the executive power exercised by the Prussian nobility.

This process shows full well that political equality is more apparent than real and that the right of the citizen-voter is nothing but the right to put a little piece of paper in a ballot box every four years. The right goes no farther, nor, above all, does it reach the real centers of decision-making and power.

The monopolies take over from parliament

The classical era of parliamentarism was the era of free competition. At that time the individual bourgeois, the industrialist, the banker, was very strong as an individual. He was very independent, very free within the limits of bourgeois freedom, and could risk his capital on the market in any way he wished. In that atomized bourgeois society, parliament played a very useful, and even indispensable, objective role in the smooth functioning of everyday affairs.

Actually, it was only in parliament that the common denominator of the interests of the bourgeoisie could be determined. Dozens of

separate capitalist groups could be listed, groups opposed to one another by a multitude of sectional, regional, and corporative interests. These groups could get together in an orderly fashion only in parliament. (It's true that they did meet on the market too, but there it was with knives, not words!) It was only in parliament that a middle line could be hammered out, a line that would express the interests of the capitalist class as a whole.

Because that was then the function of parliament: to serve as a common meeting place where the collective interests of the bourgeoisie could be formulated. Let us recall that in the heroic era of parliamentarism it was not only with words and votes that this collective interest was hammered out; fists and pistols were used, too. Didn't the Convention, that classical bourgeois parliament during the French Revolution, send people to the guillotine by the slimmest of majorities?

But capitalist society is not going to remain atomized. Little by little, it can be seen organizing itself and structuring itself in a more and more concentrated, more and more centralized way. Free competition fades away; it is replaced by monopolies, trusts, and other capitalist groupings.

Capitalist power is centralized outside parliament

Now a real centralization of finance capital, big banks and financial groups, takes place. If the **Analytique**[3] of parliament expressed the will of the Belgian bourgeoisie a century ago, today it is above all the annual report of the Société Générale[4] or of Brufina,[5] prepared for their stockholders' meetings, that must be studied to know the real opinions of the capitalists. These reports contain the opinions of the capitalists who really count, the big financial groups who dominate the life of the country.

Thus, capitalist power is concentrated outside parliament and outside the institutions born of universal suffrage. In the face of so high-powered a concentration (we need only remember that in Belgium a dozen financial groups control the economic life of the nation), the relationships between parliament and government officials, police commissioners and those multimillionaires is a relationship burdened very little by theory. It is a very immediate and practical relationship; and the connecting link is the pay-off.

The bourgeoisie's visible golden chains—the national debt

Parliament and, even more, the government of a capitalist State, no matter how democratic it may appear to be, are tied to the

bourgeoisie by golden chains. These golden chains have a name—the **public debt.**

No government could last more than a month without having to knock on the door of the banks in order to pay its current expenses. If the banks were to refuse, the government would go bankrupt. The origins of this phenomenon are twofold. Taxes don't enter the coffers every day; receipts are concentrated in one period of the year while expenses are continuous. That is how the short-term public debt arises. This problem could be solved by some technical gimmick. But there is another problem—a much more important one. All modern capitalist States spend more than they receive. That is the long-term public debt for which banks and other financial establishments can most easily advance money, at heavy interest. Therein lies a direct and immediate connection, a daily link, between the State and Big Business.

The hierarchy in the State apparatus. . .

Other golden chains, invisible chains, make the state apparatus a tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie.

If we examine the method of recruiting civil service people, for example, we see that to become a junior clerk in a ministry, it is necessary to pass an examination. The rule seems very democratic indeed. On the other hand, not just anyone can take any examination at all for any level whatsoever. The examination is not the same for the position of secretary general of a ministry or chief of the army general staff as it is for junior clerk in a small government bureau. At first glance, this too would seem normal.

But—a big **but**—there's a progression in these examinations that gives them a selective character. You have to have certain degrees, you have to have taken certain courses, to apply for certain positions, especially important positions. Such a system excludes a huge number of people who were not able to get a university education or its equivalent, because equality of educational opportunity doesn't really exist. Even if the civil service examination system is democratic on the surface, it is also a selective instrument.

. . . mirror of the hierarchy in capitalist society

These invisible golden chains are also found in the remuneration received by members of the State apparatus.

All government agencies, the army included, develop this pyramidal aspect, this hierarchical structure, that characterizes bourgeois society. We are so influenced by and so imbued with the

ideology of the ruling class that we tend to see nothing abnormal in the fact that a secretary general of a ministry receives a salary ten times higher than that of a junior clerk in the same ministry or that of the woman who cleans its offices. The physical effort of this charwoman is certainly greater; but the secretary general of the ministry, he **thinks!**—which, as everyone knows, is much more tiring. In the same way, the pay of the chief of the general staff (again, someone who **thinks!**) is much greater by far than that accorded to a second-class private.

This hierarchical structure of the state apparatus leads us to emphasize: In this apparatus there are secretaries general, generals of the army, bishops, etc., who have the same salary level, and therefore have the same standard of living, as the big bourgeoisie, so that they are part of the same social and ideological climate. Then come the middle functionaries, the middle officials, who are on the same social level and have the same income as the petty and middle bourgeoisie. And finally, the mass of employees without titles, charwomen, community workers, who very often earn less than factory workers. Their standard of living clearly corresponds to that of the proletariat.

The state apparatus is not a homogeneous instrument. It involves a structure that rather closely corresponds to the structure of bourgeois society, with a hierarchy of classes and identical differences between them.

This pyramidal structure corresponds to a real need of the bourgeoisie. They wish to have at their disposal an instrument they can manipulate at will. It is quite obvious why the bourgeoisie has been trying for a long time, and trying very hard, to deny public service workers the right to strike.

Is the State simply an arbiter?

This point is important. In the very concept of the bourgeois state—regardless of whether it may be more or less "democratic" in form—there is a fundamental premise, linked, moreover, to the very origin of the State: By its nature the State remains antagonistic, or rather nonadaptive, to the needs of the collectivity. The State is, by definition, a group of men who exercise the functions that in the beginning were exercised by all members of the collectivity. These men contribute no productive labor but are supported by the other members of society.

In normal times, there is not much need for watchdogs. Even in Moscow, for example, there is no one in charge of collecting fares on buses: passengers deposit their kopeck on boarding,

whether or not anyone is watching them. In societies where the level of development of the productive forces is low, where everyone is in a constant struggle with everyone else to get enough to live on for himself out of a national income too small to go around, **a large supervisory apparatus becomes necessary.**

Thus, during the German occupation [of Belgium], a number of specialized supervisory services proliferated (special police in the railway stations, supervision of printshops, of rationing, etc.). In times like that, the area of conflict is such that an imposing supervisory apparatus proves indispensable.

If we think about the problem a bit, we can see that all who exercise State functions, who are part of the State apparatus, are—in one way or another—watchdogs. Special police and regular police are watchdogs, but so are tax collectors, judges, paper-pushers in government offices, fare-collectors on buses, etc. In sum, all functions of the State apparatus are reduced to this: surveillance and control of the life of the society in the interests of the ruling class.

It is often said that the contemporary State plays the role of arbiter. This statement is quite close to what we have just said: "surveillance" and "arbitrating"—aren't they basically the same thing?

Two comments are called for. First, the arbiter is not neutral. As we explained above, the top men in the State apparatus are part and parcel of the big bourgeoisie. Arbitration thus does not take place in a vacuum; it takes place in the framework of maintaining existing class society. Of course, concessions to the exploited can be made by arbitrators; that depends essentially on the relationship of forces. But the basic aim of arbitration is to maintain capitalist exploitation as such, if necessary by compromising a bit on secondary questions.

The watchdog-State, testimony to the poverty of society

Second, the State is an entity created by society for the surveillance of the everyday functioning of social life; it is at the service of the ruling class for the purpose of maintaining the domination of that class. There is an objective necessity for this watchdog organization, a necessity very closely linked to the degree of poverty, to the amount of social conflict that exists in the society.

In a more general, historical way, the exercise of State functions is intimately connected with the existence of social conflicts. In turn, these social conflicts are intimately connected with the existence of

a certain scarcity of material goods, of wealth, of resources, of the necessary means for satisfaction of human needs. This fact should be emphasized: **As long as the State exists, it will be proof of the fact that social conflicts (therefore the relative scarcity of goods and services as well) remain. With the disappearance of social conflicts, the watchdogs, rendered useless and parasitical, will disappear—but not before!** Society, in effect, pays these men to exercise the functions of surveillance, as long as that is in the interests of part of society. But it is quite evident that from the moment no group in society has a stake in the watchdog function being exercised, the function will disappear along with its usefulness. At the same time, the State will disappear.

The very fact that the State survives proves that social conflicts remain, that the condition of relative scarcity of goods remains—the hallmark of that vast period in human history between absolute poverty (the condition during primitive communism) and plenty (the condition of the future socialist society). As long as we are in this transitional period that covers ten thousand years of human history, a period that also includes the transition between capitalism and socialism, the State will survive, social conflicts will remain, and there will have to be people to arbitrate these conflicts in the interest of the ruling class.

If the bourgeois State remains fundamentally an instrument in the service of the ruling classes, does that mean that the workers should be **indifferent** to the **particular form** that this State takes—parliamentary democracy, military dictatorship, fascist dictatorship? Not at all! The more freedom the workers have to organize themselves and defend their ideas, the more will the seeds of the future socialist democracy grow within capitalist society, and the more will the advent of socialism be historically facilitated. That is why the workers must defend **their** democratic rights against any and every attempt to curtail them (antistrike laws, institution of a "strong State") or to crush them (fascism).

Part III

THE PROLETARIAT IN POWER

The foregoing serves to answer some questions that arise about the State and about socialism.

Does the working class need a State?

When we say that the State remains in existence up to and including the transitional society between capitalism and socialism, the question arises whether the working class still needs a State when it takes power.

Could not the working class, as soon as it takes power, abolish the State overnight? History has already answered this question. Certainly, on paper, the working class could do away with the State. However, this would be only a formal, juridical act to the extent that the workers had not seized power in a society already so rich and with such an abundance of material goods and services that social conflicts as such, that is, centering on the distribution of these products, could disappear; and that the necessity for arbiters, watchdogs, police, to control all that chaos disappeared at the same time as did the relative scarcity of goods. This has never happened in the past and it is hardly likely that it ever will.

To the extent that the working class takes power in a country in which there is still a partial scarcity of goods, or in which a certain amount of poverty exists, it takes power at a time when the society cannot as yet function without a State. A mass of social conflicts remain.

One can always resort to a hypocritical attitude, as do certain anarchists: Let's abolish the State and call the people who exercise State functions by another name. But that's a purely verbal operation, a paper "abolition" of the State. As long as social conflicts remain, there is a real need for people to regulate these conflicts. Now, people who regulate conflicts—that's what the State is. It is impossible for humanity, collectively, to regulate conflicts in a situation of real inequality and of real incapacity to satisfy the needs of everyone.

Equality in poverty

There is an objection that can be raised to this, although it is a little absurd and not many people raise it anymore.

A society can be imagined in which the abolition of the State would be linked to the reduction of human needs; in such a society perfect equality could be established, which, of course, would be nothing but equality in poverty. Thus, if the working class were to take power in Belgium tomorrow, everyone could have bread and butter — and even a little more than that.

But it is impossible artificially to deny human needs created by the development of the productive forces — needs that have appeared as a result of the fact that society has reached a certain stage of development. When production of a whole range of goods and services is not sufficient to cover everyone's needs, banning those goods and services will always be ineffective. Such a ban would only create ideal conditions for a black market and for the illegal production of those goods.

Thus all the communist sects which, during the Middle Ages and modern times, sought to organize the perfect communist society immediately, based on perfect equality of its members, forbade production of luxury items, of items of ordinary comfort — including printing! All these experiments failed, because human nature is such that from the moment a man becomes aware of certain needs, these cannot be artificially repressed. Savonarola,[6] preaching repentance and abstinence, inveighed against luxuries and demanded that all paintings be burned; he would not have been able to prevent some incorrigible or other, a lover of beauty, from painting in secret.

The problem of distribution of such "illegal" products, which would then become even scarcer than formerly, would still arise again — inevitably.

The proletariat's gamble

Another reason, although less important, should be added to what was said at the beginning of this chapter.

When the proletariat comes to power, it does so under very special conditions, different from the seizure of power by any other previous social class. In the course of history, when all other social classes seized power, they already held the actual power of society in their hands — economic, intellectual, and moral. There is not a single example, before that of the proletariat, of a social class coming to power while it was still oppressed from the economic, intellectual, and moral standpoint. In other words, postulating that the proletariat can seize power is almost a gamble, because collectively, as a class in the capitalist system, this proletariat is downtrodden and prevented from fully developing its creative potential. For we cannot fully develop our intellectual and moral capacities when we work eight, nine, or ten hours a day in a workshop, a factory, an office. And that is still the proletarian condition today.

As a result, the power of the working class, when it comes to power, is very vulnerable. In many areas, the power of the working class must be defended against a minority that will continue, for the duration of an entire historical period of transition, to enjoy enormous advantages in the intellectual area and in their material possessions — at least in their stock of consumer goods — in relation to the working class.

A normal socialist revolution expropriates the big bourgeoisie as holders of the means of production; but it does not strip the bourgeois holders of their accumulated possessions or diplomas. Still less can it expropriate their brains and knowledge: during the entire period preceding the taking of power by the working class, it was the bourgeoisie who had an almost exclusive monopoly in education.

Thus, in a society where the proletariat has held power for only a little while (political power, power of armed men), many levers of real power are and remain in the hands of the bourgeoisie — more exactly, in the hands of a part of the bourgeoisie, which might be called the intelligentsia or the intellectual and technological bourgeoisie.

Workers' power and bourgeois technicians

Lenin had some bitter experiences on this score. Actually, it can be proved that no matter how you look at the problem, no matter what laws, decrees, institutions are promulgated, if there is a need for professors, high-level functionaries, engineers, highly trained technical people at all levels of the social machinery, it is very difficult to place proletarians in these positions overnight — and even five or six years after the conquest of power.

During the early years of Soviet power, Lenin, armed with a theoretically correct although slightly incomplete formula, said: Today engineers work for the bourgeoisie; tomorrow they will work for the proletariat; for that they will be paid and, if necessary, they will be forced to work. The important thing is that they be controlled by the workers. But a few years later, shortly

before his death, Lenin, drawing a balance sheet of that experience, asked himself the question: Who controls whom? Are the experts controlled by the communists, or is the reverse happening?

When we grapple with this question day after day and in concrete terms in the underdeveloped countries, when we see what it means in practice in a country like Algeria, we realize full well that this is a problem that can be solved easily enough on paper with a few magical formulas, but that it is a completely different matter when the problem has to be solved in a real country, in real life. In a country like Algeria, for example, it means utter control; the privilege of university education (or any kind of education) is possessed by an infinitesimal minority of society, while the great mass of people, who fought heroically to win independence, find themselves, when the time comes to exercise power, confronted with their lack of knowledge, knowledge they must now only begin to acquire. And they find that, in the interim, they must completely surrender to the educated few the power they so heroically fought for and won.

The most heroic experiment in this area, the most radical and the most revolutionary in all human history, is the one undertaken by the Cuban revolution. Drawing lessons from all the varied experiences of the past, the Cuban revolution undertook to resolve this problem on a broad scale and in a minimum of time by conducting an extraordinary educational campaign* to transform tens of thousands of illiterate workers and peasants into that many teachers, professors and university students—and in a minimum of time. At the end of five or six years work, the results obtained are considerable.

Nevertheless, a single engineer or a single agronomist in a district containing tens of thousands of workers can in practice become,

*The Cuban delegation at the Conference on Education and Economic Development, held in Santiago, Chile, in March 1962, declared: "To compare the effectiveness of Cuban methods and those adopted by the Conference, it will suffice to note that the authors of the so-called Alliance for Progress offer to lend $150 million per year to nineteen countries with a population of 200 million, while a single country—Cuba, with 7 million inhabitants—has increased its educational and cultural budget to $200 million per year, without having to pay interest to anyone whatsoever."

During the single year 1961, 707,000 adults learned to read and write in Cuba, which brought illiteracy down to 3.9 percent. Cuba has set the following educational goals for the period 1961-1964:

(a) to raise those who recently learned to read and write to the middle level of primary education;

(b) to complete the primary education of a half-million workers with only three years of elementary schooling;

(c) to assure a basic secondary education to 40,000 workers who have completed their primary education.

This has been accomplished despite the blockade and defense needs, and in spite of attacks by the United States.

despite the admirable revolutionary spirit of the Cuban people, master of the district, if he has a monopoly on the technical knowledge vital to the district. Here again, the false solution would be to revert to so simple a level that technicians would not be needed. That is a reactionary utopia.

The State, guardian of workers' power

All these difficulties indicate the necessity for the proletariat, the new ruling class, to exercise State power against all those who might wrest power from it, whether bit by bit or all at once. The proletariat must exercise State power in this new and transitional society in which it possesses political power and the principal levers of economic power, but in which it is held in check by a whole constellation of weaknesses and newly made enemies. This is the situation that makes it necessary for the working class to maintain a State after its conquest of power and that makes it impossible to abolish the State overnight. But this working-class State must be of a very special kind.

Nature and characteristics of the proletarian State

The working class, by its special position in society (which has just been described), is obliged to maintain a State. But in order to preserve the power of that State, the latter has to be radically different from the State which in the past upheld the power of the bourgeoisie, or the feudal or slaveholding class. The proletarian State is, at one and the same time, a State and not a State. It becomes less and less a State. It is a State that begins to wither away at the very moment it is born, as Marx and Lenin correctly said. Marx, developing the theory of the proletarian State, of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as he called it, the State that withers away, gave it several characteristics, examples of which were found in the Paris Commune of 1871. There are three essential characteristics:

1) No distinct separation between the executive and legislative powers. Bodies are needed which enact laws and at the same time enforce them. In short, it is necessary to revert to the State that was born of the primitive communism of the clan and the tribe and that can still be found in the ancient Athenian popular assembly.

This is important. It is the best way of reducing as much as possible the cleavage between real power, more and more concentrated in the hands of permanent bodies, and the increasingly fictitious power that is left to deliberative assemblies. This cleavage is the characteristic of bourgeois parliamentarism. It is not enough to replace one deliberative assembly with another, if nothing is essentially changed regarding this cleavage. The deliberative assemblies must have real executive power at their disposal.

2) Public offices to be elective, to the greatest extent. It is not only members of the deliberative assemblies who should be elected. Judges, high-level functionaries, officers of the militia, supervisors of education, managers of public works, should also be elected. This may be a bit of a shock to countries with an ultrareactionary Napoleonic tradition. But certain specifically bourgeois democracies, the United States, Switzerland, Canada, or Australia for example, have conserved the elective character of a certain number of public functions. Thus, in the United States the sheriff is elected by his fellow citizens.

In the proletarian state, this electing of public officials must be accompanied in all cases by the right of recall, i.e., voting unsatisfactory officials out of office at any time.

Thus, permanent and extensive control by the people over those exercising State functions must be made possible, and the separation between those who exercise State power and those in whose name it is exercised must be as small as possible. That is why it is necessary to assure a **constant changing** of elected officials, to prevent people from remaining in office permanently. The functions of the State must, on an ever wider scale, be exercised in turn by the masses as a whole.

3) No excessive salaries. No official, no member of representative and legislative bodies, no individual exercising a State power, should receive a salary higher than that of a skilled worker. That is the only valid method of preventing people from seeking public office as a way of feathering their nests and sponging on society, the only valid way to get rid of the career-hunters and parasites known to all previous societies.

Together these three rules well express the thinking of Marx and Lenin concerning the proletarian State. This State no longer resembles any of its predecessors, because it is the first State that begins to wither away at the very moment of its appearance; because it is a State whose apparatus is composed of people no longer privileged in relation to the mass of society; because it is a State whose functions are more and more exercised by members of the society as a whole who keep taking each other's place; because it is a State that is no longer identical with a group of people who are detached from the masses and exercise functions separate and apart from the masses, but which, on the contrary, is indistinguishable from the people, from the laboring masses; because it is a State that withers away with the withering away of social classes, social conflicts, money economy, market production, commodities, money, etc. This withering away of the State should be conceived of as self-management and self-government of producers and citizens which expands more and more until, under conditions of material abundance and a high cultural level of the entire society, the latter becomes structured into self-governing producer-consumer communities.

What about the Soviet Union?

When we look at the history of the USSR in the past thirty years, the conclusion to be drawn concerning the State is simple: a State with a permanent army; a State in which can be found marshals, managers of trusts, and even playwrights and ballerinas who earn fifty times as much as a manual laborer or a domestic worker; where tremendous selectivity for certain public functions has been established, making access to these functions practically impossible for the vast majority of the population; where real power is exercised by small committees of people whose tenure is renewed in mysterious ways and whose power remains fixed and permanent for long historical periods—such a State, obviously, is not in the process of withering away.

Why?

The explanation for this is simple. In the Soviet Union the State has not withered away because social conflicts have not withered away. Social conflicts have not withered away because the degree of development of the productive forces has not permitted this withering away—because the situation of semiscarcity that characterizes even the most advanced capitalist countries continues to characterize the situation in the Soviet State. And as long as these

conditions of semiscarcity exist, controllers, watchdogs, special police are necessary. Of course, in a proletarian State, these people would be serving a better cause, at least to the extent to which they defend the socialist economy. But it must also be recognized that they are detached from the body of society, that they are in large measure parasites. Their disappearance is directly linked to the level of development of the productive forces, which alone can permit the withering away of social conflicts and the abolition of functions linked to these conflicts.

And to the extent that these watchdogs, these controllers, more and more monopolize the exercise of political power, to that extent obviously can they be assured of increasing material privileges, the choice morsels in the relative scarcity that dominates distribution. They thus constitute a privileged bureaucracy, beyond the reach of control by the workers and prone to defend first and foremost their own privileges.

The argument of the "cordon sanitaire" [7]

The dangers resulting from being surrounded by capitalism are always cited by those who object to the above criticisms. The argument goes: As long as an external danger exists, a State will be necessary, as Stalin said, if only to defend the country against the hostility that surrounds it.

This argument is based on a misunderstanding. The only thing that the existence of a threatening capitalist encirclement can prove is the necessity for armament and for a military institution, but that does not justify the existence of military institutions **separate and apart from the body of society**. The existence of such military institutions, separate from society as a whole, indicates that within this society there remains a substantial amount of the social tension which prevents governments from permitting themselves the luxury of arming the people, which makes the leaders afraid to trust the people to solve the military problems of self-defense in their own way. This the people would be able to do if the collectivity really had that degree of extraordinary superiority that a truly socialist society would have in relation to capitalist society.

In reality, the problem of external environment is only a secondary aspect of a much more general phenomenon: The level of development of the productive forces, the economic maturity of the country, is far from the level that would have to exist for a society to be a socialist society. The Soviet Union has remained a transitional society whose level of development of productive

forces is comparable to that of an advanced capitalist society. It must, therefore, fight with comparable weapons. Not having eliminated social conflicts, the USSR must maintain all organs of control and surveillance of the population and, because of this, must maintain and even reinforce the State instead of allowing it to wither away. For numerous specific reasons, this has fostered bureaucratic deformations and degenerations in this transitional society, which have done the cause of socialism grave injury, especially to the extent that the label "socialist" has been attached to Soviet society for fear of telling the truth: We are still too poor and too backward to be able to create a true socialist society. And to the extent that they wanted to use the label "socialist" at all costs for propaganda reasons, they now have to explain the existence of such things as "socialist" purges, "socialist" concentration camps, "socialist" unemployment, "socialist" violations of the rights of national minorities, etc., etc.

Guarantees against bureaucracy

What guarantees can be introduced in the future to avoid the abnormal growth of the bureaucracy that appeared in the USSR?

1) Scrupulously respect the three rules enumerated above concerning the beginning of the withering away of the workers' State (and especially the rule limiting salaries of all administrators—economic and political).

2) Scrupulously respect the democratic character of management of the economy: workers' self-management committees elected in the enterprises; a congress of producers ("Economic Senate") elected by these committees, etc. In the last analysis those who control the surplus social product control the entire society.

3) Scrupulously respect the principle that if the workers' State must of necessity restrict the political liberties of all class enemies who are opposed to the advent of socialism (a restriction that should be in proportion to the violence of their resistance), it should at the same time **extend** these same liberties **for all workers**: freedom for all parties that respect socialist legality; freedom of the press for all newspapers that do the same; freedom of assembly, association, demonstration for the workers—without any restrictions; real independence of the trade unions from the State, with recognized right to strike.

4) Respect the democratic and public character of all deliberative assemblies and their full freedom of debate.

5) Respect the principle of a written law.

Theory and practice

Marxist theory concerning the withering away of the State has now been fully developed for more than a half-century. In Belgium there is only one little detail missing, one little thing we still have to do—put this theory into practice.

NOTES

1. **Anecdote of the Soissons vase.** Legendary account of an incident during the reign of King Clovis of the Franks, in the fifth century, A.D. (Clovis was the first Frankish king to embrace Christianity, and it was during his reign that most of what is now Belgium and France was united into a kingdom.) After a victorious battle at Soissons (486 A.D.), when the booty was to be divided equally among all the soldiers, Clovis wanted to keep a certain vase for himself. A soldier thereupon strode out of the ranks and smashed the vase with his sword, to indicate that no fighter had the right to any special privilege in sharing the booty.

2. **Doctrinaire.** Members of the conservative wing of the Liberal Party in nineteenth century Belgium were called **Doctrinaires.** They were violently opposed to universal suffrage, whereas the so-called Progressives in the Liberal Party were ready to accept it.

3. **Analytique.** The equivalent in Belgium of the **U.S. Congressional Record.**

4. **Société Générale.** Belgium's most important capitalist grouping since its independence in 1830. Originally organized in the form of a merchant bank, the Société Générale was a forerunner of "finance capital," which became general in other capitalist countries only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This resulted from the Société's early possession of controlling interests in many joint stock companies, especially in coal and steel. Later it controlled the famous Union Minière du Haut Katanga, as well as many other companies in the Congo.

Today it has reorganized in the form of a central holding company that controls stock in many apparently independent companies, among them Belgium's main savings bank.

5. **Brufina.** Belgium's second largest capitalist grouping, Brufina grew out of the Banque de Bruxelles, second largest Belgian bank.

6. **Savonarola** (1452-1498). Italian religious reformer and mass leader who attacked corruption and vice in fiery oratory. Incurred the enmity of Pope Alexander VI as a result of scandals he uncovered, and publicized, in the pope's court. Accused of heresy, he was burned to death at the stake in Florence.

7. **"Cordon Sanitaire."** Literally, the "sanitary cordon" or quarantine placed around the young Soviet Republic by the United States and its World War I allies. The Soviet Union was isolated or cordoned off from diplomatic, commercial and ideological intercourse with the rest of the world by the belt of countries encircling it and allied navies patrolling the sea-lanes. This policy, which caused tremendous hardships in the Soviet Union but which ultimately failed, was an earlier version of Washington's current attempt to destroy the Cuban revolution by economic blockade and to quarantine the revolutionary "infection" by forbidding travel there.

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