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Marxist Theory

# The Proletariat in Power

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**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, centring 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, [\[1\]](#) 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 call 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 [2] 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, despite the 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 labouring 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 labourer 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 semi-scarcity that characterises even the most advanced capitalist countries continues to characterise the situation in the Soviet state. And as long as these conditions of semi-scarcity 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" [3]**

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-defence 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.

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[1] 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 publicised, in the pope's court. Accused of heresy, he was burned to death at the stake in Florence.

[2] 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 per cent. 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 defence needs, and in spite of the attacks by the United States.

[3] "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 sealanes. 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.