

Marx's Ambivalence: State, Proletarian Dictatorship and Commune

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Published as: 2019 'Marx's Ambivalence: State, Proletarian Dictatorship and Commune'. *International Critical Thought* 9.1: 109-27.

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ABSTRACT

For Marx, what happens to the state under socialism in power, after a communist revolution? This study requires a strict self-discipline: to avoid reading later positions back into Marx's own positions. The material is organised in sections. The first concerns Marx's observations on hitherto existing forms of the state, especially absolutist, bourgeois and imperialist forms (directly experienced in Prussia and England). The second concerns his proposals for what may follow, focusing on the dictatorship of the proletariat. The third deals with the commune, based on the experiment in Paris in 1871. The material on the proletarian dictatorship and the commune evinces a number of tensions, which Marx bequeathed to the subsequent tradition. He also begins to offer a possible resolution. Thus, the final section examines Marx's fascinating struggle in dealing with forms of governance under communism. That he realised such governance is necessary is clear, but that he was also reticent to spell it out in detail is also obvious—not least because he seemed to know that he did not have the experience and thereby evidence to undertake a “scientific” study of what happens to the state under communism. Throughout, the emphasis is on careful analysis of Marx's texts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 March 2018

Revised 28 April 2018

Accepted 30 May 2018

Published online

KEYWORDS

Karl Marx; proletarian dictatorship; commune; governance under communism

My concern is Marx's approach to what happens to the state under socialism in power—in other words, after a communist revolution, after October. This focus does require a preliminary examination of what Marx says concerning the forms of the state that had existed until his time. And it requires overcoming a couple of preconceptions concerning Marx's observations on the state. The first is that Marx took an anti-statist position: the state would die or wither away with the achievement of full communism. Although it was Engels who formulated the term “it dies away [*er stirbt ab*]” in the third edition of *Anti-Dühring* (Engels [1877–78] 1987, 268; [1877–78] 1973, 262) —from where it became a problematic feature of Marxist orthodoxy—a comparable anti-statist position appears from time to time in Marx's thought (see below). Yet, as the following analysis shows, Marx struggled to overcome his anti-statist assumptions. This is not least because anti-statism was a very old tradition indeed in movements of social dissent, let alone the many radical movements of the nineteenth century, but more importantly because Marx found the need to distinguish his position from the anarchist position, especially in the 1870s. A second preconception is that Marx does not have a systematic theory of the state (Miliband 1965, 279; Jessop 1982, 1). To some extent this is true, especially if one compares his observations on the state with his extensive studies of capital and if one focuses on the forms of the bourgeois (capitalist) or even absolutist state concomitant with capitalism. However, once I began to examine what Marx did say about states, I found much more than might be expected—especially concerning what the form of the state may be after a communist revolution. This preconception is connected with a feature of the bulk of Marxist theories of the state: they focus on the bourgeois or capitalist state, seeking perhaps to rectify the gap in Marx's work. The result is a neglect of what Marx says about the state after a communist revolution, a neglect that may have many reasons: a nervousness about what Marx does say, a preference for the period before October, the absence of a successful revolution in Western Europe or indeed a systemic “myopia” in “Western” Marxism concerning the vast number of successful communist revolutions (Losurdo 2017). Whatever the reason, such an approach constitutes a retreat from Marx's texts. So I undertake a relatively simple task: identifying Marx's key points concerning the state, based on careful analyses of the texts. I include works jointly authored by Marx and Engels, where we can assume shared positions, but a study of Engels's highly influential work on the state is the topic of another study.

In presenting the material that follows, I exercise a strict self-discipline: as far as possible, I avoid reading later positions (Lenin, Stalin and so on) back into earlier ones. I have organised the material in sections. The first concerns his observations—usually brief and scattered—on the forms of the state that have hitherto existed, especially absolutist, bourgeois and imperialist forms (which he experienced directly in Prussia and England). The second part outlines his proposals for what may follow, focusing initially on the dictatorship of the proletariat. The third part deals with his thoughts on the commune, based on the experiment in Paris in 1871. The material on the proletarian dictatorship and the commune evinces not a few tensions, which Marx bequeathed to the subsequent tradition. But he also begins to offer a possible resolution. In light of the material on the proletarian

dictatorship and the commune, I examine carefully in a final section Marx's fascinating struggle in dealing with the forms of governance under communism. That he realised such governance is necessary is clear, but that he was also reticent to spell it out in detail is also obvious—not least because he seemed to know that he did not have the experience and thereby evidence to undertake a “scientific” study of what happens to the state under communism.

Hitherto Existing Forms of the State

In organising this material, I have opted for a series of theses that identify the main positions Marx took. They arise from consideration of Marx's texts.¹ Following the theses are analyses that examine the implications, problems and developments in Marx's thought. This section deals with Marx's own observations on the forms of the state that have existed thus far, although they have become part of a rather conventional Marxist analysis of the state since Marx (an area beyond the remit of this essay).

1. The state is produced out of the *economic* realities of mode of production, private property, division of labour and classes. Although Marx describes this ground as *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*² in the critique of Hegel,³ already by the first rough outline of historical materialism in *The German Ideology*, a class-based economic analysis emerges.⁴

2. The dominant *class* determines the nature of the state in various ways. This determination may be more direct, as the manifesto puts it: the “executive of the modern State is but a committee [*Ausschuß*] for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 486; [1848] 1974, 464).⁵ Or the determination may be indirect, since the class in question may not be—due to internal contradictions and tensions—always in immediate control. Yet this class's framework sets the terms for all actors.⁶ As *The German Ideology* observes, the “social power” of a ruling class has “its *practical-idealistic* expression in each case in the form of the state,” meaning that “their power must be constituted as the *state [als Staat konstituieren]*” (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 52, 329; [1845–46] 1973, 69, 311; emphasis in the original).⁷

3. The state is separated from and relates agonistically with society. This position already appears in the critique of Hegel: “In short, he [Hegel] presents everywhere the conflict between *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* and the state [*Mit einem Wort: Er stellt überall den Konflikt der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft und des Staates dar*]” (Marx [1843] 1975, 73; [1843] 1982, 80).⁸

4. The state is semi-autonomous from social and economic forces, becoming the arena where class struggles can play out. The autonomy may be more or less, depending upon the particular situation. It is best encapsulated in two observations, one concerning the French absolute monarchy as an “executive power [*Exekutivgewalt*], with

¹ In order to be comprehensive, additional textual references and discussion appear in the footnotes.

² I have retained the German *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, which should be translated as “bourgeois society.” Unfortunately, it is usually translated and thereby neutralised as “civil society” (to the point of a later German back-translation as *Zivilgesellschaft* [Kocha 2004, 67]). Crucially, for Hegel and Marx, this *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* includes economic activity, although in later developments “the economy” was excluded. Although Marx already suggests that Hegel's formulae should be located in the hybrid situation of the Prussian empire, where a bourgeois state had not yet emerged (Marx [1843] 1975, 95; [1843] 1982, 105), in *The German Ideology* he and Engels specify: “The term ‘*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*’ emerged in the eighteenth century when property relations had already extricated themselves from the ancient and medieval community. *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* as such only develops with the bourgeoisie [*Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft als solche entwickelt sich erst mit der Bourgeoisie*]” (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 89; [1845–46] 1973, 36).

³ Marx returns to this point repeatedly (Marx [1843] 1975, 9, 23–24, 39–40, 79, 87, 90–91, 116; [1843] 1982, 9, 24–25, 43–44, 88, 96, 99–100, 125–126) and it also appears in *The Holy Family* (Marx and Engels [1845] 1975, 113; [1845] 1974, 120). The best critical assessment of Marx's intense engagement with Hegel is by Leopold (2007, 17–99). For a useful study of Marx's theoretical path to the study on Hegel, see Chitty (2006).

⁴ Not only in *The German Ideology*, for Marx would invoke it also in later work, such as *Capital*, where the determinations of the developments of capital are complex indeed (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 46–47, 329; [1845–46] 1973, 33–34, 311; Marx [1859] 1987, 262–264; [1859] 1961, 8–9; [1894] 1998, 778; [1894] 1973, 799–800).

⁵ *The German Ideology* on at least one occasion tends in this direction: “the state is the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests” (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 90; [1845–46] 1973, 62). This approach is sometimes labelled “instrumentalist,” but this misses the point of Marx's approach. I deal with the issue of “instrumentalism” in later studies of Engels and Lenin.

⁶ A good example is the way the bourgeoisie adjusted to the varying conditions under the coup by Louis Bonaparte, being able to advance their agenda even when not in direct power (Marx [1852] 1979, [1852] 1985). See further below.

⁷ Translation modified in the second quotation. It arises out of a detailed polemic against Max Stirner's approach to the state (and private property and law), in the crucial long chapter on Stirner in which Marx and Engels first developed the rudiments of historical materialism (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 329–335, 346–348, 355–376, 399–402; [1845–46] 1973, 311–318, 329–331, 338–360, 384–387). For useful outlines of and engagements with Stirner's philosophy, see Beiser (2011) and Leopold (2006).

⁸ Marx stresses this point again and again (Marx [1843] 1975, 50–51, 67–68, 71–75; [1843] 1982, 54–55, 71–72, 77–85), which is also manifested in the tension between citizen of a state and private individual (Marx [1843] 1975, 77–78, 109; [1843] 1982, 86–87, 119; [1844] 1975c, 153–154, 167–168; [1844] 1982b, 148–149, 161–163).

its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation” that had complex forms of representation and transformation (Marx [1852] 1979, 185; [1852] 1985, 178) and the other concerning bourgeois or “vulgar democracy” as precisely the “last form of state of bourgeois society [*bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*]” in which “the class struggle has to be fought out to a conclusion” (Marx [1875] 1989a, 96; [1875] 1985, 22).

5. Marx has a preference for historical narratives, which emphasise the increasing centralisation and repression of the bourgeoisie’s path to political and economic dominance. Even his more philosophical reflections tend to be historically situated.

Let me pause for a moment to highlight certain features. Of the few who have—some time ago now—actually engaged with Marx’s texts on the state, the overwhelming focus is on this material (Miliband 1965; Jessop 1978; 1982, 1–31). It may be described as the period before October, before a communist revolution. If they do dare to explore what might happen after a revolution, they opt for the Paris Commune (see below). Further, the points identified are not mutually exclusive. Thus, points 1–2 sit side by side, with one emphasising the production of the state from economic realities and the other the class-based determination of the nature of the state. And points 3–4 draw near to one another, for point 3 is an agonistic model while point 4 stresses the relative autonomy of the state. When Marx waxes philosophical, he assumes Hegel’s position of the conflict between *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* and the state (point 3), with the state thereby autonomous (point 4).⁹ At the same time, Marx is already keen to locate these reflections in specific historical contexts. Thus, he stresses that the state in question is the bourgeois state or—given the situation in Germany—the transitional context between absolutist and bourgeois states. Even *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* is not some universal “civil society” but a distinct product connected with the rise of the European bourgeoisie and capitalism (so also in *The German Ideology*).

However, the historical narratives are more common, where we find modulations on each of the points noted above, depending on specific historical circumstances. Let me outline a number of these accounts, for they have their own variations, albeit with a common theme concerning the eventual domination by the bourgeoisie. The first example appears in “On the Jewish Question,” which presents an argument heavy with dialectical theory and specific historical moments. Marx is responding to Bruno Bauer’s claim that “political emancipation” would be achieved when all gave up their particular religious claims, the “Christian state” was abolished and a thoroughly secular and atheistic state established (Bauer 1843b, 1843a). Marx responds by arguing that the “Christian state”—the final form of the absolutist state after the Congress of Vienna (1814–15)—does not disappear with the secular bourgeois state, but that the bourgeois state is the full dialectical realisation of the “Christian state.” To back up his argument, he looks not to France or elsewhere in Europe, but to the United States, which many held to be the harbinger of the future—albeit without ever having experienced an absolutist state. Here, argues Marx, religion has become a private affair, exercised by any citizen while the state itself is ostensibly secular. This is the full resolution of the contradictions of the “Christian state,” which is actually not Christian at all. Instead, the fully realised Christian state is “the *atheistic* state, the *democratic* state, the state which relegates religion to a place among other elements of civil society [*der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*]” (Marx [1844] 1975c, 156; [1844] 1982b, 151; italics in original). Or as Marx and Engels put it in *The Holy Family*, “the politically perfected, modern state that knows no religious privileges is also the fully developed *Christian* state” (Marx and Engels [1845] 1975, 111; [1845] 1974, 117–118; italics in original).

A second example appears in *The German Ideology*, where Marx and Engels argue that the state may have been relatively independent under feudal or absolutist forms, and it remains so to an unprecedented level in the hybrid situation in Prussia due to the inability of one class to attain dominance. As the bourgeoisie gains greater wealth and power, and as the state becomes more indebted, the state loses its independence and becomes a bourgeois state, subject to the money and power of the bourgeoisie (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 195, 361; [1845–46] 1973, 178, 344–345). A couple of years later, the manifesto offers a third version. Although brief, the account offers greater complexity concerning the various alliances undertaken by the European bourgeoisie as it rose in power. Originally oppressed under feudalism, it achieved early self-governing independence in scattered medieval communes or even urban republics. From there, it moved to being a “third estate” (French monarchy) and “cornerstone” of absolute monarchies, in opposition to the nobility. Only with a world capitalist market was the bourgeoisie able to conquer “exclusive political sway” through the “modern representative State,” which now manages its common affairs (Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 486; [1848] 1974, 464).

The longest narrative appears in “The Eighteenth Brumaire,” where Marx indicates that the bourgeoisie does not need to exercise direct power to forward its agenda. It can gain and lose parliamentary control, or side as an executive with a late imperial pretender (Louis Napoleon) who was an apparent champion of the peasants and “*lumpenproletariat*,” while at the same ensuring that the form of the state that emerges favours the development of capital and profit. But a moment arises, when the opposition between state power and society becomes crystal clear. This is the moment when the bourgeoisie is able to achieve its goal. He describes this eventual

⁹ In the critique of Hegel, Marx draws upon Feuerbach’s model of religion as a hypostatized product of flesh-and-blood human beings, with the “gods” alienated from human beings and seemingly exercising control over them. Witness the frequent moves to compare Hegel’s position with theological ones (Boer 2012, 154–165).

achievement—riven with contradictions—as the “unlimited despotism of one class over other classes,” the interweaving in closest fashion of the “extensive state machine” with the “material interests of the French bourgeoisie,” and the “centralisation of the state that modern society requires” (Marx [1852] 1979, 111, 139, 193; [1852] 1985, 105, 132, 185).¹⁰

The final example comes from “The Civil War in France,” in a section where Marx attempts to set the background for the commune. Here he speaks specifically of “state power,” emphasising the increasing centralisation and repression of this power. Under the absolutist state, centralisation entails a standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy and judiciary. In this form, it became a “mighty weapon” in the hands of the bourgeoisie against feudalism (Marx [1871] 1986a, 328).¹¹ In the bourgeois state (after the French revolution), state power reveals more clearly its repressive nature.¹² Thus, a parliamentary system means increasingly “direct control by the propertied classes,” resulting in “class terrorism” and a “national war-engine of capital against labour” (329). The next phase, imperialism (such as the French and indeed Prussian empires) indicates that the bourgeoisie advances its agenda even when it is not in direct control. Imperialism is simultaneously “the most prostitute and the ultimate form of the State power,” which “full-grown bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labour by capital” (330).

While these historical accounts move, with some variations, through each of the points identified earlier, the direction is clear: the bourgeoisie’s final ability to set the agenda for the state, thereby determining the state’s nature.¹³ This agenda is implicitly economic, securing the many dimensions of the state to ensure the dominance of capital, although Marx tends not to spell out the details. At the same time, this dominance is riven with contradictions, not only in terms of the bourgeoisie’s own tensions, but also in the sense that the bourgeoisie does not need to be in direct control at all times. What has happened to the state’s relative autonomy, if not alien nature? The narrative turns: the very nature of the bourgeois state is to exploit the working class, so much so that the latter “cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes” (Marx [1871] 1986a, 328; see also Marx [1871] 1986d, 533).¹⁴

Dictatorship of the Proletariat

How does one overcome this form of the state after a revolution? On this matter, Marx offers two proposals that sit rather uncomfortably with one another. However, since he later suggests a narrative as to how they may be related, I deal initially with the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” as it appears in two groups of texts: one between 1850 and 1852 in relation to the 1848 revolutions, and the other group between 1871 and 1875. Since I offer detailed comments on the tensions between the proletarian dictatorship and the commune below, this section has relatively fewer observations.

6. After a socialist revolution, a proletarian dictatorship should be established. This dictatorship is directly opposed to “bourgeois dictatorship” or “bourgeois terrorism,” which perpetuates the “rule of capital” and the “slavery of labour.” Hence the slogan: “Overthrow of the bourgeoisie! Dictatorship of the working class [*Diktatur der Arbeiterklasse!*]” (Marx [1850] 1978, 69; [1850] 1977, 139). In other words, the proletarian dictatorship is the “revolt against the bourgeois dictatorship” and thereby a “change of society” (Marx [1850] 1978, 125; [1850] 1977, 190).¹⁵

7. The focus is both economic and political: the “appropriation of the means of production, their subjection to the associated working class” (Marx [1850] 1978, 78; [1850] 1977, 147). This entails overcoming exploitation and ensuring the economic well-being for workers (and peasants), since the proletarian dictatorship is the means to achieve “the abolition of all the relations of production” on which class distinctions rest, the “abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations” (Marx [1850] 1978, 127; [1850] 1977, 192).

¹⁰ For an insightful analysis of the complexities of this text, see Jessop (2007, 83–100). And for a comparable account of the trials and tribulations of the bourgeoisie in relation to the state under Napoleon Bonaparte, leading to its “political enlightenment,” see *The Holy Family* (Marx and Engels [1845] 1975, 122–124; [1845] 1974, 130–131).

¹¹ Since this text was originally published in English, I cite only the English version.

¹² Duly stressed by Poulantzas, although he skips the repressive role of the dictatorship of the proletariat (Poulantzas 1969, 76).

¹³ The heavily philosophical account of “On the Jewish Question” may seem to be an anomaly, but even here the direction is towards the secular bourgeois state, in which religion becomes a private matter. In its own way, this text has relevance for debates today over “post-secularism” (Boer 2014).

¹⁴ Or as Marx and Engels put it in a review of the bourgeois socialism of Girardin: “The bourgeois state is nothing more than the mutual insurance of the bourgeois class against its individual members, as well as against the exploited class, insurance which will necessarily become increasingly expensive and to all appearances increasingly independent of bourgeois society, because the oppression of the exploited class is becoming ever more difficult” (Marx and Engels [1850] 1978a, 333; [1850] 1977c, 296–297).

¹⁵ It requires a certain level of development of class conflict before “revolutionary dictatorship” can be seized (Marx [1850] 1978, 98; [1850] 1977, 166).

8. The dictatorship is repressive, “entailing the submission” of the “privileged classes” (and indeed the counter-revolution) to the “dictatorship of the proletarians by keeping the revolution in continual progress until the achievement of communism” (Vidil et al. [1850] 1978, 614; [1850] 1977, 568).¹⁶ More sharply, the proletariat “as a ruling class violently abolishes the old conditions of production [*als herrschende Klasse gewaltsam die alten Produktionsverhältnisse aufhebt*]” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1974, 482).¹⁷ *Gewaltsam* is the crucial word, bearing the senses of violence, force and power. Indeed, in his later notes on Bakunin, Marx uses the word three times: the proletariat “must use *violent* [*gewaltsame*] means,” the economic conditions that give rise to class struggle “must be violently cleared from the road and transformed [*gewaltsam aus dem Weg geräumt oder umgewandelt werden*],”¹⁸ and the process of transformation must “be accelerated by violence [*gewaltsam beschleunigt werden*]” (Marx [1875] 1989b, 517; [1875] 1962, 630).¹⁹

9. It is centralised. In a significant letter to the press from 1850, Marx connects his comments on the dictatorship of the proletariat with the measures outlined in the manifesto (Marx and Engels [1850] 1978b, 387–388; [1850] 1977a, 354). Not only does the manifesto include repressive measures as a transition to removing the conditions for class society (see next point), but it also clearly stresses the need for centralised measures. Although all of its ten points require a strong government, I stress the centralisation and indeed monopoly of communication, transport and credit in a national bank, the abolition of private property in land and inheritance, the control and expansion of agriculture and industry as the instruments of production owned by the state, the “establishment of labour armies” and the “equal liability” of all adults to labour (Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 505–506; [1848] 1974, 481–482). In short, it entails the state’s centralised control over the means of production.²⁰

10. This dictatorship is transitional: revolutionary socialism is “the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat* [Klassendiktatur des Proletariats] as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*” (Marx [1850] 1978, 127; [1850] 1977, 192; italics in original).²¹ Or as “Critique of the Gotha Programme” famously puts it, between capitalist and communist society is also a “political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat* [die revolutionäre Diktatur des Proletariats]” (Marx [1875] 1989a, 95; [1875] 1985, 22; italics in original). This is the same as what Marx calls the first or initial stage of communism, although no time frame is indicated (Marx [1875] 1989a, 83–87; [1875] 1985, 11–15).

A number of these points need some further discussion, especially those concerning centralisation, repression and violence. Commentators have at times been troubled by this clear emphasis by Marx, suggesting that by “dictatorship” Marx meant “rule [*Herrschaft*]” or “worker’s democracy,” or preferring to skip past the proletarian dictatorship and emphasise the Paris Commune (Miliband 1965; Jessop 1978; Draper 1986, 175–306; Paolucci 2007, 233–237; Adam 2010).²² That such a dictatorship is necessary is clear from Marx’s texts, especially for the sake of overcoming the counter-revolution, embodied in the “bourgeois dictatorship.”²³ But should it also involve violence? In thesis 8 (above), I translated *gewaltsam* with “violent,” not because I seek to argue that Marx had this specific sense in mind when writing (since searching for an author’s frame of mind is a futile task), but because it is part of the semantic field of the German term, along with power and force. Marx’s

¹⁶ See also the representation put in the mouths of Proudhonists: “If the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms and if the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship . . .” (Marx [1873] 1988, 393).

¹⁷ Translation mine. The English translation of “*gewaltsam . . . aufhebt*” offers “sweeps away by force” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 506), which softens the German somewhat, where *gewaltsam* also entails violence. Noticeably, the first English version of the manifesto offers “has destroyed, by force” (Marx and Engels [1850] 1977b, 621).

¹⁸ The metaphorical phrase, *aus dem Weg räumen*, has a number of senses in German, turning on clearing something off the road, removing obstacles (*Hindernisse*) from the road, clearing a barrier (*ein Sperre*), and so eliminating, ironing out, doing away with and sweeping away. Political resonances run through the phrase.

¹⁹ Translations mine. A few pages later, Marx mentions the “general means of coercion in its struggle [*allgemeine Zwangsmittel im Kampf*]” (Marx [1875] 1989b, 519; [1875] 1962, 634).

²⁰ And as “Critique of the Gotha Programme” indicates in dealing with the transitional “first phase” of communism, inequality would have to be the norm, precisely for the sake of overcoming economic inequality: “right would have to be unequal rather than equal” (Marx [1875] 1989a, 86–87; [1875] 1985, 14–15).

²¹ Or as Marx puts it in letter to Weydemeyer:

My own contribution was 1. to show that the *existence of classes* is merely bound up with *certain historical phases in the development of production*; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the *abolition* [*Aufhebung*] *of all classes* and to a *classless society*. (Marx [1852] 1983, 62–65; [1852] 1963, 508; emphasis in original).

²² For some “Western” Marxists, the desire seems to be driven by the need to avoid the connection in this matter between Marx and those who followed, especially Lenin, Stalin and Mao.

²³ It is also clearly not “Blanquist,” for which the dictatorship in question is not by the proletariat but by a small band of dedicated revolutionaries over the proletariat. Draper (1986, 34–39, 120–171, 264–288) ably dispenses with the myth that Marx’s proletarian dictatorship was derived from Blanqui.

use of the word on three occasions has a rhetorical effect that may also be rendered as “violent force” or “powerful force.” But we do not need to opt for one or another sense (in the original or in translation), for the term itself invokes its semantic field when used.²⁴

A further question concerns the relationship, found in “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” between the “transitional phase” of the proletarian dictatorship and the first and higher phases of communist society (thesis 10). Marx’s comments are brief, deliberately so for reasons that will become clear later. But the question remains: what is the relationship between these two proposals? One possible interpretation is that Marx was suggesting an initial phase, which he called the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” and that this would be followed by two subsequent stages, being those of communism. The problem is that such an interpretation requires importing a significant amount of extra material, leaving us with three phases rather than the two Marx mentions. Another and more natural interpretation is possible, which is that the proletarian dictatorship and the first stage of communism are the same. Thus, the first phase is not communist society developed on its own foundations, but “on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society, which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.” Marx writes of certain “defects,” such as unequal “bourgeois right,” differences between individuals that entail division of labour, recompense in terms of labour, and the existence of commodities, defects that are “inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth-pangs from capitalist society” (Marx [1875] 1989a, 85–87; [1875] 1985, 13–15). Only in the higher phase can one speak of the vanishing of the “enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour,” entailing that class distinctions still exist in the first phase.²⁵ For these reasons, I have followed a more natural interpretation of the texts, in which the first phase, which has just emerged from capitalist society and is still stamped with it in so many ways, is to be equated with the “revolutionary transformation” from capitalist society to communist society, which is also a “political transition period” that Marx calls the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” But it must be acknowledged that Marx’s comments are sparse and that his observations on the phases of communism and the proletarian dictatorship are separated by a number of pages, thereby leaving open the possibility of a range of interpretations.

The Commune

Given the centralised, repressive and violent nature of the proletarian dictatorship—economically and politically—in Marx’s texts, his enthusiasm concerning the Paris Commune produces a distinct ambivalence, if not tension, in his thoughts on the nature of the state after a communist revolution. Before analysing this tension, let me identify the main theses concerning the commune.

11. The very new form of the commune entails overcoming the old form of “state power,” which entails moving the functions or apparatus of governance from previous forms of the state to the communes. Marx repeatedly speaks of the “legitimate functions,” if not the “whole initiative hitherto exercised by the State” being put in the hands of, “discharged by” and “restored” to the “responsible agents of society.”²⁶

12. This appropriation has a number of levels, for example: a) moving from a misrepresentative (bourgeois) parliamentary system to a “working body, executive and legislative at the same time,” elected by local, direct and revocable universal suffrage; b) suppressing the standing army and substitution by the “institution” of the National Guard; c) stripping the police of “political attributes” and making them into responsible and revocable agents of the commune; d) divesting the judiciary of “sham independence” and ensuring it is elected.

13. Shifting such functions entails decentralisation: the old centralised government has to give way to the “self-government of the producers”—a model to be replicated in even the smallest hamlet.²⁷

²⁴ Engels would make much greater use of *Gewalt* in his analysis of the state (the subject of a subsequent study), but we also find it in Weber’s influential definition of the state as “*das Monopol legitimer physischer Gewaltsamkeit*,” which translators render as “violence” (Weber 1919, 6).

²⁵ Marx makes matters more complicated by observing that in the first phase unequal “bourgeois right” recognises “no class distinctions [*keine Klassenunterschiede*]” (Marx [1875] 1989a, 86; [1875] 1985, 14). Does he mean that classes as such do not exist, or that “bourgeois right” does not recognise classes in its operation? The latter seems the more likely sense, especially in light of Marx’s comments on the continued reality of inequality and that division of labour disappears only with the higher phase of communist society.

²⁶ Quotations in the following points are drawn from “The Civil War in France” (Marx [1871] 1986a, 330–340). In the notes on Bakunin, Marx speaks of the way elections are determined by the economic foundations. With the removal of patterns of economic exploitation, he writes that the “distribution of general functions has become a routine matter which entails no domination [*keine Herrschaft*]” (Marx [1875] 1989b, 519; [1875] 1962, 635).

²⁷ This approach to the commune is in line with what is at times called Marx’s earlier and more “humanist” phase, with a relatively positive—Enlightenment inspired—perception of human nature. The alienations produced by the division of labour, patterns of domination and exploitation embodied in class structures and the concomitant patterns of the bourgeois state had to be overcome by removing the causes of these alienations and reuniting the broken parts of human existence. At one point, Marx calls this reunited individual existence “human emancipation [*menschliche Emanzipation*]” (Marx [1844] 1975c, 168;

14. It also entails breaking the mechanism of repression, whether police, army, judiciary or “spiritual force of repression” (church and education).

15. The economic element is muted, restricted to a general observation concerning a “working-class government” for the sake of the “emancipation of Labour,” a “lever for uprooting the economical foundations upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule.” Since everyone becomes a worker (and the workers have the interests of peasants at heart),²⁸ labour “ceases to be a class attribute.”²⁹

A significant distance separates the observations on the dictatorship of the proletariat and the commune: one draws together economic and political factors and is focused on appropriating the means of production, while the other treads lightly on economics; one is clearly centralised and repressive while the other seeks to overcome the centralisation and repression of “state power.” In short, one stipulates strong measures to overcome “bourgeois dictatorship” and the expected counter-revolution while the other imagines a free association of equal workers (which was soon defeated by the counter-revolution).³⁰ Apart from the fact that Marx would bequeath this tension to subsequent efforts to understand the socialist state, the question remains: was Marx aware of the tension, if not outright contradiction? He never equated the proletarian dictatorship with the commune,³¹ but a few hints suggest that he was aware of the problem³² and that he made some initial steps to develop a narrative as to how they might be related.

The first appears in a reported speech—in paraphrase—at a celebration of the seventh anniversary of the International. Marx is reported as saying that while the commune sought to remove the conditions for oppression by transferring the means of production to the labourer (note the economic focus here) and thereby bring to an end class society, “before such a change could be effected a proletarian dictature would become necessary, and the first condition of that was a proletarian army.” Indeed, the “working classes would have to conquer the right to emancipate themselves on the battlefield” (Marx [1871] 1986c, 634; [1871] 1973, 433). While this text is a paraphrase of Marx’s speech, he seems to be suggesting here that the commune missed precisely this important step: a dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary before the aims of the commune could be achieved. A few months earlier, Marx had made a similar point in a letter to Ludwig Kugelmann. While full of praise for the initiative and bravery of the communards, he observes that it is no longer needed to “transfer the bureaucratic military machine from one hand to another, but to *break [zerbrechen]* it, and that is essential for every real people’s revolution on the Continent” (Marx [1871] 1989, 131; [1871] 1976, 205; italics in original). While this is what the commune was attempting to do, it made two mistakes: it did not march on Versailles immediately (and so deal with the counter-revolution) and the “Central Committee surrendered its power too soon, to make way for the Commune” (Marx [1871] 1989, 132; [1871] 1976, 205). The suggestion in these pieces is that the commune forwent the necessity of the proletarian dictatorship. Clearly, Marx is beginning to search for a narrative to connect the dictatorship of the proletariat and the commune.³³ This narrative appears in at least two places, although in

[1844] 1982b, 163; see also Marx [1844] 1975a, 187; [1844] 1982c, 182–183). On this topic, see especially Leopold’s detailed investigation (2007, 183–277). Note also: “Thus they find themselves directly opposed to the form in which hitherto, the individuals, of which society consists, have given themselves collective expression, that is, the state; in order therefore, to assert themselves as individuals, they must overthrow the state” (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 80; [1845–46] 1973, 77). Perhaps the best image of this “human emancipation” appears in the first rough outline of historical materialism: “[C]ommunist society . . . regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic” (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 47; [1845–46] 1973, 33). As Harding points out, this image—with touches of “agrarian anti-industrial socialism”—does not present one working as a “collier, fitter, assembly-worker and salesman” (Harding 1984, 4).

²⁸ For a late awareness of the importance of peasants, see the notes on Bakunin (Marx [1875] 1989b, 517–518; [1875] 1962, 630–634).

²⁹ The first draft is also very brief and general on economic matters (Marx [1871] 1986b, 491–492).

³⁰ Few are the commentators who actually recognise this tension (Harding 1984, 3–14; Leys and Panitch 2000, 115–116).

³¹ This avoidance has not prevented a string of commentators attempting to reconcile the two, beginning with Engels’s introduction to the third edition, published after Marx’s death: “do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat” (Engels [1894–95] 1990, 191; Johnstone 1971; Balibar 1977, 58; Miliband 1991, 151; Van Ree 2015, 77, 115).

³² Apart from Harding’s suggestion that Marx was perhaps embarrassed by the tension and studiously avoided identifying the commune with the dictatorship of the proletariat (Harding 1984, 13–14). On this score, it is worth noting that in “Critique of the Gotha Programme” Marx was quite scathing of the “old democratic litany familiar to all: universal suffrage, direct legislation, popular rights, a people’s militia, etc.” This, Marx suggests, is a “mere echo of the bourgeois People’s Party, of the League of Peace and Freedom” (Marx [1875] 1989a, 95; [1875] 1985, 22).

³³ The seeds of this dialectical narrative may be found in an early piece, where Marx suggests that revolution calls for a political act as “*destruction and dissolution [der Zerstörung und der Auflösung]*,” after which “socialism throws off its *political cloak [politische Hülle]*” (Marx [1844] 1975b, 206; [1844] 1982a, 463; italics in original).

only the second one is the proletarian dictatorship mentioned explicitly.³⁴ In the late notes on Bakunin, Marx indicates the centralisation already outlined in the manifesto would require coercion, force and violence during the initial phase, when the old economic forms persist, along with the associated class dynamics and political forms. In fact, the argument offers a dialectical approach, in which the repressive coercion of the proletarian dictatorship is precisely the means for abolishing the old economic basis and thereby the proletariat's own character as a class (*als Klasse aufheben*). Only when this situation has been achieved can the methods used for achieving it be discarded (Marx [1875] 1989b, 519–521; [1875] 1962, 634–636). The narrative is even clearer in “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” where the dictatorship of the proletariat is coterminous with the first stage of communism and that the further stage would begin to see the unfolding of full communism (Marx [1875] 1989a, 83–87; [1875] 1985, 11–15).³⁵

Before turning to the question as to what happens to the state, let me note that Marx stresses that both the proletarian dictatorship and the commune are very much works in progress. While one is a transitional means, he observes in relation to the commune that one should not “expect miracles” or “ready-made utopias,” but rather be prepared for long struggles, historical processes and the need to transform both circumstances and human beings. A crucial aspect of these struggles is dealing with counter-revolution. The proletarian dictatorship was geared to deal with such matters, but even with the commune Marx notes that it existed as a “besieged town,” only to suffer too soon the deception and savagery of the old order based at Versailles.

A Workers’ State, or, a State that Is Not a State

What happens to the state under the dictatorship of the proletariat and the commune? Many would be tempted to read back into Marx’s works the phrase coined by Engels, the dying away—or “withering away”—of the state. I deal with this matter fully in another study of Engels, suffice to refer here to a careful study by Draper (1970). He points out that Marx (and Engels) inherited a “primitive anti-statism” that has a long history indeed in the history of social dissent. Later it would congeal into anarchism, but before it did so, Marx’s early statements reflect this position—*de rigueur* for any radical. Only when he introduces a sense of delay or ultimacy³⁶ does he signal the possibility of a somewhat distinct position. Developing such a position would have to wait some two decades, until the events in Paris. In this situation in the 1870s, we find Marx struggling to articulate a position on the state *after* a revolution.³⁷ The dictatorship of the proletariat was a relatively straightforward question, given that the ultimate moment entails a long in-between period. The proletarian dictatorship clearly exercises the activities or functions of what would normally be connected with a strong state. I think less here of the way it should use the mechanisms of existing state structures to prosecute its self-abolishing agenda. But distinct implications arise in light of Marx’s historical arguments that the nature of the state is determined by the class in control: if the workers and peasants are in control during a transitional period of proletarian dictatorship, does not the state begin to change its nature?

The commune is another matter, for Marx equivocates. Or at least he does so between the earlier drafts and the final form of “The Civil War in France.” In the first draft, he writes that the commune was not a revolution “against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or Imperialist form of State Power.” Instead, it was a revolution against “the *State* itself, this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people, of its own social life” (Marx [1871] 1986b, 486).³⁸ The “state” per se is “separate and independent from society” (Marx [1871] 1986b, 486), being the machinery of class domination by its very definition. In this light, it matters not which form of the state appears, for each is essentially the same, against which the commune becomes a Hegelian negation. This is the last outburst of the old and familiar anti-statist position in Marx’s texts. Notably, even in the second and especially the final version of the text Marx drops this sentence and his writing is more considered, specifying “state power” and delineating clearly the commune’s exercise of certain functions of the state apparatus, which is directly responsible to the people. In fact, Marx also mentions in the first draft the

³⁴ Although Marx does use “*die Klassenherrschaft der Arbeiter*,” the “class rule of the workers,” in the first piece on Bakunin (Marx [1875] 1989b, 521; [1875] 1962, 636).

³⁵ Although Balibar risks reading a little too much of Lenin’s thought into that of Marx and Engels, he does stress this particular point (Balibar 1977, 63).

³⁶ This moment is first signalled in *The German Ideology*: “the communist revolution, which removes [*aufhebt*] the division of labour, ultimately abolishes [*schließlich beseitigt*] political institutions” (Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1976, 380; [1845–46] 1973, 364). It would take quite a few years to work out the implications.

³⁷ Marx did so in response to pressures from two sides: the Blanquist movement’s widespread involvement in the Paris Commune and the clarification of a distinct anarchist position through Bakunin. On the one side was the Blanquist emphasis on immediate seizure of power and dictatorship by a small band of enlightened revolutionaries, while on the other was a remade Bakunin advocating an immediate declaration of the state’s abolition (which he attempted to do in Lyons in 1870, only to be sent packing by the forces of the state he had just abolished).

³⁸ Some quote and emphasise this text, either without specifying that it appears in the first draft and was later dropped, or suggesting that it is consistent with the second and final versions (Miliband 1965, 290; Jessop 1978, 52; 1982, 27; Harding 1984, 5; Adam 2010, 8).

“state functions reduced to a few functions for general national purposes” (Marx [1871] 1986b, 490), but the point is muted.³⁹ The final text would elaborate much further: the commune exercises not state power but the necessary aspects of its apparatus.

In two other works from the 1870s, Marx offers a few intriguing suggestions along a similar line. Here we find him struggling to articulate a position concerning the nature of administration, if not governance, under communism. In “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” Marx tackles the question of the “free state” proposed by the German workers’ party. I would like to highlight three features of Marx’s response. To begin with, he reiterates the thesis—well-established in his work by now—that “existing society” is the “basis [*Grundlage*]” of the existing state and that the state in question is not an independent entity. Here he adds a crucial parenthetical comment: “or of the future state in the case of future society.”⁴⁰ In other words, any form of the state in future society would also be shaped by that society. Next, he points out that while present states manifest significant variety they have in common the fact that they are “based on modern bourgeois society [*der modernen bürgerlichen Gesellschaft stehn*].” But what is the reason for the variety? They are “more or less capitalistically developed,” by which he means that they are “more or less free from medieval admixture” and influenced by particular historical developments. Thus, even capitalist society, depending on the complexities of local histories, is in various stages of transition between feudalism and capitalism (in a European context). And this is so after hundreds of years of capitalist development. Will this also be the case in any future society, until at last the “present root, bourgeois society, will have died off [*abgestorben ist*]”? The final point returns to the state of the future. Marx asks: “what transformation will the state undergo in communist society [*kommunistischen Gesellschaft*]?” One might be inclined to offer an anti-statist answer of the kind that Marx tended to invoke in earlier works. But Marx does not do so. Instead, he writes: “In other words, what social functions [*welche gesellschaftliche Funktionen*] will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions [*jetzigen Staatsfunktionen analog*]?” These reflections are obviously in a similar vein to those of “The Civil War in France” of a few years before. Even in a communist society, distinct social functions will be required that are analogous to present state functions. Or rather, Marx raises the question without offering an answer. The reason seems to be that he does not have the actual data, the experience of constructing a communist society after a revolution. As he observes, the question can be answered “only scientifically [*nur wissenschaftlich*].” Now some ambivalence creeps into Marx’s text. Having raised the questions (above) and having refused an answer, he then mentions the transition period and the dictatorship of the proletariat. We are left wondering: when he mentions “communist society” earlier, with its social functions analogous to present-day state functions, even hinting at some qualitatively different form of the state that arises from communist society, does he mean this first and transitional stage, however long it may be?⁴¹ Or does he mean the full realisation of communism, when bourgeois society has disappeared?

The other text is comprised of Marx’s marginal notes on Bakunin, where he deploys both the strongest language yet in terms of the proletarian dictatorship and a dialectical approach in which aforesaid dictatorship enables full communism (see above). But I am interested here in his struggle to find an adequate terminology concerning the nature of the society that is to follow. The text is still close in spirit to his deliberations on the commune, but he finds that he must consider forms of organisation. In a series of responses to Bakunin’s questions, Marx makes the following pertinent points. In order to achieve “self-government of the communities,” one still needs an executive.⁴² Take the example of a trades union, where an executive administers the “common interests.” Obviously, such a situation entails “division of labour.” This is not to say that a worker ceases to be a worker when elected to an executive, in the same way that a “factory owner today ceases to be a capitalist when he becomes a municipal councillor.” But what is the function of elections? They are not progressive in and of themselves, for they depend on the “economic foundations,” if not the “economic interrelations of the voters.” Thus, as soon as the “functions” are no longer political, “1) government functions no longer exist; 2) the distribution of general functions has become a routine matter which entails no domination; 3) elections lose their present political character.” Clearly, Marx is struggling at this point, since he still seeks to assert the absence of “government functions” and “political character.” At the same time, he has to admit that there is a “distribution of general functions,” if not division of labour, executives and the need to administer the new forms. So he finds

³⁹ Although it is worth noting that in the first draft Marx also speaks of the “reabsorption of the State power by society, as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organized force of their suppression” (Marx [1871] 1986b, 487). Here he suggests that state power is negated by being reabsorbed and thereby continuing in another form.

⁴⁰ Quotations in this paragraph are drawn from a couple of pages in “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (Marx [1875] 1989a, 94–95; [1875] 1985, 21–22).

⁴¹ Draper (1970, 294) opts for this answer, based on a comment made much earlier in the text concerning communist society “not as it has developed on its own foundations, but on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society.” If so, this would mean the proletarian dictatorship with its use of coercion. However, in the passage here under analysis, Marx leaves the possibilities more open than Draper admits.

⁴² The quotations in the remainder of the paragraph are drawn from a few insightful pages of the notes on Bakunin (Marx [1875] 1989b, 519–520; [1875] 1962, 634–635).

himself using two significant phrases. The first: there will be “no state in the present political sense [*keinen Staat im jetzigen politischen Sinne geben*].” Here Marx leaves open the possibility of a state in a rather different political sense. The second: “what forms could management functions [*Verwaltungsfunktionen*] assume within such a workers’ state [*Arbeiterstaats*], if he wants to call it that?” Well, says Marx, if you want to call this new formation anything, then perhaps “workers’ state” will do for now, a placeholder for a better term.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have focused on Marx’s suggestions as to what might happen to the state after a communist revolution. On this matter, Marx bequeathed a distinct tension to the subsequent tradition concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat and the commune. Clearly, both are found in Marx’s texts, but he also seems to have been aware of the problem. So I examined his efforts to construct a narrative sequence, with at times a dialectical turn in which the coercive and repressive measures of the proletarian dictatorship are the means for achieving full communism. Further, in the 1870s he began to struggle with the forms of administration or governance after a revolution and during the period of constructing socialism. While he usually suggests that the proletarian dictatorship deploys the mechanisms of the existing state to achieve its aims, implications arise in light of his argument that the dominant class determines the nature of the state. More significant are his efforts to outline the apparatus of full communism, of which he thought he caught a glimpse in the Paris Commune. Working between his in-built assumptions and previously stated positions, he begins to speak apophatically of “no state in the present political sense,” if not using the term “workers’ state,” if one wishes to call it something.

To add to these intriguing possibilities, the German word used when Marx discusses the transitional function of the dictatorship of the proletariat is none other than *Aufhebung/aufheben* (noun and verb). In the manifesto, he and Engels write that the old conditions of production, when the proletariat is the ruling class, are violently *aufhebt* (Marx and Engels [1848] 1974, 482), if not the ultimate process in which the proletariat does the same—*hebt . . . auf*—to classes and thereby its own domination. Further, in his letter to Weydemeyer of 1852 Marx writes that the proletarian dictatorship is a transition to the *Aufhebung* of all classes (Marx [1852] 1963, 508). In the later reflections on Bakunin, Marx deploys a dialectical narrative in which the workers’ dictatorship is precisely the means for the proletariat to “sublate itself as a class [*als Klasse aufheben*]” (Marx [1875] 1962, 634). This terminology is favoured by Marx at crucial turns in his argument in other contexts (Boer 2012, 140–145), with the distinctly Hegelian sense of sublation, of *both* abolishing what has gone before *and* transforming it into a rather different entity. The tantalising suggestion arises whether the conditions of production and classes will not simply be abolished and destroyed, but that they will be transformed and continue in hitherto unexpected forms. Does this also apply to the state, which would then continue in a way not seen before?

Yet, Marx was also profoundly reticent to offer much in the way of concrete prognostication. This was not so much due to a wariness of blueprints, but rather to the knowledge that he had not experienced a successful revolution—one that had seen off the counter-revolution and had found some peace and space to begin constructing socialism. After all, one needs concrete evidence to be able to elaborate and develop theories that arise from the evidence. As he observes in “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” such a question can be answered “only scientifically [*nur wissenschaftlich*].” To others would fall the experience and the consequent evidence, as well as the philosophical reflection necessary to understand what was happening, if not offer possible guides for action. That there would be unexpected turns and developments hardly needs saying.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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