

Lenin, Class and Religion

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Published as: 2016 'Lenin, Sınıf ve Din (Lenin, Class and Religion)'. *İştirakî* 10.2: 99-118.

Translated into Turkish.

The vocabulary and grammar of the Western tradition of politics was abruptly dispensed with (Harding 1996: 152).

The argument that follows maybe stated briefly: in the same way that the state is a weapon in hands of one class to suppress another, so also is a religious institution. In order to explain that statement in some detail, I make use of unjustly neglected text, Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (Lenin 1917 [1964]).¹ Why Lenin? Despite his decidedly unfashionable status, the reason for engaging with Lenin is his resolute focus on class as an indispensable category of analysis. Why class? We need only look at the current context of Western capitalism. With the economic crisis and depression that has laid low Western capitalism since 2008, with massive protests in Greece, with the "Occupy" movement in the USA, with "Brexit," and with the persistence of the anti-capitalist movement around the world, class is once again emerging as a key issue. In that context, we would do well to return to some of the major analysts of class in order to relearn some distinct lessons, rather than setting out to redesign the proverbial wheel. And one of those analysts, who determined in so many ways the very shape of the twentieth century, is Lenin.

The argument below has four steps. The first two move rather quickly, offering a succinct (Marxist) definition of class and accounting for the concealment of class in recent analysis. The remaining two require more attention, one offering a close reading of the opening chapters of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (some of which reads as though it written for *our* situation) and the other an exploration of the relevance of that material for understanding the role of religion today.

Definition and Obscurity

Class may be defined in both objective and subjective terms. Objectively, class designates the difference between those who work to produce goods and those who extract a surplus from

¹ One may find the argument of this initial work reiterated, at times in close integration with Lenin's arguments concerning freedom, in works after the October Revolution (Lenin 1917 [1964]; 1917 [1966]: 102; 1919 [1965]-e; 1919 [1965]-c: 457-67; 1919 [1965]-b: 107-9).

those goods but do not produce them.² This objective difference is manifested in the division of labor, which operates in complex patterns of distinctions between male and female, mind and body, city and country, material and immaterial wealth. Too often discussions of class in our own context remain at the objective level, with assessments of incomes, poverty, wealth, or, as it is usually called, “socio-economic” status. For instance, anyone earning below \$50,000 belongs to the “lower” class. This is a truncated and misleading understanding of class, for class also has a subjective dimension, namely the consciousness of belonging to a particular class. That consciousness includes a complex web of cultural assumptions, modes of speech, social codes, world outlook, and religion – what Bourdieu would call a “habitus” (Bourdieu 1977, 1980). Most significantly, class consciousness is determined by a class opponent, the differences with which are marked by opposing assumptions of one’s role and importance within production, and by the cultural assumptions each holds.³ For instance, peasants regard the class that extracts their produce, whether through taxes or direct appropriation (plunder), as exploitative and cruel overlords, while those who extract such surplus regard peasants as ignorant, lazy, earthy, uncultured, and surly. In our own context, the ubiquity of derogatory terms such as “trailer-trash” (USA) “bogans” (Australia), “taber” (“loser” in Danish) – one may find myriad variations from place to place – express bourgeois ruling class denigrations of working class identity. In reverse, terms such as “fat cats,” “capitalist pigs,” and “vultures” signal working class identifications of the class enemy. The key to such class antagonism and conflict is that it invariably boils down to a stark opposition between two classes. Although residues of other classes may remain from former socio-economic formations, such as a powerless aristocracy, they are drawn up into this primary opposition.⁴

2 Or as Lenin puts it technically: “Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy” (Lenin 1919 [1965]-d: 421).

3 As Marx and Engels famously state in the Communist Manifesto: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes ... The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (Marx and Engels 1848 [1976]: 480).

4 My preference is clearly for a Marxist definition of class and class conflict. This is more persuasive and provides more incisive tools for analysis than the other significant tradition of class analysis drawn from Max Weber (Weber 1968: 302-5), for whom class initially refers to the layer or group that occupies a common economic situation. It also includes status, which thereby introduces a potential for multiple stratification. This approach is gradualist: given

We also need to distinguish between classes, social categories, and groups, although the terms are often confused (Burke 1993). A category designates those who share a common status, such as young people, intellectuals, truck drivers, or religious professionals. Groups are determined by those who have common interests, ranging from two people (cockroach racers) to large organizations (Hare Krishnas). A class involves ranking, economic resources, subjective identity, and extra-class antagonisms. It is the largest and may include categories or groups.

The question then is how this sharp and useful definition of class has been banished to a tiny room in the back of analysis, the key to the door lost amidst the dust and damp. At least two factors have played a role. To begin with, a crucial strategy of ruling class dominance is to assert that its particular preferences, beliefs, perceptions of the world – in short, ideology – is universal. The way that is achieved is to deny the validity of any other perspective, to rule it out of court by whatever means possible. It may be the assertion that we now live in a classless society; or that workers have had all their wishes met and have never had it better; or that those who struggle do so through their own fault. A telling example is the approach of the Murdoch-owned Fox News in the USA. Whenever an occasional slightly less right-wing Democrat commentator begins to speak of the gap between rich and poor, of the need to redistribute wealth to the smallest degree, Fox accuses that person of fostering old-fashioned “class warfare.” Rather than a rabid assertion of ruling class control, this strategy is rather astute. In order to maintain the status quo, one must squash any effort that may foster an alternative class consciousness, with the inevitable consequence of class conflict.

A second factor concerns the critiques of class analysis that came most strongly from poststructuralist theory. The charge was that the category of class is both essentialist and that it offers a master narrative that excludes other voices. As far as essentialism is concerned, the argument was that class is an essentialist category, designating a distinct essence, a natural identity that is unchangeable. If a person belongs to one class, then it is impossible to change. The response was to develop what is now known as discursive constructivism, in which the old essentialist categories became products of modes of speech, writing and thought (Foucault’s “discourses”). The problem here is twofold. First, this understanding of essentialism is both a caricature and neglects a dialectical feature of certain types of essentialism: that very essence may change as a result of altered socio-economic conditions. Second, the development of discursive constructivism (elaborated most extensively by Judith Butler and followed closely by her many admirers) is a development from Marxist social constructivism. The latter typically argues that the construction of categories such as class, gender, race, subject and ethical other, takes place

the complex overlaps, classes phase into one another and are defined by variables such as income and status. People move more freely between such classes as their circumstances change.

within a socio-economic context that produces such categories. Discursive constructivism has, by contrast, largely removed the socio-economic context and focuses exclusively on discourse as the agent of construction. While the importance of language cannot be denied (indeed, it is a crucial factor in the social constructivism of the Marxism), the focus on pure discourse threatens to become an idealist approach with little awareness of the materialist factors involved.

As for master narratives, the critique of a narrative in which two great antagonistic classes battle to the death was that it excludes all manner of other voices, be they women, racial others, queers, colonials, animals and so on. In the desire to enable such voices to speak, the Marxist master narrative was charged with being totalizing and thereby exclusive of such voices. The paradox here is that it has become clear that by denying master narratives (or heuristic frameworks), no voice dares to speak for fear of denying another voice (Hutcheon 1989). By contrast, it turns out that only through master narratives are such voices enabled to speak (McHale 1992). Two examples will suffice. First, the recent development of the category of “intersectionality” is an effort to bring to together the multiple layers of marginalization, such as gender, race and sexuality (Crenshaw 1991; Nash 2008). The catch is that such a move is precisely the return of a master narrative so heavily criticized a little earlier. A further problem with intersectionality is that one loses the specific possibilities of a mode of analysis such as that of class, for it is swept up into a grander conglomeration. The second example comes from the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik Party. With its master narrative of class conflict, economic exploitation, revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat, the Bolsheviks actually enabled all manner of voices to be part of the process. Thus, ethnic differences were a central issue through what they called the “national question,” sexuality was openly and vigorously debated in the new social order, and women were central to the structure, success and nature of the Bolsheviks. They comprised a third of the membership, took leading positions in the party and then government, and enabled concrete gains regarding gender that were significantly in advance of Western feminism. One need only mention some of the more significant names to gain a sense of both a largely forgotten dimension of feminism and its importance: Alexandra Kollontai, Inessa Irmand, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Vera Zasulich, and Clara Zetkin (Kollontai 1980; Zetkin 1929, 1984; Chatterjee 2002).⁵

In these ways class has been obscured as an incisive mode of analysis. But that is not the only reason for urging its return, for we find ourselves now in the midst of a brutal economic crisis, of a seismic shift in global and political power, and of widespread and enduring protests

⁵ One may find many useful texts and resources at <http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/index.htm>.

against a system that is unsustainable. In this context, the concept of class provides a much-needed ability to discern what is happening.

State and Revolution

Now I turn to an exegesis of the opening chapters of *The State and Revolution*, a work written when Lenin was in hiding, in a leaking straw hut in the Finnish countryside after the premature July revolt in 1917. Drawing upon notes he had gathered, Lenin characteristically found himself with some time to reconsider matters from the ground up. His work, as he famously writes, was “‘interrupted’ by a political crisis – the eve of the October revolution of 1917”. Although he was unable to write the crucial last part called “The Experience of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917,” he points out: “It is more pleasant and useful to go through the ‘experience of revolution’ than to write about it” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 492).

In his characteristic fashion, Lenin asserts that he is undertaking a return to Marx and Engels in light of recent misinterpretations, yet as he critiques these positions he develops an argument that builds upon but also goes beyond the initial foundation. The reason is of course that circumstances change and that Marx and Engels were not able to say everything, leaving many points undeveloped. And that applies crucially both to the nature of the state and what happens after the revolution in which power is seized. In the initial chapters of *The State and Revolution* we may identify the following crucial steps in his argument: 1) the state is the result of irreconcilable class antagonism; 2) it becomes a weapon in the hands of one class to oppress another; 3) since it is not neutral, the oppressed class cannot simply take over the existing apparatus but must overcome and dismantle it; 4) since the existing state functions as the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the way it is to be overcome is through the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Class Conflict and the State

Lenin begins by reiterating the central Marxist argument that the state is the product of class antagonism and not, as is so often assumed, an imposition upon people from outside. Although this assumption may seem natural in light of the alienation of the state from everyday life – embodied in statements such as “the state will do it” or “the state must intervene” or “the nanny state” – it is not the way the state emerges. Instead, the “state is a product and a manifestation of the *irreconcilability* of class antagonisms.” The state is therefore not a reconciliation of such antagonism, a means of mediating and ameliorating conflict within

acceptable limits. It is a signal that “antagonism objectively *cannot* be reconciled” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 387). The converse is also true, for the very fact that a state exists indicates that class conflict is irreconcilable.

This is standard Marxist theory of the state, which Lenin draws immediately from Marx and Engels. Now he takes a crucial further step, although he does by criticizing a misappropriation of this Marxist theory. Granting the point, theorists who followed Marx and Engels then argued that the state must involve a reconciliation of class conflict. We may fill in Lenin’s point here a little: since the state sets boundaries for the range of acceptable political positions by excluding “extremes,” it may appear that the state does indeed reconcile antagonism. The range of these positions, from a mild “left” to a mild “right,” with each seeking to win the “middle ground,” gives the impression that they embody all conceivable and viable political options. One need only witness the process of parliamentary bourgeois “democracy” for evidence of precisely such a phenomenon. Yet the implicit assumption of all those who play the game is that the system itself is not to be questioned, that capitalist economic structures and bourgeois culture must be sustained. Anyone or any group that questions the underlying structure is thereby marginalized from political participation. In this light, we may speak of the bourgeois parliamentary democracy as the manifestation of a one-party state, with all of the “parties” merely factions within that one party, having slightly different policies that would make the system function more smoothly.

An Organ of Class Rule

To return to Lenin’s text: how does this situation emerge? Now Lenin introduces a crucial development beyond Marx and Engels, one that remains undeveloped in their work. Given that the state is the outcome of irresolvable class antagonism, the next step is that the state becomes “an organ of class *rule*, an organ for the *oppression* of one class by another” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 387). And that class is the bourgeoisie, the class that turns the state into an organ of its own purposes. The touchstone for this argument is the Marxist inversion of Hegel concerning the state. In Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* he argues that Hegel’s approach to the state is inverted (Marx 1843 [1975]). Hegel begins with categories such as the state, sovereignty and law and then attempts to fit the lives of flesh-and-blood people within these abstract categories. Instead, argues Marx, we must stand Hegel on his feet and begin with the everyday lives of human beings. In this light, the Hegelian categories become abstractions, alienated from human life and appearing to be entities greater than and determinative of our daily lives. So also with the state.

Lenin draws upon this argument via Engels's (1884 [1990]) point out that the state is "a power which arose from society but places itself above and alienates itself more and more from it" (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 389). The trap now is that the state may appear neutral, an apparatus that is above class struggles. So its various mechanisms for imposing order also appear neutral, such as a standing army, police, prisons and so on (what Althusser would later call "repressive state apparatuses" (Althusser 1971: 121-73)). Yet both the state and its various mechanisms are very much a part of those struggles since they are crucial to the class rule by the bourgeoisie. That class imposes its own order on society, asserts the universality of its own values, cements a specific economic system in place, and sets limits for what positions are acceptable within political debate. Above all, it does so by curtailing the opportunities of its enemies, depriving them of the means and methods of struggle to overthrow the system itself, including the possibility of self-armament. Lenin's analysis reads very much as though it were for today's situation. Witness the way police are called upon to contain protests, whether the waves of anti-capitalist protests across the world or the Occupy movement in North America. Witness the way protesters are put under surveillance and dragged through interminable court proceedings, all for the sake of maintaining "order." And his observations concerning the "domination of the trusts, the omnipotence of the big banks, a grand scale colonial policy" (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 391) are as relevant today as when they were written almost a century ago. The use of the state and its mechanisms may give the impression of maintaining order and reconciling class conflict, but that conceals the systemic violence of oppressing the class that seeks to dispense with the very system the bourgeoisie has put in place.

This situation has, argues Lenin, generated both a profound dilemma and clear demarcation among those who claim to be socialists. His immediate example was fresh in everyone's experience when he wrote: the February Revolution of 1917, when the corrupt and decaying regime of the tsar finally collapsed. The outcome was the Provisional Assembly, itself an evolution from the limited Duma first granted by the tsar after the 1905 revolution. But that Provisional Assembly was a cross-party affair, including the liberal Kadets (Constitution Democrats), Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries and sundry smaller parties. Lenin castigates the other "socialist parties" for their keen desire to be involved in the Assembly, for they deployed precisely the argument that the state functions as a reconciliation of class conflict. A crucial factor in this process was the Petrograd Soviet, dominated in the early months of 1917 by the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries. After the February Revolution, the Soviet was the real basis of power in Petrograd, and yet the Soviet refused to take that power in its full legal form. Instead, the Soviet sought to hand power to a reluctant bourgeoisie, helping them achieve

a fully “democratic” revolution (Cliff 2004 [1976]: 93; Harding 2009, vol. 2: 144-9). For Lenin in the middle of 1917, this was sheer betrayal, a capitulation to the enemy that ceded to them the ground of conflict itself. The outcome clearly illustrates his point, for the Provisional Assembly, headed by Kerensky, the Socialist-Revolutionary, began to outlaw, arrest, imprison and execute the revolutionary proletariat and foster the capitalists and bourgeoisie. As Lenin writes:

A democratic republic is the best possible shell for capitalism, and, therefore, once capital has gained control of this very best shell ... , it established its power so securely, so firmly, that *no* change of persons, institutions or parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic can shake it (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 393).

Dismantling the Bourgeois State

There is, however, a larger context within which Lenin develops his argument concerning the state as a weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and that concerns the international debates between socialists concerning the state and participation within it. Karl Kautsky voiced most strongly the argument in favor of the ballot box for the advancement of socialism, arguing that with the growing strength of Social-Democracy, especially in Germany, it would be only a matter of time before they won parliamentary elections and would then be able to undertake the transformation to socialism. In this light, his criticisms of the Bolsheviks became ever sharper.⁶ Kautsky was to state these views succinctly soon after Lenin wrote *The State and Revolution*, although the former’s position was already clear (Kautsky 1918 [1964], 1919 [2011]; Lenin 1918 [1965]). For Lenin this is a more subtle position, for Kautsky recognizes that the state is the product of class antagonism, but he then argues that the working class needs to gain power of this apparatus to forward its own program.

At this point Lenin develops the third step of his argument. In contrast to Kautsky’s argument that the existing form of the state may be taken over by the proletariat, Lenin points out: “if the state is the product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms, if it is a power standing above society and ‘*alienating itself more and more from it*’, it is clear that the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, *but also without the destruction* of the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class and which is the embodiment of this ‘alienation’” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 388). That is, the state is not neutral. Since

⁶ Or as Lenin puts it in response to the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries at home: “They themselves share, and instil into the minds of the people, the false notion that universal suffrage ‘in the present-day state’ is really capable of revealing the will of the majority of the working people and of securing its realization” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 393-4).

it is the very means of bourgeois oppression of class opponents, one cannot simply take over the state, for its very structures are geared to that oppression. We need not a seizure of existing power, but the destruction of that power and its structural forms.

Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Thus far we have followed Lenin as he develops three key points: the state is the result of irresolvable class conflict; the state becomes a weapon in the hands of one class to oppress another; that state must therefore be destroyed through the proletarian revolution. But now he develops one of his most controversial arguments, sharpening his definitions as he does so: “The ‘special coercive force’ for the suppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, of millions of working people by handfuls of the rich, must be replaced by a ‘special coercive force’ for the suppression of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat (the dictatorship of the proletariat)” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 397). The state is now defined as a “special organisation of force,” which means that it is “an organisation of violence for the suppression of some class” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 402-3). Therefore, the only way to overthrow the one-party state of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is through the dictatorship of the proletariat. The argument is based on the premises that revolution is not a momentary affair but an ongoing process and that the old form of the state would not disappear overnight. Therefore, the proletariat must undertake a process of dismantling the bourgeois state and destroying its power. Only when that class and its form of the state had disappeared would it be possible to develop a new state and new form of democratic freedom. It also needs to be emphasized that Lenin envisioned the dictatorship of the proletariat as a collective process, over against the oligarchy of super-rich capitalists that constituted the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. That this ideal was not always embodied in the government of the USSR was as much due to the exigencies of ‘war communism’ during the ‘civil’ war of 1918-23 as to the failure of nerve in the communist party itself.

This argument generated outrage not only among the liberal bourgeois parties but especially among milder socialists such as Kautsky. How dare one challenge the sacrosanct value of “democracy!” Established early, it soon became a standard Western criticism of what was to become the USSR. But Lenin was by no means unfamiliar with such criticisms, for he had already formulated a position on freedom that distinguishes between actual freedom and the formal and limited freedoms of bourgeois democracy.⁷ While the former designates the often unrecognized conditions under which freedom operates, the latter is that moment when

⁷ The distinction is drawn from Trotsky (Trotsky 1976: 113-14), although Žižek also deploys it without any acknowledgment of Trotsky (Žižek 2001: 113-14).

“everything is possible,” when it is possible to alter the coordinates by which freedom itself is defined. Lenin never tires of pointing out that the much-vaunted bourgeois claims to “freedom” and “democracy” are anything but absolutes, that they are always tied to the interests of that class and thereby constricted by a whole series of limiting conditions. Freedom of industry? That gives reign to predatory wars. Freedom of labor? It is merely another excuse to rob workers (Lenin 1902 [1961]: 355). Freedom of the press? It is actually freedom for the rich to own the press and propagate their bourgeois views and befuddle the people (Lenin 1919 [1965]-a: 370-1). Parliamentary freedom? That depends entirely on the bureaucrats deciding precisely which “freedoms” might be exercised (Lenin 1906 [1962]-a: 422; 1912 [1964]). The ultimately determining instance is capitalism, which generates certain forms of political representation that further its own aims; that is, “democracy” operates within strict parameters: “The facts of democracy must not make us lose sight of a circumstance, often overlooked by bourgeois democrats, that in the capitalist countries representative institutions inevitably give rise to specific forms in which capital exercises its influence on the state power” (Lenin 1912 [1963]: 129). Lenin sums up in characteristic fashion, replete with a biblical allusion (Matthew 23:27):

All your talk about freedom and democracy is sheer claptrap, parrot phrases, fashionable twaddle, or hypocrisy. It is just a painted signboard. And you yourselves are whited sepulchres. You are mean-spirited boors, and your education, culture, and enlightenment are only a species of thoroughgoing prostitution (Lenin 1907 [1963]: 53).

But what is the basis of a truly universal freedom? Lenin’s answer is deeply dialectical, for such freedom is openly partisan. Is this not precisely the accusation hurled at the bourgeoisie, that their prattle about “freedom” conceals specific class interests? Does it not become another version of formal freedom? Not at all, but let us see why. Five factors play a role in Lenin’s argument. First, in the appropriation of Western political terminology during the revolutionary process after February 1917, “democracy” became associated with the laboring masses of workers and peasants, who were the “people” (*demos* and thereby *narod*). The opposite of democracy was not the autocracy or dictatorship, but the classes of the old aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Thus, terms such as “democratic elements,” “democratic classes,” “revolutionary democracy,” along with “democracy” itself, had distinct class dimensions. Democracy became synonymous with the range of socialist parties, while those of the bourgeoisie (Kadets) and the old aristocracy (Octobrists and others) were anti-democratic (Kolonitskii 2004). Lenin played no small part in that process of redefinition, which brings us to our second point concerning concealment: bourgeois claims to foster freedom in general conceal their class interest. By

contrast, one must not conceal the partisan nature of proletarian freedom, for it is “*openly* linked to the proletariat” (Lenin 1905 [1966]: 48). Third, bourgeois freedom is predicated on the individual, while proletarian freedom is collective. The catch here is that this supposed individuality of bourgeois freedom is in fact a collective position that is, once again, systematically concealed and denied. However, if one begins explicitly with the collective, then freedom begins to mean a very different type of freedom. Fourth, this apparently individual, bourgeois freedom operates within “a society based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like parasites” (Lenin 1905 [1966]: 48). In other words, bourgeois freedom serves the cause of capitalism in which the vast majority is systematically denied freedom. Only when the power of money and thereby capitalism is destroyed and replaced with a communist system will the masses be able to enjoy “freedom without inverted commas” (Lenin 1906 [1962]-b: 264). Finally, all of this means that bourgeois freedom constitutes a false universal, based upon a particular which is concealed, namely the power of capital, while proletarian freedom is a genuine universal, based not upon greed or careerism but upon the interests of the vast majority that unites the best of the past’s revolutionary traditions and the best of the present struggle for a new life.

Lenin’s almost utopian conclusion is his deployment of the Marxist theory of the withering away of the state. In contrast to many socialists at the time who took this to mean that the existing state would eventually wither away when the working class parties gained electoral victories, Lenin argues that such a process may take place only after a violent revolution. In other words, it is not the bourgeois state that will wither away but the proletarian state, after the latter has won power through revolution and then dismantled the “state machine created by the bourgeoisie *for themselves*” (Lenin 1917 [1964]: 405). With the abolition of the bourgeoisie, either through members of that class joining the proletariat or through being crushed, the class conflict that produced the state will no longer exist and the reason for the existence of the state in the first place will disappear.

Religion and Revolution

I wish neither to assess in detail the viability of Lenin’s argument (although the logic is impeccable), nor to dwell on the intensive effort by international bourgeois states – the Entente – to crush the Russian Revolution, suffice to observe that his analysis is largely pertinent today. The state remains a weapon in the hands of the ruling class to assert its own falsely “universal” agenda, both through persuasion and force. And it uses whatever tools are available to entrench its position, as witnessed in the responses to the Western economic crisis that has rolled on since

2008 – attacks on workers’ conditions, propping up bank profits, stripping states with relics of welfare provisions. Or as Warren Buffet has infamously stated on a number of occasions, “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning” (Stein 2006).⁸

Let us now at last explore the implications of Lenin argument for understanding the role of religion, with a specific focus on Christianity. In nuce, my argument is that the institution of the church was born in an analogous situation to that of the state, namely, through a profound political ambivalence between reaction and revolution within theology itself. Further, this institution is not a reconciliation of this political tension, but becomes a special organization of force in order to impose the agenda of the reactionary side on the whole, variegated structure of the church. This means that the church is not a neutral structure, one that may be won over by this side or that side in the perpetual struggles through which it passes. If we take Lenin’s insight further, without necessarily invoking the “dictatorship of proletariat,” then any significant change will need to do away with the structure of the church as it has been established in order to undertake a full exercise of actual freedom.

Political Struggle

As I have argued on various occasions, one may identify a profound political ambivalence within the very logic of Christian theology. I do not mean the large variety of specific theologies or church formations that have existed and continue to exist, for they may be understood as symptoms of a deeper feature of the internal workings of theology. This ambivalence or tension is captured best in Ernst Bloch’s observation that the Bible is “often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich”, but it is also “the Church’s bad conscience” (Bloch 1972: 25, 21). Antonio Negri also voices this ambivalence with his comment that “religion is a big rip-off in itself, but it can also be a great instrument of liberation” (Negri and Scelsi 2008: 205). We may find this insight expressed in different ways by a sundry collection that includes Marx and Engels (Marx 1975 [1844]: 175; Engels 1989 [1882], 1990 [1883], 1990 [1894-5]-b; 1990 [1894-5]-a: 523), Karl Kautsky (Kautsky 1947 [1895-7]-a, 1947 [1895-7]-b, 2002 [1897]; Kautsky and Lafargue 1977 [1922]), and even Max Horkheimer (Horkheimer 1978:185; 2006 [1968]; 1996: 36), but I will say a few words more on the way Bloch formulates this tension, for he offers by far the clearest account.

Bloch’s concern is the Bible, for here he espies the profound political tension that is my focus. The Bible has often been and continues to be read as a friend of the rich and powerful *and*

⁸ A variation is more circumspect: “It’s class warfare, my class is winning, but they shouldn’t be” (Doubs 2005).

it has been and continues to be an inspiration for revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow those same powerful fat cats. It is not that one side occupies the side of truth and the other is an aberration, for both positions are perfectly justifiable within the Bible. As for being a scandal to the poor, the Bible is claimed time and again by religious institutions that are on far too good terms with powerful and wealthy rulers, if they themselves are not obscenely well-heeled themselves. I need only mention the Emperor Constantine, Charlemagne, Queen Victoria and Ronald Reagan in order to illustrate such an observation. Bloch does not have in his sights merely a string of venal popes, but even Luther – especially Luther – who sided with the powerful in suppressing the Peasants' Revolt of Thomas Müntzer in sixteenth century Germany. Luther made very good use of the Bible to call down authority from above and to urge the faithful to kill any peasant they might meet. Indeed, if we go back beyond the formation of the canon of the Bible (and the heavy hand of Roman emperors after Constantine), Bloch finds that those responsible for gathering the stories in the Bible were the scribes, themselves part of a small and specialized elite in service both to the priests and kings. So one would expect that the stories they gathered would support the ruling ideology. For, as Marx pointed out, are not the ruling ideas those of the ruling class? Thus, we find many, many stories of suppressed revolt, of insurrection brought to heel, beginning with the “disobedience” of the first human beings in the Garden of Eden, running through the Murmuring Stories in the wilderness and through the call for repentance from one's sins in the New Testament. Of course, those responsible for such rebellion are cast as sinners against God and against whatever tyrant happens to be in favor.

But then the Bible is also the church's bad conscience: it has an uncanny knack of undermining any position one might want to take. If the church wishes to preserve Western culture against the perceived threat of Islam, then it must dispense with well-known biblical statements such as “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44), or, “To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one also” (Luke 6:29), or indeed that Isaac and Ishmael are both sons of Abraham who played together when children (Genesis 21:9). If the church wishes to support a government that denies political asylum to those who seek it, then it will find texts that command one to “love the foreigner” as God does (Deuteronomy 10:18-19), or the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:35, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” a little troublesome. On the other hand, if the church seeks to encourage peace, love and understanding, then the saying put in Jesus' mouth, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34), becomes problematic.

Throughout his great works on utopia – *The Spirit of Utopia* and *Principle of Hope* (Bloch 2000, 1995) – this ambivalence, or rather multi-valence shows its face time and again. However,

in the much neglected *Atheism in Christianity* (Bloch 1972) it is at the forefront of Bloch's thought, particularly in the Bible. He traces it in the story of Eden, with its oppressive God who treats the first humans as children only to find that they rebel; in the fatal conflict of Cain and Abel, where another face of God appears, the one who protects Cain with the well-known mark; in Jacob's wrestling with God (El in this case, not Yahweh) in Genesis 32; in the rebellion of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11; in the Nazirites, those enigmatic figures who swear a vow not to cut their hair, drink strong drink and call the people back to their desert, Bedouin-like life in the wilderness; in the oppressive deity of Moses and Aaron who seek to punish the people's constant murmur of rebellion in the wilderness; in the insurrections of Miriam, Moses' sister, and Korah against that authority; even in the two figures of Moses, who is both liberator of the slaves and theocratic tyrant in the wilderness; in the protests of Job against his inhuman treatment by this same Yahweh; in the prophetic denunciations of economic maltreatment and religious hypocrisy; in Jesus' stringent criticisms of the quislings who would accommodate the Roman colonizers; and in the fiery apocalyptic revolutionary protests of the Apocalypse against empire and its gods. At times the bloodthirsty, vengeful God had the upper hand, but at others (admittedly less frequently) the rebels win out through cunning and ruse.

All of which is expressed most sharply in the few letters of the prime ideologue of Christianity, the Apostle Paul (here I go beyond Bloch, who does not appreciate the deep ambivalence of Paul's thought).⁹ Paul is crucial because his position was to become so dominant, shaping not merely Christianity itself, but the ideology of an empire. And the reason is that he offers an imaginary resolution, or a literary and ideological mediation of competing social formations. Paul's thought may be characterized in terms of a series of oppositions: Jews and Gentiles,¹⁰ slave and free,¹¹ male and female,¹² flesh and spirit,¹³ elect and damned,¹⁴ Adam and Christ,¹⁵ death and life,¹⁶ grace and law,¹⁷ grace and sin,¹⁸ grace and works,¹⁹ Christ and law,²⁰ Christ and sin,²¹ righteousness through faith or works,²² law of sin and law of Christ.²³ Yet all of

9 I can offer here only the briefest of summaries of a much more detailed argument (Boer in press).

10 Romans 2: 8-10; 3: 9, 29; 9: 24; 10: 12; 1 Corinthians 1: 23; Galatians 2.

11 Romans 6; 1 Corinthians 7: 20-2; 12: 13; Galatians 3: 28.

12 Galatians 3: 28.

13 Romans 7:1; 1 Corinthians 6: 16; 15: 39, 50; Galatians 6: 13; Philippians 3: 1-4.

14 Romans 9: 11; 11: 7, 28.

15 Romans 5: 11-13, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 15: 22.

16 Romans 5-6; 7: 10; 8: 2, 6, 38; 2 Corinthians 2: 16; 2 Corinthians 4: 10-12; Philippians 1: 20.

17 Romans 4: 16; 5: 20; 6: 14-15; Galatians 2: 21; 3: 18; 5: 4.

18 Romans 5: 20-1; 6: 1, 14-15.

19 Romans 11: 6.

20 Romans 7: 4, 25; 8: 2; 10: 4; 1 Corinthians 9: 21; Galatians 2: 16, 21; 3: 1, 13, 24; 5: 4; 6: 2; Philemon 3: 9.

21 Romans 5: 21; 6: 1; 9, 11, 23; 7: 25; 8: 2, 9-10; 13: 14; 1 Corinthians 8: 12; 15: 3, 17; 2 Corinthians 5: 19; Galatians 2: 17; 3: 22; 5: 14.

22 Romans 1: 17; 3: 21-2; 4; 9: 13; 10: 6; Galatians 3: 11; 5: 5; Philemon 3: 9.

these oppositions are determined by his prime opposition of the death and resurrection of Christ. The key to this opposition is a narrative of transition from one to the other, from death to resurrection. But it may also be read at an ideological level as an effort to offer a passage from an older economic system to the one that the Romans were brutally imposing in the ancient Near East. The problem is that Paul's narrative of transition from one state to another is fraught with uncertainty, wavering between two states. It is as though he is caught between the pull of his destination and homesickness. But that is precisely why Paul's theology came to dominate and determine the shape of the Christianity that was to follow: *through his uncertainty he ensured that both conditions were preserved*. Without a clean break, caught in the messy state of transition, both sides of the oppositions have claimed a place in Christianity. So we have both law *and* grace, works *and* faith, flesh *and* spirit, Adam *and* Christ, male *and* female, slave *and* free, and, most importantly, death *and* resurrection. Paul managed to craft a contradictory system of thought and practice that preserved both moments, producing an ideology that was to resonate and become dominant after him. In this respect Paul plays an anticipatory role, enabling Christianity to adapt to a series of contradictory positions. It is no wonder that Christianity became the religion of the propertied classes along with slaves and disenfranchised freemen, the religion of emperors and peasants. In sum, the ambivalence on Paul's part enabled Christianity to take contrasting positions in relation to power, especially economic power, and it explains why Christianity so easily slipped into a seat beside the powerful.

A Special Organization of Force

I would like to characterize this ambivalence in terms of reaction and revolution, between a siding with the ruling class and simultaneously with those who are ruled, with empire and opposition to it. In light of this unresolved tension, the church as an institution arises, not as an effort to ameliorate the tension, but in order to impose the agenda of one side of the struggle over the other. We may see this most clearly in the efforts by the early church ideologues to soften the sharp edges of the Gospel statements concerning property. As Ste. Croix puts it, "Unless Christianity was to become involved in a fatal conflict with the all-powerful propertied classes, it had to play down those ideas of Jesus which were hostile to the ownership of any large quantity of property; or, better still, it could explain them away" (Ste. Croix 1981: 426-7). A string of church "fathers" – Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Lactantius, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, Augustine, John Cassian, Clement of Alexandria, Paulinus of Nola, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Theodoret – creatively reinterpret uncomfortable biblical

passages in a way that suits the propertied, ruling class (Ste. Croix 1981: 433-8; 2006: 355-68). For example, Jesus' command to the rich man, who asks for the secret of eternal life, to sell all he has and give to poor appears in all three synoptic gospels (Mark 10:21; Luke 12: 33 and Matthew 19:21). However, in contrast to the stark command in Mark and Luke, Matthew adds the conditional, "If you would be perfect." This version is quoted by all the orthodox interpreters, even when they seem to be quoting one of the other gospels. Obviously, the conditional phrase conveniently waters down the command, making it a "counsel of perfection," a perfection to which we should strive but probably never attain.

As Burton Mack (2008) has argued, the Christian church came into its own with the adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, with the subsequent legalization, sponsorship and eventual declaration – by Theodosius I in 380 CE – that Christianity was to be the sole religion of the empire. Not only does the nature of church buildings and the structure of the hierarchy become clarified, but unified doctrine and the canon of the Bible also becomes fixed under imperial pressure (often with troops at the ecumenical councils). The problem of course was that such acts always generated opposition, with heated ideological arguments, arrests, banishments, executions, breakaways and schisms from the imposed norms. Such was the nature of the struggles, that the non-Christian writer, Ammianus, was moved to observe: "Wild beasts are not more hostile to mankind than are *most* Christians (*plerique Christianorum*) in their deadly hatred of one another" (Ste. Croix 2006: 260). Perhaps the best expression of the church as a special organization of force may be found in the designation of the Western church as "Catholic," or "universal." This was a universal of exclusion, for any who would not join were crushed.

Thus far I have followed the guidelines of the first two of Lenin's points concerning the state: the church arises in a situation of irreconcilable conflict and it is an organ for the imposition of a dominant, reactionary agenda that is very comfortable indeed with the powers that be. What are the implications of Lenin's next point concerning the need not to change the institution itself but to dispense with it entirely? Here we may invoke once again the distinction between formal and actual freedom. Given the structural nature of the church, it operates under a formal freedom, providing a limited range of possibilities and excluding a significant amount of others. Above all, the institution is structurally incapable of abolishing itself, which would be an exercise of actual freedom. In some cases, that formal freedom is far more limited than we may find in the state, for religious institutions are exempt in some jurisdictions from anti-discrimination legislation. But that is an easy target. What of those churches that do operate democratically, that provide equal roles in leadership and membership to women and men, to

queer and straight, to those of diverse ethnic backgrounds? What of those churches that apologize for past injustices, such as the treatment of indigenous peoples, the removal of children from unwed mothers, the advocacy of slavery and participation in exploitative economic practices? What of those churches that take strong environmental stands? It is a rare church indeed that takes all of these positions. Yet even in this situation, the structural nature of the institution as a special coercive force limits the range of possible positions.

A classic example is the present struggle over the recognition of gay marriage, which vexes both church and state. A significant strategic move by gay activists is to pursue equality before the law in marriage, a recognition that such unions are of an equal footing with heterosexual marriage. But this misses the problem itself, for it reinforces a certain form of marriage which is deeply problematic. Under patriarchal capitalism, marriage becomes a bourgeois institution, holding up the couple and the nuclear family as the ideal, with the intrinsic abuse such an institution inescapably manifests (especially of women and of children). We may take as an example the film, *The Kids Are Alright* (Cholodenko 2010), in which the lesbian couple, Nic and Jules, have two teenage children, Joni and Laser, produced through a sperm donor. Ostensibly, the film shows how “normal” this family is, with relationship problems, infidelity and crises, all of which are overcome. The children survive and flourish despite such challenges. Never questioned is the assumed and nauseating background of the bourgeois family itself, living in a leafy suburban American street (the conventional international image of the “American way of life”), with its inherent problems of domination, subjection and abuse. Above all, this is manifested at the film’s close as the family reconstitutes itself, with the implicit conservative message that so also may capitalist society itself be rebuilt.

To return to the church: the drive to reforming the existing system – as though it were a neutral institution – inevitably falls prey to the nature of the institution itself. One need only consider the perpetual history of reform that runs through from the monastic movement of the early centuries, through the reform movements of the European Middle Ages, the Reformation itself, the Pietist movement, Vatican II and debates today over sexuality and the environment. In each case the existing institution was viewed as otiose, wealthy and lacking in zeal. And so a movement begins, claiming to return to first principles and to recover the practices of the earliest groups, or to reform unjust practices. But with time, the reform movement loses its drive, becoming either absorbed within existing structures or exhibits exactly the same tendencies that generated the reform movement in the first place.

Conclusion: What Is To Be Done?

Are we then left with Lenin's stark question as to whether the institution itself should be dismantled in a fashion analogous to the bourgeois state? Should the special organization of force be seized and used for a time to dispense with those who dominate the agenda of the church, until the institution itself is no more? Of course, even more than the bourgeois state, the church in all its forms has proven to be an extraordinarily resilient structure, for it predates the bourgeois state and will no doubt outlive that form of the state. Yet if any genuine transformation is to happen, then that may be the course to take. Here we may grasp the nettle of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," emphasizing its collective nature in Lenin's original formulation. In that light, the agency for roots-and-branch change would shift from the coterie of religious professionals to the common people. Perhaps "dictatorship of the laity" is an appropriate way to describe such a move, except that the distinction between clergy and laity itself would be abolished in the process.

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