



# Chapter 4: Bureaucratic social revolutions and the Marxist theory of the state

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The bureaucratic anti-capitalist revolutions that have occurred in Eastern Europe, Asia and Cuba did not witness the destruction of the state by the proletariat organised in armed workers' councils. Yet when the actual stages of these revolutions are examined it becomes clear that the abolition of capitalism by Stalinist parties did not contradict the Marxist theory of the state. The capitalist state was smashed in each bureaucratic revolution, but in a manner not envisaged by Marx, Engels or Lenin, nor in a manner that is at all desirable from the standpoint of revolutionary communism.

### The bourgeois state and the Marxist programme

The state, fundamentally, is the oppressive apparatus used by the ruling class to defend its economic dominance in society.

Thus, we define the class nature of a state, not by its form (which for all states can vary tremendously), nor even by the specific features of its apparatus, but by the economic regime, the mode of production, that it defends. We recognise that the common feature of all states that have ever existed is the presence of a public force ? bodies of armed men whose job it is to defend the given mode of production. As Engels noted: ?We saw that an essential characteristic of the state is the existence of a public force differentiated from the mass of the people.?1 Or as Trotsky expressed it: ?Friedrich Engels once wrote that the state, including the democratic republic, consists of detachments of armed men in defence of property; everything else serves only to embellish or camouflage this fact.?2

From this it follows that all social revolutions necessarily involve the passing of state power from one class to another: However for the bourgeoisie, during its revolutionary struggle against feudalism, it was not necessary for it to smash the feudal state or its public force. By virtue of its economic dominance prior to its achievement of political power it was possible for the bourgeoisie to merely capture the allegiance of the public force, of the whole state machine (through its influence and wealth). In other words the bourgeoisie captured and perfected the old state machine. It did not smash it:

?All revolutionaries perfected this machine instead of breaking it. The parties that contended in turn for domination regarded possession of this huge state edifice as the principal spoils of the victor.?3

But the nature of the proletariat as a class and the task of its revolution ? the conscious construction of a communist society ? require that the proletariat organise itself as a ruling class with unique and particular state forms. Unlike all ?hitherto existing revolutionary classes? the proletariat cannot achieve its historical objective by laying hold of the existing machinery and form of state ? its army, bureaucracy and officialdom ? and use it to implement its programme.

This was the principal lesson that Marx and Engels drew from the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871: ?But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready made machinery and wield it for their own purpose. The political instrument of their enslavement cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation.?4

The goal of Marxists is the abolition of classes and therefore also of all states. This is to be achieved in the first phase by the dictatorship of the proletariat; a state to be sure, but one that is, properly speaking only a semi-state:

As soon as there is no longer any social class to be held in subjection, as soon as class rule, and the individual struggle for existence based upon the present anarchy in production, with the collisions and excesses arising from this struggle, are removed, nothing more remains to be held in subjection? nothing necessitates a special coercive force, a state. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state [i.e. the workers' state -Eds] is not 'abolished'. It withers away.<sup>5</sup>

Because the proletariat's seizure of power inaugurates the transition to socialism, because the dictatorship of the proletariat is the first act in the very withering away of the state itself (i.e. of a form of coercive apparatus), the proletariat must smash the state of the bourgeoisie and replace it with a state of a new sort. Lenin, against the opportunists, made the necessity of this action clear: The supersession of the bourgeois state by the proletariat is impossible without a violent revolution. The abolition of the proletarian state i.e. of the state in general, is impossible except through a process of 'withering away'.<sup>6</sup>

If the essential characteristic of the state is the existence of bodies of armed men in defence of property, then the essential element in the smashing of the state is the destruction of the armed power of the bourgeoisie. This is a fundamental law of proletarian revolution. By smashing the state we mean first and foremost smashing its armed apparatus. Marx left no room for doubt on this question:

'Paris could resist only because in consequence of the siege, it had got rid of the army and replaced it by a National Guard, the bulk of which consisted of working men. This fact was now to be transformed into an institution. The first decree of the Commune, therefore, was the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people.'<sup>7</sup>

The Bolsheviks later codified this lesson into their programme:

'When the proletariat is fighting for the power, against whom and what is it fighting? In the first place against this bourgeois organisation [the state-Eds]. Now when it is fighting this organisation its task is to deliver blows that will destroy the organisation. But since the main strength of the government resides in the army, if we wish to gain victory over the bourgeoisie the first essential is to disorganise and destroy the bourgeois army.'<sup>8</sup>

The armed bodies of the bourgeoisie? its police and standing army? must be abolished and replaced by a militia of the armed proletariat. This repressive element of the state must be smashed, prior to or in the process of, the proletariat achieving state power. The degree of violence involved in that seizure of power will be determined by the degree to which the bourgeoisie have lost control over, and allegiance of, the coercive apparatus of the state. As long as the bourgeoisie's armed power remains at all intact then the proletariat still faces the task of destroying it. Otherwise it will be used to crush the proletariat itself.

But, in addition to its armed forces the capitalist state maintains itself by alienating the mass of producers from the administration of society by means of a huge and powerful bureaucratic apparatus (civil service, judges etc.) This is directly and indirectly linked to the army and police etc. Thus the smashing of the state must also involve the destruction of this bureaucracy. The highest ranks of the executive bureaucracy? the top civil servants, the judges? must be immediately abolished by the proletariat revolution and replaced by responsible, recallable representatives of the proletariat. In this way the bourgeois executive is smashed.

This is vital for reasons made clear by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'The executive of the modern state is but a committee for the managing of the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.'<sup>9</sup>

The bureaucracy of the modern state however, also consists of large numbers of lower ranking officials who possess administrative skills that would be vital to the functioning of a young workers' state. Therefore, the bureaucracy in its entirety would not be smashed. Rather the ranks of the lower officialdom would be heavily purged and placed under the control of the workers themselves. Lenin, for example, distinguished between the smashing of the key elements of the oppressive apparatus and the need for the workers' state to maintain certain elements of the administrative apparatus

bequeathed it by the bourgeois state. He made this clear in advance of the seizure of state in 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?':

'In addition to the chiefly 'oppressive' apparatus the standing army, the police, the bureaucracy-the modern state possesses an apparatus which has extremely close connections with the banks and the syndicates ... This apparatus must not, and should not, be smashed.'<sup>10</sup>

The tasks of book-keeping, accounting and so forth would be fulfilled by those sections of the bureaucracy thus retained by the workers' state. The Marxist tradition maintained that such initial acts as limiting the pay of all officials to that of a skilled worker, subjecting the apparatus to workers' control, were in themselves, preparatory to the gradual disappearance of administration as a distinct element in the social division of labour separate from and set against the producers themselves. The task facing a proletarian state was to progressively eliminate the separate caste of full time administrators on the road to building a communist society. This task was always seen, however, as distinct from the immediate act of smashing the bourgeoisie's oppressive machine.

Prior to the October revolution Lenin outlined the tasks of the Bolsheviks in this sphere of the state apparatus thus:

'Power to the Soviets means radically reshaping the entire old state apparatus, that bureaucratic apparatus which hampers everything democratic. It means removing this apparatus and substituting for it a new, popular one, ie a truly democratic apparatus of soviets, i.e. the organised and armed majority of the people - the workers, soldiers and peasants. It means allowing the majority of the people initiative and independence not only in the election of deputies, but also in state administration in effecting reforms and various other changes.'<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the destruction of the bourgeois state machine Marxists also insist that the proletarian revolution involves a positive action - the consolidation of a state of a completely new sort which is in the process of withering away from its very inception. In other words the organs of destruction (of the bourgeois state) are, in turn, the organs of reconstruction, of a workers' state. The workers' state itself will disappear with the advent of communism that is with the disappearance of classes. Marx and Lenin were clear the building up of the workers' state was a process that took place after as well as during the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the seizure of state power by the proletariat. This process constitutes the final element of the smashing of the state. It constitutes the continuation of class struggle even after the conquest of power by the proletariat: After the overthrow of the exploiting classes Lenin 'repeats and explains in every chapter of State and Revolution the proletariat will shatter the old bureaucratic machine and create its own apparatus out of employees and worker.'<sup>12</sup>

The victory and defeat of Soviet power

The October revolution marked the passing of state power to the proletariat organised to wield that power with new distinctively proletarian state forms - the workers' militia, the factory committees and the soviets of workers, soldiers and peasants' deputies.

The police and army of the Russian bourgeoisie had been smashed as instruments upon which the bourgeoisie could rely in order to defend its class rule. The last significant attempt of the Russian bourgeoisie to deploy the army in defence of its interests crumbled with the defeat of the Kornilov coup in August 1917. After that - in the struggle against the Moscow uprising and in the form of the White Guards of the civil war, the bourgeoisie could only deploy armed force as an instrument of counter revolution-against a victorious proletariat. In all of the major industrial centres the standing army and police force was replaced by the armed power of the workers' militia. The most essential aspect of the smashing of the capitalist state was completed - i.e. the bourgeoisie was deprived of its powers of coercion.

The executive power of the bureaucracy - its civil service chiefs and judges - was smashed by the soviet power. But the young proletarian state faced the task of building new forms of administration and regulation on the basis of the armed power of the proletariat expressed in the soviets. It faced that task in conditions of extreme material backwardness and, increasingly, of International isolation. In order to ensure the very survival of proletarian power the young proletarian state was forced to maintain, and even reintroduce, capitalist state forms in a workers' state. A standing army was

created, material privileges were granted to officials with particular invaluable skills and experience and a standing bureaucracy had to be maintained in order to preside over the unequal distribution of goods in a situation of extreme shortages and disruption of production. Lenin and Trotsky both noted and explained this inevitable development. First, Lenin:

“Bourgeois law in relation to the distribution of the objects of consumption assumes, of course, inevitably a bourgeois state, for law is nothing without an apparatus capable of compelling observance of its norms. It follows that under Communism not only will bourgeois law survive for a certain time, but also even a bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie.”

And for Trotsky:

“For the defence of ‘bourgeois law’ the workers’ state was compelled to create a ‘bourgeois’ type of instrument that is the same old gendarmes although in a new uniform.”<sup>14</sup>

By the death of Lenin the old administrative apparatus overwhelmingly determined the functioning and administration of the new Soviet state. Lenin talked of Soviet Russia as a workers’ state with profound bureaucratic deformations. The administrative apparatus in Russia was not replaced by a state of a new sort in any permanent or lasting form. But, in our view, the forms of the state were not decisive. Despite its reversion to old forms of administration, the state was based on the defence, and that time particularly, the extension of new forms of property.

The possibility of different forms of the dictatorship of the proletariat has always been anticipated by Marxists, whose method is based on a dialectical analysis of concrete reality and not on the rigid application of schematic norms to reality. Thus Bukharin perceptively commented, against Kautsky:

“In his [Marx’s] analysis of capitalist production he took capitalist economy in its ‘pure’ form i.e. in a form uncomplicated by any vestiges of the old (feudal) relations of production, or any national peculiarities and so on, and he treats the question of the dictatorship of the working class in the same way, as a question of the workers’ dictatorship in general, that is to say a dictatorship which destroys capitalism in its pure form. And there was no other way to consider the question if he was to do it in abstract theoretical terms i.e. if he was to give the broadest algebraic formula for the dictatorship. Experience of the social struggle now permits concrete definition of the question along the most diverse lines.”<sup>15</sup>

Likewise Lenin had not expected the dictatorship to have a universal form:

“Bourgeois states are most varied in form, but their essence is the same; all these states, whatever their form, in the final analysis are inevitably the Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie.”

The transition from capitalism to communism is certainly bound to yield a tremendous abundance and variety of political forms, but the essence will inevitably be the same; the dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>16</sup>

The degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviks increased the diversity of these potential forms of the dictatorship of the proletariat with tragic consequences for the Soviet and international working class, leading Trotsky to comment:

“In the interim between the conquest of power and the dissolution of the workers’ state within socialist society the forms and methods of proletarian rule may change sharply depending on the course of the class struggle internally and externally.”<sup>17</sup>

What for Lenin and Trotsky had been a temporary retreat or truce in the direction of strengthening bourgeois state forms in order to consolidate the workers’ state, was embraced as a permanent and conscious goal by the Stalinists. They strove to consolidate and extend elements of the capitalist state form in the USSR as a base for their own material privileges and as an obstacle to the proletariat’s realisation of socialism. In that the Soviet state defends bourgeois

norms of distribution, in that it maintains a massive standing bureaucracy, army and police force against the masses, it retains key features of the state of the old, bourgeois type.

In that it defends, albeit in the manner of the privileged bureaucracy, the property relations of October it retains a proletarian character. Within the degenerated workers' state bourgeois state forms continue to present themselves to the proletariat as an obstacle to the transition to socialism. The political revolution will destroy the power of the bureaucracy and, in so doing, either destroy completely bourgeois state forms or, where necessary, place them under the strict controls of the organs of the healthy workers' state.

However, from this we do not conclude that there are two types of state co-existent in the USSR. We describe the degenerate workers' state as one that has a dual, contradictory nature. It defends proletarian property forms but it does so with coercive instruments normally associated with capitalist states. It does this because the working class have been politically expropriated by the bureaucracy. Trotsky described the dual nature of the USSR thus:

'The state assumes directly and from the very beginning [i.e. even in its healthy period ? Eds] a dual character; socialistic, in so far as it defends social property in the means of production bourgeois, in so far as the distribution of life's goods is carried out with a capitalistic measure of value and all the consequences ensuing there from.'

This dual character remains right up to today but we should add that the bureaucracy have a monopoly of political control over the bourgeois aspect of the state and it serves first and foremost their interests. The Stalinist programme is historically committed to the maintenance of bourgeois state forms and the suppression of proletarian state forms even should bourgeois property relations be overthrown.

The bureaucratic workers' government

When we look at each of the post war overturns we can see that in no case did the Stalinists permit the old bourgeois state to be replaced by a state of a new sort based on workers' councils and a workers' militia. Throughout the process they tried as best they could to strengthen and maintain bourgeois state forms ? a standing army and police force, a bureaucracy separate from, and in opposition to, the mass of toilers.

The realisation of this element of their programme placed the Stalinists alongside the bourgeoisie in the struggle to break up the embryonic organs of a healthy workers' state that emerged, in some form, prior to the creation of degenerate workers' states in each case, ie in the period 1944-47.

While this was the case ? and the new workers' states were therefore created in a form bureaucratically degenerate from birth ? in each case the armed bodies of men of the old ruling class were smashed and broken up either by the entry of the Red Army into Eastern Europe, by Stalinist led partisans as in Yugoslavia, Albania and later China or, in the 1959-60 by the politically petty bourgeois July 26th Movement in Cuba. These coercive bodies were smashed to the extent that the bourgeoisie were no longer able to deploy armed force in defence of their remaining property rights, just as the coercive machinery of the Russian bourgeoisie its army and police ? disintegrated prior to the direct seizure of power by the proletariat and, to that extent, was smashed before the October revolution. Thus it is indisputable that the armed power of the bourgeoisie was physically smashed prior to each of the bureaucratic revolutions that marked the expansion of Stalinism in the post war period. This is decisive in understanding why apparently peaceful bureaucratic revolutions were able to take place. The essential element of the smashing of the bourgeois state had, in fact, already been completed.

In each case the outcome of this initial act of smashing was ? as had been the case in Russia during the process of the disintegration of the Russian bourgeoisie's enormous standing army ? a highly unstable period of dual power. In each case there coexisted:

a) the forms of a reassembled/reasserted bourgeois state kept in viable existence by the continuing direct links between the particular native bourgeoisies and the armed power of world imperialism, but in each case in need of decisive external aid in order to reconstruct and deploy armed power in defence of its property of its own accord;

b) the embryo of degenerate workers' states in the form of the Red Army itself or of Stalinist led armed bodies, not inevitably forced to, but in exceptional circumstances capable of, resolving the contradictory dual power period through the medium of a bureaucratic workers' government should either the interests of the Kremlin bureaucracy or the interests and privileges of a nascent Stalinist bureaucratic caste based on national proletarian forces come under threat in circumstances where the balance of forces between the Stalinists and the imperialists is unfavourable to the latter.

The Comintern recognised two types of 'workers' governments': ostensible workers' governments liberal and Social Democratic that were in reality bourgeois governments; and workers' governments that could act as a bridge to the dictatorship of the proletariat. To the three types of the latter category: workers' and peasants' government, workers' government in which communists participate and governments in which communists predominate, the experience after 1945 obliges us to add a fourth type: the bureaucratic workers' government. In this new type Stalinists are politically dominant. The government has the programme of anti-capitalist measures constituting the expropriation of the bourgeoisie whilst simultaneously depriving the working class of political power.

Thus it prevents the formation or development of organs of proletarian struggle, self-organisations and democracy (soviets) with methods which range from political misleadership to outright military repression. Where the working class has a history of conscious revolutionary struggle, has an alternative revolutionary leadership, the element of repression, of breaking the proletariat's advance, of smashing and bureaucratising its parties, soviets and trade unions, will generally precede the formation of a bureaucratic workers' government.

Where the proletariat is weak in numbers or where its class consciousness is obscured by petty bourgeois illusions, the process may take place while the masses are mobilised for non-socialist tasks but before clear class goals and the political forms are created to achieve and defend them, exist. In the latter case the element of repression, of Stalinist dictatorship may be attenuated for a whole period. However, what defines a bureaucratic workers' government is that it is not under the control or conscious pressure of the organs that can form the basis of a full political dictatorship of the proletariat. It is thus anti-capitalist but a bridge to a degenerate not a healthy workers' state.

Thus in Eastern Europe and in degenerate workers' states created since the late 1940s the bourgeoisie is overthrown by an anti capitalist bureaucratic workers' government. Such an overthrow of the bourgeoisie could only take place, in each case, after the potential organs of a healthy workers' state had been either physically destroyed or rendered mere appendages to the Stalinists. In Eastern Europe what remained of the bourgeoisie's administrative apparatus, in each case was either deliberately maintained or reinstated. The administrative apparatus composed largely of the personnel of the old regime was purged and key positions within it occupied by the Stalinists and their allies.

This utilisation of the capitalist state's administrative apparatus (suitably purged) for the purposes of social revolution would have been impossible had the capitalist class not been deprived of their control of armed force. The armed power of a degenerate workers' state (as in Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam and later Cuba, Stalinist-led peasants armies) can be said to have completed the first and essential stage in the smashing of the capitalist state. This alone facilitated the later complete political and economic expropriation of the bourgeoisie.

The resolution of dual power in each case did not occur on the basis of the programme of revolutionary Marxism. The Stalinists moved against the bourgeoisie, having already destroyed their armed power, with the full intention of maintaining a state profoundly similar to that of the old bourgeois type, not of replacing it with a state of a new soviet type. The creation of new workers' states was the work not of the working class acting in its own name and through its own democratic organisations but of a counter revolutionary caste based on the working class. This process was complete only after the liquidation of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of proletarian property forms. At every stage in the process the programme of the working class would have remained the seizure of power by the working class itself and the establishment of a state of a new type based on soviets and the armed workers.

This process does not contradict the Marxist theory of the state. It demonstrates that the capitalist state can be destroyed by counter revolutionary workers' parties only to the extent that these new states no longer defend capitalist property relations while retaining most of the features of bourgeois type states. They are therefore an obstacle to the socialist

transformation of society. The creation of a healthy proletarian state, a genuine semi-state, remains a task of the working class political revolution against the bureaucratic caste.

This does not mean that workers' states can be created without the smashing of the capitalist state. The bureaucratic revolutions were only possible because in each case the coercive apparatus of the bourgeoisie had been smashed. The Eastern European overturns were to prove that the historical and material preconditions for the creation of workers' states had been revised and extended as a direct result of the creation of the first workers' state in October 1917 and its consequent degeneration.

The Russian revolution mapped out the only conscious and revolutionary road for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of communism. The healthy workers' state will be the revolutionary product of the independent actions and organs of the mass of the working class, headed by a revolutionary Trotskyist party, which seeks to preserve the revolution by its extension internationally.

However, the degeneration of the Russian Revolution has meant that in certain exceptional historical circumstances, the preservation of the remaining gains of the October Revolution, together with concern for its own privileges, has driven the Stalinist bureaucracy or Stalinist parties to overthrow capitalism in a counter-revolutionary manner which retards the working class struggle for socialism and communism.

#### Footnotes

1. F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (London, 1972), p.180.
2. L. Trotsky, *Whither France*, (London, 1974), p.108.
3. K. Marx, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, (London, 1979) vol.11, p.186.
4. K. Marx, *Marx and Engels on the Paris Commune*, (Moscow, 1976) p.202.
5. F. Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, (Peking, 1976), p.363.
6. V.I.Lenin, *Collected Works*, (Moscow, 1964), vol.25, p.400.
7. K. Marx, *The Civil War in France*, (Moscow, 1972), p.53.
8. N. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism*, (Harmondsworth, 1970), p.128.
9. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, (London, 1976), vol.6, p.486.
10. V.I.Lenin; *Collected Works*, (Moscow, 1964), -vol:26, pp.105-6:
11. *Ibid.*, vol.25, p.368.
12. L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, (New York, 1972), p.50 (our emphasis).
13. V.I. Lenin, *op.cit.*, vol.25, p.471.
14. L. Trotsky, *op.cit.*, p.53.
15. N. Bukharin, *The Politics and Economics of the Transition Period*, (London, 1979), p.37.
16. V.I.Lenin, *Op.cit.*, vol. 25, p.413.
17. L. Trotsky, *Writings 1934-35*, (New York~974), p.172.
18. L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, p.54.

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