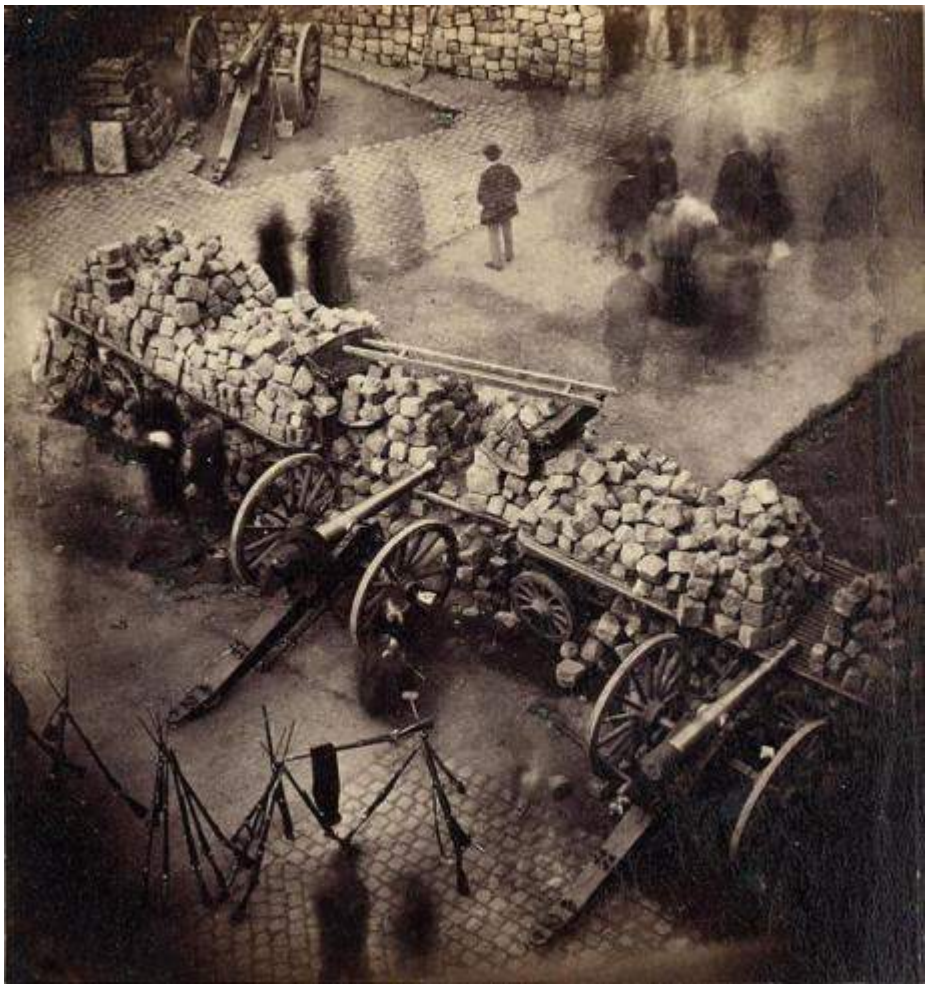
Karl Marx and the state



David Adam addresses Marx's concept of a socialist society in relation to various concepts of the state.

In April 1917, the Russian anarchist Voline met Leon Trotsky in a New York print works. Not surprisingly, both were producing revolutionary propaganda. Discussing the Russian situation, Voline told Trotsky that he considered it certain that the Bolsheviks would come to power. He went on to say he was equally certain that the Bolsheviks would persecute the anarchists once their power had been consolidated. Trotsky, taken aback by Voline's conviction, emphasized that the Marxists and the anarchists were both revolutionary socialists fighting the same battle. While it is true that they had their differences, these differences, according to Trotsky, were secondary, merely methodological differences-principally a disagreement regarding a revolutionary "transitional stage." Trotsky went on to dismiss Voline's prediction of persecution against the anarchists as nonsense, assuring him that the Bolsheviks were not enemies of the anarchists. Voline relates that in December 1919, less than three years later, he was arrested by Bolshevik military authorities in the Makhnovist region. Since he was a well-known militant, the authorities notified Trotsky of his arrest and asked how he should be handled. Trotsky's reply was terse: "Shoot out of hand.-Trotsky." Luckily, Voline lived to tell his tale.[1]

It is on the basis of the Russian experience that anarchists generally affirm that their ideas have been vindicated. Bakunin's predictions about Marxist authoritarianism came true, or so it seems. Voline's story is the perfect snapshot of the anarchist's historical vindication. Years

later, another prominent anarcho-syndicalist emphasized the main lesson of the Russian experience:

In Russia… where the so-called "proletarian dictatorship" has ripened into reality, the aspirations of a particular party for political power have prevented any truly socialistic reconstruction of economy and have forced the country into the slavery of a grinding state-capitalism. The "dictatorship of the proletariat," in which naïve souls wish to see merely a passing, but inevitable, transition stage to real Socialism, has today grown into a frightful despotism and a new imperialism, which lags behind the tyranny of the Fascist states in nothing. The assertion that the state must continue to exist until class conflicts, and classes with them, disappear, sounds, in the light of all historical experience, almost like a bad joke.[2]

Here, in brief, is the historical verdict passed on Marxism by anarchism. But does this verdict discredit the theories of the supposed originator of Marxism, Karl Marx himself? This essay will begin with a look at Marx's basic understanding of the bourgeois state and move on to consider his conception of the transition to socialism in order to demystify Marx's political ideas.

The Bourgeois State

Marx's critique of the bourgeois state, or his "critique of politics,"[3] first developed out of a critical confrontation with Hegel. The best place to start is thus his 1843 Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, in which Marx challenges Hegel's dialectical justification for the status quo. There are two main lines of argument that we should pay close attention to: (1) Marx's conception of the political state as a separate sphere and (2) his radical conception of direct democracy as opposed to the democracy of the bourgeois state.

According to bourgeois theory, in "civil society" individual citizens pursue their own particular interests in competition with and at the expense of other citizens.[4] In the state, on the other hand, only the general interest is pursued. The state stands above civil society both to act as a limiting force on competition (by declaring certain forms of competition to be illegal), and to provide the basic framework in which competition is to take place (through legal contract, property laws, and so forth). In this way, the state is supposed to guarantee the equal rights of all citizens.

Marx vehemently attacked this theory as it was found in Hegel. Far from seeing the state as a neutral arbiter that served to realize individual freedom, Marx considered the state to be a sphere of social life not only separate from, but also opposed to civil society. For Marx, this contradiction between the state and civil society is characteristic of a society divided against itself, in which the functions of government are administered against society. Marx writes, "The 'police', the 'judiciary', and the 'administration' are not the representatives of a civil society which administers its own universal interests in them and through them; they are the representatives of the state and their task is to administer the state against civil society."[5] Furthermore, the idea of the general interest of all citizens being realized within the bourgeois state was a fiction to begin with. Firstly, the "bureaucrats," who perform state activities, use the general powers of the state to pursue their own particular interests within the state hierarchy. Marx writes, "As for the individual bureaucrat, the purpose of the state becomes his private purpose, *a hunt for promotion, careerism*."[6] Secondly, the participation of private individuals in state activities does not in fact shield those individuals from the class distinctions that constitute civil society. Instead, the individuals enter into political life with those class distinctions: "The *class distinctions* of civil society thus become established as political distinctions."[7]

In elaborating the contradictory position of the state bureaucrats, Marx is simultaneously denouncing the competitive, hierarchical relations of the political sphere, which, while

supposedly realizing the general interest of the citizenry, in fact disposes of the very social equality and transparency necessary for a democratic, general interest to emerge. Here, Marx's basic conception of democracy, a social form in which society "administers its *own* universal interests," is given in outline. This radical conception of democracy must be differentiated from a representative democracy in which it is the representatives who, although elected, hold the real power. The contradictions of modern, bourgeois government are briefly drawn out by Marx:

The separation of the political state from civil society takes the form of a separation of the deputies from their electors. Society simply deputes elements of itself to become its political existence. There is a twofold contradiction: (1) A *formal* contradiction. The deputies of civil society are a society which is not connected to its electors by any 'instruction' or commission. They have a formal authorization but as soon as this becomes *real* they *cease* to be *authorized*. They should be deputies but they are not. (2) A *material* contradiction. In respect to actual interests . . . Here we find the converse. They have authority as representatives of *public* affairs, whereas in reality they represent *particular* interests.[8]

To reiterate Marx's point, there is a material contradiction in commissioning members of a divided and atomized civil society to somehow represent the general interest of that society. Even from a formal point of view, the deputies recognized as deriving their mandate solely from the popular masses, become, once elected, *independent* of their electors, and are free to make political decisions *on their behalf*. This is distinct from Marx's vision of a society that "administers its *own* universal interests." As Marx put it, "The efforts of *civil society* to transform itself into a political society, or to make the political society into the *real* one, manifest themselves in the attempt to achieve as general a participation as possible in the *legislature* . . . . The political state leads an existence *divorced* from civil society. For its part, civil society would cease to exist if everyone became a legislator."[9] There is an important point here: the separation of the state from civil society *depends* on limiting popular participation in government.

Marx's analysis of the bourgeois state and civil society is presented even more clearly in his 1843 essay "On the Jewish Question." His analysis is worth quoting at length:

Where the political state has attained its full degree of development man leads a double life, a life in heaven and a life on earth, not only in his mind, in his consciousness, but in *reality*. He lives in the *political community*, where he regards himself as a *communal being*, and in *civil society*, where he is active as a *private individual*, regards other men as means, debases himself to a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers. The relationship of the political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relationship of heaven to earth. The state stands in the same opposition to civil society and overcomes it in the same way as religion overcomes the restrictions of the profane world, i.e. it has to acknowledge it again, reinstate it and allow itself to be dominated by it. Man in his *immediate* reality, in civil society, is a profane being. Here, where he regards himself and is regarded by others as a real individual, he is an illusory phenomenon. In the state, on the other hand, where he is considered to be a species-being, he is the imaginary member of a fictitious sovereignty, he is divested of his real individual life and filled with an unreal universality.[10]

The "political state" that Marx refers to here is a modern product: it is only on the basis of bourgeois relations that the state clearly separates itself from civil society. Marx's contrasting description of feudal relations in this essay is helpful in this regard: "The old civil society [of feudalism] had a *directly political* character, i.e. the elements of civil life such as property, family and the mode and manner of work were elevated in the form of seigniory, estate and guild to the level of elements of political life."[11]

There is a connection emerging between Marx's understanding of bourgeois society as a society of competing private producers, and the alien character of this society's general interest, which can only be "unreal." The state is alien and detached from civil society precisely because bourgeois civil society is inherently divided. As Marx would put it in *The German Ideology*, "the *practical* struggle of these particular interests, which *actually* constantly run counter to the common and illusory common interests, necessitates *practical* intervention and restraint by the illusory 'general' interest in the form of the state."[12] The most important application of this analysis is Marx's vision of social emancipation: "Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a *species-being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when man has recognized and organized his *forces propres* [own forces] as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political* force, only then will human emancipation be completed."[13]

Marx speaks of man as a species-being in the sense that human consciousness and social intercourse differentiate humans from animals. Humans engage in purposive, conscious social production, transforming themselves and their environment. But when the social links between people, through which they express their species-character, become a mere means of individual existence, man is estranged, or alienated from this social essence.[14] The analysis Marx develops in the 1840's is a unified critique of human alienation, of the freeing of social production from the control of the producers and the separation of political power from the body politic. In his "Introduction" to Marx's *Early Writings*, Lucio Colletti emphasizes the significance of Marx's critique of alienation for his analysis of capitalist society: "When real individuals are fragmented from one another and become estranged then their mediating function must in turn become independent of them: that is, their social relationships, the nexus of reciprocity which binds them together. Thus, there is an evident parallelism between the hypostasis of the state, of God, and of money."[15]

The essentials of Marx's critique of politics are all elaborated in the 1840's. This is the inescapable foundation of Marx's understanding of proletarian revolution, which is given vivid expression in *The German Ideology*: "For the proletarians . . . the condition of their life, labour, and with it all the conditions of existence of modern society, have become something extraneous, something over which they, as separate individuals, have no control . . . 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."[16]

What is clear from the above is that Marx did not hold an instrumental view of the state as a mere apparatus that can be administered by different social classes. It was the bourgeois expression of the illusory general interest in a divided society: the interests of private property given general force. Yet, the reader may be wondering where Marx's theory of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, a transitional *state* characterized by the "conquest of political power for this class," comes in.[17] In fact, in *The German Ideology* itself, the theory of proletarian dictatorship (not yet given this name) is presented rather clearly: " . . . every class which is aiming at domination, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, leads to the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination in general, must first conquer political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest, which in the first moment it is forced to do."[18] The proletariat must represent its interest as the general interest because it must overthrow the old society in its entirety, transforming not only its own conditions of life, but those of other classes as well. It is not a question simply of equalizing social conditions, but of *overthrowing* a social class relationship that has spread over the entire globe: that of wage-labor and capital.

Though his early writings focused on the bourgeois state as a specific historical form, Marx's transhistorical definition of "the state" in general is also presented in *The German Ideology*, when Marx describes the state as "the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests."[19] This definition of course does not describe the specific features of any real state or historical class of states. Any state nonetheless requires some organization of armed force, legislation, justice, etc., and a "worker's state" would be no exception. *What is significant about the above definition, however, is that it makes the concepts of "state" and "class rule" coterminous.*[20] On the same page we find also an excellent description of the *bourgeois* state: "By the mere fact that it is a *class* and no longer an *estate*, the bourgeoisie is forced to organize itself no longer locally, but nationally, and to give a general form to its average interests. Through the emancipation of private property from the community, the state has become a separate entity, alongside and outside civil society; but it is nothing more than the form of organisation which the bourgeois are compelled to adopt, both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests."[21]

For Marx, popular working class participation in governance is the necessary route to a rationally planned economy, or the abolition of bourgeois civil society. When the workers-the vast majority-reclaim the political power alienated to bureaucratic hierarchies, they subordinate the state power to their economic needs, or elevate civil society to the realm of politics. We will now look at Marx's views on the transition to socialism.

Proletarian Dictatorship

To understand Marx's views on the transition to socialism, it is useful to go back to his 1844 "Critical Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform,'" where social emancipation is identified as the soul of the proletarian revolution. Marx writes, "All revolution-the *overthrow* of the existing ruling power and the *dissolution* of the old order-is a *political act*. But without revolution *socialism* cannot be made possible. It stands in need of this political act just as it stands in need of *destruction* and *dissolution*. But as soon as its *organizing functions* begin and its *goal*, its *soul* emerges, socialism throws its *political* mask aside."[22] Here we can see the emergence of a distinct conception of transition to socialism. This is developed somewhat as a distinct understanding of *political power* in Marx's critique of Proudhon:

The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society. . . . Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social. It is only in an order of things in which there are no more classes and class antagonisms that social evolutions will cease to be political revolutions.[23]

Here we see the development of the concept of proletarian political power (or "state power," as Marx sometimes referred to it): it has a social soul unlike any previous form of political power, but this class power necessarily takes a political (state) form because during the process of transition to socialism the antagonisms of civil society have not yet been completely abolished. Later Marx would label this transitional phase the period of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. This quite simply meant the political rule of the working class. This transitional period, as Marx conceived it, did not entail the existence of a transitional form of society intervening between, and distinct from, capitalism and communism. The transitional period is essentially a period of revolutionary change. "Between capitalist and communist society," wrote Marx, "lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other."[24] The *raison d'être* of the proletarian state power is to bring the means of

production into common ownership, to bring about the "expropriation of the expropriators," as Marx described the aim of the Paris Commune.[25]

A little-known text by Marx, his 1874 "Notes on Bakunin's Book *Statehood and Anarchy*," explains the concept of proletarian dictatorship more clearly than any other. In his book Bakunin ridicules Marx's concept of the transitional state power of the proletarian dictatorship, and Marx critically responds in his "Notes." Bakunin writes, "If there is a state, then there is domination and consequent slavery. A state without slavery, open or camouflaged, is inconceivable-that is why we are enemies of the state. What does it mean, 'the proletariat raised to a governing class?'"[26] Marx responds, "It means that the proletariat, instead of fighting in individual instances against the economically privileged classes, has gained sufficient strength and organisation to use general means of coercion in its struggle against them; but it can only make use of such economic means as abolish its own character as wage labourer and hence as a class; when its victory is complete, its rule too is therefore at an end, since its class character will have disappeared."[27] The claim that through revolution the proletariat will be "raised to a governing class" thus has nothing to do with creating a dictatorship of a political sect, but is rather a claim that the proletariat will use "general means of coercion" to undercut the bourgeoisie's power (by abolishing the private ownership of the means of production, disbanding the standing army, and so forth). It is the entire proletariat that is to exercise this power. Bakunin asks, "Will all 40 million [German workers] be members of the government?"[28] Marx responds, "Certainly! For the system starts with the self-government of the communities."[29] This statement is certainly striking, but there are other places in the text where Marx more subtly conveys his radical conception of proletarian democracy. When writing about proletarian power and the peasantry, Marx writes that "the proletariat . . . must, *as the government*, take the measures needed . . . "[30], identifying the transitional government with the proletariat as a class. Another example: when quoting Bakunin's critique, Marx inserts a revealing parenthetical comment: "The dilemma in the theory of the Marxists is easily resolved. By people's government they (*i.e. Bakunin*) understand the government of the people by a small number of representatives chosen (elected) by the people."[31] Here Marx is very clearly implying that he does *not* understand "people's government" or workers' government, as the government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. This is a rather clear indication that Marx is still faithful to his 1843 critique of bourgeois democracy.

Clearly, this conception of "proletarian" government is distinct from the bourgeois state, or from any previous form of state power. As Marx makes clear in the above statements, he is referring to a proletarian "government" only in the sense that the working class uses general means of coercion to enforce its aims. Proletarian government is not used by Marx to mean that some elite group (assumedly the intellectuals, as Bakunin argued) would use general means of coercion over the whole proletariat, for that would rule out working class "self-government." Rather, the proletariat *as a whole* would assert its class interests over an *alien* class (by abolishing private property, expropriating the capitalists and socializing the means of production, disbanding the standing army, etc.). For anarchists, who often define these terms somewhat differently, much of the confusion about Marx's claim that the proletariat must wield political power seems to be based on Marx's frequent use of the words "state" and "government." But as we have seen, there is nothing anti-democratic about the meaning Marx attached to these words. Most anarchists, unlike Marx, *define* the state in terms of minority rule. It is easy for someone who uses this sort of definition to read Marx's mention of a proletarian "state" and immediately associate it with oppression and detachment from effective popular control. The problem is that interpreting Marx in this way creates a number

of contradictions in his writings that vanish when his basic theoretical framework is better understood.[32]

Another example of Marx's use of the idea of proletarian dictatorship comes in an essay on "Political Indifferentism" that criticizes both the Proudhonists and the Bakuninists. Marx recognizes that the workers must struggle against the *bourgeois state*, but also that a revolutionary form of state is needed before social classes as such disappear. Marx pretends to speak for his opponents:

If in the political struggle against the bourgeois state the workers succeed only in extracting concessions, then they are guilty of compromise; and this is contrary to eternal principles. . . . 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, then they are guilty of the terrible crime of *lèse-principe*; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state, give to the state a revolutionary and transitory form.[33]

This passage illustrates fairly clearly that proletarian dictatorship is simply the political power of an armed working class. The essence of a "workers' state," for Marx, was workers' power, not any particular leadership at the helm of the state.[34]

Furthermore, as Hal Draper has pointed out, it is a mistake to assume that the word "dictatorship" in the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat" is supposed to refer to dictatorial (as distinguished from democratic) policies or forms of government. In fact, it was not until the latter part of the 19th century and more definitively after the Russian revolution that the term "dictatorship" came to have a specifically anti-democratic connotation.[35] The origin of the term is the Roman *dictatura*, which referred to an emergency management of power. After 1848, around the time that Marx began using the term, it became relatively common for journalists to bemoan the "dictatorship" or "despotism" of the people, which posed a threat to the status quo. In 1849, a Spanish politician even made a speech in parliament declaring: "It is a question of choosing between the dictatorship from below and the dictatorship from above: I choose the dictatorship from above, since it comes from a purer and loftier realm."[36] Revolutionaries had even used the word "dictatorship" before Marx to refer to a transition to socialism. Blanqui, for example, advocated an educative dictatorship of a small group of revolutionaries. Marx's use of the word "dictatorship" in the phrase "dictatorship *of the proletariat*," however, is original and deliberately distinct from Blanqui's usage. Engels emphasizes this point in a passage on Blanqui: "From the fact that Blanqui conceives of every revolution as the *coup de main* of a small revolutionary minority, what follows of itself is the necessity of dictatorship after its success-the dictatorship, please note, not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small number of those who made the *coup de main* and who themselves are organized beforehand under the dictatorship of one person or a few. One can see that Blanqui is a revolutionary of the previous generation."[37] It is clear that the Leninist model of a particular sect or political party exercising political power is much closer to the Blanquist conception of "dictatorship" than to Marx's, and Engels explicitly criticized this conception of how political power should be exercised. It is also clear that Blanqui's model of rule by a small group of revolutionaries shares more in common with popular fantasies about Marx than with Marx's dictatorship of the *whole proletarian class.*

Storming Heaven

We have seen that Marx's radical democracy formed a major part of his political perspective. Though not as explicit in his economic studies, to which Marx devoted so much of his life, his basic political perspective comes to the fore once again in his analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871, a landmark event in the history of the workers' movement. It is in his

analysis of the Paris Commune that Marx's understanding of the transition to socialism is most clearly developed. We will look closely at Marx's famous essay on the Commune, as well as his drafts for this text.

In *The Civil War in France*, Marx lauds the Commune as "a thoroughly expansive political form, while all previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive. Its true secret was this. It was essentially a working-class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour."[38] In his First Draft, Marx also characterized the Commune as "a Revolution against the *State* itself." Here he was referring specifically to the French centralized executive power, which had not been broken by previous revolutions. Marx focuses on the Commune's break with this state machinery, and the resumption of power by the masses: "It was a Revolution against the *State* itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. It was not a revolution to transfer it from one fraction of the ruling classes to the other, but a Revolution to break down this horrid machinery of Class domination itself."[39]

Although Marx's terminology is somewhat different from other parts of his writings (where he referred to the proletariat's exercise of state power), the main points of his vision of proletarian emancipation remained constant: the proletariat exercises political power through general means of coercion over the capitalist class, and it does this *as a class* rather than through an elite group of individuals raised above the rest of the ruling class, using democratic methods that would be appropriate to the future communist society. The frequent claim that Marx simply adopted the anarchist view of the state after the Paris Commune could not be further from the truth. The parasitic French state of the bourgeoisie was to be destroyed, but in 1871 Marx did not cease to call for working class *state* power.[40]

The method of political organization adopted by the Paris Commune is also described as "the reabsorption of the State power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it."[41] This "reabsorption" was accomplished when the Commune did away with "the state hierarchy altogether" and replaced "the haughteous masters of the people" by "always removable servants" acting "continuously under public supervision."[42] The Commune challenged "The delusion as if administration and political governing were mysteries, transcendent functions only to be trusted to the hands of a trained caste."[43] In Marx's writing on the Paris Commune, we can see again Marx's support, expressed as early as 1843, for a public able to "deliberate and decide on public affairs *for themselves*."[44] We see a reappearance of the themes of his Critique of Hegel: direct democracy through responsible delegates, the elimination of bureaucracy and its attendant mysteries. Marx even called the Parisians of the Commune "heaven-stormers" and contrasted them with "the slaves to heaven of the German-Prussian Holy Roman Empire."[45] It is possible that Marx was using his 1843 identification of the bourgeois state as the "heaven" of civil society. The Parisians *stormed heaven* in that they conquered the political power that had previously been sharply separated from their profane existences. The Commune easily became Marx's model for the transitional proletarian state.[46] Marx praised the workers of Paris for having "taken the actual management of their Revolution into their own hands and [having] found at the same time, in the case of success, the means to hold it in the hands of the People itself, displacing the State machinery, the governmental machinery of the ruling classes by a governmental machinery of their own."[47] Here we see that the process of transition itself must be self-managed by the workers. The opposition to Blanquist conceptions could not be more self-evident.

In his Second Draft, Marx makes an even clearer statement of the prefigurative nature of the proletarian dictatorship: "the working class cannot simply lay hold on the ready made State machinery and wield it for their own purpose. The political instrument of their enslavement

cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation."[48] Derek Sayer has emphasized this aspect of proletarian dictatorship. He writes that breaking down the separation between the state and civil society is "not for Marx one of communism's remote objectives, but an indispensable part of any conceivable *means* for its attainment. What needs to be understood is that Marx is being every bit as materialist here as in his critique of the Anarchists. If the objective is labor's self-emancipation the means *have* to be 'prefigurative', because they are the only ones which will work."[49] For Marx, this form of power can be a "state" from the perspective of its *political*, coercive function of uprooting the foundations of the rule of capital. It cannot be a "state" in the sense of a "parasitic excrescence" usurping power from the mass of workers.[50]

A passage from the Final Draft focusing on the *organization* of the Commune is worth examining closely:

In a rough sketch of national organization which the Commune had no time to develop, it states clearly that the Commune was to be the political form of even the smallest country hamlet, and that in the rural districts the standing army was to be replaced by a national militia, with an extremely short term of service. The rural communes of every district were to administer their common affairs by an assembly of delegates in the central town, and these district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents. The few but important functions which still would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally misstated, but were to be discharged by Communal, and therefore strictly responsible agents. The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organised by the Communal Constitution and to become a reality by the destruction of the State power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence. While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society. Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers in his business. And it is well known that companies, like individuals, in matters of real business generally know how to put the right man in the right place, and, if they for once make a mistake, to redress it promptly. On the other hand, nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchic investiture.[51]

Marx saw the mandated and revocable delegates of the Commune as an example of working class state power in action. Recall Marx's 1843 description of the bourgeois state: "The separation of the political state from civil society takes the form of a separation of the deputies from their electors."[52] Marx clearly thought that the Commune exhibited the opposite tendency. Here we see a vivid contrast between the bureaucratic French state machinery and the "governmental machinery" of the workers. Richard N. Hunt, in writing about the Commune, highlights what he called Marx and Engels' "double usage" of the word "state," which can function as a stand-in for a parasitic bourgeois state machinery, or as a general description of organized class rule: "The full-time army as parasite disappeared, but the part-time National Guard remained as the coercive instrument of the workers' state. Here in sharpest focus one can perceive Marx and Engels' double usage: the parasite state is to be smashed immediately; the state as instrument of class coercion is to remain until the need for it fades away."[53]

Marx makes another important distinction between the Commune and normal bourgeois government: "The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time."[54] The delegates were generally to be responsible for carrying out legislative decisions, instead of simply voting on them. As Marx put it in his Second Draft of *The Civil War in France*, "The modern bourgeois state is embodied in two great organs, parliament and the government [the executive]."[55] Parliamentarism is not identified with effective control from below, but rather with professional politicians who are not truly responsible to the public. In an 1888 letter to Laura Lafargue, Engels spoke of French political illusions: "Why, if the French see no other issue than *either* personal government, or parliamentary government, they may as well give up."[56] Clearly the solution is not greater power for one of the two "great organs" of the bourgeois state, but rather an integration of their functions under the control of the revolutionary workers. In the Commune Marx saw the destruction of a bourgeois state and the democratization of executive power. Hal Draper writes on this theme:

It was Marx's view that the abolition of the separation of powers, far from being a temporary or provisional expedient, was a basic necessity for a truly democratic government. He reiterated this view in his 1851 article on the French constitution, after quoting its statement that "the division of powers is the primary condition of a free government." [Marx:] "Here we have the old constitutional folly. The condition of a 'free government' is not the *division* but the *unity* of power. The machinery of government cannot be too simple. It is always the craft of knaves to make it complicated and mysterious."[57]

Notice Marx's desire for the simplification of government, which goes hand in hand with his lifelong disdain for the mysterious realm of bureaucracy. The workers must *understand* their government if they are to govern.

We have seen how, in the 1840's, Marx described the bourgeois state as "a separate entity, alongside and outside civil society."[58] We have also seen how the Commune represented the "reabsorption" by the people of a "parasitic" state power. In a remarkable 1891 passage, Engels draws together some of these different ideas to make a valuable contrast between proletarian state power and previous forms of state power. It is worth quoting at length:

From the very outset the Commune was compelled to recognise that the working class, once come to power, could not go on managing with the old state machine; that in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy, this working class must, on the one hand, do away with all the old repressive machinery previously used against it itself, and, on the other, safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment. What had been the characteristic attribute of the former state? Society had created its own organs to look after its common interests, originally through simple division of labor. But these organs, at whose head was the state power, had in the course of time, in pursuance of their own special interests, transformed themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society.[59] This can be seen, for example, not only in the hereditary monarchy, but equally so in the democratic republic. Nowhere do "politicians" form a more separate and powerful section of the nation than precisely in North America. . . . It is precisely in America that we see best how there takes place this process of the state power making itself independent in relation to society, whose mere instrument it was originally intended to be. Here there exists no dynasty, no nobility, no standing army, beyond the few men keeping watch on the Indians, no bureaucracy with permanent posts or the right to pensions. And nevertheless we find here two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends-and the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality dominate and plunder it. Against this

transformation of the state and the organs of the state from servants of society into masters of society-an inevitable transformation in all previous states-the Commune made use of two infallible means. In this first place, it filled all posts-administrative, judicial and educational-by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, subject to the right of recall at any time by the same electors. And, in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers.[60]

This passage emphasizes very strongly the special character of proletarian state power. Richard N. Hunt ably describes a "central thread" of Marx and Engels' analysis of the Paris Commune as "the desire to debureaucratize or, more broadly, deprofessionalize public life, to create a democracy without professionals. This is the really crucial and distinguishing characteristic of the workers' state as conceived by Marx and Engels . . . . Deprofessionalization is the remedy to the parasitic tendency which has existed in all previous states. It is exactly what is involved in 'smashing' the state machinery and 'reabsorbing' state power."[61] The payment of workers' wages to officials, mentioned by Engels, is a clear example of this deprofessionalization.

Some critics may look at a focus on the Paris Commune as bound to make Marx and Engels look very hostile to the bourgeois state, when in fact their politics were much more ambiguous. Did they not advocate participation in bourgeois elections, and the election of workers' candidates into parliament? In fact, in certain countries, they even thought that a working class parliamentary majority could be used for a peaceful transition to socialism.[62] For many anarchists, this is the defining aspect of Marx's political thought, and his supposed authoritarianism is considered proven on this evidence. Leaving aside the question of the relative value of electoral politics, it is worth asking whether there is necessarily any contradiction in advocating the use of bourgeois parliaments while hoping for their eventual replacement by Communal-type organization, in other words whether one can insist on the fullest possible democratization while participating in governmental forms that are less than ideal. The anarchist assumption, of course, is that participation in bourgeois governmental forms can only help sustain such institutions. But the error comes when it is assumed that since Marx advocated such participation, he also believed in keeping the governmental forms of the bourgeois state for the period of proletarian rule.

As we have seen, Marx in fact foresaw a fundamental change occurring when the workers reabsorb their alienated political powers, and the state becomes servant instead of master of society. Unsurprisingly, this change entails certain formal changes such as the extension of the principle of democratic control to more areas of public life, the maximization of popular control over elected delegates, a deprofessionalization of public life and an end to bureaucratism, a simplification of governmental functions and the end to the division between executive and legislative power. As Richard N. Hunt has put it, ". . . Marx and Engels never imagined that the leaders of the workers' movement would simply step into the high offices of the state and govern as a professional cadre in much the same manner as their bourgeois predecessors."[63]

Marx always believed that some democracy was better than none at all, and even that a limited bourgeois democracy can point beyond itself just by allowing some degree of popular participation in politics. As he put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "The struggle of the parliamentary orators calls forth the struggle of the scribblers of the press; the parliamentary debating club is necessarily supplemented by debating clubs in the salons and alehouses; the deputies, by constantly appealing to the opinion of the people, give the people the right to express their real opinion in petitions. The parliamentary regime leaves everything to the decision of majorities, why then should the great majority outside parliament not want to make the decisions?"[64] With regard to the use of parliament, Marx

was clear that the problem of social transformation is not solved in parliament, and that the workers cannot simply rely on the wisdom of their leaders. Hal Draper relates one instance in which Marx criticized Lassalle on these issues:

In 1863 Lassalle sent Marx a pamphlet of his in which he made his bid for leadership of the German workers' movement. Marx commented in a letter to Engels: "He behaves-with an air of great importance bandying about phrases borrowed from us-altogether as if he were the future workers' dictator. The problem of wage-labor versus capital he solves like 'child's play' (literally). To wit, the workers must agitate for *universal suffrage* and then send people like him 'armed with the unsheathed sword of science [*Wissenschaft*]' into the Chamber of Deputies." Here is how Lassalle had put it in the pamphlet, addressing himself to the workers: "When that [universal suffrage] comes, you can depend upon it, there will be at your side men who understand your position and are devoted to your cause-men, armed with the shining sword of science, who know how to defend your interests. And then you, the unpropertied classes, will only have yourselves and your bad voting to blame if the representatives of your cause remain in a minority. . . ."[65]

Marx's critique of Lassalle is especially valuable, as it was a critique of a simplistic notion of revolution-from-above in a contemporary of Marx. Marx also criticized the harmful influence of Lassalle's perspective on the Gotha Programme: "Instead of the revolutionary process of transformation of society, the 'socialist organization of the total labour' 'arises' from the 'state aid' that the state gives to the producers' co-operative societies and which the state, not the worker, '*calls into being*.' This is worthy of Lassalle's imagination that one can build a new society by state loans just as well as a new railway!"[66] Building a new society is for Marx a process of self-emancipation. The wielding of political power is an important part of this: the workers must take charge, re-organize society, and exercise the social power previously denied them. This is why Lassalle's socialism-from-above is totally inadequate.

Many people think of Marx as an advocate of socialism-from-above because they hear the word "centralization" and assume that Marx advocated some sort of authoritarian arrangement.[67] Marx did not view the functions of a central government as a pure limitation on autonomy, but rather saw the "unity of the nation" as being realized (not destroyed) by uprooting those who administer the state as a sphere separate from civil society.[68] Bakunin's approach, for example, lacks this critique, as he praised the Parisian workers for proclaiming "the complete abolition of the French state, the dissolution of France's state unity as incompatible with the autonomy of France's communes."[69] Here we can see Bakunin's debt to the Proudhonian socialism with which Marx so vehemently disagreed. While Bakunin was a sworn enemy of all political and economic centralization, Marx had a very different perspective, but one that was in no way more "authoritarian": "*National centralization of the means of production* will become the natural basis of a society composed of associations of free and equal producers, carrying on the social business on a common and rational plan."[70] Marx thought that both centralism (a *common* plan) and democratic control from below were necessary for building socialism.

Conclusion

Marx's political theory is indeed widely misunderstood. Yet anyone who has studied Marx's writing on the Paris Commune is led to agree with Hal Draper when he observes, ". . . the Commune state, any genuine workers' state, is not merely a state with a different class rule but *a new type of state* altogether."[71] This assessment is entirely consistent with Marx's emphasis on the proletariat as the bearer of a revolution with a social soul, a unique historical class in this regard. Its political rule is likewise unique as far as political rule goes. As Marx put it in the *Manifesto*, "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or

in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority."[72]

The myth of Marx's authoritarian statism flourished in the 20th century. The Soviet state, for example, wished to clothe itself in Marx's theoretical mantle-in particular, the shibboleth of proletarian dictatorship. Furthermore, Bakunin's conception of Marx's political theory came to life, so to speak, with Stalinism. It is unsurprising, then, that Marxism and anarchism have developed strikingly similar erroneous ideas about Marx's theory of the state. The mythical version of Marx's theory is indeed discredited. Marx's actual political theory, however, still deserves serious consideration.

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1. Voline, "The Unknown Revolution," in *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism*, ed. Daniel Guerin (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 476-477.
2. Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 12-13.
3. In 1845 Marx signed a contract (which he failed to fulfill) with the publisher Leske for the publication of a two-volume work entitled "Critique of Politics and Political Economy." Maximilien Rubel, "A History of Marx's Economics," in *Rubel on Karl Marx: Five Essays*, ed. Joseph O'Mally and Keith Algozin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 123.
4. "Civil society" was the term that Hegel used to describe the social relations independent of the family and the state - the "free" realm of commerce.
5. Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of State," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), 111.
6. Ibid., 108.
7. Ibid., 136.
8. Ibid., 193-194.
9. Ibid., 188-189.
10. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, 220.
11. Ibid., 232.
12. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, (Amherst: Prometheus, 1998), 53. As Derek Sayer put it, "It is this civil society, in which atomized individuals confront their own social products-above all their economic relations-as an alien objectivity over which they have no control, that for Marx underpins the modern state. Where individual labour is not spontaneously divided, but directly part of the labour of the wider community, 'economic' relations and activities are subject to direct social control and a separate mediating force seeking to impose the communal interest is superfluous." Derek Sayer, "The Critique of Politics and Political Economy: Capitalism, Communism, and the State in Marx's Writings of the Mid-1840s," The Sociological Review 33, no. 2 (1985), 239.
13. Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 234.
14. See Marx's "Excerpts from James Mill's Elements of Political Economy" and the chapter on "Estranged Labour" in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, both in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*.
15. Lucio Colletti, introduction to *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, 54.
16. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 88.
17. Karl Marx, "Marx to Bolte, 23 Nov. 1871," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 589.
18. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 52-53.
19. Ibid., 99.
20. For example: "The abolition of the state has meaning with the Communists, only as the necessary consequence of the abolition of classes, with which the need for the organised

might of one class to keep the others down automatically disappears." Karl Marx, "Review: Le socialisme et l'impôt, par Emile de Girardin," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 10 (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 333.
21. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 99. Marx made a similar statement some years later: "The bourgeois state is nothing else than a mutual insurance for the bourgeois class against its own individual members as well as against the exploited class, an insurance which must become more and more expensive and apparently more and more autonomous with respect to bourgeois society, since the suppression of the exploited class becomes more and more difficult." Marx, "Review: Le socialisme et l'impôt," 330.
22. Karl Marx, "Critical Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian,'" in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, 420.
23. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 126.
24. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 18.
25. Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, ed. Hal Draper (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 76.
26. Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 178.
27. Karl Marx, "Notes on Bakunin's Book Statehood and Anarchy," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 519.
28. Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 178.
29. Marx, "Notes," 519.
30. Ibid., 517. (emphasis added)
31. Ibid., 519. (emphasis added)
32. Bakunin, for example: "They [the Marxists] say that this state yoke, this dictatorship, is a necessary transitional device for achieving the total liberation of the people: anarchy, or freedom, is the goal, and the state, or dictatorship, the means. Thus, for the masses to be liberated they must first be enslaved. For the moment we have concentrated our polemic on this contradiction." Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 179.
33. Karl Marx, "Political Indifferentism," in *Political Writings, Volume III: The First International & After*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage, 1974), 327-328.
34. An interesting passage from Marx's Class Struggles in France discusses the outlawing of the workers' clubs in France: "And what were these clubs other than a union of the whole working class against the whole bourgeois class-the formation of a workers' state against the bourgeois state?" Karl Marx, "The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850," in *Political Writings, Volume II: Surveys From Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1977), 84.
35. Hal Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat From Marx to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 7. For a thorough treatment of the political career of the word "dictatorship," see Part I of Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume III: The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"* (New York: Monthly Review, 1986).
36. Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Volume III, 71.
37. Ibid., 302.
38. Marx, "The Civil War in France," 76.
39. Karl Marx, "The First Draft," in Marx and Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, 150.
40. See Karl Marx, "The Second Draft," in Marx and Engels, Writings on the Paris Commune, 195-196: Quoting approvingly a proclamation of the Central Committee of the National Guard, Marx adds a parenthetical comment: "'They [the proletarians of the capital] have understood that it was their imperious duty and their absolute right to take into their own hands their own destiny by seizing upon the political power' (state power)."
41. Marx, "The First Draft," 152.

42. Ibid., 153.
43. Ibid., 153. Marx had written, in his 1843 critique of Hegel: "The universal spirit of bureaucracy is secrecy, it is mystery preserved within itself by means of the hierarchical structure and appearing to the outside world as a self-contained corporation …." Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of State," 108.
44. Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of State," 193.
45. Karl Marx, "Letter by Marx of April 12, 1871 (to Dr. Kugelmann)," in Marx and Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, 221-222.
46. On this theme, see Monty Johnstone, "The Paris Commune and Marx's Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," *The Massachusetts Review* 12, no. 3 (1971).
47. Marx, "The First Draft," 162.
48. Marx, "The Second Draft," 196.
49. Derek Sayer, "Revolution Against the State: The Context and Significance of Marx's Later Writings," *Dialectical Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (1987), 76.
50. See note 51 below.
51. Marx, "The Civil War in France," 74.
52. See note 8 above.
53. Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels, Volume II: Classical Marxism, 1850-1895* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 128.
54. Marx, "The Civil War in France," 73.
55. Marx, "The Second Draft," 196.
56. Friedrich Engels, "Engels to Laura Lafargue," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 48 (New York: International Publishers, 2001), 190.
57. Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume I: The State and Bureaucracy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 316.
58. See note 21 above.
59. Compare the following passage from Marx's First Draft of *The Civil War in France*: "The peasants were the passive economical basis of the Second Empire, of that last triumph of a State separate of and independent from society. Only the proletarians, fired by a new social task to accomplish by them for all society, to do away with all classes and class rule, were the men to break the instrument of that class rule - the State, the centralized and organized governmental power usurping to be the master instead of the servant of society." Marx, "The First Draft," 151.
60. Friedrich Engels, "Introduction," in Marx and Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, 32-33.
61. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Volume II, 160-161.
62. The following passage from 1878, which emphasizes that such a transition may not stay peaceful, is a good example of Marx mentioning the winning of a parliamentary majority: "An historical development can remain 'peaceful' only so long as no forcible hindrances are put in its way by the existing rulers of a society. If, for example, in England or the United States, the working class were to win a majority in Parliament or Congress, it could legally put an end to laws and institutions standing in the way of its development, although even here only so far as societal development permitted. For the 'peaceful' movement could still be turned into a 'violent' one by the revolt of those whose interests were bound up with the old order. If such people were then put down by force (as in the American Civil War and the French Revolution), it would be rebels against the 'lawful' power." Ibid., 337. Notice that the role of the parliamentary majority is not to legislate socialism into existence, but to help clear away obstacles for the working class movement as a whole.
63. Ibid., 364.
64. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Political Writings*, Volume

II, 190.
65. Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume II: The Politics of Social Classes* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 527-528.
66. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 16.
67. With the Bakuninists in mind, Engels once observed, "It seems to me that the phrases 'authority' and centralization are much abused." Friedrich Engels, "Engels to Terzaghi," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 44 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 295.
68. See note 51 above.
69. Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, 19.
70. Karl Marx, "The Nationalization of the Land," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 136.
71. Hal Draper, "The Death of the State in Marx and Engels," *The Socialist Register*, 1970, 301.
72. Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 230.

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