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Source: *Science & Society*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Fall, 2000), pp. 333-356

Published by: Guilford Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40404782>

Accessed: 20-01-2019 22:47 UTC

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Marx's Theory of Proletarian Dictatorship Revisited

MEHMET TABAK*

ABSTRACT: For Marx, the Commune — “at last discovered” for the emancipation of the working class — was a form of proletarian dictatorship, which was based on the direct rule of the working class. This dictatorship sustains itself through a coercive (negative) function to negate the old order and a positive function to achieve an economically, socially and politically emancipated society. Our contemporaries mainly identify the proletarian dictatorship with its coercive function. In contrast, this study defines the proletarian dictatorship by its positive function, and subordinates the coercive to the positive. Moreover, as Marx explains, the proletariat needs to “shatter” the state before constructing its own political rule as a precondition to withering away of politics. The proletarian dictatorship cannot be a bureaucratic state because this model is not compatible with human emancipation, and it inherently resists withering away. Human emancipation becomes possible when the proletariat begins to rule through direct power, and abolishes the economic, social and political causes — including bureaucracy — of alienation, exploitation and domination.

Introduction

MARX'S SCATTERED WRITINGS ON THE STATE contain three distinctive sets of concepts. The most widely known and discussed set analyzes the capitalist state. The capitalist state on the whole is seen as: a) an organization with its own interests, which are not reducible to societal interests; b) a force that di-

* I thank Ann Park, Paul Thomas, Bertell Ollman, Nadia Urbinati, David Laibman, and the anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions.

rectly or indirectly preserves capitalist social relations of production, in which the bourgeoisie is the dominant class; c) a mechanism of alienation which separates politics from society, atomizes social classes and gives the abstract image of a horizontal relationship of equality that obscures the *real*, hierarchical one.¹

The second set of concepts addresses the would-be state of the state in a communist society, or, more accurately, the disappearance of the state. The state, as it appears in its modern form, disappears for two interrelated reasons: a) since communism is the realm of *harmonious freedom*, the state, which contains and maintains contradictory social relations, becomes antithetical to this *harmony* and *freedom*; b) the state disappears because the structural forces and relations of capitalism that necessitate it also disappear.

In between the above two — theoretically, spatially and temporally — there exists another set of concepts called *the dictatorship of the proletariat*, which is the subject of the present study. I argue that Marx's writings on the Paris Commune of 1871 are central to understanding what he thought of this dictatorship. Relating the Commune to the proletarian dictatorship is widely accepted by Marxists, though this view has its opponents as well. I will try to make this connection between the Commune and the proletarian dictatorship more solid.

I will also raise some critical challenges to the prevailing position, which interprets the dictatorship of the proletariat as a form of state, as an *object* to be captured by the working class. If the dictatorship of the proletariat is to be understood through the experience of the Commune, then we have to question the "stateness" of this dictatorship. Was the Commune a state? Or was it, as Engels once put it, "no longer a state in the true sense of the word"? (quoted in Neil Harding, 1981, 90).

Claiming that the proletarian dictatorship should not be interpreted as a state-form carries important theoretical and practical implications. The state, in its modern, bureaucratic formulation, cannot emancipate the working class. On the contrary, the state becomes detrimental to the transition to communism. For this reason, the proletariat needs to shatter the state during the revolution.

The aim of rejecting the state here is not to reject politics. To the contrary, only by rejecting the bureaucratic state can we meaningfully talk about the political organization of the working class into the ruling class. Thus, the destruction of the state does not bring the end of politics, but its revitalization.

According to Marx, the end of politics comes with the gradual disappearance of class distinctions and contradictions: "When in the course of development class distinctions have disappeared . . . the public power [will] also disappear" (1974, 59). Since the state is shattered during the revolution, what ultimately withers away is the non-bureaucratic political rule of the proletariat.

The "dictatorship" in Marx's conception of transitional period is often merely understood as a coercive measure against bourgeois reaction to the revolution. I will argue that this is not exactly the case. The dictatorship of the proletariat for Marx is a "normal" regime type with its own standards, rules, laws, aims, and long-term plans for transforming society into communism. I will call these the positive/constructive moments of the proletarian dictatorship.

Contemporary Marxists often underestimate the relationship between the positive and negative moments in their efforts to justify the need for coercion. The coercive moment wrongly becomes the defining, omnipresent moment of the dictatorship, and comes at the expense of the positive one. In contrast, this paper treats the positive moment as the defining moment of the proletarian dictatorship, and argues that neither the coercive institutions nor their functions should constitute obstacles to the positive moment. The coercive moment should be subordinated to the positive moment of transforming society.

The proletarian regime takes the emancipation of labor seriously, making it an integral part of its constitution. Political, social and economic emancipation together constitute the general aim, thus the constructive/positive moment. Any theory that attempts to construct a theoretical model of the proletarian dictatorship must explain how the institutionality of this polity would guarantee its general aims. Constructing merely a coercive model based on the need to defend the gains of the socialist revolution against the old order does not guarantee that the new order will necessarily proceed towards communism.

In sum, I will: a) show how the Commune was a form of proletar-

role of the dictatorship during the transition from capitalism to communism; and d) determine the political functions of the dictatorship in overseeing the economic transformation to communism. In giving the proletarian dictatorship a positive form, I will try to heed Poulantzas' warning that these propositions "can never be anything other than *applied theoretical-strategic notions*, serving, to be sure, as guides to action, but at the very most, in the manner of road signs" (1978, 22).

The Commune and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

As Harding observes, Engels was the first to call the Commune a dictatorship of the proletariat: "In 1891, long after Marx's death . . . Engels in his 'Introduction' to Marx's *The Civil War in France* identif[ied] the Commune as a, or the, form of the dictatorship of the proletariat." Harding claims that "it is very telling that Marx himself carefully and consistently avoided identifying the Commune as a form of the dictatorship of the proletariat" (1981, 90). True, Marx never called the Commune "the dictatorship of the proletariat," at least not in writing;² but was not Marx's description of the Commune somewhat identical to his definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat? Harding says no, because there is "nothing transitional about Marx's characterization of the Commune," whereas the dictatorship of the proletariat requires the inclusion of "separate bodies of armed proletarians" as a "transitional measure." The Commune's "*first act* was the abolition of the standing army,"³ meaning, "The Commune was not a preparation for something more perfected" (*ibid.*). Harding thinks that since Marx defined the proletarian dictatorship as a transitional phenomenon, the Commune was not a form of this dictatorship because it was not transitional.

That Marx thought of the proletarian dictatorship as a transitional period is not disputed. In a letter to Joseph Weydemeyer, dated March 5, 1852, Marx wrote that "the dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a *transition* to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society" (1974, 59). In *The Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx spoke

2 According to Hal Draper, a reporter from *The New York World* quoted Marx calling the Commune "dictator" (Draper, 1987, 31).

of a “*transition* period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” (1978, 538). These quotes show that Marx consistently, though infrequently, referred to the proletarian dictatorship as a transitional political instrument.

Contra Harding, I argue that Marx also thought of the Commune as a transitional phenomenon. Showing this will help establish a closer affinity between the Commune and the proletarian dictatorship. Harding himself quotes Marx as saying: “the Commune was . . . the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor” (90). This means that the Commune still had to realize the transition from non-emancipated forms of labor to its emancipation, from capitalism to communism. But if Harding thinks the Commune itself was a final form of government, thus not transitional, we have to remind him that the Commune for Marx was “a political instrument.” The existence of political power necessarily implies the existence of a transitional period (1974, 59). So long as the Commune existed as a “political form,” it necessarily represented a transitional phenomenon for Marx. The end of political institutions can only come about with the abolition of “class distinctions.” The Commune had not achieved such a condition.

Harding has one more objection: “The Commune was to reflect and promote the utmost decentralization, whereas the dictatorship of the proletariat in both political and economic spheres was to press for the most determined centralism” (90, 186). One of Harding’s justifications in concluding this is the following passage from *The Communist Manifesto*: the proletariat is “to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state” (Marx and Engels, 1985, 104). So the argument is that the dictatorship of the proletariat requires centralization whereas the Commune promoted “utmost decentralization.”

When Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* prescribed the centralization of “all instruments of production in the hands of the state,” he had in mind a Commune-like apparatus, though the mechanics of this apparatus or the shape it would take did not become clear to Marx until the experience of the Commune. If we keep reading the section in the *Manifesto*, approximately a page later we see that the state in whose hands “all instruments of production” are to be centralized is nothing other than a “vast association of the whole individuals.”⁴

Hence, as early as 1848, Marx's understanding of centralization had a highly democratic register, not unlike the tone of his characterization of the Commune in 1871. This point is further supported as Marx claims that the revolution would allow the proletariat to win the "battle of democracy" (104).

Commune Vs. the State

Some of the theorists who accept the position that the Commune represented a form of proletarian dictatorship for Marx conceptualize this dictatorship as a state-form. For Lenin, John Hoffman and John Ehrenberg, to name only three, the dictatorship of the proletariat appears as a centralized state, something that the Commune definitely *was not*. This is very misleading, especially since the state, as we know it today, is a centralized, bureaucratic apparatus.

John Hoffman's approach to this issue is particularly useful. Hoffman, quite accurately, challenges Harding's assumption that there is a contradiction between Marx's approach to the proletarian dictatorship in the *Communist Manifesto* and in *Civil War in France*. Hoffman writes, "As with the *Manifesto*, if social production is to be concentrated in the unity of the nation, political centralization must be granted. Of course, since 'united co-operative societies' are to regulate national production upon a common plan; this is a centralization expressed through local autonomy and 'the self-government of the producers' . . ." This depiction is quite similar to the way Marx approached the Commune in *Civil War in France* (Hoffman, 1986, 171).

Hoffman treats the Commune and the proletarian dictatorship as the "general organ of [the proletariat's] class domination" (173). As we shall see below, this, in principle, is accurate. But Hoffman thinks of this polity as a state-form, albeit one that is "ceasing to exist" (172).

Ehrenberg, like Hoffman, argues that the Commune, in Marx's opinion, sought to establish a "'democratic centralist' national state" (1992, 92). In order to support this, he quotes the following passage from Marx: "The few but important functions which still would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed." But this does not mean that the centralized state itself is preserved. As Ehren-

ity by the destruction of the state power" (quoted in Ehrenberg, 92; emphasis added). However, towards the end of his *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Ehrenberg's argument acquires stronger statist tones than the above passage suggests. Following Engels and Lenin, and not Marx, he replaces the "destruction of the state power" argument with "the state is not *abolished*, it *dies out*" argument (183).

The statist approach to the proletarian dictatorship, advocated by Ehrenberg and Hoffman, can lead to undesired theoretical and practical consequences. Hoffman, for instance, argues that both the Commune-form and Stalinism are variations of the dictatorship of the proletariat because in both cases, "the proletariat is organized as the ruling class" (198). It is my contention that Hoffman can accept both the Commune and Stalinism — ultimate statism — as possible forms of this dictatorship because he does not follow what he himself proposes: "What is relevant is not the ideal state of affairs but the real movement of a socialist society, the direction in which it is traveling and the extent to which it is stamped with the birthmarks of the old society" (203–4). Since this direction is towards the realm of freedom, the task of theory is to find practical solutions during the transitional period. Before accepting Stalinism and the state-form as possible forms of proletarian rule, we must ask: How would a bureaucratic-statist model oversee *not any kind* of political, economic and social transition, but ones that can take us to a classless society?

The analyses given by Hoffman and Leninists rest primarily on the need to eliminate "the birthmarks of the old society." As most of the theorizing involves the coercive/negative moment of the dictatorship (18–21), there is very little discussion of its positive moment. Thus, Hoffman concludes, "recognizing necessity is the only way to transform it: consent has to respond to coercion in order to 'negate' it" (210). What emerges out of these discussions is a solid justification for all forms of coercion as long as they are directed against the bourgeois order.

The proletarian dictatorship must contain coercive elements, but not the kinds that divert progress toward socialism into bureaucratic officialdom. The need to suppress counterrevolution by organized class power does not justify the bureaucratic/Stalinist state, as these

Marx on the Commune

Equating the Commune — and proletarian dictatorship — with the state could not be further from Marx's own thinking. For him, the Commune was the complete contrast to "that last triumph of a *State* separate from and independent of society." It stood in full opposition to the state as "the centralized and organized governmental power usurping to be the master instead of the servant of society" (1970, 167).

In the *First Draft of The Civil War in France*, Marx reminds us that "the centralized state machinery with its ubiquitous and complicated military, bureaucratic, clerical and judiciary organs was first forged in the days of the absolute monarchy" with the purpose of using it as a "weapon of nascent modern society in its struggle of emancipation from feudalism" (162). The French Revolution of 1789, Marx writes, developed "what the absolute monarchy commenced — the centralization and organization of state power." The modern state, which was established with the Revolution, was "forced to develop" its own centralization process because "with its task to found national unity — to create a nation — [it] had to break down all local, territorial, townish provincial independence" (163).

With the state established by the first French Revolution, "every solitary interest engendered by the relations of social groups was separated from society itself fixed and made independent of it and opposed to it in the form of state interest, administered by state priests with exactly determined hierarchical functions." What was started by the first French revolution reached its full development "under the sway of the first Bonaparte." The restoration and the July Monarchy "added nothing to it but a greater division of labor, growing at the same measure in which the division of labor within civil society created new groups of interest, and therefore, new material for state action" (*ibid.*).

As we see, Marx thought of the French state as an autonomous force, a tool of modernization and an instrument of national unification, which cannot be reduced to a class rule, as his critics often claim. Only under the Restoration and July Monarchy, Marx claims, did the state become a "means of forcible class domination of the

diocre adventurer with a hungry band of desperadoes behind him sufficed to wield it" (164). Marx, needless to say, is talking about Napoleon III.⁵

Marx writes that the state under the sway of Napoleon "appeared no longer as a means of class domination." Instead, the state during the Second Empire, humbled "under its sway even the interests of the ruling classes," and by doing so, it "had received its last and supreme expression in the Second Empire" (165). To say the least, Marx acknowledges that the bureaucratic state can become independent of and above civil society.

How does the Commune fit into all this? As we have seen, the state under the Second Empire represented "the last and supreme expression" of state power, that is "the centralized executive." The Commune was realized as the "true antithesis to the Empire" (*ibid.*). Marx claims that all revolutions and reactions prior to the Commune brought about the oppression of the working class because the state apparatus, a tool of oppression, only changed hands from one "part of its oppressors to the others." What made the Commune different in character was the fact that it was "a Revolution not against this or that legitimate, constitutional, republican or Imperialist form of state power," but, "was a Revolution against the state itself . . ." (166).

The proletarian revolution, then, "breaks" the state "machinery" before establishing its own dictatorship because "the centralized state machinery . . . entoids (enmeshes) the living society like a boa constrictor . . ." (162). The famous passage in *The Civil War in France*, which asserts that "the working class can not simply lay hold of the ready made state machinery, and wield its *ubiquitous* organs of standing army, police bureaucracy, and judicature for its own purposes" (1978, 629), should be interpreted in relation to the above anti-state statement of Marx. Following Lenin, many Marxists misinterpret this passage as Marx expecting the working class to build its own state, as opposed to the state of the bourgeoisie, thus providing the justification for Soviet-type states in the name of Marxism.

Marx did not call for the formation of a proletarian state but for the abolition of the state altogether. This is because the state, the

5. Interestingly enough, the Soviet state, another state that grew so independent of and above

"political instrument" of the workers' enslavement, "cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation" (1970, 228). What can serve their emancipation is the communal polity, which is "the reabsorption of the State power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it . . ." (168).

The only addition Marx and Engels made to the *Manifesto* came after 1871, and it was the addition of the above quoted passage that the proletariat "can not simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery." This does not mean that Marx's view on the proletarian dictatorship, and the state, had changed only after the experience of the Commune. Marx held the same view as early as 1852, when he wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. After the experience of the Commune, Marx, who was happy to see one of his prophecies come true, wrote the following to Kugelmann: "If you look at my *Eighteenth Brumaire*, you will see that I declare the next attempt of the French revolution to be not merely to hand over, from one hand to another, the bureaucratic military machine . . . but to *shatter* it" (1933, 126, emphasis in original). This reflects the fact that, as early as 1852, he favored shattering the centralized state. Nor did Marx ever give up on the idea in the latter part of his life. In the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, written in 1875, Marx echoes his earlier anti-statism: "Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinated to it . . ." (1978, 537).

Wither or Shatter the State?

The above passages show that, at least from Marx's own perspective, the statist version of the proletarian dictatorship cannot be sustained. One question, however, remains unanswered: If the state is shattered, what withers away?

As David McLellan claims, Marx never used the expression "wither away (*absterban*)," preferring instead "the more direct term 'abolish' (*abschaffen*)" (1981, 31, n. 59). It was Engels who introduced the concept. Regardless, I believe *withering away* has a register in Marx's theory, though not in the way it is usually understood.

Since the dictatorship of the proletariat begins with the shattering of the bureaucratic, centralized state, then what withers away is the proletarian dictatorship itself. This dictatorship lasts until "the

(Marx, 1978, 547). This means that the state is shattered during the socialist revolution, but the capitalistic “foundations” of the economy last until their future destruction, which, as we shall see, is a gradual process of long duration.

For Marx, on the whole, there are two main reasons why the bureaucratic state must be abolished before the withering away process can take place: a) bureaucratism is *not* compatible with complete human emancipation, especially since bureaucratization requires atomizing and depoliticizing the working class; b) bureaucracy *can* become an autonomous social and political force, and resist withering away.

Lenin asserted in 1917 that “socialism is not created with orders from above. State-bureaucratic automatism is alien to its spirit; socialism is alive, creative — the creation of the masses themselves.” This is the Lenin we agree with, but not the one, who, in 1919, declared that “it is precisely in the interests of socialism that the masses unquestionably obey the single will of the leaders of the labor process” (quoted in Mett, 1967, 5). It is the message in this latter statement that unjustly came to represent the Marxist theory of proletarian dictatorship, as a centralized, bureaucratic state.

The bureaucratic state, as Paul Thomas rightly observes, “forcibly excludes the voluntary common action” and “autonomous self-rule developed within the social and economic realms” (1994, xv–xvi). By doing so, as Marx put it, the bureaucratic state liberates itself “without man himself being liberated” (1978, 32). Its own corporate interests and hierarchical structure allows the bureaucracy to exist and function independently of society. The bureaucratic state represents human emancipation only in an abstract sense, but leaves social inequality intact. The bureaucratic state, which can be efficient in fulfilling the negative aims of the proletarian dictatorship, proves to be institutionally unfit for the positive aims of this dictatorship, that is human emancipation.

For Marx, human emancipation can only become complete when man “has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as *social* powers so that he no longer separates this *social* power from himself as *political* power” (46). The bureaucratic state perpetuates the separateness of the social and political. The dictatorship of the

according to Marx, was precisely that it de-institutionalized political power, and in so doing re-politicized society" (Thomas, 1994, 93).

For Marx, the bureaucratic state alienates because it is the "intermediary between man and human liberty. Just as Christ is the intermediary to whom man attributes all his own divinity and all his religious bonds, so the state is the intermediary to which man confides all his non-divinity and all his human freedom" (1978, 32). Also, bureaucracy alienates because it creates "the antithesis between mental and physical" activity (531). Hence, complete human emancipation, the aim of the proletarian dictatorship, cannot come about in a bureaucratic regime.

The second reason why the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be bureaucratic has more to do with bureaucracy itself than with its alienating relationship to society. The state bureaucracy, once established, can become an interest group, whose members enjoy economic and power-related privileges. As such, the bureaucracy not only resists withering away, but also does everything in its power to entrench itself.⁶ Moreover, bureaucracy can exist as a parasitic caste in any form of economic system, and once extant, tends to create reasons and support for its own existence. For this reason, abolishing the economic foundations of capitalism does not necessarily require the disappearance of bureaucracy.

Marx, long before Weber and Michels, was in fact aware that the bureaucrats, regardless of their social origin, could become self-interested rulers, as individuals and as a corporate body.⁷ This is explicitly stated in his writings, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* being a well known case. In an early work, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx explicitly says that the state bureaucracy "constitutes itself as an actual power and itself becomes its own material content." As such, "the bureaucracy takes itself to be the ultimate purpose of the state" (1978, 23–25).

Unlike Marx, Lenin had always maintained that the state necessarily rests on a socioeconomic class alone. Hence, with the destruction of the bourgeoisie, he had assumed that the state would, "of itself" wither away (1985, 73). This theoretical mistake allowed him to advocate the

6. See Michels, 1958, and Weber, 1958, for more on this.

transformation of the Soviets (communes) “into state organizations” (1981, 38). This policy marked the triumph of bureaucracy as the working-class organizations were subordinated to bureaucratism.

In 1921, when the anti-bureaucratic uprising of the Kronstadt Soviet, modeled after the Paris Commune, was being crushed by the Bolshevik troops, Lenin was busy banning “all opposition” at the Tenth Party Congress. Ironically, during the same Congress, Lenin declared that his program “formulates the task of combating the evils of bureaucracy . . .” Lenin’s proposed solution was to promote “workers from below” to bureaucratic positions, without doing away with bureaucratic structures (1978, 201).

Lenin’s proposal missed the crucial aspect of proletarian dictatorship. By assuming that the promotion of workers to bureaucratic positions would eliminate the “evils of bureaucracy,” he must have assumed that workers, as individuals, are inherently non-bureaucratic. Bertell Ollman thinks this was Marx’s view also: “Marx believed people in the government do not have important interests which conflict with those of the class from which they come. Consequently, the elected leaders of the proletarian dictatorship will want to represent the workers.” To think that workers in government would become corrupt is a “foolish and impossible dream. Marx is asserting, in effect, ‘The workers are not like that,’ or, to be more precise, ‘will not be like that when they come to power’ (1979, 61).

Bakunin, thinking that this was Marx’s view too, warned: “Just as soon as [former workers] become representatives or rulers of the people *they will cease to be workers*. . . . And they’ll start looking down on all ordinary workers from the height of the state; they will now represent not the people but themselves and their claims to govern people” (in Marx and Engels, 1978, 546). Bakunin was right, as Soviet history demonstrates. However, it is my contention that Marx was misunderstood on this score.

To Bakunin’s point, Marx responds, “No more than a factory-owner ceases to be a capitalist nowadays because he has become a member of the town council” (1979, 61). In this connection, Marx’s response to Bakunin means that the elected members of the proletarian dictatorship do not become specialized functionaries, but serve in the government as workers. Even those who become paid “servants”

is that the real power in communal government rests on the working-class organizations, which are at once the legislative and executive body. It is the structural design of the proletarian dictatorship, and not the benign nature of the workers, that would prevent the elected or hired officials from becoming corrupt rulers.

The state, as the *habitus* of the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy as the material content of the state enter into a mutual relationship of self-realization and preservation. Hence, the bureaucratic state is inherently antithetical to withering away. The task of the proletarian dictatorship, on the other hand, is to constitute the proletariat as an actual power and as its own material content. As such, the proletariat becomes the "ultimate purpose" of the proletarian dictatorship. However, there is an essential difference between bureaucracy and the proletariat, which explains why the bureaucratic state *would not* and the proletarian dictatorship *would* wither away.

Whereas the bureaucracy's self-realization is its own preservation, the proletariat's self-realization is its own destruction. The bureaucracy is its own end. The proletariat is its own negation, as the politically dominant working class cannot preserve its own subjugation. For this reason, the bureaucracy cannot let the political apparatus — its source of life — wither away, whereas the proletariat must. Thus, the proletarian dictatorship, in order to avoid the bureaucratic dilemma of self-preservation, is both a *non-state* and *anti-bureaucratic*.

An important question remains to be answered: If not the state, what other political form should the proletarian dictatorship assume?

The Commune and the Politics of Transition

The experience of the Commune gave Marx the empirical material to develop measures for proletarian dictatorship. These measures are compatible with his overall theoretical apparatus and with his scattered remarks on the transition to communism. In attempting to formulate the positive form of the proletarian dictatorship, I will supplement Marx's writings on the Commune with his other writings.

The term "dictatorship" is misleading. Hal Draper tells us that "... in the middle of the nineteenth century the old word 'dictatorship' still meant what it had meant for centuries, and in this

tocracy, and above all it was *not* counterposed to democracy" (1987, 110). Nor did Marx ever think of proletarian dictatorship as antithetical to democracy (26). This is Draper's first contribution.

Draper's second contribution is his claim that "... Marx thinks of class dictatorship . . . in terms of the class nature of political power, rather than in terms of special governmental forms" (32). This is to suggest that proletarian dictatorship expresses the "class content" of the socialist regime. In this sense, it can acquire a variety of "governmental forms" (45–6). Many Marxists — Draper claims all but Rosa Luxemburg — wrongly thought of the proletarian dictatorship as a particular form of government, designed solely for the purpose of crushing the opposition. Lenin epitomizes this misunderstanding: "The scientific term 'dictatorship' means nothing more nor less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force" (quoted in Draper, 90). Draper responds: "On the contrary, its operation means that it establishes its own, new, class-reoriented laws, rules, standards and authorities, new institutions under its own law" (91).

Draper's account, however useful, leaves things too open-ended. As Norberto Bobbio aptly puts it, "In the Marxian expression 'dictatorship of the proletariat' the term 'dictatorship' has no particular evaluative significance: since all states are dictatorships, in the sense of domination by a class, the term refers substantially to a state of affairs and has an essentially descriptive significance" (1989, 166). It is thus the term "dictatorship," and not, I argue, "the dictatorship of the proletariat" that demands no particular institutional expression. Draper's conflation of the two leads him to conclude that Marx had "said nothing about the forms that might be found to outfit a workers' state. Even where Marx did have views on what such forms might be, it was not the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' that communicated those views" (127, 131). If, as Draper acknowledges, the Paris Commune was a form of proletarian dictatorship (31), then Marx had said much more than "nothing" about the appropriate forms of government to "outfit" the socialist regime. Let us piece together what Marx wrote on the matter in *The Civil War in France* and elsewhere.

As we have repeatedly seen, the dictatorship of the proletariat

The commune to consist of the municipal councilors of the different arrondissements . . . chosen by all citizens, responsible, and revocable in short terms. The majority of that body would naturally consist of workmen or acknowledged representatives of the working class. It was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. The police agents, instead of being the agents of a central government, were to be the servants of the Commune, having, like the functionaries in all the other departments of the administration to be appointed and always revocable by the Commune; all the functionaries, like the members of the Commune itself, having to do their work at workmen's wages. The judges were also to be elected, revocable, and responsible. . . . In one word all public functions, even the few ones that would belong to the Central Government, were to be executed by communal agents, and therefore under the control of the Commune. (Marx, 1970, 233.)

The legislative and executive body consists of working-class dominated communes, whose laws and regulations are represented, and carried out, by the elected or hired employees, who hold no real power over the citizens. They are no longer bureaucrats!

The centralist objection that the general functions of society would become impossible in the absence of a centralized state is an "absurdity" for Marx. He claims that it is not the functions "but the functionaries . . . (who) raise themselves over real society" that would have to disappear (233). The Commune's experience sufficed for Marx to criticize the "delusion" that "administration and political governing [are] mysteries, transcendent functions only to be trusted to the hands of a trained caste — state parasites, richly paid sycophants and sinecurists . . ." (169).

The "first condition for the hold of political power is to transform working machinery and destroy it" (170). But the struggle for full emancipation does not end by destroying the centralized state because, for Marx, the Commune was only "the political form of social emancipation." This means that the Commune was not the "social movement of the working class and therefore a general regeneration of mankind, but an organized means of action." The Commune, therefore, "does not do away with the class struggle." It is the working classes that "strive to the abolition of all classes" (171). The distinction made here requires the existence of working class organiza-

controlled organizations, as Lenin had proposed, but rather into building blocks of the proletarian regime.

The role of the dictatorship of the proletariat in human emancipation is to afford "the rational medium in which [the] class struggle can run through its different phases in the most rational and humane way" (171). The Commune "begins the emancipation of labor — its great goal — by doing away with the unproductive and mischievous work of the state parasites . . ." (171–2).

The instruments of coercion and defense that the proletarian dictatorship employs have to be of the appropriate kind too. To the Proclamation of the Central Committee of March 22, which declared the establishment of a militia "that defends the citizens," Marx added that "the people only had to organize this militia on a national scale." Again, let us not confuse the concept of organizing on a "national scale" with having a centralized state apparatus in the hands of a few bureaucrats or technocrats.

The organization of the militia would require eliminating the standing armies, a "constant *danger to government usurpation of class rule*" (Marx, 1970, 169, emphasis added). Clearly, Marx, fearing governmental "usurpation of class rule," wants to maintain coercive power in the militia form. The point here, I believe, is not to define the exact form of the coercive means of proletarian rule, but to ensure that the proletariat directly controls these means.

Here, two distinct concepts must be clarified. First, the dictatorship of the proletariat contains coercive means. But the institutional design of the dictatorship should safeguard against governmental "usurpation" of power by maintaining the coercive means under the direct control of the proletariat. Marx proposed the non-bureaucratic, militia form.

Second, coercion is not the norm. Marx predicts that the Commune, once its organization is firmly established on a national scale, "might" still undergo "catastrophes" caused by the "sporadic slaveholders' insurrections, which, while for a moment interrupting the work of peaceful progress, would only accelerate the movement by putting the sword into the hand of the Social Revolution" (1970, 172). In an otherwise normal, "peaceful progress," the proletarian dictatorship becomes "dictatorial" only to "suppress the bourgeois resis-

commented, one must not make a "virtue of necessity" and freeze into a "complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon" the revolution by the circumstances of the civil war (1970, 79). It is one thing to realize the necessity of the "sword," quite another to make a virtue of it.⁸

Economic Transition

No single work by Marx leaves the issue of human emancipation unnoticed, nor should any theory of proletarian dictatorship. Ehrenberg aptly captures the most important element in the dictatorship of the proletariat: it is "nothing more — and nothing less — than Marxism's account of the full transition from blind necessity to conscious freedom" (Ehrenberg, 1992, 181). It is crucial to recognize that the destruction of both the bourgeoisie and state bureaucracy does not automatically lead to human emancipation. From his 1844 *Manuscripts* to the last volume of *Capital*, Marx had always maintained that the processes and organization of labor could physically and mentally be detrimental to the human condition and human freedom. The division of labor, attachment to the machine, separation of mental and physical activity, organization of factory labor, and domination of present labor by past, accumulated labor all contribute to human alienation and "enslavement." Marx's main critique of the cooperativist doctrine of Proudhon, besides its apolitical character, rested on the assertion that mechanisms and organization of labor could also play an independent role in labor's enslavement. Insofar as these are inventions of capitalism, they can be carried into other regime types as well, as the former "Communist" regimes attest. Then, as Bertell Ollman asserts, "it is clear that the dictatorship of the proletariat gives top priority to correcting this situation." The aim "of all action in this field is, first, to make work bearable, then agreeable, and finally, human" (Ollman, 1979, 62).

8 The Bolshevik justification of terror often came from Engels' writings. In an article, "On Authority," Engels writes, "A revolution is . . . the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon . . ." After the revolution "the victorious party must maintain (its) rule by means of terror" (Engels, 1978, 733). Here, but not always, "means of terror" characterizes the proletarian dicta-

Based mainly on the *Communist Manifesto* and the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Ollman pieced together a coherent set of economic measures that would gradually achieve human emancipation. Some of these measures are: a) "shortening the work day"; b) planning to satisfy "social needs"; c) increasing social expenditure while d) decreasing administrative expenses; and e) equal pay for equal work (62–66). These measures, however, are not the ultimate aims of the proletarian dictatorship, as they are also possible under capitalism. The work day can be — has been — shortened under capitalism. Welfare states have been planning to satisfy "social needs." Social expenditure keeps increasing in the United States. The point here is that under proletarian rule these measures are continuous and have a general point of reference towards which they must progress, whereas they appear as merely accidental, compulsory responses under capitalism.

The following passages from the *Critique of the Gotha Program* seem suitable as points of reference, or as general norms and aims towards which the dictatorship of the proletariat struggles in the economic realm. The proletarian dictatorship gradually abolishes "the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical work." It allows labor to "become not only a means of life but life's prime want." Productive forces increase "with the all-round development of the individual." The proletarian dictatorship alters the aim of production from capital accumulation to the satisfaction of social needs by having "all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly," until "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" can be realized (Marx, 1978, 531).

Marx is more explicit in the third volume of *Capital* on the prerequisites of Communism:

In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. . . . With [man's] development, this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these needs also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of

the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of their human nature. But it nonetheless remains the realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its prerequisite. (Marx, 1966, 820.)

Hence directing technological development towards constant increase in productivity — to satisfy increasing needs — and constant decrease in the need for compulsory labor — to increase human freedom — becomes an essential part of the proletarian constitution.

According to Marx, once the workers acquire the political power in the form of the Commune, “the superseding of the economical conditions of the slavery of labor by the conditions of free and associated labor can only be the *progressive work of time*.” Marx asserts that the economic transformation that would set labor free requires “not only a change of distribution, but a new organization of production” (1970, 172).

Of course, Marx knows that “this work of regeneration will be again and again relented and impeded by the resistance of vested interests and class egotisms.” How should the dictatorship of the proletariat respond to the impending “resistance of vested interests”? Marx thinks that “the present ‘spontaneous action of the natural laws of capital and landed property’ can only be superseded by ‘the spontaneous action of the laws of the social economy of free and associated labor’ by a *long* process of development of new conditions.” Marx sees the triumph of the economic laws of free and associated labor superseding the economic laws of capital in the fashion that the “economic laws of slavery . . . and of serfdom” were superseded (172–3). Though the similarity can only be in form, it is my contention that Marx imagined the transformation of society into communism to be very similar to the transformation from serfdom to capitalism.

For example, the French state after the Revolution of 1789 provided the legal grounds for the development of capitalism — by institutionalizing private property, providing a unified national market, creating a free labor force by abolishing serfdom and declaring

was able to develop more freely, so is the socialist government to provide the legal grounds for the free development of socialism. In short, the task of the dictatorship of the proletariat is not to make molds of socialism to fit the whole society in, but to respond to the changes with "spontaneous" acts as developments require, with the general aim of human emancipation being the reference point of action and judgment.

As mentioned above, the dictatorship of the proletariat "does not [do] away with class struggles." In other words, the socialist government, the Commune, does not abolish classes by expropriating the bourgeoisie. It only becomes the overseer of the social transformation. Just as the capitalist "state machinery and parliamentarism are not the real life of the ruling classes . . . but the political guarantees and forms and expressions of the old order of things," so the Commune becomes the political guarantee of the new order of things, not the movement of "a general regeneration of mankind." Even though Marx expects the full emancipation of labor to come after a long process of development and "different phases of class struggle," he claims that "great strides may be [made] at once through the Communal form of *political* organization . . ." (171-3).

As the above quotes suggest, the proletarian dictatorship establishes its political economy through the "Communal form of *political* organization." Thus, both the political and economic spheres fall under the direct rule of the proletariat. In contrast to capitalism, then, there is no structural separation between the two realms of power. Moreover, in contrast to the bureaucratic, Communist states, the two spheres, which are now fused, are de-bureaucratized under the proletarian regime.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Marx's most complete description of the dictatorship of the proletariat can be found in *The Civil War in France*. Marx, for the first time, had something concrete to work with: the Paris Commune of 1871. He concluded that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a political organization, and not the "general movement" of society's emancipation. Its task is not to abolish classes, but to politi-

For Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat can only be the complete "antithesis" of the centralized, authoritarian state machinery, exemplified by the so-called "Communist" states. The proletarian dictatorship is to take the form of self-rule of "the people acting for itself by itself," not self-rule through "the means of an oligarchic club" (141). The workers cannot "simply lay hold of the ready made state machinery." They need to shatter the state because its existence, as a tool of oppression, is not compatible with the aims of proletarian dictatorship. This incompatibility emanates from the fact that bureaucratism depoliticizes and atomizes society. Also, the bureaucracy can become a social power with its own interests, and usurp political power to preserve itself against the aims of the proletariat. As the self-realization of bureaucracy and that of the proletariat are two contradictory processes — the former needs self-affirmation and the latter self-negation — the proletarian dictatorship cannot assume a bureaucratic character.

The bottom line is that the dictatorship of the proletariat must be institutionally compatible with the general aims of the proletariat. It is not enough to rely on efficient means of coercion to defend the gains of the revolution. The means of coercion must be subordinate to the positive, constructive means and functions of the proletarian rule, which are propelled by the aim of building communism. This fact limits the possible forms the proletarian dictatorship can take to non-bureaucratic, direct political organizations of the working class. For the reasons this paper has sought to clarify, the proletarian dictatorships must be modeled on the general form and principles of the Paris Commune.

On the economic front, the aim of the proletarian regime is to transform society from the realm of "necessity" into the realm of "freedom." Again, this transformation is to take place with the "spontaneous laws" of the proletarian regime. The realm of "freedom" for Marx does not consist in the satisfaction of material needs alone. The ability of human beings to objectify their inner selves in the external world, the ability to use one's own consciousness to manipulate the material world, is also required. Hence, the dictatorship of the proletariat ultimately must do away with the alienating conditions of labor. This would involve moving gradually towards increasing productivity while simultaneously reducing the need for compulsory

alienating environment. One thing is certain: For Marx, the project of building a communist society involves the elimination of both capitalist and bureaucratic elements from all spheres of life.

I do not propose that the conditions of the 19th century still persist today. This is to say that the Commune, as it happened, may not be sufficient in providing us with everything needed to construct a modern dictatorship of the proletariat. The failure of the Soviet experience to produce a proletarian dictatorship — characterized by its bureaucratic state and the political passivity of the workers generated by this state — compels us to reconsider the virtues of the Commune as a viable alternative.

As globalization threatens the existence, rights and interests of the working classes the world over, neither authoritarian nor bourgeois-democratic regimes have proven capable of addressing the needs of the workers. The dictatorship of the proletariat, understood properly, remains as a solid political alternative to what exists now. Only this dictatorship appears capable of placing human need, satisfaction, and freedom above the needs of capital and special interests of ever-growing bureaucracies and the bourgeoisie.

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