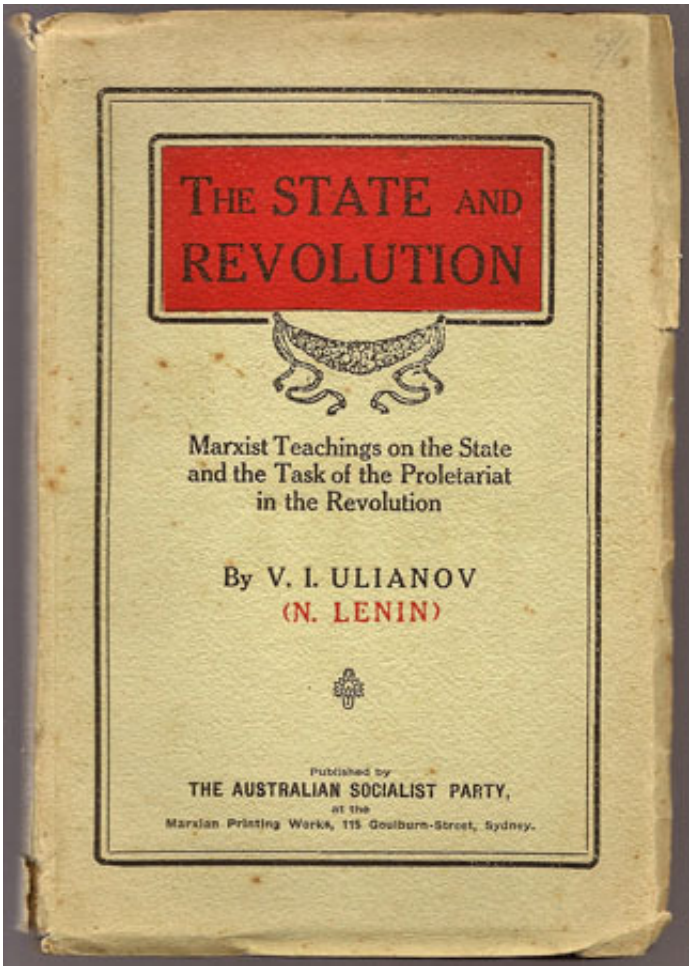
The Strengths and Limitations of Lenin's State and Revolution



(https://revintcan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/lenin8940.jpg)

As important of a text this is, is it the final word on the question of State and Revolution?

The Strengths and Limitations of Lenin's *State and Revolution*

Section II of **Towards the War of Position: Gramsci in Continuity and Rupture with Marxism-Leninism (http://wp.me/pqCiM-Fm)**

by Amil K.

As the title of Lenin's *State and Revolution* (S&R) suggests,the question of the State and the question of revolution are intertwined; and the first should be answered before the second. How one conceptualizes the State comes to bear upon how one conceptualizes the revolution that is required to overthrow it.

S&R is written in the throes of the first inter-imperialist war and published on the eve of the Russian revolution in August 1917. *S&R* was intended to be a decisive polemical intervention against all the revisionist forces of the Second International and their "superstitions concerning the 'State'" (Lenin, *State and Revolution*, p.5), more than any others the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries who were supporting the bourgeois Kerensky government after the February revolution.

The approach of Lenin's *S&R* is to reclaim the ideas of Marx and Engels, or "those aspects of their teachings which have been forgotten or opportunistically distorted" (p.6) by "resuscitat[ing] the real teachings of Marx on the state" (p.7). In essence, Lenin is making a series of affirmations of revolutionary Marxism in light of the Second International's usurpation, degeneration, and revisionism of some of the basic tenets put forward by Marx and Engels. Among these affirmations include the points that:

- "The state is the product and the manifestation of the *irreconcilability* of class antagonisms," and, therefore, "the existence of the state proves that the state class antagonisms are irreconcilable" (p.8);
- The state is an instrument for the exploitation of the oppressed classes; and finally,
- The state is made up of "special bodies of armed men who have at their disposal prisons, etc." (p.10), which is contrasted with the "self-acting armed organization of the population" that preceded the rise of the state.

These ideological interventions were essential on the eve of the Russian revolution for establishing a definite clarity about the inability of the bourgeois state (managed by the Kerensky government, after the February revolution) to serve as a mediating force for resolving the antagonism of classes in Russia. The third affirmation, concerning "special

bodies of armed men" in the service of class dictatorship, underscores the need for an armed force of the proletariat to replace bourgeois dictatorship with a transitional proletarian dictatorship. A substantial part of the rest of *S&R* is dedicated to defending the historical necessity of a *dictatorship of the proletariat* as an instrument for repressing the bourgeoisie. As Lenin puts it,

Opportunism does not lead the recognition of class struggle up to the main point, up to the period of transition from capitalism to Communism, up to the period of overthrowing and completely abolishing the bourgeoisie… the state during this period inevitably must be a state that is democratic in a new way (for the proletariat and the poor in general) and dictatorial in a new way (against the bourgeoisie) (30-1).

In affirming these essential theses of Marxism on the question of the state, Lenin is affirming an analysis of the state that while evidently applicable to Russia – considering the success of the Russian revolution – is arguably less applicable to other western States at the time of Lenin's writing. Lenin's exclusive emphasis on the coercive aspects of the state – as a dictatorship of the ruling class(es), with its "special bodies of armed men" –while essential, overlooks those aspects of bourgeois power that are beyond the repressive apparatus, such as in ideology and civil society where consensual domination is exercised, the realm of *hegemony*. It is difficult and would be erroneous to fault Lenin with not developing a theory of the state more applicable to the conditions of societies other than Russia. *S&R*, while arguably containing *certain* universal positions on the bourgeois state, is not a completely universal view of the State in its modern form, or even in Lenin's day.

Those aspects of bourgeois power constituted in the realm of civil society were already well-developed and quite formidable in the capitalist-imperialist countries to the West in Lenin's time, and certainly underwent further development between the inter-imperialist wars with the vast expansion of the productive base of capitalism. Gramsci acknowledged the differences between the Russian state and the western European states at the moment of the Russian revolution when he reflected more than a decade later in his prison notebooks that

In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The State was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements. (Gramsci [1930-32], *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 238).

Therefore, the urban insurrection that succeeded in Russia would prove less than sufficient to topple the more "sturdy fortresses" of the more advanced capitalist regimes, as the postwar period would reveal at the expense of great losses to the proletarian movement.

But with the triumph of the Russian revolution, the enormous prestige of Leninism in its wake, and the urgent necessity of building an international communist movement in the context of the postwar revolutionary situation meant that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union served as a major pole of attraction for new communist parties around the world. In

the context of the revolutionary situation in the immediate postwar period where a rapid regroupement of communist forces was required, unfortunately emulation trumped innovation. The consequence of inadequate theorization of the state in the ICM led to the application of strategies and tactics ill-conceived for contexts other than where they were originally formulated.

This is not to suggest that there were no contributions by Lenin that were universal, and that should not have been appropriated of by the new Communist Parties. Lenin's conception of the vanguard party and the Bolshevik example set it apart from the failed 'mass parties' of social democracy that placed the proletariat under the leadership of the petty-bourgeoisie, labour aristocracy, and opportunists almost universally. Lenin's theory of imperialism was also a significant theoretical contribution, not only in advancing internationalism and developing anti-colonialism within the communist movement, but also in explaining the relationship between imperialism and the corruption of the 'bourgeoisified' section of the working-class. These elements of Leninism all contributed to its widespread appeal for communist regroupement in the immediate postwar period. But the strength of Leninism, and its canonization in the Communist International, also relieved communist parties of their duty of creatively adapting and developing Marxism-Leninism in relation to their domestic contexts.

Another major limitation of *S&R* that should be mentioned here, and is relevant to the conceptual innovations by Gramsci, concerns the supposed "withering away of the state" after the revolution that Lenin defends in his book. Lenin defends Engels' position on the question of the "withering away" of the state, which was that it can only come *after* the proletarian revolution, and that it is an *act* of socialist society. Lenin affirms Engels' position against the opportunists who use this phrase against the essence of what Engels meant in order to propose a process of "slow, even, gradual change, free from the leaps and storms, free from revolution. The current popular conception…of the 'withering away' of the state undoubtedly means a slurring over, if not a negation, of revolution" (*State and Revolution*, 16). The point is reiterated by Lenin that the bourgeois state does not "wither away…but is 'put an end to' by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after the revolution is the proletarian state or semi-state" (17). Engels' own polemic was aimed at both the reformists and the anarchists: the former for their rejection of revolution, the latter for refusing to understand the state (in all its forms) is not simply "smashed" in one grand night. Lenin further clarifies his position on this point later in the text when he states: "the proletarian state will begin to wither away immediately after its victory, because in a society without class antagonisms, the state is unnecessary and impossible" (25).

Once again, in making these affirmations, Lenin was countering the distortions of the opportunists. But what *S&R* has to say on this question is historically limited by virtue of a socialist society having not yet existed. But the historical experience of socialist society that follows the Russian revolution reveals in practice that, quite the opposite of withering away, class struggle rages on within socialist society, and not just against the old enemies, the bourgeoisie, but new ones as well. The bourgeoisie and its foreign imperialist sponsors in

Russia are militarily defeated by the end of the Civil War; and any remnants of the rural bourgeoisie are liquidated by the forced collectivization policies of the late 1920s. However, this does not prevent the rise of a new bourgeoisie within the Soviet Union, which in time comes to exercise influence, leadership, and ultimately control over the CPSU in subsequent decades. Suffice it to say that for the purposes of this essay that the protracted and violent struggles within the Soviet Union itself, from the civil war to the forced collectivizations, certainly bears its mark upon Gramsci's notion of the sort of proletarian power that would be required to make revolution in countries with even more powerful and deeply entrenched bourgeois social relations. Gramsci was afforded with the hindsight to see that the greatest challenge facing the dictatorship of the proletariat was not simply in seizing state power, but holding on to it, maintaining the dictatorship of the proletariat in the face of all external and internal enemies in a way that moved socialist society closer and closer to communism. When the problem is posed like so, the question then arises of what forms of proletarian power are necessary in the lead up to a revolution in order to best secure the dictatorship of the proletariat after the revolution? The answer to this question entails a rethinking of both forms of States – the dictatorships of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat. And to these questions Gramsci responds with a protracted revolutionary strategy that elaborates the Leninist party form and communist strategy in a way that articulates the relationship between the Party and the organizations of the masses that had not yet been clearly articulated in the international communist movement, and was only just beginning to take form in the Chinese Communist Party.

The next section establishes the context out of which Gramsci's thought develops. (https://ri-ir.org/2013/09/10/the-historical-context-of-gramscis-political-work-prior-to-the-prison-notebooks/)

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