

The State and Revolution

Tamás Krausz

The impact of the book and its historical context

*The State and Revolution*¹ is perhaps the most influential, most read, and most highly valued work by Lenin to date.² The significance of the barely over a hundred-page pamphlet is unquestioned even by those of Lenin's biographers and analysts of his legacy who look upon it, from a theoretical point of view, as an insignificant hack job.³ Moreover, for some reason not even those who gave it an ahistorical

1 The credible history of the book is summarized by the best biographer of Lenin, Vladlen Loginov: "Sziniaya tetrad", in *Oktjabr 1917: Vizovi dlja XXI veka*, Moskva, URSS, edit: A.A. Sorokin, 2008. pp. 190-211.

2 This was Louis Fischer's opinion in the late 1960s in his cited volume, *The Life of Lenin*, p. 113.

3 There are those authors who profess that the main aim even of this work by Lenin, written in deep illegality, is some sort of personal ambition for power. "Among Lenin's main goals as a Marxist, was to prove the correctness of his own ideology." This statement holds that considerations of wielding power was the driving force behind the writing of this book as well. See Service,

examination, marking it off as some sort of specialized work, or a work that “had not been validated by history, and therefore held no interest,” could bypass it. To the contrary, passionately, or “professionally” they argued, and continue to argue with it mostly irrespective of the fact that the fundamental subject of the work and its field of interest covers the intersection of state and class relations in Marxist theory. In 1970s the significance of *The State and Revolution* could not be disputed in that its author had “unearthed, partly on his own and partly in the footsteps of other Marxist scholars, forgotten ideas of Marx” in order to theoretically better capture the outlooks of the socialist revolution. Virtually the same finding was made by Bukharin, who was earlier criticized in this very field by Lenin, in a lecture he gave on communism in the beginning of the 1920s.⁴ The twentieth century saw whole political movements built worldwide upon this unfinished work by Lenin. He paid close attention to the fate of his work after the October Revolution.

Not only communists read the volume almost like a bible (until Stalin slapped it out of their hands on the grounds of his statist conviction) however, but anti-statist, anti-capitalist parties and movements at large thought it merited in-depth study. This, primarily on account that it sketched an attractive socialist future, which brought high social-communal values into the sphere of politics. Obviously there must be a “secret” to the little book’s success if its historical influence goes far beyond any other work of the same field, though the others may have been better worked out, more matured. The book is easy to read, with a clear exposition of its logic, and it covers the requirements of a scientific-theoretical exposition just as well as that of a political pamphlet. It is a passionate work fully in the spirit of the struggle that is both a call for the implementation of the proletarian revolution and a classical summary of the aims of the fundamental aims of the revolution.

The significance of the book in world history is that—in more senses than one—it became **the philosophy of the October Revolution**. On the one hand, the revolution is presented through its component immediate objective (seizing power) and end goal (voluntary association of free communities) at once, with political revolution shown as the initial momentum in social revolution; on the other, though “**predating the revolution**,” its perspective became an integral part of the authoritative critical theory with which later developments were approached, also later becoming vulgarized in the utopist fashion, especially in the Marxist-Leninist pro-

2:216–17.

4 In this lecture of Bukharin—an excellent student of Lenin by that time—while discussing the issue of the state acknowledged the historical role of Lenin, saying that “he was the first who conducted archeological explorations into Marx’s theories, cleansing them from the layers of dirt left on them by their interpreters and commentators, such as Kautsky and Plekhanov.” *Lektsiya N. Buharina: Razvitije kommunizma ot Marksza do Lenina*, RGASZPI f. 329, op. 1. dok. 40. 2–3.

paganda publications during the period of state socialism. And then, decades later, in the dominant ideological “narrative” of the anti-utopist world of regime-change, this work of Lenin’s came to be sublimated in the guise of the pipe smoke–clouded dreams of a doctrinaire fantasist, which all “serious” intellectual trends were (and are) expected to ridicule. Two main tendencies can be observed even among the more notable analyses. One of the interpretations understood it as an intrinsically coherent and consistent theoretical work (Neil Harding, Kevin Anderson), grounded in libertarian ideals and principles, and the other main approach takes in the historical circumstances and consequences following from the revolution and historicizes these as if *The State and Revolution* had been the intellectual inspiration behind and expressions of an authoritarian turn and development (A. J. Polan and, less rigorously, Robert Service, who implicitly assumes the authoritarian message of this work by Lenin).⁵

Of all Lenin’s books, *The State and Revolution* has had the most interesting afterlife. The Marxist flank, and actually almost every system-critical and anti-capitalist movement has used it as its own, for the text could be applied in opposition to both capitalist and Stalinist conceptualizations of the state, inasmuch as the Marxist end goal of the state’s demise was (and is) a stated aim of the Russian Revolution itself, and the universal socialist revolution as well. The idea of transposing *The State and Revolution* into a different historical context had already surfaced in the last phase of the period of state socialism, especially in the Weberian, liberal analysis, with the aim of setting up the book as the historical precursor to the Stalinist period and the Stalinist interpretation. The conclusion to this line of thought was that the Soviet state and its institutions were crystallized as an embodiment of this work by Lenin, as the ideological underpinning of the communist monopoly on power. This is how Lenin’s text became “an active agent and component in the realization of the coming future,” in other words a causal relationship between the Leninian work and the development that followed the revolution, that is, the Stalinian praxis, the Gulag, came to be posited. This position sets out to eliminate the difference between the “autocratic” Lenin of *What Is To Be Done?* and the “libertarian” Lenin of *The State and Revolution*, with proof to the effect that the same “authoritarian” philosophy and politics are at the heart of both.⁶ Of course, later Marxist criticism showed the ahistorical and “presentist” ideological traits that characterize the approach

5 On the one hand, see Neil Harding, *Lenin’s Political Thought*, vol. 2; Kevin Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); on the other hand, see A. J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (London: Methuen, 1984); and R. Service, *Lenin*, vol. 3, 379–80. This latter critique, with no minor distortion of facts “contextualized” *The State and Revolution* on the basis of Kautsky’s (*The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*) and Martov’s writings of 1918–19, and essentially presented as a literary justification of the evolving civil war and terror.

6 A. J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics*, p. 49.

Polan subscribes to, and also demonstrated that the Weberian analysis accounts for the “unification of the executive powers and legislative powers in labor associations” as an authoritarian concept, because it paves the way for theoretical and political critiques of bourgeois democracy. For this thesis is where any liquidation of independent bureaucratic structures starts out and ends if it seeks to transcend the confines of either bourgeois democracy, or any kind of dictatorial handling of power.⁷ Since *The State and Revolution* speaks plainly, it frankly declares its party alliance and class-commitment, a fact that sent shudders down the spine of scientific officialdom even then. This finds expression in an oft-quoted formulation of Lenin’s regarding the essence of politics:

People always have been the foolish victims of deception and self-deception in politics, and they always will be until they have learned to seek out the *interests* of some class or other behind all moral, religious, political and social phrases, declarations and promises.⁸

Neither Marx’s approach nor Lenin’s, constructed upon it, are—as opposed to the Weberian reading—normative theories, and neither are independent of historical circumstance and conditions. Read adequately, according to *The State and Revolution* Lenin never thought that socialism, “self-governing labor democracy, commune democracy, could be easily introduced in Russia”; in his interpretation this was a task for a whole epoch. Moreover, this work, seen in purely philosophical terms was, in particular, not about the subordination of society to the state; to the contrary, it “subordinates” the state to society. This is in no way altered either by what happened in Russia after October 1917, or how it is evaluated. The following comment is right: “Clearly, Lenin did not fully address the issue of the state/civil society relation. . . . Both Lukács and Gramsci were inspired by the idea of Soviets as overcoming the state/civil society distinction, inscribed in liberal democracy, which separated the public from the private realm, the political from the economic.”⁹ The doubling of “private” and “political” is natural to bourgeois thinking; after all, its source and grounds are the market, the relations of capital. This is the problem Lenin raised in theoretical and practical terms.

The “demise of the state” as a political and theoretical problem always came up in the tradition of Marxist thought as the process of “eliminating class.” Lenin himself registered at the outbreak of the war, that in comparison with previous

⁷ An apt critical analysis by Jules Townshend, “Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*: An Innocent Reading,” *Science and Society* 63/1 (1999): 63–82.

⁸ Lenin, *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, LCW, vol. 19, pp. 21–28.

⁹ Townshend, p. 72.

epochs of history the role of the *state* had grown in almost every sphere of social life throughout the capitalist world-system, but especially at its core. In this phase of growing regulatory bureaucratic complexity, Lenin postulated that the proletariat could replace the bureaucratic system with its own, pro-active apparatus organized from the bottom up. On the other hand, his image of the replacement of this “monster,” this “colossus of a state,” with the “workers’ state” had such facility and ease that it seems to have presumed that the crisis of power in the Russian system was typical of the whole world.

He was absolutely clear – opposite to old falsifications - that “every cook,” as mentioned in *State and Power*, cannot get on right away with the complex work of leading the state, but may nevertheless get on with its preparation:

We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration. In this we agree with the Cadets.... We differ, however, from these citizens in that we demand an immediate break with the prejudiced view that only the rich, or officials chosen from rich families, are capable of *administering* the state.

On the basis of the landlords having been able to direct their own state—for after the first revolution Russia was governed by 130.000 landlords—he argued, what is there to indicate that

240.000 members of the Bolshevik Party will not be able to govern Russia, govern her in the interests of the poor and against the rich.... In addition to that we have a “magic way” to enlarge our state apparatus *tenfold* at once, at one stroke, a way which no capitalist state ever possessed or could possess. This magic way is to draw the working people, to draw the poor, into the daily work of state administration.¹⁰

Anti-utopist utopia?

This “utopistic work” (dubbed as such by the moderate leftist ideologists of “modernity” who emerged out of the 1989 regime change in Eastern Europe)¹¹ set out as a reconstruction of Marx and Engels’ thought, which built its “image of the future” on a critique of the *Gotha Program*, the program of the German Social Democratic Party. In line with Marxist tradition, Lenin conceived the message of this work not particularly in a utopist vein. Indeed, he raised the question:

¹⁰ LCW, vol. 26, pp. 111–13.

¹¹ See for example, József Bayer, *A politikai gondolkodás története* [The history of political thought] (Budapest: Osiris, 1998), p. 321.

On the basis of what *facts*, then, can the question of the future development of future communism be dealt with? On the basis of the fact that it *has its origin* in capitalism, that it develops historically from capitalism, that it is the result of the action of a social force to which capitalism *gave birth*. There is no trace of an attempt on Marx's part to make up a utopia, to indulge in idle guesswork about what cannot be known.¹²

As Lenin thought of it, even the Paris Commune was “not a state in the sense of the actual meaning of the word.” The state in demise (*commune*), which comes into being during the period of the revolution, was presented as a fundamental institution of the *political period of transition* or *dictatorship of the proletariat*, which would, in principle, create the conditions for socialism. In the theoretical (three-step) groundwork, socialism was shown as the first phase of communism, and then communism itself shown as the *possible* end result of a long historical course of development. All state oppression would cease within the framework of socialism, but the civilized human race would only turn completely and finally into a “community of associated producers” in communism.¹³ Lenin reached these conclusions after a survey of the different economic fundamentals of the state and the state in demise, and the disparate producer-proprietor relations underlying them.

Critical commentary to this work by Lenin claiming it is “naïve” is of course not completely unfounded. Lenin recognized, or thought he recognized “primitive democracy” (Bernstein's concept), the early forms of direct democracy, as “an element of capitalism and capitalist culture.” He referred not only to the high level at which the socialization of production stood, but also to the workers' old tradition of organizing their community. Factually he was right, but it seems nevertheless that he overestimated the cultural experiences of the community already accumulated under the capitalist system to be defeated. The communal tradition of the *obshchina* was by then decaying, and he had studied the conditions of its coming into being in his earlier years. Large-scale industry, the postal service and other institutions of capitalist organization appeared to him as perfect initial vehicles for “commune democracy,” “soviet democracy,” and “labor democracy” under the hierarchical relations whose survival is unavoidable in the *transitional phase*. (No need to dwell on how greatly the authoritarian, autocratic traditions in Russia amplified this hierarchy.)

Sources

Marx saw a faint chance for the Russian village communities (the *obshchina*)

¹² LCW, vol. 25, p. 458.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 457.

becoming a starting point for socialism, the first generation of Russian Marxists with Plekhanov at the helm related to the revolution as scholar theoreticians and did not perceive it as an immediate practical task, also convinced that the village communities were in the final state of dissolution and could not possibly fulfill any positive historical role. Their predecessors, the so-called revolutionary democrats—such as Herzen, Chernishevsky, or Dobrolyubov, not to speak of the Russian Jacobinists, Tkachov and Nechayev, or Russian Blanquism—had linked their own “peasant socialism” directly with the practical necessity of the revolution, under which they meant an idea of toppling the autocratic regime through a coup d’état that grasps the reins of power based on a minority group of revolutionaries.

The experience of 1905: The soviets

I may be wrong – he wrote -, but I believe (on the strength of the incomplete and only “paper” information at my disposal) that politically the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies should be regarded as the embryo of a *provisional revolutionary government*.¹⁴

In other words, he saw this people’s organization as a national political center comprising the whole of society, with its inclusion of others, and not only social democrats being its “advantage, rather than disadvantage.” In the soviets he saw evidence to the effect that the social democrats do not want to force any experimental principles upon Russia, and leave the direction of the country firmly in the hands of the popular alliances.¹⁵

Somewhat later Lenin thought about the role of the soviets as follows:

In the fire of battle, a peculiar mass organisation was formed, the famous *Soviets of Workers’ Deputies*, comprising delegates from all factories. In several cities these *Soviets of Workers’ Deputies* began more and more to play the part of a provisional revolutionary government, the part of organs and leaders of the uprising.¹⁶

14 Ibid., p. 21.

15 Ibid., pp. 26–27.

16 LCW, vol. 23, p. 248. In an article of 4 July 1906, Lenin entered into polemics with the ex-chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, Khurstalev-Nosar, who had been arrested and then exiled, arguing that the establishment of new soviets was not timely. When the revolution is on the defensive, it would be a mistake to risk the labor organizations, the “vanguard,” and expose them to the despotism of the power. Agreeing with Nosar, who wrote, “The Soviet was the revolutionary parliament of the revolutionary proletariat,” he made the establishment of soviets conditional upon specific conditions in politics and the movement. See LCW, vol. 11, pp. 90–93.

The labor self-government—Lenin emphasized many times during the years of 1905–1906—cannot exist in the framework of the old system, and pointed out for those who were naïve about this.¹⁷

The philosophy of the October revolution, or a critical appraisal of the modern state and parliamentarism

One of the cornerstones of Lenin’s theory of revolution, as with Marx, was the first phase of the social revolution, the *overthrow* and liquidation of an institution of thousands of years of standing, the *political state*. The question of the state as a “central issue of every revolution” occupied Lenin since his student years. This approach had already engrained itself in pre-Marxist Russian revolutionary thought, taking a variety of historical shapes (foremost among them the Bakuninists and other anarchists).¹⁸ Lenin however, emphasized the *class characteristic, social* and universal bearings and traits of revolution from the start, confronting the “peasant” and “nationalist” utopias.

Even at the time of the war, when speaking of the system, Lenin drew attention to the circumstance that capitalism inevitably and continuously conflicts with democracy, which extends between legal equality and social-economic inequality. The system of capital tries to resolve this contradiction with the all-pervasive web of traits that typify “corruption” and “bribery.”¹⁹

The basic difference between imperialism and pre-monopolist capitalism in the way Lenin’s view was constructed was that in imperialism “the power of the stock exchange increases,” as the greater banks merge with the stock exchange and swallow it whole, and thereby capital draws the sphere of politics under its supervision as if it were another item of sale, some sort of market phenomenon. Lenin was of course aware that the prostitution and corruption of bourgeois democracy was regulated by law, and thus not unbounded. At the same time, however, he stressed that these processes of legalized corruption on the scale of all of society are rooted in wealth, because *wealth* “is fully capable of achieving domination over any de-

17 “The Zemstvo Congress,” *Proletary*, No. 19, October 3 (September 20), 1905; LCW, vol. 9, p. 306.

18 One kind of anarchism, the one most worked out in terms of theory, which may be tied to Kropotkin’s name, could not gain an influence in respect of the social democratic labor movement involved in the class struggle—and even less so with Lenin—primarily because of its moral orientation. Kropotkin counterposed “mutual assistance” with “mutual struggle,” and left politics, as a relatively amoral field of action, out of consideration, as in his opinion the “inclination,” the moral necessity for solidarity and association that had developed among laborers, only takes shape in “civil” organizations. See P. Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, ed. with an Introduction by Paul Avrich (New York: New York University Press, 1972), pp. 246–51.

19 LCW, vol. 23, pp. 45–46.

mocratic republic by bribery and through the stock exchange ... that is, politically independent, republic” as well. Therefore Lenin’s main thought in the field notes bourgeois democracy is not freedom, but “the freedom of purchase.” In September 1917 he formulated the problem as follows:

The capitalists (followed, either from stupidity or from inertia, by many S.R.s and Mensheviks) call “freedom of the press” a situation in which censorship has been abolished and all parties freely publish all kinds of papers. In reality it is not freedom of the press, but freedom for the rich, for the bourgeoisie, to deceive the oppressed and exploited mass of the people.²⁰

Bourgeois Parliamentarism holds, in this sense, only a “historical interest” of specialized scientific bearing for Lenin, but does not have a future. The emperor has no clothes.

Therefore in his interpretation “parliamentary rule” is only the battle of competing power cliques for the “spoils” (jobs, economic positions, etc.). The system is above calling it into question in legal and political terms. For this reason too the bourgeois democracies are also—and emphatically—dictatorships according to Lenin’s theory, and this, one of their particulars, cannot be corrected without revolution, and the “demolition of the bureaucratic-military state machine.”

Representative institutions remain, but there is *no* parliamentarism here as a special system, as the division of labor between the legislative and the executive, as a privileged position for the deputies.²¹

In the revolutionary program, or “philosophy” of liquidating the state as political entity, the elimination of the “parasitical state” was an important argument as a political precondition of the “economic liberation of labor.” Therefore where Lenin is concerned, state and freedom came to be interpreted as diametrically opposed notions.

From the perspective of the revolution this thin volume essentially set out, in methodological and political terms, to do away with the “opporTunusiatic illusions” bound up with Parliamentarism, and with Bernsteinian revisionism, as well as the utopist, anarchist approach, all at the same time. Lenin saw social democracy as the kind of plastic notion held by Engels, who noted in 1894, with regard to his articles from the 1870s, that he “used the term ‘communist’ instead of ‘social democrat’ in every article, since even the Lasalleans were calling themselves social democrats at

20 See “How to Guarantee the Success of the Constituent Assembly—On Freedom of the Press,” *Rabochy Put*, No. 11, September 28 (15), 1917; LCW, vol. 25, pp. 375–76; 377–78.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 424.

the time.” In contrast to the bourgeois conception of the state representative of the age, Lenin’s approach did not treat it merely in its sociopolitical or formally legal sense. He often alluded to the fact that the apologists of the state leave the “financial,” “all-capitalist,” “all-landowner”, that is, the economic function of the state hidden, but no one in the revolutionary camp apart from the anarchists—not even the peasant wing of the S.R.s, for example—understood that to fight the state was in itself wholly unproductive, unless its economic base was also liquidated.

Lenin arrived at a common position with the anarchists on the revolution as “happening,” as a question of “political and theoretical necessity.” Nonetheless, he called the anarchist thesis demanding the “total and final destruction” of the state the annihilation of the revolution’s defenses in the subchapter dedicated to disclosing the twists in anarchist reasoning.²² With reference to Engels he emphasized that with the disappearance of the political, state authority and subordination will not cease immediately. After all, if you “take a factory, a railway, a ship on the high seas, said Engels, is it not clear that not one of these complex technical establishments, based on the use of machinery and the systematic co-operation of many people, could function without a certain amount of subordination and, consequently, without a certain amount of authority or power?”²³ Lenin shared Engels’ difficulty with the anarchists, that they “want to abolish the state completely overnight.”²⁴

So Lenin outlined a sort of *tertium datur* between the reformist social democrats and anarchism based on Marx and Engels, in the way he connected the question of revolution and state. A highly significant political understanding that Lenin came to, noted in other contexts earlier, was that the Russian bourgeoisie and the “quivering,” weak middle class in general could not stabilize either the old “semi-parliamentary” system (with, or without the tsar), or the bourgeois democratic system. In his view, these attempts at stabilization opened the path to counterrevolutionary dictatorships if the revolutionary solution is set off, or suffers defeat.

The fact that Lenin wrote this work of his after he went underground, following the order of arrest issued against him by the Provisional Government after the “July

22 Ibid., p. 437. He argues elsewhere with the anarchists along the following lines: “There is no trace of utopianism in Marx, in the sense that he made up or invented a ‘new’ society.... He ‘learned’ from the Commune.... Abolishing the bureaucracy at once, everywhere and completely, is out of the question. It is a utopia.... We are not utopians, we do not ‘dream’ of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination. These anarchist dreams, based upon incomprehension of the tasks of the proletarian dictatorship, are totally alien to Marxism, and, as a matter of fact, serve only to postpone the socialist revolution until people are different.” Ibid., pp. 425–26.

23 Ibid., pp. 436–37. Lenin commented on Engels’ critical opinion of the anarchists as expressed in his article *On Authority*. The anarchists “demand that the political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social relations that gave birth to it have been destroyed.” MECW, vol. 22, pp. 422–25.

24 LCW, vol. 25, p. 484.

days,” had symbolic significance. Hardly had bourgeois democracy taken shape than it was already in crisis. It is no surprise, then, that the question that preoccupied Lenin in his cottage in Razliv was with which institutional system should the revolutionary class “replace the destroyed state apparatus,” which lay in ruins across Russia. For this reason he did not bring the Russian model, the soviet, into relief, but the “prototype” instead, the Paris Commune, which could raise the end-goal of proletarian revolution in practice. The fundamental aim and subject of the new, “commune-type” *self-government* as an economic and community organization was to eliminate, in the final run, the *economic and social inequalities*.

It is not coincidental that the word *party* does not appear as a concept in *The State and Revolution*. This circumstance is often explained unclearly, though it is quite simple. For Lenin, classes and parties no longer exist in the theoretically outlined, self-governing socialism. It is quite unscientific to state, on the grounds of the Kautsky volume, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* written in 1918, and various arguments raised by Martov in his later writings that Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* was criticized for introducing the one-party system in its own time. These prejudiced criticisms are directed at the realities of post-1917 Soviet Russia, drawing up arguments against it, and projecting the newly formed situation back onto Lenin’s earlier work, as if he had already been for the one-party system in 1917.²⁵ Lenin’s reasoning naturally changed, or came to be modified on numerous points in the spheres of both politics and theory over the years, but to smuggle the one-party system into *The State and Revolution* is the falsification of history, or a complete misunderstanding of things as they stood. Both in principle and practice, it is a fact that the October Revolution repositioned the soviet as a practical alternative to parliamentarism, even if by 1918 the soviet, as an organ of labor self-government, had begun to infiltrate the structures of central power, and the new hierarchy gradually developed and defined by it. Incidentally, the one-party system was not legally introduced, but if so, it was done by way of the 1977 constitution under Brezhnev, which declared the soviet system a *one-party system* for the first time. In Lenin’s day, political parties were generally persecuted on an administrative basis, taking either the war or counterrevolutionary actions as their grounds, but they were not legally banned under constitutional law. What was *effectively* a fully formed one-party system by 1921 took the legally never legitimated “official” stance also represented by Lenin that the *soviet dictatorship*, the “dictatorship of the majority (dictatorship of the proletariat) vis-à-vis the minority” was politically legitimated by the revolution itself. The contradictions were soon to make themselves felt.

²⁵ An example of such projection to the earlier period can also be found in Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, p. 195.

Revolution and state: The functional alternative

From state to revolution

The February Revolution does not have an independent history, in that developments in Russia did not branch out on a bourgeois democratic course.²⁶ Even so, there was indeed an onslaught of bloodshed at its outbreak—in contrast, by the way, to the revolutionary events of October in St. Petersburg—with continuous political crisis in which the “July days,” which sent the Bolshevik Party underground, provided a turning point. But how does *The State and Revolution* enter the picture as the inciter of violence? This is simply a case—detailed above in a different context—of designs to reposition this work by Lenin from the independent-minded “libertarian interpretation” into the “authoritarian narrative.”²⁷ In a row of essays and lectures, Eric Hobsbawm shows profound wit in refuting those writers who unfold the actions and consideration of Lenin and the Bolsheviks not from the given historical alternatives, but from their own, current political views, as they derive history from the self-generated movement of ideologies. This sort of new presentism brings the usual distortion into play, pretending as of this day that the events and crossroads of the revolution had been entirely foreseeable, and only veered off in another, “wrong” direction by the will of Lenin.²⁸ Another frequent approach taken to presenting *The State and Revolution* as a book based on authoritarian principles is that certain inconsistencies of Lenin’s use of concepts are not taken into account.

In 1917, a modification in his understanding of the inner development of the phases of the Russian Revolution did take place. His idea that the bourgeois and socialist “stages” of the revolution grow separate in the course of development did not, and could not, prove true.

The modern industrial laborers in Moscow and St. Petersburg were the product

26 Recent historiography leans towards the interpretation—suggesting a number of reasons for each point of view—that the February Revolution signaled the beginning of a new revolutionary **process**, a process that could not be halted “artificially.” See, for example, C. Hashegava, “Fevralskaya revolyuciya: kontsensensus s issledovateley?” and V. P. Buldakov, “Istoki i posledstviya soldatskogo bunta: k voprosu o psikhologii ‘cheloveka s ruzhyom’,” both in *1917 god v sudbah Rossii i mira. Fevralskaya revolyutsiya: Ot novih istochnyikov ko novomu osmislennyiyu*, ed. P. V. Volobuyev (Moscow: RAN, 1997), pp. 107–8; 208–17. The editor found both studies “at fault” in exaggerating the “military aspect.” Modern literature on Lenin is also sensitive to the fact that a unified process is in question here. *The State and Revolution* documents how Lenin gave up his earlier concept of a “multiple phased” revolution due to this process. See Statkis Kouvelakis, “Lenin as Reader of Hegel: Hypotheses for a Reading of Lenin’s Notebooks on Hegel’s The Science of Logic,” in *Lenin Reloaded*, p. 195.

27 Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, pp. 197–98.

28 See Eric John Hobsbawm, “Looking Forward: History and the Future,” and “Can we write the history of the Russian Revolution?” in Hobsbawm, *On History*, pp. 37–55, 241–52.

of the coexistence of modern and archaic conditions, having preserved numerous elements of their past in the village community where in so far as their origins, living conditions and its way of thinking were concerned. This found expression in the independent functioning and internal structure of the spontaneously established soviets and workers' councils, and integration in even the most modern, well-organized social democratic workers' movement.²⁹

The other stratum of the revolutionary camp was composed of the essentially conservative "past-bound" but at that moment rebellious, anti-capitalist peasantry of the *obschinas*, with the desire to acquire land by prohibiting the sale of land—to stop future poverty. These aims found a voice in the famous land decrees of the October Revolution. These two strata were connected by the third main "stratum" of the revolution, a mass of armed soldiers numbering in the millions, who were mainly of peasant stock but had "seen the world." Historically speaking, the practical issues current in the period after the October Revolution had little in common with the theory of socialism, and more to do with all that was said in the *April Theses* and the post-October concept and practice of—to use a modern phrase—"mixed market economy" in the beginning of 1918. Włodzimierz Brus and László Szamuely, followed by Soviet historians, established this decades ago, and became the first to theoretically ground the *transitional period* and consider it socialism under the premises of "Socialist Market Economy"—in the footsteps of Stalin.³⁰ So the exaggeration of the "post-analogy" on ideological grounds, as a "part of socialism," also paved the way for an interpretation of this work by Lenin as an authoritarian.

It is evident that any interpretation that suggests or claims that Lenin's thought and political actions in 1917 were dictated by some sort of authoritarian conceptualization of power and revolution, cannot rest, so to say, on documentary proof. Lenin spoke not only about the direct forms of workers' rule, as opposed to the bour-

29 On the subject, see Dmitry Churakov, "A munkásönkormányzatok közösségi aspektusai az 1917-es orosz forradalomban" [Community in the laborers' local governments of the Russian Revolution of 1917], in *1917 és ami utána következett* [1917 and what followed], ed. Tamás Krausz (Budapest: Magyar Ruszisztikai Intézet, 1998), pp. 53–67; Vladimir Bukharayev, "1917—az obscsinaforradalom pírroszi győzelme" [1917—The pyrrhic victory of the obshchina revolution], in *ibid.*, pp. 37–52.

30 Włodzimierz Brus, *The General Problems of the Functioning of the Socialist Economy* (London: Oxford, 1961); László Szamuely, *Az első szocialista gazdasági mechanizmusok* [The first socialist economic mechanisms] (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1971); E. G. Gimpelson, *Voyenniy kommunizm: politika, praktika, ideologiya* (Moscow: 1973). In the necrology he wrote for W. Brus ("Włodzimierz Brus: Economist committed to market reforms and democracy in Poland," *Guardian*, November 13, 2007), Jan Toporowski noted that in 1951–52, Brus spoke highly of Stalin's book, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.*, in which Stalin outlined the thought of market socialism for the first time, a momentum duly recognized in its own time by Ferenc Tökei. For more on this, see Tamás Krausz, "A 'sztálini szocializmus'" [Stalinist socialism], in *Lenintől Putyinig* [From Lenin to Putin] (Budapest: La Ventana, 2003), pp. 98–99.

geois republic, but also distanced himself from the tradition of *state socialism*, that is, the “introduction of socialism” by means of state power. He spoke, on the one hand, about the “commune-state,” and on the other, in thesis no. 8, about how “it is not our *immediate* task to ‘introduce’ socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the **control** of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies.” Among the main tasks of this program he mentioned the unification of all the banks “into a single national bank, and the institution of control over it by the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies.”³¹ (The “post office analogy” fits into this context.) In order to ensure that power remained firmly in the hands of the soviets and won the support of the poor peasantry as well as the landless agrarian proletariat, he planned the confiscation of land from the landed gentry, pomeschchikov by way of immediate nationalization, so it could be redistributed under the supervision of the peasant soviets (put into written word by the October land decree). The emphasis in the *April Theses*³² was already on cooperative agriculture.³³ The *April Theses* was a turning point in Lenin’s career, and signaled a turning point in the history of the revolution; it proved to be such a rare instant of foresight as to constitute a truly organic mold of theoretical analysis and political practice—a rare historical moment, which has a role in the historical context of *The State and Revolution*.

The *April Theses* defined the fundamental traits of the economic program in the supervision of laborers in industrial plants, in the soviet overseeing of trust companies, and in progressive taxation of income and property.³⁴ Apparently Lenin—in contrast to the commonplace statements and claims of current historical literature—did not set out for the October Revolution with any kind of nationalizing or statist concept. A centralized postal system and the hierarchic restructuring of trusts in general must be seen as the “state capitalist” methods of the *transition* period rather than instant nationalization—which in fact did not take place until later, along with “war communist” measures in the summer of 1918. This is the sense in which Lenin refers to the “planned operation” and methods of “accounting” in the economic institutions of the capitalist system as examples to be followed, as they are drawn organizationally into the scope of the workers’ authority, so that community interests gain prominence.³⁵ He could hardly have worked out more concrete ideas on economic policy for “indeterminable” historical-political situations at any earlier stage.

31 Ibid.

32 Lenin, *The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution*, LCW, vol. 24, pp. 19–26.

33 Ibid., pp. 22–24.

34 Ibid., pp. 327–29.

35 Ibid., p. 329.

The Social Backdrop to the Revolution

Lenin and the Bolsheviks could not have taken their place at the helm of the revolutionary masses in October 1917 had they not been aware of the social background to the revolution.

Lenin had drafted the framework for the Decree on Land, adopted in October by the 2nd all-Russian Congress of Soviets, at the end of August 1917. The decree, which was reminiscent of the S.R. agrarian program, showed that an overwhelming majority of peasants were just as opposed to capitalist ownership of land as they were to feudal large land-holdings. In terms plainly understood by all, the decree aimed to unify the revolutions of the workers and peasants to contend with the old ruling classes:

According to the summary, the peasant land demands are primarily abolition of private ownership of all types of land, including the peasants' lands, without compensation. This was probably the most succinct expression and practical actuation of the fact that a combination of two revolutions was unfolding: the revolution of the urban soviet and the peasant "*obshchina* revolution." Lenin did not call the October Revolution a "worker-peasant revolution" by mere chance. It not only pointed to the spontaneous confiscations of land by peasants in the summer and autumn of 1917, but also to the fact that significant masses of peasants across the country had organized themselves in their own soviets, as alternative seats of authority in opposition. The "revolution of peasant village communities" united with the proletarian revolution of the cities in October showed no signs of conflict, thereby strengthening the anti-capitalist aspect of the revolution.

Some notes of summary

The language, key terms, rhetoric and theoretical characteristics of *The State and Revolution* cropped up in the letters Lenin wrote when he was in hiding to the members of the Central Committee. These were analyses, and instructions of a political and organizational nature that encouraged implementation of an armed uprising and the seizure of power. After October, as events developed, the gap between the theoretical horizon and the practical political contingency of *State and Revolution* grew extremely wide. His most basic awareness among the theoretical experiences was that the socialist revolution and socialism (more exactly, the transition leading to it) became a concrete historical possibility for humankind.

On the basis of the above, it is an interesting and instructive experience that on the one hand, in the century after the October socialist revolution the Western working class and its political organizations could not and/or did not want to surpass the bourgeois world order, the capitalist mode of production, and on the other hand, this fact always served as an excuse for the political elite of the Eastern state socialist re-

gimes for deviating from the bases of Marx and Lenin, namely *theoretical socialism* (self-government – obshchestvennoe samoupravlenie). At the same time, at a global scale, from Spain to Mexico and Hungary or Poland, there have been a number of experiments of the workers and producers to organize production on their own.

The decisive lesson of the Soviet and Eastern European state socialist experience is that if power is transferred from the control of the productive classes to other bodies, it will have fatal implications for the social self-government (obshchestvennoe samoupravlenie). Lenin's original ideas about the transition to socialism as developed in *The State and Revolution* and other works, are very much instructive in this respect, and they contain a number of important considerations for the future socialist experiments. Therefore it is worth summarizing its most important conclusions.

In Lenin's theory the first stage of a Communist society, namely the socialist formation is a classless structure, whose real history starts with the abolishment of class differences. As Lenin writes: "Socialism will not be realized unless classes are abolished".³⁶ According to this, socialism does not recognize the political state and the parliamentary system; their tasks are taken over by the self-governing bodies. Democracy as a state form is replaced by the self-governing system of direct producers.

"And state is necessary only insofar it has to defend – apart from the defense of the public ownership of the means of production – the equality of labor and the equality of the division of products"³⁷ The organic consequence of the survival of civil legislation is the task to enforce the law, which, according to Lenin, presupposes the "civil" state. Thus, "it is not only the civil legislation, which survives but also the bourgeois state – without bourgeoisie!"³⁸ He adds that the transition from a capitalist society to a Communist one is impossible without the period of a "political transition".³⁹ The main function of this period is experimenting with and creating new forms of economic and social organization, which lead to socialism, and gain their final form and function in a Communist society.

The Soviets are the direct organizations of the working people, which help the masses to take control of the state and govern themselves in all possible ways. Through this activity, the individuals learn administration and the democratic exercise of power.

Lenin makes a clear distinction between nationalization and the realization of social control. He argues that the appropriation and nationalization of the means

36 Lenin's Collected Works in Hungarian, 40th volume, Bp., Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1974, p. 288.

37 Lenin's Collected Works in Hungarian, 33rd volume, Bp., Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1965, p. 86.

38 Ibid., p. 90.

39 Ibid., p. 78.

of production is a simple but the most important political-power operation. The realization of social control, however, means a new quality in an economic sense: production is organized in such a way that it provides for a national, economical and rational management and coordination of labor in a multi-sectoral economic system.

As in the Lenin's theory the local Soviets are considered to be the basic units of political life, in economy the cooperatives and communes constitute the "basic cells of the village and the town". In the new labor organizations the communalized producers are striving to utilize the most modern achievements of science and technology. Direct democracy is enforced also in the field of economics. (In the world of the Internet and modern computer technology this is not a utopia in any sense of the word.)

Until it is not possible to abolish private property (both the capitalist and the "statist") and create a classless socialist society, the bourgeois production of commodities will co-exist with the forms, which surpass it. The struggle with the surviving capitalist and petty bourgeois modes of production presupposes the context of market relations and the existence of the market sector.

Even later Lenin makes a clear distinction between the two types of "the dictatorship of the proletariat". In the advanced capitalist countries, where the majority of wage laborers are wage earners or agricultural workers, it is possible to realize a direct transition to socialism in a social, economic and political sense. According to Lenin's argument, in these countries there are no serious obstacles to create organs of "state administration" because the technical preconditions have already been realized in the capitalist era. Its introduction in itself is not an economic but a political act: the accompanying phenomenon of the takeover of the proletariat. In such cases the period of "central administration and control" will organically grow into the first stage of a Communist society, where the workers' control of the state bureaucracy will be replaced by the workers' control of production and distribution. This, according to Lenin, will lead to the gradual "withering away" of any state bureaucracy and it will create an order, where every individual can perform the simple tasks of supervision and accountancy, which will become habits, and therefore, the distinct functions of a separate group of people, namely state bureaucracy will cease to exist.

Since the Russian revolution was not accompanied with a Western revolution, the implementation of the achievements of the Western civilization was inevitable. In *The State and Revolution* Lenin clearly excluded the possibility of a direct transition to socialism for Russia.

By the end of the 1920s, the "dictatorship of the proletariat", the "dictatorship of the Soviets" was transformed into the "dictatorship of the Communist Party",

which was in sharp contrast with the original ideas, the revolutionary legitimation itself. Therefore the established one-party system was not included in the Constitution of 1936; this happened only in 1977, when the Constitution was modified. This was the date of the official renunciation of the self-governing socialism. Namely the theory that self-governance is the fundamental unit and system of socialism, excludes the existence of the parties including the Communist Party as well as all kinds of bureaucracy, which is detached from society. Such a system survived as a part of the 1961 theoretical program of the party and it disappeared alongside the party in the post-1989 world after the second issue (vtoroe izdanie kapitalizma) of capitalism. Eventually in 1989-1991 the enormous state property, which had been accumulated by many generations of the workers, was appropriated by the elite, which constituted 3-4% of the Eastern European societies through the process of privatization. This has been called the “change of regimes”. This new world, the world of oligarchic capitalism means “the return of the old shit” as Marx said.

Until we live in such a world, *The State and Revolution* will stay with us and the “blue note-book” will always be a handbook of the exploited, the people, who are standing at the bottom of the social ladder even if they are not conscious of it.