

The State and the Socialist Revolution

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Part One: The Ideology of "Sovietism"

The Mysticism of the Soviet Regime

The revolutionary movement that is tinged with Bolshevism recognises soviets as the form of political organisation (even the sole form) by which the emancipation of the proletariat can be realised.

According to this viewpoint, the soviet state structure – said to be a phase in the progressive abolition of the state itself in its role as an instrument of social oppression – is the historically motivated product of a long evolution, arising in the midst of class antagonisms, when these have reached great acuteness under imperialism. It is described as the perfect embodiment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Appearing at a time when "bourgeois" democracy is said to have lost all content, the soviet regime is pictured as the perfect expression of real democracy.

However, every perfection has this dangerous feature. Persons untroubled by critical reasoning, persons blind to the nuances of "idle" theory, are impatient to possess themselves of the perfection, without bothering to take note that the perfection in question is supposed to be based on particular historical conditions. Metaphysical reasoning refuses to accept the dialectical negation of the absolute. It ignores the relative. Having learned that the true, the genuine, the perfect mode of social life has at last been discovered, it insists on

having this perfect mode applied to daily existence.

We therefore see that, contrary to its own theoretical claims, this perfect political form has become applicable to all peoples, to all social groups. All that is necessary is that the people concerned want to modify the structure of the state under which it is suffering. Soviets have become the slogan for the proletariat of the most advanced industrial countries the United States, England, Germany. They are also the slogan for agricultural Hungary, peasant Bulgaria and Russia, where agriculture is just issuing from primitive structures.

The universal efficacy of the soviet regime reaches even farther. Communist publicists seriously speak of soviet revolutions occurring, or about to occur, in Asiatic Turkey, among the Egyptian fellahin, in the pampas of South America. In Korea, the proclamation of a soviet republic is only a matter of time. In India, China and Persia the soviet idea is said to be advancing with the speed of an express train. And who dares to doubt that by now the soviet system has already been adapted to the primitive social conditions of the Bashkirs, Kirghizes, Turkomans and the mountain people of Daghestan?

No matter what Marxist thought may have to say on the subject, the soviet regime, as such, is not only said to solve the antagonism arising

between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie under conditions of highly developed capitalism, but is also presented as the universal state form that cuts through the difficulties and antagonisms arising at any degree of social evolution. In theory, the lucky people bursting into soviets are expected to have passed – at least ideologically – the stage of bourgeois democracy. They are expected to have freed themselves from a number of noxious illusions – parliamentarism, the need for a universal, direct, equal and secret ballot, the need for liberty of the press, etc. Only then can they know the supreme perfection incorporated in the soviet state structure. In practice, however, nations here and there, possessed by the metaphysical negation of the course traced by soviet theory, jump over the prescribed stages. Soviets are the perfect form of the state. They are the magic wand by which all inequalities, all misery, may be suppressed. Having once learned about soviets, who would consent to suffer the yoke of less perfect systems of government? Having once tasted the sweet, who would choose to continue to live on bitterness?

In February 1918, at Brest-Litovsk, Trotsky and Kamenev still defended with great obstinacy the right of peoples to self-determination. They demanded from victorious Germany that this principle be applied, through the instrumentality of the equal and universal ballot, in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. The historic value of democracy was still recognised at that time. But a year later, at the congress of the Russian Communist Party, the intrepid Bukharin already insisted that the principle of “self-determination of peoples” had to be replaced with the principle of “self-determination of the labouring classes”. Lenin succeeded in obtaining the maintenance of the principle of self-determination – for backward peoples – paralleling in this respect certain philosophers who, not wanting to fall out with the Church, would limit the scope of their materialist teachings to animals deprived of the benefits of divine revelation. But it was not for doctrinal reasons that the Communist congress refused to fall in line with Bukharin. Lenin won out with arguments of a diplomatic order. It was said to be unwise to alienate from the Communist International the Hindus, Persians and other peoples who, though still blind to the revelation, were in a situation of pan-national struggle against the foreign oppressor. Fundamentally, the Communists were in full agreement with Bukharin. Having tasted sweetness, who would offer bitterness to his neighbour?

So that when the Turkish consul at Odessa permitted himself to launch the hoax about the triumph of a soviet revolution in the Ottoman empire, not a single Russian newspaper refused to take the obvious hoax seriously. Not a single publication showed the slightest scepticism

concerning the ability of the good Turks to jump over the stages of self-determination, universal franchise, bourgeois parliamentarism, etc. The mystification was quite successful. Mystifications find a favourable soil in mysticism. For no less than mystical is the concept of a political form that, by virtue of its particular character, can surmount all economic-social and national contradictions.

In the course of the congress of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany at Leipzig, good men racked their brains to discover how to conciliate “all power to the soviets” with the traditional notions of the Social Democracy concerning the political forms of the socialist revolution, especially with the notion of democracy.

For here is a mystery that escapes the understanding of the true believers of Sovietism with the same persistence that the mystery of the immaculate conception has ever escaped the understanding of the Christian faithful. Sometimes it escaped the understanding of its own creator.

Thus we have the amusing example of the reception of the news that the soviet idea had triumphed in Hungary. It seemed, at first, that everything was performed according to the rites. But one essential detail was missing. It was reported that the Hungarian “soviet” did not come into being as a result of a fratricidal war of the Hungarian proletariat (we shall see later how important is this detail). It was, on the contrary, the product of the unity of the Hungarian proletariat. Lenin was troubled. In a telegram, the complete text of which appeared in the foreign press, he asked Bela Kun: “Please inform us what real guarantees you have that the new Hungarian Government will actually be a communist, and not simply a socialist government, i.e., one of traitor-socialists.”¹ Bela Kun’s reply, published in the Russian press, betrayed some confusion and a lack of preciseness. The Hungarian revolutionary power, it appeared, rested in the hands of a group of five persons, two of whom were Communists, two Social Democrats and the fifth “in the same category as your Lunacharsky”. The mystery had grown thicker.

As a result of the extreme class antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the proletariat overthrows the most complete embodiment of democratic statism. By this act, the proletariat creates for itself a new political mode, which is also the specific expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Here is the starting point of the “soviet idea”.

The political mode thus created is universally applicable. It fits the needs and consequences of all kinds of social change. It can clothe the multiform substance of all the revolutionary acts of the twentieth century. That is the “soviet idea” at the close of its own evolution.

This dialectical contradiction summarises the

mystery of “sovietism”, which is a mystery beyond the dogmatic comprehension of thinkers, both on the Left and on the Right.

Dictatorship of the Minority

The mechanism of the popular revolutions of the preceding historic period had the following characteristics.

The role of active factor in the overturn belonged to minorities of the social classes in whose interest the revolution developed. These minorities exploited the confused discontent and the sporadic explosions of anger arising among scattered and socially inconsistent elements within the revolutionary class. They guided the latter in the destruction of the old social forms. In certain cases, the active leader minorities had to use the power of their concentrated energy in order to shatter the inertia of the elements they tried to wield for revolutionary purposes. Therefore, these active leader minorities sometimes made efforts – often successful efforts – to repress the passive resistance of the manipulated elements, when the latter refused to move forward toward the broadening and deepening of the revolution. The dictatorship of an active revolutionary minority, a dictatorship that tended to be terrorist, was the normal culmination of the situation in which the old social order had confined the popular mass, now called on by the revolutionaries to forge their own destiny.

There where the active revolutionary minority was not able to organise such a dictatorship, or to maintain it for some time, as was the case in Germany, Austria, France in 1848 – we observed the miscarriage of the revolutionary process, a collapse of the revolution.

Engels said that the revolutions of the past historic period were the work of conscious minorities exploiting the spontaneous revolt of unconscious majorities.

It is understood that the word “conscious” should be taken here in a relative sense. It was a question of pursuing political and social aims that were quite definite, though at the same time quite contradictory and utopian. The ideology of the Jacobins of 1793-94 was thoroughly utopian. It cannot be considered to have been the product of an objective conception of the process of historic evolution. But in relation to the mass of peasants, small producers and workers in whose name they demolished the old regime, the Jacobins represented a conscious vanguard whose destructive work was subordinated to positive problems.

In the last decade of the 19th century, Engels arrived at the conclusion that the epoch of revolutions effected by conscious minorities leading unknowing masses had closed for ever. From then on, he said, revolution would be prepared by long years of political propaganda, organisation, education, and would be realised

directly and consciously by the interested masses themselves.

To such a degree has this idea become the conception of the great majority of modern socialists that the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” was originally launched as an answer to the need of assuring, during the revolutionary period, the maximum of active and conscious participation and the maximum of initiative by the masses in the task of social creation.

Read again Lenin’s articles and speeches of 1917 and you will discover that their master thought, “all power to the soviets”, amounted then to the following:

(1) the direct and active participation of the masses in the management of production and public affairs; (2) the obliteration of all gaps between the directors and the directed, that is, the suppression of any social hierarchy; (3) the greatest possible unification of the legislative and executive powers, of the production apparatus and the administrative apparatus, of the state machinery and the machinery of local administration; (4) the maximum of activity by the mass and the minimum of liberty for its elected representatives; (5) the total suppression of all bureaucracy.

Parliamentarism was repudiated not only as the arena where two enemy classes collaborate politically and engage in “pacific” combats, but also as a mechanism of public administration. And this repudiation was motivated, above all, by the antagonism arising between this mechanism and the unbounded revolutionary activity of the mass, intervening directly in administration and production.

In August 1917, Lenin wrote: “The workers, after winning political power, will smash the old bureaucratic apparatus, shatter it to its very foundations, and raze it to the ground; they will replace it by a new one, consisting of the very same workers and other employees, *against* whose transformation into bureaucrats the measures will at once be taken which were specified in detail by Marx and Engels: (1) not only election, but also recall at any time; (2) pay not to exceed that of a workman; (3) immediate introduction of control and supervision by *all*, so that *all* may become ‘bureaucrats’ for a time and that, therefore, *nobody* may be able to become a ‘bureaucrat’.” (*The State and Revolution*, p.103, early Russian edition.)²

He wrote of the “*substitution of a universal popular militia for the police*”, of the “election and recall at any moment of all functionaries and commanding ranks”, of “workers’ control in its primitive sense, direct participation of the people at the courts, not only in the form of a jury but also by the suppression of specialising prosecutors and defence counsels and by the vote of all present on the question of guilt”. That is how the replacement of the old bourgeois democracy with the soviet regime was interpreted in theory – and

sometimes in practice.

It was this conception of “all power to the soviets” that was presented in the first Constitution – adopted at the third Soviet Congress on the initiative of V. Trutovsky. It recognised the complete power of the communal soviet within the limits of the “volost”, the power of the district soviet within the bounds of the “ouyezd”, that of the provincial soviet within the limits of the “gubernia”, while the unifying functions of each of the higher soviet organs expressed themselves in the levelling of the differences arising among the organs subordinated to it.

Anticipating the argument that such extreme federalism might undermine national unity, Lenin wrote in the same brochure: “Only those who are imbued with the philistine ‘superstitious belief’ in the state can mistake the destruction of the bourgeois state machine for the destruction of centralism! Now if the proletariat and poor peasants take state power into their own hands, organise themselves quite freely in communes, and *unite* the action of all the communes in striking at capital, in crushing the resistance of the capitalists, in transferring the privately-owned railways, factories, land and so on to the *entire* nation, to the whole of society, won’t that be centralism?” (Page 50, early Russian edition.)³

Reality has cruelly shattered all these illusions. The “Soviet state” has not established in any instance electiveness and recall of public officials and the commanding staff. It has not suppressed the professional police. It has not assimilated the courts into direct jurisdiction by the masses. It has not done away with social hierarchy in production. It has not lessened the total subjection of the local community to the power of the state. On the contrary, in proportion to its evolution, the Soviet state shows a tendency in the opposite direction. It shows a tendency toward intensified centralism of the state, a tendency toward the utmost possible strengthening of the principles of hierarchy and compulsion. It shows a tendency toward the development of a more specialised apparatus of repression than before. It shows a tendency toward the greater independence of the usually elective functions and the annihilation of the control of these functions by the elector masses. It shows a tendency toward the total freedom of the executive organisms from the tutelage of the electors. In the crucible of reality, the “power of the soviets” has become the “soviet power”, *a power that originally issued from the soviets* but has steadily become independent from the soviets.

We must believe that the Russian ideologists of the soviet system have not renounced entirely their notion of a non-statist social order, the aim of the revolution. But as they see matters now, the road to this non-statist social order no longer lies in the progressive atrophy of the functions and institutions that have been forged by the

bourgeois state, as they said they saw things in 1917. Now it appears that their way to a social order that would be free from the state lies in the hypertrophy – the excessive development – of these functions and in the resurrection, under an altered aspect, of most state institutions typical of the bourgeois era. These shrewd people continue to repudiate democratic parliamentarism. But they no longer repudiate, at the same time, those instruments of state power *to which parliamentarism is a counterweight within bourgeois society*: bureaucracy, police, a permanent army with commanding cadres that are independent of the soldiers, courts that are above control by the community, etc.

In contrast to the bourgeois state, the state of the transitional revolutionary period ought to be an apparatus for the “repression of the minority by the majority”. Theoretically, it should be a governmental apparatus resting in the hands of the majority. In reality, the soviet state continues to be, as the state of the past, a government apparatus resting in the hands of a minority. (Of another minority, of course.)

Little by little, the “power of the soviets” is being replaced with the power of a certain party. Little by little, the party becomes the essential state institution, the framework and axis of the entire system of “soviet republics”.

The evolution traversed by the idea of the “soviet state” in Russia ought to help us to understand the psychological basis of this idea in countries where the revolutionary process of today is yet in its initial phase.

The “soviet regime” becomes the means of bringing into power and maintaining in power a revolutionary minority which claims to defend the interests of a majority, though the latter has not recognised these interests as its own, though this majority has not attached itself sufficiently to these interests to defend them with all its energy and determination.

This is demonstrated by the fact that in many countries – it happened also in Russia – the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” is launched in opposition to the already existing soviets, created during the first manifestations of the revolution. The slogan is directed, in the first place, against the majority of the working class, against the political tendencies which dominated the masses at the beginning of the revolution. The slogan “All Power to the Soviets” becomes a pseudonym for the dictatorship of a minority. So that when the failure of 3 July 1917 had brought to the surface the obstinate resistance of the soviets to Bolshevik pressure, Lenin tore off the disguise in his pamphlet *On Slogans* and proclaimed that the cry “All Power to the Soviets!” was thenceforward out of date and had to be replaced with the slogan: “All Power to the Bolshevik Party!”⁴

But this “materialisation” of the symbol, this

revelation of its true content, was only a moment in the development of the perfect political form, “finally discovered” and exclusively possessing the “capacity of bringing out the social substance of the proletarian revolution.”

The retention of political power by the minority of a class (or classes), by a minority organised as a party and exercising its power in the interests of the class (or classes), is a fact arising from antagonisms typical of the most recent phase of capitalism. It thus offers a difference between the old revolutions and the new. On the other hand, the fact that it is a dictatorship by a minority constitutes a bond of kinship between the present revolution and those of the preceding historic period. If that is the basic principle of the governmental mechanism in question, it hardly matters if the exigency of given historic circumstances have made this principle assume the particular form of soviets.

The events of 1792-94 in France offer an example of a revolution that was realised by means of a minority dictatorship set up as a party: the Jacobin dictatorship. The Jacobin party embraced the most active, the most “leftward” elements of the petty bourgeoisie, proletariat, and declassed intellectuals. It exercised its dictatorship through a network of multiple institutions: communes, sections, clubs, revolutionary committees. In this network producers’ organisations on the style of our workers’ soviets were completely absent. Otherwise, there is a striking similarity, and a number of perfect analogies, between the institutions used by the Jacobins and those serving the contemporary dictatorship. The party cells of today differ in no way from the Jacobin clubs. The revolutionary committees in 1794 and 1919 are entirely alike. The committees of poor peasants of today bear comparison with the committees and clubs, composed especially of poor elements, on which the Jacobin dictatorship based itself in the villages. Today, workers’ soviets, factory committees, trade union centres, mark the revolution with their stamp and give it its specific character. Here is where the influence of the proletariat in the large industries of today makes itself felt. Nevertheless, we see that such specifically class organisms, such specially proletarian formations, issuing from the milieu of modern industry, are as much reduced to the role of mechanical instruments of a party minority dictatorship as were the auxiliaries of the Jacobin dictatorship in 1792-94, though the social origins of the latter were entirely different.

Placed in the concrete conditions of contemporary Russia, the Bolshevik party dictatorship reflects, in the first place, the interests and aspirations of the proletarian elements of the population. This would be truer in the case of soviets that might have arisen in advanced industrial countries. But the nature of the soviets,

their adaptation to producers’ organisations, is not the decisive factor here. We saw that after 3 July 1917 Lenin envisaged the *direct dictatorship* of the Bolshevik party, outside of the soviets. We see now that in certain places such a dictatorship is fully realised through the channel of revolutionary committees and party cells. All of this does not stop the party dictatorship (direct or indirect) from preserving in its class policy a primordial lien with the proletariat and reflecting, above all, the interests and aspirations of the urban labouring population.

On the other hand, as organisational cadres, the soviets may find themselves filled with elements that have a different class character. At the side of the workers’ soviets arise soviets of soldiers and peasants. So that in countries that are even more backward economically than Russia, the power of the soviets may represent something other than a proletarian minority. It may represent there a peasant minority, or any other non-proletarian section of the population.

The mystery of the “soviet regime” is now deciphered. We see now how an organism that is supposedly created by the specific peculiarities of a labour movement corresponding to the highest development of capitalism is revealed to be, at the same time, suitable to the needs of countries knowing neither large capitalist production, nor a powerful bourgeoisie, nor a proletariat that has evolved through the experience of the class struggle.

In other words, in the advanced countries, the proletariat resorts, we are told, to the soviet form of the dictatorship as soon as its élan toward the social revolution strikes against the impossibility of realising its power in any other way than through the *dictatorship of a minority*, a minority within the proletariat itself.

The thesis of the “finally discovered form”, the thesis of the political form which, belonging to the specific circumstances of the imperialist phase of capitalism, is said to be the only form that can realise the social enfranchisement of the proletariat, constitutes the historically necessary illusion by whose effect the revolutionary section of the proletariat renounces its belief in its ability to draw behind it the majority of the population of the country and resuscitates the idea of the minority dictatorship of the Jacobins in the very form used by the bourgeois revolution of the 18th century. Must we recall here that this revolutionary method has been repudiated by the working class to the extent that it has freed itself from its heritage of petty-bourgeois revolutionarism?

As soon as the slogan “soviet regime” begins to function as a pseudonym under the cover of which the Jacobin and Blanquist idea of a minority dictatorship is reborn in the ranks of the proletariat, then the soviet regime acquires a universal application and is said to be adaptable

to any kind of revolutionary overturn. In this new sense, the "soviet form" is necessarily devoid of the specific substance that bound it to a definite phase of capitalist development. *It now becomes a universal form, which is supposed to be suitable to any revolution accomplished in a situation of political confusion, when the popular masses are not united, while the bases of the old regime have been eaten away in the process of historical evolution.*

Dictatorship Over the Proletariat

The revolutionary sectors of the population do not believe themselves able to draw along with them the majority of the country on the road to socialism. Here is the secret of the spread of the "soviet idea" in the confused consciousness of the European proletariat.

Now the majority opposing socialism, or backing parties that oppose socialism, may include numerous worker elements. To the extent that this is true, the principle of "soviet rule" implies not only the repudiation of democracy within the framework of the nation but also the suppression of democracy within the working class.

In theory, soviet rule does not annul democracy. In theory, soviet rule merely limits democracy to the workers and the "poorest peasantry". But the essence of democracy is not expressed – either exclusively or in principle – by mathematically universal suffrage. The "universal suffrage" attained by the most advanced countries before the Russian Revolution excluded women, the military, and sometimes young people up to the age of 25. These exceptions did not deprive these countries of a democratic character, as long as inside the majority called on to exercise the sovereignty of the people there remained a degree of democracy consistent with the preservation of the capitalist basis of society.

For this reason, denying electoral rights to bourgeois and rentiers, and even to members of the liberal professions – an eventuality admitted by Plekhanov for the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat – does not of itself make the "soviet" regime something absolutely undemocratic. We may even suppose such a measure to be entirely compatible with the development of other features of democracy, which, in spite of the limitation of electoral rights, may really make of the regime "a democracy more perfect" than any previous political form based on the social domination of the bourgeoisie.

The exclusion of the bourgeois minority from participation in state power may not necessarily help to consolidate the power of the majority. It may even hinder this object by tending to impoverish the social value of the popular will expressed in the electoral struggle. That is not, however, sufficient to make the soviet system undemocratic.

What gives the soviet system this character is

the suppression of democracy also in the relations among the privileged citizens who are called on to become the holders of state power.

The following are the inalienable tokens of a democratic regime, no matter how limited is the circle of citizens to whom they apply:

1. The absolute submission of the entire executive apparatus to popular representation (even though in the case of the soviets it does not comprise all citizens).

2. The electiveness and recall of the administration, of judges, of the police. The democratic organisation of the army.

3. The control and publicness of all administrative acts.

4. The liberty of political coalition (though it may mean liberty only for the "privileged", in the mentioned sense of the term).

5. The inviolability of the citizens' individual and collective rights and protection against any abuses on the part of the final agents of state power.

6. Citizens' liberty to discuss all state questions. Citizens' right and power to exercise freely pressure on the governmental mechanism. Etc., etc.

We find in history democratic republics that admitted slavery (Athens, for example). The theoreticians of sovietism have never rejected the democratic principles enumerated above. On the contrary, they have affirmed that on the reduced electoral base of the soviets these principles will develop as they never were able on the more extensive foundation of capitalist democracy. We must not forget Lenin's promise that all the workers would participate directly in the administration of the state, all soldiers in the election of officers, that police and officialdom as such would be suppressed.

The absence of democracy *within* the soviet system presumes that the proletarian (revolutionary) elements building the regime recognise the existence of the following conditions:

1. The working class forms a minority in a hostile population.

2. Or it is itself divided into fractions struggling for power among themselves.

3. Or the two given phenomena exist simultaneously.

In all the mentioned cases, the real reason for the popularity of the "soviet idea" is found in the desire to repress the will of all other groups of the population, including proletariat groups, in order to assure the triumph of a determined revolutionary minority.

Charles Naine, the well-known Swiss militant, writes: "At the beginning of 1918, we were in a panic. There was no time to delay. Soviets of workers, soldiers and peasants had to be formed in Switzerland immediately and a red guard constituted. The knowing minority had to impose its will on the majority, even by brute force. The great mass, the workers, are in economic slavery.

They cannot accomplish their own liberation. Their minds are formed by their masters; they are incapable of understanding their true interests. It is left to the knowing minority to free the mass from the tutelage of its present masters. Only after this is done will the mass understand. Scientific socialism is the truth. The minority possessing the knowledge of the truth of scientific socialism has the right to impose it on the mass. Parliament is only an obstruction. It is an instrument of reaction. The bourgeois press poisons the minds of the people. It should be suppressed. Later, that is, after the social order will have been totally transformed by the socialist dictators, liberty and democracy will be reconstituted. Then the citizens will be in the position to form a real democracy; they will then be free from the economic regime which, oppressing them, keeps them at present from manifesting their true will." (Charles Naine, *Dictature du prolétariat ou démocratie*, p.7.)

Only the blind and the hypocritical will fail to recognise that Charles Naine has presented here, divested of its usual phraseological ornamentation, the ideology of Bolshevism. It is in this shape that the latter has been assimilated by the masses in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and wherever Bolshevism has made its appearance.

This phraseological ornamentation does not always succeed in hiding. There is, for example, the important statement by P. Orlovsky, entitled 'The Communist International and the World Soviet Republic'. The author proposes to deal with the "crux" of the question of the soviet system.

"The soviet system", he writes, "merely *implies* participation of the popular masses in the administration of the state: but it does not *assure* them either mastery or even a predominant influence [in the administration of the state]."

If we substitute the words "parliamentary democracy" for the term "soviet system", we get as elementary a "truth" as the one expressed by Orlovsky. Indeed, developed democratic parliamentarism assures the masses of the opportunity to participate in state administration. It does not, however, guarantee their political domination.

Here is Orlovsky's conclusion: "Only when the soviet system has put the effective state power in the hands of the Communists, that is to say in the party of the working class, may the workers and other exploited elements obtain access to the exercise of state power as well as the possibility of reconstructing the state on a new basis, conforming to their needs, etc."

In other words, the soviet system is good as long as it is in the hands of the Communists. For "as soon as the bourgeoisie succeeds in possessing itself of the soviets (as was the case in Russia under Kerensky and now – in 1919 – in Germany), it utilises them against the revolutionary workers and peasants, just as the Tsars used the soldiery, sprung from the people, to oppress the people.

Therefore, soviets can fulfil a revolutionary role, and free the working masses, only when they are dominated by the Communists. And for the same reason, the growth of soviet organisations in other countries is a revolutionary phenomenon in the proletarian sense – not merely in the petty-bourgeois sense – only when this growth is paralleled by the triumph of communism".

There could be no clearer statement. *The "soviet system" is an instrument which permits state power to slip into the hands of the Communists. The instrument is put aside as soon as it has fulfilled its historic function.* That is never said, of course.

"The Communist Party, that is to say, the party of the working class" The principle is always posed in these words. Not "one of the parties" – nor even "the most advanced party", nor "the party most representative of the interests of the proletarian class". No, but the "only real workers' party".

Orlovsky's idea is excellently illustrated in the resolutions adopted by the Communist conference at Kashin, published in *Pravda* No.3, 1919:

"The middle peasant may be admitted to power, even when he does not belong to the party, if he accepts the soviet platform – with the reservation that the preponderant role of direction in the soviets must remain with the party of the proletariat. It is absolutely inadmissible to leave the soviets entirely into the hands of the non-party middle peasants. That would expose all the conquests of the proletarian revolution to the danger of complete destruction, at a moment when the last and decisive battle against international reaction is taking place."

The Communists at Kashin contented themselves with baring the real meaning of the "dictatorship" only in so far as it applied to the peasantry. But everybody knows that the same solution also disposes of the "middle" worker. We are dealing here with a "worker and peasant" power and not merely with a "worker" power.

What originally made the "soviet idea" so attractive to socialists was, no doubt, their unlimited *confidence* in the collective intelligence of the working class, their confidence in the workers' ability to attain, by means of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", a condition of complete *self-administration*, excluding the shadow of tutelage by a minority. The first enthusiasm for the soviet system was an enthusiasm springing from the desire to escape the framework of the hierarchically organised state.

Ernest Däumig (Left Independent) stated in his eloquent report, at the first Pan-German Congress of Soviets, held from 16-21 December 1918: "The present German revolution is distinguished by its possession of deucedly little confidence in its own forces. We are still suffering from the spirit of military subservience and passive obedience, our heritage from the past centuries. This spirit cannot

be killed by mere electoral struggles, by election tracts passed out among the masses every two or three years. It can only be destroyed by a sincere and powerful effort to maintain the German people in a condition of permanent political activity. This cannot be realised outside of the soviet system. We ought to finish, once for always, with the entire old administrative machinery of the Reich, of the independent [German] states, of the municipalities. To substitute *self-administration* for administration from above should become more and more the aim of the German people."

And at the same congress, the Spartacist Heckert declared: "The Constituent Assembly [Parliament] will be a *reactionary institution* even if it has a socialist majority. The reason for this is that the German people is completely apolitical. It asks to be led. It has not as yet made the smallest act that might be evidence of its desire to become master of its own destiny. Here in Germany people wait to have liberty brought to them by leaders. Liberty is not created at the base."

"The soviet system", he continued, "is an organisation confiding to the large masses the *direct task* of constructing the social edifice. The Constitutional Assembly [Parliament], on the other hand, leaves this function to leaders."

We have struck here against something especially interesting. In the same report that glorifies the soviets as a guarantee of the self-administration of the working class, Däumig gives a rather dark picture of the *real* German soviets, personified in their congress of 1918:

"No revolutionary parliament in history has revealed itself more timorous, more commonplace, meaner, than the revolutionary parliament here congregated. Where is the great breath of idealism that dominated and moved the French National Convention? Where is the youthful enthusiasm of March 1848? There is not a trace of either."

And though he finds the German "soviets" timorous, limited and mean, Däumig seeks the key to all the problems raised by the social revolution in the delivery of "all power to the soviets". All power to the *timorous* as a means of throwing ourselves boldly beyond the easy formula of universal suffrage! A bizarre paradox? Oh, no! The paradox hides a very precise significance, which, if it still remains in the "subconscious" for Däumig, attains conscious expression in P. Orlovsky's formula: "*With the aid of the soviet system, state power passes into the hands of the Communists.*" Put another way – *through the intermediary of the soviets, the revolutionary minority secures its domination over the "timorous majority"*.

Däumig's observation was in complete agreement with the facts. In the first Pan-German Congress of Soviets, Scheidemann's partisans and the soldiers held an overwhelming majority. The congress smelled of timidity and meanness of viewpoint. Four and a half years of "class

collaboration" and "brotherhood of the trenches" have not failed to leave marks both on the worker in overalls and the worker in military drab.

And just as correct as Däumig were the Bolsheviks in June 1917, when they threw up their hands in indignation at the despairing narrow-mindedness that dominated the first Pan-Russian Congress of Soviets, though at its head was a politician like Tseretelli, an individual who had, to an exceptional degree, the ability to raise the mass above its everyday level. We, the Internationalists, who had the pleasure of being a tiny minority at this Congress, also despaired at the timidity and lack of understanding shown again and again by the immense "bog" of the Menshevik and Social-Revolutionary majority in the face of stupendous world events and the most weighty political and social problems. We could not understand why the Bolsheviks, who showed such great indignation at the spirit dominating the Congress, should nevertheless call for "All Power to the Soviets!" We refused to understand them even when, in view of the existing situation, they organised a demonstration the object of which was to force an assembly of this character to possess itself fully of state power.

I have already mentioned that the fear of making possible the triumph of the "timorous" majority pushed Lenin, after 3 July 1917, to repudiate, as outdated, the slogan: "All Power to the Soviets!" We find a German analogy to this in the Spartacist decision to *boycott* the election to the second (April) Pan-German Congress of Soviets.

The consequent course of the Russian revolution cured Lenin of his passing "lack of faith". The soviets fulfilled the role expected of them. The rising tide of bourgeois revolutionary enthusiasm set in motion the worker and peasant masses, washing away their "meanness". Lifted by the wave, the Bolsheviks possessed themselves of the government apparatus. Then the role of the insurrectionary element came to an end. The Moor had accomplished his task. The state that came into being with the aid of the "power of the soviets" became the "soviet power". The Communist minority incorporated in this state made itself secure, once for always, against a possible return of the spirit of "meanness". The idea slowly engendered in the subconscious reached its full development in the theory of P. Orlovsky and the practice of the Kashin Communists.

Dictatorship as a means of *protecting the people against the reactionary narrowness of the people* – such is the historic point of departure of (19th century) revolutionary communism at the time when the worker class, which it claims to represent, begins to see through the lies and hypocrisy of the liberty proclaimed by capitalism.

Buonarotti, the theoretician of Babeuf's plot of 1796, concluded that as soon as state power was taken over by the communists they would find it

necessary to isolate France from other countries by an insuperable barrier – in order to preserve the masses from bad influences. No publication, he declared, might appear in France without the authorisation of the communist government.

“All socialists, excepting the Fourierists”, wrote Weitling in 1840, “subscribe unanimously to the belief that the form of government called democracy does not suit, and is even prejudicial to, the social organisation whose principles are being shaped at this moment.”

Etienne Cabet wrote that socialist society could allow, in each city, a single newspaper, which would of course be issued by the government. The people were to be protected against the temptation of seeking the truth in the clash of opinions.

In 1839, at the political trial devoted to the insurrection led by Blanqui and Barbes, much was made of a communist catechism found on the accused. This catechism dealt among other things with the problem of dictatorship:

“It is unquestionable that after a revolution accomplished in behalf of our ideas, there will be created a dictatorial power whose mission it will be to direct the revolutionary movement. This dictatorial power will of necessity base itself on the assent of the armed population, which, acting in the general interest, will evidently represent the enlightened will of the great majority of the nation.

“To be strong, to act quickly, the dictatorial power will have to be concentrated in as small a number of persons as possible.... To undermine the old society, to destroy it at its base, to overthrow the foreign and domestic enemies of the Republic, to prepare the new foundations of social organisation and, finally, to lead the people from the revolutionary government to a regular republican government – such are the functions of the dictatorial power and the limits of its duration.” (Bourguin, *Le socialisme français de 1789 à 1848*, Paris, 1912.)

One may ask if the doctrine of those that stand for “power to the soviets”, in the manner of P. Orlovsky and the Kashin Communists, is much different from that of the Parisian communists of 1839.

Metaphysical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism

The working class is a product of capitalist society. Its mind is subjected to the influence of capitalist society. Its consciousness is developed under the pressure of the bourgeois masters. The school, the church, the barracks, the factory, the press, social life, all contribute to form the consciousness of the proletarian masses. They are all potent factors in the service of bourgeois ideas and tendencies. According to Charles Naine, it was on this observation of fact that the revolutionary socialists, at least in Switzerland, based their belief in the necessity of a dictatorship by a minority of

conscious proletarians over the nation and even over the majority of the proletariat itself.

Emile Pouget, the prominent syndicalist leader, wrote: “... If the democratic mechanism were applied in the labour organisations, the lack of will on the part of the unconscious majority would paralyse all action. The minority is not disposed to abdicate its claim and aspirations before the inertia of a mass that has not yet been quickened by the spirit of revolt. Therefore, the conscious minority has an obligation to act without considering the outlook of the refractory mass....

“The amorphous mass ... numerous and compact though it be, has little reason to complain. It is the first to benefit by the action of the minority.... Who could complain against the disinterested initiative of the minority? Certainly not the unconscious folk to whom the militants barely attribute the role of human zeros – and who acquire the numerical value of a zero only when added to the right of a number.

“Here is the enormous difference of method distinguishing syndicalism from democratism. Through its machinery of universal suffrage, the latter puts the function of guidance in the hands of the unconscious, the backward, or worse, their representatives. Democratism stifles the minorities that bear in them the future. The syndicalist method gives diametrically opposite results. The impetus is given by the conscious ones, by the rebels. All good wills are called on to act, to participate in the movement.”⁵

The recognition of the inevitable mental enslavement of the proletarian masses by the capitalist class forms also one of the premises of P. Orlovsky's conclusions, given in the preceding chapter. This idea flows, without doubt, from a materialist viewpoint. It is based on the observation that the thought of man depends on the material environment.

This idea characterised many socialists and communists, utopian and revolutionary, at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th. We can discover its traces in Robert Owen, Cabet, Weitling, Blanqui. All recognised that the mental enslavement of the masses came from the material circumstances of their existence in the present society. And all deduced from this condition that only a radical modification of the material circumstances of their existence, only a radical transformation of society, would render the masses capable of directing their own destiny.

But by whom will this transformation be realised? “The wise educators of humanity sprung from the privileged classes, that is to say, individuals freed from the material pressure weighing on the mind of the masses – they will do it.” That was the answer of the social utopians. “A revolutionary minority composed of men whom a more or less accidental combination of circumstances has enabled to save their brains and

will from this pressure, persons who constitute in our society an exception that proves the rule – they will do it!” This was the answer of revolutionary communists like Weitling and Blanqui, and the conception of their epigones of the anarcho-syndicalist type, as Pouget and the late Gustave Hervé.

A benevolent dictatorship for some, a violent dictatorship for the others, such is the *deus ex machina* that was going to throw up a bridge between the social environment producing the mental enslavement of the masses and the social environment that would render possible their full development as human beings.

“Man’s character”, wrote Robert Owen, “is formed by environment and education.... The problem flowing from this is the following: to transform these two factors of character in such a manner that man will become virtuous.” (*The New View of Society*.)⁶ According to Owen, the task of operating this transformation fell to the legislators, to the philanthropists, to the pedagogues.

Whether pacifist or revolutionary, the utopians were only *half* materialist. They understood only in a metaphysical manner the thesis according to which human psychology depends on the material environment. They were hardly aware of the *dynamics* of the social process. Their materialism was not *dialectical*.

The state of correlation binding a given aspect of the social consciousness to a given aspect of social life, which is the determining cause of the former, presented itself in the minds of those people as something congealed, as something immovable. That is why they stopped being materialists and became idealists of the first water as soon as they tried to find out how it was necessary to act practically in order to modify the social milieu and render possible the regeneration of the masses.

Quite a good while ago, in his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, Marx observed: “The materialist doctrine that men are the products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are the products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence, this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society (Robert Owen, for example).”⁷

Applied to the class struggle of the propertyless, this means the following. Impelled by the same “circumstances” of capitalist society that determine their character as an enslaved class, the workers enter into a struggle against the society that enslaves them. The process of this struggle modifies the social “circumstances”. It modifies the environment in which the working class moves. This way the working class modifies its own character. From a class reflecting passively the mental servitude to which they are subjected,

the propertyless become a class which frees itself actively from all enslavement, including that of the mind.

This process is not at all rectilinear. It does not take in homogeneously all the layers of the proletariat, nor all phases of their consciousness. It will be far from attaining its full development when the combination of historic circumstances permits, or obliges, the working class to tear from the hands of the bourgeoisie the apparatus of political power. The workers are condemned to penetrate into the realm of socialism when they still bear a good share of those “vices of the oppressed”, the yoke which Lassalle had so eloquently urged them to throw off. As a result of the struggle against capitalism, the proletariat modifies the material milieu surrounding it. It modifies this way its own character and emancipates itself culturally. Exercising its conquered power, the proletariat frees itself completely from the intellectual influence of the old society – in the degree that it realises a radical transformation of the material milieu, which in the last place determines its character.

But only “finally!” Only at the end of a long, painful, contradictory process, which is analogous to all preceding historic processes in this respect. The social creation assumes its form on the anvil of necessity, under the imperious pressure of immediate needs.

The conscious will of the revolutionary vanguard can appreciably accelerate and facilitate this process. It can never *avoid* it.

Some people presume that if a compact revolutionary minority, animated by the desire to establish socialism, seizes the machinery of government, and concentrates in its own hands the means of production and distribution and the control of the organisation of the masses and their education,⁸ it may – in pursuance of its socialist ideal – create an environment in which the popular mind will little by little be purged of its old heritage and filled with a new content. Only then, it is averred, can the people stand erect and move by their own strength on the road to socialism.

If this utopia could be followed to the end, it would lead to a diametrically opposite result, though we considered it only from the angle of Marx’s observation that the “educator must himself be educated”. For the practice of *such* a dictatorship, and the relations established between the dictatorial minority and the mass, “educate” the dictators, who may be everything we want them to be but cannot direct social evolution toward the construction of a new society. We do not need to demonstrate that such an education can only corrupt the *masses*, that it can only debase them.

The proletarian class considered as a whole – we are using the word in its broadest sense,

including intellectual workers whose collaboration in the direction of the state and the administration of the social economy is indispensable till the contrary becomes true – is the only possible builder of the new society, and it must consequently be the only successor to the classes that formerly dominated the functions of government. The propertyless will also find it indispensable to benefit by the active aid, or at least, friendly neutrality of the non-proletarian producers, who are still numerous in the city and countryside. This flows from the nature of the social overturn that is the historic mission of the proletariat. This change must manifest itself in every part of the life of society. The proletariat will be able to take in hand the huge heritage of capitalism, without dilapidating it – it will be able to set in motion the gigantic productive forces of capitalism so that the result is real social equality based on the increase of the general well-being – only by giving proof of the maximum of moral energy it can generate. That, we repeat, is an unavoidable condition, which is, in its turn, subordinated to the greatest possible development of organised initiative on the part of all the elements composing the working class. The latter presupposes an atmosphere that is absolutely incompatible with the dictatorship of a minority or with the permanent satellites of such a dictatorship: terror and bureaucracy.

In the course of the free construction of the new society, the proletariat will re-educate itself and eliminate from its character those traits that are in contradiction with the great problems it will have to solve. This will be true about the working class taken as a whole as well as about each of its component elements. It is evident that the duration of this process, will vary for each of these elements. To remain on the firm ground of political reality, the political action of the socialists will have to

reckon with this fact. It will have to take into account the slow pace of the necessarily progressive adaptation of the entire class to its new milieu. Every attempt at forcing this process artificially is certain to yield the opposite results. Many compromises will be found absolutely inevitable in order to suit the march of history to the intellectual level attained by the different elements within the working class at the moment of the fall of capitalism.

But the final goal justifies only those compromises that do not lead in opposition to results that are in opposition to this goal. Only those compromises are justified which do not bar the road to the goal. For that reason, it is impossible to consider too pronounced compromises made either with the destructive tendency or with the conservative inertia that are typical of one or another section of the working class.

A compromise made with the enemy class is nearly always fatal to the revolution. A compromise that guarantees the unity of the class in its struggle against the enemy can only advance the revolution – in the sense that it opens up wide possibilities for the spontaneous, direct action of the mass.

True, this result will be obtained at the price of a movement that is slower, more sinuous, than the straight line which a minority dictatorship can trace in the task of revolution. But here as in mechanics what is lost in distance is made up in speed. The gain is made here by overcoming rapidly the inner psychological obstacles that arise in the way of the revolutionary class and hamper it in its attempt to achieve it. On the other hand, the straight line, preferred by the doctrinaires of the violent revolution because it is shorter, leads in practice to the maximum of psychological resistance and that way to the minimum creative yield of the social revolution.

Part Two: Destruction or Conquest of the State?

Marx and the State

The very partisans of the “pure soviet system” (an expression current in Germany) do not themselves realise, as a rule, that the cause which is fundamentally served by the methods of contemporary Bolshevism is the organisation of a minority dictatorship. On the contrary, they usually begin by looking around sincerely for political instruments that might best express the genuine will of the majority. They arrive at “sovietism” only after repudiating the instrument

of universal suffrage – because it does not seem to furnish the solution they are seeking.

Psychologically the most characteristic thing about the rush of the “extreme leftists” toward “sovietism” is their desire to jump over the historic inertia of the masses. Dominating their *logic*, however, is the idea that soviets constitute a new, “finally discovered”, political mode. This, they say, is the specific instrument of the class rule of the proletariat, just as the democratic republic is according to them the specific instrument of the

rule of the bourgeoisie.

The idea that the working class can only come to power by using social forms that are absolutely different, even in principle, from those assumed by the power of the bourgeoisie, has existed since the dawn of the *revolutionary* labour movement. We find it, for example, in the fearless propaganda of the immediate predecessors of the Chartist movement: the building worker James Morrison and his friend, the weaver James Smith. At the time when the advanced workers of the period were only beginning to conceive the idea that there was the need to seize political power and to win universal suffrage in order to accomplish the latter, Smith was already writing in his journal, the *Crisis*, of 12 April 1834:

“We shall have a real House of Commons. We have never yet had a House of Commons. The only House of Commons is a House of Trades, and that is only beginning to be formed. We shall have a new set of boroughs when the unions are organised: every trade shall be a borough, and every trade shall have a council of representatives to conduct its affairs. Our present commoners know nothing of the interests of the people, and care not for them.... The character of the Reformed Parliament is now blasted, and like a character of a woman when lost, is not easily recovered. It will be substituted by a House of Trades.” (Quoted by M. Beer in his *History of British Socialism*, p.265 of the German edition.)¹

Morrison wrote in his publication, the *Pioneer*, of 31 May 1834: “The growing power and growing intelligence of trades unions, when properly managed, will draw into its vortex all the commercial interests of the country, and, in so doing, it will become, by its own self-acquired importance, a most influential, we might almost say *dictatorial* [emphasis added], part of the body politic. When this happens, we have gained all that we want; we have gained universal suffrage, for if every member of the Union be a constituent, and the Union itself becoming a vital member of the State, it instantly erects itself into a House of Trades which must supply the place of the present House of Commons, and direct industrial affairs of the country, according to the will of the trades that compose the associations of industry.... With us, universal suffrage will begin in our lodges, extend to the general union, embrace the management of trade, and finally swallow up the political power”. (M. Beer, p.266.)²

Substitute soviet for union, executive committee (“ispolkom”) for council of representatives, Soviet Congress for House of Trades, and you have a draft of the “soviet system” established on the basis of productive cells.

In his polemic against the *trade union* conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, B. O’Brien, who later headed the Chartists, wrote: “Universal suffrage does not signify meddling with

politics, but the rule of the people in the State and municipality, a Government therefore in favour of the working men.” (M. Beer, p.266. From *Poor Man’s Guardian*, 7 and 21 December 1833.)³

Basing itself largely on the experience of the revolutionary labour movement in England, the 1848 communism – “scientific socialism” – of Marx and Engels identified the problem of the conquest of state power by the proletariat with that of the organisation of a rational democracy. The *Communist Manifesto* declared: “We have seen ... that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.”⁴

According to Lenin, the *Manifesto* still poses the question of the state “in an extremely abstract manner, in the most general terms and expressions” (*The State and Revolution*, p.29, Russian edition).⁵ The problem of the conquest of state power is presented more concretely in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Its concretisation is completed in *The Civil War in France*, written after the experience of the Paris Commune. Lenin is of the opinion that, in the course of this development, Marx has been led precisely to that conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat which forms today the basis of Bolshevism.

In 1852, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx wrote: “Every previous revolution has brought the machinery of state to a greater perfection instead of breaking it up.”⁶ On 12 April 1871, in a letter to Kugelmann, he formulated his viewpoint on the problem of revolution as follows: “If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire* you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic military machine from one hand to another, but to *break* it, and that is essential for every real people’s revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting.”⁷ In this spirit, Marx declared (*The Civil War in France*) that the Commune was “a republic that was not merely to suppress the monarchic form of class domination but the class state itself”.⁸

What then was the Commune? It was an attempt to bring about the effective and rational establishment of a democratic state by destroying the military and bureaucratic state apparatus. It was an attempt to establish a state based entirely on the power of the people.

As long as he speaks of the destruction of the bureaucracy, the police and permanent army, as long as he speaks of the election and recall of all officials, of the broadest autonomy possible in local administration, of the centralisation of all power in the hands of the people’s representatives (thus doing away with the gap between the legislative and executive departments of the government, and replacing the “talking” parliament with a “working body”⁹); as long as he speaks of all of

this in his defence of the Commune, Marx remains faithful to the conception of the social revolution he presented in the *Communist Manifesto*, in which the dictatorship of the proletariat is identified with “winning the battle of democracy”. He therefore remains quite consistent with himself when in his letter to Kugelmann, quoted above, he stresses that the destruction of the bureaucratic and military machine is “essential for every real people’s revolution *on the Continent*” (emphasis added).

On this point, it is interesting to compare the experience gathered by Marx and Engels from the events of 1848 with the conclusions drawn by Herten. In his *Letters from France and Italy*, Herten wrote: “When universal suffrage is found alongside the monarchic organisation of the state, when it is found alongside that absurd separation of power so glorified by the partisans of constitutional forms, when it is found alongside a religious conception of representation, alongside a police centralisation of the entire state in the hands of a cabinet – then universal suffrage is an optical illusion and has about as much value as the equality preached by Christianity. It is not enough to assemble once a year, elect a deputy, and then return home to resume the passive role of administered subjects. The entire social hierarchy should be based on universal suffrage. The local community should elect its government and the department (province) its own. All proconsuls, made sacred by the mystery of ministerial unction, ought to be done away with. Only then will the people be able to exercise effectively all their rights and proceed intelligently with the election of their representatives to a central parliament.” The bourgeois republicans, quite on the contrary, “wanted to maintain the cities and municipalities in complete dependence on the executive power and applied the democratic idea of universal suffrage to only one civic act” (Herten, *Works*, Pavlenkov ed., Vol.5, pp.122-3).

In other words, Herten, like Marx, denounced the pseudo-democratic bourgeois republic in the name of a republic that was genuinely democratic. And like Herten, Marx rose against universal suffrage to the extent that it was no more than a deceptive appendix attached to the “monarchic organisation of the state”, a legacy of the past. He opposed it because he was for a state organisation built from top to bottom on universal suffrage and the sovereignty of the people.

Commenting on Marx’s idea, Lenin observes (*The State and Revolution*, p.367, Russian edition): “This was understandable in 1871, when Britain was still the model of a purely capitalist country, but without a militarist clique and, to a considerable degree, without a bureaucracy. Marx therefore excluded Britain, where a revolution, even a people’s revolution, then seemed possible, and indeed was possible, *without* the precondition of destroying the ‘ready-made state machinery’.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, Lenin hurries to pass over this point without reflecting on all the questions posed for us by Marx’s restrictions.

According to Lenin, Marx admitted a situation in which the people’s revolution would not need to shatter the ready-made state machinery. This was the case when the state machinery did not have the military and bureaucratic character typical of the Continent and could therefore be utilised by a real people’s revolution. The existence, within the framework of capitalism and in spite of the latter, of a *democratic apparatus of self-administration*, which the military and bureaucratic machine had not succeeded in crushing, was evidently exceptional. In that case, according to Marx, the people’s revolution should simply take possession of that apparatus and perfect it, thus realising the state form that the revolution could best use for its creative purposes.

It is not for nothing that Marx and Engels admitted theoretically the possibility of a *peaceful* socialist revolution in England. This theoretical possibility rested precisely on the democratic character, capable of being perfected, which the British state presented in their day.

Much water has flowed under the bridges since then. In England, as in the United States, imperialism has forged the “military and bureaucratic state machine”, the absence of which had constituted, as a general feature, the difference between the political evolution of the Anglo-Saxon countries and the general type of capitalist state. At the present time, it is permissible to doubt if this feature has been preserved even in the youngest Anglo-Saxon republics: Australia and New Zealand. “Today”, remarks Lenin with justification, “in Britain and in America ... ‘the precondition for every real people’s revolution’ is the *smashing*, the *destruction* of the ‘ready-made state machinery’.”¹¹

The theoretical possibility has not revealed itself in reality. But the sole fact that he admitted such a possibility shows us clearly Marx’s opinion, leaving no room for arbitrary interpretation. What Marx designated as the “destruction of the state machine” in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and in his letter to Kugelmann was the destruction of the *military and bureaucratic apparatus* that bourgeois democracy had inherited from the monarchy and perfected in the process of consolidating the rule of the bourgeois class. There is nothing in Marx’s reasoning that even suggests the destruction of the *state organisation as such* and the replacement of the state during the revolutionary period, that is during the dictatorship of the proletariat, with a social bond formed on a *principle opposed to that of the state*. Marx and Engels foresaw such a substitution only at the end of a process of progressive “withering away”¹² of the state and all the functions of social *coercion*. They foresaw this atrophy of the state and the functions of social

coercion to be the result of the prolonged existence of the socialist regime.

It is not for any idle reason that Engels wrote in 1891, in his preface to *The Civil War in France*: “In reality ... the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy; and at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose *worst sides* [emphasis added] the proletariat, just like the Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at once as much as possible until such time as a generation reared in new, free social conditions is able to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap heap.”¹³

Isn't this clear enough? The proletariat lops off the “worst sides” of the democratic state (for example the police, permanent army, the bureaucracy as an independent entity, exaggerated centralisation, etc). But it does not suppress the democratic state as such. On the contrary, it creates the democratic state in order to have it replace the “military and bureaucratic state”, which must be shattered.

“If one thing is certain it is that our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. *This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown*” (emphasis added).¹⁴ That is how Engels expresses himself in his critique of the draft of the Erfurt programme. He does not speak there of a “soviet” republic (the term was, of course, unknown), nor of a commune-republic, in contrast to the “state”. Neither does he speak of the “trade union republic” imagined by Smith and Morrison and by the French syndicalists. Clearly and explicitly, Engels speaks of the democratic republic, that is, of a state – “an evil inherited by the proletariat” – democratised from top to bottom.

This is stated so clearly, so explicitly, that when Lenin quotes these words, he finds it necessary to obscure their meaning. “Engels”, he says, “repeated here in a particularly striking form the fundamental idea which runs through all of Marx's work, namely, that the democratic republic *is the nearest approach* [emphasis added] to the dictatorship of the proletariat. For such a republic, without in the least abolishing the rule of capital, and, therefore, the oppression of the masses and the class struggle, inevitably leads to such an extension, development, unfolding and intensification of this struggle that, as soon as it becomes possible to meet the fundamental interests of the oppressed masses, this possibility is realised inevitably and solely through the dictatorship of the proletariat, through the leadership of those masses by the proletariat.” (*The State and Revolution*, Chapter IV, p.66.)¹⁵

However, Engels does not speak of a political form that “is the nearest approach to the

dictatorship”, as is interpreted by Lenin in his commentaries. He speaks of the only “specific” political form in which the *dictatorship can be realised*. According to Engels, the dictatorship is forged in the *democratic republic*. Lenin, on the other hand, sees democracy *merely* as the means of sharpening the class struggle, thus confronting the proletariat with the problem of the dictatorship. For Lenin, the democratic republic finds its conclusion in the dictatorship of the proletariat, giving birth to the latter but destroying itself in the delivery. Engels, on the contrary, is of the opinion that when the proletariat has gained supremacy in the democratic republic and thus realised its dictatorship, *within the democratic republic*, it will consolidate the latter by that very act and invest it, for the first time, with a character that is genuinely, fundamentally and completely democratic. That is why, in 1848, Engels and Marx identified the act of “raising the proletariat to the position of ruling class” with “winning the battle of democracy”. That is why in *The Civil War in France* Marx hailed, in the experience of the Commune, the total triumph of the principles of people's power: universal franchise, election and recall of all officials. That is why in 1891, in his preface to *The Civil War*, Engels wrote again:

“Against this transformation of the state and the organs of the state from servants of society into masters of society – an inevitable transformation in all previous states – the Commune made use of two infallible means. In the first place, it filled all posts – administrative, judicial and educational – by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, subject to the right of recall at any time by the same electors. And, in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers.”¹⁶

Thus, universal suffrage is an “infallible means” to prevent the transformation of the state “from servants of society into masters of society”. Thus, only the state conquered by the proletariat under the form of a basically democratic republic can be a real “servant of society”.

Is it not plain that when he speaks this way and identifies, at the same time, such a democratic republic with the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, Engels is not employing the latter term to indicate *a form of government* but to designate the *social structure* of the state power? It was exactly this that is stressed by Kautsky in his *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* when he says that for Marx such a dictatorship was not a question “of a form of government but of its nature”.¹⁷ An attempt at any other interpretation leads perforce to the appearance of a flagrant contradiction between Marx's affirmation that the Paris Commune was an incarnation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the emphasis he laid on the total

democracy established by the Paris Communards.

Lenin's text demonstrates that when he really permitted himself to make contact with the viewpoint of the creators of scientific socialism, he rose above a simplistic conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and did not then reduce it to *dictatorial forms of organisation of power* and did not then fasten to the term the meaning of a definite "political structure". In the quotation from *State and Revolution* reproduced above, Lenin puts an equals sign between "dictatorship of the proletariat" and "the leadership of those masses by the proletariat". The equation corresponds entirely to the conception held by Marx and Engels. It is exactly this way that Marx represented the dictatorship of the proletariat under the Paris Commune when he wrote that "this was the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative, even by the great bulk of the Paris middle class – shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants – the wealthy capitalists alone excepted".¹⁸ The voluntary acceptance by the great majority of the population of the hegemony of the working class engaged in the struggle against capitalism, forms the essential basis of the "political structure" that is called the "dictatorship of the proletariat". Similarly, the voluntary acceptance by the popular masses of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie permits us to designate the political structure existing in France, England and the United States as the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie". This dictatorship is not done away with when the bourgeoisie finds it worth while to offer to the peasants and the petty bourgeois, whom it directs, the appearance of sovereignty, by granting them universal suffrage. Similarly, the dictatorship of the proletariat that Marx and Engels had in mind can be realised only on the basis of the sovereignty of all the people and, therefore, only on the basis of the widest possible application of universal suffrage.¹⁹

Therefore, when we consider the opinions of Marx and Engels on the dictatorship of the proletariat, on the democratic republic and on the "state that is an evil", we are obliged to arrive at the following conclusion. To Marx and Engels, the problem of the taking of political power by the proletariat is bound up with the destruction of the bureaucratic-military machine, which rules the bourgeois state in spite of the existence of democratic parliamentarism.

To Marx and Engels, the problem of the dictatorship of the proletariat is bound to the establishment of a state based on genuine and total democracy, on universal suffrage, on the widest local self-administration, and has, as its corollary, the existence of the effective hegemony of the proletariat over the majority of the population. In that regard, Marx and Engels continue and extend the political tradition of the Mountain of

1793 and the Chartists of the O'Brien school.

It is true, however, that it is possible to discover in the works of Marx and Engels the traces of other ideas. These appear to offer ground to theses according to which the *forms*, and even the *institutions*, that may embody the political power of the proletariat, take on an essentially new character, opposed in principle to the forms and institutions that embody the political power of the bourgeoisie, and opposed in principle to the *state* as such. These ideas belong to a special cycle and merit a separate study. We shall deal with them in the following sections.

The Commune of 1871

When he considered the Commune in his writings, Marx could not merely present his views on the dictatorship of the proletariat. The uprising had many enemies. The first thing to be done was to defend the Commune against the calumny of its enemies. It was natural for this circumstance to influence Marx's manner of dealing with the slogans and ideas of the movement that produced the events of March 1871.

Because the revolutionary explosion which led to the seizure of Paris by the armed people on 18 March 1871 was the expression of a fierce class struggle, it also provoked a conflict between the democratic-republican population of the large city and the conservative population of the provinces, especially that of the rural districts.

During the preceding two decades, the "backward" peasantry of France helped to crush revolutionary and republican Paris by supporting the extreme bureaucratic centralism of the Second Empire. As a result of this, the revolt of the Parisian democracy against the national representatives sitting at Versailles, appeared at first as a struggle for *municipal autonomy*.²⁰ This circumstance gained for the Commune the sympathy of many bourgeois radicals, people who were for administrative decentralisation and wide local autonomy. For some time, this aspect of the Paris Commune of 1871 hid the real nature and historic meaning of their movement even from the most outstanding Communards.

In his book of recollections of the International, the anarchist Guillaume tells how immediately after the outbreak of the revolt the Jura Federation sent their delegate Jacquault to Paris, in order to learn what would be the best way of helping the uprising, which the Jurassians considered to be the beginning of a universal social revolution. Great was the surprise of the men of Jura when their delegate returned with a report of the total lack of understanding shown by E. Varlin, the most influential of the "left" militants among the French Internationalists. According to Varlin, it appears, the uprising had a purely local aim – the conquest municipal liberties for Paris. According to Varlin, the conquest of these liberties was not

expected to have any social and revolutionary repercussions in the rest of Europe. (*L'Internationale, Souvenirs*, Vol.2, p.133.)

It is understood that this could have been said only during the first days of the Commune. Soon the historic scope of their revolution began to become clear to the Paris proletariat. It is nevertheless true that the Commune never completely freed itself from the bourgeois conceptions that wanted to limit its aims to questions of municipal autonomy.

It is this lack of *ideological* clarity in the Communards' minds that Marx later attacked in a letter to Kugelmann. In this letter, Marx mentions a demonstration staged against him by Communard refugees in London, and takes the occasion to recall that it was he, however, who had "vindicated" the revolution of 1871.²¹ Marx "vindicated" the Commune by revealing its historic meaning, a meaning that the Communard combatants themselves were unaware of.

But the Commune was influenced by other ideologies besides that of bourgeois radicalism. It also bore the imprint of anarchist Proudhonism and Hébertist Blanquism, the two tendencies that fused in the general French working class movement. The representatives of these currents of thought sought in the Paris Commune a content that was diametrically opposed to that which the democratic bourgeoisie wanted to put into it. The semblance of identity between the social-revolutionary and the bourgeois radical viewpoints was only due to the fact that both took a common stand against the bureaucratic and centralising leanings of the state apparatus left by the Second Empire.

During the last few years before the Commune, the French Blanquists managed to make some contact with the working people of their country. They partially passed beyond the bourgeois Jacobinism under whose influence (and the influence of the Babeuf school) they grew up. While they did not cease to draw their political inspiration from the heritage of the 18th century revolution, the most active representatives of Blanquism became more circumspect in regard to the Jacobin forms of democracy and revolutionary dictatorship. They tried to find for the proletarian movement of their time an ideological support in the revolutionary tradition of the "Hébertists", the extreme Left of the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution.

In 1793-1794, Hébert and his partisans found support among the real *sans-culottes* of the Parisian faubourgs, whose vague social and revolutionary hopes they tried to interpret. By means of this support, the Hébertists strove to turn the Paris Commune into an instrument by which they might exert pressure on the central government. Making use of the direct help of the armed populace, the Hébertists wanted to

transform the Paris Commune of 1794 into a centre possessing total revolutionary power. As long as Robespierre had not as yet reduced it to the level of a subordinate administrative mechanism (and he did that by crushing the Hébertists and sending their chiefs to the guillotine), the Commune of 1794 really represented the active revolutionary elements among the Parisian *sans-culottes*, by whom it had been chosen. Up to then, it incarnated the instinctive desire of the masses of the city poor to impose their dictatorship on rural and provincial France with its backward political conceptions.²² The Commune, as the instrument of the revolutionary will and the direct revolutionary action of the propertyless masses, contrasted to the democratic state, became the political ideal of the young Blanquists during the latter years of the Second Empire.²³

In the course of the Revolution of 18 March, another political trend, that of the anarcho-Proudhonists, became visible. It moved alongside the "Hébertist" current, at times mingling with it. Both tendencies saw in the "commune" a lever of revolution. But to the Proudhonists the commune did not appear to be a political, and specifically revolutionary, organisation that, pitted against the just as political, and more or less democratic, state, was to obtain the effective submission of the latter by means of the dictatorship of Paris over France. They opposed every form of the state as an "arti-ficial" – that is, political – grouping, established on the basis of the subordination of the citizenry to an apparatus, even under the fallacious guise of popular representation. The "commune" they had in mind was the "natural" social organisation of producers.

According to their outlook, the commune was not merely to rise *above* the state, or subject the latter to its dictatorship. It was also to *separate* itself from the state, and invite all the 36,000 *communes* (cities and villages) of France to proceed the same way, thus decomposing the state and substituting for it a free federation of communes.

"What does Paris want?" asked *La Commune* on 19 April, and it answered its own question as follows: "The extension of the absolute autonomy of the Commune to all the localities of France, assuring to each its rights, to every Frenchmen the complete exercise of his faculties and aptitudes as a human being, citizen and worker. The autonomy of the Commune will be limited to the right of equal autonomy of all the communes participating in the pact. Such an association will assure French unity."

Logically flowing from this stand was a *federalist* programme in the Proudhon-Bakuninist spirit, recognising a voluntary and elastic pact as the only tie between the communes and excluding the complicated apparatus of a general state administration. The Communards were quite

pleased when they were nicknamed “federalists”.

“On 18 March”, wrote the Bakuninist Arthur Arnoult, a member of the Commune (*Popular History of the Commune*, Russian translation, p.243), “the people declared that it was necessary to escape the vicious circle, that it was necessary to destroy the evil in the egg, that the thing to be done was not merely to change masters, but no longer to have any. In a miraculous recognition of the truth, seeking to reach the goal by all the roads leading to it, the people proclaimed the autonomy of the Commune and a federation of communes. For the first time, we were to interpret the real rules, the just and normal laws, which assure the true independence of the individual and the communal or corporative group, and to effect a bond between the various homogeneous groupings, so that they might enjoy, at the same time, union, in which there is strength ... and autonomy, which is indispensable to ... the infinite development of all the original capacities and qualities of production and progress.”

This communal federalism appeared to the anarcho-Proudhonists to be the organisation in which the economic relation of the producers would find their *direct* expression. “Each autonomous grouping”, continues Arnoult, “communal or corporative, depending on circumstances, will have to solve, within its own framework, the social question, that is, the problem of property, the relation between labour and capital, etc.” Note the restriction: “communal or corporative, depending on circumstances.” The viewpoint of the federalist-Communard approaches quite closely to the outlook which, in 1834, led Morrison and Smith to their formula of a “House of Trades”; which, at the beginning of the 20th century, gave rise to the doctrine of Georges Sorel, Edouard Berth, De Leon and others, on the replacement of the “artificial” subdivisions existing in the modern state by a federation of “natural” corporative (occupational) cells; and which, in 1917-1919, created the conception of the “soviet system”.

“Communal groupings”, comments Arnoult later, “correspond to the ancient political organisation. The corporative grouping corresponds to the *social* organisation” (emphasis added). Thus the communal organisation was to serve as a *transition* between the state and the “corporative” federation.

This opposition of a “political” organisation to a “social” organisation presumes that the “destruction of the state machinery” by the proletariat will immediately re-establish among the producers “natural” relations, which supposedly can only manifest themselves outside of political norms and institutions. This contrast underlay the social-revolutionary tendencies that were in favour among the Communards.

“Everything that the socialists stand for, and

which they will not be able to obtain from a strong and centralised power, no matter how democratic, without formidable convulsions, without a ruinous, painful and cruel struggle – they will get in an orderly manner, with certainty, and without violence, through the simple development of the communal principle of free grouping and federation. The solution of these problems can belong only to the corporative and productive groupings, united by federative ties, and therefore free from governmental and administrative – in other words, *political* – shackles, which till now have maintained, by oppression, the antagonism between capital and labour, subjecting the latter to the first” (ibid, p.250, emphasis added).

That is how *the most advanced* of the Communards – the combatants who were closest to the social-revolutionary class movement of the French proletariat of the time – conceived the substance and scope of the Commune of 1871.

Charles Seignobos is obviously wrong when he states (in his note on the Commune, found in the *History of the 20th Century* by Lavissee and Rambaud) that the revolutionaries renounced their initial aim – the seizure of power in France – and rallied to the cause of the autonomous commune of Paris, because they found themselves isolated from the rest of France and had to pass to the defensive. The latter circumstance merely helped the triumph of the anarcho-federalist ideas in the development of the Commune. If in the programme of the Communards, the Hébertist conception of the Commune as the dictator of France ceded ground to the Proudhonist idea of an apolitical federation, it is because the class character of the struggle between Paris and Versailles came out in the open. At that time, the class consciousness of the proletarians in the small industries of Paris gravitated entirely around the ideological opposition of a “natural” union of producers within society to the “artificial” unification of the producers within the state.

We have seen how, at the beginning, Varlin presented the Commune as a thing of pure democratic radicalism. In its proclamation of 23 March 1871, the Paris section of the International declared that: “The independence of the Commune is the guarantee of a contract whose freely debated clauses will do away with class antagonism and assure social equality.” This means the following. After the state and the power of constraint exercised by the state had collapsed, it becomes possible to create a simple “natural” social bond among the members of society – a bond based on their economic interdependence. And it is precisely the commune that is destined to become the framework within the limits of which this bond can be realised.

“We have demanded the emancipation of the workers”, continues the proclamation, “and the

communal delegation is the guarantee of this emancipation. For it will provide every citizen with the means of defending his rights, of controlling effectively the acts of the mandatories charged with the administration of his interests, and of determining the progressive application of social reforms.”²⁴

It is easily seen that for the anarchist idea of a *commune of labour* – that is, a union of producers, as contrasted to a union of citizens within the state – the proclamation discreetly substitutes the idea of a *political* commune, the prototype of the modern state, a state microcosm, inside of which the representation of interests and the satisfaction of social needs become specialised functions, just as (though certainly in a more rudimentary form) in the complicated mechanism of the modern state. P. Lavrov understood this quite well. He thus notes in his book on the Commune (P. Lavrov: *The Paris Commune*, p.130, Russian edition):

“In the course of the 19th century, the unity of communal interests disappeared entirely before the increased struggle of classes. As a moral entity, the commune *did not exist at all* [emphasis by Lavrov]. In each commune [municipality] the irreducible camps of the proletariat and the big bourgeoisie faced each other, and the struggle was further complicated by the presence of many groups of the small bourgeoisie. For a moment, Paris was united by a common *emotion*: irritation with the Bordeaux and Versailles Assemblies. But a passing emotion cannot be the basis of a political regime.”

He adds (p.167): “The effective autonomous basis of the regime, to which the social revolution will lead, is not at all the political commune, which admits inequality, the promiscuity of the parasites and labourers, etc. It is formed rather by a *conjointly responsible* grouping of workers of every kind, rallied to the programme of the *social revolution*” (emphasis added).

P. Lavrov speaks clearly of a “confusion of two notions: (1) the autonomous political commune (municipality), the ideal of the Middle Ages, in the struggle for which the bourgeoisie solidified itself and grew strong during the first stages of its history; and (2) the autonomous commune of the proletariat, which is to appear after the economic victory of the proletariat over its enemies, after the establishment, *within* the community, of a social solidarity that is inconceivable as long as the economic exploitation of labour by capital continues, and, therefore, as long as class hatred within each community is inevitable. When we analyse the demands of communal autonomy, as they were generally formulated in the course of the struggle in question, we may ask what relation could the unquestioned socialists of the Paris Commune see between the fundamental problem of socialism – the struggle of labour against capital – and the slogan of the ‘free commune’ which they

inscribed on their flag?”

The paradox indicated by Lavrov consists of the following. The very possibility of the process of trans-forming the capitalist order into a socialist order is subordinated to the existence of a social form whose mould, we believe, can only be furnished by a more or less developed socialist economy. This confusion is typical of the anarchists. If it is obvious that the destruction of the basis of private economy, the transformation of the whole natural economy into socialist economy, will do away with the need of having an organisation rise above the producer in the shape of the state – the anarchists deduce from this that “the destruction of the state”, its “decomposition” into cells, into “communes,” is a *prerequisite condition* for the social transformation itself. There existed in the ideology of the Communards a Juxtaposition of Proudhonist, Hébertist and bourgeois-autonomist notions. So that in their discussions, they passed with the greatest of ease from the political “commune” – a territorial unit created by the preceding evolution of bourgeois society – to the “corporative” commune – the free association of workers, which we may imagine will be the social grouping when a socialist order has been achieved and the collective effort of one or two generations will have rendered possible “the progressive atrophy of the state” as predicted by Engels.

The interesting exposition made Dunoyer, one of the witnesses who appeared before the inquest commission appointed by the Versailles National Assembly after the fall of the Commune (quoted by Lavrov in his *Paris Commune*, p.166), suggests the following conclusion. The “communalist” ideas, as they were conceived in the minds of the workers, merely represented an attempt to transplant into the structure of society the forms of *their own* combat organisation: “In 1871, the grouping of the workers within the International by sections and federations of sections was one of the elements that contributed toward the spread of the commune idea in France.” The International “possessed a ready-made organisation, where the word ‘commune’ stood for the word ‘section’ and the federation of communes was nothing else than the federation of sections.”

Compare this statement with the citations that we made, in the preceding section, from the writings of the English trade unionists of 1834, whose programmes called for the replacement of the parliamentary bourgeois state with a “Federation of Trades”. Let us recall the analogous theses of the French syndicalists in the 20th century. And let us not forget that in our time working people take to “the idea of the soviets” after knowing them as combat organisations formed in the process of the class struggle at a sharp revolutionary stage.

In all the “commune” theses we discover one

recurring point. It consists in spurning the “state” as the instrument of the revolutionary transformation of society in the direction of socialism. On the other hand, Marxism, as it developed since 1848, is characterised especially by the following.

In accordance with the tradition of Babeuf and Blanqui, Marxism recognises the state (naturally after its conquest by the proletariat) as the principal lever of this transformation. That is why already in the '60s the anarchists and Proudhonists denounced Marx and Engels as “statists”.

What then was the attitude taken by Marx and Engels toward the experience provided by the Paris Commune, when the proletariat tried for the first time to realise a socialist “dictatorship”?

Marx and the Commune

The Proudhonists and the anarchists were not greatly addicted to the study of economics. They had a naive, almost simplistic, conception of what would follow the seizure of the means of production by the working class. They did not realise that capitalism has created, for the concentration of the means of production and distribution, so huge an apparatus, that in order to lay hold of these means, the working class would require effective administrative machinery extending over the entire economic domain that was previously ruled by capital. They had no idea of the immenseness and complexity of the transformation that would come as a result of a social revolution. And only because they did not understand all these things was it possible for them to think of the autonomous “commune” – itself based on “autonomous” productive units – as the lever of such a transformation.

Marx was well aware of the preponderant role played by anarcho-Proudhonism in the movement that brought forth the Paris Commune. In a letter to Engels (20 June 1866), he refers ironically to “Proudhonised Stirnerianism”, according to which “Everything [is] to be broken down into small ‘groupes’ or ‘communes’, which in turn form an ‘association’, but not a state” (*Correspondence*, Vol.3).²⁵

In 1871, however, Marx faced the task of defending the Paris Commune against its enemies, who were drowning it in blood. He faced the task of justifying, in the shape of the Commune, the first attempt of the proletariat to seize power. If the Paris Commune had not been crushed by external forces, this effort would have led the workers beyond its first aims and shattered the narrow ideological bounds that repressed its vigour and denatured its content.

We can, therefore, understand why, in his apology for the Commune, Marx could not even pose the question of whether the realisation of socialism is conceivable within the framework of autonomous, city and rural, communes. In face

of the existing division of labour, economic centralisation and the degree of development of the powerful means of production already attained at that time – merely to pose the question would have been tantamount to a categorical rejection of the claim that the autonomous commune could “solve the social question”.

We can understand why Marx avoided the question of whether a federalist union of communes could assure systematic social production on the scale customary to the preceding capitalism. We can understand why Marx touches only lightly on one of the most serious problems of the social revolution – the relationship between the city and the country – and merely declares, without any supporting evidence, that “the Communal Constitution [organisation] brought the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts, and there secured to them, in the working man, the natural trustees of their interests”.²⁶ But would it be possible to hold the socialist economy in the framework of a federation of autonomous communes while this federation permitted the economic direction of the country by the city? Marx could permit himself to “adjourn” all these questions. He could assume that such problems would automatically find their solution in the process of the social revolution and would, at the same time, cast out the anarcho-communalist illusions that prevailed in the minds of the workers at the beginning.

But Marx did not merely remain silent on such contradictions of the Paris Commune. It is undeniable that he attempted to solve them by recognising the Commune as “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical eman-cipation of Labour”,²⁷ and thus contradicted his own principle, that the lever of the social revolution can only be the conquest of *state power*.

“The Communal Constitution”, declared Marx, “would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society” (*The Civil War in France*). “The very existence of the Commune involved, as a matter of course, local municipal liberty, but no longer as a check upon the, *now superseded*, State power” (emphasis added).²⁸

Thus, the “destruction of the bureaucratic and military machine” of the state, dealt with in Marx’s letter to Kugelmann, changed imperceptibly and came to stand for the suppression of all state power, of *any* apparatus of compulsion in the service of the social administration. The destruction of the “power of the modern state”, the Continental type of state, became the destruction of the state as such.

Are we in the presence of an intentional lack of precision, enabling Marx to gloss over, in

silence, the weak points of the Paris Commune at a moment when the Commune was being trampled by triumphant reaction? Or did the mighty surge of the revolutionary proletariat of Paris, set in motion under the flag of the Commune, render acceptable to Marx certain ideas of Proudhonist origin? No matter what is the case, it is true that Bakunin and his friends concluded that in his *Civil War in France* Marx approved of the social-revolutionary path traced by them. So that in his memoirs, James Guillaume (Guillaume, *L'Internationale*, Vol.2, p.191) observes with satisfaction that, in its appreciation of the Commune, the General Council of the International (under whose auspices *The Civil War* was published) adopted in full the viewpoint of the federalists. And Bakunin announced triumphantly: "The Communalist revolution had so mighty an effect that despite their logic and real inclinations, the Marxists – with all their ideas overthrown by the Commune – were obliged to bow before the insurrection and appropriate its aims and programme." Such statements are not free from exaggeration. But they contain a grain of truth.

It is these, not very precise, opinions of Marx on the destruction of the state by a proletarian insurrection and the creation of the Commune that Lenin recognises as the basis of the new social-revolutionary doctrine he presumes to reveal. On the top of these opinions of Marx, Lenin raises the anarcho-syndicalist canvas, picturing the destruction of the state as the immediate result of the conquest of the dictatorship by the proletariat, and replacing the state with that "political form 'at last discovered'", which in 1871 was embodied in the Commune and is represented today by the "soviets" – since "the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, in different circumstances and under different conditions, continue the work of the Commune and confirm Marx's brilliant historical analysis" (*The State and Revolution*, p.53, Russian text).²⁹

Already in 1899, in his well-known *Principles of Socialism*, Eduard Bernstein observed that in *The Civil War* Marx appears to have taken a step toward Proudhon: "In spite of all the other points of difference between Marx and the 'petty-bourgeois' Proudhon, on these points their lines of reasoning run as close as could be." Bernstein's words throw Lenin into a great fit of anger. "Monstrous! Ridiculous! Renegade!" screams Lenin at Bernstein, and he takes the opportunity to revile Plekhanov and Kautsky for not correcting "this distortion of Marx by Bernstein" in their polemics against Bernstein's book.³⁰

But Lenin could have attacked on the same count the "Spartacist" Franz Mehring, unquestionably the best student of, and commentator on Marx. In his *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* (Leipzig, 1918), Mehring declares explicitly, leaving

no room for doubt:

"As ingenious as were some of Marx's arguments [on the Commune], they were to a certain extent in contradiction with the conceptions championed by Marx and Engels for a quarter of a century and previously formulated by them in the *Communist Manifesto*. According to these conceptions, the decomposition of the political organisation referred to as the 'state' evidently belongs among the final accomplishments of the coming proletarian revolution. It will be a *progressive decomposition*. That organisation has always had as its principal purpose to assure, with the aid of the armed forces, the economic oppression of the working majority by a privileged minority. The disappearance of the privileged minority will do away with the need of the armed force of oppression, that is, state power. But at the same time Marx and Engels emphasised that in order to achieve this – as well as other, even more important, results – the working class will first have to possess itself of the organised political power of the state and use it for the purpose of crushing the resistance of the capitalists and recreating society on a new basis. *It is difficult to reconcile the General Council's lavish praise of the Paris Commune, for having commenced by destroying the parasitic state, with the conceptions presented in the Communist Manifesto*" (p.460, emphases added). And Mehring adds: "One can easily guess that Bakunin's disciples have utilised the address of the General Council in their own fashion."

Mehring is of the opinion that Marx and Engels clearly saw the contradiction existing between the theses presented in *The Civil War* and their previous way of posing the problem as a question of the conquest of state power. He writes: "Thus, when, after Marx's death, Engels had the occasion to combat the anarchist tendencies, he, for his part at least, repudiated these reservations and resumed integrally the old conceptions found in the *Manifesto*."³¹

What are the "old conceptions found in the *Manifesto*?" They are the following: (1) The working class seizes the state machine forged by the bourgeoisie. (2) It *democratizes* this machine from top to bottom. (See the immediate measures which, according to the *Manifesto*, the proletariat of that time would have had to enact when it seized power.) It thus transforms the machinery formerly used by the minority for the oppression of the majority into a machine of constraint exercised by the majority over the minority, with a view of freeing the majority from the yoke of social inequality. That means, as Marx wrote in 1852, not merely to seize the ready-made machinery of the state, of the bureaucratic, police and military type, but to *shatter* that machine in order to construct a new one on the basis of the self-administration of the people under the leadership of the proletariat.

Lenin put to his own use the inexact formulae

found in *The Civil War in France*. These formulae were sufficiently motivated by the immediate need of the General Council to defend the Commune (directed by the Hébertists and the Proudhonists) against its enemies. But they did away almost completely with the margin existing between the thesis of the “conquest of political power” presented by the Marxists and the idea of the “destruction of the state” held by the anarchists. On the eve of the revolution of October 1917, in his struggle against the republican democratism practiced by the socialist parties which he opposed, Lenin used these formulae with such good effect that he accumulated in his *State and Revolution* as many contradictions as were found in the heads of all the members of the Commune: Jacobins, Blanquists, Hébertists, Proudhonists and anarchists. Objectively, this was necessary (Lenin himself did not realise it, without doubt) so that an attempt to create a state machine *very similar* in its structure to the former military and bureaucratic type and controlled by a few adherents³² might be presented to the masses, then in a condition of revolutionary animation, as the destruction of the old state machine, as the rise of a society based on a minimum of repression and discipline, as the birth of a *stateless* society. At the moment when the revolutionary masses expressed their emancipation from the centuries-old yoke of the old state by forming “autonomous republics of Kronstadt” and trying anarchist experiments such as “workers’ control”, etc – at that moment, the “dictatorship of the proletariat and the poorest peasants” (said to be incarnated in the real dictatorship of the supposed “true” inter-preters of the proletariat and the poorest peasants: the chosen of Bolshevik Communism) could only consolidate itself by first dressing itself in such anarchist and anti-state ideology.

The formula of “All Power to the Soviets” was found to be most appropriate to express mystically a tendency that agitated the revolutionary elements of the population at that time. This slogan presented to the revolutionary elements of the population two contradictory aims: (1) the creation of a machine that would crush the exploiting classes to the benefit of the exploited; but (2) which would, at the same time, free the exploited from *any* state machinery pre-supposing the need of subordinating their wills as individuals or groups to the will of the social entity.

No different in origin and significance is the “soviet mysticism” now current in Western Europe.

In Russia itself the evolution of the “soviet state” has already created a new and very complicated state machine based on the “administration of persons” as against the “admin-

istration of things”, based on the opposition of “administration” to “self-administration” and the functionary (official) to the citizen. These antagonisms are in no way different from the antagonisms that characterise the capitalist class state.

The economic retrogression that appeared during the World War has *simplified* economic life in all countries. One of the results of this simplification is the eclipse, in the consciousness of the masses, of the problem of the organisation of production by the problem of distribution and consumption. This phenomenon encourages in the working class the rebirth of illusions in the possibility of laying hold of the national economy by handing over the means of production directly – with the aid of the state – to single groups of workers (“workers’ control”, “direct socialisation”, etc).

From the ground provided by such economic illusions, we see rise again the fallacy that the liberty of the working class can be accomplished by the *destruction* of the state and not by the *conquest* of the state. This belief throws back the revolutionary working class movement toward the confusion, indefiniteness and low ideological level that characterised it at the time of the Commune of 1871.

On the one hand, such illusions are manipulated by certain extremist minorities of the socialist proletariat. On the other hand, these groups are themselves the slaves of these illusions. It is under the influence of this double factor that these minorities act when they seek to find a practical medium by which they might elude the difficulties connected with the realisation of a real class dictatorship – difficulties that have increased since the class in question has lost its unity in the course of the war and is not capable of immediately giving battle with a revolutionary aim. *Fundamentally, this anarchist illusion of the destruction of the state covers up the tendency to concentrate all the state power of constraint in the hands of a minority, which believes neither in the objective logic of the revolution nor in the class consciousness of the proletarian majority and, with still greater reason, that of the national majority.*

The idea that the “soviet system” is equal to a definitive break with all the former, bourgeois, forms of revolution, therefore, serves as a screen behind which – imposed by external factors and the inner conformation of the proletariat – there are again set in motion methods that have featured in the bourgeois revolutions. And those revolutions have always been accomplished by transferring the power of a “conscious minority, supporting itself on an unconscious majority”, to another minority finding itself in an identical situation.

Part Three: Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

IN HER polemic against Eduard Bernstein, Rosa Luxemburg declared, quite correctly, that: “There was no doubt for Marx and Engels about the necessity of having the proletariat conquer political power.”¹ However, the conditions under which this conquest was to be accomplished did not appear the same to Marx and Engels at different periods of their life.

“At the beginning of their activity”, writes Kautsky in his *Democracy or Dictatorship*, “Marx and Engels were greatly influenced by Blanquism, though they immediately adopted to it a critical attitude. The dictatorship of the proletariat to which they aspired in their first writings still showed some Blanquist features.”²

This remark is not entirely accurate. If it is true that Marx, putting aside the petty-bourgeois revolutionism that coloured the ideology and politics of Blanquism, recognised the Blanquists of 1848 to be a party representing the revolutionary French proletariat, it is no less true that there is nothing in their works to show that Marx and Engels found themselves at that time under the influence of Blanqui and his partisans. Kautsky is right when he points out that Marx and Engels always took toward the Blanquists a wholly critical attitude. It is undeniable that their first conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat arose under the influence of the Jacobin tradition of 1793, with which the Blanquists themselves were penetrated. The powerful historic example of the political dictatorship exercised during the terror by the lower classes of the population of Paris served Marx and Engels as a point of departure in their reflection on the future conquest of political power by the proletariat.

In 1895 (in his preface to *The Class Struggles in France*), Engels drew the balance of the experience that his friend and he had gathered in the revolutions of 1848 and 1871: “The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities *at the head of masses lacking consciousness*, is past” (emphasis added).³ When he said this, Engels recognised that in the first period of their activity, the question for him and Marx was exactly that of the conquest of political power “by small conscious minorities at the head of masses lacking consciousness”. In other words, the problem that seemed to face them was the duplication, in the 19th century, of the experience of the Jacobin dictatorship, with the role of the Jacobins and the Cordeliers taken by the conscious revolutionary elements of the proletariat, supporting themselves on the confused social fermentation of the general population.

By adroit politics, which, because of its knowledge of the practice and theory of scientific

socialism, the vanguard would be able to carry on after its seizure of power, the broad proletarian masses would be introduced to the problems current on the day after the revolution and would thus be raised to the rank of conscious authors of historic action. Only such a conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat could permit Marx and Engels to expect that, after a more or less prolonged lull, the revolution of 1848 – which began as the last grapple between feudal society and the bourgeoisie and by the same internal conflicts occurring between the different layers of bourgeois society – would end in the historic victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie.

In 1895, Engels recognised the inconsistency of this conception. “Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that.”⁴

That does not mean to say, however, that in 1848 Marx and Engels did not entirely realise what were the necessary historic premises of the socialist revolution. Not only did they recognise that the socialist transformation could only come at a very high level of capitalism, but they also denied the possibility of keeping political power in the hands of the proletariat in the case that this imperative condition did not first exist.

In 1846, in his letter to M. Hess, W. Weitling described his break with Marx in the following words: “We arrived at the conclusion that ... there could be no question now of realising communism [in Germany]; that first the bourgeoisie must come to power.” The “we” refers to Marx and Engels, for Weitling says further on: “On this question Marx and Engels had a very violent discussion with me.”⁵ In October-November of 1847, Marx wrote on this subject with clear-cut definiteness in his article, “Moralising Criticism”:

“Incidentally, if the bourgeoisie is politically, that is, by its state power, ‘maintaining injustice in property relations’ [Heinzen’s expression], it is not *creating* it. The ‘injustice in property relations’ ... by no means arises from the political rule of the bourgeois class, but vice versa, the political rule of the bourgeois class arises from these modern relations of production.... If therefore the proletariat overthrows the political rule of the bourgeoisie, *its victory will only be temporary, only an element in the service of the bourgeois revolution itself* [emphasis added], as in the year 1794, as long as in the course of history, in its ‘movement’, the material conditions have not yet been created which make *necessary* [emphasis added] the abolition of the bourgeois mode of production and

therefore also the definitive overthrow of the political rule of the bourgeoisie.” (*Literary Heritage*, Volume II, pp.512-513.)⁶

It appears therefore that Marx admitted the possibility of a political victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie at a point of historic development when the previously necessary conditions for a socialist revolution were not yet mature. But he stressed that such a victory would be transitory, and he predicted with the prescience of genius that a conquest of political power by the proletariat that is premature from the historic viewpoint would be “only an element in the service of the bourgeois revolution itself”.

We conclude that, in the case of a notably “premature” conquest of power, Marx would consider it obligatory for the conscious elements of the proletariat to pursue a policy that takes into consideration the fact that such a conquest represents objectively “only an element in the service of the bourgeois revolution itself”. He would expect a party leading the proletariat to limit voluntarily the posing and the solution of the revolutionary problems. For the proletariat can score a victory over the bourgeoisie – and not for the bourgeoisie – only when “as long as in the course of history, in its ‘movement’, the material conditions have not yet been created which make *necessary* [not merely objectively *possible!*] the abolition of the bourgeois mode of production”.

The following words of Marx explain in what sense a passing victory of the proletariat can become a point in the process of the bourgeois revolution: “The terror in France could thus by its mighty hammer-blows only serve to spirit away, as it were, the ruins of feudalism from French soil. The timidly considerate bourgeoisie would not have accomplished this task in decades. The bloody action of the people thus only prepared the way it.”⁷

The terror in France was the momentary domination of the democratic petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat over all the possessing classes, including the authentic bourgeoisie. Marx indicates very definitely that such a momentary domination cannot be the starting point of a socialist transformation, unless the material factors rendering this transformation indispensable will have first been worked out.

One might say that Marx wrote this specially for the benefit of those people who consider the simple fact of a fortuitous conquest of power by the democratic small bourgeoisie and the proletariat as proof of the maturity of society for the socialist revolution. But it may also be said that he wrote this specially for the benefit of those socialists who believe that never in the course of a revolution that is bourgeois in its objectives can there occur a possibility permitting the political power to escape from the hands of the bourgeoisie and pass to the democratic masses. One may say

that Marx wrote this also for the benefit of those socialists who consider utopian the mere idea of such a displacement of power and who do not realise that this phenomenon is “only a point in the process of the bourgeois revolution itself”, that it is a factor assuring, under certain conditions, the most complete and radical suppression of the obstacles rising in the way of this bourgeois revolution.

The European revolution of 1848 did not lead to the conquest of political power by the proletariat. Soon after the June days, Marx and Engels began to realise that the historic conditions for such a conquest were not yet ripe. However, they continued to overestimate the pace of historic development and expected, as we know, a new revolutionary assault shortly after, even before the last wave of the tempest of 1848 had died away. They found new factors that seemed to favour the possibility of having political power pass into the hands of the proletariat, not only in the experience gathered by the latter in the class combats during the “mad year” but also in the evolution undergone by the small bourgeoisie, which seemed to be pushed irresistibly to a solid union with the proletariat.

In his *Class Struggles in France* and later in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx noted the movement of the small democratic bourgeoisie of the cities toward the proletariat, a movement that took definite form by 1848. And in the second of the indicated works, he announced the probability of a similar movement on the part of the small peasants, hitherto deceived by the dictatorship of Napoleon III, whose principal creators and strongest support they were.

“The interests of the peasants ...”, he wrote, “are no longer, as under Napoleon, in accord with, but in opposition to the interests of the bourgeoisie, to capital. Hence the peasants find their natural ally and leader in the *urban proletariat*, whose task is the overthrow of the bourgeois order.” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire*, German edition, p.102.)⁸

Thus the proletariat apparently no longer had to wait to become the absolute majority in order to win political power. It had grown large as a result of the development of capitalism, and it benefited besides by the support of the small property-holders of the city and country whom the pinched chances of making a living moved away from the capitalist bourgeoisie.

When, after an interruption of twenty years, the revolutionary process was revived to end in the Paris Commune, it was in this new fact that Marx thought he saw an opportunity favouring the solution of the last uprising by the effective and solid dictatorship of the proletariat.

Marx wrote in *The Civil War in France*: “... this was the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class

capable of social initiative, even by the great bulk of the Paris middle-class – shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants – the wealthy capitalists alone excepted.... The same portion of the middle class, after they had assisted in putting down the working men's insurrection of June 1848, had been at once unceremoniously sacrificed to their creditors by the then Constituent Assembly.... They felt that there was but one alternative – the Commune, or the Empire.... In fact, after the exodus from Paris of the high Bonapartist and capitalist *Bohême*, the true middle-class Party of Order came out in the shape of the 'Union Républicaine', enrolling themselves under the colours of the Commune and defending it against the wilful misconstruction of Thiers." (*The Civil War in France*, Russian edition, *Boureviestnik*, pp.36-37.)⁹

Already in 1844, at the time when he was only groping his way to socialism, Marx indicated in his "Introduction to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*" the necessary conditions permitting a revolutionary class to lay claim to a position of dominance in society. For that, it must be recognised by all the masses oppressed under the existing regime as "the class of liberation *par excellence*". This situation is possible when the class against which the struggle is led becomes in the eyes of the masses "the class of overt repression".¹⁰ In 1848 this situation certainly did not exist. The decomposition of small property was not yet far enough advanced.

The situation appeared quite different in 1871. By that time, Marx and Engels had undoubtedly freed themselves from the influence of the Jacobin tradition and, therefore, from their conception of the dictatorship of a "conscious minority" acting at the head of unconscious (not understanding) masses (that is, *masses which are simply in revolt*). It is precisely on the fact that the ruined small property-holders grouped themselves knowingly around the socialist proletariat that the two great theoreticians of scientific socialism based their forecast of the outcome of the Parisian insurrection, which, as we know, began against their wishes. They were correct concerning the city petty bourgeoisie (at least, that of Paris). Contrary to what happened after the June days, the massacre of the Communards in the month of May 1871 was not the work of the entire bourgeois society but only of the big capitalists. The small bourgeoisie participated neither in putting down the Commune nor in the reactionary orgy that followed. Marx and Engels were however, much less correct concerning the peasants. In *The Civil War*, Marx expressed the opinion that only the isolation of Paris and the short life of the Commune had kept the peasants from joining with the proletarian revolution. Pursuing the thread of reasoning of which *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is the beginning, he said:

"The peasant was a Bonapartist, because the great Revolution, with all its benefits to him, was, in his eyes, personified in Napoleon. This delusion, rapidly breaking down under the Second Empire (and in its very nature hostile to the Rurals), this prejudice of the past, how could it have withstood the appeal of the Commune to the living interests and urgent wants of the peasantry. The Rurals – this was, in fact, their chief apprehension – knew that three months' free communication of Communal Paris with the provinces would bring about a general rising of the peasants...." (*The Civil War*, p.38.)¹¹

The history of the Third Republic has demonstrated that Marx was mistaken on this point. In the '70s, the peasants (as, moreover, a large part of the urban petty bourgeoisie in the provinces) were still far from a break with capital and the bourgeoisie. They were still far from recognising the latter as the "the class of overt repression", far from considering the proletariat as "the class of liberation" and confiding to it the direction of their movement. In 1895, in his preface to *The Class Struggles*, Engels had to state:

"And once again it was proved *how impossible* even then, twenty years after the time described in our work, this rule of the working class still was" (emphasis added), because "France left Paris in the lurch". (Engels gave also as a cause of the defeat, the absence of unity in the very ranks of the revolting proletariat, which, in proof of its insufficient revolutionary maturity, led it to waste its strength in "unfruitful strife between the Blanquists and Proudhonists".)¹²

But no matter what was the error in Marx's evaluation, he succeeded in outlining very clearly the problems of the dictatorship of the proletariat. "[T]he Commune," he said, "was ... the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly *national Government*." (*The Civil War*, p.38, emphasis added.)¹³

According to Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat does not consist in the crushing by the proletariat of all non-proletarian classes in society. On the contrary, according to Marx, it means the welding to the proletariat of all the "healthy elements" of society – all except the "wealthy capitalists", all except the class against which the historic struggle of the proletariat is directed. Both in its composition and in its tendencies, the government of the Commune was a working men's government. But this government was an expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat not because it was *imposed* by violence on a non-proletarian majority. It did not arise that way. On the contrary, the government of the Commune was a proletarian dictatorship because those workers and those "acknowledged representatives of the working class"¹⁴ had *received the power from the majority itself*. Marx stressed the fact that:

“The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town.... While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society ... universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers in his business.”¹⁵

The completely democratic constitution of the Paris Commune, based on universal suffrage, on the immediate recall of every office-holder by the simple decision of his electors, on the suppression of bureaucracy and the armed force as opposed to the people, on the electiveness of all offices – that is what constitutes, according to Marx, the essence of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He never thinks of opposing such a dictatorship to democracy.

Already in 1847, in his first draft of the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels wrote: “In the first place it [the proletarian revolution] will inaugurate a democratic constitution and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat. Directly in England, where the proletariat already constitutes the majority of the people. Indirectly in France and in Germany, where the majority of the people consists not only of proletarians but also of small peasants and urban petty bourgeois, who are only now becoming proletarianised and in all their political interests are becoming more and more dependent on the proletariat...” (*The Principles of Communism*, Russian translation under the editorship of Zinoviev, p.22.)¹⁶ The first step in the revolution, by the working class, declares the *Manifesto*, “is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy”.¹⁷

Between the elevation of the proletariat to the position of a ruling class and the conquest of democracy, Marx and Engels put an equals sign. They understood the application of this political power by the proletariat only in the forms of a total democracy.

In the measure that Marx and Engels became convinced that the socialist revolution could only be accomplished with the support of the majority of the population accepting *knowingly* the positive programme of socialism – so their conception of a class dictatorship lost its Jacobin content. But what is the positive substance of the notion of the dictatorship once it has been modified in this manner? Exactly that which is formulated with great precision in the programme of our Party [the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party], a programme drafted at a time when the theoretical discussion provoked by “Bernsteinism” led Marxists to polish and define with care certain

expressions which had obviously lost their exact meaning with long usage in the daily political struggle.

The programme of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was the only official programme of a Labour Party that defined the idea of the conquest of political power by the proletariat in the terms of a “class dictatorship”. Bernstein, Jaurès and other critics of Marxism insisted on giving the expression “dictatorship of the proletariat” the Blanquist definition of power held by an organised minority and resting on violence exercised by this minority over the majority. For this reason the authors of the Russian programme were obliged to fix as narrowly as possible the limits of this political idea. They did that by declaring that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the power used by the proletariat to crush all resistance which the exploiting class might oppose to the realisation of the socialist and revolutionary transformation. Simply that.

An effective force concentrated in the state, which can thus realise the conscious will of the majority despite the resistance of an economically powerful minority – here is the dictatorship of the proletariat. It can be nothing else than that in light of the teachings of Marx. Not only must such a dictatorship adapt itself to a democratic regime, but it can only exist in the framework of democracy, that is, under conditions where there is the full exercise of absolute political equality on the part of all citizens. Such a dictatorship can only be conceived in a situation where the proletariat has effectively united about itself “all the healthy elements” of the nation, that is, all those that cannot but benefit by the revolutionary transformation inscribed in the programme of the proletariat. It can only be established when historic development will have brought all the healthy elements to recognise the advantage to them of this transformation. The government embodying such a “dictatorship” will be, in the full sense of the term, a “national government”.

Notes

Part 1

1. Lenin, *Collected Works* (hereafter LCW), Vol.29, 1965, p.227.
2. LCW, Vol.25, 1964, p.481.
3. *Ibid.*, p.429.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.183-90. The pamphlet does not in fact contain the slogan “All Power to the Bolshevik Party”.
5. From an article by Pouget, ‘L’organisation et l’action de la Confédération Générale du Travail’ (‘The Organisation and Action of the General Confederation of Labour’) published in the collection of *Le mouvement social dans la France contemporaine*, pp.34-36. [Author’s note.]
6. Presumably the reference is to Owen’s *A New*

View of Society, or perhaps his *Catechism of the New View of Society*. However, we have been unable to find this precise quotation in either work.

7. Marx-Engels, *Collected Works* (hereafter MECW), Vol.5, 1976, p.7.

8. The suppression of the entire press outside of the official has its partisans and has even been partially tried in Europe under the euphonious label of “socialisation of the press”. [Author’s note.]

Part 2

1. M. Beer, *History of British Socialism*, 1929, Vol.1, p.339.

2. *Ibid.*, p.340.

3. *Ibid.*, p.337.

4. MECW, Vol.6, 1976, p.504.

5. LCW, Vol.25, 1964, p.406.

6. MECW, Vol.11, 1979, p.186, where the translation is given as: “All revolutions perfected this [state] machine instead of breaking it.”

7. MECW, Vol.44, 1989, p.131.

8. MECW, Vol.22, 1986, p.331, where the translation reads: “a republic that was not only to supersede the monarchical form of class-rule, but class-rule itself”.

9. *Ibid.*, p.331.

10. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol.25, p.415.

11. *Ibid.*, p.416.

12. Quoted *ibid.*, p.396, from Engels’ *Anti-Dühring*. Cf. MECW, Vol.25, 1987, p.268, where the translation has it that the state “dies away”.

13. MECW, Vol.27, 1990, p.190.

14. *Ibid.*, p.227.

15. LCW, Vol.25, p.445.

16. MECW, Vol.27, p.190.

17. See K. Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 1964, p.49, where the wording is slightly different.

18. MECW, Vol.22, p.336.

19. In 1903, as is known, George Plekhanov declared that when the revolutionary proletariat had realised its dictatorship, it may find it necessary to deprive the bourgeoisie of all political rights (including the right to vote). [See *1903: Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party*, 1978, p.220.] However, to Plekhanov this was one of the *possibilities*, one of the *contingencies*, of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In my pamphlet *The Struggle Against Martial Law Within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party*, I tried to interpret Plekhanov’s words as presenting an example admissible only in logical abstraction and therefore used by him to illustrate the thesis that “the safety of the revolution is the supreme law” and takes precedence over any other consideration. I expressed the belief that Plekhanov himself probably did not presume that, after they had acquired power, the proletariat of countries that were *economically ripe for socialism* could find themselves in a situation where it was not possible for them to support themselves on the willing acceptance of their direction by the people but, on

the contrary, had to deny to the bourgeois minority, by force, the exercise of political rights. In a private conversation with me, Plekhanov objected to my putting such an interpretation on his words. I understood then that his conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat was not free of a certain kinship with the *Jacobin dictatorship by a revolutionary minority*. [Author’s note.]

20. “The 18th of March took the aspect of a rebellion of Paris against provincial oppression”, writes Paul Louis, the historian of French socialism (*Histoire du socialisme français*, 2nd edition, p.308). [Author’s note.]

21. The quotation is in fact from Marx’s letter to Sorge, 9 November 1871. See MECW, Vol.44, p.271.

22. It is to Hébert’s Commune of Paris and that of Lyon that belongs the credit of initiating the extreme acts of political terror (the September executions, the expulsion of the Girondins from the Convention) and the measures of “consumers’ communism” by which the cities, deprived of resources, attempted to force the petty bourgeoisie of the villages and the outlying provinces to provide them with foodstuffs. It is in the Communes of Paris and Lyon that the expeditions of the “army of provisioning” started. There were organised the “committees of poor” for the purpose of appropriating grain from the contemporary “kulaks”, whom the jargon of the period called “aristocrats”. The two Communes of the French Revolution imposed contributions on the bourgeoisie and “took charge” of the stocks of commodities produced by industry during the preceding years (especially at Lyon). From these organisations emanated the requisition of residences, the forcible attempts to lodge the poor in houses considered too large for their occupants, and other equalitarian measures. If in their quest for historical analogies, Lenin, Trotsky and Radek had shown a greater know-ledge of the past, they would not have tried to tie the genealogy of the soviets to the Commune of 1871 but to the Paris Commune of 1793-94, which was a centre of revolutionary energy and *power* very similar to the institution of their own time. [Author’s note.]

23. In his letter to Marx, 6 July 1869 (*Correspondence*, Vol.4, p.175) [MECW, Vol.43, 1988, p.308], Engels mentions Tridon’s pamphlet, *Les Hébertistes*, in which the author presents the arguments of that wing of Blanquism: “It’s a comic idea that the dictatorship of Paris over France, which *led to the downfall of the first revolution* [emphasis added], could be accomplished without more ado today once again, and with a quite different result.” [Author’s note.]

24. We find today among the Bolsheviks in Russia, and in Western Europe, the same confusion with their specific “political form” that is supposed to accomplish the social emancipation of the proletariat. Also for these people, the question is said to be one of replacing the territorial organ-

isation of the state with unions of producers. Indeed, at first that was described to be the essence of the republic of soviets. This substitution is presented to us, at the same time, (1) as the natural result of the functioning of an achieved socialist regime and (2) as the necessary precondition for the realisation of the social revolution itself. The confusion overflows all boundaries when an attempt is made to remedy it by resorting to the new notion of a “soviet state”. The latter is supposed to incarnate the organised violence of the proletariat and, in that capacity, prepare the ground for the “withering away” of all forms of the state. But at the same time, it is, in principle, supposed to be opposed to the state as such. The Paris Communards reasoned the same way. They permitted themselves to imagine that the commune-state of 1871 was something whose very principle was the opposite of any form of the state, while, in reality, it represented a simplified modern democratic state functioning in the manner of the Swiss canton. [Author’s note.]

25. MECW, Vol.42, 1987, p.287.
 26. MECW, Vol.22, pp.333-4.
 27. Ibid., p.334.
 28. Ibid., pp.333, 334.
 29. LCW, Vol.25, p.432.
 30. Ibid., pp.428-9. [Editorial note.] Of course, Lenin, too, wrote a great deal on the subject of Eduard Bernstein’s book, without taking the trouble of correcting that “distortion”. [Author’s

note.]

31. The translation is given here as it appears in Julius Martov, *The State and the Socialist Revolution*, 1938, pp.53-4. Cf. F.Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, 1936, pp.452-3.

32. Let us recall that Lenin said that if 200,000 proprietors could administer an immense territory in their own interests 200,000 Bolsheviks would do the same thing in the interest of the workers and peasants. [Author’s note.] Cf. ‘Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?’, LCW, Vol.26, 1964, p.111.

Part 3

1. *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 1970, p.81.
2. K. Kautsky, *Demokratie oder Diktatur*, Berlin 1918.
3. MECW, Vol.27, p.520.
4. Ibid.
5. M. Hess, *Briefwechsel*, 1959, pp.150-1.
6. MECW, Vol.6, p.319.
7. Ibid.
8. MECW, Vol.11, p.191.
9. MECW, Vol.22, pp.336-7.
10. Marx, *Early Writings*, Penguin ed., 1992, p.254. Cf. MECW, Vol.3, 1975, p.185.
11. MECW, Vol.22, p.338.
12. MECW, Vol.27, p.514.
13. MECW, Vol.22, p.338.
14. Ibid., p.331.
15. Ibid., pp.331, 332-3, 333.
16. MECW, Vol.6, p.350.
17. Ibid., p.504.