In State and Revolution, Lenin addresses the Marxist notion that the state will whither away. He somewhat reinterprets the idea, and makes prominent the idea of the "dictatorship of the proletariat".

CHAPTER I

Class Society and the State

4. The "Withering Away" of the State and Violent Revolution.

Engels' words regarding the "withering away" of the state enjoy such popularity, they are so often quoted, and they show so clearly the essence of the usual adulteration by means of which Marxism is made to look like opportunism, that we must dwell on them in detail. Let us quote the whole passage from which they are taken.

The proletariat seizes state power, and then transforms the means of production into state property. But in doing this, it puts an end to itself as the proletariat, it puts an end to all class differences and class antagonisms, it puts an end also to the state as the state. Former society, moving in class antagonisms, had need of the state, that is, an organisation of the exploiting class at each period for the maintenance of its external conditions of production; therefore, in particular, for the forcible holding down of the exploited class in the conditions of oppression (slavery, bondage or serfdom, wage labour) determined by the existing mode of production. The state was the official representative of society as a whole, its embodiment in a visible corporate body; but it was this only in so far as it was the state of that class which itself in its epoch, represented society as a whole: in ancient times, the state of the slaveowning citizens; in the Middle Ages, of the feudal nobility; in our epoch, of the bourgeoisie. When ultimately it becomes really representative of society as a whole, it makes itself superfluous. As soon as there is no longer any class of society to be held in subjection; as soon as, along with class domination and the struggle for individual existence based on the former anarchy of production, the collisions and excesses arising from these have also been abolished, there is nothing more to be repressed, and a special repressive force, a state, is no longer necessary. The first act in which the state really comes forward as the representative of society as a whole—the seizure of the means of production in the name of society—is at the same time its last independent act as a state. The interference of a state power in social relations becomes
superfluous in one sphere after another, and then becomes dormant of itself
Government over persons is replaced by the administration of things and the
direction of the processes of production. The state is not "abolished," it withers
away. It is from this standpoint that we must appraise the phrase "people's free
state"-both its justification at times for agitational purposes, and its ultimate
scientific inadequacy-and also the demand of the so-called Anarchists that the
state should be abolished overnight.

Without fear of committing an error, it may be said that of this argument by Engels so singularly
rich in ideas, only one point has become an integral part of Socialist thought among modern
Socialist parties, namely, that, unlike the Anarchist doctrine of the "abolition" of the state,
according to Marx the state "withers away." To emasculate Marxism in such a manner is to
reduce it to opportunism, for such an "interpretation" only leaves the hazy conception of a slow,
even, gradual change, free from leaps and storms, free from revolution. The current popular
conception, if one may say so, of the 'withering away' of the state undoubtedly means a slurring
over, if not a negation, of revolution.

Yet, such an "interpretation" is the crudest distortion of Marxism, which is advantageous only to
the bourgeoisie; in point of theory, it is based on a disregard for the most important
circumstances and considerations pointed out in the very passage summarising Engels' ideas,
which we have just quoted in full.

In the first place, Engels at the very outset of his argument says that, in assuming state power, the
proletariat by that very act "puts an end to the state as the state." One is "not accustomed" to
reflect on what this really means. Generally, it is either ignored altogether, or it is considered as a
piece of "Hegelian weakness" on Engels' part. As a matter of fact, however, these words express
succinctly the experience of one of the greatest proletarian revolutions-the Paris Commune of
1871, of which we shall speak in greater detail in its proper place. As a matter of fact, Engels
speaks here of the destruction of the bourgeois state by the proletarian revolution, while the word
about its withering away refer to the remains of proletarian statehood after the Socialist
revolution. The bourgeois state does not "wither away" according to Engels, but is "put all end
to" by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after the revolution is the
proletarian state or semi state.

Secondly, the state is a "special repressive force." This splendid and extremely profound
definition of Engels is given by him here with complete lucidity. It follows from this that the
"special repressive force" of the bourgeoisie for the suppression of the proletariat, of the millions
of workers by a handful of the rich, must be replaced by a "special repressive force" of the
proletariat for the suppression of the bourgeoisie (the dictatorship of the proletariat). It is just this
that constitutes the destruction of "the state as the state." It is just as that constitutes the "act" of
"the seizure of the means of production in the name of society." And it is obvious that such a
substitution of one (proletarian) "special repressive force" for another (bourgeois) "special
repressive force" can in no way take place in the form of a "withering away."

Thirdly, as to the "withering away" or, more expressively and colourfully as to the state
"becoming dormant," Engels refers quite clearly and definitely to the period after "the seizure of
the means of production [by the state] in the name of society,” that is, after the Socialist revolution. We all know that the political form of the "state" at that time is complete democracy. But it never enters the head of any of the opportunists who shamelessly distort Marx that when Engels speaks here of the state "withering away," of "becoming dormant," he speaks of democracy. At first sight this seems very strange. But it is "unintelligible" only to one who has not reflected on the fact that democracy is also a state and that, consequently, democracy will also disappear when the state disappears. The bourgeois state can only be "put an end to" by a revolution. The state in general, i.e., most complete democracy, can only "wither away."

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The replacement of the bourgeois by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution. The abolition of the proletarian state, i.e., of all states, is only possible through "withering away."

CHAPTER V

The Economic Base of the Withering Away of the State

1. Formulation of the Question by Marx.

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The whole theory of Marx is an application of the theory of evolution-in its most consistent, complete, wellconsidered and fruitful form-to modern capitalism. It was natural for Marx to raise the question of applying this theory both to the coming collapse of capitalism and to the future evolution of future communism.

On the basis of what data can the future evolution of future Communism be considered?

On the basis of the fact that it has its origin in capitalism, that it develops historically from capitalism, that it is the result of the action of a social force to which capitalism has given birth. There is no shadow of an attempt on Marx's part to conjure up a Utopia, to make idle guesses about that which cannot be known. Marx treats the question of Communism in the same way as a naturalist would treat the question of the evolution of, say, a new biological species, if he knew that such and such was its origin, and such and such the direction in which it changed.

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The first fact that has been established with complete exactness by the whole theory of evolution, by science as a whole-a fact which the Utopians forgot, and which is forgotten by the presentday opportunists who are afraid of the Socialist revolution-is that, historically, there must undoubtedly be a special state or epoch of transition from capitalism to Communism.

2. Transition From Capitalism to Communism.
Marx continues:

*Between capitalist and Communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the former into the latter. To this also corresponds a political transition period, in which the state can be no other than the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.*

This conclusion Marx bases on all analysis of the role played by the proletariat in modern capitalist society, on the data concerning the evolution of this society, and on the irreconcilability of the opposing interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

Earlier the question was put thus to attain its emancipation: the proletariat must overthrow the bourgeoisie, conquer political power and establish its own revolutionary dictatorship.

Now the question is put somewhat differently: the transition from capitalist society, developing towards Communism, towards a Communist society, is impossible without a "political transition period," and the State in this period can only be the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.

What, then, is the relation of this dictatorship to democracy?

We have seen that the *Communist Manifesto* simply places side by side the two ideas: the "transformation of the proletariat into the ruling class" and the "establishment of democracy." On the basis of all that has been said above, one can define more exactly how democracy changes in the transition from capitalism to Communism.

In capitalist society, under the conditions most favourable to its development, we have more or less complete democracy in the democratic republic. But this democracy is always bound by the narrow framework of capitalist exploitation, and consequently always remains, in reality, a democracy for the minority, only for the possessors, only for the rich. Freedom in capitalist society always remains just about the same as it was in the ancient Greek republics: freedom for the slave owners. The modern wageslaves, owing to the conditions of capitalist exploitation are so much crushed by want and poverty that "democracy is nothing to them," "politics is nothing to them"; that, in the ordinary peaceful course of events, the majority of the population is debarred from participating in social and political life.

The correctness of this statement is perhaps most clearly proved by Germany, just because in this state constitutional legality lasted and remained stable for a remarkably long time—over a century (1871-1914)—and because Social Democracy in Germany during that time was able to achieve far more than in other countries in "utilising legality," and was able to organise into a political party a larger proportion of the working class than anywhere in the world.

What, then, is this largest proportion of politically conscious and active wageslaves that has so far been observed in capitalist society? One million members of the Social Democratic party—out of fifteen million wageslaves. Three million organised in trade unions—out of fifteen million.
Democracy for an insignificant minority, democracy for the rich— that is the democracy of capitalist society. If we look more closely into the mechanism of capitalist democracy, everywhere, both in the "petty"—so called petty—details of the suffrage (residential qualification, exclusion of women, etc.), and in the technique of the representative institution, in the actual obstacles to the right of assembly (public buildings are not for "beggars"!), in the purely capitalist organisation of the daily press, etc., etc.—on all sides we see restriction after restriction upon democracy. These restrictions, exceptions, exclusions obstacles for the poor, seem slight, especially in the eyes of one who has himself never known want and has never been in close contact with the oppressed classes in their mass life (and nine tenths, if not ninety-nine hundredths, of the bourgeois publicists and politicians are of this class), but in their sum total these restrictions exclude and squeeze out the poor from politics and from an active share in democracy.

Marx splendidly grasped this essence of capitalist democracy, when, in analysing the experience of the Commune, he said that the oppressed were allowed, once every few years, to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class should be in parliament to represent and repress them!

But from this capitalist democracy—inevitably narrow, subtly rejecting the poor, and therefore hypocritical and false to the core—progress does not march onward, simply, smoothly and directly, to "greater and greater democracy," as the liberal professors and petty bourgeois opportunists would have us believe. No, progress marches onward, i.e., towards Communism, through the dictatorship of the proletariat; it cannot do otherwise, for there is no one else and no other way to break the resistance of the capitalist exploiters.

But the dictatorship of the proletariat—i.e., the organisation of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class for the purpose of crushing the oppressors cannot produce merely an expansion of democracy. Together with an immense expansion of democracy which for the first time becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the rich folk, the dictatorship of the proletariat produces a series of restrictions of liberty in the case of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. We must crush them in order to free humanity from wage slavery; their resistance must be broken by force; it is clear that where there is suppression there is also violence, there is no liberty, no democracy.

Engels expressed this splendidly in his letter to Bebel when he said, as the reader will remember, that "as long as the proletariat still needs the state, it needs it not in the interests of freedom, but for the purpose of crushing its antagonists; and as soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom, then the state, as such, ceases to exist."

Democracy for the vast majority of the people, and suppression by force, i.e., exclusion from democracy, of the exploiters and oppressors of the people—this is the modification of democracy during the transition from capitalism to Communism.

Only in Communist society, when the resistance of the capitalists has been completely broken, when the capitalists have disappeared, when there are no classes (i.e., there is no difference between the members of society in their relation to the social means of production), only then
"the state ceases to exist," and it becomes possible to speak of freedom." Only then a really full democracy, a democracy without any exceptions, will be possible and will be realised. And only then will democracy itself begin to wither away due to the simple fact that, freed from capitalist slavers from the untold horrors, savagery, absurdities, and infamies of capitalist exploitation, people will gradually become accustomed to the observance of the elementary rules of social life that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years in all school books they will become accustomed to observing them without force, with out compulsion, without subordination, without the special apparatus for compulsion which is called the state.

The expression "the state withers away," is very well chosen, for it indicates both the gradual and the elemental nature of the process. Only habit can, and undoubtedly will, have such an effect; for we see around us millions of times how readily people get accustomed to observe the necessary rules of life in common, if there is no exploitation, if there is nothing that causes indignation, that calls forth protest and revolt and has to be suppressed.

Thus, in capitalist society, we have a democracy that is curtailed, poor, false; a democracy only for the rich, for the minority. The dictatorship of the proletariat, the period of transition to Communism, will, for the first time, produce democracy for the people, for the majority, side by side with the necessary suppression of the minority-the exploiters. Communism alone is capable of giving a really complete democracy, and the more complete it is the more quickly will it become unnecessary and wither away of itself.

In other words: under capitalism we have a state in the proper sense of the word, that is, special machinery for the suppression of one class by another, and of the majority b! the minority at that. Naturally, for the successful discharge of such a task as the systematic suppression by the exploiting minority of the exploited majority, the greatest ferocity and savagery of suppression are required, seas of blood are required through which mankind is marching in slavery, serfdom, and wagelabor.

Again, during the transition from capitalism to Communism, suppression is still necessary; but it is the suppression of the minority of exploiters by the majority of exploited. A special apparatus, special machinery for suppression, the "state," is still necessary, but this is now a transitional state, no longer a state in the usual sense, for the suppression of the minority of exploiters, by the majority of the wageslaves of yesterday, is a matter comparatively so easy, simple and natural that it will cost far less bloodshed than the suppression of the risings of slaves, serfs or wage laborers, and will cost mankind far less. This is compatible with the diffusion of democracy among such an overwhelming majority of the population, that the need for special machinery of suppression will begin to disappear. The exploiters are, naturally, unable to suppress the people without a most complex machinery for performing this task; but the people can suppress the exploiters even with very simple "machinery," almost without any "machinery," without any special apparatus, by the simple organisation of the armed masses (such as the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers Deputies, we may remark, anticipating a little).

Finally, only Communism renders the state absolutely unnecessary, for there is no one to be suppressed-"no one" in the sense of a class, in the sense of a systematic struggle with a definite section of the population. We are not Utopians, and we do not in the least deny the possibility
and inevitability of excesses on the part of individual persons, nor the need to suppress such excesses. But, in the first place, no special machinery, no special apparatus of repression is needed for this; this will be done by the armed people itself, as simply and as readily as any crowd of civilised people, even in modern society, parts a pair of combatants or does not allow a woman to be outraged. And, secondly, we know that the fundamental social cause of excesses which consist in violating the rules of social life is the exploitation of the masses, their want and their poverty. With the removal of this chief cause, excesses will inevitably begin to "wither away." We do not know how quickly and in what succession, but we know that they will wither away. With their withering away, the state will also wither away.

Without going into Utopias, Marx defined more fully what can now be defined regarding this future, namely, the difference between the lower and higher phases (degrees, stages) of Communist society.

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Marx continues:


In a higher phase of Communist society, when the enslaving subordination of individuals in the division of labour has disappeared, and with it also the antagonism between mental and physical labour; when labour has become not only a means of living, but itself the first necessity of life; when, along with the allround development of individuals, the productive forces too have grown, and all the springs of social wealth are flowing more freely - it is only at that stage that it will be possible to pass completely beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights, and for society to inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability; to each according to his needs!

Only now can we appreciate the full correctness of Engels' remarks in which he mercilessly ridiculed all the absurdity of combining the words "freedom" and "state." While the state exists there is no freedom. When there is freedom, there will be no state.

The economic basis for the complete withering away of the state is that high stage of development of Communism when the antagonism between mental and physical labour disappears, that is to say, when one of the principal sources of modern social inequality disappears-a source, moreover, which it is impossible to remove immediately by the mere conversion of the means of production into public property, by the mere expropriation of the capitalists.

This expropriation will make a gigantic development of the productive forces possible. And seeing how incredibly, even now, capitalism retards this development, how much progress could be made even on the basis of modern technique at the level it has reached, we have a right to say, with the fullest confidence, that the expropriation of the capitalists will inevitably result in a gigantic development of the productive forces of human society. But how rapidly this
development will go forward, how soon it will reach `the point of breaking away from the
division of labour, of removing the antagonism between mental and physical labour, of
transforming work into the "first necessity life"- this we do not and cannot know.

Consequently, we have a right to speak solely of the inevitable withering away of the state,
emphasising the protracted nature of this process and its dependence upon the rapidity of
development of the higher phase of Communism; leaving quite open the question of lengths of
time, or the concrete forms of withering away, since material for the solution of such questions is
not available.

The state will be able to wither away completely when society has realised the rule: "From each
according to his ability; to each according to his needs"; i.e., when people have become
accustomed to observe the fundamental rules of social life, and their labour is so productive, that
they voluntarily work according to their ability. "The narrow horizon of bourgeois rights," which
compels one to calculate, with the hard heartedness of a Shylock, whether he has not worked half
an hour more than another, whether he is not getting less play than another- this narrow horizon
will then be left behind. There will then be no need for any exact calculation by society of the
quantity of products to be distributed to each of its members; each will take freely "according to
his needs."

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What is generally called Socialism was termed by Marx the "first" or lower phase of Communist
society. In so far as the means of production became public property, the word "Communism" is
also applicable here, providing we do not forget that it is not full Communism. The great
significance of Marx's elucidations consists of this: that here, too, he consistently applied
materialist dialectics, the doctrine of evolution, looking upon Communism as something which
evolves out of capitalism. Instead of artificial, "elaborate," scholastic definitions and profitless
disquisitions on the meaning of words (what Socialism is, what Communism is), Marx gives an
analysis of what may be called stages in the economic ripeness of Communism.

In its first phase or first stage Communism cannot as yet be economically ripe and entirely free
of all tradition and of all taint of capitalism. Hence the interesting phenomenon of Communism
retaining, in its first phase, "the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights." Bourgeois rights, with
respect to distribution of articles of consumption, inevitably presupposes, of course, the existence
of the bourgeois state, for rights are nothing without an apparatus capable of enforcing the
observance of the rights.

Consequently, for a certain time not only bourgeois rights, but even the bourgeois state remains
under Communism, without the bourgeoisie !

This may look like a paradox, or simply a dialectical puzzle for which Marxism is often blamed
by people who would not make the least effort to study its extraordinarily profound content.

But, as a matter of fact, the old surviving in the new confronts us in life at every step, in nature as
well as in society. Marx did not smuggle a scrap of "bourgeois" rights into Communism of his
own accord; he indicated what is economically and politically inevitable in a society issuing from the womb of capitalism.

Democracy is of great importance for the working class in its struggle for freedom against the capitalists. But democracy is by no means a limit one may not overstep; it is only one of the stages in the course of development from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to Communism.

Democracy means equality. The great significance of the struggle of the proletariat for equality, and the significance of equality as a slogan, are apparent, if we correctly interpret it as meaning the abolition of classes. But democracy means only formal equality. Immediately after the attainment of equality for all members of society in respect of the ownership of the means of production, that is, of equality of labour and equality of wages, there will inevitably arise before humanity the question of going further from formal equality to real equality, i.e., to realising the rule, "From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs." By what stages, by means of what practical measures humanity will proceed to this higher aim-this we do not and cannot know. But it is important to realise how infinitely mendacious is the usual bourgeois presentation of Socialism as something lifeless, petrified, fixed once for all, whereas in reality, it is only with Socialism that there will commence a rapid, genuine, real mass advance, in which first the majority and then the whole of the population will take part - an advance in all domains of social and individual life.

Democracy is a form of the state - one of its varieties. Consequently, like every other state, it consists in organised, systematic application of force against human beings. This on the one hand. On the other hand, however, it signifies the formal recognition of the equality of all citizens, the equal right of all to determine the structure and administration of the state. This, in turn, is connected with the fact that at a certain stage in the development of democracy, it first rallies the proletariat as a revolutionary class against capitalism, and gives it an opportunity to crush, to smash to bits, to wipe off the face of the earth the bourgeois state machinery- even its republican variety; the standing army, the police, and bureaucracy; then it substitutes for all this more democratic, but still a state machinery in the shape of armed masses of workers, which becomes transformed into universal participation of the people in the militia.

Here "quantity turns into quality": such a degree of democracy is bound up with the abandonment of the framework of bourgeois society and the beginning of its Socialist reconstruction. If everyone really takes part in the administration of the state, capitalism cannot retain its hold. In its turn, capitalism, as it develops, itself creates prerequisites for "every one" to be able really to take part in the administration of the state. Among such prerequisites are universal literacy, already realised in most of the advanced capitalist countries, then the "training and disciplining" of millions of workers by the huge, complex, and socialised apparatus of the postoffice, the railways, the big factories, largescale commerce, banking, etc., etc.

With such economic prerequisite it is perfectly possible, immediately within twenty-four hours after the overthrow of the capitalists and bureaucrats, to replace them, in the control of production and distribution, in the business of control of labour and products, by the armed workers, by the whole people in arms. (The question of control and accounting must not be
confused with the question of the scientifically educated staff of engineers, agronomists, and so on. These gentlemen work today, obeying the capitalists; they will work even better tomorrow, obeying the armed workers.)

Accounting and control,—these are the chief things necessary for the organising and correct functioning of the first phase of Communist society. All citizens are here transformed into hired employees of the state, which is made up of the armed workers. All citizens become employees and workers of one national state "syndicate." All that is required is that they should work equally, should regularly do their share of work, and should receive equal pay. The accounting and control necessary for this have been simplified by capitalism to the utmost, till these have become the extraordinarily simple operations of watching, recording and issuing receipts, within the reach of anybody who can read and write and knows the first four rules of arithmetic. [note: When most of the functions of the state are reduced to this accounting and control by the workers themselves, then it ceases to be a "political state," and the "public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into simple administrative functions."

When the majority of the people begin everywhere to keep such accounts and maintain such control over the capitalists (now converted into employees) and over the intellectual gentry, who still retain capitalist habits, this control will really become universal, general, national and there will be no way of getting away from it, there will be "nowhere to go".

The whole of society will have become one office and one factory with equal work and equal pay.

But this "factory" discipline which the proletariat will extend to the whole of society after the defeat of the capitalists and the overthrow of the exploiters, is by no mean our ideal, or our final aim. It is but a foothold necessary for the radical cleansing of society of all the hideousness and foulness of capitalist exploitation, in order to advance further.

From the moment when all members of society, or even only the overwhelming majority, have learned how to govern the state themselves, have taken this business into their own hands, have "established" control over the insignificant minority of capitalists, over the gentry with capitalist leanings, and the workers thoroughly demoralised by capitalism—from this moment the need for any government begins to disappear. The more complete the democracy, the nearer the moment when it begins to be unnecessary. The more democratic the "state" consisting of armed workers, which is "no longer a state in the proper sense of the word," the more rapidly does every state begin to wither away.

For when all have learned to manage, and independently are actually managing by themselves social production, keeping accounts, controlling the idlers, the gentlefolk, the swindlers and similar "guardians of capitalist traditions," then the escape from this national accounting and control will inevitably become so increasingly difficult, such a rare exception, and will probably be accompanied by such swift and severe punishment (for armed workers are men of practical life, not sentimental intellectuals, and they will scarcely allow any one to trifle with them), that very soon the necessity of observing the simple, fundamental rules of everyday social life in common will have become a habit.
The door will then be wide open for the transition from the first phase of Communist society to its higher phase, and along with it to the complete withering away of the state.