

Theses on David Adam "Marx & the state"

A text for discussion / Fredo Corvo

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I. Introduction

The communist conception of the state has been formulated by several generations of revolutionary minorities as an evolving understanding based on the understanding that capitalism is as historically limited as the previous exploitative societies, and that the working class is the bearer of communist society. Advances in the understanding of the state are reflected in the fact that initial abstract representations of the proletarian revolution give way to concretizations made possible by experiences from the high points of the workers' struggle. Important milestones in the advancing understanding of the state include elements that Marx adopted from Hegel's conception of the bourgeois state, Marx's radical critique of Hegel's conception of the state, Marx and Engels' first comprehensive articulation of historical materialism in *German Ideology*, the *Communist Manifesto*, their lessons from the Paris Commune, Marx' *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and Lenin's *The State and Revolution*.

Since the revolution in Russia remained isolated, the criticisms of the German-Dutch Left, especially the *Group(s) of International Communists* (G.I.C.), of reformist and blanquist elements in the Bolshevik conceptions of the proletarian revolution are of great importance, especially where they remain present in the conceptions of Bordiga and Trotsky and their followers, even where they adhere to the basic framework of proletarian internationalism and world revolution.

For the sake of brevity, a few theses will be presented here on the view of the state as it developed from Marx to the council communism of the G.I.C. Starting from the views of the German and Dutch left, these theses also try to point out shortcomings in David Adam's approach ¹. These theses were originally written as an impuls for discussion in the group around the Dutch blog "Arbeidersstemmen" (Workers' Voices) about the political framework of the G.I.C.'s "Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution." In this version, in addition to textual and substantive changes, the polemic with Adam has been brought more to the fore.

Fredo Corvo (August 2017)

II. Participation in less ideal forms of government?

David Adam's text brilliantly refutes the common anarchist idea that Marx was a proponent of an authoritarian bourgeois conception of the state by demonstrating the anti-state continuity from the young to the old Marx. Adam does not want to go into the question of participation in electoral struggles in his text, but he can't avoid some interpretations that fit wonderfully with the M.H.I.'s commitment to the recent U.S. presidential election campaign and the struggle against Trumpism as "the greatest danger." For example, Adam speaks rather vaguely of "betting on the highest possible democratization while participating in forms of government that are less than ideal" (p. 20). Referring to a Marx quote regarding the bourgeois revolutions of 1848, Adam concludes, "Marx always believed that some democracy was always better than none at all, and that even limited bourgeois democracy can point the way to surpassing it by allowing to some extent popular participation in politics" (p. 21). Such interpretations and current positions based on them ignore the changes since Marx and can be considered historically obsolete, since the working class in this *period of crises and wars* has no influence on the more or less "democratic" disguises of capitalism.

III. Reasoning for argument's sake or actual mass participation?

The bourgeois state reproduces within itself the capitalist relations of production as fractions of different capital interests, as the representation of the self-interest of the elected against their electors, and as the self-interest of the bureaucrats. Because of the only formal equality of state citizens and because of the opacity of the functioning

¹ David Adam "Karl Marx & the State," MHI, 6-9-2010. A Dutch translation has appeared as David Adam "Karl Marx & de Staat." Adam uses Marx interpretations by authors unknown to us in his text, which complicates our understanding, and may have led to misunderstandings.

of the state (ostensibly for the sake of the separation of powers), the bourgeois state prevents the direct exercise of power by the mass of the population in the general interest of the progress of human society as represented by the revolutionary proletariat. Instead, all the institutions of the bourgeois state today (from the police and judiciary to popular assemblies) at both the national and local levels, including state-approved trade unions and state-run "social" institutions), mediate the class conflicts inherent in capitalism against society as a whole and against the working class in particular.

Adam quotes some excerpts in his exposition of Marx's critique of Hegel (Adam's end-note 6):

"Civil society, on the one hand, would give itself up if all were legislators; on the other hand, the political state opposed to it can only tolerate society in a form appropriate to its measure." ²

In our view, Marx reasons for the sake of argument. In doing so, Adam notes, "An important point is made here: the separation of the state from civil society depends on limiting the participation of the people in government." (p. 5). Here, however, Marx is arguing that bourgeois democracy is not rule by the majority, but on the contrary rule by a minority over the majority of the population. In his further argument, however, Adam appears to take Marx's reasoning as real, namely as an argument for participation in today's bourgeois democracy as a means of political struggle. According to the views of the German and Dutch Communist Left, however, the historical period in which this was possible is over.

IV. Taking back the power of society

In his critique of Hegel, Marx emphasizes that the state has existed in isolation from society since the emergence of private ownership of the means of production. For Marx, the bourgeois state is completely corporatized and alienated from society. Hence, for Marx, the "taking back the power of society" is identical to the reappropriation of the means of production by the revolutionary proletariat.

Under the heading "The Bourgeois State" (pp. 6-8), Adam quotes Marx and Engels from *German Ideology*. In the context of the views of the G.I.C., it is further important to note how Marx even in this youthful work formulates the then-abstract idea of society "taking back" power, both *political* and *economic*. In *German Ideology*, we read under

² Karl Marx Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts (MEW, Bd. 1, S. 325.

the heading (from the editors of the MEW) "Appropriation by the associated individuals: self-activity.

"So two facts emerge here. First, the productive forces appear as entirely independent of and abstracted from individuals (...). On the other hand, we have the majority of individuals facing these forces of production, from whom these forces have been extracted and who have thus been deprived of any real life content, have become abstract individuals, who, however, are only thereby enabled to enter into relationship with each other as individuals.

The only link that still connects them to the productive forces and to their own existence, labor, has lost in them all semblance of self-efficacy and sustains their life only by affecting it. (...) Now, therefore, it has come to the point where individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only in order to achieve their self-sufficiency, but if only to secure their bare existence. This appropriation (...) must (...) therefore have a universal character, in accordance with the productive forces and traffic. The appropriation (...) can only be accomplished by association. Which, because of the character of the proletariat itself, again can only be a universal association. And through a revolution, in which, on the one hand, the power of the former mode of production and traffic and social structure is overthrown. And in which, on the other hand, the universal character and energy of the proletariat develops, without which appropriation cannot be accomplished. And in which, moreover, the proletariat frees itself from everything that still clings to it from its former social position."

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This idea of appropriation also reappears repeatedly in the later Marx, but now in more concrete formulations thanks to the lessons of the 1871 Commune. In Lenin's formulation:

"The Commune is the form 'finally discovered' by the proletarian revolution, under which the economic liberation of labor can take place. The Commune is the first attempt of the proletarian revolution to shatter the bourgeois state machine and also the 'finally discovered' political form by which one can and must replace the shattered." 4

Since the Commune, after the rise of big industrialism, we have seen the mass strikes of the early 20th century and the rise of workers' councils or "the soviets of workers' and soldiers' delegates, who have all the power and shared it with no one else." 5 As

³ Marx/Engels The German Ideology, I Feuerbach (MEW Bd. 3, S. 67/68).

⁴ Lenin State and Revolution ch. 3.

⁵ Lenin State and Revolution last ch.

the G.I.C. has shown ⁶ , after the October Revolution, Lenin, because of his "state communist" views - which he derived from reformism - saw no need for the masses of the proletariat to exercise power, both political and economic. As far as Adam is concerned, we do not see in Marx, nor in the workers' struggle, a reconquest of the bourgeois state, about which Adam (unintentionally) leaves ambiguity under the heading "The Bourgeois State" on p. 8 when he asserts:

"For Marx, participation of the working class in government constitutes the necessary path to a rationally planned enterprise, or the abolition of bourgeois civil society. When the workers - the vast majority - recapture political power alienated from bureaucratic hierarchies, they subordinate state power to their economic needs, or elevate civil society to the domain of politics."

If, like Adam, one wants to speak of a radical concept of democracy in Marx, this can only be understood in the sense of a mass exercise of power not in, but against the bourgeois state, that is, beyond bourgeois democracy. This concept refers to the proletarian revolution, to the smashing of the bourgeois state, to the dictatorship of the proletariat, until finally all domination over men is ended.

V. Political struggle

Against anarchists who merely 'abolished' the state in words while preserving the market (Proudhon) and/or bypassing political struggle (Bakunin)⁷ , Marx argued for the necessity of political struggle in the sense of struggle to smash the bourgeois state, and also in the sense of its replacement by an exercise of power by the proletarian masses, which he called the "workers' state". Marx called this exercise of power a 'state' because it shared a number of characteristics with the previous exploiters' states. He spoke of a "workers'" or "half state" because it was a state of an entirely new type.

VI. Democracy and dictatorship

The monopoly of violence is an essential feature of every state so far, but while states differ in the extent to which their power is based on violence, no state can rely solely on the exercise of force, in other words, on the dictatorship of the ruling class. In addition, every state relies on the pretense of protecting the general interest of society, and on an apparent representation of that society (the "people"). In this sense, dictatorship and democracy both within the exploitative states and in the "workers" state are not opposites, but presuppose and complement each other.

⁶ G.I.C., [Marxism and state communism. The withering away of the state](#) - G.I.C. 1932

⁷ The latter also applies to half-anarchists such as the Social Revolutionary Movement.

The success of any exploitative state depends on maintaining these illusions of universal representation and advocacy among the population it oppresses. When this no longer works, the mere exercise of force falls short, and revolution is at the door.

VII. Democracy in the workers' state

The workers' "state" differs from the previous states, among other things, in that the dictatorship or monopoly of violence is in the hands of the proletariat, which organizes itself en masse as a class for itself, and not in the hands of an institution separate from it, such as the state in the case of capitalism.

The general representation of interests by the workers' "state" is not an illusion, because the proletariat, as the first exploited class to become the ruling class, strives for the abolition of all exploitation, of all oppression of one man by another, and therefore for the abolition of every state, including the temporary workers' state.

The representation of society will for the first time be that of the vast majority of the non-exploiting population, which, moreover, will exercise its influence not through imaginary representatives, but directly with clear mandates and permanently revocable delegates, in accordance with the mass exercise of power by the working class.

VIII. Marx's triple concept of democracy

Marx's understanding of radical democracy in terms of the massive exercise of power over persons, relates to the proletarian revolution and the subsequent transitional period to communism. In the transitional period, power over persons declines and in this sense democracy dies with the state. As a mass exercise of power over things, this concept of radical democracy extends from the proletarian revolution as the reappropriation of the means of production by the mass organized proletariat in the name of society, through the association of free and equal producers in the transitional period, to mature communism, in which not "equality" but the unfolding of each person's uniquely individual characteristics is paramount⁸. Democracy in the sense of power over things thus does not die out, but actually expands. The transitional period, the fading

⁸ Karl Marx, in his Critique of the Gotha Program, explains that equality at the beginning of the transitional period is only a formal equality and that eventually "In the highest phase of communist society, after the disappearance of the enslaving division of labor, when with it the opposition between main and manual labor has disappeared, when labor is no longer a mere means of living, but itself becomes a primary necessity of life, when together with the all-encompassing unfolding of individuals, the productive forces have grown and all sources of common wealth will overflow, only then will the narrow horizon of bourgeois law be able to be completely transcended and society can write on its banner: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!"

away of the state and democracy understood as class rule is the period in which power over persons gives way to power over things.

Lenin, in *The State and Revolution*,⁹ presents Engels' position on overcoming democracy. The G.I.C.¹⁰ also took this position. Engels, Lenin and the G.I.C. are concerned with democracy in the sense of power over people, not in the sense of Marx's complex understanding of radical democracy.

The term democracy has another meaning in Marx's writings, namely a form of the bourgeois state with a maximum of bourgeois freedoms and rights. In his time of the rise and flowering of capitalism, Marx considered this form of state the most favorable breeding ground for a proletarian revolution. The European bourgeois revolutions of 1848 led to the development of the theory of a double (bourgeois and proletarian) revolution. This theory, which has never been successfully applied anywhere, erroneously served as a point of reference for all Marxist revolutionaries when analyzing the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. In doing so, it was ignored:

- a. Marx's analysis of Tsarist Russia as an Asian mode of production (which was not comparable to the development of Western European capitalism), and
- b. the end of the historic rise and flowering period of capitalism marked by the outbreak of the First World War.

The latter theme was an essential element in the proletarian-internationalist positions against the First World War and can be found in Luxemburg, Lenin, Gorter and others as well as in the first declarations of the Communist International. The German and the Dutch Left (Communist Workers Party) maintained it even during the counterrevolution.

⁹ Lenin *State and Revolution* ch. 4, part 6

¹⁰ G.I.C., [Marxism and state communism. The withering away of the state](#) - G.I.C. 1932