Marx was not a “statist”

Jonas Čeika

Apr 15, 2020

Contents

Introduction . . . 3
Lower phase and higher phase . . . 3
The transitionary period . . . 5
The Paris Commune . . . 6
Lenin . . . 8
The Soviet Union . . . 9
Acknowledgments . . . 11
Works quoted . . . 11
Recommended works . . . 12
Note . . . 12
Further Notes . . . 13
- Relevant videos . . . 13
- Important reading . . . 13
- Marx's Feuerbachian Critique of the State . . . 14
- Socialism, communism and the DotP . . . 15
- Lenin . . . 17
- Withering away . . . 18
- Wage Labor in the USSR . . . 18
- The DotP in the USSR . . . 20

Introduction

There is a very common assumption, propagated all over the political spectrum, both by Marxists and anti-Marxists, that for Marx, socialism is about state control, or at the very least presupposes state control.

And this isn't that surprising. After all, in The Communist Manifesto, the most widely read Marx & Engels text, Marx lists 10 measures to be done immediately after the working class seizes state power, and these involve massive nationalization and strict centralization. Obviously, this can't be done without a state.

But, before we tackle this, let's rewind a little bit for the beginners, and start with what at least most Marxists already know. For Marx, the state is something that must eventually be abolished. After all, communism is a classless, moneyless, and of course, stateless society. For him, the existence of the state necessarily presupposes political alienation. This is because the social powers that people develop among themselves are alienated from them by being transferred to the state, and so all of their actions are mediated by state bureaucracies. Already in 1844, when he wrote Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, he said that "In true democracy the *political state disappears*". However, so the common narrative goes, before the state can be abolished, it must first be seized by the working class, utilized to establish socialism, and once communism is on the horizon, the state will naturally wither away.

So here's a common narrative you see online. First, you have capitalism – markets, the state, classes, and all that. Then, socialism emerges when workers take power – under socialism, you still have the state and classes, but with the working class being in power. Finally, once the bourgeoisie have been defeated, classes, money, and the state finally disappear, we have communism. This is an extremely common, but it is not Marx's narrative.

Lower phase and higher phase

First of all, to avoid confusion, we should point out that Marx never distinguished between socialism and communism, in the sense that the former comes first, and the latter comes after. He didn't use the word "socialism" that often, preferring to use "communism", and when he did use it, he usually used it interchangeably with communism, as they were generally used interchangeably in the socialist theory of his time.

The only times that Marx or Engels actually distinguished socialism from communism, was when they used "socialism" to refer to socialist tendencies they were against. For instance, in one preface to the Communist Manifesto, he and Engels even say "in 1847, socialism was a middle class movement, communism a working class movement. Socialism was, on the Continent at least, 'respectable'; communism was the very opposite. And as our notion, from the very beginning, was that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself,' there could be no doubt as to which of the two names we must take. Moreover, we have, ever since, been far from repudiating it."

The popular distinction between socialism and communism, where socialism is said to come first, and then leads into communism afterwards, was popularized by Lenin. Now, there is of course one significant distinction Marx DID make, in Critique of the Gotha Programme, where he distinguished between lower phase communism and higher phase communism. In the lower

phase, people must work for labor vouchers – these are not the same as money because they cannot be accumulated – kind of like a movie ticket – you use it once and then it's rendered invalid – because they cannot be accumulated they cannot be turned into capital, hence, they're not capitalist. These labor vouchers can then be used in exchange for various products. In other words, lower phase communism still contains material incentives for work, as the amount of labor vouchers you receive depends on the number of hours worked. Once society reaches a sufficient level of development, productivity increases to the point of abundance, and people have become fully socialized into this new form of social life, we have entered the higher phase of communism. Labor vouchers are no longer necessary and are replaced by the principle: From each according to ability, to each according to need.

Later, as popularized by Lenin, the lower phase of communism was termed socialism, and higher phase communism was termed, simply, communism. But note that whether we're talking about the lower phase, or the higher phase, it is still moneyless, because money is replaced with labor vouchers. If it's moneyless, it is also classless, because without money, there is no class that owns all the capital and uses it to wield power over the rest of society, and therefore stateless, because for Marxists, a state is merely the means by which one class exerts its power over subordinate classes. No classes means no state.

There are several crystal clear indications that Marx does not distinguish between socialism and communism as stages in a single development. For example, in Critique of the Gotha Programme, he writes: "What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges." If communism was something that only develops after a long period of the development of socialism, this quote would not make sense. Instead, it's clear that, even when not distinguishing between lower phase and higher phase, Marx speaks of communism as that which emerges right out of capitalism.

So, Lenin begins using the term "socialism" to refer to "lower phase communism", which Marx never did, and some of his formulations do differ from Marx, but at this point, Lenin's narrative is still in essencce Marx's narrative, with merely some terminological changes. Both socialism and communism here still refer to moneyless, classless society. The distorted narrative that is popular nowadays, only fully emerges after Lenin's death. However, already here some confusion is introduced, because when new readers of Marx already have the Leninist distinction between socialism and communism in mind, they are often confused by the way Marx uses the term "communism". But of course, people will not yet be convinced, we need to go further. Don't close the video yet.

So, if both lower phase and higher phase communism is stateless, what about the measures in The Communist Manifesto? Since they demand centralization and nationalization in the hands of the state, they obviously presuppose the state, and because they also demand a certain form of taxation, they presuppose money, and so all the other elements that communism, whether lower or higher phase, is supposed to do away with. Well, these are not measures for the establishment of the socialist mode of production itself – that is nowhere said. People assume that the working class taking power IS socialism, but Marx never says this. If he did, that would in fact contradict his own views. Things like taxation and nationalization still presuppose property, money, and capital accumulation, in other words, all the elements that Marx analyzes as part of the capitalist

mode of production. The measures in the manifesto do not concern socialism however, rather, these are measures intended for the transitionary period.

The transitionary period

Transitionary period, you might say, what the hell is that? As the common narrative goes, I thought that you have capitalism, then socialism is established when the working class seizes state power, and then after a long period of development, you finally have communism. Well, Marx clearly states, for example in Critique of the Gotha Programme, that "Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat."

If you're interested in what a dictatorship of the proletariat is, I encourage you to watch the third part of my collaboration with Anarchopac and Red Plateaus, in which I go into this topic. Dictatorship here does not mean what it means in common discourse nowadays – rule by a dictator, rather it means "absolute authority". The dictatorship of the proletariat is the absolute authority of the working class, just as capitalism is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, absolute authority of the capitalist class. As Marx clearly states, and contrary to popular claims, the dictatorship of the proletariat is NOT socialism or lower phase communism, because it is the means by which the working class exerts its will over other classes, and socialism, or lower phase communism, is classless. Indeed, if one argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat IS socialism, or in Marx's terminology, lower phase communism, one would be lead into the absurd claim that "the transition from capitalism to communism is communism".

So, now we can correct the aforementioned narrative into one that Marx believed in, along with other great Marxist theorists such as Rosa Luxemburg or Lenin. First, you have capitalism. Then the workers seize power – this is the transitionary period, or the dictatorship of the proletariat. The state, markets, and classes, in other words, capitalism, still exist, merely with the working class now in power. The process begins to vanquish classes. Once the working class has defeated the bourgeoisie, lower phase communism is established, and has no states, no money, and no classes, but still has material incentives for work. After a long period of development, higher phase communism emerges, which just like the lower phase, has no states, no money, no classes, but with material incentives replaced with free access to the society's products.

So, the measures written down in The Communist Manifesto, are not measures for establishing the socialist mode of production, indeed they can't be because none of the measures involve fundamental changes in the mode of production, rather they're measures meant for the transitionary period, measures by which the working class exerts its will on all other classes.

Now, some may say, who cares if we say that the state exists in the transitionary period or in the socialist period, that's merely a semantic difference, and it doesn't change the fact that Marx saw the state as necessary for socialism to be established.

That's completely fair, and so we need to go even further, the story doesn't end here. After all, the development of Marx's thought did not end with the first release of the Communist Manifesto – at that point, one of the most important developments in Marx's thought was still yet to come. In 1871 something happened which changed Marx's entire thinking about the state. The Paris Commune.

The Paris Commune

The Paris Commune was a government established by revolutionary workers in Paris, which implemented a radical form of democracy that allowed regular working people to take active participation in political decision-making. It made incredible achievements in political practice, and lasted for 2 months before being crushed by the French military in a bloody massacre.

After this event, it's not like Marx's views just changed on a whim. He always emphasized that one's political theory must be informed by historical developments, and this was for Marx an event of extreme historical significance, because he took it to be the first historical instance of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It showed everyone what it means for workers to be in power.

This event was so significant, that a year later Marx & Engels wrote a new preface to the Communist Manifesto, in which they said that the aforementioned revolutionary measures listed in the Manifesto have now become obsolete. "…no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II. … in view of the practical experience gained, first in the February Revolution, and then, still more, in the Paris Commune, where the proletariat for the first time held power for two whole months, this programme has in some details been antiquated." And further "One thing especially was proved by the Commune, vis., that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the readymade state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."

So, after the experience of the Paris Commune, not only did Marx & Engels conclude that the 10-step revolutionary program they previously proposed had become in many details antiquated, they also concluded that the state as it exists, cannot simply be wielded by the working class for its own purposes. It is by nature bourgeois, and must be destroyed, and replaced by entirely new, radically democratic, working-class institutions. Further, in the original Manifesto, chapter 3 contained the statement that "in Germany it is the task of the really revolutionary party to carry through the strictest centralization." After the experiences of the Commune, the manifesto was now updated with a footnote renouncing this earlier statement. "It must be recalled today that this passage is based on a misunderstanding. At that time-thanks to the Bonapartist and liberal falsifiers of history — it was considered as established that the French centralised machine of administration had been introduced by the Great Revolution and in particular that it had been operated by the Convention as an indispensable and decisive weapon for defeating the royalist and federalist reaction and the external enemy. It is now, however, a well-known fact that throughout the whole revolution up to the eighteenth Brumaire the whole administration of the departments, arrondissements and communes consisted of authorities elected by the respective constituents themselves, and that these authorities acted with complete freedom within the general state laws ; that precisely this provincial and local self-government, similar to the American, became the most powerful lever of the revolution and indeed to such an extent that Napoleon, immediately after his *coup d'état* of the eighteenth Brumaire, hastened to replace it by an administration by prefects, which still exists and which, therefore, was a pure instrument of reaction from the beginning."

In short, the demand for strict centralization was now deemed by Marx & Engels to be based on a misunderstanding, because they had believed that the French centralized administration was of a progressive and revolutionary character, and now they realized it to have been a "pure instrument of reaction from the beginning", and in opposition to such centralized administration, they instead favored as the true lever of revolution, "local self-government".

But for a more detailed statement, we must go to the text The Civil War in France, written the same year that the Paris Commune was established. It is here that we really see to what extent Marx's views on the state had changed.

With this text in hand, we can also note that while Marx clearly argued that the commune was a dictatorship of the proletariat, he at the same time said about the Commune's policies, that "there is nothing socialist in them except their tendency". In other words, in the Commune the working class was in power, and yet there was nothing socialist in their policies. Once again, this is completely incoherent if one claims that the dictatorship of the proletariat, or workers' rule, is identical to socialism. Instead, it's the political form that eventually leads into socialism.

Now, just as Marx realized that it was local self-government, rather than centralized administration that was the motor of the French revolution, so he realized that it is the Commune, and not the state, that shall lead the proletarian revolution.

He saw in the Paris Commune a vision of quote "All France … organized into selfworking and self-governing communes, the standing army replaced by the popular militias, the army of state parasites removed, the clerical hierarchy displaced by the schoolmasters, the state judge transformed into Communal organs, the suffrage for national representation not a matter of sleight of hand for an all-powerful government, but the deliberate expression of the organized communes, the state functions reduced to a few functions for general national purposes."

So, even though here Marx makes clear that the dictatorship of the proletariat would still have a state, it would be fundamentally different from the bourgeois state, as it would be, as Marx says, reduced to "a few functions for general national purposes" and would have no means of centralized enforcement, as the standing army would be replaced by popular militias, consisting of people elected from the working class itself.

And if that's not enough, he even went as far as to say "The true antithesis of the

Empire itself — that is to the state power, the centralised executive, of which the Second Empire was only the exhausting formula — was the Commune … This was, therefore, a Revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or Imperialist form of State Power. It was a Revolution against the State itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. It was not a revolution to transfer it from one faction of the ruling class to another, but a Revolution to break down this horrid machinery of class domination itself … The Second Empire was its definite negation, and, therefore, the initiation of the social Revolution of the 19th century".

Marx's emphasis on local self-government is further confirmed when Bakunin asks "The Germans number around forty million. Will for example all forty million be members of the government?". And Marx, in his notes, responds: "Certainly! Since the whole thing begins with the self-government of the commune."

And finally, Engels confirms this, when he proposes as one of the points for the program of the German social-democratic party, "Complete self-government in the provinces, districts and communes through officials elected by universal suffrage. The abolition of all local and provincial authorities appointed by the state."

So, if we go by Max Weber's definition of the state, often used by anarchists, which defines the state as a monopoly on violence over a given territory, the dictatorship of the proletariat would arguably not be a state. It would however, be a state on the definition often used by Marxists – that the state is the means by which one class exerts its power over others. A lot of confusion in

the debate between Marxists and anarchists on the state derives from the differing definitions of the state that are used.

The truth is that the kind of state socialism that Marx is so often accused of, is actually closer to the socialism of German politician Ferdinand Lassalle, who was, like Marx, one of the biggest name in the socialist politics of 19th century Germany. He believed that socialism was a matter of state control, and Marx heavily disagreed with him on this point. The Critique of the Gotha Programme that I've referenced several times in this video, was a critique of the program of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany, which was heavily influenced by Lassalle. And in the critique, Marx wrote that

> "…the whole program, for all its democratic clang, is tainted through and through by the Lassallean sect's servile belief in the state, or, what is no better, by a democratic belief in miracles; or rather it is a compromise between these two kinds of belief in miracles, both equally remote from socialism."

Lenin

Now, this is all in Marx, but just in case someone accuses me of providing an interpretation of Marx that is in fact an anarchist deviation and misinterpretation, Lenin agreed with all of what I just said.

First of all, he agreed with Marx that in between capitalism and lower-phase communism, or socialism, is a transitionary period. He makes this division clear even in the list of chapters for State and Revolution, as the transitionary period is clearly separated from the lower phase of communism. In the text "The Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" he clearly distinguishes socialism from the transitionary period, or the dictatorship of the proletariat, as I did earlier. "Socialism means the abolition of classes. The dictatorship of the proletariat has done all it could to abolish classes. But classes cannot be abolished at one stroke.

And classes still *remain* and *will remain* in the era of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The dictatorship will become unnecessary when classes disappear."

Lenin here saying that "socialism means the abolition of classes" makes several things clear. First, that he distinguishes socialism from the transitionary period, or the dictatorship of the proletariat. After all, if dictatorship of the proletariat is rule by the working class, and socialism is the abolition of classes, they cannot possibly be identical. Secondly, that, by implication, socialism is stateless. We can derive this through a bit of syllogistic reasoning, for those who are into logic:

Proposition 1: According to Lenin, socialism is the abolition of classes.

Proposition 2: Lenin accepts Marx's definition of the state, which sees it as an instrument of class rule, and therefore presupposes classes.

Conclusion: If both proposition 1 and proposition 2 are true, then according to Lenin, socialism is stateless.

Okay, but then, you may ask, didn't Lenin consider the Soviet republic to be socialist, and it couldn't have been socialist according to the preceding points, because it still had money and the state?

No, Lenin, did not in fact consider the Soviet Republic to have established the socialist mode of production. Far from it. In a speech to Russian congress he said "We are far from having completed even the transitional period from capitalism to socialism. We have never cherished

the hope that we could finish it without the aid of the international proletariat. We never had any illusions on that score, and we know how difficult is the road that leads from capitalism to socialism. But it is our duty to say that our Soviet Republic is a socialist republic because we have taken this road, and our words will not be empty words." In other words, the socialist republic, just like the Paris Commune, was called socialist NOT because it had established the socialist mode of production, but because it was in the transitionary period moving towards it.

This is further confirmed in Lenin's text "Tax in Kind" : "No one, I think, in studying the question of the economic system of Russia, had denied its transitional character. Nor, I think, has any Communist denied that the term Socialist Soviet Republic implies the determination of Soviet power *to achieve the transition to socialism*, and *not* that the new economic system is recognized as a socialist order." Oh Lenin, you were very optimistic in saying this.

Ok, so Lenin agreed with Marx on the existence of a transitionary period, and believed that the Soviet Republic was in this period. What about his views on what the dictatorship of the proletariat would look like? Again, full agreement on all the basics. Lenin believed that the dictatorship of the proletariat would involve the abolition of the standing army, the police force, and the bureaucracy, instead being replaced with radical democracy. Quote "…at a certain stage in the development of democracy, it first welds together the class that wages a revolutionary struggle against capitalism–the proletariat, and enables it to crush, smash to atoms, wipe off the face of the earth the bourgeois, even the republican-bourgeois, state machine, the standing army, the police and the bureaucracy and to substitute for them a more democratic state machine, but a state machine nevertheless, in the shape of armed workers who proceed to form a militia involving the entire population." He also quotes, in full agreement, all the passages in Marx and Engels that emphasize local self-government.

The Soviet Union

But, given all this, why is it that this narrative became obscured by the different one outlined in the beginning? The Marxist thing would be to see what material and historical conditions led to the abandonment of the original Marxist view. In my view, one of the primary reasons was the failure of revolution in Europe, particularly in Germany. As Lenin said in the previously mentioned quote: "We have never cherished the hope that we could finish it without the aid of the international proletariat." From the very beginning, Marx emphasized that the revolution would have to be international. Capitalism is an international system, and it must therefore be challenged on international terms. If a revolution happens in only one country, it will become isolated, and the only way for it to survive will be to make compromises and trade agreements with capitalist countries, and thus in order to maintain itself it will have to maintain commodity production, production for profit, never being able to transition out of capitalism.

For example, Engels wrote: "Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone? No. By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth … into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others. … It follows that the communist revolution will not merely be a national phenomenon but must take place simultaneously in all civilized countries … It is a universal revolution and will, accordingly, have a universal range."

This is especially significant for Russia considering that at the time it was not yet a fully industrialized country, and a large percentage of the population was the feudal peasantry, and in such conditions establishing socialism is that much more difficult. The soviet doctrine was at this point in keeping with Marx and Engels, who in 1882 wrote that "If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development."

The original plan, therefore, was to keep Russia under workers' control, until the revolution in the West happens, and makes socialism possible in Russia. This was expected as a workers' revolution was happening in Germany in the years 1917 to 1919, and active revolutionary movements were cropping up around the globe. At this time, a big part of Soviet policy was to support these revolutionary movements politically and economically.

However, the German revolution failed, betrayed by the German social-democratic party, which used the proto-fascist paramilitary group Freikorps to execute the revolutionary leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, thereby paving the way for the rise of fascism.

To add to this, the civil war cost the Bolsheviks almost their entire working class base. By 1921, most industrial workers had either left to fight in the Red Army or to return to the land. This even led Lenin to say: "We are the representatives of a class which has ceased to exist."

In these conditions, the bureaucracy swelled up so much, that in his last words to the communist party, Lenin declared "If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed.»

In the face of this situation, the Soviet Union became isolated and bureaucratized, faced with extremely difficult conditions through no fault of their own. I do not doubt the good intentions of the Soviet leadership, that they truly did want to bring about socialism, but the class situation of Russia and the world generally made this impossible, and the party became stuck in place, incapable of moving forward. Having lost their proletarian base, the party shifted from a revolutionary organization to the representatives of a capitalist society, functionally becoming social-democrats – the state overseers of a market economy. Some Soviet leaders had argued that they should gradually develop the forces of production, while continuing to support the international communist movement and wait for it to succeed. However, the solution that emerged victorious was to abandon the international project, and instead focus on national state-building, which was finally solidified in Stalin's conception of "socialism in one country" – something which Marx would consider an utter impossibility.

The fact that there was a shift from internationalism to nationalism is clearly expressed if we look at Stalin's Foundations of Leninism from 1924. In the original edition, the views of Lenin were actually accurately reflected:

"The overthrow of the power of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a proletarian government in one country does not yet guarantee the complete victory of socialism. The main task of socialism, the organisation of socialist production, still lies ahead. Can this task be accomplished, can the victory of socialism in one country be attained, without the joint efforts of the proletariat of several advanced countries? No, this is impossible… For the final victory of socialism, for the organisation of socialist production, the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia are insufficient."

And yet, just a few months later, this edition was withdrawn, and a new one was released that stated the exact opposite:

"After consolidating its power and leading the peasantry in its wake the proletariat of the victorious country can and must build a socialist society…"

Because the Soviet state still required to legitimate itself, over time the official doctrine changed and the dictatorship of the proletariat and socialism became equated. The previously existing heated debates between Soviet economists about how to abolish money ended, and the leadership less and less expected to transition out of capitalism. The USSR was said to be socialist despite not fulfilling any of the criteria that either Marx or Lenin had elaborated on. At this point the USSR was no longer a workers' state by any criteria, the workers' councils and workers' militias, wherever they existed, no longer had any power, the state was engaged in breaking up strikes, and even censored certain writings by Marx, refusing to release a publication of his complete works. Now, instead of focusing on support for revolutionary movements, the USSR increasingly moved to support for nationalist movements, at the expense of revolutionaries. As one example of how bad this got, the Soviet-controlled Communist International, or Comintern for short, supported the Chinese nationalist party, and the

Chinese nationalist politician Chiang Kai-shek was an honorary member of the Comintern. Chinese communists in the 20s had attempted a revolution, but were stopped by the Comintern and instead ordered to form an alliance with the Chinese nationalist party, which led the Chinese communists to be disarmed, and in 1927 the Chinese nationalist party massacred thousands of them. In other words, this development did not point to the failure of Marxism, but the success of a counterrevolution against Marxism.

Marx had devoted so much of his theoretical powers to defeat the Lassallean strand in socialism, the "servile belief in the state", as he put it, and this is worth respecting not because it comes from Marx, but because it reflects the struggles of the working classes around the world since the dawn of capitalism – it is they who are the movers of history. As Engels put it: ""The idea that political acts, grand performances of state, are decisive in history is as old as written history itself, and is the main reason why so little material has been preserved for us in regard to the really progressive evolution of the peoples which has taken place quietly, in the background, behind these noisy scenes on the stage."

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Rad Shiba for help with the video and reading out quotes: youtube.com/channel/UCnqIikIa6u1loeIQXmGVkhg

As well as Xexizy: youtube.com/channel/UCDULjo1v2Hivuu4h4LZSTUQ

And Red Plateaus: youtube.com/channel/UCsln1E-ttrNPsMivrnf9V7w

Music by musou: musou.bandcamp.com/track/backwater-dub

Works quoted

Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels — The Communist Manifesto — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf

Karl Marx — Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critique_of_Hegels_Philosophy_of_Right.pdf
Karl Marx — Critique of the Gotha Program — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critque_of_the_Gotha_Programme.pdf
Karl Marx — The Civil War in France — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/civil_war_france.pdf
Karl Marx — Conspectus of Bakunin's Statism and Anarchy — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1874/04/bakunin-notes.htm
Friedrich Engels — A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891 — marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm
Vladimir Lenin — State and Revolution — marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/
Vladimir Lenin — Economics and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat — marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/oct/30.htm
Vladimir Lenin — Third All-Russia Congress Of Soviets Of Workers', Soldiers' And Peasants' Deputies — marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/10.htm
Vladimir Lenin — The Tax in Kind — marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/apr/21.htm
Friedrich Engels — The Principles of Communism — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/prin-com.htm
Vladimir Lenin — Eleventh Congress Of The R.C.P.(B.) — marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/27.htm#fw01
Joseph Stalin — Foundations of Leninism — marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/foundations-leninism/index.htm
Friedrich Engels — Anti-Dühring — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/

Recommended works

Karl Marx — Critique of the Gotha Program — marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critque_of_the_Gotha_Programme.pdf
Vladimir Lenin — State and Revolution — marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/
Simon Pirani — The Russian Revolution in Retreat — libcom.org/files/[Simon_Pirani]_The_Russian_Revolution_in
ok.org).pdf
Victor Serge — Memoirs of a Revolutionary — my-blackout.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/webpage2.pdf
On the Chinese revolution of 1925: libcom.org/history/chinese-revolution-1925-1927

Note

In some of his later writings, Lenin does start conflating the dictatorship of the proletariat, in contradiction with Marx and his own earlier writings. There are 3 reasons why this might be:

1. As his party becomes less revolutionary, he might already be in the process of legitimating the state as socialist, which culminates in Stalin.

2. He might be less careful with his terminology due to decreasing health.

3. He is using "socialism" in a different sense, as in the socialist tendency.

Further Notes

Relevant videos

- InDefenseOfToucans, a small channel specializing in Soviet history had coincidentally already made a video on the distinction between the dictatorship of the proletariat and lower/higher phase communism without me knowing. This video is shorter than mine and is very useful for that specific topic.

- Anarchopac has touched on some of the same topics in her response to Jason Unruhe. While looking into Marx's views on the transition into communism, she compares it to Marx's view of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and makes a more general point about how Marx views society. It's more detailed and dense with theory than my video, and so is recommended if you want more theoretical grounding.

- Although coming from a different approach and focusing less on Marx's views as such, Red Plateaus made a video on whether socialists should take state power, in which they examine some arguments both for and against.

Important reading

Karl Marx – Critique of the Gotha Programme. This was a thorough critique of the draft program of the United Workers' Party in Germany, as Marx sought to resist the heavy influence of German social-democrat Ferdinand Lassalle on the party. It was written in 1875 but only published by Engels in 1891. An essential read, because despite of how short this text is, it is one of Marx's most important works on revolutionary strategy and one of the very few instances in which he talks about the details of communist society. It contains clarifications of many common falsehoods about Marxism, emphasizing opposition to nationalism, the state, and wage labor. It also shows that Marx was not an egalitarian, and contains the famous principle "from each according to ability…"

Karl Marx – The First Draft of the Civil War in France, specifically the section on The Commune. This text shows how much Marx's political views were changed by the experience of the Paris Commune – the radically democratic workers' government in Paris (1871) which Marx deemed to be the first historical instance of the dictatorship of the proletariat ("DotP" from here on). Thus it involves Marx's description of the features of the DotP, which include, as the Commune did, local self-government, direct democracy, and workers' militias. The text also includes many negative references to "state parasites", who are to be done away with in the course of a workers' revolution.

Vladimir Lenin – The State and Revolution. This work is recommended even if you dislike Lenin as a revolutionary and politician, as it's a solid work of Marxist theory, clarifying many falsehoods ironically spread by Marxists-Leninists. It follows Marx in its distinction of a transitionary period from lower/higher phase communism, and in modelling the DotP after the Paris

Commune. Lenin was led to write it after a debate with Bukharin on the existence of the state after revolution, and in fact wrote it to emphasize Marx's anti-statism, for which he was accused by some of being an anarchist. He cites the abolition of the bureaucracy and the standing army as essential features of the DotP.

Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan — Revolution Against the State: The Context and Significance of Marx's Later Writings. This is an academic paper without which my video would not have existed, as it made completely clear the anti-statism in Marx's late writings. This is where I first discovered many of the points made in the video.

Marx's Feuerbachian Critique of the State

From very early on, Marx believed that the state is a sphere of alienation and has to be eliminated for the sake of human emancipation, and never changed on this point. He expressed this view as early as 1843, in Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, where he wrote that in "true democracy", the "political state" disappears, or, what amounts to the same thing, that in true democracy, there is no longer a separation between society on the one hand and the state ruling it on the other.

Marx applied to the state an influential critical method derived from the Young Hegelian Ludwig Feuerbach[1], one of Marx's main early influences. Although he would later attack him, Marx considered Feuerbach to be the most important thinker since Hegel, due to his critical method which functioned by "reversing" central elements of Hegel.[2]

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach had analyzed humanity's religious alienation – it occurs because humans project an idealized image of themselves onto something outside themselves: namely, God in heaven, and thereby become estranged from themselves. In other words, humans take whatever is best in themselves and attribute it to God, in effect giving God credit for their own accomplishments. The result is that, ironically, the more humanity achieves, the more power it attributes to God, and therefore becomes increasingly weaker in the face of God. And because humans idealize heaven in this way, they end up deprecating the real, material, sensuous, empirical world.

Humans transfer to God all of their positive qualities and therefore retain none for themselves: the more they worship God, the more they chastise themselves; the larger and more powerful God grows in their eyes, the smaller and weaker does humanity become in its own eyes. The goal, for Feuerbach, was therefore for humanity to re-appropriate for itself what it had attributed to God: overcome alienation by taking back for itself all the positive qualities that it had transferred to God. Thus, religion would become humanism.[3]

---

[1] Stanford article on Feuerbach.

[2] For example, Hegel gave primacy to Absolute Spirit ("Geist", which can also be translated as "mind" or "consciousness") and saw humanity as the development of this Spirit. Feuerbach argued that this was backwards and had to be reversed, as it confused subject and predicate. It made consciousness the subject, and man merely its predicate, when it's really the other way around. Consciousness is produced by man, rather than man being produced by Consciousness. When Marx "stood Hegel on his head" as he's famously described doing, he was following Feuerbach's lead.

[3] It is important to note that Christianity had a very big influence in German politics at this time, and Germany was particularly socially conservative. The government of Prussia had control over church affairs, and the king recognized himself as the leading bishop. This is why political radicals and progressives, including Marx himself, wrote critiques of religion, and (state) Christianity in particular.

I'm recounting this because Marx had applied this critical method to the state, to identify human alienation outside of the religious sphere: not just religious alienation, but *political alienation*. In religion, humans alienate themselves by attributing their positive features to a God, who rules over them. Similarly, in politics, humans alienate themselves by transferring their social powers to a state, which rules over them. The more social power they give to this state, the more are they dominated by it. So just as overcoming religious alienation requires re-absorbing the positive attributes one had transferred to God, so overcoming political alienation requires re-absorbing the social powers that one had transferred to the state.

In both cases of overcoming alienation, a critical reversal is carried out: while the alienated person believes that man is made in the image of God, overcoming this alienation requires seeing that, on the contrary, God is made in the image of man. Likewise, in politics, it is typically believed that people have social powers because they have been granted them by the state, but overcoming political alienation requires seeing that it is in fact the state which has social powers because it has been granted them by the people.

Marx makes his humanism clear when he says, in On the Jewish Question, that "*All* emancipation is a *reduction* of the human world and relationships to *man himself*."[4] Religious emancipation occurs when humans no longer make a separation between man and God. Political emancipation occurs when humans no longer make a separation between man and the state.

In the same text (1843), Marx expresses his opposition to the state when he writes that "only when man … no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished."[5] The state is precisely this separation of peoples' "social power" from themselves "in the shape of political power". This means that politics as such, as a separate sphere of human life, would disappear under communism.

However, as already shows up here, what makes Marx more radical than Feuerbach, is that the alienation Marx identifies is not simply a matter of imagination (like with religion, where humans transfer their powers to God in their imagination), but one of material reality (as it is a material, empirical fact that the state is made more powerful). Therefore, its solution requires not just a change of consciousness, but a political change, i.e. revolution. This is where Marx's materialism goes beyond Feuerbach: its emphasis on praxis. Hence why the famous line

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world … the point is to change it" appears in Theses on Feuerbach.

Socialism, communism and the DotP

A lot of confusion has been caused by the common distinction between socialism and communism as stages in a single development, as Marx never spoke this way. In Marx's time, Germans did not usually make a clear distinction between socialism and communism, and these terms were often used interchangeably. Marx and Engels sometimes used socialism interchangeably with communism, but mainly preferred "communism" as they wanted to distinguish themselves from "middle class movement[s]" which claimed the term "socialism" for themselves.

It is unclear when Marx's account of the development from lower phase to higher phase communism was renamed as the development from socialism to communism, but it undoubtedly reached the peak of its prevalence in the USSR.

[4] Marx – On the Jewish Question.

[5] Ibid.

The following is roughly how Marx saw the transition from capitalism to communism, as laid out in Critique of the Gotha Programme, as well as reflected in Lenin's State and Revolution.

Dictatorship of the bourgeoisie (capitalism)	**Dictatorship of the proletariat (transition from capitalism to communism)**	**Lower phase communism (later sometimes called simply socialism)**	**Higher phase communism (later sometimes called simply communism)**
The capitalist (bourgeois) class in power.	The working (proletarian) class in power.	No classes.	No classes.
The state expresses the interests of the capitalists. Exerts power over workers.	The state expresses the interests of the workers. Exerts power over capitalists with the goal of eliminating them as a class.	No state.	No state.
The capitalist class exerts physical power through a national military and police.	The working class exerts physical power through local workers' militias.	No class violence.	No class violence.
Wage labor and capital.	Wage labor and capital, but in the process of being eliminated.	Work for labor vouchers. Vouchers distributed according to amount of work done and can be directly exchanged for products. Vouchers are not accumulative and therefore cannot be turned into capital.	Free access to products according to need. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"

It is important not to take these categorical divisions for more than what they are. Marx, to my knowledge, in his writings only uses this distinction between lower and higher phase communism once, and this simplistic division is made mostly for the sake of presentation and clarification. As Marx was a dialectical thinker, it shouldn't be assumed that these divisions are clear-cut. The transition into lower and then higher phase communism is a *process* , and so there would be many shades and gradations of society that don't neatly fit exactly into one or the other, and the development would not necessarily be straightforward or linear, as the developments could occur at different times and speeds in different places.

Compare it to the transition from feudalism to capitalism: this transition took a long time, its pace and intensity varied from place to place, and remnants of feudalism lasted long after the

appearance of industrial capitalism. This is the main point of the division: that traces of capitalism will still remain during the initial establishment of communism and will only disappear in an extended process of development. The main such initial remnant of capitalism will be the exchange of equivalents – labor vouchers exchanged for amount of labor performed – "the same principle prevails as in the exchange of commodity equivalents: a given amount of labor in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labor in another form." But this will no longer be the capitalist mode of production, because, among other things, "no one can give anything except his labor, and because, on the other hand, nothing can pass to the ownership of individuals, except individual means of consumption."[6]

The clearest way in which Marxists-Leninists usually diverge from Marx here (as well as from Lenin) is by equating the transitionary period with socialism (lower-phase communism). This equation is partly made possible by the confusion caused by calling lower phase communism 'socialism', and calling higher phase communism simply 'communism'. The absurdity becomes clear if we use Marx's original language, as to say that 'the transitionary period *is* lower phase communism' is to say that 'the transition from capitalism to communism *is* communism'.

A related way in which Marxists-Leninists diverge from Marx and Engels is by treating socialism and communism as two distinct modes of production. For Marx, communism, whether lower phase or higher phase, is the same mode of production, distinguished only by its level of development. Lower phase communism is the communist mode of production "as it *emerges* from capitalist society" and higher phase communism is the communist mode of production as "*developed* on its own foundations"[7].

Lenin

Lenin did not equate the transitionary period with socialism/communism. While the transitionary period is the period of working class rule, Lenin himself says that "Socialism means the abolition of classes."[8] As I found out from InDefenseOfToucans, in a speech at The All-Russia Congress of Transport Workers, Lenin recalls seeing a placard with the inscription "The reign of the workers and peasants will last for ever." Lenin pointed out the problem with this claim: "if the reign of the workers and peasants would last for ever, we should never have socialism, for it implies the abolition of classes; and as long as there are workers and peasants, there will be different classes and, therefore, no full socialism."[9]

Although Lenin followed Marx pretty closely on this in State and Revolution, there is one particular part that needs to be mentioned, which frankly I'm confused about. In Chapter 4 of State and Revolution, Lenin writes:

> "In its first phase, or first stage, communism cannot as yet be fully mature economically and entirely free from traditions or vestiges of capitalism. Hence the interesting phenomenon that communism in its first phase retains "the narrow horizons of bourgeois law". Of course, bourgeois law in regard to the distribution of consumer

[6] Marx — Critique of the Gotha Programme, I.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Lenin – Economics and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.
[9] Lenin – Speech delivered at The All-Russia Congress of Transport Workers.

> goods inevitably presupposes the existence of the bourgeois state, for law is nothing without an apparatus capable of enforcing the observance of the rules of law."[10]

The first part of this section is in line with Marx. In Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx writes that the first phase of communism will distribute labor vouchers according to labor input, and this is a vestige of capitalism: the exchange of equivalents, which Marx calls bourgeois law, or alternatively translated as bourgeois right.

However, the claim that this presupposes the "bourgeois state" contradicts both Marx and Lenin himself. Lenin himself believed that the state is an apparatus of class rule, and that the first phase of communism has no classes, which makes the claim that the first phase still has a state bizarre. It is even more bizarre that this is a "bourgeois state", given that even the transitionary period does not have a bourgeois state, but a proletarian one. Lenin, in the State and Revolution, says that in the course of revolution the bourgeois state is smashed, and a proletariat one is established in its place. Why would then a bourgeois state return in the first phase of communism itself? I can only speculate the reason behind this strange claim. It was either a mistake on Lenin's part, or a misleading use of language.

Withering away

Lenin says that while the bourgeois state is *smashed* , the proletarian state that is then established *withers away*. Because the function of the proletarian state is to crush the bourgeois class, once that is finished, and classes disappear, it will lose its need, and gradually disappear, becoming indistinguishable from society in general.

This has since become an extremely common expression and principle, both among Marxists-Leninists and Marxists more generally. The only thing I want to point out about it is that Marx himself never uses this phrase. The phrase comes in fact from Engels' Anti-Dühring.

Wage Labor in the USSR

Marxists who acknowledge the difference between the transitionary period and (lower phase) communism, vary regarding their analysis of the Soviet Republic. They tend to agree (as I do) that it never achieved socialism (lower phase communism). The elimination of capital, wage labor, commodity production was clearly never carried out, and in my opinion, was not even possible given the circumstances. Some Marxists-Leninists claim that the Soviet Republic was socialist from the beginning, because they equate socialism with the transitionary period, going against Lenin's own straightforward claim that the Soviet Republic was *not* socialist. Those Marxists-Leninists who recognize the latter, argue that although the Soviet Republic was in a transitionary period during Lenin's life, it transitioned to socialism under Stalin's collectivization. They claim that capitalist social relations were in fact effectively abolished, but their arguments are unconvincing, as for them to work, straightforwardly bourgeois countries in certain periods would have to be classified as socialist as well.

Piece work:

Some argue that Soviet money effectively functioned as labor vouchers, because people were paid according to number of units produced rather than per hour (what's called "piece work").

[10] *Lenin* – State and Revolution, 4.

The obvious problem with this argument is that piece work has existed throughout the history of capitalism in unambiguously capitalist countries like the UK and the US and was strongly advocated for by Frederick Winslow Taylor[11]. In fact, piece work systems often allowed for greater abuse and manipulation of workers by paying them less than an hourly wage would and were commonly resented by workers. The early uses of the term "sweatshop" (or the precursor "sweating system") referred to piece rate workplaces.

Full employment:

Others argue the USSR was socialist by referring to the fact that it had full employment: because the workers technically could not be threatened with being fired as such, they had control over the production process. Once again, this would have to mean that Australia was socialist in the years 1941–75, as it had legally enforced conditions of full employment in this period.

State planning:

A final argument I have heard is that the USSR was socialist because production was determined by a state plan, and therefore production was carried out according to use-value, not profit. This could not be true, however, as, even ignoring all else (like the internal competition between companies despite their common ownership by the state), the USSR had to compete economically with other capitalists on the world-scale, and this could not be done without accumulating capital, which requires steering production to generate profits. Like with the previous arguments, Soviet state planning had equivalents in capitalist countries, especially in cases of state intervention at times of war.

Some substantiate the claim that the USSR produced according to use-values by pointing to the fact that the state plan drew up what's called "material balances" – calculation of input and output by material units (for example, gallons of oil, kilos of steel, etc.). But this too has been done under capitalism (for example, the Controlled Materials Plan in the US under WWII), nor were monetary units absent from the plan.

What's incredible is that Stalin himself, in his Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR, says that commodity production exists under socialism, which is straightforwardly inconsistent with both Marx and Lenin. Commodity production is by definition oriented to producing profit.

Some classic critiques of the economic character of the USSR:

Raya Dunayevskaya – The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a Capitalist Society. Dunayevskaya was one of the pioneers of Marxist Humanism. This is a short pamphlet and its title is pretty clear. A central point is made when she writes that "The determining factor in analyzing the class nature of a society is not whether the means of production are the *private* property of the capitalist class or are state-owned, but whether the means of production are *capital*, that is, whether they are monopolized and alienated from the direct producers. The Soviet Government occupies in relation to the whole economic system the position which a capitalist occupies in relation to a single enterprise."

Amadeo Bordiga – Dialogue with Stalin. Here the leader of the Italian communist party, an influential left-communist, examines the economic character of the USSR in an engagement with Stalin's writings.

[11] Taylor is famous for his work The Principles of Scientific Management, which sought to elucidate how to make workers on the factory floor as efficient as possible. He was popular among capitalists and managers for this reason, and implementations of his proposals were usually resented by workers. Taylor wanted to deepen the division between mental labor and manual labor, and wanted the workers to be fully commanded by managers.

Aufheben – What Was the USSR? This UK-based Marxist collective examines various theories on what the USSR was and develop their own view which goes beyond standard 'state capitalism' accounts. They argue that the USSR was essentially based on commodity-production, but due to its "historical form of forced transition to capitalism there was dislocation between the capitalist nature of production and its appearance as a society based on commodity-exchange." Whatever you think of its conclusion, the text could be helpful for its overview of a few different ways of analyzing the political and economic character of the USSR.

I have seen the following two books recommended, although I haven't read them. They are much more academic, detailed, and empirically grounded than the preceding ones. Both of them argue that the USSR was a capitalist society:

Neil C. Fernandez — Capitalism and Class Struggle in the USSR. This work criticizes previous theories of Soviet capitalism and develops its own by emphasizing the predominance of capital. It then turns to an analysis of class struggle in the USSR.

Paresh Chattopadhyay — The Marxian Concept of Capital and the Soviet Experience. This one analyzes the USSR as a capitalist society, arguing that the wage-labor relationship is necessary and sufficient for the existence of capitalism.

The DotP in the USSR

So the Soviet Republic was not socialist, but was it a dictatorship of the proletariat? Views about this vary. Left-communists tend to argue that, in the early years, it was. For example, the Internationalist Communist Tendencyhold this view. Views about when it ceased being a DotP vary as well, some placing it around the time of Lenin's decline and the subsequent emergence of Stalin, others placing it around the time of the Kronstadt Rebellion[12] in 1921. Either way, it's fair to say that the Soviet Republic, even in its early years, did not resemble Marx's or Lenin's own descriptions of what a DotP consists in. Lenin, in State and Revolution, identified the standing army and the bureaucracy as two main elements to be abolished in the establishment of a DotP. Although the revolution initially abolished the standing army, it was soon re-established along similar lines, and the bureaucracy was never abolished at all, also retaining many central features of the old bureaucracy. Here's a well-argued article on the position that the old state was never smashed, and that the Soviet Republic was therefore never a DotP.

Trotsky and Trotskyists, on the other hand, argue that the USSR was a DotP that under Stalin became a "degenerated workers' state" (Trotsky's term). Trotsky argued that the USSR was in the process of transitioning from capitalism to socialism but got stuck in the middle of this transition due to bureaucratization. Trotsky did not consider the bureaucratic caste to be a new ruling class, because its political control did not extend to economic ownership. The purpose of this analysis for Trotsky was twofold: 1) to criticize Stalin's consolidation of power and the existing Soviet regime, 2) while nevertheless acknowledging Soviet achievements, and maintaining the possibility that the USSR could be restored to a genuine workers' state.

Some Marxists argue that it's misguided to judge the early Soviet Republic by the criteria of Lenin's earlier description of the DotP, given the historically unique circumstances the country

[12] The Kronstadt rebellion was an uprising of revolutionary Soviet sailors, soldiers and civilians, many of whom had previously been active in the revolution. They demanded, among other things, more democratic control by workers' councils. The Bolshevik Party falsely reported on public radio that the uprising was a plot by the White Army, and the rebellion was violently crushed by the Red Army.

was in, which made the DotP of that description impractical, if not impossible. Whatever the case may be, it should be said to the Bolsheviks' credit that they recognized early on that without a revolution in Europe, socialism could not be established in Russia, and so a big part of their early policy was funding and helping the revolutionaries in Germany. In this sense, at least, the party did act as a force for socialism in the world, and its failure was decided once the internationalist project was abandoned in favor of national state-building (reaching its ultimate conclusion in Stalin's "socialism in one country").

Although I agree with many criticisms of the USSR put forth by anarchists, some of them are insufficiently grounded in material conditions. Criticizing actions taken by the party, and even the party form itself, is important, but one shouldn't attribute the failure of the revolution to the actions of Lenin individually, or even Stalin, nor attack the USSR by reference to the intentions the Bolsheviks had. Given the fact that Russia was not a fully industrialized country, that it had just endured a World War and a civil war, that it was isolated and surrounded by foreign aggressors, and given the failure of revolution in other countries, the Soviet Republic had to either degenerate or be overthrown by reactionaries (which would have been much, much worse, both in terms of the gruesome immediate aftermath, and the long-term effect on the Russian peoples' living quality).

The mode of production is not a moral category, and it is possible to celebrate the achievements the Soviets made, as well as praise the struggle and good intentions of particular individuals, while still recognizing that, as a matter of fact, the mode of production never moved beyond capitalism.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Jonas Čeika
Marx was not a “statist”
Apr 15, 2020

<youtube.com/watch?v=rRXvQuE9xO4>

theanarchistlibrary.org