

WWP Talking Outline: State and Revolution

The outline below consists of a series of questions to be read aloud and discussed by the class. Class leaders can decide if discussion of the questions should come before reading the excerpts, after—or both! Some excerpts have comments included as well, about important points to be raised or potential issues to address. For further or future discussion, at the end of the outline are brief passages on the State written by other Left forces to present contrasting views on the question of the State to that of Workers World Party.

Readings:

[Lenin, State and Revolution, Chapter 1](#)

[Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#)

[Marcy, A Marxist Defense of the LA Rebellion](#)

from [What is Marxism All About](#)

- [How the State Arose](#)
- [The State Today](#)

Here are passages for reading and discussion, with comments in italics and questions in bold.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What is the State?
<p><i>When Marxists speak of the State that does not refer to the state of New York, Ohio or California. It's Important to clarify that "the State" is not "everything around us," "the government" or "capitalism." Marxists define the State as Engels did:</i></p>

“a product of society at a certain stage of development--when society has split into classes; when society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, these classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power, seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state.” Frederick Engels, [The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#) quoted in [Lenin, State and Revolution, Chapter 1](#)

This expresses with perfect clarity the basic idea of Marxism with regard to the historical role and the meaning of the State. The state is a product and a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. The state arises where, when and insofar as class antagonism objectively cannot be reconciled. And, conversely, the existence of the state proves that the class antagonisms are irreconcilable.

- **What does this power mainly consist of?**

The power of the State consists of special bodies of armed men having prisons, etc., at their command.

“The state, simply, as the repressive apparatus of the government — the courts, the prisons, the police, and the military — stands to maintain the social relations as they are, to protect the owning and possessing few from the exploited and oppressed masses.” (What Is Marxism All About)

“The previous chapter traced the evolution of the state — the army, courts, cops, prisons and tax collectors — from its formation 6,000 years ago. This state has consistently served the privileged classes — first slave owners, then

feudal lords and, today, the capitalists.” (What Is Marxism All About)

“The state can take on many different forms. A state can have the form of a bourgeois democracy; it can be a monarchy; it may be ruled by a military junta. And in modern society, on the very edge of the 21st century, it may have a totalitarian or fascist form.

Whatever its form, its essence is determined by which class is dominant economically and consequently also dominant politically. In contemporary society, this means the rule of the imperialist bourgeoisie over the proletariat and the oppressed nationalities.” (Marcy, LA Rebellion)

“In general, then, the Los Angeles insurrection shows that democracy is a veil that hides the repressive character of the capitalist state. The state at all times is the state of the dominant class. And the objective of the special bodies of armed men and women is to secure, safeguard and uphold the domination of the bourgeoisie.” (Marcy, LA Rebellion)

- **Where does the State come from?**

“The state first came into existence around 4,000 B.C. Before that, societies existed communally, sharing as necessary because of scarcity. As production capability began to change, a surplus beyond what was necessary to survive from one day to the next was produced. The surplus was hoarded and made the private property of a few, while the majority had no property. From this came the split of humanity into classes: the propertied and those who possessed no property. An apparatus, the state, grew from antagonisms between the propertied and the non-propertied. The state existed then, in its earlier forms, as it does now — as specially trained and armed people who protect the interests of the few owners of wealth from the great majority who are impoverished.” (What Is Marxism All About)

- **What does it mean that "class antagonisms are irreconcilable?"
What is the significance of this?**
- **Why is it important that we understand that the State serves the interests of one class over the other(s)?**

"...if the state is the product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms, if it is a power standing above society and "alienating itself more and more from it", it is clear that the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, but also without the destruction of the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class and which is the embodiment of this "alienation". As we shall see later, Marx very explicitly drew this theoretically self-evident conclusion on the strength of a concrete historical analysis of the tasks of the revolution." (Lenin, Chap. 1)

- **After the state is smashed, with what will it be replaced?**
- **What is the "dictatorship of the proletariat" or workers' state?**

The 'armed bodies of men' like the police "...the 'special coercive force' for the suppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, of millions of working people by handfuls of the rich, must be replaced by a 'special coercive force' for the suppression of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat (the dictatorship of the proletariat)." (Lenin, Chap. 1)

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 demonstrated the capacity for the existence of a new kind of state — a workers' state. This revolution abolished capitalism in Russia, just as slavery and serfdom had been overthrown there before. All wealth, except personal property, was made the common property of all workers. The economy was planned to meet human needs, not the profits of the few.

The Soviet state existed in the historic interests of the entire world's working class and oppressed. Despite its deficiencies, and its eventual defeat in 1991, the Soviet state was an inspiration for socialist revolutions in China, Cuba, Vietnam and other countries around the globe. Even today, after many of these

countries have experienced counterrevolutions or have turned toward the market, millions around the world are fighting and dying for the establishment of a new state of this kind. Workers and the poor in countries as varied as Colombia, Venezuela, Nepal, India, and the Philippines struggle daily for a workers' state like the one Cubans have been building for 50 years.

As the economic crisis in the U.S. escalates more and more, workers at home will start to demand a new state as well.

The state has always been an instrument of dictatorship: of the slave owner over the slave, the feudal lord over the serf, the capitalist over the workers and oppressed. The workers' state maximizes democracy for the working class as it exercises a dictatorship over the remnants of the former capitalist ruling class.

- **What does it mean to abolish all class antagonisms, for the state to wither away?**

“The supersession of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution. The abolition of the proletarian state, i.e., of the state in general, is impossible except through the process of “withering away.” (Lenin, Chap. 1)

- **Can we vote our way to socialism? Is revolution necessary? Consider Social Democracy and the experience of Chile in the 1970s.**
- **What might this transition, a withering away of the state, look like? Why won't there just be socialism after a revolution?**

“The overthrow of capitalism worldwide will set the stage for the gradual disappearance of the state as the world currently knows it. It will provide the conditions for the world's wealth, produced in abundance by modern technology, to be shared in common. Capitalism's demise will unlock the

potential for humans to live in a modern, peaceful society, without any need for the old state's instruments of suppression." (What Is Marxism All About)

"As soon as there is no longer any social class to be held in subjection, as soon as class rule, and the individual struggle for existence based upon the present anarchy in production, with the collisions and excesses arising from this struggle, are removed, nothing more remains to be held in subjection — nothing necessitating a special coercive force, a state." (This and following passages draw on Engels "Anti-Duhring" quoted in Lenin's "State and Revolution.")

Can someone paraphrase what this excerpt is saying?

"The first act by which the state really comes forward as the representative of the whole of society — the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society — is also its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies down of itself. "

Can someone paraphrase what this next excerpt is saying?

"The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not 'abolished.' It withers away. This gives the measure of the value of the phrase 'a free people's state,' both as to its justifiable use for a long time from an agitational point of view, and as to its ultimate scientific insufficiency; and also, of the so-called anarchists' demand that the state be abolished overnight." (The above passages draw on Engels "Anti-Duhring" quoted in Lenin's "State and Revolution.")

Why can't the state be abolished immediately?

"As a matter of fact, Engels speaks here of the proletariat revolution 'abolishing' the *bourgeois* state, while the words about the state withering away refer to the remnants of the *proletarian* state *after* the socialist revolution. According to Engels, the bourgeois state does not 'wither away.'

but is 'abolished' by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. What withers away after this revolution is the proletarian state or semi-state."
(Lenin, Chap. 1)

"... in speaking of the state 'withering away,' and the even more graphic and colorful 'dying down of itself,' Engels refers quite clearly and definitely to the period after 'the state has taken possession of the means of production in the name of the whole of society,' that is, after the socialist revolution. We all know that the political form of the 'state'" at that time is the most complete democracy. But it never enters the head of any of the opportunists, who shamelessly distort Marxism, that Engels is consequently speaking here of democracy 'dying down of itself' or 'withering away.' This seems very strange at first sight. But it is 'incomprehensible' only to those who have not thought about democracy also being a state and, consequently, also disappearing when the state disappears. Revolution alone can 'abolish' the bourgeois state. The state in general, i.e., the most complete democracy, can only 'wither away.'
(Lenin, Chap. 1)

Material for additional discussion, or for an additional class

Below are 4 passages from social democratic and anarchist sources on the question of the State. How do these views of the State differ from the Leninist position? What would you say in response to advocate for a Leninist understanding of the State?

1. From the Communist Party USA Constitution:

Socialism in the United States would be built on the strong foundation of our Constitution's Bill of Rights. This includes making the promises of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and equality for all real. The rights to a job, to health care, and education must also be guaranteed by the Constitution. The criminal justice, police and prison systems must be overhauled from top to bottom to get rid of racial disparity.

2. From DSA: “Resistance Rising: Socialist Strategy in the Age of Political Revolution”:

Achieving our goals will require grassroots organizing and “street heat,” but it will also require a critical mass of political office holders to implement them. Although elections in and of themselves will not bring about major political, economic or social reforms — let alone establish a pathway to socialism — it is difficult to imagine how we could achieve any of our objectives in the United States without taking part in the electoral process. In the short term, we need to engage in electoral activity for several important reasons: to defend existing rights; to put forth new demands for social and economic justice that could change public conversations and thereby create openings for more fundamental structural reforms down the road; to attract new members to DSA and thereby build our capacity as an organization; and to build and sustain non-electoral activism.

The nature of our electoral activism will vary based on local political conditions. But it will include supporting progressive and socialist candidates running for office, usually in Democratic primaries or as Democrats in general elections but also in support of independent socialist and other third-party campaigns outside the Democratic Party. In the medium-to-long-term we will work to build the organizational capacity necessary to run candidates of our own (as one of DSA’s predecessor organizations, Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, and DSA itself were able to do in the 1970s and 1980s), to forge larger socialist electoral coalitions both within and outside of the Democratic Party and ultimately to create a majoritarian electoral coalition in support of socialist political and economic reforms.

3. From Philadelphia Coalition for a Just District Attorney:

This May, Philly has a chance to elect a brand new district attorney. The DA is the most powerful decision-maker in our criminal justice system — and Philly needs a DA that’s here for the people. In a city that arrests twice as many people on average than other big cities, and that locks up far more Black & Brown folks, the DA has massive power over who is protected and who is prosecuted.

Aside from having control over the decisions that can make or break someone’s life, they have executive power over the hundreds of staff and

prosecutors running cases in our city courts. They have deeply coordinated relationships with the police, judges, and a big influence in Harrisburg. Especially in the Trump era, when we're seeing a resurgence of racially coded "Law & Order" tactics and violent persecution of immigrant families, the DA election is one of the most important to show up for.

The 2017 race is wide open — and that means candidates have to earn our votes. We need more than talk about progressive policies, we need real concrete plans and commitments to stop putting so many Black and Brown people in cages. Because the persistence of high crime in the most heavily policed areas tells us one thing: criminalizing the most vulnerable of us doesn't keep us safe.

4. From anarchists: Michael Bakunin, "Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism"

The State is the organized authority, domination, and power of the possessing classes over the masses the most flagrant, the most cynical, and the most complete negation of humanity. It shatters the universal solidarity of all men on the earth, and brings some of them into association only for the purpose of destroying, conquering, and enslaving all the rest. This flagrant negation of humanity which constitutes the very essence of the State is, from the standpoint of the State, its supreme duty and its greatest virtue. Thus, to offend, to oppress, to despoil, to plunder, to assassinate or enslave one's fellowman is ordinarily regarded as a crime. In public life, on the other hand, from the standpoint of patriotism, when these things are done for the greater glory of the State, for the preservation or the extension of its power, it is all transformed into duty and virtue. This explains why the entire history of ancient and modern states is merely a series of revolting crimes; why kings and ministers, past and present, of all times and all countries — statesmen, diplomats, bureaucrats, and warriors — if judged from the standpoint of simply morality and human justice, have a hundred, a thousand times over earned their sentence to hard labor or to the gallows. There is no horror, no cruelty, sacrilege, or perjury, no imposture, no infamous transaction, no cynical robbery, no bold plunder or shabby betrayal that has not been or is not daily being perpetrated by the representatives of the states, under no other pretext than those elastic words, so convenient and yet so terrible: "for reasons of state."