

The Rectification of the *Communist Manifesto*¹

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translated by Patrick King

*“Citizens, did you want a revolution without revolution?” –
Robespierre, “Réponse de Maximilien Robespierre à l'accusation de
J.B. Louvet” (November 5, 1792)*

*“Dictatorship is a big, harsh and bloody word, one which expresses a
relentless life-and-death struggle between two classes, two worlds, two
historical epochs. Such words must not be uttered frivolously.” – Lenin,
“A Publicist’s Notes,” 1920*

The *Communist Manifesto*, a text which Marx and Engels’s comrades in struggle “commissioned” them to write under now-distant circumstances, is today one of the fundamental texts of our revolutionary theoretical training. Not the only one, but for hundreds of thousands of communist militants throughout the world, nearly always the first, which lays the ground and traces the general perspectives for a scientific knowledge of society and its history, closely linked to proletarian struggle. We will study it from this angle.

In the preface to the 1890 edition, Engels recounted the history of the *Communist Manifesto*: the history of its composition, the conditions in

¹ “The Rectification of the *Communist Manifesto*,” in *Cinq études du matérialisme historique* (Paris: Maspero, 1974), 65-101. It first appeared in the French Communist Party theoretical journal *La Pensée*, no. 164 (August 1972): 38-64. We would like to thank Étienne Balibar for giving his blessing for us to publish a translation of his work.

which it was read, and the effects it produced. “*The history of the Manifesto*,” he writes, “*reflects the history of the modern working-class movement*.”²

In fact, the three stages in this history of a single pamphlet correspond exactly to the three major, distinct stages of the international workers’ movement. Let’s recall them:

- Prior to the revolutions of 1848, the period of “utopian” socialism and communism, and revolutionary sects (but also, in England, the first touchstones and battles of the trade union movement and mass politics)
- From 1850 to 1872, the period of the International Workingmen’s Association (the First International, founded in 1864), which culminated in the Paris Commune and its aftereffects
- Finally, after 1872, the period of the first mass workers’ parties (above all in Germany), national parties adhering to the doctrine of “scientific socialism” – that is, Marxism – and which would go on to form the Second International

The *Manifesto*, written on the eve of the 1848 revolutions, was not widely republished and distributed throughout Europe until after 1870, when Marxism emerged as the necessary theoretical expression of the political movement of the proletariat. It was apparently absent for the second stage, or rather, it was hidden. But the situation is in fact more complex, for its fundamental theses on the historical autonomy of the proletarian class struggle, on its necessarily internationalist character, took on different formulations. It is thus not a matter of a simple temporal discrepancy between theory and practice. More profoundly, the

² Friedrich Engels, “Preface to the Fourth German Edition (1890) of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 27 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 59. *Translator’s Note*: Emphasis is Balibar’s.

transformation of the workers' movement and its place in the historical process of class struggle corresponds to a transformation in the relationship between the theory of the *Manifesto* to the workers' movement.

Can we go a step further, and speak of necessary transformations in *the theory* itself?

Taken in the strong sense, Engels's wording bears on another operation [*application*]: it sets us on the path of discoveries concerning the necessary link – not external and circumstantial but internal and reciprocal – between Marxist theory and the workers' movement. It allows us to understand why Marxist theory, unique to its kind and breaking with all others, was not mummified or progressively rejected by the workers' movement; rather theory was transformed by the movement at the same time as theory transformed the movement. Engels's formulation moves us forward in understanding the dialectical process of the "merger" between theory and practice.

Indeed, the text of the *Manifesto* itself underwent transformations: corrections, clarifications, even full-fledged *rectifications*, tied to the determinate stages of this process.

Thus, in their preface to the Russian edition of 1882 (which is Marx's last published text), Marx and Engels took the transformation of the global conjuncture and social relations since 1847-48: this preface ends by pronouncing the effects that could trigger a revolution in Russia.

And Engels, who was in the process of writing *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* in line with Marx's notes on Morgan and his own researches, in his 1883 preface (and in the footnote on the opening

page of chapter 1) “revises” the opening thesis of the *Manifesto* (“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”) by referring to the “unwritten” pre-history of societies. This point naturally deserves its own study.

But the most important of these corrections is also the first, and it openly sets itself as such. It is stated in the 1872 preface, written in the immediate aftermath of the Paris Commune: for the Commune carries a theoretical lesson that closes off the 1848 revolutions, and dominates, in its significance and effects, the new period that had been opened up, the conjuncture in which the theory of the *Manifesto* was “reactivated,” re-actualized.

Here is the text of Marx and Engels:

However much that state of things may have altered during the last twenty-five years, the general principles laid down in the *Manifesto* are, on the whole, as correct today as ever. Here and there, some detail might be improved. The practical application of the principles will depend, as the *Manifesto* itself states, everywhere and at all times, on the historical conditions for the time being existing, and, for that reason, no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of [Section II](#). *That passage would, in many respects, be very differently worded today. In view of the gigantic strides of Modern Industry since 1848, and of the accompanying improved and extended organization of the working class, 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 political power for two whole months, this programme has in some details been antiquated. One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and*

wield it for its own purposes." (See *The Civil War in France*, Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association, 1871, *where this point is further developed.*)³

We know what precise point in the text the necessary rectification applies to: the end of Section II of the *Manifesto*, which outlines a "program of revolutionary measures." And we know what, in the first instance, constitutes this rectification: the text of *The Civil War in France*, from which a crucial passage is cited.

But we can allow ourselves another citation. It is in fact clear that although Marx and Engels perfectly saw and indicated (who else would have done it for them?) what *the* correction they themselves made consisted of, and on what point it bears, only the later history of the workers' movement caused it to appear in all its importance. Not until Lenin could it be explained, because he was forced to. This is what he did in *State and Revolution*, where he specifically notes:

The only "correction" Marx thought it necessary to make to the *Communist Manifesto* he made on the basis of the revolutionary experience of the Paris Commune.

The last preface to the new German edition of the Communist Manifesto, signed by both its authors, is dated June 24, 1872. In this preface the authors, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, say that the programme of the Communist Manifesto "has in some details become out--of--date," and the go on to say:

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Preface to the 1872 German Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 23 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), 174-75. [Translator's Note: Emphasis is Balibar's.]

“... One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes...'”

The final words of this passage, placed between quotation marks, are borrowed from Marx's *The Civil War in France*.

Marx and Engels thus attributed such great significance to one of the basic, principal lessons of the Paris Commune that they introduced it as an essential correction in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Something extremely characteristic: it is precisely this essential correction which has been deformed by opportunists, and whose meaning has been ignored by 9 out of 10, if not 99 out of 100, of the readers of the *Communist Manifesto*. We will talk in detail about this deformation later on, in a chapter devoted specifically to them. It suffices to remark for the moment that the current, vulgar “interpretation” of Marx's formulation cited above would have emphasized the idea of a gradual evolution, in opposition to the seizure of power, etc.

In reality, *exactly the opposite* is the case. Marx's point is that the working class must *break, destroy* the “ready-made state machinery,” and should not limit itself to taking possession of it.⁴

⁴ V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 419. There are slight differences in French translation of the passage from Marx's *The Civil War in France*, in the current translation (Editions Sociales), repeated in the *Manifesto* (Editions Sociales) and in *State and Revolution* (*Œuvres complètes de Lénine*, Paris-Moscow, volume XXV). I respect this difference. The German text reads: “Aber die Arbeiterklasse kann nicht die fertige Staatsmaschinerie einfach in Besitz nehmen usw...”. It is therefore the translation from Lenin's Complete Works that is the most literally exact (“prendre la machine d'Etat toute prête”) [in English: “lay hold of the ready-made state machinery”]. But the current French translation (“prendre telle quelle la machine d'Etat”) [in English: “lay hold of the state as is,” or “as it exists”) which has a similar meaning when placed in context, rightly removes any ambiguity on the interpretation of this “ready-made” (it that were still needed). *Translator's Note*: Balibar is referring here to the translation of *La Guerre civile en France* published throughout the 1950s-70s by Editions Sociales, the French Communist Party's publishing house, as

Let us add that Lenin mentions the “correction” of the *Manifesto* not only in *one* passage, but *in every* chapter of *State and Revolution*, beginning with the second: sometimes extensively, other times allusively. It is thus a true key to reading the entire work, which Lenin had to write in order to repair what was, at the time, the not quite innocent “ignorance” of “99 out of 100” readers of the *Communist Manifesto*.

Yes, it is indeed an *essential correction* at stake: essential because it has not ceased to be a sticking point in the reading of Marx, and further still because it is a touchstone for “Marxist” practice. Essential because it concerns a crucial and delicate issue in Marx’s theory itself, which has played a determining role in its fate and probably still does today. Essential because, in the movement of a necessary rectification, it criticizes in advance a deformation we now know to be just as historically necessary. This correction, then, depending on whether it is carried out or not, admitted or rejected, effectively practiced or repressed, would trace an unavoidable line of demarcation. This is why I propose to study it to some degree below.

1. The Theses on the Proletarian State in the *Manifesto*

In order to be able to correctly follow the rectification stated by Marx, we must first analyze the text of the *Manifesto*. Here it is, such as it has been unambiguously designated:

We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.

part of its “Classiques du Marxisme” series. As well, the emphasis in the quotation of Lenin is Balibar’s.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible.

Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionising the mode of production.

These measures will, of course, be different in different countries.

Nevertheless, in most advanced countries, the following will be pretty generally applicable.

1. Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
2. A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
3. Abolition of all rights of inheritance.
4. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
5. Centralisation of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly.
6. Centralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State.

7. Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State; the bringing into cultivation of waste-lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
8. Equal liability of all to work. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
9. Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equitable distribution of the populace over the country.
10. Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, etc, etc.

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free

development of each is the condition for the free development of all.⁵

We must apologize for the long citation, since again, a complete reading of Marx's text clearly shows the following: this passage of the *Manifesto* features the listing of a series of political and economic "measures," more or less adaptable to circumstances. But these measures should in no way be taken for simple, particular procedures of a purely technical or conjunctural character – an insufficient basis to discover the crux of the politics of the proletariat. Rather, these "measures" (from expropriation and obligatory labor up to the abolition of the division of labor in its current form, passing the centralization of the whole economy into the hands of the state, which is the keystone), these "measures" connect with the revolutionary politics of the proletariat, and it is this politics, in its principles, that we will soon return to, once it is a question of evaluating or correcting them.

In fact, the text goes further: it logically inscribes these measures and politics in their necessary place in the successive stages of the historical process which, starting from capitalism (and through it, all prior forms of exploitation and class struggle) is already in motion to bring us toward a classless society, communism. It shows this politics, with the measures it implies, to be *historically necessary*: it is the only path toward the effective realization of the historical objectives of the proletariat. Or better: if the tendency toward the disappearance of all class antagonisms is objectively inscribed in the proletariat's class situation, in the specific character of the antagonism by which this class is opposed to capital, this politics is nothing other, but nothing less, than the *realization of a tendency*.

⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 504-6. [Translator's Note: Hereafter cited as *Communist Manifesto*.]

Let us pause on this point, which brings the whole crux of the problem into view.

If our reading is correct, the crux of the text is what Marx and Engels indicate as the essence of the “communists” position: the position which simultaneously unifies the movement on the material basis of class autonomy,⁶ and effectively pushes it toward *its own future*.⁷

But why does the working class paradoxically need to be pushed (or drawn) toward its own future – precisely through the politics we have just seen defined – while it also needs to be unified on the particular basis of class unity? To understand this, we must relate all that has been said to one of Marx’s fundamental ideas, notably expressed at the beginning of the *Manifesto*, where he writes:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles...in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, *either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes*.⁸

Yet there is no added necessity in communism than in all the other class struggles in earlier periods of history. This is the crucial lesson of the *Manifesto*, which demonstrates, for the first time, that communism is not

⁶ “The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.”

⁷ “The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.”

⁸ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 482 [*Translator’s Note*: emphasis is Balibar’s].

a moral ideal but the result of actual history. And actual history is always, in its structure of struggles and transformations, “open”: it is no longer directed toward an ideal end, nor is it the accomplishment of a program fixed in advance. This basic idea, which distinguishes historical materialism from any philosophy or theology of history, and which can be found elsewhere in different formulations, signifies that the future is necessary, materially determined, but *not predetermined*, necessary precisely insofar as it is not predetermined. A historical “tendency,” then, is never *automatically* realized, either by force of chance and accumulation of chances, or the effect of destiny or providence.

We now understand that this system of “measures” ultimately concerns proletarian politics as *practive* necessarily inscribed in its own historical tendency, and necessary for its realization.

But what determines the nature, the conditions, and objectives of this practice?

Marx and Engels’s text is organized around three terms or notions, which are present from beginning to end. They are:

1. *The state.*
2. *“The organization of the proletariat as the ruling class.”*
3. *The transformation of the relations of production.*

It is by correctly thinking these three terms, within a unified analysis, that we will be able to think, even very abstractly, the destruction of present relations of exploitation, and thus the end of the proletariat’s existence as a dominated, exploited, and particular class, thus the end of the very existence of classes and their struggle, under whatever form it takes.

Outside the material conditions that define these terms, perspectives toward the abolition of exploitation are only a hollow dream.

We are indeed at the core of Marx's theory and politics. And we are also – not by accident – at the point where the practical difficulties, the critiques or “refutations” of Marx – from the “left” or “right,” including those which claim to unmask and pinpoint him as an advocate of a “state socialism” as coercive [*contraignant*] as capitalism itself – are most concentrated.

For Marx, who also writes in this regard that “every struggle is a political struggle,” the question of politics overlaps with the question of the state: not in itself (formally), but materially, only in conditions actually determined by history. The politics of the proletariat, which tend toward the transformation of the relations of production (and not only juridical, political relations, or relations governing the distribution of wealth) in order to abolish exploitation, is shaped by its proper relationship to the state. And the question of proletarian revolution is politically, practically, ordered by the question of the state-form, its conquest and withering away. We can, it seems, summarize in four points the principal dimensions of Marx's line of argument, from a theoretical perspective.

1. *A Definition of the State*

This definition has a remarkable form. It is explicit in the phrase “...in the hands of the State, *i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class.*”⁹

According to Lenin, this is a “highly interesting definition of the state,” and “is also one of the ‘forgotten words’ of Marxism...it has been deliberately ignored, for it is absolutely irreconcilable with reformism,

⁹ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 504. [Translator's Note: Emphasis is Balibar's.]

and is a slap in the face for the common opportunist prejudices and philistine illusions about the “peaceful development of democracy.”¹⁰ I will refer to Lenin’s commentary in what follows, as it is imperative to reread.

We should take careful note of Lenin’s explanations, for no future rectification of this definition can proceed *without* what it has to teach us. This definition of the state in the *Manifesto* is *already incompatible* with both reformism and anarchism; it situates the Marx of the *Manifesto* as beyond the class line of demarcation which he himself traces in theory and renders completely vapid the speculations of those who inquire, to this day, into Marx’s “statist” tendencies, or, on the other hand, of the (libertarian) anarchists.

What initially interests Lenin in this definition is that it affirms the need for the proletariat to organize its political domination in order to “subdue” or “suppress” the class resistance of the exploiters, the bourgeoisie. A *dominant* class implies a *dominated* class, and dominated by the organized, concentrated force of the state.

But this definition is interesting for another reason, due to its conceptual form. It clearly harkens back to the analysis in the first chapter of the *Manifesto*, devoted to the economic and political history of the bourgeoisie. We find there the idea of the *bourgeoisie organized as the ruling class*, organized for rule “in the modern representative State” (whereby “[t]he executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”) This is the result of historical struggles which have led first to the existence, then the organization (and thus political autonomy), and finally the domination of the bourgeoisie in society.

¹⁰ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 407.

Marx's elaboration in the *Manifesto* thus proceeds from a "general" definition (or at least, one that is common in two historical situations), which encompasses;

1. The state = the bourgeoisie organized as the ruling class;
2. The state = the proletariat organized as the ruling class; thereby; the state is the dominant class itself, such as this class organizes its rule or, what amounts to the same thing, such as this class organizes itself in order to exercise its rule.

I will have the chance later on to show the problems the form of this particular definition raises.

2. *A Definition of Revolution*

A definition of revolution is developed in the formulae: "conquest of political power," "win[ning] the battle of democracy," "despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production," and the "sweep[ing] away by force the old conditions of production."¹¹ These formulae render the state the means, and by the same gesture, the primary revolutionary goal.

We can observe that they already bring together the two poles which establish the tension specific to the Marxist concept of (proletarian) "revolution": this revolution implies both "democracy" and "despotism" (or violence), connected by a *sign of equality-identity*: it is the unity, even identity, of "democracy" and "despotism." How to think this contradictory unity? It is evident that in the *Manifesto*, Marx remains content to pose it, to affirm it without demonstration or a possible concrete illustration (only a program, which is very different). But why

¹¹ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 498, 504, 506.

this affirmation? Is it to satisfy, like others, a moral demand for justice, right, progress...and political effectiveness at the same time? Certainly not. Rather: Marx intentionally “practices” *the negation* of the traditional metaphysical opposition founded by bourgeois and petit-bourgeois political philosophy between right and fact, justice and violence, force and law, democracy and despotism, etc. This new affirmation, which is at once the negation and critique of an entrenched [*invétérée*] ideological problematic, points to a problem, but does not solve it.

But let us remark here: this definition of revolution is not only a moment of the *definition of proletarian politics* (with its “strategy,” which focuses on the conquest of power as the critical point, and its “tactics,” in part left to “circumstances”), it is also a *political definition* of revolution. More precisely, it is, in its very principle, the definition of a *political form*: although “democracy,” “despotism” are political forms, even “systems,” defined at the level of what Marx calls elsewhere the social “superstructures,” the same is necessarily true for any combination of such forms, including contradictory ones. The definition thus does not possess its own justification, at its own level, but only in its relation to a material “base,” or better: to the overall process in which it constitutes itself on a material basis.

Finally, two problems are thus simultaneously posed: that of the concrete political forms necessary for revolution, and the relationship these forms have to the material basis of the entire revolutionary process.

3. *The Revolutionary Process*

The questions raised by this initial definition of revolution are developed by Marx and Engels through terms that force us to take a step further.

The proletarian revolution is not conceived as an *act*, the act of the proletariat realizing its own program or project, even though it is indeed the political practice of the proletariat that carries out the revolution (recall Marx's later remark that "force is the midwife" of history). Revolution is not conceived simply as an act, but as an objective *process*.

In this process, the component "measures" of a revolutionary program are only a first step, which would necessarily be followed by others, which are not yet included. These measures engage the process, but they do not *abolish* class antagonisms, as if this abolition could be enacted by decree or even a (violent) overthrow; they only produce the material conditions through which, "in the course of development," class antagonisms can disappear.

The proletarian "revolution" is the *entirety* [*tout l'ensemble*] of this process. Consequently, the very core of this revolution resides in the force or play of forces that transmit its movement.

Marx writes that the initial "measures" appear to be "economically insufficient and untenable, but...in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves." Insufficient and untenable because, as we have learned from the terminology of the *Manifesto*, the ultimate objective of revolution is, at first glance, something wholly different: the abolition of the "conditions of existence of capital," *wage-labor*.

Is this to say that these measures "*outstrip themselves*" according to a "spontaneous" movement, a "self-movement," *because* they are insufficient and untenable? Is the reason for their necessary overcoming found located in their very insufficiency? Is this the "negative" force of a lack, what we might well call a negativity?

Or might we rather say that the measures outstrip themselves in the material *effects* they produce, which Marx indicates as the centralization of production (“in the hands of the state”) and the development of the productive forces? But these effects are sufficient to explain the necessary transition to the abolition of classes, if we do not first explain under what conditions, what kinds of social (political and economic) relations these results are obtained. We thus circle back to our question.

In fact, the force that pushes to outstrip every stage stems neither from the empty gap of what will be realized in the future and its exigency (a purely idealist explanation) nor from the economic and juridical results of the first stage (a mechanistic and stagist explanation). It can only be *consistent with what was described* in the whole first section of the *Manifesto*: a material force arising at each moment from the class antagonism itself. If there is a force, tendency, and thus a process, it is only because there is antagonism.

In this way, the principal dimension of this process is introduced, concurrently with the problem it raises: *the revolutionary process itself is a process of class struggle through and through [de part en part]*. In other words, the revolutionary process consists of a process of class struggle leading toward the abolition of class struggle, through an internal necessity inscribed in the specific structure of this struggle, which is the result of all the others but is fundamentally dissimilar from them. Thus a third possible issue for the class struggle rears its head, radically new, distinct both from the “the common ruin of the contending classes” and the constitution of *another* form of class domination. “The organization of the proletariat as the dominant class,” the conquest of state power, is only the first moment of this struggle – but a decisive moment, since it precisely creates the conditions of a new *form*, hitherto unknown, but

without for all that *representing* the final result. To the contrary: the final result is in no way predetermined, in no way guaranteed.

Let us pause for a moment.

The preceding formulations, which help us understand the theoretical problem the necessity of the proletarian revolution posed for Marx, are daresay purely verbal. But they do contain, if not a veritable scientific *knowledge* (of which object? Nothing is more absurd than to imagine a “Marxist plan” [*prospective*]), then at least a theoretical and political *orientation*, and it is for this reason that they have played an immense practical role in the history of the workers’ movement, where these formulations have themselves constituted real material forces. Because far from adding a “Marxist” *solution* to all those proposed by the ideological communisms and socialisms to “exit” the contradictions of contemporary society, Marx’s formulations pose a totally different *problem*; they effectively *opened* the road to the revolutionary struggle of proletarian organizations, whose path has continued, at each possible moment, to uphold the opening of the problem posed by Marx. As a result, Marx’s formulations concerning the revolutionary process are one of the keys to the problematic of historical materialism.

They strengthen and confirm the fundamental thesis of the *Manifesto*, and allow us to grasp its strictly dialectical character: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” There are *no exceptions* to this rule, not even those making up the transition to communism, to “classless society.” History does not advance by its “good side” but by its “bad side”; it does not advance through the anticipation of its peaceful and “brilliant” future, only struggles of the present. And it is the contradiction of these struggles which renders it possible to think something akin to their future or outcome.

We can go further. Marx's text is remarkable in that it completely leaves aside the common sense "solution," which would be: the class struggle "quite simply" ends because one of the classes (the proletariat) *prevails* and, in its victory, eliminates its adversary. This solution (with the combat ceasing "for lack of combatants") is not actually a solution, since it makes reference to a *formal* concept of "struggle," as a balanced confrontation between adversaries, and applicable to any struggle whatever. But Marx's historical dialectic is not a general "theory of struggle" or contradiction. It is the struggle of a specific, materially determined struggle. And the *Manifesto* already demonstrates (which will become a clear and developed concept with the theory of surplus-value, in *Capital*) that the elements of this struggle (classes) are not figures or protagonists existing outside of it, independently appearing or disappearing from one to the other, but are themselves material effects of struggle, that is, effects of the antagonistic conditions of social production. What must be transformed are these antagonistic conditions, these relations of exploitation.

We can then understand why, to be able to think the end of exploitation, we must think about the constitution of a proletarian *state*, opposed to all forms of capitalist property, and which violently *destroys* them, in order to replace one form of the appropriation of production with another. And we can understand that, in this way, the conditions are created for an arrangement of social production *opposed* to those which have historically produced the state as a means of domination, and which consequently must set in motion the withering of the state. But we do not completely understand the *modality* of this transformation, which carries *the association of individuals* (producers) from the status of the state to that of a "free" association which is no longer a state. And this difficulty is reflected

throughout the entire process, since it concerns the crucial point of revolution: the form in which the struggle is concentrated and unfolds.

But as Lenin reiterates several times in focusing on this passage from the *Manifesto*, Marx's formulation here is *abstract*. It must be recalled, according to Lenin's terminology, that truth, and thus knowledge, is always "concrete." This is why Marx's formulation leads us back to the difficulties that the definition of revolutionary political forms already presents, this time regarding its conceptual basis.

Let us state once again: in this famous text by Marx, are we dealing with something other than a mere *assertion*, at the level of description, of the contradictory characteristics of this process? In other words: we know that the social relations existing in bourgeois society are *actually* contradictory relations, which depend upon the irreconcilable antagonism between capital and the proletariat; and that the very nature of this antagonism explains the necessity for its overcoming, and thus the real transformation of the contradictions which stem from it; and that the concept – contradictory in itself – of proletarian revolution needs to be introduced precisely in order to think this transformation, the transformation of struggle into non-struggle through the development of a new struggle, the abolition of the very terms in confrontation (social classes) through the intensification and explosion of their struggle. Ultimately, to be able to think the solution of a real contradiction, have we only introduced a *logical contradiction*?

Of course, this is a difficulty of any kind of "dialectic." From a materialist perspective, the solution to this difficulty is not to be theoretically *invented*, a pure argumentative effort; it must be *practically* produced. We who are reading Marx's text more than a century after the fact, can designate "solutions" which have begun to be realized in

practice: the successive series of socialist revolutions, the Paris Commune, the Soviet Revolution of October 1917, the Chinese Revolution. They very much exist. Does this mean, then, that the difficulty can only be stated in this abstract form which blocks it in place, preventing its necessity from being *explained* in any detail? In other words, are we going to have to admit that the dialectic of class struggle and communist revolution, *in its content*, ultimately escapes theory? And how to subsequently explain, in line with Marx's theory, the history of concrete socialist revolutions, their triumphs, their failures – how do we analyze the universal import of the lessons they provide and apply them in our own practice if, in principle, the powers of theory extend up to moment prior to the revolutionary process, but not beyond it?

4. *The “End of Politics”*

To finish our analysis of Marx's formulations in the *Manifesto*, let us examine one last point. We will indeed take up an argument that condenses the preceding elements all at once, including the “difficulties” we encountered, and gives them a very important *new formulation*. This argument is implied in the sentence: “When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared...*the public power will lose its political character.*”¹²

Do we find in this formulation something more than: 1.) the idea that every class struggle is a political struggle; 2) the idea that the political domination of a class implies this class possesses state power; 3.) the idea of the necessary disappearance of the state following the disappearance of class relations?

¹² This theme also appears, in a very similar form, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. [Translator's Note: Emphasis in the quoted passage is Balibar's].

It appears to me the answer is yes: on this basis, we find in this passage the *thesis of the necessary disappearance of politics as such in the history of humanity*. And not only a determinate form of “politics,” transformed into something else through new conditions but the outright disappearance of all “politics,” *whatever its forms might be*.

Put otherwise, we find the idea of a form of *social* organization (association of individuals, collective organization and appropriation of production, etc.) that is *non-political*, or better: at a distance from all politics, *a-political*. In these passages of Marx, I would argue that the “end of the state” entails the “end of politics”; not only the end of political institutions or apparatuses, but *the end of political practice*.

An objection will perhaps be raised that what is at issue is purely a matter of terminology: in a sense, anyone is free to define the terms they use as they see fit; and Marx, for example, is free to *identify* “politics” and “state” so that the end of state is *by definition* the end of politics, of political practice.

But this objection is untenable. It would only make sense if we were dealing here (and in historical materialism) solely with a theoretical system relying on its own initial agreed rules, its arbitrarily posed “axioms.” Historical materialism would then only be the “theoretical” equivalent of the utopianism that Marx persistently fought against. But in the *Manifesto* – as its title indicates – we are dealing with something completely different. We can recall the thesis (from the beginning of section II) which states that communists “do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.” Marx and Engels only engage the “future” in relation to present struggles, and in terms which themselves constitute practical interventions in these struggles, and on the basis of the language

developed within them. This is why these terms have sooner or later been able to function as slogans [*mots d'ordre*].

The terminology leads us back to its own effects, which are necessary and unpredictable. And at the same time, this supplementary thesis raises additional questions: what does it entail, and who does it oppose?

Marx writes of a *public power* having lost its *political character*. Again playing with the oppositions of bourgeois ideological categories so as to critique them, Marx proposes to think “public power” outside of its relationship to “private” institutions, above all private property. Once again, it remains the case that this indication is purely negative and provisional.

This thesis, which needs to be taken in its most conclusive form to avoid the problems it raises, immediately calls to mind other famous formulations in the history of Marxism. Most notable is Engels’s later formulation in the *Anti-Dühring*: “the government of persons [die Regierung über Personen] is replaced by the administration of things [die Verwaltung von Sachen], and the conduct of processes of production.”¹³ Of course, this sentence (I will come back to it) is talking about persons (and therefore individuals) and not classes, but is of the greatest interest in that it is not solely negative. It determines a counter to the disappearance of the state, and also brings to light the *non-political* character of this alternative: the administration of things and the direction of processes of production.

Here we may open a parenthetical note. We know that this formulation comes from Saint-Simon. Engels himself notes this fact in the prior section of the *Anti-Dühring* (section III, chapter 1):

¹³ Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 25 (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1987), 268. [Emphasis is Balibar’s.]

In 1816 [Saint-Simon] *declared that politics was the science of production and foretold the complete absorption of politics by economics*. Although the knowledge that economic conditions are the basis of political institutions appears here only in embryo, what is already very plainly expressed is the transition from political rule over men to the administration of things and the guidance of the processes of production – that is to say, the abolition of the state, about which there has recently been so much noise.¹⁴

In Saint-Simon's work, the thesis has both a utopian and technocratic connotation. *Utopian*, because it calls for an immediate transformation, the *reversal* of politics into the industrial "science of production," which abolishes politics by "realizing" it. Additionally, it has a *technocratic* meaning: because it is not, as Saint-Simon believes, the spontaneous tendency of the industrial economy, because in fact the state and politics cannot disappear on their own, but only through the effect of a long class struggle, the watchword of the administration of things, etc., can only correspond *in practice* to a political rule which does not dare to proclaim itself as such, and hides behind so-called "economic" or "technical" imperatives, etc. In Engels, these two dimensions disappear precisely to the extent that the conquest of political power by the proletariat is advanced as a necessary stage and means, as already outlined in the *Manifesto*. But the question fully remains of knowing whether, under these conditions, the idea of a pure "administration of things," the idea of a *non-political society*, possesses a completely different content. We will leave that question open for the moment.

2. The Lessons of the Commune

¹⁴ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 246-7. *Translator's Note*: Emphasis is Balibar's. This passage would later reappear in Engels's 1880 work, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.]

We can now proceed to *the* rectification carried out by Marx in 1872, that “important correction” Lenin discusses.

What is at stake in this correction, if we had to put it in a word? It concerns the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, whose concept is developed in *The Civil War in France* and in Marx and Engels’s later texts, always in explicit reference to the experience of the Paris Commune.

It will not be possible to examine all the problems this concept raises; it is only a matter of locating the precise point of the correction.

We can remark at the outset that the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” does not appear in the *Manifesto*, even if there are a number of closely related expressions. Indeed, whatever the origin of the term (Blanquist, according to some), the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was not defined by Marx until the following period, after the writing of the *Manifesto*. More precisely, it was established in two phases:

– First phase: from 1848 to 1852 (see the texts from the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, *Class Struggles in France*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*), Marx only defines the dictatorship of the proletariat *negatively*: he articulates the need to oppose, against the *dictatorship of the bourgeoisie* realized in the modern state (including the democratic state and parliamentary republic), a dictatorship of the proletariat; he shows, at the same time, that it is imperative to “smash the existing state machine,” instead of using it and “perfecting” it as all previous revolutions had done, especially the successive series of French revolutions. Marx draws in this way the lessons of the proletariat’s failure in 1848-49.

– Second phase: in *The Civil War in France*, by analyzing the Paris Commune as “a new point of departure of world-historic importance”

of the Paris Commune in its “very working existence,” Marx can provide a *positive* definition of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” In other words, he can show *which direction* the proletarian revolution is *practically* oriented toward, analyze the aspects of its experience which already have a “world-historic importance.”¹⁵ And Marx does this not via a purely theoretical effort, but in and through the practical effect of a genuine historical experiment.

The dictatorship of the proletariat as glimpsed in the Paris Commune is, according to Marx, “essentially a *working class government*, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.”¹⁶ There is a necessary relationship between the “economic” action of the Commune, its practical transformation of the relations of production, and its political form of proletarian dictatorship. Not only does this new type of “economic policy” presuppose the ensemble of the new politics of a “working class government,” but the former has its material condition a new political form of the exercise and realization of power, and the radical destruction of previous forms.

We can turn to the text of *The Civil War in France* in more detail (and to Lenin’s commentary in *State and Revolution*). One can glean that the principal aspects of this new political form for Marx are:

1. *The armed people*, the condition and guarantee of all the other measures (in place of the permanent army);

¹⁵ Karl Marx, “Letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, 17 April 1871,” *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 44 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 137.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 22 (Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), 334. [*Translator’s Note*: Emphasis is Balibar’s.]

2. *The doing-away with [la suppression] of parliamentarism and bureaucratism [fonctionnarisme]*, which had become the functional basis of the bourgeois state: the direct subordination (through direct revocability and responsibility) of elected officials and delegates, replaced as a whole by the people (including their “workmen’s wages”), an end to the apparent independence of the judicial system, administration, educational institutions, etc.

To repeat the point, these are not merely “immediate measures” imposed by the circumstances, but measures with a unique aim: to dismantle the existing state machine, positioned “above” society and replace it with a different political form. This is why, as Marx notes, that the Commune – precisely because of its internal contradictions – was “a thoroughly expansive political form,” able to continuously transform itself in the direction of the objective tendency it indicated (even if the ultimate failure of the Commune in its military struggle against the dominant classes interrupted this development and forced it to be taken up later, under changed conditions). These first measures suffice to prove, however, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the *material* realization of the old “contradiction” between *democracy* and *despotism* (violence, dictatorship), democracy for the “vast majority” under the form of the dictatorship of one class, that of the workers.

It is above all the material realization of a state which is at the same time already something *other* than a state, a state...transformed into something which is no longer the state proper.”¹⁷ Put differently, the Commune not only proves that what appeared to be “impossible” was “possible.” It proves that contradiction (in which idealist philosophy sees the mark of the impossible) is the mark of the *necessary* possible [*du possible nécessaire*]: of the *real* as such.

¹⁷ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 424.

But, in a much more concrete manner – and *the* “correction” made to the *Manifesto* becomes clear in fact – the Commune proves that the “non-state” (the destruction of the state) is not only a *final outcome* of the revolutionary process. On the contrary: it is an *initial aspect*, immediately present, without which there would be no revolutionary process *tout court*. Doubtless, as Lenin shows against the anarchist interpretation, the total withering away (disappearance) can only happen *after* the complete disappearance of class relations (exploitation in all its forms): but this withering away begins *from the first*, and its immediate commencement, not through an intention but in the practical measures which directly counteract the inevitable “survivals” of the state, is the material condition of the effective transformation of the relations of production as well as the decisive disappearance of the state itself.

This is, without any shadow of a doubt, the crucial point. We can therefore turn back to the text of the *Manifesto*, and provide a first response to our initial question: why do Marx and Lenin speak of a rectification, an “essential correction”? *What* is it?

I will say this: these terms must be taken in the strongest sense. They also engender (but this time within theory and history) a veritable contradiction. To grasp the necessity of the history of Marxist theory, we have to go so far as to find and state a contradiction between the *Manifesto* and *The Civil War in France*, and not simply a “development,” “evolution,” etc. But this contradiction does not place two theories in opposition, in an indeterminate manner: it is a determinate, localized contradiction, internal to the theory itself.

To sum up:

1. The term dictatorship of the proletariat is absent from the *Manifesto*;
2. The *immediate* need for the proletarian revolution to “smash the machine,” to “smash the existing state apparatus,” is absent;
3. The practical measures corresponding – even in an insufficient and particular form – to the destruction and “extinction” of the state *are completely absent*: this extinction is only thought as a distant final objective. In question is only the *positive* use of the state.

We can state this outcome in different terms: in the *Manifesto*, the “destruction (then extinction) of the state” and “proletarian revolution” appear as *two distinct processes*. On the one hand, the extinction of the state is not really a revolutionary process, a process of struggle and social clashes, necessarily “violent” in this sense, but an evolution or the result of an evolution. It is not imperative to make it the aim of a specific practice; material (economic) conditions are enough to gradually realize it. On the other hand, the proletarian revolution does not feature the destruction of the state as one of its necessary aspects, the contradiction between the state’s necessary destruction and its equally necessary use.

In contrast, in the *Manifesto*, as we have seen, there is the problematic idea of democracy as identical to a “despotism” (even a dictatorship), of the conquest of political power through violence, the organization of the proletariat as the dominant class.

We can thus affirm: certainly, as Lenin demonstrates, the formulation of the *Manifesto* is *already* incompatible with opportunism; it suffices (or rather it sufficed in a determinate conjuncture) to break with the latter, it is situated on the terrain of historical materialism, in which it poses a problem that will no longer go away. At the same time, as Lenin also remarks, this formulation is “abstract.” However, this abstraction cannot be concretized without a contradiction arising. What is missing is not

simply a lacuna (one side – the state – would already be present, the other side – the “non-state” – would still be absent). But this absence profoundly affects the thesis present in the *Manifesto*. And consequently, when the contradiction appears, the meaning of the *Manifesto* finds itself retrospectively changed.

Of course, all this was and continues to be *politically* significant: for in politics it is not the intentions or possible interpretations of a theoretical text that count, but only its letter, the extent to which it produces political effects. We thus have the right to say that the *Manifesto* is politically equivocal, or better: it is burdened by *an indecision on an essential point*, provided it is understood that this indecision only appears after the fact, or what amounts to the same thing, it corresponded to the actual indecision encountered in the workers' movement prior to 1848 and, above all, prior 1871. And ultimately, provided it is understood that the theory of the *Manifesto*, taken to the letter, was itself one of the necessary conditions for the emergence of the theoretical indecision it contained.

3. The Rectification

It is now a matter of indicating the consequences of this rectification, some of which are only outlines or even problematics, on the overall set of theses of the *Manifesto* and historical materialism.

We can list at least five at the outset, which are closely linked:

1. A transformation of the *definition of the state*.
2. A transformation of the *theory and history of the state*.
3. An initial *concrete* determination of the problem of the abolition of classes and exploitation (why does the proletarian revolution, marking its

difference from all other revolutions, in no way lead to a *new* form of exploitation?).

4. The possibility of definitively exiting the circular political antimony between anarchism and reformism, of “left” opportunism and “right” opportunism.

5. The possibility, even necessity, of *posing anew*, in different terms, the problem of the “end of politics,” the replacement of political practice by the “purely economic” practice of the administration of things, etc.

I will limit myself to a few indications concerning the first and last points, to show the connection between them.

1. *New Definition of the State*

Marx’s “rectification” involves a transformation in the definition of the state (in truth, this point is not strictly separate from a transformation in the conception of the history of the state).

Let us immediately lay out the central point, which renders it possible to advance – to the extent that it corrects it – the problematic of the *Manifesto*: the new definition of the state depends upon a distinction between *state power* and the *state apparatus*. It is thus a complex definition of the state, understood both as state power and as the state apparatus.

The reader must be warned: this definition has nothing to do with what might be the object of a putative “Marxist political science,” by which I mean a typology of forms (essentially *juridical*) of state power and the state apparatus, and their combinations. In reality, it has to do with analyzing the historical conditions of the conquest and exercise of state power, as they stem from the nature of the state apparatus created by the dominant classes.

Marx's theses (subsequently developed by Engels and Lenin) is the following: the *political power* of a ruling class, like the bourgeoisie, is not exercised "directly" but "indirectly," in a double sense.

Political power is not exercised directly in the sense that the economic domination of a class (the appropriation of the means of production and, on this basis, the extraction of surplus labor) *would itself be sufficient*. Let us not forget that this domination, or more precisely, the exploitation of labor which it makes possible is both the basis of all forms of domination and the objective it seeks to permanently maintain: it is "reproduced" through the ensemble of the class struggle of the ruling class. But, precisely from this perspective, it is not sufficient: this domination requires the "detour" of a properly political class struggle.

Political power is no longer exercised directly in the sense that the ruling class would wield, as a *collectivity*, a political power over the dominated classes. In certain cases, this situation can appear to approach reality, as in the "city" of antiquity, in which property-owners are also citizens; if such a pure situation ever existed, it is in any case a situation the historical development of the state *moved away from* and did not extend further. In this sense the capitalist state, the state of the capitalist class, is never the state of *capitalists* (it is never a "union" of capitalists). In other words, the ruling class is never defined as a political "subject" (one would have said during the classical period, "the sovereign"). If this were the case, it would never have been necessary to research and find, "behind" the surface appearances of the state, the class realities which control it, defined in the last instance by their place in the process of production-exploitation.

In fact, the political power of a dominant class is actually exercised *through the intermediary of a specialized apparatus*, set “above” society, that is, *in the service* of the dominant class. Moreover (this point is of great practical importance), the *modalities* of this service vary in different social formations, although they fulfill a common general “function” in the service of successive ruling classes. Whence, precisely, the apparent permanence of the state.

In *The Origin of the Family*, Engels began to study these modalities and the historical constitution of the state. He drew particular attention to the “public force of armed men” which constituted the specifically *repressive* kernel of the state apparatus, and the necessary *material basis* of state tributes or *taxes*. The tax is a specific economic form, distinct from surplus-value (and thus profit) and more broadly from all successive historical forms of surplus directly stemming from relations of exploitation, although it could only exist on the basis of these forms and historically transforms alongside them. Marx and Engels’s “political” works, following the period of the 1848 revolutions, contain on the other hand a rich series of analyses of the forms of capitalist state apparatus and the latter’s function in the class struggle.

It is thus essential to examine the consequences of this “difference.” Therefore, the necessary existence of the state apparatus (and because of it) the political power of *one* class over another or several others is transformed and subsequently realized in a complex fashion. Very schematically, it is realized through the simultaneous play of two series of relations:

1. It involves on the one hand the power (*de facto* power, the result of historical struggles) of representatives of this class *over the apparatus*: these representatives are themselves a determinate fraction of the dominant

class; and this power can be the stake of struggle, not just between classes, but between classes of the dominant class (see, in France, the “revolutions” of 1830 and 1848-51, or closer to our present, the “coup d'état” of May 13, 1958).

2. On the other hand, it involves the power (the *legally* organized power) *of the apparatus over “society,”* as a collection of individuals gathered opposite this apparatus and in relation to it.

In other words, the political power of the state does not present itself, or better, does not *realize itself* in the forms of a relationship between classes, although it is exactly at the level of political power, covering the totality [*ensemble*] of the social production process, that class relations are maintained and reproduced in the class struggle on an ongoing basis. It goes without saying: the existence of the state apparatus realizes, in an “altered form,” the political domination of the ruling class, even if it is in no way *the origin* of said political domination. Only the relations of force within the class struggle can be at the root of political domination – specifically, in the last instance, in the “economic” class, in exploitation. There is no “supernatural” power of the apparatus as such (even the “institution,” preferred target of the false petty-bourgeois critique of the state, the Proudhons and Stirners of our time). While political domination is only realized and acquires a reality in the functioning of the state apparatus, the latter is completely unintelligible when detached from the class relation it embodies.

In the functioning of the state apparatus, the class relation is thus *hidden*, and obscured by the very mechanism which realizes it. Indeed, the state apparatus never deals with classes as such, no more those who actually *hold* power than those who are *subject* to it. As a result, political power appears as a power (an “authority”) *of the state itself over “society,”*

whether the latter is defined as a status hierarchy (castes, estates, etc.) or as a collectivity of (more or less equal) individual persons. More exactly, the existence of the state apparatus constitutes the “state” and “society” as opposite poles (and the one enwrapping the other).

It needs to be understood that this mechanism is not in itself an *illusion*, no more than the juridical forms which institutionalize it; it is not only apparently, but actually the case that proletarians and capitalists alike are free and equal *individuals*, and it is as individuals that they are registered in the civil state: they attend (or do not attend) school, they perform (or do not perform) their military service, they vote (or do not vote) in elections and plebiscites, they are elected (or not elected) as elected officials or municipal council-members, they sign (or do not sign) property or employment contracts, etc. But this mechanism necessarily generates an illusion or misrecognition concerning the class relation it realizes.

Because this mechanism is objective, realized in material practices, it allows for an objective explanation of why this illusion is by necessity tied to the representation of the state, which even incorporates this illusion into its functioning; in short, what makes the state apparatus, across determinate institutions and practices, not solely a *repressive* apparatus, but an *ideological* apparatus.¹⁸

¹⁸ These formulations remain gestural, although they suffice for our present aim. They do not indicate how the repressive dimension and ideological dimension of the state apparatus function, in their complementarity – which would force us to clearly distinguish and analyze the ideological state apparatuses. This is what Althusser attempted to do, in the form of an initial sketch, in the June 1970 issue of *La Pensée*. [Translator’s Note: Balibar is referring to Althusser’s essay, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation).”]

In the *Manifesto*, this illusion is hard to grasp, which leads Marx to represent bourgeois society, in equivocal phrases, as a society which “tears away the veils” of religion, the family, the state, and which which compels humanity to “to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind,” a society in which the end of political illusions would be the spontaneous outcome of capitalist relations of production themselves.

The state apparatus should be constituted, then, in a manner permitting the exercise of power by a determinate class. It should facilitate the exercise of power by its “representatives.” And it is imperative that the latter be *transformed into representatives of “society,” (re)produced as the legitimate representatives due to the structure of the apparatus and due to the fact they occupy a “post”* – whether it be an elected post, or designated and recruited according to other modalities. Whence the form of the state, with its hierarchies (hierarchy based on juridical equality is a specific, limit case) and relations of dependence (the dependence based on individual freedom is a specific, limit case). And to briefly discuss the matter, this is why every ruling class has for its task and historical objectives not only to make use of the state apparatus, but to first create, develop, organize, and transform it (the “typically” political character of the revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848, emphasized by Marx, in his view precisely adheres in the fact that they relatively isolate this process, turning it into the immediate stake of certain conjunctures of class struggle).

Obviously, this mechanism is, to invoke Marx, “perfected”; its realization is pushed to the limit in the historical state-forms which are the outcome of past class struggles: “bourgeois democracy,” in which the functioning of the state apparatus includes, under the effect of all prior class struggle, the *entirety* of “society” *directly* in the operation of this apparatus, while also rendering society wholly opposite to it through an unprecedented specialization and centralization. The representatives of the bourgeois class who exercise the power they hold over the apparatus consequently must, in one way or another, be transformed into representatives of “the people” as a whole. From this perspective, there is not a contradiction, but rather a close fit between the analyses of the *Manifesto*, wherein Marx shows how, “in order to attain its own political ends,” the bourgeoisie “is compelled to set the whole proletariat in

motion,” and the analyses of parliamentarism and universal suffrage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and later texts.

2. *A New Practice of Politics*

Let’s return to the dictatorship of the proletariat and its first definition. It is essential to try and clarify, while sticking to the same texts as a matter of principle, this idea of *a state which is already a “non-state,”* in relation to the distinction between state power and state apparatus.

It is well-known that this idea appears as a literal absurdity to bourgeois political ideology, even when it seems to abstractly consider the idea of an end to the state. *Either* the state exists and functions, *or* it does not exist: between the two terms of this “alternative” only sees room for a “middle solution,” for an intermediate situation between the state and the non-state, in the sense of a continuous and progressive gradation (or degradation). But if the “non-state” is only the *degree zero* toward which the degradation of the state tends, or put otherwise, if we are only ever dealing with one term, the state itself, then Marx’s phrase is indeed unthinkable, a play of sense and nonsense. The new distinction developed by Marx allows us to get outside this logical “aporia.”

The Paris Commune indeed proves this point, by the fact of its “working existence,” and which Marx acknowledges in *The Civil War in France*. If there was a state which is *already* to a certain extent something other than a state, a “non-state,” it is obviously not because the *state power* of the proletariat would be attenuated, on the road to extinction; rather this state power would be *strengthened*, and continuously strengthened, all throughout the dictatorship of the proletariat. But it is to the extent that the *state apparatus* is already *no longer* a state apparatus, in the sense that the whole of prior history has perfected it and the class

struggle itself has consistently strengthened this tendency. For the “people in arms” (clearly not to be confused with obligatory military service), in addition to the abolition of parliamentarism and bureaucracy, signifies the end of the separation and specialization specific to the state apparatus.

Another consequence follows. While in all of past history, the consolidation of one class's state power always had as a material condition the strengthening of the state apparatus, here we find ourselves, for the first time, faced with the exact opposite situation: the reinforcement of state power has as its condition the weakening of the state apparatus, or more precisely, the struggle against the existence of the state apparatus.

The *fact* thus discovered can be stated in a general form: *the exploiting classes and the exploited class* – which for the first time in history and due to its place in the process of production, is in the position to take power for itself – *cannot exercise their power* (even their absolute power: their “dictatorship”) *by the same means, and therefore not in the same forms*. They cannot, not in the sense of moral impossibility, but in the sense of a material impossibility: the state machine *does not function* “on behalf” of the working class; either it does not function at all, or it does function, but on behalf of someone else, who can only be the class adversary. It is impossible for the proletariat to conquer, then safeguard and use political power by wielding an instrument analogous to that wielded by the dominant classes. Otherwise the proletariat will necessarily *lose* political power in one form or another, be it “violent” or “peaceful.”

But this revolutionary transformation has two conditions, which alone renders it possible to grasp the role it can immediately play in the

transformation of production relations, which will lead to the abolition of labor exploitation:

1. The first condition is the existence, *to the side* of the state apparatus, of political organizations of a new type, mass political organizations, *political organizations of workers*, which control the state apparatus and subdue it, including under its new form. For Marx, it is before *such organizations* that elected officials and functionaries, whom it is impossible to do without, are “directly revocable and responsible.” We should understand that they are not responsible to *individuals*, even individual workers. These organizations were represented in the Commune in outline form, by the “clubs” of worker-soldiers and their families.¹⁹ But in this way the effective organization of “the majority” was sketched, which tended toward abolishing the mechanism which sought to “represent” the people: the game of referring [*jeu de renvoi*] representatives of the dominant class to be representatives “of society” within the state apparatus.

2. But the second condition is still more important, as it determines the first: *the penetration of political practice in the sphere of “labor,”* of production. In other words, the end of the absolute separation, developed by capitalism itself, between “politics” and the “economy” [*économie*]. Not in the sense of a “political economy,” which is nothing new, nor in the simple transfer of political power to the workers; but *for the workers to exercise political power as workers*, and to do so in an enduring fashion – the transfer, *into* the sphere of production, of a *dimension* of political practice.

¹⁹ But take note: what matters in Marx’s view is not so much the “political theory” which inspired these organizations (the “model” of ‘89 or ‘93, a specifically French factor gradually transmitted to the Parisian “sections” of the Commune through the worker sects), since this was precisely their weakness, responsible in part for the defeats of the Commune, the terrible internal confusion which objectively aided its military repression by the French bourgeoisie. What matters for Marx is their character as mass political organizations of the producers. This is why the Commune immediately posed, more urgently than ever before, the question of the party of the working class.

In this way, we can think how labor, and its preceding social conditions, becomes not only a “socially useful” or “socially organized” practice, but a political practice. I will return to this point in a moment.

We can turn our attention, then, one last time to the *Manifesto*, to draw out the consequences of these new formulations. To read the *Manifesto* alone, an interpretation of the definition of the state as the “organization of the ruling class” is not ruled out, at least if one abstracts from the difficulties raised by Marx’s explanations. This interpretation traces back to the analogy or parallelism between the bourgeois revolution and the proletarian revolution, and even between the development of bourgeoisie within feudal society that of the proletariat within bourgeois society (“A similar movement is going on before our own eyes...The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.”) This analogy is completely formal; it only has a transitory and pedagogical function, and like any pedagogical artifice, it carries its own risk of confusion and error. In fact, in this analogy, there is neither a parallelism nor symmetry, but total opposition and dissymmetry. In particular, the bourgeoisie historically gained power by forcing feudalism to make room for it in the state apparatus, alongside it (this is the interpretation Marx and Engels already gave of absolute monarchy in the *Manifesto*); while the proletariat never controls the existing state apparatus, nor can it, under bourgeois rule, progressively find a place in it.

Paradoxically, the *Manifesto*, without its correction, might lead to the idea of a bourgeois state (“the bourgeois class organized as ruling class” and a proletarian state (“the proletariat organized as ruling class”) as having a shared principle, if of course distinct and opposed in their social bases and policies: the simple “organization as ruling class.”

Yet we see, rather, that the bourgeoisie “organizes itself as the ruling class” only by developing the state apparatus. The proletariat, on the other hand, “organizes itself as the ruling class” *only* by bringing into being alongside the state apparatus and against it forms of political practice and organization which are radically different: in fact, therefore, by destroying the existing state apparatus and replacing it not just with another apparatus, but *with the ensemble constituted by a new state apparatus plus something other than a state apparatus*. In the dictatorship of the proletariat, coercion, which is inherent to any state (including, as Marx insists, every democracy) is not only nor principally exercised by a (coercive) specialized apparatus (what Lenin describes as the “special coercive force”²⁰). But it is also increasingly, and principally, exercised by a “general” power: by the organized masses of workers led by the proletariat. And in the same way, the centralization of production “in the hands of the state” is not reducible to the centralization in the hands of the state apparatus, even if it is ruled by the proletariat. At the same time as this centralization takes place (which is first of all juridical), a centralization of a new type takes shape, resulting from the organization of the workers themselves.

We can therefore understand, to return to the question just posed, that a “state which is already a non-state” is not something intermediary between the existence of the state and its disappearance, one moment of a simple degradation. It is a contradictory reality, because we are not dealing with a single term but with two. The “non-state” is not merely the zero, the absence of the state: it entails the positive presence of another term. It is not a matter of the progressive involution of the state, but indeed the (political) struggle against the state and the means of this struggle.

²⁰ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 402.

In formulating these conclusions, Marx only analyzed and articulated the real tendency revealed by the struggles of the Commune. He did not construct any “solution” anticipating the future. But at the same time, this was enough for him to find and define certain immediate tasks. At the first rank was the organization of the party of the proletariat, within which, even prior to the communist revolution and in order for it to be possible, these two contradictory tendencies had to co-exist. From this stems Marx and Engels’s ongoing struggle for social democracy to not be solely a part of the existing political apparatus (which was inevitable) but also something else entirely. This struggle, which prefigured Lenin’s own, obviously deserves its own longer analysis.

We can, to end on an open question, come back to the problem I indicated above, the idea raised in the *Manifesto* (and the *Anti-Dübring*) concerning the “end of politics.”

What might this idea now mean? It should be clear that it remains, in part, inevitably obscure, as any analysis which touches upon the future tendencies of the proletariat’s historical movement. In fact, the concrete content of this idea is nowhere else than in the recognition of the *current form* of these tendencies. It is not a prophecy. When Marx, to stick with him, speaks to us about the future, he also and above all speaks to us about the present, sometimes our most immediate present. This is why his analysis of the historical tendency itself has an influence on practice.

But how to present the question of the “end of politics,” following Marx’s analyses and their transformation? In 1847, Marx and Engels explain that the end of the state (its withering away) entails the end of politics. Logically, if (as the Commune demonstrates) the end of the state begins immediately, and if this “end” is not a difference of degree, but the contradictory combination of two tendencies in struggle, then

the “end of politics” must also “begin” right away. However, the real tendency, already sketched in the Commune, is something else entirely: it is the constitution, at first hesitant and fragile, of another form of “politics.”

Let us be clear. It is not a question of understanding here: the Commune disclosed that political practice *is not reducible* to the functioning of the state. If anything, it is in fact “reducible” to the state. Political practice does not have a historical existence outside of material conditions: the state, the forms of the state apparatus, developed and “perfected” by capitalism. This is why the proletariat, whose historical action leads to a *new practice of politics*,²¹ has no other way of reaching it than to penetrate the terrain of the state and the state apparatus.²² But the proletariat enters onto this terrain from its own class basis and class unity, which it never actually *leaves* (material production, the experience of production and organization in production), in order to combat the ruling class both with the dominant class’s own weapons (which are “turned against itself”) and with new weapons, which have nothing to do with those belonging to the bourgeoisie. Whence the radical novelty of this situation: politics as practiced by the *producers*, with state power targeted, conquered, and then exercised by the producers.²³

²¹ I suggest this expression as a deliberate echo of the formulation Althusser used with respect to Lenin when he spoke of a “new practice of philosophy.” See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). In fact, since, as Althusser has shown, philosophy is nothing more or less than politics in theory, one and the same problem is at issue here, in two different modalities.

²² To be more precise, as I indicated above, the terrain of both repressive and ideological apparatuses, the ensemble of which constitute the state apparatus.

²³ The immediate conjuncture in which I am writing has provided me with a concrete illustration of this dialectic, presented by a great revolutionary leader of our time, Phạm Văn Đồng: “It is imperative,” he declares in his interview with *Le Monde* from May 18, 1972, “that the United States finally recognize that their bombings of the Ho Chi Minh Trail were ineffective, that they draw conclusions from it, just like the failure of ‘Vietnamization.’ Their operations have run up an exorbitant cost, a pure loss. Yet they have *waged war with all the scientific means at its disposal*. But with the means at our disposal, we *wage war scientifically*, even when our equipment is modest. Of course, we do not intend to limit ourselves in the use of the modern weapons we can obtain, but it is not enough to

We can therefore state the following: the real tendency traced by Marx is no longer a simple tendency, but a *complex tendency*:

– on the one side, it is the tendency toward the destruction of the state, thus the tendency toward the disappearance of politics as it is identified with the class struggle for and in the state;

– but it is also the tendency toward the constitution of a new form of “politics,” or better, a *new practice of politics*, although the latter is necessarily ordered at first by the imperatives of class struggle, and thus constituted against the state and in relation to it. And this second tendency *is the very condition for the realization of the first*, since it alone represents the positive historical originality of the proletariat, and provides it with the instruments of struggle.

A final question rears its head: what proves that this second tendency is only “transitory,” that it is without a future? If communism is not an ideal, but the *result* of a real movement and practices, must it not also be said that the proletariat is oriented toward a *transformation* of the nature of “politics” and its practice? Not, as is sometimes suggested according to an overly hasty reading of these texts, a “disappearance of politics in favor of the economy,” of the “purely technical” organization of production, etc. (this ultimately translates into what remains a *bourgeois* conception of both politics and the economy), but rather a transformation of the economy, of the practice of production, *into a directly political task?*

possess advanced technological means for war to be scientifically conducted. Our way of planning war is scientific because we fight *on our own terrain for our own objectives, with our own methods*. This is why the adversary, despite its whole scientific apparatus, is baffled [*dérouté*]. We have maintained the initiative” (emphasis mine). [Translator’s Note: See Claude Julien, “Nous voulons réserver à Washington une issue honorable nous déclare le premier ministre nord-vietnamien,” *Le Monde*, May 18, 1972.]

We cannot give an answer to this question on the sole basis of Marx's texts, which I have confined myself to. But we can confirm the validity of the question, by simply making the following remark.

What does the idea of "the administration of things" mean, tied to the understanding of the "end of politics?" This idea has a well-established positive content: it designates the *mastery, the appropriation of production* by the producers themselves, in opposition to the dispossession of the producers and the "anarchy of production" which reigns in current society.²⁴ But besides this positive content, it must be admitted that it offers us an ambiguous formulation, which can be misleading. This formulation relies entirely on the bourgeois *juridical antimony* between "persons" and "things," and thus on the very ideology bound up in commodity circulation and the functioning of the state. By opposing the "government of persons" to the "administration of things," this formula, when isolated and taken to the letter, would lead in this way to a result in twofold contradiction with historical materialism:

– in the analysis of the state, it would replace its real origin in the *class* struggle with the very illusion which results from the state's operation (the exclusive relation to individuals, to *persons*).

– it would suggest that communist production is a production *outside of all social relations of production*, a production which is "reducible" to the activity of labor, to the action on the nature of freely associated *individuals*. It would thus involuntarily substitute the idea of the abolition of social relations of production in general for the idea of the abolition

²⁴ This suffices, of course, to definitively prohibit the confusion of Marxism with the petty-bourgeois idea of "self-management." It might be useful to recall how often this confusion, which traces back to an enduring Proudhonian tradition, has continually reappeared in our present moment, sometimes within the workers' movement itself.

of exploitation, which would lead us to rediscover the old dream of a return to the state of nature.

The very *emptiness* [*vide*] of such a representation allows us to confirm the validity of our question, by compelling us to carry forward *the* rectification of the *Manifesto*, and prompts us to return to the experience of socialist revolutions past and present, to discover the concrete forms through which the constitution of communist relations of production utilizes and develops proletarian politics.