
Questions of the State:

The State—Some Problems

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It is not my intention here to restate general Marxist propositions regarding the State, although I will need, in the course of my examination of some problems in this field, to refer to certain main ideas which are commonly regarded as embodying the Marxist approach to the State. There are four main problems which I would like to consider. They are:

- (a) What is political power?
- (b) The relation of coercion to consent, and their utilisation in advanced capitalist countries.
- (c) How valid is the formulation that the State is an apparatus of class rule, an instrument for maintaining class domination?
- (d) How do we view today the proposition concerning the necessity to "smash the state" in order to end the capitalist system?

In selecting these four problems for examination I do not intend, in any way, to imply that these are necessarily the main problems that a revolutionary movement must consider in relation to the State. For those working in capitalist countries, especially in developed ones such as Britain, the main task is to win understanding that the State is a key institution by which the big monopolies maintain their political power, and consequently their economic domination. This understanding is absolutely vital for the British labour movement. Its failure to grasp this, and to act accordingly, is the Achilles heel of our movement.

Years of propaganda by the ruling class, the mass media, the various institutions for conveying ideas, including our educational system, and the views expounded by right-wing labour and trade union leaders and by reformists generally, have deceived the majority of working people into accepting the idea that the State is an impartial institution, standing above the class struggle. Consequently our working class still limits its political activity, in the main, to voting in elections, not seeing that, in addition to securing a Parliament and Government that will respond to its aspirations, it is essential to achieve a qualitatively new State, one that is no longer dominated by representatives of big business, but a State that is an expression of the aims and aspirations of the majority of the people, the working class and its allies. This fundamental change of

political power is the key to advance from capitalism to socialism.

The four problems considered in this article in no sense exhaust all the questions that this major political task involves, but they have been selected for examination because I consider that they embrace issues which can no longer be dealt with on the basis of repeating phrases that pertain often to different times and different circumstances. Some things written here may seem controversial but I believe that it is timely to discuss them.

(a) WHAT IS POLITICAL POWER?

What is political power? What are its main pillars? Moreover, do the different instruments of political power possess permanently the same degree of importance relative to one another, or do they rather, at different phases of class conflict, become of greater or lesser significance according to the nature and stage of the conflict itself?

These questions require some prior examination if we are to comprehend the changing nature of the State in the total political system of which it is a part. Additionally, it is essential to consider these questions because, on the one hand reformists, liberals and conservatives tend to argue as if political power rested solely or almost entirely with Parliament and Government, while those of ultra-left views, on the other hand, tend to dismiss Parliament and parliamentary Government as virtually irrelevant, and to see political power in the somewhat simplified form of an armed institution ready to repress and shoot down anyone who challenges it. Lenin wrote in *Letters on Tactics*, in April, 1917:

"As we have always known and repeatedly pointed out, the bourgeoisie maintains itself (i.e. in power: author) not only by virtue of force but also by virtue of the lack of class consciousness, the clinging to old habits, the timidity and lack of organisation of the masses."¹

On another occasion he expressed the view that *political power is the ability to compel by force if*

¹ V. I. Lenin: *Selected Works*, Vol. 6, pp. 35-36.

necessary. These definitions of Lenin's certainly embrace the idea of force or coercion as an element of political power, but they go beyond this. Machiavelli argued that State political power rested on a combination of "coercion and consent".² Machiavelli's concept, which contains certain elements of Lenin's, was taken up by Gramsci, and has recently been drawn on by Enrico Berlinguer when discussing the lessons of the coup against the Allende Government in Chile.³

Taken together, these different formulations help us to understand the nature of political power. Although in each case the conception may contain a different emphasis, all of them contain a certain common kernel, namely that "force" or "coercion" or "compulsion" is an essential element of political power but that "consent" or acceptance by a substantial part of the population, even when gained by deception, is also essential.

Three Pillars of Power

Basically that power rests on the fact that the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange (i.e. of the factories, land, shops and banks) is in the hands of private capitalists, mainly powerful ones. It is this economic basis that gives rise to the political power being in the hands of the most powerful monopolies. How does this power operate in an advanced capitalist country such as Britain?

There are three main pillars of power at the disposal of the monopoly capitalists. These three pillars are inter-related, and it is their combination that makes it possible for the ruling class to maintain its domination of our society.

First, there is power over people's minds, the power of ideas which partly by people's force of habit in their thoughts and actions, and partly by deception (which today, with the power of the mass media, has become a major weapon), wins or seduces the majority into accepting the *status quo*. It is this power which enables the rulers to gain the "consent", the acceptance, of the ruled, which is a reality even when gained by duplicity.

Secondly, there is power exercised through Parliament and Government, and through the State, which in a bourgeois-democratic country such as Britain is, constitutionally, subject to the authority of Parliament and Government. Of special significance is the power of the ruling class over the State institutions of coercion—the legal apparatus, the police, prisons and armed forces. Other parts of the State, the Ministries, Government departments, and upper echelons of the Civil Service, perform a

certain supporting role in the functioning of the coercive side of the State (e.g. the immigration authorities, customs and taxation departments, etc.), but equally play a role in securing the people's acceptance of measures which are often very much against their real interests.

Thirdly, there is economic power, the private ownership of the commanding heights of the economy by the big banks, big industrial monopolies, and big landlords and property companies. This economic power naturally gives these forces the opportunity to influence the main pattern of economic policy in the country; but economic power does not exercise a purely economic function. It plays a role, too, in the exercise of coercion in the sense that pressures and sanctions (dismissals of individual militants, mass redundancies, lock-outs or threats of closure) can be used to compel workers to accept wages and conditions which probably they would otherwise not accept. (The fear of eviction can play the same role in relation to tenants and landlords.) Economic power also enables the monopolies to establish media power (commercial radio and television, films, newspapers and journals), which assist them to win the "consent" of a majority of people, aided by a combination of deception, demagoguery and distortion. Economic power and the wealth derived therefrom also enables the big monopolies to establish and maintain political parties and other subsidiary political and research bodies, which again play a part in the total system of political power.

Inter-Connected

In the same way, the coercive arms of the State are themselves part of the ideological strength of the ruling class.⁴ People's awareness that the army, police and the law are not really on their side, are not really at their disposal or ready to act in their defence, can become a serious inhibiting factor for many of them, a form of weakening their resistance so that they come to accept the *status quo*. On the other hand, among more conservative sections of the population uncritical acceptance of the myth of the impartiality of the State, and a consequent belief that the existing "law and order" must be maintained, renders them consenting supporters of the existing system, even to the point of becoming more ready to support a right-wing backlash.

All three pillars of power in capitalist Britain are therefore interconnected, each one reinforcing the other, and each playing an additional role beyond its own main function. Under "normal" conditions of bourgeois democracy, as in Britain, the ruling class maintains its domination of society *mainly* by

² Nicolo Machiavelli: *The Prince*.

³ Enrico Berlinguer: *Reflections after the Events in Chile—Marxism Today*, February, 1974.

⁴ See, for example, Alan Hunt: *Law, State and Class Struggle—Marxism Today*, June, 1976.

its ability to persuade a majority to accept the existing system. Yet, at all times, bourgeois democracy in Britain is based on the rule of the big bourgeoisie itself, despite the democratic gains secured by the working people after centuries of struggle.

Thus, even in the outwardly most democratic systems of capitalist democracy, State power and particularly its coercive aspects are ever present to back up capitalist domination; and when the ability of the rulers to maintain the people's acceptance begins to falter, they increasingly seek to make more pronounced use of coercive measures, although whether they can use these measures or not is, of course, another matter.

(b) THE RELATION OF COERCION TO "CONSENT"

If State political power rests on a combination of coercion and "consent", with different pillars of power functioning interchangeably in each sphere, then clearly the relation of class forces at any given stage influences the extent to which greater reliance is placed by the ruling class on coercion or "consent".

In Russia, in 1917, as Gramsci has stressed, the main problem of the revolution was to overthrow the State power of a small ruling class whose domination was based mainly on repression, and where it had not been able to build up a system of firm, extensive alliances with other classes. Thus the problem was to shatter, with a violent, powerful blow, the system of coercion of an isolated, small class.

In Western Europe, however, argued Gramsci, the situation was, in the main, very different:

"In Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying—but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country."⁵

As regards Italy, Gramsci pointed out that these "fortresses" include a strong Church (with its own schools, papers, banks, etc.) and a diversified educational and cultural system through which the ruling class provides itself with intermediate personnel who help it to maintain its power by widespread consent. As a result, the ruling class in a

country such as Italy is not detached and isolated, and does not rule simply by force, but has managed to build around itself a system of alliances, including at the economic and social level, by means of concessions, welfare, and so on, and at the political and moral level, winning wide sections of intellectuals and even sections of the working class to accept a capitalist and conservative outlook.

Gramsci's main concern was to find a valid strategy for revolutionary change in Italy. This required, among other things, finding a way to win over the millions of Catholic belief. Conditions in Britain are, of course, very different. Not only do we not have any equivalent of a Christian Democrat Party, or an influence, in political terms, of religion on the scale of that in Italy; we also have a mass Labour Party, based on a united trade union organisation which now embraces 11 million wage and salary workers. Such a Party does not exist in Italy where the Socialist Party and the Social Democrat Party are both relatively small.⁶ For a change to socialism to succeed in Britain, therefore, our task is somewhat different, requiring above all the winning of the majority of trade unionists for socialism and, through that process, defeating the right-wing hold in the Labour Party as well.

Need for Allies

Nevertheless, Gramsci's conception of revolutionary advance in Italy, the validity of which is being borne out by the gains of the Italian Communist Party and other left and democratic forces, is not without significance for other West European countries.

One can say that by and large the countries of Western Europe despite their variations,⁷ present a fairly common pattern, with the political power of the monopoly capitalists largely depending on their being able to maintain this system of alliances, this bloc of social, political, cultural and moral forces. This whole system requires, for its continued operation, the economic possibilities to make concessions when necessary, combined with a continued ability to exercise intellectual domination. Therefore, to end the rule of monopoly capitalism in Western Europe one cannot tackle the State in isolation. The whole question of the State, its character, its transformation, its very behaviour, is closely bound up with the shifting relationship of class and political forces, with the system of alliances, with the ability or otherwise of the ruling class to continue to make concessions and maintain its intel-

⁵ Antonio Gramsci—*Selections from Prison Notebooks*, London, 1971, p. 238.

⁶ In the recent general elections in Italy the Socialist Party received 10.2 per cent of the votes for Parliament, and the Social Democrats 3.1 per cent, compared with 33.8 per cent for the Communist Party.

⁷ We are not including any fascist State in this grouping.

lectual hold on decisive sections of the people.

If, as we have argued, the people's acceptance of the existing system is one of the pillars of political power, then the working class, if it is to challenge and defeat that power, needs to organise its own mass consent to revolutionary change. This means that it must build its own system of alliances with other classes and social strata. It must win allies away from monopoly capitalism in order to isolate and weaken it, to add forces to its own side and to prevent the ruling class using such strata for counter-revolutionary purposes. It must develop its own intellectual challenge to capitalism and secure its own intellectual leadership in society.

(c) IS THE STATE A "MACHINE"?⁸

No State power rests solely on coercion. Even the most repressive fascist State requires an ideological base, although this is founded on demagogic slogans, on extreme chauvinism, racialism, anti-semitism, and anti-communism.

In a bourgeois democratic country such as Britain, the political parties play a major role in winning the people's "consent". The Tory party represents the interests of big capital, but millions of small producers, farmers, shop-keepers, professional and technical people, and even many workers, support it and vote for it. Yet the Tory party does not act in the interests of the millions who vote for it, and this provides the possibility of the organised working class movement detaching many of these millions over to its side: and that is vital if the ruling class is to be defeated.

Apart from the capitalist parties such as the Tories and Liberals, the workers have also built up their parties, the Labour Party and the Communist Party. Within the Labour Party the right-wing leaders play an important role in the system of capitalist class rule in Britain. It has been their role over the years to confuse and divide the movement, to limit its activities, especially in the political field, to sap the confidence of the working class in its own strength and capacity to struggle, in its ability to win victories and manage society. It has persuaded

⁸ Much of the argument in this section relates to what can be regarded as insurrectionary situations, which are not envisaged as the way to socialist change in Britain in the *British Road to Socialism*, nor in the strategies of most West European Communist Parties. But the *main* point being made here, namely that the armed forces (or the police) are not immutable institutions but can be influenced by the totality of political influences at work, has a validity in non-insurrectionary situations, too. After all, in the *British Road to Socialism*, the way to advance is aimed at minimising the danger of a counter-revolutionary coup; essential to stop such a threat is to influence the politics of the army, and to bring it into closer association with the strivings of the majority of the people, with the aspirations of the nation.

the movement that it should work for reforms within the system, not to work to bring about a revolutionary change of the system itself.

Recent years, and especially the big struggles of the early 1970s, have shown that a weakening of the grip of the right-wing leaders unleashes the enormous potential power of the working class movement to such an extent that it begins to challenge the ability of the ruling class to carry on as hitherto.

Forces of Coercion

This brings us back to Lenin's formulation that political power is "the ability to compel by force if necessary". This formulation contains three essential ideas. First, that compulsion or coercion is not necessarily the permanent nor the main direct form of maintaining and exercising political power. Secondly, that the ruling class turns to the use of force when this has become necessary. Thirdly, that when faced with this necessity, the ruling class, if it is to retain its political power, has to be in a position to place its main reliance on coercion and have the means to do this.

This third point is of immense importance. The Marxist concept that the State is "a machine for the oppression of one class by another"⁹ has sometimes been used in a literal, exaggerated or distorted way as though the various parts of the State, and especially the powers of coercion, are really monolithic, material instruments, ready to be picked up and used by the ruling class whenever it deems it necessary. Yet, we should remember that Engels defined the coercive departments of the State as bodies of "armed *people*"—and people are not a "machine" nor inanimate "instruments" at the ready disposal of those who may want to use them.

At the same time, of course, one should not ignore the fact that the armed forces, just like other State institutions, are not just composed of "people" in an abstract sense. The people concerned are themselves of different class composition, and with different political ties or sentiments; and the top posts are overwhelmingly in the hands of ruling class representatives, sons (and a few daughters) of rich businessmen, landowners and top professionals, educated in public schools and Oxbridge. It is these top State officials who take the decisions and so influence largely the way the State institutions operate in their normal daily affairs. The armed forces themselves have their own internal forms of "law and order", through which the officers exercise a quasi-dictatorial role; and it is the practice, in consequence, for the troops to obey the voice of

⁹ V. I. Lenin—*The State: Speech made to Students of Sverdlov University, July 11, 1919. Selected Works*, Vol. 11, p. 649.

command. But what happens under "normal" conditions in no way determines how State institutions will act under quite different circumstances, when the character and scale of class and social conflict can affect not only the rank-and-file personnel of State institutions, including the army, but also the middle echelon and even some at the topmost pinnacle, even if only temporarily and for limited aims.

When Lenin refers to "the ability" of the ruling class to make use of its powers of coercion it is precisely this aspect to which he is drawing our attention. Clearly, the converse of Lenin's point—namely, the *inability* of the ruling class in some situations to make use of its own forces of coercion at a moment of crisis—is of very considerable importance, and especially for those concerned with the tactics of revolutionary struggle.

Professor Crane Brinton has written that "it is almost safe to say that no government is likely to be overthrown until it loses the ability to make adequate use of its military and police powers."¹⁰ Making basically the same point, and in a much more emphatic manner, Le Bon has argued that "It is obvious that revolutions have never taken place, and will never take place, save with the aid of an important faction of the army."¹¹ (The situation has been different in many third world countries where, in the course of the national liberation struggle, it has been necessary for the indigenous people to create their own armed forces and confront the foreign troops of the imperialists.)

The propositions of Crane Briton and Le Bon were confirmed by the events in Portugal on April 25, 1974, when, largely through the action of the Armed Forces Movement, it became possible to overthrow fascism which had clearly lost its "ability to compel by force if necessary".

Dr. George Rude has noted that it would seem to be "almost a truism that the key factor in determining the outcome of popular rebellion and disturbance is the loyalty or disaffection of the armed forces at the government's disposal".¹² Continuing his argument, Dr. Rude discusses the general propositions regarding the ability or otherwise of a ruling class to use the army to defend its system at a moment of crisis, and here, it seems to me, he puts his finger on the key issue.

"Such assertions," he writes, "are true enough as far as they go; yet they are not the whole truth and they even tend, when presented in such baldly

military terms, to beg the further and more important question of why the army refuses to obey or why the government loses control of its means of defence. *Essentially, this is a social and political rather than a military question.* (italics added) For if a magistrate condones riots or soldiers fraternise with or refuse to fire on rebels, it is because the ties of class or political affiliation are at that moment stronger than allegiance to the established order of government."

Determining Factors

This emphasises the danger of a mechanical use of terms such as the State being an "instrument", "a machine", or "a weapon". Even more, it is politically hazardous to allow one's political thinking about the State and questions of political power to be influenced or dominated by conceptions arising from a strict verbal meaning of these terms. Armed forces are an instrument only in a very particular sense. They certainly include instruments, weapons, machines, such as guns and ammunition and so on, with which they are equipped. But whether or not the ruling class is able to rely unconditionally on this institution depends in the last resort not on the equipment or firing power of the armed forces, important as this may be, but on whether the armed forces are prepared to use their weapons against the rulers' opponents. In other words, it depends on social and political factors. This is why it is misleading to try and reduce everything to the slogan "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun". Political power grows out of the strength, unity, determination, political understanding and organisation of the mass of the people. It is this which, in the last resort, determines if, when and *in what direction* the guns are going to be used.

This was confirmed only too clearly in Portugal on April 25, 1974, when the democratic struggle of the Portuguese people, alongside the military resistance and success of the people of Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Angola, became such a powerful combination that opinions in the armed forces were decisively changed, thus opening the way to the formation of the Armed Forces Movement and the victory of April 25. The more recent setbacks suffered by the Armed Forces Movement and its virtual demise in no way invalidate this argument; on the contrary, they confirm it, since it has been mainly political factors which has produced a certain turn-around inside the Portuguese army.

The political factors which determine the behaviour of the armed forces are basically of two kinds. Firstly, there are the forces operating outside the army, primarily the political relationship of class forces. This largely determines the possibility and the degree of necessity for the ruling class to use the armed forces for political purposes. It helps to

¹⁰ Crane Briton—*The Anatomy of Revolution*, New York, 1960.

¹¹ G. Le Bon—*The Psychology of Revolution*, New York, 1913.

¹² Dr. George Rude—*The Crowd in History, 1730-1848*, New York, 1964, p. 266.

determine, too, whether there is an alternative open to the ruling class of seeking a solution not involving the use of the armed forces, by making concessions to its class opponents.

A clear example of the latter was the crisis in 1972 over the Pentonville 5, whom the British Government had to release in face of the massive protest of the whole Labour Movement and the threat of a general strike called by the General Council of the TUC to secure the release of the arrested dockers. Theoretically, the Government could have defied the Labour Movement and called on the armed forces to break the projected strike; but in the given circumstances, in the light of the then existing relationship of forces, it deemed it wiser not to risk a further escalation of the class confrontation by using its full State power, even though the armed forces displayed no signs of inner contradiction or division at that given time, and in that limited sense, therefore, presented themselves as "an instrument" ready for use. The Government, despite its having the armed forces, the law, prisons, police, and mass media at its disposal, had to retreat; although it has to be borne in mind that in this particular conflict there was no question of a change of political power involved, only the release of five men from prison resulting in a heavy blow against the Industrial Relations Act. So the Government, in this instance, organised a tactical withdrawal while keeping its political power and domination intact, but a little bruised.

Yet, one should not ignore the immense potential power of the British working class revealed in those conflicts and its possibility, if united and with a clear political vision, of making a challenge to the big monopolies not just for immediate demands but for a change of political power.

The Government faced similar problems with the UCS and other factory occupations, and the 1972 miners' strike. Again, the ruling class had all the state institutions available to it, but the relation of forces at the time obliged it to seek other ways of overcoming the problems involved, even at the cost of big concessions.

Internal and External Influences

But circumstances operating outside the armed forces are only one factor determining whether the ruling class possesses "the ability to compel by force". There are also factors operating inside the State institutions themselves, though these, in the last resort, are produced and precipitated by the surrounding circumstances, by the clash of classes, by ideological influences, by the economic and other crises of society and by the general strains in its entire fabric.

After all, the individuals who comprise the armed forces are in no sense completely isolated and

immured from the surrounding great movements and shifts of public opinion. Influenced as they may be by the nature of their training, by the views projected by the most reactionary members of the top brass, by their class and social ties, by the purposes they are expected to fulfil, and by the fact of being part of a specialised, hierarchical institution, barracked and housed apart from the general population, they are nevertheless subject to other counter-influences. Their relatives and friends, in the midst of swirling changes taking place in civilian life, may themselves be progressively influenced to an extent by these developments. Some of this may rub off on officers and other ranks by letters, by personal contact and so on. Men in the armed forces read papers, journals and books, listen to radio, watch television, talk with one another. Despite the reactionary character of much of what they read, hear or see on their TV screens, the sight of a workers' demonstration with its slogans on the screen, even the occasional broadcast by a Communist on the radio, may have some influence on their thinking.

In countries where armed forces have been used against guerrilla forces, as in Peru, Uruguay, Bolivia, the experience of this fighting was, in fact, an important factor in producing a radical wing of the officer corps. In the case of Peru, where it was combined with special training for officers in social, economic and political matters, in the expectation that such instruction would assist them in acting to prop up the establishment, it had a somewhat contrary effect. This has happened, too, in those countries where the officers have been obliged to study Marxist writings and the works of guerrilla leaders such as Che Guevara, in the hope that this knowledge would make them more effective counter-insurgency operators. Once again, the result was often quite different.

Thus, as political situations mature, processes get under way inside the armed forces, and these processes sometimes reach a stage which makes it impossible for the ruling class to use the army against the people. In such cases things may develop to a situation, as in the Sudan in 1964, when the army officers showed reluctance to act against the people or intervene against the general strike which was a prime cause of the downfall of General Abboud. Or, it may reach a more advanced stage, as in Portugal in 1974, when the majority of the armed forces, including a decisive section of the middle officers and a few at the top, took a key part in toppling Caetano's fascist regime.

Both in the Sudan and in Portugal, up to the time of the downfall of the old regime, the armed forces were formally speaking at the disposal of the rulers. The "instrument", the "machine", was there. The equipment was available. The men were armed. They

were trained and led by capable officers. But neither the soldiers nor the officers were "instruments" or "machines". They were thinking individuals, subject, even if in different ways, to the selfsame influences and political considerations that affect the thinking and behaviour of those not in uniform. And when the civilian population in both cases showed in no uncertain terms that it wanted to do away with the old system, when similar influences had worked their way into the armed forces, and when the most reactionary officers realised that they could no longer obtain obedience to their command if they tried to uphold the Government of the day, then the "machine" of the institutionalised force was no longer available to the rulers. It was politics that had the last word.

These experiences (and there are a number of others), indicate clearly what attitude a revolutionary movement should take towards the armed forces. Some people on the left adopt a crude, oversimplified approach, and regard the army as one monolithic and reactionary organisation, as the enemy which must be confronted and destroyed. Such barren anti-militarism, even if accompanied by reference to Marx and Lenin on the need to "smash the State" of the ruling class, is not a Marxist position, nor can it lead to revolutionary success.

Already, at the end of the nineteenth century, Engels was noting how technological advances in the army and its growth in size had rendered the old-style street fighting of 1848 of limited value *unless accompanied by other factors*. Yet, even up to 1848, he stressed that the main aim of street fighting was not to win outright military victory but to make the troops "yield to moral influences. . . . If they succeed in this, the troops fail to respond, or the commanding officers lose their heads, and the insurrection wins. . . . Even in the classic time of street fighting, therefore, the barricade produced more of a moral than a material effect. It was a means of shaking the steadfastness of the military."¹³

With changes after 1848, Engels argued that conditions had become far more unfavourable for civilian fighters and far more favourable for the military. This disadvantageous situation, wrote Engels, had to be "compensated by other factors", the principal one of which was "the masses themselves". But in order for the masses to understand what had to be done, "long, persistent work" was needed. This work was required in order to bring mass pressure to bear on the whole of society, including the State and especially the armed forces,

¹³ Frederick Engels—*Introduction to the Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, by Karl Marx (written and published in 1850); Introduction by Engels written in 1895: Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1. pp. 120-121 (Moscow/London, 1950).

in order to make the army yield to "moral influences" and "shake its steadfastness".

Struggle for Democratisation

Today, in the advanced capitalist countries in Western Europe, this has become a major question, both in the struggle to end reactionary and fascist regimes and in defence of democratic government. Experiences since the commencement of this century underline the necessity for the working class and democratic movement to influence the army, to win for it democratic rights and better conditions of service, promotion and pay, and to establish a situation in which troops yield to "moral influences" and begin to act as a defender of the nation, and of people's rights and aspirations, and cease being used internally as a tool of big business and reaction to suppress the people. In other words, the strategy to be followed—and this is being done, with increasing success, in Italy, France and Spain¹⁴—is not that of trying to "smash" the army of the ruling class, but of transforming it in order to deprive the monopolies of their possibilities of using the army to "compel by force".

The fact that even the army reared by Portuguese fascism could be won away from the monopolies at the moment of crisis and side with the people's anti-fascist revolution, justifies the correctness of this approach—and this is notwithstanding the difficulties that subsequently arose when the political balance in the armed forces shifted away from the left.

Neutralising, or winning part or even a majority of the army also helps the working class to win allies in civilian life. The middle strata are very much influenced by the attitude of the armed forces.¹⁵ The officers play a particular role here because of their class and social links with such strata. But in addition, the army, as an institution, has considerable prestige among wide sections. The working class, too, is not unmindful of army behaviour, and the soldiers, after all, in Western Europe, are mainly workers. All this affects the total politics of the country.

The issue, therefore, is not the people versus the army, but whether the army will stand with the majority of people against the small minority who own the banks, land and industries, control the mass media and wield State power—or will it continue to act as the defender of privilege and reaction. It is in the interests of the people, and in the interests of the

¹⁴ The same general position holds good for Portugal, too, despite the recent setbacks; and in Greece, too, the Communist Party is working in the same direction.

¹⁵ The reverse is also true, and this is an additional and very important reason why the working class needs to establish an alliance with the middle strata.

army itself, that it undergo a democratic transformation and become an institution for progress that assists the democratic transformation of society as a whole.

Word of Warning

There is one final word of warning here. I have argued that the progressive forces in the army, even the majority of the armed forces when the changes have gone that deep, can and must play an important role in helping to change society.

But there are certain limitations to this if one is considering, for example, the armies in Western Europe. The army personnel is of mixed class and social origin, with officers coming from upper and middle class families. All army personnel are tied to civilian life by a thousand strands. They reflect all the political tendencies in civilian life. The officers include individuals with ambitions and, sometimes, with Bonapartist hopes and strivings. As an institution, the army is autocratic, hierarchical, and at best paternal. It is used to instruct and command. Even when officers accept democracy it is often a kind of 'autocratic democracy', a democracy under their guidance and control. The army, therefore, cannot fulfil the role of a political party, nor can it act as a leader of the people. It has a role to play, but not as the commander of the revolution. If it tries to act as if it were, there can be acute dangers, as we have seen only too well in Portugal, not to mention third world countries such as Egypt, Syria and Peru.

(d) IS IT NECESSARY TO "SMASH THE STATE"?

Since the State, both in its coercive and non-coercive aspects, is a key pillar in the system of political power, those concerned with ending capitalism and constructing socialism must be concerned, too, with the question of the State and, above all, what must be done with it.

A revolution involves a change of class power. A socialist revolution requires a change of power from the hands of the big monopolies into the hands of the working class and its allies.

On more than one occasion Lenin emphasised the well-known formula of Marx regarding the necessity to "smash the State" of the bourgeoisie. Lenin even employs such drastic terms as "smash the old machinery of State to atoms", and "leave not a stone of it standing". It would, I believe, be misleading to try and apply such ideas mechanically, especially in conditions of Britain or other advanced capitalist countries. In a certain sense one can argue that there is a certain ambiguity in Lenin's remarks on this question if one simply puts side by side his various observations at different times and in connection with varying circumstances. For example,

notwithstanding his urgent calls to "smash the State", in his last years he more than once felt obliged to point out that, in fact, one of the things which the Bolsheviks failed to do was to "smash the State". This whole question clearly merits at least some discussion.

Writing in April, 1917,¹⁶ Lenin noted—"The world-wide experience of bourgeois and landlord governments has developed two methods of keeping people in subjection. The first is violence"—and here he cites Russia where the tsars "demonstrated to the Russian people the maximum of what can and cannot be done by this hangman's method".

But he then goes on to point to "another method, best developed by the English and French bourgeoisie, who learnt their lesson in a series of great revolutions and revolutionary movements of the masses." This other method, he explains, is "the method of deception, flattery, fine phrases, numberless promises, petty sops and concessions of the unessential while retaining the essential."

There is, possibly, too much of a sweeping contrast between the two methods described here. After all, the tsars did not rely *only* on the hangman. The peasants, the vast majority of the people, even when they began to turn against the landlords in 1905, still had faith in the tsar, the "little Father", and were, in large part, also influenced in their thinking by the priests; thus confirming, once again, that all forms of political power rely on a certain measure of "consent" as well as on the powers of "coercion". Similarly, modification needs to be made as well regarding Lenin's definition of the second method utilised in Britain, France and other West European countries; for here, too, alongside the deception and concessions through which the big capitalists secure the "consent" of the people, there is also reliance on the use of the State's coercive powers.

Yet, broadly speaking, Lenin was absolutely correct to point to the essence of the difference in the two instances—tsarist Russia relying *mainly* on force, Western Europe *mainly* on deception and concession. It is not illogical, therefore, to argue that if, as Lenin pointed out, there were two rather different methods of bourgeois rule, then there could be, generally speaking, two different methods of ending that rule.

Winning the Majority

Careful reading of Lenin's writings up to the October revolution, and in the first years after it, indicates that Lenin tended to link the question of "smashing the State" with the question of the political party of the working class winning to its side not only the majority of wage workers, but also

¹⁶ V. I. Lenin—*Selected Works*, Vol. 6, p. 51.

the majority of all working people, including peasants and other small producers, artisans and traders. Lenin's conclusion, emphasised on more than one occasion, was that under conditions of capitalism the rulers had such great power to maintain their intellectual hold over the mass of the petty-bourgeoisie and even over substantial sections of workers, that it was impossible to win a majority.

First, he argued, the working class had to "smash the State"; only after that was accomplished could the working class, with the aid of State power, win a majority. Thus, in December, 1919, he wrote:

"... the proletariat must *first* overthrow the bourgeoisie and conquer the power of the State, and then use the power of the State... as an instrument of its class in order to gain the sympathy of the majority of the toilers."¹⁷

Again:

"... the power of the State in the hands of one class, the proletariat, can become and should become an instrument for winning over the non-proletarian toiling masses to the side of the proletariat, an instrument for wresting these masses away from the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois parties."¹⁸

And again:

"The proletariat cannot triumph unless it wins a majority of the population over to its side, but... to confine the winning of a majority to, or to make it conditional upon, obtaining a majority of votes at the poll *under the rule of the bourgeoisie* is either the densest stupidity, or a sheer attempt to fool the workers..."¹⁹

And then he adds:

"In order to win the majority of the population, the proletariat must, in the first place, overthrow the bourgeoisie and seize the power of the State; secondly, it must set up a Soviet government and smash the old machinery of State to atoms."²⁰

Lenin explains that the "solid majority of the population" is made up not only of the proletariat or "that section of the proletariat which realises its revolutionary aims and is capable of fighting for their realisation", but also of a "mass of toilers" who do not realise that they are "proletarians", who are "half-proletarian and half petty-bourgeois", who have no faith in their own strength nor that of

the proletariat, and who do not realise "that it is possible to secure the satisfaction of their essential needs by expropriating the exploiters."

The Proletariat and its Allies

These sections of the working population, avers Lenin, are "allies for the vanguard of the proletariat"; moreover, all these toilers, together with the proletariat "form a solid majority of the population." But once again Lenin comes back to his essential point:

"... the proletariat can win over these allies only with the aid of such an instrument as the power of the State, i.e. only after the bourgeoisie has been overthrown and its State machinery smashed."²¹

The final point worth noting here is Lenin's argument as to why he considered that the working class, even if a minority of the population, is able to break the power of the capitalists.

"In all capitalist countries the strength of the proletariat is incomparably greater than its numerical strength in proportion to the total population. This is due to the fact that the proletariat economically dominates the centre and nerve of the whole economic system of capitalism, and also because under capitalism the proletariat economically and politically expresses the true interests of the vast majority of the toilers.

"For this reason the proletariat, even when it forms a minority of the population (or when the class-conscious and truly revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat forms a minority of the population), is capable of overthrowing the bourgeoisie and of then gaining numerous allies from among the mass of semi-proletarians and petty bourgeois, who otherwise would never have expressed themselves in favour of the rule of the proletariat, and would never have understood the conditions and aims of the proletariat, and who only by their subsequent experience become convinced that the dictatorship of the proletariat is inevitable, proper and legitimate."²²

The argument is clear enough. Under conditions of capitalism it is not possible to win a majority for socialism. Therefore the working class, even if a minority, must first take power. This involves a violent smashing of the existing State machine. Only *after* power has been seized, the State smashed, and proletarian power established, will it be possible for the working class, with the aid of their new State, to win a majority to its side.

Strategy in Advanced Capitalist Countries

One has only to ponder over this approach for a short while to realise that it really has no relevance

¹⁷ V. I. Lenin—*The Elections to the Constituent Assembly, Selected Works*, Vol. 6, p. 473.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 472.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 473.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.* p. 484.

²² *ibid.* p. 484.

at all to the strategies for socialism worked out by the Communist Parties in the advanced capitalist countries. There is not, to my knowledge, a single programme or Congress document of any Communist Party in Western Europe (whatever different views they may hold on other matters) which today bases itself on the conception of the taking of power by a minority as the only way to win the support of the majority. Surely, therefore, if Lenin's view on the "smashing of the State" was so linked with his belief that without this it was not possible to win a majority to the side of the working class, one is justified in querying at least one aspect of the idea of "smashing the State".

It should be remembered that these concepts of Lenin up to 1919 were put forward under the impact of the harsh nature of the struggle in Russia, the harsh realities of the class structure of Russia (a small working class in a sea of peasants), the impact of the imperialist war (with the consequent militarisation even of the advanced capitalist States, accompanied by a vast growth of the bureaucracy), and the experience of the two Russian revolutions of 1917.

Yet all this notwithstanding, Lenin did not entirely shut his eyes to other possibilities, and even gave a clue as to an alternative way. In one of his references to the need for the working class to "smash the bourgeois State machine" and then use it to satisfy the needs of the people in order to "gain the sympathy and support of the majority of the toiling non-proletarian masses",²³ Lenin remarks, in passing: "The contrary would be a rare exception in history (ay, and in such an exception the bourgeoisie may resort to civil war, as was shown in the case of Finland.)"

No Longer a "Rare Exception"

The question is: Has the "rare exception" today become a more realistic alternative road in Western Europe, where Lenin had already noted an important difference in the form of ruling class power as compared with tsarist Russia (see above), as Gramsci (as we noted above) was to do later?

What gives added weight to this whole matter, and, to a considerable degree, adds strength to the argument that the "rare exception" has today passed the stage of being exceptional and has now become the real alternative for the people in Western Europe,²⁴ is the fact that after 1919 Lenin, who in his last years gave much thought to developments in Europe, returned to this question of winning the

majority. Under the impact of the defeat of the armed uprisings in Germany in March, 1921, Lenin apparently revised his views.²⁵

At the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921 an intense debate took place. There was fierce discussion both before the Congress and during the Congress itself. The issue was the question of "winning a majority". Analysing the reasons for the German defeats in 1921, Lenin declared that to be successful in achieving a revolutionary change it was necessary for the Communists "to have the majority behind them all over the country, and not just in one small district."²⁶ Taking up this theme in the actual preparations for the Third Congress of the CI, Lenin took issue with Radek, Zinoviev and others who wanted to delete from the draft thesis the reference to the need to win a majority of the working class. Lenin insisted that winning a majority of the workers was "the basis of everything", and added:

"The tactics of the Communist International should be based on a steady and systematic drive to win a majority of the working class, first and foremost within the old trade unions. Then we shall win for certain, whatever the course of events."

At the Congress itself Lenin developed his ideas still further and emphasised that "what is essential to win and retain power is not only the majority of the working class . . . but also the majority of the working and exploited rural population"²⁷—which meant, in practice, an absolute majority of the population.

This is clearly a fundamental modification of his former views. Lenin recognised the new situation developing in the world, and also the characteristics of Western Europe which differed in important aspects from those of pre-revolutionary Russia. This, again, should justify one querying whether the term "smash the State machine" is adequate to embrace today's problems and possibilities. But there are additional reasons why, it seems to me, the term is inappropriate.

Term Now Inappropriate

Firstly, even in the classic formulae about "smashing the state" one finds the phrase "the proletariat cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machine and wield it for its own purposes."²⁸

²⁵ Those who may fear being labelled "revisionist" because they find some idea of Lenin's no longer valid should take courage from Lenin who never hesitated to revise Lenin if experience showed this was necessary.

²⁶ V. I. Lenin—*Collected Works*, Vol. 42, p. 323.

²⁷ V. I. Lenin—*Collected Works*, Vol. 32, p. 476.

²⁸ V. I. Lenin—*Can the Bolsheviks retain State Power?*, *Selected Works*, Vol. 6, p. 262.

²³ *ibid.* p. 483.

²⁴ The same arguments hold good for other advanced capitalist countries; the Japanese Communist Party, for example, envisages this alternative road as the way to socialism in Japan, on the basis of a democratic majority.

The capitalist State must be replaced "by a new one." Talking in terms of "smashing" the State can, I believe, serve to hide the essence of the question, which is that the working class needs a new State, a qualitatively different State suited to the aims of building socialism.

Secondly, Lenin himself drew attention to parts of the State which did not require "smashing". These included certain non-coercive parts of the State, such as banking, statistics, and accounting:

"This apparatus must not, and should not be broken up. It must be wrested from the control of the capitalists; the capitalists must be *cut off, lopped away, chopped off* from it, together with the threads by which they transmit their influence". . . .²⁹ It is not enough to 'get rid' of the capitalists; it is necessary (after getting rid of the useless ones, the incorrigible resisters) to employ them in *the service of the new State*. This applies to the capitalists as well as to the higher bourgeois intellectuals, office workers, etc."³⁰

Thirdly, the non-coercive sides of the State in Britain today are far more comprehensive, more diverse, and have a far larger personnel than the State in old Russia. Our State institutions embrace extensive economic functions and the nationalised industries, as well as education, the health services, social services, and so on. In essence what is required in these State sectors is a democratic transformation and forms of democratic control, not any "smashing" of such bodies which, under socialism, can really serve the people's interests once the essential democratic changes have been made.

Differences with Russia in 1917

Fourthly, the personnel employed in the various departments of the British State today bear no comparison with those employed in the tsarist State of 1917. In a certain sense quantity has produced a new quality. The needs of a modern State like that of Britain requires such an expansion of personnel that, in addition to the top ruling class personnel, the State has had to employ immense numbers from the lower middle class and even from the working class, compared with earlier States which relied so much for its personnel on those coming from a higher strata of society. One has only to think of the average State employee in a Chekhov story or as depicted by Gogol to get the real flavour of the difference.

The vast majority of the hundreds of thousands employed in our State and in local Government, too, are in trade unions affiliated to the TUC through which they are linked with the industrial working class. Their members take part in strikes and other

protest actions, often alongside other trade unionists. Radical political tendencies are making themselves felt in the civil service unions and in the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE).

There is no reason why a solid majority of the State personnel, apart from those at the top, cannot be won to ally their fortunes with the industrial working class, with other white-collar sections, and with the broad anti-monopoly alliance for a radical new Britain and, through that experience, won for socialism, too. Such a possibility of winning the majority of the personnel of the State never existed in Russia in Lenin's time.

Fifthly, in most West European countries the working class and democratic movement in proportion to the population as a whole is a much larger and more weighty factor in political life, constitutes a far greater force in the economy and potentially represents a massive power which can attract to its side the overwhelming majority of the population. In Britain, in fact, the wage-earning class and its families already constitute a majority.

Sixthly, the coercive sides of the State are beginning to be influenced by the big political developments of our time. We have already noted the role played by the Armed Forces Movement in overthrowing the fascist regime in Portugal. In France, where the Communist Party has worked out a whole programme of demands for the armed forces, it has been estimated that 50 per cent of the officers voted for Mitterand, the joint candidate of the united left, in the last Presidential elections. In Italy, where important public conferences on the armed forces have been initiated by the Communist Party and where, too, detailed programmatic demands have been elaborated (and proposals worked out, too, for the police and prison system), it has been estimated that at least 40 per cent of conscript soldiers were communist voters even before the recent election. The figure is no doubt now still higher.

Whatever the precise figures, it is clear that the political influences making themselves felt in civilian life are washing over the armed forces in France and Italy, as they are to an extent, too, in Spain. There are also indications in France that parts of the police force, and large numbers of magistrates are beginning to express sentiments that place them increasingly on the side of democratic change and not in the camp of defenders of the status quo. The same tendencies can be seen in Italy, where, in the recent general elections, 31 per cent of the police force (it was 34 per cent in Milan) voted Communist, making it the first Party among the police; and in Spain where a number of judges and other law officers are coming out against the present Government

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 266.

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 269.

and in favour of radical democratic change.

In Britain, of course, the same tendencies are not yet apparent. Apart from the fact that we have a professional army, which makes things more complex, the political movement in the country as a whole has not yet reached the stage that it has in France or Italy, and it is therefore not surprising that substantial changes in the outlook of the personnel of the army and other coercive departments of the State are not yet in evidence. This confirms once again that it is above all political developments in a given country, the thinking and actions of the civilian population, that are prime causes of changes in the attitude and behaviour of the armed forces. Because the political struggle in Britain is at a different stage from that of France or Italy we have a dangerous situation in which authoritarian trends are being more and more asserted. In this situation the coercive sides of the State could become still more remote from the people. This is an additional reason why the struggle must be waged for the democratic transformation of all departments of the State.

This is not an easy concept for the British Labour Movement to accept, especially in relation to the coercive institutions of the State. Denunciations of the police as "fascist pigs" or tendencies to regard the armed forces as a total "write-off"—feelings which are often understandable in the face of police violence against strikers, demonstrators, black youth and so on, and in the face of army behaviour in Northern Ireland—are no solution to the problem. Our main enemy is the big monopolies. Our aim is to build a democratic, socialist Britain. The members of the police and the armed forces must also have a place in that new Britain. They must be won to serve the people, serve the nation, and no longer be placed in a position in which they have to act as the defenders of the power and privilege of big business.

Essential steps to transform these institutions so that they serve the people include securing for their personnel the same civic, political and trade union rights as those enjoyed by the rest of the population. In this respect, it is significant that a number of Labour MPs recently argued strongly in Parliament for trade union rights and other democratic innovations for members of the armed forces. Alongside the effort to win democratic rights for the personnel of all State institutions it is vital to secure democratic changes in the functioning of these departments, as well as to obtain a greater measure of democratic control over them by Parliament, by local councils, and by public bodies and social organisations. The recent proposals of some councillors for them to have some powers of inspection and supervision over the prisons in their locality is an interesting suggestion in this connection.

Transforming the State institutions, including its

coercive wings, does not signify that we would limit our aims to changing what exists. Included in the conception of transformation would be not only the addition of new departments and institutions and the introduction of new democratic methods of work involving different forms of people's participation, but also the "lopping away" or "chopping off" (to use Lenin's term) of some departments which require abolition, not changing. This would involve, for example, substantial parts of "military" intelligence, of the Special Branch of the police, and other institutions whose main activities are directed against the working class and the democratic movement. Personnel, also, would be involved, in the sense that those members of State departments who showed an inability or unwillingness to carry out the politics of a Government elected on a socialist programme would obviously have to be found other work.

While many of these changes would only be won under a Socialist Government, it is necessary for the labour and progressive movement to strive for such democratic transformations now. The democratic transformation of the State may be a long protracted process, in which changes are won, step by step, even though in that process there may be sudden sharp conflicts and dramatic turning points, at which much more decisive innovations are introduced.

There is a seventh and final reason why our approach to the State cannot be a mechanical repetition of what Lenin considered appropriate for Russia in 1917. We live in an epoch of big world changes. The favourable balance of world forces makes the question of direct military intervention by the imperialists in support of counter-revolution much more difficult. It cannot, of course, be entirely ruled out; but in Western Europe, for example, with big progressive developments taking place in the same epoch in a number of countries, the possibility of direct interference by the imperialists becomes all the more hazardous for them. This, too, it seems to me, must have an important influence on the possibilities of taking the State away from the monopolies in a new way.

In a Socialist Britain

There is a final comment that needs making about our perspective in Britain. I have said at the outset that all political power is based on a combination of coercion and "consent". How would this apply in a socialist Britain?

First, our strategy for revolution in Britain is based on the idea that it must enjoy the democratic consent of the majority, a consent which includes it being expressed in an electoral majority for socialism. Secondly, we envisage socialism in Britain being constructed, at all stages, through the democratic

consent of the majority and democratic participation of the people as a whole, both in decision-making and in carrying through the decisions democratically arrived at. Thirdly, the armed forces would no longer be used internally in civilian disputes, but would be responsible for defending the country against external aggression. Fourthly, all democratic gains would be protected, and new democratic possibilities opened up to the people. There would be a system of plurality of political parties, all of them, including those opposed to socialism, being allowed to carry on normal political activity. Whatever the electoral verdict of the people, we would abide by it. If a socialist government were subsequently voted out by the majority of the people, we would accept that, too. The threat of civil war would, therefore, not arise from our side, from the side of the working class.

Fifthly, if the monopolies or their supporters attempted to use violent and illegal methods to thwart the democratic decisions of the majority,

or to interfere with anyone's democratic rights, then the forces of the law would be used to deal with such illegal activity; and, if necessary, the people themselves, through their democratic organisations, would mobilise their strength to back up the efforts of the State against the enemies of democracy. If the enemies of democracy were able to influence sections of the army against the people, then those members of the armed forces that remained loyal to the democratically elected government would be expected to act against military rebels who, by supporting illegal actions against the Government, would have committed mutiny and would have to be dealt with accordingly by the army authorities and the Government.

Thus, in a socialist Britain, the powers of coercion would still exist alongside the people's consent to the measures being pursued by the Government. But these powers would be used only against those acting illegally to thwart the democratic decisions of the majority.
