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The Journal of Politics, Volume 32, Issue 1 (Feb., 1970), 3-18.

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The Journal of Politics

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THE "WITHERING AWAY" OF THE STATE: A RECONSIDERATION

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Marx and Engels rarely appear to differ in matters of theory. But with regard to the subject of this essay, namely, the Marxian design for the final disposition of the state, the collaborators occasionally seem to take irreconcilable positions. Inquiry indicates that the inconsistency looms larger in appearance than in substance, but the anomaly does pique the 'student's curiosity. So does the fact that the virtually unquestioned interpretation of the theory of *das Absterben des Staats*—that the eventual goal of Marxism is Anarchism—broaches more questions than it resolves. The validity of this inveterate exegesis, however, was challenged more than two decades ago by the late Solomon F. Bloom, who, after a perusal of some of the available material, concluded that "the weight of the evidence is rather against an anarchistic interpretation of Marxism as that doctrine was defined by its principal author."¹ While Professor Bloom shed some light on the matter and provided more than one insight, his essay is somewhat misleading, and it leaves a number of questions unanswered. The most conspicuous of these is: Could Marx and Engels conceivably have held different views concerning this vital aspect of Marxism?

A reexamination of all the evidence indicates that the views of Marx and Engels on this subject were identical, and that the following hypotheses, although iconoclastic, appear tenable: First, although Marx and Engels anticipated the demise of "politics" and "political power," the future communist society they envisioned was by no means anarchistic; the state was to be its one indispensable institution. Second, the fact that for a century Marxism has enjoyed the undeserved benefit of a certain mystique derived from its alleged anarchistic intentions is attributable partly to a few suggestive, and invariably misinterpreted, statements of Marx, but mainly to what seem to be the misrepresentations by both Marx and Engels

¹Solomon F. Bloom, "The 'Withering Away' of the State," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 7 (January 1946), 114-121.

or their followers. These misrepresentations appear to have been occasioned, in every instance, by the successive threats to Marxism from Anarchism, which was the more radical variety of nineteenth-century socialism and the one it struggled with intermittently for decades.

An insight into the true meaning of the theory of "the withering away of the state" is contingent upon a correct understanding of the interrelated and uniquely Marxian definitions and classificatory criteria on which the theory was predicated. The first of these definitions is that of "political power."

Approaching the conclusion of his 1847 polemic against Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx touched briefly on one of the characteristics of the future society he envisioned. Answering his own question as to whether or not the collapse of the old society would precipitate "a new class domination, culminating in a new political power," Marx replied that the working class would establish "an association, which excludes classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power, since political power is just the official expression of antagonism in civil society."² Hence this major theoretical treatise of Marxism, although it said nothing of the state's demise, confidently predicted that "political power," uniquely defined, would inevitably atrophy.

The first comprehensive exposition of Marxian ideology, *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848, revealed that the inherent dynamic of capitalist society would ineluctably precipitate a proletarian revolution, and also prescribed a wide variety of measures for the state to undertake subsequent to the revolution. Immediately after these prescriptions, Marx and Engels concluded that "in the course of development, the public power loses its political character." And they reiterated, with slight refinement, Marx's definition of the previous year, namely, that "political power, in the true sense, is the organized power of one class for the suppression of another."³ Nothing was said of the end of the "public power" now being wielded by the state; it merely loses its "political character," i.e., by definition, its class character. Of equal significance is their failure even

²Marx, *Das Elend der Philosophie*, in *Werke*, by Marx and Engels, IV (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956-68), 181.

³Marx and Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, in *Werke*, IV, 481-482.

to mention the state in this connection. The temptation to read "state" where in fact Marx and Engels have written "political power" should, in the interest of precision, be resisted.⁴ The former meaning, as will be shown below, is the very antithesis of these words. The phrase is undeniably suggestive, but nevertheless explicit: "political power" ceases. This initial confrontation with a "non-political state" is somewhat disconcerting, only if the singularly narrow definition of "political power" is overlooked. In short, the final product of the proletarian revolution is a state, now exercising a "public power" that is no longer "political," but a state nonetheless.⁵ After a brief digression to consider two essential points, we shall take up the *Manifesto* again to demonstrate the validity of this allegation.

The *Manifesto* does not define "the state." "The modern state power" is characterized as "the committee which supervises the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie class."⁶ And, as Marx and Engels indicated a few pages later, the proletarians are not the slaves of "the state," but of "the bourgeois state." This significant distinction is quite in accord with the tentative assertion that only one species of state, the class-political, is to pass away, but that another, the "non-political" state, or simply the state, will continue to function indefinitely.

According to Marxian theory, it follows that the one indispensable prerequisite for the existence of "political power" in society is the presence of antagonistic "classes." But the concept of "class," the very cornerstone of the Marxian theoretical edifice, remained ill-defined by its builders. An examination of its usage, indicates that only one classificatory criterion was employed by Marx and Engels

⁴This error is easily committed. For example, John Plamenatz wrote: "In *The Communist Manifesto* it is said that 'political power properly so-called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another.' In other words, the state is essentially an instrument of class oppression, so that in a classless society there can be no state." See his *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 135.

⁵I am by no means the first to notice that Marxism contains a "non-political" state. Compare Ernst Lewalter, "Zur Systematik der Marxschen Staats- und Gesellschaftslehre," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 68 (March 1933), 650; and Hans Kelsen, *Sozialismus und Staat: Eine Untersuchung der Politischen Theorie des Marxismus* (2nd ed.; Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld Verlag, 1923), 89-90.

⁶Marx and Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, IV, 464, 469.

to determine, in the case of capitalist society, whether a member was a bourgeois or a proletarian: the relation of the member, in terms of possession or nonpossession, to the means of production.⁷ Logically, this procedure could yield only a two-fold classification, and thus a society comprised of only two classes. The owners of the means of production (and land) belong to one of the two classes, the bourgeois class; the non-owners belong to the remaining class, the proletarian class. Because only these two classes were foreseen as still existing at the time of the anticipated proletarian revolution, this oversimplification endowed the prognosticative aspect of Marxian ideology with a generous measure of theoretical elasticity.⁸ And this latitude was subsequently utilized to maximum political advantage.

The exercise of "political power" in society is thus wholly contingent upon the presence of antagonistic "classes," whose existence in turn depends completely on the private ownership of the means of production. If the private ownership of these means ceases, "political power" also ceases. Hence when the state, as envisioned by Marx and Engels, assumes the ownership of the means of production, the continued existence of "classes" and "political power" is logically precluded. Precisely because this particular aspect of Marxism is a *purely logical construction based on uniquely Marxian definitions and classificatory criteria*, a correct understanding of the definitions and criteria, and an application of logic, render it immediately intelligible. To postulate explicitly what Marx and En-

⁷Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, "Karl Marx' Theory of Social Classes," in *Class, Status and Power: A Reader in Social Stratification* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1953), 26-35. For an explicit statement of this criterion, see Engels, *Frankreich: Politische Vorgänge*, in *Werke*, IV, 434.

⁸Marx and Engels appear to have remained naively oblivious to the fact that the specter of bureaucracy was haunting the specter of communism which, they boldly claimed, was haunting Europe. Both Bakunin and the little-known Polish revolutionary Jan Waclaw Machajski, however, perspicaciously predicted that the implementation of the Marxian blueprint for the future society would result in the genesis of a new scientific-political class, in short, that the "classless" society of Marxian escatology was a never-to-be-realized myth. For Marx's remarkably ingenuous reply to Bakunin's prognosis, see his *Konspekt von Bakunins "Staatlichkeit und Anarchie"*, in *Werke*, XVIII, 635. For the best introduction to this fascinating subject, see the following works by Max Nomad, *Apostles of Revolution* (2nd ed. rev.; New York: Collier Books, 1961), 142-147; and *Aspects of Revolt* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1959), 96-120.

gels implied: an inverse ratio exists between the degree of political power and the scope of state ownership of the means of production.

The *Manifesto* fits easily into this conceptual framework which, in fact, is its own, but which for exegetical purposes has been brought into sharper focus. Marx and Engels prescribed, among other measures, the gradual extension of state ownership of factories and the means of production, and they predicted that the outcome would be elimination of classes and political power.⁹ The ever-increasing state ownership gradually diminishes the size of one of the classes, the former owners—the bourgeoisie—and thus the degree of political power required for use against the remainder correspondingly decreases. When the state has finally acquired *all* the means of production, one of the classes will have thereby ceased to exist. And because, according to Marxism, a one-class society is a non-antagonistic or classless society, "political power," by definition, can no longer exist. The *Manifesto* means precisely what it says: "political power" ceases. And Marxism of 1848 is the very antithesis of Anarchism. If history were not to reverse itself, and if the benefits engendered by the capitalist method of production, which Marx was determined to preserve and perfect, were not to be sacrificed, then the state, whose acquisition of the means of production would terminate capitalism's "anarchy of production," which had obviated the full exploitation of these benefits, would have to continue to exist.

This particular aspect of Marxism clearly reflects Marx's application of Hegel's dialectic to history. Capitalism, the uniqueness of which is derived from its method of production, necessarily engenders its own "antithesis," the proletariat. Capitalism is eventually eliminated, but its positive features are both preserved and perfected in the new "synthesis," socialism, which is distinguished from capitalism by state ownership. Under socialism, the old motives (profits) and the methods (competition) of exchange can no longer act as a brake on production.

Before investigating the subsequent modifications of the 1848 attitude toward the state, it may be noted that Marx was not at all unaware that he was defining "politics" in a unique fashion. In *Das Kapital* he asserted that "man is by nature, if not as Aristotle

⁹Marx and Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, IV, 481, 482.

maintains, a political animal, by all means a social animal."¹⁰ But it is obvious from his own footnote to this observation that Marx was merely verbalizing for effect. There he admitted that what Aristotle "really" meant by "political animal" was "town dweller."¹¹ Inasmuch as Aristotle did not mean "class" by "political," and did not conceive of the *polis* as a mere topographical entity, it would appear that Marx erred on both counts. But, ironically, Aristotle's dictum was actually vindicated by Marx. The sense of the former's "political animal," which is best conveyed by "communal being,"¹² corresponds rather nicely *mutatis mutandis* to the Marxian definition of "social": "the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what circumstances, and to what end."¹³ Thus it might be said that Marxism is not in every sense an "anti-political" ideology.

The theory of "the withering away of the state" underwent a protracted subterranean growth before first seeing the light of day in 1886; its germination may be traced to 1851. In two short essays of that year, Marx and Engels appeared to reverse completely their positive attitude toward the state expressed in the *Manifesto*. Now it was asserted, with apparent indignation, that "the abolition (*Ab-schaffung*) of the state has a meaning only for the Communists, as the necessary result of the abolition of classes, with which the need for the organized power of one class for the suppression of another ceases of itself."¹⁴

Before explaining why this apparent reversal was effected, it should first be determined if, in substance, an actual reversal did

¹⁰Marx, *Das Kapital*, I, in *Werke*, XXIII, 346.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 346n. I have taken the liberty to translate Marx's *Stadtbürger* as "town dweller" instead of "town citizen" as the former seems better to convey his meaning. His footnote reads as follows, "Aristoteles' Definition ist eigentlich die, das der Mensch von Natur Stadtbürger. Sie ist für das klassische Altertum ebenso charakteristisch, als Franklins' Definition, das der Mensch von Natur Instrumentenmacher, für das Yankeetum."

¹²Carl Joachim Friedrich, *Man and His Government: An Empirical Theory of Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1963), 37-38.

¹³Marx and Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, in *Werke*, III, 29-30. For another "refutation" of Aristotle, coupled with incorrect imputation of a juridical connotation to his term "political," see Marx and Engels, *Der Bürgerwehrgesetzesentwurf*, in *Werke*, V, 251.

¹⁴Marx and Engels, Book review of *Le socialisme et l'impôt par Emile de Girardin*, in *Werke*, VII, 288; Engels, *Über die Lösung der Abschaffung des Staats und die deutschen "Freunde der Anarchie"*, in *Werke*, VII, 417. This passage is identical in both essays.

occur. This is certainly very radical sounding anti-state rhetoric, but a closer look reveals that something was omitted. Nothing was said of the *cause* of the abolition of classes, and the elision was no oversight. A disclosure of the cause, which, as in the *Manifesto*, is the state expropriation of the means of production, would not only have exposed the misleading nature of this statement, but it would have forced Marx and Engels to publicly proclaim an absurdity. This occasion marks the first appearance of the well-known Marxian definition of "the state," which Marx and Engels formulated simply by extending their definition of the class-political state to include "the state" itself. Ordinarily, this subsumption of the genus under the species would result in only a logical fallacy: Converse Accident. But in this case the formula extends beyond mere fallacy to logical absurdity: state ownership abolishes the state. Obviously, nothing is being abolished but the *word* "state," and even this would necessarily require the state's continued existence as owner and operator of the means of production. We are indeed fortunate to have a candid admission from one of the perpetrators of this terminological legerdemain that he and Marx had not at all abandoned their 1848 plans for the state: "the real meaning of the abolition of the state is *the most concentrated state centralization*."¹⁵ This merely affirms what has been tentatively alleged, namely, that the goal of Marxism is far removed from Anarchism. In fact, it would appear from Engels's letter that he and Marx were aiming at a rather extreme variety of statism. This is the formula for Marxian "Anarchism" which Marx and Engels will employ, with slight verbal variations, until 1894.

What precipitated this manipulation of definitions by Marx and Engels may be determined by reference to contemporaneous political circumstances. That the phrase "abolition of the state" was not the creation of Marx and Engels is apparent even from its context. According to Engels, it had become the catchword of an inchoate Anarchist movement in Germany, the theoretical luminaries of which were Max Stirner and Proudhon.¹⁶ Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own*, (1845), which advocated a solipsistic variety of philo-

¹⁵"der wahre Sinn der Abschaffung des Staats die verstärkte Staatszentralisation ist." Letter of Engels to Marx, August 10, 1851, in *Werke*, XXVII, 306. (Italics added)

¹⁶Engels, *Abschaffung des Staats* VII, 417.

sophical Anarchism, was the inspiration of *Die Freien*, who were holding forth regularly in the relocated and enlarged Hippel Weinstube; in 1850 this group had begun to expound its views in its own organ, the *Abendpost*.¹⁷ The incipient German Anarchism of this period was also abetted by the anti-state ideas of Proudhon, translated into German by Arnold Ruge, a Left Hegelian who had co-edited the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* with Marx.¹⁸

This German movement had a growing counterpart across the Rhine where the state was no longer viewed by all radicals as a *deus ex machina*. From February to June 1848, the attempts of the socialist Republic in France to implement the idealistic schemes of Blanc, Saint-Simon, Fourier, and others, had all ended as abysmal failures.¹⁹ State socialism had been discredited in the eyes of both the Right and of some elements of the Left. One bourgeois writer, Reybaud, wrote in 1852: "To speak of socialism nowadays is to deliver a funeral oration. . . . Should the human mind in its vertigo ever take it up again it will be in a different form and under the influence of other illusions."²⁰ But far more significant, Proudhon epitomized the new negative attitude of a growing segment of the Left toward "that fictitious being, without intelligence, without passion, without morality, that we call the State."²¹ Thus by 1851 the polarization of nineteenth-century European radicalism was already well under way.

The standing of Marxism in revolutionary circles had been jeopardized by the emergence of this new ultra-radicalism, and Marx and Engels deftly responded by co-opting the slogan of their rivals without, however, modifying their own real plans which remained

¹⁷John Henry Mackay, *Max Stirner: Sein Leben und Sein Werk* (2nd ed.; Treptow bei Berlin: Bernhard Zack's Verlag, 1910), 211-212.

¹⁸Max Nettlau, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Sozialismus, Syndikalismus, Anarchismus*, Vol. I: *Der Vorfrühling der Anarchie: Ihre Historische Entwicklung von den Anfängen bis zum Jahre 1864* (Berlin: Verlag "Der Syndikalist", 1925-31), 147.

¹⁹Charles Gide and Charles Rist, *A History of Economic Doctrines: From the Time of the Physiocrats to the Present Day*, trans. from the 7th French edition by R. Richards (London: George Harrap and Co., 1948), 308-314.

²⁰Article on "Socialism" in the *Dictionnaire d'Économie politique* (1852), quoted in *ibid.*, 308.

²¹P. J. Proudhon, *Idée générale Révolution au XIX^e siècle* (2nd ed.; Paris: Garnier Frères, 1851), 239.

diametrically opposed to Anarchism.²² The consummation of this adroit deception was immensely facilitated by the fact that the whole episode was a mere tempest in a theoretical teapot. In the early 1850s, none of the parties was in a position to abolish anything except the rhetoric of the others. Marx and Engels were safe, not having to demonstrate the sincerity of their "anarchistic" aims, simply because their rivals could do little more than sanguinely contemplate the "abolition of the state."

Almost two decades elapsed before Marx and Engels were constrained to exhume, although not without modification, their 1851 anarchistic formula, which during the interim had fallen into disuse. The initial Marxist-Anarchist encounter of the early 1850s had been a relatively mild affair, hardly descending to the realm of practice from its theoretical plane. But the collision of the 1870s was of far larger consequence, and the prize at stake was immeasurably greater: domination of the First International, founded in 1864. Equally significant was the fact that Marxism's major opponent was now a man unaccustomed to idle speculation. Michael Bakunin, the very quintessence of political activism, was leading the second Anarchist assault on Marxism, waving his newly adopted black banner on which was emblazoned the slogan: "Abolition of the State!"

Marxism's major political crisis had arrived. In Europe of the early 1870s, "abolition of the state" was not a slogan to be taken lightly. The leaders of the Paris Commune of 1870-71, imbued with the anarchist-federalist ideas of Marx's inveterate antagonist Proudhon, had loudly proclaimed their intention to dismember all France into a network of autonomous communes. The Communeards, canonized by the whole European Left, were immune to Marxian denunciation, but neither could Marx and Engels bring themselves to extoll the anarchistic sentiments they abhorred. Marx had extricated himself from this dilemma by misrepresenting the aims of the Commune; he simply denied that its goals were an-

²²That Anarchist provocation might have precipitated the formation of Marxism's "anti-state" attitude has previously been suggested. Compare K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies II*, (4th ed. rev.; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 328 (n. 8 to ch. 17); and Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, trans. from the 2nd German edition by J. Kahane (New York: Macmillan Co., n.d.), 129.

archistic.²³ A decade later, however, Marx ruefully conceded that the majority of the Commune "was in no sense socialist nor could it be."²⁴

Bakunin and his avid followers, on the other hand, could not be written away so easily; more subtle methods were required. But first a statement of the problem that Marx and Engels confronted should render their attempted solutions more readily intelligible. Anarchism, particularly in Spain, Belgium, Italy, parts of France, and the French and Italian cantons of Switzerland, was rapidly becoming a political force to be reckoned with. This burgeoning ultra-radicalism posed a threat not only to the national states, but to the Marxian domination of the General Council of the International. Again in the 1870s, as before in the 1850s, Marxism was in danger of being outflanked from the Left. But this time Marx and Engels could not simply co-opt, as they had previously done, the slogan of the opposition. Bakunin and many others were all too willing to "abolish the state," the very antithesis of Marxism's plans for that institution. In short, Marx and Engels had to generate an anti-state rhetoric to match that of the Anarchists. On the one hand, it must insure that the latter would not gain sufficient strength to begin abolishing states; on the other, it must protect their predominance in the International. If serious political losses were to be averted, misrepresentation was unavoidable, but a modification of the old formula was required. Not only was the slogan "abolition of the state" useless to Marx and Engels, but now it had to be assailed as downright pernicious. Their 1851 prescription for the state's "abolition" was by no means abandoned, but slight variations were introduced. And the modifications they effected, it may be said in retrospect, have succeeded remarkably well. The few who have remained unconvinced of the sincerity of their anarchistic intentions have remained confounded.

The first passage containing a variation appeared in the conclud-

²³Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *Selected Works*, by Marx and Engels, I (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 516-30. For an excellent detailed critique of Marx's treatment of the Commune, see Bertram D. Wolfe, *Marxism: One Hundred Years in the Life of a Doctrine* (New York: Dial Press, 1965), 103-147.

²⁴Letter of Marx to Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, February 22, 1881, in *Werke*, XXXV, 160.

ing paragraph of Marxism's 1872 rejoinder to Bakunin's *Sonvillier Circular*, which had demanded an attenuation of the prerogatives of the Marxian-dominated General Council. Marx and Engels replied:

All Socialists understand by Anarchism the following: it is at once the goal of the proletarian movement to achieve the abolition of classes, and thus to eliminate the power of the state, which serves to maintain the great producing majority under the yoke of a less numerous exploiting minority, and to transform the governmental functions into simple administrative functions.²⁵

The passage is significant for several reasons. Although Marx and Engels could not co-opt, for reasons stated, the slogan of the Anarchists, there was nothing to prevent them from expropriating the latter's abstract theoretical classification, "anarchism," which, inasmuch as it postulates no immediate target, is far less hortatory than "abolition of the state!" According to this rendition, the Marxists were the real Anarchists, and "all Socialists" knew that Anarchism by no means contemplated the state's abolition but aimed instead at a cessation of its "power," dutifully followed by the appropriate definition, and at a "transformation" of its functions. Although highly suggestive, as indeed it was designed to be, this is merely a modified version of Marxism's old 1851 formula for "Anarchism," which Engels had revealed as a mask for statism. The same omission is apparent. Nothing was said of the *means* by which these aims were to be accomplished. But it would have been better for Marx and Engels never to have written the essay than to have proclaimed openly that state expropriation of the means of production would "abolish classes," eliminate the political "power" of the state, and thus "transform" its functions. It might also be noted here that the Saint-Simonian distinction between the government of persons and the administration of things, which we shall see again, appears not to have been taken too seriously by Marx and Engels. In 1851 they had ridiculed Emile de Girardin's argument that the state could be replaced by an administrative committee.²⁶

²⁵Marx and Engels, *Die Angeblichen Spaltungen in der Internationale*, in *Werke*, XVIII, 50. This same passage also appears in Marx and Engels, *Ein Komplot gegen die Internationale Arbeiter-Assoziation: Bericht über das Treiben Bakunins*, in *Werke*, XVIII, 343.

²⁶Marx and Engels, Book review of *Emile de Girardin*, VII, 286.

Hence even this often misinterpreted passage fits easily into the conceptual framework of the *Communist Manifesto*; Marx and Engels were no more anarchistic in 1872 than they had been in 1848.

As a result of this maneuver, Bakunin and his camp, no longer regarded by "all Socialists" as Anarchists, were left with a mere slogan to which no general theoretical classification corresponded. So Engels gallantly provided one for them: "Anti-Authoritarians"; and he then proceeded to uphold the principle of "authority" in the abstract. No common endeavor, he wrote, would be possible without this "authority" on whose institutionalization he, understandably, neglected to elaborate.²⁷ Even in a society composed of only two persons, each would have to surrender a measure of his autonomy to "authority."²⁸ But his short essay of 1872-73 entitled *On Authority* is even more germane. To the reader versed in Marxian semantics, he disclosed that the goal of Marxism is not Anarchism. The coming social revolution, Engels predicted, would result in the disappearance of "the political state and political authority."²⁹ At this point in the discussion, no exegetical comments on this statement should be necessary. Marx himself made an analogous assertion. Glossing Bakunin's major theoretical salvo of the lengthy campaign, *Statism and Anarchism* of 1873, he rebutted Bakunin's accusation that Marxism aimed at statism, alleging that "when the class rule has disappeared, . . . no state will exist in the current political sense."³⁰ Clearly, no change of attitude on this score since 1848 is apparent and, moreover, it is doubtful that Marx actually believed that his own meaning of "political" was at all "current."

While this radical anti-state posture was being affected in public, Marx at least was making immeasurably more candid statements in private. The *Critique of the Gotha Program*, one of the most revealing pieces he ever wrote, was not penned with publication in mind; it was intended for the perusal of only a few close political associates. In it Marx criticized the draft program of the German Social Democratic Party, not only for its failure to deal

²⁷Letter of Engels to Paul Lafargue, December 30, 1871, in *Werke*, XXXIII, 365.

²⁸Letter of Engels to Theodor Cuno, January 24, 1872, in *Werke*, XXXIII, 389.

²⁹Engels, *Von der Autorität*, in *Werke*, XVIII, 308.

³⁰Marx, *Bakunins "Staatlichkeit und Anarchie,"* XVIII, 634.

with the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat," the stage scheduled to follow *immediately* upon the proletarian revolution, but for neglecting to elaborate on "the future state organization (*Staatswesen*) of communist society."³¹ But even more striking was his comment on the interrelation between freedom and the state: "Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ imposed upon society, to one completely subordinate to it."³² Although critics may debate both the meaning and the merits of the Marxian conception of freedom, few would contest the fact that Marx and Engels alleged the realization of freedom to be their goal. Thus the state, no longer a "political" institution serving the interests of only one segment of society, is envisioned by Marxism as being an indispensable component of the future communist society in which freedom is to be realized.

The research of which this essay on Marxian semantics is the product was initially prompted by the apparent incompatibility of the views of Marx and Engels on this very point. According to the latter, "as soon as there can be talk of freedom, the state as such ceases to exist."³³ But the qualification "as such," as Engels went on to explain, means as a class-political institution. Hence the inconsistency between the collaborators is illusory.

Most of the misinterpretations of this particular aspect of Marxism may be traced, directly or indirectly, to Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, written in 1876-78 and bearing, by his account, Marx's imprimatur. This is somewhat paradoxical, because if the temptation to focus undivided attention on the captivating "withering away" phrase can be overcome and due attention devoted to what precedes it in the same paragraph, the treatise is quite revealing.

In the most comprehensive theoretical statement of Marxism, Engels asserted the following: "*The proletariat seizes the state power and immediately converts the means of production into state property. But it thereby abolishes (aufheben) itself as proletariat, abolishes all class differences and antagonisms, and abolishes the state as state.*"³⁴ With the exception of one substitution and

³¹Marx, *Kritik des Gothaer Programms*, in *Werke*, XIX, 28.

³²*Ibid.*, 27.

³³Letter of Engels to August Bebel, March 18-28, 1875, in *Werke*, XIX, 7.

³⁴Engels, *Herrn Eugen Dühring's Umwälzung der Wissenschaft-Anti-Dühring* (3rd ed.; 1894), in *Werke*, XX, 261.

one addition, the former more interesting than important, this passage is virtually identical in substance to the passage of the two short essays of 1851 in which Marx and Engels had first proclaimed their anti-state goals. Because Engels could no longer use the Anarchists' word *abschaffen*, he substituted *aufheben* which, in this context, means exactly the same thing: instant destruction or "abolition." But of far greater significance is that here Engels revealed for the first time in a public statement *how* classes and the state "as state" were to be "abolished": by the state expropriation of the means of production! He actually disclosed that what lay behind Marxism's anti-state rhetoric was statism. Moreover, in these few lines he revealed the nature of the unique Marxian semantics that had enabled him and Marx to construct their spurious anarchistic facade.

A few lines below, Engels actually reiterated this disclosure, again asserting that the state's expropriation of the means of production would be its last independent act "as state." And this was followed by the well-known prediction that the "government of persons" would be replaced by the "administration of things" and the supervision of the processes of production, all of which are even further affirmations of the state's continued existence in communist society. It would seem, however, from Engels's previous remarks on "authority," that he and Marx expected the future state to exercise at least some measure of authority, however slight, over the members of communist society.

In the wake of these startling revelations and affirmations of the state's indispensability to communist society, Engels abruptly asserted: "The state is not 'abolished'; *it withers away*." Obviously, the state which, "as state," has already been "abolished" (*aufheben*) by its expropriation of the means of production, and which is supervising the processes of production, cannot be "abolished" (*abschaffen*) at the time time. But by the same token neither can it "wither away." The fact that this arresting little epigram does not even appear in the first edition of *Anti-Dühring* testifies to its true significance and also accounts for its striking contextual incongruity.³⁵ This enchanting little phrase, the source of much bewilder-

³⁵This modification first appeared in the second German edition of 1886, which is identical to the third edition of 1894. The real significance of the

ment and speculation, can stand for neither more nor less than any of Marxism's previous "anarchistic" statements, that is to say, it must also stand for statism. From the negative references to the Anarchists, inserted at the same time, it is obvious that even this "theory" was formulated in response to Anarchist provocation, whether immediate or remote. Possibly Engels decided, after Marx was already resting peacefully in Highgate Cemetery, than an *explicit* refutation of the Anarchists' slogan was a touch without which the exhaustive *Anti-Dühring* would not be complete. Even his somewhat enigmatic reference to the "so called Anarchists" is explicable if it is recalled that in the early 1870s "all Socialists" had discovered, no doubt to the dismay of some Socialists, that Marx and Engels were the real Anarchists. And Bakunin, his violent anti-state pronouncements notwithstanding, had been exposed as a mere "Anti-Authoritarian."

But the evidence has rendered a contrary verdict. The future communist society envisioned by Marx and Engels was antithetical to Anarchism; the state was foreseen as being its one indispensable institution. By exploiting the unique semantics of their ideology to maximum political advantage, Marx and Engels adroitly constructed a specious anarchistic facade to ward off the successive threats from their more radical rivals, the Anarchists. The theory of "the withering away of the state," and its earlier variations, were no more than misleading myths. Marxism, from 1848 to 1894, was a statist ideology.

The vicissitudes that the theory of "the withering away of the

"withering away" phrase, as well as the reason for its inclusion, are indicated by a comparison of the texts of the two editions:

". . . von Produktionsprozessen. Die freie Gesellschaft kann keinen 'Staat' zwischen sich und ihren Mitgliedern brauchen oder dulden. Hieran ist die Phrase vom 'freien Volksstaat' zu messen also sowohl nach ihrer zeitweiligen agitatorischen Berechtigung wie nach ihrer endgültigen wissenschaftlichen Unzulänglichkeit." Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (1st ed.; Leipzig: 1878), 234.

". . . von Produktionsprozessen. Der Staat wird nicht 'abgeschafft', er stirbt ab. Hieran ist die Phrase vom 'freien Volksstaat' zu messen also sowohl nach ihrer zeitweiligen agitatorischen Berechtigung wie nach ihrer endgültigen wissenschaftlichen Unzulänglichkeit; hieran ebenfalls die Forderung der sogenannten Anarchisten, der Staat solle von heute auf morgen abgeschafft werden." Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (3rd ed.; 1894), in *Werke*, XX, 262.

state" subsequently experienced in the hands of Marx's disciples, both in Germany and in Russia, remain to be reexamined in the light of the findings of this investigation. It may be noted now, however, that this conclusion explains what has generally been regarded as something of a paradox. Alfred Cobban expressed the prevailing attitude when he wrote: "One of the ironies of the modern world is that in the name of Marx, whose theoretical pattern was fashioned with a view to the ultimate 'withering away' of the state, the state should have reached its apogee."³⁶ On the contrary, the Soviet Union stands as the apodixis of the dangers inherent in classifying social phenomena, as Marx and Engels did, with a "metaphysician's precision."³⁷ Inasmuch as the state owns the means of production, and thus classes have ceased to exist, the Soviet Union could proclaim tomorrow that "political power," and even the state, have already "withered away." All of which should serve as a reminder that the omnipotence conferred by the prerogative of definition does not extend beyond the realm of theoretical logomachy.

³⁶See Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), 192.

³⁷This appropriate phrase is used in connection with Marx by George Catlin in *The Story of the Political Philosophers* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1939), 593. Catlin's remark, we may note, comports nicely with the more recent observation of Nicholas Lobkowitz that, "Marx's passage to the proletarian cause is so perfectly 'logical' as to make rather unconvincing the widespread notion that by declaring himself for the proletariat Marx ceased to be an *abstract Left-Hegelian revolutionary*." For an excellent study of the Hegelian origins of Marxism, see Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 285.