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Bureaucracy: a Term and Concept in the Socialist Discourse about State Power (Before 1941)

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Summary

The term and concept of bureaucracy is discussed as found in the debates of Marx, Engels, and the German Social-democratic Party, then in Lenin's Fight against Bureaucracy and the State Machine, and finally in Stalin's Unavowed Thermidor (these are the subtitles). It is concerned only with "upstream of Yugoslavia", i.e. what the Communist parties had accepted or at least known of in the 1930s, and the CPY started modifying after 1948. All outside of such a vulgate (Weber, Trotsky, and so on) is not discussed.

Keywords: bureaucracy, State, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, German Social-democratic party before World War I

The philosopher [Wittgenstein] speaks no other language but the one he finds in his cognitive object.

Gunter Gebauer

Introduction

This essay is part of a discussion focusing on historical semantic lineaments of the term and concept "bureaucracy", and its epistemological implications, in the 19th Century socialist movement and the two paradigmatic European socialist States, Russia and Yugoslavia. My aim in this first essay is modest: to provide the background and premises indispensable for understanding, in a second essay, the discourse about bureaucracy and State power in post-revolutionary Yugoslavia. This aim excludes an exhaustive account of this theme in the 19th Century or in revolu-

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tionary Russia, as well as a critical account of the strengths and weaknesses of these semantic usages (which shall be dealt with in the following essay on Yugoslav discourse). I wish only to delineate a discursive universe which will be used after 1945 both by the Party/State and the oppositional discourse in SFR Yugoslavia.

This essay starts from the premise that Lenin and his Bolshevik party collaborators inherited the term of bureaucracy from the tradition represented on the one hand by Marx and Engels, and on the other hand the experience of the Second International and its main pillar, the German Social-democratic party. They fused it with the experiences of the tsarist officialdom and ranking system (*činovniki*), whose key executive role Lenin excoriated from his beginnings (for example in the polemic with Struve, 1894). In all of his programmatic writings about the Russian social-democratic party, he insisted that all public functionaries must be elected and recallable; when Lenin wrote against the Kerensky government before the October revolution, he blamed its “reactionary bureaucratic ways” (IP: 81) which harked back to the old regime. I cannot here do justice to this important Russian context. The essay deals only with the Marx-to-Lenin tradition in the socialist and then communist movements and its perversion by Stalinism in the USSR.

“Bureaucracy” was from Marx to Lenin used in the discourse about (always class-derived) State power and its revolutionary replacement. In the USSR after Lenin it began to mean, confusingly, both a subordinate part of the State totality and a *pars pro toto* for it; while under Stalin it principally came to mean what impeded the centralization, expansion, and smooth work of the hierarchical State machinery, with perhaps a demagogic hint to the workers and peasants that the Powers That Be were their allies against this oppressive excrescence. In Yugoslavia it advanced to the privileged key-word for an apparatus standing above civil society and implying a separate social group (possibly class), in the discourse criticizing or indeed opposing socialist State power. It represented there the emergence of the understanding that in absolutism and capitalism the bureaucracy was, together with the army, an important part of the ruling class hierarchy; however, after the communist revolutions (which annihilated the other functions of the ruling hierarchy), the bureaucracy – the army was not considered further – became the whole of the hierarchy. In the USSR and Yugoslavia, it came to stand for the banished discourse about a new, Thermidorean ruling class.

As to “socialism”, disregarding my reservations about the term when used as a historical epoch,¹ I shall use it here to cover the political movement loosely organi-

¹ Suvin, “Marksizam: nauka ili komunizam?” “Aktiv br. 2”, *Novosti* [Zagreb] of 26 November 2010, p. 3, www.novosti.com/2010/11/marksizam-nauka-ili-komunizam/.

I write State as *état* with a capital letter, to differentiate it from state as *condition*, and “soviet” when referring to the various local councils and their system, but “Soviet” when referring to the

zed in the Second International as well as the power constellations in the USSR during its formative period, roughly from 1917 to 1929 (and in the second essay, the power constellations in the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, roughly from 1945 to the early 1970s).

I am aware that this endeavour is a kind of archaeological excavation into discourses and semantics (with very practical equivalents in social life), certain versions of which were familiar in “socialist” States, and are therefore well-known to specialists of those spacetimes, but are quite buried under the rubble of intervening events for most, including those who would wish to look at them anew. It cannot pretend to originality, but only to helpfulness. I have decided to run the risk of unnecessary repetition rather than of omission of relevant matters and texts.

I shall avoid confrontation with the non-Marxist discourse on bureaucracy – by the ineffable Spencer and scores of anti-socialist polemicists during the rise of the German and French Social-Democratic parties (for the latter, see Angenot, 1993: 65-67), then Weber, Michels, Merton, and so on – until it might naturally arise, in a following essay, through its repercussions in SFR Yugoslavia. Certainly up to then the militant tradition of Lenin’s successors (including the pioneering Trotsky, who is here also not represented) had no time or money to enter into substantial confrontations with that discourse. This was understandable in view of their overriding necessities and of the fact that they had some once excellent tools. But after the 1920s, and especially the 1940s, this exclusive concentration turned sectarian, and the rapidly changing times demanded a much refurbished toolbox.

1. Marx, Engels, and the German Social-democratic Party as Sources

Bureaucracy was always considered by Marx as a mainstay of the State system, and in particular of the one begun in Absolutism and maturing after the French Revolution, when capitalism needed a powerful State, even at the price of strong monarchic and even landowning elements – as in Germany and the U.K. The role of bu-

USSR. Disliking “God words”, I write “party”, “communist”, and “revolution” in lower case, except for quotes and specific cases such as “October Revolution” or “Bolshevik Party”. “CP” means “communist party”, which was in the USSR at the beginning called “Russian (and later the All-Federal) Communist Party (bolshevik)”, acronym VKP(b), in Yugoslavia translated as SKP(b).

In section 2 I draw heavily on Lenin’s *Collected Works* in English, where possible checked against his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th edn., on his *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, and on Bettelheim (though I disagree with his insufficient dichotomy between bourgeoisie and proletariat in socialism); they are cited as CW, IP, and B.

My thanks for much help with materials is due to Inter-Library Loans Dept. of McGill University, its English Dept. and Valentina Matsangos, and my long-time and constant friend Marc Angenot.

reocracy depended thus on one's views about the State, which in Marx crystallized after the Paris Commune of 1871.²

However, from his earliest *Notes for a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* he identified the central characteristic of bureaucracy as "founded on [the] separation [of the State and civil society]". Further, "The general spirit of the bureaucracy is the secret, the *mystery*, preserved within it by means of the hierarchy and externally as a closed corporation. To make public the mind and the disposition of the State appears therefore to the bureaucracy as a *betrayal* of its mystery. Accordingly, *authority* is the principle of its knowledge and being, and the deification of authority is its *mentality*" (WAMW/1843/critique-hpr/ch03.htm). Bureaucracy is "*an estate* in the medieval sense..., where civil and political positions are immediately identical" (WAMW/1843/critique-hpr/ch05.htm). Hegel's "civil society" (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) as private economic life is in Marx inverted as the presupposition for the State, and in *The Jewish Question* evolves to stand for the economic and ideological aspects below the political State (Tucker, ed.: 33), or below the power structure of the ruling class. Marx treats both as alienations of human possibilities: the State is an empty idealism of societal unity, civil society a petty materialism of individualist egotism (*ibidem*: 32, 40-42, and in the 10th *Thesis on Feuerbach*, 109). Focusing on politics and then economics, at least since 1847-1848 Marx and Engels always write about "the army and the bureaucracy" as pillars of the State. And in chapter 7 of *The 18th Brumaire* we find a first sketch of both the history and the function of bureaucracy in a modern autocratic State. As to history:

This executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organization, with its wide-ranging and ingenious state machinery, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million – this appalling parasitic growth which enmeshes the body of French society and chokes all its pores sprang up in the time of the absolute monarchy...

Then the French Revolution, Napoleon, and all successive governments added and strengthened it: "All revolutions perfected this [State] machine instead of breaking it". This diagnosis was to be repeated and brought to a head in *The Civil War in France*.

As to social role:

² I cite the internet texts on www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/ as WAMW, and the 1972 *Marx-Engels Reader* as Tucker, ed. Italics in all citations are by the original author, unless otherwise stated. In view of the sometimes differing and often anonymous translations of Marx into English, I have checked all with the German text and tacitly emended some translations, especially from WAMW.

An enormous bureaucracy, well gallooned and well fed, is the 'Napoleonic idea' which is most congenial to the second Bonaparte. How could it be otherwise, considering that alongside the actual classes of society, he is forced to create an artificial caste for which the maintenance of his regime becomes a bread-and-butter question? Hence one of his first financial operations was the raising of officials' salaries to their old level and the creation of new sinecures. (WAMW/1852/18th-brumaire/ch07.htm; Tucker, ed.: 514 and 520)

Bureaucracy is here something approximating a separate class, though not founded on economy but on politics, and therefore somewhat curtly called "an artificial caste". Marx is here backgrounding the point which was to worry communist heretics from the time of Trotsky to that of the *Praxis* writers: just how is bureaucracy situated in the class system?

I shall further confine myself to two key texts which were to be cited again and again in debates within socialist countries about their economic system and State apparatus: Marx's admiring analysis of the Paris Commune in 1871 and his critique of the German Social-democratic Party four years later. Engels's work in the *Anti-Dühring* and elsewhere is almost equally important, but will be discussed through his influence on Lenin.

Chapter 3 in *The Civil War in France* describes the workings of the Paris Commune. It wanted "to abolish that class property which transforms the labour of the many into the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour" (Tucker, ed.: 557). The Commune substituted the "armed people" for the standing army and "revocable agent[s] of the Commune... serv[ing] at *workmen's wages*" for a closed civil-service group administering public affairs (*ibidem*: 554). The horizon was: "While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority claiming pre-eminence over society itself.. The Commune type of constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the parasitic excrescence of 'State', feeding upon and clogging the free movement of society" (*ibidem*: 555-556). And further, quite prophetically for socialist States:

[The Commune] was essentially *a working-class government*, the result of the struggle of the creating against the appropriating class, the finally discovered political form under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour. // Without this last condition, the Commune type of constitution would have been an impossibility and a delusion. The political rule of the producer cannot coexist with the perpetuation of his social slavery... With labour emancipated, every man becomes a labourer, and productive labour ceases to be a class attribute. (*ibidem*: 557)

The marginal glosses to the program of the German Workers' Party, translated as the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and for a long time forgotten, were popularized mainly by Lenin's *State and Revolution*, but deserve to be treated on their own. I shall bracket out here the discussion of economic aspects of the future "emancipation of labour", immensely influential for example in Yugoslavia, and focus on his famous division of post-capitalist society and its road toward communism into two phases. The *first* phase is "a communist society... just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges. Accordingly, the individual producer receives back from society – after the deductions [for the common funds] have been made – exactly what he gives to it" (*ibidem*: 386-387). What obtains is still regulated by an "exchange of equal values", that is, this phase is subject to an ideal "*bourgeois right*" (*Recht* means right, law, and even jurisprudence):

[T]his *equal right* is still burdened by a bourgeois limitation. The... equality consists in the fact that measurement is made with an *equal standard*, labour... This *equal right* is an unequal right for unequal labour... it tacitly recognises unequal individual endowment and thus performance capacity as natural privileges. *It is, therefore, a right of inequality in its content, like every right.* // [T]hese defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society... Right can never be higher than the economic structuring and its entailed cultural development of society. (*ibidem*: 387)

In a *second*, "higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour... has vanished... – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be entirely overstepped and society inscribe on its banner: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (*ibidem*: 388).

In this perspective it is then possible to ask what transformation will the State undergo in communist society. Marx's even more famous answer is that between capitalism and full communism, in a "political transition period" corresponding to "the period of revolutionary transformation of the one into the other", the State in the sense of a specialized ruling apparatus "can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*" (*ibidem*: 395 and 396).³

³ I cannot enter here into the semantic confusions occasioned by the Roman term "dictatorship", possibly larger than even for "proletariat", except to say that Lenin from his earliest writings on (say, *Two Tactics*) always explained it as Marx's dictatorship of a whole class, and not of a party or smaller group; see Draper and Balibar. True, having lost the core of the working class in the Civil War epoch, he fell back on the communist party as a temporary expedient. This imposed necessity became the precondition for, but cannot justify, Stalin's autocracy. For Lenin's horizon,

Finally, the theoretical toolbox of Bolshevism and Lenin himself was in good part inherited from the Second International (cf. both books by Lih). Though harbouring a spread of attitudes, its parties came to be modelled on bourgeois parties and eventually got to be strongly institutionalized, that is, bureaucratized. Its pillar, the German Social-democratic Party, practiced a from top down relationship of the leadership to the lower echelons, whose local secretaries and other organizers were in great part appointed by and paid from the central instances. In 1907, the party's apparatus comprised 20,000 people, and the number was rising (in the Weimar Republic, it grew to between 100,000 and 300,000 paid functionaries, of which 7,500 were paid about triple the income of a small entrepreneur or the salary of a high German State functionary) – Bricianer (1969: 123). Little democratic centralism remained, it was becoming centralism *tout court*, so that Lenin's recipe of the time even for the illegal organization to fight tsarism was considerably more democratic (the practice under the Russian police onslaught limped behind).

It should also be noted that Lenin unreservedly admired the efficiency of the "Prussian" (German) bureaucracy and State organisation, especially the post office and railways, but then also the wartime centralization of all economic life, and wished for such a "culture" in the USSR as the basis of socialism (see, among many examples, IP: 159 and 432).⁴

2. Lenin's Fight against Bureaucracy and the State Machine

My thesis is that "two lines" coexisted in the USSR views on bureaucracy and the State machine up to Stalin's triumph: a call for radical proletarian democracy from below, with Marx's final horizon of a non-State association of communes without a permanent army and bureaucracy, and a call for strong centralized State apparatus, due in Lenin's time to the pressing needs of the revolution's survival and later used to justify full dictatorship by a small group in the Party-State personal union. Adding to the Maoist parlance the Blochian one (1959, I: 240-42), we can also call them the warm and the cold streams within Soviet theory and practice.

Paradoxically, both of them have had their strongest as well as most intelligent and articulated defender in Lenin, in different periods. Leaving aside his work before World War I (his supposed mania for centralization of the underground party has been misinterpreted by kremlinologists eager to establish a full continuity between him and Stalin; see their demolition in Lih, 2006), the two periods are 1915-1917 and 1918 to end (practically 1922). To anticipate, I believe his heart was in

Gramsci's better term of "hegemony" is at hand, and in fact Lenin occasionally used its synonym *glavenstvo* (B 1: 127).

⁴ His other paragon was the US technology, trust organization, and educational system.

the full democracy of the Soviets on the model of the Commune, but as a statesman whose overriding aim was to save revolutionary power in the unprecedented Civil War and total economic and biopolitical catastrophe, he had to retreat to what he in the NEP debate called the “commanding heights” of State power. The immediate task of avoiding the fate of the Paris Commune had to take precedence over the final horizon.

2.1. *The Theory of Revolution, 1915-1917*

Lenin took to heart Marx’s (and then Engels’s) lessons learned from the Commune of Paris. He did not know of Marx’s early philosophical writings or the *Grundrisse*, but in *The State and Revolution* of 1917 he analyzed, while in the underground hiding from the Kerensky government, their accessible documents, including letters, most thoroughly and on the whole fairly, though interpreting (as his subtitle shows) the “Marxist Teaching on the State” with fierce concentration on “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the [Impending] Revolution”: the strength, and no doubt limitation, of Lenin’s theorizing is that it was for him always a phase of practice. He placed his readings into the overwhelming context of the monstrous growth of imperialist armed forces, as evident in World War I just going on, which were realizing Engels’s warning that they could “devour the whole of society and even the State” (IP: 132). The only way out was for him a violent revolution superseding such a State. From this vantage point, he cited the conclusion of Engels’s *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*:

The State is therefore... a product of society at a particular stage of development; it is the admission that this society has involved itself in insoluble self-contradiction and is cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to exorcise. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of >order<; and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the State. (WAMW/1884/origin-family/ch09.htm)

His somewhat one-sided gloss runs: “The State arises when, where, and to the extent that class antagonisms objectively cannot be reconciled. And conversely, the existence of the State proves that the class antagonisms are irreconcilable” (IP: 129). And further, “the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible... without the destruction of the apparatus of State power which was created by the ruling class and which is the embodiment of this ‘alienation’” (IP: 130).

Two further specifications in Engels’s argument, indicated by Lenin, are:

[The State]... is normally the State of the most powerful, economically ruling class, which by its means becomes also the politically ruling class, and so acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class... The... modern representative State is the instrument for exploiting wage-labor by capital. Exceptional periods, however, occur when the warring classes are so nearly equal in forces that the State power, as apparent mediator, acquires for the moment a certain independence in relation to both.

The State, therefore, has not existed from all eternity... [It] became a necessity because of [the cleavage of society into classes]. We are now rapidly approaching a stage in the development of production at which the existence of these classes... becomes a positive hindrance to production. They will fall as inevitably as they once arose. The State inevitably falls with them. The society which organizes production anew on the basis of free and equal association of the producers will put the whole State machinery where it will then belong – into the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze ax. (WAMW/1884/origin-family/ch09.htm)

Lenin then highlights Engels's discussion in *Anti-Dühring* of the proletariat's seizing political power and "turning the means of production into State property":

But in doing this, it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, abolishes also the State as State... When at last it becomes the real representative of the whole of society, it renders itself unnecessary. As soon as there is no longer any social class to be held in subjection; as soon as class rule, and the individual struggle for existence based upon our present anarchy in production, with the collisions and excesses arising from these, are removed, nothing more remains to be repressed, and a special repressive force, a State, is no longer necessary. The first act in which the State really constitutes itself as the representative of society as a whole – this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a State... The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things and the direction of processes of production. The State is not 'abolished', it *withers away*. (cited from the very slightly emended form used for *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Tucker, ed.: 635)

Lenin clarifies and updates: "Engels speaks here of the proletarian revolution 'abolishing' the *bourgeois* State, while the words about the State withering away refer to the remnants of the *proletarian* State *after* the socialist revolution" (IP: 136). In between there would exist "*the State... of the proletariat organized as the ruling class*", as Lenin approvingly cites (and underlines) from the *Communist Manifesto* (IP: 140). Seizing on Marx's letter to Weydemeyer of March 5, 1852, he focuses on its words "that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; [and] that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abo-

lition of all classes and to a classless society”. Mindful of both the Tsarist and the World War legacy facing him, Lenin adds: “... this period [of transition] is inevitably a period of unprecedented violent class struggle in unprecedented acute forms, and consequently, the State must inevitably be a State that is democratic *in a new way* (for the proletariat and the propertyless in general) and dictatorial *in a new way* (against the bourgeoisie)... The dictatorship of a *single* class is necessary... for the entire *historical period* which separates capitalism from ‘classless society’, from communism” (IP: 147-148).

Taking up Marx’s distinction between a first phase of communism and a higher one, Lenin believed that in the first or lower phase, ending private property of the means of production means that “the exploitation of man by man will have become impossible”, but that there will persist “the other injustice, which consists in the distribution of articles of consumption ‘according to the amount of labour performed’ (and not according to needs)... the inequality of ‘bourgeois right’”. He optimistically believed that injustice and the sway of bourgeois right will be ended by “[converting the means of production] to *common* ownership”, while they will persist “in the distribution of products and the allotment of labour among the members of society” (IP: 189). Having explained that socialism is an incomplete communism, he boldly stated: “It follows that under communism there remains for a time not only bourgeois right but even the bourgeois State – without the bourgeoisie!” (IP: 192). And *for the first time* (though relying on precedents possibly in German discussions) he noted that this phase is “commonly called ‘Socialism’” (IP: 188), and he proceeds to use it without the quotation marks; Stalin then, with his penchant for scholastic clarity, simplified and flattened this historical scheme into the two phases of “socialist society” and “communist society” (none of which has any bourgeois earmarks except, early on, the remnants of bourgeois property), whence it passed to all other CPs.

It should be clear from the cited arguments and from Marx’s *Civil War in France* (also discussed at length, together with Engels’s 1891 Preface to it, IP: 175-179) what happens in such circumstances to the State mainstays, the armed forces and the bureaucracy. This is briefly summed up in Marx’s letter to Kugelmann at the time of the Commune: “the bureaucratic-military machine [should be] *broken*, and this is the preliminary condition for every real people’s revolution on the continent” (IP: 150) – a statement which Lenin foregrounds as “the principal [task] of the proletariat during a revolution in relation to the State”. To replace these twin pillars of class rule, “Instead of the special institutions of a privileged minority (privileged officialdom, the chiefs of the standing army), the majority itself can directly fulfil all these functions...” (IP: 153-154). The workers’ expropriation of the capitalists “must be exercised not by a State of bureaucrats, but by a State of *armed workers*”

(IP: 190 – reality showed Lenin then, after 1918, that this was too hasty a jump). His summation is twofold, beginning with a quasi-Rousseauist vision of the reason for bureaucratic alienation:

Under capitalism democracy is restricted, cramped, mutilated, disfigured by all the conditions of wage slavery, of the masses' distress and misery. This and this alone is the reason why the functionaries of our [social-democratic] political organizations and trade unions are corrupted – or more precisely, tend to be corrupted – by the capitalist condition, and betray a tendency to become bureaucrats, that is, privileged persons losing touch with the masses, standing *above* the masses. (IP: 205)

The workers, having conquered political power, will smash the old bureaucratic apparatus, they will shatter it to its very foundations, they will destroy it to the very roots, and they will replace it by a new one, consisting of the very same workers and office employees, *against* whose transformation into bureaucrats the measures specified in detail by Marx and Engels will at once be taken: 1) not only election but also recall at any time; 2) pay not exceeding that of a workman; 3) immediate introduction of control and supervision by all, so that *all* shall become 'bureaucrats' for a time and, therefore, *nobody* may be able to become a 'bureaucrat'. (IP: 200)

To sum up, Lenin confidently believed in 1917 that the “large-scale production, factories, railways, the postal service, telephones, etc.” created by capitalism has “so simplified [the great majority of the old ‘State power’ functions that they] can be reduced to such exceedingly simple operations of registration, filing, and checking [as are] easily performed by every literate person... for ordinary ‘workmen’s wages’...” (IP: 154). This is true even when the revolution is made “by people as they are now, people who cannot dispense with subordination, control, and ‘foremen and bookkeepers’. // But the subordination must be to the armed vanguard of all the exploited and toiling people, that is, to the proletariat. A beginning can and must be made at once, overnight...” (IP: 158). His confidence was sorely tested after 1918, but he might today wax even more optimistic in view of the PC, the internet, possibly two-way television, and similar.

However, Lenin shared Marx’s scathing dismissal of a “free State”. He cited approvingly Engels’s observation that freedom obtains when “the State as such ceases to exist” (IP: 185). No doubt, after the experiences of Hitler, Stalin, Pinochet, Pol Pot, and quite a lot of others in the century after *The State and Revolution*, even Marxists should undertake some additions to this very general long-range position, beginning with Lenin’s own later additions.

2.2. *The Revolutionary Practice, 1918 on*

Soon after the 1917 October revolution, Lenin began to note with growing dismay the tendency of the necessary, and rapidly growing, State apparatus (*gosapparat*) to evolve modes of conduct incompatible with the revolutionary horizon. In particular, while acknowledging and strongly stressing the need for centralization of all efforts in order for the revolution to survive, he inveighed against the de facto dispossession of the soviets of the working people, which were theoretically supposed to run the new country from top to bottom as the real power-holders or dictators. At his instigation, and probably with a good deal of support from the ranking cadres and even more by the file of the Bolshevik Party, many supposedly binding resolutions of the CP congresses and decisions of its leading bodies were passed – but then in practice disregarded. “[T]he general tendency [of the Party center] was to bureaucratization – which would later increase its ‘monolithic’ character... The process was that of the transformation of a political party into a State apparatus” (Lewin, 1975: 126; cf. also 22-23). Lenin bitterly fought “the metamorphosis of the soviets into State organizations” (IP: 361), remarked how such a united Party/State machine was acquiring an independent and dominant momentum, yet for all his frequent denunciations admitted that no remedy for this evil was at hand.⁵

From the very beginning in 1918, at the 7th CP Congress and the struggle against financial collapse, Lenin noted that the State power as then constituted was not truly proletarian, but exercised by a vanguard party, so that it was necessary “to protect the material and spiritual interests of the... proletariat from that very same State power”, allotting this role largely to the trade unions (CW 32: 20-24; B 1: 98-99). In his important speech at the 8th CP congress in 1919 (CW 29: 182-183; B 1: 330), Lenin rightly coupled the “bureaucratic deviation” (*uklon*) or “bureaucratism” with the absence of “mass participation from below in Soviet rule”, attributed it to the infiltration of the indispensable tsarist and “bourgeois-exploitative” specialists, and lamented both their low level and the lack of “cultured forces” that would allow to kick them out (IP: 431 and 432). A deviation means, in the imaginative geography of this discourse, a serious wrong turning, which can nevertheless still be rectified (Trotsky’s post-exile diagnosis is based on this concept). The party programme

⁵ In 1951, Boris Kidrič, the best Yugoslav CP theoretician, noted that, after the October Revolution, “There began the great drama of Lenin’s ceaseless conflict with bureaucratism, which he was objectively unable to eradicate, but he had in his quality of revolutionary and Marxist on the one hand to fight them and on the other – in the given situation – to strengthen them; this drama of the Russian revolutionaries ended in a tragedy” (1979: 140-141).

It should be mentioned that in the age of mass organization bureaucracy already in 1891 numbered 0.75 million members in the USA, 1.5 million in France and 1 million in the U.K. (Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, 1966: 183), and these numbers swelled hugely in all major States up to, and especially during, World War I and after it.

adopted at that congress devoted a paragraph to the “struggle... for the complete eradication of this evil”, in three points: “1. Every member of a soviet must undertake some definite work in the administrative service”; 2. There must be continuous rotation in that work; “3. By degrees, the whole working population must be induced to take turns in the administrative service” (Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, 1966: 383).

However, as the Civil War practically pulverized the Russian working class, and reduced the city population of Moscow by half and of Petrograd by 2/3, in mid-1920 new accents began to appear. Lenin had a confidential survey conducted in a major Soviet institution: from its 1,500 employees there were 900 from the old intelligentsia, 250 from the working class, and ca. 300 from the quondam bourgeois, landowners, clerics or high tsarist officials (Lewin, 1988: 227-228). At the 9th CP congress, Lenin boldly reiterated that the Soviet State was not a proletarian one, but a workers’ and peasants’ State with a bureaucratic distortion. In the booklet against *‘Left-Wing’ Communism, an Infantile Sickness*, he underlined that the “human material made by capitalism”, including the proletarians, imported “its own petty-bourgeois prejudices” into the administration and into the communist party: “Within the Soviet engineers, within the Soviet teachers, within the privileged, i.e. the most qualified... *workers* in Soviet factories, we see constantly reborn all the negative traits of bourgeois [careerism, vulgar philistine routine..., national chauvinism, etc.]” (IP: 623-624). Towards the end of 1920, he harked back to his radical anti-State proposal of 1917 by declaring: “It is the task of the Soviet government to completely destroy the old machinery of State, as it was destroyed in October [1917] and to transfer power to the soviets” (CW 31: 421; B 1: 331).

Thus, when, in *On the Tax in Kind* of May 1921, he asked what were the economic roots of bureaucracy, he found no real answer beside pointing to pre-capitalist peasant backwoods, economic collapse, and grave lack of cultural know-how (IP: 701-702 and 705; CW 32: 335ff). Or, three months later, to “the trivial round (*obydenshchina*) of economics in a country of smallholders... and the elementary petty-bourgeois force (*stikhiia*) which surrounds us like air and mightily penetrates into the ranks of the proletariat” (IP: 722-723).

By January 1922, his theses on the new role of the trade unions identified the existing power as a “transitional type of proletarian State”, in which a proletarian class struggle, including strikes, had to obtain against both the capitalist appetites and “all sorts of survivals of the old capitalist system in the government offices” (CW 33: 187; B 1: 330); regardless of the old, somewhat oversimplified tag of “capitalist system”, that meant the class enemy was now partly inside the government apparatus! All through the year, he poured his most acerbic scorn on the “Soviet bureaucrat”. Thus in a letter to Sheinman in February 1922 he acidly noted: “At

present the State Bank is a bureaucratic power game. There is the truth for you, if you want to hear not the sweet communist-official lies (with which everyone feeds you as a high mandarin), but the *truth*. And if you do not want to look at this truth with open eyes, through all the communist lying, you are a man who has perished in the prime of life in a swamp of official lying” (CW 36: 567). And in his March report to the 11th CP congress, he emphasized that the economic dangers were much stronger than the past military ones “because the difficulty lies within ourselves... This difficulty consists in the fact that we do not want to acknowledge this unpleasant truth imposed upon us, we do not want to get into the unpleasant position which is yet indispensable: start learning anew.” He concluded by taking the example of the Moscow communists in the administrative machine and asking whether they led the bureaucratic machine for which they were responsible: “To tell the truth, they do not lead, they are led” (IP: 765 and 774).

Lenin sketched two mutually reinforcing explanations for this danger, which was for him on a par with the foreign encirclement and the internal petty bourgeoisie (mainly peasant). One was cultural backwardness, and the other remnants of the tsarist past. At the end of 1922, addressing the 4th congress of the Comintern, he largely identified the Bolshevik “machinery of State” with the old tsarist one:

We now have a vast army of government employees, but lack sufficiently educated forces to exercise real control over them. In practice it often happens that here on the top, where we exercise political power, the machine functions somehow, but down below, the government employees have arbitrary control, and they often exercise it to counteract our measures... (IP: 805; CW 33: 428-429; see also CW 36: 605-606; B 1: 330-331 and 490-493)

But furthermore, he began to complain that the coercive apparatus of the supposedly proletarian dictatorship and its core CP members were themselves transformed by the exercise of power in the ruthless circumstances of economic collapse and civil war 1917-1921. The best contemporary short approach to Lenin concludes that “The new enemy acquired a bitterly ironical label: the ‘soviet bureaucrat’...”, and that he found the reason for this grave devolution in “the cultural deficit of the proletariat and (even more) of the [people]”, by which he meant literacy, elementary habits of organization, and other basic skills of modern ‘civilization’” (Lih, 2011: 182-183). Discussing at the 11th CP congress some émigré circles who believed the Soviet rule was sliding toward a bourgeois rule, he even warned: “Let us talk openly, such matters are possible... [T]he struggle with capitalist society has become a hundred times fiercer and more dangerous, because we do not always clearly see whether in front of us there stands an enemy or a friend” (IP: 773). Lenin was thus, before his incapacitation and then death, haltingly coming to approximate Rosa Luxemburg’s 1918 critique of the Russian Revolution (which she supported) as too

Jacobin and dictatorial in the bourgeois sense, so that eventually, with the fading vitality of the soviets and other public or plebeian institutions, “only the bureaucracy remains as the active element” (Luxemburg, 1940: 47).

I have not been proposing here to give a balanced assessment of Lenin’s theory, especially of his exile and underground phase culminating in *The State and Revolution*, since my aim is to identify the parts which were to remain in the tradition as mediated by Stalinism and handed down to the Yugoslav CP. It remains a fact that grave economic and then political difficulties caused Lenin to veer back to State power, however restricted its actual class basis was. In particular, the (originally temporary) prohibition of factions in the CP at its 10th congress in 1921 proved to be a grave mistake, opening the door for a slide to Stalinist autocracy. It would be fair to retroactively note that he had not yet understood the danger (but only the advantages) of monolithism. Furthermore, his fear from 1922 that an open split in the leadership might lead to the break-up of the CP means that he kept the struggle secret and only within the Politbureau (for a long time Trotsky would do this too). Thus, Marx’s idea that the radically anti-State Paris Commune type of institution provides “the... medium in which the class struggle can run through its different phases in the most rational and humane way”, because it “begins *the emancipation of labour*... by doing away with the unproductive and mischievous work of the State parasites” (1971: 149-150), vanished after 1922 from the USSR agenda.

The resulting tradition arose as a balancing act by Stalin, who was in a cleft stick in dealing with Lenin’s legacy (see the excellent passage in Kidrič, 1949: 153-154). On the one hand, given the continuing prestige, at home and abroad, of the founder of the party and State, he necessarily had to continue propagating Lenin’s work. He draped himself in the mantle of his faithful disciple and indeed only continuator (the rest, from Trotsky and Bukharin on, were killed and their work in part tacitly appropriated by Stalin and fully expunged from the official doctrine). Furthermore, there were large swatches in Lenin, beginning with the theory and establishment of the party and culminating in his insistence on a strong central State, which could, with suitable extrapolation out of the original situation and misinterpretation, be used in the Stalinist vulgate. On the other hand, some of his work did not fit and was subjected to various types of falsification, from a number of outright suppressions (cf. Medvedev, 1980: 556), as in the case of his anti-Stalin “Testament”, to editorial tricks, for example muddling the horizon of his copious notes on Hegel, which stressed that contradiction reigns in every process and there is no final victorious harmony, by adding to it some other unimportant writings on various philosophers so that the volume could then be called *Philosophical Notebooks*, rather than *Notes on Hegel* or *Notes on Dialectics*. Most important, the unsuitable works were backgrounded, edited late and in small numbers, and expunged from

any official syllabus for the communist parties of the USSR or of the 3rd International. Characteristically, in *A Short Course of the CPSU/b/ History* – which was, together with Stalin’s *Questions of Leninism*, as it were the New Testament of the world communist movement – all the major works by Lenin are glossed, except *State and Revolution!*

In this complex negotiation, however, beside a dominant cold-stream Lenin usable for Stalinism there remained an irreducible core with the horizon of a radical soviet-type democracy that had already been published in the first 10 years of the USSR and could not now be censored outright. When read with discerning and interested eyes, as in the Yugoslav post-1948 debates (the translation of *The State and Revolution* was published there by Winter 1947-1948), this horizon of Lenin’s testified to his difference from official crudely hierarchical Stalinism not simply by the quality of his texts but also by its “warm stream” horizon of liberatory Marxism.

3. Stalin’s Unavowed Thermidor

In this section I shall follow the USSR developments between roughly 1922 and 1929, by which time the Stalinist social system had, for all the subsequent convulsions in the countryside and the upper reaches, acquired its permanent lineaments.

The most cruel Civil War

brought about a deep trauma in the history of bolshevism and communism... The Civil War was the triumph of a most terrible and primitive violence of arms and men, a flagrant contradiction of the fundamental ideas from the October Revolution, and it perpetuated what those ideas were supposed to bury forever... Having barely survived this ordeal, the CP came out of it exhausted, the soviets were emptied out, the working class of the two 1917 revolutions dispersed. And there clearly appeared a gap between the movement from below and the decimated and bureaucratized vanguards; revolutionary discipline had largely been supplanted by war mentality, by the conditions of dire need, by corruption. (Cortesi, 2010: 303-304)

The CP and State apparatus grew more and more powerful to cope with the huge demands of war and the accompanying economic breakdown. As an example, in 10 months between April 1920 and February 1921, the Uchraspred, a non-elected body assigning CP members to important tasks, made 40,000 assignments to important bodies (B 1: 304 citing Shapiro, 1970: 253). Stalin was elected general secretary of the CP central committee (further CC) in March 1922, and during Lenin’s ensuing illness proceeded to a full-scale top-down reorganization of the CP and Soviet State apparatus, practically merging and hugely inflating them, and rigidly subjecting them not to the CC nor its elected Organisation Bureau, but directly to the Secretariat. This hugely increased the powers and material privileges of the

apparatus members, giving them a strong incentive for clientelism: compared to the average monthly salary of under 7 rubles, it instituted an official minimum of 30 roubles, while CC members received 43 roubles; with a bonus of 50% for CP functionaries with a family of three, and another 50% for extraordinary work, the lowest *apparatchik* (professional CP functionary) had a standard of living which I would calculate as 8 times the average. All of them had also free housing, clothing, medical aid, and in the higher echelons transport (eventually to become office limousines). On top of it, at that time of dearth such functionaries received regular distribution in kind of meat, sugar, rice, tea, cigarettes, etc. The criterion, as formulated by Stalin at the 12th CP congress in 1923, was to select such cadre so that “posts will be taken by people capable of following the [Party] line” (another new Stalinist shibboleth, alongside “monolithism”, which became Stalin’s obsessive catchword, extolled in a key speech on industrialization in 1928 – B 2: 539). By 1923, the number of functionaries paid by the Secretariat was over 20,000, with 40,000 further “technical staff”, also with special emoluments (the CP had then 400,000 members).⁶ Perhaps as important, the “CC instructors” to the provincial CP committees were given almost unlimited powers to steer the work of and the elections to those bodies, so that by that year about half of the provincial secretaries were already elected on “recommendation” of the Secretariat. Lenin’s ideal practice of a democracy from below upward was thus erased, the soviets were practically powerless after 1921, and elections in the CP were in most – later all – important cases rigged in advance (all data in this paragraph from Podsheldolkin [1989?]).

During Stalin’s rise to dominance, his calls for “reconstructing the State apparatus” zigzagged between ritual repetitions of tags from Lenin and anodyne calls “to make [the apparatus] sound and honest, simple and inexpensive” (B 2: 367-368). In the speech to the 8th congress of the Communist Youth League, Stalin called for mass control from below, especially against “the new bureaucrats... and finally, communist bureaucrats”, and for the party’s “ruthless struggle against bureaucracy” (B 2: 224-226). The 16th CP conference of April 1929 even put on its agenda “the fight against bureaucracy”, and passed a resolution criticizing the “bureaucratic perversion of the State machinery”, asking that this machinery be improved in order to accomplish the Five-Year Plan, stressing “precise execution of their respective tasks by each link in the chain” and “overcoming inertia, red tape, bureaucratic suppression, mutual ‘covering-up’ and indifference to the need of the working people” (B 2: 435-436). The theme was soon buried by a management counter-offensive

⁶ At that time, Trotsky began to speak of the danger of “bureaucratic degeneration”, later his central diagnosis; in exile, he called the ruling bureaucracy a caste and not a class. Important as this pioneering – though to my mind insufficient – insight is, it was edited out of the Stalinist tradition, so I shall not deal with it here.

(B 2: 230), even if it was to periodically recur. Confusingly, Stalin's purges, and later recurrent police persecutions, at times also cut into the bureaucracy, probably because it still had many members from Lenin's time, and then because no group should feel safe (Lewin, 1981: 32-33). The situation is well characterized by an anecdote about Brecht's attitude to it: he struck a penitent pose, squinted, and said (impersonating the State), "I know I should die out"... However, Stalin's preferred means, increased violence by the State, issued in a new doctrine of "intensified class struggle", justifying most cruel and sweeping repressions: it was announced in a speech in July 1928 (see Davies, 1980: 598-599), repeated in 1933, and in 1939 led eventually, after his complete victory, into a head-on denial of the "rotten" anti-State axiom of Marx's and Engels's (see McNeal, 1980: 62).

In spite of oscillations and manoeuvrings, bureaucracy thus principally meant in Stalinism what impeded the further centralization, expansion, and smooth work of the oligarchic and despotic State machinery, that is, paper-pushing or what the French call *la paperasserie*, and this remained its official meaning until the end of the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, it was useful not only for disciplining subordinates in the apparatus, but also in giving a hint to the workers and peasants that the top was aware of their oppression and working against its bearers. This last aspect was closely watched so as not to give too much scope to the "culturally and technically backward" masses, and never allowed to coalesce except as a movement for "socialist emulation" and Stakhanovite work productivity. True, Bukharin was as late as in 1929 still allowed to criticize the distended State apparatus, which he linked with increasing pressure on the peasants, and to call for "all possible forms of association by working people so as, at all costs, to avoid bureaucratisation". Since all this hinged on the role of the Bolshevik Party, he also took aim at its blind discipline, exhorting members, in the critical tradition of Lenin, "to take not a single word on trust... to utter not a single word against their conscience". But this was the swan-song of the original Marx-to-Lenin line: soon, Bukharin was to be denounced by the Stalinists for bowing to "the backwardness and discontent of the masses" and infringing the necessary "iron discipline" in the party (B 2: 424 and 486; Cohen, 1973: 304), and definitely silenced.

A further rough indication about bureaucracy could be gleaned from the composition of the CP. In its 1927 census it had one million members, of whom the "office workers and others" – the latter were mainly students – occupied fully 60% as against 30% of the workers (B 2: 334-335 and 350-351). True, later a huge drive was launched to get a "workers'" majority in the party; but the definitions of social provenience were vague and mainly based on unchecked declarations by the members who had an incentive to claim virtuous working-class ascendancy. It seems that in most cases membership in the CP was in personal union with the official or

“bureaucratic” post one filled. The bureaucracy grew into “a social stratum which led a life different from that of the workers in the factories and the fields, arrogated privileges to itself, and was unaware of the real problems faced by the masses” (B 2: 336). The 1939 USSR census found that, including families, 14 million people were clerical workers or professionals employed by the State, 3.5 times as many – 10 million more – than in 1926 (McNeal, 1980: 59-60). At the time, Stalin claimed that, of almost 3.5 million CP members, there were 3-4 thousand “superior” leaders or executives, 30-40 thousand middle ones, and 100-150 thousand members of “the lower Party leadership” (*ibidem*: 46; the first two were usually called *krupnyand gosudarstvennyand deiatel’* and *otvet-rabotnik* – Lewin, 1981: 32).

It is therefore not too surprising that in the backward USSR Stalin’s course was not without mass support in the CP and the country, including the reconstituted industrial workers (of whom 8% were CP members – see B 2: 338-340). He appealed first to stability, a modest but clear rise of the overall living standard in comparison to the years of collapse, the longing for peace which dominated a people that had gone through seven years of war and civil war, and later to the interest of the new dominant class to build “socialism in one country” (that is, industrialization and modernization which would preserve the existing oligarchy) in the USSR. The social system of ripe Stalinism from the 1930s on was “a hierarchy, but with ample opportunities of upward mobility” (McNeal, 1980: 57). The price to pay for this was to become very high: it began with “the confiscation *sine die* of the elementary liberties of political expression, of gathering, of knowledge, of travel, of personal adventurous freedom” (Cortesi, 2010: 725) as well as of strikes, and ended in mass assassinations and/or incarcerations of entire social groups. Politically, it consisted in the rise of a ruling stratum or class no longer in feedback with the masses: concerning the peasants, this disjuncture was true from the October Revolution on and moderated only by Lenin’s insistence on safeguarding their interests and their monopoly on food production; concerning the industrial working class, it became largely true since its reconstitution in the roughly five years after Lenin’s death, after the old revolutionary core had been decimated, and the workers in the party “were very quickly absorbed into the various apparatuses, so that they left the working class” (B 2: 517). Economically, it was based on rapid industrialization and a scarcity of consumer goods. As Trotsky satirically remarked:

The basis of bureaucratic rule is the poverty of society in objects of consumption, with the resulting struggle of each against all. When there is enough goods in a store, the purchasers can come whenever they want to. When there is little goods, the purchasers are compelled to stand in line. When the lines are very long, it is necessary to appoint a policeman to keep order. Such is the starting point of the power of the Soviet bureaucracy. It “knows” who is to get something and who has to wait. (1936, ch05.htm)

It meant that the 1919 1:5 ratio of minimum to maximum incomes grew in the 1930s to between 1:10 and 1:12 (Nove, 1982: 212), not counting the top apparatus, while in 1950 it was 1:40 (Ossowski, 1966: 130). At the peak of this High Stalinism, the bureaucratic material privileges, superadded to those of authority and prestige, were huge: top people (including privileged artists) could use secret special shops with generally unavailable goods: the lowest bureaucrats had to pay for them, the middle ones paid only half, while the top echelons had unlimited free drawing rights (Mandel, 1968: 8). To the contrary, the living standard of the workers, in particular, was subject as of the beginning of Five-Year plans to a sharp reduction in favour of State accumulation, only partly due to the great influx into towns and industries (see Cliff, 1948; ch04-a.htm#s0). As to the intelligentsia, when Gorky urged Lenin to institute an alliance of the workers with the intellectuals, he is reported to have replied: "This is not a bad idea, not at all. Tell the intelligentsia it should join us" (Fischer, 1970 1: 415). But the majority remained inimical; the powerfully creative humanist minority which did join in was as a tolerated epicycle, as of the end of the 1920s subject to strong control by bureaucratic organizations and then beheaded in the 1930s. However, natural sciences and a streamlined educational system were as of the first Five-Year plans strongly fostered. A new, subservient intellectual class became the subordinate administrative and technical elite (Stalin, as usual, called it a "stratum" – McNeal, 1980: 58).

To sum up sections 2 and 3 about the USSR, I shall use citations from two of the most important books in the field.

A general conclusion would be Cortesi's take, in the best and richest survey to date, that the Thermidor "shaped an autocratic State, with a growing distance from the 1917 revolutionary ideas" (2010: 737).

On bureaucracy in particular, Bettelheim's conclusion is:

Lenin too used the expressions 'bureaucracy' and 'bureaucratic distortion', but what is important is that he did not rest satisfied with these elements of analysis or of description, but strove to relate them to class relations and the class struggle. For almost all the CP members, including the leaders, however, the expressions 'bureaucracy' and 'bureaucratic distortion' served as substitutes for class analysis... Consequently, the fight against these phenomena seemed not to be primarily a question of class struggle, but to depend exclusively on the development of the productive forces, of education, or of repression. (B 1: 516-517)

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