

Whither the State?

The Abolition of the State in Marx and Engels

Guy Mor

Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that classical Marxism is committed to the abolition of the state, yet there is no agreement regarding the meaning or significance of this notion. This paper attempts to explore the doctrine of the abolition of the state in the writings of Marx and Engels, and to thereby determine what classical Marxism's "anti-statism" amounts to. I argue that consideration of the bulk of textual evidence shows that Marx and Engels do not in fact possess a unified notion of the abolition of the state, but rather two largely distinct theses that have been advanced under this name. The first thesis involves the abolition of the state as a force alien to society, and is predicated on the radical transformation of public forms of participation and representation. I show that Marx and Engels considered this transformation to be realizable as the first act of revolution. The second thesis involves the gradual dissolution of government functions alongside class repression, and their replacement by purely administrative functions. I show the latter notion to be the result of the protracted process whereby class distinctions disappear in the post-revolutionary society. Furthermore, unlike some have suggested, I contend that the abolition of the state is no mere rhetorical device, and that both conceptions of the abolition of the state have to do with a radical and substantive transformation of society. Finally, I argue that both Marx and Engels were largely committed to both theses, and therefore that the sharp contrast some scholars claim exists between their positions on the fate of the state disappears and becomes a matter of emphasis.

1 Introduction

Exponents of Marxism generally view the abolition of the state as a key precept in the Marxist revolutionary programme. Nevertheless, the precise meaning of the notion is shrouded in mystery. Marx was notoriously reluctant to describe or predict in any details the workings of a post-revolutionary communist society. One cannot set blueprints for the future, he thought, and give away now the “receipts [...] for the cook-shops of the future”.¹ Thus, while the notion that in the society of the future the state will be abolished runs throughout his writings, it is never spelled out in detail. Therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct it from various, sometimes fragmentary pieces of textual evidence, belonging to a vast corpus of writing which spans more than forty years.

Among commentators, interpretations of the notion of the abolition of the state have varied significantly. One family of interpretations shares a view of the abolition of the state as involving a substantive and thoroughly radical transformation of society, although the disagreements on details – where any are at all given – are considerable. Among these, orthodox interpreters have often held Marx’s commitment to the abolition of the state to be anarchistic in character, making him an “eventual anarchist” of sorts. As Solomon Bloom had commented in 1946, at that time one of the issues least open to question among scholars is Marxism’s final “*dénouement* [...] in anarchism”.² This sentiment was shared by the leading figures of Marxism in the early 20th century. In his *State and Revolution*, Lenin claimed that the Marxists “do not, after all, differ with the anarchists on the question of the abolition of the state as the *aim*”.³ Russian anarchist Voline recounted Trotsky’s similar assurances to him that the difference between Marxists and anarchists is “a little question of methodology, quite secondary”.⁴ “Like you”, Trotsky told Voline, “we are anarchists, in the final analysis.”⁵

¹ Karl Marx, “Capital Volume I”, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works vol. 35* (New York: International Publishers, 1996), p. 17.

² Solomon F. Bloom, “The ‘Withering Away’ of the State”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 7(1), 1946, p. 113.

³ V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), pp. 98-99.

⁴ Voline, “The Unknown Revolution”, in D. Guerin (ed.), *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), p. 477.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Some academic scholars of Marxism have also shared this view. Robert Tucker, for example, argued that “Marx’s normative position with regard to the state was anarchism”.⁶ Richard Adamiak referred to the view that “the eventual goal of Marxism is Anarchism” as “virtually unquestioned”, although he himself did go on to challenge it.⁷ In the same vein, Hans Kelsen described classical Marxism as having “a thoroughly anarchistic character”, claiming that the only difference Marx’s anarchism and other forms of anarchism has to do with the question *when* the state disappears.⁸ “So far as the social ideal is concerned”, he wrote, “Marxism is anarchism”,⁹ and indeed he considers Marxism to be “the most important of all anarchistic doctrines”.¹⁰ French Marxologist Maximilien Rubel went further than most, taking Marx’s anti-statism as an indication that Marx was in fact a full-blown anarchist. “Under the name communism”, Rubel wrote, “Marx developed a theory of anarchism; and further, that in fact it was he who was the first to provide a rational basis for the anarchist utopia and to put forward a project for achieving it”.¹¹ Shlomo Avineri’s influential interpretation differs from those mentioned above. While accepting the view of the abolition of the state as a substantive and radical notion, he attempts to show that it is based on Hegelian philosophical concepts¹² and has nothing to do with the mechanistic act of destruction associated with anarchist anti-statism.¹³

This family of interpretations did not however go unchallenged. Some exponents either down-played the importance of the abolition of the state in classical Marxism, or even outright denied that classical Marxism is anti-statist in any significant sense. David Lovell referred to Marx’s vision of the future society as state-less only “in a superficial sense”.¹⁴ Bloom likewise considered Marx’s anti-statist remarks as mere “anarchistic concessions, delivered on polemical occasions”, and concluded that Marx

⁶ Robert Tucker, “Marx as a Political Theorist”, in Shlomo Avineri (ed.), *Marx's Socialism*, p. 150.

⁷ Richard Adamiak, “The ‘Withering Away’ of the State: A Reconsideration”, *The Journal of Politics* 32(1), 1970, p. 3.

⁸ Hans Kelsen, *The Communist Theory of Law* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1955), p. 40.

⁹ Hans Kelsen, *The Political Theory of Bolshevism: A Critical Analysis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1949), p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 10

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¹² Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 208.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 239.

¹⁴ Lovell, p. 32.

was “closer to the liberal tradition than to formal anarchism”.¹⁵ An extreme position on this matter is taken by Richard Adamiak. In his study on the Marxist view of the fate of the state in post-revolutionary society, Adamiak concludes that contrary to appearances, Marx and Engels were in fact “aiming at a rather extreme variety of statism”.¹⁶ Their phrases about the disappearance of the state in post-revolutionary society are not to be taken literally, for behind the surface rhetoric lies rabid statism and anti-anarchism.¹⁷ Quite astoundingly, Adamiak suggests, Marx and Engels’ apparent support for the abolition of the state is only the result of an attempt to co-opt some of their ultra-radical rivals’ slogans, without at all compromising their extreme statism.¹⁸ This is said to have been a “spurious anarchistic façade” constructed by Marx and Engels intentionally.¹⁹

The relation between the two progenitors of classical Marxism on the issue of the fate of the state has also drawn some interest. It has generally become fashionable among academic scholars to strongly differentiate Marx from Engels, and their treatment of the abolition of the state is usually presumed to be a locus of disagreement between them. Thus, Avineri claims that Marx and Engels’ ideas on the fate of the state come from two distinct and opposed intellectual lineages. Bloom likewise spots significant differences between them, and Adamiak has even taken their positions on this matter to be entirely irreconcilable.²⁰

This paper sets out to explicate the meaning of the notion of the abolition of the state in classical Marxist thought, and to thereby clarify what classical Marxism’s “anti-statism” amounts to. Unlike many of the commentators mentioned previously, I contend that comparisons with anarchism are not very helpful in this project; anarchism is no single doctrine, and the precise meaning of the abolition of the state in various anarchist philosophies is in itself a matter of some ambiguity. The meaning of the abolition of the state in classical Marxism is thus needed to be established positively. Despite the proliferation of views and interpretations, as shown above, this notion has not actually received many comprehensive analyses based on the majority of the

¹⁵ Bloom, “The ‘Withering Away’ of the State”, p. 121.

¹⁶ Adamiak, “The ‘Withering Away’ of the State: A Reconsideration”, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰ Adamiak, “The ‘Withering Away’ of the State: A Reconsideration”, p. 3.

relevant textual evidence. Indeed, many accounts are highly speculative, or focus primarily on a few texts, usually from the same period. In what follows, I shall discuss the relevant texts written by Marx and Engels both in the early and the later periods. I argue, first, that the notion of the abolition of the state indeed commits Marxism to a radical and substantive transformation of society, and does not amount to mere rhetoric or empty phrases. Secondly, I argue that Marx and Engels do not possess a unified conception of the abolition of the state, but rather two largely distinct theses. Thirdly, I argue that both theses are largely supported by both Marx and Engels. Indeed, I claim that Marx and Engels are both fully and equally committed to the second thesis, but that the first is articulated in more depth and has more importance with Marx than with Engels. The result is that the difference between the two on the question of the fate of the state becomes much less significant than others have presumed.

I will generally not discuss at any length any of the interpretations mentioned above, except for specific points of contention. Specifically, I will not discuss in depth Adamiak's far-reaching contention that Marx and Engels were, appearances notwithstanding, extreme statist, which I believe lacks any substantial evidential basis. A key piece of evidence in Adamiak's case is a somewhat surprising statement that he quotes from Engels' letter to Marx from 1851,²¹ in which Engels writes that "what abolition of the State really means is intensified state centralization".²² However, Adamiak quotes out of context, leaving out that this is a proposition Engels does not endorse himself, but rather attributes to Proudhon. Far from espousing what Adamiak attributes to him, Engels in fact mocks Proudhon's anti-statist mutualist scheme for abolishing the state only nominally, while strengthening it in fact. While I will not directly discuss Adamiak's other contentions, I do hope to positively establish that Marx and Engels truly were committed to a radical transformation of society under the name of "the abolition of the state". I take the following discussion to provide sufficient support for this view.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 9.

²² Frederick Engels, "Engels to Marx, About 10 August 1851", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 38* (New York: International Publishers, 1982), p. 418.

2 Participation and Representation

The doctrine of the abolition of the state first appears in Marx's early text, the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, written in 1843 and published only posthumously. A principal object of criticism in this text is the separation between civil society and state, which Marx takes to exist both in Hegel's thought and in reality. It is in this context that the claim about the abolition of the state emerges. Essentially, the abolition of the state signifies here the overcoming of this division and the dissolution of the state as an entity alien and opposed to society. This, however, requires fundamental changes in the structure and content of public participation and representation.

A key component of the separation between the state and civil society has to do with the alienation of legislative power. Marx believes that the overcoming of the division between state and civil society would take the form of the extension and universalization of participation in legislation. As Marx writes, "the striving of *civil society* to turn itself into *political* society, or to turn *political* society into *actual* society, appears as the striving for as *general* as possible a participation in the *legislative power*".²³ When participation in legislation is truly generalized, civil society becomes political society, the latter ceasing to exist as a separate and antagonistic entity. From these lines, it might appear that Marx proposes universal suffrage as the means through which participation in legislation is extended and the state abolished. This interpretation is notably endorsed by Avineri and Joseph O'Malley, among others, and I shall later discuss it in more detail. It is already worth noting, however, that when discussing the problems with the alienation of legislative power, Marx raises issues that go far beyond what universal suffrage could by itself hope to achieve. In a key sentence, Marx writes that "the separation of the political state from civil society appears as the separation of the deputies from their mandators. Society delegates only elements from itself to its political mode of being".²⁴ Only the deputies – the parliamentary representatives of civil society – have a true political existence, yet their electors do not. "It is precisely the participation of civil society in the political state through *delegates* [Abgeordnete]

²³ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 3* (New York: International Publishers, 2005), p. 118.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 123.

that is the *expression* of their separation and of their merely dualistic unity”.²⁵ It is not therefore the limitations of suffrage which constitute the political sphere as alien to civil society, but also and more importantly the nature of participation in politics and the relation between the electors and their representatives.

In what sense can the distinction between state and civil society be overcome, and what does that signify for public participation and representation? This can be understood from the contradiction that Marx identifies between the presumptions of parliamentary representation and its actuality. This contradiction “appears in two ways”. First, “*formally*”:

The delegates of civil society form a society which is not linked with those who commission them by the form of the ‘instruction’, the mandate. Formally they are commissioned, but once they are *actually* commissioned they are *no* longer *mandatories*. They are supposed to *be delegates*, and they are *not*.

The explicit authority of parliamentary representatives is drawn from the mandate received from their electors, yet they are not in fact bound by this mandate, which becomes meaningless. The representatives immediately become entirely independent of their electors. The resolution of this contradiction would be to make the deputies true delegates, bound and responsible to their electors. The second contradiction appears “*materially*”, “with reference to interests”. The problem in this respect is that although the representatives “are commissioned as representatives of *general* concerns, [...] they actually represent *particular* concerns”. Marx at this stage is still no communist; he is making strides towards a class analysis of society, but has not quite reached it. Indeed the notion of class does not appear in this text, and Marx’s analysis is still given in terms of estates [Stände]. The particular interests that the representatives look after are here not a class interest, but rather their own selfish concerns. Marx here rebukes the representatives for abandoning general concerns in favor of their personal interest. When the distinction between state and civil society is overcome, representatives will truly represent general concerns.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 119. The translation of “Abgeordnete” as “delegates” might cause some confusion. Marx is here using the regular word for “representatives”.

The resolution of the contradiction of parliamentary representation is radical in nature, reaching beyond parliamentarism and conventional forms of representation. The public representatives become true delegates, directly bound and accountable to their mandators. Furthermore, when the distinction between the state and civil society is overcome, not only will the legislators become both formally and materially bound to their electors, but the very nature of representation will change. Then, Marx says,

the significance of the *legislative* power as a *representative* power completely disappears. The legislative power is representation here in the sense in which *every* function is representative — in the sense in which, e.g., the shoemaker, insofar as he satisfies a social need, is my representative, in which every particular social activity as a species-activity merely represents the species, i.e., an attribute of my own nature, and in which every person is the representative of every other. He is here representative not because of something else which he represents but because of what he *is* and *does*.²⁶

Marx's comments here are somewhat puzzling. How could an elected public delegate be a representative in the same sense that shoemaker is? Philip J. Kain usefully suggests that Marx is here contrasting two forms of representation: "one that represents from outside and the other that represents from within a community".²⁷ The elected legislators must become members of a true community, and come to represent it from within. The legislator, like the shoemaker, is simply "handling a specific task for the benefit of the community" to which he belongs.²⁸ But Marx's contention also has to do, I believe, with the changes introduced in commissioning of legislators. When legislators are directly bound by the mandate they are given, they no longer truly constitute a representative in any special sense of the word. No longer is there a special sphere of representation distinct from other forms of social activity.

In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, therefore, the abolition of the state is achieved by the thoroughgoing politicization of civil society. The political

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Philip J. Kain, *Marx and Modern Political Theory: From Hobbes to Contemporary Feminism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), p. 170.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

sphere is no longer alien to civil society or standing above it, but synonymous with it. This leads to the dissolution of both the state and civil society as distinct spheres:

In actually positing its *political existence* as its *true* existence, civil society has simultaneously posited its civil existence, in distinction from its political existence, as *inessential*; and the fall of one side of the division carries with it the fall of the other side, its opposite. *Electoral reform* within the *abstract political state* is therefore the demand for its *dissolution*, but also for the *dissolution of civil society*.²⁹

The abolition of the distinction between civil state and society would create “true democracy”. By this phrase Marx means neither a parliamentary nor a direct democracy, but a form that can be said to lie between them. Marx seemingly approved of the position of “the French”, perhaps Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, that in “true democracy the *political state is annihilated* [untergehe]”.³⁰

As noted before, some commentators such as Joseph O’Malley and Avineri stress the role of universal suffrage in Marx’s notion of the abolition of the state. O’Malley writes that “the implementation of universal suffrage elevates civil society to political existence, thereby dissolving civil society as a separate sphere, and simultaneously dissolving the state as a separate and opposed sphere.”³¹ Avineri similarly states that “the act of the state in granting universal suffrage will be its last act as a state”.³² Avineri contends that this position is also present in Marx’s draft plan from 1844 for a work on the modern state that never materialized, in which the 9th and last chapter was given the title “*Suffrage, the fight for the abolition of the state and of bourgeois society*”.³³ Yet nowhere does Marx say that universal suffrage is *constitutive* of the abolition of the state, as O’Malley, and perhaps Avineri, seem to believe; rather, he says that the former is the “fight” or the “demand” for the latter. That is, universal

²⁹Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law”, p. 121.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 30.

³¹ Joseph O’Malley. “Introduction”, in Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. lxii.

³² Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 37

³³ Karl Marx, “Draft Plan for a Work on the Modern State”, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 4* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 666.

suffrage leads the way towards the abolition of the state, forming as it does a part of “the striving for as *general* as possible a participation in the *legislative power*”.³⁴ But universal suffrage is not sufficient on its own, Marx’s conception of a “true democracy” being much more radical than parliamentarism could allow by itself.

Another aspect of the radical change in participation and representation involved in Marx’s notion of the abolition of the state in the *Critique* has to do with the abolition of the bureaucracy and the simplification of administration. Because the bureaucracy administers the state “over against civil society”, its existence is essential to the state’s separation from civil society. Hegel considered the bureaucracy a universal estate, an estate that “has for its task the *universal interests* of society”.³⁵ Marx disputes this, and calls the bureaucracy’s ostensible universality “illusory”.³⁶ For Marx in the *Critique*, the bureaucracy, like the elected deputies, only serves its own selfish interests. This, however, creates a great potential for abuse of power. Marx ridicules Hegel’s suggestion that the hierarchy of bureaucracy could defend against the abuse of power by civil servants. “The lesser evil” of the abuse of power, says Marx, “is indeed abolished by the greater” evil of hierarchy, “insofar as it vanishes by comparison”.³⁷ As Marx comments:

As if the hierarchy were not the chief abuse, and the few personal sins of the officials not at all to be compared with their inevitable hierarchical sins. The hierarchy punishes the official if he sins against the hierarchy or commits a sin unnecessary from the viewpoint of the hierarchy. But it takes him into its protection whenever the hierarchy sins in him; moreover, the hierarchy is not easily convinced of the sins of its members.³⁸

For the bureaucracy to truly become a universal estate it has to become “the estate of every citizen”.³⁹ This would mean the “the abolition [Aufhebung] of the

³⁴ Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law”, p. 118.

³⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 195 Hegel, *Outlines*, p. 195, §205.

³⁶ Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law”, p. 50.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 53.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 52.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

bureaucracy”.⁴⁰ While Marx does not specify what this involves, he gives a few clues. He makes clear that the opportunity of all to become part of the bureaucracy is not sufficient to abolish it as an alien force, just like the fact that every Catholic can join the clergy does not make the latter any less of an “other-worldly power”.⁴¹ Therefore, Marx vehemently rejects civil service examinations, which are nothing but the “bureaucratic baptism of knowledge”.⁴² Furthermore, he raises the possibility of completely dispensing with the “hierarchy of knowledge” that is essential to the bureaucracy.⁴³ What Marx seems to be pointing at, then, is the radical simplification and democratization of administrative functions. He seems to envisage a world in which all or most would take part in administration. The details, of course, are absent.

In Marx’s conception of the abolition of the state in the *Critique*, and his treatment of both elected representatives and the bureaucracy, two elements can be discerned. The first is that the state becomes a truly universal sphere, working towards the general interests and not particular ones. This is the *material* sense which Marx refers to in the *Critique*. This by itself is consistent both with a parliamentary democracy and with a state/civil society division. At this stage Marx had no class analysis; he had not yet realized that private property is the reason that neither the legislators nor the bureaucrats serve the general interests. Nominally, therefore, his comments on the state being abolished by coming to truly represent the universal interest are compatible with bourgeois parliamentarism. It is the second element, that having to do with the *formal* aspect, which is the more radical. This second thesis involves the thorough-going involvement of civil society in both legislation and administration, through a revolution in the form and content of participation and representation in both these domains.

As we shall soon see, Marx soon adopted a different conception of the abolition of the state. But this is not to say that he abandoned the conception outlined above. It most prominently reemerged in Marx’s account of the Paris Commune in his 1871 *Civil War in France*, almost thirty years after the *Critique*. Although this text is descriptive rather than prescriptive in tone, Marx’s enthusiastic description of some aspects of the

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 48.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 51.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 50.

commune leaves little doubt about his endorsement of them, and this has been the usual interpretive approach to this text. Obviously, the way in which Marx describes the events is extremely telling. Marx commends the commune's formation out of municipal councillors, "chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms".⁴⁴ This was true not only of the elected legislators, but of all public officials. Marx adds here what was only implicit in the *Critique*, that for the representatives to be bound by their mandate they must be revocable. Only in this way can their responsibility towards their mandators be continuous.

In view of these radical changes, Marx describes the commune as "the reabsorption of the State power by society, as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it".⁴⁵ In terms reminiscent of the *Critique*, the state is described here as a parasite, an alien force standing over and above society. What the commune did was to "[restore] to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the state parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society".⁴⁶ Marx merely puts here in different words the same doctrine put forward in the *Critique*. There, it was the overcoming of the division between civil society and the state through the politicization of civil society. Here, it is the reabsorption of the state into society. Like in the *Critique*, this change is considered here as tantamount to the dissolution of the state itself:

This was [...] a Revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or Imperialist form of State Power. It was a Revolution against the *State* itself, this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people, of its own social life.⁴⁷

In a later letter to Blos from 1877, Marx explicitly described the content "expounded in my pamphlet on the 'Civil War' in France" as the abolition [Abschaffung] of the state.⁴⁸ Similar in content is the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*'s call for "converting the

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 22* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986), p. 331.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, "First Draft of The Civil War in France", *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 22* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986), p. 487.

⁴⁶ Marx, "The Civil War in France", p. 333.

⁴⁷ Marx, "First Draft of The Civil War in France", p. 486.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, "Marx to Wilhelm Blos. 10 November 1877", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 45* (New York: International Publishers, 1991), p. 288.

state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it”.⁴⁹ All of these are the words of the mature Marx, not of the young Marx still making strides towards communism through the critique of Hegel. It is thus clear that the doctrine of the abolition of the state as introduced in the *Critique* survived Marx’s engagement with the critique of Hegel, and was later redrawn in non-Hegelian terms.

Although this conception of the abolition of the state originated with Marx and was put forward most strongly by him, it seems to have at least resonated with Engels. Indeed, it makes an appearance in Engels’ *Anti-Dühring*, a *locus classicus* of a different conception of the abolition of the state, which we shall explore shortly. Here Engels writes that “*the proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production in the first instance into state property*. But, in doing this, it abolishes [...] the state as state.”⁵⁰ As Lenin points out, this sentence is usually either completely ignored or taken as some kind of “Hegelian weakness” on the part of Engels.⁵¹ Lenin tried to square this with Engels’ notorious claim only a few sentences ahead that the state is not abolished but rather “withers away” by claiming that it is the bourgeois state that is abolished and the proletarian state created in its stead that withers away.⁵² But Lenin’s interpretation has no textual support, and Engels is quite clearly saying that the state *as state* is abolished. This is also clear from another passage:

The first act by virtue of which the state really constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society – the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society – this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a state.⁵³

Eric Hobsbawm is correct in noting that what Engels says here is that “in representing the whole of society [...] [the public power] is no longer classifiable as a state”.⁵⁴ The

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme”, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 24* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), p. 94.

⁵⁰ Frederick Engels, “Anti-Dühring”, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 25* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), p. 267.

⁵¹ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, p. 53

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Engels, “Anti-Dühring”, p. 268.

⁵⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 54.

same approach is evidenced by Engels' claim in a letter to Bebel that the Paris Commune "ceased to be a state in the true sense of the term".⁵⁵ This is an admittedly thin expression of the conception of the abolition of the state outlined above, limited to the *material* aspect only, but it is an expression of it nevertheless. By expressing the universal interest of society, says Engels, the state ceases to be a state.

3 Government and Administration

Above we have examined a conception of the abolition of the state whereby by being truly integrated with society, the public power ceases to be a state. This abolition occurs in the process of or immediately after the revolution, applying as it did to the revolutionary Paris Commune. But what would be the form of the "public power" in an advanced and developed communist society? Marx was intimately aware that state activity involved both the "specific functions arising from the antithesis between the government and the mass of the people", and "the performance of common activities arising from the nature of all communities". The state performs both repressive functions in the interest of the dominant class, and vital social functions, which will be necessary even in a post-revolutionary society. What are these vital social functions and what form will they take in the future? Marx is not forthcoming on this point, noting that the question "what social functions will remain in existence" in advanced communist society "that are analogous to present state functions" can only be answered scientifically. In the writings of Marx and Engels there occurs a second and distinct conception of the abolition of the state, I argue, and it affords us some insight into the aforementioned questions. This conception is exhibited in Engels' famous statement in *Anti-Dühring* that following the revolution

State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies out of itself; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production. The state is not "abolished". *It dies out* [Er stirbt ab].⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Frederick Engels, "Engels to August Bebel. 18-28 March 1875", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 45* (New York: International Publishers, 1991), p. 64.

⁵⁶ Engels, "Anti-Dühring", p. 268.

This canonical passage is often referred to, in a less literal translation, as the “withering away” of the state. Engels says here that after the revolution a gradual process occurs in which government functions become unnecessary and give way to the administration of production. Strictly speaking, Engels is not saying that government functions are gradually *reduced* in scope, intensity, etc. – it might only be that the process of those functions becoming superfluous is gradual – but this is strongly implied. In his essay *On Authority*, Engels put this thesis in similar words, claiming that in the future society “public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society”.⁵⁷

Some commentators consider the “withering away of the state” to be an exclusively “Engelsian” thesis, and attempt to distance it from Marx. Avineri, for example, claims that the “withering away” notion comes from a different intellectual lineage distinct and opposed to that which informs Marx’s conception of the abolition of the state. The supposedly “Engelsian” conception he derogatorily terms “mechanistic”, as opposed to Marx’s “philosophical” conception. Bloom writes that “it is significant that the theory of the ‘withering away’ of the state was propounded not by [Marx] but by Engels”.⁵⁸ In the same vein, Lovell emphasizes that “Marx had never spoken of the ‘withering away’ of the State”.⁵⁹ In what follows, I will show that both the notion of the abolition of the state as a gradual and protracted process, and the notion that its end result is an “administration of things”, are present in Marx. Then, I will discuss the meaning of this conception of the abolition of the state.

But first, a short aside about the relation between Marx and Engels is necessary here. It has become fashionable among academic scholars to treat Engels as a distorter of Marx and to postulate, or rather pre-suppose, substantial differences between the two co-authors, not only but especially on the question of the fate of the state in post-revolutionary society. Such differences should not be ruled out, obviously, but evidence needs to be presented on a case by case basis. Unsurprisingly, this contention is often

⁵⁷ Frederick Engels, “On Authority”, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 23* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), p. 425.

⁵⁸ Bloom, “The ‘Withering Away’ of the State”, p. 121.

⁵⁹ David W. Lovell, *From Marx to Lenin: An Evaluation of Marx's Responsibility for Soviet Authoritarianism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 76.

accompanied by an almost exclusive focus on Marx's early writings. Yet when only the earliest of Marx's writings are examined in contradistinction to Engels' much later writings, it is easy to see a deep chasm separating the two. When the entire corpus is examined, however, a different picture emerges. Specifically regarding *Anti-Dühring*, there are good reasons to believe that Marx was in agreement with Engels. Indeed, Marx gave Engels substantial help with respect to economic matters discussed in the book, wrote one of its chapters, and Engels even read to Marx the entire manuscript before its publication.⁶⁰ Engels stressed that because he had a lesser role in the development of the ideas presented in the book than Marx, he felt obliged to run it by Marx.⁶¹ Later, Marx praised Engels' book in private correspondence with Bracke, and condemned its critics for their "lack of judgment".⁶² It is therefore unlikely that any fundamental differences between the two would have gone unnoticed by him and without remark. Marx is well known for his vicious and sometimes unfair critique of authors with whom he disagrees, and it would be surprising for him not to comment on or criticize views he disagrees with, even coming from as close an associate as Engels, or even to allow such a view to be related to him by association. But such psychological speculation is unnecessary here, since we have very good direct reasons to believe that Marx was fully in agreement with the "withering away of the state" described by in *Anti-Dühring*.

First, Marx definitely possessed a conception of the abolition of the state as the result of a process whereby the need for class suppression disappears. To this Engels attested in a letter to Van Patten:

Marx and I, ever since 1845, have held the view that *one* of the final results of the future proletarian revolution will be the gradual dissolution and ultimate disappearance of that political organisation called *the State*; an organisation the main object of which has ever been to secure, by armed force, the economical subjection of the working majority to the wealthy

⁶⁰ Engels, "Anti-Dühring", p. 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Karl Marx, "Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 11 April 1877", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 45* (New York: International Publishers, 1991), p. 218.

minority. With the disappearance of a wealthy minority the necessity for an armed repressive State-force disappears also.⁶³

Engels' assertion is borne out in passages from *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and other texts. The position Engels describes also appears in a 1850 review of a work by Émile de Girardin that endorsed the abolition of taxation and the state, in which Marx writes:

Behind the abolition of taxation lurks the abolition of the state. The abolition of the state has meaning with the Communists, only as the necessary consequence of the abolition of classes, with which the need for the organised might of one class to keep the others down automatically disappears.⁶⁴

The standard Marx-Engels Collected Works (MECW) translation is slightly misleading, rendering the state's falling away of itself ("von selbst [...] wegfällt"⁶⁵) as "automatically disappears". The literal translation highlights the similarity between Marx's wording to Engels' "withering away".

Secondly, Marx foresaw this process as involving the replacement of government functions by administrative functions. In a fascinating passage from the polemical pamphlet *Fictitious Splits in the International*, directed against Bakunin's anarchist faction, Marx writes:

Anarchy, then, is the great war-horse of their master Bakunin, who has taken nothing from the socialist systems except a set of labels. All socialists see anarchy as the following programme: once the aim of the proletarian movement, i.e., abolition of classes, is attained, the power of the State, which serves to keep the great majority of producers in bondage to a very small exploiter minority, disappears, and the functions of

⁶³ Frederick Engels, "Engels to Philipp Van Patten. 18 April 1883", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 47* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), p. 10.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx, "*Le socialisme et l'impôt*", par Emile de Girardin", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 10* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1978), p. 333.

⁶⁵ MEGA Band 10, p. 297

government become simple administrative functions. The Alliance reverses the whole process.⁶⁶

Interestingly, Marx here professes anarchy to be the end goal of all socialists, criticizing Bakunin's Alliance only for reversing matters by trying to create anarchy now in the midst of the workers' movement instead of waiting for its gradual realization after the revolution. Marx's conception of anarchy in which "the functions of government become simple administrative functions" contains all there is to Engels' formulation about the "administration of things".

A similar position is expressed in Marx's private notes on Bakunin's *Statehood and Anarchy*. In rebutting Bakunin's contention that the Marxists support a "government of the people" which is no more than the rule of a few elected representatives, Marx clarifies that although elections will be employed in advanced communist society, their character will change substantially. Because "government functions [will] no longer exist", elections will "lose their present political character" and will become "a routine matter".⁶⁷ Marx also appears to agree that the administrative functions remaining in the future society would principally have to do with production. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* he remarks that "the general costs of administration not belonging to production [...] [will] be very considerably restricted in comparison with present-day society, and [...] [will diminish] in proportion as the new society develops". It is safe to assume that the costs of administration not related to production will dramatically decrease because the need for such administration will decrease. Gradually, only (or mostly) the administration of processes of production will remain.

Having established Marx and Engels' agreement regarding the replacement of government functions with administrative functions, it is time to investigate the

⁶⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Fictitious Splits in the International", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 23* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), pp. 121-122.

In his extraordinary book, *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men's Association*, Wolfgang Eckhardt recounts how Marx tried to get this pamphlet approved by the International's General Council members, most of which could not understand its French, by falsely passing it off as a historical study of the principles and policy of the International. See Eckhardt, pp. 201-203.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, "Notes on Bakunin's Book *Statehood and Anarchy*", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 24* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), p. 519.

meaning of this. What is meant by the “administration of things”, however, is as Bloom claims nowhere discussed “directly and comprehensive” by Marx and Engels.⁶⁸ Bloom tried to remedy this by looking at Engels’ accounts of the emergence of the state.⁶⁹ Bloom’s thought is that by discovering how Marx and Engels thought that the state arose, the meaning and significance of its disappearance could be inferred. This methodology is problematic, however, on several grounds. First, there is no reason to believe that the state-less society of the future would be essentially similar to the stateless society of the distant past, or that the circumstances of the state’s formation could tell us much about the state of affairs that follows its dissolution. Whatever was the form of society in its presumed pre-state days, it involved neither advanced industry nor the administration of production, and Marxism is certainly no atavism. Nor is there reason to think that study of the formation of the state would expose the essential characteristics that it has today, and would allow us to infer what its dissolution would be like. As John Plamenatz writes, “the causes of an institution's growth do not determine its functions”.⁷⁰ The historical causes behind the growth of the state will not necessarily expose its contemporary functions and instruments. Second, there’s a number of incompatible accounts of the emergence of the state in Marx and Engels, and it isn’t quite clear which is the most relevant one for these purposes. At any rate, this methodology does not lead Bloom to any notable conclusions. Nevertheless, I do not believe that we are quite in dark about the meaning of the “administration of things” as Bloom has it. But first, some things should be noted about the origin of this notion.

Ben Kafka has noted that the notion of the replacement of the government of persons by the administration of things, often attributed to Saint-Simon, is in fact due to Comte.⁷¹ Kafka refers to Comte’s early text, the *Plan of Scientific Work*, in which Comte propounded his view of “scientific politics”. All other forms of politics, thought Comte, whether they had for a legislator only one man, a number of people or society as a whole, would simply amount to arbitrariness. Indeed, if society as a whole were to substitute itself for the legislator, the problems and disadvantages of arbitrary power would only become more severe. “Scientific politics”, on the other hand:

⁶⁸ Bloom, “The ‘Withering Away’ of the State”, p. 116.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ John Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (London: Longman, 1954), p. 138.

⁷¹ <http://www.west86th.bgc.bard.edu/articles/the-administration-of-things.html>

radically excludes arbitrariness, because it removes the absoluteness and the indistinctness which have engendered it and which maintain it. In this politics, the human race is viewed as subject to a natural law of development, which is capable of being determined by observation, and which prescribes as unequivocally as possible the political action that can be exercised in each area. Arbitrariness therefore necessarily ceases.⁷²

It is then, says Comte, that “the government of things replaces that of men”.⁷³ This idea of Comte was no doubt influential and known to Marx and Engels. But unlike what Kafka claims, the notion of the “administration of things” is not quite present there. It is highly significant that Marx and Engels spoke of the *administration* and not the *government* of things. We shall dwell on the difference between the terms shortly. Marx and Engels’ formulation is not simply copied from Comte, but is probably a mixture of his position with Saint-Simon’s early conception of the “governmental regime” being replaced by an “administrative regime”. As Célestin Bouglé and Élie Halévy remark in their illuminating editorial notes to *The Doctrine of Saint-Simon* (originally published by Saint-Simon’s disciples), Comte did not accept the redundancy of government.⁷⁴ Late Saint-Simonians, they note, not only rejected the conception of a mere “administrative regime”, but completely inverted it.⁷⁵ While tracing the origins of this phrase in early socialist thought cannot disclose its meaning in Marx and Engels, a comparison with Comte would be of value. Comte’s vision is a technocracy in which scientific experts govern; Marx and Engels’ vision is different in several respects.

Lenin is famously thought to have said that in the future communist society, every cook will be able to participate in administration.⁷⁶ If this is an apt

⁷² Auguste Comte, “Plan of Scientific Work”, in H. S. Jones (ed.), *Auguste Comte: Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 108.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Armand Bazard, Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin and Emile Barrault, *The Doctrine of Saint-Simon: An Exposition; First Year, 1828-1829*, edited and translated by Georg Iggers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 29.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ The aphorism is mistakenly attributed to Lenin. It comes in fact from Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem, titled "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin":

The spectaclad white-collars,

spitting in spite,

Sneaked off

characterization of classical Marxism's position, then it radically differs from Comte's. Indeed, the technocratic aspect of Comte's positivist philosophy was one that Marx seems to have completely rejected. When asked about positivist elements inside the International Workingmen's Association, Marx condemned positivism for seeking "only to put a new hierarchy in place of the old one".⁷⁷ Similar sentiments, it will be recalled, are echoed in Marx's much earlier contention in the *Critique* that the abolition of the bureaucracy would dispense with the "hierarchy of knowledge".⁷⁸ Similarly, Marx commended the Paris Commune for "doing away with the state hierarchy altogether" and for being composed of "simple working men".⁷⁹ Nor is there reason to suspect Marx thought that the simplification of administration, occurring already during and immediately after the revolution, was to be reversed as post-revolutionary society develops. On the contrary. Marx and Engels emphasized that only "simple administrative functions" (emphasis added) would remain in the future society – presumably, simple enough for all to do.⁸⁰

While Marx and Engels had not inherited Comte's technocratic aspirations, they did seemingly adopt his belief that all problems facing the public power would be technical ones. In the context of their writings, the distinction between government and administration (*Verwaltung*) is significant. Government is the site where different ends, different conceptions of the good, are publicly deliberated, battled out, negotiated and decided. Administration, on the other hand, only occupies itself with finding the best means for the realization of an already given end. We have previously mentioned Marx's insistence in his notes on Bakunin's *Statehood and Anarchy* that in communist society, when government functions no longer exist, elections become a "routine matter". A "business matter" would be the literal translation of the term Marx uses,

*to where Kingdoms and dukedoms
still remain.*

Good riddance!
*We'll train every cook
so she might
manage the country
to the worker's gain.*

See The Collected Poems of Vladimir Mayakovsky // trans. Dorian Rottenberg, USSR, 1972, p. 227.

⁷⁷ Karl Marx, "Record of Marx's Interview with *The World Correspondent*", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 22* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986), p. 605.

⁷⁸ Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law", p. 50.

⁷⁹ Marx, "First Draft of The Civil War in France", pp. 488-490.

⁸⁰ Marx and Engels, "Fictitious Splits in the International", p. 122.

“Geschäftssache”. Marx’s comment clarifies that elections will have a wholly technical nature of fitting means to ends, and would thus “[entail] no domination”.⁸¹ Likewise, when Engels says that in the “administration of things” the administrators will be simply “watching over the true interests of society”, he seems to assume that the administrators will *know* what the true interests of society are, that is, that it will be no open question

4 Particularity and the End of Politics

The replacement of government with administration has radical consequences. In essence, it signifies the end of politics, but not only in Marx and Engels' sense of politics, but also in the wider, common usage of the word. Marx and Engels' conception of politics is notoriously narrow. “Political power, properly so called”, they tell us in *The Communist Manifesto*, “is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another”.⁸² A similar analysis is given in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Given this narrow definition of politics, it is tempting to understand the abolition of the state trivially, involving only the cessation of class repression and nothing more. On this interpretation, the abolition of the state is simply the process in which the public power loses its “political character”.⁸³ The state’s “withering away” is after all, as Marx and Engels make clear, the result of class repression becoming superfluous when class differences cease to exist. But as Engels notes in the letter to Van Patten, class repression is the “main object” of the state, not its only one.⁸⁴ Marx and Engels appear to understand the distinction between function and essence; they believe that the *function* of the state is class repression, but not that this is all the state *is*. That is not to say that everything belonging to the essence of the state will disappear, since obviously administrative functions undertaken in the general interest are part of it. But it does mean that we should not take Marx and Engels to expressing a trivial or minimal position regarding the disappearance of the state. Secondly, as we have seen we have

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⁸² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* Vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), p. 505.

⁸³ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, p. 505.

⁸⁴ Engels, “Engels to Philipp Van Patten. 18 April 1883”, p. 10.

very good reasons to believe Marx and Engels were committed to a substantive transformation of the public power and not only to the termination of class repression.

It is apparent, therefore, that the “administration of things”, signifies the end of politics not only in Marx and Engels’ sense of the term, but also in its deeper, common sense. The end of politics in this sense implies the cessation of any true conflict within the public power and its transformation to a merely technical apparatus of problem solving. Allan Megill believes that Marx arrived at this sort of eschatology just a few years after writing the *Critique*:

By 1845-46 Marx also concluded that science (natural and social) will tell us, unequivocally and without room for doubt or disagreement, what needs to be done. In other words, matters of state and administration can be so scientifically structured that deliberation will be unnecessary – the *machine*, which human beings will of course be directing, will function. Thus Marx concluded that politics is *unneeded*.⁸⁵

Here it is worth noting a fundamental tension between the two conceptions of the abolition of the state. Abolition of the state in the first sense, and as the first act of revolution, *universalizes politics* by establishing a public power which is no longer estranged from society but is rather integrated with it, and thoroughly *politicizes society* through the creation of radical democracy. Abolition of the state in the second, processual sense, *dismantles politics* by reducing the public power to a minimal organization occupied with administration alone. The first form of the abolition of the state revolutionizes and deepens public participation and representation, while the second processual form makes public participation almost unnecessary. In a sense, therefore, the second processual form of the abolition of the state nullifies the achievements of the first. The first act of revolution is the establishment of radical democracy; the last is its disappearance. If the politicization of society means the extension of “deliberating and deciding [...] matters of general concern”, its depoliticization means the end of any need for public deliberation properly so called.

⁸⁵ Allan Megill, *Karl Marx: The Burden of Reason (Why Marx Rejected Politics and the Market)* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), p. 58.

It might be thought that what allows the public power to become a non-political, non-antagonistic sphere is the disappearance of conflict from society in general. Universality is thus achieved by the erasure of particularity. As Avineri puts it, “the life of the individual [...] achieve universal content”.⁸⁶ In the original Hebrew edition of his book, this thesis is put even more bluntly; there he says that in communist society “universality becomes the content of life in general”.⁸⁷ Leszek Kolakowski goes as far as describing Marx’s communist society as “a society of perfect unity, in which all human aspirations would be fulfilled, and all values reconciled”.⁸⁸

Does Marx endorse the dissolution of particularity? He certainly seems to believe that *individuality* would be greatly developed under communism. Unlike capitalism, where “the living person is dependent and has no individuality”, in communism “objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development”. Similarly, he stated in the *Grundrisse* that communism would exhibit “free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth”. It would be “a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle”. How could this be reconciled with a public power free of conflict? One interpretive solution to the puzzle is that true individuality would simply not amount to particularity, in the sense of *particularity of interest*; that individuality and complete social harmony could co-exist. Admittedly, the textual evidence does not straightforwardly rule out this option. But it seems overly naïve, and we would need good reasons to think this is the case.

In his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel admonishes Plato for wishing to “exclude particularity from his state”.⁸⁹ His criticisms of Plato do not seem to apply, however, to Marx’s version of communism. Marx’s communism, predicated as it is on promoting “the free development of each”, is entirely foreign to Plato’s strict division of labor and his conception of the whole polis as an individual person, feeling pleasure

⁸⁶ Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 203.

⁸⁷ Shlomo Avineri, *Mishnato Hamedinit Ve-Hahevratit shel Karl Marx* (The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1976), p. 194. [Hebrew]

⁸⁸ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Rise, Growth, and Dissolution, Vol. 3: The Breakdown* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 523.

⁸⁹ Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 184, §185.

and pain as a single organism.⁹⁰ Even Hegel's unique view about the importance of private property for true individuality and particularity does not immediately rule out particularity in Marx's communist society. For Marx, "private property" has a distinct meaning – privately owned means of production. And although goods in Marx's communist society are owned in common before distribution, there is no reason to think that after being distributed they would not be owned, to the full extent in which the concept of ownership is applicable to a classless and non-market society, by the individuals who take possession of them. As the *Communist Manifesto* states, "communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriations". There is thus no indication that Marx wanted to abolish the distinction between 'mine' and 'thine', as Plato did in the fourth book of the *Republic*.⁹¹ Indeed, Plato's vision was close to what Marx and Engels derisively termed "barracks communism".⁹² Any similarities between the two visions of communism are entirely superficial.

Given this, I agree with David Leopold that "we would seem to require a good reason to assume that any future 'unity' would preclude the existence of either conflicts of interest or a 'private' dimension to life".⁹³ Often those asserting that Marx espoused a communist society free of any conflict Voltorn on a few passages from Marx's early writings. While some of these passages may indeed give the impression of an entirely harmonious society, I argue that a close reading shows this conclusion to be unnecessary. In an article from 1844 Marx writes that "the state is based on the contradiction between *public* and *private* life, on the contradiction between *general interests* and *private interests*".⁹⁴ Here Marx does not say that the state's abolition would require the abolition of any *distinction* between private and public life, but only the abolition of their *contradiction*. Private and public life may cease to contradict one

⁹⁰ Plato, "Republic", in John M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 1090, 462d.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 1089, 462c.

⁹² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 23* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988), p. 543.

⁹³ David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 262.

⁹⁴ Karl Marx, "Critical Marginal Notes on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian"", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 3* (New York: International Publishers, 2005), p. 198.

another without being one and the same. Furthermore, strictly speaking there is no necessity that specific private lives and private interests would not contradict one another, only that they will not contradict what is in the interest of all. In the same article Marx writes that “if the modern state wanted to abolish the *impotence* of its administration, it would have to abolish the *private life* of today. But if it wanted to abolish private life, it would have to abolish itself, for it exists *only* in the contradiction to private life”.⁹⁵ Notice that Marx is speaking here of the private life *of today* – it is bourgeois private life which is abolished, not private life as a general category. While it is true that in *On The Jewish Question* Marx rails against “the division of the human being into a *public man* and a *private man*”, this is not to be seen as a call for private man to be swallowed within the public sphere.⁹⁶ What Marx protests is the antagonistic form of this division, not the division as such.

It seems to be that Marx thought that the universality of the public power and will be unimpeded by the particularity and antagonisms outside it. But if conflict in society does not cease, how could Marx possibly expect it not to rise up and take expression in the public power? An interesting solution is offered by Richard Archard, who suggested that Marx’s vision of the future communist society is characterized not by harmony of interests and desires but rather by what Archard calls sociality:

What we might term the *sociality* of communist society consists of the fact that individuals relate directly one to another as human beings, that these relations are under their collective control, and that these relations are ‘universal’, unconfined by any ‘local’ or ‘parochial’ ties.⁹⁷

Archard’s suggestions is that this form of sociality could allow for conflicts of interest to exist without needing to be resolved antagonistically, or politically, by the public power. Marx is thus not espousing the rather absurd view that in communist society particularity ceases and the distinction between private and public is overcome, but the

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 3* (New York: International Publishers, 2005), p. 155.

⁹⁷ David Archard, “The Marxist Ethic of Self-realization: Individuality and Community”, in J. D. G. Evans (ed.), *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 29.

somewhat more plausible view that in virtue of the abolition of classes, in communist society the public power will work towards the universal interest, and that the forms of particularity of a non-class society will not impinge on its universality. Individuals will not lose their non-universal ties to each other, but those ties will not be sufficient to make the public power non-universal in character. The public power will not be a battlefield where conflicts arising from such non-universal ties will play out; they will play out outside of it. The public/private distinction will thus remain. Marx is perhaps guilty of overemphasizing the role of class in human affairs – it is difficult, after all, to believe that even in a classless society where characterized by sociality conflicts between persons and different conceptions of the good will not be expressed in the public power – but he is not guilty of wishing to expunge particularity.

5 Authority without Coercion?

Another matter of interest is what the disappearance of the state's governmental functions means for authority and coercion. One of the only places where this question is directly discussed is Engels' essay *On Authority*. In this text, Engels understands authority to be "the imposition of the will of another upon ours". Engels' principal claim, directed against "anti-authoritarians", is that some level of authority is a practical necessity in everyday activities such as running a factory, managing railways, etc., and will no doubt remain so in the future society. It can only be hoped, he says, to reduce it to the level necessitated by the organization of industry. Similarly, Marx writes in volume III of *Capital* that every form of co-operative labor requires "a commanding will to coordinate and unify the process", similar to the role of an orchestra conductor.⁹⁸ This will remain necessary "in every combined mode of production".⁹⁹

Interestingly, in *On Authority* Engels reproaches the anarchists for not restricting their opposition to political authority only (*autorità politica* in the Italian original), which he claims all socialists are agreed will disappear. It is not entirely clear what Engels means in claiming that political authority will disappear. If Engels understands here politics in the same narrow sense of the *Communist Manifesto* and the

⁹⁸ Karl Marx, "Capital Volume III", in *Marx/Engels Collected Works Vol. 37* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998), p. 382.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Poverty of Philosophy – basically, as class domination and suppression – then the statement that political authority disappears in a classless society is entirely trivial. Naturally politics thus understood disappears when there are no classes to suppress, along with authority of the specifically political sort. Furthermore, as we saw Marx and Engels believe that ultimately the public power will only task itself with the administration of production. But if production requires authority, then it is very much probable that the administration of production requires authority. It isn't clear, then, if anything can be made of Engels' claim that political authority will disappear. Given his and Marx's pronouncements cited earlier, it is likely that authority, understood as the imposition of another's will, would continue to exist in the public power, even if its scope would be reduced (perhaps limited only to production).

A different point, however, is whether this authority requires any coercion. It is important to appreciate that the two issues are distinct, since the imposition of another's will need not necessarily involve coercion. In various circumstances we often accede to other people's decisions, for example because of our respect for them or for the process in which the decision was made. Perhaps this behavior could become universal in communist society? This is the opinion of Avineri, who following Thilo Ramm, suggests that Marx might be "the last of the Lutherans", as obedience in the future communist society will be based on "internal identification rather than external coercion".¹⁰⁰ Lewis agrees that the final stage of communist society would involve "the absence of restraint", but I argue that this does not imply the cessation of authority as understood by Engels.¹⁰¹ It is necessary therefore to investigate the question of coercion separately from that of authority.

One aspect of the question of coercion is the existence of law under communism. Obviously coercion does not have to accord with law, but we might expect that if under Marx's communism public coercion exists, it would not be of the arbitrary form – it would be lawful, not based on the exercise of personal power. Soviet legal scholar Evgeny Pashukanis believed that the withering away of the state would be accompanied by "the withering away of law altogether, that is to say the disappearance

¹⁰⁰ Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 202.

¹⁰¹ John D. Lewis, "The Individual and the Group in Marxist Theory", *International Journal of Ethics* 47(1), 1936, p. 48.

of the juridical factor from social relations”.¹⁰² Kelsen’s interpretation, somewhat more cautious, is that law will exist in the future communist society, but will have changed its form considerably; it is to be non-ideological in character, “a law which will be the realization of justice”.¹⁰³ Both accounts are speculative, however, and there doesn’t seem to be any relevant evidence in Marx and Engels to decide the case.

There is no doubt that Marx and Engels were opposed to the thorough regulation and regimentation of life that would be characteristic of 20th century “communist” regimes. I have previously referenced Marx and Engels’ condemnation of “barracks communism” when commenting on Sergey Nechaev’s *The Fundamental Principles of the Social Order of the Future*. It is worthwhile to quote one of the passages:

What a beautiful model of barrack-room communism! Here you have it all: communal eating, communal sleeping, assessors and offices regulating education, production, consumption, in a word, all social activity, and to crown all, OUR COMMITTEE [i.e. Nechaev’s proposed revolutionary committee], anonymous and unknown to anyone, as the supreme director. This is indeed the purest anti-authoritarianism.¹⁰⁴

It is evident that Marx and Engels are not merely trying to expose the inconsistency of Nechaev’s plan with his self-professed anti-authoritarianism, but that they are wholeheartedly opposed to the extreme regulation of social activity and the regimentation of life that it offers. The well-known passages from *The German Ideology* about the freedom of the worker under communism give this additional credence.

Commenting on Bakunin’s *Statehood and Anarchy*, Marx notes that during and immediately after the revolution the proletariat “must use *forcible* means, that is to say, governmental means”.¹⁰⁵ From this, perhaps, it could be inferred that when no governmental means are employed, no forcible means are employed – that is, that when

¹⁰² Evgeny Bronislavovich Pashukanis, *The General Theory of Law & Marxism* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003), p. 61.

¹⁰³ Kelsen, *The Communist Theory of Law*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁰⁴ Marx and Engels, “The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men’s Association”, p. 543.

¹⁰⁵ Notes on Bakunin’s *Statehood and Anarchy*, MECW vol 24, p. 517

government functions disappear, so does any form of coercion. It is possible that Marx is again employing again the narrow conception of politics and the state as a sphere of class repression. If so, he only says that forcible means of *class repression* are by necessity governmental, but not all forcible means *as such*. This is not enough to yield the conclusion that without government, all coercion ceases. Nevertheless, Marx talks here about governmental means and not political means, and he later refers to the disappearance of government functions and the disappearance of the political character of the public power as distinct things. It is therefore plausible that he holds that with the disappearance of governmental functions, public coercion would disappear too.

Even in areas of social life when no authority need be directly exercised, where there is no need to impose one's will on another, there is probably a need to prevent outright anti-social activities. That is, even in those areas there is still some need for an "obedience" of sorts. What could allow the preservation of the social order? There are at least three different answers offered in the literature. We have already seen Ramm and Avineri's suggestion that internal identification with the community would restrain individuals in lieu of coercive measures. Kelsen on the other hand suggests that individuals will simply have no interest in contravening with the social order:

The socialist society of the future will be a stateless society, a society the order of which will be maintained without the employment of force. This will be possible since the social order will naturally be in the interest of everybody, so that nobody will be induced to violate the order.¹⁰⁶

Note that this does not necessary require that all have the same interests. It does not strictly require the end of particularity. But it does require that the universal interest that the social order expresses will be compatible with everyone's particular interest, and also that each and every one will recognize this to be the case. Both parts may seem highly implausible. Lenin, interestingly, gave a different answer:

¹⁰⁶ Kelsen, *The Political Theory of Bolshevism: A Critical Analysis*, p. 11.

For when *all* have learned to manage and independently are actually managing social production by themselves, independently keeping accounts, and exercising control over the parasites, the sons of the wealthy, the swindlers, and other ‘guardians of capitalist traditions’, escape from this popular accounting and control will inevitably become so incredibly difficult, such a rare exception, and probably accompanied by such swift and severe punishment (for the armed workers are practical men and not sentimental intellectuals, and they will scarcely allow anyone to trifle with them), that the *necessity* of observing the simple, fundamental rules of the community will very soon become a *habit*.¹⁰⁷

Lenin believed that in the future communist society the compliance with the social order will simply become a habit, but that this is guaranteed by a kind of vicious and unrelenting mob coercion, whereby any violations receive a “swift and severe punishment”. This will make sure that any contravening of community rules becomes a “rare exception”, and so coercion will not be a regular occurrence. Although Lenin refers here primarily to the situation immediately following the revolution, he appears to think this will also be true of an advanced communist society.

Which of the three interpretations, if any, is true? We are forced to admit, I believe, that we are in deep speculative waters. The evidence simply does not allow us to draw any definitive conclusion. It seems plausible that Marx and Engels conceive of what we might term authority without coercion – the imposition of the will of others will remain, perhaps limited only to the sphere of production, yet this will not require coercion. But this is impossible to affirm with any certainty, and it is especially difficult to interpret the basis for acceptance of this authority and the avoidance of anti-social behavior in general.

6 The Critique of the Gotha Programme

Before concluding, I would like to shortly address an apparent interpretive conundrum posed by some passages in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in which Marx

¹⁰⁷ Lenin, *State and Revolution*, pp. 141-142.

seems to refer to the future state of the advanced communist society. There he says that “it is possible to speak of the ‘present-day state’, in contrast with the future”.¹⁰⁸ He poses the question, “what transformation will the state undergo in communist society?”, and states that the Lasallean *Gotha Programme* does not deal “with the future state of communist society”.¹⁰⁹

It does not seem to be that Marx simply used the terminology of the *Gotha Programme* itself, which talks about a supposed “free state”, for he explicitly ridicules this phrase and states that the programme does not actually deal with the future communist state. Therefore, some commentators have made much of these few sentences. Bloom had taken them as definitive evidence that Marx – in contradistinction to Engels – did not at all espouse the abolition of the state in communist society in any meaningful sense. Uri Zilbersheid, taking a more modest position, took these passages to stand for an abandonment of the notion of the abolition of the state.¹¹⁰ Lenin was similarly troubled by this pronouncement which he saw as contradicting Marx’s previous pronouncements. At this point, I believe, Bloom’s interpretation can be safely rejected. Marx most definitely believed in a through-going transformation of society under the name “the abolition of the state”. These passages, written late in Marx’s life, could then either signify an abandonment of his previous substantive position or a change in terminology.

What, then, could explain these statements? Did Marx really abandon his long-standing commitment to the abolition of the state – so abruptly and with no explanation? Even those who deny that Marx ever meaningfully held the position that the state will be abolished in communist society, such as Bloom and Adamiak, will have to admit that he spoke *as if* he did. At the least, then, the sudden change in terminology is in need of explanation, or why Marx finally and so nonchalantly expressed in explicit terms his real position on this matter.

One possible solution is proposed by Hal Draper. Draper notes that in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx “is explicitly *not* using the term ‘communist

¹⁰⁸ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme”, p. 95.

¹⁰⁹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme”, p. 95.

¹¹⁰ Uri Zilbersheid, “Marx’ Abkehr von der Theorie über die Aufhebung des Staates”, *Der Staat* 29(1), 1990, pp. 87-89.

society' to mean some very advanced stage of the future social order".¹¹¹ As he points out, Marx refers in this text to "communist society [...] just as it *emerges* from capitalist society". From this Draper infers that Marx's term, "the future state of communist society", merely refers to the transitory proletarian state which replaces the capitalist state.¹¹² But this solution will not do; in the passage discussed, Marx first states that in the political transition period between the capitalist and communist society the state can be "nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*". The *Gotha Programme*, Marx then claims, "does not deal with this [i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat] nor with the future state of communist society". Marx is clearly talking about the "future state of communist society" as distinct from the transitional revolutionary state.

I believe that the solution to this "puzzle" lies elsewhere. These commentators, as well as the translators of the standard English translation in the MECW edition, were apparently oblivious to the fact that in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* Marx always refers to the so-called communist state of the future and to it alone as "Staatswesen", yet opting for the word "Staat" to describe the existing state or the revolutionary transitory state. In the MECW edition, both "Staat" and "Staatswesen" are misleadingly rendered as "state". "Staatswesen", however, does not simply mean the state, but rather the "Staat als Gemeinwesen", that is, the state insofar as it is an organized collective and a community. The word "Staatswesen" has a similar meaning to that of the term "body politic" in English. Marx's specific usage of "Staatswesen" to refer only to the future communist "state" suggests that his choice of words is important. He thus only refers to the state *qua* public power, or community, of the future communist society. Moreover, his counter-position of the "*social functions*" of the future to the "present *state functions*" ("*gesellschaftliche Funktionen*" and "*Staatsfunktionen*", emphasis added) and the general spirit of his treatment of the state in this text strongly indicate a sharp distinction between the state and the future public power of communist society.¹¹³

Engels was somewhat more explicit in his letter to Bebel soon after the *Critique of the Gotha Program* was sent out. There he wrote that because "as soon as there can

¹¹¹ Hal Draper, "The Death of the State in Marx and Engels", *The Socialist Register* 7, 1970, p. 294.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", p. 95.

be any question of freedom, the state as such ceases to exist”, the Lassallean phrase from the *Gotha Programme* about establishing a “free people’s state” is nonsensical and paradoxical.¹¹⁴ He therefore suggested, on behalf of both Marx and himself, to replace the word “state” with the German word “Gemeinwesen”, similar to the French “Commune”.¹¹⁵

There is thus no real reason to consider Marx’s passages as expressing any change in position in respect to the future of the state. They are neither proof that Marx’s vision was in fact statist all along (*contra* Bloom), nor that he has at this stage come to reject his prior commitment to the abolition of the state (*contra* Zilbersheid). There is no real conundrum then, and the only question left is why Marx chose to change his terminology. But even this is misleading, for Marx employed various terms in relation to the disappearance of the state in the future communist society. In support of his interpretation, Avineri claimed that “Marx always refers to the abolition and transcendence (*Aufhebung*) of the state”.¹¹⁶ But this contention is quite mistaken. Most often, Marx did not even use terms that can be translated as *abolition*. Indeed, even when referring to the state’s *abolition*, he often uses the German *Abschaffung*, lacking the dialectical overtones of *Aufhebung*. Even in the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* he does not talk specifically about the *Aufhebung* of the state, but rather of the *Aufhebung* of the bureaucracy, the dissolution (*Auflösung*) of the state, its going under, and so on.

There is thus no reason to read too much into a change of terminology. Neither Marx nor Engels use any terminology systematically. Attaching exaggerated significance to specific phrases gives way to interpretive problems. For example, we saw that Avineri, Lovell and others emphasized that Marx never referred to the “withering away” of the state. But even Engels used this phrase exactly once, at other times opting for other phrases to convey the same meaning. It is thus a mistake to make the “withering away of the state” into some special doctrine, and this leads to confusions. Similar confusions arise in respect to the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* when too much significance is put into a change of terminology which need not signify

¹¹⁴ Engels, “Engels to August Bebel. 18-28 March 1875”, p. 64.

¹¹⁵ Engels, “Engels to August Bebel. 18-28 March 1875”, p. 64.

¹¹⁶ Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 202.

much. The mere fact of a change of terminology should not be taken to indicate a change of substance. As far as the content of Marx's new terminology in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is concerned, as we have seen there is no reason to understand it as abandoning the thesis of the abolition of the state.

7 Conclusion

As we have seen, Marx and Engels do not possess a single unified conception of the abolition of the state. Rather, we have identified two distinct theses that have been put forward under this name. The first involves the elimination of the state as an entity alien to society, or its reabsorption into society. This is done through substantial changes to the structure and content of participation and representation, in the legislative sphere as well as in the executive. The state is eliminated as an alien force by the reshaping of the public power into one directly controlled by the electors, through delegates that are bound by their mandates and are recallable and that serve the material interest of their electors. The bureaucracy and its “hierarchy of knowledge” are abolished and give way to the simplification of administration and to increased participation in it. This, Marx and Engels believed, is immediately achieved by the social revolution. The second thesis, on the other hand, involves a protracted process whereby after the successful revolution the need to suppress the capitalist class disappears, government functions likewise disappear and give way to the simple administrative functions. This signifies the end of politics both in the Marxian and common usages of the word. Both theses, as we saw, involve a radical and substantive social transformation. One is the first act of revolution, the other a future result of the revolution.

Despite irreconcilable differences that some have claimed exist between Marx and Engels’ position on the fate of the state, we saw that the notion of the “withering away of the state” and the replacement of the government of persons by the administration of things are fully present in Marx.¹¹⁷ Although the first conception of the abolition of the state has been developed by Marx and was put forward most

¹¹⁷ Henri Lefebvre has argued (unconvincingly, I believe) that the notion of the withering away of the state is already present in early Marx's "critique of the Hegelian philosophy of the State". This appears however to be a later development in Marx's thought, occurring shortly after he abandoned the critique of Hegel. See Henri Lefebvre, "The Withering Away of the State", in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, p. 72.

strongly by him, a slightly shallower version of it was presented by Engels. The result is that the difference between Marx and Engels on the matter of the abolition of the state becomes more a difference of emphasis, not of position, and hardly a significant one.

The two notions are not mutually exclusive. Marx and Engels expected both to be realized successively. Yet, it is important to note that there is some tension between them. In a sense, the second thesis nullifies the first. For if governing becomes simple administration, then participation in the public power assumes an entirely technical nature. While the representatives remain both formally and materially bound to their electors, this representation loses its cardinal significance. Marx of the 1843 *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* thought that only radical changes in the form and content of representation would allow for a “true democracy”. This would be characterized by “deliberating and deciding [...] matters of general concern”, and “the most fully possible universal participation in legislative power”. The abolition of the state means here an extension of participation in politics, in the regular sense of the term. After the abolition of the state in this sense, politics is not limited to a separate sphere, but is rather integrated with society and all participate in it. But after governing becomes administration, not much of this is left. The robust democracy that the abolition of the state in the first sense creates, is gradually eroded, and is superseded by a society in which democracy is not necessary, because governing itself has become superfluous.

Richard Hunt took “democracy without professionals” to be “the very essence of Marx’s teaching”.¹¹⁸ The discussion above shows that is perhaps an apt description of the society created after the state is abolished in the first sense we have explored. But it is not an accurate description of Marx’s ultimate vision. It is not a vision of democracy without professionals, but rather of a thin administration without professionals, for democracy is impossible where there are no politics. The first conception of the abolition of the state already features the vast simplification of administration, but it incorporates neither the end of governing nor the limiting of administration to processes of production. These will have to await an advanced communist society, developed on its own foundations.

¹¹⁸ Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels, Vol. 2: Classical Marxism, 1850-1895* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 161.

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