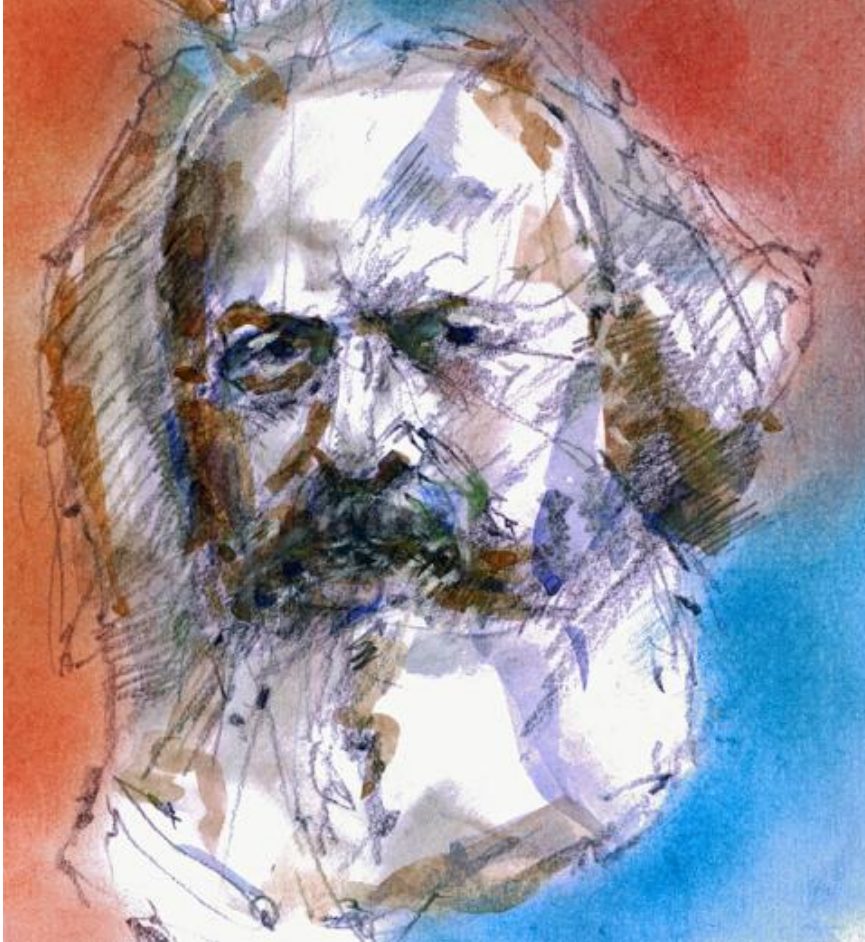


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Marx's Theory of Stages: The Withering Away of the State Under Socialism

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I. The Marxist Theory of Stages

The distinctive feature of Marxism among the socialist ideologies is its historical theory, especially the doctrine of the inevitability of socialism. Already in 1847, Marx credits the "petty bourgeois socialists like Sismondi, with having practically completed the critique of capitalism on economic grounds, and having exposed "the hypocritical apologies of economists."¹ What these men had so far neglected to do was to lay bare the laws of historical development, whereby an epoch follows necessarily from the one preceding, and develops, necessarily, into the one following, until, at the end of this chain, lies socialism.

The great moving powers in history are, according to Marx, "the material productive forces," evidently meaning the sum of capital goods at any given time. To these correspond, at every stage of their development, certain "relationships of production." These relationships are "determined, necessary, and independent of human will." On this framework of property relationships there is elaborated the whole intellectual, political, and social "superstructure."²

Throughout Marx's whole exposition of his theory, machines are assumed to be active, not passive factors. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that at some point, the "material productive forces" come to feel themselves cramped in the system of property relationships within which they had previously peacefully evolved. They fall into conflict with the old relationships, fight it out, and create new ones, more appropriate to the new, higher stage of the "material productive forces."³

Now, "in bold outline, one may consider the Asiatic, Antique, Feudal and Modern Bourgeois forms of production as the progressive economic forms of society."⁴ At some point in history, says Marx, one mode of production, e.g., the feudal (ownership of the tools by the worker) begins to be too narrow for the means of production. "It has to be annihilated; it is annihilated."⁵

Capitalism, likewise, carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Not only does the tendency toward centralization of all wealth in the hands of monopolies assure the final, natural elimination of all except one capitalist, but capitalism breeds its own grave-diggers, the proletariat. This "special and essential product of capitalism" has "been schooled, united and organized" by the bourgeoisie itself. It grows with the system of which it is the characteristic feature. Just as with feudalism, "the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist shell. It is burst. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."⁶ Capitalism was the last antagonistic social form; with it ends mankind's pre-history.⁷ The class conflict, which had filled the chief chapter in the history of civilization, has ceased forever, now that the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

Now, it is important to realize that, not only did Marx neglect to define the most important concepts in his theory, but no proof is offered for any of his grand generalizations. Most of the Marxist philosophy of history is contained in fifteen numbered propositions in the Introduction to his *Critique of Political Economy*. They stand as conclusions would at the end of a long argument, only the argument is missing.

The fundamentals of the theory are open to obvious criticisms, e.g., machines are not self-creating or self-moving, but are the product of human thought and will. But we will restrict ourselves to a few observations on the idea of stages.

Why, at a certain point, must the means of production have outgrown the feudal mode of production? This assumes a steady increase in capital, which is what actually did happen, but did not *necessarily have to* happen, or, rather was not predetermined on account of the previous stage of capital accumulation. It is conceivable, for instance, that local wars and barbarian incursions could have kept the sum of capital at a constant level for thousands of years, and that, finally, Europe might have been entirely overwhelmed by one of the barbarian people. What actually happened was that human skill and human prudence, under favorable conditions, succeeded in so transforming the medieval economy that now one could speak of a capitalist economy.

Throughout history, the "material productive forces" have changed, and with them, the "relationships of production." That is the basis of Marx's theory. But, someday, something very curious will occur. Once socialism is established, the means of production will continue to progress, but property relationships will not. Although the foundation continues to change, the first and second stories are, apparently — for some reason — independent, and do not change accordingly. Naturally, no explanation of this contradiction is offered.

Marx's theory is put into the form of a philosophy of history because it is "scientific socialism," and value-free. Ostensibly, Marx does not say that socialism is *better* than capitalism; as a great scientist, he could not say that. Rather, he asserts, it is, bound to come, with "the necessity of a process of nature." His theory is, therefore, a substitute for an argument, since to say that socialism will inevitably come about because of force "immanent" in capitalism says nothing about its desirability. If we were to accept the crude set of "historical epochs" of Marx, then at one point — the transition from ancient to feudal production — society experienced a regression in the division of labor and general well-being. What is the guarantee that the transition from capitalism to socialism is not of the same type?

But, as is clear to anyone who reads the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx's theory is anything but scientific. It resembles less the philosophies of continual historical progress of the Enlightenment than it does the Christian view of history as the fulfillment of the scheme of salvation. Marx asserts a Garden of Eden, pre-historic society, and an original sin, the introduction of private property. The penalty for this sin is class-warfare, which is waged ceaselessly until a savior, (the proletariat) brings on a last judgment (the dictatorship of the proletariat) and paradise (naturally, socialism). Marx's whole philosophy of history is a wish-fulfillment, and is inferior even to the Christian scheme, which, at least, has had the good grace not to arrogate to itself the name of "science."

Marx, of course, knew no more of the future than any other human. His prediction of the inevitable coming of socialism is comparable to the election-eve predictions of the chairman of the national committee of a political party. It was made simply to fire the enthusiasm of Marx's own party and to shake the courage of his opponents. It has been executing both functions admirably now for more than a century.

II. The Withering Away of the State

Orthodox Marxist political theory begins by positing a definition of the State which rejects both Hegelian mysticism and liberal social theory. Marxism sees the State neither as "the image and reality of Reason" nor as the coercive instrument necessary to insure the peaceful progression of the processes of production. It is, first of all, not necessary, being according to Engels, "the product of Society at a certain stage of its development," and "an acknowledgement that the given Society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has broken up into irreconcilable antagonisms, of which it is powerless to rid itself."⁸ The State is, according to Marx, and especially Engels, the organ of class domination, of the oppression of one class by another. In the ancient "gentilic" or tribal organization, there existed an armed body of the whole population, which might redress wrongs, etc. With the break-up of Society into classes, and consequently into oppressed and oppressing groups, it became impossible to perpetuate this system, for the oppressed could obviously not be trusted with the possession of arms. The chief distinguishing characteristic of the modern State is, therefore, "the establishment of a public population no longer identical with the population," in the form of special groups of armed men, prisons, etc.

Since the State is the instrument of class control, the history of the class conflict has been a political one — the struggle for control of the governmental apparatus. The bourgeoisie labored for centuries to turn the State from the service of the landed feudal nobility, the result being the modern liberal state.⁹ The victory of the proletariat will likewise be signaled by the capture of the government, but, "The proletariat takes control of the State authority, and, first of all, converts the means of production into State production. But by this very act it destroys itself, as a proletariat, destroying at the same time all class differences and class antagonisms, and with this also, the State."¹⁰ Between the period of capitalist state and of the communist no-State, there is the period of the proletarian state, or "dictatorships of the proletariat" that transitional period when all opposition is silenced, entrepreneurs liquidated, etc. The slogan, "withering away of the State," refers to this proletariat State; the "capitalist State" is forcibly overthrown."¹¹

The founders of Marxism insisted that in the socialist society there would be no State: "Society will banish the whole State machine to a place which will then be the most proper one for it — to the museum of antiquities side by side with the spinning wheel and the bronze-ax."¹² Not only will the class-conflict no longer occasion the intervention of a police-force, but even isolated individual crimes will disappear, once the want and wretchedness which drove men to steal, murder, etc., is replaced by the literally unbounded wealth which socialism offers every man. The problems of the enforcement of the decrees of the Socialist production authorities is given one sentence by Engels. After asserting that the State must vanish with the capitalist order, he adds: "The authority of government over persons will be replaced with the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production."¹³ But things cannot be directed without directing people, and the processes of production are sets of series of acts by people. Even with the founders of Marxism, therefore, the doctrine of the "withering away of the State" is a fiction.

What remains is to show how the chief interpreter of Marxism, Lenin, and, consequently, the socialist regime in the Soviet Union, have abandoned this idea altogether.

Lenin reiterates that "excesses" will vanish with socialist prosperity. "Freed from capitalist slavery ... people will gradually become accustomed to the observation of the elementary rules of social life." As for isolated criminal acts, no special machinery is needed; the armed national will stop these, just as a crowd today will part to combatants. But what of the peculiar problems of Socialism? What is the guarantee that people will be satisfied

with the portion allotted to them for consumption. The State, says Lenin, will wither away at the highest stage of Communism, when "there will be need for any exact calculation by Society of the quantity of products to be distributed to each of its member; each will take freely according to his needs." "But it has never entered the head of any Socialist 'to promise' that the highest phase of Communism will actually arrive. ... As long as it has not arrived the socialists demand the *strictest* control, by *Society and by the State*, of the quantity of labor and the quantity of consumption."¹⁴

The precondition for disappearance of the State is, then, an abundance which the world has not even up to this time experienced. Because of the real anarchy of production under a world Socialist regime, resulting from the impossibility of economic calculation, this precondition can never be realized. On the contrary. Each year will see increased want and misery. The most colossal State in history will be necessary to suppress the starving masses, constantly on the point of crime or revolt. No one will care that *now* the State is, at least, no longer the tool of the capitalist class.

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- ^{1.} Marx: *The Communist Manifesto*, New York, 1948, p. 34.
 - ^{2.} Marx: *Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie*, Introduction, Propositions 1–3.
 - ^{3.} Marx: *Kr. der Pol. Oek.*, Intro., Prop. 5–7.
 - ^{4.} Marx: *ibid.*, Prop. 13.
 - ^{5.} Marx: *Das Kapital*, Moscow, 1932. Vol. 1, p. 802.
 - ^{6.} Marx: *ibid.*, p. 303.
 - ^{7.} Marx: *Kr. der Pol. Oek.* Intro., Prop. 14 and 15.
 - ^{8.} Engels: *Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums, und des Staates*, quoted by Lenin in *State and Revolution*, p. 10.
 - ^{9.} Marx: *Com. Man.*, pp. 10, 11.
 - ^{10.} Engels: *Herrn Eugen Duehrings Unwaelzung der Wissenschaft*, p. 302.
 - ^{11.} Engels: *ibid.*, p. 303.
 - ^{12.} Lenin: *op.cit.*, p. 21.
 - ^{13.} Engels: *Anti-Duehring*, p. 303.
 - ^{14.} Lenin: *op.cit.*, p. 100 and 101.

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