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## After October: Towards a Theory of the Socialist State

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### ABSTRACT

A consequence of the Russian Revolution was the emergence of the theory and practice of a new type of state. While the Soviet Union was not a federation, nation-state, empire or colonising power, it remains somewhat difficult to determine what type of state it was. This article offers a theoretical (rather than practical) analysis of the way the theoretical possibility of a new state, a socialist state, could emerge. The first step of the argument deals with broader theories of the state, although the vast majority focus on the European situation, variously calling it a nation-state, liberal state, capitalist state or bourgeois state. One searches in vain for detailed theoretical studies of the socialist state. The second step, therefore, concerns the first seeds of such a theory, which are found—perhaps surprisingly—in the works of Stalin.

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We now have an entirely new, Socialist state (*sotsialisticheskoe gosudarstvo*), without precedent in history (Stalin [1939] 1978, 421–22; [1939] 1997, 336).

One of the consequences of the Russian Revolution was the emergence of the theory and practice of what some have called a new type of state formation. Apophatically, it is easier to say what it was not: a federation, nation-state, empire or colonising power (Suny 1993, 85; Martin 2001, 15, 19, 461; Weeks 2005, 567).<sup>1</sup> But the question remains: what type of state was it? There are two approaches to this question, one theoretical and the other practical. My focus is resolutely theoretical. Or rather, it offers a theoretical clearing-house, tracking the way the theoretical possibility of a new state, a socialist state, could emerge. The following argument has two main steps. The first concerns the broader context in terms of theories of the state, although it soon becomes clear that the vast majority of studies focus on the European situation, despite an almost irresistible temptation to universalise.<sup>2</sup> The terms given for such a state vary, such as nation-state, liberal state, capitalist state or bourgeois state, but the European specificity is clear. By contrast, theoretical studies of the socialist state are few and far between. Thus, the second step of the argument examines the works of Stalin, who provides the seeds for a theory of the socialist state.<sup>3</sup>

### The Bourgeois State

In contrast to the classical tradition, which saw the state in implicit (and at times explicit) theological terms as arising from a state of nature and entailing specific limits for the sake

of the common good,<sup>4</sup> the modern tradition actually begins with Friedrich Engels.<sup>5</sup> Some may protest that it begins with Max Weber, but it will soon become clear why this is not so. In a crucial section of “The Origin of the Family” (Engels [1884] 1990a, 268–72; [1884] 1990b, 263–67),<sup>6</sup> Engels makes the following salient points: (1) the state arises from a society riven with “irreconcilable opposites,” which are “classes with conflicting economic interests”; (2) so that society does not tear itself to pieces, a power (*Gewalt*) is necessary to “alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of ‘order’”; (3) this power “alienates itself more and more” from society, so that the apparatus stands, as the organs of a society, “above society”; (4) the state becomes an “instrument for the exploitation of wage labour by capital,” an “organisation of the possessing class for its protection against the non-possessing class”;<sup>7</sup> (5) the state divides its subjects “according to territory” and not by tribe or gens; (6) it “establishes a *public power* [*Gewalt*]” separate from the population and comprised “not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons and institutions of coercion of all kinds”; (7) in order to “maintain this public power, contributions from the citizens are necessary—*taxes*”; (8) with the advent of full communism, the state will “wither away.”

Let me recast Engels’s multifaceted definition as follows (and to facilitate the following analysis). It may be seen in terms of three distinctions, two of them obviously dialectical: dependency-agency; subjective-objective; power-apparatus. In terms of the first opposition (points 1–3), the state may be dependent upon and arise from the social dynamics of class struggle, but it also becomes alienated from society and thereby a collective agent in its own right. As for the subjective-objective tension, this appears in Engels’s ambivalence concerning the notion of the state as an “instrument” or as an “organisation of the possessing class” (point 4). Subjectively, is the state a neutral instrument, wielded by one or another class against its opponent? If so, it entails an implicit awareness of the crucial ideological role of the state, for the class in question must have a reasonably clear consciousness of what it wishes to achieve through the state. Or, objectively, is it a “product of society at a certain stage of development,” indelibly shaped by the class in question and “entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself,” so much so that it becomes possible to speak of a bourgeois or capitalist state?<sup>8</sup> Finally, the power-apparatus distinction appears in Engels’s deliberations over *Gewalt* (power, force, violence), which requires the “material adjuncts” and “institutions of coercion,” as well as the specification of a territory and the demand for taxes (points 2, 5–7). I add that Engels’s famous formulation of the state’s withering (point 8) would profoundly influence Marxist deliberations in the Soviet Union, but it also signals that Engels’s theory is mostly concerned with the bourgeois state. I return to this feature of Engels’s analysis a little later.

### The Weberian Line

The many facets of this definition would coalesce into two parts of a tradition concerning the modern European or bourgeois state. Each part emphasises certain features of Engels’s definition while neglecting others. The first is the Weberian line, which sides with the state’s agency, drops the subjective-objective opposition and focuses on power and apparatus. Weber defines the state as “the form of human community [*Gemeinschaft*] that (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* [*Gewalt*] within a particular territory” (Weber 2004, 33; emphasis in the original). Here we find agency,

*Gewalt*, territory and legitimacy, the final term indicating (for Weber) the dreaded bureaucracy that provides a rational-legal legitimacy to the state.<sup>9</sup> Now we face a problem: too many rush to assume that Weber's (derived) definition is a universal one. Yet, Weber is keen to stress that it is "specific to the present," that it applies to a "nowadays" that concerns the Western "modern state." This particularity applies to the definitions that attempt to tweak Weber's, despite the almost irresistible temptation to universalise. For example, the European state form is really a "protection racket" produced out of the interaction between war-making to overcome rivals, state-making, protection and extraction in the form of taxes (Tilly 1985, 1990), or it is a monopolising of physical violence plus taxation (Elias [1994] 2000). By now it should be obvious that these proposals also draw from Engels. At the same time, Weber provides the merest hint towards developing a feature implicit in Engels's definition. I speak here of what may be called the ideological dimension of the state. Weber comes closest with the suggestion of a legal legitimation of the state (*de jure*), but it would fall to others in the Weberian tradition to emphasise the ideological dimension further: symbolic capital and violence which underlie physical violence so as to procure order (Bourdieu 2014, 4);<sup>10</sup> a cultural and moral power that constitutes and regulates social and individual identities (Corrigan and Sayer 1985); or indeed the neologistic processes of "biopower" and "governmentality" (Foucault [2012] 2014).

### **The Marxist Line**

The other side of this tradition leads us to Lenin and then the spate of Marxist approaches to the state in the flurry of the 1970s and 1980s. Lenin's ground breaking contribution, "The State and Revolution," was written on the eve of the October Revolution, in a leaking straw hut in the Finnish countryside after the premature July revolt in 1917. Lenin writes in the spirit of returning to Marx and Engels and yet goes beyond them, since they left many points undeveloped, if not untouched, concerning the post-revolutionary state. The important steps in the opening pages of the work (Lenin [1917] 1964, 392–402; [1917] 1969, 7–18)<sup>11</sup> are as follows: (1) the "state is a product and a manifestation of the *irreconcilability* of class antagonisms," so much so that "antagonism objectively *cannot* be reconciled"; (2) the state is "a power which arose from society but places itself above and alienates itself more and more from it"; (3) it becomes in the hands of the bourgeoisie "an organ of class *rule*, an organ for the *oppression* of one class by another"; (4) the oppressed class cannot simply take over the existing apparatus but must overcome and destroy "the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class"; (5) since the existing state functions as the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, it "must be replaced by a 'special coercive force'<sup>12</sup> for the suppression of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat (the dictatorship of the proletariat)"; (6) when the former enemies have been vanquished (or absorbed), the state is no longer necessary and will wither away.

Lenin is most interested in the two dialectical oppositions neglected by the Weberian line, namely, dependency-agency and subjective-objective. In this respect, he is closer to Engels (points 1–3 and 6 are drawn directly from Engels). But he also replicates Engels's ambivalence concerning the state as an organ or as inescapably shaped by the class in question—the subjective-objective tension. On the one hand, the state is an organ, an instrument deployed by one class.<sup>13</sup> Its various mechanisms for imposing order also appear neutral, such as a legal system, standing army, police, prisons and so on. On the

other hand, the state and its various mechanisms are very much a part of those struggles since they are crucial to the class rule by the bourgeoisie. That class imposes its own order on society, asserts the universality of its own values, cements a specific economic system in place, and sets limits for what positions are acceptable within political debate. Above all, it does so by curtailing the opportunities of its enemies, depriving them of the means and methods of struggle to overthrow the system itself, including the possibility of self-arming. The trap, then, is to succumb to the temptation to work within the framework of the bourgeois state, with its liberal democratic shape (as Kautsky argued: Kautsky [1918] 1964, [1919] 2011; see Lenin [1918] 1965, [1918] 1969).<sup>14</sup> If I now include points 4 and 5, it should be clear that Lenin bends towards an objective analysis of this form of the state.

Subsequent Marxist efforts to analyse the state fall within the pattern of these oppositions, although they tend to shy away from Lenin's proposed solution concerning the destruction of the bourgeois state and the dictatorship of the proletariat. While Lenin was interested in how such a state may be overthrown, they are interested primarily in how it functions. In this light, many proposals attempt to mediate between the dependency of the state on the relations of domination and the simultaneous function of the state as an autonomous shaper of such relations (Esping-Andersen, Friedland, and Wright 1976; Carnoy 1984, 50). At the extreme end of the agency argument is the proposal—with obvious debts to Weber—that the state is an autonomous organisational actor, having developed independently from capital and class and seeking to enhance its own interests and power, at times at the expense of dominant capitalists (Skocpol 1979; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Block 1980; Mann 1986–2013). Other critics prefer some form of dependency, such as the stronger position that the state derives from the contradictory logic of capitalist accumulation and performs the long-term enabling tasks (law, police and military, infrastructure, education and so on) that capital cannot perform for itself (Holloway and Picciotto 1978). Or the state's autonomy is “embedded” through the specific connections between the state and elite interests (Evans 1995). Or, in an effort to mediate more dialectically between autonomy and dependency, the state becomes an internally contradictory apparatus that is both constrained, in light of capitalist demands, in acting in the best interests of the population (the contradiction between capitalist accumulation and democratic legitimation) and attempts to solve problems arising from capitalist relations (inequality, exploitation, social breakdown) although it cannot deal with the core capitalist features that generate such problems (Offe 1984, 1974).

As for the subjective-objective tension, proposals tend not to interpret it in dialectical terms, but to run with either side. Subjectively, the capitalist state becomes an instrument of class domination, whether by legitimating capital class hegemony (Gramsci) or through a ruling class based on the concentration of capital in the relatively few hands that have material and ideological control over the levers of power (Sweezy 1942; Baran and Sweezy 1966; Miliband 1969; Domhoff 1979). At this point, the implicit ideological dimension of the subjective position comes truly to the fore, since a crucial factor in the ruling class's use of the state is ideological control and legitimation. On the objective side, the state becomes a structure—divided between apparatus and power—for ameliorating and regulating class struggle, the inherent crises of capitalist economics and its uneven development—so as to provide a relatively stable environment for capital (Poulantzas 1969, 1978, 1980; Mandel 1975; Therborn 1978; Wright 1978; Jessop 1982; Przeworski 1985).<sup>15</sup>

Thus far, I have emphasised that the bulk of these considerations focus on the bourgeois or capitalist state, especially of European provenance. This is even the case with Engels, let alone the Weberian and Marxist lines that derived from Engels. The very tensions that I have traced should be seen as constitutive of the ambivalent and contradictory modern bourgeois state.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, the possibility of a socialist state has rarely been analysed. Those who do so tend to focus on the practical realities, seeking to assess the actual formations of the Soviet Union (Therborn 1978; Harding 1984; Hagen 1990). Analysis of the theoretical background to the socialist state is almost non-existent. In the next section, I turn to Stalin for the first theoretical steps in developing the possibility of a socialist state.

## A Theory of the Socialist State

Although Stalin is usually ignored in analyses of the state, he is the one who produced the first seeds for a theory of the socialist state. In order to do so, he had to overcome a number of hurdles bequeathed to him by Lenin, let alone Engels. The first concerns the tension between the state as a neutral instrument and as a form indelibly shaped by the particular situation and the class in control, while the second concerns the doctrine of the state's withering. In short, Stalin had to face squarely the limitations of Engels and Lenin in their focus on the bourgeois state. And yet, he had to do so while remaining faithful to both.<sup>17</sup> Let us see how he attempts this delicate task. The following analysis follows the twists and turns of Stalin's texts, tracing how he arrives at the theoretical basis for a socialist state.

### *Neutral Instrument?*

Concerning the first hurdle—between a neutral (and implicitly universal) tool or a specific form—Stalin initially tends towards the former position but then shifts decisively to the latter. In his earlier reflections, Stalin tended to see the state as a somewhat neutral tool that can be used in one way or another. Thus, if one speaks of a “bourgeois” or “proletarian” state, one speaks of the class that is wielding the state for its own purposes. For instance, in 1925 Stalin mentions, with reference to Lenin, a “new proletarian type of state” (Stalin [1925] 1954a, 313; [1925] 1952a, 306). He defines it as a state that exists not for the oppression of workers—as with a “bourgeois state”—but for their emancipation. Clearly this is a position close to Lenin's more instrumental notion, as the quotation from Lenin regarding a “socialist state” in the same year indicates (Stalin [1925] 1954b, 163; [1925] 1952b, 161). Indeed, earlier references to a socialist state continue in a similar vein, where Stalin offers any hint of a definition at all.<sup>18</sup> So, in a report to Lenin he speaks of an “apparatus” needed to “build” the socialist state (Stalin [1919] 1953a, 231; [1919] 1947a, 224; see also Stalin [1929] 1954c, 129; [1929] 1949c, 123; [1933] 1954a, 178; [1933] 1951a, 175), or of the socialist state systematically raising the wages of workers and reducing prices so as to provide the basis for economic wellbeing (Stalin [1927] 1954b, 198; [1927] 1948, 195), or of such a state not being one that exploits peasants even in the “scissors” situation of the late 1920s, since improvement of economic conditions is a basic feature (Stalin [1928] 1954, 168–69; [1928] 1949, 160; [1929] 1954b, 53–54; [1929] 1949b, 50).

## Withering?

By the 1930s, a subtle but significant shift begins to take place, when it became clear that the socialist state would be relatively permanent, rather than a transitional class tool. This trigger was the doctrine of the “withering away of the state.”<sup>19</sup> The wider theoretical context is vital, for it was the major hurdle Stalin had to overcome. Although Marx had hinted from time to time concerning such a withering (Marx [1847] 1976, 212; [1847] 1972, 182; Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 505–6; [1848] 1974, 482), Engels was the one who coined the phrase itself.<sup>20</sup> However, he did so only in the third edition (1894) of the deeply influential *Anti-Dühring*, where he adds “Der Staat wird nicht, abgeschafft, *er stirbt ab*” (Engels [1877–78] 1973, 262; emphasis in the original)—“The state is not ‘abolished.’ *It dies out*” (Engels [1877–78] 1987, 268; emphasis in the original).<sup>21</sup> And in “The Origin of the Family” Engels had spoken of the machinery of state being relegated to the museum of antiquities (Engels [1884] 1990a, 272; [1884] 1990b, 110). As for Lenin, the logic of his argument leads him also to this position, particularly in his exegesis of Marx’s brief comments on the stages of communism (Marx [1875] 1989, [1875] 1985; Lenin [1917] 1964, 472–79; [1917] 1969, 95–102). Lenin interprets this argument as the difference between socialism and communism, and thereby established a distinction that holds unto this day. Only in the stage of communism, argues Lenin, in which the distinction between mental and physical labour has passed (and thereby classes), in which human beings work voluntarily rather than under compulsion, and in which the last vestiges of the bourgeois state (“bourgeois law”) have passed, will the basis be established for the state’s withering away. That is, the state will not die out with communism, but only after communism is well and truly established. I stress one further point: the inability to predict when this will happen and the consequent delay. Stalin will make much of this delay, concerning which Lenin observes, “how soon . . . we do not and *cannot* know.” Indeed, he emphasises the “protracted nature of this process,” leaving the question of time open, “because there is *no* material for answering these questions” (Lenin [1917] 1964, 473–74; [1917] 1969, 96; emphasis in the original). What are we to make of this doctrine? As Losurdo points out, both Marx and Engels equivocate over what is really an anarchist position (Losurdo 2016). While they suggest—especially Engels—that the state would die out, they also repeatedly assert that certain administrative functions would need to continue for the sake of organisation and distribution of production. One of course needs a state for such tasks.

What does Stalin make of the doctrine? While he initially adheres to it (Stalin [1906–1907] 1954, 336–38; [1906–1907] 2013, 160–62; [1925] 1954b, 161; [1925] 1952b, 158), he also reinterprets it in light of the dialectical realities of what was now a much longer era of socialism. Such a reinterpretation begins to appear in 1933, in the midst of what one may initially suspect would be a rather droll joint plenum of the Central Committee (Stalin [1933] 1954a, 211–16; [1933] 1951a, 206–12).<sup>22</sup> The immediate context is the completion of the first five-year plan, with early claims that socialism had been founded in all aspects of the economy. One might expect that capitalist elements have been eradicated, but not quite, for he argues that the “moribund classes,” although defeated, have resorted to worming their way into the new forms of industry, agriculture, trade and even government in order to sabotage the new project. This situation leads him to argue for the intensification of class conflict, but as he does so, he also offers this comment on the state’s withering:



The abolition of classes is not achieved by the extinction of the class struggle, but by its intensification. The state will wither away, not as a result of weakening the state power, but as a result of strengthening it to the utmost, which is necessary for finally crushing the remnants of the dying classes and for organising defence against the capitalist encirclement that is far from having been done away with as yet, and will not soon be done away with. (Stalin [1933] 1954a, 215; [1933] 1951a, 210–11)<sup>23</sup>

No objective or even mechanical withering away here (as Engels and Lenin suggested), due to the state having passed its use-by date. Instead, it requires subjective intervention, actively strengthening the state in order to deal with the ferocious mischief and slander of one's class opponents. As he puts it elsewhere in debate with Bukharin, the purpose of a strengthened "proletarian state" is to "smash" the bourgeois state, which will only then enable a withering away of the state (Stalin [1929] 1954b, 77; [1929] 1949b, 73). Crushing one's opponents requires an even stronger state, let alone the need for a professional army in order to deal with international marauders.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the full force of his dialectic requires another turn. The state's strength is not merely the basis for its withering: the growth of the Soviet state's power intensifies "the resistance of the last remnants of the dying classes" (Stalin [1933] 1954a, 216; [1933] 1951a, 211–12).

### *Delay of Communism*

The seeds are already here for an argument for a strong socialist state. But let me first deal with the phrase "will not soon be done away with" from the text quoted above. Stalin picks up Lenin's emphasis on the length of time required, not only for communism but also for the withering of the state that follows. Elsewhere, he stretches out the "interim" of socialism, pushing the era of full communism further and further into the future. So he emphasises Lenin's phrase concerning the "very, very long time [*ochen' i ochen' dolgo*]" that it will take for global communism with its global language to arrive (Lenin [1920] 1966, 92; [1920] 1981, 77; Stalin [1929] 1954a, 361; [1929] 1949a, 346).<sup>25</sup> A couple of years earlier, in response to a question from the first labour delegation from the United States, Stalin comments laconically: "Clearly, we are still a long way [*eshche daleko*] from such a society" (Stalin [1927] 1954a, 140; [1927] 1949a, 134). The sense of delay increases in the 1930s, precisely in the context of the socialist offensive. For instance, in a speech to collective farm shock-brigaders in 1933, Stalin observes that a "happy, socialist life is unquestionably a good thing." "But," he continues, "all that is a matter of the future" (Stalin [1933] 1954b, 252; [1933] 1951b, 245). And in his report to the 17th Congress in 1934, he speaks poetically of "the commune of the future," which will be based on high technical achievements, abundance and collective living in all dimensions. "When will that be?" he asks in his typical catechetical style. "Not soon, of course [*Konechno, ne skoro*]" (Stalin [1934] 1954, 360; [1934] 1951, 353). Yet the question remains: when? A universal culture and society will not happen even in the early period of communism, which will be global and see a universal dictatorship of the proletariat. This stage marks only the beginnings of communism, for which we need to await a near mythical time in which communism "becomes part and parcel of the life of the peoples" (Stalin [1929] 1954a, 364; [1929] 1949a, 349). For this to happen, communism—in economics, politics and culture—must become second nature to human beings and the planet.



### *From the Practical to the Theoretical*

In the meantime, the stage of socialism was gaining its own characteristics. No longer was it seen as transitional, but it was becoming a stage in its own right. What is the nature of the state taking shape? Was it a relic of the bourgeois state, as Lenin would have it, or was it distinct and new? Circumstances had led to the position that the state was not so much a neutral instrument but a distinct and concrete entity determined and shaped by those in control. This situation evinces both practical and theoretical arguments, with the former leading to the latter. These appear in Stalin's most substantial reflections on the nature of the state (Stalin [1939] 1978, 411–22; [1939] 1997, 330–36; see also Stalin [1951–1952] 1986, 289; [1951–1952] 1997, 218). The issue once again was the state's withering. Now the situation was widely agreed to be an achieved socialism, with the exploiting classes abolished as a result of the socialist offensive. Why not give the state a push, argued some, enabling it to wither and become a feature of the museum of antiquities? Stalin replies by returning to Engels's well-known text (discussed earlier). True enough, suggests Stalin, but he invokes the spirit of Marxism through the letter: at an abstract theoretical level, Engels may be correct in light of the circumstances in which he wrote, but circumstances change and Marxists should reinterpret in light of the changed situation. The relevant circumstances in 1939 include the reality of specific internal developments in the country and the international situation. Thus, class opponents have been abolished within the Soviet Union, which entails that his argument from six years earlier concerning the intensification of class conflict is no longer necessary, or, at least, it is not necessary *internally*. The external situation is another matter. In a global situation, enemies abound, with the capitalist encirclement, persistent interventions and the ever-present threat of a fifth column. The new proletarian state may be able to withdraw from the internal situation, if not die away to some extent, but it would be foolhardy to imagine that international forces would simply leave the Soviet Union alone. The class struggle has shifted, from an internal reality and constitutive of the state, to an external and international reality, in which socialism faces off with capitalism. In this situation, one can hardly expect the dismantling and withering away of the socialist state. As van Ree observes, he "was realistic enough and not enough of a utopian to embark on a course of self-destruction" (Van Ree 2002, 137). The pertinence of such a practical assessment in 1939 should not be missed.

While he develops this argument, Stalin returns to his point that the founders of Marxism could hardly have known what the actual situation would have been under socialism in power, especially in terms of the development of socialism in one country, and so their abstract formulations need to be reconsidered. Crucially, even Lenin's "The State and Revolution" remained incomplete, with a second volume unwritten due to the realities of the October Revolution. Lenin may have tentatively called this section "The Experience of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917," but Stalin seeks to deal with the experience of the socialist state after 1917.<sup>26</sup> In short, Stalin argues that this second section concerns nothing less than the second stage of socialism.

### *A Second Stage of Socialism*

I cannot emphasise enough this distinction, between a first and second stage of socialism and thereby of a socialist state. Let me pause for a moment to set the context. This was the

extraordinary decade of the 1930s, which was extremely disruptive and saw the Soviet Union emerge as an economic and military superpower. The decade began with the “socialist offensive” underway, with its massive industrialisation and agricultural collectivisation, seeking to overturn at breakneck speed the sheer backwardness of Soviet industry and the chronic famines that had devastated Russia for decades, well before the October Revolution (Davies, Harrison, and Wheatcroft 1980–2003; Tauger 1991, 2001, 2005). The socialist offensive produced its winners and losers, with many enthusiastically embracing the changes and not a few dragging their feet, if not actively opposing the process. It was a decade of the affirmative action programme in relation to minority nationalities (Martin 2001), major breakthroughs for women, the Stakhanovite movement (Siegelbaum 1988, 210–46; Buckley 2006), the 1936 constitution and the beginnings of active involvement in anti-colonial struggles. At the same time, it also saw the elimination of the kulaks as a class, the gulags, criticism and self-criticism, the profound threats of a fifth column from exiled opposition forces and the Red Terror. In the midst of this revolutionary period, the theory of a new state began to emerge.

In terms of this theory, we may distinguish between form and content. Formally, in the act of distinguishing between two phases of the socialist state, Stalin opens up the possibility, if not necessity, for a socialist state in its own right. It remains to provide some content, beyond Lenin’s initial formulations. In the first stage, the socialist state functioned as Lenin stipulated, dealing with class enemies internally and externally, predicated on the interests of the labouring majority. This majority seizes control of the state apparatus and, through the dictatorship of the proletariat, wields the state apparatus to crush its enemies. Stalin adds the need for economic reconstruction and widespread universal education, which includes the crucial component of ideological education.

Only in the second stage does the socialist state begin to come into its own. Content concerning this stage must be drawn from various writings by Stalin, especially since he provides only the briefest of suggestions in but one paragraph of the piece I have been analysing thus far (Stalin [1939] 1978, 420–21; [1939] 1997, 335–36). The first three of the following points are drawn from this paragraph, but the remainder must be drawn from other writings: (1) the elimination of the last remnants of capitalist elements; (2) the establishment and reality of a socialist economic system (as a result of the socialist offensive); (3) cultural revolution, by which Stalin means educating and raising the masses to socialism; (4) the internationalisation of the class struggle and thereby of the dictatorship of the proletariat, farmers and intellectuals, in which the military, punitive organs and intelligence services turn their focus to external enemies;<sup>27</sup> (5) the consequent need for a strong socialist state, internally for the sake of enacting comprehensive reforms and externally for the purpose of protecting socialism in the context of capitalist encirclement (Stalin [1939] 1978, 420; [1939] 1997, 336; [1950] 1986, 178; [1950] 1997, 134);<sup>28</sup> (6) a new approach to the national question, in which the international category of class provides a new angle on the diversity of nationality, so that the socialist state is a multinational state (Boer 2015);<sup>29</sup> (7) the positive or affirmative action programme of the Soviet Union, which was not only the world’s first in terms of minority nationalities (or “ethnic groups”), but also requires a strong state and has been followed by socialist states since (Martin 2001); (8) the resolute anti-colonial drive that arose, theoretically and practically, from the internal experiences of affirmative action and provided the basis for the post-colonial era (Boer, *forthcoming*); (9) the need for the communist party to hold the reins of

power, although—in a dialectic of transcendence and immanence that constitutes socialist democracy—the party should never forget that it arises from the masses and is responsible for guiding them forward (Stalin [1924] 1953, 175–93; [1924] 1947, 169–86).

### Conclusion: At the Threshold

I suggest that Stalin has arrived at the threshold of a *theory* of the socialist state, in rather stark contrast to the majority of Marxist and other scholars, whose concern has been the bourgeois or capitalist state of European provenance. This is so even for Engels and Lenin, although they at least seek to understand the bourgeois state so as to overthrow it. Yet they remain trapped within its framework, signalled by the theory of the state's withering. This difference becomes apparent when we compare Engels's main points with those of Stalin. So stark is the difference that the only intersection between them concerns struggle. For Engels (and Lenin following him), the bourgeois state arises from class antagonisms, but then alienates itself from them to become a distinct structure shaped by the concerns of capital. By contrast, for Stalin the socialist state is clearly involved in struggle. It prosecutes socialism—the interests of workers, farmers and intellectuals—internally and increasingly externally. This takes place at many levels, in terms of economic construction, cultural revolution, nationalities policy, affirmative action, anti-colonialism and an internationalisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants.

At a theoretical level, Engels and Stalin are speaking of rather different entities. For some, the differences are simply too great, so they dismiss Stalin's arguments as a betrayal of Marxist "orthodoxy," as opportunistic and a finding of excuses to maintain the power of the Communist Party and thereby his own power through what was nothing more than a "bourgeois" state riven with class conflict (Aspaturian 1954; Balibar 1977, 49–55; Poulantzas 1980, 253–56; Cliff 1987, 144–61; Resnick and Wolff 2002).<sup>30</sup> At this point, we arrive at the intersection of theory and practice. I have emphasised throughout that my concern has been theoretical, moving from the overwhelming focus on the bourgeois or capitalist state to the first seeds of a theory of the socialist state. Many are those who have trod the ground of the former, while very few have even attempted to analyse the latter. Stalin was one of the few, if not the first. But his suggestions remain very much first steps towards a much fuller theory of the socialist state. The questions that remain are many. Does such a theory apply to other socialist states, or was it specific to the Soviet Union? How many stages can be identified? Is a communist state possible?<sup>31</sup> What is the relation between theory and practice? And what does the rich history of states with socialism in power teach us about such a state? The possibility of such questions and debates is possible only by stepping through the theoretical threshold provided by Stalin.

### Notes

1. It was also not a "neo-patrimonial state" (Gorlizki 2002; Gorlizki and Khlevniuk 2004, 58–65) or a "limping Behemoth" (Edele 2011, 98–122). Further, the proclamations (including by NATO) that it was an imperialist and (internal) colonising power have little weight (Viola 1996; Werth et al. 1999; Loring 2014).
2. In more recent research on the state, a scholarly division of labour has arisen, in which some seek the origins of states in ancient Southwest Asia (archaeologists and anthropologists) while others focus on the "modern" state (sociologists and political scientists).

3. My approach is born of patient and detailed attention to the texts in question, even though some would seek to dismiss Stalin's intellectual ability (Trotsky 1941, 83–84, 386; Deutscher [1949] 1967, 290; Plamenatz [1954] 1975, 7–8; Laue 1964, 202–3; Tucker 1973, 315, 318; Cliff [1976] 2004, 132). By contrast, for all its many flaws, Kotkin's biography notes Stalin's "vigorous intellect" (Kotkin 2014, 7).
4. Carnoy and Held offer useful surveys, focusing on Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, James and John Stuart Mill, and Rousseau (Carnoy 1984, 12–23; Held 1984, 14–31).
5. Apart from the fact that much of the material by Marx and Engels evinces shared positions (Engels wrote the work on the basis of Marx's notes), Engels was most influential on the second generation of Marxists, including Lenin. It may be possible to trace elements in Marx's texts (Carnoy 1984, 45–56), but the clearest statement was provided by Engels.
6. The following quotations are drawn from these pages. Emphases are in the original text.
7. In more detail: such a state is not only the state of the "economically dominant class," but this class, "through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class," which now "acquires a new means of keeping down and exploiting the oppressed class."
8. As Engels puts it elsewhere: "The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital" (Engels [1877–78] 1987, 266; [1877–78] 1973, 260). See also the statement in the second German edition of "The Manifesto of the Communist Party": "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes" (Marx and Engels [1872] 1988, 175; [1872] 1976).
9. In contrast to the earlier form of traditional (customary) legitimacy and the ambiguous charismatic legitimacy, of which Weber is both suspicious (the "conviction politician"—Weber's term) and for which he longs in order to overcome bureaucratic deadness (Weber 2004, 34–35).
10. More fully: "the state is the name that we give to the hidden, invisible principles—indicating a kind of *deus absconditus*—of the social order, and at the same time of both physical and symbolic domination, likewise of physical and symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 2014, 7).
11. The following quotations are drawn from these pages. Emphases are in the original text.
12. Lenin defines a "special coercive force" as "an organisation of violence for the suppression of some class" (Lenin [1917] 1964, 407; [1917] 1969, 24).
13. Some tend to caricature Lenin's approach as purely instrumental (Carnoy 1984, 45–61; Held 1984, 37–38).
14. "A democratic republic is the best possible shell for capitalism, and, therefore, once capital has gained control of this very best shell . . . it established its power so securely, so firmly, that *no* change of persons, institutions or parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic can shake it" (Lenin [1917] 1964, 398; [1917] 1969, 14).
15. Some efforts have been made at transcending these tensions, but they often end up replicating them (Jessop 1982, 1990; Held and Krieger 1984; Alford and Friedland 1985).
16. This includes transitional forms such as the "familial" state, the much-studied "welfare" state and—in an effort to apply the European concepts further afield—the loosely defined "developmental" state (Esping-Andersen 1990; Barrow 1993; Evans 1995, 47–59, 229–34; Woo-Cumings 1999).
17. Van Ree indicates that Stalin was studying the question closely in the 1930s, as marginal notes in the works by Marx, Engels and Lenin in his library indicate (Van Ree 2002, 136–38).
18. Early references without any effort at definition, apart perhaps from building a socialist state, appear occasionally (Stalin [1919] 1953b, 238; [1919] 1947b, 230; [1926] 1954, 87; [1926] 1948, 81).
19. Stalin summarises his argument here concerning the socialist state in the later intervention on linguistics (Stalin [1950] 1986, 178; [1950] 1997, 134–35).
20. Lovell is only partially correct in asserting that the doctrine was from Engels and not Marx (Lovell 1984, 71–89).
21. A comparison between the first and third editions in MEGA reveals the absence of the phrase there (Engels [1878] 1988, 445; [1894] 1988, 535). Only the third edition is published by MEW and MECW (cited above).

22. For useful analyses from the 1950s and 1960s, see the detailed discussions and disagreements in Daniels, Medalie, and Möller and Picht (Daniels 1953; Medalie 1959; Möller and Picht 1963).
23. A year later, at the 17th Congress, he summarises these points (Stalin [1934] 1954, 357–58, [1934] 1951, 350–51). Boobbyer quotes this text but then misses its significance entirely, preferring to seek for signs of the personal-cum-bureaucratic structure of Stalin's role in the state (Boobbyer 2000, 83–99).
24. Van Ree makes much of the military dimension, in which an army presupposes a state (Van Ree 2002, 138–39).
25. This crucial phrase is quoted on a number of occasions, first in 1927 (Stalin [1927] 1954c, 156; [1927] 1949b, 151; [1930] 1954, 374; [1930] 1949, 363).
26. Unfortunately, Krausz's analysis is decidedly unhelpful on this crucial point (Krausz 2005, 238–39).
27. In his interview with Emil Ludwig, Stalin observes that the new state is not a “national” state but an “international” state, which strengthens the international working class (Stalin [1931] 1954, 107; [1931] 1951, 105; see also Stalin [1937] 1978, 248; [1937] 1997, 155; Van Ree 2002, 138–39). Only a couple of years later, the need for such institutions became all too evident with the Nazi attack on the socialist state (Stalin [1941] 1984, 16; [1941] 1997, 77).
28. As Losurdo (2008, 95–102; [1998] 2015, 77–78) points out, it was the genius of the Bolsheviks not merely to recover the state when it was on its way to collapse during the disasters of the Japanese War, First World War and Civil War, but to develop a strong state. Van Ree (2002, 136) pays due emphasis to the strong state. However, Kotkin cannot see past this feature of the state, while Poulantzas is decidedly unhelpful on the question of Stalin's approach to the state as such (Poulantzas 1980, 253–56; Kotkin 2014, 289–95).
29. For example, in his reflections on the 1936 constitution, Stalin speaks of “fully formed multinational Socialist state [*mnogonatsional'noe sotsialisticheskoe gosudarstvo*]” (Stalin [1936] 1978, 163; [1936] 1997, 126), which has weathered all manner of shocks and withstood all tests.
30. Cockshott and Cottrell offer a useful counter-argument (Cockshott and Cottrell 1993, 4–5).
31. Stalin hints at the possibility (Stalin [1939] 1978, 422; [1939] 1997, 336).

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