

SECTION IV: BASIC ANALYSIS OF POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY
FIRST WEEK--THE STATE

I. Introduction to this section of study

After taking a quick overview of the historical materialist analysis of economics (the "base"), we now move our focus to general analysis of the "superstructures"--politics and ideology. We plan to spend three weeks studying the theory of the superstructures, compared to the one week that we spent on economics, because we feel that the former is of more immediate practical importance to all of us.

The study for the first week of this section deals with the predominant structures of political and ideological power in society (principally capitalist society). This study revolves around the concept of the State. For Marxism, the State is the primary means by which the reproduction--the continued existence and development--of a given class society is guaranteed. Since the State only exists in class societies, its function is to insure the continuing domination of the prevailing ruling class. The State's main role is to contain and combat the class struggles of the subordinate classes, as it organizes the class struggle of the ruling class.

It is important to note, however, that a ruling class (or ruling alliance of classes and class fractions) does not maintain its dominance simply through coercion and threat of coercion. A ruling class must win a degree of "consent" from the masses by saturating them with ruling-class ideology. Thus a ruling class guarantees its rule by means of both coercion and "cultural hegemony."

We must, therefore, approach the question of the State, by relating it to the question of hegemony.

II. The first reading for this week: Lenin's State and Revolution

To say the obvious, State and Revolution is a very famous book. And today, over 60 years since it was written, it remains the most widely read Marxist text on the State. However there are problems with the way in which S & R is often studied, especially by those in the dogmatic wing of the US Marxist-Leninist movement. S & R is often read as if it were a fully developed Marxist treatise on the general theory of the State--which it isn't--and as if it contained a full analysis of the capitalist State--which it doesn't. To read S & R properly, in a Marxist manner, we have to know something about what S & R is, and something about the historical moment during which it was produced.

Lenin wrote S & R as a carefully-aimed polemical intervention in the emergency situation of mid-1917. The Russian Revolution was deep into its first stage: Tsarist absolutism had been overthrown, and the proletarian seizure of State power was imminent. Furthermore, international capitalism had been critically weakened by three years of fratricidal imperialist war. In the war-torn chaos of Europe, the popular masses were beginning to stir. But the international socialist movement, apparently unified and strong on the eve of World War I, was deeply split and confused. Throughout Europe, and in Russia, two wings were emerging. A reformist wing (the original "revisionists")

was gaining ascendancy in Europe (though not in Russia) and was threatening to divert the masses from revolution and objectively aid in the re-stabilization of capitalism. And a revolutionary wing was developing, though it was scattered and un-unified everywhere--except in Russia.

Lenin's purpose in S & R was to attack the revisionist blockade of the revolutionary process throughout Europe and Russia, and to strengthen the revolutionary trend. And his attack was shaped to meet the demands of the situation.

First of all, he did not concern himself with a general overview of the theory of the State. He addressed the particular problem of the relationship between the proletarian revolution and the State, especially the problem of the nature of the future proletarian State--the "dictatorship of the proletariat." This is evident in the title that Lenin gave to this book: "The State and Revolution."

Secondly, he made no attempt to "break new theoretical ground," to further develop and extend the existing Marxist theory of the State and proletarian revolution. As he clearly states in the "Introduction", his purpose was to concisely restate what Marx and Engels had said about the question at hand, and to prove that the revisionists had completely broken with Marxism and were now holding anti-Marxist and anti-revolutionary positions--the latter's claims to the contrary notwithstanding. This explains why Lenin so extensively quotes and paraphrases Marx and Engels. Lenin was no quotation-mongering dogmatist, and his use of quotation in S & R has a very particular political purpose. Furthermore the sections of S & R where he did plan to extend the theory of the State--Chapter VII on the Russian Revolution of 1905 and 1917--were never written.

Thirdly, it should be observed in passing that the extremely sharp polemical manner in which Lenin deals with the revisionists reflects the character of the period. Lenin felt that, in the prevailing revolutionary and pre-revolutionary situation, the revisionists were enemies of the revolution. Subsequent events--particularly in Germany--proved him to be right.

History indicates that State and Revolution successfully fulfilled its purpose. It strengthened the Bolsheviks, and helped them to establish the first socialist State. Moreover it was a document that helped to draw the line between revisionists and communists, thus aiding the birth of the world-wide Communist International.

But again, for us to study S & R as if it gave us all of the basic conceptual tools to analyze the advanced capitalist State, and to elaborate strategy vis a vis this State, is to theoretically disarm ourselves. It can, though, be used as a very valuable introduction to certain aspects of this problem.

III. Introducing the author of the second reading: Antonio Gramsci

The Marxist theory of the State was little developed from the time of Lenin's death to the 1960's for a variety of reasons. On the theoretical level, the theses of Lenin's State and Revolution were in fact repeated by many communists in an increasingly dogmatic manner, as if they were sufficient in themselves as a general theory of the State. On a practical level, in the advanced capitalist

countries, shifts occurred from forms of ultra-left sectarianism to forms of rather extreme pragmatism. For example, forms of ultra-leftism appeared which tended to see anything but a policy of diametrical opposition to, and absolute abstention from, developments in any aspect of the State apparatuses as anti-Marxist. On the other hand, rightist pragmatic attitudes appeared (increasingly from the late thirties), which mandated unprincipled surrender of initiative to and even collaboration with aspects of the Capitalist State, in the name of necessity. Such shifts in practice are symptomatic of the poverty--or virtual absence of adequate guiding theory.

There were, of course, exceptions. And Antonio Gramsci was the most notable of these. Gramsci was a leader of the Italian Communist Party, was imprisoned by Mussolini in 1926, and died shortly after he was released from the fascist jails (he was released because he was fatally ill) in 1934. His contributions to the Marxist theory of the State are numerous, but for our purposes we can mark out the two main ones. First, drawing heavily on Marxist analyses and concepts in particularly the 18th Brumaire, Gramsci looked deeply into the relationship between the various state apparatuses themselves, between the State apparatuses and bourgeois institutions not normally associated with the State, and between the various apparatuses and the classes and fractions of classes present in bourgeois social formations. Secondly, he was especially concerned with the role of culture and ideology as both the "cement" of capitalist formations, and as a crucial component of the proletarian class struggle. In this regard he developed the concept of the "hegemonic" function of ruling class ideology. Parenthetically, it is not surprising that many of his notes on the State and hegemony constantly revolved around the hegemonic crisis, dictatorship and fascism.

For our study, we have chosen a number of selections from Gramsci's prison notebooks, the main corpus of his mature writings. The problem with using selections from the prison notebooks in a study group is that these writings are very hard to read and understand. Gramsci's notebooks are often rambling and cryptic--full of references and asides that are sometimes quite obscure. Moreover, he frequently employs unusual and elliptical terminology, sometimes defining terms inconsistently. The reasons for these difficulties can be quickly summarized.

Gramsci wrote his notebooks in a very unfavorable climate: fascist prison. He was subjected to brutality, intermittent isolation from the outside world, a lack of books and reference material, and almost constant illness. All of these factors made it difficult to develop sustained, systematic analyses.

Also Gramsci had to write in such a way that his notebooks would not be seized by the prison censors. He often employed Aesopian language, and less offensive (to the fascists) terminology: "social group" for ~~Marxism~~; "the founders" for Marx and Engels, "philosophy of praxis"

Finally, Gramsci, due to his commitment to help rescue Marxism from the mechanical economism that came to dominate the pre-World War I Second International, drew heavily on the Italian neo-Hegelian Idealism tradition, and especially on some figures like Croce. In doing so, he sometimes imported terminology into his own analyses, giving it an historical materialist content. In fact, it is likely that Gramsci went too far in this direction at times, though not in

the selections that we are reading.

All of these factors have to be taken into account when reading Gramsci. The short selections that we have made from his work attempt to avoid some of the most problematic passages. At the risk of further over-extending this study guide, we have decided to provide some guidelines for studying our selections.

IV The second readings for this week

Our first reading from Gramsci is a selection from his "Formation of the Intellectuals." In this he discusses the functionaries ("deputies") that are either "organically" generated ("organic intellectuals"), or adopted ("traditional intellectuals"), by the bourgeoisie. (Elsewhere Gramsci writes on intellectuals--both organic and traditional--which are attached to classes other than the bourgeoisie.) In particular he analyzes the intellectuals' role in "political society" (the State), and in "civil society" (the realm of ideology and culture). Gramsci's use of the concept "intellectuals" as a special social category is somewhat unusual for our movement, though it is not unusual in the broader Marxist tradition. What is different in Gramsci is the wide scope that he gives to this category, and his original distinction between organic and traditional.

In our second selection, taken from Gramsci's note on "The State," he somewhat elusively criticizes several bourgeois notions about the capitalist State ("ethical State", gendarme-nightwatchman State, "interventionist State," etc.). Within these ideological notions he identifies partial truths, then hypothetically suggests a broad, scientific conception of the State. His hypothesis is that the capitalist State is more than the government or "political society" (more than simply the apparatuses of coercion and administration), for it includes certain "private organisms," certain elements of "civil society." This conception is encapsulated in the formula he suggests: "...State= political society+civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion." Gramsci goes so far as to suggest that the simple identification of State with government represents an "economic-corporative" error--that is, a narrow, superficial viewpoint.

Our third selection is from Gramsci's note on "...Political Parties in Periods of Organic Crisis." This piece was clearly inspired with his drive to understand authoritarian forms of the capitalist State--especially fascism. For our purposes, though, it is especially important to view this selection as an example of how central the ideological-hegemonic function of the State is to Gramsci's theory of the State; Gramsci proposes that a "crisis of hegemony" reverberates "throughout the State organism." Also Gramsci suggests that analyses of different forms of the capitalist State must start from an analysis of the functioning of and the relationship between the various State apparatuses. And the historical transition between forms of State entails radical shifts in the relationships between apparatuses. His discussion here exemplifies the tentative definition of the State that was present in the previous selection, for he includes both governmental institutions (parliament, the bureaucracy, the military, the executive) and "private" institutions (political parties, the Church, "newspaper organization") among the State apparatuses.

This selection draws heavily and explicitly on Marx's 18th Brumaire. It shares with this essay by Marx an overriding concern

with the mechanisms by which social classes "represent" themselves in the sphere of politics and ideology--for the ruling class, the sphere of the State.

The final selection, "Wave of Materialism" and "Crisis of Authority", also deals with the hegemonic crisis. This time, however, the approach is from a different angle: how a "rift between popular masses and ruling ideologies" appears, how it tends to be resolved, what opportunities it opens.

To sum-up: it is our hope that by grappling with some of the admittedly difficult texts by Gramsci in our study group, and by collectively clarifying the reading during our discussion sections, we will all get some sense of possible lines of analysis to better understand the U.S. capitalist State. It is unfortunate that the analytical suggestions made by Gramsci so long ago have only recently been taken up by such theorists as Nicos Poulantzas and Charles Bettelheim.