

# 5. Lenin as Theorist of the Autonomy of the Political?

*On a Recent  
Misunderstanding*

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## 5.1 Introduction

In the recent Italian Marxist debate, some authors (like Carlo Formenti) have considered Lenin as the theorist of the autonomy of the political.<sup>1</sup> This operation had already been accomplished by Mario Tronti in *Operai e capitale*, in which Lenin is the one who discovered the laws of a ‘political rationality *absolutely autonomous* from everything’ (Tronti 2019, 288). To be understood: autonomous from the level of struggles and capable of targeting a further level of class conflict, namely the State. The political aim of this reading is easily discernible: through the valorisation of the Soviet experience of the NEP, Leninism becomes a theoretical-organisational model for bringing the wild market economy (with its destructive effects on the sovereignty of nations) back to the political control of the State. An abstract, state-centric ‘re-politicisation of the economy’ is thus seen as the best strategy to combat the capitalist economy. This reading of Lenin’s thought provided a strict separation between Lenin’s theoretical reflection on the NEP and Lenin of *State and Revolution*, seeing in the former a realistic correction to the utopianism of the latter. Formenti, in fact, like Losurdo, has judged the problem of the extinction of the State as a mythological and messianic remnant of a typically nineteenth-century philosophy of history, which views history as a progressive liberation from all forms of natural and political domination (Losurdo 1997, 182-205). Formenti says also, with regard to Tronti, that there is a convergence between the Schmittian and Leninian conceptions of the political, ‘an option, Formenti says, that has been reproached by a left-wing culture accustomed to looking at the finger instead of the moon’ (Formenti 2024).<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this short paper will be to show the theoretical and political inconsistency of such a proposal. In the first place, we have to say that a text such as *State and Revolution* and the texts from 1918 to 1922 are *not* in contradiction

because they are on two different theoretical levels: the former, speaks of the forms of development and dissolution of the State as an instrument of class dictatorship; the latter, speaks of the economic empowerment of the workers’ State after the tremendous crisis caused by wartime communism, civil war and, of course, the failure of Revolution in Europe; the first, investigates the *morphological movement* of the State as an instrument of dictatorship; the second, discusses about the realisation of the socialist hypothesis in a given historical context. As we will try to demonstrate immediately with a quick analysis of some texts from 1918-1922, Lenin’s theorisation of a tactic of proletarian state capitalism *is not* in direct contradiction with the Marxian and Leninist idea of the withering away of the state. But let’s move now on to the texts. Obviously, I will not be able to cover the complex economic and political history of this period of the Soviet experience here. Here I will limit myself to reflecting on certain concepts and theoretical-political categories employed by Lenin.

## 5.2 State and Revolution, and NEP

In the 1919 text, *Economy and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Lenin writes that the transitional period from capitalism to communism cannot but contain the traits or peculiarities of *both* these forms of social economy. In Russia, the dictatorship of the proletariat, which requires an intensification of the class struggle, faces three forms of social economy, namely capitalism, small-scale commodity production, and communism, corresponding to three essential social forces, namely the bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeois peasantry, and the proletariat (Lenin 1974, vol. 30, 107-118). This means that, in the early years of Soviet Russia, the class division of society is *far* from being overcome: hence the *dictatorial* form of the proletariat’s political power through the party. The monopoly capitalism of the socialist state is required by the *non-uniform*

class structure of Russian society. Soviet power must be able to govern the still existing plurality of classes, and at the same time, enhances the economic strength of the nation in order to overcome feudal backwardness. The Soviet state is not yet *the self-government of the whole of society*, but the proletarian government of still existing classes and the respective economic traits of these classes. Lenin does not get lost in an illusory proletarian government of developed, virgins, capitalist elements as in western countries without workers control, as Bukharin put it in the pages of *The Political Economy of the Transitional Period against the hypothesis of proletarian state capitalism* (Bukharin 1979, 134). After all, even the working class, Lenin admitted, is fragmented and unprepared to exercise its dictatorship directly.

In the 1921 text, *The Tax in Kind*, Lenin says that the necessity of transitioning to state capitalism in Russia has a *profound* economic reason, namely the various economic and social forms existing in Russia: patriarchal peasant economy, small-scale commodity production, private capitalism, state capitalism, and socialism. Lenin notes, in this regard, that the struggle is not between state capitalism and socialism, but between the first three elements and state capitalism and socialism, because both the petty bourgeoisie and the peasant economy do not tolerate either state interference in their affairs or state control over capitalism, that is, a more advanced and rationalised form of capitalist economy, as Friedrich Pollock noted in his studies on the planification of economy (Pollock 1973). Lenin, in short, always holds firm to the concrete economic situation of Russia, which cannot be forced and changed by a voluntaristic act. Lenin asserts that capitalism is a gigantic step forward, leading to a more secure path to socialism, since ‘socialism is inconceivable without the technique of large-scale capitalist industry, organised according to the latest word of modern science, without a systematic state organisation that subjects tens of millions of people to the strictest observance of a single norm in the process of production and distribution of products’ (Lenin 1974, vol. 32, p. 339). Here there is no vague idea of reconciling capitalism and socialism, but rather the necessity of imposing a worker’s political direction on the economic development of capitalism towards more organised forms. We could say with a formula: *a worker acceleration of capital*. This, in the NEP period, will lead to

the management, by the workers’ state, of the development of productive forces through the opening to private capitalism, and the concession system. The investment of capitalists in Russia, as well as the concession of industries to capitalists, will lead to an increase not only in industrial production, but also in the working class, necessary for the implementation of social revolution in the transitional phase. This phase of retreat, this tactical withdrawal, which in 1921 also forced the establishment of buying and selling and the circulation of money regulated by the state, is a moment of the war *against the bourgeoisie*. Lenin binds to refunctionalise questions of political economy to the political government of the workers’ state. This process, it goes without saying, is not linear. Lenin is well aware that the bourgeois enemy may take over: the NEP is a contradictory and dangerous phase.

In the text *End of the Retreat* from the XI Congress of the Russian Communist Party on March 27, 1922, Lenin claims the experimental nature of this socialist state capitalism, in the establishment of which, he says, ‘we must proceed on our own’, without models (Lenin 1973, vol. 33, 259-326). This means that state capitalism in a socialist state<sup>3</sup> is irreducible to state capitalism in a capitalist state. Hence the uselessness of leafing through the old books. In *The Impending Catastrophe*, state monopoly capitalism, where corporations and trusts work for all the people, ‘inevitably and unfailingly means a step, the march towards socialism’ (Lenin 1977, vol. 25, 323-369). It is important to see in these statements, against the accusations Lenin received from Bukharin and other left-wing communists, and against socialsciivist,<sup>4</sup> not a rigid exaltation of state capitalism as the ultimate stage of socialism, but rather its dialectical character as a step, a stage, a moment, of a transitional process. Moreover, the theme of the extinction of the state, that is of communism, in which the experienced masses *know how* to govern and direct the state and the economy, does not cease to return as a dialectical correlate in the writings from 1918 onwards. In a text such as *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power*, Lenin reasons on the need to learn from the more advanced capitalist states (e.g. Germany and America), the administration and management of the productive machine, scientific progress, the Taylor system (Lenin 1972, vol. 27, 235-277). Only once the Soviet state has modernised will it be able to dispense with the bourgeois technicians and scientists (initially

<sup>1</sup> We will refer below to a series of texts recently published by Carlo Formenti in his blog Per un socialismo del XXI secolo, particularly: Comunismo, democrazia, liberalismo, 19 October 2021 (Formenti 2021), Che cosa ho imparato da Mario Tronti, 19 August 1923 (Formenti 2023), and Antonio Negri. Un uomo che voleva assaltare il cielo alzandosi sulla punta dei piedi, 1 January 2024 (Formenti 2024). / <sup>2</sup> According to Tronti, who here goes to Schmitt’s trolling, ‘in Lenin’s political criterion there is no longer the iustus hostis: the just enemy disappears, the entire bourgeois cosmos becomes altogether the enemy to be put down by all means’ (Tronti 2023, 245). We will see shortly how far Lenin is from both this terrorist revolutionary romanticism and any mysticism of revolution. In Lenin there is always a lucid dialectical assessment of the measures to be taken against the ‘class enemy’, starting with an analysis of the concrete situation. A text like Leftism, Childhood Illness of Communism demonstrates this. / <sup>3</sup> On this subject, see Giacché 2017, 54-81. / <sup>4</sup> The debate with these currents was recently analysed with great care in Krausz 2015.

paid as an elite administrative class) and leave the knowledge of government to the masses capable of running the entire society. Lenin's insistence on the problem of the education of the masses in the administration of things implies the persistence, albeit undercurrent, of the theme of the extinction of the state as the ultimate goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>5</sup>

### 5.3 Communism and Organisation

In *Communism, Democracy, Liberalism* (Formenti 2021), it is no coincidence that Formenti brands the distinction, revived by Álvaro Linera, between state socialism (state monopoly of the means of production) and control from below of social richness as messianism and utopianism. But, on closer inspection, at stake in this distinction is the difference between socialism and communism. A difference that, from Formenti's point of view, should coincide as such with a messianic perspective. Thus, it seems that the *possible socialism* proposed by Formenti, and in fact coinciding with a state capitalism controlled by a socialist political force, entails the *impossibility of communism*. Yet,

socialism should be understood, dialectically, as a transitional phase that, among other things, educates the masses in the regulated administration of society and prepares the objective conditions of the property relations and real appropriation that should characterise the communist mode of production. In short, it is as if Formenti refuses even to think about the most avant-garde and unheard-of aspects of Marx and Engels' political theory, namely: 1) the irreducibility of the organisation of society to the state-form; 2) the fact that the communist (i.e. no-longer-statural) organisation of society is more rational and efficient than the statural one.

So, contrary to what Formenti says, the development of the productive forces does not depend on a 'infatuation with technology' (in Formenti's words), but it is the necessary objective condition for the transition<sup>6</sup> to socialism, which requires an efficient organisation of production, the presence of specialised and disciplined workers, and a high level of technical and scientific development to be subordinated to the interests of society as a whole. For Lenin, the problem lies not only in the amount and intensity of political power, or in the

economic means, but also in the technical skill and governmental ability of the working class: its ability to lead and maintain the transition. As is evident from these quick references, the state's political governance of socio-economic forms in the transitional phase is not inspired by a vague idea of the autonomy of the political, but by the dialectical relationship between political class struggle and economic development.<sup>7</sup> The need for socialist state capitalism depends on the peculiar economic structure of Soviet Russia, its petty-bourgeois and backward character.<sup>8</sup>

In Formenti's hypothesis, on the contrary, a state that controls the market and redistributes products and resources, a state capitalism with a strong welfare state (in the model of the Hegelian state), seems to coincide with the transition to socialism itself. But, on closer inspection, state control of the economy, state intervention in the economy, *is not* socialism as such. Indeed, a distinction must be made between social and economic intervention by the capitalist state (often motivated by the intensity of cycles of struggle and inherent to the class nature of the state) and socialism.<sup>9</sup> And speak, as Formenti does, of a strong more democratic state makes *no sense* from Lenin's point of view, both because a strong state without workers' control remains a bourgeois and capitalist state, and because a democracy *sans phrase*, a democracy whose class character is not specified, is the revisionist ideology of pure democracy that Lenin contested in Kautsky.

Thus, in our view, the position like Formenti's fails to grasp the complex dialectic, within Lenin's thought, between internationalism and the national question,<sup>10</sup> between the development of productive forces and the

establishment of socialism, between the extinction of the State and the State as a *necessary dictatorship of the proletariat*,<sup>11</sup> between politics and economics. For Lenin, politics is the state condensation of society's contradictions, the space of their resolvability, not a generic and voluntaristic act of breaking the time continuum, nor, still less, the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction, which is always exercised *against* an external enemy, in order to conquer it, *after* the internal enemy has been silenced through violence, that is, in the case of Schmitt's Germany, the socialist forces (Schmitt 2007). We do not think that the Leninist conception of the political struggle separated from the economic struggle can be rubricated under the category of 'autonomy of the political' (in Tronti's sense). The political struggle, although independent of the tradeunionist struggle and involving different figures (the professional revolutionaries), points to the state because the state is the 'field of relations between all the classes' of *society*: the state is the political-organisational summit of society (Lenin 1977, vol. 5, 422). That is why the revolutionary organiser must address 'all strata of the population'. In this sense, for Lenin, there is no autonomy of the political as a decisionist irruption that subdues the savage force of the economy under its command. Politics, for Lenin, is the point of condensation and control of exploitation that invests the whole of society and the economic sphere.

'Politics is the concentrated expression of the economy', says Lenin. Politics, as long as it exists, and as long as there are classes, is that element which allows a *particular class* to maintain its domination, *thus also* its economic tasks (*Once Again on Trade Unions*, Lenin 1973, vol. 32, 70-108).

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive reading of the NEP period that focuses on Lenin's awareness of the risks of bureaucratism, see Le Blanc 2023, 157-177. On the relationship between the extinction of the state and the overcoming of the distinction between manual labour and intellectual/organisational labour, Antonio Negri insists in his recent preface to the new Italian edition of *State and Revolution* (Negri 2022) / <sup>6</sup> If we bear these brief passages in mind, we understand that Formenti makes a complete nonsense when he argues that in Lenin there is 'the idea of a revolutionary will that abruptly interrupts the 'normal' flow of historical events, imposing the reasons of social reproduction against those of economic progress, which makes the revolution of 17 present conservative rather than progressive characteristics in the bourgeois sense' (Formenti 2024). / <sup>7</sup> On Lenin's conception of the dialectic as knowledge of the contradictions of a social whole in the present moment, see Budgen, Kouvelakis, Zizek, 2007, 101-205. / <sup>8</sup> If, on one hand, Massimo Cacciari denies (wrongly in our opinion) the merely tactical-conjunctural character of the NEP, on the other hand he rightly states that the NEP represents the Leninist challenge of accepting and governing the contradiction between economic development and institutional forms, which makes total arbitrary control of objective economic legality by a certain political (albeit socialist) power impossible (Cacciari, Perulli 1975, 11-35). / <sup>9</sup> Concerning these functions, necessary for the reproduction of class relations by the capitalist state, Bucharin wrote in his 1915 essay *Toward a Theory of the Imperialist State*: 'To the extent that the organisations of state power are constructed according to a plan and are consciously regulated (something that occurs only at a certain stage in the state's development), to the extent, in other words, that one can speak of the state's having a purpose, that purpose must be defined by the interests of the ruling classes and their interests alone. This situation is by no means contradicted by the fact that the state fulfils, and has fulfilled, a variety of socially useful functions. The latter are simply a necessary condition, the *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of state power. Thus, the 'socially useful activities' of the state are essentially the conditions for prolonging and promoting to the utmost the exploitation of the enslaved classes of contemporary society, above all, of the proletariat. In their politics the ruling classes are guided by certain calculations, and the principle of the economy of forces prevails within the state organisation as well. The state builds railways, undertakes irrigation works, erects schools, etc. Why? Because this is the only way to facilitate the further development of capitalist relations, to ensure that a greater mass of values is created and flows into the pocket of the capitalist class, to guarantee that the process of exploitation will proceed even more smoothly and quietly. The state undertakes a number of sanitary measures, comes forth as the 'protector of labour' (factory legislation, etc.). Why? Again, not because the enslaved proletarians have pretty eyes, but because it is profitable for the ruling class, under certain conditions, to take this approach. The ruling class acts either in its own direct interest (e.g., the contemporary state is interested in good soldierly material and therefore occasionally has nothing against measures that somewhat retard national degeneration), or else out of strategic considerations in the class struggle against the oppressed. In the latter case the state power makes concessions because otherwise the process of exploitation would not proceed so smoothly. In this case the governing principle is still the interests of the ruling classes, which are merely hidden under a pseudonym – the interests of the 'nation', the 'people', the 'whole.' And the state is still the organisation of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class' (Bucharin 2015).

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, it seems to me that Formenti fails to grasp the contradictory nature of the nation state and the even positive aspects of its tendential overcoming. In the nation state he sees (in my opinion abstractly) only a sort of lifeline against the de-territorialising processes of capitalist globalisation. Why abstractly? Because it is as if he equates the national and anti-imperialist self-determination struggles of developing countries (whose importance is duly intercepted) with the western nation-states, as if Italy had the same 'need' for national self-determination as Palestine! Not to mention the fact that the capitalist nation-state has been and continues to be an unparalleled device for the exploitation of force-labour. Just take a look at the Italian situation: the removal of the citizenship income has served to 'liberate' (in the Marxian sense) huge quantities of very cheap force-labour. / <sup>11</sup> We agree with Althusser when he states that the concept of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is not a tactical concept, but a scientific concept, i.e. a necessary outcome of the Marxian analysis of capitalist society as a society still divided into classes (Althusser 2016).