



Louis Althusser's Critique of the Communist Party and the Question of the Postrevolutionary State

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This essay explores some aspects of the debate led by Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar on the strategy of the French Communist Party (PCF) in the 1970s. They saw the Euro-communist turn of the party as a strategy that accepted the influence of social democrats without addressing the crucial question of mass participation in the party. Their criticism of the PCF was also a criticism of the statist strategy in socialist countries at that time, which they saw as a fusion of the socialist state with the working-class party. Althusser radicalized his stance when he demanded that a revolutionary party should stay outside the state, both before and after a socialist revolution. In this text, the references made by Balibar and Althusser to works of Marx and Engels are compared with the political positions developed in the original texts, and some conclusions for contemporary political strategies are hinted at.

Key Words: Class Domination, Dictatorship of the Proletariat, Étienne Balibar, Euro-Communism, Louis Althusser

Between 1975 and 1980, Louis Althusser radicalized his stance towards the state when he openly criticized the prevailing tendencies in the French Communist Party (PCF). The debate gained momentum when the PCF abolished the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” from its program in 1976. Étienne Balibar and Louis Althusser saw this deletion of the term from the program as a mistake, as if the heart of Marxism was being removed. While the deletion of this term seemed to be a concession to a more democratic form of communist politics, as had been demanded by the strong Euro-communist tendencies in Italy and Spain, from the perspective of Althusser and Balibar it opened the door to a stronger influence of the social-democratic and petty bourgeois ideologies in the PCF. The debate about these issues stopped abruptly in the early 1980s, but it was recently taken up in a few texts (Cavazzini 2009; Carlino 2010; Girometti 2012; Kalampokas, Betzelos, and Sotiris 2013; Motta 2014). Andrea Girometti (2012, 1) emphasizes that it is no coincidence that this debate between different strands of Marxists about the state started when a new fusion of politics and the state was being established in with the rise of neoliberalism—a phenomenon that is dominating global politics

today. It was in this period, the end of the 1970s, that Althusser underlined that politics cannot be reduced to the state, and he revived the battle for the abolition of the state in order to dismantle the neat integration of parties of the working class with the state both in capitalist and in socialist countries (2). Girometti claims that Althusser's questions can empower us to fight the long conservative counterrevolution that affects us today. In a similar vein, Andrea Cavazzini (2009) claims that the new form of capitalist hegemony that emerged at the end of the 1970s is integrated with the crisis of the communist option. Thus if we are to be serious about challenging capitalist hegemony today, we would have to go back to the causes of the disappearance of revolutionary organizations. Kalampokas, Betzelos, and Sotiris (2013) identify the quest for a new practice of politics as the center of Althusser's political and theoretical project, a proletarian politics that would not be limited by its integration into the state, by the confines of legality, or by the rules of ideological apparatuses. They recognize Althusser's idea to move the initiative of the masses to center stage, but they also note that all the participants of the debate in the late 1970s (including Althusser) overestimated the strength and underestimated the inherent contradictions of the contemporary social movements. While Kalampokas, Betzelos, and Sotiris (2013) think that Althusser's notion of a party outside of the state was evading way to avoid a debate on the state, they propose that a new practice of politics should be anchored into a *politics of labor*.

In this essay, I discuss the arguments put forward by Althusser on why he perceived the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as an essential feature of Marxism, and how this concept is connected to Althusser's critique of the state in the late 1970s. To do so, I discuss some texts that have been rarely looked at until today. In a second step, I will revisit key texts of Marx and Engels and reconstruct the problem that Althusser tried to address. The third part will take up insights from the debates in the nineteenth century and the 1970s and bring them to the contemporary world and the challenges for a revolutionary transformation of capitalist societies in the twenty-first century. I contend that Althusser's stance toward the problems of dealing with the state in postrevolutionary societies addresses a key question for left and progressive politics today. How can the state apparatus be transformed in a way that the participation of the broad masses in politics can be enhanced significantly, and how can this transformation be bound up with a dismantling of capitalist relations of production? For Althusser and Balibar these questions were condensed into the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, link mass democracy to the forms in which labor is organized. Thus, these key questions affect politics and work and their contemporary forms, which are guaranteed by the state. These questions also emerge in the contemporary theoretical approaches of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. And their contemporary relevance has led to the difficulties of new protest movements and political parties of the left both in Europe and in Latin America to change the course of their respective societies in a sustainable fashion. While Syriza in Greece and local governments in Barcelona and Madrid are facing serious

85 problems in breaking out of the iron cage of austerity due to the strangling by financial markets, most Latin American governments of the left are highly dependent on the export of raw materials and thus to a model of growth that is harming not only natural resources but also rural communities that are displaced from their territories and robbed of their traditional sources of income. Both of these deadlocks can be resolved by broader mechanisms of popular control, a more profound restructuring of state apparatuses, and more decisive ruptures in the model of economic relations. Althusser did not provide a satisfactory answer to the question of how to implement more profound changes but raised issues that pointed to key problems. As Balibar (1977, 110) put it, "Well-posed problems will always be more valuable than dozens of imaginary answers."

95 **The State and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in Althusser's Critique of the PCF**

100 The PCF adopted the notion of democratization of the state in its 1976 party congress, thereby replacing the demand for a dictatorship of the proletariat. This was a response to the Euro-communist tendencies that were looking for a more democratic approach to politics. The debates in the Italian and in the Spanish Communist Parties (which had the strongest Euro-communist tendencies) were oriented towards a rupture with Stalinism but that might also throw out the baby with the bathwater: any rupture with existing state formations was about to be abandoned in favor of a left, social-democratic approach that would allow for coalition governments with social-democratic parties. Even the Communist Party in Portugal that was generally perceived as traditional was blocking rather than supporting the initiatives of workers to take over factories when it was in government in 1974 and 1975. Thus, there was a growing motivation in Western European communist parties to participate in 'normal' governments and opt for piecemeal changes.¹ Pietro Ingrao (1979) from the Italian Party opted for a left-wing variant of Euro-communism and was hoping for the possibility of socializing the state by way of a strong civil society. In this context, Althusser's and Balibar's emphasis on the dictatorship of the proletariat seemed to fall out of time and was regarded as a weird "hyper-Leninist" position, but nonetheless their position had considerable repercussions.

115 Althusser (1978a, 12) had two main criticisms of this turn of the PCF: First, he emphasized that the notion of a democratization of the state might accompany illusions about the possibility of a peaceful and parliamentary road to socialism and that this kind of transformation might not entail a profound restructuring of the

120 1. The only West European communist party that did effectively participate in a national government during this period was the French Communist Party, and its brief participation in the first Mitterrand government amounted to a total defeat.

existing ensemble of state institutions. Second, he maintained that existing communist parties such as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the PCF would reproduce a bourgeois form of politics. In his famous text *The Crisis of Marxism*, Althusser addresses the problem of working-class organizations in the following way:

In the East as in the West we are confronted with the grave problem of the relation existing between these organisations and the State: with the problem, in the East, of the fusions of these organisations with the State, an open fusion; with the problem, in the West, of the *risk* of fusion, because the bourgeois State never stops trying to integrate the organisations of class struggle of the working class into its own operations, often with success. (1978b, 220; emphasis in the original)

Here it seems that the state is the main problem for a working-class movement and its organizations due to the state's power of integration. But Althusser (1978c, 72) clarifies the point in other texts from the same period. In his interview with Rossana Rossanda, he states that the objective tendency of contemporary society towards communism is a tendency that can be only realized by means of political struggle. He emphasizes that, with respect to the state, politics, and ideology, the tendency of communism seems to be "blocked" (72). He differentiates between the idea that the class struggle always and necessarily refers to the state as a terrain, as he had emphasized himself in the famous ISA-text, and a necessary critique of state-centered politics, which would have to complement the critique of political economy (73). The problem resulting from this lack of a profound critique of politics would be the lack of "an entirely different conception" (74) in the working-class movement of both politics and the state. But he does identify a practical critique of the bourgeois form of politics, one that is embodied in the manifold forms of organization in the new social movements: "And, of course the form of organization of the Communist Party is put into question since it is exactly modeled after the bourgeois political apparatus" (75; translated by the author).²

In this context, Althusser formulates one of his most controversial political theses: "Corresponding to its political and historic legitimation of existence, the party has to remain outside of the State by principle, even in the bourgeois State, and more so in the proletarian State. The Party has to be the instrument of smashing the State, before it becomes (formulated in a provisional way) one of the instruments for the withering away of the State" (75; translated by the author).³ He claims that the fundamental principles on this issue are already

2. Original in German: "Und natürlich wird auch die Organisationsform der Kommunistischen Partei in Frage gestellt, da sie genau nach dem Modell des bürgerlichen politischen Apparataufgebaut ist" (Althusser 1978c, 75).

3. Original in German: "Entsprechend ihrer politischen und historischen Daseinsberechtigung muß die Partei aus Prinzip außerhalb des Staates stehen, selbst im bürgerlichen Staat und erst

visible in the texts of Marx and Lenin. Althusser contends that without this autonomy of the Communist Party and working-class politics with reference to the state there is no escape from the logic of the bourgeois state.

Thus, it is not only the state that Althusser identifies as the main problem for working class politics, but more precisely the “bourgeois State” and the bourgeois political apparatus—this organizational form would include the Communist Party. In the interview with Rossanda the focus is more on the fact that the Communist Party has to remain outside of the state and less on its organizational form. In a third article from this period he further differentiates his stance. Here, Althusser (1998, 270) constructs a critique of Kautsky and Lenin’s formulations that bourgeois intellectuals would bring science into the worker’s movement (Kautsky 1902; Lenin 1961): “Behind this view ... lies a whole conception of the relations between theory and practice, between the Party and the mass movement, and between party leaders and simple militants, which reproduces bourgeois forms of knowledge and power in their separation.”

The relationship of Marxist theory to the working-class movement proves to be the starting point for Althusser’s considerations. His criticism of the bourgeois form of politics in the communist parties takes a detour to theory. It is in the 1859 preface that Marx designs his understanding of the role of Marxist theory, albeit implicitly. He defines a basis and a superstructure and states that “men become conscious” of class conflict “and fight it out” within the realm of ideological forms. Marx (1987, 263) makes perfectly clear that class struggle and the development of society are primary and that ideas about both emerge from these processes. Theory comes from ideas that enter into the class struggle in ideological form: “Marx no longer considers them as principles of explanation of the given whole, but solely in terms of their possible effect in the ideological struggle. Therewith the ideas change their form: they pass from ‘theoretical form’ to ‘ideological form’ ... Hence the essential thesis that ideas, no matter how true and formally proven, can never be historically active in person but only in the form of a mass ideology, adopted in the class struggle” (Althusser 1978c, 275). Althusser thereby concedes that Marxism has to enter the ideological realm in order to become an effective part of class struggle—thus, it follows that in class struggle there is no clean position beyond ideology. But if ideas have to enter the realm of ideology by necessity in order to become effective, can we draw the parallel conclusion that politics has to enter the realm of the state?

Althusser’s criticism of Marx in his last published text starts with questioning the organizational forms of the Communist Party that are at the very heart of his critiques in the late 1970s. Althusser writes that neither Marx nor his successors addressed the problem adequately and that for Marx “the whole problem resolved in advance through the transparency of a conscious, voluntary community

recht im proletarischen Staat. Die Partei muß das Instrument der Zerschlagung des Staates sein, bevor sie (provisorisch formuliert) eines der Instrumente für das Absterben des Staates wird.”

constituted by free and equal members” (Althusser 1978c, 276). Marx did not see “that every organization must furnish itself with an apparatus so as to ensure its own unity of thought and action, that there is no organization without an apparatus, and that the division between apparatus and militants could reproduce the bourgeois division of power and cause problems so serious as to end in tragedy—this was inconceivable to Marx” (276). Thus, the question arises through which kind of organization will the transition to socialism be achieved, and, once socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat are installed, how should they be organized in a way that the masses effectively participate in power? It is quite interesting that Althusser refers twice to Rosa Luxemburg in this text; he writes that she “sensed the danger” of installing the Communist Party as an apparatus that dominates the masses (276). And, moreover, Althusser hints at a new form of ideology: specific ideologies that emerge from organizations and are intended to reproduce their existence, which also includes organizations of the working class. Marxists “did not really take into account the fact of the difference and the potential contradiction between Marxist ideology and the ideology required for the existence, unity and defense of the organization” (277). For Althusser this shows that, first, Marxism needs a theory of the Party in order to reflect on the development of organizations of the working class, and, second, it also shows that bourgeois ideology exerts its influence on the organized working class not only on the level of ideas but also and more importantly on the level of “the materiality of organizational structures” (278). Althusser goes on to specify the problem addressed in his latest texts, from the existence of the state to the specificities of the bourgeois state and finally proceeding to the form of working-class parties that reproduce a certain ideology and a certain organizational structure. In all these critiques, his focus is to reflect on the forms of a postrevolutionary state.

But Althusser never wrote extensively on the notion of dictatorship of the proletariat. It is Balibar who delves deeper into the relevance of this concept; he identifies the dictatorship of the proletariat as the shaky and difficult period in which the working class is either able to move forward to communism or might stagnate and return to a capitalist order.⁴ Balibar underlines that it is one of the basic assumptions of Marxism that every society other than communist is a dictatorship of a class—which does not say anything about the political forms of this dictatorship. Thus, parliamentary democracy is a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, as are fascist regimes. The same goes for the dictatorship of the proletariat: it is necessary in order to break the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, and it is not bound to specific political forms. However, for Balibar, it is bound to two crucial features. First, the dictatorship of the proletariat can only be based on mass democracy (1976, 111), that is, the widest political participation of the masses based in support of the majority

4. Althusser (1977) repeats more or less the same positions in his later text “On the 22nd Congress of the French Communist Party.”

of the population This aspect is also linked to the necessity of a coalition between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie (114–5).

Second, the question of the mass organizations of the working class is crucial. How effective control of the state by the masses can be achieved is highlighted as one of the key questions by Balibar (118–23).⁵ Balibar raised similar questions as Althusser, but he added one important point: “For the ‘bureaucratic deformation’ is not a simple accident, not a simple inheritance from ancient times, which disappears in advanced capitalism (on the contrary—we have before our eyes proof of the enormous development of bureaucracy to which this leads!): it is, in different degrees and in different, evolving forms, inherent in every State, in the ‘division of labour’ which it involves. In fact, the contradiction is located *within* the proletarian State itself” (120; emphasis in the original).

Thus, the whole issue comes back to its starting point. The issue at stake is how, by which institutional means, can the masses establish a sustained control of and participation in a postrevolutionary, socialist state? It is the stateness of this state that goes along with certain hierarchical forms of division of labor, inherited from the bourgeois state. These do not disappear immediately, partly due to certain differences in qualifications, partly due to power networks. If the period of transition to communism is a long one (Balibar 1976, 121), marked by a protracted ideological and political struggle to contain the influence of the petty bourgeoisie, then it is obvious that these mechanisms and ideologies of control of the state by the masses have to be institutionalized themselves.⁶ Balibar concludes that the new state apparatus of the postrevolutionary state has to be combined with forms of mass democracy (123).

The State as a Machine and the Party Outside of the State

In this section, I delve deeper into the ideas that were at the center of debates for Balibar and Althusser in the period 1975 to 1980: the party-form, the relationship between the popular masses and a postrevolutionary state, and why these issues are condensed in the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. For this, I present a close reading of two texts: One text by Balibar that is an immediate answer to the interview that Althusser gave to Rossanda and a departure from the positions Balibar shared with Althusser. The second text “Marx in His Limits,” written by Althusser (2006), has been published only posthumously.

5. Althusser (1977) defines “the withering away of the state” as “its replacement by mass organizations.”

6. One could even ask how this institutionalization of popular power, intended to control the postrevolutionary state, can again be controlled by the masses. The question of how to guarantee mass democracy is obviously not easy to tackle and provides for a potential endless circle of control mechanisms in order to guarantee real democracy.

The first text by Balibar (1979), titled “Fragen zur Partei außerhalb des Staates” (Questions about the party outside the state), addresses Althusser’s demand that the Communist Party should remain outside of the state and places a big question mark behind this demand. Balibar’s first step is to underline a problem that is present in Marx’s writings. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels (1976) refer to a revolutionary party of the working class but not to the question of the postrevolutionary state. In a later text *The Civil War in France*, Marx (1986) refers to the necessity of doing away with the bourgeois state apparatus but is not referring to the role of the revolutionary party. Thus, Balibar (1979, 149) concludes that the two interrelated problems, the revolutionary party and the bourgeois state as well as the proletarian state—and the question of their mutual relations—belong to different theoretical orders in Marx’s work that are never discussed together. Thus, the issue of the revolutionary party’s autonomy, which haunts the working-class movement in the embodiment of worker’s autonomy and operaism, is called an aporia by Balibar, something that cannot be realized but remains a phantom. Balibar pushes the issue to its limit and declares that the revolutionary party and the proletarian state are two competing solutions for the same problem—both are necessary, but one of them is always redundant (150).

In the next section of the text, Balibar follows a similar path to Althusser. He writes that ever since Robert Michels’s investigation into the bureaucratization of German social democracy, in which he understood the working-class party as a small-state apparatus, there has not been much Marxist research about the nature of working-class parties as such. Various positions, such as council communism or anarchism, have rejected the very idea of working-class parties, but Balibar characterizes their outright denial of the party form as the other side of the coin to the approach of the working-class parties themselves and not as a solution to the problem. This position hints at his problems with Althusser’s demand to remain outside of the state. For Balibar, the issue to be addressed is to understand thoroughly the nature, effects, and reality of working-class parties in order to fully grasp their positive and negative aspects—which could provide insights for how to transform the existing parties without abandoning them completely.

That said, Balibar (1979) takes a turn in his text that seems to be completely opposed to Althusser’s demand to have a Communist Party outside of the state. Balibar starts with the assertion that “the masses” have never been outside of the state, due to the dense network of state institutions, the welfare state, occupational categories, registration, etc. Here he seems to adopt a notion of the state that is much closer to Poulantzas. It is difficult to make a proper judgment as to which is the more realistic approach vis-à-vis the state: the position of the late Althusser that dwells on the exteriority of the masses with regard to state machinery or the approach of Balibar and Poulantzas that starts with the omnipresence of the state in the life of the masses. Moreover, the picture is even more complex. Poulantzas (1978, 142) claims that the relationship of the popular masses with the bourgeois state will always remain in a subaltern position and thus be radically different

from the relationship of the bourgeoisie towards the same state. And Althusser makes perfectly clear in his ISA essay that the state has a significant presence in several everyday systems like the school, the family, religion, etc. One could say that both positions have a moment of truth—there is a certain amount of integration of the masses into the state, but at the same time they remain alien and exterior to it. It is this objective and contradictory situation that makes it difficult to decide how to construct on a theoretical level what Balibar will call a proletarian politics of the working-class movement. In this regard, both the strategies of institutional transformation and of radical autonomy seem to be adequate—but can one follow both at the same time?

It is not at all clear which practical and strategic solution Balibar proposes. He seems to argue against Poulantzas' approach by hinting at the fact that new combinations of parliamentary and direct democracy would not solve the underlying problem. And he reminds his reader of Lenin's maxim that proletarian politics must attack the strongest bastions of bourgeois class power—which is why the party-form has been regarded as useful. It is striking that in this text Balibar opposes one of Althusser's main tenets by emphasizing that the working-class movement has always been "inside of the State," yet he ends up with the same preliminary result as Althusser: a critique of the party form as such. Euro-communism is characterized by Balibar (159) as a way to create solutions for the deep crisis of communist parties without questioning the form of the party. The result has been a combination of top-down political structures inherited from Stalinism with bourgeois politics. Balibar is eager to design a rupture with the party form within these parties themselves and not exclusively or primarily outside of them—a project that proved to be almost impossible in most of the communist parties.

My second close reading addresses the state, which does not start with the integration of the masses into its mechanisms but rather with the state itself as a machine with its specific logic. Whereas Balibar's text is just 15 pages long (it is very dense), Althusser (2006) devoted more than 150 pages to the subject of the state in "Marx in His Limits." Why is the state one of the central objects of class struggle? For Althusser, one can only transform the economic base if the state has been captured and transformed: "The working class will have to take state power ... because it [the state] is the instrument ... on which everything depends whenever it is a question of changing the economico-social bases of society, that is, the relations of production" (69). After state power has been conquered, there arises the need to "build 'a state which is a non-state', an altogether different revolutionary state, different in structure from the present 'machine,' and so designed that it tends not to grow stronger, but to wither away" (69). Here, Althusser repeats the classical formula but in his own words.

In other passages, Althusser (2006, 71) specifies some of his findings about the state, which I will summarize in a cursory manner. The state is held separate from class struggle to some extent and needs this separation in order to be able to intervene in the class struggle on the side of the dominant class; this intervention

consists both in oppressing the dominant class and to moderate the class struggle within the dominant class (71); the separation from class struggle materializes itself in restrictions on the right to strike for certain state personnel and in the special organization of hierarchy and discipline within the state apparatus (75–9). While some of these ideas sound similar to some of the Euro-communist arguments, there is a crucial difference: Althusser says that the idea that the state “is by definition traversed by class struggle” – that class struggles have by nature an effect on the state and are thus present and can be develop in all of its apparatuses—is to engage in wishful thinking” (80). Consequently, Althusser contends: “We know enough about the state, however, to be able to say that the separation of the state has nothing to do with autonomy” (83). He argues that this separateness is completely subordinated to the interests of the dominant class.

In the next section, Althusser (2006, 87) dwells on the use of the word “dictatorship” as in the expression “dictatorship of the proletariat.” He is making two points here. The first one is that Lenin was using the term for two different conceptions, a correct and an incorrect definition. The incorrect definition would be a dictatorship “in the sense of a *political regime*,” a government above the law. The situation in the early Soviet state required Lenin to fall back into a political dictatorship according to Althusser. The correct definition of dictatorship of the proletariat for Althusser is the dictatorship of a class in the sense of class domination (*Klassenherrschaft*)—“the whole set of economic, political, and ideological forms of domination” (89). He proposes to go back to the alternative term of class domination (used by Marx) in order to avoid the misunderstandings that Lenin’s ambivalent use of the term “dictatorship” has engendered: “In Marx’s thought, the dictatorship of a class has nothing to do with political dictatorship or a dictatorial form of government. There is another word—class domination—that is a thousand times better than ‘dictatorship’” (89).⁷ Thus Althusser makes it perfectly clear: “*the political forms* of this domination [class domination of the proletariat] cannot—barring exceptional cases, and even then only provisionally—have anything at all in common with the forms of a government which is ‘above the law’ and ‘knows no law’, and is therefore violent and dictatorial. The forms are normally the forms of the broadest possible mass democracy, in which democracy ‘is taken to the limit’” (94; emphasis in the original).

But Althusser (2006, 99) was not finished with the issue of the state at that point. He remained unsatisfied with the notion of the state as an instrument; the theoretical effect would be ‘economism.’ Only an economist perspective that does not pay attention to the political nature of the structure of the bourgeois state can conceive

7. In the Barcelona speech, Althusser (1976, 161) takes the opposite position: “To speak of class rule (as in the *Manifesto*) or of class hegemony (as in Gramsci) may be, or seem to be, too weak or too learned. If we need a familiar word that is sufficiently forceful and emotive, not just to be understood but also to evoke the tremendous force of this relation of ‘absolute power’ standing above any law, then we must choose ‘dictatorship.’”

of the (bourgeois) state as an instrument that can be used to engender fundamental changes in economic relations. Thus, he proposed to take the perspective of reproduction in order to move Marx's and Lenin's thought beyond its absolute limits. To achieve this, Althusser tried to develop the metaphor of the state as a machine. He conceived of the state as a machine that transforms the energy of force (violence) of the class struggle of the dominant class into another energy—legal power (107–9):
405 “It is *this excess of conflictual force, real or potential* ... which is subsequently transformed into power by the state-machine: *transformed into right, laws and norms*” (109; emphasis in the original). It is not only the labor of the producers that is disappearing in the product bought on the market but also the violence of the class struggle of the bourgeoisie is disappearing with the appearance of the state and the legal apparatus. The state exists to make the class struggle disappear from sight (110). Althusser explicitly mentions the problems of dealing with a postrevolutionary state:
415

By the end of his life, Lenin had quite simply sunk into despair: he had to make up his mind to create a ‘reliable apparatus’, a hardline apparatus, the Workers’ and Peasants’ Control Commission, for the purpose of monitoring a bureaucratic state. Experience was to show that this was not a measure
420 but a failure. Those seeking the causes of Stalinism are not wrong to focus on the terrible adventure of the relations between the state and the Revolution. (117)

So, what do we make of Althusser's last extensive consideration on the problems of a Marxist theory of the state? It is obvious that Althusser aims to address questions of strategy by way of theory, that is, the theory of the state. He shows why the notion of the “state as instrument” gives rise to economist tendencies, and he emphasizes why the separateness of the state as a special apparatus is a crucial characteristic for its function in the class struggle. Thus, the state *is* an instrument of the dominant class, but only saying this is rather misleading. Althusser's provisional solution, emphasizing the role of the state as a machine that is transforming an energy, might lead to another mechanical misunderstanding. But the content of this metaphor is spot on; the actual, existing class struggle is taking place every day in workplaces, in a violent way, for example, workers being forced to labor hard in ways that severely affect their health, and is effectively being made unseen by the legal form of social and economic relations. It is due to the construction of the state as a special machine that it cannot be traversed by a simple conquest of its institutions by the leading personnel of a working-class party. Thus, these are answers regarding political strategy derived from theoretical considerations, but the question of how to deal with the relationship of the popular masses and the postrevolutionary state and the role of a working-class party in this process is not developed any further—with the notable exception that
440 Lenin's contradictory and unclear formulations are exposed in several passages.

We are left with the idea that “class domination” (of the proletariat) is a better term than “dictatorship” (of the proletariat). But how should this proletarian class domination become effective?

At this point, I want to return to Balibar’s assertion that it seems impossible for Marx to deal with the two issues of the revolutionary party and the postrevolutionary state in one and the same text. It was the crucial contribution of both Balibar and Althusser to address these issues in the late 1970s. I revisit key Marx and Engels texts in the next section in order to understand the references made by both Althusser and Balibar.

Marx and Engels on the Revolutionary Party and the Postrevolutionary State

Of Marx and Engels’s writings, it is the *Communist Manifesto* that presents the first clear outline for a working-class revolution. Here, in contrast to Balibar (1979, 149) who maintained that in this text the party is conceptualized but not the state, we find a conception of the working class taking over state power and the immediate measures to be taken by the workers’ state but no concept of the party as an organization. This is quite surprising given that the original title is *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

On the level of terminology, Marx and Engels (1976, 495) use the term “class domination” (*Klassenherrschaft*). The entire text refers mainly to the movement of the proletarian class and its aspiration for domination (*Herrschaft*): “The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.” And, there is a broad outline of what the proletarian class should do once it has established itself as the dominant class:

We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy. The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state that is, of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible. Of course, in the beginning, this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production. (1976, 504)

This passage is followed by the famous ten-point program that includes progressive taxation, nationalization of banks and transport businesses, expropriation of landed property, public and free schooling, etc. But the three decisive issues here for my focus are the following: the proletariat as a ruling class will introduce democracy; the proletariat as a ruling class will organize itself within the state and

centralize the means of production within this state; and the proletariat will use despotic means with regard to bourgeois relations of property.

The theoretical schema established here by Marx and Engels is the juxtaposition of two class dominations: the bourgeois class rules in a despotic way, and the proletarian class has to replace this domination with its own class domination but takes despotic measures in some respect. Thus, despotism and democracy coexist here: the introduction of democracy, and despotic measures against unequal property relations, in the context of a movement of the vast majority for the vast majority—a quite coherent conception. It is accompanied by the short sentence on the next page: “Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another” (Marx and Engels (1976, 505). It is in this context that political power will cease to exist once the classes have been dissolved.

But now we come to the almost complete absence of the Communist Party in the text. The party is mentioned in two passages. The first one: “this organization of the proletarians into a class, and, consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves” (Marx and Engels (1976, 493). This is a rather general description. The next passage is more important and relates to the specific goals of the communists:

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties ... The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole. The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others ... The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat. (497–8)

Thus, there is a specific characterization with respect to the difference of the communists vis-à-vis other working-class activists (and it remains unclear if the communists should operate in their own organization, or within other organizations), but there is not at all any outline on the role this party would play after the conquest of political power by the working class.

In summary, what we find in the *Communist Manifesto* is the juxtaposition of two forms of class domination, bourgeois and proletarian, and the plan of a movement of the vast majority to capture political power. Some of the first measures of the new proletarian state are envisioned, like the centralization of the means of production. Yet there are no ideas on how to facilitate the participation of the

masses in the new kind of state or anything that points to the role of the communist or the working-class parties in this new state. There is no mention of dictatorship, but the terms ‘domination’ and ‘despotism’ are used interchangeably.

Marx’s text *Class Struggles in France* (1978), deals with a richer experience of revolutions and upheavals. One understands how new governments after the revolution in February 1848 had to make symbolic compromises with the working classes, even adopting phrases of the worker’s movement and including a socialist politician like Louis Blanc—but without any profound social transformations and then to violently crush the working-class revolt in June 1848 with bloody violence. The terminology in this text is again “class domination,” and Marx analyzed how the democratic republic was used to reproduce bourgeois class domination. There are three separate places where Marx uses the phrase “dictatorship of the working class”: one is in the context of stating that the domination of the bourgeoisie turned into “bourgeois terrorism” and “bourgeois dictatorship” (69). Thus, what we conclude from this text is that the term “domination” (Herrschaft) is the one most frequently used by Marx, maybe fifty or one hundred times in the *Class Struggles in France*, while the term “dictatorship” is used five times and three times with reference to the working class.

Hal Draper has made an explicit reference to the question of why Marx used the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” and when he used it. His argument is twofold. First, he claims that the word “dictatorship” did not have the special meaning it started to have by the early twentieth century to the present day. Following Draper, it was used more often as a synonym for “rule” or “domination” (Draper 1987, 20–1). Second, Draper believes that Marx was using the term in order to distinguish himself from the ideas of Blanqui. He underlines that the term is only used in certain periods (1850–2 and 1872–4), periods when Marx was forced to cooperate with Blanqui and his followers. They had an explicit concept of a socialist dictatorship of the minority, and Draper believes that Marx invented the term, “dictatorship of the proletariat” as an antidote to Blanqui’s idea of the conspiracy of a minority that would have to educate the masses once it acquired power. It was important for Marx to emphasize that it would be the entire class that would exercise and participate in political power (Draper 1987, 22–5, 29–31).

The motif of taking the lead in a violent confrontation with bourgeoisie and aristocratic forces became more prominent in the writings of Marx and Engels in the 1870s, a result of the advance of popular uprisings that were able to gather local governments in a number of cases, most prominently in the Paris Commune in 1871. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx (1986, 326) is clearly in favor of a more ruthless attack against the armed conspiracies against the Commune. He explains repeatedly that the state is increasingly under the immediate influence of the propertied classes:

At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labour, the

state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism (*Maschine der Klassenherrschaft*). After every revolution marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the state power stands out in bolder and bolder relief. (329)

The second passage is the one in which Marx warns that the working class cannot employ the 'state machinery' as it is, but that it has to be transformed in order to be used properly by the working class.

Marx clearly conceived of the Paris Commune as a government of the working class, repeating it several times ("it was essentially a working-class government" ((334), "a working-men's government" (338), "government of the people by the people" (339)). Marx also describes the Commune as a republic that will do away with class rule (*Klassenherrschaft*, 331).

But, it is obvious again, that Marx had quite clear ideas about a transformation of the state, derived from the example of the Commune, but did not make any reference to how a revolutionary-workers' party would act in this workers' state and what would be the relations of such a party to this state. Thus, in contrast to Balibar's contention that the problems of the revolutionary party and the workers' state are never dealt with in the same text, the situation is slightly different. There are various and pretty much concrete ideas presented by Marx and Engels how to transform the State after a working-class revolution, but their ideas on the special role of a working class party are rather vague or absent. In the following years, Engels wrote several texts that both criticized Blanqui's notion of a dictatorship of a minority and the anarchists' idea that the working class should not engage in political struggles but on in strikes, for example, in the text "Programme of the Blanquist Commune Refugees" (1989): "Since Blanqui regards every revolution as a coup de main by a small revolutionary minority, it automatically follows that its victory must inevitably be succeeded by the establishment of a dictatorship—not, it should be well noted, of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small number of those who accomplished the coup and who themselves are, at first, organized under the dictatorship of one or several individuals" (13). A second difference is that Engels regards it as necessary to arrive at communism by way of "intermediate stations and compromises" (17), which the Blanquists explicitly rejected. It is in the immediacy of total revolution that the Blanquists have common ground with the anarchists, while their ways of organizing are, at least in theory, diametrically opposed to each other.

One could say that Marx and Engels had the vision necessary to install a transitory workers' state by violent overthrow of the existing state, to deal with compromises, and to participate in revolutionary governments in order to prevent violent counterrevolution with force. But are there any more precise plans on how to proceed after the seizure of state power? That the party of the working class as an organization might develop ideas that are not favorable for a working-class

revolution—this largely absent problematic became obvious in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1989, 94). An important comment in this text addresses the aim of freedom: “Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it,” that is, the well-known question of how to regain control of the state by society. Finally, he addresses the transition from capitalism to communism: “between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” (95). This is again a familiar formula that remained more or less unchanged since *The Communist Manifesto* but this time including the expression “dictatorship.” But what is more relevant, Marx repeats another time that during the period of transition to communism there will be a state.

Contemporary Debates and the Question of the Postrevolutionary State

There are three issues on the state and revolutionary strategy that appeared to be common sense for Marx and Engels. First, the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat did not have the special and fetishized meaning that it acquired since the early twentieth century in Marxist debates. It was synonymous with proletarian ‘class rule’ or ‘class domination’. Second, Marx and Engels understood class domination of the proletariat as rule by the majority of the population. Third, Marx and Engels had no doubt about the necessity to participate in revolutionary governments and about the fact that the state will not disappear so quickly after a successful revolution.

But, there were serious shortcomings in their conceptualization that are addressed by Balibar and Althusser. For one thing there is no notion of the role of working-class parties with regard to the postrevolutionary state, and such a notion is also absent from Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* (1961). Connected to this absence is the question of the political representation of the working class. That representation as such might be a kind of complex issue is already present in the texts *Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with the claim of bourgeois republicans to represent the interests of the working class. The question is never perceived as a major issue itself by Marx and Engels: What is the mechanism of representation of the working-class parties with reference to the working class? How is it guaranteed that working-class parties will not develop into apparatuses that reflect their own interests as an organization—the whole issue that was articulated in the early twentieth century by Robert Michels and the anarchists and council communists. Finally, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx (1979) extensively analyzed how the aristocratic state was used for bourgeois class domination without open rule by the bourgeoisie; the

transition from feudalism to capitalism is acquired under the shell of aristocratic government. This opens up the perspective that there might be situations in which more than one class dominates society.

Both Althusser and Balibar addressed these three unresolved issues: the relation of workers' parties with the state, the relation of workers' parties with the oppressed masses, and the question of single- or multiclass rule. However, both made incorrect assumptions about what Marx meant on some of these issues. Balibar claimed that Marx would refer to either the revolutionary party or the socialist state but never to both in the same text. Yet, as was shown in the previous section, Marx did not consider the party in a more detailed way at all, but he had quite clear ideas about the socialist state. Thus, the aporia that Balibar sees with respect to the couplet revolutionary party/socialist state did not exist in that form. Althusser contended that the notion of the Communist Party as a party outside of the bourgeois and socialist state can be found both in Marx and Lenin; it is obvious that both authors opted for a seizure of the state by the revolutionaries as a first step, whatever they thought should happen later. Thus, Althusser's claim that Marx and Lenin had already thought about a party outside of the state is wrong; Marx and Lenin are clearly in favor of taking the power in revolutionary governments.

Althusser and Balibar dealt mainly with the problematization of the first issue: if the working-class parties remain entangled in the institutions of the bourgeois state, they will also remain entangled in the institutions of the postrevolutionary, socialist state. In addition, the socialist state will share some characteristics with the bourgeois state because a total rupture between the two states is realistically impossible. This is aggravated by the fact that the postrevolutionary state will be dominated by the working class on the political level, but the economic and ideological relations do not change as rapidly as the political forms. Rupture on the political level is only the precondition for the installment of new economic and ideological relations not characterized by the domination of the bourgeoisie. There is a constant and recurring insistence by both Balibar and Althusser that the transformation of capitalist relations of production is a key issue that is inseparable from the bourgeois ideology of experts/technocrats and its division of labor that guarantees better salaries for experts. Thus, there is considerable danger that a revolutionary organization will only establish a "capitalism without capitalists" (Althusser 1976, 174), capitalist relations of productions managed by a state party.⁸ It seems that this is how Althusser interprets what was happening in the Soviet Union. And, this tendency towards a capitalism without capitalists does not just start after the seizure of power by the working classes but well before, and this is the contemporary relevance of this debate both in the 1970s and today.

8. "Namely, the tendency that *no-one wants to talk about*, that of a 'capitalism without capitalists' (Marx) where the bourgeois state concentrates and distributes the functions of accumulation and investment, and, therefore, the reproduction of the capitalist relation" (Althusser 1976, 174).

It is mainly Althusser who addresses the organizational form of the communist parties as a problem, and it is also here that the installation of experts and bureaucrats inside those parties goes along with a reproduction of bourgeois ideology. There seems to have been a logic of administration at work that pervaded socialism in the mid-1970s both at the level of economic planning and at the political level, effectively precluding a proper proletarian politics. The third issue, the question as to what extent proletarian-class domination will be combined with the petty bourgeoisie or peasant class is mainly taken up by Balibar. One crucial issue would be the ideological education of the petty bourgeoisie who tend to cling to inegalitarian notions of individual performance, which allows for special benefits.

But in 1978 Althusser launched his demand for a party that remains outside of the state, and this is the moment when Balibar departs from Althusser.⁹ Althusser's demand, already hinted at in earlier text (1976), was clearly inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution as a political project that aimed to reconquer the state from below,¹⁰ but the Communist Party in China seized power in 1949 as a classical Leninist party, and it was after eighteen years of government of this party that Mao decided that the class struggles in socialist China could not make any progress by way of internal struggles within the Party but would have to be launched from the rank and file against the party *nomenclatura*. One has to wonder if this strategy can be easily transposed to the European scenario and if this mode of struggle can also be applied to a situation in which socialist revolutionaries have not already seized power.

While Althusser never explains how the strategy of a party outside of the state would be implemented practically, Balibar was content to demand more reflection on the effects of the integration of working-class parties into the state. It was Poulantzas who provided the most sophisticated practical solution to these problems, proposing a combined strategy of transformations inside and outside of the bourgeois state. But he also did not conceive of how to deal with postrevolutionary dilemmas regarding the relationship of working-class parties to the state. At least Poulantzas (1978) underlined that the organs of popular power created at a formal distance from the state should have some control of the institutional basis of socialism.¹¹

9. "Balibar ... had by 1977 begun defending a version of the Poulantzian position that he had only recently been storming: the idea that the capitalist state can be democratized from within" (Goshgarian 2006, xxvii).

10. A text that Althusser published anonymously in 1966, *On the Cultural Revolution*, reveals that the main issues that he addressed between 1975 and 1980 were already part of his ideas in the 1960s, but withheld from the public. In the text from 1966, he supports a mass ideological revolution that would be necessary in order to impede socialist countries from returning to capitalism.

11. As has been underlined by Luiz Eduardo Motta (2014), Poulantzas repeats more or less the position that Rosa Luxemburg (1940) took in her text *On the Russian Revolution* when she criticized Lenin for closing down the constituent assembly in Russia.

This debate remains more or less unfinished. Its issues are not explicitly reflected upon but are present in the debates of Badiou and Žižek on the contemporary relevance of communism. Both authors remain in a tense and difficult relationship with Althusser's writings (Nowak and Ebner 2010; Sotiris 2014). Rather than recalling the problems at stake in the debate of the 1970s, both authors present different solutions that seem to be two sides of the same coin. Žižek (2008, 174–6) largely proposes that a socialist revolution has to deploy the utmost violence in the most ruthless form in order to guarantee its success, thus deploy repressive power. It is significant that Žižek never reflects about the problem of state power and any mechanisms of popular control after a revolution. Badiou (1988, 2012), on the other hand, seems to cling to the position of the late Althusser; he proposes that any resistance has to remain outside of the state and employs a Manichean idea of social action, with the revolutionary “event” on the one side and the continuity of “being” on the other side.

Badiou was a student of Althusser and fiercely attacked Althusser in a 1976 book on ideology for his conception of state apparatuses that Badiou regarded as disconnecting ideology as something “imaginary” from the everyday practices of domination (Badiou and Balmés 1976, 11–42). He took a Maoist position and contended that the Leninist form of the party would only serve for the seizure of power but would not be useful to reach the goal of communism. Thus a new type of party (Badiou 1982, 221), a post-Leninist party, would have to be created in order to shift the focus from the problem of state revolution to state communism. Badiou (2012, 59–60) later replaces this theory of two phases, a Leninist and a Maoist one, by a new and non-Marxist conception of communism. Popular power and insurrection have to remain radically autonomous and should impose their will on anyone else:

By “popular dictatorship” we mean an authority that is legitimate precisely because its truth derives from the fact that it legitimizes itself... there are only the people who are there; and those who are there, and who are obviously in a minority, possess an accepted authority to proclaim that the historical destiny of the country (including the overwhelming majority comprising the people who are not there) is them. “Mass democracy” imposes on everything outside it the dictatorship of its decisions as if they were those of a general will.

The essential difference between Badiou and Žižek's approaches is that Badiou conceives of an unregulated revolutionary power from below and Žižek of an unregulated revolutionary power from above, but they agree that there has to be a rigid way of imposing the will of revolutionaries on the majority of the population.¹²

12. Ishay Landa (2013, 430) regards Badiou's conception of communism as a profoundly elitist project that addresses the few that elevate themselves above the masses: “Badiou mobilizes bourgeois valuations against the bourgeoisie.”

It is in this form that Badiou and Žižek simply avoid the more difficult and more decisive questions that came up in the debate between Althusser, Balibar, and Poulantzas. First, how can the broadest political participation of the masses be combined with profound transformations of society? Profound transformations require a certain centralization of power to combat the power of the bourgeoisie, but it is this centralization that stands in stark opposition to the aim of broadest participation. It was exactly this issue that Lenin failed to solve under the siege of the White armies that fought against the Bolsheviks, and he took recourse in a dictatorship in the proper sense of the word. Badiou and Žižek try to escape this question by taking refuge in an imaginary Blanquist solution, a provisional minority dictatorship.

The second question is directly connected to the first one: how can one save working-class organizations from turning into apparatuses of power whose main task is to guarantee an income for its employees? Thus the task of reproducing the organization itself becomes superior to the task of transforming social relations. It is obvious that this question is connected to the organizational structure of these organizations, but even in Spain where since 2011 the 15-M movement has established an organizational logic firmly rooted in rank and file democracy, the party membership of the new anti-austerity party, Podemos, opted in a referendum for a top-down structure and against tight control of the party base vis-à-vis the party leadership. Thus, the open question remains: how can participatory organizations be established on a mass basis?

The third question concerns the issue of representation. It is more about the external relationships of working-class organizations. It is not by chance that the issue of representation was in the center of complicated and lengthy discussions in poststructuralist philosophy ranging from the Bernsteinian problematization of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) and the dilemmata of the impossibility and undecidability of representation developed by Judith Butler (1993) to the peculiar problems of the representation of subaltern subjects in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) work. The issue of representation is undoubtedly not an easy one, and the inherent problems are not only about how a class coalition between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie can be constructed but also about how the hegemony of the working class in such a coalition can be guaranteed. This issue is complicated enough; we can see how recent socialist projects in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador are haunted by a number of conflicts and problems. While these projects focus on state appropriation of rents from the sale of natural resources like gas and oil and a more just distribution of these revenues, questions of land grabbing and the consent of indigenous and other neighboring populations to projects of industrial development are often not resolved in a participative but rather in a top-down manner. Yet, the relations of production remain largely unchallenged. Thus, the questions of who should be represented and with what interests and how these different interests can be aligned or weighed against each other remain. Should just distribution be favored over a transformation of the

division of labor? Should one start with the former and then succeed with the latter as a second step? These questions remain largely untouched in contemporary neo-communist political philosophy. Maybe these matters are too practical for the new philosophers of communism, but the issues at stake in the debate of the late 1970s might provide for a change of terrain of the debate and thus offer a way out of the impasse of a too-philosophical, political philosophy.

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