

# ***Introduction***

## **INTELLECTUALS AND THE STATE: COMPLICITIES, CONFRONTATIONS, RUPTURES**

---

**Antonis Balasopoulos**

*The real end of the state thus appears to the bureaucracy as an end opposed to the state. It therefore makes the formal mind of the state, or the real mindlessness of the state, a categorical imperative.*

Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

*If politics is a thought, and to the extent that it is, then it is impossible for it to be governed by the State, it cannot be conceived through or reduced to its statist dimension. Let us venture a slightly hybrid formula: The State does not think.*

Alain Badiou<sup>2</sup>

IN A BOOK HE PUBLISHED IN 1976, NORBERTO BOBBIO BEMOANED “the widely acknowledged absence of a Marxist theory of the state that is up to date, applicable to the contemporary situation, and theoretically consistent in its different components.”<sup>3</sup> No Marxist himself, he took pleasure in polemically excoriating the doctrinaire parochialism he identified in Italian—but not only Italian—Marxists, who allegedly obsessed for years over a few “scanty allusions” in Marx, while ignoring the “rich tradition of liberal thought on the subject,” from Locke to Kant, Constant, and Tocqueville.<sup>4</sup> Whatever one might think about this appraisal today, at a time when the problem of the state has fully reentered public debate in circumstances that include not simply profound economic but also political crisis, including a virulent crisis of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right,”* trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Mailley, ed. Joseph O’Mailley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, “A Speculative Disquisition on the Concept of Democracy,” in *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 87.

<sup>3</sup> Norberto Bobbio, “Is There a Marxist Doctrine of the State?,” in *Which Socialism? Marxism, Socialism, and Democracy*, trans. Roger Griffin, ed. Richard Bellamy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



democratic social contract itself, Bobbio's polemic contains a rather seminal insight: what distinguishes the Marxist conception of the state in his own eyes is the fact that, contrary to the normative and functionalist trends of the liberal tradition, it preoccupies itself not with the "how" of ruling but with *who—which social class—rules*. This shift of focus is in turn predicated upon a "negative conception of politics" that effectively preempts the pursuit of a "good form of government" that would replace an existing "bad" one and focuses instead on the role of the state in the preservation and reproduction of relations of production and, hence, of social relations.<sup>5</sup> For Marx himself, after all, "political power is always derivative while social power is conceived as original and self-generating."<sup>6</sup>

In short, the Marxist theory of the state is not a normative theory of *government*<sup>7</sup> but a critique of the mechanisms of social power that is premised on the acknowledgment of class struggle. And conversely, disquisitions on *government*—and this is precisely the substance of what Bobbio described as a "rich tradition of liberal thought on the subject"—are *not quite theories of the state* in the modern sense of the term. The modern state acquires the density of a properly *theoretical* problem only to the extent that it is extricated from what Fredric Jameson describes as "all those ancient issues of constitutions and citizenship, of civil society and parliamentary representation, of responsibility and civic virtue" that serve as means of repressing both the realities of the class struggle under capitalism and the "challenges of the revolutionary century."<sup>8</sup> Hence, even if one was prepared to agree with Bobbio's allegations concerning "the poverty of Marxist thought" on the subject of the state,<sup>9</sup> one ought to simultaneously recognize such "poverty" as "precisely one of the merits of Marxism," which relentlessly "thrust aside the grand metaphysical flights of so-called political philosophy," along with their "vague and nebulous theorizations" of the state as abstract, normative, and formal generality.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 61. See also Martin Oppenheimer, *The State in Modern Society* (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 14; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5, 24. Though Negri had originally responded critically to Bobbio's pejorative remarks on Marxism (see "Is There a Marxist Doctrine of the State? A Reply by Antonio Negri," in *Which Socialism?*, 121–38), he would eventually come to share much of Bobbio's disparagement of a Marxist theory of the state. In the introduction to the essays in *The Labor of Dionysus*, for instance—essays spanning some three decades of Negri's individual and collaborative work—he and Hardt note: "it should not seem paradoxical that often, we prefer reading the bourgeois theoreticians of the State. John Maynard Keynes, John Rawls, and the other authors critiqued in this book bring to the light the critical moments of the life of the bourgeois State, from the inside. While the Marxist tradition sometimes flattens and categorizes the phenomena under study . . . the devotion of bourgeois theoreticians to their beloved object . . . allows us to understand the phenomena from within" (19).

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Brown, "Power without Logic without Marx," in *Politics out of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 64–65.

<sup>7</sup> This is, first, because state power is by no means exhausted in the functions of government, which is only one of its instruments. It involves the function of a number of so-called repressive and ideological apparatuses (though the distinction is itself problematic) not normally associated with government. Second, it is neither necessary nor vital for the ruling classes to be represented by the political party or parties that govern; and hence, changes in government are by no means changes in the balance of class power, which is crystallized in the state and which the state safeguards and perpetuates.

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, "The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau," trans. Rupert Swyer, *New Left Review* 1, no. 95 (January–February 1976): 67–68. See also Nicos Poulantzas, "The Problem of the Capitalist State," *New Left Review* 1, no. 58 (November–December 1969): 67–68.

<sup>10</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1980), 20. See also his "Marxist Examination of the Contemporary State and Law and the Question of the 'Alternative,'" trans. Gregory Elliott; "The

But if, as an *object* of theoretical reflection, the state marks a paradoxically necessary “poverty of thought,” it also tends to appear, at least within the Marxist tradition, as the *subject* of such poverty. This is at least what my two epigraphs —separated by some 150 years—seem to indicate. Whatever else it is or is thought to be, the state appears as a force that essentially negates thinking: for Marx, the state bureaucracy that takes itself as the state’s “final end” converts the “real mindlessness of the state” into a Kantian “categorical imperative.” In Badiou’s more vehement formulation, the state as such “does not think.” It is that which represses the possibility of politics as “the pure affirmation of collective presentation” and thus as a self-valorizing end.<sup>11</sup> If it has always somehow eluded political philosophy, it is because its nature is to be “an objectivity without a norm,” which frustrates any attempt to logically deduce the possibility of the “good State.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the discovery of resistance to thought as an attribute of the state (of Marx’s Prussian autocratic state or of the state in general, the state in itself) presupposes engagement with what others have thought, or indeed *failed* to think, about it. In Marx’s case, the attack on the bureaucracy (“the state formalism of civil society”)<sup>13</sup> is simultaneously an attack on Hegel’s refusal to confront the effective vacuity and indeed stupidity of what he goes so far as to hypostatize as a “universal class”<sup>14</sup> that would embody the abstract rationality of the state. The imputation of “real mindlessness” is meant to refute another intellectual’s complicity with a statist “knowledge” reduced to mere “deification of authority.”<sup>15</sup> Its goal is to expose the fully ideological and hence also deceptive character of the Hegelian characterization of the state as “that which knows.”<sup>16</sup> In Badiou, too, preceding figures of the intellectual—Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau—serve as instances of the insuperable difficulties “political philosophy” faces whenever it tries to think the singularity of politics as a “rupture with what exists” within the domain, and under the conceptual auspices, of the state; and hence, such figures also serve as indications of the superfluity of the very project of such a philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

In short, in the space opened by these two statements, the relationship between the “intellectual” and the “state” already emerges as a highly overdetermined complex of *confrontation and antagonism* (the intellectual is opposed to the state as “thought” is opposed to “mindlessness” or to “objectivity without norm,” but simultaneously, and paradoxically, the intellectual is opposed to a prior intellectual’s thought on the state as rational, thinking entity, indeed as the form of embodied collective reason); of *complicity* (between intellectuals and statist ends or, alternatively, statist dead ends); and of *rupture* (between, say, Marx’s early, “democratic” critique of the monarchist state and his conversion, after 1848, and especially after 1871, to the conceptual dyad of “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the “withering away of the state,” or between Marx’s

---

Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State,” trans. J. W. Freiburg; and “Interview with Nicos Poulantzas”; all in *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, ed. James Martin (London: Verso, 2008), 38, 321, 403–4.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, “A Speculative Disquisition,” 81, 84.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 83. Badiou’s designation of the state as “objectivity without a norm” is, among other things, a refutation of Hegel’s speculative idealist position: “The state is real. . . . A bad state is one which merely exists. A sick body also exists, but it has no true reality. . . . True reality is necessity. What is real is in itself necessary.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (New York: Dover, 2005), 152.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Critique*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 175–76, 179, 181–83, 195.

<sup>15</sup> Marx, *Critique*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 150; see also *ibid.*, 153: “To the complete state essentially belong consciousness and thought. Hence the state knows what it wills, and knows it as something thought.”

<sup>17</sup> Badiou, “Against ‘Political Philosophy,’” in *Metapolitics*, 24; Badiou, “A Speculative Disquisition,” in *Metapolitics*, 87.

juridico-political and class-based critiques of the state and Badiou's mathematical-ontological one, for which the "state" is "a sort of meta-structure" that presides over the "presentative multiplicity" of subsets that constitute a "situation").<sup>18</sup>

## I

But these structural designations of the relationship will not suffice on their own; one needs to supplement them with a diachronic account of the dominant or determining forms this relationship has assumed since the nineteenth century, when both the modern state and its critical theorization attained maturity. At the same time, no such account would be adequately reflective without dwelling on the ways intellectuals themselves have understood the *historicity* of the state as a phenomenon that invites critical thought.<sup>19</sup> In the nineteenth-century Marxist canon—a direct outgrowth of Hegel's own brand of a speculative philosophy of the state and a rebuttal of its idealist premises—the state emerges as the historically bounded form of a rupture. Marx and Engels would view the state not as a primordial event that puts an end to a speculative state of nature but as a specifically *modern* and economically overdetermined phenomenon, one that is organically linked to the quantitative and qualitative transformation of forms of private property, their legal and customary entrenchment through institutions like monogamy and primogeniture, and the intensification of social antagonisms brought about by slavery, the "cleavage" of the people into classes, and patriarchy: "The state . . . has not existed from all eternity," Engels was to note in 1884, for "there have been societies which have managed without it, which had no notion of the state or state power." Given that the existence of the state was understood to be tied to the comparatively recent history of class division and antagonism, the idea became that the projected, communist achievement of a classless society was inextricable from the salutary disappearance of the state itself: "The society which organizes production anew on the basis of free and equal association of the producers will put the whole state machinery where it will then belong—into the museum of antiquities, next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe."<sup>20</sup>

The Engelsian, anthropological account of the state as the crystallized expression and logical outcome of a finite and terminable historical catastrophe—a result of the rupture of primitive society by property ownership and the destruction of primitive freedom by property relations—is preceded by some forty years by another account of rupture, more strictly identifiable with political modernity, and especially with the French Revolution's "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen."<sup>21</sup> In Marx's work during 1843, and particularly in "On the Jewish Question" and the unpublished *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* the state is an abstraction synonymous with the condition of modernity, at once the product of the collapse of medieval society

<sup>18</sup> See Badiou, "Politics as Truth Procedure," in *Metapolitics*, 143–44.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Poulantzas will go as far as to identify "history" itself—in the sense of the chronological span of class struggle—with the state. See *State, Power, Socialism*, 40. This putative identification may be one reason why Hardt and Negri, having come to repudiate Marxism as the foundation of their postmodern versions of materialism and communism, attack the procedure whereby the "tradition of Marxist State theory" is translated into the "tiresome practice of constantly referring to the developments of the tradition . . . and . . . taking positions with regard to the other Marxist authors who have addressed this or that question" (*Labor of Dionysus*, 18).

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1986), 212.

<sup>21</sup> See Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 228–32. For a contemporary approach to this question, see Etienne Balibar, "'Rights of Man' and 'Rights of the Citizen': The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom," in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy before and after Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 39–59.

and the telling sign of a rupture between the “political state” and “civil society,” between the human being as “citizen” and as “living individual,”<sup>22</sup> and therefore also between “political” and “economic” existence, abstract, formal equality and the lived conditions of social division, hierarchy, and exploitation:

The perfected political state is by its nature the *species*-life of man in opposition to his *material* life. All the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist *outside* the sphere of the state in *civil* society, but as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained its full degree of development man leads a double life, a life in heaven and a life on earth. . . . He lives in the *political community*, where he regards himself as a *communal being*, and in civil society, where he is active as a *private individual*, regards other men as means, debases himself to a means and becomes a plaything of alien powers. . . . The old civil society had a *directly political* character, i.e. the elements of civil life such as property, family and the mode and manner of work were elevated in the form of seignory, estate and guild to the level of elements of political life. . . . The political revolution which overthrew this [feudal-type] rule and turned the affairs of the state into the affairs of the people . . . inevitably destroyed all the estates, corporations, guilds and privileges which expressed the separation of the people from its community. The political revolution thereby *abolished* the *political character of civil society*. . . . It gathered together this [the political] spirit from its state of dispersion, liberated it from the adulteration of civil life and constituted it as the sphere of the community, the *universal* concern of the people ideally independent of those *particular* elements of civil life.<sup>23</sup>

In opposition to both the older, Hobbesian understanding of sovereignty in terms of the artificial incorporation and unification of atomistic wills and to the more recent Hegelian attempt to conceptualize the state in terms of the subordination of empirical divisions to a higher, rational, and spiritual principle of unity, the theory of the state that dominated intellectual attitudes in this first phase highlights the realities of traumatic rupture and antagonistic division. It is a theory for which the state, far from being a power capable of “reconciling” human beings to each other and to themselves, is in effect something that both *presupposes* irreconcilable internal and mutual divisions and that *generates* them in its own right. Distinctions of birth, rank, education, and occupation, Marx notes, are only *partially* abolished even in the perfected or democratic state; in reality, they are simply relegated to the nonpolitical sphere of civil society. And whereas the state appears indifferent to them, in fact it “presupposes them in order to exist, it only experiences itself as a *political* state and asserts its *universality* in opposition to these elements.”<sup>24</sup>

The modern, nominally secular, and rational state is thus synonymous with the “splitting of man” into public and private selves, “communal” and “partial” being.<sup>25</sup> It is coextensive with the chasm that divides “sensuous, individual and *immediate* existence” from “species being,” from the life of one’s “fellow men and from the community.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the very material constitution of state power “presupposes a special public power separated from the body of the

<sup>22</sup> Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 221.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 220, 232–33. See also Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right,”* 32: “The abstraction of the state as such belongs only to modern times because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times. The abstraction of the political state is a modern product” (and see Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right,”* 32–33, 45, 72–73, 77).

<sup>24</sup> Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 219.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 222, 231.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 234, 230.

people”<sup>27</sup>—standing army, police, prisons, coercive institutions—which follows upon the entrenchment and qualitative intensification of the division of the people into freemen and slaves, rich and poor, exploiters and exploited.<sup>28</sup> This functional separation of state force from communal and collective self-defense effectively gives the state a Janus face, since its nominal function as mediator estranged from and raised above “the people” is only a rationalization of its actual function as an instrument of domination, “a machine for holding down the oppressed, exploited class” that does not cease to function in democracies, where “wealth . . . employs its power indirectly, but all the more surely.”<sup>29</sup>

The difference one may rightfully observe between these two versions of the state as sign and agent of rupture—the difference between a critique that subordinates such themes to a diagnosis of the merely *partial, incomplete* character of emancipation in the modern bourgeois state and one that effectively identifies the state with the destruction of a freedom enjoyed by earlier, pre-statist societies<sup>30</sup>—is one that owes much to the bitter experience of intellectuals, including most prominently Marx and Engels themselves, with the defeat of the emancipatory political projects of 1848 and 1871 and with the dire realities of physical state coercion. It is the difference between the state as seen from the standpoint of bourgeois revolution (1776, 1789, 1793) and from that of authoritarian counterrevolution or that of the first indications of a post-bourgeois revolutionary possibility. After the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in May 1871, it would no longer be possible to embed the problematic of rupture within a still humanist critique of the state as alienating agent and generator of multiform and mutually compounding schisms. Perceiving the state as an instrument of class rule would dictate a passage from *qualified* to *absolute* antistatism. In his 1891 “Introduction” for the twentieth anniversary of the Commune, Engels would thus note that the Communards had been immediately compelled to recognize that “the working class, once come to power, could not manage with the old state machine,”<sup>31</sup> echoing Marx’s own 1871 remark that the “working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”<sup>32</sup> The progressive intensification of the class struggle, Marx had come to believe, made the “purely repressive character of state power” stand out “in bolder and bolder relief.”<sup>33</sup> With its heroic life and tragic demise, the Commune had confirmed what the apparently anomalous situation of Louis Bonaparte’s coup

<sup>27</sup> Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 128.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 207, 209.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 215, 211. See also Engels’s 1891 introduction to *The Civil War in France*: “In reality, however, the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy.” Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin, *The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 22.

<sup>30</sup> See Engels’s well-nigh utopian portrait of life under the (pre-statist) “gentile constitution”: “No soldiers, no gendarmes or police—no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, or lawsuits—and everything takes its orderly course. . . . There cannot be any poor or needy—the communal household and the gens know their responsibilities towards the old, the sick, and those disabled in war. All are equal and free—the women included. There is no place yet for slaves, nor, as a rule, for the subjugation of other tribes” (Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 129). For a more contemporary—and highly positive—anthropological portrait of pre-statist social life, see Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 169–75, 189–218. See also Poulantzas’s critique of both Engels’s and Clastres’s equally “historicist” accounts of the passage from pre-statist to statist society in *State, Power, Socialism*, 42–43.

<sup>31</sup> Engels, introduction to Marx and Lenin, *Civil War in France*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, in Marx and Lenin, *Civil War in France*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

d'état twenty years earlier had already suggested: that the state had become a monstrosity, an "appalling parasitic body,"<sup>34</sup> a "parasitic excrescence" that clogged "the free movement of society" and annihilated the autonomy of civil society it had earlier been said to presuppose.<sup>35</sup> Its destruction, and not simply its seizure as a neutral instrument that could be deployed for more just ends, was the fundamental and legitimate goal of the Communal Constitution and should henceforth be the rallying cry "for every real people's revolution on the Continent."<sup>36</sup>

The nineteenth-century passage from Hegel's speculative-idealist conception of the state to Marx and Engels's originally qualified and later absolute hostility toward it can be said to constitute the first world-historical cycle of the relationship between intellectual activity and the modern state. But its terminal point would not really arrive until Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. This work, the most thorough materialist treatment of the question of the state since Marx began delving into the question in 1843–44, was "interrupted," as we know, by the October Revolution itself, much to its author's delight:<sup>37</sup> the "state revolutionary"—and Lenin is the exemplary embodiment of that conflictually charged subject position—is the antistatist revolutionary intellectual-cum-revolutionary statesman.<sup>38</sup> In exchanging "grey theory" for the "eternal green" of actual life,<sup>39</sup> he transforms abstract reflection into a practical, objective rupture so momentous as to interrupt—in more ways than one—the intellectual task itself. Arguably, such rupture or interruption is not simply something that happens to the work from the *outside*, through the activities of its author in the turbulent period from the failed July uprising to the world-historical October storming of the Winter Palace.<sup>40</sup> It is something *internal* to the work: the attempt to faithfully build on all that Marx and Engels had to say on the subject of the state leads Lenin both to a series of unresolved internal contradictions and to a number of fresh and historically un-

<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1994), 121.

<sup>35</sup> See Marx's exposition on the well-nigh totalitarian character of the Bonapartist regime in *ibid.*, 61–62: "It is immediately apparent that in a country like France, where the executive power commands an army of officials numbering more than half a million individuals and therefore constantly maintains an immense mass of interests and livelihoods in the most absolute dependence; where the state enmeshes, controls, regulates, superintends, and tutors civil society from its most comprehensive manifestations of life down to its most insignificant stirrings, from its most general modes of being to the private existence of individuals; where through the most extraordinary centralization this parasitic body acquires a ubiquity, an omniscience, a capacity for accelerated mobility and an elasticity which finds a counterpart only in the helpless dependence, in the loose shapelessness of the actual body politic—it is obvious that in such a country the National Assembly forfeits all real influence when it loses command of the ministerial posts, if it does not at the same time simplify the administration of the state, reduce the army of officials as far as possible and, finally, let civil society and public opinion create organs of their own, independent of the governmental power."

<sup>36</sup> Marx, in Marx and Lenin, *Civil War in France*, 58–59; Marx, April 12 letter to Kugelmann, in Marx and Lenin, *Civil War in France*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> See "Postscript" to V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/postscpt.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 521: "In effect, what constitutes the trans-worldly subjectivity of the figure of the state revolutionary is indeed the fact that it tries to enact the separation between the state and revolutionary politics, with the added tension that *it tries to do so from within state power*. Consequently, the figure in question only exists if we presuppose this separation."

<sup>39</sup> See V. I. Lenin, "Letters on Tactics," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/x01.htm> (accessed June 1, 2012). Lenin's reference is to the words of Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*.

<sup>40</sup> The circumstances of the composition of *State and Revolution* may have contributed to some degree to its internal fractures: most of it was written early in 1917, while Lenin was in exile in Switzerland. The writing was interrupted by Lenin's return to Russia and finished during the summer of 1917. It was published in August of that year, a month after the failed Bolshevik uprising against Kerensky's Provisional Government and two months before the October Revolution.

precedented insights into the problems the state presents from a revolutionary perspective. Hence, Lenin initially echoes Engels in describing the proletarian revolution as something that puts “an end to the state . . . as a state,” only to then distinguish between the “bourgeois” and the “proletarian state” as *particular* incarnations of an implicitly more general state-principle.<sup>41</sup> He describes the proletarian state as a “semi-state” (i.e., as a reduced form of the state, one in which important dimensions have disappeared), only to quickly refer to it as “the state in general.”<sup>42</sup> He argues that “every state is a ‘special repressive force’ for the suppression of the oppressed class,” thus suggesting that revolution entails the displacement of the state as agent of bourgeois repression by a *symmetrical* “‘special repressive force’ for the suppression of the bourgeoisie,”<sup>43</sup> only to then insist (on account of the Commune, specifically) that the two forces *are not at all symmetrical*. By chapter 3, the idea will rather have become that the proletarian state is *not* “a special force for the suppression of a given class” but a qualitatively altered “*general force* of the majority of the people.” It is precisely, Lenin will now suggest, the end to the need for a “‘special force’ for suppression” that constitutes the precondition for the immediate “withering away” of the state under the auspices of proletarian revolution.<sup>44</sup> The “proletarian state,” which had earlier (in chapter 1) been described as both a “semi-state” and “the state in general,” is now “no longer really a state”<sup>45</sup> at all.

If such instabilities indicate a measure of uncertainty in Lenin’s own understanding of the role, extent, and nature of repression in the projected proletarian state, the customary antistatist doctrine (according to which the state is a mere “organ for the *oppression* of one class by another”)<sup>46</sup> *also* comes into question in the course of his attempt at sustained doctrinal elaboration. Originally, he appears to draw from his precursors the most rigorous and stringent consequences as regards the question of what is to be done with “the state machine” after the revolution: the “chief and fundamental thesis in the Marxian doctrine of the state,” he insists, is that this machine “must be smashed, broken” rather than “perfected.”<sup>47</sup> This, he argues in several sections of the pamphlet, is precisely what defines the irreconcilable chasm between revolutionary Marxism and Kautskyite Social Democracy, which opportunistically wishes to simply transfer the “machine” from the hands of the exploiting minority to those of the majority, as if revolution did not require a fundamental change in the nature of the state.<sup>48</sup> Yet Lenin *also* suggests that “smash[ing] the bureaucratic machine of the modern state” is *not* identical with destroying the state as a “mechanism of social management,” which would be “capable of being wielded by the united workers themselves.”<sup>49</sup> Clearly, the “state” here—or, rather, that remnant or residue of the bourgeois state which he argues *is* transferable and *must* be transferred to proletarian

---

<sup>41</sup> V. I. Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” in *Essential Works of Lenin: “What Is to Be Done?” and Other Writings*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Dover, 1987), 281–82.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 282, 285.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 283, 282.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 301–2; and see 320, 339–40.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.*, 290, 297, 302–3, 310, 351–57, 358, 360, 362–64. This is also the central contention of Lucio Colletti’s important 1967 essay “Lenin’s *State and Revolution*,” in *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. John Merrington and Judith White (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 219–27.

<sup>49</sup> See Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 307–8.

hands—is *not at all* understood as an instrument of class violence or coercive force. It is, on the contrary, taken as a nonpolitical or perhaps postpolitical component, a function of pure, depoliticized administration that can and must survive under proletarian rule,<sup>50</sup> at least up to that speculative historical point when the transformation of *everyone* into a “bureaucrat” will have deprived the word of any residually baleful meaning.<sup>51</sup>

The split between *State and Revolution*’s antagonistic definitions of the modern state—one of which continues to designate it as the armed, “organized force”<sup>52</sup> of repression that ought to be both immediately destroyed and temporarily maintained in a hopefully qualitatively altered form, while the *other* extracts from it a more or less “non-political,” “administrative,” more or less self-effacing component—comes fully into the foreground in Lenin’s discussion of the “housing question” and of the issue of bourgeois right during an anticipated socialist transition to communism. In the former case, Lenin suggests that as mundane a socialist measure as “the letting of houses that belong to the whole people to separate families” *does* call for “a certain form of state,” but adds that such a form is not necessarily identical with “a special military and bureaucratic apparatus.”<sup>53</sup> In the latter, he clearly differentiates between the directly repressive functions of the proletarian state, which are expected to gradually “wither away” even during the socialist stage, and the far more intractable nature of the statist logic of bourgeois right—in other words, of relatively abstract and formal equality—as a dimension that effectively reproduces the need for a state for as long as the Marxian imperative “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs” cannot be genuinely and thoroughly attained:

Hence, the first phase of communism cannot produce justice and equality; differences, and unjust differences, in wealth will still exist. . . . If we are not to fall into utopianism, we cannot imagine that, having overthrown capitalism, people will at once learn to work for society *without any standard of right*. . . . And there is as yet no other standard than that of “bourgeois right.” To this extent, therefore, there is still need for a state, which, while safeguarding the public ownership of the means of production, would safeguard the equality of labor and equality in the distribution of products. The state withers away in so far as there are no longer any capitalists, any classes, and consequently, no *class* can be *suppressed*. But the state has not yet completely withered away, since there still remains the protection of “bourgeois right” which sanctifies actual inequality. . . . Of course, bourgeois right in regard to distribution of articles of *consumption* inevitably presupposes the existence of the *bourgeois state*, for right is nothing without an apparatus capable of *enforcing* the observance of the standards of right. Consequently, for a certain time not only bourgeois right, but even the bourgeois state remains under communism, without the bourgeoisie!<sup>54</sup>

In its original, Marxian context, the imperative that defines the “higher phase of communist society” beyond the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right” vitally concerns the abolition of “the

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 317–18. Lenin refers to Engels’s 1872–74 “On Authority”

(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/10/authority.htm>) to raise the question of the “transformation of public functions from political functions into simple functions of administration,” suggesting that “at a certain stage of its withering away the moribund state can be called a non-political state.”

<sup>51</sup> See Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 355, and “socialism will . . . create conditions for the *majority* of the population that will enable *everybody*, without exception, to perform ‘state functions,’ and this will lead to the *complete withering away* of the state in general” (362).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 341–43, 346.

antithesis between mental and physical labor.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the revolutionary intellectual is, at least in this first historical phase, precisely one who foregrounds the structural link between the repressive character of the modern state and the persistence of the intelligentsia as separate, particular class: as long as it remains a particular and specialized caste, the intelligentsia reproduces, within the realm of ideas, the distortions that reflect its contaminating attachment to feudal or bourgeois class interest; conceived formally and abstractly, political revolution does not solve the problem, for it does not attack the preconditions that enable the formation of the intelligentsia as a particular class. Continuing to function as bearer of a pseudo-universality that is also the distinguishing mark of the modern, bourgeois state and of its ideology of bourgeois right, the intelligentsia threatens to convert the realm of revolutionary state administration itself into a specialized and impregnable enclave, a new sphere of privilege and distinction. Lenin did not discover the problem on his own, of course. In his writings between 1844 and 1845, Marx had already drawn attention to the incompatibility between the preservation of a specialized intelligentsia and the achievement of communism: though thinking and being are “no doubt distinct,” he notes in his 1844 *Manuscripts*, they are also “in unity with each other,” and the truly rich human being is one “in need of a totality of human life-activities,” one for whom self-realization in the fullest sense “exists as an inner necessity, as need”;<sup>56</sup> communist society, as *The German Ideology* famously put it, can only be one in which “nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes,” retaining the right to “do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner . . . without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.”<sup>57</sup>

It should then come as no surprise that in *State and Revolution*, the discussion of “bourgeois right” quickly leads Lenin into confrontation with the question of intellectuals, or that Lenin’s attitude toward them is one of measured hostility. Having argued that the first phase of communist society necessitates that citizens have “account and control” of the state, he adds that the becoming-universal of citizen participation in the state is something opposed not simply to residues of capitalism but also to “the intellectual gentry, who preserve their capitalist habits.”<sup>58</sup> Distrust of the intelligentsia, viewed as a force inimical to the universalization of competences allowing for a genuine democratization of the proletarian state, becomes more apparent in “A Great Beginning” of 1919, which essentially views the contemporary Russian intelligentsia as a recalcitrant obstacle to the revolutionary project of the proletariat.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, and already by 1917, Lenin is willing to temper the anti-intellectual dimension of his antistatism: revolutionaries, he remarks, are realistic enough to know that “an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration,” even if they must simultaneously demand “an immediate break with the prejudiced view that only the rich, or officials chosen from rich families, are capable of *administering* the state, of performing the ordinary, everyday work of

---

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 119.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 105–6, 111.

<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 53.

<sup>58</sup> Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 348. Intellectuals seem to be the real subject of an otherwise confusing reference to the “gentry, who wish to preserve their capitalist habits,” soon afterward (348–49).

<sup>59</sup> V. I. Lenin, “A Great Beginning” (1919), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>.

administration.”<sup>60</sup> The revolutionary proletarian party, he wryly observes in 1920, cannot avoid being “invaded” by a number of “bourgeois intellectuals,” who will “worm their way into the Soviets, the courts and the administration,” yet remain necessary as means for the building of communism and “cannot be expelled and destroyed” at will.<sup>61</sup> If such words hint at pragmatism, however, the end of Lenin’s life is marked by a rather staggering reversal of what such pragmatism involves. “Better Fewer, but Better,” his last text, will take Russian intellectuals to task not for being “too bourgeois” but *for failing to prove themselves bourgeois enough*; lacking the sophistication of their west European equivalents, they are unable to educate the proletariat to a level that would be compatible with the transformative ambitions of the revolutionary project:

Our experience of the first five years has fairly crammed our heads with mistrust and scepticism. These qualities assert themselves involuntarily when, for example, we hear people dilating at too great length and too flippantly on “proletarian” culture. For a start, we should be satisfied with real bourgeois culture; for a start we should be glad to dispense with the crude types of pre-bourgeois culture, i.e., bureaucratic culture or serf culture, etc. In matters of culture, haste and sweeping measures are most harmful. Many of our young writers and Communists should get this well into their heads. . . . [Workers] are not sufficiently educated. They would like to build a better [state] apparatus for us, but they do not know how. They cannot build one. They have not yet developed the culture required for this; and it is culture that is required. . . . We have elements of knowledge, education and training, but they are ridiculously inadequate compared with all other countries. Here we must not forget that we are too prone to compensate (or imagine that we can compensate) our lack of knowledge by zeal, haste, etc.<sup>62</sup>

The state as a parasitical “machine,” “tool,” or “instrument” of class oppression that must be “smashed” and rendered inoperative, as a “necessary” but also “transitory” “apparatus . . . for suppression,”<sup>63</sup> as a nonpolitical, “technical” and basically innocuous means of administering goods or collecting rent that must needs perpetuate the rule of bourgeois right until some future

---

<sup>60</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?” (October 1917), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm> (accessed June 1, 2012). As Etienne Balibar observes, Lenin’s view is not the banal one that the revolutionary state ought to employ people from the ranks of the working class but the far more radical position that it should be a state that tends to allow workers to govern themselves. See Etienne Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, trans. Grahame Lock (London: New Left Books, 1977), 98.

<sup>61</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), appendix, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/appendix.htm>. And see Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 109, 148–49.

<sup>62</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Better Fewer, but Better” (March 1923), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/mar/02.htm> (accessed April 20, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 339. But notice the paradoxicality of the example Lenin gives when he tries to explain the qualitative transformation of state repression when this is exercised on behalf of the majority: “no special machine, no special apparatus of repression is needed for this [repression of “individual persons,” after the abolition of classes]: this will be done by the armed people itself, as simply and as readily as any crowd of civilized people, even in modern society, parts two people who are fighting” (339–40). Comparing the repression of transgressive individuals by “the armed people” with mediation between “two people who are fighting” is a clearly misleading analogy: the latter instance concerns pacific intervention between two belligerent parties, whereas the former concerns the collective exercise of violence or the threat of violence on an individual body. Still, it is worth reflecting on the similarities between this puzzling comparison and Walter Benjamin’s comparison, in 1921, of the “pure means” of “nonviolent resolution of conflict” with the “pure means” of the proletarian general strike as prototype of revolutionary violence. See “Critique of Violence,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1996), 244–45.

point when antagonisms will have vanished and the state will have dissolved into “habit”;<sup>64</sup> the specific form of the “proletarian state” as a trimmed-down, withered version of the bourgeois state (“semi-state”), as a perfected, genuinely democratic version of the state principle (“the state in general”), as a mere semblance or virtual equivalent of the state (“no longer really a state”); the character of proletarian state repression as antagonistically “special” and as “general” enough to practically dissolve into thin air; the final abolition of the state as both the earnest “ultimate aim”<sup>65</sup> of revolutionary politics and as a speculative affair that it “has never entered the head of any Socialist to ‘promise’”<sup>66</sup>; intellectuals both as active obstacles to the communist abolition of the division of mental and manual labor and as vital components of any attempt to overcome it, charged with the paradoxical task of inculcating and nourishing a “culture” that could ultimately render them superfluous as a caste: in Lenin, the gap between Marx’s early critiques of the narrow-mindedness of the bureaucratic Prussian state and his later vociferous antistatism has been both drastically condensed and partially inverted. *State and Revolution* begins where *The Civil War in France* ends, only to end almost—though not quite—where Marx begins: with the intractability of bureaucratic and administrative needs and with the limits imposed by bourgeois notions of right and by the division of labor, even in a revolutionary, proletarian state.

Naturally, this is hardly the “monolithic” conception of the state that Lenin was to be impugned with in later years.<sup>67</sup> What we have instead is a compressed, synchronic expression of the conceptual tensions that were already at work in the evolution of Marx and Engels’s thought through the second half of the nineteenth century and that are only partially translatable into differences between the “bourgeois” and the “proletarian” state or between different “stages” of the transition to communism. Subsequent Soviet history, from the Russian Civil War to the abrupt shifts in direction marked by Lenin’s own New Economic Policy<sup>68</sup> and Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan, and then to the latter’s seemingly counterintuitive declaration of an “end” to the dictatorship of the proletariat in the year of the unleashing of mass state terror,<sup>69</sup> would only compound the aporias Lenin wrestled with. It thus laid the ground for a second phase in the evolution of the relationship between intellectuals and the state. In sharp contrast to the first, this phase no longer privileges the subjective destiny of the state revolutionary; it is overwhelmingly colored by the absence of revolutionary prospects, the eclipsing of “proletarian dictator-

---

<sup>64</sup> See Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 333, 338, 349. In “O Lenin kai to telos tēs vias” [Lenin and the end of violence], I have spoken of the peculiarities and paradoxes involved in Lenin’s conception of “habit,” which is at once speculative and futural and yet improbably backward gazing, even naively nostalgic. Effectively, Lenin’s “habit” is an attempt to proffer a logical solution to the intractable problem of how to imagine a nonviolent and nonrepressive end to the necessary violence of the proletarian state. See Antonis Balasopoulos, *To vivlio tōn micron syllogismōn* [The book of brief reflections] (Athens: Astra, 2011), 87–92.

<sup>65</sup> Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 333.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 344. Shortly after stating that conditions permitting the final abolition of the state have in fact never been promised, Lenin adds with vehemence: “Until the ‘higher’ phase of communism arrives, the Socialists demand the strictest control, by society and by the state, of the amount of labor and the amount of consumption” (345). It is difficult to see how such a state could be even of the more modest “semi-state” or partially withered state variety that he elsewhere posits as possible from the very first day of the revolution.

<sup>67</sup> See Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 70–71.

<sup>68</sup> See Moshe Lewin, *Lenin’s Last Struggle*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), xxix, 16–19, 21–29; and E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 1985), 269–79.

<sup>69</sup> See Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 49–55; and J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

ship,” and the entrenchment of parliamentary democracy in conditions of advanced capitalism, which now defined the “West” as a space where the question of the state can no longer be addressed through recourse to the thought bequeathed by the theoreticians of the first phase.

Speaking schematically, the tradition of revolutionary antistatism is split into three main strands. The first, and the one that is closest to classical Marxist origins, is founded on a hermeneutic expansion and elaboration of the concept of the state; it can be described as a tradition of transformative state critique. It is the tradition inaugurated by Antonio Gramsci’s elaboration of a theory of political hegemony in Italy and, subsequently, by Nicos Poulantzas’s partly structuralist and partly neo-Gramscian intervention on the questions of state power and class struggle, particularly in France. The second tradition, which I am tempted to designate as “epistemological antistatism,” is most characteristically represented by Michel Foucault’s investigations on the questions of “power” and “discipline,” which effectively bypass the distinction of state and civil society while also questioning the distinction between consent and force and the prospects of a “withering away” of functions previously associated with state power. The third trajectory, which one could term “ethical antistatism,” is predicated on a largely ethico-juridical critique of state power, primarily in relation to its dependence on what Benjamin has called “law-making violence,” as well as its prominent role in the extension of biopolitical power and the generation of near-permanent “states of exception.” Giorgio Agamben’s influential and striking combination of Benjaminian antinominism, Schmittian conservative juridicism, and the Foucauldian investigation of biopolitics is a prime example of this last trajectory.

## II

Gramsci’s work, though it is arguably far more fragmented, contradictory, and elliptical than that of his predecessors, can be said to have inaugurated a new stage in the theoretical engagement with the question of the state for at least two vital reasons. The first is its orientation toward the necessity of a concrete, rather than general, theory of the state. Such a theory would take into consideration the ways in which the social, economic, and political features of quasi-feudal states (like that prevailing in Czarist Russia) differ from those that characterize the advanced capitalist states of the West. Crucial in this respect is Gramsci’s acknowledgment of the fact that the “bourgeois class” differs vitally from “previous ruling classes”: the former “poses itself as an organism in continuous movement” instead of functioning as a “closed caste.” For this reason, “the entire function of the State” under its leadership is “transformed.”<sup>70</sup> The state takes up an “educative” function (recall Lenin’s frustration with postrevolutionary Russia’s lack of “real bourgeois culture”). The state’s Hegelian guise as ethical self-realization of a universal will<sup>71</sup> is precisely an indication of the bourgeoisie’s ambition to absorb, through ethical, cultural and juridical leadership, “the entire society,” its utopian effort to perfect the state and law to such a degree as to lead to their peaceful “withering away” within civil society.<sup>72</sup> It is only the “saturation” of the bour-

---

<sup>70</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 260.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid.*, 258–59: “Hegel’s conception belongs to a period in which the spreading development of the bourgeoisie could seem limitless so that its ethnicity or universality could be asserted: all mankind will be bourgeois.” See also *ibid.*, 146, 262. On the implicitly Hegelian character of Gramsci’s understanding of the ethical role of the state, and of Benedetto Croce’s influence in this respect, see Perry Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 100 (November–December 1976): 39–40, 48–49.

<sup>72</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 260.

geois class—its failure to preserve the conditions of its continuous expansion—that forces it to return to the “conception of the State as pure force” that had theretofore prevailed in the Marxist tradition.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, the Hegel-Marx divide concerning the predominant character of the state is resolved historically, for Gramsci recasts it as a result of different—progressive and reactionary—stages in the evolution of the bourgeoisie as ruling class (an evolution that is unequal and that results in differential incarnations of the state principle in different countries). On the other hand, however, this same divide is recomposed as a fundamental feature of an irreducible duality characteristic of the Western, bourgeois state, which is said, at least in some of the formulations of the *Notebooks*, to combine force and consent:

The “normal” exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary régime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. . . . By “State” should be understood not only the apparatus of government, but also the “private” apparatus of “hegemony” or civil society. . . . It should be remarked that the general notion of State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion).<sup>74</sup>

Gramsci, as Perry Anderson meticulously demonstrates, never quite managed to arrive at a unitary theory of the Western, parliamentary democratic state. This was partly because of the fragmentary and unsystematic nature of the *Notebooks*, composed as they were under the duress of life in prison, and partly because the most direct cause of his engagement with the question was, paradoxically enough, the fascist state of bourgeois counterrevolution. Hence, the *Notebooks* waver between three basic configurations: the first of them identifies “hegemony” with the preponderance of the consensual institutions of “civil society” over the state; the second reintegrates coercion and consent but distributes them indiscriminately between civil society and the state; the third effectively subordinates civil society to the state, fusing them into a more general, integrative principle of class power (interestingly, this last formulation emerges on the occasion of wrestling with the problem of the state in liberal capitalism specifically).<sup>75</sup> Each of these configurations, in turn, corresponds to a different military topology of the state: a view according to which the state is merely “an outer ditch,” behind which there lie the far more resistant “earthworks” of civil society;<sup>76</sup> one according to which the two are balanced in a “proper relation”<sup>77</sup> that contrasts with the preponderance of the state in the East; and finally, one according to which “the massive structures of the modern democracies—both as State organizations and as

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 80, 261, 263.

<sup>75</sup> See Anderson, “Antinomies,” 26–27, 31–34. And Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 159–60: “The ideas of the Free Trade movement are based on a theoretical error whose practical origin is not hard to identify; they are based on a distinction between political society and civil society, which is made into and presented as an organic one, whereas in fact it is merely methodological. Thus it is asserted that economic activity belongs to civil society, and that the State must not intervene to regulate it. But since in actual reality civil society and State are one and the same, it must be made clear that laissez-faire too is a form of State regulation, introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means.”

<sup>76</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 236.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 236.

complexes of associations in civil society”—function as “trenches” and “permanent fortifications” of an unspecified principle of class power.<sup>78</sup>

Though, as Anderson is correct to note, none of these formulations present an adequate and clear solution to the question of the specific character of state power in capitalist parliamentary societies,<sup>79</sup> they unquestionably allow Gramsci to delve into the role played by ethico-juridical and cultural institutions (schools, the church, newspapers, the press) more than any of his predecessors. For this reason—and this is the second vital aspect of his intervention into the question—they allow him to position intellectuals, conceived in both a functionally specialized and a more socially integral sense,<sup>80</sup> in connection both to the reproduction of state power and to the possibility of its subversion by new, emergent social forces. Intellectuals are no longer a sociologically indiscriminate mass: they are either “traditional” or “organic”; they relate to the popular masses differently in metropolitan centers than they do in the backward peripheries;<sup>81</sup> they enter into specific relations with political parties and social classes; they represent a broad array of technical and specialized, as well as cultural and ethical, functions;<sup>82</sup> and they are vital for both the coming-to-self-consciousness of a social class or group and for its ability to organize itself as a unified and coherent social force that is capable of mediating between theory and practice.<sup>83</sup> The problem Lenin identified in his last text, that of “culture,” is by no means reducible to an issue of the “superstructure” but pertains to the essence of the direction of class struggle (including that which it may take in a socialist society), since

the educational relationship should not be restricted to the field of the strictly “scholastic” relationships by means of which the new generation comes into contact with the old. . . . This form of relationship exists . . . between intellectual and non-intellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and the ruled, *élites* and their followers, leaders and led, the vanguard and the body of the army. Every relationship of “hegemony” is necessarily an educational relationship.<sup>84</sup>

Above all, then, Gramsci’s intervention on the question of intellectuals consists in revealing their fundamental import for the production and reproduction of political power and, hence, for its forms of crystallization in the state. For Gramsci, intellectuals actively participate in the production of state forms at the same time that they produce the terms for the theoretical conceptualization of those forms: Hegel’s speculative idealism, for instance, suggests that one of the ways in which the state *reproduces itself* as moral absolute is by *producing* intellectuals whose class outlook predisposes them to view it so;<sup>85</sup> while Machiavelli, Gramsci’s “domestic” version of Marx, emerges as a theorist of state power who disengaged his thought from politically dominant groups in order to open it up

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 243; and see Anderson, “Antinomies,” 12.

<sup>79</sup> See Anderson, “Antinomies,” 49, 51

<sup>80</sup> See Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 8–9, 323, 333.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 14–16, 342.

<sup>82</sup> See *ibid.*, 5–23, 26–43.

<sup>83</sup> See *ibid.*, 5, 10, 333–35.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>85</sup> See *ibid.*, 116–17, 262. “Indeed it happens,” Gramsci notes, that “many intellectuals think that they *are* the State, a belief which . . . occasionally has important consequences and leads to unpleasant complications for the fundamental economic group which *really* is the State (*Prison Notebooks*, 16).

to a class-in-becoming, a class deprived from knowledge of the secrets of state power: “the revolutionary class of the time,” the people of Italian “citizen democracy.”<sup>86</sup>

Poulantzas’s project may be thought of as an attempt to revisit Gramsci in the context of a positing of the state in terms effectively homologous to those of capital: not as an “intrinsic entity” but as a “relation of force between classes and fractions of classes.”<sup>87</sup> To think the state as a relation, Poulantzas suggests, is also to move beyond the “impasse” of a certain double bind that effectively subsumes all preceding state theory: that of conceiving the state as “a thing” and that of conceiving it as a “subject.” The latter is the tendency that characterizes “bourgeois political sociology,” from Hegel to Weber or Keynes: the tendency to view the state as something that possesses “absolute autonomy” and that “functions of its own will,”<sup>88</sup> hence inevitably reducing it to “the power of the group” (the bureaucracy, managerial elites) that “concretely represents” the rationality and power embodied in such autonomy.<sup>89</sup> The former tendency is one that is diagnosed as present in the views of the Social Democrats of the Second International but also, ultimately, in the polemics of the opponents of social democracy: in Lenin’s critique of their positions in *State and Revolution*, for instance, but also in the theorization of the state in the Stalinist era of the post-Leninist Third International.<sup>90</sup> For what Poulantzas attributes to all three (if only partially to Lenin) is the tendency to reduce the state to a mere instrument or tool of class domination,<sup>91</sup> hence replicating the bourgeois sociological error of understanding its relation to classes and the class struggle as merely “a relation of externality.” In such a construction, the state and the dominant classes confront each other within a schema of the “zero-sum” game, so that either the dominant classes reduce the state into mere instrumentality, or reversely, the state achieves its autonomy by depriving “the dominant classes of power to its own advantage.”<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 135, and see 172, 174–75.

<sup>87</sup> Poulantzas, “The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State,” 307; Poulantzas, “The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau,” 74.

<sup>88</sup> Poulantzas, “The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State,” 308.

<sup>89</sup> Poulantzas, “The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau,” 74.

<sup>90</sup> In his 1969 “Problem of the Capitalist State,” for instance, Poulantzas juxtaposes his own view of the “relative autonomy of the State” to “a long Marxist tradition” that has seen the state as “only a simple tool or instrument manipulated at will by the ruling class,” while excluding Marx himself from this criticism (74). He also criticizes the reductive impact on state theory of the “economism” of the Comintern both before and after 1935, both in “Problem of the Capitalist State” (68) and in the earlier essays “Marxist Examination of the Contemporary State and Law and the Question of the ‘Alternative’” (1964) and “Preliminaries to the Study of Hegemony in the State” (1965), trans. Gregory Elliott, in *Poulantzas Reader*, 27, 75–77, 81. Later on, and as he comes to reject the Leninist emphasis on a revolutionary conquest and “smashing” the state apparatus, he will implicate Lenin himself in the tradition of an instrumentalist conception of the state, despite the fact that *State and Revolution* attacks precisely the social democratic conception of the state as a neutral instrument that can be transferred at will. See, for instance, his 1977 interview with Henri Weber, “The State and the Transition to Socialism,” in *Poulantzas Reader*, 334–35; and the 1979 “Interview with Nicos Poulantzas,” in *Poulantzas Reader*, 394–95. The argument of a complicity between Leninist and Stalinist varieties of “instrumentalism” and between both of these and social democratic perceptions of the state can be found in the last chapter of his last book, published independently as “Towards a Democratic Socialism,” trans. Patrick Camiller, *New Left Review* 1, no. 109 (May–June 1978): 75–76, 77–79. On the considerable theoretical maneuvering involved in this aspect of Poulantzas’s theory, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New “True” Socialism* (London: Verso, 1998), 28, 32, 44. Henri Weber is also highly critical of the overextension of the allegation of “instrumentalism” to Lenin’s intervention. See his “The State and the Transition to Socialism,” 335–36.

<sup>91</sup> Poulantzas, “The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State,” 308.

<sup>92</sup> Poulantzas, “The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau,” 74. Compare this second version of the “zero-sum” game with Engels’s reference to “exceptional periods” in which the state is not an instrument of the dominant

Poulantzas's attempt to expand on and refine the Gramscian concept of hegemony is thus meant as a "double corrective" to both of the prevailing tendencies within state theory. His intervention involves a number of fundamental theoretical assertions: first, and following upon Marx's own critical remarks on Hegel, he suggests that the modern state involves itself in the class struggle, not by simply embodying the "volition of a certain class in power,"<sup>93</sup> but by crystalizing, within the very sphere of its ostensible universality, the fundamental logic of social relations structured under bourgeois hegemony. This is the case with the state sublation of "equality" and "liberty" that effectively sanctifies the fundamental norms of the contractual relations of labor, exchange, accumulation, and surplus-value extraction, even while it also allows the proletariat a glimpse at the "positive ideal-real existence of genuine liberty and equality."<sup>94</sup> Second, and as a consequence of the first proposition—which highlights the ultimately ambiguous nature of the positing of liberty and equality as abstract yet universally valid norms—"the modern state" is deemed incapable of "unequivocally" ratifying "the specific socio-economic interests" of the dominant classes. For the function of universality, which is indispensable to the ideological encoding of bourgeois hegemony, "necessarily contains" a guarantee "of certain of the dominated classes' economic-corporate interests"<sup>95</sup> (hence, to the extent that intellectuals mediate the content of bourgeois ideology to the dominated classes, they guarantee the reproduction of the latter's relationship with the state).<sup>96</sup>

However (and this marks a significant departure from Gramsci's own analytical emphases, and certainly from those of classical Marxism), the function of hegemony, conceived as a "contradictory unity of organization" and leadership on the one hand and of "coercion on the other,"<sup>97</sup> is not to be limited to the structuring of ruling-class domination but has to be extended to the structuring of relations between discrete sectors of the dominant class. For Poulantzas, the class struggle is in no way to be understood as a "dualistic conflict" but involves "a complex relationship between several classes and class fractions."<sup>98</sup> It is here that the insistence on the "relative autonomy" of the state, which constitutes something like the permanent foundation in Poulantzas's thought on the question, can be most securely grounded: the state is "relatively autonomous" not simply from "civil society" but also, and necessarily, from the dominant classes themselves. Otherwise, it would not be able to fulfill its essential function as "the factor of unity" of the several, and presumably antagonistic, "dominant classes or fractions."<sup>99</sup> Consequently, it would also be unable to work as the "the factor of reproduction of the conditions of production of a system that itself determines the domination of one class over the others."<sup>100</sup> The state, in other words, does not simply allow the dominant class to present itself as the embodiment of the general interest of society as per Marx's early critique of Hegel; it is also that which allows the "specific general interest" of the dominant fractions within this class to attain a coherent political

---

class but, as with Bonapartism and Bismarckism, acquires "a certain independence in relation to both," playing classes too weak to achieve dominance against each other. Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 210.

<sup>93</sup> Poulantzas, "Marxist Examination," 27.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 33–34. See also Poulantzas, "Study of Hegemony in the State," 80, 82–85.

<sup>95</sup> Poulantzas, "Study of Hegemony in the State," 92.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>100</sup> Poulantzas, "Problem of the Capitalist State," 73.

articulation. Its seemingly apolitical or even apparently benign “regulatory function” (as in the case of the so-called welfare state) is what actually grounds its hegemonic character, for it allows the state to establish an “order” between the different fractions of the dominant class” and thus to contain their contradictions.<sup>101</sup>

These three fundamental precepts, in turn, serve as the ground for Poulantzas’s development of a theory of socialist strategy, particularly after 1974, and his critique of the French Communist Party’s concept of “state monopoly capitalism.” For Poulantzas, the PCF’s understanding of developments in the modern capitalist state in Europe relied erroneously on the postulation of a “fusion” of the state and capitalist monopolies that misunderstood the role of the relative autonomy of the state as a necessary precondition for its structural role in determining and reproducing conditions of class domination. The thesis on a “fusion” of the state and monopolies was, in this argument, merely the obverse side of the bourgeois sociological perception of the “independence” of the state, since both wrongly presupposed that the state exists in an “external” relation to monopoly capital and possesses power on its own, independently of its function as “the contradictory locus for the balance of forces” between the dominant and the subordinate classes and within fractions of the dominant class itself.<sup>102</sup> Precisely because this is *not* the case, Poulantzas would argue, precisely because the state’s role as a “factor of cohesion of the social formation” is *not* “distinct from its functions in relation to the class struggle,” it is also marked by the tensions and contradictions of such struggle. As an institution “destined to reproduce class divisions,” the state “cannot really be a monolithic, fissureless bloc” as viewing it as an instrument presupposes; it is internally divided.<sup>103</sup> Particularly in periods of crisis, such as the one that the state entered in the midseventies, state policy is forced to become increasingly chaotic and contradictory, revealing “fissures and disarticulations” in the state apparatuses.<sup>104</sup>

Within the broader ambit of Poulantzas’s last theoretical phase, between 1977 and 1978, this furnishes the foundations for a critique of Lenin’s strategic conceptualization of the establishment of “dual power” as a preamble to “smashing” the bourgeois state apparatus, and for a parallel advocacy of a “democratic road to socialism”: the existence of fissures and contradictions within the state apparatuses and within the power bloc whose power they embody allows socialist strategy to abandon previous efforts, exceedingly difficult and politically problematic, to erect a “counter-state” *outside* the state.<sup>105</sup> They transform the state itself into a terrain of a popular struggle that does not aim to substitute “the workers’ state for the bourgeois state” by smashing the latter, but to gradually *transform* it by exploiting its “internal contradictions.”<sup>106</sup> The identification of “instrumentalism” with Leninism and with the strategy of “dual power” leads to their common rejection in favor of a model of transition to socialism that will be led, not to abolish the “formal liberties” and political “pluralism” synonymous with bourgeois parliamentarian-

---

<sup>101</sup> Poulantzas, “Study of Hegemony in the State,” 111, 114, 116–17; see also Poulantzas, “The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau,” 71.

<sup>102</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 1978), 158–59.

<sup>103</sup> Poulantzas, “The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau,” 75.

<sup>104</sup> Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, 171; Poulantzas, “The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau,” 75.

<sup>105</sup> See Weber, “The State and the Transition to Socialism,” 337, 340–41.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 337–38, see also 344; and Poulantzas, “Towards a Democratic Socialism,” 80–81, 82–84.

ism,<sup>107</sup> but to open them up to penetration by popular initiatives, forms of direct democracy, and the decentralizing work of new social movements:<sup>108</sup>

In the democratic road to socialism, the long process of taking power essentially consists in the spreading, development, reinforcement, co-ordination and direction of those diffuse centers of resistance which the masses always possess within the state networks, in such a way that they become the real centers of power on the strategic terrain of the State. . . . The real alternative raised by the democratic road to socialism is indeed that of a struggle of the popular masses to modify the relationship of forces within the State, as opposed to a frontal, dual-power type of strategy. . . . Authoritarian statism can be avoided only with the development of forms of direct, rank-and-file democracy or the movement for self-management.<sup>109</sup>

The aporias involved in this final theoretical direction are not restricted to the fact that Poulantzas effectively ends with a Eurocommunist recasting of the social democratic doctrines he had earlier rejected, nor to the fact that in order to do so he has to conceive the capitalist state as at once internally divided—and thus traversable and transformable by popular struggles—and as integrally unified.<sup>110</sup> They extend to the tension between the theoretical optimism, even voluntarism, that surrounds the idea of the feasibility of a gradual, seemingly peaceful transformability of the capitalist state, and the pessimistic and anxious engagement, more or less in the same period, with the advent of an “authoritarian state,” which might in fact indicate the advent of a different stage of capitalism, beyond the industrial and monopoly phases of Lenin’s periodization.<sup>111</sup> Already by 1976, in his work on a “crisis” of the state, Poulantzas would thus diagnose a number of worrying tendencies in Western, capitalist state practices, including the extension of state intervention into a number of “previously marginal” domains and the adoption, by the state itself, of the functions “normally fulfilled” by the intense crises of the accumulation cycle.<sup>112</sup>

The possibility of a mutation that would favor an “authoritarian state” as more adapted to “the new realities of the class struggle” at the stage of the crisis of monopoly capital also seemed to receive confirmation from a number of emerging symptoms that are uncannily familiar in our

<sup>107</sup> See Weber, “The State and the Transition to Socialism,” 344, 346–47; see also “Interview with Nicos Poulantzas,” 391; and Poulantzas, “Towards a Democratic Socialism,” 76–79.

<sup>108</sup> See “Interview with Nicos Poulantzas,” 402.

<sup>109</sup> Poulantzas, “Towards a Democratic Socialism,” 81, 82, 83. The similarities between this view and the social democratic views Poulantzas originally rejected are quite striking; see, for instance, Colletti’s discussion of Bernstein’s views on democratic transformation rather than dual power as a socialist desideratum in “Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International,” in *From Rousseau to Lenin*, 51. For an extended Marxist critique of Poulantzas’s “Neo-Gramscian” critique of state theory, see Simon Clarke, “Marxism, Sociology and Poulantzas’ Theory of the State,” *Capital and Class* 2 (Summer 1977): 1–31. See, finally, Perry Anderson’s and Henri Weber’s critical remarks on the oversimplifications involved in neo-Gramscian (and, at times, Gramscian) conceptions of the possibility of gradual “transformation” of the state in Anderson, “Antinomies,” 41–42, 44, 52, 56, 69–70, 75–77; and Weber, “The State and the Transition to Socialism,” 338–39, 342, 352.

<sup>110</sup> “There is no question of there being separate ‘pieces’ of the state, or of an effective division of state power between the fractions that compose the power bloc. The capitalist state is characterized, today just as in the past, by a specific internal unity of its apparatuses” (Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, 164; and see his “On Social Classes,” in *The Poulantzas Reader*, 211–12). Such unity, on the other hand, is also a desideratum, given the equation of the dual-power strategy with a pernicious tampering with the liberties guaranteed by parliamentary democracy. Meiksins Wood notes that already in *The Crisis of the Dictatorships* (1975–76), Poulantzas rejects any political “attack on the integrity of the state . . . as a threat to ‘democratization’” (*Retreat from Class*, 44).

<sup>111</sup> “Interview with Nicos Poulantzas,” 399.

<sup>112</sup> Poulantzas, “The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State,” 318–19. See also Poulantzas, “Research Note on the State and Society,” in *Poulantzas Reader*, 407, 409.

own historical context, especially after 2001 and, in a different phase, after 2008: “prodigious concentration of power in the executive” at the expense of parliamentary and popular democratic institutions; “organic confusion” of executive, legislative, and judicial powers; accelerated state restriction of “citizens’ political liberty” and state violation of the limits dividing public and private; reinforcement of the administrative and bureaucratic power of the state vis-à-vis the political-organization functions of bourgeois political parties; accentuation of the use of state violence, both physical and symbolic; creation of a “vast network of new circuits of ‘social control’”; overthrow of the “juridical ideology” corresponding to the “traditional ‘state of law’”; increase of the applicability of a principle of secrecy in the function of state apparatuses; “massive development” and “increased organizational role” of “parallel state networks”; rise of a “contradictory, spasmodic micropolitics” on the “part of the state and its various governmental majorities.”<sup>113</sup>

### III

Those who would diagnose a certain Foucauldian strain in these remarks would not be mistaken. Poulantzas explicitly cites Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975) in the course of considering the import of the latter’s notions of “anatomic politics” and of the “microphysics of power” for the state’s attempts to restrict political liberty and to overturn the “traditional limits” of the public-private divide. Poulantzas’s last work, *State, Power, Socialism* (1978), is testament to the import of his ambivalent response to Foucault’s differently accentuated—and, ultimately, more theoretically influential—approach to the question of the state, particularly in its “authoritarian” dimensions and tendencies. At the kernel of their disagreement is what I have described as the “epistemological antistatism” of Foucault’s work: his tendency to posit the absolute primacy of “power” vis-à-vis the institutional materiality of the state, which is thereby shrunk to the role of a rather secondary epiphenomenon of diverse and all-pervasive “practices” and “techniques.” Poulantzas, whose tendency, conversely, is to extend the domain of the state so as to include the nominally “private” ideological institutions<sup>114</sup> while also deploying an expansive conception of ideology,<sup>115</sup> finds his own notion of the “transformability” of the state opposed by an antistatism that consists in minimizing the import of the state-form for modern social and political relations.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, his insistence that state power is grounded exclusively on the terrain of the class struggle finds itself at odds with a second, and implicitly related, premise of the Foucauldian epistemology of power, which is its extrication from a class-determined conception of the social field. It is precisely because Foucault rejects the premise that class power is the “cor-

---

<sup>113</sup> Poulantzas, “The Political Crisis and the Crisis of the State,” 321–22; and Poulantzas, “Research Note on the State and Society,” 410–11.

<sup>114</sup> Louis Althusser’s conception of “ideological state apparatuses,” broad enough to include institutions traditionally linked to “civil society” such as the educational system, the media, the family, and even sports, is foundational for Poulantzas’s own maximalist tendencies in this respect. See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–86; Poulantzas, “Problem of the Capitalist State,” 77–78; Poulantzas, “On Social Classes,” 210–11, 214–17.

<sup>115</sup> As Poulantzas puts it, it is mistaken to restrict “ideology” to “ideas,” for one has to also note that ideology is embodied, “in the strong sense, in *institutions*.” Such institutions “belong to the system of the State whilst depending principally on the ideological level” (Poulantzas, “Problem of the Capitalist State,” 76–77).

<sup>116</sup> “For Foucault and Deleuze, the State is always limited to the public kernel of army, police, prisons, courts, and so on. But in fact, a number of sites of power which they imagine to lie wholly outside the State (the apparatus of asylums and hospitals, the sports apparatus, etc.) are all the more sites of power in that they are included in the strategic field of the State” (Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, 36–37).

nerstone of power” in social formations, along with the premise that this power is “pre-eminently concentrated and materialized by the State,” Poulantzas argues, that Foucault, and Deleuze, are attracted by a theoretical model that is doubly problematic; for it both seriously underestimates “the importance of classes and class struggle” and “dilutes and scatters power among innumerable microsituations.” It thus risks returning us to the naïve and effectively bourgeois premises of “Anglo-Saxon sociology and political science,” from functionalism to institutionalism.<sup>117</sup>

There is little doubt that Poulantzas was correct to discern, within the terrain of Foucauldian thought, a theoretical paradigm that threatened to displace the Marxist strain of state theory, including his own attempts to grasp, even against the grain of his own Eurocommunist optimism, the lineaments of a situation of “exception” that he described as “authoritarian statism.” And indeed, with Foucault we enter not merely a new and unprecedented variety of anti-statism—neither Marxist nor conventionally anarchist—but also a paradigm wherein the categories of state and civil society, of the state and class struggle, or of the bourgeois and the proletarian state have lost all purchase. This is already evident in the fact that Foucault does not even accept placing the state in the position of an institution that disciplinary modernity superannuates. His choice for that superannuated position is rather “sovereignty” and “sovereign power”—which are certainly dimensions of the modern state but which clearly tend to either displace or to reconfigure the significance of its Marxian dimensions: the questions of the division between the political and the economic, of class hegemony and the power bloc, or of the potential takeover and transformation of the state through “wars of position” or of “movement,” through “dual power” or “popular struggle” waged in the terrain of the state. In his first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, published, significantly, in the same year as Poulantzas’s *State, Power, Socialism*, Foucault thus produces an analysis of power meant to disprove not the Marxist theory of the state—which he effectively bypasses entirely—but the “juridical” reductions involved in the equation of social power with sovereignty:

In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king. . . . One remains attached to a certain image of power-law, of power-sovereignty, which was traced out by the theoreticians of right and the monarchic constitution. It is this image that we must break free of, that is, of the theoretical privilege of law and sovereignty, if we wish to analyze power within the concrete and historical framework of its operation.<sup>118</sup>

“Power,” “law,” and “sovereignty” dissolve and replace the institutional and political centrality of the state; “subjects,” produced through processes of disciplinary individuation,<sup>119</sup> dissolve and replace classes, now at best present in the guise of a division between “rulers and ruled” that does not dovetail with the actual deployment of power in the social field;<sup>120</sup> “discourse” displaces “ideology,” for it is seen as both an “instrument and an effect of power.”<sup>121</sup> And

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>118</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 88–89, 90.

<sup>119</sup> See, e.g., Michel Foucault, “‘Omnes et Singulatim’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,” in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 3, *Power*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 2002), 298–325; Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 29–30; Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Macmillan, 2007), 115–34.

<sup>120</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:94.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 101.

finally, neither Leninist “revolution” nor Gramscian “hegemony,” and not even a Poulantzian “transformation” of the state, are envisaged any longer, for the plural, omnipresent, dispersed, and strictly relational nature of power means that there can be “no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary”—and no space for discussions of strategy, either. What there is instead is “a plurality of resistances . . . possible, necessary, improbable,” or perhaps “spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent,” “interested or sacrificial”<sup>122</sup>—the great carnival of life, violence, struggle, and death as immanent realities, disarticulated from any rationalizing “logic of history” or from any utopian aspirations in the “withering away” of the social necessity of domination and power.

On the other hand, Foucault’s project, both in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* and in his earlier lectures at the Collège de France during 1975–76, involves a radically different conceptualization and periodization of the “authoritarian” and perhaps even “totalitarian” mutation of the capitalist state than that offered by Poulantzas, who clearly locates it after the economic crisis of 1973–74 and in relation to a theory of crisis as potentially politico-economic conjuncture. In Foucault, and precisely as a result of the treatment of “law” and “sovereignty” as effective substitutes for the modern conception of the state, the beginnings of the authoritarian mutation are already—and paradoxically—traceable in the eighteenth century, in the retroactive construction of an ideology of a “rule of law” that posits itself as a guarantee of the restriction of sovereign violence and of the absolute power of the sovereign over life and death. For Foucault, the rise of political modernity becomes synonymous with the rise of “biopower,” which in turn is predicated on the seemingly benevolent substitution of the sovereign right to kill or to refrain from killing with the “reverse right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life,”<sup>123</sup> the right, as Foucault puts it in his lectures, to “make live and to let die.”<sup>124</sup> This substitution of an asymmetry tipped “in favor of death”<sup>125</sup> with one that privileges life displays its catastrophic side after the nineteenth century with the vital intervention of racism, which drastically reshapes so-called biopower in a genocidal, thanatopolitical direction:

How can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents and to compensate for failings? . . . It is, I think, at this point that racism intervenes. . . . What in fact is racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die. . . . Racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship. . . . Once the State functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State.<sup>126</sup>

This reintroduction of the notions of state and of sovereign power—once again, as effective synonyms—is telling. In effect, Foucault’s attempt to advocate a theory of power that moves “outside the field instituted by juridical sovereignty and the institution of the State,”<sup>127</sup> his positing of “biopower” and “disciplinary power” as macro- and microtechnologies of control that de-

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 95–96.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>124</sup> Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 241.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 254–56.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 34ff.

velop beyond the formal, juridical, and centered imaginary of sovereignty,<sup>128</sup> is forced to come to terms with the reality of the state to make sense of twentieth-century genocide. Hence, the idea that biopolitics is capable of mutating into a politics of mass extermination, imposed on the direction of the argument by the need to explain the massive atrocities of the Nazi state, makes it ultimately impossible to ignore the abiding organizational and functional significance of a “State apparatus” that assumes the right to “bioregulation,” the right to “use race, the elimination of races and the purification of the race, to exercise its sovereign power.”<sup>129</sup> A methodological compromise becomes necessary, and it takes the form of explaining the thanatopolitical bent of the Nazi state in terms of a fusion of the archaic and the ultramodern.<sup>130</sup> This configuration, in turn, works to ground the “authoritarian state” *not* on some politico-economic crisis of the modern capitalist state, as is the case in Poulantzas, but in a monstrous dialectic between premodern sovereignty and a post-eighteenth-century biopolitical investment in the fostering and management of life. Foucault, in other words, admits the state into the picture of modernity only in its “exceptional” guise as “totalitarian” state and only after having liquidated the significance of constitutional theories of state power in the eighteenth century; this in turn allows him to entirely bypass the task of engaging with the Marxist tradition on the question, from the encounter of Marx with Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* onward.

Such typological and historiographical choices might be thought to reveal, apart from a decided anti-Marxist bent, a certain, highly mediated form of anarchist antistatism as well. That this is true is corroborated by Foucault’s well-known observations on the question of the intellectual, which, in its “traditional” guise, is for him a question that lies very much at the intersection between those of the state and of the limits of its Marxist critique: in his 1977 interview “Truth and Power,” for instance, Foucault begins by repeating his claim that the state does not exhaust the problem of power, being in fact “superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks,”<sup>131</sup> only to subsequently link the obsolete figure of the intellectual as “spokesman of the universal” at once to “faded Marxism” and the juridical notions of universality proper to the bourgeois state.<sup>132</sup> What is rejected here is thus a presumed nexus between the intellectual, the state, and its inadequately radical Marxist critique, and the Gramscian “educative” function is dismissed in favor of an abandonment of vanguardist pretensions to “representing” or “enlightening” the masses: May 1968, a cardinal moment for Foucault’s political trajectory, had clearly showed that “masses no longer need” the intellectual “to gain knowledge”; not only do they “know perfectly well, without illusion,” but they are “certainly capable of expressing themselves.” Hence, the intellectual’s role “is no longer to place himself ‘somewhat ahead and to the side’ in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity,” but to “struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of ‘knowledge,’ ‘truth,’ ‘con-

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 35–40, 242–50.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 250, 258.

<sup>130</sup> See *ibid.*, 260: “We have, then, in Nazi society something that is really quite extraordinary. . . . The two mechanisms—the classic, archaic mechanism that gave the State the right of life and death over its citizens, and the new mechanism organized around discipline and regulation, or in the other words, the new mechanism of biopower—coincide exactly.”

<sup>131</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” trans. Colin Gordon, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 122.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 126, 128.

sciousness,' and discourse."<sup>133</sup> The advocacy of a "specific" intellectual, operating subversively within local struggles after having renounced the secretly domineering ambitions of universality and totalization, was Foucault's decided (and dismissive) answer to Gramsci's own attempt to foreground the class-bound, politically vital role of the "organic" intellectual.<sup>134</sup>

Yet Foucault's lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*, conducted soon after the "Truth and Power" interview, evince a surprising turn in the antistatist bent of Foucault's thought. While *The History of Sexuality* and "Society Must Be Defended" begin as explorations of the questions of sexuality and war only to end with a grim vision of the Nazi state as a site where archaic, illimitable sovereign power meets modern technologies of bioregulation, *The Birth of Biopolitics* begins as an intended discussion of biopolitics only to take the form of an extensive treatise on the question of neoliberalism: its remote roots in eighteenth-century classical liberalism, the reinforcement of its sense of historical destiny by the traumatic experience of "state phobia" under the Nazi regime, its German, French, and American varieties, its conversion to state policy at precisely the time (the mid-1970s) Poulantzas identifies with the emergence of a postfascist form of "authoritarian statism." In fact, the object of the Foucauldian critique of "state phobia"—and of its implicit and not-so-implicit ties to the ideological legitimation of neoliberal attacks on the welfare state—seems to be precisely the vociferously anti-Marxist conception of the state of the "*nouveaux philosophes*" whom Poulantzas had excoriated in *State, Power, Socialism*.

It was, at least to some extent, an issue of an internal, and largely Parisian, struggle over the political form of the legacy of 1968, one no doubt impelled by the media popularity attained by the vulgar anti-Marxism and antistatism of a "new Right," exemplified in figures like André Glucksmann and Bernard Henri-Lévy.<sup>135</sup> For Poulantzas, Foucault had risked, ironically through his connections to Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>136</sup> too close a proximity to a politically suspect fad for a "hollow and pretentious metaphysics of Power and the State," where "everything is always a replica of the Master, the State and the Law," and where "State totalitarianism is both primeval and eternal."<sup>137</sup> For Foucault's 1978–79 lectures, the variety of antistatism that was emerging "from a great many perspectives" in his own time suggested the prevalence of a moralistic outlook that had made of an essentialized and generically conceived "state" the root of all evil: "the unlimited growth of the state, its omnipotence, its bureaucratic development, the state with the seeds of fascism it contains, the state's inherent violence beneath its social welfare paternalism."<sup>138</sup> Against this "inflationary critique of the state," whose epistemological foundations and premises he decisively attacks, Foucault intellectually and politically defends a distinction that neoliberal

<sup>133</sup> "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 207–8.

<sup>134</sup> See Foucault, "Truth and Power," 128–33. For a critique of Foucault's dismissal of Gramsci's subaltern approach to the tasks and possibilities of intellectual intervention, see R. Radhakrishnan, "Toward an Effective Intellectual: Foucault or Gramsci?," in *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 57–99.

<sup>135</sup> See "On the New Philosophers and a New General Problem: Interview with Gilles Deleuze," *Discourse* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 17–22; and Fatos Tarifa, "The Poverty of 'New Philosophy,'" *Modern Age* 50 (Summer 2008): 226–37.

<sup>136</sup> See Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, 20–21, 68–69.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41. For Poulantzas's angry attack on the *nouveaux philosophes* (particularly Glucksmann), see also 20–23, 45–46.

<sup>138</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 186–87.

ideology was already at great pains to obfuscate: “the welfare state has neither the same form, of course, nor, it seems to me, the same root or origin as the totalitarian state, as the Nazi, fascist, or Stalinist state.”<sup>139</sup> The paradoxical confluence between Poulantzas’s symptomatology of the “authoritarian state”—a product, in his view, of the crisis of the mid-1970s that was fully compatible with capitalism—and of Foucault’s somewhat belated attack on the fully ideological and neoliberal character of facile antistatism poses an important question: how is one to understand neoliberalism, surely the prevalent ideological signatory of our own crisis, if it is simultaneously predicated on a series of authoritarian and state-interventionist developments—analytically listed by Poulantzas—yet legitimated *as antistatism*, as an attack against the interventionist presence of the primeval state despot, father, or sovereign protector? And is it possible to arbitrate this question at all without recourse to the increasingly abandoned question of class struggle itself, without a perspective capable of distinguishing between zones wherein state intervention is quantitatively and qualitatively intensified and zones wherein the strategy of the state is, rather, withdrawal, “scaling down,” deferral to the initiatives and organizational structures of the private and corporate sector?

In his own time, Gramsci would argue, against the ideologists of the “Free Trade Movement,” that the hypostatization of the distinction between political and civil society tends to obfuscate the active role of the state in the very constitution of the field of relations of production: “*laissez-faire* too is a form of State ‘regulation,’ introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means.”<sup>140</sup> Earlier still, in 1867, and in the context of a broader discussion of “primitive accumulation,” Marx was to address the question of “national debt” as one of the most “powerful levers of primitive accumulation,” given its power to turn “unproductive money” into “capital”: “The national debt, i.e. the alienation of the state—whether that state is despotic, constitutional or republican—marked the capitalist era with its stamp.”<sup>141</sup> This mark, Marx showed, consists in the tremendous powers conferred upon “stock-exchange gambling and the modern bankocracy” given their role as “creditors” of all modern states, regardless of their constitutional character.<sup>142</sup> These two early diagnoses—on the one hand, of the largely statist character of liberalism (and, necessarily, neoliberalism) and, on the other, of the insignificance of the constitutional form of the capitalist state when one looks at it from the perspective of its universal subordination to banking and speculative interest—are certainly uncannily resonant in our time. But they are also both conflictually related and unthinkable without a methodological refusal to reduce the state to a simply juridical determination, to hypostatize its “essence” in isolation from the question of relations of production and from that of the class struggle.

#### IV

Yet this is precisely the form of “ethical antistatism” that was culturally dominant at the time of the global economic and political crisis that exploded in 2009. Giorgio Agamben’s work on the *Homo Sacer* project—and particularly on *Homo Sacer* itself, *States of Exception*, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, and *The Kingdom and the Glory*—is, if anything, further removed from a class-bound

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>140</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 160.

<sup>141</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 919.

<sup>142</sup> See *ibid.*, 919–21.

problematic than Foucault's own work,<sup>143</sup> which serves as one of its central theoretical pillars.<sup>144</sup> Certainly, Foucault's late concern with neoliberal "state phobia" and with its evolution as a technology of government from the end of the Second World War to the mid-1970s is effectively missing in Agamben; at the same time, Foucault's earlier tendency to favor a periodization that bypasses the modern, liberal state in favor of a concatenation of premodern sovereign violence and late modern biopolitics becomes far more dramatically accentuated. As in Foucault's "*Society Must Be Defended*" and in the last section of the *History of Sexuality*, the tendency is to privilege a historical gaze on the state that is more or less yoked to the standpoint of the Holocaust and the concentration camp (in *Homo Sacer* and in *Remnants of Auschwitz*) or, in a closely related version, to that of the immediately preceding onset of a constitutional state of exception in the Weimar Republic (in *States of Exception*). The state is thus not so much epistemologically bypassed by being shrunk as regards its jurisdictional domain (as is generally the case in Foucault's work) as submitted to a double operation: on the one hand, it is reduced to its simultaneously juridical and anomic function,<sup>145</sup> and on the other, it is identified (as is already prominent in the work of the *nouveaux philosophes*) with an ever-active principle of "totalitarianism."

The possibility of political resistance to such inherent tendencies is as obscurely related to anything reminiscent of collective, politically mediated life as it was in Foucault's work: habeas corpus is not an achievement in human freedom from arbitrary state incursion but the "first recording of bare life as the new political subject";<sup>146</sup> modern (post-seventeenth-century) democracy does not abolish the archaic institution of an exceptionally defenseless "sacred life" but "disseminates it into every individual body";<sup>147</sup> what lies at the basis of the modern state "is not man as a free and conscious political subject" but as bare life;<sup>148</sup> in their attempts to ground the protection of life, humanitarian organizations can only grasp it "in the figure of bare or sacred life," and therefore "maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight";<sup>149</sup> and the only way out is for bare life to be "transformed into the site for the constitution of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life," becoming a *bios* that is dissolved in its "own *zoē*."<sup>150</sup> The obscurity of such ontologico-political prescriptions, of course, does not quite amount to "radicalism" when it comes to political practice; in a recent piece on the severe results of the Greek

<sup>143</sup> Indeed, Agamben fully adopts Foucault's own attempt to amalgamate Marxism within the more general terrain of theories of "race war" in "*Society Must Be Defended*" (59–62, 65–84, 254–63). He thus consigns the class struggle to a merely local instantiation of the more general rule of Schmitt's friend-enemy principle: "When one looks closely, even what Marx called 'class conflict' . . . is nothing other than the civil war that divides every people." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 178. *The Kingdom and the Glory*, his only work to deal with the economy, has precious little to say about the class struggle and barely touches on the onset of political modernity. Its project is rather to offer "a theological genealogy" of the concept of *oikonomia*, one that heavily—and inevitably—privileges patristic and medieval sources. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>144</sup> *Homo Sacer* virtually begins with Foucault's reflections in "Right of Death and Power over Life," in the last section of *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3–9.

<sup>145</sup> See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 29, 32, 35, 51, 64; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 71–72.

<sup>146</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 123.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

and European crisis, Agamben could do no better than to advocate the formation of a “European constitutional power” that could “once again give life and real existence to European institutions”<sup>151</sup>—in short, yet another version of the bourgeois legalism that both Marxists and Foucauldians did so much to deconstruct decades ago.

But Agamben’s unabashed return to the hallowed traditions of bourgeois constitutionalism seems more than a simple result of attempting to respond to the extreme pressures of the contemporary economic and political crisis; for it is also inevitable testimony to the consequences of the increasing detachment of intellectuals from the organizational experience and the practical exigencies involved in proletarian agency. Writing on what she ironically called the “New ‘True’ Socialism,” Ellen Meiksins Wood noted that the tendency, specifically after the 1960s, to “declass” the socialist project has led not simply to the “rejection of class politics” in favor of the “democratic struggles” of the so-called new social movements but, however ironically, to an increasing reinvestment of privileged status in intellectuals themselves, who have for some time appeared as those primarily authorized to attempt the task of social change, now taken as the result of mere indulgence in abstractly “subversive” discursive practices.<sup>152</sup>

Paradoxically, the split between “politics” and “economy,” or between “political” and “civil” society, which Marx saw as the structural precondition of the modern state very near the beginning of a series of encounters between intellectuals and the state, has thus ended up reintroducing itself as both the symptom and the limit of current state critique. On the one hand, one discerns all sorts of signs that the liberal democratic state is exhibiting a rapidly increasing number of authoritarian tendencies, including an escalating recourse to physical violence and coercion, a severely delegitimized and impotent parliamentarianism, an increasing distaste for the universality of rights (particularly as regards the rights of “undocumented” immigrants), a penchant for proliferating detention or “hospitality camps,” and a flagrant disregard for popular demands. In all these respects, the line of thought that connects late Marxist and post-Marxist investigations of the state, from Poulantzas’s “authoritarian statism” to Agamben’s (and, in part, Foucault’s) interest in the encounter between the generative violence of sovereign authority, the ambiguous function of the “rule of law,” and the growth of the terrain of disciplinary and biopolitical techniques, seems relevant and trenchant. On the other hand, however, the post-2009 period has recontextualized all such symptoms or developments within the terrain of the state’s role in ever more blatant forms of oxymoronically “antistatist” economic intervention: Western

---

<sup>151</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Greece and Europe,” translated into Greek by Akis Gavriilides and published in the newspaper *Ē Epochē*, June 4, 2012. Earlier, another of Europe’s luminaries, Jürgen Habermas, made his own appeal to constitutional reform as the only hope of salvaging the “European project,” which, in his own words, he began to perceive as not quite automatically conducive to democracy with the onset of the crisis, in 2008. See “Jürgen Habermas, the Last European,” trans. Paul Cohen, *Presseurop*, <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/1242541-juergen-habermas-last-european> (accessed March 15, 2012).

<sup>152</sup> Wood, *Retreat from Class*, 3–6. In a recent article entitled “The Revolt of the Salaried Bourgeoisie,” the avowedly “radical Marxist” Slavoj Žižek characteristically proclaimed that “today’s strikes” are mostly led by a “salaried bourgeoisie” driven by fear of losing its surplus wage” and rhetorically asked: “who dares strike today when having a permanent job is itself a privilege?” *London Review of Books* 34, no. 2 (January 26, 2012): 9–10. At the time these lines are being written, the steelworkers of Aspropyrgos, Athens, are in the 228th day of the longest strike in Greek history, which has gone mostly unreported and remains effectively ignored by Western intellectuals, despite the vested international interest in the turbulent Greek situation. As for the “salaried bourgeoisie,” said to have replaced a long-vanished working class, one might have good reason to suspect that it is only the latest guise of ex-Trotskyite and New Right ideologue James Burnham’s frequently criticized diagnosis of a “managerial revolution” back in 1941. See Vangelis Zervas, “Slavoj Žižek’s Political Economy: Destroying the Notebooks of Marxist Theory,” *Praxis: Review of Critical Social Studies* 1, no. 1 (May 2012): 11–13 (in Greek).

capitalist societies seem to have been caught in a new cycle of violent “primitive accumulation” that includes the expropriation of public and national resources by private capital, the slashing of wages, jobs, pensions, and benefits, the dismantling of the welfare state, the subjection of previously semiperipheral states into forms of neocolonial dependency, and the constant grafting of “third worlds” within sectors of the first.

In short, we are now finding ourselves once again within the terrain of the state as inextricably tied to what Marx would not hesitate to call the class struggle, to forms of class domination, and to their globally uneven and combined historical rhythms, tied as these are to nationally specific but globally overdetermined cycles of economic expansion and recession and to the grinding slowness of what appears like a long and painful period of politico-economic transition. The first cycle of state theory—that which connects Hegel to Marx and Engels and to Lenin and that seems to live a strongly revised afterlife in Gramsci and Poulantzas—seems suddenly less closed than it has for a long time, if only for negative reasons.<sup>153</sup> At the end of his *Representing “Capital,”* Fredric Jameson notes accordingly that a return to the Althusserian distinction between “exploitation” and “domination” reveals the far-reaching consequences of the “radical disjunction between politics and economics” for our own moment; for this, Jameson seems to suggest, is a time in which so-called new social movements (including Occupy Wall Street and its European equivalents) reveal a secret dependence on the very system they aim to oppose, an inability to move beyond a reformist (and perhaps utopian) impulse to rationalize and readjust what they perceive as only local and discardable “expressions”<sup>154</sup> of the capitalist mode of production:

I here follow Althusser’s position, which grasps the structure of the mode of production as one fundamentally organized by the “relations of production,” or in other words by the structure of exploitation: domination is therefore not only the “secondary” result of this structure but also the mode of its reproduction rather than of its production. . . . Anarchism places primary emphasis on domination, that is to say, on versions and forms of power as such (rather than what we could for shorthand call economics), and everyone knows the seduction exerted by this many-faceted word today, in politics and theory alike. I believe that the Marxist position evaluates this emphasis as an essentially moral or ethical one, which leads to punctual revolts and acts of resistance rather than to the transformation of the mode of production as such; . . . the outcome of an emphasis on exploitation is a socialist program, while that of an emphasis on domination is a democratic one, a program and a language only too easily and often coopted by the capitalist state.<sup>155</sup>

## V

The essays that follow are, inevitably, different attempts to negotiate this divide; to explore, as it were, the terrain of complicities, confrontations, and ruptures between spheres of existence and action, pedagogical and repressive apparatuses, or geopolitical and functional zones. The immense complexity of this terrain underlines the continuing evasiveness of the question of the state, of which it seems it is now high time to think again. Alberto Toscano’s “The Nonstate In-

---

<sup>153</sup> For an interesting attempt to reengage with this first cycle of revolutionary antistatism, against its subsequent forms of “left democratic” critique, see Badiou, “Speculative Disquisition on the Concept of Democracy,” 78–95.

<sup>154</sup> This is revealed by the overwhelming tendency of the contemporary Left to replace criticism of the *capitalist state* with criticism of neoliberalism, with the latter perceived as a destructive and irrational mutation of an implicitly “benevolent” Keynesian mode of governance.

<sup>155</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Representing “Capital”: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011), 150.

tellectual: Franco Fortini and Communist Criticism” offers a detailed analysis of the interventions of a neglected figure of the postwar Italian Left, critic and poet Franco Fortini, in an attempt to challenge both “bland invocations of the death of the intellectual” and “confident pronouncements about the outdatedness of notions like partisanship and commitment.” Combining impassioned commitment to a communist ethos that was at once “unbending” and “non-dogmatic,” Fortini’s cultural and political work simultaneously challenged traditional appeals to the intellectual as the recipient of a social mandate or the “organic” representative of a class and facile evocations of intellectuals’ significance as emblematic figures of a presumed transition to “immaterial labor,” the “official communism” embodied in the figures of the state and the party, and the revisionist euphoria of a “postcommunist” ethos. In Fortini, Toscano traces, as it were, the lineaments of an alternative past for the politically committed intellectual, one that retained a measure of critical distance from all more well-known embodiments of such a figure (Brecht and Sartre among others), and one that generates a number of divergent and nontotalizable possibilities, all of which Fortini was committed to exploring: the communist “copywriter,” who collaborates in the forging of means of antisystemic communication and, hence, in the immersion into collective and collaborative practice; the critic, who remains vigilantly negative toward capitalist forms of reification and actively aware of the dependence of his or her work on the division of labor that capitalism reproduces and intensifies; and the poet, for whom communism becomes a matter of formal and allegorical prefiguration, “a metaphorical prophecy and a prophetic metaphor of formalized life.”

My own “The Discreet Charm of the ‘Anarchist Sublime’: Sovereign Power and Bare Life Revisited” provides a critical examination of the political implications of another, more contemporary, and far better known intellectual figure of the Italian New Left, Giorgio Agamben, whose work came to shape the stance of academic leftism toward the problem of the state at a very determinate conjuncture: that of late capitalist political culture between the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001 and the onset of the capitalist crisis that first made global news almost exactly seven years later, with the collapse of the finance and investment giants Lehman Brothers and AIG. Tracing the “structures of feeling” that underwrote Agamben’s meteoric rise in the Anglophone world in this period, the essay situates his work in the conjuncture that was formed between an “antipolitics of boundless optimism” that prevailed until the September 11 attack and the “antipolitics of quasi-nihilistic catastrophism” that replaced it when the interdependence of law and violence (a problem that Marx and Engels placed at the heart of the question of the birth of the state more than a century ago) disrupted the complacency of “end of history” euphoria in the West. I take Roman antiquity, early modernity, and the industrial era as three privileged moments in the articulation of the relationship between what Agamben termed “sovereign violence” and “bare life.” They serve as contexts in which to investigate the implications of his work for our understanding of the political functions of Roman *sacratio*; the secret dialogue between “political theology” and what we might call a “political zoology,” a discourse on sovereignty itself as a form of “bare life”; and the emergence, within the domain of political economy, of a violence fully vested with the sovereign right to kill, yet subtracted from the juridical model of sovereignty and from any grounding in the sovereign body. Agamben’s work, I argue, is an attempt to disavow not merely the distance between modernity and antiquity but also the import of Marx’s work for the very comprehensibility of this distance. For it is this work that originally thinks bare (proletarian) life as a life that may subsist *beyond the limits of sovereignty*, as the precarious complement of the impersonal, unlocalizable, juridically indifferent

power of the capitalist “market.” Comprehensible neither as a “state of exception” nor as an instance of the theatrics of sovereign decision, this form of power challenges us to rethink the terrain formed between biopolitics and political economy, state violence and the “war of all against all” that normatively constitutes the sphere of so-called civil society.

Neferti Tadiar’s “Life-Times of Becoming Human” constitutes precisely such an attempt. Following on the work of postcolonial theorists like Achille Mbembe, Tadiar begins by crucially reminding us of a fact that neither Foucault’s nor Agamben’s investigations of state thanatopolitics register: the fact that the construction of life in terms of waste and disposability has been a long and vital factor of the colonial policy of Western states and, hence, that the interrogation of the limits of “formal humanism” is originally the task of anticolonial critique. The collusion between contemporary neoliberalism and neocolonial states of exception—a collusion Tadiar locates at the center of the contemporary moment—suggests, contra prevailing attitudes among the Western intelligentsia, the existence of a potentially “antagonistic relation” between the “war to be human” and the problem of “becoming human in a time of war.” The former presupposes a surreptitious acceptance of Western privilege, and thus a readiness for silent complicity with the Western “politico-military project” for the protection of that privilege at the cost of the destruction of “Third World” lives; the latter emerges as a problem precisely from the standpoint of those deemed expendable for the safeguarding of the humanity of the West: Filipino activists and social workers slaughtered by paramilitary units financially aided by the Bush regime; overseas domestic workers forced into the exploitative extraction of “affective labor” and exposed to domestic and sexual violence in Western households; poor maquiladora workers murdered at the US-Mexico border like so many instances of disposable humanity. In such contexts, Tadiar notes, cultural and political activism involves a readiness not merely to invoke the victims’ “humanity” but to also draw attention to the ways in which (falsely) abstract “humanity” has evolved into “a category of valuable life from which a growing global majority of people are systematically excluded.” This means, as Marx had already begun to suggest in the nineteenth century, that it is not adequate to ground the problem of bare and disposable life by protesting its expulsion from “a juridical (i.e., state-defined and protected legal) humanity.” On the contrary, readiness to accept such a framework amounts to readiness to naturalize the violence that prevails “in the realm of everyday material social life.” A critique that is commensurable with the challenge such a situation presents cannot rely, as Western political theory has so often done, on the opposition between political *bios* and “the denigrated sphere of the unfree, meaningless, merely reproductive labor of making life”; rather, it has to address the conditions of this life, precarious as it is, as fundamental to the gestation of any genuinely emancipatory and universal politics. Tadiar consequently proposes a theorization of “life-time” as the proper sphere of living labor—including labor customarily regarded as devalued or unremunerated “nonwork”—which is to say, as at once the site of brutal exploitation, the source of all economic value, and the sphere wherein the political subjectivity of the global dispossessed is at once ensnared and forced to address the concrete conditions of its existence.

“Worlding Justice / Commoning Matter,” Dimitris Papadopoulos’s contribution to this issue, is also centrally concerned with the implications of the concept of “living labor,” which it takes as an ongoing challenge to the unavowed statism of forms of political critique, including those associated with the name of Marxism. For Papadopoulos, the project of a radical Left posthumanism that would move us beyond the limits of a facile and possibly pernicious universalism depends on a critique of a historical tradition for which the motivation of revolutionary

activity is ultimately the conquest of state power. Left politics, irrespectively of its particular colors, has thus been ensnared by an understanding of the state as “humanist but not humanist enough,” which in turn has led to a severe underestimation of the prospects of a “material worlding” of (social) justice. Such worlding, conversely, presupposes the emancipation of critical thought from the obsession with social power and with the humanist political subject that, taken together, constitute the framework and prison of the state as horizon of political thinking. Thus, the critique of the limits of critique in Marxist state theory involves the excavation and retrieval of what Papadopoulos calls “a long history of nonhumanist struggles”—against indenture, slavery, and forced labor, for instance. Such struggles contested the underpinnings of Western, humanist and individualist subjectivity, for, rather than seeking to articulate themselves in the form of “dual power”—of a counterstate pitted against the state—they focused on a “commoning” of everyday, material existence that included relations to the natural world. Wage labor can hence be conceived as a reactive measure aimed to repress precisely the possibility of such commoning of matter and to ensure the imprisonment of insurrectionary, living labor within regimes of discipline, efficiency, performance, and the capitalist work ethos. Faced with the paradox of the entanglement of the “freedom” of contractual relations and the exploitation of labor that constituted the capitalist response to the communing practice of the multitude, Marxism could do no better than to eliminate a false freedom while blocking the generative potential of plebeian commoning, leading the exploited toward a state socialism that amounted to nothing else than a form of backward capitalism. “New social movements” were the response to the historical failure of revolution to destroy the repressive alliance of humanism and the state; they were attempts to escape the limits of a statism that had paralyzed Marxism by jettisoning the very idea of state revolution as the strategic goal of radical political practice. Following Negri and Deleuze, Papadopoulos underlines the worlding significance of joy against “both the cognitivist left fixation with events and historical subjects to come” and “the circulation of class privileges” in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. He concludes with an attempt to think the political import of “forms of life” that both resonates with Tadiar’s own deployment of the term and accentuates it differently, embedding it within a context of “alter-ontology” that he grounds on a fusion of Benjamin’s envisioning of divine violence and Bakhtin’s celebration of the “ordinary materiality of existence as a space where justice can be enacted.”

Arne De Boever’s “Aesthetic Education and the Pharmacology of the State” revisits Foucault’s skeptical response to “state phobia” to address the broader ambivalence that intellectuals in the postwar era have exhibited toward the concept of the state, particularly the welfare state. Like the Platonic *pharmakon*, this state has tended to appear both as agent of death and as protector of life; or, in the terms De Boever invokes from Bruce Robbins’s essay in the previous issue of *Occasion*, as both lethal “Agent Orange” and nourishing “orange juice.”<sup>156</sup> De Boever posits the possibility of a “pharmacology of the state” and begins to explore its import by discussing Foucault’s and Robbins’s respective positions on the welfare state’s “curative” and “empoisoning” dimensions. Taking a cue from Bernard Stiegler’s work on technics and pharmacology, De Boever argues for a consideration of the psychopolitical dimensions of welfare state biopolitics, while also inviting us to think of the state at large “as one of those technical extensions or prostheses through which the human being projects itself into the world.” Such projection in-

---

<sup>156</sup> See Bruce Robbins, “Orange Juice and Agent Orange,” *Occasion 2* (2010): 1, [http://arcade.stanford.edu/journals/occasion/files/article\\_pdfs/Occasion\\_v02\\_Robbins\\_122010\\_0.pdf](http://arcade.stanford.edu/journals/occasion/files/article_pdfs/Occasion_v02_Robbins_122010_0.pdf) (accessed May 10, 2012).

volves us in a reflection on the relation between attitudes toward the state and what Foucault would have called “the care of the self.” One of the forms this relation takes, De Boever suggests, is anger. Catherine Malabou’s *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* are read as explorations of the relation between anger, the care for human welfare, and the state (a relation that may be said to have been concretely instantiated in the so-called indignant movement in Europe or in Stéphane Hessel’s topical plea for a politics of anger, *Indignez-vous!*<sup>157</sup>). De Boever concludes by turning to the question of “aesthetic education,” particularly as regards the presumed need for an education of anger, which became the center of debate on the recent London riots. Against the kind of repressive “education” into consensus politics that conservative commentators called for, De Boever suggests, the work of thinkers like Malabou and Robbins (or Ishiguro) seems to call “for another kind of aesthetic education in which anger becomes part of a politics of dissensus” that would genuinely take people’s welfare into account.

With Ashis Nandy’s “Nationalism, Genuine and Spurious: A Very Late Obituary of Two Early Postnationalist Strains in India,” we return to a question first opened up by Neferti Tadiar’s contribution: namely, to the import of postcolonial experience for thinking the question of complicities, confrontations, and ruptures between intellectuals and the state. Nandy focuses on the complex and ambiguous relation of Rabindranath Tagore, India’s “national poet,” to the concept of the nation-state. The writer or composer of both India’s and Bangladesh’s national anthems (and the composer of Sri Lanka’s anthem as well), Tagore occupied both the prominent position of a national intellectual who patriotically inspired the anticolonial struggle in his country and that of the antinationalist skeptic, whose harsh criticism of the masculinist and militarist strains of nationalism embarrassed and angered his audience in his own country and elsewhere in the Asian continent. Developing a complex linguistic strategy, Nandy notes, Tagore attempted to disentangle patriotism, which he understood as an ecumenical value, from nationalism, which he associated with the uncritical imitation of Western, statist territoriality. In his fiction, Tagore suggested that in this abstract and statist guise, nationalism was effectively “non-Indian or anti-Indian,” incompatible with indigenous values, which prized religious and cultural plurality; he envisioned it as a destructive force that corrodes community life and forms the basis for the rise of organized, mass violence. Despite his Brahmin background, Tagore envisioned Indian unity, not on the basis of adherence to the country’s canonical sacred texts, but on that of the tradition of India’s medieval mystics, poets, and religious figures. He thus found himself estranged from both the inheritance of his caste and the discourse of rational reform adopted by India’s modernizing elite, yet he was able, by the same token, to advocate a notion of unity that “dissociated Indianness from the state” in ways that largely converged with that other famously elusive emblem of the Indian anticolonial struggle, Mahatma Gandhi. Their largely eccentric trajectories, Nandy concludes, can only be understood on the basis of a rigorous theoretical distinction between nationalism and patriotism as forms of imagining territorial belonging.

Taking a different standpoint for its inquiry into the question of the state, Timothy Brennan’s “Diaspora, Intellectuals, and the State” directs a critical gaze at the unwillingness of many metropolitan intellectuals to bring their otherwise salutary engagement with diaspora and cosmopolitanism to bear upon “the changing character of the state” as a reality that grounds apparently cultural phenomena in political and economic realities. In effect, Brennan argues, the pronounced culturalism of most current theoretical work on the question of diaspora is a sign of a disavowal of such realities dictated by the sharply middle-class orientation of academic radical-

<sup>157</sup> See Stéphane Hessel, *Indignez-vous!* (Montpelier: Indigène Editions, 2010).

ism. To that extent, it is a “left-wing” counterpart—a mirror image—of the conservative, new Right discourse it ostensibly calls into question. At the same time, the prevailing idiom of academic diaspora discourse tends to consist in a largely unreflective denunciation of the state as an entirely reactionary, static phenomenon. To address the far-reaching implications of this tendency, Brennan undertakes a discussion of what he terms “cultures of belief”—in other words, of the forms taken by “solidarities of outlook” and the affiliative bonds that form around them for understanding both intrastate and interstate antagonisms. For Brennan, the inability to recognize the consequences of secular belief-cultures presupposes the monopoly of certain kinds of identity at the expense of others. This monopoly has largely insinuated itself in the professedly radical yet unavowedly conservative attitudes of intellectuals in the contemporary Left, who have turned away from the complex function of belief in emancipatory projects precisely because they have rejected all possibility of accepting the possibility of belief “as a secular project of rational controversy.” Arguing against the customary conflation of belief with (incipiently fundamentalist) faith, then, Brennan asks us to think about the centrality of the question of “cultures of belief” in the broader question of subaltern agency and its relationship to the self-positioning of intellectuals. Unlike what a culturalist and aestheticizing understanding of diasporic politics would predispose us to think, such politics is not free from questions of conscious and rational affiliation. Nor is it possible, Brennan concludes, to understand the complexity of such politics without critically confronting the fact that far from being reducible to power, the state “is not separable from our ability to live”—nor indeed from our ability to disseminate our thought materially. “Philosophy,” in this sense, “is always a component of the state,” though not necessarily of the state that exists, of the state as a static given.

The issue’s final essay, Gopal Balakrishnan’s “Speculations on the Stationary State,” is an extensive reflection on the state *in* crisis, on the one hand, and on the state—the status—of the current crisis, on the other. Balakrishnan takes stock of the consequences of the implosion of neoliberalism by boldly asking us to depart from prevailing ideologies of illimitable growth and to reconsider the conceptual framework of early political economy, when the consensus, unlike what it came to be in the postwar period, was that the prospects of growth were inherently limited, and that the supervention of a “stationary state” was an ultimately inevitable eventuality. For Balakrishnan, the current crisis uniquely combines “a conjunctural crisis of accumulation” with a series of “epochal shifts in world capitalism”: on the one hand, it is the climax of the failure of three decades of neoliberalism to resolve the world economic crisis of the 1970s, particularly as regards what Balakrishnan (following Robert Brenner) views as a “protracted sluggishness in the growth of demand,” which reinforced stagnation. What has frequently been described as a grotesquely cannibalistic phase of capitalist transition is thus in fact only the inevitable result of attempts to enforce a belated systemic “shakeout,” which had not been allowed to take place over the last three decades. On the other hand, the structural impasse signaled by the crisis involves at least three additional complications whose import has not been duly appreciated: first, the failure of “technological revolution” to qualitatively transform the mode of production, despite its assumed centrality in the “post-Fordist” economic order; second, the ultimately abortive status of a second capitalist grand narrative, that of the rise of the East not simply as a new economic center but also as the engine for the substantive rejuvenation of waning capitalist energies in the West; and third, the explosion of the demographic problem of a “gray society,” which vastly increased “the costs of social reproduction” by burdening growth with the costs of health care. With these complications in mind, Balakrishnan speculates on the prospects of reforming

capitalism beyond the impasses of imploding neoliberalism, only to end up discovering renewed signs of a dead end: the Keynesian solution of increased state spending as the key to kick-starting sagging rates of consumption appears thoroughly unfeasible as a solution for massive state debt, while a transition to “green capitalism” seems equally remote as a prospect given its high political cost. More properly “political” solutions to the crisis seem equally unthinkable: the mass projects of the extreme Right and the radical Left that marked the previous Depression era of the 1930s seem preempted by the largely hedonistic, individualist, antiauthoritarian, and counter-disciplinary culture prevalent almost everywhere today, while interimperialist conflicts of the classical type are undermined by the fact that state insolvency and the need for serious cuts in military budgets have rendered war itself a luxury. “We are entering,” Balakrishnan pessimistically concludes, “into a period of inconclusive struggles between a weakened capitalism and dispersed agencies of opposition, within delegitimated and insolvent political orders.” In such a historical landscape, shaped by the double decline of the capitalist world system and of the political autonomy and legitimacy of the state, it becomes difficult to determine whether the questions of this issue represent harbingers of still unimaginable future mutations and reconfigurations or, as Hegel might be inclined to think, tokens of the possibility of a knowledge that can only come too late, after the living force of its historical object has reached its end. A