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## Socialist Strategy and the Capitalist Democratic State

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The growing prominence of democratic socialism in the United States has revived debates about what it would mean to take state power. This upsurge stems from the impasse faced by both social democratic and vanguardist

political strategies. While the acceptance of neoliberal reforms has discredited social democratic parties, vanguardist strategies that prioritize extra-parliamentary struggles have been unable to build a substantial following among the working class or advance a credible strategy for socialist transition today.

The positions taken in this new debate are influenced by deeply rooted traditions of left thinking on the state, which tend to either see the state as a “fortress” of capitalist power, or else as subject to the command of whichever political party takes electoral office. Moving beyond these positions requires advancing a different conception of the capitalist state and a corresponding political strategy. We suggest that struggles on the terrain of the state can be advanced by, and also help to build, a broader political ecology of movements and forces. A genuine mass socialist politics requires successfully advancing political struggles within state institutions, without at the same time falling into the trap of social democratization that further accommodates the working class to capitalism.

Although socialist transition is hardly on the agenda now, considering these questions is vital for charting a viable path forward. The contemporary democratic socialist revival should be understood as an opportunity for *transforming the state* — fusing strategic electoral campaigns and extra-institutional workplace struggles and social movements. This current movement can serve as a litmus test for the idea that, rather than being inherently at odds, electoral politics, mobilizing social struggles from below, and building the institutional infrastructure of working-class power can be mutually reinforcing components of a unified political strategy.

### *Beyond Social Democracy and Leninism*

In recent years, some proponents of democratic socialism have framed it as advancing social democracy in the United States, inspired by both the New Deal and the Nordic model (Marcetic, 2019). Indeed, European social democratic parties once plausibly claimed to pursue incremental reforms as a path to socialism. This was partly because the state was seen as being able to decommodify not just public services but *labor itself*— giving workers a choice as to whether to enter the labor market or accept public support (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, in some respects, this deepened the operation of market mechanisms. Social democracy simultaneously encouraged commodification by *maximizing* labor force participation, and these states remained dependent on market discipline through the export-led growth models they increasingly pursued.

Furthermore, this conception holds a view of the state not as inherently capitalist, but as fundamentally neutral in the struggle between capital

and labor. While it may be occasionally “captured” by the capitalist class, the state could also become a workers’ state by electing social democratic parties, whose officeholders would then wield it in workers’ interest while compromising with the more liberal parts of the capitalist class. Such was the strategy of *parliamentary centralism*, whereby top-down social democratic parties led by a technocratic elite directed all resources and forces toward winning elections (Panitch, 1986; Miliband and Liebman, 1986).

However, this view misses the state’s structural role in reproducing capitalist class power, which goes far beyond electoral victory or business lobbying (Mizruchi, 2013). The integration of social democratic parties within the capitalist state, reinforced by their politics of class compromise and the depoliticization of the labor movement, left them incapable of resisting the neoliberal resolution to the 1970s crisis (Przeworski, 1986). Their top-down, technocratic structure was anathema to cultivating broader social struggles — which could have built workers’ democratic capacities but also risked challenging the party elite. Rather than transforming the state, social democratic parties disciplined labor into accepting its capitalist constraints. By the 1980s, any remaining commitment to class struggle was replaced by a politics of “inclusion” for marginalized groups within corporate capitalism. These parties’ conversion to the neoliberal Third Way and the hollowing out of their representative democratic capacities (Mair, 2013) has contributed to their decline across the core capitalist countries.

This same failure to see the state as fundamentally *capitalist* is also apparent in contemporary social democratic calls to nationalize industries and enlarge the public sector. Taking private firms under public control and expanding public services, while important, does not democratize either the means of production or state administration. Accomplishing the latter would require empowering public sector workers and the communities they serve, building capacities for movements from below, and developing new and more substantial channels for democratic participation.

A second orientation, inspired by the Trotskyist tradition, has understood the state as an institution almost wholly at the service of capital (Post, 2018). In this view, the state is mainly an alienated and repressive political authority — what Lenin (1972) called a “machine for maintaining the rule of one class over another” — that is superimposed upon society. In seeing the state as a political instrument in the hands of capital, this approach has emphasized a strategy of building mass movements that can constitute a form of dual power if and when a crisis of the state creates a revolutionary opening. Here, “smashing” the state and replacing it with a transitional dictatorship of the proletariat remains the necessary object of achieving genuine democracy.

To be sure, both the Bolsheviks and other Marxist–Leninist parties incorporated electoral tactics into their revolutionary strategies (Nimtz,

2014). In non-revolutionary periods, parliamentary channels were used for agitation and demands that the capitalist state structurally could not meet; during “objectively” revolutionary moments this tactic was explicitly a means for marshaling mass support for dual power and, ultimately, insurrection. However, after taking power and confronting the practical needs of governing (let alone transforming) Russian society, Lenin was forced to significantly modify the strategy of “smashing” the Tsarist state, effectively reconstituting the state machinery under new leadership (Rigby, 1979).

This history is often blurred by calls for smashing the state today. Moreover, these tactics have been insufficient for mobilizing the extensive working-class support that this strategy requires, in part because of these organizations’ skepticism about even “muscular” reforms. It has been argued that state-provided measures such as education, welfare, healthcare, or even nationalization, may modify but not fundamentally challenge capitalist class rule (Barker, 1985), ultimately supplying capital with more docile workers for exploitation. This neglects the role that working-class struggles have historically played in securing measures such as universal suffrage, the shortening of the working day, and collective bargaining — forcing significant enough concessions by the bourgeoisie to institute the welfare state regimes of the 20th century (Eley, 2002).

### *A Terrain of Struggle*

The shortcomings of both traditional social democratic and “revolutionary” socialist approaches pose the challenge of undertaking a struggle both *within* and *against* the state. Doing so requires accounting for the role the state plays in conditioning and organizing class power. Much as capital is not a thing but a social relation, the capitalist democratic state is not a unitary subject but a social relation between contradictory forces. The state is inherently structured to reproduce capitalism, but also presents opportunities for democratic movements to counter-organize within and across its institutions. In this manner, it provides a terrain on which working-class demands can be formed, contested, and possibly implemented.

This line of thinking is rooted in the Marxist tradition dating back to the *Communist Manifesto*. There, Marx and Engels underscored the importance of struggles for radical reforms, including universal suffrage and education, a progressive income tax, and the creation of a national bank. Engels (1978, 565–566) later called winning universal suffrage “one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat.” When linked to class mobilization from below, this was transformed “from a means of deception, which it was heretofore, into an instrument of emancipation.” With this, “an entirely new mode of proletarian struggle came into force. . . . It was found that the state

institutions, in which the rule of the bourgeoisie is organized, offer still further opportunities for the working classes to fight these very state institutions.”

Later figures like Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci also recognized the complementary character of struggles on the terrain of the state and mass action. For Luxemburg (1970), parliamentary struggles pedagogically developed the democratic power and political capacities of the working class, while mass movements radicalized struggles within the state. In turn, Gramsci’s notion of a “war of maneuver” assumed an ideological and mobilizational “war of position” within the political and cultural institutions of civil society (Gramsci, 1971, 238–243). These authors saw the state as protecting capitalist social relations, but also as more than a machine of domination fully external to working-class organization. Within certain limits, the capitalist state was sufficiently riven by contradictions to serve as a terrain of struggle on which power relations could be contested.

Nicos Poulantzas represents the most significant touchstone for this perspective today. For Poulantzas, the main task of the capitalist state was to create an “unstable equilibrium of compromise” among capitalist class fractions, while at the same time disorganizing the working classes (1973, 192). Through its various apparatuses — political (parties, the bureaucracy, legal institutions), economic (monetary apparatus, fiscal policy), and ideological (the media, educational institutions) — the state organized fractions of the bourgeoisie into a power bloc. It was thus structured to act in the general political interest of the capitalist class taken as a whole, even if against the particular interest of one or another class fraction. This *relative autonomy* allowed the state the flexibility to reproduce capitalist social relations — to commodify labor power, create markets, and address crises — but it also meant that it was not directly controlled by any specific class fraction. Struggles within and between social classes traversed the state as internal contradictions, and were thus embedded and articulated in its institutions (Poulantzas, 1978).

One major contradiction that defined postwar capitalist states and persists today is that between the reproduction of the class relations required for capital accumulation, and the imperative to secure political legitimacy and allow for popular representation (Offe, 1975). The *capitalist democratic* state must create the social conditions necessary for successful, stable accumulation. These include the ongoing commodification of labor power; investment in public infrastructure, education, and housing; taxation; and preserving public order through law and repression. But the capitalist *democratic* state must also ideologically legitimate these social relations by reproducing notions of popular sovereignty, juridical equality and legality, and “the public interest.”

The legitimacy of the capitalist state depends on its ability to absorb and ameliorate the demands of working-class struggles. Because of the general

contradiction between accumulation and legitimation, during upsurges of class struggle, workers' demands may resonate through state institutions and lead the state to make political compromises not desired by significant sections of the capitalist class. Even as they are implemented on the state's biased terrain, these struggles nevertheless affect its balance of forces, potentially winning meaningful gains that could create opportunities for further advances.

At the same time, the pressures stemming from private control over investment — the need to maintain “business confidence” and investment, avoid capital flight, and prevent a downturn in living standards — continue to impose multiple formal and informal veto points on social democratic reforms. Austerity measures intended to encourage investment have further undercut the state's legitimation function. In recent decades, both conservative and social democratic parties in Western Europe have converged around such measures, which have been protected by key nodes of state administration, becoming increasingly insulated from public and legislative oversight (Jessop, 2016).

Historically, social struggles pursued by social democratic parties were institutionalized through corporatist arrangements (trade unions, social welfare provisions) that did not transform the relations of production or disrupt the ongoing commodification of labor power. Although such programs can expand the state to provide essential protections for workers, they fall short of fundamentally democratizing it so that it governs *differently*.

Despite the general decline of representative institutions and the insulation of the state administration since the 1970s, the capitalist state today remains subject to the periodic crises stemming from the contradiction between accumulation and legitimation. The question is: Under what conditions can working-class struggles today *challenge*, rather than perpetuate, the state's role in reproducing capitalist class hegemony, and create new openings for subsequent victories?

### *The Transformation of the State*

Attempts by Eurocommunist parties to transform the state in the 1970s faltered (Escalona, 2017). Nevertheless, given the weakness of the left today, neither a militant minority nor sporadic upsurges of protest are sufficient to build the lasting power base necessary for a socialist transition. The more modest challenge for today's democratic socialists is implementing changes that can both withstand the pressures of the global capitalist order and simultaneously create openings for new victories.

Such a strategy involves a program of radical demands and political interventions on the terrain of the state. This entails operating on two fronts: building a democratic working-class movement outside of state institutions, and simultaneously exerting pressure on the contradictions inside the capitalist state to modify the balance of forces and expose it to further popular interventions. This means adopting tactics that engage with the state on its own terrain (class-struggle elections, democratizing state institutions) and those seeking to fundamentally shift the terms of conflict (extra-institutional social movements, and new participatory initiatives).

The struggle to transform the state is indispensable for democratizing the economy. Today, the multinational corporation remains the primary means for organizing capitalist production and investment, and it is constituted in and through state power. Constructing a new regime of democratic economic planning requires either fundamentally transforming the state's existing institutions, or organizing new ones. Ambitious measures such as the Green New Deal commonly advocated by democratic socialists (Aronoff, Battistoni, Aldana Cohen, and Riofrancos, 2019) require state intervention to socialize the economy and introduce a massive program of new investment, including producing green technologies, retrofitting infrastructure, and re-training workers. Furthermore, democratizing the financial system (Epstein, 2019; Maher, Gindin, and Panitch, 2019) is also impossible to envision apart from interventions within the state to nationalize major banks and develop public, participatory institutions for the democratic planning of investment.

In the United States, socialist tactics have involved candidates running within the Democratic Party. However, an independent socialist party remains the necessary means for organizing the working class and transforming the capitalist state, notwithstanding the major institutional biases against third parties (Abott and Guastella, 2019). Even then, any reforms won will have to be continually defended outside the state and advanced by popular movements. This requires cultivating extra-parliamentary forces that further draw workers into the political arena and build greater capacities for mobilization and organization in the workplace and in the community, with the goal of democratic political and economic self-management.

Combining pressures from mass movements outside the state and strategic opportunities from within can build working-class power and capacity, expand the spaces of democratic practices within the state, and facilitate new forms of decision-making and social planning. Waging a struggle within and against the state would require building new forms of participation and working-class organization, all aiming for eventually breaking with capitalist social relations. Yet if the latter is to take place, it will be neither through a single rupture with the existing order, nor a smooth evolution. More

likely, it will be an uneven process: a *series* of ruptures that includes both the re-consolidation of past victories and the threat of possible reversals.

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## The Welfare State and the Bourgeois Family–Household

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### *Introduction*

In an era of painful austerity and cuts to social services, it can be tempting to look back on the Keynesian welfare state fondly and to view its restoration as a worthy goal. In his introduction to *The State Debate* (1991), Simon Clarke quotes the pleading postscript to the second edition of *In and Against the State* (London–Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, 143): "We must not let go of the understanding of capitalism and the state that we acquired so painfully during the Keynesian decades." I will attempt to answer that call through a discussion of two important but largely forgotten Marxist–feminist books of that era — Elizabeth Wilson's *Women and the Welfare State* (1977) and Cynthia Cockburn's *The Local State: The Management of Cities and*

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