

ANTONIO

# NEGRI

THE END OF SOVEREIGNTY



TRANSLATED BY ED EMERY



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# **The End of Sovereignty**

Antonio Negri

Translated by Ed Emery

polity

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# Introduction

## On the State Form

In selecting articles from among the many materials that could best illustrate my path in the study of the state form (the work of a lifetime!), it struck me that the phrase that best sums up my work is – to paraphrase Antonin Artaud – *pour en finir avec la souveraineté* [‘to have done with sovereignty’]: I wanted to see an end to the sovereign state, to that particular form of despotism that the capitalist organization of bourgeois society has imposed upon us. I wanted to show how the sovereign bourgeois state, built in modernity (on the ruins of, but also in continuity with, the barbaric worlds that preceded it), has now become a weapon in the hands of a declining ruling class, a class sometimes exhausted in its institutional expressions and at other times frenetic, zombie, and parafascist. This happened after a few centuries of development and unspeakable events of death, war, suffering, and disasters imposed on citizen workers. The articles chosen for this volume are a summary of what I have analysed and written on the subject over the years.

But at the same time I realized that, while living my life in the critique of the modern state machine and in the struggle against it, I had gradually come to isolate myself from the theoretical currents that dominate what claims to be critical thinking [*pensiero critico*] on politics and the state. I emphasize *critical* thinking, because obviously I always saw myself as far removed from the conservative or normalized thought that exalts the state and sees it as a force for good in society; far from ‘critical thinking’, then – in other words far from those currents of thought in which my own education was completed and my political passion

formed, more than fifty years ago - I mean the critique that was linked to the denunciation of the action of capitalism and its type of state. Why is that thought no longer my friend today? Because I believe it betrayed the very vocation that had left its stamp on me from the start. In my view, it has in fact abandoned the quest for a society in which the despotic power of the state might be abolished. This happened when the so-called critical thinking of the second half of the twentieth century came to be identified with the thought (and action) of the left. That is a left that can no longer be my friend, because it has changed its attitude towards the state. Instead of considering it a place of power that, once conquered, should have had its despotic hold on society destroyed, should have seen itself transformed as an ordering power of economic reproduction, and finally should have been dissolved as an autonomous figure of the monopoly of legitimate violence, this left sees the state rather as inevitable and has convinced itself to inhabit and use it for what it is.

At their inception, socialism and, even more, communism defined themselves as peace-bearing, anti-war movements that promoted work and happiness against the sad conditions of life and miserable social reproduction of workers, and supported the fight for liberty against the employers, their state, and its monopoly on legitimate violence. On the other hand, the call was for the abolition of the state: the state had to be removed. This was the call, and for this people fought, sometimes losing, sometimes dying, sometimes winning. This past has now been jettisoned by the left and is treated outrageously by what still purports to be critical thinking. The left has come to feel ashamed of having been 'communist' - as if to say that communism is synonymous with Stalinism or similar horrors. In reality it is the other way round, because the Stalinist bureaucrats sent the rebellious worker to the

gulag just as the tsar had done, and as our capitalist democracies have always treated workers in revolt or subaltern peoples in the colonies. The abolition of the state, they say, is a utopian notion, a dangerous leftist fantasy, an extremist delusion ...

This was proclaimed by the reactionaries - who, after the repression of the Paris Commune (a formidable first example of state abolition), massacred and banished the communards. Then came the fascists, who changed banishment into prisons and extermination camps. They were followed by bureaucrats from all parties, revolutionary and reformist alike, who with equal measures of unparalleled cynicism and violence proclaimed the autonomy of the political as a divinity on earth and ensured the exclusion and repression of those who did not play along but still thought that the real meaning of 'politics' was to be found in class struggle in society. So the left ceased to be what it was. It became indistinguishable from the right, and critical thought stopped thinking.

The call for the abolition of the state is still alive; there is no moment of liberation, no subversive action, no communist project or constituent practice that does not embody it - yes, as a utopia, but a concrete one: a utopia that lives and becomes concrete in every thought of liberation, where by 'liberation' we mean the abolition of the conditions that subordinate human beings to the laws of capitalist productivity. This concrete utopia operates in every liberating action, and its difference from what is not liberating lies in the intensity of the will to erode that statehood, which was established in the production of sociality and expressed in inequality and exploitation. Put briefly, the task is to abolish the state as the central moment in the organization of force against living labour and free citizenship. Let our enemies smile if they see here again the old workerist banner of 'refusal of work': it



rediscovers its taste for the present when it is raised against capitalist exploitation, which, through the state and within globalization, has become an increasingly ferocious extraction of value and wealth from associated living labour.

In order to clarify the rationale behind the present collection of my writings on the state, I would like to recall an old story from the world of publishing. In 1968 I was given the task of translating into Italian and editing for Feltrinelli a German paperback volume of an encyclopedia of political science. When the volume - 600 pages in which the activity of the state was subjected to analysis by excellent professors of public law and distinguished politicians - came out in 1970, being substantially redone in the Italian edition, I wrote as follows in the Preface:

Perhaps readers will be surprised not to see, among these many entries, one that they might consider fundamental and that actually features on the cover of the volume: the concept of the state. This could be explained by the fact that an entry 'State' is also absent from the German edition. But such an explanation is not convincing; in this case an entry 'State' is absent precisely because of those academic and conservative assumptions that we have criticized and that are typical of that volume. Indeed, the state has always presented itself to academic science at least as an ambiguous concept, when trying to define it. On the one hand, it tends to be representative of power itself, almost a synonym for it. On the other, it looks like the limit of an uninterrupted series of connotations: the state as sovereignty, as right, as legitimacy - or, in parallel, as fiscal policy, welfare policy, and so on. Thus, in the light of these considerations, the state appears as a horizon, a non-conclusive but nonetheless effective entity that only a full treatment of the problems associated with it can address properly, as something that only the entirety of political experience can allow us to define. The immediate consequence, for academic science (but wasn't it always its presupposition?) is that the state is indefinable, because within it is represented a preconceptual radicality, an essential, foundational structure, from which political life becomes analysable but which cannot itself be defined. The mystification therefore becomes perfected in the mystical representation of the state as something profoundly human, as complex as humans themselves are, like a generic and collective entity: a limit not only of series of facts, but of nature and history, of violence and reasonability. To this we should add organization and subordination, pointing out that they are necessary concomitants.

The reason why an entry 'State' is absent from this edition of the volume *Stato e politica* [*State and Politics*] in the *Enciclopedia Feltrinelli Fischer* is quite different. It is absent not because the state is regarded here as a limit to be approached that will always remain obscure, given its elusive ontological nature; it is absent because the state is considered a reality that the new human beings produced by capitalist development - these human beings who know nature and history not as a dark nexus but as their own reality - built and suffered in the exploitation that the organization of labour determines; and they experience it as an imposture, to be destroyed by destroying all the forms through which the state becomes a reality of domination. As if replying to a long, painful, and terrible question of the oppressed of all times, the modern proletariat, made master of the world by an alienating and monstrous mode of production, now understands the state as both its product and its alienation, all within the production and alienation of labour. Its relation to power is one that only loathing and a longing for destruction can characterize. And it is in this light that the state is still a limit, not abstract but terribly concrete, and not of conceptual definition but of practical destruction. To see how it works is to know what it is: in this case, practice nurtures theory in order to impose its own dissolution on it. Here is the new meaning of the absence of an entry 'State' in this encyclopaedia, which is all aimed at combining the understanding of political facts with a desire to separate a new proletarian practice from the misery of state domination.<sup>1</sup>

These paragraphs were written between 1968 and 1970, during a period when the working-class struggle proved to be decisive and successful in every social conflict, both

domestically and globally. We were then at the end of the 'glorious thirty' - the name given to the 30 years during which Keynesianism and Fordism, introduced into the economic and productive policies of European societies that emerged after the Second World War, created the conditions for post-war recovery and for the consolidation of capitalist development. That was when my analysis of state form began; and it was devoted to unravelling the law of class struggle as the cause of capitalist development and the origin of its various compositions and crises. Not that this law has not always been in operation, even before the period we are considering. However, in the twentieth century (and in relation to the Soviet revolution and the international action of the communists), it came fully to the fore. Step by step, then, a new figure of the state emerged through the capitalist effort to hold back the expansion of the red revolutionary movement, and at every turn the violent content of state action was - directly or indirectly - defined by the balance of power between the parties involved: the state and living labour. Power and counterpower, too, we might say: it becomes increasingly clear, in the eyes of living labour, that the well-being and happiness achieved are inversely proportional to the effective power of the state. Let's see how things went. The October Revolution compelled capitalist governments to carry out a fundamental reform of their policy throughout the 'short century' (1917-1989): this was the triumph of Keynesian policies and of a certain 'politics of planning', even in the advanced capitalist countries. It meant above all the conquest and consolidation of the welfare state for the western proletariat, or rather for the social reproduction of living labour. This radical reform of the state would extend into the period after the second great imperialist war of the twentieth century; and then, around 1968, it would lead into another revolutionary phase, in favour of the working classes. During that same period the

greedy imperialist and colonial talons were gradually cut off the central states – only the talons, mind; yet something had been taken away, and the central states were still hurting. Hence a new cycle: the invention of neoliberalism, an extraordinary backlash for capitalist initiative. Was this initiative a restoration of state power from before 1917? Certainly not. To obtain a reversal in the negative trend of the rate of profit, to start accumulating again by taming the movement of living labour, capital had nevertheless been forced into globalization – and thus, once again, large amounts of sovereignty were surrendered by the state. Far from there being a restoration of the old power of the belle époque, a certain rebalancing of the class relations was achieved only by paying a very high price in terms of sovereignty.

The pieces contained in the present volume, the fifth that I have put together for Polity, tell this history. [Part I](#), ‘Once Upon a Time’, has an article that I wrote in 1968 on the first great transformation of the capitalist state in the twentieth century, the one caused by the triumph of Keynesianism. This text has in some way become a staple of Marxist reading on the theme of the capitalist state between the two wars, up until the 1970s. It should be accompanied by two other pieces from the 1970s, one on the communist theory of the state and the other on the crisis of public finance and the state (the latter cannot be published here but is already available in English since 1994).<sup>2</sup> They address the historical configurations of the ‘planner state’ of twentieth-century capitalism.

Referring the reader to these texts in addition to the one on Keynes allows me to open the book up to research material on more current topics. [Part II](#) contains my reflections on the crisis of modern sovereignty. For instance, in the 1970s I was engaged in a fierce debate on the state with Norberto Bobbio, an eminent bourgeois political scientist and



recently I debated sovereignty with Roberto Esposito. Both these encounters are useful for deepening our awareness of the crisis of the modern state.

A further extension would be the pages that carry a reflection that has characterized my work for many years. I'm talking about my reflection on the shift from discipline to control in the transformation of capitalist command over living labour in the post-Fordist era (post-Fordist in industrial policy, but also post-Taylorist when it comes to labour policies and post-Keynesian in terms of economic macro-politics). This is a study of the transformation of the form of sovereignty from the figure of transcendent and local command into a dispositif of immanent and global control. In *Empire*, together with Michael Hardt, I followed this process of transformation (or extinction?) of the concept of sovereignty - a transformation that left empty some central places in the table of categories of modern political theory. In addition to the material in the present volume, the interested reader can consult my earlier *Marx and Foucault* (Polity, 2017).

Finally, I return to the initial slogan: abolition of the state. Here too it would be necessary to expand our scope considerably, and in particular to answer a question that immediately springs to the fore. It is well and good to destroy the state, but where do we go from there? I shall attempt an answer to this question in the next volume of this collection, through a series of writings on the concept of the common. For now, let us content ourselves with addressing the old slogan of state abolition - with retracing the history that stands between Lenin and us, between a past that is now almost distant and a future that we wish were close.

*Paris, spring 2021*

## Notes

- [1.](#) [*Enciclopedia Feltrinelli Fischer*, vol. 27: *Scienze politiche 1: Stato e politica*, ed. A. Negri. Milan: Feltrinelli 1970, pp. 9-11.]
- [2.](#) [Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus*, Minnesota University Press: Minneapolis 1994, pp. 179-214.]

**Part I**

**Once Upon a Time ...**

# 1

## **John Maynard Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State\***

### **1929 as a fundamental moment for a periodization of the modern state**

Fifty years have passed since the events of Red October 1917. Those events were the climax of a historical movement that began with the June 1848 insurrection on the streets of Paris, when the modern industrial proletariat first discovered its class autonomy, its own, independent antagonism to the capitalist system. A further decisive turning point was, again, in Paris: it was the Commune of 1871, whose defeat led to the generalization of the idea of the party and to awareness of the need to organize class autonomy politically.

The intervals 1848 to 1871, then 1871 to 1917: this periodization seems to provide the only adequate framework for a theorization of the contemporary state. A definition of today's state has to take into account the total change in relations of class power that was revealed in the revolutionary crises that spanned the latter half of the nineteenth century. The problem imposed on political thought and action by the class challenge of 1848 led to a new critical awareness, to some extent confused, of the central role now assumed by the working class in the capitalist system. Unless we grasp this class determinant

behind the transformation of capital and the state, we remain trapped within bourgeois theory; we end up with a formalized sphere of 'politics', separated from capital as a dynamic class relation. We must go beyond banal descriptions of the process of industrialization; our starting point is the identification of a secular phase of capitalist development in which the dialectic of exploitation (the inherent subordination and antagonism of the wage-work relation) was socialized - a process that led to its extension over the entire fabric of political and institutional relations in the modern state. Any definition of the contemporary state that does not encompass these understandings is like Hegel's dark night in which all cows appear grey.

The year 1917 is a crucial point of rupture in the process: at that point, history became contemporary. The truth already demonstrated in 1848 - the possibility that the working class would appear as an independent variable in the process of capitalist development, even to the extent of imposing its own political autonomy - now achieved full realization, Hegel's *Durchbruch ins Freie* ['breakthrough into freedom']. The land of the Soviets was the place where working-class antagonism had been structured in the independent form of a state. As such, it became a focus of internal political identification for the working class internationally, because it was a present, immediately real, objective class possibility.

At that point socialism took a step from utopia into reality. From then on, theories of the state would have to take into account more than just the problems involved in the further socialization of exploitation. They would have to come to terms with a working class that had achieved political identity and had become a historical protagonist in its own right. The state would now have to face the subversive potential of a whole series of class movements, which in their material content already carried revolutionary



overtone. This means that the enormous political potential of this first leap into working-class world revolution was internalized within the given composition of the class. At every level of capitalist organization there was now a deeper, more threatening and contradictory presence of the working class, which was now autonomous and politically consistent. In this respect, the originality of 1917, the unique character of the challenge it presented by comparison to preceding cycles of working-class struggle, towers supreme. From there on, all problems acquired new perspectives and an entirely new dimension; the working-class viewpoint could now find its full independent expression.

Of course, the capitalist class became aware of the real impact of the October Revolution only slowly. At first the movement was seen essentially as an *external fact*. The initial response was an attempt, successful to a varying degree, to externalize the danger, to isolate the Soviet republic militarily and diplomatically, and to turn the revolution into a foreign issue. Then there was the *internal threat*. What was the general response of capital to the international wave of workers' struggles in the period that immediately followed – I mean to the creation of powerful new mass trade unions and to the explosion of the factory council movement, which competed for control over production?<sup>1</sup> During this period, only backward, immature ruling classes responded with fascist repression. But the more general response, which was to reproduce reformist models of containment, only scratched the surface of the new political reality. The overall goal of capital in the period that followed was to defeat the working-class vanguard or, more specifically, to undermine the material basis of their leadership throughout this phase – that is, a class composition that featured a relatively highly 'professionalized' sector (typically, engineering), which

came with an ideology of self-management as its corollary. The primary objective, then, was to destroy the basis of an alliance between workers' vanguards and proletarian masses – the very alliance on which Bolshevik organization was premised. To cut the vanguard off from the factory and the factory from the class, *to eradicate the party from within the class*: this was the aim of capitalist reorganization, the specific form of counterattack against 1917 in the West.

Taylorism, the Fordist revolution in production, and the new 'American way' of organizing work had precisely this function: to isolate the Bolshevik vanguards from the class and to rob them of their hegemonic role in production through the massification of the productive process and the deskilling of the labour force. This in turn accelerated the injection into production of new proletarian forces that broke the striking power of the old working-class aristocracies, neutralized their political potential, and prevented their regroupment. Earlier, in the mid-nineteenth century, capital had attempted to break the nascent proletarian front with the help of a new industrial structure that fostered the creation of labour aristocracies. Similarly after 1917, the working class had achieved political recomposition, in the wake of that breaking point in the cycle, capital once again turned to technological means of repression. As always, technological attack – increases in the organic composition of new sectors, assembly lines flow production, scientific organization of work, subdivision and fragmentation of jobs, and so on – was capital's first and almost instinctive response to the rigidity of the existing class composition and to the threat it engendered to capitalist control.

But the qualitatively new situation after 1917 imposed limits precisely here. The possibilities for the recomposition of the labour force in the phase of post-war reconversion

certainly existed in the short run. But the capitalist class soon realized that this reorganization would open up an even more threatening situation in the long term. Not only would capital have to contend with the enlarged reproduction of the class that these changes would inevitably bring about; it would have to face its immediate political recomposition too, and at a higher level of massification and socialization of the workforce. The October Revolution had introduced once and for all a political quality of subversion into the material needs and struggles of the working class, a spectre that could not be exorcized. Given this new situation, the technological solution would backfire in the end. It would only relaunch the political recomposition of the class at a higher level. At the same time, this response or counterattack was not sufficient for confronting the real problem that faced capital, namely how to recognize the political emergence of the working class while finding new means, through a complete restructuration of the social mechanism for the extraction of relative surplus value, of controlling this new class politically within the limits of the system. Conceding working class autonomy had to be accompanied by an ability to control it politically. The recognition of the originality of 1917, of the fact that the entire existing material structure of capital had been thrown out of gear and that there was no turning back, would sooner or later become a political necessity for capital.

The day of reckoning was not long in coming. As always, capital's political initiative has to be forced to free itself. Soon after the defeat of the General Strike in Britain - the event that seemed to mark the outer limit of the expanding post-war revolutionary process - the spectre of 1917 returned in a new and more threatening guise. The collapse after 1929 was all the more critical as a result of this looming threat. Capitalism now confronted a working class

that had been socially levelled by the repression exerted against it, had become massified to a point where its autonomy needed recognition, and had to be both acknowledged in its subversive potential and grasped as the decisive element and motive power behind any future model of development. The great post-1929 crisis was a moment of truth, a rebounding upon capital's structure of the previous technological attack on the working class, and the proof of capital's limitations of that attack: the lesson of 1917 now imposed itself on the system as a whole via this delayed reaction. Controllable only in the short run, the political initiative of the working class in 1917, in all its precise and ferocious destructiveness, now manifested itself in a crisis of the entire system, showing that it could not be ignored or evaded. The earlier attempts to avoid the problem, to ignore the effective reality of the specific political impact of the working class on the system, now boomeranged on the system itself. The crisis struck deepest precisely where capital was strongest and where technological conversion had been most thorough: in the United States.

In this sense the post-1929 crisis represents a moment of decisive importance in the emergence of the contemporary state: a *political* turning point, largely misunderstood by the economistic traditions of Marxism. The chief casualty of the crisis was the material basis of the liberal constitutional state; 1929 swept away any residual nostalgia for the values that 1917 had destroyed. The Wall Street crash of Black Thursday 1929 destroyed the political and state mythologies of a century of bourgeois domination. It marked the historic end of constitutional law [*stato di diritto*], understood as an apparatus of state power aimed at formally protecting individual rights through the bourgeois safeguards of due process, and established with a view to guaranteeing bourgeois hegemony on the basis of

citizenship. This was the final burial of the classic liberal myth of the separation of state and market, the end of laissez-faire.

But this was not simply a matter of collapse of the classic relation between state and civil society and the arrival of an interventionist state. After all, the period after 1871 had also seen a growth in state intervention and a socialization of the mode of production. What was new now and marked this moment as decisive was the recognition of the emergence of the working class and of the ineliminable antagonism it represented within the system as a *necessary feature*, which state power would have to accommodate. Too often (and not just in Italy, with the limited perspective that fascism allowed)<sup>2</sup> the novelty of the new state that emerged from the great crisis has been characterized as a transition from a liberal to a totalitarian form of state power. This is a distorted view: it mistakes the immediate and local recourse to fascist and corporatist solutions, the *form of regime*, for the central, overriding feature that distinguishes the new historical form of the capitalist state: the reconstruction of a state based on the discovery of the inherent antagonism of the working class. To be sure, this reconstruction has possible totalitarian implications, but only in the sense that it involved an awareness of intrinsic antagonism and struggle at all levels of the state.

Paradoxically, capital turned to Marx, or at least learned to read *Das Kapital* (from its own viewpoint, naturally, which, however mystified, is nonetheless efficacious). Once the antagonism was recognized, the problem was to make it function in such a way as to prevent one pole of the antagonism from breaking free into independent destructive action.

Working-class political revolution could in the future turn its continuous struggle for power into a dynamic element