‘Abolishing the present state of things’

Reconstructing Marx’s critique of politics and the state

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Our key point...

- Detachment is not caused by the political class being less ‘representative’ of their social base than in some previous era.

- Its lack of a social base makes the political class’ actual role — in representing the interests of the state, within civil society — more apparent.
Social basis for anti-politics

- Hollowing out of political structures provides the social basis for the greater prominence of anti-politics.

- The attempts by political elites to resolve the crisis of the 1970s via a ‘neoliberal’ political project pushed forward this process.

- Neoliberalism also created its own antinomies.
1. A widespread mood among ordinary people related to Gramsci’s description of ‘detachment’.

2. A political strategy by sections — or aspiring sections — of the political class, drawing on this mood for support.

3. A consistent strategy of social revolution, building a movement that overcomes politics by overcoming the state: ‘communism’ as the end of politics
Theorising anti-politics

- 20th century dominated by millions of ordinary people seeing politics as the place they could get their social interests advanced
- The Left – including those sections of the Marxist Left that were formally anti-state – came to see political struggle as complementary to social struggle, not antagonistic
- So what tools available to theorise the crisis of politics and rise of anti-politics?
  - We started with Gramsci...
Gramsci on ‘detachment’

‘At a certain point in their historical lives, social classes become detached from their traditional parties. In other words, the traditional parties in that particular organisational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them, are no longer recognised by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression.’

—Gramsci (1971), Selections From The Prison Notebooks
Gramsci revisited Hegel on state and civil society [Thomas]

Hegel saw state as expression on earth of the Absolute Spirit, or the *universality* of humanity

Civil society and the family were expressions of state in terms of *particular* humans; modern civil society atomistic: competing egoistic individuals – ‘war of all against all’

Such an engagement was also the grounds of Marx’s ‘Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’ (CHPR)
Marx contra Hegel

- Marx criticises Hegel for seeing the state as truly universal – because it is only an estranged, formal general interest.
- Hegel understands contradiction between state & civil society – but resolves it by placing a mediation between them: the legislature [CHPR].
- Marx: contradiction between civil society & state is unresolvable, because the irreconcilability of competing private interests in civil society requires a state that stands ‘over against’ civil society to regulate it.
- The state therefore imposes the bourgeoisie’s common class interests against its individual members [German Ideology].
The modern state is modern

- ‘The abstraction of the state as such ... was not created until modern times. The abstraction of the political state is a modern product’ [CHPR]
- c.f. under feudalism serf & lord were also subject & sovereign (social relations were ‘directly political’)

- The existence of a separate political sphere therefore only arises with the rise to dominance of capitalism
- The product of an alienated, debased collectivity
Political v social

- ‘On “The Jewish Question”’ (OTJQ): French Revolution sweeps away feudal relations in part by actively separating state from civil society
  - Effectively depoliticises civil society
  - The state (and ‘political society’) become a ‘spiritual’ community where competing ‘profane’ (material) interests allegedly get brought together as part of a ‘universal’ interest

- Social emancipation requires not just recognition by state but reabsorption of politics into civil society
  - i.e. ends society-politics divide
  - Identifies proletariat as the ‘universal class’ — a class in civil society that is not of civil society
(Mis-)representation

Marx also attacks the idea of ‘political representation’:

- As soon as deputies are authorised by constituents to enter the state, they stop being deputies & instead become part of the state.
- They become the representatives of the state’s interests ‘over against’ civil society (& hence their electors).

There is always a ‘crisis of representation’; the hollowing out of the social basis of politics just makes it apparent.
In ‘Marginal Critical Notes on “The King of Prussia and Social Reform”’ Marx attacks the ‘political’ way of viewing social reality

‘The state...will never see in “the state and the system of society” the source of social maladies. Where political parties exist, each party sees the root of every evil in the fact that instead of itself an opposing party stands at the helm of the state. Even radical and revolutionary politicians seek the root of the evil not in the essential nature of the state, but in a definite state form, which they wish to replace by a different state form’
While civil society is the true basis of the state, the state and its political class view themselves in an inverted fashion – as the basis of civil society

- All social problems are seen as either because of problematic administration or due to natural causes beyond any human control; i.e. not product of bourgeois civil society

- Cannot imagine ending bourgeois society because for the state (and politics) that would be ‘suicide’

- For Marx social ills require social revolution to be fixed
- This does require the proletariat to be ‘political’ in the sense it must smash the existing state – a political act by definition
Marx’s key insight

- Many claim Marx never worked out a systematic critique of politics, or that later insights override the early ones.

- In fact Marx moved on to understand the basis of the state by elucidating ‘the anatomy of civil society’ [1859 Preface]
  - Marx doesn’t revise his initial state theory (he carried around and referred to CHPR his whole life)
  - Already grasped correct level of analysis to understand the state is as an abstraction from civil society as a whole
    - Not directly from the value-form, class struggle, etc.
Deepening the critique

- *Paris Manuscripts* (1844) outline the basis of civil society (private property) in alienated labour

- *The German Ideology* (1845) situates this in an overarching theory of history

- Analogous approach in CHPR and *Capital* Vol. 1 – process of *real abstraction* [Colletti]

- Commune was ‘reabsorption’ of the State power by society, as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organized force of their suppression—the political form of their social emancipation’ [1871]
All ‘politics’ is bourgeois

- Not a terminological issue but difference between seeing illusory community or social forces as driver of change
- Social movements emerge from self-activity of the mass of people in civil society, who act not because of political motives but because of social contradictions
- Yet Marxists who have tended to adapt to politics c.f. consistently treating it as terrain of the enemy
  - Proletarian hegemony must be qualitatively different to bourgeois hegemony (which ‘puts politics in command’)

"politics" is bourgeois
Social-political antagonism

- Otherwise we can get confused in this anti-political moment: to not understand what underpins it and what it means for a project of human emancipation.

- Politics is an alienated / abstract / illusory / debased collectivity; its logic is antagonistic to the social revolution.

- Today new movements also come into a directly antagonistic relationship with politics (and, effectively, the political Left) – should we tell them they are wrong and need to find a ‘political exit’?
Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.

—Marx & Engels (1845), *The German Ideology*

- If the real movement of society is against politics, why is the Marxist Left so keen to renovate it?
But what about politics?

- We are not saying that politics can be simply ‘gotten around’ – this is kernel of truth in pro-politics argument
  - c.f. ‘autonomist’ and ‘movementist’ arguments

- What is an intervention in ‘the political’ for?
  - Is it in the service of reconstructing politics? A government of the Left that must be ‘defended’ by the movement?
  - Or is it in the service of breaking politics up and asserting a social logic? A reabsorption of politics back into the social?
  - And agency? A new political elite or ‘the real movement’ and the new society it constructs?