The State as a Class Weapon: Vanguard Organisation, Proletarian Sovereignty, and the Defence of Revolutionary Transformation

Eduardo Salgado Reyes

Editor

Solidariogb

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Abstract

In Marxist-Leninist political theory, the state is neither an abstract moral evil nor a neutral administrative arbiter, but an organised instrument of class rule. Examining the historical debate between Nikolai Bukharin and anarchist theorist Mikhail Bakunin, this paper rejects the idealist framing of the state as an ontological "trap" in favour of a historical-materialist analysis of state power as an indispensable class weapon. Integrating a comprehensive literature review of Marxist state theory alongside core organisational doctrines—including vanguard party theory, democratic centralism, and anti-imperialist national liberation—as well as the theoretical contributions of Mao Zedong and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, this study traces how smashing the bourgeois state machinery is essential to securing working-class emancipation. Through an examination of 21st-century constituent processes in Latin America (Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua) alongside a comparative analysis of existing socialist states (China, Cuba, and Vietnam), this article demonstrates that proletarian sovereignty requires the resolute consolidation of centralised revolutionary authority until domestic class antagonisms and external imperialist encirclement are definitively resolved.

1. Introduction: The Historical-Materialist Conception of the State

Bourgeois political science and petty-bourgeois anarchism share a common methodological flaw: both treat "the state" as a metaphysical entity standing above society, detached from the material relations of production. In contrast, Marxism-Leninism establishes that the state is the direct historical product of irreconcilable class antagonisms (Engels, 1884/2010; Lenin, 1917/1992).

Wherever society is divided into wealth-producing workers and surplus-extracting exploiters, the state emerges as the coercive apparatus through which the dominant economic class suppresses its rivals. As Mao Zedong (1949/1961) succinctly formulated, the state apparatus—comprising the army, police, and courts—is the instrument by which one class oppresses another; to the hostile classes, it is an instrument of oppression, not "benevolence." Consequently, the central strategic task for the working class is not to abstractly "abolish" authority overnight, but to wrest state power from the bourgeoisie, smash its bureaucratic-military machinery, and construct a proletarian state capable of securing the transition to communism (Lenin, 1917/1992).

2. Literature Review: Debates in Marxist State Theory

The strategic question of whether the state can serve as an instrument of working-class emancipation has generated extensive theoretical debate within historical materialism. Beyond the foundational polemics between Bukharin (1918) and Bakunin (1873/1990), subsequent generations of Marxist theorists have examined how bourgeois states maintain class domination and what institutional transformations are required to secure proletarian power.

2.1 The Instrumentalist–Structuralist Debate: Miliband and Poulantzas

In the late 20th century, Marxist political sociology was dominated by the exchange between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas regarding the nature of the capitalist state. In *The State in Capitalist Society*, Miliband (1969) advanced an instrumentalist perspective, demonstrating empirically that the state functions as an instrument of the ruling class because its key administrative, judicial, and military posts are occupied by individuals drawn from—and socialised within—the bourgeoisie.

Conversely, Poulantzas (1969, 1978) argued from a structuralist standpoint that the state's class character does not depend merely on the personnel occupying office, but on the objective structural position of the state within the capitalist mode of production. Poulantzas (1978) conceptualised the state as a "material condensation of a relationship of forces between classes," warning that attempting to capture the existing bourgeois state apparatus without fundamentally transforming its institutional architecture inevitably traps progressive movements within the reproduction of capital. From a Marxist-Leninist perspective, this debate reaffirms Lenin's (1917/1992) synthesis: because both the personnel and the structural machinery are fused with capital, the working class must smash the bourgeois apparatus rather than merely staffing it with new actors.

2.2 Hegemony, Ideological Apparatuses, and the "Integral State": Gramsci and Althusser

Other theorists have expanded the analysis of state power beyond direct physical coercion to examine how ruling classes secure ideological consent. Antonio Gramsci (1971) introduced the concept of the "integral state," defined as political society (coercive institutions such as the police, army, and courts) combined with civil society (schools, media, religious institutions, and trade unions) through which the

bourgeoisie exercises cultural and ideological hegemony. Gramsci argued that in modern societies with developed civil institutions, a revolutionary movement must wage a protracted "war of position" to build counter-hegemony before seizing state power—a framework that anticipates Mao Zedong's (1943/1965) emphasis on ideological struggle and mass mobilisation.

Building upon Gramsci, Louis Althusser (1971/2014) distinguished between the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA)—which functions primarily by violence—and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which reproduce capitalist relations of production through ideology. Althusser's framework explains why post-revolutionary states in Latin America and elsewhere face relentless internal destabilisation if they leave bourgeois media, educational systems, and judicial bodies intact: so long as the bourgeoisie retains control over Ideological State Apparatuses, it can continuously manufacture counter-revolutionary consent even after losing executive office.

2.3 Bureaucratic Degeneration vs. Anti-Imperialist State Sovereignty: Đilas, Trotsky, and Losurdo

A third body of literature addresses the post-revolutionary trajectory of socialist states. Critics of Soviet state-building, such as Leon Trotsky (1937/1972) and Milovan Đilas (1957), argued that conditions of economic scarcity and international isolation enabled an administrative bureaucracy to usurp political power from the proletariat, forming what Đilas termed a "new class" of state managers. While bourgeois commentators frequently cite these critiques to validate Bakunin's claim that all state power is inherently oppressive, Marxist-Leninist scholarship—most notably Domenico Losurdo (2011, 2017) and Michael Parenti (1997)—challenges this interpretation as historically idealist.

Losurdo (2017) demonstrates that what Western liberal and anarchist critics condemn as "bureaucratic authoritarianism" in socialist states was overwhelmingly the product of a permanent state of exception imposed by relentless imperialist encirclement, economic blockades, and military invasion. Similarly, Parenti (1997) argues that strong, centralised state institutions were the sole mechanism preventing the re-enslavement of wealth-producing populations by domestic oligarchies and foreign finance capital. Consequently, this literature underscores that the decisive question for revolutionary movements is not whether to abolish state authority in the abstract, but how to maintain vanguard accountability and mass participation while defending proletarian sovereignty against imperialist restoration.

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3. Bukharin vs. Bakunin: Scientific Socialism Against Petty-Bourgeois Idealism

3.1 Bukharin and the Proletarian State as an Emancipatory Instrument

In *Toward a Theory of the Imperialist State* (1915/1972) and *Anarchy and Scientific Communism* (1918), Nikolai Bukharin defended the Marxist-Leninist thesis against anarchist voluntarism. Bukharin demonstrated that the modern imperialist state is structurally fused with monopoly finance capital; therefore, the working class cannot simply inherit or reform the existing parliamentary apparatus. Instead, the bourgeois state must be dismantled and replaced by a historically unprecedented form of class rule: the dictatorship of the proletariat (Bukharin, 1918).

For Bukharin (1918), this transitional proletarian state is the sole instrument capable of:

- **Expropriating the expropriators:** Breaking the economic monopoly of landlords and capitalists over land, industry, and finance.

- **Centralising social production:** Replacing the anarchy of capitalist markets with rational economic planning oriented toward human need rather than private profit.
- **Defending the revolution:** Suppressing internal counter-revolution and repelling external imperialist intervention.

Only after the complete liquidation of exploiting classes on a global scale does the state lose its political character and gradually "wither away" into non-coercive economic administration (Engels, 1884/2010).

3.2 The Anarchist Fallacy: Bakunin's Ahistorical Determinism

Mikhail Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy* (1873/1990) posited that all state structures inevitably generate a privileged ruling caste, leading anarchists to demand the immediate abolition of the state on the morrow of a revolution. From a Marxist-Leninist perspective, this position represents petty-bourgeois idealism that disarms the working class in the face of organised capital (Bukharin, 1918).

Historical experience demonstrates that where revolutionary movements fail to consolidate centralised proletarian state power—from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the anarchist collectives of the Spanish Civil War in 1936—they are swiftly annihilated by the disciplined, centralised armies of the bourgeoisie (Parenti, 1997). Refusing to wield state power does not create freedom; it leaves a strategic vacuum immediately filled by counter-revolutionary terror.

4. Organisational Pillars: Vanguard Party, Democratic Centralism, and National Liberation

To prevent the working class from being outmanoeuvred by the concentrated power of domestic capital and foreign imperialism, Marxism-Leninism integrates state theory with three core organisational principles:

- **Vanguard Party Theory:** Because the working class develops unevenly under capitalist ideological hegemony, spontaneous trade-union consciousness is insufficient to overthrow the bourgeois state (Lenin, 1902/1961). A disciplined vanguard party—composed of the most class-conscious elements of the proletariat—is required to synthesise theoretical clarity with mass struggle, providing strategic cohesion before, during, and after the seizure of power.
- **Democratic Centralism:** To unify mass participation with decisive execution, the proletarian state and vanguard party operate on the principle of democratic centralism—characterised by full internal debate prior to policy adoption, followed by strict unity in action once a collective decision is reached (Lenin, 1906/1965a). Mao Zedong (1957/1977) further theorised this mechanism as essential for correctly handling contradictions among the people through democratic persuasion while exercising firm dictatorship over the enemies of the people.
- **Anti-Imperialist National Liberation:** In the era of monopoly capitalism, the class struggle assumes an explicitly international dimension (Lenin, 1916/1963). For nations subjected to colonial or neo-colonial extraction, building a strong socialist state is simultaneously an act of anti-imperialist national liberation, defending domestic sovereignty and natural resources against foreign economic strangulation and military intervention (Ho Chi Minh, 1960/2007).

5. Smashing the Bourgeois Machinery: Actors, Apparatus, and Revolutionary Praxis

A superficial reading of politics assumes that progressive change occurs merely by placing new political actors at the helm of existing institutions. Marxism-Leninism exposes this as a dangerous illusion: new working-class actors cannot operate a bourgeois state apparatus built to protect private property (Lenin, 1917/1992). Both the personnel and the institutional machinery must be transformed simultaneously.

During the 1917 October Revolution, the Bolsheviks dissolved the bourgeois Provisional Government, the Tsarist judiciary, and the old officer corps, transferring sovereignty directly to the Soviets (councils of workers, soldiers, and peasants). While severe economic devastation caused by imperialist invasion and civil war temporarily compelled the Soviet leadership to utilise former bourgeois technical specialists under strict proletarian supervision, the consolidation of centralised Soviet power enabled the USSR to rapidly industrialise, eradicate illiteracy, and defeat the fascist war machine in 1945 (Parenti, 1997).

Ernesto "Che" Guevara (1965/2003) later deepened this analysis in *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, warning that building socialism cannot rely on the "dull instruments" left behind by capitalism—such as individual material incentives and bourgeois administrative habits. Rather, the revolutionary state must simultaneously construct a new economic base and cultivate a "new human being" (*el hombre nuevo*) driven by socialist consciousness and collective duty. From a Marxist-Leninist lens, the eventual dissolution of the USSR in 1991 did not validate Bakunin's critique of state power; rather, it resulted from ideological revisionism and the erosion of vanguard discipline, which allowed opportunistic bureaucratic strata to dismantle socialist planning and restore capitalism from within.

6. Constituent Assemblies as Tactical Battlegrounds: Venezuela, Ecuador, and Nicaragua

In contemporary Latin America, where revolutionary movements confronted entrenched domestic oligarchies backed by U.S. imperialism, National Constituent Assemblies served as vital democratic instruments to break the institutional stranglehold of the bourgeoisie (*partidocracia*).

- **Breaking Oligarchic Monopolies:** Under Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1999) and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007–2008), popular movements utilised constituent power to bypass corrupt bourgeois parliaments and judiciaries, drafting progressive

constitutions that enshrined social rights, national sovereignty over natural resources, and participatory democracy.

- **The Counter-Offensive of Capital:** However, because these processes left the underlying capitalist property relations largely intact, domestic oligarchies and foreign imperialists retained vast economic leverage. In Ecuador, following the departure of Correa, right-wing political forces exploited transitory institutional mechanisms (such as the 2018 referendum and the CPCCS-T) to purge progressive officials, dismantle social protections, and realign the state with international finance capital—a trajectory of neoliberal constitutional manipulation that Ecuadorian voters ultimately rejected in November 2025 *[Insert primary/news source, 2025]*. Similarly, in Venezuela, the domestic right wing weaponised its 2015 legislative majority to establish an imperialist-backed parallel structure aimed at economic strangulation and state collapse.
- **Foreclosing Imperialist Subversion in Nicaragua:** To break this cyclical sabotage, revolutionary governance must confront a fundamental question: *Democracy for which class?* (Lenin, 1918/1965b; Losurdo, 2011). Marxism-Leninism defines "the people" strictly along material lines: producers (workers and peasants who create all social wealth) versus parasitic extractors (capitalists, landlords, and imperialist proxies). Following repeated foreign-backed destabilisation attempts—most notably the violent 2018 coup attempt—the Sandinista government in Nicaragua moved to permanently foreclose the avenues of imperialist subversion. By enacting sweeping constitutional reforms in 2024–2025 that restructured state institutions around unified revolutionary leadership and curtailed foreign-backed opposition networks *[Insert constitutional/legal source, 2025]*, the Nicaraguan state prioritised substantive proletarian and national sovereignty over the formalist rituals of liberal parliamentarism.

7. Comparative Analysis: Durable Models of Proletarian State Governance

While the Soviet Union ultimately succumbed to internal revisionism, the historical validity of the Marxist-Leninist state model is demonstrated by the resilience of China, Cuba, and Vietnam. Each of these states successfully smashed the colonial and bourgeois state apparatus, consolidated vanguard leadership, and adapted socialist governance to resist imperialist encirclement.

Dimension	People's Republic of China	Republic of Cuba	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
Revolutionary Rupture & Theoretical Synthesis	Smashed the semi-feudal, semi-colonial Kuomintang state in 1949 via protracted people's war, establishing the People's Democratic Dictatorship led by the working class and peasantry (Mao Zedong, 1949/1961).	Overthrew the U.S.-backed Batista dictatorship in 1959, dismantling the old military and expropriating foreign monopolies while cultivating socialist consciousness and anti-imperialist internationalism (Guevara, 1965/2003).	Defeated French colonialism (1954) and U.S. imperialism (1975), unifying the nation under a socialist state rooted in Ho Chi Minh's synthesis of Marxism-Leninism and national independence (Ho Chi Minh, 1960/2007).
Vanguard & Institutional Structure	Governed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) via democratic centralism and the Mass Line ("from the masses, to the masses"), maintaining command over strategic state-owned enterprises (Mao Zedong, 1943/1965).	Governed by the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) alongside the *Poder Popular* (People's Power) system of grassroots municipal assemblies and recallable delegates.	Governed by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) through the National Assembly and the Vietnam Fatherland Front, integrating mass labour, peasant, and youth unions.
Economic & Anti-	Socialism with Chinese	Maintains a	*Đổi Mới* (Renovation):

Imperialist Strategy	Characteristics: utilises regulated market mechanisms under strict state macro-control to develop productive forces and eradicate extreme poverty.	predominantly planned, socially owned economy, prioritising universal healthcare, education, and biotech sovereignty despite a six-decade U.S. blockade.	combines a socialist-oriented market economy with dominant state ownership in strategic sectors to drive rapid national development.

Across all three cases, the preservation of revolutionary gains has depended directly on refusing to surrender state power to bourgeois multi-party competition. By keeping the commanding heights of the economy, media, and security apparatus firmly under vanguard proletarian leadership, China, Cuba, and Vietnam have prevented the oligarchic restoration that reversed progressive gains in Ecuador and threatened sovereignty in Venezuela.

8. Conclusion

The historical record from 1917 to the present demonstrates that the state is only a "trap" when the working class hesitates to wield it decisively against its class enemies. While anarchist idealism invites defeat by refusing to organise centralised revolutionary authority, and social-democratic reformism fails by attempting to manage the existing bourgeois apparatus, Marxism-Leninism provides a coherent materialist synthesis. By uniting the discipline of the vanguard party, the organisational cohesion of democratic centralism, Mao’s Mass Line, and Guevara’s commitment to forging revolutionary consciousness, the proletarian state serves as the indispensable historical bridge from class exploitation to human emancipation.

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