

1917-2019: Dual Power,' Then... and Now?

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Global capitalist crisis, impending ecological disaster, and new responses by popular movements in some regions, particularly in Latin America, inspire radical thinking about the need to go “beyond capital.” But how to attain the desired “system change” — today, an ecosocialist regime in place of capitalist rule — continues to be a matter for debate and experimentation.

Recently a number of Marxist scholars and activists have revived a debate on the role of electoral action, parliament, and efforts to build alternative forms and institutions of direct democracy to replace the domination of capital. Many of the major contributions may be found on [John Riddell's website](#).

Other discussions of these issues can be found in the on-line [bulletin published by the Toronto-based Socialist Project](#), in a series on “The State and Socialist Strategy.”

A central bone of contention: the viability of using representative democracy and parliamentary means to attain and retain workers' and popular power even while attempting to achieve radical social change through promoting extra-parliamentary mobilization and institutions — a strategy of working both “in and against the state,” as [Panitch and Gindin express it](#).

This is a debate that in fact began more than a century ago with the Russian Revolution of 1917, which took a novel form, unforeseen by most socialists of that time including its Russian protagonists. Some key issues raised by the Russian October revolution, and generalized in the early years of the Communist International that it spawned, were to have a decisive impact on the course of 20th century socialism.

The Russian Tsar was overthrown in February by a general strike during which workers, peasants and soldiers formed *soviets* or councils, first in the capital Petrograd, then in quick order throughout the Empire. The Petrograd Soviet initially agreed to the formation of a bourgeois Provisional Government on condition that it implement the Soviet's program, including an immediate end to Russia's involvement in the Great War, enactment of full political freedoms, and immediate measures for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly.

“The highly remarkable feature of our revolution,” Lenin wrote in April, “is that it has brought about a *dual power*.... Alongside the Provisional Government, the government of the *bourgeoisie*, another government has arisen, so far weak and incipient, but undoubtedly a government that actually exists and is growing — the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.”[\[1\]](#)

Lenin emphasized the instability of this situation. “Two powers cannot exist in a state.... The dual power merely expresses a transitional phase in the revolution’s development, when it has gone farther than the ordinary bourgeois-democratic revolution, but has not yet reached a ‘pure’ dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry” — Lenin’s formula for the worker-peasant government he had long anticipated would be produced in a Russian revolution.[\[2\]](#)

In the months following the February revolution the Soviets radicalized as events demonstrated to the overwhelming majority of workers that the Provisional Government had no intention of implementing its promises including land reform, an end to Russia’s participation in the war and the convening of a Constituent Assembly. By September a majority of the soviet delegates from Petrograd factories were identified with the Bolsheviks, the most intransigent faction of the Social Democrats, who were now campaigning under the slogan of “All Power to the Soviets.”[\[3\]](#)

A peasant revolt was sweeping through the countryside, making feasible the prospect of a successful “workers and peasants revolution.” Meeting in Petrograd on October 18, an All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees resolved following lengthy debate: “The salvation of the revolution and the goals put forward for it by the toiling masses lies in the transfer of land to the hands of the Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies.” On October 25, the entire capital was in the hands of the Soviet following an almost bloodless insurrection.

Soviets in Moscow and other centres soon followed suit. A soviet government was established by the Bolsheviks, joined shortly afterward by the Left Social Revolutionaries, a radical peasant party that by late November was dominant in the All-Russian Congress of Peasant Deputies. The “dual power” paradox had been resolved.

In short order, the Congress of Soviets decreed a radical land reform, guarantees of self-determination for the oppressed nations, and workers’ control over production to keep factories in operation and prevent capitalist sabotage. Steps were taken to withdraw from the imperialist war and emergency measures were implemented to organize distribution of food and other necessities.

In *State and Revolution*, published in 1918, Lenin compared the soviets to the Paris Commune, the short-lived government created by the armed workers in 1871, “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour,” as Marx had described it.

Writing a decade later, Trotsky generalized the Russian Soviet experience: “If the state is an organisation of class rule, and a revolution is the overthrow of the ruling class, then the transfer of power from the one class to the other must necessarily create self-contradictory state conditions, and first of all in the form of the dual power....”[\[4\]](#)

Dual power, then, entailed in the Bolshevik conception (1) a revolutionary crisis, (2) formation of councils or soviets by the workers (and perhaps by other popular classes) coexisting but in competition with the bourgeois regime, and (3) within a brief period an insurrectional moment in which, if successful, the soviet power, led by a disciplined vanguard party similar to Lenin’s Bolsheviks, (4) would replace the bourgeois power and its parliament with a dictatorship of the proletariat. Dual power was simply a brief episode on the short road to soviet power.

Soviet template

Bolshevik leaders were quick to generalize this formula as applicable to revolutionary overturns in other countries.

The founding congress of the Communist International (Comintern), in 1919, reviewed “the form of proletarian dictatorship that has already taken shape [in the wake of World War I], i.e., Soviet power in Russia, the Räte [council] system in Germany, the shop stewards committees in Britain, and similar soviet institutions in other countries,” and concluded that “Only the soviet organization of the state can really effect the immediate breakup and total destruction of the old, i.e., bourgeois, bureaucratic and judicial machinery. ... The Paris Commune took the first epoch-making step along this path. The soviet system has taken the second.”[\[5\]](#)

In his report on the topic, Lenin ridiculed the German centrists’ “stupid proposal to unite ‘peacefully’ the National Assembly with the soviet system, i.e., to unite the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie with the dictatorship of the proletariat....”

However, as the Bolsheviks found to their dismay, the old state bureaucracy — far from being destroyed — reappeared in the wake of the civil war and economic crisis, later providing an indispensable material foundation for Stalin’s rise to power. And while the old standing army was smashed during the civil war, the new Red Army that defeated it incorporated many of the same features, including some personnel and chains of command. (See Ed Rooksby, “[The Bolsheviks did not ‘smash’ the old state.](#)”)

And what if the workers achieved governmental power in other ways, without pre-existing soviets, as they had for short periods in Finland, Hungary and Bavaria? Did the dual power scenario rule out the possible formation of a workers’ government initiated through election to a parliament (an institution equated here by Lenin with the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie), even outside of a revolutionary crisis? The Comintern grappled with these questions in its subsequent congresses of the early 1920s as delegates assessed the effect of the ebb in the postwar revolutionary ferment and the potential blocs of social forces and forms of struggle that might nevertheless point the way to successful anticapitalist revolutions. In the end they came up with more varied strategies for workers’ power.

The second congress, in 1920, focused its attention on the revolutionary potential of liberation struggles in the oppressed nations at the periphery of global capitalism.[\[6\]](#) The third congress (1921) acknowledged the Comintern’s failure at that point to win hegemony in the broader socialist movement and addressed the need to develop united-front actions with other anticapitalist currents in the workers movement, a strategy expanded after the congress to embrace alliances with non-revolutionary currents in pursuit of objectives of common concern.[\[7\]](#)

Workers’ government

The fourth congress (1922), drawing *inter alia* on various international experiences of Communists in forming governments with non-Communists (Hungary, Bavaria), extended the united-front approach to include the possible participation of Communist parties in a number of variants of “workers’ governments” that could include “non-Communist workers’ parties and workers’ organizations” but “only if there are guarantees that the workers government will carry out a genuine struggle against the bourgeoisie” and subject to a number of conditions including agreement of the Comintern. It included among the possible variants “a workers’ government that arises from a purely parliamentary combination, that is, one that is purely parliamentary in origin....”[\[8\]](#)

“Through united struggle of all workers against the bourgeoisie,” the resolution stated, “the entire state apparatus can pass over into the hands of the workers’ government,” adding that “The most basic tasks of a workers’ government must consist of arming the proletariat, disarming the

bourgeois counter-revolutionary organisations, introducing [workers'] control of production, shifting the main burden of taxation to the shoulders of the rich, and breaking the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie."

In this, the Comintern's 1922 resolution reprised but supplemented the long-standing position of classic pre-WWI social democracy on the "road to power."^[9] John Riddell notes, "The relevance of its workers' government discussion lies [...] in alerting us to the possibility that working people should strive for governmental power even in the absence of a soviet-type network of workers' councils."^[10]

A meeting of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, in June 1923, integrated the agrarian program adopted at the Second Congress into the governmental formula, amending it to read "workers' and peasants' government." Reporting on the resolution, Comintern leader Gregory Zinoviev cited the Soviet government's New Economic Policy, a partial reintroduction of capitalism designed to restore economic relations between city and countryside and revive the shattered economy left by the Civil War. At the Fourth Congress, said Zinoviev, "we all agreed" that the NEP "is not a Russian phenomenon and that the victorious proletariat of any country will have to face the problem of the appropriate unification of the working class and peasantry when the time comes. If this is so, and we do not doubt it, the logical conclusion to be drawn is the necessity of a worker and peasant government. If we consider conditions in a number of countries, we do not see a single country for which this solution would not be the most fitting."^[11]

The Comintern's focus was now on the program of a revolutionary government, not on the institutional forms it might take, and on socialist revolution as a process rather than an insurrectional event. However, the Comintern never explicitly abandoned the soviet orientation as expressed in the First Congress resolution cited above. And in his 1938 "transitional program for socialist revolution,"^[12] Leon Trotsky repeated the scenario. The call for soviets, he said, "crowns the program of transitional demands."

"Soviets can arise only at the time when the mass movement enters into an openly revolutionary stage. From the first moment of their appearance, the soviets, acting as a pivot around which millions of toilers are united in their struggle against the exploiters, become competitors and opponents of local authorities and then of the central government. If the factory committee creates a dual power in the factory, then the soviets initiate a period of dual power in the country.

"Dual power in its turn is the culminating point of the transitional period. Two regimes, the bourgeois and the proletarian, are irreconcilably opposed to each other. Conflict between them is inevitable. The fate of society depends on the outcome. Should the revolution be defeated, the fascist dictatorship of the bourgeoisie will follow. In the case of victory, the power of the soviets, that is, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist reconstruction of society, will arise."

Could the formation of a "workers' and peasants' (or farmers') government" by "the traditional workers' organizations" — even without the participation of a revolutionary Marxist party — serve as a transitional step toward the dictatorship of the proletariat? Trotsky was sceptical:

"Past experience shows... that this is, to say the least, highly improbable. However, one cannot categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that, under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass

revolutionary pressure, etc.), the petty bourgeois parties, including the Stalinists, may go further than they wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie. In any case one thing is not to be doubted: even if this highly improbable variant somewhere at some time becomes a reality and the ‘workers’ and farmers’ government’ [...] is established in fact, it would represent merely a short episode on the road to the actual dictatorship of the proletariat.”

In 1938, however, there was no inclination in Stalin’s Comintern to revisit the issue of soviets or transitional anticapitalist forms of government. The CPs of the imperialist countries, under Moscow’s direction, were immersed in the Popular Front tactic of alliances with the “antifascist” bourgeoisie.

Postwar overturns

In the two decades following the close of World War II, Trotsky’s “completely exceptional circumstances” — in actual fact, quite typical under imperialized capitalism at the time he wrote! — resulted in overturns of capitalist regimes. Governments in Yugoslavia, China, South-East Asia, and later revolutionary Cuba, thrust into power by wars or “revolutionary pressure,” implemented in various ways the tasks the early Comintern had listed as essential steps to be taken by any authentic workers’ and peasants’ government. The old army, if not destroyed in the revolutionary upsurge, was replaced by the revolutionary army or militias, and major institutions of the old regime were revamped from top to bottom. Foreign capital and the native bourgeoisie and landlords were expropriated within months or a few years. The major industries were subject to state planning and foreign trade was monopolized by the new state. Extensive agrarian reforms were implemented. All of these regimes benefited in varying degrees from the economic support and military protection of the Soviet Union, at least in their initial stages.

Yet none of these revolutions, with all of their distinct national features, took the form of a soviet-type experience.^[13] With the exception of the East European “buffer states” liberated from Nazi rule, which were structurally assimilated into the USSR’s orbit, these overturns took the form of national liberation struggles, their leading protagonists in most cases schooled in Stalinism but rooted in popular struggles and their national culture. To the degree that national liberation was linked to the anticapitalist overturn, the popular mobilization in defence of national sovereignty against imperialist intervention constituted a surrogate multiclass form of dual power.

The assertion, strengthening and defense of national sovereignty and self-determination allowed the mobilization of support from diverse class forces within the nation. But it also brought some of these countries into conflict with the national interests of the Kremlin bureaucracy. Tito’s Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform. Mao’s China was in open conflict with the Soviet Union barely a decade after its revolutionary victory, denouncing Moscow’s line of “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism. And none of these countries institutionalized forms of direct democracy from below or established a dominant pluralist ethos of democratic policy debate within the revolutionary process. They were, as a consequence, especially vulnerable to pressure from globalized capital. In recent decades, most have reverted to capitalism through authoritarian regimes now ruled by an emergent bourgeoisie.

War of manoeuvre... or war of position?

These successful anticapitalist overturns had occurred on the periphery of the global capitalist

system. Six decades after the Russian October revolution, some revolutionary Marxists in Western Europe debated the prospects for socialist revolution in the imperialist countries of Western Europe or North America.

Some, like Ernest Mandel, a leader of the Trotskyist Fourth International, retained a by now traditional soviet “dual power” perspective. In a 1976 interview,[\[14\]](#) he argued that the rise of soviets and a clash of soviet power with bourgeois power to the point of insurrection were features of the post-WWI German revolution, the Spanish revolution of the 1930s, and “in a more embryonic form” in the Portuguese “revolution” of 1974-75. “Early signs of their development can be seen too in the Italian events of 1920, in the revolutionary upsurge in Italy at the end of the Second World War and even in May ’68 in France. That is why we consider these to be the most likely forms of revolutionary crisis in Western Europe.”

However, none of these uprisings resulted in a successful struggle for state power. Likewise, none of the workers’ parties elected to office through parliament has come anywhere near to effecting an overturn of capitalist rule.

Other Marxists, questioning the soviet dual power scenario, found useful clues to resolving this conundrum in the recently published *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci, writing in the 1930s from a fascist jail in Mussolini’s Italy. Gramsci had contrasted the political structures of the European “East,” where “the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous,” with the “West,” where “there was a proper relationship between State and civil society” — the State “only an outer ditch, behind which there was a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks,” the institutions of civil society.[\[15\]](#) Gramsci suggested, borrowing from military strategy, that the “war of manoeuvre” in the Dual Power scenario — the seizure of state power by soviet-type organs of the proletariat — did not eliminate the necessity in the West of a “war of position” in which bourgeoisie and proletariat contended in a dialectic of offensive and defensive actions over a more-or-less lengthy period during which the proletariat could shed its illusions in bourgeois democracy and prepare itself for power.

In a sympathetic 1976 essay, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” *New Left Review* editor Perry Anderson concluded that ultimately Gramsci’s analysis, while insightful, failed to address the need for what Anderson still regarded as the decisive resolution of a Dual Power moment, a point of rupture. In Gramsci’s account, he said, revolutionary strategy “becomes a long, immobile trench-warfare between two camps in fixed positions,” essentially proletariat and bourgeoisie, “in which each tries to undermine the other culturally and politically.” But, asked Anderson, “what happens to the phase of insurrection itself — the storming and destruction of the State machine that for Marx or Lenin was inseparable from the proletarian revolution?”

Gramsci, said Anderson, never relinquished the fundamental tenets of classical Marxism on the ultimate necessity for violent seizure of State power, but at the same time his strategic formula for the West fails to integrate them. The mere counterposition of “war of position” to “war of manoeuvre” in any Marxist strategy in the end becomes an opposition between reformism and adventurism.

Conquer the state... or transform it?

In retrospect we can see more clearly that in the advanced countries of Europe certain reforms wrested by the workers under capitalism, with its imperialist superprofits — not least, the universal franchise, the industrial relations regime, and the welfare state — had, over time, produced significant changes in workers’ consciousness. To the extent that they thought politically, they

tended to self-identify increasingly as citizens and view the path for further reform through parliament and the existing state forms, while defining themselves less and less in terms of socio-economic class. Less attractive was the idea of building their own class power outside of and against the state.

A contribution by Nicos Poulantzas, published in 1978, sought to address this underlying problematic.^[16] In an earlier debate with Ralph Miliband,^[17] Poulantzas had argued that the state was objectively a capitalist entity that could serve no purpose other than that of preserving the capitalist mode of production. Now he proposed, instead, that socialists view the bourgeois state as a “battleground” and develop strategies for “combining the transformation of representative democracy with the development of forms of direct, rank-and-file democracy or the movement for self-management.”

Poulantzas criticized what he thought was the Comintern’s “dual power” scenario for treating the state as a “monolithic bloc without cracks of any kind.... Class contradictions are located between the state and the popular masses standing outside the state... right up to the crisis of dual power, when the state is effectively dismantled through the centralization at national level of a parallel power, which becomes the real power (soviets).”

Referring to Gramsci’s metaphor of “a frontal struggle of manoeuvre or encirclement, taking place outside the fortress-state and principally aiming at the creation of a situation of dual power,” Poulantzas called instead for a “strategic vision of a process of transition to socialism — that is, of a long stage during which the masses will act to conquer power and transform the state apparatuses.” The “essential problem of the democratic road to socialism,” he said, “must be... *how is it possible radically to transform the state in such a manner that the extension and deepening of political freedoms and the institutions of representative democracy (which were also a conquest of the popular masses) are combined with the unfurling of forms of direct democracy and the mushrooming of self-management bodies?....*” [emphasis in original].

Instead of purporting to abolish the capitalist state outright, the democratic road to socialism would entail a fight *within* the state to shift the relationship of forces, to use the state “in the development of popular movements, the mushrooming of democratic organs at the base, and the rise of centres of self-management.” Not a simple opposition between “internal” and “external” struggle, but a combination of the two.

This was not traditional reformism, Poulantzas insisted. “... [T]o shift the relationship of forces within the state does not mean to win successive reforms in an unbroken chain, to conquer the state machinery piece by piece, or simply to occupy the positions of government. It denotes nothing other than a stage of real breaks, the climax of which — and there has to be one — is reached when the relationship of forces on the strategic terrain of the state swings over to the side of the popular masses.....”

But he acknowledged the danger in this approach. In “a long process of transformation, the enemy has greater possibilities... of brutally intervening to cut it short.” To confront this danger, “active reliance on a broad, popular movement... must always be linked to sweeping transformations of the state.”

Two other aspects of these 20th century debates are important to note. Revolutionary Marxists were adamant that, irrespective of how they acceded to government, workers’ and peasants’ regimes must at the earliest opportunity establish decisive control of the state apparatus and (as the *Communist Manifesto* said) not shrink from making “despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production.” It was assumed as well that these tasks could only be

successfully accomplished under the leadership of a party or parties prepared to break “the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie.”

Although Poulantzas was primarily addressing the failure of socialist transformation in Western Europe (he cast his argument as a contribution to the debate on Eurocommunism), his strategic concept of using representative (parliamentary) government to help develop forms of direct democracy and self-management of the producers is echoed in recent attempts to articulate a new vision of 21st century socialism in Latin America. Arguably, it could be viewed as a revised “dual power” perspective — but now envisaged as a prolonged process of developing popular power “from below” with complementary solidarity and support “from above” of a government pledged to go beyond capitalism. Of particular interest are efforts along these lines in Venezuela and Bolivia.[\[18\]](#)

These are informed as well by critical assessments of the tragic outcome in Chile in 1973 where indeed the failure of the elected Popular Unity coalition government to effect the necessary constitutional and institutional reforms — not just the radical reform or elimination of the military’s command structure, but the promotion of organs of popular power parallel to and complementing the state power — served to embolden the right wing and imperialism while depriving the government’s popular base of a strategy to take the struggle forward. (See, for example, Ralph Miliband’s insightful post-coup balance-sheet of the Allende experience in [“The Coup in Chile,” recently republished in Jacobin.](#)) [\[1\]](#)

On the whole, however, the Latin American experiences of the early 21st century, each with their unique characteristics, have not been cited in most of the recent discussions of system change among intellectuals in the global North. There is a need to incorporate them in this discussion, perhaps in a subsequent article.

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[\[1\]](#) “The Dual Power,” *Lenin Collected Works* (hereinafter CW), Vol. 24, pp. 38-41. Emphasis in original.

[\[2\]](#) “The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution (Draft Platform for the Proletarian Party),” CW Vol 24.

[\[3\]](#) Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*; David Mandel, *Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

[\[4\]](#) Trotsky, op. cit., Vol. I, Ch. 11, “Dual Power.”

[\[5\]](#) “Theses and Report on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” in John Riddell (ed.), *Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress, March 1919*, pp. 149-164.

[\[6\]](#) John Riddell, (ed.), *Workers of the World and Oppressed peoples, Unite!*, New York, Pathfinder Press, 1991.

[\[7\]](#) John Riddell, “The origins of the united front policy,” *International Socialism*, Issue 130, April 2011. Also, *To the Masses, Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2015.

[\[8\]](#) John Riddell, [“The Comintern’s unknown decision on workers’ governments.”](#) See also Riddell,

(ed.), *Toward the United Front, Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, Chicago, Haymarket Books 2012.

[9] See, for example, Karl Kautsky, *The Road to Power* (1909).

[10] John Riddell, "[A 'workers' government' as a step toward socialism.](#)"

[11] "Resolution on Workers and Peasants Government Adopted at the June 1923 ECCI Plenum," in *International Internal Discussion Bulletin*, Vol. XVIII, No. 5, June 1982 (Fourth International).

[12] "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," in *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York, Pathfinder Press 1973).

[13] However, in the antibureaucratic revolts in Hungary (1956) and Poland (1980), the workers did assert their power by self-organizing in workers' councils. Not discussed here are the various attempts to institute workers' self-management in Tito's Yugoslavia, all of which were initiated "from above" by the government and its ruling party.

[14] Ernest Mandel, "Revolutionary Strategy in Europe: A Political Interview," *New Left Review* 100, 1976. Originally published in *Critique Communiste* No. 8/9, September-December 1976.

[15] Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review* 100, 1976.

[16] "Towards a Democratic Socialism," in *State, Power, Socialism* (London 1978). Also in *New Left Review* 109 (1978), pp. 75-87. Translated by Patrick Camiller.

[17] Poulantzas, N. & Miliband, R. (1972), "The Problem of the Capitalist State," in R. Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory*, New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 238-262.

[18] See in particular *A World to Build: New Paths toward Twenty-First Century Socialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2015) by the late lamented Marta Harnecker.

P.S.

• Life on the Left. Tuesday, August 27, 2019:
<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2019/08/dual-power-then-and-now.html>

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 36195), [September 11, 1973 - The Coup in Chile:](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36195)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36195>