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## The Withering away of which State?

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**Abstract:** Communism and the state share, historically, an intrinsic link, so much so that, at least in North America, state control, totalitarianism, and communism have become practically synonymous with each other in general parlance. Marx, and countless Marxists after him, however, advocated for the disappearance of the state, taking aim at the state's role, and complicity in, forwarding and perpetuating class inequalities, and the entire structure of capital itself. In this same sense, the state can be seen as a form of meta-structure, reinforcing through law, force, and ideology, the internal logic of capitalism itself. Thus, while also exploring what the state as such is, this talk will ask: what then does the disappearance of the state mean today, how do these forms of hegemonic control function across a wide range of variegated contexts, and through what modes can we resist them?

**keywords:** materialism, state, post-capitalism, anti-idealism

The word state itself, at least in English, is a term whose political meaning, however nebulous, is entirely taken for granted. It is common to conceive of the state as nothing more than the ruling body (and the diverse amount of bodies therein) of a particular territory. That is, the entire structure of governance and control, whether it be through law and force, or, simply through the force of law itself. Yet, the origin of the word (again in English) is very definitive. The word state derives from the Latin word *status*, which simply means "condition or circumstances." In turn, *status* itself derives from *stare*, "to stand," or to be "permanent." Thus, at its origins, the state can be seen, at least in an abstract way, as a permanent perpetuation of current circumstances, or, as it were, the reproduction of a particular set of conditions, and thus also the divisions therein. It is also crucial to note from the outset that the state is materially determined. That is, that the state cannot be simply seen as divorced from matter, rather it was and continues to be distinctly created, artificially created. Here, we should oppose, as Katerina Kolozova does, Hegel's abstract notion of the state, which itself relies on a form of abstract subjectivity, whereby the material world is subsumed, picked up, into the real world of thought, the in itself, for itself, for us. This dematerialization results in an absence of material politics, which often leads us into a politics of recognition (which is embodied by philosophers such as: Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas etc.). This recognition, if not submitted to material practice, however, amounts to nothing more than a form of individual voluntarism. This is precisely why, as Walter Benjamin states in regards to the rise of Fascism:

Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property.<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin's critique is also true, in a certain sense, of liberalism— not in the radical or originary sense, however— as well as particular post-structuralist discourses, which insist on the primacy of individuation. This is not to say in any way whatsoever that post-structuralism carries some form of fascist seed. Benjamin was of course writing in a very particular historical (and as such materially constituted) time, but rather that the emphasis of the rights of subjects has moved away from real material change, into more abstract and diffuse forms of change in which representation and recognition have often taken a primary role. I am also here not rejecting the progress, and liberating aspects of much of post-structuralist theory, but rather simply pointing out the danger of the hierarchy itself. Especially as identitarian politics can take on their own form of discrimination, producing and ruling by cultural and social capital, and, as such, running the risk of doing away with more broad and universal conceptions of change.

It follows rather naturally from this, and we will again return to this later, that a Marxist critique of the state cannot simply be an abstract critique of an entity, but rather a

concrete critique of actually existing material social conditions, which are produced and reproduced within a given state of affairs, by a given body or series of bodies. Thus, the title of this talk, which summons Engels famous dictum, already implies the withering away of a body and a reproductive function, or, the bureaucratic management, violent control, and ideological components of a global capitalist society (itself of course a term that could be unpacked). State in this sense is also then a meta-state. However, we should not be so quick to reduce the state to either point, as either the ideological mass, or the violent and organizing governing body.

As Marx has famously shown, capitalism itself, and thus capitalism as form of state, or at its lowest possible form, a key component of the state's organizing principle, is itself formed on primitive accumulation, acquired through legal thievery. Indeed, there is nothing fundamentally illegal about capitalism itself, capitalism is the result and generator of its own laws, of its own internal drive for growth, exploitation and division, which is entirely linked to the state. According to Marx, primitive accumulation required an almost arbitrary interference on the part of the state. Arbitrary here not meaning accidental, or without purpose, but rather devoid of any true universal reasoning. Or in other words, it was neither a natural nor equal process. Indeed, it is critical to maintain, as Kolozova does, that "there is no such thing as a natural or apolitical economy. The economy is always already political, as it is the economy's material core of power, control, and its main mechanisms – i.e. exploitation and oppression."<sup>2</sup> It is crucial to take from

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Katerina Kolozova, "Philosophy as capitalism and the socialist radically metaphysical response to it," *Labyrinth* 19 (2017): 54.

this two things. Firstly, the modern conception of private property, and with it an intensified division of classes was carried out by the state itself, under what Marx deemed an act of “ruthless terrorism,” that is to say, the state and capitalism are always-already tied together. Secondly, that the entire structuring of capitalist society, at its core lever, is anchored by a form of legal fraudulence. Not unlike the concept of State Capture in relation to illiberalism as expounded upon by Katerina Kolozova and the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Skopje. Lawlessness is indeed the law, which is also why, in a certain sense, merely legal changes within the state offer little recourse to more radical forms of change. Crucially, this means that if we are to reimagine what a post-capitalist society could be, what governs what a post-capitalist society could be appear as, it is also necessary to dissolve the state itself, the state which is always-already a state of permanent exception, which is grounded and reinforced by the reciprocal relations of capitalism to the point where it is almost impossible to parse where the state ends and industry begins. The state and capitalism appear, at this point, as nothing more than a pornographic display, a beast with two backs, where everything is constantly exposed, and yet this very exposure appears almost as a mutual cover up.

Shifting now to the notion of subjectivity and state apparatuses, I would claim that the state and subjectivity are both intrinsically and extrinsically linked. Intrinsically in the dual sense that a subject is (at least partially) interpellated, or to speak more generally, formed by the ideological and non-ideological (in the sense of not merely ideological) aspects of the state, while also contributing to the formation

of the hegemonic function of the state via the willingness of the subject as such. In other words, interpellation is neither a directly one-way function, nor is it determined in a way that exceeds the subjects who are said to be interpellated as such. Extrinsically, as Karatani points out, the state is self-alienated from itself as a form of global actor, what we could also call a sort of global externality, which grants it internal legitimacy and in turn allows for national subjects, for state subjects, as well as subjects of value. Now, if we look at Althusser’s foundational text on the issue of *State Apparatuses*, we immediately observe a clean distinction between two forms, Ideological and Repressive. To state it in a somewhat tautological fashion, Ideological State Apparatuses function ideally, that is, according to the reproduction of the *eidōs* of the state itself, and, as it were, the states’ complicity in the functioning of capitalism. The subject, who, to borrow Lacanian language, acts as the detritus of being, as a sort of empty husk, but who nonetheless has the freedom to revolt, accepts their posturing as naturally internal, while nonetheless ‘voluntarily’ engaging with these apparatuses themselves. This process of interpellation therefore entails the dematerialization of the subject as such, and its retransformation into an ideal structural effect which is nonetheless, in the last instance, nothing more than matter itself. That is, the subject in this sense becomes an ideal ego of the state, and its ego ideal is reciprocally constructed. Repressive State Apparatuses, however, are direct forms of oppression qua violent actions from the state, they are direct material interventions into the bodies of the citizens, the subjects who refuse to be proper subjects; if they do not relinquish their matter it will be beaten out of them until

they bow at the bloody altar of capitalism and state. Here, it is also crucial to clarify, as Althusser himself does, that ideological state apparatuses do not belong to the state qua legal governing body, but rather are the result of the ruling class, of the bourgeois class. The reason this distinct relation is so crucial is because the implication is that any withering away of the state would, or at least could, also automatically signal the withering away of the ruling class. However, it simultaneously raises the following question: if the ruling class were not in fact the bourgeois, or perhaps more accurately, if class distinction as such did not exist, would the ISAs themselves inevitably reflect this, reflect this new relation? In more general Marxist terminology, we could ask: can the superstructural effects of capitalism be shifted into superstructural effects of the working class? Here we should be wary about falling into the trap of the naïve distinction between base and superstructure, as well as being overly optimistic about any form of state, or ideological apparatus. However, this not our main point.

In a similar fashion to Althusser, the State in Badiou is also conceived of as a meta-structure. The meta-structure of the State does not simply secure presentation, but actively works to prohibit any form of rupture or event, that is to say, any possible form of radical change. In Badiou's language, the State reduces all possible change to the constructible, that is, what is constructible in a given situation. Everything is always-already subsumed into the lexicon of the ruling order, or, in this case, the order of capital. For Badiou, the mode of resistance to this is dependent on subjective intervention. A subject being the embodiment of a universal exception, that is, that which exists but is

not reducible to the current situation. Similarly, for Badiou, a work, as opposed to waste, is an infinite relation that grounds the finite situation itself. Infinities are themselves infinite, and function as a hierarchical index of the ascension towards ideals. That is, work is defined by the universal overcoming of the particular hegemony of a finite situation, a situation which is only capable of producing waste products. A work is incorporated by subjective action, subjective not referring to any individual subject, but rather the mass who dares defy the order as it is, the order which is dominated by the infinite finitism of capitalism. A work is to be carried out through a careful and structural procedure whereby the truth of a situation, what exceeds the situation through formal subtraction therein, is discovered and transmitted. We could say then, that what it requires is a certain novel syntax, a syntax which adheres to the real of the situation, but does not stop merely on the level of transmission. Political syntax is, in the strong sense, akin to revelation, but also revolution. The subjective embodiment of a political work is nothing short of the dismantling of an entire order through the universalization of the means of production, and the creation of new forms of thought. However, we also encounter here the issue of the idea as an idealist category. For Badiou, the idea must be resuscitated against its idealist version. That is to say, we cannot reduce ourselves to mere minor changes, but must assert the idea of communism, of absolute and international commonality, this, however, also has its direct opposite side, which we will explore momentarily. With that being said, and although we do not have the time to go through it now, it is worth noting Badiou's use of the concept of the idea, and indeed mathematics in general, most certainly needs to be questioned

Returning to the question of State Apparatuses: If the state is not simply a legality according to Althusser, then what is a non-state apparatus which serves the same principles of the state itself, that is, the reproductions of the conditions of capitalism, and the reproduction of the reproduction of ideology. If we look at the apparent phenomenon of manufacturing consent, made famous by Noam Chomsky, we can immediately notice something peculiar that's going on in today's media (something Chomsky himself later admitted). If the media is meant to be an ISA, and yet, what is under constant attack is in fact main stream media itself, then what precisely are those other outlets, podcasts, blogs, etc. We see here how the full meaning of state (as *status*) must extend far beyond the narrow confines of a particular organizational structure, and must instead be seen primarily as an entire mode of organization itself. This is precisely why Foucault states that:

We can't defeat the system through isolated actions; we must engage it on all fronts – the university, the prisons, and the domain of psychiatry – one after another since our forces are not strong enough for a simultaneous attack. We strike and knock against the most solid obstacles; the system cracks at another point; we persist. It seems that we're winning, but then the institution is rebuilt; we must start again. It is a long struggle; it is repetitive and seemingly incoherent. But the system it opposes, as well as the power exercised through the system, supplies its unity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action: "Until Now", in Donald Bouchard (ed.) *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 230.

That being said, these disparate and varied modes of transference must not make us lose sight of the more traditional notion of state itself. That is, the state as the securer of the means of production, or, at the very least, that which allows for, and promotes, a particular form of unified organization, even if this organization is itself diffuse. This is why we should not be overly tempted by Foucault's anti-hegemonic conceptions, or in other words, his insistence on the absence of a core, quilting point, or real generator of ideology and power, be it capital or otherwise. De-centering power, rendering it nothing more than a series of interconnected processes, inevitably leads to a form of forgetting, as if such and such power relations existed *ex-nihilo*, without having direct reason. Reason in this sense being the logic internal to the preservation of an idea, in this context the idea of capital, or, even more simply, the idea of value.

A perfect example of this is Covid-19. So much of the philosophical and theoretical discourse surrounding Covid had to do with the diffuse and rhizomic nature of the virus, of its status of being both dead and alive, or undead even. Yet, what the Covid era showed, no matter your opinion on the regulations and responses themselves, was a direct, unequivocal abuse of state power, in contra-distinction to not only democratic values, but the democratic count itself. The crushing power of the state, of the permanent state of exception imposed upon citizens, turning them into subjects of, and subjected to, the state, while simultaneously creating diffuse effects and inevitably establishing and creating modes of micro politics, of micro-inequalities, was nonetheless carried out by a form of mega-state,

a conglomeration of individual states, of individual exceptional states. A prime example of this, as well as a prime example of the relations between Althusser's classic distinction between ISAs and RSAs can be seen in the violent reaction against peaceful, largely working class protesters in Canada. Not only were the protests deemed to be racist, fascist even (an ideological reductionism and Othering), but Trudeau attempted to employ the War Measures Act (which he politely referred to as the emergencies act instead), which had not been deployed since the terrorist act of the radical Quebecois group the FLQ. Likewise, he literally froze (or attempted to) the assets of those who refused to desist (a clear sign of repressive economic violence). Now, why was this an emergency, what was the emergent dilemma? The answer is simple; it is precisely the loss of profit. Now, of course there were other jobs at stake other than the truckers', but this was nonetheless an anti-democratic suspension in which the will of the minorities, representing the universal majority, was immediately stifled. Here again, status as *status* is critical. They were meant to remain silent, to, and again I will reference Foucault, act as "docile bodies" who were meant to reproduce a machine, yet their absence of work, in a completely radical way, was the dismantling of part of the machine itself, a revealing of its fragility. The class divide is something that can never be forgotten during this era. It was, if not the crystallization of, then at least the pulling away of, the thinly veiled curtain pretending to hide the complicity of capital and state. According to a Financial Times article from 2021:

As the virus spread, central banks injected \$9 trillion into economies worldwide, aiming to keep the world economy afloat. Much of that stimulus

has gone into financial markets, and from there into the net worth of the ultra-rich. The US Federal Reserve, for example, has put \$8.1 trillion into the economy through quantitative easing, about one third of gross domestic product. The total wealth of billionaires worldwide rose by \$5 trillion to \$13 trillion in twelve months, the most dramatic increase ever registered.<sup>4</sup>

Now, this ideological move is not reducible down to purely economic qua monetary oppression. Rather it is always based on an idea, on the Idea, as the Idea as *eidos*. In capitalism this Idea that stands over and above matter is value, pure value. If we look at the radical right thinker Aleksandar Dugin's analysis of Putin in relation to the state and sovereignty (far before the current invasion of Ukraine) we can see this conceptualization of the Idea perfectly: "As both the formal and informal pinnacle of the power pyramid, how could anything exist above Putin? Inherent in the very notion of sovereignty is that above him stands no other institution of authority. That is the point. So what exists above Putin, if everything (in Russia) exists below or beside him? The idea stands above."<sup>5</sup> The idea always stands above matter, it makes matter subservient to it, it is, in a certain sense, that which cannot be questioned, that which embodies the real real of any given situation and holds more power than even the most tyrannical rulers.

<sup>4</sup> Ruchir Sharma, "The Billionaire Boom: How the Super-Rich Soaked Up Covid Cash," *Financial Times* (May 14, 2021). <https://www.ft.com/content/747a76dd-f018-4d0d-9f3-4069bf2f5a93>

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Dugin, *Putin vs Putin: Vladimir Putin Viewed from the Right* (Arktos, 2014), 545.

Now, at the beginning of this talk I spoke of the problematic of particular postmodern or post-structuralist discourses on the left that often lead to nothing more than a politics of recognition, which in a certain sense itself relies on a form of dematerialization, of moving away from more collective and concrete material struggles in favor of more abstract and individual ones. However, as I will now briefly show, critiquing the limited and ultimately self-defeating and self-referential circles of particular postmodern discourses is by no means an automatically leftist nor materialist pursuit. To state that we must move beyond the correlationis circle, or, alternatively, the tautology of subjectivity-centered thought, in order to structure new modes of thought, even modes of non-anthropocentric thought, traverses, crucially, the left-right divide. It is pivotal therefore to understand the precise method of overcoming this dilemma so that we do not find ourselves in an equally dubious position. Let us turn now to the work of Nick Land, who finds himself on the far-right of the political spectrum, in order to show how this phenomenon can ultimately manifest along right-leaning lines.

For Land, deconstruction reduces negativity to difference, to the structuring of binary terms, positivity is thus not only the result of negativity but negativity itself is constituted only in relation to itself, to the positive logical constructions which come into being only through negation. The result, for Land, is that any radical deployment of negativity within postmodern discourse is always already neutered—that the only position deconstruction can take is one of indifference—a petty deferral of a foregone conclusion:

All uses, references, connotations of the negative are referred back to a bilateral opposition as if to an inescapable destination, so that every 'de-', 'un-', 'dis-', or 'anti-' is speculatively imprisoned within the mirror space of the concept. If we were to follow deconstruction to the letter here it would follow that atheism, antihumanism, and antilogic, far from being virulent pestilential swamps, had no force except through their determinate relations to their enemies, which had thus always already bilateralized them into docility.<sup>6</sup>

Here, Land is distinctly critiquing the entire structure of deconstruction itself, not merely as an epistemological mode of understanding, but as a force of potential change, including of course political change. The automatic reduction to the binding term that is meant to be negated is nothing more than its inevitable and inextricable pairing. In the same way that dialectical logic is forced into a relation of relationality, whereby the negativity inherent in the concept is sublated according to the contradictions present, and thus into a preset horizon of knowing, deconstruction remains trapped in the 'mirror space of the concept,' or, in other words, its power is stripped away due to its own tautological structure. Thus, we could also state (although Land does not make this point himself) that this postmodern conception of deconstruction, not only does not signal a radical critique of how things are, but also does not transcend a particular philosophy of presence which it fought, historically, so hard to bury. Indeed, if presence is thought of as ascribing a certain *is*, a certain being to be-

<sup>6</sup> Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (Routledge, 1992), 19.

ing-there, then deconstruction in this sense merely states that this *is*, ought to exist as a confinement without offering any possible way out. In regards to this way out, it is crucial to note that Land's ultimate proposal, although this idea only fully manifests in his later essays, is to propose a form of absolute zero. Land thus rejects the strictures of academic/lo-gical discourse, which is to say, any barring, by way of pseudo inclusion of the negative, the radical negative qua zero. Put more simply, against ideas of absence and the absolute, Land promotes a more primitive escape by recourse to a real outside of discourse, to the negative not as a concept, but as a driving force, not as a sublation (Hegel) but as an escape. This escape, however, is not idealist in the traditional sense (but is nonetheless idealist in a more abstract sense).

While Land unequivocally asserts a sort of absolute zero which is not simply the negation of what exists, it is neither the presence of absence nor the absence of presence, he does so in a way that is both anti-anthropocentric, and anti-thought itself. Negativity is thus seen as the annihilation of the subject, and not it's affirmation, or apotheoization, it simply is not something special for humanity. As Vincent Le perfectly articulates in his analysis and comparison of/ between Land and Brassier:

[...] if thought cannot grasp reality's radical alterity without reducing it to a thing for us, the only way to access the real is at the limit or even death of thought itself. Death, after all, marks precisely the cessation of subjectivity. [...] For Land as for Brassier, our mortality is not a fact to be bemoaned or repressed; instead, death should become the tran-

scendental horizon for the critique of all anthropocentric [...] philosophies, so as to set the stage for the real's recession from the clutches of reason.<sup>7</sup>

For Land, this subjective self-destruction is a direct result of capitalism's unmitigated erasure of relations, its melting into air of all which preceded it, or again in his own words: "The limit of capital is the point at which transcendent identity snaps, where the same is nothing but the absolutely abstract reproduction of difference, produced alongside difference, with utter plasticity."<sup>8</sup> Capitalism, for Land, thus leads to the infinite reproduction of self-related difference. Capitalism is pure flux, constant change, but what changes, changes the same. What is allowed to exist is only the same as difference and vice versa. Far from mourning this banality, Land actively pursues its acceleration. Again, to quote Le: "[...] Land sees humanity's annihilation as a solution to accessing the real rather than as a problem as it is for Deleuze and Guattari, he affirms that we should actively strive to become bodies without organs, not even if it kills us, but precisely because it kills us"<sup>9</sup> What replaces human hubris in Land is thus the complete abolition of the human mind (as uniquely privileged in any way) in favour of the infinite sprawl of multiplicity perfectly exemplified in his take on Deleuze and Guattari, and his dystopian vision of complete machine take over in which humans are reduced to nothing. Land thus manages to assert a sort of (un)radical (as ungrounded) but nonetheless staunchly anti-anthropocentric materialism. What

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Le, "The Decline of Politics in the Name of Science?" *Constellations and Collisions between Nick Land and Ray Brassier, Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 14:3 (2018), 33-34.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings* (Urbanomic, 2011), 276.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent Le, "The Decline of Politics in the Name of Science?," 35.



appears as ontological negativity for humans isn't stripped of material referents for the sake of simplicity, but is taken as irrelevant and second order. It simply doesn't matter where negativity comes from for us, because us does not matter. Only that which eludes our relation to matter matters, and we must escape ourselves into negativity, into the unfolding of ecstatic multiplicity. What's banished is not the thing in itself, some absolute idea, but our co-relation to it. For Land the real is thus the real without humanity, there is always something unknown, but that unknown is not fundamentally a qualitative difference, there is not pure truth, riddled with invisible value, but truth itself is stupidity, graspable only by the sheer computational power of advanced machines. What's also crucial to note here is that the opposite of not only materialism, but also anti-anthropocentrism is not anti-idealism. The absolutizing of machines, and the wish for the acceleration and death of humanity as such is nonetheless a form of idealist hubris (no matter how anti-anthropocentric, and apparently materialist) because it does not take into consideration humanities material and organic bodily constitution in relation to the real itself which constitutes it. Of course, we are not saying that humanity, the human, should be privileged in any way whatsoever, it is the precise opposite, rather that its material construction is grounded in a material real, a real which is nonetheless not (just as it is not for any other beings) reducible to computational power, nor is it meant to be submitted to technocratic and bureaucratic control. Through Land we can see that anti-anthropocentrism, anti-correlationism as well as an attempt at materialism does not automatically deliver us to any form of radical critique, or radical horizon of change.

Now, to return properly to the question of the state, of the withering or disappearance of a particular state, what we have tried to show is that we can neither reduce things down to a level of discursive defeatism or amelioration, nor can we simply critique the particular failings of particular aspects of postmodern thought. Indeed, what should define a rejection of the state is a universal notion of humanity (as beings amongst other beings, including plants and animals), centered around fundamental axioms. The dialectic of too little or too much (full blown revolution or minute changes in policies), which always results in the too little being declared too much by the state, is itself a form of subreption, an illusion whereby unity is itself deemed impossible. In reality things are much more simple, pragmatically what all leftist movements should share in common is a rejection of the exploitation of not only human beings but beings as such. This also means a return to the materiality of existence, not in the sense of some inane hierarchy of this or that material trait, but to our own material conditions, conditions that are shared not only by humans, but beings as such.

