



# Lenin on democratic theory

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## Abstract

Lenin's *State and Revolution* is not only a project for imminent revolutionary policy and not only a legitimization argument for a revolutionary dictatorship, but also a theory of state and theory of democracy. Lenin points at the reduplication of state organs that is inherent in a democratic state. While the Russian revolutionary thinks of this reduplication as something transitory, we today increasingly see it as a durable condition coterminous with the late-modern democratic state. I use Lenin's treatise as a point of inspiration to briefly characterize my dialectical theory of state.

**Keywords** Lenin · Democracy · State · Dialectics · Councils

## *State and Revolution* and the present state of things

In the recent two decades, Lenin has attracted considerable attention as a thinker. This has happened due to the resurgence of the radical left discourse (particularly in academia), the growing de-legitimization of capitalism, the 100th anniversary of the 1917 revolution, and of course his personal and intellectual brilliance, which withstood the attempts to trivialize it by the Western and Soviet liberal orthodoxy. The most important voice in the Lenin renaissance has been Slavoj Žižek who has by now published two anthologies of Lenin (Žižek 2002, 2017), with lengthy pieces of his own, and an edited volume, «Lenin Reloaded» (Žižek et al. 2007). Apart from this, one should mention a recent book by Ali (2017) and (inspired by Žižek as it is) a philosophically rich article by Lorenzo Chiesa focused exclusively on the exegesis of the *State and Revolution* (Chiesa 2017).

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My task in this paper is to revisit Lenin's 1917 book along with its recent readings, and to focus on its implications for understanding the contemporary state.

For Žižek, writing in 2002, *State and Revolution* was not at all central. He was much more interested in Lenin's theory of revolution and politics of concrete action. For Žižek, Lenin's is a «politics of truth», or of the «Real». The only mention of Lenin's state theory happens where Žižek evokes democracy.

This is the hard kernel of today's global capitalist universe, its true Master Signifier: democracy. The limit of democracy is the State: in the democratic electoral process, the social body is symbolically dissolved, reduced to a pure numerical multitude ... When Badiou says that the State is always in excess with regard to the multitude it represents, this means that it is precisely this excess which is structurally overlooked by democracy: the democratic illusion is that the democratic process can control this excess of the State. (Žižek 2002: 273)

Thus, Žižek interprets Lenin primarily as a *critic* of liberal democracy and even of democracy as such, which is, to Žižek at that stage of his development, hard to disentangle from liberalism completely. His Lenin is the one who perceives democracy, against Kautsky's democratic views which were (and are) predominant in social-democracy, as a form of *state* and thus as a regime of repression. In my view, as expressed below, this is only one side of Lenin's message. The other side is a theory of the post-revolutionary democratic state, which Lenin believed would be transitory but which we today recognize as an uncannily contemporary picture.

In 2017, in publishing Lenin's post-revolution writings, Žižek still largely ignored *State and Revolution*. However, he is now much more interested in the state and in the details of a revolutionary regime. On the one hand, Žižek asks: "Do we not also live in an era when the state and its apparatuses, inclusive of its political agents, are simply less and less able to articulate the key issues?" (Žižek in Lenin 2017: KL 810–811). On the other, he points to the need for a new Master figure in politics and presents Lenin's institution-building as an attempt to accommodate one: in instituting the Central Control Commission, he says, "Lenin was trying to square the circle of democracy and the dictatorship of the party-state. While admitting the dictatorial nature of the Soviet regime, he tried to establish at the summit of the dictatorship a balance between different elements, a system of reciprocal control that could serve the same function—the comparison is no more than approximate—as the separation of powers in a democratic regime" (Žižek in Lenin 2017: KL 918–922). The question is: "who controls the controllers"? Žižek also emphasizes (in partial contrast with his 2002 comments) Lenin's democratic leanings as expressed in his proclaimed respect for national autonomy.

Žižek's argument becomes contradictory. Either we speak of the crisis of capitalist state and the task of its subversion through a mass movement led by a charismatic leader, or we speak of a state form which would combine strong personal power with democracy (understood not as a vote but as mass involvement

in government and management). If one simply postpones such state for after the revolution, then the conversation becomes abstract. However, in many cases, such as for instance the centrality of the *control* function, Lenin's attempt to build a socialist state resonates with the situation of contemporary liberal democracy and can therefore be viewed as a part of *democratic theory* normatively related to the current politics and not only to an eventual post-revolutionary future.

Pierre Rosanvallon describes the contemporary democratic state as a "counter-democracy" in "the age of distrust" (Rosanvallon 2008). By this he means that the legitimacy of the state comes today less from the electoral representation or from the rule of law, but rather from the various forms of *counterpower* that holds officials in check and/or obliges the officials to consult with those they govern. "Control", through popular movements, NGO's, courts, etc., plays the central role in the exercise of this alternative power. "Counter-democracy" does not at all mean that the resulting regime is anti-democratic but rather that democracy goes against itself, contests its own frozen, elitist, and statist form. We see that *mutatis mutandis*, Lenin describes, not his fantasy, but an objective vista on where a democratic state tends to drift, whether in a revolutionary or reformist way. The crisis of legitimacy is being resolved through a *reinforcement* of state and a redoubling of its functions by the engagement of civil society.

## Lenin's argument

Lenin began writing his book in 1916 following a polemical exchange with Bukharin who had a unilaterally negative view of the prospects of statehood after the proletarian revolution. First, Lenin simply compiles quotes to prove his point of view, namely that Marxism provides for a transitional state, otherwise known as "dictatorship of the proletariat." The text of the book was completed, based on the earlier notes and quotations made in Zürich, in the summer of 1917, in the Finnish village of Jalkala, after Lenin had worked on it in the hut in Razliv (near St-Petersburg at what was then Finnish border) where he and Grigory Zinoviev were hiding from the police of the newly established Russian republic. The inspiration came at a moment of an enforced break from revolutionary activity (For information on the book's worldwide impact see figures at the end of the article).

Most of Lenin's book is the detailed exegesis of Marx and Engels's writings on the state. It is even more impressive because Lenin did not know Marx's manuscript "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (Marx 1970 [1843]), his main work on democracy, but comes close to it. Lenin notes two ambivalences: that Marx both recognizes the need for a dictatorial state *and* insists on smashing the state, and that he both praises democracy and sees it as one more form of the state. It is also important that Lenin associates his criticism of democracy with the *imperialist* nature of the Modern state, a topic that he earlier developed in his "Imperialism" brochure. It is imperialism and financial capitalism that allow the democratic state to compensate for relative political equality with economic inequality:

At present, imperialism and the domination of the banks have “developed” into an exceptional art both of these methods of upholding and giving effect to the omnipotence of wealth in democratic republics of all descriptions (Lenin 1974: 397-398).

In a socialist republic, the completion of democracy would dialectically lead to its self-destruction, a phenomenon which is still linked to the state.

The Commune, therefore, appears to have replaced the smashed state machine “only” by fuller democracy: abolition of the standing army; all officials to be elected and subject to recall. But as a matter of fact, this “only” signifies a gigantic replacement of certain institutions by other institutions of a fundamentally different type. This is exactly a case of “quantity being transformed into quality”: democracy, introduced as fully and consistently as conceivable at all, is transformed from bourgeois into proletarian democracy; from the state (= a special force for the suppression of a particular class) into something which is no longer the state proper (Lenin 1974: 424).

Lenin, who knew Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, interprets it via Engels, but what he says also makes sense in the stricter Hegelian sense of the logic of essence, as subsequently elaborated by Herbert Marcuse (Marcuse 1955). Marcuse thought it to be central for dialectics that a thing, when it realizes its essence, is *destroyed*. Thus, by fulfilling itself and becoming democratic, the state is no longer a state.

After introducing Marx’ and Engels’s general doctrine of the state, Lenin moves on to the historical revolutionary experiences of 1848 and 1871. Both are viewed, again, through the lens of Marx and Engels. Most importantly, the Paris Commune of 1871 is the model of what successful proletarian revolutions, according to Lenin, should do—smash the bourgeois state and establish a proletarian dictatorship by recruiting the largest possible number of workers into the administrative apparatus.

From these analyses Lenin moves on to the presentation of his own positive program and outlines how a proletarian counter-state should look like. In contrast to the usual liberal humanist understanding of democracy as freedom, self-expression, etc., Lenin gives a relatively bleak technocratic picture of discipline, accounting, and control. But, these functions are being fulfilled by an increasing number of people, so that at the limit *everyone* becomes an administrator.

Kautsky has not understood at all the difference between bourgeois parliamentarism, which combines democracy (not for the people) with bureaucracy (against the people), and proletarian democracy, which will take immediate steps to cut bureaucracy down to the roots, and which will be able to carry these measures through to the end, to the complete abolition of bureaucracy, to the introduction of complete democracy for the people. (Lenin 1974: 486)

It is at that point that the state gradually turns into something else and loses the mark that had differentiated it from society. Importantly again, Lenin insists that a socialist republic must be unitary, not federative (a position he later abandoned). Lenin’s critique of federation is evidently linked to the above mentioned thesis on the interconnection of *imperialism* and bourgeois democracy: unlike the latter, socialist

democracy would not be able to oust its contradictions to the periphery. However, Lenin consistently supported national self-determination because he saw in it a road to the world revolution by different means. We can conjecture that he criticized the federalization of existing liberal states, but supported what we could call a federalism from below, an alliance of national soviet republics.

In the final section, Lenin turns to the criticism of Kautsky's "opportunist" shift to the political understanding of socialism as democracy (that is, a form of state), and contrasts his views with those of Anton Pannekoek who, says Lenin, better understands the Marxist teaching on revolution as the *destruction* of the state.

Lenin planned to finish the book, symmetrically, by an account of one more revolutionary experience, that of Russia. He did not have time to do so because he soon started a new revolution. In the surviving plan for the seventh missing chapter, Lenin writes about the decay of the Soviets (under pressure from parties) and about a *messianism*, presumably in response to the frequent criticism of the Bolshevik party, which would claim authority in the vacuum of democracy's self-destruction (Lenin 1933: 20).

The book's argument is not easy to summarize, since it is rigorously dialectical, maybe the most dialectical of Lenin's works (which comes right after his period of reading Hegel and composing the *Philosophical notebooks*). The argument is that the proletarian revolutionary state is indispensable, but that it is a peculiar form of state, actually the opposite of a regular bourgeois state. As such, this state is most fundamentally a negative operator, whose task is to destroy, 'smash' the existing state. But in doing so, the revolutionary apparatus becomes a *new* state of sorts, universally inclusive and democratic. It carries the important technical function of "control and accounting." However, it needs to fulfill also a third function, that of destroying itself so that it gradually "dies out."

The supersession of the bourgeois state by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution. The abolition of the proletarian state, i.e., of the state in general, is impossible except through the process of "withering away." (Lenin 1974: 406)

This dying out, the ongoing self-annulment, is not the same as the task of destroying the preexisting bourgeois state: According to Engels, the bourgeois state does not "wither away" but is "abolished" by the proletariat in the course of the revolution. In Lenin's words, "what withers away after this revolution is the proletarian state or semi-state." (Lenin 1974: 402).

The revolutionary negativity lives on and is then directed by the proletarian state against itself. Unlike the "smashing" of the existing state machine, this self-negation does not come in a dramatic way but is more akin to a slow death or, say Engels and Lenin, "falling asleep". Penzin (2016) noted that this falling asleep somehow reserves the state for the future, and it has a potential to revive if needed.

In sum, there *needs* to be a state, but there also *does not* have to be a state (Lenin laughs at Kautsky who reproaches Pannekoek for this apparent contradiction, which is the dialectical truth of Marxist theory). The contradiction is resolved in a way by distributing the contradictions in time: the revolutionary state is a *transitional* model. Some note that Lenin frames it in an authoritarian and Fordist way (control,

discipline, armed repression). Others point to the democratic understanding of the state in which everyone becomes an official and which serves to raise consciousness to the level where the state is no longer needed: a radical democratic imaginary that Lenin would have to abandon soon after the revolution (Harding 2009). Given the dialectical nature of the argument, both parties in the debate are right and wrong. The authoritarian hypertrophy of the state would change its essence, make it more and more inclusive. The state, in the Lenin of 1917, takes the shape of a demonic vanishing mediator whose task is violence, including violence against itself. In Hegel's terms, it is the hidden fourth step of dialectical movement which embodies a pure negativity which also denies itself (Hegel 2015).

## Was Lenin right?

Historically speaking, Lenin was surprisingly far-sighted. The Soviet experiment was haunted by the illegitimacy of the state apparatus it created. Stalin's repressions against bureaucracy in the 1930s, set as a collective exercise in party cleansing and as a struggle for the purity of the rank (Kharkhordin 1999), may be viewed as a perverse application of Lenin's theory. The subsequent development of the Soviet state was characterized by ultra-alienation, where state, repressive but badly administered, de facto withdrew from everyday life and sustained, paradoxically, an anarchic and anomic community of citizens who successfully sought to escape its scope into ubiquitous "empty zones". (Cf. Magun 2017). From a destructive, active negation of itself, Soviet society turned into a privative, passive nihilism; but negativity was still at work in both moments. Negativity was indeed destructive of the new socialist state, but not in the trans-democratic and communist way that Lenin had envisioned.

Moreover, it does not appear that we today have gone beyond the problems Lenin described. We commonly associate a normative form of the contemporary state with democracy. But this association is not without its problems. Democracy, and not capitalism, Žižek is right to say, is the nodal point of contemporary ideology. And this was surprisingly central for Lenin, too: even though democracy was not yet at that time the universal "master signifier" that it is at present, Lenin consistently defends "democracy" throughout his career (Lih 2006). In this he follows Kautsky, but unlike the latter, he understands democracy not as a system of government but as the plebeian spirit of the rule of the masses, the access of the simple folk to government. Therefore, while defending democracy in principle, Lenin sees its serious limitations when it comes to the form of state.

There is a tension between state and democracy which increasingly generates revolutionary violence. Is the democratic state merely a bureaucracy periodically elected by the people? This assumption contradicts the history of both notions (state and democracy) and loses its credibility at moments of domestic crisis or international conflicts. Today, the democratic state is characterized not just by elections, but by a vibrant civil society which has a right to freely contest the government without resorting to revolution. Otherwise, it is hard to distinguish between the democratic

states of the European Union (whose governments are highly elitist, with professionalized parties, and of functions of which are administered by non-elected officials in Brussels) and the authoritarian governments of Russia, Egypt, and Turkey. Leaders of these countries are elected and are popular; what makes them undemocratic are crackdowns on opposition and media meant to preclude a regime change. In this way, Western democracies are “demonstration democracies” (Etzioni 1970) whose governments are legitimate precisely because there are strong forces that oppose them, often radically (the alterglobalist Left, the anti-European Right). If we look at “democracy” outside the West, we see the regular emergence of anti-authoritarian *revolutions* (most recently 2011–2012) that are viewed favorably by Western governments. Revolution at the “periphery” of the world acquires legitimacy where it has none at its core. There is thus (as Lenin saw well) a revolutionary dialectic of imperialist state and democracy, but whereas Lenin distributed them in time, here they are distributed in space. The stability of democracy as a mainstream regime in the world “core” crucially depends on the constant subversion of order in the “periphery”, while conceptually both mainstream stability and provincial turmoil (which often develop into civil wars) are univocally understood as democratic. Lenin would say that quantity passes into quality here, but this passing happens structurally, spatially, rather than temporally.

Miguel Abensour turns to Marx’s early “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” to demonstrate the tension between “State” and “Democracy” (Abensour 2011). He projects it onto today’s de-legitimization of the “democratic state” as a representative state, but then derives a relatively mild political conclusion in the spirit of Claude Lefort: democracy, he says, is a gap, a dent of negativity within the state, which prevents it from closing down. Abensour does not quote Lenin who, as we have seen, develops the same intuition about the contradiction between democracy and the state in a utopian revolutionary way.

## The negativity of the state

If one looks at the situation even more broadly, one perceives a continuity between Lenin’s thought and the trajectory of the concept of state as such. There has always been *a moment of negativity* in the notion of state. It was understood as an entity *separate* from royal power and from the society at large; violence and security were seen as its main functions (it was above all a “power of the sword”).

The State was originally meant to be an alibi of sovereign power, an abstract notion that replaced direct proper names. The liberal state tends to downplay its authority, to present itself as technical, conceal itself. Thus, the contemporary neo-liberal state is largely a “concealed state” (Lindsay 2013) that outsources its functions but preserves control over the social actors whom it empowers. The neo-liberal state relies on the constant criticism of state functions but ends up increasing the state apparatus for control purposes: the rhetoric of privatization often blinds the populace to this increase.

However, in the 19th century, “state” acquired a more idealistic and human meaning. If, originally, it was detached from civil society, now it became a powerful apparatus able to penetrate and regulate everyday social issues. Hegel named the state “the March of God on Earth” (Hegel 2005: 197), because he thought that it was civil society, not the state, that served as a dialectical mediator and a self-negating element of history. The state, on the contrary, was the result of this negation of the negation: it successfully sublated its own contradictions (Hegel 2005). Despite the enormous influence of Hegel’s political philosophy, things changed in German liberal democratic thought that was contemporary to Lenin. The state was understood, as in Hegel, as an all-encompassing idea and a legal framework for society. However, to be democratic or at least liberal, such a state had to *limit* itself, to constitute civil society through auto-limitation. So claimed the most famous German legal theorist of the late 19th–early 20th centuries, Georg Jellinek, who wrote

The essence of sovereignty consists not only in the highest power projected outside, but above all in self-mastery, in the power to give injunctions to its own will, in the capacity to create law for itself. (...) Thus, any act of the state’s will is a limitation of the state will which is not imposed on it from outside but comes from the inner nature of this will, is a self-limitation. And the self-limitation of the state is not an accidental, passing condition... (Jellinek 1880: 18, 120, my translation—AM).

Again, I draw attention to the scale of negativity. There is not yet a thought of self-destruction, just of self-containment. However, it is related to Lenin’s idea of building an anti-state, which would be busy with annulling the regular state power. There is an abyss of the potential anarchic violence hidden beyond the idea of the self-limitation of power, be it through morals or through external pressure that it is meant to be achieved. Hence, this liberal compromise does not work in peripheral and semi-peripheral states of the world, where political antagonism may be extreme, not allowing for moderation. A self-limitation of authority may quickly lead to a civil war (if we think of Soviet and post-Soviet realities, such as the case of Mikhail Gorbachev refusing to suppress both the democratic and “patriotic” movements in 1989, Russian President Putin allegedly calling the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to stop the Berkut in February 2014, etc.).

Therefore, even though we are probably not experiencing a proximate revolutionary transformation, we can nevertheless engage Lenin in thinking normatively about democracy. It is crucial that:

- The democratic state is torn between the apparatus of coercion and popular movements.
- The democratization of the state threatens, at the limit, the destruction of this state and its eventual transformation into a non-state.
- The compromise-based democratic state of the metropolis continues and replicates itself in the periphery through antagonism and revolutionary destruction.



Therefore, democratic state-society is as such already in part an anti-state, a “semi-state”, that is a state mid-way to its own demise. The dialectical perspective allows us to perceive the internal tension and broaden the perspective to include the totality of interconnected phenomena. The contemporary Western liberal-democratic state thrives on the ongoing crisis of authority. This crisis allows it to sustain and welcome contentious social movements and media and to constantly develop new structures of counter-authority (“counter-democracy”): control, moral censure, legal monitoring of government. Today in US we witness a proliferation of new socio-political controls which follow the logic of curtailing the previously existing social power, limiting if not undermining the power of established elites (affirmative action, vigilance in gender and minority issues, etc.). Critics may exaggerate the connection of these measures to the historical “Left”, but we see a strange structural homology between these tendencies and those in Lenin’s Russia where the proletariat built its state for the sake of fighting against the social power of the bourgeoisie, while preserving this power in part via bureaucracy.

The issue is not the “Left”, but the dialectical logic of the democratic state as such.

For Lenin, the dialectic was possible in a wider historical horizon, where the tension between democracy and authoritarianism would be resolved with the emergence of a new, communist society. Today, lacking any working examples of a radically different regime, we tend to perceive the same dialectic in *spatial* terms (on spatial dialectic, see Jameson 2010): revolutions, civil wars, and stable representative polities, as well as the tendencies for mass managerial functions and for ubiquitous hostile control-based governance, are simultaneous. Current democracy is fully conceivable only as a global structure, where negativity, being “destituent” rather than constituent (cf. Agamben 2014) is evacuated to the peripheries but included in world governance and managed by the “democratic” power centers.

So how should we build a democratic state if we do not trust in the gradual withering away of the state (as I think we should not)? Or, briefly, how do we approach building a dialectical state? Lenin’s response was a dictatorship of proletariat, which he came to understand as the dictatorship of the party (the proletariat’s avant-garde). This dictatorship would, he thought, be a reverse image of the existing bourgeois state, itself a concealed dictatorship. Its important organs would be the party and the soviets. This dialectical model of the state did not really work politically: Lenin and the Bolsheviks gradually rid themselves of any pluralism and contestation of their own authority. Clearly, this was a forced failure of dialectic, to which Stalin paid a debt only in the form of a symptom (pseudo-spontaneous purges). But, revolution or no revolution, the problem is there: how to combine the system of impersonal power with personal authority and with a plebeian critical element that opposes it at least in part? Many contemporary left and liberal thinkers (Negri 1999; Kalyvas 2005; Geenens et al. 2015, and others) propose to bridge the divide by means of the notion of “constituent power”, whereas Lenin tends to emphasize mass participation in management. There is a value in seeing clearly the contradiction between the liberal

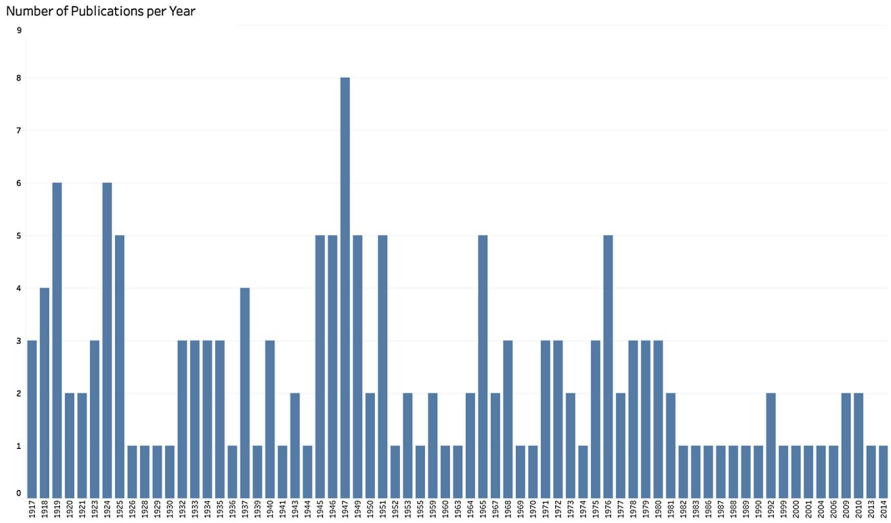
state and democracy and not pretending that the “rule of law” “is” democracy. As Žižek rightly observes, we need to “square a circle”: to find a system that would combine strong vertical rule and lively self-governing deliberative institutions. This strong rule is necessary in order to protect the potential grassroots councils of radical democracy and observe peace in their mutual communications. Moreover, it is important to find a moment when to intervene: the moment when, for instance, the democratic masses want to unseat their democratic leadership and to replace them with the forces of *status quo* (what Lenin did in Kronstadt, what the Chinese did at Tiananmen, and what Gorbachev or Morsi did not do).

The same reflexive adjustment is needed in the *geographical* sense: democracy exists on the global level, and it is on this level that it must be legislated in the view of the regulative ideal of a world democratic state. Lenin’s paradoxical insistence on national independence along with centralism and the dictatorship of proletariat may point in the direction of a wide *delegation of authority* to nation-states, which would not equal absolute sovereignty. Even though Lenin, in *State and Revolution*, rejects federalism while defending the spontaneous self-organization of autonomous units into a centralized space, Soviet experience later showed this could mean a wide regional/ethnic autonomy with a strong central state intervening only in key issues. The current coexistence of periphery revolutions and central consensual societies should be first understood and then used to reform international law to become more just and realistic, to include, for instance, the right to revolution.

We see that a proper combination of state and democracy, short of a new historical stage (communism), requires not just the enthusiasm of the masses, but also a self-limiting *virtue* and *virtuosity* of leadership that would *know* the appeal and the danger of popular movements, to be able to maneuver between their sovereignty and its own.

To conclude, Lenin’s hastily written and pragmatically motivated book not only legitimized his subsequent exercise in Jacobin state-building and repressive policies against the bourgeoisie and nobility, but also elaborated a Marxist analysis of the state phenomenon as such, the last left-wing theory of state that would not be nihilistic. This analysis is still valid and should serve for inspiration in understanding and re-constituting the state today, the moment of post-imperialist, post-industrialist, and half-democratized capitalism. Such a state doubtlessly serves the interests of capitalists and organizes them as a class, but it *also* organizes the lower classes into democratic units and institutionalizes the contestation of both political and economic power on their part. Thus, it embodies and exercises a contradiction between the universal good and elite domination which lies at the core of any social power.

Figure compiled by Alexandra Price



Geographical Distribution of Editions of *State and Revolution*



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