CHAPTER 2

Revolution and the Problems of Bureaucracy

Soon after the October Revolution, many Bolsheviks began to assert that the problem of bureaucracy had not died with the old regime. Although there was a consensus that bureaucracy was a growing problem, there was little agreement on exactly what that problem was or how to account for its reappearance. A series of opposition groups, employing traditional Marxist analysis, defined the problem in terms of political alienation, and perceived bureaucracy in the elevation of Soviet political, economic, and military institutions above the control of the working class. Furthermore, in keeping with the classical Marxist analysis, they argued that this problem was related to the degree of political power or influence exercised by the exploiting classes. Lenin spoke similarly at times, warning of the bureaucratising influence of the bourgeois specialists, and denouncing the ’bureaucratic’ centralism and authoritarianism of some of his comrades. However, on other occasions he employed bureaucracy in a wholly different sense to characterise the enormous inefficiency of the Soviet state and party apparatuses. In later years Trotsky, too, would come to define the problem of Soviet bureaucracy in terms of extreme political alienation. However, in the first period of Soviet power his analysis was unusual in that it rejected both the view that Soviet bureaucracy involved the rule of officials and the notion that it was related to the use of bourgeois specialists. Instead, Trotsky identified the problem exclusively with the sources of inefficiency in Soviet military, economic, and political organs.

2.1 The Dream Deferred

On the eve of the Bolshevik insurrection Lenin confidently predicted that the coming revolution would resolve the age-old problem of bureaucracy. In The State and Revolution he argued that the socialist revolution would establish a dictatorship of the proletariat modeled after the Paris Commune. Through the soviets the masses of workers and, following them, the peasants would take power into their own hands. Popular control over the state would be assured by the dissolution of the standing army, the elimination of the distinction between the state’s executive and legislative branches, the introduction of election and recall of all officials, and the limitation of officials’ salaries to the level of ‘workmen’s wages’. In time, as the need for a repressive apparatus faded, even this radically democratic state would disappear.
During the first six months of power the Bolshevik leaders had reason to believe that their utopian dreams were about to become a reality. The insurrection itself, though planned and directed by the party leadership, enjoyed the ardent support of industrial workers. The day after the insurrection the Bolsheviks handed power over to the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, composed in the majority of Bolshevik delegates. In the following weeks and months workers and peasants throughout Russia continued to establish soviets as organs of local government. At all levels elected soviet deputies received only minimal wages and exercised both executive and legislative powers.\(^1\) Outside of the soviets as well, the new regime was characterised by a high degree of popular participation. In the early months of Soviet power the factory committees first introduced workers’ control over the factories and then began to nationalise them outright; workers in Petrograd organised their own tribunals to dispense revolutionary justice; and peasants spontaneously seized the property of the large landowners.\(^2\)

On the crest of this revolutionary wave the Bolsheviks continued to proclaim the dream of a radically democratic and anti-bureaucratic state. In this regard no one was more optimistic than Lenin. Immediately after the insurrection he repeated to the Petrograd Soviet the central refrain of *The State and Revolution*: ‘The oppressed masses will themselves create a power. The old state apparatus will be smashed to its foundations and a new administrative apparatus set up in the form of the Soviet organisations.’\(^3\) At the Seventh Party Congress in March 1918 he elaborated, ‘Soviet power is a new type of state without a bureaucracy, without police, without a regular army, a state in which bourgeois democracy has been replaced by a new democracy, a democracy that brings to the fore the vanguard of working people, . . . makes them responsible for military defence and creates state machinery that can re-educate the masses’.\(^4\) In the same period he further argued that other mass institutions such as the trade unions, factory committees, militia groupings, and peoples’ courts, could facilitate popular participation in the affairs of state.\(^5\) Finally, he continued to predict that under socialism the state would disappear altogether.\(^6\) At the Seventh Party Congress Lenin noted that the withering of

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3 Lenin 1960–70, vol. 26, p. 239.
4 Lenin 1960–70, vol. 27, p. 133.