

THE MARXIAN CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

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In orthodox Marxist philosophy, democracy occupies an important position in the evolution and goal of social dialectics. Marxists explain the origin, development and ultimate destiny of the state in terms of the theories of dialectical and historical materialism. The evolution of political institutions is closely related to and is determined by the different modes of production. The state came into existence when the division of society was brought about by a mode of production based on private property. The state, being the result of irreconcilable class interests, is primarily an instrument used by one class for the oppression of another, or else — in the nonproletarian stage of the development of the mode of production — it is an organization for the safeguarding and maintenance of private property.

According to the Marxist dialectic process, classes will disappear with the coming of communism. Since the state is a class instrument, the disappearance of classes must also mean the exit of the state from the stage of society. The period between the birth of the state and its "withering away" is governed by the economic laws of a particular epoch. The history of more recent times is marked by three modes of production, which are responsible for the existence of the feudal, bourgeois and proletarian societies. Each society has a roughly corresponding form of political system: monarchic, liberal-democratic and the proletarian dictatorship.

The bourgeois state is overthrown when a conflict occurs in the given society between the forces of production and the relations of production. As a consequence, the victorious masses establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. In Marxist terminology, dictatorship of the proletariat means rule by the proletarian majority. In a bourgeois state, the political institutions are used by the property-owning minority for the sole purpose of suppressing the proletarian majority. When the proletariat comes to power the position of the two classes is reversed, but the essence of the state remains the same.

This interpretation of the bourgeois and proletarian states forms the basis of the Marxists' contention that a proletarian dictatorship is far more democratic than the typical bourgeois democracy. In the former the dictatorship operates only against the bourgeoisie, which constitutes a small fraction of the total population. In the latter, democracy is practiced only within the minority and never reaches the proletarian majority.

The two principal functions of the dictatorship of the proletariat are the suppression of the nonproletarian classes and the gradual establishment of socialism and later of communism. The proletarian dictatorship is the transition stage from capitalism to communism; its importance lies in the fact that its duration has never been precisely defined by Marxist theorists.

Marx mentioned democracy as the ideal goal of social dialectics in his earliest writings. He maintained that the general will of the "real" people is embodied in the actions of the state. "Democracy is the solution of the riddle of all constitutions. Here the constitution is... constantly reduced to the real men, the real people, and posited as their own work". With the abolition of classes under the proletarian dictatorship, the state ceases to serve class interests. It becomes transformed into an instrument of the "real" people — a Marxian variant of Rousseau's general will, according to Alfred Meyer. But as soon as this is accomplished there is no longer a need for political institutions, because once the interests of the community and the interests of the individual coincide, the need for a state, in the role of an arbitrator, disappears. The general will can express itself directly, without the aid of political institutions. Consequently political democracy will vanish together with the vanishing state.

The Marxists envision democracy in an ideal communist society not as a political but as a social order. The realization of communism is accompanied by a simultaneous change in human nature, which with the disappearance of classes becomes depoliticized. Under communism, man becomes truly free and sovereign over himself; only then is he able to master nature and to cease being its servant.

These highly idealistic notions of the future society — a perfect democracy — played apart in producing a totalitarian system of the worst type. The Marxist ideal of a classes society in which the interests of the community and the interests of the individual coincide was foreshadowed by the Jacobin dictatorship aimed at the inauguration of a reign of virtue and by the Babouvist scheme of an egalitarian communist society. All three systems called for the total emancipation of man. J. L. Talmon points out that this attitude was the main reason for the early evolution of totalitarian democracy into a pattern of coercion and centralization. The Jacobins and Babou-vists as well as the Marxists took a perfectionist attitude toward man:

Man was not merely to be freed from restraints. All the existing traditions, established institutions, and social arrangements were to be overthrown and remade, with the sole purpose of securing to man the totality of his rights and freedoms, and liberating him from all dependence. It envisaged man per se, stripped of all those attributes which are not comprised in his common humanity... To reach man per se all differences and inequalities had to be eliminated....

Man was to be sovereign. The idea of man per se went together with the assumption that there was some common point where all men's wills would necessarily coincide... Men as individuals, and not groups, parties or classes, were called upon to will. Even parliament was not the final authority, for it was also a corporate body with an interest of its own. The only way of eliciting the pure general will of men was to let them voice it as individuals, and all at the same time.

But in order to create the conditions in which the general will could constantly express itself, the elements hindering such expression had to be eliminated. Thus during the French Revolution and in Communist Russia, the supporters of the all-embracing and all-solving schemes of equality and freedom soon found out that the will of the majority is not necessarily the same as the general will. Furthermore, the Jacobins and Babouvists in France and the Communists in Russia discovered that in order to make the expression of the general will effective, the people had to be freed from the detrimental influence of the old order and re-educated so that they could will what they were destined to will. These tasks required someone who knew the contents of the general will and the methods of its successful application. History has shown that the tasks also required an elaborate state apparatus, with such innovations as concentration camps, one-party dictatorships, mass liquidations, mass purges, etc. In 18th century France, the "someone" who really knew the intricacies of the general will was Robespierre, who operated with the assistance of the Committee of Public Safety and the Jacobin clubs; in the Soviet Union it was Lenin and Stalin who made the general will effective through the Politburo and the Communist Party.

There is sharp disagreement among Marxists themselves as to whether Marx rejected the possibility of the realization of communism through democratic method. Many citations can be produced from the writings of Marx and Engels to support either view. In his **Criticism of the Gotha Program**, for instance, Marx argued for the revolutionary method and held such democratic reforms as universal suffrage, direct legislation, etc. to be "a mere echo of the middle-class People's Party." But in a letter to Kugelmann Marx expressed the opinion that in democratic countries such as England and the United States, there would be no need for the proletariat to destroy the state machinery.

After the unsuccessful experience of the Paris Commune, Marx and Engels seem to have concluded that in countries where a liberal democracy was firmly established, there was a possibility of the proletariat coming to power through nonviolent means. Engels, who lived to see the growth of the proletarian parties, was especially concerned for such a possibility. However, this apparent change of heart toward democratic institutions did not come about as a result of any modification of the basic philosophic premises, which still regarded liberal democracy as the most advanced type of bourgeois state in which class antagonists reach the highest degree of intensity, but rather as a result of new political and social conditions that could not have been foreseen three decades earlier. The willingness of Marx and Engels to use democratic institutions as a means of acquiring power was based primarily on nonideological considerations. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that they always reserved the right to use any other means should the machinery of the democratic state fail as the means of acquiring power.

Lenin maintained during the first years of his political career, in good orthodox Marxist fashion, that the creation of a liberal, democratic and constitutional state was the necessary first step on the road to proletarian dictatorship in reactionary Tsarist Russia. However, by the second decade of the century, Lenin's attitude toward democracy had become highly contradictory. On the one hand, he continued to stress the idea that democratic institutions constituted a favorable environment for the realization of proletarian aspirations, but on the other hand, he began to emphasize the notion that democracy is wholly inadequate as a means of bringing about a proletarian regime. At times Lenin called democracy the most convenient arena for the class struggle, a test of the proletarian consciousness, a factor in sharpening class antagonisms. On other occasions he regarded democracy merely as a bourgeois instrument for deceiving the working class, a device employed for the purpose of corrupting the proletariat.

This constant ambivalence toward democracy can best be explained by the fact that above everything else Lenin was interested in the acquisition of power. In this sense, ideological questions were for him only secondary. It would be erroneous to conclude, however, that Lenin did not consider ideology an important factor in social processes. As a good

Marxist, he accepted the tenets of the Marxist system and devoted his whole life to their realization. He was also quite convinced of their practicability. But his espousal of Marxism did not prevent Lenin from acting as he saw fit in different situations. For him, ideology was at once cause and effect. In certain cases Lenin acted because he thought that ideological considerations demanded a particular action; in other cases he acted in order to prove that ideology was right. Even though sooner or later Lenin had to find ideological justification for all his political activities, this did not stop him from manipulating ideological motives in such a way that sometimes different and contradictory reasons were given in order to prove the correctness of the same policy.

After the October Revolution, Lenin and his collaborators showed that once they had acquired power and were faced with the necessity of putting their former declarations to the test of practical politics, all their earlier notions about the democratic method had completely disappeared. The institutions and practices of the Soviet state clearly indicate that after the Civil War Lenin tried, as his successors have been trying ever since, to effect — in the Jacobin and Babouvist tradition — the expression of the "general will" in all phases of human life.

It is interesting to note that today Communists do not hesitate to proclaim themselves to be the only true democrats and the countries in which they are in power to be democracies. This insistence on a monopoly of perfect democracy is no doubt used for sheer propaganda reasons, as the Leninist tradition clearly indicates, but it also has an important ideological motivation that stems from Marx's early notions of democracy as the goal of social dialectics. His concept of totalitarian democracy is congenial to the present institutions and practices — aimed at the creation of the "new" man and the "new" society — of the Communist-controlled states, and it can be conveniently used as the democratic ideal whose realization is compatible with the most undemocratic and inhumane means.

NOTES:

1. Quoted in A. Meyer's **Leninism**, 1957, from Marx and Engels, *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*, "Kritik der Hegelschen Staatsphilosophie," part I, vol. I, half-tone I, p. 434.
2. J. L. Talmon. **The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy**, London, 1952, pp. 249-250.
3. In this connection it is well to remember that even though Marx based his philosophy on the inevitable operation of objective historical laws and processes, he nevertheless found it necessary to remind his readers of the importance of the human will. "Man makes his own history," Marx wrote, in **The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon** (p. 9), "but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand."
4. p. 38.