

# Democracy and the "dictatorship of the proletariat"

Nick Beams  
4 April 2002

Dear Nick Beams,

In concluding Part 3 of *The World Economic Crisis: 1991-2001* dated 16 March 2002 you propose the "*social ownership making possible genuine democratic control of the productive forces*". Do you or do you not mean the dictatorship of the proletariat? "Democracy" is a term constantly used by the capitalist politicians and media to divert and confuse the working class and to dragoon us into war against its alleged enemies.

Sincerely,

DT

17 February 2002

Dear DT,

In the first place it is necessary to understand what is meant by the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Such a clarification will show that it is wrong to counterpose it, as you do, to democracy.

The dictatorship of the proletariat, in the writings of Marx and Engels, means nothing other than the political rule of the working class. This political rule must include the control by the associated producers—the working class which constitutes the overwhelming majority of society—of the productive forces they themselves have created. In other words, the dictatorship of the proletariat means nothing other than the establishment of genuine democracy.

The term "dictatorship of the proletariat" as used by Marx and Engels does not mean tyranny or absolutism or rule by a single individual, a minority or even a single party but political rule exercised by the majority of the population.

This was also the sense in which the term "dictatorship" was used by defenders of the ruling classes in their opposition to universal suffrage and the development of democratic forms of rule.

As the author Hal Draper noted in his study of this question: "The London *Times* thundered against giving the vote to the majority of the people on the ground that this would in effect disenfranchise 'the present electors' by making the lower classes 'supreme'. Manchester capitalists denounced a strike as 'the tyranny of Democracy'. The liberal Tocqueville, writing in 1856 about the Great French Revolution, regretted that it had been carried through by 'the masses on behalf of the sovereignty of the people' instead of by an 'enlightened autocrat'; the revolution was a period of 'popular' dictatorship, he wrote. It was perfectly clear that the 'dictatorship' he lamented was the establishment of 'popular sovereignty'" (Hal Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin*, p. 17).

Marx and Engels did not counterpose the dictatorship of the proletariat, the political rule of the working class, to democracy. Rather, they insisted, it was the form through which genuine democracy was established. This is clear from their analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871, which, for a period of 72 days, established a "dictatorship of the proletariat."

In his 1891 introduction to the re-issue of Marx's analysis of the Commune in *The Civil War in France*, Engels explained that the Commune, which was nothing other than the "dictatorship of the proletariat", began with the "shattering of the former state power and its replacement by a new and truly democratic one."

There were two characteristics of the new state. As Marx put it: "While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society. Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for workmen and managers in his business."

There were two means by which this transformation was effected. It filled all posts on the basis of universal suffrage, with the right of recall at any time by the electors and it ensured that all officials were paid wages no higher than those received by other workers.

In his first outline for *The Civil War in France*, Marx underscored its democratic character as follows: "The Commune—the reabsorption of the state power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own forces instead of the organised force of their suppression—the political form of their social emancipation, instead of the artificial force appropriated by their oppressors (their own force opposed to and organised against them) of society wielded for their oppression by their enemies. This form was simple like all great things."

The Commune abolished the "whole sham of state mysteries and state pretensions" and made public functions the activities of working people instead of "the hidden attributes of a trained caste." Its tendency of development, Marx emphasised, was "a government of the people by the people."

The second great historical experience with the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is the Russian Revolution of 1917. In this case the

isolation of the revolution in an economically backward country and the tremendous pressure exerted by the imperialist powers (including the attempt to overthrow it by military intervention) led to the degeneration of the revolution and the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

This history has provided grist to the mill of all those defenders of capitalist rule who maintain that the conquest of political power by the working class and the establishment of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” leads inevitably to the nightmare of Stalinism.

It has also given rise to a “leftist” tendency which, in the name of combating bourgeois ideology and establishing its “revolutionary” credentials, has attempted to divorce the “dictatorship of the proletariat” from “democracy” and counterpose one to the other.

This has nothing to do with the positions of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who made clear that the workers’ state, based on soviets or workers’ councils, involved the realisation for the first time of genuine democracy.

Here is what Lenin wrote in 1919 in his *Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, which was presented to the founding conference of the Communist International:

“Only the soviet organisation of the state can really effect the immediate breakup and total destruction of the old, i.e., bourgeois, bureaucratic and judicial machinery, which has been, and has inevitably had to be, retained under capitalism even in the most democratic republics, and which is, in actual fact, the greatest obstacle to the practical implementation of democracy for the workers and the working people generally. The Paris Commune took the first epoch-making step along this path. The soviet system has taken the second.

“Destruction of state power is the aim set by all socialists, including Marx above all. Genuine democracy, i.e., liberty and equality, is unrealisable unless this aim is achieved. But its practical achievement is possible only through soviet, or proletarian democracy, for by enlisting the mass organisations of the working people in constant and unflinching participation in the administration of the state, it immediately begins to prepare the complete withering away of any state” (See *Founding the Communist International*, Pathfinder Press, pp. 157-158).

This perspective was not able to be realised because the extension of the socialist revolution, upon which it was based, did not take place. The old ruling classes of Europe were able to survive the post-World War I revolutionary upsurge and the working class was pushed back. Rather than beginning the process of withering away, the state assumed monstrous forms under the Stalinist bureaucracy which usurped political power in the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union there have been all manner of attempts to declare the Russian Revolution and socialism in general dead and buried.

But all the great problems in the historical development of mankind which the revolution set out to resolve in the first decades of the 20th century—imperialist war, colonialism, economic oppression—are erupting once again at the beginning of the 21st.

Not least is the question of democracy. More than 100 years ago

Engels explained how state power had become completely independent in relation to society even in the most democratic of democratic republics, the United States. “[W]e find here,” he wrote, “two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends—and the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality dominate and plunder it” (Marx and Engels, *On the Paris Commune* p. 33).

This description has lost none of its relevance. It sums up the deep-going alienation of millions of people not only in the US but also in all the “parliamentary democracies” of the major capitalist countries.

The stealing of the 2000 US presidential election by George Bush, with the Supreme Court and the military playing key roles, and the attacks on democratic rights by the Bush administration in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, is only the most graphic expression of processes under way in all the so-called capitalist democracies.

These anti-democratic political tendencies are rooted, in the final analysis, in economic processes. The world’s resources and wealth are controlled and exploited by vast transnational corporations, driven not by human needs but by the struggle for profits. In addition, all social questions are increasingly subordinated to the dictates of financial markets, to which, in the words of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “there is no alternative.” These two great facts of economic life place the question of democracy at the centre of political struggle.

It is true, as you suggest, that capitalist politicians continually invoke democracy to try to confuse the working class. But this does not mean that socialists should renounce the struggle for democracy.

On the contrary, they must draw out the yawning contradiction between the professions of the ruling classes and actual practice. Living reality is confirming the analysis undertaken by the Marxist movement that democracy is incompatible with the profit system and the corporate ownership of the means of production. The establishment of genuine democracy, the political rule of the working class, which forms the overwhelming majority of the population, is only possible when the productive forces they themselves have created are brought under social ownership and subject to their conscious control.

Yours sincerely,  
Nick Beams



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