

V. I. Lenin on Democracy

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Journal: International Critical Thought

Date of acceptance: 29th October 2020

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ABSTRACT

The concept of democracy has a prominent place in the ideological legacy of V. I. Lenin, the founder of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the leader of the world's first socialist state. In opposition to the Marxist revisionists of his era, who defined democracy as a "pure" category, a "neutral" form of government, Lenin highlighted its class essence. Democracy for him expresses the rule of a definite class. From this proposition he derived the following theses: First, democracy is a political means of class struggle, and it cannot resolve this struggle. Second, democracy for one class means dictatorship for another. Third, democracy precludes freedom. It cannot "free" everyone. These claims have had a lasting impact upon the theory and practice of Marxism. They have also been routinely misunderstood and unfairly criticised. Lenin provides several insights into the contradictions of democracy. They remain relevant for democratic struggles today.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 August 2020

Revised 22 September 2020

Accepted 29 October 2020

Published online

KEYWORDS

Lenin; democracy; dictatorship; freedom; Marxism

Introduction

The concept of democracy has a prominent place in the ideological legacy of V. I. Lenin, the founder of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the leader of the world's first socialist state. Early on in his revolutionary career he emphasised that "communists, adherents of Marxism, should . . . never forget the enormous importance of **DEMOCRACY**" (Lenin [1894] 1977, 290; emphasis in the original). Lenin himself never forgot this importance. His *Collected Works* are riddled with references to the concept. It is a constant theme throughout his work. Lenin returned to the subject of democracy repeatedly throughout his intellectual development. He likely wrote more about it than any other Marxist.

Lenin's thoughts on democracy are significant for several reasons. To begin with, they had a huge political influence. Leninist states once ruled over half the world's population, and they based their political structures upon Lenin's conception of socialist democracy. China, Cuba, Vietnam and Laos still do so today. A range of communist organisations and movements also continue to view Lenin as a guide for their position on democracy.

Lenin's democratic theory also had a sizeable intellectual impact. His influence upon Marxism in this regard has been unparalleled. In the words of A. Hunt, one of his critics, Lenin's writings "provided the central and inescapable point of reference for all [Marxist] discussions of the state and democracy" (Hunt 1980, 9). Indeed, "many of the most important discussions since 1917 take Lenin as their starting point" (Hunt 1980, 9). This is evident in the writings of prominent Marxist theorists such as Luxemburg, Kautsky, Althusser and Poulantzas (Hunt 1980, 9; Cunningham 1987, 44). Lenin's most comprehensive discussion of democracy is contained in his "The State and Revolution" (Lenin [1917c] 1974), which has been published, disseminated and read in the millions. Few would now deny the historical significance of his democratic thought. They have inspired individuals, organisations, and countries all over the world.

Most discussions of Lenin's democratic theory focus upon his critique of liberal democracy or his conception of socialist democracy.¹ This article examines his more general thoughts on the meaning of democracy itself, including its relation to other social phenomena.

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¹ For the view that Lenin's conception of socialist democracy is undemocratic, see: Femia (1993, 5, 10); Lively (1975, 344–345); Dahl (1989, 53–54); Hindess (1983, 43–44); Hunt (1980, 7–8); Pierson (1986, 80–83); Sartori (1965, 424–425; 1987, 462–467); Laurat (1940, 132–144); Graham (1986, 215, 227); Glaser (1998, 137–139; 1999, 245); Mayo (1955, 139); Vishniak (1946); Louw (1991, 139–147); Harding (1992, 155–189); Williams (2013, 18); Brie (2019). For the contrary view, see: Macpherson (1966, 20, 22); Levin (1989, 157–165); Le Blanc (2010); Priestland (2002); Vanaik (1995); Nash (1990); Marik (2008, 378–380); Blackledge (2018); Kiss (1982, 206–315);

In opposition to the Marxist revisionists of his era, who defined democracy as a “pure” category, a “neutral” form of government, Lenin highlighted its class essence. Democracy for him expresses the rule of a definite class. From this fundamental proposition he derived the following theses: First, democracy is a political means of class struggle, and it cannot resolve this struggle. Second, democracy for one class means dictatorship for another. Third, democracy precludes freedom. It cannot “free” everyone. These claims have had a lasting impact upon the theory and practice of Marxism. In the course of re-examining them, this article argues that they have also been routinely misunderstood and unfairly criticised. Lenin provides several insights into the contradictions of democracy. They remain relevant for democratic struggles today.

I. The Concept of Democracy

As a committed Marxist, Lenin derived his democratic thought from the works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the founders of the doctrine. Since Marx and Engels lived during a time when despotic regimes dominated Europe, they viewed democracy as a slogan of tremendous significance for the fighting working class. In the *Communist Manifesto*, for instance, they called upon the proletariat to “win the battle of democracy” as an essential condition for their emancipation (Marx and Engels 1976, 504). However, the founders never provided a comprehensive outline of what this meant. One will struggle to find a systematic or detailed discussion of democracy in their scattered pronouncements on the concept. As a consequence, subsequent Marxists interpreted the meaning and significance of democracy in different ways.

For Lenin, who spent much of his life as a revolutionary leader, and not merely a theorist, the task of gaining an objective understanding of democracy was a matter of life and death importance. Getting it right would help the proletarian revolution to succeed. Getting it wrong would aid its collapse. The essential thing, in his view, was to undertake a scientific examination of the phenomenon, not only as it appeared in theory, but also as it appeared in reality, under various social relations. It was imperative, in short, to adopt a *class* analysis of democracy.

In its basic etymological sense, Lenin recognises that “democracy in Greek literally means the power of the people” (Lenin [1919a] 1974, 479), and that “the very word ‘democrat’ . . . denotes an adherent of the sovereignty of the people” (Lenin [1905a] 1977, 514). The essence of this slogan is that the *whole* of society governs itself, by deciding and executing the major public decisions.

Lenin considers democracy to be “a form of the state, one of its varieties” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 477). He defines the state as a body of political officials separated from society, and which has a monopoly over the means of violence. As the official expression of politics, the state mediates, fixes, and expresses social relations in a constitutional form. “[L]ike every state,” therefore, democracy “represents . . . the organised, systematic use of force against persons” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 477), the “domination ‘of one part of the population over the other’” (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 58). However, the *democratic* state form has three distinguishing characteristics. The first is political equality. It “signifies the formal recognition of equality of citizens, the equal right of all to determine the structure of, and to administer, the state” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 477). And by “all,” Lenin means adult citizens; not children or those excluded from the franchise. The second feature is majoritarianism. Democracy entails “the rule of the majority,” and the subordination of the minority to it (Lenin [1912] 1978, 282). The third is free and fair elections. “Only . . . direct and equal elections can be called democratic” (Lenin [1912] 1978, 282).

By highlighting these points, Marxists during the early twentieth century tended to define democracy as a “neutral,” “pure,” “classless” form of government. Some even thought that the democratic system existing at the time could emancipate the workers. Lenin denounced these elements as revisionists and opportunists. He reminded them of Marx and Engels’ teaching that the state is not a neutral force. “The state is a product and a manifestation of the *irreconcilability* of class antagonisms” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 392; italics in the original). It “arises where, when and insofar as class antagonism objectively *cannot* be reconciled” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 392; italics in the original). As such, “*every* state is a machine for the suppression of one class by another” (Lenin [1918a] 1974, 107; italics in the original). Lenin spelt out the implications this had for democracy in his “The State and Revolution” (Lenin [1917c] 1974). “Democracy,” he argues here, “is a *state* which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority, i.e., an organisation for the systematic use of *force* by one class against another” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 461; italics in the original). This passage establishes a clear Marxist

Shandro (2014). Magun (2018, 141) uses Lenin’s theory of democracy as a “point of inspiration” for developing his “dialectical theory of state.” Nimitz (2014a; 2014b) outlines Lenin’s electoral strategy prior to October 1917. Moore (1957) discusses Lenin’s critique of liberal democracy. Pahnke (2019) explores how Lenin developed his revolutionary practice through his engagement with liberal democracy.

definition of democracy. The essential aspect is its *class content*. Democracy reflects the antagonisms inherent in society by manifesting the fact that a particular class is ruling whilst another is being suppressed. It expresses that the ruling class owns the state and utilises it in its own interest. Democracy, as a form of political power, expresses the factual inequality of classes, and it does not and cannot change social inequality by acknowledging, on the political plane, the equality of people. As such, “if we are not to mock at common sense and history, it is obvious that we cannot speak of pure democracy as long as different *classes* exist; we can only speak of *class* democracy” (Lenin [1918b] 1974, 242; italics in the original).

Democracy manifests formal majority rule. But for most of its history, Lenin argues, democracy has actually expressed the rule of a minority. In the exploiting societies, even under the most democratic conditions, the ruling class has barred the working majority from participating in politics and asserting its power (Lenin [1918b] 1974, 250).

With the inception of democracy in the ancient Greece, the majority of the population, which consisted of the toiling masses, was excluded from citizenship and politics. Lenin describes these democracies as a form of minority rule. For although “everybody took part . . . everybody meant only the slave-owners, that is, everybody except the slaves” (Lenin [1919a] 1974, 480). To be more precise here, he should have mentioned that women and Metics (foreigners living in ancient Greece) were excluded as well.

The franchise is universal under modern capitalism, where “we have a more or less complete democracy” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 465). But here as well “the majority of the population is debarred from participation in public and political life” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 465). For starters, the limitation of participation to voting once every few years prevents the masses from administering the state and deciding its daily decisions. Second, the representative system prohibits the majority from assuming political posts. Third, the major decisions are made not in the legislative assemblies, but in the bureaucratic branches of the executive, which are non-elected and unaccountable. Fourth, the economic sphere, a key arena of political power, is in the hands of the bourgeoisie and beyond state control. For these reasons, “this democracy . . . remains, in effect, a democracy for the minority, only for the propertied class, only for the rich” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 465).

Only a socialist revolution can establish a democracy in which the majority actually rules. Only this transformation can ensure the real rule of the oppressed masses and their extensive political participation. Although “proletarian democracy” can assume various forms, Lenin does outline several essential features. First, a system of workers’ soviets (councils) replaces the bourgeois parliamentary state. Its elected representatives receive workers’ wages and are subject to recall at any time. The fusion of the soviet legislative and executive organs into working bodies enables representatives to not only pass laws, but also execute them (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 486). Second, the state extends democracy into the economy, and organises production in accordance with a definite plan (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 478; [1917b] 1974, 468). Third, the mass of the population participates in the administration of the state, in a system of nationwide “registration, filing and checking” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 426). Mass organisations—such as the trade unions—mobilise the workers, educate them, and voice their demands (Lenin [1921a] 1973). The masses can also use their people’s control² organisations to inspect, supervise and monitor the work of the political organs (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 486). Last but not least, the “Workers’ Party” safeguards and directs the development of the proletarian state. It is the “vanguard . . . the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 409). Parties representing other groups may operate as long as they accept the leading role of the Workers’ Party.

Socialist democracy does not develop smoothly. Lenin identifies several contradictions in its growth. For one thing, the workers’ power does not arise by simply extending democracy to those who were debarred from it earlier. It also represses the exploiting classes who oppose the social transformation. These classes may otherwise use the opportunities provided by democracy in the interest of their opposition. These manipulations are facilitated by the fact that, on the one hand, the exploiters have traditionally developed a great influence, and on the other hand, that in the course of socialist transformation, several temporary difficulties arise. For example, the working masses may waver in their commitment. Making use of this, the bourgeoisie might influence the population and endanger the construction of communism. A successful socialist transformation therefore demands and means the limitation of the democratic rights of the exploiting classes (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 439–440, 461, 466–467).

Another contradiction is the growth of “bureaucratic distortions” (Lenin [1921a] 1973, 100). During the early stages of proletarian rule, some workers will lack the necessary knowledge and experience to

² Soviet theorists after Lenin used the capitalised term “People’s Control” to describe the organisations/functions Lenin described, e.g., Turovtsev’s (1973) *People’s Control in Socialist Society*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.

perform the more complex state functions. These will have to be performed by specialists, some of whom may have worked for the old regime. If these elements are not subjected to sufficient democratic oversight, they may form a bureaucratic stratum that may undermine the workers' sovereignty. The people's control organisations must therefore monitor these elements closely, so that they remain as humble servants, and not rulers (Lenin [1921c] 1973, 25–26).

These contradictions are not permanent. They actually begin to dissipate from the inception of proletarian democracy; for as citizens are educated in the theory and practice of state administration, they will gradually replace the specialists; and as class distinctions diminish, so too will the various forms of class suppression. The soviets will be able to implement their laws without force, and the people excluded from participation will regain their political rights (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 460–461; [1917f] 1977, 113). This democratisation culminates in communism, a society where there are no capitalists, classes, bureaucrats, or political restrictions. Here a “truly complete democracy” will arise, one “without any exceptions” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 467). But it is precisely here, Lenin argues, that democracy “disappears” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 402).

Some claim-by pointing to the above remarks- that Lenin envisions the abolition of democratic procedures and the “end of politics” under communism (Polan 1984). Since there are no classes, he supposedly believes that there will be no conflicts of interest, and that a universal harmony will emerge. Everyone will agree on everything, thereby making democratic methods superfluous (Sartori 1965, 424–425; Pierson 1986, 82–83; Levine 1985, 105–107; Marik 2008, 378–379).

This view has no basis. It overlooks the fact that Lenin makes a conceptual distinction between (i) democracy interpreted as a *state*, a form of rule, and (ii) the forms of democratic *government*, or what he calls *democratism*. This distinction has gone unnoticed because Lenin rarely uses the term *democratism*, and nor does he define it. This shadowy concept is an important one, however. Lenin employed it, for instance, in his “The State and Revolution,” when he said that “democracy is *not* identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a *state*” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 461; italics in the original). He also utilised it whilst disputing the thesis of “industrial democracy,” though here he emphasised another aspect. In opposition to those who thought that democracy consisted in the election of reliable economic leaders, he argued that their reasoning was “obviously artificial and incorrect . . . democracy is more than ‘nomination and seconding of candidates, elections, etc.’” (Lenin [1920a] 1973, 81). For Lenin, the decisive and essential element of democracy is the issue of state rule, the class essence. But this rule is always expressed in the form of government, the various procedures and manifestations of democratism. These include, amongst other things, the voting system, the theory and practice of how leaders give an account of their work to their electors, the right of accepting and disseminating various ideas, and the ways of practicing the rights of freedom. Democratism covers a wider field than democracy. The latter is a political category. It exclusively denotes a form of state. Democratism, by contrast, is not only a political category. It appears in other social fields as well, to denote procedures of management and systems of organisation. When democratism appears in the state sphere, it is a part of democracy. It denotes the degree—the narrowness or broadness—of the democratic state. The existence of a multitude, or even completeness, of the characteristics of democratism expresses the richness of democracy, whilst their lack means its poorness. These characteristics also differ quantitatively (Kiss 1982, 39–41). For example, Lenin notes that suffrage may be limited, based on census, or universal; and the election system may be proportionate or based on majority vote (Lenin [1917d] 1977, 336–337; Lenin [1905b] 1977, 52).

Lenin bases the separation of democracy and democratism upon his study of the historical facts. The latter, he argues, existed before the state in the classless tribal societies of primitive communism. Some of these (such as the Iroquois) featured a democratic government (what Lenin sometimes calls “primitive democracy”) in which everyone participated in the major decisions, under conditions of social equality and limited freedom. This political form, however, was neither a kind of rule nor a state, since “in those times there was no state, no special apparatus for the systematic application of force and the subjugation of people by force” (Lenin [1919a] 1974, 474). This meant that the democratism of primitive times was not a democracy in the scientific sense.

With the growth of slavery and the division of labour, society atomised into antagonistic classes. The state arose as the reflection and expression of this antagonism, and it became an illusory community standing above society and increasingly alienated from it. This organisation enabled the exploiters to rule in a democratic way. In the process, democratism assumed a state character, social equality became formal political equality, partial human freedom became political freedom, and majority decision became decision by the exploiting class.

Under capitalism, democratism exists in several non-state forms, such as in the trade unions. Predominantly, however, it appears in the political sphere, in democratic states, in the form of elections, the legislature, and political parties. It is this coincidence, in Lenin's view, that explains the erroneous

bourgeois conflation of democratism with democracy.

Democratism expands even more under socialism, where the workers' mass organisations become predominant. At the same time, the proletarian state begins to wither away from the moment it is established, as the workers perform more state functions and coercion becomes superfluous.

Under communism this withering process ends, and democracy finally disappears. But democratism will persist and develop (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 461). It will provide general social equality, valid for every member of the community. It will mean universal, and not only political freedom, and majority decisions will more accurately express the interests of society—precisely because classes disappear. Governing and control over people will give way to self-government based on the social activity of the entire citizenry (Levin 1983, 89; 1989, 158). As Lenin explains in “The State and Revolution”:

. . . someone may . . . suspect us of expecting the advent of a system of society in which the principle of subordination of the minority to the majority will not be observed—for democracy means the recognition of this very principle.

No, democracy is *not* identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a *state*. . . .

We set ourselves the ultimate aim of abolishing the state. . . . We do not expect the advent of a system of society in which the principle of subordination of the minority to the majority will not be observed. In striving for socialism, however, we are convinced that it will develop into communism and, therefore, that the need for violence against people in general, for the *subordination* of one man to another, and of one section of the population to another, will vanish. . . . (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 461).

Under communism, the people will be free to develop their abilities and assert their positive actions. Social activity will increase, its forms of expression will grow, and its sphere will broaden. The forms of democratism will become more significant under these circumstances. The trade unions, for instance, will play a leading role in economic organization. Likewise, the soviets will not only remain, but expand, albeit without the need for bureaucrats, coercion, or political restrictions. Since all will govern in turn, the distinction between the rulers and the ruled will vanish. Differences of interests will persist and be respected. Whilst structural class antagonisms will come to an end, disagreements concerning the organisation and aims of society will not.

For Lenin, then, democracy is a phenomenon with inherent contradictions. It arose with the express purpose of oppressing classes, and so it does not automatically mean the rule of the majority, the working people. This is why he differentiates between three types, or to be more precise, three phases in the development of democracy. The first type is the one existing in the exploiting societies. This is “democracy only for the rich and a thin layer of the proletariat” (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 30). Here, “democracy [is realised] only as an exception, never complete[ly]” (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 30). The second phase arises during the transition from capitalism to communism. This is “democracy for the poor, for 9/10 of the population,” and it entails the “forceful suppression of the resistance of the rich” (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 30). Here “democracy [is] almost complete, limited only by the *suppression* of the resistance of the bourgeoisie” (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 30). The third type of democracy is achieved under communism. Here it becomes “genuinely full democracy,” complete to the point that it “becomes a habit,” which in turn means that democracy withers away and gives its place to the principle “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs” (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 30). As Lenin expressed it, “full democracy equals no democracy. This is not a paradox but a truth” (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 30).

A helpful way of elucidating Lenin's conception of democracy is to contrast it against the interpretation that dominates western political science. According to Grugel and Bishop:

This mainstream view tends to be closely linked to the empirical theory which considers the actually existing democracies of the West as emblematic of democracy. . . . [T]he twin phenomena of liberal democratic institutions and a market economy are conflated with the very notion of democracy itself. (Grugel and Bishop 2014, 20)

To borrow the terminology of Robert Cox, the “empirical” conception of democracy is a “problem solving theory” (Cox 1981, 128). It is ahistorical, and rooted in the capitalist economic system and its corresponding democratic superstructure, which it views as natural and immutable. It denies that this structure can change, and it therefore defines democracy as liberal democracy. In doing so, it “falsely assumes that all Western societies are democratic,” “it . . . ignores . . . the structured privileges and hierarchies that are generated, sustained and reconfigured by capitalism and privileges of birth or social position,” it “ignores the question of power” that render these institutions “fundamentally” undemocratic; and it can only modify the institutional framework of liberal democracy, rather than identify alternatives (Grugel and Bishop 2014, 32).

Leninism, by contrast, is what Cox (1981, 129) calls a “critical theory.” By situating itself outside

capitalism, it can take a historical perspective and distinguish between the various historical forms of democracy. Leninism therefore recognises that liberal democracy is not synonymous with democracy itself, but instead a particular historical stage of it that will eventually give way to a broader socialist democracy.

In order to adopt a scientific, as opposed to an ideological approach to democracy, Lenin recommends detaching the following two sides of the concept that are closely interdependent:

a) Who holds the power, or, more precisely, what class or classes wield state power; who is the master of the means of production in the given society?

b) How is power exercised, what is the form of the political system, how is the state management of society achieved, and to what extent do the popular masses take part in the managing of the state and society? What is the condition of the citizen in state and society? What rights and freedoms do they have? (what is their political-juridical status).

These elements are organically connected, though the first has a decisive weight compared with the second, since it represents the objective element that determines the class character of democracy, and by this the actual limits of its achievement, both at the level of the political regime and as that of the citizen's political-juridical status.

By making a dialectical analysis of democracy, Leninism does not give absolute value to any of these theses, but appreciates them in their interdependence, granting to each one the significance and part that it plays in the social process of asserting democracy.

The "empirical" conception of democracy, by contrast, dismisses the essential question of who holds power, and it defines the concept purely as a set of institutions, procedures, and rights, usually those found under the liberal democracy.

Lenin argues, via an appeal to the historical facts, that an abstract "pure" democracy does not exist. Democracy is a socio-historical category, the content of which changes from one order to another. Democracy always has a class character, being directly linked to the nature of political power. Democracy is determined by the essence of the social order, and ultimately, by the form of production relationships in the given society. The true nature of democracy and democratic institutions is the result of the fight of the popular masses against social and national oppression. The fight for democracy is interwoven with the fight for progressive social changes. To repeat, Lenin asserts that there is no democracy in general. There are only different democracies defined by their class characteristics. There are ancient, bourgeois, socialist and communist democracies.

Have these ideas withstood the test of time? Some have and some haven't. For starters, Lenin's view that ancient democracy served a minority class remains relevant. Academic apologists continue to skirt over and downplay this fact. They promote Athenian democracy as a positive "ideal" to strive towards, because it was "purer" and more "direct" than modern representative democracy. They uncritically praise Pericles's famous "Funeral Oration," which extolled the virtues of this republic, whilst ignoring its exclusive character (Grafton, Most and Settis 2010, 259). Lenin's Marxist approach can help to expose this class basis and combat the academic fetishisation of the ancient democracies.

Historical experience has also validated Lenin's thesis that liberal democracy manifests the rule of the capitalist class. It is, in effect, a form of oligarchy, one that empowers the wealthy bourgeois elite. As of 2020, the working class has managed to establish its political supremacy in not a single liberal democracy. The self-proclaimed "democratic socialist" parties that have won elections in the capitalist countries are no exception. Because they retained liberal democracy, they have been unable to dismantle the oligarchic system and establish proletarian rule. Hugo Chavez's Venezuela (1998–2013) is often cited as one of the more successful examples in recent times, but even his reforms fell short of constructing and consolidating a workers' state. To suggest otherwise would insult the workers who suffer there now, under his successor Maduro. The bourgeois character of "democratic socialism" supports Lenin's claim that socialist democracy, the rule of the working class, demands the "smash[ing]" of the liberal democratic state and its replacement with "institutions of a fundamentally different type" (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 424).

Having said that, history has also shown the necessity of updating and developing Lenin's conception of socialist democracy in several respects. For one thing, his view that a single "Workers' Party" should have a leading role under socialism has become infeasible in the Western countries, with their established liberal multi-party traditions (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 409). The majority there have been imbued with the ideals of bourgeois democracy, and so they will probably oppose this "vanguard" conception for some time to come. Communist parties in these countries have modified Lenin's proposals by advocating the transition to multi-party proletarian democracies (see, for example, *Britain's Road to Socialism* [The Communist Party of Britain 2011]).

The contradictions of socialist construction have also exposed underdeveloped aspects in Lenin's vision. He said little, for example, about the relationship between the Workers' Party and the other

democratic organs under socialism. Although, in soviet Russia, Lenin called for the stricter separation of Party and soviet responsibilities, he never clarified the details (Lenin [1922] 1973, 253). Some believe that this enabled the Party to violate and usurp the soviets during subsequent periods.

Historical experience has also disproved Lenin's view that the socialist state begins to wither away from its inception. This thesis was based upon the assumption that the socialist revolution would succeed in several advanced capitalist countries at once, thereby providing the conditions for a relatively peaceful and quick transition to communism. History took another course. By the end of the Great War only Russia had established a workers' state. Upon examining the domestic and international situation, Lenin's successor J. V. Stalin concluded, in 1933, that the soviet state actually needed to *strengthen* before it could begin to wither away, in order to crush the dying classes and survive capitalist encirclement (Boer 2017, 314–315). Subsequent socialist countries confirmed this thesis.

In connection with this, Lenin was also mistaken in assuming that proletarian rule begins to erode bureaucracy from the outset. As the soviet state began to organise areas previously organised by private individuals—such as the economy—it took on a larger number of more complex and wider ranging tasks. The workers were too inexperienced to perform these tasks without training, and so the state required more specialists, not less. Lenin, who was not prepared for this demand, outlined insufficient measures for managing the rise of bureaucracy and subjecting it to popular control. Some allege that a corrupt bureaucratic apparatus arose in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries, one that fuelled the rise of mass discontent.

Lenin's critics highlighted these and other issues particularly vociferously from 1989 onwards, when European communism began to crumble. Francis Fukuyama (1989) led the assault. Months before the fall of the Berlin Wall he proclaimed that Marxism-Leninism had been defeated ideologically, and that liberal democracy was the highest form of government, the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989, 5). Anti-communists have regurgitated this declaration repeatedly since then. J. Femia expresses it in his book on Marxism and democracy, which remains the authoritative, unchallenged work on the subject. Here he writes that Lenin's “vanguard model of democracy” has been “consigned to Engels's ‘museum of antiquities’” (Femia 1993, 141).

Enfu Cheng and Chang'an Xie (2016, 1) argue that this claim is empirically indefensible. The success of socialist democracy in the People's Republic of China offers “powerful proof” against the “end of history” thesis. Boer (2014) corroborates this view. By developing Lenin's ideas and supplementing them with those of Marxists like Mao Zedong, China has, in his view, established a stable “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics,” one that has gone a long way in resolving the issues of corrupt bureaucratic domination and excessive Party interference (Boer 2014, 47). To quote paramount Leader Xi Jinping, “the way we plan and accelerate China's socialist democracy plays a decisive, comprehensive, and far-reaching role in our national and political life” (Xi 2017, 311). The future is of course uncertain. But for now at least democracy is still progressing beyond its liberal form, and under the Xi Jinping's leadership, the Communist Party of China (CPC) is leading the way. Many within the anti-imperialist camp already prefer China's political model to America's. And as China continues to rise, more countries might see things this way. Remember too that the CPC has not abandoned Lenin's goal of abolishing the state and perfecting democracy. Xi Jinping (2017, 4, 34) has frequently voiced the Party's goal of striving for communism. By creatively updating Lenin's democratic theory for the present era, China has showcased its continuing relevance.

II. Democracy as a Political Form of Struggle

It has been established that Lenin views the democratic state as a political phenomenon, “a category proper only to the political sphere” (Lenin [1920a] 1973, 26). In the Marxist doctrine of historical materialism, economics shapes politics. As such, the democratic state, as a political embodiment of class relations, is a *reflection* of underlying economic forces. “In the final analysis,” Lenin writes, “every kind of democracy, as political superstructure in general . . . serves production and is ultimately determined by the relations of production in a given society” (Lenin [1921a] 1973, 81). This means that in a society with private ownership of the means of production, democracy will serve as an instrument for consolidating and advancing private property, while in a socialist society democracy is a means of strengthening socialist ownership and its various forms.

Lenin's hostile commentators have criticised his conception of democracy for its economic determinism. He supposedly presents democracy as an epiphenomenon of the economic base, with no reciprocal affectivity or autonomy. This overlooks the fact that the historical forms of democracy can struggle *against* the prerogatives of the dominant economic forces, and even overturn them. Hunt, a leading exponent of this view, criticises Lenin's economic determinism in relation to liberal democracy under imperialism, under state monopoly capitalism. Lenin allegedly argues that the imperialist economic base favours reaction and precludes the rise of democracy. “As a consequence, the analysis of

bourgeois democracy is no longer for Lenin a pressing, current problem, but a past which has been historically overtaken by the onward march of monopoly capitalism” (Hunt 1980, 14). But whilst this reactionary situation may have prevailed during the First World War, when Lenin proposed it, “the whole subsequent development of capitalism throughout the remainder of the twentieth century reveals the falsity of Lenin’s thesis” (Hunt 1980, 14). This period has been characterised not primarily by reaction, but by “the preservation of bourgeois democratic forms” (Hunt 1980, 14). The regimes that preserved and expanded democracy were the ones that achieved a “general economic and political victory” (Hunt 1980, 14). Even the rise of fascism in the 1930s and 40s did not defeat bourgeois democracy. “It follows that bourgeois democracy is not a question of the past, but a very pressing contemporary question for socialists and Marxists” (Hunt 1980, 15). Hunt blames Lenin’s economic determinism for the charge that Marxists do not “take democracy seriously” (Hunt 1980, 7).

Hunt’s charge has little textual basis. Lenin does view the economic base as the primary determinant of democracy. But this is not a rigid, one-way relationship. “In actual life,” he writes, “democracy . . . will exert its influence on economic life as well, will stimulate its transformation; and in its turn it will be influenced by economic development, and so on. This is the dialectics of living history” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 457–458). Lenin recognises that democracy can react back against the logic of the economic structure, and he applies this view to liberal democracy under imperialism. In his critique of Pyatakov’s “imperialist economism,” as well as some representatives of Polish social democracy, Lenin refused the view that under imperialism it is hopeless to struggle for democracy, simply because monopoly capitalism opposes it. On the one hand, he writes, “the political superstructure . . . of monopoly capitalism (imperialism is monopoly capitalism), is the change *from* democracy *to* reaction. Democracy corresponds to free competition. Political reaction corresponds to monopoly” (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 43; italics in the original). Since imperialism “strives towards violations of democracy, towards reaction,” it “is indisputably the ‘negation’ of *democracy in general, of all democracy*” (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 43; italics in the original). This is “a contradiction between the economic system and the political superstructure” (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 43). Nevertheless, imperialism can be reconciled with democracy through two mechanisms: “direct bribery,” and an “alliance of government and stock exchange” (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 47). With these mechanisms in force, democracy can flourish even under the domination of monopoly finance capital.

Lenin suggests that the political struggle might even force imperialism to realize certain aspects of democracy. Analyzing the events of the First World War, he wrote that “the violation of democracy with regard to the small nations” could result in a revolt or mass radicalization (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 51). Under these circumstances it is not only possible but profitable for the imperialists to permit “small nations as much democratic freedom as they can,” even political independence if necessary, so as to not harm their domination (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 51). Therefore, “to overlook the peculiarity of political and strategic relationships” and to simply highlight the ant-democratic essence of imperialism “is anything but Marxism” (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 51).

As should be clear, Lenin rejects the charge that imperialism precludes the development of democracy. He rejects the idea that democracy has no power to struggle against the economic base. Far from dismissing its importance, Lenin devoted considerable attention to the problems and features of imperialist democracy.

The alleged economic determinism of Lenin’s democratic theory has been linked to another feature: class reductionism. Lenin supposedly believes that “the specific historical forms of democracy constitute democracy for a specific class or classes and the denial of democracy for other classes” (Hunt 1980, 9). This conception has again been rejected in its application to liberal democracy. History shows that this form of rule, by granting universal suffrage and rights to all, has empowered the working class; not only the bourgeoisie (Hunt 1980, 16; Pierson 1986, 78, 80–81; Femia 1993, 50, 61). B. Jessop (1980, 59) describes this as “the political indeterminacy of formal democracy.” Instead of the class content of the liberal state being fixed and determined by property relations, it remains uncertain, vague, and open to contestation.

The claim that Lenin denies the possibilities for class struggles under democracy is inaccurate. Although his formulaic utterances can be interpreted in this “reductionist” way, his concrete discussions advance a more nuanced conception of democracy. When Lenin says that democracy has a class character, he means that it *privileges* the political power and influence of a definite class. This does not mean that the subordinate classes are powerless. On the contrary, the various forms of democracy grant them more or less space to struggle for their aims and hegemony.

Lenin applies this view to liberal democracy under imperialism. Although the bourgeoisie reign supreme, “the domination of finance capital . . . does not in the least nullify the significance of political democracy as a freer, wider and clearer *form* of class oppression and class struggle” (Lenin [1916b] 1974, 145; italics in the original). As such:

. . . all arguments about the “impracticality,” in the economic sense, of one of the demands of political democracy under capitalism are reduced to a theoretically incorrect definition of the general and basic relationships of capitalism and of political democracy as a whole.

. . . [A]ll the fundamental demands of political democracy are only partially “practicable” under imperialism, and then in a distorted form and by way of exception. . . . But from this it does not by any means follow that Social-Democracy should reject the immediate and most determined struggle for *all* those demands. (Lenin [1916b] 1974, 145; italics in the original)

In this passage Lenin recognises that the political sphere, and within this, democracy, has a relative independence, an inner logic. Under certain circumstances, especially as the result of political demands or in the case of changes in political power relations, the subordinate classes may achieve *limited* power. He acknowledges that liberal democracy does occasionally counterbalance the disadvantages of the exploited. It may ensure a freer assertion of various interests and a freer struggle for them. It may help the workers to promote their interests and power through political means. This is why Lenin, unlike the ultra-leftists of this time, *supported* the workers’ participation in bourgeois democracy (Nimtz 2014a; 2014b; Claudin 1977, 66–67; Krausz 2015, 100). His point, however, is that under capitalism the workers can empower themselves only “partially,” “exception[ally],” and in a “distorted” fashion (Lenin [1916c] 1974, 145). They should therefore formulate their demands “in a revolutionary and not a reformist manner” (Lenin [1916c] 1974, 145). Whilst utilising liberal democracy, they must also ignore the law when necessary, go “beyond speeches in parliament and verbal protests,” and draw “the masses into decisive action” (Lenin [1916c] 1974, 145). They should extend and intensify “the struggle for every fundamental democratic demand up to . . . the socialist revolution” (Lenin [1916b] 1974, 145). The democratic struggle in itself will not liberate the proletariat. Only an “economic revolution” and the destruction of private ownership can accomplish this. Imperialist democracy “cannot be overthrown by democratic transformations, even the most ‘ideal’” (Lenin [1916c] 1974, 25). Nevertheless, the democratic struggle may and does create better conditions for proletarian liberation, and “a proletariat not schooled in the struggle for democracy is incapable of performing an economic revolution” (Lenin [1916c] 1974, 25).

For Lenin, then, democracy is both a means of struggling for socialism and its political expression. But it does not fulfil the tasks of proletarian emancipation, which is attained under a communist society. Democracy is therefore a *means to an end* surpassing it—communism—and it must be subordinated to this objective. It is in this context that Lenin evaluates democracy and the application of its procedures. After the October Revolution, for instance, he argued that the workers’ interests were “superior to the interests of a democratic constitution” (Lenin [1917e] 1977, 355). He urged not to “return to the old prejudices, which subordinate the interests of the people to formal democracy” (Lenin [1917e] 1977, 355). This is also why Lenin, when evaluating Trotsky’s role in the trade-union debate, recognised the latter’s formal right to start a debate and formulate his own platform. Trotsky’s actions, however, threatened the Party and the trade-union movement with a split that endangered the socialist system. This was an instance when democracy and socialism contradicted each other. Lenin emphasised that “formal democracy must be subordinate to the revolutionary interest” (Lenin [1921a] 1973, 86).

Since democracy is a purely political phenomenon, Lenin argues that the working class cannot rest satisfied with its realisation. It must extend its revolutionary activity of transformation beyond the political sphere to all fields of society. Political emancipation must become social emancipation. Marx made this point in his *On the Jewish Question* (Marx [1843] 1975, 168, 393), as did Engels in several works (Engels [1843] 1975, 466; [1844] 1975, 513). Lenin summarises their views in “The State and Revolution,” where he describes democracy as only “one of the stages on the road . . . to communism” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 476). Democracy means formal equality, but the communist revolution goes beyond this. It strives towards equality for all “in *relation* to ownership of the means of production, that is, equality of labour and wages” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 477; italics in the original). It strives to introduce the distributive principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 477).

Since democracy is a political category, Lenin warns against the illusions spread about it. Democracy by itself creates no material value. It produces neither material abundance nor welfare. It does not make the people cultured and happy. Democracy may, however, promote better decisions in the various areas of life. It may help in involving more people in the execution of decisions. It may persuade people to live a more rational and effective life by making use of the opportunities offered by socialism. Consequently, it may promote the faster advance of society. Lenin views democracy as a political means, and as such it has advantages and deficiencies. His message is to be aware of this when estimating its possibilities, and when evaluating the results achieved under it. Democracy should not be underestimated, but nor should the illusions that surround it (Kiss 1982, 60–61).

This message is particularly timely today, in an age when the imperialist nations of Western Europe and North America “promote” democracy abroad as a universal solution to global ills. Has the imperialist imposition of democracy in Africa lifted the toiling masses there out of poverty? No it hasn’t. Has the imperialist imposition of democracy in the Middle East created peace there? No it hasn’t. In many of the places where it has been forcibly imposed, democracy has done more harm to the masses than good. In fact, democracy has failed to serve the masses even in the advanced capitalist societies. Femia could not be more mistaken in claiming that “the liberal state is probably maximising the material living standards of the great bulk of the population” (Femia 1993, 66). As V. Sebestyn writes in his 2017 book *Lenin the Dictator*, in reference to these wealthy Western states:

Millions of people . . . are doubting whether liberal democracy has been successful in creating a fair society and sustained freedom and prosperity, or can deal with gaping inequality and injustice. The phrases global “elite” and “the 1 per cent” are now used in a decidedly Leninist way. . . . [H]is questions are constantly being asked today. (Sebestyn 2017, 2–3)

The United Kingdom showcases the issues raised here. This is one of the wealthiest capitalist countries on earth, respected the world over for its long-established democratic procedures. And yet British democracy has not abolished child poverty. It has not ended widespread dependence upon food-banks. It has not ended the exploitation of the working class. It has, however, enabled a rich elite to profit off their backs. The universal ideals of justice and fairness are hard to find in the UK. Democracy there has not overcome the workers’ oppression and misery.

Those who support the proletarian cause would benefit from remembering Lenin’s thesis that democracy does not automatically empower the masses or improve their well-being. It is only one component of the liberation struggle.

III. Democracy and Dictatorship

Western political scientists juxtapose democracy to dictatorship. They define the former as majority rule, and the latter as the unrestrained domination of a single person or clique (e.g., Bermeo 1992). After the October Socialist Revolution several Marxists supported this narrative. The most prominent exponent was Kautsky, the so-called “pope” of Second International Marxism. In his *Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Kautsky (1918) tried to prove that (1) dictatorship is unconnected with class rule; (2) Marx did not desire the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that this term was only an “unfortunate” one; (3) the dictatorship established in Soviet Russia did not mean proletarian rule; and (4) Lenin’s regime violated democracy, chiefly by depriving the counterrevolutionaries of their political rights. On the one hand, therefore, Kautsky’s critique negated the proletarian character of Soviet Russia, and on the other hand, it laid the foundation for the Marxist juxtaposition of dictatorship to democracy, the latter of which he defined as a “pure” non-class form of government.

Lenin repudiated these theses in several writings, including his classical work, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (Lenin [1918a] 1974; [1918b] 1974). Following in the line of Marx and Engels, Lenin presents the rule of a class as an *ipso facto* dictatorship, and democracy, he argues, is no exception. Indeed, this is another one of its contradictions: Although democracy means formal popular rule, it is also a dictatorship, the antithesis of popular rule. A democratic state always provides democracy for the ruling class, and dictatorship for the subordinated class.

Lenin argues that only two forms of democratic dictatorship are possible in modern societies: “the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or the dictatorship of the working class” (Lenin [1919b] 1974, 262). The former falsely portrays itself as a pure democracy, the antithesis of dictatorship, whilst the latter acknowledges its dictatorial status (Lenin [1918c] 1974, 370). Another difference is that the bourgeoisie try to strengthen their dictatorship, whereas the proletarian one is consciously temporary. It disappears under communism.

For Lenin, the juxtaposition of “pure” democracy against “pure” dictatorship is mistaken and unscientific. History proves that there are few, if any, “above class” phenomena in society, and democracy and dictatorships both bear class characteristics. When bourgeois theorists contrast these concepts in their abstract meanings, they ignore the various forms of democratic and dictatorial rule, and they instead oppose an abstract conception of democracy in general, which they declare to be positive, with an abstract conception of dictatorship in general, which they declare to be negative. By doing this, the opposition becomes a means of manipulation. It conceals the fact that the ruling class has always asserted its absolute power; it conceals the question of which class is in power and which class is being oppressed; and it creates the illusion that democracy is not the rule of one class but the rule of the “people” and all members of society understood in the general sense (Lenin [1918b] 1974, 242, 249). The “condemnation of dictatorship” and the “defence of democracy” is therefore an important argument for justifying the rule of the exploiters (Lenin [1919c] 1974, 457).

Lenin's critics frequently cite his view that "[t]he scientific term 'dictatorship' means nothing more nor less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force. The term 'dictatorship' *has no other meaning but this*" (Lenin [1906] 1978, 246; italics in the original). In its application to democracy, this definition has been frequently misunderstood. One common tendency is to define it as an unlawful form of rule (Lapenna 1967, 262; Lovell 1984, 174; Marik 2008, 378; Liebman 1980, 354; Kolakowski 2005, 762–63). The main criticism of this definition is that liberal democracies are not unlawful. They operate within a legal structure (Medvedev 1981, 42).

Lenin's conception of dictatorship actually provides no foundation for the arbitrary infringement of lawfulness (Shandro 2014, 385). During "normal" periods of class rule, when the social system is stable, he maintains that unlawfulness is usually unnecessary. Lenin also recognises that dictatorships may maintain laws from the previous regime. For instance, socialist democracy smashes some forms of bourgeois legality, whilst filling others with a new proletarian content. He suggests that some pre-socialist laws will persist even under communism (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 476).

The statement that dictatorships are "untrammelled by any laws" (Lenin [1906] 1978, 246) only suggests that the ruling class prioritises its power above everything else, and that it will act unlawfully in order to maintain it, if necessary (Lenin 1918d, 519). Firstly, if there is no law that safeguards the ruling class' power, then it will not necessarily wait until the government creates one. It will do whatever is required to stabilise its hegemony. This situation emerges when a class has just seized power and has not yet had the time to codify its revolutionary achievements. After the October Revolution, for instance, the Party encouraged the elected judges to "enforce the will of the proletariat," and if necessary, "[ignore] the laws of the deposed governments" (Lenin [1919d] 1974, 131). This situation may also arise when a class has ruled for a long time, since it cannot foresee every event of the class struggle, and it therefore cannot prepare laws for regulating everything. The ruling class might also be prevented from optimally asserting its interests by its own earlier laws. In these cases the state may disregard the law and enforce extraordinary measures (Lenin [1919c] 1974, 462–463). Another instance is when the regime faces serious resistance or a crisis period. Here the state may again employ all means and forces without legal restriction (Lenin [1910] 1977, 306–307). Finally, during the revolution and the period immediately following it, the victorious classes may rule without legal restraint, since the revolution elevates new forms and organisations that do not, because they cannot, rest on the legality of the former regime (Lenin [1906] 1978, 243–244). Lenin provides several examples of these instances from liberal and proletarian democracy.

According to another popular narrative, Lenin's definition of dictatorship is based purely on direct violence, and it rules primarily through coercion. This view has been criticised for inaccurately describing liberal democracies. For although liberal democracies have a monopoly over the means of violence, they do not deploy it directly, and nor is it the main instrument through which the rulers maintain their power (Medvedev 1981, 42).

Lenin actually rejects the idea that dictatorships rule solely through direct violence. He was careful when describing this characteristic. The extent to which a democracy uses force depends, in his view, upon the circumstances, and the balance of power between the classes. When the ruling class has established its stable domination, it can use mostly peaceful, constitutional, everyday methods of control. But when the class struggle sharpens, the rulers can maintain their position only by using extraordinary and extreme regulations that may, if necessary, assume the form of civil war, and within this, terror. Lenin points out that both bourgeois and proletarian democracies have been compelled to do this (Lenin [1919c] 1974, 458).

Nevertheless, he argues that the severity and breadth of force is different in each form of rule. Under capitalist democracy the exploiting minority must suppress the majority of the population, and so it must apply force on the widest scale and often with the utmost severity. Under *developed* socialism, by contrast, only a minority is repressed, so violence can be less severe in these aspects. And as society progresses towards communism, "the need for a special machine of suppression will begin to disappear" (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 468).

As it turns out then, Lenin's definition of dictatorship is in full conformity with the general legality and peacefulness of bourgeois democracy. It entails neither the arbitrary infringement of lawfulness nor the constant use of direct violence.

But is his association of dictatorship with democracy useful today? The soviet dissident scholar R. Medvedev thinks not. In his view, this reduces the value of the democratic institutions and legal safeguards which the workers have not always enjoyed, but which they fought for themselves by conducting a "prolonged, bitter and often bloody struggle . . . in the name of democracy" (Medvedev 1981, 42–3). For Medvedev, "the plain fact" that the capitalist class dominates the bourgeois-democratic republic "does not necessarily imply that this power must be *dictatorial*," for in several democratic countries "the observance of laws, the constitution and other judicial standards is by no means an empty

formality” (Medvedev 1981, 46). Lenin’s conflation of dictatorship with democracy ignores the principled differences existing between states where “vicious dictatorial regimes do exist,” and the places where they do not (Medvedev 1981, 46). One must therefore accept “that by no means all political power and every form of state government may be described automatically as a dictatorship,” and one must realise that “democracy is more than simply one of the manifestations of ‘hidden’ dictatorship” (Medvedev 1981, 46). Medvedev is not the only proponent of this view. Many non-ruling communist organisations refuse to describe bourgeois and proletarian democracies as dictatorships because of the term’s negative, despotic connotation.

Nonetheless, the textual and historical evidence does not suggest that Lenin’s conception of dictatorship devalues democratic institutions for the working people and their struggle. Whilst using the term to expose the class character of liberal democracy, he also highlights its progressive character and achievements, and he describes the proletarian dictatorship in positive terms. Lenin’s writings on dictatorship inspired numerous proletarian struggles during and after his lifetime. Whilst some rejected Lenin’s conception of dictatorship as unsavoury, many others endorsed it, and many still do.

Lenin’s concept of dictatorship does not diminish the differences between democratic and non-democratic regimes. He frequently emphasised that dictatorships assume different political forms. He made it clear that democratic dictatorships are preferable to undemocratic ones.

Far from undermining the significance of democracy and the proletarian struggle for it, Lenin’s conception of dictatorship can aid this struggle. Today, many have been indoctrinated with the myth, promoted by bourgeois propaganda, that democracy is synonymous with liberal democracy, and that the latter means the rule of the “people,” the “majority.” Many are blind to the class character of the bourgeois state, and democratic slogans are used to manipulate and pacify the masses, rather than to mobilise them against the bourgeoisie. The term dictatorship can help to overcome these illusions because it has always been a less mysterious, more evocative and explicit concept. “Dictatorship is a big, harsh and bloody word,” Lenin wrote, “one which expresses a relentless life-and-death struggle between two classes, two worlds, two historical epochs. Such words must not be uttered frivolously” (Lenin 1920b, 355). It is precisely for this connotation that dictatorship should be linked to democracy. It can help expose the class essence of the latter, destroy the illusions that mystify it, and encourage the masses to struggle for their proletarian rule.

IV. Democracy and Freedom

In his preparatory notebooks for “The State and Revolution”, Lenin wrote that “usually the concepts ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ are considered identical and one is often used instead of the other. Very often, vulgar Marxists . . . reason precisely in that way. In fact democracy precludes freedom” (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 25). He was referring to Kautsky, Bernstein and the other advocates of “pure” democracy here.

In order to fully understand this passage, it is necessary to firstly recognise Lenin’s distinction (not always explicit) between the political and human dimensions of freedom. He views the former as the totality of political and civil rights. These protect the individuals’ freedom from infringement by other people, social organisations and governments. They ensure one’s entitlement to participate in the political and civil life of the state and society without repression or discrimination.

Lenin interprets human freedom as a positive state, one in which *every* individual has the resources to pursue and fulfil their goals. People achieve it when they obtain mastery over nature, society, and themselves (Lenin [1908] 1977, 187–188). Each of these aspects can be realised only as the result of a historical process. Firstly, control over nature requires the advanced development of the productive forces, which takes place gradually. Secondly, people can obtain control over society only once they socialise the means of production and build communism, a society of material abundance, which functions in accordance with the aforementioned distributive principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 477). Communism also presupposes the abolition of classes, the abolition of the division of labour, and the withering away of the state, all of which require a long time to achieve. Thirdly, people can control themselves only when they abandon obsolete ideas and develop a communist consciousness. This allows them to be versatile, conscious, and creative in their individual lives and social relations. This again develops only over the long course of historical development.

Lenin’s first thesis is that democracy is distinct from freedom. This is so because human freedom is a comprehensive category, one involving a total transformation covering every dimension of human existence. In comparison to this, democracy is a narrower concept.

But democracy is not even identical with political freedom, since it consists not only of rights, but also the forms and procedures of state government, its organisational structure and political system. It includes the institutions and measures necessary for the assertion of rights and their restriction.

Lenin's second thesis is that "democracy precludes freedom" (Lenin [1917a] 1972, 25). It violates the human dimension because it is a state, a form of class rule that uses coercion; and this prohibits freedom. Democracy is therefore the consequence and expression of such conditions under which it is impossible to guarantee universal human freedom (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 467).

Examining it from the other side, Lenin argues that human freedom also precludes democracy. For when the workers realises communism, a society in which people can live their public and private lives as free, conscious, active individuals, the democratic state will wither away. In other words, "when there is freedom, then there will be no state" (Lenin [1917a] 1974, 25).

Lenin argues that democracy even violates political freedom. He acknowledges, on the one hand, that "[A]ll 'democracy' consists in the proclamation and realisation of 'rights,'" either *de jure* or *de facto* (Lenin [1916a] 1974, 74; italics in the original). Unlike despotism, it involves a certain minimum of political rights in order to function, such as the right to vote, assume political posts, and express one's opinion (Lenin [1903] 1977, 357). This is one of the reasons why Lenin promotes democracy over the other forms of rule: it is the best for providing and developing political freedom. As he points out, however, the formal recognition of rights in a democracy does not guarantee their universal enjoyment. Even the most detailed democratic constitution is merely "a sheet of paper with the people's rights recorded on it" (Lenin [1905c] 1977, 461). Ultimately, it is the social power relations that determine how rights are enjoyed in practice. As it happens, democracy has always provided political freedom for some classes, whilst suppressing it for others. This is because it uses coercion to deprive enemies of their rights. For some, primarily for the ruling class, democracy provides political freedom, but for others, for the classes that are suppressed and excluded from power, it means the lack of this freedom. This is another contradiction of democracy.

In the ancient democracies, for instance, only a small enfranchised minority enjoyed the full range rights; only they had political freedom (Lenin [1917c] 1974, 465). Under liberal democracy, by contrast, these rights are formally universal. But structural disparities in economic and political power prevent their equal enjoyment. The bourgeoisie can use their superior control over the media to shape the public opinion, undermine critical thought, and brainwash the masses. Liberal democracies also repress the rights of those who the ruling class deem as a threat. As such, "even in the freest and most democratic bourgeois republic, 'freedom' and 'equality' never were, and never could be, anything but an expression of the equality and freedom of the *commodity owners*, the equality and freedom of *capital*" (Lenin [1919f] 1974, 379–80; italics in the original).

Lenin's critics accuse him of rejecting the protection of rights under socialism. He supposedly saw them as "the ideological supports of the bourgeois system and had to be destroyed along with it" (Femia 1993, 36). This claim has no basis. Socialist democracy, in Lenin's view, facilitates the further broadening of political freedom, since it gives the workers the material resources to utilise the rights controlled by the bourgeoisie under capitalism. To take freedom of the press as an example, the main printing presses and news outlets are taken from the bourgeoisie and given to the workers' state. But the socialist dictatorship also suppresses the rights of the exploiting minority—the bourgeoisie and their supporters—who threaten socialism and proletarian freedom. In spite of this, Lenin argues that socialist democracy, by advancing political freedom, is also a necessary condition for bringing society closer to communism and human freedom (Lenin [1921b] 1973, 504; [1919e] 1974, 121–122).

Lenin therefore identifies a positive relationship between the democratic struggle for political freedom and the attainment of human freedom, but *only* if this struggle extends the political freedom of the working masses. This struggle is a contradictory process in class societies. The extension of freedom there will necessarily increase the freedom of one class and restrict it for another. If, in capitalism for instance, democracy expands as the result of the workers' struggle, then this is progress towards human freedom. But if, under socialism, freedom is extended without discrimination, then this will strengthen the reactionary forces and delay the realisation of complete freedom. This is why Lenin opposed the demand for complete democracy and complete freedom, and instead proposed the power of the working class.

Consequently, Lenin views political freedom not as an end in itself, but as a means in the hands of certain classes. He supports it only to the extent that it aids the working class struggle. "For every revolution, socialist or democratic, freedom is a very, very important slogan. But our programme says that if freedom runs counter to the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital, it is a deception" (Lenin [1919g] 1974, 351–352). It is only by studying the class content of freedom, assessing its effect on the various classes, and examining the conditions for its realisation, that one can identify the relation of political freedom to the realisation of complete freedom.

Lenin's distinction between freedom and democracy is significant. It reminds Marxists not to confuse the part with the whole; namely, political emancipation with human freedom, or, taking another dimension, a part or manifestation of freedom with democracy itself. This distinction represents a

revolutionary standpoint that is not satisfied with partial liberation, with political emancipation, and which maintains that complete freedom cannot be exchanged for political freedom. Lenin shows that it is necessary to make use of democracy, broaden it as far as possible, and at the same time surpass it, in order to realise the kingdom of freedom (Kiss 1982, 118–119).

Conclusion

In the course of combatting Marxist revisionism Lenin provided several insights into the concept of democracy, insights that remain relevant to democratic struggles today. His fundamental thesis is that democracy has a class character. It manifests the rule of a definite class. From this premise Lenin advanced several interrelated propositions. One is that democracy is a means of struggle; though not an end in itself. The basic point here is that the working class should use democracy to advance their aims, but it alone will not emancipate them. Economic transformations are also necessary. A second thesis is that democracy is a form of dictatorship. This label is helpful precisely because it is evocative. It can help to dispel the illusion that liberal democracy means the rule of the people, the majority. It can motivate the socialist struggle. A third proposition is that democracy contradicts freedom. This can remind communists that their end goal is not democracy as such, but the kingdom of human freedom that lies beyond it. Democracy can help to achieve this freedom, but it is not synonymous with it. All of these points express the Leninist thesis that democracy is a paradoxical concept, one containing inherent contradictions. It can realize its true form, the rule of the working masses, only through a process of self-transcendence.

Notes on Contributor

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