Democracy and Socialism by Phil Sharpe

The important assumption of this article is that credible socialism cannot be possible without the establishment of genuine democracy. However historical experience has indicated that this has been a difficult problem. It could be argued that the very conception of democracy elaborated by Marx and Lenin has defects that have undermined the possibility for their models to be realised in practice. Hence it is vital that their understanding be supplemented by more recent contributions concerning the character of democracy. An important work in this regard is provided by David Held, who has provided an invaluable guide for understanding the history of our subject.(1) He is able to outline significant objections to the Marxist approach and provide alternatives that do not uncritically justify liberal democracy. His starting point is discussion of the direct democracy of Ancient Greece. Held outlines how despite the exclusion of the political role of slaves and women it was possible to develop a democratic system based on the principles of participation and accountability. (2) These are principles that any credible socialist system would attempt to incorporate and develop in order that the differentiation between the ruled and rulers is minimised and society in general is composed of citizens that are able to make important decisions.

John Dunn has outlined important objections to this prospect. He argues that the result of the contemporary revolutionary process is the formation of a one party state and the domination of a technocratic bureaucracy: “First, a revolutionary road to socialism, where this proves to lie open, must pass through immense economic destruction and civil war, and because it must do so, can only be travelled to its end through the construction of massive centralized coercive and organizational power, creating at its outcome a society in which, whatever its economic strengths or weaknesses, tyranny is mitigated only by its pervasive inefficiency.”(3) This is not necessarily an argument in favour of Parliamentary socialism because Dunn is aware of the problem of the resistance of the capitalists to the realisation of an alternative to capitalism within liberal democratic society. Hence it appears that socialists can only resolve the problem of power by the coercive suppression of opponents because the perspective of pluralistic change via the role of elections does not seem to be plausible. In this context the principles of democracy are sacrificed in favour of the necessity of political domination. But democracy also seems to be an ineffective basis for the realisation of hegemony. Socialism has a strategic dilemma that involves the apparent ineffectiveness of democratic change. This situation did not seem to be present in the beginning of the struggle for socialism. The 1848 revolution seemed to indicate the close relationship between democracy and the popular struggle of the people. (4) It was the ruling class of Europe that wanted to restrict the extent of changes in terms of the creation of a franchise that was limited to the property owners. This meant the question of the extension of democracy seemed to be connected to the perspectives of the supporters of socialism. The character of liberal democracy was connected to the relationship between the defenders of a system of property ownership and a limited franchise. (5) Consequently the system of representative democracy, as articulated by Locke, Madison, and Mill, connected the role of a minimal state with support for the market and private property with the exclusion from the franchise of women and the working class. Limited state intervention could be supported in order to promote reforms but the principles of unregulated capitalism had to be upheld. (6)

In other words the political system of representative democracy as originally envisaged was deliberately biased towards the affirmation of the interests of the capitalist class. It was possible to grant political equality in terms of freedom of speech and association because this was not considered to be opposed to the economic interests of what was defined as a property owning democracy. Important political developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries meant that universal suffrage was conceded by the political elite. Therefore in order to defend the political domination of the ruling class any suggestion of the realisation of direct democracy was rejected. Instead ideas became influential that implied the ordinary voter was irrational and unable to cope with complicated political decisions. Instead the mass of the voters were only capable of electing the elites via the role of political parties who would rule and become the government. This understanding was defined as competitive elitism. Held argues that this standpoint underestimated the capabilities of the people in order to justify the rule of the privileged political class: “If the electorate is regarded as unable to form reasonable judgements about pressing political questions, why should it be regarded as capable of discriminating between alternatives sets of leaders? On what basis could an electoral verdict be thought adequate? If the electorate is capable of assessing competing leaderships, it surely is able to understand key issues and discriminate between rival platforms.”(7)

Thus it is possible to conclude from the inconsistencies of the arguments being made in favour of elitist versions of representative democracy that the alternative of participatory democracy is credible. The proponents of elitism have betrayed the most important principle of democracy which is that the people should rule. (8) The defenders of competitive elitism have betrayed the position that the people can govern and that the political system should have a credible system of accountability between those who rule and the ruled. Consequently the advocates of participatory democracy should be able to outline strong arguments in favour of their standpoint, and yet this approach is discredited and representative democracy is considered the only form of genuine and popular political system. What has occurred? Firstly, the historical experience of the Russian revolution did not result in the flourishing of participatory democracy via the role of the Soviets. Instead the party replaced the role of the soviets in the organisational expression of economic and political tasks. (9) Secondly, serious questions have been raised about the Marxist conception of participatory democracy. Held outlines how to Marx the realisation of communism means the end of economic scarcity and related disputes about economic questions. The state has withered away and the basis for politics because of class conflicts has also been transcended. The end of politics can be described in the following manner: “In this world of material abundance and self-regulation, the state would finally ‘wither away’ completely. Governments, legislatures and judiciaries would no longer be necessary. As institutions they are based on the assumption that there will be severe conflicts of interest in society and that these must be ordered and regulated. But in communism all remnants of classes will have disappeared and with them the basis of conflicts…..Some coordination of tasks will be necessary in both community life and work generally, but this will be accomplished without creating a stratum of privileged officials…The administrator or coordinator will be ‘appointed’ by a process of election which Marx describes as a ‘business matter’, i.e., a non-political affair. Furthermore, since everyone agrees on public policy, elections are likely to be uncontested and to become mechanisms to ensure the rotation of administrative tasks. Thus the ‘end of politics’ will, Marx thought, have been achieved.”(10)

This approach, according to Held, makes assumptions that deny the continued importance of political questions such as issues about race, gender, ecology, and political parties would be formed that would want to present competing strategies to an electorate. Crucially it is necessary to have a situation whereby elections can be held that result in changes in the composition of political power. This process is connected to the development of institutions that are based on negotiation, conflict and the exchange of views: “In order to prevent those who hold power from – let us say those at the pinnacle of the pyramid of Communes – from transforming themselves into an immovable political leadership, there must always be the possibility of removing this leadership, with its particular policies, from office…..Additionally, if differences of opinion often underpin differences of political belief, a series of institutional procedures and mechanisms for debating and taking decisions about public affairs is essential.”(11) Thus it was the optimistic view of Marx that the process of the realisation of communism was resolving important economic and political questions, and this situation suggested that the role of politics was unnecessary. Hence it was implied that there was only one official policy concerning the administration of society that was legitimate and this assumed view seemed to justify authoritarian politics. The fact that society was making progress towards a classless society suggested that the role of party politics was ended. Instead politics would be reduced to one official viewpoint. Accordingly to Held this conception of the end of politics became the justification of the party state of the Bolsheviks.

Thus the choice seemed to be between a flawed representative democracy that ultimately upheld the economic power of capitalism and the one party state of the Bolsheviks that claimed to be socialist. However Engels provided additional justification for a pluralist conception of socialism that did not uphold the supposed conception of the end of politics. In his Preface to Marx’s ‘Class Struggles in France’ he outlined a strategy for the advent of socialism that was based on the role of Parliamentary politics. (12) This suggested the prospect of the combination of bourgeois democracy with the emergence of mass revolutionary politics. Hence the standpoint of pluralism would be combined with the principled approach of the end of communism. The class struggle would assume forms that combined the importance of Parliament and universal suffrage with the perspective of transition to socialism and communism. The assumption is that multi-party politics would continue after the successful realisation of the aims of the revolutionary politics. This standpoint was not necessary an alternative to the conception of the Commune state advocated by Marx but it was a modification of this approach because the ‘end of politics’ approach was replaced by understanding of the competition of parties after the revolution. However the opportunism of Social Democracy in 1914 meant the approach of pluralistic socialism was discredited and the emphasis returned to adherence to a rejection of bourgeois democracy combined with support for soviet democracy. Hence the questions about the ‘end of politics’ conception of Marxism were renewed.

It has been argued by some Marxists that the democratic problems of the USSR had little relationship to the end of politics perspective and instead were the consequence of the repressive character of Stalinism. (13) The problem with this standpoint is that it can explain the empirical history of the USSR in terms of the importance of exploitative class systems but it cannot relate the issue of democracy back to limitations in the approach of Marx and Lenin. A more perceptive approach to the issue of tackling democracy is the standpoint of Poulantzas who considers that the Bolsheviks made a crucial error when they decided to disband the Constituent Assembly, or repress the expression of representative democracy in favour of the exclusive role of the Soviets. (14)The ultimate expression of this decision was to justify restrictions on the freedom of speech and the banning of political parties. What was not recognised was the importance of the Constituent Assembly for advancing the democratic legitimacy of the revolutionary regime. This problem was exacerbated when the Soviets quickly became the instrument of the Bolshevik regime. Callinicos glosses over this historical issue of the tensions between representative democracy and direct democracy and instead is primarily concerned to outline the limitations of liberal democracy. However this critique of the political institutions of capitalism is not sufficient to overcome the tensions of the Marxist conception of democracy. Hence Held makes the valid point that Callinicos fails to establish what would constitute democratic politics in a revolutionary socialist society: “Accordingly, the form and nature of democratic and representative institutions need to be specified and elaborated. For without this, the spheres for public deliberation and decision making cannot be properly demarcated. Marxism has consistently underestimated the significance of the liberal preoccupation with how to secure freedom of criticism and action, i.e. choice and diversity, in the face of political power, although this is by no means to say that the traditional liberal formulation of the problem is satisfactory.”(15) The point is that it is not adequate to blame Stalinism for all of the defects in the past concerning Marxist practice because the issue of the importance of political autonomy and democracy within a socialist society has not been resolved. Thus it is not surprising that Callinicos is inclined, like Marx, to underestimate the prospect of conflicts and tensions within communism, or to effectively reject the necessity of politics. Formally he may be in favour of the role of politics but also assumes that the merits of direct democracy will resolve the contradictions of socialism. Implicitly, if unintentionally, his argument could be one more justification for the domination of one party rule in order to resolve the uncertainties of political dispute. It is not surprising that Held concludes that Marxist theory has not established the importance of democracy within socialism.

This limitation of Marxism is important because the failure to resolve the significance of democracy within socialist society can only contribute to the validity of the bourgeois view that capitalism is superior because it upholds liberal democracy. In other words the argument for socialism becomes reduced to a critique of the economic limitations of capitalism in terms of poverty and inequality. However the apparent authoritarian tendencies of revolutionary Marxism are not resolved because of the apparent categorical rejection of liberal democracy. The differences between bourgeois democracy and proletarian democracy are outlined by the Communist International in the following manner: “Bourgeois democracy consists essentially of a purely rhetorical and formal recognition of rights and freedoms, which are in fact inaccessible to the working people – the proletarian and semi-proletarian elements – on account of their lack of material means. The bourgeoisie at the same time has every opportunity to use its material means, its press and organization to cheat and deceive the people. However, the new type of state power, known as the Soviet system, ensures the proletariat the opportunity of guaranteeing its rights and freedom in practice. Soviet power provides the people with the best palaces, houses, printing works, stocks of paper, etc. for their press, and clubs for their meetings. Only such measures make proletarian democracy really possible. It is only on paper that bourgeois democracy and its parliamentary system give the masses the opportunity to participate in the running of the state.”(16)

It is entirely true that the rights of liberal democracy can be formal and not realised in practice for the majority of the population. However it is also true that these formal rights can become effective in terms of the formation of a variety of political parties, the development of trade unions, organisations related to race and gender, religious freedom, and the ability to agitate on behalf of diverse issues involving issues about the quality of life. It is this effective aspect of liberal democracy which needs to be maintained and nurtured within the socialist society. In this context it is problematical to contrast liberal democracy with Soviet democracy and to affirm the latter at the expense of the former. Instead what would be more principled would be to provide a constitutional guarantee that the rights of liberal democracy would be upheld within a socialist society. Indeed it could be argued that it is not possible to uphold a democratic form of socialism without the rights of freedom of speech and association. In practice the various left wing organisations cherish the rights and liberties of liberal democracy even if this is not recognised at the level of theory. Consequently if we project these liberal democratic freedoms to the future society of socialism we can suggest that politically the system would represent a combination of aspects of liberal democracy combined with the type of participatory democracy that was expressed by the Paris Commune. This would mean that the system expresses the role of universal suffrage, competition between political parties, and the results of elections would be the defining aspect of the political system. In the last analysis it would be possible for a pro-capitalist party to win an election and so start the process of restoring capitalism. However it is to be hoped that the successful construction of socialism would mean that this possibility was a distant prospect. People are not likely to vote for capitalism if socialism has meant the end of exploitation, alienation, and has resulted in full employment and the improvement in the standard of living of the people. Furthermore people will vote in favour of socialism if it has promoted the development of a society that is genuinely more democratic than capitalism. The demise of the old ruling class has created a situation in which the differentiation between the rulers and the ruled has been overcome. Instead the system is based on accountability and the participation of the people in the system of administration. In this context the domination of one party would mean the distortion of the principles of socialism and the justification of the rule of a privileged stratum over the people. The absence of real democracy would express the fact that socialism was not being developed. In this context the restrictions on the rights of liberal democracy would become the justification to undermine the promotion of direct democracy. This situation is what happened in the Russian revolution.

However it was argued by supporters of orthodox Leninism that the coercive methods of class struggle are required in order to maintain the hegemony of the revolutionary regime. Only party dictatorship can establish successful revolution and maintain the rule of the working class against the threat of counterrevolution: “The successful proletarian dictatorships and revolutions of this century have been party dictatorships and revolutions; they have never emerged from trade unions, soviets, factory or peasant committees. They have never been won by all toilers and workers, but rather by a highly organized minority which has gained the support or, the more or less active neutrality of the majority.”(17) It could be argued that this situation actually is exceptional and refers most explicitly to the period of the civil war in Russia. Furthermore, the revolution was not possible without the role of the Soviets, and the failure to end the party dictatorship after the civil war resulted in the bureaucratic distortions that meant the prospect of democratic socialism was not realised. The role of party dictatorship is not a principled defence of proletarian revolution and instead should only have an emergency character. In order to promote the aims of the revolution in a more effective manner it is necessary that Soviet democracy should flourish and the rights of liberal democracy should not be restricted. This means that the multi-party system is an expression of the interests of the revolution and so does not compromise the role of the class struggle. Instead it becomes the expression of testing the level of support for the revolutionary process and therefore represents the democratic legitimacy of the regime. Hence the view that a multi-party system is only a tactic of the class struggle should be rejected as the justification of party elitism. Therefore we repudiate the following view: “We are also opposed to the Euro-Trotskyist position which regards the multiparty system as an inviolable principle. We hold that this decision is dependent upon the process of class struggle, and the needs of the revolution, in addition to the type of relations established between the parties in the first years of the revolutionary dictatorship.”(18)

Obviously we cannot exclude the possibility of emergency measures if there is a counterrevolutionary revolt and attempts to overthrow the revolutionary regime by force. However in all other circumstances it is to be expected that a multi-party system should flourish and be based on open competition for the support of the people. The result of elections should decide which party has dominant political power. Does the existence of a multi-party system imply the existence of Parliament? Not necessarily. The question of whether a Parliament, the institution of representative democracy, or organs of participatory democracy, should be the ultimate expression of the views of the people, has to be decided by the democratic wishes of society. This decision could possibly take the form of a referendum. But what is not negotiable is the actuality of economic democracy. Without economic democracy the exploitative character of capitalism could be re-introduced in terms of the extraction of a surplus by a state bureaucracy. Only with economic democracy, or workers control of production, is it possible to develop socialist relations of production and ensure that economic activity aims to overcome the production of the reproduction of exploitation. Furthermore, it would probably be the views of the revolutionary party that we should strive to establish the political role of organs of direct democracy. This approach would facilitate the prospect that the distinctions between the institution of Parliament and the role of the electorate are resolved. But it would be the distortion of the principles of democracy if this view was imposed on a society that was in favour of Parliament. Instead the Soviets (institutions of direct democracy) should continue to exist and they should act as the socialist conscience of Parliament. Indeed this possibility could have emerged in relation to the implications of the results of the elections for the Constituent Assembly in Russia in 1918. The Bolshevik led Soviets could have acted as advisors to the Constituent Assembly with its Social Revolutionary majority. Instead the dissolving of the Constituent Assembly did not strengthen the institutional role of the Soviets and only resulted in discrediting the democratic legitimacy of the revolutionary regime. This type of mistake should not be made again.

Some commentators might argue that it is authoritarian to insist on the permanent importance of economic democracy. They would maintain that this standpoint was a violation of the possible views of the electorate. However, most elections in the present system are not based on a questioning of the private ownership of the means of production, or capitalism. The role of the political system is to uphold the supremacy of the market and private ownership. Hence it would not represent a different principle if an important aspect of the democratic system under socialism is to uphold its economic character in terms of the functioning of workers control. Ultimately people would have the right to vote for the restoration of capitalism, but until that situation occurred the aim of the political system will be to uphold the supremacy of socialist relations of production. This aim should not undermine the principles of multi-party democracy just as the commitment to private capitalism does not undermine the liberal democratic character of politics in regards to present day conditions. The point being made is that the most important aspect of a mode of production is the way in which economic activity is carried out. Hence the crucial aim of the democratic system under socialism is to uphold economic democracy and the generation of socialist relations of production. This perspective should not be at the expense of democratic rights and instead should represent the flourishing of democracy in all the aspects of society.

Does the socialist society mean the end of politics? The very conception of an ‘end of politics’ is unrealistic. Firstly, the importance of the economy involves discussion about the allocation of resources and this involves plenty of controversy. Secondly, the contemporary importance of ecology also involves arguments and critical evaluation of the Marxist aim of abundance. Thirdly, the significance of oppression will generate disputes and the possible formation of parties that are primarily committed to the resolution of gender and racial divisions. In these terms society will be based on the importance of political tension and controversy and so the ‘end of politics’ will be considered to be a dogmatic assertion of Marx and Engels that is unobtainable in relation to the continued contradictions of socialism.

However is the possible socialist society of the future compatible with the aim of individual autonomy? Do the collective aims of socialism undermine the realisation of the aspiration of people as individuals? David Held comments: “The principle of autonomy is, however, at the core of the modern liberal democratic project – a project preoccupied with the capability of persons to determine and justify their own actions, with their ability to choose among alternative political programmes, and with the necessity of introducing guidelines to delimit the democratic process.”(19) This conception concerning the ability of the person to realise their individual capacity in political terms would seem to be most compatible with economic opportunity based on private ownership of the means of production. This is because the importance of independence and privacy can be extended from the realm of the political to the economic. However this standpoint seems to represent ideological prejudice when the issue of autonomy is made more precise. Autonomy can be defined by five criteria. Firstly: effective participation, which is the right to engage in the public domain, and voluntarily form views and preferences. Secondly: enlightened understanding or access to the knowledge that would enable people to make rational choices. Thirdly: the ability and authority to decide what should be on the public agenda. Fourthly: each citizen is equal and this means a process of collective decision making. Fifthly: inclusiveness or the powers of citizenship for adults. But Held also justifies a qualification. This definition of what could be considered to be ideal autonomy does not mean it can be realised in all circumstances: “However, ideal does not mean immediately attainable, and this would surely be recognized. For there exist, of course, diverse circumstances, from economic scarcity to crisis situations, which constrain and limit actual choices.”(20) Therefore what is attainable is the mediation between the ideal and real.

If we compare this definition of autonomy with a Marxist approach we can establish the following result. It can be argued that Marxism is not against individual autonomy and we would suggest that freedom of choice and action can be enhanced by a socialist society. More people would be entitled to do work that was creative and it would be possible to establish a small business if people did not want to be part of the nationalised economy. In relation to the five criteria, the principal of effective participation would be upheld in terms of the right of freedom of speech and association. Furthermore, effective understanding would be realised in terms of access to the knowledge that promotes the ability to make economic and political choices. Access to public and university libraries would be free and people would be encouraged to study the records of local and national authorities. Newspapers would have more articles about political questions and hopefully the apathy of contemporary society would be overcome. Thirdly: the process of decision making would be open to public intervention and the ability to decide what items should be on the agenda of the authorities that decide policy. Fourthly, the democratic character of society will mean that every person is equal and able to have a role in the implementation of policy. Fifthly, the previous expression of autonomy will mean that all citizens are equal. In other words there are no substantial reasons why individual autonomy cannot be realised under socialism. However we would contend that a society based on social ownership and economic democracy is more likely to realise autonomy in practice as well as theory. The historical experience of societies claiming to be socialist does not seem to confirm this view but we would suggest that a genuinely socialist society would be democratic and so respect the principles of individual autonomy.

These points can be elaborated in relation to what Held defines as the rights of individual autonomy. Firstly: health and the promotion of physical and emotional wellbeing. The socialist society would aim to improve on the record of capitalism and provide equal access to health care for all citizens. Secondly, welfare and the provision of child care and educational services. Socialism would aim to improve these services and overcome the variable quality of provision under capitalism because of economic crisis and the effects of austerity policies. Thirdly: cultural, or freedom of expression and religious faith. Socialism would attempt to overcome the repressive limitations of the past and uphold freedom of speech and the ability to participate in religious worship. The state ideology of atheism would be rejected and instead religion would become a question of individual choice. Fourthly: the independence of civil society, and the right to form autonomous associations. This principle would also be upheld but the undemocratic power of big business will be ended and replaced by economic democracy. The powers of the state will be limited and its previously coercive ability to ban political parties and trade unions will be rejected. Fifthly: the economy. Held defines the economy in terms of an ethically regulated capitalism which presumably is considered to be most compatible with individual autonomy. Hence, the economy has access to financial and productive resources and diverse forms of consumption and property and a guaranteed minimum income. In other words he is outlining the reasons for the formation of a mixed economy and the replacement of actually existing capitalism. Most Marxists would consider that this type of economy is impractical and instead the only alternative to existing capitalism and its justification of exploitation and inequality is by the establishment of a different type of economic activity based on workers control and the role of co-operatives. We believe that this form of socialism is still compatible with individual autonomy. Sixthly: a state that rejects the role of war and instead emphasises the importance of peaceful co-existence. This view denies the relationship between capitalism and war and also rejects the possibility of a just war against forms of oppression. However we would also suggest that the establishment of world socialism is the most effective guarantee that war can finally be ended. The last reason connected to the rights of individual autonomy concerns equal treatment before the law. A socialist society should reject the terrible record of Stalinism in this regard and instead respect the importance of laws and an independent judiciary. The law making process should not be distorted and undermined by the influence of politics. (21)

Consequently we can argue that the issue of individual autonomy can be upheld by a socialist society. The point of contention is the ideological question about whether socialism is more appropriate than liberal democracy for the promotion of individual autonomy. Historically the record of so-called socialism seems to be problematical but we can argue that it is not a dilution of the character of socialism to define it in terms of compatibility with individual autonomy. In contrast, Held is not able to uphold the principles of individual autonomy without supporting an ideal and unrealised conception of capitalism. His ontology of individual autonomy is not based on the actuality of neo-liberalism and is instead connected to a conception of ethical capitalism. As opposed to this utopianism we can contend that individual autonomy can be reconciled to a socialist society based on social ownership. It is true that this society is not in existence but it will continue to be the objective aim of discontent as long as the limitations of capitalism continue and the problems of poverty, mass unemployment and exploitation are central features of reality. This situation suggests that the most practical basis to establish democracy is the struggle for socialism, and the alternative of Held is unrealistic because he aims to modify capitalism. The actual alternatives are still those of existing capitalism or democratic socialism.

Held would contend that the command economy of socialism has been a historic failure, and he would suggest that it is possible to improve and transform the market economy of capitalism. Consequently: “If democratic legal relations are to be sustained, corporations will have to uphold…..a commitment to the requirements of autonomy. What this entails is that companies, whilst pursuing strategic objectives and profit goals, must operate within a framework which does not violate the requirement to treat their employees and customers as free and equal persons, as specified by democratic public law…Within their sphere of competence, that is to say, companies would have to pursue working conditions and practices which sustained health and safety, learning and welfare, the ability to engage in discussion and criticism (including of the company and its staff) and the capacity to join independent organizations (in this case trade unions and professional organizations).”(22) In other words the extension of democratic law into the activity of the economy would involve extensive development of the principles of participation, and the workforce and wider public would have an important voice in the process of the development of capitalism. However this is the very aspect that is rejected by the owners of big business as an interference with the task of developing a profit and successful enterprise. If the principle of participation is to be realised then it will require the methods of class struggle for its implementation. Instead Held assumes that a benevolent government can introduce an ethically regulated capitalism. Thus he relies on the approach of ‘socialism from above’ rather than socialism from below. In contrast principled Marxists would suggest that participation, or economic democracy, can only be introduced with the realisation of democratic socialism. The standpoint of ethical socialism is an illusion that will be resisted by the defenders of capitalism who are concerned about measures that may undermine the process of making profits.

Held also argues that in the era of globalisation the principles of autonomy requires democratic laws that are of an international character: “A commitment to the principle of autonomy entails a duty to work towards the establishment of an international community of democratic states and societies committed to upholding democratic public law both within and across their own boundaries: a cosmopolitan democratic community.”(23) This would not imply the formation of an homogenous world state which is an illusion, but instead sovereign nation states would agree to laws that had international significance: “Cosmopolitan law demands the subordination of regional, national and local ‘sovereignties’ to an overreaching legal framework, but within this framework associations may be self-governing at diverse levels. A new possibility is portended: the recovery of an intensive and participatory democracy at local levels as a complement to the public assemblies of the wider global order: that is, a political order of democratic associations, cities and nations as well as of regions and global networks.”(24) The problem is that this approach represents justification of a utopian model of the future that glosses over the problems involved in its process of realisation. The concept of cosmopolitan democracy is presented as a moral ideal that should be implemented, and the actual issue of how this development can be realised is not articulated in an adequate manner. Primarily the problem posed by the influence of nationalism and the related opposition to cosmopolitanism is not tackled. Furthermore, the question about how capitalism – based on the political role of the nation state – can be transformed to accept cosmopolitanism is not discussed in detail. Instead Held outlines his structural conception of the character of cosmopolitan democracy.

His aim is that the issues of economy and defence are brought under democratic control and the relationship between important political institutions and the associations of civil society be based on democratic principles. He argues that the existing nation state system has failed in this regard and the UN has not overcome tensions within the international community. He calls for improvement in the role of the UN and the formation of a new international human rights court. In order to extend the remit of democratic law he supports the establishment of a new assembly to complement the UN. This would enforce law and attempt to implement health, social and welfare rights. In other words the UN would be reformed to make it more democratic and accountable, there would also be compulsory jurisdiction of an international court, and a new economic agency would be establish to co-ordinate regional and global economic activity. An international military force would be established to tackle all expressions of coercion and not be limited to the self-interest of the Western powers. However it is a complex issue as to who would introduce and implement the process of cosmopolitan democracy? Held seems to reject change from below: “Sixthly, the problems of grass roots governance from above cannot be solved through the extension of grass-roots democracy alone. For the questions have to be posed: which grass roots, and which democracy? There are many social movements – for instance, right wing nationalist movements…..which highlight how the very nature of a grass roots movement can be contested and fought over. Grass roots movements are by no means merely noble and wise….Like most social, economic, or political forms, they can appear in a variety of shapes, with a variety of patterns of internal organization. An appeal to the nature or inherent goodness of grass roots associations and movements by-passes the necessary work of theoretical analysis.”(25)

Consequently the apparent problematical character of many popular organisations means that the process of change is dependent on the role of elites. However these in turn are subordinated to the hegemony of the USA and the influence of trans-national corporations. This means that the approach of Held seems to express a strategic impasse because his conception of cosmopolitan democracy seems to be a ‘good idea’ but he lacks the understanding of what would represent an effective means of transformation from the present to the future of cosmopolitan democracy. In this regard he neglects to examine the transforming possibilities of the role of international labour because of his rejection of the importance of socialism. He also fails to explain how the procedures of cosmopolitan democracy could tackle the movement of capital in order to establish the most favourable conditions for economic activity and the related tendency to worsen social conditions. In other words his immaculate political model of democracy does not resolve the economic aspects that would undermine its success. His aim of an ethically regulated capitalism based on global forms of democracy would be undermined by the significance of powerful economic actors. He has constructed a model that assumes that political institutions can dictate what happens in economic terms. This is an illusion. Instead the role of economic will influence the character of politics and so ensure that the political situation tends to express the balance of power between the leading economic forces. The result is that globalisation is in the interests of the major economic actors and upholds the policy of hegemonic countries like the USA.

Instead of addressing these difficult questions, Held seems to assume that the development of globalisation is creating the pre-conditions for cosmopolitan democracy. He contends: “In the last hundred years political power has been reshaped and reconfigured. It has been diffused below, above and alongside the nation state. Political power is multilevel and multilayered. Globalization has brought large swathes of the world population ‘closer together’ in overlapping communities of fate. Life chances are affected by national, international and transnational processes. Democratic and human rights values are entrenched in important sectors of international law, and new regional and global courts have been set up to examine some of the more heinous crimes humans can commit. Transnational movements, agencies and corporations have established the first stages of global civil society. These, and related developments, create anchors for the development of cosmopolitan democracy. The latter does not have to start from scratch, but can develop from legal and institutional stepping stones laid down in the twentieth century.”(26) But the contemporary establishment of various forms of global legal and political institutions does not constitute a process of transition towards the realisation of cosmopolitan democracy. Indeed it can be argued that what is actually hegemonic is liberal democracy, and this situation has been reinforced by the demise of the USSR and the creation of a global economic system of capitalism. Furthermore, Held does not allow for the importance of the various aspects that undermine the realisation of cosmopolitan democracy. In this context it is necessary to establish that the development of globalisation is not identical with transition to cosmopolitan democracy. Globalisation is mainly an economic development and so the character of political institutions may lag behind what is happening in the sphere of economics. Primarily the character of globalisation will determine the possibilities for cosmopolitan democracy. We would argue that socialism and not capitalism is required if the potential for cosmopolitan democracy is to be realised.

John Dunn has a more realistic conception of the potential and limitations of existing democracy. He outlines how democracy was in the 19th century connected to the egalitarian ideals of socialism. However the historical experience of Stalinism discredited this relationship: “The four decades of the cold war provided something less than transparent collective self-education; but they did establish beyond reasonable doubt that it is a simple and ludicrous abuse of language to describe a wholly unaccountable ruling body, which denies its subjects the opportunity either to express themselves freely, or organize to defend their interests, or seek their own representation within government on their own terms as a democracy (or indeed for that matter, a Peoples Republic)”(27) Consequently the ability of the elites of Western Europe to appropriate the ideal of democracy in the name of egoism or capitalism became more influential. Democracy was the ideology which the USA utilised in order to extend its hegemony. This does not mean that democracy is workable according to its own premises, and apathy in so-called democratic countries is often widespread. Instead democracy acts as an ideological function to justify the system of the West and its economic character: “The first way of seeing the issue is bound to attach special weight to the sense that democracy can only be adequately seen not as a form in which individual states are or are not governed, but as a political value, or a standard for justifiable political choice, against which not merely state structures, but every other setting or milieu in which humans being live, can and should be measured.”(28) Hence democracy is not an aspiration for the democratisation of society and is instead a political programme without substance. In this context democracy acts to make inequality tolerable: “Representative democracy, the form in which democracy has spread so widely over the last six decades, has equipped itself for the journey by making its peace ever more explicitly with the order of egoism. It offers a framework within which that order can flourish, but also one in which the citizens can set some bounds both to its pretensions and to its consequences. Wealth by permission of the people may or may not present less of a practical hazard to any of them than wealth secured in open defiance of their will. At least it is less obnoxious.”(29)

Despite what seems to be criticism of the ideological pretensions and contradictions of representative democracy, Dunn concludes that it is the most global and superior model of political system: “In the midst of impotence and despair, representative democracy is scarcely an impressive recipe for building order, peace, security, prosperity or justice. No one could readily mistake it for a solution to the riddle of history. But, in its simple unpretentious way, it has by now established a clear claim to met a global need better than any of its competitors…….The fact that none of representative democracy’s surviving rivals acknowledges the need as clearly, and none at all volunteers to provide the question with a global answer, lend it a unique status, fusing timeliness and well-considered modesty with a claim for the present to something very close to indispensability.”(30) Hence representative democracy is the closest approximation of rule for the people in the name of the people. If the actual rule of the people had been established the result would have been chaos. Instead we have the nearest relation of an ideal to reality that is possible. The very word democracy expresses the ideal of a form of government that is accountable to the people. But if democracy is to be improved then it is necessary that the channels of communication between the governments and the governed be improved, and the issue of inequality should be seriously tackled. Only if these measures are introduced will the ultimate difference between principles and reality be overcome.

What is not explained is how will these measures of democratic transformation be realised? Who will be the agency of change? Dunn has already argued that the elites who dominate the process of democratic government have no incentive to promote change. They benefit from a situation of inequality and the domination of egoism. However Dunn is unable to indicate what parties or social forces could advance the cause of democratic change. Therefore his approach results in a strategic impasse. Ultimately the present character of representative democracy expresses an ideal that is not adequately realised in practice. The contemporary institutions dominated by an elite effectively act to undermine the aspirations of the majority of the people. In this context we have no choice other than to advocate class struggle and revolutionary transformation in order to advance the cause of democracy and equality. Dunn would argue that the result of previous class struggle was the denial of democracy and the justification of inequality. Thus it is preferable to have representative democracy with all its imperfections rather than to promote bureaucratic socialism. However we can learn from history. We can establish how and why democracy was undermined in the USSR and aim to overcome these problems in the future. We can learn from the sensible words of Rosa Luxemburg about democracy. But, primarily we know that working people would not tolerate a new attempt to build socialism without democracy. A party genuinely based on the working class would aim to promote democracy related to socialism. We have learnt from history that socialism cannot be developed without genuine democracy.

The approach of Dunn is undermined by two serious inconsistencies. Firstly he argues that the market economy is not necessarily incompatible with equality: “The market economy is the most powerful mechanism for dismantling equality that humans have ever fashioned. But it is not simply equality’s enemy….Instead, two centuries later and after much considered thought and many confused struggles, that economy has settled with growing resolution on a single political form and a particular image of society. Each grounds itself directly on the claim to recognize the ways in which humans are equal and to protect them equally in living as they choose. You do not need to accept the validity of that claim (or even its sincerity) to see what a momentous shift the claim represents.”(31) The point he is making is that the economic inequality that is promoted by the market economy may be compensated for by the political equality of representative democracy. The assumption is that this situation is the best that can be achieved and the establishment of political equality prepares the possibility to achieve a similar situation in economic terms. The fact that Dunn has already outlined how representative democracy is a compromise with egoism is ignored by this new perspective. This standpoint is similar to that of the defenders of market capitalism who insist that this is a system that realises economic equality in terms of consumer choice. Dunn does not argue that equality is being realised in this situation but he suggests that the potential for equality makes representative democracy the superior system. Marxism would argue that it is possible to realise a situation that is superior to the promise of representative democracy. It is possible to reconcile political equality with actual economic equality via the development of socialism. Dunn would argue that socialism cannot uphold its promise of equality and this is the very fact that ultimately makes him a defender of capitalism and liberal democracy. The fact that liberal democracy only makes promises is of less importance than the failures of socialism, and in that sense Dunn regards the promises of liberal democracy as being serious and capable of fulfilment. The prospect of political equality may result in economic equality despite the opposing tendencies represented by the market. The contradiction between the economic and the political can be resolved in favour of equality, and it is this situation that makes capitalism superior to socialism.

Secondly, the goal of complete equality promised by socialism is undesirable: “But untrammelled and complete equality is not even coherent as an idea; and the route towards it has always proved savagely divisive. It appeals to too few human emotions, for much too little of the time, and is swamped, rapidly and fatally, by the immediacy and impact of its incessant collisions with far too many other emotions. As a goal for rule it requires of any ruler who tries to implement it extreme and permanent coercion; and it guarantees to their subjects nothing but recognition (if indeed that).”(32) Hence the unrealistic character of the socialist conception of equality can only result in the domination of one party rule and the repression of society by the state. We can agree that this has been the history of so-called socialist societies. But the cause has not been devotion to the cause of equality and instead what results has been the development of a privileged stratum that dominates society. It is not possible to discredit the concept of equality because this principle has historically not been realised. We have yet to build a society in which equality is one of its most important principles. But the continuing limitations of societies based on inequality are a pertinent argument that favours the goal of equality. The standpoint of equality has not been discredited by equality.

Dunn defines democracy in the following manner: “What we mean by democracy is not that we govern ourselves. When we speak or think of ourselves as living in a democracy, what we have in mind is something quite different. It is that our own state and the government which does so much to organize our lives, draws its legitimacy from us, and that we have a reasonable chance of being able to compel each of them to continue to do so. They draw it, today, from holding regular elections, in which every adult citizen can vote freely and without fear, in which their votes have at least a reasonably equal weight, and in which any uncriminalized political opinion can compete freely for them.”(33) There is no reason to believe that a genuine socialist society would be inferior to liberal democracy in the provision of these types of political freedoms. Principled socialism can hold regular elections and be based on a multi-party system. The role of universal suffrage would mean that the vote is important. What could be different is that the socialist system does attempt to establish methods of participatory democracy, which would mean that elites do not rule over the ruled. However how this system of direct democracy would be developed would be a matter of great importance and consultation. It is quite possible that people would conclude that direct democracy was unworkable and so the most effective political system would still be a form of representative democracy. The point is that people would be able to discuss the merits or otherwise of different forms of democracy. The resolution of issues would not be decided by the actions of monolithic one party rule. This process of discussion and consultation would be a lively contrast to the apathy that often characterises the practice of liberal democracy.

It is still necessary to address the issue as to whether revolution is inherently undemocratic. The popular conception of revolution is that it involves force and violence and so the outcome will be a society based on the importance of state coercion. However we can argue that this was the experience of the past and related to the conditions of civil war in Russia. It is true the various exponents of the Soviet revolution outlined its merits in terms of the continuation of the class struggle against the bourgeoisie and the crushing of counterrevolutionary opposition. In these conditions the possibility for the flourishing of democracy was limited. This intensification of the class struggle in the form of war explains the following comment of the Bolsheviks: “Lastly, the civil war which was started by the Cadet-Kaledin counter-revolutionary revolt against the Soviet authorities, against the workers and peasants government, has finally brought the class struggle to a head and has destroyed every chance of setting in a formally democratic way the very acute problems with which history has confronted the peoples of Russia, and in the first place her workers and peasants.”(34) The point is that this situation does not have to be repeated in the future. We would maintain that the revolutionary process can occur without the prospect of civil war. This is because unless the revolution is based on the support of the majority of the people it will not occur.

The legitimacy of the capitalist system in advanced countries is based on the operation of representative democracy. Hence the system will continue as long as people consider that the politicians they elect still express their views. This situation is still present even when the party of the opposition wins the election and becomes the new government. Consequently it will take an ideological revolution and the intensification of the class struggle for this domination of liberal democracy to be undermined by the politics of revolution. People will have to have taken the conscious decision that the various forms of liberal democracy no longer represent their opinions. This development has not occurred in the post-war period apart from possibly France in 1968 and Portugal 1974. What is being argued is that the potential for the revolutionary transformation of society only occurs when people develop a form of democracy that could express an alternative to capitalism. However, this prospect only occurs with an immense leap in consciousness. Until this occurs liberal democracy will continued despite its many defects. In other words the possibility of a revolution by a minority within advanced capitalist society is effectively not credible. The idea that a party could lead a conscious minority to power is nonsensical and represents a regressive rejection of the gains of liberal democracy. Instead the conditions for revolution will only be realised when the immense majority indicate by their practice that they no longer tolerate the continuation of capitalism. This will take the form of the development of types of democracy that are superior to liberal democracy. The opinions of the people will be articulated in a manner that could not be politically expressed by the present system. If this democratic revolution does not occur then the present system will continue. In this context the popular character of the revolution suggests the prospect of the democratic development of socialism. However, this possibility also implies that one party does not impose itself on the revolutionary process in an authoritarian manner.

If this prospect of authoritarianism is not to be realised it is necessary that the rule of one party has to be ended.(35) The point is that the rule of the monolithic political organisation can be justified in undemocratic terms such as ruling on behalf of the working class. This suggests that the economic and political institutions are an expression of extreme centralisation and based on the aim of implementation of the orders of the ruling elite. In other words to some extent the importance of the party system has to be replaced by a situation in which the influence of the working class becomes primary. This cannot be expressed by pure spontaneity because that can result in disorder and confusion. Instead what is necessary is that the process of economic democracy should influence the character of the political system. The major aspect of the overcoming of alienation and the domination of external forces on the activity of humanity is in the realm of the economic. If it is possible to resolve this contradiction the generation of coercion within the political system should also be resolved. This would involve the development of revolution simultaneously in the advanced capitalist countries and the establishment of the material conditions for the realisation of the self-regulation of the producers or the end of dominating economic and political power : “The emancipation of labour from the rule of capital is feasible only if the objective conditions of its emancipation are fulfilled whereby ‘the direct material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis’, giving way to the free development of individualities’. By implication so long as ‘penury and antithesis’ remain characteristics of the material base of society, the political form must suffer their consequences and the ‘free development of individualities’ is hindered and postponed.”(36)

The problem with this approach is that it suggests that the resolution of economic problems such as the domination of capital over labour will mean the end to political questions such as the resolution of the issue of democracy. This view is an expression of the impasse justified by Marx that was outlined by Held. We can agree with Meszaros that the capacity to achieve a self-regulated economic system will represent a tremendous advance in terms of the development of society after capitalism. However the question of the role of the political, and of democracy in particular, will still be problematical. It is interesting that Meszaros explicitly supports the conception of the end of politics as the resolution of this problem. In other words he considers that democracy is an expression of the class politics of capitalism. We would suggest that the political aspirations of the people would be left unresolved with the actual practice of this formulation. Furthermore, how is it possible to attain economic democracy without aspiring to realise the same condition in the realm of the political? The only explanation for this omission is that Meszaros implicitly accepts that democracy within the transitional society is a threat to the possibility of building communism or that he uncritically supports the standpoint of Marx as the last word on the question. Hence he outlines in detail what he considers to be the economic prospects for the demise of the rule of capital but neglects to outline what this would mean in political terms. This is because he seems to consider that the domination of capital can only be ended by economic measures: “The rule of capital, rooted in the prevailing system of division of labour (which cannot conceivably be abolished by a political act alone, no matter how radical and free from ‘degeneration’), thus prevails over a significant part of the transitional period, although it must exhibit the characteristics of a diminishing trend if the transition is to be successful at all.”(37)

However in some vague manner Meszaros does accept that it is necessary to promote some type of political system that is compatible with the generation of an economy that was able to overcome the domination of capital: “Positive developments in this respect may be envisaged only if the system finds some way of achieving an effective, institutionally underpinned distribution of political power (even if very limited in the first place) which does not represent a danger to the prevailing mode of extracting surplus labour as such – although of necessity it would question the particular manifestations and excesses of surplus extraction……. In other words, ‘decentralization’, ‘diversification’, ‘autonomy’, and the like must be implemented in post-revolutionary societies as – in the first place – political principles, in order to be meaningful at all.”(38) Hence what is crucial in explaining the character of society is the manner in which surplus is extracted, and therefore the role of the political can only modify and humanise this process. There is not suggestion that the importance of the political could transform and define the character of the economic and the way in which the surplus is extracted. Consequently Meszaros avoids the issue concerning the prospect that political democracy could be crucial for the generation of economic democracy. This means that he does not outline in explicit terms that the un-democratic character of the political system has been responsible for the continuation of the domination of capital in post-capitalist societies. It is not possible to explain the resilience of capital in the revolutionary society except in terms of the formation of one party rule and the end of democracy. Instead Meszaros understands developments in terms of the inability of the political to influence the importance of the economic. The result of his one-sided approach is that he denies the interaction of the political and the economic. He does not recognise that without political democracy it is difficult to develop economic democracy. This is why the continuation of one party rule is compatible with the continued importance of capital within the revolutionary society. Instead Meszaros seems to be indifferent to the question of the character of the political system and the lack of democracy. Instead he conceives of the post-capitalist society in terms of the coercive role of the state as the basis of the inability of the economy to overcome the influence of capital. He does not recognise that this aspect is related to the fact that the state has not become truly democratic.

Thus based on the standpoint of Marx, Meszaros contends: “The rule of capital over labour is fundamentally economic, not political in character. All that politics can do is provide the ‘political guarantees’ for the continuation of a materially already established and structurally entrenched rule. Consequently, the rule of capital cannot be broken at the political level, only the guarantee of its formal organisation. This is why Marx, even in his most positive references to the political framework of the Paris Commune, defines it negatively as a ‘lever for uprooting the economic foundations of class rule’, indicating the positive task in ‘the economic emancipation of labour.’”(39) But what is ignored by Meszaros is that Marx also outlines how the Commune state is the highest expression of democracy and in this manner implies that this creates the pre-conditions for the economic transformation of society and the overcoming of the domination of capital. The point is that without the aspect of democracy within the transitional society the prospect of realising the establishment of the supremacy of labour over the forces of capital would be unlikely.

Instead of this standpoint, Meszaros interprets Marx in an economic determinist manner and therefore he lacks a strategy that would promote the role of democracy within the transitional society. Thus his emphasis is on the ideological role that democracy represents as a justification for the domination of capital.(40) The result of this type of standpoint is to question the importance of democracy for the transitional society of post-capitalism. Is democracy possible for the society aiming to overcome the domination of capital, or is the only progressive aim to end the role of politics? What he never asks is whether the very prospect and need for economic democracy, in order to undermine the influence of capital, is connected to the flourishing of political democracy? Instead the assumption is that the effective end of politics is connected to the demise of the importance of capital within society. But historical experience seems to refute this standpoint. We would suggest that it was the very role of the one party state that enabled a command economy to be created which is responsible for surplus extraction within the post-revolutionary society. Therefore the neglected issue of democracy is central to the prospect of the construction of a type of socialism that has overcome the significance of the domination of elites. Erik Olin Wright outlines this point in the following manner: “The argument for socialism defined as democratic power over the allocation and use of productive resources, is thus not that socialism guarantees social and political justice, but rather that it creates the most favourable socioeconomic terrain on which to struggle for justice. This, basically, rests on what might be termed “faith in democracy”: the belief that the more democratic the distribution of power is in a system the more likely it is that humane and egalitarian values will prevail. This presupposes not a belief in the innate goodness of people, but rather the belief that under conditions of a wide and deep democracy people will interact in ways in which the more humane impulses of our nature are more likely to prevail. But democracy can be hijacked. Exclusionary solidarities can be fostered as well as universalistic ones. There are no guarantees.”(41)

However, this comment only establishes the principle of democracy and its relationship to socialism Wright does not elaborate the precise character of this connection. This task remains to be carried out. But we can suggest that one party rule represents the type of violation of democracy that Wright is concerned with. The domination of the party expresses the attempt of the particular to rule on behalf of the universal. In this context it could be argued that all forms of credible democracy are based upon a multi-party system. Hence the idea that there is a party that represents the essence of the working class and which should rule on its behalf has been discredited by history. All these various types of parties have ultimately acted on their own behalf and have discredited any connection to the working class. The actual tragic dilemma in history is that the working class has failed to be able to develop its own organs of self-rule, but this very problem is connected to the imposition of the role of party organisations like the Bolsheviks that claim to speak for the class despite carrying out measures that undermine democracy and also promote the domination of an elite. The period in which the Bolsheviks and the working class had an organically close relationship was tragically brief. In other words the workers in the USSR lacked the most important means of evaluating the programme of the Bolsheviks which was the multi-party system. Hence the claim to express the interests of the working class is not something that the party can decide in terms of its claim to uphold the doctrine of Marxism. Instead the authenticity of this claim can only be decided by the development of struggle and the role of the electoral system. This is not to suggest that the elections fought under conditions of bourgeois democracy are an accurate expression of this connection because of the distortions imposed by ideology. What is actually being referred to concerns the situation under a transitional system aspiring to promote socialism. Thus democracy is actually more important under socialism than capitalism. Democracy under capitalism is constantly being distorted by the interests of the capitalist class. The major task for the working class is to create a mass movement that can challenge the power of the system. Democracy becomes meaningful in the struggle for change and in relation as to how socialism is to be developed.

The formal character of multi-party bourgeois democracy begins to acquire a principled dimension under socialism. It could be argued that political questions are more important under socialism than under capitalism. For example, the issue as to whether the Brest Litovsk treaty should have been signed in 1918 concerned the very future of the revolutionary regime in Russia. The issue was between peace and revolutionary war in order to promote world revolution. It was necessary not just to consult the Bolshevik party but to involve the Soviets and the other parties in the process of decision making. But Lenin imposed his prestige on the process and was able to subvert the mechanism of party and Soviet democracy. Furthermore the increasing degeneration of the political process meant the end of democracy and the consolidation of one party rule. This situation facilitated the increasing influence of capital in the economy via forced collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. Hence the inability to uphold democracy was the basis for the failure to end alienation within the economy. The centralisation of the economy meant extraction of a surplus on behalf of the party state. Only democracy in all spheres of society could have resolved this situation in favour of socialism.

In relation to the question of the elitist character of the party what is problematical is not the defence of socialism against the spontaneous generation of bourgeois ideology within the working class. It is perfectly reasonable and principled to outline arguments that reject demoralised support for right-wing populist formations like UKIP. Marxism has an invaluable role when it provides reasons why migrants are not the enemy of the working class. In this context it is the task of Marxism to provide a credible justification for the development of a mass movement against austerity. (42) Consequently the defence by Marxism of progressive ideas against reactionary moods that represent rejection of politics can be invaluable. Hence what is involved is the defence of democracy against the standpoint of reaction and authoritarianism. But, what is problematical is the dogmatic claim by a specific Marxist party that it represents objective truth and is the exclusive expression of the interests of the working class.

For example, whilst it was credible for the Bolsheviks to suggest that they were the revolutionary party of the working class because of the Mensheviks support for the bourgeois Provisional government during 1917 they were unable to provide similar support for this viewpoint when they became part of the Soviet government. This was because the Mensheviks had become an independent expression of the discontent of the working class with the Bolsheviks. Therefore the Mensheviks had a principled reason to uphold the interests of the working class within the USSR despite international connections with reformism. Thus the Bolshevik dismissal of the importance of the Mensheviks does not recognise their crucial task of defending the interests of the Soviet workers against their own government. The Communist International claims: “The policy pursued by the petty-bourgeois democratic parties, i.e., the parties affiliated to the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals, represented in Russia by the S.R. (Socialist Revolutionary) and Mensheviks parties, is the political expression of the vacillations of the petty bourgeoisie. These parties now have their headquarters and newspapers abroad, and are actually in a bloc with the whole of the bourgeois counterrevolution and are serving it loyally.”(43) However this is not what the Soviet workers would have considered to be the significance of the Mensheviks. They would be glad of the role that the Mensheviks could still express between 1918-22 in defence of the interests of the working class such as upholding freedom of speech and the rights of the trade unions. If the Bolsheviks had been genuinely democratic they would have acknowledged the invaluable importance of the Mensheviks. Instead the significance of the Mensheviks was ridiculed as the Communist International viewpoint outlines. Consequently, exclusive conception of the vanguard party upheld the tendency towards authoritarianism as Ronald Aronson explains: “Contained within Lenin’s innovation of the vanguard party is a fundamental decision: he overcomes Marx’s ambivalence about whether theory or the workers should predominate, and fully shifts the locus of consciousness from the workers to the bourgeois intellectuals. Theoretical consciousness thus takes precedence over workers consciousness born of the struggle with capitalism. And this theory is lodged in an insulated centre of revolutionary consciousness, protected from the meteoric rises and falls of spontaneous proletarian consciousness. Such a recasting would only intensify any existing tendencies toward authoritarianism.”(44) Hence the party would embody truth via the primacy of theory over practice. This tension was repressed when the party in 1917 defended the revolutionary implications of the very practice of the working class, but the very formation of the Soviet government generated contradictions between party and class that were resolved in authoritarian manner. The principles of democracy could only be upheld if the party rejected the claim to be the vanguard, or the personification of an exclusive truth. Recognition that truth is fragmentary and pluralistic, meant acceptance of the democratic legitimacy of open competition between rival parties. Only awareness of the prospect of coalitions and alliances could uphold the significance of democracy for the construction of socialism.

Aronson believes that democracy can only be upheld as the major principles of a socialist movement by rejecting what he considers to be the dogmatic doctrines of Marxism.(45) We do not have to support such drastic measures because the problem is not Marxism but instead the exclusive pretensions of the vanguard party. This is not an argument against the revolutionary party and is instead criticism of the ideology of exclusiveness that often justifies the role of the Leninist organisation. In other words the party is concerned to defend its exclusive status and so can become indifferent to the tasks of promoting class struggle. It can become indifferent to the tasks of strategic elaboration and programmatic advance and instead is concerned with ideological control of the membership. This seems to be the present situation on the British Left and is a reason why the Left has not been equal to the tasks of the contemporary class struggle. In this context the principles of democracy would undermine the ideology of exclusiveness and prepare the prospect of the formation of broad coalitions of Left forces who would be ready to struggle for socialism. The formation of the Left Unity organisation is a welcome step in this regard. However if this development is to consolidate and become durable this party must be patient and immerse itself within the working class community. In this manner the role of organisation is connected with the democratic impulses of the community. Thus in a certain manner socialism is being built within capitalism, and the principles of solidarity ensure that this development is both democratic and participatory. However it will require the success of revolutionary strategy if these impulses for change are to be realised. But what is important is that strategy is not the exclusive prerogative of any single party or group, and working people should have an invaluable importance for promoting an action programme for change. It is to be hoped that the superiority of this approach when compared to liberal democracy will motivate action to transform society. The democratic basis of change should be crucial for ensuring that the ultimate result is also democratic.

We can test this model against Ralph Miliband’s conception of democratic socialism. Miliband would possibly criticise the above perspective because of the apparent commitment to extra-Parliamentary change. However the major aspect of his criticism of this revolutionary approach is connected to the hegemonic importance of the vanguard party. (46)He rejects the very principles of the communist revolution because of its anti-democratic results. But what we consider a revolution is different to the Leninist orthodoxy because of the changed relationship between the party and the class. The role of the class is not to carry out the dictates of the party and is instead to establish a type of society that expresses the logic of class struggle and the democratic impulses of working class communities. Hence the basis of socialism is within capitalism, and the expression of this tendency is the very fact that the democracy created by the class struggle is superior to the liberal democracy promoted by capitalism. If people are not convinced of this perspective they will not attempt to change society and its economic and political system. Thus capitalism will continue as long as liberal democracy seems credible and the alternative form of democracy of the class struggle seems to be temporary, episodic and inferior. The primary role of the revolutionary party is not to justify a status as a vanguard organisation but instead to promote the alternative form of democracy. This point is outlined by Miliband in the following manner: “Thus conceived, socialism is part of the struggle for the deepening and extension of democracy in all areas of life. Its advance is not inscribed in some pre-ordained historical process, but is the result of a constant pressure from below for the enlargement of democratic rights; and this pressure is itself based on the fact that the vast majority located at the lower ends of the social pyramid needs these rights if those who compose it are to resist and limit the power to which they are subjected.”(47)

He accepts that there are no guarantees of the success of socialism, and its goals could become distorted by the influence of political elites and the limitations of human nature. However if our aim is democratic socialism then it is possible that these problems can be avoided. In other words the perspective of a form of democracy that both incorporates liberal democracy and yet transcends its limitations can promote a principled type of socialism that is superior to capitalism. (48) Miliband rejects the traditional form of Leninist revolution based on the installation of a one party regime. However what he has described as the democratisation of society as the basis of socialist change represents a different form of revolution. His starting point is that the revolutionary regime will be based on a strong constitution and uphold a law making process. The point is that in order to avoid excesses in political decision making involves the role of a constraint on the process of government and this would be related to the acknowledgement of human rights. The rule of law would mean that the power of the government is not unregulated and is instead connected to institutions with a democratic pedigree. Hence it would not be possible to justify dictatorship of the party or of individuals because of these constitutional restraints. However the constitution would not only proscribe what could not be done it would also outline the empowerment of the citizen in terms of rights.

This process of constitutional change would go alongside a limited transformation of the state which would mean that the role of the state was recognised, and a certain continuity of officialdom from the capitalist period would be maintained, but the purposes of the state would express the interests and aims of the socialist society. Hence the judiciary would be purged of reactionary judges but liberal judges would have great influence. In other words: “However the state was organized, it would include a vast army of officials that would remain in being for a long time to come. A main aim of ‘participatory democracy’…..is to enable ‘ordinary people’ and grassroots organizations to take over many of the functions of performed by officials, and thus to give effective meaning to the notion of self-government. This too comes very high on the socialist agenda; but it is all the same unrealistic, for the relevant future, to think that officialdom can be done away with, and that the state and bureaucracy can be made to wither away.”(49) This standpoint is a welcome alternative to the traditional Marxist utopianism about the abolition of the state. However, the actual formulation also provides justification for the view that the existing bourgeois state can be utilised in a modified manner within the new socialist society. This approach is also problematical. The point about the smashing of the bourgeois state made by Marx is not about the necessity of a purge of the state apparatus. What is being argued is that it is only possible to change the functions of the state by the process of smashing. Until this process occurs the state continues to act in accordance with the requirements of the logic of capital: “Thus, as regards the possibility of managing the structural separation and antagonism of production and control, the legal framework of the modern state is an absolute requirement of the successful exercise of tyranny in the workshops. This is on account of its ability to sanction and protect the alienated material and means of production (i.e. property radically divorced from the producers) and its personifications, the (by capital strictly mandated) individual controllers of the economic reproduction process. Without its legal framework even the smallest ‘microcosms’ of the –antagonistically structured – capital system would be internally torn by constant strife, nullifying thereby its potential economic efficiency” (50)

The point being made by Meszaros is that the character of the state is not solely defined by the composition of its officials. It is also an issue of the role it has in terms of upholding and regulating capitalist productive activity. This is why if the state is not transformed by the revolutionary process it will continue to act in terms of the interests of the logic of capital. Consequently a purge of the state is insufficient for the purposes of socialism. Not only has the class content of the state to be changed in relation to personnel but what is crucial is that the character of the state has also to be altered in a fundamental manner. This prospect can only be realised by smashing the state and establishing a state that is based on the principles of democracy in both economic and political terms. However it is also unrealistic to contend that this process of transformation is the beginning of the demise of the state. For the result of such a retrograde action would be to create a society without authority and legitimacy. Instead what is required is a state that is a commune state in terms of its new functions of promoting socialist democracy instead of capital, and this state will represent the democratisation of society. It will not be a coercive organ that presides over society and is instead accountable to society. However the state may have some of the officials of the previous state still working within the new state and its actions will be constrained and limited by the role of law.

The point is that Marx was perceptive to argue that an entirely different type of state was required that was accountable to the people, and based on the rejection of the logic of capital, and therefore promoted socialist relations of production. However he was making concessions to anarchism when suggesting that this state would wither away because the character of the commune state was to promote democracy and not to uphold coercion as its primary function. The state as a separate organ standing above society was being replaced by a state that was a part of society, and was therefore an expression of a relationship to civil society. To reject the role of the state would be to repudiate an important institution that could advance democracy within society. The state would establish universal suffrage and pass laws that would uphold the constitutional rights of the people such as freedom of speech and the right of association. Without the state there would not exist an appropriate institution that could legislate in favour of the democratic rights of the people. In contrast the state of the Bolsheviks perpetuated the character of the bourgeois state in that its major functions were devoted to the exercise of coercion. It was not a state based on the importance of consent and democratic legitimacy, and instead becoming an organ that was unaccountable to the people. This situation was not because of the acceptance of the power of the state and instead was an expression of the influence of bourgeois ideology in the practices of the Bolsheviks. They could not envisage what the commune state would be like in terms of the genuine expression of democracy. Instead their formal commitment to Soviet democracy actually meant the justification of an omnipotent state that was dominant over society.

Miliband argues that it is necessary not to distrust the role of the state bureaucracy if it is accountable to the people, and the most important posts are subject to election and the right of recall. However this is not simply a matter of empirical common sense that has not been recognised by dogmatic left-wing theory. The point made by Meszaros is that the strategic role of a state bureaucracy is in order to control the activity of labour. (51) Hence the aim of principled socialism is to overcome the significance of bureaucracy by the mass involvement of the working class in the organisation of the state. This process would not mean the rejection of hierarchy and the election of officials but it would mean that the function of the state was to end the subordination of labour to capital and to ensure that the rule of a privileged stratum over the population did not occur. Miliband does accept the importance of the accountability of the state to the people but fails to recognise the important question of the character of the commune state which is to overcome the influence of capital.

Miliband is also in favour of the decentralisation of power to local and regional authorities but not to the extent that this situation could obstruct the national implementation of the socialist programme. In order to ensure the democratic legitimacy of socialism Miliband is committed to the importance of elections. The Socialist government should be elected by a majority of voters and be ready to accept the results of elections: “Where defeat, for whatever reason, seemed possible, a socialist government would have no option but to go to the polls and accept its results. The alternative, namely the refusal to hold an election, would amount to a pre-emptive coup which could only be sustained on the basis of rule lacking all legitimacy and with the prospect of bitter resistance.”(52) However he also considers that it would be principled to declare a state of emergency in order to defeat a proposed reactionary coup by fascist type forces. The point is that this extreme action would not undermine the utilisation of universal suffrage in order to provide democratic legitimacy for the socialist government.

This overall approach is understandable because of Miliband’s opposition to a Stalinist type coup that lacks genuine popular support. Hence he considers that there is no alternative than to conduct the class struggle by means of the role of elections and Parliament. Only in this manner is it possible to avoid the justification of socialism by un-democratic methods. Hence his primary approach is connected to support for the methods and institutions of representative democracy. What this perspective ignores is the logic of the class struggle which could establish institutional forms that challenge the importance of Parliament. Indeed Meszaros argues that accommodation to Parliament by the forces of the labour movement will mean that it will not be able to change society: “There can be no way of opting out of politics, no matter how disheartening its dominant institutional forms and their self-perpetuating practices. But precisely for that reason, politics is too important to be left to politicians and; and indeed, democracy worthy of its name is name is far too important to be left to capital’s actually existing and feasible parliamentary democracies and to the corresponding narrow margin of action of parliamentarians, even of ‘great parliamentarians’.(53) The rejection of the strategic importance of Parliament is not a repudiation of democracy in the name of the vanguard party because this approach of minority revolution led by the Leninist organisation is also in a process of strategic crisis. Instead the basis of democratic activity is the mass movement motivated by the crisis of capitalism: “The objective potentialities of the socialist offensive are inherent in the structural crisis of capitalism itself…..Now the point is to stress a major contradiction: the absence of adequate political instruments that could turn this potentiality into reality. Furthermore, what makes these things worse in this respect is that the self-awareness of the organizations concerned is still dominated by past mythologies, depicting the Leninist party, for instance, as the institution of strategic offensive, par excellence.”(54) In other words the strategic importance of the methods of extra Parliamentary struggle is not a justification for the rejection of democracy in the name of the Leninist party. This is because this elitist approach will never result in the overthrow of the domination of capital. Instead only the democracy of the mass movement will bring about the process of social transformation. In the context of liberal democracy only the generation of a movement that appears to have more democratic credentials will succeed in bringing about social transformation. This is why minority revolution led by the vanguard party will not succeed. Only the mass movement of the working class based on a socialist perspective can establish a superior alternative to liberal democracy. However, Miliband is wary of this perspective because of the historical experience of extra-Parliamentary struggle. Instead he defines the character of democratic socialism in terms of the role of Parliament. Hence he has to gloss over the traditional outcome of this standpoint which has been the reconciliation of Social Democracy with the capitalist system. Indeed the weakness of Miliband’s book is that he neglects discussion of the complexities of the attempt to bring about the revolutionary transformation of society. Instead his attention is on the tasks of socialist government.

In an intransigent manner Miliband argues that the Socialist administration should not allow itself to be undermined by reactionary resistance. This is to be expected. But he is also principled to maintain that this intransigence should not be at the expense of the democratic credentials of the left wing government. The threat of counterrevolutionary opposition should be resolved by the utilisation of tough constitutional measures, and in the last resort by the use of coercion. But if this tension can be peacefully resolved the political situation should be conducted in terms of democratic practice. Hence he is right to suggest that in the last analysis the socialist government should accept the verdict of the people based on universal suffrage. He is aware that the failure to accept this verdict results in a government that is trying to reconcile socialism with dictatorship. Historically this type of reconciliation is not successful and instead only succeeds in bringing about the domination of the single party. The situation of a socialist government without the vindication of democratic procedures effectively means a coup has occurred. This could only encourage the forces of reaction to overthrow the regime. Historically the condition of socialism without democracy was made possible to Soviet military takeover, as in relation to Eastern Europe. Miliband is aware that socialism has to be based on popular consent and the most effective expression of this possibility is with the role of universal suffrage. This means the political system is based on the competition between rival parties, and these parties support either socialism or capitalism. Thus the prospect of capitalism is located within the very operation of the electoral system. However, this risk is preferable to the alternative of the creation of a so-called socialist government that acts on behalf of a few and is only in power because of a political system that is undemocratic. The suggestion being made by Miliband is that if the socialist government is effective and efficient in all aspects of its social and economic policy the chances of re-election will be great. This is why the development of socialism is compatible with democracy. Thus the concept of bureaucratic socialism is contradictory and unrealisable. The only genuine form of socialism is democratic.

However, Miliband is also ambitious because he is not content to accept the inequalities of power that undermine the realisation of genuine democracy. Hence he rejects the unequal situation which prevails under capitalism in which one individual/company can own large parts of the mass media. Instead individuals can only own a single media company and the media would be open for access by political parties, trade unions and community groups: “But no individual or company would be allowed to own or control more than one such means of communication. This would no doubt be attacked as an intolerable infringement of freedom. It would in fact be no more than the protection of society from a degree of private ownership and control which gives to wealthy individuals a power which no truly democratic society should countenance.”(55) The point being made is that with access to broader and more factual information people would become truly knowledgeable about what was happening within society. This would mean that they could make choices that expressed rational understanding rather than the influences of tradition, inertia and prejudice. This does not mean that people would automatically favour the socialist government because they may become increasingly aware of the limitations of the projects proposed by this administration. But what would be realised is the development of active citizens with an understanding of their rights as well as obligations to the society of which they are a part.

But it could be argued that the above only represents good intentions if the institutional character of the democratic system is not successfully developed. Miliband rejects the role of total participatory democracy as being unrealistic and instead suggests that what is relevant would be the combination of the most accessible type of representative democracy with elements of participatory democracy. The crucial point is that the continued aspect of representative democracy will not become a type of oligarchy that often develops within capitalist society, and instead the system is based on the role of active citizens. However the institutional forms will continue to express the importance of political parties and organisations like the trade unions as the basis of representation. Direct democracy will not be possible. The result of this situation is that: “Indeed, socialist democracy would encourage the devolution of as much responsibility as possible to citizen associations at the grass roots, with effective participation in the running of educational institutions, health facilities, housing associations and other bodies which have a direct bearing on the lives of the people concerned.”(56)And: “In a socialist democracy, all such structures would be subject to the greatest possible measure of control by the people located in them. This is simply to say that democracy would pervade all of society and be part of the to-be-taken-for-granted organization of the social order, with participation as a ‘natural’ right of citizenship.”(57)

However these types of comments only establish the principles of participation and the commitment to a higher form of democracy than exists under capitalism. What is not resolved is the issue of the tension between the institutional forms of representative democracy, such as Parliament, and the organisational expression of participatory democracy like Soviets. However we can conclude from Miliband’s rejection of the strategy of revolution and his commitment to ‘socialism from above’ that he is committed to the importance of Parliament as the basis for the implementation of socialist policies. He believes that it is possible to overcome the limitations of the history of Social Democracy and to act in an offensive manner which means principled commitment to socialism via the actions of a government with working class support.(58) However this also means that the working class is conceived in secondary terms as an additional mass pressure for the actions of the government, but the emphasis is on the importance of the introduction of policies that would attract the support of the trade unions, workers and activists.(59) Whilst he recognises that people should not be uncritical of the government his emphasis is on the dynamism of the government and the effective passivity of its popular support. The conclusion of his approach is that only a socialist government with strong executive power in order to tackle crisis, opposition and emergencies, will be able to implement the policies that enable the realisation of socialism. He is aware that this situation could result in the regression of the government into dictatorship. The dilemmas of the socialist administration are outlined in the following manner: “All governments, when hard pressed, are tempted to behave in arbitrary ways; and a socialist government, faced with a multitude of grave problems, would also be subject to that temptation. This is why effective constraints upon the exercise of power are essential. But it is as well to be clear that the realization of a programme designed to transform the social order in democratic and egalitarian directions requires, as an essential condition, that the government be equipped with adequate power. It is only where that condition is met that a socialist government would be able to proceed with the reforms to which it was committed.”(60)

What is the social force that would oppose any temptation to degenerate into dictatorship in a situation of crisis for the socialist government? The answer is provided by the mass movement of the working class which is ignored, alongside the importance of participatory institutions, by Miliband. The point is that the government is liable to become isolated and bureaucratic unless it is supported by alternative institutions of participatory democracy. But what is most problematical about Miliband’s approach is that he conceives that a party revolution will bring about socialism via the role of Parliament. This ignores the fact that what is involved in the class struggle is the opposition of capital and labour and only the relationship of labour to a socialist perspective can bring about victory in the class struggle: “For capital, truly, ‘there is no alternative – and there can never be – to its exploitative structural dependency on labour. If nothing else, this fact sets well marked limits to capital’s ability to permanently subdue labour by violence…..It can use violence with success selectively, against limited groups of labour, but not against the socialist movement organized as a revolutionary mass movement. This is why the development of ‘communist mass consciousness’….in contrast to the vulnerability of narrow sectarian orientation, is so important.”(61) We can understand the relationship of democracy to this class struggle. The development of the revolutionary mass movement of the working class creates forms of democracy that can bring about the success of labour in the conflict with capital. In contrast, the role of Parliament cannot represent the political power capable of achieving victory in the class struggle. This is why revolutionary democracy and its institutional forms like Soviets are indispensable if capitalism is to be overcome. However this may not necessarily mean the end of the role of Parliament. Instead the class dynamic of the extra-Parliamentary could be vital in order to uphold the legitimacy of Parliament: “What is important to bear in mind here is that the renewal of the parliamentary form of political legislation itself is unavoidable if the labour movement is to achieve anything at all under the present circumstances. Such a renewal can only come about through the development of an extra-Parliamentary movement as the vital conditioning force of Parliament itself and of the legislative framework of transitional society in general.”(62)

We can accept that the importance of the institutions of participatory democracy should not become the justification to deny the importance of democratic freedoms like universal suffrage and the role of political parties. However these institutions are also indispensable as an expression of the revolutionary power of the working class. In this context they express a distinctive aspect of the society aspiring to be socialist. But this recognition does not mean the end of representative democracy because we can agree with Miliband that absolute direct democracy is unworkable and would actually express the atomised wishes of individuals and so result in chaos. Instead people will continue to be represented by parties and civic organisations. In this context the challenge will be to ensure that the organisations and activity of representative democracy does not degenerate into the rule of elites. This point is applicable for both Soviets and Parliaments. But, it is to the merit of Miliband’s standpoint that he accepts – whatever form of democracy is adopted – the plural competition of parties and acceptance of the verdicts of elections. It is this standpoint that is also essential for realising a genuinely democratic standpoint.

.However, the tensions concerning democracy arise in relation to the sphere of economics. Miliband assumes that the overall character of policy and planning will be in the domain of government. On the other hand the workers will have an important say about the daily development of production. He accepts that this situation could be problematical: “It is as well to recognize, however, that here is another point of tension because of contradictory pulls. So long as a distinction between management and employees endures, there is bound to be an area of dispute in regard to the prerogatives of management on the one hand and the right to participation by employees on the other. The point about public enterprise in the context of socialist democracy is that its spirit would be such as to make the conflicts that do arise capable of being resolved without bitter confrontation, though the possibility of such confrontation cannot be discounted.”(63) This comment actually does not tackle the crucial point which concerns who controls the surplus. If the government has effective monopoly control of the proceeds of the surplus it could be argued that it has the potential to become a new ruling class. The very purpose of democratic planning is to realise a situation in which the working class has effective control of the allocation of the surplus. Only in this manner can the possibility of the generation of capital can be overcome. Hence democratic planning will mean that the government is not the monopoly decision maker even if it has an important role. The trade unions can mediate between government and workers in this regard and ensure that the workers are consulted and the aims of government are not ignored. Economic democracy is ultimately the most important aspect of democracy because it is the primary basis for ensuring the success of socialism.

The problem with Miliband’s approach is that he assumes that only the approach of centralisation can overcome the tendencies towards fragmentation within a socialist economy. The result is that he does not overcome the limitations of bureaucratic socialism. He is not able to establish the importance of economic democracy for the operation of the plan and instead the assumption is that the dynamic aspect of economic activity is provided by the government. Hence he does not outline an approach that can overcome the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ within the relations of production. Consequently we have a difference between a political sphere that is based on democratic principles and an economy that is organised according to the importance of hierarchy. Ultimately this situation will produce tensions that can only be resolved by democratic methods or by the utilisation of coercion. He is not able to create an understanding that is based on the importance of participation and the involvement of the workers in the economy. Hence he does not reconcile the principles of centralisation and de-centralisation in an amicable manner. (This issue of workers control will be explored in greater detail in a different part of the text)

A CRITIQUE OF THE WORK OF ROBERT DAHL AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO SOCIALISM

One of the most important theorists on the question of democracy is Robert Dahl. In many books he has developed an understanding of what is meant by democracy. One of these works: ‘Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy’ will enable us to grapple with the complexities of the relationship between socialism and democracy.(64) He argues that democracy is only compatible with the existence of pluralistic organisations that are independent of the state: “Organizations may use the opportunity to increase or perpetuate injustice rather than reduce it, to foster the narrow egoism of their members at the expense of concerns for a broader public good, and even to weaken or destroy democracy itself.”(65) Hence the task of democratic pluralism is to establish the right balance between autonomy and control of civic organisations. The major principle of modern democratic society is that government is based on elected officials who are chosen by universal suffrage, and citizens have the right to criticise the government without fear of punishment, and are able to form relatively independent associations.(66) The most significant type of these organisations are business companies and trade unions. It is not possible to conceive of democracy without these organisations: “The rights required for democracy on a large scale make relatively autonomous organizations simultaneously possible and necessary. For example, elections cannot be contested in a large system without organizations. To forbid political parties would make it impossible for citizens to coordinate their efforts in order to nominate and elect their preferred candidate and thus would violate the criteria of voting equality and effective participation. To forbid all parties save one would be to grant exceptional opportunities to the members of one party in comparison with other citizens.”(67) Hence the first action of governments that aim to become authoritarian is to ban other parties and autonomous organisations, as in the Soviet Union.

Thus Dahl is suggesting that the historical experience of socialism is based on the undermining of the most valid model of democracy which is democratic pluralism or polyarchy. This argument is extend to include the suppression of religious and cultural groups, and the possibility of diversity that involves the formation of interest groups does not suggest genuine democracy unless these organisations are independent from the government and it is possible for rival parties to contest free elections. Hence the assumption is that only capitalism is compatible with pluralism. However it is possible to develop a credible argument that indicates that the relationship between so-called socialism and authoritarianism was based on circumstances that undermined the promotion of democracy. Genuine socialism is based on the importance of pluralism that would involve the significance of civic associations like the trade unions and the possibility to form competing parties. Dahl would argue that this practice of democracy is limited because it is not applicable for large scale business organisations but it can be argued that the demise of multinational companies involves the extension of economic freedom for the formerly subordinated class. What is also important is that the expropriated business class would have the right of association and the ability to form political parties that could oppose the prevailing type of economic activity. Thus the depriving of their economic power and resources would not mean the end of the political influence of the capitalists. Dahl admits that one of the limitations of traditional pluralistic democracy is the inability to alter the unequal economic situation, but it could be argued that one of the advantages of democratic socialism is that this impasse is overcome and instead dynamic economic change is brought about without resorting to one party rule. It will be possible to bring about revolutionary type changes in economic and political terms without undermining the principles of pluralism.

Dahl suggests that an important limitation of pluralism is the tendency to promote group egotism. This may undermine the importance of solidarity and altruism that may be required for national tasks. It is argued by Marxists that the major type of social tension is that between classes, Dahl objects to this standpoint: “However, this interpretation underestimates the continuing strength of primordial identification formed by subcultures centred on religion, region, ethnic group, race, and language, and of new identifications centred on a variety of social and economic differences that do not fall nicely along a single prominent cleavage line but generate several cleavages, like those that tend to divide skilled from unskilled workers, blue collar from white collar, service workers from professionals, and so on.”(68) The point that Dahl seems to be making is not that the Marxist conception of class is necessarily false, but that the actual political dynamics of class are connected to the importance of pluralism within democratic societies. This means that instead of a polarisation between the two major contending classes of capitalists and workers instead the actual demarcation points are between the various forms of association that express group interests such as occupational organisations, forms of national identity and religious affiliation.

Marxists would not dispute the importance of these types of organisational affiliation. However what they would argue in opposition to Dahl is rejection of his sceptical attitude that implies the intensification of the class struggle cannot occur in democratic countries. Instead Marxism would contend that a mass movement can occur that is able to transcend occupational, cultural and national differences in order to become a challenge to the domination of capital. This situation has occurred in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and the neo-liberal offensive of the ruling class has been based on a type of reactionary class struggle in order to undermine the post-war gains of the working class. Despite this adverse development the advantage of democratic pluralism is that it not only encourages group egotism it also enables workers to associate in unions in order to defend their gains. Hence the autonomy of associations is not necessarily to the advantage of the existing system. Dahl suggests that the prospect of social change is limited by the very interaction of polyarchy and democracy: “Instead after decades of reform the crucial limit on redistribution has finally come to be set by the interaction of polyarchy and capitalism – that is, by how much redistribution a majority of voters will support or tolerate, on the one hand, and on the other, the effects of redistribution on incentives in a privately owned, market-orientated economy. Once this limit has been reached, further redistribution requires structural changes in the ownership and control of the economic order itself.”(69) However this type of change will not occur because there is not a sense of the common good that overrides the significance of group consciousness that inhibits the generation of the solidarity necessary to bring about this type of socialist change. Instead the very pluralism of democratic society will undermine the prospect of revolutionary change. Dahl may be outlining an important objection to the Marxist revolutionary perspective and his standpoint may be valid for most of the time. But this does not mean that in conditions of crisis and growing class polarisation the intensification of the class struggle could not occur and therefore create revolutionary opportunities. The very open ended character of history means that this prospect cannot be ruled out. In contrast, Dahl utilises a very determinist argument in order to suggest that in a pluralistic democratic society only limited reformist change is possible. His standpoint may explain what is usual and general but the very quality of revolutionary is that it is unexpected and unusual.

What may also motivate Dahl’s scepticism about revolution is the implicit assumption that democratic pluralism is superior to the authoritarian tendencies of revolutionary change. However we have already suggested that in order to promote a mass movement in favour of change it will be necessary to generate a type of democracy that would be superior to the limitations of democratic pluralism such as the justification of group egotism. The movement for socialism could generate a type of solidarity and cooperation – a notion of the common good – that facilitates the transition to a new society. Dahl believes that this is impossible because he does not consider that this type of civic consciousness can be produced. Instead the very division of society into pluralistic groups makes radical change unlikely. However Marxism rejects this type of pessimism and instead contends that the divisions of occupation, religion, and so on, can be replaced by a common sense of class solidarity. This does not mean that the temporary transcendence of pluralism in order to generate the unity required for revolutionary change does not mean that the post-revolutionary society will lack pluralism. Instead it is a universal truth upheld by Dahl that pluralism is vital for the formation of a democratic society – whether capitalist or socialist. It will be necessary that whatever institutional forms are created under socialism that they will have to uphold the quality of pluralism in order to be compatible with the principles of democracy. That is why socialism will have to be connected to the role of strong pluralistic civic organisations.

Dahl outlines how the majority of examples of democratic pluralism are located within an economic system based on private ownership of the productive resources and limited government intervention. In contrast the USSR has been based on extreme centralisation and a one party state. Capitalism was based on the relationship of decentralised control and autonomous organisations in terms of the relationship to government but it is possible that this could occur under socialism. Hence it is conceivable that a socialist form of pluralism could develop: “If socialism by definition entails social ownership of economic enterprises, and unless by definition it must be centralized, then a socialist economy could be highly decentralized and therefore organizationally pluralistic. A socialist government might grant extensive autonomy to enterprises in order to permit internal controls much more democratic than exists either under capitalism or in centralized socialist systems like the USSR. Obviously no socialist government – probably no government – would eliminate all external controls, whether by markets or by government of the state, or both. A decentralized socialist order might nonetheless generate just as much organizational pluralism as exists in any non-socialist order, and perhaps a great deal more.”(70)

It is welcome that Dahl who is generally sympathetic to the relationship between capitalism and democratic pluralism should accept that this development could occur within socialism provided there is a de-centralised relationship between enterprises and the state. The point of controversy is that it could be difficult to decide what is meant by de-centralisation? Does this mean a fully fledged market economy in which the relations between enterprises are effectively decided by a system of competition and the ability of the autonomous firms to make profits? In this context the laws of capital still decide the character of the system. What is crucial to the success of socialism is to overcome the domination of capital over labour: “Capital is the most comprehensively alienated mode of control in history, with its self-enclosed command structure. For it must operate by strictly subordinating the producers – in every respect – to a system of decision making radically divorced from them. This is an irremediable condition, due to the totalizing – and in its objective implications from the outset globally expansionary – character of the system which cannot share power, even to a minimal degree with labour. Thus the alienated control process must be objectively defined as the inexorable logic of capital, which in its turn calls for the definition of the controlling personnel as the personification of capital in command over labour.”(71) Thus the most important task in trying to promote the democratic character of socialism is to generate the ability of labour to overcome the domination of capital. This is why the command economy of the USSR is ineffective because the very continuation of hierarchy means the influence of capital has not been ended. In contrast Dahl considers that the most important aspect undermining the possibility for socialism to become democratic is the lack of pluralism. This problem can be resolved by enterprise autonomy. But we have to ask what does this enterprise autonomy consist of? Is labour able to control the production process and therefore able to establish relations with workers of other enterprises that would mean the development of productive activity is not decided by the market, or the logic of competition and profitability? Instead the role of the market would be limited to consumer choice. Enterprises would be able to plan production in accord with the aspirations of the consumer, and this would require the ability of producers to freely consult with each other about the amounts and quality of the output. This situation of economic democracy would be complemented by a pluralistic political system. It would be the very ability of society to overcome the domination of capital that expresses the realisation of the process of decision making by the producers. Hence it is not the pluralistic realisation of the role of the market that enables democracy to occur within socialism but instead the defeat of the importance of the market by the implementation of the ability of the producers to control the process of production: “What remains crucial in this respect, too, is the decision making process itself. For without a substantively democratic decision making by the associated producers themselves there can be no way out from the vicious circle of society’s adversarially regulated – not least when within the framework of the market’s deregulated – distributive relations.”(71)

Despite these criticisms of Dahl’s approach we can welcome his acceptance of the possibility of a conception of socialism that is not identical to the model of the USSR. He can accept the potential for a democratic socialism based on pluralism. However, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by enterprise autonomy? We would argue that this means the ability of an enterprise to consult with other enterprises in order to create a democratic plan of production. In contrast, Dahl seems to imply that this autonomy means the possibility to act in accordance with market logic. This approach would not establish the basis to overcome the tyrannical power of capital. Dahl replies and suggests that the Marxist conception of the pluralistic democratic socialist society is vague. He accepts that the government in these socialist societies would take the most important economic decisions such as in relation to output goals, investment decisions, and enterprises would be subject to centralised policy. But this does not resolve the question as to whether the enterprise should operate within a market system? It is not possible to grant autonomy to the enterprises and also destroy the market? The choice is posed by Dahl as being between a market based economy or the centralisation of the plan. But there is an alternative to these choices which is the creation of a type of economy that has never yet been established, the participatory democracy of the producers and consumers. (73)

Dahl objects and argues who would administer this type of economy? Should it be predominantly the workers in a given enterprise, or should consumers also have an important role? Furthermore, the differences between enterprises will result in higher wages in some workplaces when compared to others, and this unequal situation could only be resolved by the workers of a given enterprise voluntarily transferring parts of their wages to other enterprises, or this process could occur because of centralised dictate of the government: “Or consider the question of protecting broader interests – the general good, the public interest, the interest of the workers class as a whole – and so on. Is there much reason to suppose that workers in autonomous enterprises would spontaneously seek to maximize broader interests against their own particularistic interests? Are we to expect some kind of hidden hand at work that would cause group egoism to converge somehow on the good of all?.....Yet without a major transformation of civic orientations, would not many of the political difficulties in regulating firms in a capitalist order also arise in a democratic socialist order?”(74) Furthermore, would it be necessary for workers in given enterprises to sacrifice their well being in order to be efficient and produce goods wanted by consumers? Would the right to self-government undermine the aim of productivity and material wellbeing of the workforce?

We can answer these points by first suggesting that the choice of market or centralised plan is a false and arbitrary one. Instead we would suggest that the aim is to promote a democratic plan with a limited role for the market in terms of consumer choice. If this prospect is not possible we would suggest that democratic socialism is not possible. Instead the enterprise autonomy of market socialism would result in capitalism or alternatively the centralised plan of the USSR type economy would produce the domination of a hierarchical stratum over the producers. The alternative to this false choice is the generation of genuine socialist relations of production based on principled economic democracy. Only under this system could reasoned decisions be made about the relationship between plan and the market. In contrast a total centralised economy has taken arbitrary decisions to try and totally eliminate the market or has alternatively allowed the market to have a role on the basis of the permission of the state. This policy has proved unworkable in practice. The question about who should have the leading role in the administration of the economy also represents a false choice. The point is that producers are also consumers and consumers are often producers. It is the recognition of this dual role which should express the possibility to develop output that is of a high level of quality and able to meet consumer demand. It will also be possible for enterprises to increase production in order to ensure that any increased demand is also realised. This process will not mean that enterprises are able to act totally exclusively but instead act in accordance with consultation with other production units in terms of modification of the targets of the plan.

Dahl’s most serious objection is to maintain that the establishment of pluralism or enterprise autonomy would mean that workers acted in accordance with group egoism rather than civic consciousness or general interests. Dahl seems to have a crude conception of socialism based on strict equality in the allocation of wages or rewards of labour. But the actual crucial point is who is in control of the production process? Is labour able to determine its own level of remuneration in accordance with its capacity to define control of the economic activity: “For through the real involvement of the associated producers in the control of the social reproductive process….the activation of the individuals repressed creative potentialities, bringing major material benefits to society as a whole as well as to the particular individuals.”(75) The ability to control economic activity brings labour in general the prospect of determining material incentives in a manner that is to the benefit of the producers in general. This does not mean equal wages but instead rewards are based on issues of efficiency, output and needs of the producers. What is vital is that all workers will have had the ability to participate in determining the rewards of labour, and this means that resentment caused by arbitrary defined levels of wages because of the dictates of a centralised plan or the operation of the market can be avoided. In this situation a sense of the common good will become cultivated within the workforce.

However what is most problematical is that Dahl retreats form his acceptance of the validity of his conception of a pluralistic socialist society. Firstly, he argues that in a democratic society there is a limit to the level of distribution that is acceptable in popular terms. In other words, the democratic choice is for a market economy even if society may support the formation of a welfare state and moderate forms of redistribution of resources. The most that is acceptable is selective centralisation within a market economy. Secondly: it is difficult to establish a society based on a democratic plan: “Democratic control over the central planners depends heavily on the possibility of a coherent central plan…….It is one thing if the decisions of the overseers are made strictly according to a comprehensive plan that is discussed, enacted and watched over by the legislature, the parties, the press, political associations and the public. But it is quite another if such a plan is merely façade and decisions are in fact made….must be made – by crude intuition, inappropriate ideological principles, prejudices, moral principles inadequate to the task, questionable rules of thumb, myths and so on.”(76) Dahl argues that the latter condition is typical of centralised economies and so makes most forms of planning unworkable. He also argues that pluralistic forms of socialism have resorted to authoritarianism in order to overcome economic problems. Thus in the last analysis he contends that socialism is not compatible with pluralistic society and an economy based on planning does not work for the reasons given.

In other words whilst it is possible to reform capitalism in favour of greater income distribution and welfare provision the existing democratic system is not likely to be transformed in terms of socialism: “If socialism requires both social ownership and greater equalization of incomes, then the change in civic orientations needed to achieve socialism looks to be considerably greater than the change required to achieve greater income equalization within a privately owned system.”(77) This comment has proved to be historically accurate and explains important reasons why socialism has not been realised within advanced capitalist society. It seems to be possible to reconcile private interests with the aim of equality without requiring the revolutionary transformation of society in terms of the attainment of a socialist society. It could be argued that it is against the egotistical instincts of humanity to support socialism and this is why the existing forms of socialism have always been attained by undemocratic methods. It is difficult to empirically argue against this standpoint because it seems to correspond to historical experience. However at unexpected moments in history – the Paris Commune, 1917, 1936, 1968 and 1974 – it has been possible for mass movements to arise that express civic consciousness and the solidarity necessary to bring about socialism. In this context the democracy of the mass activity represents a higher form of democracy than the typical forms of democratic pluralism. Hence it is entirely possible that this type of cooperation can be generated by the limitations of capitalism and therefore promotes the formation of democratic socialism.

In relation to Dahl’s scepticism about the prospect of democratic planning this view is also vindicated by historical experience. However many theorists have concerned themselves with the study of what would constitute democratic forms of planning. It is to be hoped that these contributions could be invaluable in relation to the task of establishing a type of planning that is not bureaucratic and over-centralised. Dahl does not concern himself with these contributions and instead asserts that planning cannot be democratic and limits himself to the experience of the USSR. He is also sceptical that the type of system in Yugoslavia could genuinely overcome authoritarianism. This standpoint is dogmatic and is based on an ideological defence of the democratic superiority of capitalism based on the welfare state. He is ultimately sceptical about the abilities of the working class to support democratic planning because of the problem of group egoism: “In order for the general welfare to be attained solely by means of individualist egoism strictly requires, according to the normative theories of market capitalism, certain regulative structures. These regulative structures exist in no democratic country, and probably exist in no country. Civic orientations sufficient to sustain them have either failed to develop or have never lasted long.”(78) Marxism rejects this scepticism and contends that a system in which the domination of capital is consciously opposed by the extension of economic democracy can express the reconciliation of participation with the role of the plan. Dahl’s scepticism about the feasibility of democratic socialism is because of his pessimism about the possibility to reconcile egoism with civic and moral virtue. He does not think that people can be unselfish to the extent that they can accomplish collective goals. This is why he thinks that democratic planning would not work and instead planning has to be imposed by state centralisation and repression. Democratic consent is only possible in a society that is based on the acknowledgement of individual interests. However Marxism would contend that socialism is the reconciliation of the individual and collective interests, and that humans have the co-operative instinct and ethic of solidarity that would enable this possibility to be realised.

Dahl contends that the Marxist standpoint is undermined by the implication that the worker requires a high level of theoretical understanding in order to become aware of the necessity for solidarity in order to struggle for socialism. This problem is reinforced by the fact that workers may not attain the altruism required for collective action and instead prefer to act in accordance with individual interest. The ability to act as the ‘working class as a whole’ is always undermined by the loyalties established by smaller group interests: “The effort to transfer the loyalty and solidarity of the smaller groups to the larger aggregate constituted by the “working class” is often defeated by the very existence of strong loyalties within the smaller group itself. Over against the hypothetical interests of the great amorphous aggregate of workers are the concrete attachments to smaller aggregates like neighbourhood, workplace, craft, labour union, or church, and even when solidarity expands to a more inclusive aggregate more often than not the larger group is still no more than a fragment of the working class as a whole.”(79) Consequently in order to overcome these difficulties the party acts on behalf of the class in an elite manner and so undermines the connection between democracy and socialism.

Principled Marxism is aware of these issues and attempts to provide answer that do not reject the relationship between democracy and socialism. In this context the importance of theory is not its apparent complexity but is instead the aim to connect theory to practice. The goal of theory is to guide the development of a mass movement towards the realisation of the socialist perspective. This does not mean that the party should impose itself onto the class struggle in an elitist manner. Instead the importance of the party is indicated when it establishes a conscious unity with the very dynamics and tempo of development of the class struggle. In this manner the party is the instrument of the working class and is not an elite imposition that instructs the class as to what it should do. Dahl’s point that the working class can only attain a sense of small group loyalty is generally historically accurate. However, many situations in the class struggle would be inexplicable if this condition was absolutely true. Instead it is possible to indicate when the working class has been able to develop a sense of its general class unity and has acted in this manner. The whole period 1917-39 was one in which the international working class posed the question of class power. In the post-war period there have been generalised instances of revolutionary opportunities because of class militancy. Thus it has been the period of the neo-liberal offensive, and the success of the ruling class, that has raised the most serious question about the ability of the working class to act in a collective manner. However Marxists would argue that it is still possible to elaborate strategies that promote the collective resistance of the working class against economic crisis and austerity.

Dahl argues that if it is a choice between capitalism and democratic pluralism or a bureaucratic centralised socialism he would choose the former. He is aware of the limitations of societies like America that lack a consistent commitment to equality, and large corporations have immense power, but he believes that the very democratic character of society can bring about progressive changes. However we would contest that this is the choice that has to be made. Instead it is possible to establish a relationship between democracy and socialism if a concerted commitment is made to ending hierarchy and coercion within the system. In this context a genuine aim of establishing equality can be realised in terms of the importance of participation within the economy. In other words the dilemma posed by Dahl is false and pessimistic: “If the regime is to be democratic, one cannot reasonably expect civic virtue to prevail as a steady orientation; and if civic virtue is steadily to prevail in collective decisions, the regime cannot, it seems, be democratic. The path traced out of this dilemma by the argument for guardianship is as ancient as Plato and well marked.”(80)

It is the standpoint of Marxism that it is possible to reconcile the principles of democracy and civic virtue without resort to authoritarianism. Indeed it is the approach of democratic socialism to contend that bureaucratic socialism is the re-assertion of group egoism in a new form and at the expense of civic virtue which is represented by economic democracy. Furthermore, the emphasis on group egoism in democratic societies is ultimately the erosion of the principles of democracy in favour of individual and powerful interests like big corporations. In contrast the moral argument for the class struggle is that the group interest of the working class can transcend these limitations and become an expression of universal imperatives and the aim of the classless society. Dahl is suggesting that the ambitious of Marxism are unrealistic and instead we have to reconcile the progressive logic of democracy with the selfishness of the market economy. This is the only way to uphold pluralism. Marxists reject this compromise as unprincipled and instead contend that it is possible to reconcile group interests with civic virtue in the form of democratic socialism. In order to establish this aim in practical terms it is necessary to overcome the alienating domination of capital and replace it with the logic of cooperation and workers control of production.

One of the most important books written by Dahl is ‘Democracy and its Critics’. (81) This work outlines important criticisms that have been made against the principles of democracy. He indicates how anarchism is opposed to the approach of democracy because the latter apparently justifies a coercive state. Anarchism believes that there is a contradiction between personal autonomy and the compulsion expressed by the exercise of authority by the state. Dahl objects and argues that it is not possible to develop a humane society without the role of the state. For example it is necessary to have a state in order to ensure that human behaviour is regulated by laws. The alternative is that the exercise of absolute personal autonomy could mean the justification of immoral behaviour that is of harm to other people. The actual conditions that allow the exercise of responsible moral autonomy is to create the best possible form of state, which is based on the authority of consent and coercion, and takes the form of a democratic state. It is entirely valid to oppose laws that a person believed were in opposition to the dictates of a moral conscience. The society of the democratic state would not be perfect but it is the best possible form of society: “In my view, the best possible state would be one that would minimize coercion and maximize consent, within limits set by historical conditions and the pursuit of other values, including happiness, freedom, and justice. Judged by ends like these, the best possible state, I believe, would be a democratic state.”(82)

Traditionally Marxism has tended to accommodate to the anarchist view of the state as inherently coercive. However the practice of many so-called Marxists is to promote an omnipotent state in the name of the working class. In order to resolve this contradiction it is necessary to agree with Dahl that the idea of a stateless society is impractical and unreal. All types of society require authority in order to regulate human behaviour, and therefore the most preferable state is a democratic one. This is a state which in some sense is based on the government of the people, and the making of laws is in accordance with principles of accountability and political equality. The aims of Marxism would become realistic and moderate if it rejected the standpoint of Anarchism concerning the state and instead was based on the tasks of trying to support the creation of the most democratic state possible. This would mean the combination of the gains of liberal democracy together with the participatory forms generated by the class struggle. Hence it would be possible to promote the formation of a state that was based on the exercise of authority according to the principles of consent and the role of coercion would be reduced to a minimum. This perspective would replace the view that the state can only be an expression of coercion, and therefore useful only for the suppression of political opponents. Instead the development of the democratic state would enable the process of reconciliation between the working class and former bourgeoisie to occur, and the building of socialism would be based on consent. This society would be based on respect for laws and so would be constitutional and with an independent judiciary. Instead of an absolute rejection of bourgeois democracy this political form would be incorporated into the state. However it is also necessary to accept the importance of pluralism and so sphere of civic associations would be distinct from the state and be able to articulate an independent voice in relation to the actions of the state.

Dahl would suggest that the very character of Marxism means that it is opposed to the principles of democracy. Instead in the form of Marxist-Leninism it upholds the rule of the elite, or guardians: “However, it would be wholly unrealistic to think that a working class shaped by exploitation, oppression, and the dominant culture of capitalism could sufficiently understand its own needs, interests, and potentialities, and the strategies its liberation would require, to bring about, unaided, a revolutionary transformation of capitalism to socialism and the later stage of communism in which the state itself, and with it all forms of collective coercion, will have disappeared. What is needed, then, is a dedicated, incorruptible, and organized group of revolutionaries, a vanguard, who possess the knowledge and commitment necessary to that task. These revolutionaries would need knowledge of the laws of historical development. That knowledge is to be found in the only body of scientific understanding capable of unlocking the door to liberation: the science of Marxism, now in virtue of this new insight, the science of Marxism-Leninism. Like Plato’s guardians, the members of the vanguard party must be carefully recruited, trained, and selected for their dedication to the goal of achieving the liberation of the working class (and thereby humanity itself) and expert in their knowledge of Marxism-Leninism. Since the historical process may be long and arduous, the leadership of these guardians of the proletariat may well be necessary for some time even after the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state. But as with Plato’s guardians, the guiding role of the party would have the consent – if not express, at least implied – of the working class itself and thus of the overwhelming majority of people.”(83)

This view represents a powerful criticism of the elitism of the Leninist organisation. However it could be argued that the very influence of the principles of democracy mean that the perspective of the party led revolution and elite domination within the post-capitalist society have become discredited. It will not be possible to realise the revolutionary transformation of capitalism unless the mass movement of opposition expresses a higher level of democracy than exists within present society. Until that possibility occurs the activity of liberal democracy will continue and express hegemonic justification because of the lack of a democratic alternative to the existing system. In this context the role of the Leninist party will have to change. Instead of instructing the class about its revolutionary tasks the party will have to become an organisation that is able to promote the development of a mass movement of opposition to the capitalist system. Hence the role of the party is to remind the class that it was through the role of Soviets that collective opposition to the system was most effective. It was because of the dynamism of the Soviets that revolutionary change occurred. This perspective means that a variety of parties and working class organisations would have to unite in order to create the militant organisations required in order to challenge the hegemony of capitalism: “For the meaning of socialist pluralism – the active engagement in common action, without compromising but constantly renewing the socialist principles which inspire the overall concerns – arises precisely from the ability of the participating forces to combine into a coherent whole, with ultimately inescapable socialist implications, a great variety of demands and partial strategies which in and by themselves need not have anything specifically socialist about them at all.”(84) The contemporary weakness of the Leninist organisation is an indication that its historical time is over. Instead it has to accept a more modest role and participate in common actions that express the urgency of creating popular support for the revolutionary perspective. The end of the illusion in the exclusive and elite role of the party does not mean that the party form itself has become anachronistic. Instead it still has a vital importance in providing propaganda in favour of a mass movement of opposition to capitalism. However the prospect for change depends on the ability of workers to be receptive to the arguments for the socialist offensive. Unless the working class itself leads the socialist offensive it will not happen. It will be up to the workers to create Soviets as occurred in 1905 and February 1917.

Dahl provides powerful arguments as to why we should prefer democracy to the rule of the guardians. He suggests that elites are not able to establish the most reasoned justification for their actions, and paternal domination is inferior to a situation in which the people, or their representatives, make the laws: “For in its ideal outcomes, democracy is better. In an ideal system of guardianship, only the guardians can exercise one of the most fundamental of all freedoms, the freedom to participate in the making of laws that will be binding on oneself and one’s community. But in an ideal democracy, the whole people enjoy that freedom.”(85) He also maintains that the ability of the people to learn from their mistakes is better than exclusive decision making by the elite. However this argument glosses over the increasing fact that liberal democracy has become rule by the experts. The very argument for democratic socialism is that it can reconcile the ideal model of democracy, as outlined here by Dahl, with practice. This is because the democratic system is no longer distorted by the immense power of the transnational companies and rich individuals and instead could become truly accountable to the people via the role of universal suffrage. However in order that this possibility occurs it is necessary that the political system is no longer dominated by the party state or the rule of the guardians. This means that parties have a more modest role within socialist politics and instead the voter acquires more influence. This means the system, as Dahl argues, must be based on the principles of intrinsic equality, in which the representatives give equal consideration to the interests of all voters affected by a given decision. (86)

In a discussion of majority rule, Dahl contends that the aim is to realise a situation in which the practice of majority rule does not harm the interests of a minority. This is because the minority will expect to become the majority and so will not support special provisions to defend their status: “Finally……majority rule is likely to gain greater support among members of a minority if they are confident that collective decisions will never fundamentally endanger the basic elements of their way of life, whether in matters of religion, language, economic security, or others.”(87) The important question for socialism concerns whether it can offer the same consideration of minorities given the aim of expropriating the property of the capitalist class? The aim of socialism seems to be to diminish the power of the capitalists, and so this minority would exist in a repressed condition within the post-capitalist society? It would seem that the answer to this question is yes, the capitalist class would be a minority whose property rights have been ended and therefore would be suppressed by the socialist system. However the primary aim of socialism is to provide an end to exploitation and alienation within economic activity for everyone. It would also be possible that the former owners of big business could acquire small family businesses, and so fulfil their desire for entrepreneurship in this manner. But most importantly, the minority former capitalist class would have the right to create political parties that could mobilise in favour of capitalist restoration. In this sense majority rule would not be a detrimental imposition on the minority and the minority would be able to organise in order to restore the previous form of society. However the majority would also have the right to make propaganda in favour of socialism, and the commitment to full employment and economic democracy would be powerful incentives against the prospect of the restoration of capitalism. The point is that the majority has not used its majority position in order to deprive the minority of its political rights. It is true that there have been momentous economic changes but these have not become the pretext to undermine the rights of the new minority. Hence the standpoint of the socialist government is that its ascent to power by democratic means should not become the justification of an end to democracy: “Nothing in human experience tells us that democracy can’t break down. But people committed to the democratic process would be bound, logically to uphold the rights necessary to the democratic process. If they knowingly infringe on these rights they thereby declare that they want to reject the democratic process.”(88)

In other words the transformation of private property into social ownership is not an infringement of political rights because the capitalist class still has the right to agitate and organise in favour of the restoration of capitalism. But the working class and the socialist government also have the right to make propaganda in favour of the economic measures that have been taken in order to establish a socialist society. Hence the role of democracy favours those who have majority rule, but it does not discriminate against the minority because they have the right to become the majority in the next free election. Hence whilst the economic rights of the capitalist class have been infringed it is also true that the democratic rights of the formers owners of big business are maintained in terms of the open political competition of the rival political parties. It is the system of liberal democracy that is less democratic than socialism because some of the citizens lack the resources that would enable them to participate fully in the making of decisions in an unequal capitalist society. In contrast the former capitalists will have plenty of resources that will enable them to agitate effectively against the decision to create an economy based on social ownership. Thus whilst a democratic socialist society would carry out measures that undermined the rights of the former capitalists it will also be acting in order to realise the equal intrinsic worth of all citizens.(89) Therefore society will not be without its tensions and contradictions but the actions of the system will correspond to the principles of democracy. Nationalisation of the economy is not inherently undemocratic instead what would be against the standpoint of democracy is a situation in which the former capitalists were unable to oppose these measures.

Dahl argues that representative democracy when compared to participatory democracy can allow for greater size for the political system, accept diversity, and promote tolerance. The system is based on government by elected officials, free and fair elections, universal suffrage, the right to run for office, freedom of expression, and access to alternative information, and the possibility to form independent organisations.(90) Dahl agrees that levels of participation could be improved in this representative system but suggest that it is unrealistic to change this system for one that is based on the principles of participatory democracy because this would be an historical anachronism. It was the small Greek city states that represented direct democracy. In reply, the first point to make is that the approach of democratic socialism is compatible with the standpoint of representative democracy. The aim of an elected government based on free elections, and with the right to form political parties in order to mobilise for electoral success, is entirely in accordance with the approach of the relationship between democracy and socialism. What would be a possible matter of dispute is the question of the institutional form of representative democracy. Instead of an emphasis on the role of Parliament we would suggest that it is possible and workable that organisations like Soviets could become representative institutions. This prospect could also solve the issue of the unsatisfactory levels of participation of liberal democracy. (However it is necessary not to be dogmatic about the necessity of Soviets if people still favour the role of Parliament)

Dahl suggest that the issue that would undermine polyarchy (pluralistic democracy) is expressed by the intensification of conflict between rival interest groups that could result in civil war: “It is reasonable to suppose, then, that the prospects for polyarchy are greatly reduced if the fundamental beliefs and identities among the people of a country produce political conflicts and are correspondingly increased if beliefs and identities are compatible and therefore not a source of conflict.”(91) The implication is that socialism based on the approach of class struggle could represent the type of intensification of conflict that would undermine the flourishing of democracy. This has been the experience of the history of the USSR but it could be argued that there democratic procedures were never properly implemented which could have limited political tension in constitutional terms. We have learnt from this experience that it is more expedient and effective to try and resolve contradictions in democratic terms. This would mean granting the political rights to the former owners of big business to be able to agitate in favour of the restoration of capitalism. Such a development would not inevitable solve the threat of civil war but it would greatly reduce it and enable the development of socialism to occur in a popular and peaceful manner.

Dahl contends that the major problem for democracy is the problem of minority domination or a situation in which a ruling class is able to have primary influence to the extent that the institutions and practices of democracy are undermined. (92) The minority is homogenous and able to control the government of the state, but he also argues that a truly pluralistic democracy can overcome this problem and allow for the influence of civic organisations and voters. Primarily the theory of minority domination denies the potential of democracy: “By asserting the existence of a dominant minority, these theories divert us from a realistic assessment of the true limits and potentialities of democracy in the modern world. Either they offer ill-founded hope for an apocalyptic revolutionary transformation that will lead us into the promised land of perfect freedom, self-realization and full acceptance of the equal worth of all human beings, or else they offer us no hope at all and counsel us, directly or by implication, to give up the ancient vision of a society in which the citizens, possessing all the resources and institutions necessary to democracy, govern themselves as free and equal citizens.”(93) Hence the suggestion is that Marxism offers only a pessimistic conception of limits to democracy because of minority domination which is to be resolved by the unrealistic perspective of revolution. Instead it is more effective to strive to realise genuine democracy within what are pluralistic societies.

In practice Marxism does not dispute the benefits of democratic society. It utilises gains in order to organise and agitate, and make propaganda in favour of socialism. Hence, Marxism would agree that the benefits of democratic society outweigh the limitations. However, it would suggest that unequal economic power has important political consequences that undermine the strengths of representative democracy. Dahl would actually agree with this assessment. He accepts that the private ownership of the workplaces has justified a conception of despotism and democracy is not part of the usual practice of economic activity: “But it seems to me undeniable that in an advanced democratic country citizens would place the question of governing economic enterprises high on their agenda of important issues. To justify the introduction of the democratic process in governing economic enterprises, they would not have to conclude that democratically run firms would function better by economic standards than conventional firms. If democratically run firms were as good by economic standards, then taken all around they would be superior to conventional firms. For the scales would be tipped by the added values of the democratic process.”(94) He admits that this development would represent a complicated process, but its achievement would contribute immensely to the development of democracy.

However, Marxists would also maintain that it is not just sufficient to establish forms of economic democracy what is also crucial is the issue of their character and function. This is why a social alternative to the domination of the market is necessary because that would enable the primacy of capital to be overcome. None of this can occur without revolutionary transformation and so ultimately the issue of the durability of economic democracy does require success in the class struggle. But, despite this criticism Dahl has outlined an important limitation to the success of democracy within the existing system. The problem is that he cannot consistently envisage an historical alternative that would resolve this contradiction. Instead he considers the revolutionary approach to be dogmatic and instead is content to be critical of the democratic deficit within liberal capitalism. Marxists would suggest that any tendency towards economic democracy within the existing system would be unstable and resented by the capitalist class. This is precisely why a revolutionary perspective is valid because it is the most effective and principled manner that would ensure that workers control of production can be maintained. One of the most crucial aspects of socialism is that it is based on the importance of the transformation of the relations of production in favour of democratisation. In contrast the capitalists will oppose the extension of economic democracy and assert their despotic control over the economy. This is because economic democracy is considered to be against the interests of a profit making economy. Ultimately economic democracy can be subordinated to the imperatives of capitalism or else it can be liberated from these limitations via a process of revolutionary transformation.

Dahl also suggests that the tendency towards minority domination has to be overcome by a citizenry that is knowledgeable and an active part of the political process. (95) He admits that the complexity of information is a problem and is to the advantage of an intellectual elite but he also suggests that knowledge can be made accessible to the active citizen. This is an important point and has relevance for a socialist society that is concerned to uphold democratic norms of political conduct and is vigilant about tackling any tendency towards the domination of intellectuals. In a discussion of the common good and civic virtue Dahl modifies his previous approach and accepts that modern pluralistic society could realise these principles. But this standpoint also means that socialism is not required for the establishment of the common good. (96) It is possible within existing society to establish the enlightened understanding that will enable citizens to have an equal opportunity to take part in decisions. But this standpoint upholds an ideal conception of democracy that does not allow for the various aspects that justify minority domination within capitalism. In actuality, Dahl acknowledges that this viewpoint is a gloss concerning the aspects of political inequality. It is the strong argument of socialism that the common good can be realised in terms of the establishment of a society that is committed to both economic equality and the realisation of genuine democracy. Critics would suggest that socialist societies have not realised the common good but supporters of this system would maintain that these problems can be addressed and a society that is based on universal interests can be established.

In his book: ‘On Democracy’ Dahl discusses the superiorities of democracy when compared to other political systems. (97) Firstly, democratic regimes do less harm to their citizens than autocratic and despotic regimes. Dahl is not claiming that democratic regimes cannot oppose the interests of its citizens but their record when compared to despotism is superior. Dahl would argue that socialism results in despotism because of its tendency towards one party rule. However we would contend that this development is opposed to socialism because of the creation of elites that rules over the population. Thus we would suggest that it is possible to generate democracy as the basis of socialism or else socialism would not be successful. If socialism is not based on democracy within the economy and politics the alternative will be forms of despotism. This has been the lesson of history, and so principled socialists refuse to accept that only capitalism can be the expression of democracy. Secondly: democracy is a system of rights such as the right to participate, the right to vote, the right to express views and the right to consider alternatives to the existing government. This also means: “Institutions that provide for and protect basic rights and opportunities are necessary to democracy not simply as a logically necessary condition but as an empirically necessary condition in order for democracy to exist.”(98) Formally socialism has supported democratic rights and has created institutional forms that seem to be compatible with democracy. The problem has been that in practice these rights have not been observed and upheld. This has been because the one party state has undermined the possibility to make these rights more than formal. It has not been possible to support rival parties and to argue openly against the policies of the dominant party. It is this unacceptable situation that must be changed with the establishment of a genuinely democratic system. Instead of rights that cannot be exercised the system must be based on rights that can be respected and realised. This possibility can only be expressed with the development of a multi-party system.

Thirdly: democracy is the basis for the realisation of a broad range of freedoms. Dahl does not specify what he means by this advantage but it would suggest self-determination, autonomy and similar advantages. (99) The assumption is that a market economy combined with democracy is the form of society that is most able to realise these types of freedoms. Dahl would suggest that the only alternative that could express the principles of autonomy is anarchism but that this type of society is unworkable because of its rejection of the role of the state. Socialism has been considered opposed to these aims because of its emphasis on collectivism but it could be argued that the aim of successfully realising the aspirations of socialism is freedom. The point is that the conception of freedom would not necessarily be the same as Dahl’s. Instead it would mean freedom from work and the realisation of artistic creativity. (100) However it could be argued that what makes the aim of freedom meaningful is provided by its connection to genuine democracy. It is a contradiction in terms to envisage that freedom can be realised in one party state. Only with freedom of expression and the ability to choose between competing parties can people really exercise their freedom and have freedom as the ultimate goal of their activity. Hence it is not sufficient to suggest that freedom can be realised in economic terms in regards to bringing an end to alienation and yet political freedom cannot be realised because of the lack of a democratic regime. What Marxism has to recognise is that economic emancipation cannot exclusively realise freedom. It is also necessary that it upholds the type of political activity which is compatible with the principles of self-determination.

Fifthly: the laws of society are chosen by its members. People have the right to discuss and decide the laws of society. This does not necessarily mean that the result is the realisation of the laws that you prefer but it does mean that every citizen has the opportunity to decide what should be the laws of the land. Hence the result of this process of consultation is fairer than what occurs in a non-democratic country, and so even if you disagree with the result it is possible to accept that what has occurred is acceptable. To some extent this summary of the process of the formation of laws relates to an ideal society. However it can be argued that what occurs in practice in terms of the actions of elected officials is still superior to the unaccountable actions of the party in despotic regimes. Furthermore the importance of the law in despotic societies is undermined by the role of political controls of the judicial system and the inability of the people to challenge repressive laws. Dahl is right to argue that fair laws are more likely in a democratic society. But we would argue that this situation is also possible under socialism. Sixthly, democratic decisions allows for the exercise of moral responsibility. This point is very important. The despotic regime is not subject to any form of accountability and so is able to make decisions that do not express any sense of moral responsibility. However a government subject to the views of the electorate has to take into account the importance of the exercise of conscience.

Seventh: only democratic regimes can promote human development which requires open discussion and the ability to consider the rights and obligations of others as well as themselves: “All other regimes reduce, often drastically, the scope within which adults can act to protect their own interests, consider the interests of others, take responsibility for important decisions and engage freely with others in a search for the best decision. A democratic government is not enough to insure that people develop these qualities, but it is essential.”(101) It is not possible to refute this argument. The point is that political maturity is encouraged in a system in which open discussion is possible and the only type of society that is an expression of this prospect is a democracy. Eight: only a democratic government can promote political equality. However Dahl accepts that this principle is in contradiction with the condition of economic inequality. It is the aim of socialism to bring about economic and political equality. This process of reconciliation need not mean that undemocratic methods are utilised in order to the realisation of the aim of economic equality. But Dahl contends that these economic and political aims are contradictory and so resolution in a democratic manner is impossible. (To be evaluated in more detail later on)

Ninth: wars between governments of representative democracies do not occur. Marxists would argue that this situation is not because of the importance of democracy but instead because of the fact that the economic interests and political interests of the democratic countries were compatible and opposed to the interests of the authoritarian powers in World War One and World War Two. These wars expressed the opposition between rival imperialist powers and World War Two was not primarily a war for democracy against fascism. Furthermore, the ascendency of the USA to hegemonic power explains why war has not occurred in the recent period rather than because of the significance of democracy. However it has to be admitted that it is the general democratic aspiration of the peoples of the liberal democratic countries that war is to be opposed and this is the reason why these regimes only participate in limited wars with Third World regimes that oppose the interests of the major powers. Tenth: Dahl makes the controversial point that democracy and market economies are compatible and this relationship has resulted in prosperity: “In sum….modern democratic countries have generally tended to provide a more hospitable environment in which to achieve the advantages of market economies and economic growth than have the governments of nondemocratic regimes.”(102)

This standpoint is over-generalised and ignores the favourable conditions for economic growth because of the post-war boom, the domination of American capitalism, and the influence of the trade unions and state regulation. The utilisation of Keynesian methods meant the generation of the conditions for economic growth under exceptional conditions. But in the period since the 1980’s the commitment to the market economy has often meant an undermining of living standards and the creation of mass unemployment. It has been possible to utilise the methods of democracy in order to create mass support for measures that have actually undermined the welfare of millions of people. Hence it would be more accurate to suggest that liberal democracy is compatible with a system of economic inequality. However it has not been possible to develop support for socialism because of its very reputation for being undemocratic. The limitations of market economy and liberal democracy have not resulted in popular support for socialism.

It is hinted at by Dahl that Marxists support the rule of the guardians or an elite that acts on behalf of the working class. He contends that this type of regime results in despotism because of the tendency to realise absolute power.(103) Hence the alternative is democracy whereby the standpoint that some are better qualified to rule than others is rejected and instead all adults have the right to participate in the decision making process and the elaboration of policies: “Except on a very strong showing to the contrary in rare circumstances, protected by law, every adult subject to the laws of the state should be considered to be sufficiently well qualified to participate in the democratic process of governing that state.”(104) Dahl effectively argues that guardianship was the perspective of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the period of the beginning of the revolution. But, the standpoint of guardianship was not their initial aim and intention, and instead the gradual justification of this viewpoint was the result of civil war and the increasing unpopularity of the Bolshevik regime. However the only alternative to guardianship was the creation of a democratic regime in the terms outlined by Dahl. This would actually have been a progressive measure because the ultimate result of guardianship was the creation of the reactionary and repressive Stalin regime. However it is also necessary to mention that the element of participation in the democratic process has not been realised in the conditions of liberal democracy. Instead there is a tendency for the justification of rule by political elites even if despotism has not been realised. The promotion of participation is the most difficult part of any political system and it would be a complex issue for even the most democratic of socialist regimes. Hopefully, the combination of participation with representation can be the beginning of the resolution of this complex task within socialism. But Dahl has outlined an important argument, an elite is not more qualified than the members of the ordinary population to be the government of the state. There is nothing superior about rule by elites and instead the absence of democratic controls of that type of regime is likely to result in despotism. This is the result of the Bolshevik experience, and is an important reason why all principled Marxists should reject the conception of the party acting on behalf of the working class. This approach does not mean that the cause of socialism will make progress and instead results in the domination of a bureaucratic stratum. In other words the only manner in which the aims of socialism can make genuine advance is if the socialist regime conforms to the restraints imposed by democracy. This will mean that the working class, via its democratic representatives, will make decisions and the standpoint of guardianship will be firmly rejected. In this manner control over government decisions will be made by elected officials, there will be fair and frequent elections, freedom of expression and rights to alternative sources of information. (105)

Dahl presents contrasting arguments about the relationship of market capitalism to democracy. Firstly, the establishment of an economy based on decentralised regulation between private actors has led to economic growth and has resulted in a stable middle class that is committed to autonomy and freedom. The only alternative form of economic coordination is government by the state which results in the extreme centralisation of the planning process. The amount of information required to rune this economy is immense and so results in inefficiencies: “It is not the inefficiencies of a centrally planned economy, however, that are most injurious to democratic prospects. It is the economy’s social and political consequences. A centrally planned economy puts the resources of the entire economy at the disposal of government leaders. To foresee the likely consequences of that fantastic political windfall, we might recall the aphorism that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. A centrally planned economy issues an outright invitation to government leaders written in bold letters: you are free to use all your economic resources to consolidate and maintain your power!”(106) Dahl qualifies his view and accepts that societies without democracy can have dynamic market economies and capitalism has historically had periods of significant state intervention. But these qualifications do not undermine this central standpoint which is that state economic centralisation tends to result in despotism.

However we would dispute this view and suggest that it has been the introduction of an undemocratic political one party regime that has enabled the introduction of extreme centralised state planning to occur. This is what happened in the USSR and meant that the New Economic Policy was rejected and replaced with the five year plan. Hence the actual cause of despotism was actually the domination of the party state. In this context the type of planning that was introduced reflected the character of the regime in political terms. Thus we would argue that it is possible to develop democratic forms of planning that would express the development of democratic socialism. In this context the role of state centralisation would not be to increase the economic resources and power of the party bureaucracy and instead would be about the creation of efficiency and regulation within the economy. The realisation of democracy within this form of society would mean that the inefficiencies of the command economy of the USSR could be overcome and instead it would be possible to promote workers control of the economy that would truly bring about socialist relations of production. In this situation the common good of all would replace the interests of a bureaucracy that was based on control of the resources of the economy via the role of the centralised plan. However Dahl is correct to indicate the relationship between the centralised plan and the interests of the party elite.

Dahl also accepts that there has never been a capitalist system that has not been influenced by state regulation in order to overcome economic inequalities. He also accepts that the result of economic inequality has been political inequality in the distribution of political resources. The political system of liberal democracy has tended to favour the rich and powerful. But he argues that despite these limitations there is no alternative to market capitalism, and Social Democracy and trade unions have adapted to its domination.(107) He calls upon democratic society to improve civic participation in the political system and to enhance access to means of political information. But his overall conclusion is pessimistic: “Will democratic countries, whether old, new, or in transition, rise to these challenges and to other they will surely confront? If they fail to do so, the gap between democratic ideals and democratic realities, already large, will grow even greater and an era of democratic triumph will be followed by an era of democratic deterioration and decline.”(108) He does vaguely suggest that challenges can be overcome but his overall sense is that of resignation and a sense that the problems are too great to be surmounted.

In contrast the approach of Marxism can represent greater confidence about the future of democracy. We can argue that the alternative to the limitations of democracy within market capitalism is the development of a mass movement that can express superior forms of democracy. In other words there does not have to be an historical impasse based on failed forms of socialism and flawed liberal democracy. Instead the promotion of class struggle can still provide possibilities that are constructive and represent the potential to be genuinely democratic. We cannot provide any guarantees that these alternatives will be successful but we can suggest that they express something that is superior to the limitations of capitalism. One of the reasons that socialism still has something to say is because it can make worthwhile reasons why it is connected to democracy.

In his book ‘After the Revolution’, Dahl modifies his views about the lack of democracy within a centrally planned economy. He contends: “Thus the apparent strict association between dictatorship and the state owned centrally directed economic orders of the “socialist” countries is contaminated, so to speak, by Leninism. With its arrogant assignment of the role of the vanguard to the Communist party, which in practice means the hegemony of the party leaders (or leader) in a one party system, orthodox Leninism denies a place to the political pluralism that a country requires if it is to be democratic. Even during the brief period of the New Economic Policy, Leninist doctrine led directly to the suppression of opposition parties. In short, independently of a state-owned, centrally directed economy, Leninist political views would no doubt have been sufficient to bring about the suppression of oppositions and the creation of authoritarian regimes.”(109)This viewpoint seems to be a more sophisticated understanding of the creation of the one party regime in the USSR and other countries. The ideological impulse to this development has been the relationship of Leninist ideology with unfavourable circumstances for the development of democracy such as civil war. However it would actually be one-sided to emphasise the role of political factors without the importance of the economic. It can be argued that the consolidation of the one party state regime under Stalin was reinforced by the installation of the command economy and the centralised plan. This enabled the creation of a bureaucratic class to occur because of its control of the economic resources. Hence the creation of ‘socialism from above’ was connected to the importance of the centralised plan and the ability of the party to obtain control of the allocation of resources and the domination of the proceeds of the surplus. However what enabled this process to occur was the particular elitist defence of Leninism and the vanguard party that was upheld by Stalinism.

Dahl also mentions that the character of capitalism is not based on the exclusive role of the market and instead it has also been influenced by state regulation and the pressure of trade unions and the socialist parties to introduce reforms that have made the system more humane. He concludes from his analysis of the history of capitalist society that: “It seems obvious, then, that the search for solutions to the problems generated by a predominantly privately owned market-orientated society has been and will continue to be a major element in the political agenda of every democratic country.”(110)This does not mean that the only alternative is to support the market, but instead it is necessary to maintain the pluralism of society. But he also contends that the alternatives do not mean support for public ownership: “Probably nothing strengthened the impetus of socialists toward bureaucratic centralization more than their implacable rejection of economic controls in general and the market in particular. Because they could not envisage a vital coordinating role for economic controls, they were trapped into dependency on the state. Being dependent on the state, they had to reject industrial democracy, for in the absence of economic controls, the only co-ordinating mechanism that remained was governmental controls. But co-ordination by governmental control was obviously inconsistent with autonomy and self-government in the firm. What would industrial democracy do to the sacred central plan?”(111)The implication is that with the influence of the market it could be possible to introduce industrial democracy and provide an alternative to the strict centralisation of the plan. A balance between the market, governmental controls and the role of various forms of industrial democracy could provide an alternative to an unlimited market or strict governmental controls. What is also being suggested is that the problem of the inequality of resources and the lack of democracy within economic activity is being addressed.

Dahl’s support for industrial democracy is welcome and it does address a serious inequality within capitalist society. However it could also be suggested that as long as this economic democracy is located within capitalism it will create tensions and problems. The crucial issue will be who will manage: the workers or the capitalists? Dahl tries to overcome this problem by developing a form of industrial democracy that would satisfy all contending forces but this could mean that a ‘safe’ type of industrial democracy will ultimately be unsatisfactory for the workforce. This was the point made by Trotsky in the Transitional Programme: “The working out of even the most elementary economic plan from the point of view of the exploited, not the exploiters, - is impossible without workers control, that is, without the eyes of the workers penetrating all the open and concealed mechanisms of the capitalist economy……..Thus workers control becomes a school for planned economy. On the basis of the experience of control, the proletariat will prepare itself for direct management of nationalized industry when the hour for the eventuality strikes.”(112)The point is that if we are talking about genuine workers control that is introduced because of the action of the rank and file and this condition will always be unstable because of the fact that it represents militant activity that has the potential to realise socialist relations of production. In contrast, if industrial democracy, however well intentioned, is the outcome of government action it will become tame and ultimately alienate the workers. It is this second and inferior form of industrial democracy that is supported by Dahl. This reform is unworkable and is unlikely to satisfy both capitalists and workers. Hence real, dynamic workers control is likely to arise during periods of the intensification of the class struggle. The issues which arise are related to dual power – which class rules in the workplace? Thus principled workers control requires revolutionary transformation in order that it is implemented. It was the forgotten promise of the October revolution that its aim of workers democracy was soon to be neglected and rejected.

It is to the credit of Dahl that he is opposed to the economic despotism of capitalism. Hence he supports industrial democracy, but he is opposed to the revolution that would make it credible. He is basically a reformist who wants to improve the democratic procedures of capitalism. Marxism would basically suggest that this reformist perspective is no longer credible. However we retain Dahl’s ardent support for democracy and would suggest that is with socialism despite the limitations of Leninism that enables democracy to be finally realised in all its forms.

FOOTNOTES

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