IS MARXISM AUTHORITARIAN?

It has often been suggested that the repressive and authoritarian character of the Marxist regimes of the Soviet Union and elsewhere were an indication that the ideology of Marxism was practically expressed in terms of the domination of the role of a party elite. In this context it could be suggested that the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was a justification of this situation and that this meant that revolutionary objectives were not compatible with the role of a political system based on the importance of democracy. But Marx did not consider that the dictatorship of the proletariat was opposed to the expression of popular democracy. Hence he suggested in terms of the role of the revolutionary Paris Commune that it was based on the connection of a system of genuine popular democracy with the creation of a revolutionary government based on the interests of the working class. But the problem was that it was not possible to consolidate this regime because of the success of the process of counterrevolution. After this development it became apparent that the interests of the workers became defended and upheld by the role of socialist parties. It seemed obvious that these organisations would become the basis for the expression of the interests of the workers. Hence it seemed inevitable that socialist parties would act on behalf of the workers and so the aspect of elitism seemed to be an inherent aspect of the expression of the aim of socialism. This elitist standpoint seemed to be confirmed by the elaboration of the conception of the revolutionary party by Kautsky and Lenin, who suggested that the workers could only develop a limited trade union consciousness and so the aim of socialism would be promoted by the role of a Marxist party. In other words, the revolutionary organisation would define the very objectives of the workers and so in that manner have an important role in the elaboration of the aims of the struggle for socialism. This elitist stance seemed to be confirmed by the October revolution of 1917 in Russia which led to the formation of a one-party regime which claimed to be acting on behalf of the interests of the workers and peasants. The ultimate expression of this development was the formation of the authoritarian Stalinist regime which seemed to suggest that the logical culmination of the application of Marxism was the creation of an elitist social formation which meant the denial of the accountability of this type of society to the people. However, Kautsky attempted to establish that this development was in opposition to the aims and principles of Marxism. He contended that the approach of Marx was based on a recognition of the economic development of capitalism which would create the political possibilities for socialism in terms of the generation of the role of a large and educated working class that would be able to vote in favour of the development of this perspective. Hence the elitism of Bolshevism was based on the fact that Russia was not economically or politically capable of establishing a credible type of democratic socialist society. In other words, the voluntarism of the Bolsheviks meant that they adopted an elitist political perspective that was not based on the democratic approach concerning the issue of transition to socialism. This meant that Bolshevism was the practical undermining of the principles of Marxism rather than their confirmation. But it could be suggested that there was no coherent conception of a process of revolutionary change and this limitation was connected to the lack of a Marxist understanding of socialism. Thus, it would seem that the superiority of the Bolsheviks was that they at least were concerned to develop an effective perspective of revolutionary change in the context of the situation of economic and political crisis caused by the first world war. Their opponents like Kautsky seemed to instead have a cautious concern for merely promoting a perspective of reformist change within capitalism. This meant a polarisation developed between an emphasis on the merits of bourgeois democracy as the basis to uphold the interests of the working class which was contrasted with a more revolutionary approach and the expression 0f a different and more popular form of democracy. Only a few people like Rosa Luxemburg seemed to understand the necessity to connect the role of democracy with the development of revolutionary change. The ultimate result of these tensions was that Marxist theory seemed to be polarised between a cautious reformism or an authoritarian revolutionary approach that justified the domination of a one-party regime. In this context the aspect of the importance of popular democracy as the aspect of a socialist society seemed to be either ignored or underestimated. The theoretical and political limitations of Marxism could be considered to have resulted in the justification of authoritarianism, and this aspect seemed to have been confirmed by the authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union.

It could be suggested that the initial theoretical problem was created by the vague character of Marx’s aims concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism. He did not outline in a detailed manner what he meant by these aims and so the aspect of the relationship of class and party in relation to the realisation of these objectives was not clarified. Instead, the assumption was being made in dogmatic terms that the dictatorship of the proletariat would in some essential manner express the importance of the principles of democracy even though this was not established in terms of the elaboration of the aspects of this type of political system. An assumption was being made that a popular character of the proletarian revolution would automatically result in the creation of a democratic system, which would mean that the character of the government would be based on an expression of the aspirations of the workers. There was no recognition that the very exercise of power by the proletarian government could result in the development of a situation of domination that would mean that the principles of democracy were not being realised. Instead, assumptions were being made that expressed the dogmatic assumption that the process of proletarian revolution could only result in the formation of a form of government that was accountable to the workers. But how could the workers exercise power except in terms of the creation of a government based on the importance of its most conscious adherents? Hence the issue of the relation of a worker’s government to the members of the proletariat outside of this administration would tend to create questions about the possible corrupting aspects of power. Therefore, a dilemma seemed to be apparent in relation to Marx’s revolutionary perspective. The very possibility for the consolidation of the role of the revolutionary administration would seem to suggest that this development would be realised in terms of a situation of authoritarian political supremacy of the members of the government. In other words, the development 0f authoritarian domination of an elite would seem to be the logical outcome of the failure to establish the role of the revolutionary government in terms of the application of democratic principles. Instead, the political justification of this type of administration would be based on the dogmatic assumption that the only manner in which the interests of the workers could be realised is by the role of a system based on the importance of the government acting on behalf of the people. However, Marx never articulated this possible logic of his approach and instead defined the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat in vague terms. In this unsatisfactory manner the tensions in his approach were glossed over and instead the assumption was being made that the revolutionary character of the class struggle could only result in a progressive and emancipatory outcome. This meant that the possibility that a party could exploit the discontent of the workers in an elitist manner was not being analysed and the necessity of a democratic conception of the realisation of an alternative to capitalism was not elaborated. Instead, it was the Chartist movement that independently of Marx outlined the importance for a democratic system of universal suffrage in order to realise the interests of the workers in an effective and principled manner. Ultimately the problem was that Marx’s aims of the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism were not connected to the role of the mass struggles of the workers in the 1840’s. What was not understood by Marx was that the establishment of a genuinely democratic system based on the role of universal suffrage would represent a significant progress for the workers and so enable the possibility to make advances towards the development of revolutionary change that would express the potential for socialism. The domination of the capitalist class was connected to an elitist political system and was not based on the role of universal suffrage. Hence, the establishment of popular democracy would not automatically result in the end of capitalism, but it would develop the possibility to increase the influence of the workers within society. In this manner a favourable balance of class forces would be created that would facilitate the possibility to transform society in progressive terms. Marx could only envisage the role of the democratic republic as expressing the interests of the capitalist class and so could not recognise its progressive potentialities for the workers. This apparent indifference to the importance of democracy did not represent an authoritarian approach but rather that he considered this aspect to be secondary in relation to the tasks of proletarian revolutionary change. The point is that the aim of the dictatorship of the proletariat was not connected to the importance of the role of democracy. This apparent one-sidedness did not represent the justification of authoritarianism because it was assumed that the proletarian administration would be genuinely popular and so in that manner would resolve the issue of democracy in the post-revolutionary society. But it was not outlined in convincing terms how this expression of popular democracy could be realised by a revolutionary government based on support of the workers. Instead, this approach was assumed rather than elaborated in convincing terms. Hence Marx does not justify authoritarianism, but neither is he apparently aware of this issue for the role of the post-revolutionary government. Instead, he assumes that the post revolutionary government will combine the aspect of dictatorship and democracy. Hence it is left to the people after Marx to tackle the issue of the political character of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Kautsky develops the perspective that a genuine socialist government will be elected by the people as a result of the role of elections to a parliamentary institution. This means that the approach of the dictatorship of the proletariat is being effectively rejected and replaced with the importance of the process of democratic institutions which create within capitalism the political basis for transition to socialism. In this context the election of a socialist government acts in order to create the possibility of radical change that will result in the replacement of capitalism with a different and emancipatory type of society. But this approach assumes that the parties of the bourgeoisie will accept the verdict of the political process of democratic elections, and it is also being suggested that the socialist party will not limit its demands to what is possible under capitalism and instead continue to uphold revolutionary aims within this parliamentary system. The other approach is that of Lenin who contends that a revolutionary party will establish the political character of the process of change and so act as a vanguard organisation that supervises the creation 0f the conditions that make the transition to socialism possible. These elitist views are only opposed by Rosa Luxemburg who outlines the approach of the role of the mass strikes of the trade unions that generates the possibility of the development of revolutionary change. But what is intellectually dominant is the view that the role of the socialist party establishes the political conditions that makes transition to a post-capitalist society feasible. To what extent is Marx responsible for this apparent justification of elitism? We would suggest that the answer to this question is inconclusive because Marx failed to outline a conception of the relationship of party and class in relation to the development of the possibility of change. Instead, he effectively indicates the importance of the objectives of the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism without elaborating a strategy concerning how this will be realised. This is why it is precisely the task of Marxism to provide an understanding of how this aim will be achieved. In this context a tension between reformism and revolutionary perspectives becomes apparent and this issue is never resolved. However, what develops is a justification of the role of the party acting on behalf of the workers as the most effective manner in which the aspect of class interests can be realised, either in reformist or revolutionary terms. In other words, the concept of proletarian self-emancipation which Is vaguely asserted by Marx is increasingly rejected in terms of the emphasis on the role of the party as the most conscious and dynamic expression of the interests of the workers. But the issue to be resolved is whether this development is ultimately the outcome of elitist aspects in the approach of Marx. This issue will be evaluated in terms of an evaluation of the work of Tom Rockmore entitled: “Marx’s Dream from Capitalism to Communism” (University of Chicago Press, 2018)

Rockmore considers that Marx’s approach is based on a dogmatic rejection of the validity of a capitalist system based on the private ownership of the means of production: “Marx does not attack property in general but rather private ownership of the means of production. He regards this institution not as useful but as pernicious, and as the main obstacle to human development in modern industrial society beyond the minimal capacity to meet basic or reproductive needs. Here and in later writings, Marx simply assumes without argument that private property in all its forms is illegitimate, hence that it is legitimate to do away with it. In this way, he rides roughshod over a practice that many think is an important, indeed vital component of human development, in simply ignoring the many efforts to justify this institution.” (p17) The impression being justified is that Marx is not able to establish the premises for a transcendence of capitalism except in terms of the importance of dogmatic reasoning. But this criticism seems to ignore the importance of Marx analysis of the relations of production of the capitalist economic system in which the interests of capital are based on the exploitation of labour. Marx implies that this situation is not defensible because of the apparent fact that the productive role of labour is the basis of a process of the accumulation of capital. The assumption being made is that this situation will only be improved when the forces of labour are able to define the character and objectives of the economic system. However, the actual important problem is that Marx does not outline a perspective that would enable the relations of production to be transformed in an emancipatory manner. Instead, he only vaguely refers to the possibilities for the cooperative character of labour to be realised. The important problem is that his various works seem to lack a credible strategy of change for the development of the hegemonic supremacy for the role of labour. Rockmore suggests that Marx has a dynamic conception of the character of the workers as a subject of change, but the problem is that this perspective is non convincing since Marx also outlines the capacity of the forces of capital to uphold its economic ability to ensure the subordination of labour within the relations of production. But Rockmore implies that Marx resolves this problem theoretically in terms of the conception of the dynamism of labour as an economic subject which implies that it will ultimately have the capacity to overcome the domination of capital. However, the problem is that this apparent perspective of Marx seems to have been falsified by the very events of history which seem to indicate the possibility for capital to undermine the realisation of a potential for change by the role of labour. Only in terms of the elitist substitution of the role of the party acting on behalf of the class has it been possible to end the domination of capital in certain countries. Thus, the difficulties and complexities of achieving the success of revolutionary change has developed the possibility for the creation of the domination of an elite party over society.

But it could also be suggested that there is a more important objection concerning the credibility of Marx’s approach, which is that he has an unrealistic conception of the objective of communism, which is summarised by Rockmore in the following terms: “Marx’s solution to the question of human flourishing turns on the identifying the practical conditions of human freedom through the revolutionary transformation of modern industrial society into communism. He understands capitalism as well as communism through the self-production of finite human beings. In capitalism individuals meet basic human needs through work. In a future communist society, individuals will supposedly realize human potentials through free human activity.” (p46) But this approach is vague and it could be said to fail to establish how communism will be able to realise these aims because the very conception of an emancipatory type of human activity is not established in convincing terms. Instead, what would be more convincing would be to try and elaborate a conception of productive activity under communism that was not alienating and instead expressed the creative role of the expression of economic activity by the workers. It could be suggested that the failure to develop this understanding facilitated the possibility to justify an elitist conception of socialism in which nationalised production was administered by the role of a supervising strata of society that was able to define the aims of the economy in terms of its apparent expression of a higher level of class consciousness. In other words, the incomplete character of Marx’s conception of the communist society meant that the various ambiguous aspects about how this social formation was to be organised became defined in terms of the apparent ability of the dominant revolutionary party to define the character of communism in an elitist manner. Hence the ultimate elaboration of socialism by the Bolsheviks could be said to be a faithful interpretation of a Marxist understanding because it could be suggested that they were merely developing the unfinished aspects of Marx’s own perspective. However, it could also be indicated that Marx did outline some of the principles of what would constitute an emancipatory type of society in terms of the assumption of an end to the exploitative domination of a ruling class within the relations of production. The aspect of the extraction of a surplus would become defined by the interests of labour within the relations of production. This perspective implies the development of the supremacy of the role of the producers in the organisation and character of economic activity. Indeed, the Bolsheviks were initially committed to this type of approach. However, the difficulties of developing production in the context of a situation of civil war meant that the aspect of economic democracy of labour was replaced by the consolidation of the domination of the party elite in relation to the role of one management. Such a situation could only be justified in terms of the practical demands of the situation and the problems involved in developing a feasible type of economic democracy of the producers. This meant that the vagueness of Marx’s conception of communism was contrasted to the empirical adjustments of the Bolsheviks to an unfavourable economic and political situation. There was no justification in the works of Marx for this development, but it could be suggested that Marx could not have anticipated the complex situation after the Bolshevik revolution. The Bolsheviks were responding to an unfavourable development of economic and political upheaval which meant that the incomplete character of Marx’s conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism was empirically overcome by the justification of the hegemonic role of the party in the process of transition to an emancipatory society. It could be suggested that Marx’s works did not justify these empirical developments, but nor could it be argued that he would necessarily be against the policies of the Bolsheviks concerning the character of the post-revolutionary society. Instead, the urgent demands of the empirical situation meant that the Bolsheviks effectively suggested that they were acting in accordance with a Marxist perspective of the necessity to strengthen the regime of the proletarian dictatorship. But in order to justify this understanding it had to be considered that there were no differences of interests in terms of the relations between party and class. This approach was actually unprecedented because Marx had not elaborated an understanding of the relationship of party and class in the post-revolutionary society. Instead in a vague manner he assumed that the proletariat as a class would be able to act in accordance with its interests and so introduce measures to create communism. In other words, it was the very aspect of the role of the party which was effectively not considered in terms of Marx’s conception of communism and the aspects involved in the creation of that type of society. In this manner it could be said to be an innovation of Bolshevism in relation to its primary emphasis on the role of the party in the creation of a socialist and then communist social formation. Indeed, it could be suggested that the almost naïve approach of Marx was to effectively consider the act of proletarian revolution as an expression of the activity of the workers which implied that the role of a revolutionary party was essentially of a secondary character, or indeed not actually required as a result of this act of self-emancipation. However, this approach of Marx does suggest that the emphasis of the Bolsheviks on the role of the party in the revolutionary process and the creation of communism was an innovation which could not necessarily be considered to be a faithful expression of Marx’s perspective of revolutionary change. But it could also be suggested that Marx would have been critical of Kautsky’s effective rejection of a revolutionary conception of class struggle. Instead, it could be argued that his approach was most compatible with Luxemburg’s conception of the importance of the mass struggle of the workers for creating the economic and political possibilities for revolutionary change and communism.

In other words, the ultimate problem in strategic terms was that Marx did not elaborate a precise and coherent conception of the process of revolutionary change and instead made vague suggestions concerning the possibilities of the transformation of capitalism into the dictatorship of the proletariat. This meant that whilst he was quite emphatic about the objectives of the process of revolutionary change, he did not indicate how this development was to be realised in terms of the popular participation of the workers in the process of struggle to achieve these objectives. The vagueness of his strategic approach meant that it would become feasible for Lenin and others to outline the political character of the process of revolutionary change in terms of the dominant role of the revolutionary party which essentially instructs the workers concerning the importance of achieving the realisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism. It could not be said that Lenin and others distorted the meaning of the strategy of Marx, but instead they acted to elaborate his approach in terms of this development of the relationship between party and class. However, it could be said that the interpretation of the approach of Marxism by Lenin and others was based on a refutation of the initial emphasis on the possibility of the workers to be able to define and realise their objectives in terms of the importance of self-organisation and the dynamism of mass movements. Instead, these aspects became related to the development of the important hegemonic role of the party which would influence the workers to become adherents of a revolutionary approach concerning political change and the aspiration to realise communism. This elaboration of the perspectives of Marxism could not be considered to be a distortion of the principles and aims of Marx but instead an elaboration of the understanding of the relationship of party and class concerning the process of change. However, this interpretation of the strategy of Marx indicated the importance of the revolutionary organisation in a manner that Marx may not have supported. This was because the apparent emphasis on the hegemonic role of the party in the process of change may be considered to challenge the understanding of the importance of the principles of the self-emancipation of the working class. But it could be suggested that in empirical terms there was no alternative to this interpretation of the character of the class struggle. It was unrealistic to suggest that the workers could spontaneously develop the level of consciousness and the related forms of activity that would result in the generation of the conditions of revolutionary change. However, it was necessary in this situation that a democratic relationship between the party and class be developed in order to overcome any possibility of an authoritarian distortion of the objectives of communism. It could be suggested that this necessity was not realised and instead the role of the revolutionary party was based on the assumption of an elitist relationship to the workers. This took the form of both a reformist and revolutionary approach concerning the class struggle. Only Rosa Luxemburg seemed aware of the political limitations of this type of political approach with her conception of the importance of the mass struggles of the workers if genuine revolutionary change was to be realised. But the problem was that her standpoint become ultimately marginal when compared to the influence of these more elitist conceptions of the character of the class struggle and the character of communism.

However, Rockmore suggests that Marx’s emphasis was not on the issue of the authoritarian potential of the process of change and the creation of communism but instead on outlining how the contradictions of capitalism would result in a different type of society. He comments: “According to Marx, the institution of private property is not only morally unjustified and unjustifiable but also pernicious. He claims that capitalism is not stable but rather unstable. He attacks as well the orthodox economic conviction of the stability of capitalism in suggesting its inevitable replacement through a different organisation of the means of production. He finally rejects the view that human being either do or possibly could flourish under capitalism in calling for its replacement through communism.” (p52) But it is necessary to suggest that this perspective of Marx was connected to his emphasis on the possibilities created by the co-operative character of labour. The understanding was being developed that the co-operative role of the workers within capitalism was creating the conditions for the possibility of economic and political change that would result in communism. However, this perspective did not address the issue of the hegemony of bourgeois ideology that would undermine the possibility of this development. Indeed, in his work ‘Capital’ Marx did outline how the workers became to accept the very domination of capitalism as a durable aspect of social reality. Therefore, the logical conclusion of his approach was to imply the importance of the role of the revolutionary party in relation to the issue of the development of the potential for change that would result in communism. But this logical understanding was never developed in a coherent and convincing manner. Instead, it was implicitly being suggested that the co-operative character of the role of labour would ultimately be expressed in the development of a consciousness of this aspect and that this would facilitate the creation of a compatible form of political organisation and mass action in order to realise the objective of a different and emancipatory form of society which was vaguely defined as communism. However, this vague perspective was not connected to a precise strategy of change that would connect the possible discontent of the workers with the capitalist system to the development of a perspective of transformation. This meant that it was Marxists like Lenin who outlined a perspective for revolutionary change in a more systematic manner. In this manner Marx’s understanding of the revolutionary character of the working class became projected onto the role of the party. The ultimate theoretical and political problem was the interpretation of the work of Marx which could be said to justify a version of an elitist approach. It would be unfair to criticise Marx for this development because it could be suggested that Marx could not necessarily anticipate how his views would be interpreted by his followers. But it could also be indicated that an important problem was that Marx did not elaborate a strategy of revolutionary change that was based on the significance of the dynamic role of the workers. Instead, this perspective was only implied by his approach. This meant that the apparent lack of a strategy of change based on the dynamic role of the workers became overcome in the elitist terms of the increasing emphasis on the role of the party as being crucial for the prospects of success in relation to the class struggle.

Indeed, Rockmore considers that this elitist approach was always implicit in the standpoint of Marx: “In anticipating Lenin’s view of the party as the vanguard of the revolution, very early on in his career Marx thinks the proletariat can an indeed must learn from the philosophers in transforming society. Yet neither what they will be able to learn, nor how they will be able to carry out this task is specified. Kant correctly thinks that not everyone is capable of philosophy…..Marx suggests, contra Kant, that the proletariat is in a permanent non-age or state of immaturity. This view presupposes that the working class does not now and will not later have the capacity to think for itself. It is therefore, unable to learn what to do on its own…..Marx’s quasi Platonic conviction that, since the proletariat cannot think for itself, philosophers must think for it, points towards philosophers and philosophy. It therefore points beyond philosophers towards a political party, hence by extension towards the dictatorship of the party over the proletariat, thus towards Leninism and Maoism, its main contemporary exponents.” (p155) In other words it is being suggested that the origins of authoritarianism in Marxism actually originates in the approach of Marx. But this view is very problematical because there is no obvious comment in the work of Marx that would suggest this conclusion. Indeed, it is questionable whether Marx ever really discusses in systematic terms the party and class relation. Thus, we can assume in a naïve manner that he actually supported a perspective of the self-emancipation of the working class in which the role of the party was minimal. In an incomplete manner his work on the Paris Commune did outline the possible principles of the relation of party and class in that the party could express the aspirations of the workers to create an emancipatory type of society. But this understanding was not conceived in terms of the development of formulations concerning the relation of party and class. Instead, it was assumed that socialist type parties could articulate the very aspirations of the workers, and so without the importance of the consciousness and activity of the proletariat it would be impossible to understand the role of the revolutionary party. Hence the party could not be considered to have a leadership relationship to the workers but instead was the most systematic expression of the very aspirations of the proletariat. Without the dynamism of the workers the importance of the party could not be conceivable. In other words, there is no distinction between party and class in the approach of Marx. Therefore, we can suggest that the development of a genuine and effective relationship of party and class is important if the possibility of revolutionary change is to be realised. But this means that the very possible dynamism of the working class becomes connected to the expression of the revolutionary programme of the party. Without this development the prospects of change are unlikely to be realised. This means the party does not instruct the workers in an elitist and authoritarian manner, but also without the development of this relationship the possibilities of revolutionary transformation are unlikely to occur. However, this is all that can be implied in terms of the approach of Marx. Important complex aspects of the relation of party and class, such as the problem of substitutionism, and the party acting in an elitist manner on behalf of the class, are not tackled in his approach. Thus, the elitist aspects of the approach of Lenin are an innovation that cannot be justified in terms of the standpoint of Marx. Instead, it can only be assumed that Lenin’s standpoint is connected to the logic of authoritarianism concerning the relation of party and class.

Indeed, Rockmore suggests that Marx lacks a credible perspective of the very process of proletarian revolution and indeed does not have a satisfactory conception of communism: “He proclaims to be sure, that capitalism is driven to its knees, the proletariat will turn away from a system of economics based on private property and towards a system of economics in which private property no longer exists. But he provides no sustained account of this political process, no vision other than the generic idea of revolution, of how, when, and through what means the proletariat will wrest control of private property from the capitalist class. And he also fails to offer accounts of how the destruction of capitalism will lead to communism or contribute to the deeper human flourishing in the modern industrial space.” (p193) It is suggested by Rockmore that these very omissions in the approach of Marx are ultimately overcome by Lenin in the elitist manner of the importance of the role of the party in the creation of the post-capitalist society. But we can question whether Marx would have supported this type of theoretical and political innovation. Instead, all that is being implied by Marx in relation to his aim of the dictatorship of the proletariat is that this type of society suggests the dominant role of the workers in the organisation and character of the economic and political formation. In this context the ultimate approach of the Bolsheviks was a pragmatic innovation that expressed an undermining of the intention of Marx to establish a type of society based on the principles and expression of the participatory and dominant role of the workers. Certainly, it could be suggested that Marx had not established the principles and aspects of a post-capitalist society in a satisfactory manner, but this does not mean that his limited and brief perspective was a justification for the creation of an authoritarian society. Instead in inadequate terms he indicated the basic principles of communism as a society organised and administered by the workers, which implied the necessity for the organisation of this social formation in accordance with the expression of the interests of the producers. The only manner in which this type of social formation could be developed would be in terms of the expression of the role of its democratic development in terms of the activity and organisation of the workers as the most important class within this type of society. Thus, the aspects of opposition to capitalism would become transformed into the organisation of the economy in terms of the principles of democratic participation of the people as producers and the expression of the connection of this form of democracy in terms of the development of a compatible type of political system. Hence it can be suggested that the very necessity to realise the principles of economic democracy in order to replace the domination of capital with that of the supremacy of labour would imply that the only compatible political aspect of this type of system would be a type of democracy based on the role of different parties. The expression of democracy in political terms would represent a supportive aspect of the development of economic democracy. In this manner it could be suggested that the premises of Marx’s approach were opposed to authoritarianism. However, this assumption is never outlined in terms of a detailed perspective of the economic and political aspects of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This meant that it became possible to interpret Marx in elitist and authoritarian terms. But it could be suggested that this understanding was not a principled interpretation of Marx, but instead the justification of the dictatorship of the party in circumstances of the difficulties of a revolutionary process that Marx could not have necessarily anticipated.

Rockmore outlines the possible interpretations of Marx’s understanding of the relationship of party and class and the dictatorship of the proletariat in two contrasting terms. Firstly: “There is a basic discrepancy between a theory that calls for democracy in the transition from capitalism to communism and a practice, that since it calls for dictatorship, obviously denies democracy in either theory or practice. There seems to be only two main ways to understand the difference. One possibility is that in turning from a dictatorship of the proletariat to a dictatorship over the proletariat an essential element of Marx’s position was simply betrayed through the difference between Marxism and Marx. This suggests that through simple ineptitude or for whatever other reason, a dictatorship of the proletariat turned into dictatorship over the proletariat. Thus one might argue that Lenin’s proclaimed intention to realize democracy through the October revolution led to its opposite as the result of political errors later committed by himself or other Bolsheviks.”(p198) The other perspective is that: “Another possibility is that in practice Marx’s theory of the transition from capitalism to communism was inevitably stultified since it could only be realized, if it could be realized at all, through the dictatorship over the proletariat, hence through what in practice turned out to be a necessary stultification of Marx’s intentions. To return to our example, in this case one could argue that Lenin not only did not but could not have realized democracy through the Bolshevik revolution, which led and in fact could only have led to a dictatorship over the proletariat. This explains Luxemburg’s ability, in following out the foreseeable consequences of the Leninist theory of the party, to forecast its transformation in practice into a dictatorship over the proletariat. In short, if Marx’s theoretical solution runs through the establishment of democracy in which the proletariat exercises power, then either it was later betrayed by Marxism in practice, or if it was not betrayed, it simply could not be realized in practice. It is difficult to know where the correct answer lies.” (p198)

The first viewpoint of Rockmore suggests that the approach of democracy and dictatorship could not be reconciled and so the imposition of the approach of the dictatorship of the proletariat led to the rejection of the role of democracy and instead resulted in the creation of an autocratic and repressive regime based on the domination of the workers by the party elite. In other words, the theoretical perspective of the aim of the dictatorship of the proletariat was flawed because the very attempt to realise this objective could only result in a type of society that was unable to express the principles and aspects of this standpoint. The very practical expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat was manifested in the rule of the party. But this apparent result of the Bolshevik revolution was not the aim of Marx who instead did consider that the dictatorship of the proletariat would result in a democratic regime based on the genuine participation of the people in the realisation of the objectives of the creation of an emancipatory communist society. It could be argued that Marx’s approach was flawed, and he did not consider the possible problems involved in the attempt to realise a democratic social formation. But this apparent limitation does not mean that he justified the domination of a revolutionary elite. However, it would also be dogmatic to suggest that the political practice of Bolshevism was simply a betrayal of the objectives of Marx. Instead, the practical difficulties of the post-revolutionary society meant that the revolutionary Bolshevik government reacted by adopting the authoritarian measures of policies based on the effective rejection of the principles of democracy. Marx could not have anticipated the difficulties of the post-revolutionary situation in Russia and so the expression of a form of elite government on behalf of the interests of the workers and peasants could be said to be the result of an unfavourable situation that did not favour the genuine participation of the people in the process of the realisation of the objectives of the attempt to create the economic and political conditions for socialism. Indeed, Marx did not develop an understanding of what would be the political aspects and character of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and so in this sense the approach of the Bolsheviks was a pragmatic response to the difficulties of the post-revolutionary situation in economic and political terms. The Bolsheviks could suggest that they were implementing Marx’s understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but this contention cannot be considered to be an expression of the approach of Marx which was that this development would in some sense be the result of the activity of the workers rather than the result of the policy of a political party. In other words, Marx did not discuss the significance of a revolutionary party and instead assumed that it would be the spontaneous collective and participatory act of the workers that would create and consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat. This meant that the development of a situation in which the party ruled on behalf of the people did not have prior theoretical justification in the approach of Marx. Instead, he seemed to assume that the aspects of democracy and dictatorship would be resolved by the apparent possibility of the workers to be able to organise a society in emancipatory terms. But this assumption did not mean that the Bolsheviks acted against the principles and aims of Marx concerning the development of the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Instead, they were reacting to what they considered to be the practical economic and political tasks of the situation as it developed in the post-revolutionary period. It could be argued that the unfavourable aspects of the situation meant that the attempt to create a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat could only assume the form of the aspect of the hegemonic role of the revolutionary party acting on behalf of the workers. In this context the effective rejection of the principles of Marx concerning the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat would only occur when it could be considered that the Bolshevik government became an elite formation ruling in terms of its own distinct interests rather than expressing the aims of the workers. Thus, it could be suggested that the basic approach of Marx could not be realised under the complex conditions of the post-revolutionary situation in Russia. The role of the Bolsheviks acting on behalf of the workers was essentially an inevitability in relation to the adverse economic and political situation. However, this did not mean that the perspective of Marx concerning the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat had become superseded in relation to these complex circumstances. Instead, Marx had outlined an approach that would represent the theoretical and practical criteria by which to evaluate the policies of the Bolsheviks. If it could be shown that their actions were undermining the possibility to realise the interests of the worker’s, it could be shown that this party represented a government that was increasingly of an authoritarian and elite character. However, the situation was very complicated because there were aspects of the approach of war communism and the New Economic Policy that could be said to undermine the realisation of the interests of the workers. The major point is that the Bolshevik government ended the role of economic democracy within the production process because this was said to undermine the efficient development of industrial production. Hence the apparent requirements of the economic situation meant that the influence of the workers within the economy had to be ended and instead the consolidation of the role of the enterprise managers was strengthened. This meant that the ultimate criteria adopted in order to define the post-revolution situation in Russia as the expression of the role of a worker’s state was defined by the role of the Bolshevik party. This standpoint had not been anticipated by Marx who instead considered the dictatorship of the proletariat as the expression of the primary importance of the workers in the organisation of the economic and political aspects of the post-revolutionary society.

The question to be asked is whether these developments under the Bolsheviks indicate that Marx’s approach was unrealistic in practical terms? In answering this question, it is important to recognise that Marx’s perspective was the only principled expression of an understanding of what could constitute a post-revolutionary society. He outlined the conception that only when the workers are administering a post-revolutionary society in economic and political terms is it both principled and feasible to suggest that in these circumstances the conditions for communism are being genuinely developed. However, Marx did not outline the details of this approach, and so it was the task of Marxists to provide the details of this standpoint if they were to be faithful to his perspective. But this was not carried out, not even by Luxemburg who was the most faithful adherent of to Marx’s legacy. Instead, it became increasingly assumed that the approach of Marx would be expressed by the role of a revolutionary party acting on behalf of the workers in relation to the process of revolutionary change and the creation of a communist society. In this context the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the transitional expression of this development and this aspect would be primarily mediated by the role of the party expressing the interests of the workers. We cannot suggest that this position would have been supported by Marx, but nor can we also contend that he would have rejected it. Hence, we do not know what Marx’s approach to these issues would have been because the issue of the role of the revolutionary party did not seem to him to be of primary importance in relation to the issues of the class struggle which he analysed. Thus, the Paris Commune was understood to be an act of the workers and the role of the various socialist parties was considered to be merely an expression of the importance of the actions of the proletariat. It was Kautsky who genuinely pioneered the importance of the conception that the party would express the possibility and character of a proletarian revolutionary process and in this manner express the role of a socialist government. Lenin elaborated his perspectives based on an adaptation of the approach of Kautsky for understanding the conditions in Russia. The assumption being made was that the interests of the revolutionary party and the workers would be identical and so in that manner the objectives of Marx concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism would be realised in these modified terms. However, this approach was based on the problematical assumption that the revolutionary party would almost automatically express the interests of the workers and the aim of communism. What this standpoint did not allow for was that the complexities and problems of an empirical situation could result in a Marxist party acting in a manner that actually undermined the realisation of the interests of the workers. In other word the complications of a practical situation could mean that a contradictory relationship could develop in the relations of party and class in the situation of the challenges of both revolutionary change and the development of communism. Marx could not anticipate these issues because he did not elaborate the role of a Marxist party in the revolutionary process and the aspect of transition to communism. This apparent omission in the work of Marx meant that the Marxist parties could increasingly justify an opportunist understanding of the tasks of revolution and the character of communism as the expression of being an empirical elaboration of the approach of Marx. Did this development mean that the ultimate problem was the apparently incomplete character of the theory of Marx? It would be unfair to justify this conclusion because it could be suggested that the theory of any individual is bound to be incomplete and one-sided. Instead, it is still possible to evaluate the policies of the Bolsheviks in terms of the approach established by Marx. He did indicate that the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat is based on the genuine realisation of the interests of the workers based on their active participation in the organisation of society. In this context the Bolshevik regime became increasingly problematical and as a result it could be suggested that Stalin’s regime was a repudiation of the aims of Marx concerning the creation of a genuine communist society. Ultimately the adverse circumstances of the post-revolutionary society in the Soviet Union generated a rejection of the objectives of Marx concerning the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat and communism.

This conclusion means that we would reject the suggestion by Rockmore that the Bolshevik social formation was a possible expression of the approach of Marx. The point is that Marx did not outline a strategy based on the workers adhering to the programme and perspectives of a revolutionary party. Instead, if any perspective is indicated it is that the very dynamic aspect of the class struggle will enable the workers to develop increasingly radical conclusions about the necessity to strive to realise the revolutionary result of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that they will then attempt to transform this type of society into communism. Implicitly the Marxists such as Kautsky and Lenin considered that this approach was unrealistic and that instead the revolutionary leadership of the Marxist party was required in order to achieve these objectives. But the apparent failure to achieve genuine communism in relation to this strategy has led to a renewed emphasis on the revolutionary possibilities of spontaneous mass struggle. However, the vanguard role of the workers has been replaced with that of the activist who is motivated by various issues within capitalism to engage in mass struggle which could result in the transformation of society into an alternative emancipatory type of social formation. But the problems with this approach is similar to that concerning Marx’s initial strategic perspective for revolutionary change. How is it possible for spontaneous struggle to acquire a conscious expression in terms of the realisation of a new emancipatory type of society? Indeed, this issue is indicated in relation to the fact that the various forms of contemporary mass activism seem to be concerned to primarily realise their aims within capitalist society. There would seem to be no alternative to the role of the revolutionary party if mass struggles are to acquire a conscious anti-capitalist character. But the problem is that the Marxist party no longer seems to be a credible organisation. The result of this situation is that the various contemporary mass struggles lack strategic clarity. Hence the problems associated with the role of the Marxist party have not been resolved by the aspect of contemporary mass struggles. Instead, it would seem that these issues could be tackled most effectively by the creation of a new type of socialist party that was based on the highest level of democratic principles. In other words, the problems of the present are not created by Marxism but instead by the unfortunate role of the authoritarian practices of various Leninist organisations. Hence it would actually be progress if a democratic Marxist party could be created that was able to uphold the aims of socialism and communism in a non-elitist manner. This would mean that the leadership of these parties did not dominate the development of the policies of their organisations and instead the rank and file were able to have a significant influence over the development of a programme for revolutionary change and the creation of socialism and communism. It is unrealistic to emphasise a conception of the spontaneous role of revolutionary change that did not involve the role of a socialist party, but this very point means that it is necessary to create a genuinely democratic type of party. Indeed, this aspect was expressed by the fact that Marx considered his role was to advise the First International and not to try to dominate this organisation. The First International had genuinely democratic congresses and was concerned to try and give advice to workers in struggles rather than attempt to impose policies in an elitist manner. Hence Marx considered that his role was advisory rather than a justification of political domination of the role of parties and class struggle. It would have been preferable if Marx’s example had influenced the approach of Marxism. But instead under Kautsky and Lenin the perspective that was adopted was the attempt to impose a programme of transition to socialism and understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat that was based on the primary role of the party. In this manner it could be suggested that Marxism differed from the approach of Marx concerning the character of the class struggle and the conception of post-capitalist society. It could be suggested that Marx’s approach was unrealistic, but did this mean that the only alternative was the role of the party effectively instructing the workers concerning their aims and objectives?

Rockmore concludes that historical experience indicates the practical limitations of Marx’s conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat: “The history of our times records a series of revolutions supposedly undertaken in the name of the people in which the latter are later represented by those who rule over them while claiming to rule in their name. Marx perhaps romantically suggests that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a step in the transition to a classless society. But in practice once a group takes power by force it rarely ever relinquishes this role. A classless society would in theory result in a society in which private property is abolished by the proletariat, which later abandons its dominant role. Yet history records no example of the practical realization of this noble goal.”(p198) Thus: “There is a fateful difference between theory and practice, between what proletarian dictatorships should be and the various forms of Marxist dictatorship over the proletariat that later came in practice in the Soviet Union, China and many other Marxist states…”(p198) In other words it is being suggested that a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat based on the actual importance of the political role of the workers is essentially unrealistic and so what actually occurs is the situation of the dominating aspect of the party in the organisation of the post-capitalist society. But the logical conclusion of this view would be to suggest that Marx was being unrealistic when he suggested that a society based on the expression of the interests and primary organisational role of the workers could be possible. Hence Rockmore seems to be claiming that Stalinism Is the logical and essentially inevitable results of the process of overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with a different type of society. But the Bolshevik revolution established the importance of the Soviets as the basis of the political system, and also developed aspects of a possible workers management of the economy. However, these democratic possibilities of the post-revolutionary society could not be consolidated because of adverse circumstances, and instead the consolidation of the domination of the party became realised. In other words, the revolution had expressed an emancipatory potential that could not be consolidated because of economic problems and the upheaval of civil war. In this situation the domination of the party was considered to be necessary in order to consolidate the ascendency of what had been an unstable system. It could be suggested that in more favourable circumstances the possibility for genuine Soviet democracy and workers management of the economy was not unrealistic. However, once the bureaucratic character of the post-revolutionary society was established this became a precedent for the expression of the very conception of the aim of socialism. It became understood that socialism could only be realised in terms of the dominant role of the Stalinist party. This approach was a departure from the perspectives of Marx concerning the importance of the process of the self-emancipation of the working class. Furthermore, it could also be suggested that Lenin tried to develop the understanding that a revolutionary party could establish genuinely progressive relations with the workers that would create the possibilities for advance towards a genuine socialist society. In other words, the difference between Stalin from Marx and Lenin was that his approach was essentially about the creation of a new type of exploitative society in which the party ruled over the workers. But they considered that the role of Marxism was to facilitate the development of the condition for social emancipation of the workers. It could be suggested that there was an aspect of elitism in this approach, but this was connected to concern about the process of the realisation of socialism and communism.

However, Rockmore disagrees with this view. He suggests that both Marx and Lenin had an implicit elitist view that could only justify an authoritarian conception of society: “In characterizing the transitional period between capitalism and communism, Lenin supplements the views of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the withering away of the state through the further view of the party as the vanguard of the revolution…..Lenin drew the practical consequences of an anti-democratic, even totalitarian idea. This idea is already implicit in Marx’s early view that philosophers are the brain and the proletariat the brawn of the coming social revolution. The proletariat requires philosophical guidance because Marx, in distinctly following Plato, thinks this class cannot and does not know. In following Marx on this point, Lenin turned away from the dictatorship of the proletariat and toward what in practice became the dictatorship over the proletariat.” (p200) But this would seem to be a questionable interpretation of the approach of Marx who could be considered in general terms to adhere to the objective of the realisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat by the actions of the workers who would then define the character of this post-revolutionary society. Indeed, it could be suggested that Lenin had a version of this perspective in terms of the conception of the role of Soviet democracy as the basis to express the political character of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only the development of increasing serious economic and political problems led to an emphasis on the dominant role of the party for understanding the character of the post-revolutionary regime. Thus, it could be suggested that a difference between theory and practice developed because of the problems associated with the tasks associated with the necessity to develop the economy in the context of the uncertainties of the situation after the revolution. The result was the imposition of the elitist approach of one-man management that became connected to the decline of the aspect of economic democracy and the role of the Soviets.

However Rockmore implies that this development was the logical result of the unrealistic character of the aim of democracy of the producers: “Lenin’s utopian promise to the workers of direct rule was rapidly transformed through a series of steps from the planned dictatorship of the working class over the party into the dictatorship of the party over the working class, which in turn became what for all the world looked like a permanent dictatorship of the party.”(p205-206) This perspective would seem to imply that the very objective of workers management of the economy was not only unrealistic in the unfavourable economic circumstances of post-revolutionary Russia, but would also not be feasible in more favourable circumstances as in relation to advanced capitalist countries. In other words, it is being suggested that the very democratic aspirations of socialism in economic and political terms cannot be realised and instead these objectives can only assume the form of the role of a bureaucratic elite. Hence authoritarian Leninism is the logical outcome of the problematical character of the realisation of the aim of socialism in practice. But this view does not indicate the aspect of the economic and political situation which meant that the possibility to establish the importance of a functioning and effective Soviet democracy became problematical given these aspects. The very decline of the role of industry in the circumstances of economic crisis meant that the attempt to establish the importance of workers management of the economy was undermined. But primarily the advent of civil war meant that there was no alternative to the necessity of the imposition of what was effectively an expression of authoritarian rule of the Bolsheviks. In this context the participatory conception of socialism outlined in Lenin’s ‘State and Revolution’ could not be realised. These developments were not the logical outcome of an inherently authoritarian conception of socialism, contrary to the views of Rockmore, but instead represented a pragmatic response to a complex situation of increasing economic and political crisis. But the problem that did develop was that the effective imposition of the domination of the party over society did become considered to be the essential expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat. What was initially understood to be the approach of a revolutionary regime in a problematical situation became to be defined as the very essence of the development of socialism. This understanding was systematically justified with the onset of the Stalinist regime. In this context the rule of the party was considered to be the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, in the era of Lenin this issue was not definitively resolved and instead the character of the revolutionary government was defined in terms of the necessity to implement important economic and political policies like war communism and the New Economic Policy. Increasingly this pragmatic emphasis became the justification of the view that the dictatorship of the proletariat was defined by the party acting on behalf of the class. Lenin understood this approach in pragmatic terms of the importance of given policy, but Stalin began to define the system in these elitist terms. But the views of Marx could not justify these pragmatic developments.

In other words, it was not Marx’s theoretical conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat which explained this increasing development of an authoritarian political regime but instead the pragmatic response of the Bolsheviks to the complicated problems of the economic and political situation. It did not seem possible in these unfavourable conditions to realise a society based on the principles of popular democracy and instead the role of the government was increasingly expressed in terms of the role of an administration that acted according to the empirical necessities of implementing policy on behalf of the interests of the workers and peasants. However, there was no expression of the accountability of this government to the people in terms of the possibility of the role of democratic elections. Instead, the various elections to the Soviet institutions assumed the approach that the party administration could not be changed, and instead such votes merely confirmed the continuation of the domination of the Bolsheviks. This situation could be considered to be the expression of the legacy of Marx because Marx had not outlined in any systematic detail the political aspects of the regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Indeed, he had not elaborated an understanding of the role of a party in the revolutionary process. Thus, the various empirical innovations of the Bolsheviks could be said to be an attempt to tackle the issues not resolved by Marx in theoretical terms. But it could be argued that ultimately their various policies in this context were problematical because the ultimate result was the development of a situation in which the domination of the party over society was consolidated. Thus, the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat was considered to be an expression of the rule of the revolutionary party. In the era of Lenin, it could be said that this relationship was realised in terms of the Bolsheviks being able to express the interests of the workers and peasants, especially with the approach of the New Economic Policy. Thus, in a bureaucratic and elitist manner the Bolshevik government did represent the possibility to act in accordance with the aims of the people. However, the unfavourable situation actually meant that it was an achievement that in this period the Bolsheviks represented a form of degenerated worker’s state. It could be suggested that in more favourable circumstances it would have been possible to create a genuine worker’s state based on the democratic participation of the role of the workers in the organisation of society. This possibility would express the realisation of the approach of Marx. In other words, this perspective was the legacy of Marx and indicated that his standpoint did not have an authoritarian character. He would have been the first to suggest that a regime of the party elite would have been in opposition to the realisation of the emancipatory potential of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But the problem was that he never outlined in detail what this type of society would actually be like. He did not envisage the possible problem of the aspect of the relationship of party and class in the regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Hence the various omissions of Marx concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat had to be overcome by the theoretical work of Marxism. But this elaboration led Kautsky to emphasise the perspective of socialist change via the institutions of bourgeois democracy, whilst Lenin effectively suggested a government accountable to the Soviets, which became the basis to justify the development of the domination of the Bolsheviks. This process of accommodation to either reformism or authoritarianism would not have been supported by Marx. Marx cannot be blamed for these developments because he could not be expected to anticipate the problems of the class struggle.

But Rockmore considers that the ultimate problem of the legacy of Marx is that increasingly the aim of communism has proved to be impractical: “Marx’s effort turns on focusing the relationship at least in theory and practice in realizing communism as the necessary precondition of human flourishing. Yet this aim that may or may not have been, is being or will be realized in theory has not been, is apparently not being, and in all likelihood will not later be realized in practice. It is then difficult to infer that the future will be unlike the past or that, as Marx thinks, in reality the future belongs to the proletariat.” (p240) But this prediction is dogmatic because it implies an inevitable end to history in the continual domination of capitalism. We can suggest that if the influence of revolutionary consciousness does not develop then the possibility for radical change is not possible. However, it is also possible to suggest that the role of mass struggles, combined with the increased influence of revolutionary parties, mean that this type of development is not impossible. But if change does occur it will be necessary to learn the lessons of history and to recognise that only with the development of a genuinely democratic type of society can the problem of authoritarianism be overcome and resolved. In this manner we should not be content with Marx’s unsatisfactory comments about the role of democracy in the post-revolutionary society and instead attempt to elaborate the importance of democracy as the only manner in which socialism can be developed and consolidated in principled terms. But an important question arises: would this task mean continued adherence to the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat?