MANDEL AND SOCIALIST DEMOCRACY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is not merely to criticise Ernest Mandel on the issue of socialist democracy. We are aware that Mandel liked to present his views as an orthodox expression of the views of the great thinkers of Marxism. Hence any criticism of him would seem to represent opposition to the Marxist tradition. Instead we aim to outline what is principled and what is dogmatic in his approach. Thus we want to maintain some of his standpoint, whilst calling for revision in other instances. Our starting point is that revolutionary Marxism has never developed an appropriate and complex understanding of what democracy should be like in a genuinely socialist society. Instead Marxism has tended to consider that the development of a classless society based on economic equality and the end of exploitation would imply that outstanding democratic problems would be resolved. However, the limitations of the Marxist understanding of democracy was indicated when the Constituent Assembly was dissolved in 1918 in favour of the rival claims of the Soviets. An organisation that was elected on the basis of universal suffrage was held to represent inferior political legitimacy when compared to the importance of the Soviets. The fact that the Bolsheviks came a respectable second in the amount of votes for the Constituent Assembly was considered to be insignificant because of the unfortunate fact that the Social Revolutionaries were the most popular as a result of their mass peasant support. The point was the Bolsheviks could not reconcile an institution inherited from the era of bourgeois democracy with the Soviets which expressed the interests of the working class. The Bolsheviks had an opportunity to try and reconcile both of these institutions in the name of democracy, but instead preferred to dissolve the Constituent Assembly in the name of the working class. This act was unfortunate because it meant the Soviet regime was lacking the ultimate democratic credentials of an organisation based on universal suffrage. The result was not to strengthen the importance of the Soviets which declined rapidly as an organ of popular democracy, but instead to promote the formation of a single party dictatorship. Instead a functioning Constituent Assembly could have enhanced the effectiveness of the Soviets, because it would have been necessary to maintain their popular character when compared to an institution elected according to universal suffrage.

The Soviets in 1905 called for the formation of the Constituent Assembly, and did not consider that it would undermine their own role. Instead the aim of the original Soviets was for the formation of a democratic republic in order to express the political supremacy of the working class. But the dissolving of the Constituent Assembly mean that this original aim of a democratic republic was seriously undermined. What was not understood was that an institution originating within bourgeois democracy could become a connected aspect of the process of strengthening proletarian democracy in the form of the Soviets. The relationship of these two institutions would represent the realisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. The fact that the Bolsheviks were a sizeable minority within the Constituent Assembly meant that this institution could not become an organ of counterrevolution. Instead the Social Revolutionaries and Bolsheviks would have to work together in order to enable the Constituent Assembly to function. The existence of this Parliamentary institution would not be able to sanction the undermining of the revolutionary state because the working class was dominant within the Soviets, which had the ultimate political power. However the role of the Constituent Assembly would have ensured that the popular effectiveness of the Soviets was also upheld. But with the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the dynamism of the Soviets declined. The result was the formation of a single party state. What was not understood – apart from Luxemburg – concerns how the interaction of the Constituent Assembly with Soviets was vital for the political legitimacy of the revolutionary regime. This truth should be expressed in any future workers state. Only the application of the highest level of democracy, which means the incorporation of bourgeois democracy within the new society, will ensure that the impulses for democracy are realised in a consistent manner. This is one of the major lessons of the Russian revolution.

Hence it is not adequate to call for the freedom of Soviet parties. Such a formulation implies a narrow understanding of what is meant by socialist democracy. Instead we have to accept that to some extent socialist society will involve the open competition of bourgeois and revolutionary organisations. Only if the working class has the effective political freedom to choose which party to support will it be possible to argue that socialist democracy is as genuine as bourgeois democracy. Of course under the bourgeois democracy of capitalism the political system is biased in favour of the parties of the status quo. These parties have the resources and the favourable influence of bourgeois ideology in order to promote their interests within the electoral system. However, even this unfair situation is more democratic than a single party state which bans other parties in the name of the revolution. This type of repressive system can never acquire the necessary level of democratic legitimacy which would complement the attempt to economically construct socialism. Instead the lack of democratic credibility of the revolutionary regime would ultimately undermine it, and the result would be the development of a yearning for the 'political freedoms' of capitalism. Thus the economic development of socialism would be questioned because of the lack of political integrity of the system. It is also the dislike of one party regimes which means that people support bourgeois democracy despite being critical of the economic limitations of capitalism. So, if we are to provide a conception of the democratic credibility of socialism we have to accept that it will be a multi-party system and that people would have the right to strive to restore capitalism. Only in this situation will workers control of production also acquire a connected democratic legitimacy. It would be paradoxical to have a repressive political regime co-existing with workers management of the economy. Only with consistent political democracy will it be possible to promote the relevance and credibility of industrial democracy. Support for the end of the subordination of labour under the new relations of production can only be generated effectively if this development occurs alongside a functioning multi-party system.

In this context it is not adequate to merely call for the freedom of Soviet parties. We have to also defend the rights of parties that do not want to be part of the Soviets! This means we have to uphold the development of a parliamentary type institution which is based on the open competition of all types of parties. This organisation would co-exist with the Soviets. The aim would be to develop co-operation between the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly. Thus the government would be formed from members being democratically selected from both institutions. However, the bias would be in favour of those that aimed for the promotion of socialism, unless there is a general democratic mandate favouring the restoration of capitalism. This situation would effectively be similar to that which occurs under bourgeois democracy, where capitalism is not questioned unless a genuinely revolutionary organisation wins the election. However, it is important to recognise the importance of the Soviets under socialism because they are the organisation which enables the people to participate in the activity of the state. In this manner the Soviets are complementary to the organs of workers management within the economy. The inter-relationship of Soviets and the organisations of workers control enables the political and economic development of what is a commune state to be realised. But this development will not be politically legitimate unless it is connected to the highest level of democratic freedom. Thus the system has also to be related to the role of a Parliament elected on the basis of universal suffrage. This Constituent Assembly will share political powers with the Soviet. It is to be hoped that the members of what could be rival organisations are able to recognise the merits of compromise and negotiation. Over a period of time people will become used to a political system based on the division of powers. If, however, the revolutionary regime is seriously threatened by the possibility of military invasion, the Soviets in this emergency would have to contemplate assuming full political power. This would be like the formation of a War Cabinet and coalition, as occurred in the UK during the Second World War. But once this war crisis is over, the situation of dual power should resume.

It will be argued by critics of the above viewpoint that what is being legitimised is the development of rival and opposing political institutions in the form of the Constituent Assembly and the Soviets. This situation is entirely possible. But it is to be hoped that if the revolutionary regime – based on a government selected from the two major democratic organisations – is able to achieve success in terms of the improvement of public services and the effective promotion of industrial democracy, then it is entirely possible that the character of the government will express these progressive developments. However, what is crucial is that the government will have been elected by a system involving universal suffrage. In this manner people will be able to express their view about its performance. In the last analysis, they will be able to choose a different party to govern. It is to be hoped that this new party of government will be based on supporting the gains made in terms of the development of socialism and will not be in favour of the restoration of capitalism. Indeed it would be irrational that people would vote in favour of capitalism if they have already experienced, and indeed contributed to, the creation of socialism. If people are acting to overcome the alienation and exploitation of capitalism it would be irrational for them to vote for capitalism? But it is this implicit fear of the irrationality of the masses which means that many Marxist effectively advocate the formation of a single party regime. They trust the party to protect the people from themselves and so defend the system from any counterrevolutionary impulses of the masses. This is a false mistrust of the people if the attempt to create socialism is genuinely democratic and able to economically transform the character of production. A society that is based on improvement of material welfare, and which involves the political and economic participation of the people, is unlikely to vote to restore capitalism. Only a society with problems could vote in favour of a return to the old system. But if people can genuinely participate in their own destiny, and so bring about social progress, they are unlikely to vote for a system in which poverty would re-emerge and inequality is established in terms of the domination of the capitalist class.

It is also necessary to emphasise that without genuine political democracy people could come to resent socialism even if social improvements do occur. What is crucial is that the process of progressive economic change occurs alongside the application of the most genuine mechanisms of democracy. In this context the people as voters would be able to register their praise or complaints about what has been occurring. They would be able to change policy if they considered that the actions of the exiting government have been ineffective or effectively detrimental for the interests of society. Only the ability to change a government by means of the vote would mean that society was truly democratic. This exercise of the vote is not merely passive, as it often is under bourgeois democratic regimes, but it is based on the fact the people will be – if they want to be – active citizens in terms of participation in the organs of the state and the economy. As interested participants in the development of society they will be able to exercise the vote in a most fulfilling and meaningful manner. The vote will mean something definite and practical because it will result in improvement of the functioning of the political and economic mechanisms of society. This is because the organs of state and economy will be accountable to the voters. In this context their votes will be meaningful and have practical results. The system of representative democracy will start to acquire the features of the direct democracies of Ancient Greece, and the result is a fusion of these two forms in terms of the development of participatory democracy. However, it is necessary to emphasise that none of this will occur if the political system is not based on an effective multi-party system. Voters will only become an interested part of the political process if they believe that their vote for a particular party has meaning and significance. If their vote for a party is able to change the composition of the government, it will mean that engagement with the political process will express attitudes of enthusiasm and rejection of cynicism. In this situation people will finally believe that socialism can be more democratic than capitalism. One of the last prejudices against socialism will have been overcome. This will be the context in which people can work collectively and meaningfully to realise the goals they have established in a dedicated manner. This situation will be possible only if people consider that the government truly represents them because they have voted for it! Whilst those that have not voted for the governing party will not be alienated from the political process because they also consider that it is truly democratic.

MANDEL'S VIEW OF SOCIALIST DEMOCRACY

Mandel outlines his views in his document: 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Socialist Democracy'(1) His starting point is problematical in that he considers bourgeois democracy as nothing more than the expression of the interests of capitalism, and its justification of its dictatorship. Certainly, it has this aspect, but bourgeois democracy is also an immense progressive gain. It means that people have the vote and the formal right to choose an elected government. This right may often be reduced to a facade, but in its most dynamic terms it has enabled a revolutionary government to be chosen by universal suffrage, as in Nicaragua and Venezuela. These situations have promoted the development of more popular forms of democracy and increased the class confidence of the working class to change society. Where bourgeois democracy is a mere formality, this is not because of the electoral system but rather the influence of bourgeois ideology means that conservative type parties tend to be elected. They then rule in the interests of the capitalists. People tend to become disillusioned in these situations. This is why revolutionary struggle has to generally take the form of the development of rival forms of more popular democracy, and the result of such development can be the formation of a workers state.

Mandel defines the dictatorship of the proletariat in the following manner: “The word dictatorship has a concrete meaning in that context: it is a mechanism for the disarmament and expropriation of the bourgeois class and the exercise of state power by the working class, a mechanism to prevent any reestablishment of bourgeois state power or of private property in the means of production, and thus any re-introduction of the exploitation of the wage earners by the capitalists.”(2) However, this definition is problematical because of its brevity and what it omits to mention is vital for the effective functioning of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is necessary to mention that the revolution itself can only be valid and legitimate if it is an expression of the highest levels of democracy of the workers and peasants. This is why it has to be based on the formation of soviets and the promotion of workers control of industry. Furthermore, the very ability to defend the gains of the revolution is only conceivable if the new regime establishes the highest levels of democracy in terms of the inter-connection of the Constituent Assembly and Soviets. In this sense, Mandel's approval for Lenin's emphasis on the repression of the bourgeoisie is problematical. Instead it is necessary to emphasise that the realisation of the process of social ownership of the major enterprises, whilst involving the expropriation of the capitalists, should not mean the utilisation of repression and coercion. Instead these measures should be subject to the democratic approval of the new political institutions. Hence Lenin is being contradictory and inconsistent when he suggests that democracy for the workers and peasants can be at the expense of the lack of political rights for the bourgeoisie. Indeed it is problematical whether the workers would support the extension of social ownership if it meant the repression of the former owners of the factories. Instead only the application of the highest levels of democracy will ensure that the process of development of socialism will meet with mass and popular approval. In that sense the dictatorship of the proletariat should more accurately be described as a democratic commune state. The aspects of coercion should be limited to opposing any genuine military opposition to the new revolutionary regime.

In other words the new revolutionary state has to establish the highest levels of political and moral legitimacy in order to establish its credibility with working people. It should be based on the principles of peace and socialism rather than being motivated by the role of coercion. The popular power of the working class should be sufficient in order to undermine any threat of counterrevolution. Furthermore, the need to repress coercion in Russia was caused by the terrible fact of civil war. But it is to be hoped that in countries with a tradition of bourgeois democracy civil war will not occur. Instead it will be possible to realise a peaceful process of change. This development will not mean conciliation of the former ruling class because the democratic impulses of the process of revolutionary change will mean that the balance of class forces favours the interests of the working class and not the bourgeoisie.

Mandel maintains that if the state does not wither away after the revolution, the result could be the development of bureaucratic degeneration. This is a dogmatic view that denies the necessity of the state in order to promote the role of authority within society and the importance of law and order. But what will primarily undermine any degeneration of the state is its ability to be accountable to the members of society. This prospect takes the form of the development of role of democracy in order to ensure that the actions of the state are based on the principles of being responsive to the interests of the members of society. Hence if the state is democratic, in terms of the elections of its officials and the scrutiny of its measures in the various democratic institutions of society, it is possible that the state will not degenerate. However, the most important measure that ensures that the state does not degenerate is the thriving of a multi-party system and this means the organs of government are not dominated by a single party elite. If the process of democracy is restricted, because parties are banned, and elections become a formality, this will mean that the single party assumes autocratic power and so enables it to become an omnipotent bureaucratic elite. In this context the role of the vanguard party should not become the justification for it to assume autocratic power. Instead the vanguard party should primarily act as the advisor of the working class and therefore restrict its aspirations for political power. The political system should be based on genuine competition between parties. In this manner no single party will become the dominant force within government, and so enable it to develop repressive control of the state. Instead the activity of multi-party democracy is the most effective basis to overcome any tendency for the development of single party rule. In this manner the bureaucratisation of the state can be avoided.

Mandel quotes Lenin to the effect that the proletarian state is more democratic than capitalism. But what is ignored by Mandel in his uncritical interpretation of Lenin, is that the role of multi-party democracy has been seriously restricted under the Soviet regime in Russia. This means that the Bolsheviks as the most important party are bound to dominate the state, and so acquire a privileged relationship to this organ of power. The result of this monopolistic domination of the state by the Bolsheviks is the impetus towards the generation of bureaucratic control of society. The Bolsheviks may be motivated by the most principled objectives, but their privileged political situation was bound to create the conditions for autocratic domination of society. The only alternative to this situation was the promotion of multi-party democracy. In this sense, the possibility of a single party rule would be moderated and influenced by the fact of accountability to a political system based on pluralism. A party could not assume absolute power if it had to explain its actions to other parties and a democratically based electorate. In contrast, Mandel emphasises the limitations of bourgeois democracy in order to justify the unfortunate development of the Soviet regime in Russia on the basis of single party rule. He may be right to suggest that Social Democrats are not consistent defenders of democracy, but this does not mean that the lack of multiparty democracy within Russia was not a problem. The problem is that social being defines consciousness. The monopolistic and privileged position of the Bolsheviks within the state, because of the effective decline of the multi-party system, cannot but result in the development of bureaucratic elitism. The party may still have had revolutionary intentions and goals, but its absolute control of the state meant that these aims were mediated by this situation of domination by the single organisation. Mandel does not provide any comprehensive critique of this development, and instead tries to avoid the necessity of analysis by referring to the hypocritical criticisms of the situation by Social Democracy. This point may have validity, but it does not provide a principled perspective that would represent resolution of the undemocratic limitations of one party rule. Thus because of this failure he is unable to recognise the relationship between the decline of multi-party democracy and the generation of bureaucratic degeneration. However, in another part of his document, Mandel does implicitly accept this point because he does suggest that the dictatorship of the proletariat is compatible with a multi-party system. There is a tension in his approach between defending the Soviet regime and its one party rule together with his acknowledgement of the importance of multi-party democracy within the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Mandel defines socialism in the following manner: “A socialist society is not possible without the collective ownership of the means of production and the social surplus product, economic planning and administration by the working class as a whole through democratically centralised workers councils, i.e. planned management by the toilers. No such socialisation is possible unless the capitalists are economically and politically expropriated and state power is wielded by the working class. No fully developed socialist society can emerge within the narrow boundaries of the nation state.”(3) It is possible to agree with this definition of socialism and still consider that it is questionable. The point is that the very process of economic transformation from the domination of capital to the development of relations of production based on the interests of the working class has to be based on the importance of politics, which means that democratic procedures have occurred in order to establish agreement for this development. The creation of a socialised economy based on workers councils cannot occur without controversy, and this means that the issue of democratic approval is essential if the establishment of a different and socialist type economy is to acquire popular support. Therefore society has to be established upon the significance of democratic vindication for any changes that occurred since capitalism has been overthrown and drastically modified. Hence the generation of the economic logic of socialism is not merely the result of the action of a new state. It is also the outcome of the involvement of the people in approving the process of change. The creation of a socialist economy is inconceivable without the role of democratic vindication for what has occurred. This means that socialism is the outcome of the democratic procedures described above.

Mandel argues that the revolutionary approach is based on a rejection of the role of bourgeois parliamentary institutions. Instead there is no principled alternative to the overthrow of bourgeois state power by the working class. He is making the valid point that reformist type accommodation to the institutions of bourgeois democracy can only result in adherence to the capitalist system, and opposition to the revolutionary perspective of struggle for socialism. This point is valid in relation to the fact that this reformist approach means accommodation to capitalism, and rejection of the aim of trying to transform the system by means of revolutionary struggle. However under socialism the political institutions of what have been bourgeois democracy may still have their validity. This is because a parliament, or Constituent Assembly, becomes one of the means or mechanisms by which the moods and aspirations of the people can be tested and expressed. The role of the Constituent Assembly becomes an institution which is able to establish the mood of the people, and their level of willingness for supporting socialism. This organisation complements the role of the soviets or workers councils, which are the most principled form of democratic accountability of society.

Mandel would dispute this point because he would argue that an institution that was based on the defence of the interests of capitalism, and so was only able to express democracy in a limited and restrictive manner, has no role under socialism. Instead he would contend that: “The logical conclusion flowing from this critique is that workers democracy must be superior to bourgeois democracy not only in the economic and social sphere – such as the right to work, a secure existence, free education, leisure time, etc. – but also because it increases the democratic rights enjoyed by the workers and all layers of toilers in the political and social sphere.”(4) It is certainly true that if functioning effectively socialist democracy should be superior to bourgeois democracy. The latter is a political system in which the majority of the people are influenced and persuaded to uphold the interests of the few- the big capitalists – by means of the vote, or the application of universal suffrage. This also means that the interests of working people are considered to be unrealistic to implement. Instead only the parties of reaction are defined as being reasonable and moderate, even if they are carrying out reckless policies in the interests of capital, like Thatcherism. Hence if revolutionary change is to occur the effective limitations imposed by the application of bourgeois democracy have to be opposed and contrasted with the popular organisations established to represent working class interests, such as the Soviets. This expression of mass proletarian democracy has to become superior if revolutionary change is to occur. However, under socialism the class character of Parliamentary institutions can be transformed. They are no longer merely the means by which the capitalist class persuades the working class to vote against their own interest. Instead they acquire a neutral character as an expression of the moods and aspirations of the electorate. In this context, Parliament, or the Constituent Assembly, can represent the views of voters who primarily aspire to promote the development of socialism. However, it will still be an expression of conflict between parties.

In words the political superiority of socialism would be indicated by the fact that it was able to combine the democratic logic of what had been an institution of bourgeois democracy with the organisations of proletarian democracy in the form of the workers councils. This would mean that Parliament is no longer defined by its previous role, which was to uphold the political interests of the ruling class against any opposition. Instead it is no longer an institution based on tradition and deference and has become an integral aspect of how opinion is formed and expressed under socialism. It is also necessary to argue that the working class is unlikely to support the abolition of Parliament in the name of their class interests. Instead they want Parliament to be improved, and become an institution that expresses their interests in a more accountable manner. If this development occurs it would be quite feasible to combine what has been an institution of bourgeois democracy with the emerging new political organs of workers power. It could be argued that there potentially can be a conflict of interest between the Constituent Assembly and the Soviets. Indeed this was the reason given for the abolition of the Constituent Assembly in 1917. However, if the division of labour is constitutionally agreed, and so neither institution tries to extend its power at the expense of the other, it is perfectly possible that a form of co-existence could be realised. It is necessary to emphasise that concessions to bourgeois democracy have not been made, because the Parliamentary institution is now functioning in relation to the interests and requirements of socialism. Under capitalism these organs had a different character. But within socialism, the Constituent Assembly becomes a means by which the democratic accountability of the system is expressed alongside the role of the Soviets.

Mandel makes an important point when he comments that socialism should not be based upon restrictions on freedom of speech and access to the media, or denying any right to strike or rejecting the independence of the trade unions. There should be no domination of society by a single party. He concludes this point by arguing: “Therefore an extension of democratic rights for the toilers beyond those already enjoyed under conditions of advanced bourgeois democracy is incompatible with the restrictions of the rights to form political groupings, tendencies, or parties on programmatic or ideological grounds.”(5) The suggestion is that a single party regime is unacceptable because it would imply the banning of other parties and so mean restrictions of democratic rights. However, how would this aim of flourishing genuine democracy be realised in a manner that would transcend the limitations of good intentions? The only answer to this question is that the political system has to be based on the ability of parties to compete with each other in terms of genuine rivalry, which would be tested by means of elections based on the application of universal suffrage. Institutions have to be created that enable the interests of the people to be mediated by the role of voting.

In contrast Mandel is careful to avoid this type of commitment to a system of genuine political pluralism. Instead he argues that democracy will be superior under socialism. This is because: “Moreover, self-activity and self-administration by the toiling masses under the dictatorship of the proletariat will take on many new facets and extend the concepts of “political activity”, “Political parties”, “Political programmes” and “democratic rights” far beyond anything characteristic of political life under bourgeois democracy. This applies not only to the combined flowering of council democracy (congress of councils, with growing manifestations of direct democracy, with political instruments like referendums on specific questions being used to enable the mass of the toilers to decide directly on a whole number of key questions of policy.”(6) But despite the promise that socialism will involve the flourishing of genuine and popular democracy, Mandel does not outline explicitly and emphatically what this means. The point is that his standpoint is limited by the apparent fact that he is not committed to genuine competition between parties for political power. Instead there is the implicit assumption that a vanguard party may still be politically dominant. Mandel has not rejected the notion that a vanguard party is still essential in order to uphold he interests of socialism, and to promote its various economic and political forms. Hence, whilst political parties are allowed to function, it is still assumed that the vanguard party has the ability to have the dominant political role within society. If this is an unfair criticism of Mandel, it is still promoted by the vague analysis he has outlined. What does it mean for political parties to flourish? What is meant by democratic rights? An obvious and effective answer to this question is that only with an accountable and genuine multi-party system can it be possible for authentic democracy to be realised. Unless there is pluralistic competition between parties, the impetus will be for a vanguard party to assume a dominant position of power. The point is that it is quite possible for parties to be allowed to function in a secondary and limited manner, but they will only have genuine influence if they also have the ability to become the dominant party via the role of electoral competition.

It could be argued by Mandel that these secondary parties may be dedicated to ending socialism. This will be the consequence of their electoral victory. But this argument only has justification if the attempt to develop socialism becomes flawed. If instead the development of socialism has proved to be successful it would be illogical for anti-socialist parties to be elected. But the point is that the political system will only represent genuine political freedom if the various reactionary parties have the right to contest elections and be able to influence policy. Mandel is careful to avoid analysing this point, and instead implies that the superior character of socialist democracy will ensure that it is compatible with the economic interests of the system. This standpoint is a dogmatic assumption to make, and instead we can only repeat that genuine democracy implies the competition of parties with rival programmes. Only if in this instance a party committed to socialism wins an open electoral contest can it argued with justification that the system is based upon democratic support of the people. Mandel implies that instead of this democratic process there will be referendums, but this is a flawed argument. Referendums are limited to one issue, and so cannot become the primary basis for defining the legitimacy of a government. Indeed, referendums have often been problematical because they are only held in order to uphold the interests of a government. Indeed it could be argued that instead of referendums it would be more effective if a government was truly accountable to the people. This possibility can only be ensured by the functioning of a multi-party system. Mandel implies that this prospect will be superseded by the role of Soviet democracy. But, even the authentic democracy of the Soviets has to be based on the competition of parties. The genuine character of the Soviets in Russia was undermined when various parties were banned, apart from the Bolsheviks.

In other words, Mandel has outlined a formal commitment to democracy, and the role of contending parties, but he has not outlined how this process of pluralism will function. Instead it is entirely possible to suggest that his approach could be based on the implicit assumption that one given party will still have a 'natural' political hegemony because it is the 'revolutionary party'. If this is his intention it would compromise what he is suggesting in terms of the importance of political pluralism. In order to uphold democracy it is necessary to accept limitations on the role of the vanguard party. Its role would not necessarily be to assume state power, but instead upholds a political conception of the interests of the working class and socialism. The role of the revolutionary party under socialism should be primarily educational, and not necessarily imply involvement in elections. Instead it would be a task of workers to form political parties that would be able to directly express class interests. These parties would be involved in the electoral process and contest for political power. Hence if a truly working class party was able to win an election, it could genuinely be said that the working class was the dominant political force within society. In contrast, the role of the original revolutionary party would become reduced to a propaganda role concerning discussing ideas about how to construct socialism in the most effective manner. If Mandel is serious about the development of the political involvement of the working class, this would mean that workers would form parties, or a single party, with the aim of becoming the government. It would be illogical for such parties to be nothing more than a replica of the trade unions, and so limited to particular issues. Hence if the working class is to become the genuine ruling class it would begin to form parties with the aim of realising government via the act of elections. In this manner the political system would be considered truly democratic and not the instrument of an elite party, but in order for this development to occur the actual vanguard party has to accept that its traditional functions have to change, or become more limited and moderated by the very socialist system they support. The principle of political pluralism means that the revolutionary party has to reject emphatically any perspective of the single party state. In contrast, Mandel seems to uphold political pluralism, but his commitment to rejecting the single party state is uncertain. Only the explicit limitations on the role of the vanguard party will mean that its aim is not to dominate socialist society.

Mandel is orientated to opposing the domination of the economy by an elite party, which would mean the bureaucratic degeneration of society. He say that the alternative to this situation is 'the mechanism of democratic centralised workers power'. (7) But what does this mean, and how can it be achieved? In economic terms he indicates that what is being aimed for is: 'a classless socialist community of self-administering producers and consumers'. (8) Such a development can be promoted in terms of the role of industrial democracy, or workers control of production, but at some point this very economic transformation will require the vindication of the legitimacy expressed by democratic political elections. There will need to be regular elections in order to obtain political and popular support for the aim of developing socialism. It will not be sufficient to suggest that economic processes can be cultivated without at some point this development being upheld, or rejected, in the form of the accountability represented by universal suffrage. It is entirely possible that an election would mean that the voters had different views about how socialism should be created, or they had complaints about the existing economic system, but did not envisage drastic modification. If the generation of socialism has created many problems the voters may even contemplate voting in favour of a return to capitalism. But it is to be hoped that the superiority of socialism is expressed in the participation of people in its construction, and so because of that aspect they will support its continuation.

Mandel does not consider the possible problems of socialism in such a serious manner. Instead he suggests it should have various safeguards in the form of independent trade unions and the right to strike. These are welcome proposals in order to oppose the possibility of the bureaucratic degeneration of the workers councils and the undermining of economic democracy. But what he has proposed is not sufficient. This is because at some point society will have to vote its verdict on the activity of the forces of economic democracy. This popular vote based on universal suffrage will have to suggest what could be done to improve the administration of the economy, and how its functioning can be advanced. In a certain sense people as consumers are voting about the standards generated according to the role of industrial democracy. Do the consumption goods met the needs of society? Mandel outlines how socialism involves constant change, but he does not also suggest how this process of transformation can be made accountable to the people. What is crucial is to avoid the development of a discrepancy between people as producers and consumers. The success of industrial democracy will be realised if goods can be made that are attractive to the consumer, and so represent high levels of skill and quality. In this sense the very willingness of the consumer to obtain consumption items made by producers will be a crucial aspect of the economic success of socialism. At some point this development will have to be approved, or rejected, by the electorate. But Mandel has no analysis of the major aspects of the economic and political implications of socialism. Instead in a vague manner he outlines that it will involve change. Vaguely, he maintains that this process of development will require democratic discussion: “All these endeavours, for which humanity possesses no blueprints, will give rise to momentous ideological and political debates and struggles. Different platforms on these issues will play a very important role. Any restriction of these debates and movements, under the pretext that this or that platform “objectively” reflects bourgeois or petty bourgeois pressure and interests and “if logically carried out to the end”, “could lead to the restoration of capitalism”, can only hinder the emergence of a consensus around the most effective solutions from the point of view of building socialism, i.e., from the overall class interests of the proletariat as opposed to sectoral interests.”(8) Mandel makes a welcome justification of the necessity of diverse democratic discussion on the basis of the political validity of contending platforms in relation to the tasks of constructing socialism. He rejects any suggestion that a given viewpoint should be dismissed as being reactionary, and instead its merits in relation to the issue of developing socialism should be seriously debated. But the problem is that the context of this discussion is not outlined. These different platforms concerning the promotion of socialism will have an audience both within the Soviets and Parliament. It will also be these institutions that will ultimately have to decide which standpoint is most appropriate and realistic in relation to the tasks of developing socialism. The approval of the popular and mass organisations of democracy will mean that the people as an electorate has decided in an accountable manner which platform is considered to be vital in relation to the issue of building socialism. If this process did not occur in the matter of decision making it would be possible for the state in an autocratic manner to determine which of the contending platforms was appropriate. In this context discussion would occur, but the actual decision would be made by the elite that controlled the state. In order to oppose this possible development it is necessary that the institutions based on the principles of universal suffrage make the decisions concerning policy.

In other words the problem with the approach of Mandel is that he does not connect means and ends. He is committed to the importance of the principle of democracy in terms of different policies that are involved in a process of interaction and discussion, but he does not establish how this interaction is resolved in the most reasonable and agreed manner. This is because he is uncertain about the actual legitimacy of the institutions that are supposed to represent democracy. In this context he is reticent to suggest that there should be a representative assembly based on the principle of universal suffrage. Only such an organisation, in consultation with the Soviets, could decide without the dictates of coercion which approach should be adopted in order to forward the interests of socialism. It is also this democratic procedure that could alter its policies and adopt a different platform in relation to the aims of building a classless society. The point is that parties and platforms require an organisational context in which to function. This aspect is provided by the representative assembly. In this manner decisions could be taken by this institution without alienating the supporters of a defeated platform. It would be accepted that the process of decision making was fair, reasonable and acceptable. Instead Mandel considers the process of discussion as a virtue in itself, which it is, but discussion has to result in decision making. This act can only be carried out by a democratic institution which is accepted by all the various contributors to the process of discussion. If this democratic organ did not exist, or took the limited form of workers councils, the process of discussion could be considered to have an imposed and arbitrary result in the form of state intervention. Only the assembly elected on the principles of universal suffrage would have the credibility and accountability to take decisions without alienating any of the contending advocates of the different platforms. The role of pluralistic discussion must have a credible institutional form by which it is mediated, and so this process is most effectively advanced in terms of the decisions of the Constitutional Assembly.

Mandel suggests that women and the various groups of the oppressed would have their own independent organisations in order to promote their interests, and to connect them with the process of the construction of socialism. This an important and valid point, but how do the organisations of the oppressed make their influence effective within society? Mandel's perspective is that the leadership of the revolutionary party is the most effective manner by which the interests of the oppressed are realised. But the problem with this view is that it implies that only under the paternalistic leadership of the vanguard party, which has domination within the state, can the interests of the oppressed be realised. This implicit perspective is unacceptable from the democratic point of view. Instead the interests of the oppressed can be realised most effectively if their concerns become an important area of policy making for the representative assembly. In this context the ability to resolve any grievances and injustices are provided with the highest level of democratic justification via the actions of the representative assembly and the Soviets.

Mandel also rightly argues that the economic construction of socialism should be based on the increasing importance of the self-activity of the workers councils or soviets. The principle of self-management will define how the economy is organised and the working class will democratically decide how its priorities are established and realised. It is necessary to emphasise the importance of this approach because only through the transformation of the relations of production can the subordination of labour to capital be ended. This means that labour acquires the ability to define its own aspirations without being distorted by the alienating and exploitative logic of the imperatives of capital. However, this economic aspect is not fully established without in the last analysis having the legitimacy provided by the support of the representative assembly. This approval would mean that the actions of the workers in developing industrial democracy is also supported by the society in general via the mediation of the institution elected by universal suffrage. It is to be hoped that no conflict of interest could arise because the workers who have organised the development of self-administration of industry are also voters to the Constituent Assembly. In this context the political system, as under capitalism, will acknowledge the supremacy of how the economy is organised. Hence the political apparatus would approve of the principle of industrial democracy and the role of self-management of the economy. Thus the Constituent Assembly is unlike to reject this development because it could not provide a more effective method to organise a socialist economy than that which represents the principle of industrial democracy.

Mandel also contends that the workers will participate in the organisation of the state, via the role of the workers councils. However, the experience of the Russian revolution indicates that this process could become the pretext for the privileged party to administer the state on 'behalf' of the working class. How can this situation be overcome? The only effective manner is to ensure that the ability to take part in the administering of the state is based on open elections, via the supervision of Soviets and Constituent Assembly. If this principle is not strictly adhered to the result can be that a privileged party emerges in order to monopolise the administration of the state. Hence if there was a situation of single party rule it would instantly be able to control the state in its own privileged interests. Only the open competition of diverse parties would enable this situation of domination of the state by an influential party to be overcome. Mandel suggest this ability to ensure adherence to the principles of socialist democracy requires the role of the Soviets. This aspect is undoubtedly important, but what makes Soviet democracy meaningful and effective? The answer is that it involves the importance of competition between parties. If people within the Soviets do not have the right to vote for one or other of competing parties, then Soviet democracy becomes a farce. In this manner the Soviets are no longer able to act efficiently in order to establish influence within the state. Only if Soviet democracy is real and genuine do workers consider that these institutions can be adequately powerful and important. Only in this situation is the Soviet dynamic enough and able to make the state accountable to its interests. The domination of the Soviet by a single party means the end of its significance. The role of the Soviet becomes passive and formal. The workers are alienated by a one party regime within the Soviet. Only with genuine democracy within the Soviet is it able to function in a dynamic manner, and based on the active involvement of the workers. This was the experience of the Soviets in 1905 and 1917. However, the Soviets could never establish control of the workers state because this was controlled by the domination of a single party. This is the major lesson if we are to be able to advocate effective Soviet democracy and to propose how it can establish genuine influence over the state.

BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY AND THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

In his brief summary of the history of bourgeois democracy, Mandel's emphasis is on the rights won by struggles of the working class and oppressed. He makes no mention of any merits of bourgeois democracy, and instead implies that it is a political system that upholds the interests of the capitalist class. This implies that the most important effect of the political system of capitalism is that it undermines the democratic rights of the masses. Only the influence of the workers ensures that any semblance of democracy is maintained at any given moment of time. The aspects of democracy within capitalism are an expression of the balance of power within society. The tendency is for capitalism to restrict democratic rights and only the organisations of the working class such as trade unions and workers councils genuinely uphold the principle of democracy. Thus he cannot outline any form of praise for the institutions of bourgeois democracy in terms of the role of universal suffrage. Hence it is implied that the working class and oppressed have gained nothing of substance from this type of representative political system. There is no mention of how the working class has been able to utilise this democratic form in order to obtain concessions from the ruling bourgeois parties. Instead, Mandel makes the derogatory point that only reformism has supported bourgeois democracy because it has a political perspective based on illusions about improving the existing system. Hence it is not surprising that Mandel concludes: “Through this experience of struggle and participation in their own democratically run organisations, the masses will experience more freedom of action and more liberty in the broadest sense of the word than they ever exercised in the institutional framework of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. This is the indispensable link in the chain of events leading from capitalist rule to the conquest of power by the proletariat. It will also be of vital experience to draw upon in establishing the democratic norms of the workers state. Self-organisation of the proletariat in the course of the class struggle – from democratic strikers’ assemblies and democratic elected strike committees to a generalised system of dual power – therefore is the best school of proletarian democracy under the dictatorship of the proletariat.”(9)

Consequently, given that Mandel conceives of the character of bourgeois democracy in what are absolute terms, it is logical and predictable that he would consider that the expression of socialist democracy in terms of working class organisations is superior. There is nothing of substance that can be inherited from bourgeois democracy, primarily universal suffrage, which would be of relevance for the socialist society. Instead the character of democracy under socialism is something that is novel and unique to the new type of society being developed. The democratic rights won by the working class under capitalism are not inherently bourgeois, but instead freedoms that will be only genuinely expressed under the different conditions of socialism, such as the right of association and press freedom. Furthermore, this approach means that it is logical for Mandel to suggest that the highest expression of democracy under capitalism is expressed by the organisations of the working class. These democratic forms will realise their full potential under socialism, such as in relation to the administration of the state and workers councils. Given his extremely critical approach to bourgeois democracy it is not surprising that the role of universal suffrage and a parliamentary institution is not considered as being suitable for socialism. Instead the only form of democracy that is being contemplated as progressive is that developed by working class organisations like the Soviets. It is implicitly being suggested that all forms of bourgeois democracy are unsuitable for development under socialism. In political terms it is implied that capitalism has nothing progressive to offer socialism.

 However, we could argue that possibly the most progressive aspect of capitalism is its political system. In economic terms the most autocratic aspect of the system is the rule of the capitalist. But in relation to politics all people are at least formally equal in terms of having the right to vote. We could formally vote a revolutionary government into power, which has been done in Venezuela and Nicaragua. It is the influence of bourgeois ideology which means that we tend to vote for conservative type parties, or moderate reformist organisations. But the formally democratic system means that the leading politicians are open to scrutiny and often have to change policies under the influence of 'public opinion'. Thus the most successful politicians are those that are able to utilise bourgeois ideology in order to establish popularity. This process is confirmed by popular vote. Thus we can establish that there is a genuinely democratic political system, but which is distorted by the limitations of the interests of capitalism as an economic system. The potential of the political system to encourage revolutionary type change rarely occurs, because the economic interests of capitalism generally undermine this possibility and instead ensure that democracy operates in accordance with the aims of capital. However, if the domination of capitalism was ended by a process of effective revolutionary change it is possible that the progressive possibilities of the political system could be utilised and developed. In this context the principled character of universal suffrage would become an integral aspect of the political system of socialism. It could mean that the socialism was genuinely democratic and that people were able to establish and articulate their views by means of the popular vote. Universal suffrage would become an integral means of ensuring that governments were accountable to the people. The fact that the vote was meaningful would mean that both the government and the state were ultimately subject to the role of public opinion. Any unpopular government could be voted out of office.

But Mandel cannot envisage any strengths to bourgeois democracy, and therefore effectively denies its utilisation under socialism. In a narrow instrumental manner he defines bourgeois democracy as being nothing more than something that is in the interests of capitalism, and so is unsuitable for application under socialism. That means the socialist political system is narrowly defined by the role of the Soviets. But these organisations are predominantly about participation of the working class in the state. Whilst the economy is organised in accordance with the role of workers management. Hence there is a political vacuum in the system. This can only be overcome by the role of a Constituent Assembly which is organised in accordance with the principle of universal suffrage. In this manner the aim of selecting a representative government is established, and parties can genuinely compete for the majority of votes. This organisation can be more democratic then under capitalism by the fact of having annual parliaments, the recall of delegates, and voting in accordance with proportional representation. In this manner the workers state would be a democratic republic, which is similar to that of the historic Paris Commune. The achievements of bourgeois democracy would be retained, but the political process would also be improved and its ideology of deference should be ended. Instead the delegates elected are truly accountable for their policies and the voters would not be a passive mass, but instead would organise in order to ensure that the government is not absolute and autocratic. In this manner the political system is based on the real views and interests of the voters. Hence what was formal representative democracy acquires some of the features of direct democracy.

But the limitations of Bolshevik orthodoxy means that Mandel cannot appreciate the advantages of the above political system. Instead he can only contemplate a system based on the soviets and freedom for soviet parties. The problem with his approach is that he does not recognise that the Soviets are generally unsuitable for being the effective representative of the views of the people. The Soviets have an important role as organs of revolutionary struggle, and in this manner could become important organs of the new workers state. But they cannot replace the superior representative character of the Constituent Assembly. This organisation can truly register the popular vote and develop a government accountable to the voters. Indeed the voters can organise in order to ensure that their vote has practical meaning, and represents the ability to influence the actions of the government. These developments do not represent the dilution or undermining of the revolutionary process. Instead they will express its confirmation in terms of the popular accountability of the government. This process, alongside the importance of the Soviets, will represent the flourishing of the Commune state.

Mandel cannot support this position because he considers that the exercise of proletarian democracy is more effective when compared to the limitations of bourgeois democracy. He comments: “Through the experience of struggle and participation in their own democratically run organisations, the masses will experience more freedom of action and more liberty in the broadest sense of the word than they ever exercised in the institutional framework of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. This is an indispensable link in the chain of events leading from capitalist rule to the conquest of power by the proletariat.”(10) It is true that within the capitalist system the working class can realise more democratic involvement in their own organisations in relation to the requirements of the class struggle. These organs of mass power, especially when they attain the status of soviets, can become indispensable for the process of the revolutionary transformation of society. But this development does not mean that the institutions of bourgeois democracy have become superfluous. Instead if they are changed in accordance with the interests of working people within socialism, the role of a Constituent Assembly could become crucial. It could represent the most appropriate and effective mechanism by which the views of the people are expressed and articulated. The Soviets are the mass organisations that facilitate the possibility for the success of the revolutionary process, but historical experience has indicated that they cannot represent the views of the people within a workers state in the most effective manner. In fact they are organs for the administration of the state, and so express the ability of working people to participate in the activity of what is a commune state. In this context, there is still the necessity for an institution which can express the views of the people. This function is expressed by the Constituent Assembly, elected on the principles of universal suffrage, and which is an institution which could cooperate with the other organisations like the Soviet in order to form a government.

Mandel would disagree with this above perspective because to him only the organs of proletarian democracy represent the principled basis for the functioning of the workers state. He assumes that the workers councils or soviets would be the most important organisation of the future socialist society. The problem is that workers themselves have generally considered these organs as being primarily about the promotion of class struggle. The soviets usually only represent the most militant workers in specific factories, or the most discontented soldiers. They do not express the views of the overall population, and so if the soviets form the government many people are not involved in this process of decision making. In this context the government of the workers state would represent the most militant and class conscious workers. This situation may be advisable for a given period of time when the workers state is being established and consolidated, but it cannot be satisfactory in general terms. Instead it is necessary to create a government that is based on the votes of the overall population. This possibility can only be promoted in terms of the role of a Constituent Assembly based on the application of a universal franchise. Such a development would not mean the importance of the Soviets would be ignored, but instead both organisations could co-operate and act together in order to form a government. This possibility was ignored in 1917 when the leadership of the Soviets dissolved the Constituent Assembly. Such an action was a mistake because it represented ignoring the possibility to create a genuine workers and peasants alliance. Instead the domination of the Soviets in 1917 actually meant government by the Bolshevik party elite. The possibility to establish democratic credibility for a revolutionary administration was rejected, and this meant the prospect of the formation of a single party regime was advanced. Dissolving the Constituent Assembly was a mistake because it primarily undermined the democratic interests of the workers and peasants. The leaders of the workers state rejected the opportunity to promote democratic credibility for their regime.

Mandel emphatically rejects the suggestion that a one party regime is acceptable, at least in formal terms. However, he places limits on this development by suggesting that the workers and peasants should decide what parties are able to function within the soviets: “By their free vote, the workers and poor peasants indicate themselves what parties they want to be part of the soviet system. In that sense, the freedom of organisation of different groups, tendencies and parties is a precondition for the exercise of political power by the working class.”(11) But is this a genuine definition of political freedom? The problem is that the organisations that are likely to want to be involved in the Soviets are generally going to be committed to the interests of the workers state and its success. The opponents of the Soviets are unlikely to become participants in its functioning and instead will be more inclined to be critics of this organ of workers power. But they will want to become part of a Constituent Assembly elected in accordance with the principle of universal suffrage. In other words this institution can be genuinely inclusive, and is not based on ideological commitment. Whilst the Soviets, in contrast, are composed of those that support the aims of the workers state. Thus the Soviets must express a restrictive and biased conception of democracy. Only the Constituent Assembly can provide a forum for all of the people to be represented. This situation would mean that both supporters and opponents of socialism would be part of this organisation. In this context genuine discussion would occur about how the delegates consider society should develop. The supporters of socialism should not be wary about this situation, because if the process of constructing socialism is successful, which it should be, then they will have a majority of support within the Constituent Assembly.

In other words to argue, like Mandel, that only soviet parties are acceptable, is not a genuinely democratic standpoint. This is because the character of the Soviets is revolutionary, and so would basically be composed of organisations with this type of perspective. For example, the Russian Soviets generally became based on either Bolsheviks or Mensheviks. Hence if the process of democracy within a workers state is not be restrictive or exclusive it will be necessary for a more open and popular organisation to be formed. This development would be expressed by the Constituent Assembly that would be receptive to many genuinely different parties because it would be based on the principle of election by the method of universal suffrage. Such a development would not mean that the Soviets are being undermined, because they would continue to have an important role within society. They would express how working people are able to participate in the functioning of the state. Furthermore, the economy would be based on the principle of workers self-management. In this society with diverse organisations, the role of the Constituent Assembly is to provide ultimate political sovereignty, and in this manner enable the different interests to be represented and able to voice their opinions. This situation would not be possible if the process of the articulation of political expression was limited to the role of the soviets. These organs would only articulate the views of the revolutionary forces, and instead could become the basis for the domination of the major vanguard party. In contrast, the Constituent Assembly could express genuine political pluralism. There would be no restrictions on the ability to promote a given political viewpoint.

Mandel is committed to genuine political freedom in the process of constructing socialism. The problem is that his conception of the means to the end is flawed. This is because he does not recognise the limitations of the Soviets which could undermine the realisation of his commitment. The problem is that the Soviets are likely to be dominated by revolutionary type organisations, and the realisation of genuine political pluralism and freedom becomes a problem. Such a limitation can only be resolved by the creation of a representative assembly that can truly express the opinions of the many diverse strands of opinion within society. It will only be possible to promote this possibility if such an organisation is based on the application of a franchise expressing universal suffrage. In comparison the Soviets are often based on a restricted franchise, because they represent particular workplaces or regions, and so cannot become a truly representative democratic form. Hence under these circumstances political freedom, in terms of expressing the views of all the people, cannot be realised. Instead a superior democratic form has to be created. The Soviets are an effective expression of mass struggle, but they do not represent the most representative type of democracy under a socialist society. This is why there is no alternative to the promotion of the role of the Constituent Assembly.

Mandel makes an important point: “Revolutionary Marxists reject the substitutionist, paternalistic, elitist and bureaucratic deviation from Marxism that sees the socialist revolution, the conquest of state power, and the wielding of state power under the dictatorship of the proletariat, as a task of the revolutionary party acting “in the name” of the class or, in the best of cases, “with the support of” the class.”(12) This is an emphatic rejection of the view that a single party state is the most suitable and principled form in which the construction of socialism can be realised. But there is a problem, because Mandel also contends that the revolutionary party is vital 'both in the conquest of power and the building of a classless society'.(13) How can this perspective be reconciled with the contrasting view that the working class should engage in mass work independently in order to realise its objectives? Mandel's contradictory standpoint is that the party will educate the class so that is able to utilise its own initiative in the process of constructing socialism. The problem is that this relationship of leaders and those who are led has often within history resulted in elitist developments such as the formation of a party state. Indeed it is unrealistic to believe that the working class can in some spontaneous manner come to express its own class interests without forms of political representation. Thus it is unrealistic to believe that the class will act without some form of party political influence. This means the problem of elitism can only be resolved if we have a party that is truly committed to encouraging the working class to act according to its own interests. Therefore the role of the vanguard party is principally defined by its ability to encourage the working class to create institutions of workers management within the economy, and its ability to form political parties that they replace the very role of the traditional revolutionary organisation. The vital question that is being asked is whether the working class, with the encouragement of the vanguard party, can genuinely form its own organisations. This means the role of the elite party is replaced by new parties based on actual worker leaderships, and with the ability to define class interests without external guidance. The very success of the vanguard party will be that it becomes superfluous in the revolutionary process, and is instead replaced by groups that are more representative of the working class. It will hopefully be these organisations that will have an important role in the construction of socialism. In this context it will be important for the trade unions to form parties.

This development will overcome the limitations of the October revolution in which the vanguard party always had a dominant role in instructing the working class about the correct policy. This situation was bound to result in a single party state because it was assumed that there could only be one political party able to represent the working class in a principled manner. In contrast to this situation it should be the aim of the vanguard party to promote political pluralism, and the flourishing of diversity within the working class. There is no monolithic organisation that can express the interests of the working class and instead the role of the vanguard party should be to promote genuine pluralism and different organisations within the working class. Only this situation will prevent the formation of a single party regime. If the workers are politically educated, and able to express their own interests, a situation can be created in which they truly realise the process of self-emancipation. But if the workers are passive, and deferential towards what is an elite party that acts on their behalf, this situation will mean that the divide between leaders and the led will not be overcome. Only the working class can resolve this problematical situation by creating their own organisations and ensuring that they are not instructed about how to develop socialism. Instead what was the vanguard party remains an organisation dedicated to theory, but the confidence about how to create socialism now resides with the more genuine organisations of the working class. Only in this manner will the dynamics towards forming a one party state really be ended.

Mandel considers that the issue of a one party state can be resolved by the workers having the right to elect their own delegates to the workers councils, or soviets. But the problem with this perspective is that he ignores the fact that the vanguard party, like the Bolsheviks, dominated this process and therefore utilised this situation in order to create a single party state. How can we avoid this development in the future? The most effective approach is to recognise that the Soviets are not the most suitable organ for the expression of the democratic aspirations within society. Thus what is required is the creation of a more effective forum in which to articulate the views of society, and as explained this will take the form of a Constituent Assembly. However it also necessary to recognise that the political process has traditionally been limited by the domination of a few elite parties. This unsatisfactory situation has to be overcome by the flourishing of genuine working class and popular organisations. Only if the situation is transformed in this manner will the organisations of society become authentic expressions of the interests of the working class. The workers have to discover their own independent voice, but this prospect cannot occur in some unorganised and vaguely spontaneous manner. Instead it will take the form of workers developing the confidence to form their own parties. Mandel supports this approach, and suggest that workers councils should be elected on the basis of workers developing their own programmes. He confirms his standpoint when he maintains that: “Any restriction of party affiliation restricts the freedom of the proletariat to exercise political power, i.e., restricts workers democracy, which would be contrary to the historical interests of the working class, to the need to consolidate workers power, to the interests of world revolution and of building socialism.”(14)

Thus Mandel is making the point, which we can fully agree with, that the political process under socialism should be more democratic and diverse than under capitalism. New organisations will emerge that have distinctive platforms with regards to the process of building socialism. The result of this situation is a fruitful interaction and polemic between the different groups and ultimately these platforms will be subject to democratic scrutiny. However, for the reasons given the most appropriate forum to discuss opposing views will be the Constituent Assembly. In this situation of political pluralism, the role for the vanguard party will be undermined in terms of any impulses to establish dominant power, as a result of its hegemonic role in the revolutionary process. Instead this organisation should become a forum to encourage the process of political pluralism and in this manner cultivate the emergence of new forms of working class activity. But it could be argued that the vanguard party still retains its hegemonic role if the workers state is endangered by the aggressive actions of imperialist powers. Under this dire situation it may be necessary to support the formation of a government with the highest level of Marxist theory. However, once the emergency has been hopefully resolved peacefully, then this vanguard party government would dissolve. In times of peace, it is to be hoped that the political development of socialism involves the principle of political pluralism and the possible development of a coalition government which would unite diverse interests such as the unity of industrial and public sector workers in a common administration.

In this context, the role of what has been the vanguard party would be reduced to ideas about promoting the progress of socialism. But it would accept that its own power should be limited to an advisory capacity because it would deny the possibility of assuming a privileged position within society. Mandel rightly denies the theoretical validity of the concept of a single party state. But the point is how can this development be avoided when a primary vanguard party has had such an important role in the revolutionary process? The only possible answer is that what has been the vanguard party should explicitly accept that it should renounce the prospect of political power in the new socialist society. Instead it should directly encourage the development of political pluralism and the creation of institutions that would promote this aim. Hence the vanguard party would become a party of theory and not practice. It should not dominate the state, via influence within the Soviets, and it should encourage the workers to create their own forms of management within the economy. Furthermore, it should not enter elections to the Constituent Assembly. Instead in organisational terms the vanguard party would dissolve into the many new political organisations of the working class. The party of the revolution would become an organisation of propaganda, and its major activity would be to promote the theory of Marxism. Only in theoretical terms would it influence the course of creation of socialism. Its practical role would be limited to emergency situations when its expertise would be needed to defend the gains of the revolution.

Mandel is right to suggest that within a socialist society parties should not be banned because they have a reformist or pro-bourgeois character. This approach would not be consistent with the view that free elections should occur for the workers councils. Furthermore, he also makes the important point that within socialism it is certain that the influence of political currents which are not revolutionary will survive, and this influence cannot be overcome by the utilisation of organisational repression and the banning of organisations. Plus, if political freedom is ended by the role of state coercion this will establish a precedent that factions and other groupings could become banned in the revolutionary organisation. But he also effectively denies the right of all political parties to exist under socialism because of his following formulation: “Thus, the real alternative is not either freedom for those with a socialist programme (who ideologically and programmatically support the soviet system) or freedom for all political parties. The real choice is either genuine workers democracy with the right of the toiling masses to elect whomever they want to the soviets and freedom of all parties who abide by the soviet constitution in practice (including those who do not ideologically support the soviet system), or a decisive restriction of these political rights of the working class itself, with the consequences flowing from them. Systematic restriction of political parties leads to systematic restriction of freedom within the revolutionary vanguard party itself.”(15)

The problem with this comment is that it limits the right of a party to exist in terms of whether it accepts the soviet constitution. This is still restrictive and unrealistic because of the problem we have outlined in terms of the limitations of the soviets as organs of democratic opinion. Many political parties will not want to participate in the soviets because they are explicitly pro-socialist organs of power. Hence by this action they will make themselves illegal. In this context the only parties that will effectively become participants in the soviets will be committed to the building of socialism. Thus the soviets will still acquire a monolithic character even if they are not based on the domination of a single party. But this problem can be overcome if a Constituent Assembly is established, because this assembly will be open for any party to become involved with in terms of the competition of the process of universal suffrage. This political process will be considered attractive by parties of all types of opinion. This means all parties will be legal that agree to abide by the constitution of the Constituent Assembly. In this context reformist and bourgeois organisations will be able to compete with socialist organisations for the votes of the people. This situation will mean that the socialist organisations will have to be effective and able to promote the aims of equality and prosperity in order to ensure that they still are able to acquire majority support. The importance of the Constituent Assembly means that there is genuine competition between the ideas of socialism and capitalism. It will be necessary that workers management of the economy is efficient and successful if the parties of socialism are to continue to obtain majorities in the Constituent Assembly.

In other words this perspective appreciates that political pluralism will be integral to the development of socialism. So, it will be inconceivable that the advance of the economic system will occur in a monolithic manner and without the role of discussion and argument. There will still be a considerable number of people who consider that capitalism is a superior system. In order that these people do not engage in counterrevolutionary violence it will be necessary that they be able to articulate their views via the role of universal suffrage, and the election of deputies to the Constituent Assembly. This situation should not be considered to be detrimental to socialism and instead the criticisms of the people who support capitalism should motivate the adherents of a revolutionary alternative to ensure that there system is democratic and efficient in both economic and political terms.

However, Mandel is uneasy with this situation of political pluralism. He says that he does not advocate that workers create organisations with reactionary programmes, but if such organisations are created it would be wrong to suppress them. His goal is to replace political pluralism with an ideological uniformity or agreement with the aim of socialism: “The political, ideological and cultural homogenisation of the working class, bringing the great majority of its members up to the point where they are capable of substituting a free community of self-administered citizens to the survival of a state machine (i.e., able to achieve the building of socialism and the withering away of the state) is a gigantic historical task.”(16) This perspective indicates his unrealistic conception of the development of a classless society. He denies the obvious fact that the actual process of creating socialism will involve the generation of more discussion and argument. In that context the working class will become more diverse and individual, even if united around common goals. Everyone will develop an opinion about what is required in order to promote socialism, and so the collectivity of the class will assume particular and specific forms. This will mean that the attitudes of the workers may assume increasingly complex organisational developments, such as a multiplicity of parties. But primarily the very process of developing socialism will require the democratic approval of the Constituent Assembly, which is voted by universal suffrage. In this context it is possible that defeats and reversals will occur, because voters may dislike particular policies of the socialist government. Hence the unity of the working class will continually be tested in the complex process of trying to develop the most effective and popular form of socialism. It is possible that at certain moments in time the rival views of the bourgeois politicians may seem credible because of failures in the attempt to build socialism. This situation may be encouraged by the pressures of the remaining imperialist powers. Only the successful advance of the international revolution will consistently ensure that the successful realisation of socialism occurs in national terms. Such progress will enable a national revolutionary government to argue that capitalism is truly a declining system when compared to the global and national success of socialism.

It is also necessary to maintain that the successful realisation of socialism will not mean the withering away of the state. This is an unrealistic aim because the state represents an essential expression of authority within society. Therefore instead of aspiring to achieve what is unreal it would be more constructive and sensible to create an increasingly democratic or commune state. The organisation of the state would be based on the participation of the people organised into the soviets. In this manner the state would be accountable to society. Thus the purpose of the role of the state is to develop an organisation which is not primarily coercive, but is instead based on the participation of the people in the administration of government, and the role of law and order. In this manner the character of authority is not imposed onto people, but is instead an increasingly expression of their involvement in the very process of administering society. The principles of solidarity and co-operation would represent the role of authority under socialism. In contrast, the abolition of the state is an unrealistic aim that would mean society is left without any form of coherent principles with regards to the role of law. The result would be a regression to chaos and the development of rampant individualism which would undermine the socialist principles of society.

Mandel outlines how a revolutionary party is needed for leadership during the struggle to overthrow capitalism and build socialism. This approach is only partially true. The role of the revolutionary party is certainly needed in order to oppose the influence of bourgeois ideology within the working class, and to promote strategies that uphold the aim of the overthrow of capitalism. Hence the contribution of the party to the class struggle is that it promotes the very ability and capacity of the working class to be able to challenge capitalism and replace this system with the formation of a workers’ state. But there is a very dilemma in the successful realisation of the relationship between party and class. There is a tendency for the party to substitute itself for the role of the class, and this takes the form of the party potentially becoming the privileged force within the emerging workers state. The problem is the creation of the party state. Hence within the revolutionary regime the party has to consciously undermine its own practical influence in terms of consciously rejecting the possibility to dominate the new workers state. It has to limit its practical influence within society and instead emphasise its theoretical role. In this context it has to encourage the mass participation of the working class in the construction of socialism. The aim of the vanguard party should be to encourage the working class to create and develop their own organisations which will be more representative and popular than the vanguard party. The trade unions could be encouraged to form parties, the same point could be applied to women and other oppressed groups. In this context a truly pluralist society is formed that would undermine any tendency to create a party state. The vanguard party would have rejected any temptation to become the most privileged force within society in the name of the interests of the working class and socialism. Instead workers would be encouraged to overcome their traditional deference and reluctance to become politically involved and the result of this development could be the flourishing of new organisations. Mandel is formally in favour of this possibility, but implicitly he also seems to support the vanguard role of the revolutionary party. He does not accept that this privileged position of the primary revolutionary party is unacceptable under socialism. Instead it has to relinquish this position in the name of the interests of the working class. In contrast to the creation of the party state, the political process becomes based on the open electoral competition for seats within the Constituent Assembly. In this manner what becomes the dominant party has acquired an electoral mandate. Consequently the accountability of the electoral system means that no one party can acquire monopolistic power within the state.

Mandel does make the valid point that the operation of democracy must acquire the representative form of the role of parties. Only in this manner can government become practical and feasible, and the workers councils will be workable in a similar manner. He argues that it is unrealistic that people will make political choices without the role of parties. However, his assumption is that the process of voting will be in terms of the role of Soviet democracy. We have outlined why this type of democracy is limited and inferior when compared to the alternative of the Constitutional Assembly. This is the only forum in which genuine universal suffrage can occur. In these terms a popular government can be formed which is based on the popular support of the people. Such a development need not be in contradiction with the role of the Soviets, which is the basis for the administration of the state. Hence what is being created is the division of power between the soviets as state and the Constituent Assembly which creates the government. (There is also another important distinction which is the organisation of the economy according to the principle of workers self-management)

Mandel also tries to reconcile the creation of a socialist democracy with the continued vanguard role of the revolutionary party. He considers that it was not primarily the leading role of the party which led to bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet regime, instead the reason for this development was the role of the unfavourable material conditions and its related isolation. This point has some validity, but what actually occurred was that there was an interaction between the importance of the adverse objective conditions and the significance of the vanguard role of the party. The result was the formation of a single party state. Therefore in order that this development is not repeated in the future means that there is no alternative than the diminution of the influence of the major revolutionary party within the workers state. The leading party should not be able to acquire a privileged position within the state, which may result in having a privileged position. Hence the only principled course of action is for the vanguard party to facilitate the process of political pluralism and to encourage the formation of new working class parties. The role of what has been the vanguard party should be limited to being the theoretical guardian of the new workers state. In this context this would mean that nobody could become a Lenin, or a person who as leader of the vanguard party has virtual absolute power. Instead the vanguard party would have a high reputation within society because it has rejected the temptations of political power and instead has become the ultimate theoretical expression of the new regime. It could be argued that this theoretical influence could represent the ability to acquire effective political power. But this claim would be rebutted by the fact that the party has no offices within the government or state. It has no means of coercion and political authority. Instead it only has its reputation for revolutionary integrity and principle.

Mandel argues that the reasons for the process of bureaucratic degeneration in the USSR was not because of the dominant role of the party, and instead was the result of the unfavourable material conditions and the isolation of the regime. This point has some validity, but the monopolistic domination of the party over society must have contributed to the decline of the revolutionary character of society. If the party has absolute power, because of the lack of a democratic system, it must acquire a privileged position. The single party regime was a crucial aspect in explaining why the party could acquire domination of the state, and the result was bureaucratic control of society. In order to resolve this problem the only policy that could have been viable would have been to introduce open elections within the Soviets. The development of political pluralism could have ended the situation of control of the state by a single party. Furthermore, in this manner the involvement of the working class in the decisions made by the state would have been promoted. Obviously this democratic policy would not have resolved all of the problems created by the isolation of the regime, but it would have meant that the leading party within society is based on the role of democratic approval of an electorate.

Mandel makes the point that a revolutionary party is crucial for providing leadership within the class struggle in relation to the task of overthrowing capitalism. However he also maintains: “A strengthened mass Leninist party must lead the workers in running a state and building a new society, until capitalism has been uprooted on a world scale and a classless society has been fully achieved.”(17) This formulation means support for the concept of a single party regime. Mandel may be formally committed to the role of a multi-party democracy, but he is also suggesting that because of its revolutionary credentials the only party that has the right to have a leading position within the workers state is the vanguard organisation. This perspective would imply that this party is not subject to democratic scrutiny of an electorate, and is instead able to exercise absolute power because of its revolutionary character and credibility. Furthermore, the various problems of the construction of socialism, such as the allocation of scarce resources and requirements of consumption, defence against imperialism, and building a new international to promote world revolution, and the national question, 'require the intervention of a party armed with the revolutionary Marxist programme'(18) Therefore only one type of party is suitable for promoting the ability to resolve the tasks of socialist development. This is the vanguard party. Hence the only logical conclusion that can be reached is that a single party regime is necessary in order to resolve the problems involved in the transition to socialism and the successful advance of world revolution. In this context it would seem that any commitment to multi-party democracy is strictly formal because the only legitimate party that can rule within society is the vanguard organisation. Mandel is arguing that only this type of party has the credentials and principles to enable it to preside over a workers state in an effective manner.

But there is a contradiction in the approach of Mandel. On the one hand he insists that the revolutionary party is crucial if socialism is to be advanced. On the other hand he is committed to the role of democracy: “To implement a radical and revolutionary programme of socialist workers democracy....a revolutionary vanguard party of the working class is especially indispensable. It must exercise its authority by free vote and political confidence gained among the masses and not by administrative means.”(19) Thus it becomes apparent that Mandel resolves any contradictions by implying that the role of democracy within the workers state is effectively limited to the voting being utilised in order to obtain political approval for the policy of what is a single party state. The application of democracy is not about competition between contending parties, and is instead a method in which the ruling party gains mass support for its attempt to build socialism. The perspective that any other party than the vanguard organisation could have dominant political power is unthinkable for Mandel. Only the primary revolutionary organisation has the credentials and principles to be able to preside over the process of developing socialism. However we would suggest that there is an important dilemma within Mandel's standpoint. The very development of absolute power of the ruling party would mean that it establishes a privileged position within society, and so its ability to promote the aims of socialism become compromised. The only manner in which this situation can be resolved is by having genuine competition between parties in terms of open elections. Also, in order to overcome the tendency for the major revolutionary party to achieve domination within society would imply that this organisation deliberately restricts its own influence. Therefore the vanguard party should become a propaganda organisation that encourages the formation of other working class parties. In this situation of political pluralism, the interests of socialism could be advanced without the problem of a single party dominating the state and society.

Instead of this commitment to political pluralism, Mandel considers that the problem of absolute power can be resolved by the revolutionary party carrying out internal measures in order to ensure that its aims are realised in terms of the role of inner party democracy. The party would have the right of factions to develop and the party should retain close links with the working class, and he also contends that the party and state apparatus should be strictly separated. These measures are welcome, but how is it possible to overcome the tendency for the party to dominate the state if it is the most powerful organisation within society? The only manner in which these issues can be resolved is if the power of the party is strictly limited, and the most effective manner to realise this aim is to develop an effective political system of democratic competition between parties. Only when the voters really have the ability to vote out of office the leading party in government will they be able to ensure that no one party is able to develop absolute power within the state and government. But this is not a political system that Mandel seems to want to support. Instead he concentrates on inner reforms within the revolutionary party in order to overcome any tendency towards bureaucratic degeneration. Nevertheless he also seems to take it for granted that the revolutionary party will be the most powerful organisation within society. In this context he is apparently not aware of the problem of the privileged party becoming the absolute power within the state. If the ruling party remains revolutionary these issues 'should' be resolved in a principled manner. This is not an adequate standpoint. Instead we have to connect the problem of absolute power with the tendency to end democracy within society. This issue can only be resolved by the development of genuine multi-party democracy. If the revolutionary party is to be the most important within society this possibility should be established by means of authentic elections. Only in this manner can it resolve any tendency to become omnipotent. The issue of the single party state can only be resolved by the accountability established by regular and open elections.

The inconsistent aspect in his position is that Mandel is on the one hand committed to a new society in which democratic freedoms are greater than under capitalism, but he is also supportive of the hegemonic role of the vanguard party. This tension has to be resolved. The only manner in which it can be tackled in a principled manner is by the voluntary acceptance by the revolutionary party that it should not politically dominate the workers state. Instead genuine multi-party democracy should be developed and this would mean that the possibility for the perpetual rule of a single party would become minimised. The very idea of socialism would be openly contested against the supporters of capitalism. However, Mandel is reticent to accept this approach because he does not want to make any concessions to what he considers to be the reactionary character of bourgeois democracy. He does not recognise that there are progressive aspects under bourgeois democracy, such as the electoral competition of parties, which could be utilised and improved upon under socialism. In other words it is not possible to develop functioning and effective socialist democracy without incorporating the advances represented by bourgeois democracy. Mandel defines socialist democracy in terms of the participation of the masses, but he ignores the fact that one of the most important aspects of that principle is the right to be involved in genuine and open elections. The socialist system should ensure that this right is upheld and improved upon.

Mandel concludes the first part of his document by arguing that all major struggles of the working class have been expressed in soviet type organisations. These could have become the basis of the political organisation of socialism but were undermined by the process of bureaucratic degeneration. This perspective is partly true. Certainly, all the struggles of the working class that have assumed revolutionary type dimensions have taken the form of the development of Soviets. This why a crucial demand to be raised for any ambitious mass movements is that it develops Soviets in order to establish dual power within society, which would be a preliminary prelude to the actual insurrectionary overthrow of capitalism. But there is a problem, historically Soviets have not been an adequate political mechanism by which to express the opinions of people in a revolutionary regime. Thus the role of the Soviets should be limited to becoming organs that administer the state in a participatory manner. But the issue of establishing the democratic accountability of the political system requires the development of a superior form of elections and institutions. This can only take the form of the establishing of a Constituent Assembly which is based on universal suffrage and is open to parties in terms of free and fair elections. Only in this manner will the issue of democracy be resolved under socialism.

STALINISM AND SOCIALIST DEMOCRACY

Mandel outlines how Stalinism opposes genuine workers democracy because it insists that only a single party regime can truly represent the interests of the working class. The leading role of the party is needed in order to oppose the influence of bourgeois ideology within the proletariat, and a monolithic party is required so that any reactionary trends can be repressed. Only the party can oppose the possibility of capitalist restoration. But the problem with what is generally valid criticism is that Mandel himself is supportive of the conception of the leading role of the party. He effectively does not deny that the vanguard party should primarily influence the process of creating socialism. Hence his criticisms of Stalinism cannot be substantive but instead must be about specific aspects of their ideology. He is still trying to argue that it is possible to reconcile the leading role of the party with workers democracy. Thus Stalinism is an elitist and bureaucratic distortion of this standpoint. What is primarily the matter in dispute is that the revolutionary credentials of Stalinism are being rejected. It is not a principled party, and so Mandel tries to outline its elitist limitations. But this does not mean that he is necessarily opposed to a single party regime. Instead he rejects the dogmatic and bureaucratic reasons that the Stalinist provide for the leading role of the party. Instead Mandel wants to reconcile the importance of the hegemonic party with the role of workers democracy. Thus his standpoint, as opposed to Stalinism, is that it is possible to interact the importance of the revolutionary party with popular assent for its leading role within society. But the problem is that without an explicit commitment to open elections, it is possible that an elitist single party regime could also be the result of his approach.

Mandel contends that a single party representing the working class is a myth, but the limitation of this view is that this very standpoint has been upheld under societies claiming to be socialist. He also contends that the stratification of the working class means that it becomes represented by many different parties. This point is also valid but once more the problem is that under so-called socialism a single party emerges which is determined to represent the working class in an exclusive manner. Only the commitment to open elections can undermine the tendency in this situation for a single party regime to form. Primarily, Mandel suggests that a revolutionary party that is genuinely democratic will be able to withstand any tendencies towards bureaucratic degeneration. This point can only be valid if this party is also committed to supporting a pluralistic democratic electoral system. The Bolsheviks had inner party democracy but this did not overcome the tendency for bureaucratic degeneration because they acquired a privileged and monopolistic position within the state. Mandel considers that the answer to these problems is a vague commitment to socialist democracy, but what does this mean? He outlines how a revolutionary government will make mistakes, and these need to be corrected by a process of open discussion, but it is still assumed that the government will be the vanguard party. His political approach does not provide an alternative to the justification of the single party state. Instead he is against an infallible and monolithic one party regime. Hence he is against a distortion of the one party regime, but is he against a democratic and principled version of this approach? We are not sure. Instead whilst he emphasises the importance of open discussion within society, and he concludes ambiguously: “Thus, there is objective need for real control over decision making to rest in the hands of the proletariat as a class, with unlimited possibilities to denounce pilferage, waste and illegal appropriation and misuse of resources at all levels, including the highest ones. No such mass democratic control is possible without opposition tendencies, groups, and parties having full freedom of action, propaganda, and agitation, as well as full access to the mass media, as long as they are not engaged in armed struggle to overthrow workers power.”(20)

What is ambiguous in this comment is that there is a vague commitment to genuine political democracy, but what does this consist of? The right to make complaints about the economy is not radical, it is something that exists within Stalinist societies. Furthermore, if parties exist what does this represent in terms of the possibilities for open competition in electoral terms? The application of democracy will only be meaningful if it is connected to the creation of a political system based on universal suffrage. If this does not occur we could be considering a system that has political parties but they are still subordinated to the domination of the leading revolutionary organisation. There is no other basis for developing genuine democracy than the end of the hegemonic role of the revolutionary party. But this is a goal that Mandel is not committed to supporting. Instead he vacillates in terms of upholding vague formulas that avoid tackling what is an uncomfortable issue for him. There is only one principled manner in which he can emphatically reject the single party state and that is to commit himself to political pluralism. Formally he accepts this approach, but still combines it with a lingering attachment to the single party state. This means his critique of Stalinism on this question is not sufficient and instead makes concessions to such a viewpoint. Mandel does comment that: “To protect itself against the professional risks of power, the revolutionary party will have to reject its members accumulating positions in the state apparatus and positions in the leadership of the party.”(21) This comment seems to be restricted to the role of individuals, but it is noticeable that it does not apply to the party itself. Hence there is no rejection of the prospect of the single party regime. Mandel is against the influence of the party within the state, but does not oppose the possibility that its importance could be overwhelmingly dominant within society. This situation would mean that the party would inevitably exert pressure on the actions of the state. Thus his formula is ineffective and vague.

He does outline how the process of economic development will create pressures for the state to appropriate the social surplus. He rightly calls for workers to be able to exercise economic power as the resolution of this problem. However, this point is not outlined in terms of the development of workers self-management of production. This is the only effective basis in which the pressure of the state for accumulation to be resolved in terms of the interests of the producers. It is also necessary to outline how only this situation can bring about the creation of the consumer goods that will be attractive and appealing to the public. In other words if the producers have effective control within the relations of production they will be capable of establishing how the economy is defined in terms of it aims and priorities. There is no alternative to this situation, and so state planning should be based on the importance of the aims of the producers. It could be argued that only planning will express the priorities of a system that is not based on the role of commodity production and the primacy of the market. But if planning is dis-connected from the significance of the input of the producers this situation could develop the impulse for the state to establish a dominant relationship within the economy. However, Mandel argues that if the working class has genuine sate power this is the major basis to oppose the possibility of capitalist restoration. This view is inadequate, because it is necessary that the relations of production have been transformed in terms of workers management in order to end any possibility of the re-emergence of the domination of capital over labour.

Mandel argues that the influence of bourgeois ideology could promote the restoration of capitalism. This is always a possibility, but if the economy is efficient and is based on the involvement and aspirations of working people the belief in the necessity of capitalism will diminish. But people will always have the opportunity to vote in favour of capitalism in relation to the role of the Constituent Assembly in which pro-bourgeois parties can take part in its elections. These elections will indicate the level of support for socialism and whether improvements have to be made to the economy or the process of political administration. Mandel is right to suggest that it will be necessary for the proponents of socialism to engage in open dialogue with the defenders of capitalism. The administrative repression of support for capitalism will not be fruitful for the interests of socialism. Repressive measures in the attempt to defend socialism cannot be justified, and instead it will be the method of free discussion that means the aims of the system will be upheld in the most effective manner.

But the following view of Mandel could be problematical: “This means that freedom of political organisation should be granted to all those, including pro-bourgeois elements, who in actual practice respect the constitution of the workers state and operate within the legal framework of its institutions, the soviets, and are not engaged in direct action to overthrow workers power and collective property.”(21) To what extent could this formulation prevent the ability of the pro-capitalist forces to advocate the return to capitalism? Certainly violent counterrevolution would be considered to be illegal according to the socialist constitution, but it would be perfectly permissible to advocate the restoration of capitalism. Indeed this aim would be tested at each election to the Constituent Assembly. Mandel considers that propaganda for capitalism is possible within socialism, but he seems to consider it also unconstitutional to try and bring about this aim in practical terms. This standpoint is ambivalent and essentially undemocratic because if you are a supporter of capitalism you will try to end socialism in order to realise this aim. Indeed, this standpoint should be perfectly legitimate under the constitution. This is because people will have the perfect right to vote in favour of the return of capitalism. It is not possible for the socialist system to be genuinely democratic if it does also express the ability to vote in favour of capitalism. Instead Mandel is ambiguous about this issue and claims that it is unlikely that working people will vote in favour of capitalism. This point is hopefully true, but instead of Mandel's equivocation it should be explicitly possible to vote to restore capitalism. This should be one of the democratic rights of socialist society. Mandel makes it seem unacceptable to support capitalism because he defines its possibility only in terms of the prospect of violent counterrevolution. But what about the ability to vote in favour of its return. On this important issue he is silent, we should not be ambiguous and instead explicitly accept that people have the democratic right to vote for capitalism. However, we hope that the potential success of socialism will mean that such a situation does not occur.

Mandel make the welcome argument in favour of the rule of law under socialism, but in a contradictory manner he opposes the role of a professional judiciary. This is a misguided application of dogmatic theory. The role of an independent and expert judiciary is vital if the application of the law is to be realised in a professional and impartial manner. It would be stupid to have developed a tried and tested judiciary under capitalism and yet effectively refuse to utilise their services under socialism. What will be different is that the services of a lawyer should be free, and expenses paid by the state. The procedures of a legal situation should be very similar to those that have functioned under capitalism. The defence should be guaranteed competent and skilled expert support, and this principle should apply in all situations. The legal system should also be free of political bias, and should not be deferential to the workers state. Mandel calls for the election of judges, the problem with this proposal is that this situation may result in the creation of an amateur judiciary. Instead it would be more in the interests of the people that an expert collection of judges is chosen in terms of having passed professional exams.

Mandel argues that the communist party should supervise the process of transition to socialism. This formulation is an indication that he considers it difficult to reject the standpoint of a party state. It is true that during the revolution itself, the act of insurrection, the role of the party will be crucial as a leadership that is able to provide a practical strategy that guides the actions of a mass movement against capitalism. Also, if civil war was to occur this leading role of the revolutionary party would be vital. But the actual process of the promotion of socialism requires that the self-activity of the working class becomes vital. People will have to learn from their own experience what is required in order to build socialism. In this context the party should become a propaganda organisation which primarily gives advice, but does not impose itself onto the dynamics of the class struggle. Mandel is right to suggest that self-confidence is the most important aspect of promoting the effective functioning of socialism. Only the popular participation of the working class can ensure that socialism is being advanced. But whilst Mandel seems to consider that civil war could be an inevitable outcome of the revolutionary process, we would suggest that peace should be the aim of the class struggle. If peace is realised it becomes the most favourable basis in which to build socialism. The act of revolution does not mean that civil war will occur, but instead the popular character of this process of change can ensure that the situation remains peaceful. Indeed this should be the aim of the revolutionary forces. Peace would mean that the situation becomes favourable for the building of socialism.

Mandel comments that: “While we reject the idea that nuclear war is inevitable we likewise reject the idea that propaganda, agitation and class organisation of the toilers in the capitalist countries alone is sufficient to prevent wars of aggression by imperialism against old and new revolutions.”(23) This formulation seems to reject the perspective of peace and socialism. It instead implies that war is an inherent part of the process of world revolution. Whilst it is necessary to prepare for war as an extreme contingency, it should not be considered as an inevitable aspect of the international class struggle. Instead the aim of the world proletariat should be to prevent war in order to further the cause of socialism. If the threat of war is overcome, this development can only advance the cause of the class struggle. Only the forces of imperialism have a vested interest in creating counterrevolutionary wars. This is why the policy of peace should be a crucial aspect of the attempt to realise world revolution. The threat of war that would be caused by the success of revolution can only be opposed by a policy of peace. Obviously the new workers state would have to be prepared for war, but its policy would be peace. Mandel is reluctant to endorse this viewpoint, possibly because he does not want to support the conception of peaceful co-existence. Instead he concentrates upon the necessity of maintaining socialist democracy as the alternative to imperialist war. This point is true, but logically peace is also a crucial aspect of the opposition to the threat of military aggression by imperialism. His refusal to make this point indicates an omission in his revolutionary programme.

In conclusion we would suggest that Mandel has made a welcome contribution to the understanding of socialist democracy. However, we would suggest that the modifications that we have introduced into his approach are vital if a consistent and more principled understanding of what is democracy under socialism is to be developed. This means that the orthodox views of Lenin and Trotsky on the issue of socialist democracy have to be revised. Instead new novel ideas have to be introduced and elaborated. This means that a Kautskyite appreciation of the progressive character of bourgeois democracy has to be recognised and that this institution has to be incorporated within socialism in the form of the Constituent Assembly. In this manner we can fully maintain that socialism can be a genuinely democratic system. In contrast, Mandel's approach, whilst often admirable, is also is undermined by support for Bolshevik orthodoxy. He has essentially not gone beyond the limitations of the works of Trotsky. This means he fails to address the question as to whether it will be possible to vote for capitalism within the socialist system. He also does not effectively tackle the problem of the single party state. But despite these limitations it is also feasible to accept his document as one of the important contributions to the views of Socialist Standpoint.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Ernest Mandel Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Socialist Democracy, (1985) Marxist Internet Archive

(2) ibid p3

(3) ibid p4

(4) ibid p5

(5) ibid p6

(6) ibid p6

(7) ibid p7

(8) ibid p8

(9) ibid p12

(10)Ibid p12

(11) ibid p12-13

(12) ibid p13

(13) ibid p13

(14) ibid p14

(15) ibid p15

(16) ibid p16

(17) ibid p20

(18) ibid p20

(19) ibid p21

(20)Section two, page 7

(21) ibid p7

(22) ibid p10

(23) ibid p15