SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY

by Phil Sharpe

PART ONE – THE UNITY OF DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM

The historical experience of Leninism and Stalinism seems to indicate the inability of Marxist regimes to realise principled forms of democracy. Instead the outcome of these regimes is the justification of one party rule and repressive dictatorship. Hence it has become customary to connect liberal democracy with capitalism. The very process of revolution is considered to undermine the principles of democracy. Thus it is only possible to reconcile the aims of socialism with democracy when a process of adaptation to capitalism is justified in the form of reformism and the rejection of the revolutionary objectives of Marxism. However, there is nothing within Marxism that rejects the role of multi-party democracy, and the importance of negotiation and consensus for resolving disputes instead of resorting to state repression. The very defence of democracy by Kautsky indicates the possibility of an alternative that has been little explored because of the limitations of Stalinism and reformism. Indeed, the aspiration for forms of democratic self-rule is continually generated by the restrictions of liberal democracy which upholds capitalism in terms of unsatisfactory participation of the people in the political process, and the fact that only one economic option is available to those that engage in the act of voting for candidates at Parliamentary elections. The increasing undermining of the welfare state in favour of the forces of neo-liberalism has promoted discussion about the limitations of contemporary democracy. Unfortunately the alternative seems to be socialism that does not provide any guarantees about the importance of the role of democracy. This problematical issue has undermined the development of popular support for socialism within advanced capitalist society.

The question of the relationship of democracy to socialism has been complicated by the tensions between the respective merits of direct and representative democracy. What we should possibly establish before we can even discuss this issue are the conditions for a principled form of democracy, which would involve the right of individual freedoms, and the ability to choose and criticise governments.(1) These aspects can be present within forms of liberal democracy and socialist democracy. The point is that these two types of democracy are not opposed as Lenin might have argued. However, some Marxists have effectively opposed the role of democracy because they do consider that it undermines the attempt to promote socialism. Hence they are reluctant to support the right of the people to democratically decide to restore capitalism. But such a decision is only likely to occur if the attempt to generate socialism is proving to be a failure in terms of the inability to realise human needs and welfare, and the connected ascendency of a state bureaucracy. If the progress of socialism is satisfactory, and is able to provide high quality goods and services, it would be irrational to vote in favour of capitalism. But the system is only truly democratic when this right to vote for social alternatives is possible. What is not being argued for is the creation of some type of 'perfect' democratic society based upon the total involvement of the people. Instead we are concerned with the ability to make choices that truly indicate that society is democratic. This means under socialism the ability to choose a party for government that is not the ruling revolutionary party, or ultimately the possibility to reject the continuation of socialism in favour of capitalism and liberal democracy. The very capacity to make these radical choices will mean that society is based on the free exchange of views and toleration of the opinions of others. Polarisation within society will become unacceptable when the minority no longer considers that its views are listened to by the majority. Hence democratic activity will involve negotiation and the attempt to realise a consensus.(2) Thus the majority will not have absolute power, and instead will have to listen to what the minority is articulating.(3)

The primary problem is that majority rule becomes distorted, a minority acts on behalf of the majority, as occurred after the Russian revolution. The actual impulse for the generation of opposition to democracy within a socialist society is not the possible unrealistic character of its aims and objectives, but instead the tendency for an elite to emerge that considers itself the true voice of the people. (4) Indeed it could be argued that the outcome of this situation is not socialism, which is expressed by genuinely democratic economic and political structures, but instead the development of new forms of exploitation and oppression. In this context the justification of the dictatorship of the proletariat has been historically shown to be problematical because this is the formulation which has upheld the rule of a minority. The point being made is that the working class does not exercise political power because of the undemocratic limitations of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This standpoint is exercised by the vanguard party which rules on 'behalf' of the class. Genuine socialist democracy requires the rejection of this elitism. This means no single or exclusive party can define itself as the personification of the views of the working class. Instead the only claim to represent the working class is genuine victory in a free election. Hence the relationship of any party with any section of the population is expressed by a democratic mandate. This mandate can be freely rejected in the next election. Indeed the aim of a party is not to achieve political power, but instead to utilise that power to promoting the objectives of socialism in terms of encouraging the development of industrial democracy and advancing the egalitarian objectives of social welfare and generalised material need. The working class is perfectly entitled to claim that a given political party does not adequately advance these objectives, and so should be recalled and replaced by a new elected formation.

However there is an objection to the above standpoint. It could be argued that the working class is no longer the majority of society, and has been fragmented by economic and technological advances within capitalism. Hence whilst it is still possible to practice democracy in terms of majority rule, this majority will not necessarily favour socialism. Indeed, this seems to be the problem that undermines the possibility of the election of left-wing governments within advanced capitalist societies. (5) However, it could also be argued that it is the very lack of genuine democracy within capitalism that unifies diverse social strata in favour of realising a type of society that establishes the connection between popular participation in the political process to economic aims and values. By extending control over greater aspects of society democratic values are realised in the process of aspiring to attain socialism.(6) The material inequality generated by capitalism is something that the majority of the people are never eternally reconciled with, and so there is always the potential to vote for a party with socialist objectives. Ideologues of liberal democracy and capitalism justify inequality in terms of the criteria of economic efficiency. But periods of economic crisis means this standpoint becomes subject to increasingly critical scrutiny. The actual merit of democratic socialism is that it can provide arguments as to why economic inequality can be overcome by a process of democratic change. In this sense, the role of democracy is crucial if the situation of economic inequality is to be transformed.

Unfortunately, the Labour party, and similar parties, have accepted the views of the monetarists concerning the standpoint that there is no alternative to capitalism.(7) The role of bourgeois political economy ideology has had a powerful role in trying to convince people that the options within the present system are limited. In this context socialism becomes considered to be undemocratic because it is defined as unrealistic, and therefore can only be upheld by authoritarian measures. We have to dispute this standpoint, and instead advocate that the alternative to the actions of a passive electorate that reluctantly supports austerity because of the apparent lack of other options, is to provide the connection between more principled forms of democracy and the objective of socialism. The rejection of bourgeois political economy is integral to this development of an alternative perspective. Indeed we have to go onto the offensive and outline how the most dogmatic defenders of bourgeois political economy only support liberal democracy as long as it works in their favour. Their priority is defence of the market and not democracy. In contrast, we acknowledge that we can only advance socialism by means of democracy.

However, it will be argued by supporters of capitalism that revolution is an undemocratic act. Thus it is only possible to be a consistent democrat by rejecting the perspective of revolution. We would reply that the process of revolution is a democratic activity that involves many people in transforming their lives through the development of organs of popular sovereignty. However, historical events have shown that it problematical to replace the institutions of liberal democracy with those of popular democracy. As Poulantzas remarked: “What is to replace the bourgeois state en bloc is no longer direct rank and file democracy. The Soviets are now not so much an anti-state as a parallel state – one copied from the instrumental model of the existing state, and possessing a proletarian character in so far as its summit is controlled/occupied by a single revolutionary party which itself functions according to the model of the state. Distrust of the possibility of mass intervention within the bourgeois state has become distrust of the popular movement as such. This is called strengthening the state/soviets, the better to make it wither away in the future. And so was Stalinist statism born.”(7) In other words the Soviets originated as genuine organs of working class opinion via the role of workplacedelegates. But over time this situation was replaced by party based delegates, and this was how the Bolsheviks obtained a majority in the Petrograd Soviet. This meant the Soviets ultimately became bureaucratised institutions, and the expression of one party rule. Poulantzas is ambiguous about how this situation can be resolved. But we have to be emphatic and suggest that the workplace councils cannot ultimately replace the legitimacy of long established Parliamentary organs. The workplace councils have to co-exist with the role of Parliament. In this manner the relationship of direct democracy and representative democracy can be reconciled, and the principles of liberal democracy are not rejected. Ultimately the process of revolution is legitimised by elections to the Parliament. If these elections reject the role of revolutionary activity, this situation will have to be accepted by the workplace councils.

However, even if capitalism is restored by this development the workplace councils can remain as an expression of the aspirations of the people for an alternative to the limitations of capitalism. These events will not be without their tensions and contradictions but this is the only outcome that can reconcile democracy with the objective of socialism. At the very least the popular revolt represented by the formation of workplace councils will indicate that people do not want to be ruled in the traditional manner of the domination of the ruling class. Instead the people will demand more measures that are in their interests, and so will reject the imperatives of bourgeois political economy and austerity. The progress of democracy will have occurred in contrast to the continued limitations of capitalism. This situation could possibly represent the dual power of the workers and capitalists. The potential will be generated for further social change, including the election of a left-wing party. The fact that the claims of popular democracy have to be accommodated to the conflicting objectives of representative democracy does not mean that opportunities for revolutionary change have been squandered. Instead capitalism will be in continual crisis if it has to constantly reject the popular possibilities for democratic advance.(9) The very popular legitimacy of the forms of direct democracy will continue to generate the possibility for change at the level of representative democracy.

This relationship was not recognised by the German Social Democrats in 1918 when they undermined the influence of the workers councils because of an acceptance of the exclusive legitimacy of the National Assembly. In contrast, the emerging German Communists failed to recognise the organic relationship between these two different types of institution, and so refused to participate in elections to the National Assembly. This was a sectarian mistake which isolated the Communists from the democratic impulses of the working class. In contrast, Kautsky underestimated the significance of the workers councils, and so nobody had a coherent revolutionary strategy. These types of mistakes have to be avoided in relation to any possible revolutionary development in advanced capitalist societies. Instead of counter-posing direct democracy with representative democracy, we have to understand their connections. This is vital if the relationship of democracy to socialism is to be understood in a principled manner. Ian Bullock has made the point that the British Marxists at the time of the Russian Revolution made a strategic mistake because they glamorised Soviet democracy and ignored the continued importance of Parliament.(10) Lenin was to remind the British Communists of the importance of Parliamentary representation if the democratic legitimacy of socialism was to be advanced.(11) The ultimate result of the ideological influence of the October revolution was to divide socialism between those that emphasised the role of Parliamentary change, the role of the reformists, and those revolutionary forces that upheld the importance of Soviets. Kautsky tentatively outlined the possibility to unite the significance of liberal democracy with the class struggle, but he still denigrated the role of the Soviets. (12) We can overcome these tensions and indicate the strategic connections of representative and popular forms of democracy in the process of transition to socialism.

It has been argued that the connection of democracy to socialism is difficult to realise because the complexities of developing a socialist economy based on the role of planning can only result in the domination of a state bureaucracy, and the rule of an elite will compromise the possibility to develop forms of popular sovereignty. These complex issues could be tackled by the participation of the people in the administration of the government, and the accountability of the actions of the state in terms of the importance of regular elections. But these aspects would not resolve the connection of planning to the domination of the state, but the development of successful forms of workers self-management of the economy could resolve the tensions between the tendencies for centralisation created by state planning and the impulse towards popular participation promoted by industrial democracy.(13) It can also be argued that it is possible to realise a credible socialist economy in which planning is combined with the individual choice represented by the aspirations of the consumer for high quality goods. In this manner planning cannot be rigid and inflexible and instead must respond to the impulses of the consumer. This aspect was not present within the USSR because the party elite was not held accountable to the electorate, and so could continue to produce goods that nobody wanted. Thus democratic socialism is most likely to be compatible with the role of the market.

Possibly the major argument in favour of liberal democracy is that it exists and so is superior to the unknown aspect of the supposed virtues of democratic socialism. This point is reinforced by the historical experience of the USSR which was based on the rule of a single party. But the point is that the very dynamics of class struggle can pose the possibility of the generation of a socialist society, and so democracy would then become an immediate and important issue. We can also learn from historical events that the attempt to construct socialism without credible democracy has proved to be a failure. Hence the aim of promoting socialism cannot occur without attention to the importance of democracy. In this context it is firstly necessary to recognise the gains of liberal democracy. Lenin argues that: “Take the fundamental laws of modern states, take their administration, take freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, or “equality of all citizens before the Law”, and you will see at every turn evidence of the hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy with which every honest and class conscious worker is familiar.”(14) The suggestion is that these democratic rights amount to deceit because of the limitations of bourgeois democracy, and so are of limited value. But surely the democratic response is to propose measures to overcome the tensions in these rights and therefore effectively extend the level of democratic rights within society. Instead these rights are considered in terms of the denial of these rights to the bourgeoisie: “Freedom of the press ceases to be hypocrisy, because the printing press and stocks of paper are taken away from the bourgeoisie. The same thing applies to the best buildings, the palaces, the mansions, and manor houses. Soviet power took thousands upon thousands of these best building from the exploiters at one strike, and in this way made the right of assembly – without which democracy is a fraud – a million times more democratic for the people.”(14) Furthermore, proletarian democracy is justified in terms of the end of universal suffrage and the restriction of the voting rights of the bourgeoisie. The ultimate logic of this situation is that the very role of democracy is compromised as Lenin admits: “Kautsky talks about anything you like, about everything that is acceptable to liberals and bourgeois democrats and does not go beyond their circle of ideas, but he does not talk about the main thing, namely the fact that the proletariat cannot achieve victory without breaking the resistance of the bourgeoisie, without forcibly suppressing its adversaries, and that, where there is “forcible suppression”, where there is no freedom, there is of course no democracy.”(16) Hence the very logic of the class struggle results in the denial of the significance of democracy.

What Lenin does not admit is that the very class that most crucially requires democracy is the proletariat. The dynamics of the class struggle require the development of democracy rather than its restriction and suppression. Lenin seems to forget that the Tsarist regime was authoritarian and lacked any democracy. Hence the formation of the Soviets was an expression of the democratic impulses within the working class, and one of its major aims was for the creation of a Constituent Assembly. It was assumed that a democratic republic would enable the interests of the working class to be expressed. But in the name of proletarian democracy the Constituent Assembly was dissolved, and universal suffrage was compromised by the restrictions placed upon the act of voting. The ultimate victim of this effective undermining of democracy was the proletariat because it no longer had a free vote to express its dissatisfaction with the increasingly repressive measures of the Bolsheviks. Elections to the Soviets became rigged, and the measures taken to undermine liberal democracy became the basis to also restrict the role of proletarian democracy. Hence the view that proletarian democracy had been enhanced by these actions was a fiction. Instead the demise of representative democracy meant the end of proletarian democracy. This was because representative democracy was a crucial part of the activity of the Soviets, such as the pluralistic competition between different parties. The idea of an exclusive proletarian democracy that had little to do with liberal democracy was a myth created by Lenin. However, this does not mean that Kautsky's underestimation of the importance of the Soviets in favour of bourgeois democracy was correct. Instead the genuine development of democracy under the revolutionary regime in Russia would have meant the enrichment of the connection between the gains and rights of bourgeois democracy with the advances of Soviet and proletarian democracy. This would have meant an institutional connection between the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly.

Thus historical experience has shown that it is problematical to counter-pose representative and participatory democracy. Instead what is principled, and in the overall interests of democracy, is to try to reconcile the advantages of both of these forms. This standpoint is not a dilution of political aims, contrary to what Lenin claims. The point is that the absolute counter-position of liberal democracy and proletarian democracy has proved to result in the very demise of all forms of workable democracy. Instead the attempt to connect the advantages of liberal democracy and proletarian democracy can result in a process of the generation of the democratic character of socialism. For example, the legal system of capitalism can be inherited by socialism, and the universal suffrage of liberal democracy can become the basis to oppose any tendency towards single party rule within socialist society. The point is that establishing the most principled relationship of liberal democracy and direct democracy will advance the ability to promote the collective self-determination of society. In contrast, the process of polarisation between liberal democracy and direct democracy can only result in single party rule and the domination of elite.

However, Cunningham argues that post-Marxists believe that the very perspective of working class leadership in the struggle for socialism can be authoritarian, and so the principled alternative is to strive to develop an alliance for change based on values like pluralism. (17) But the emphasis on the centrality of the working class is not arbitrary. It is based on its importance within society, and the development of opposition to capitalism will involve diverse alliances and the role of pluralistic co-operation. Thus an emphasis on the importance of social class need not result in justification of sectarian forms of political practice. Indeed it should also be recognised that the strategic importance of the class struggle is still a means to an end, which is that democratic self-government is the basis to transform society in a progressive and constructive manner: “What is essential for Marxist theory is the thesis of the objective possibility of self-government, and not of its necessary realization. The very idea of self-government presupposes that people are the creators of history in given conditions, i.e., in the objectively determined framework of possibilities. In this way, the idea of self-government presupposes an open, activist interpretation of history in which the artificial gap between law and contingency, necessity and freedom has been overcome.”(18) This historical standpoint means that we can be flexible about the character of the struggle for the realisation of the aim of self-government. There will be an irreducible aspect of contingency in relation to this process of transformation, and so the question of the components of the struggle will be secondary when compared to the possibility to realise its objective of democratic self-government and socialism. This view is not a justification for a denial of the importance of the working class, but rather we are asking what are the aims and tasks of struggle, and in this context how it promotes the goals of democracy and socialism.

Such an issue is important because vanguard organisations can attempt to establish the priorities of their own standpoint as the basis of struggle, and this situation can undermine the prospects of the unity of a mass movement. But it is not possible to resolve this problem easily because each vanguard organisation will regard its politics as vital for the class struggle and the success of the realisation of socialism. Nor can these tensions be simply resolved by the assertion of non-party activists concerning the merits of pluralism and opposition to sectarianism. This standpoint can only contribute to the strife. Instead the only alternative is to try and combine diverse social forces in opposition to capitalism. This will allow discussion between rival groups about strategy whilst being part of a united front of struggle: “The appeal to common sense is crucial to breaking down doctrinaire assumptions on the radical left and try to overcome divisions between “old and new”. It also emphasises the need to regroup the left in new political formations that provide a space for strategic thinking, that allow different strategies to co-exist in a certain tension, whilst also creating the conditions for unity and action.”(19)

Hence the major problem in the task of generating support for the aim of uniting democracy and socialism is not the organisational issue of the role of vanguard parties, or the supposed problem of out-dated strategies based on class reductionism. Indeed, in relation to the last issue we still have to elaborate a more detailed understandings of capitalism if we are to be able to provide an effective strategy of social change.(20) Instead we have to tackle the ideological problem that a lot of people consider that socialism is not committed to democracy. This standpoint is also based on the view that the forces of socialism can never attain political power by means of democratic methods. The very results of elections have been utilised in order to prove the justification of this view. However, this issue could be rectified if Marxists and Socialists struggle more energetically for democracy and socialism, and attempted to develop a more viable strategy for social change. We have tried to outline aspects of this strategy in this article. What we have not tackled is the issue of the relationship of democracy to planning. (We have attempted to address this issue in other articles) Instead we have concentrated on the reasons why democratic socialism has not been realised in the past, and how this problem can be resolved in relation to the possibility of reconciling the objectives of liberal democracy and direct democracy.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Frank Cunningham: Democratic Theory and Socialism Cambridge University Press, 1987 p48
2. Thomas McCarthy: The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas, MIT press, Cambridge Mass 1978
3. Cunningham op cit p71-75

(4) ibid p76-78

(5) ibid p96

(6) ibid p100-101

(7) Noel Thompson: Political Economy and the Labour Party: UCL Press, London, 1996 p251-286

(8) Nicos Poulantzas: State, Power, Socialism: Verso, London 1981 p255

(9) Cunningham op cit p109-110

(10) Ian Bullock: Romancing the Revolution, AU Press, Alberta 2011 pp169-183

(11) ibid p231-232

(12) Lenin: The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky, in Collected Works Volume 28, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964, p257-263

(13) Cunningham op cit p125-137

(14) Lenin: op cit p244

(15) ibid p248

(16) ibid p257

(17) Cunningham op cit p194-197

(18) ibid p223

(19) Luke Cooper and Simon Hardy: Beyond Capitalism? Zero books, Hants, 202012 p160

(20) Erik Olin Wright: Envisioning Real Utopia's, Verso, London 2010

PART TWO – THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL AND DEMOCRACY

In 1978 the United Secretariat of the Fourth International adopted an important resolution on the issue of democracy within a socialist society. Criticism of this resolution suggested that in order to uphold the importance of political freedom, the perspective of the formation of the dictatorship of the proletariat was being undermined. This was because it was considered unrealistic to uphold a situation of liberalisation and freedom for the activity of reactionary opponents in the period of intense class struggle when the very future of the proletarian state was being decided. For example during the Russian civil war, the role of the Red Terror was crucial for the survival of the regime. The role of coercion meant that democratic rights had to be limited. The historical experience of the Russian revolution has indicated that repression is crucial if the class struggle is to be won in the immediate period after the revolution. (1)

The problem with this criticism is that it considers the possibility of violent counter-revolution to be the norm and not the expected exception within the period of the formation of the socialist regime. In contrast the USFI is trying to tackle a different situation concerning the possible peaceful development of the revolutionary process within the conditions of liberal democracy. Consequently this perspective will mean the possibility of the peaceful and democratic resolution of the class struggle. The rejection of this perspective suggests that any revolutionary success of the working class will be opposed by a reactionary united front that is prepared to struggle violently in order to undermine the revolutionary regime.(2) This criticism implies that it is not possible to limit the dynamics of the class struggle to political and ideological norms. Instead revolutionary violence and counter-revolution will be an inevitable aspect of the revolutionary process. But the point is that we know from historical experience that this development of violent struggle will not benefit the interests of the working class. Instead it is crucial that the aims of socialism are advanced by democratic methods, and the connected peaceful resolution of the tensions of the class struggle. This prospect may not be immediately realisable. It is possible that the former ruling class may resort to violence in order to try and overthrow the revolutionary regime. But what we have learnt is that this reactionary threat is not progressively dealt with by the undermining of democratic rights such as banning bourgeois parties and restricting freedom of speech. Instead the very extension of democratic rights will promote the possibility for the peaceful resolution of the class struggle in terms that are favourable to the working class. In contrast, the development of coercion and repression will only enhance the possibility of the creation of a bureaucratic and elitist regime. The effective formation of a single party regime will not enhance the possibility to promote socialism because the democratic basis of socialism will have been undermined. In reply to this standpoint, it is argued that the forces of 'counter-revolution' will assume the mantle of democracy and call for Soviets without parties.(3) But the answer to this reactionary opposition is not to restrict the role of democracy, or to primarily utilise the forces of state repression. Thus the most appropriate, effective and principled response may be to call an election concerning those issues dividing society. We should have confidence that the result will favour the revolutionary regime, and if the result is unfavourable it will be necessary to resolve the situation in peaceful terms. The acceptance of retreat and defeat is more principled than attempting to uphold a proletarian regime that lacks democratic credentials. This is because the regime without democratic validity can only uphold itself by means of coercion and repression. This situation would undermine the very credibility of the objective of socialism.

It is argued that it is not possible to accept the validity of democratic rights under the dictatorship of the proletariat because their application may promote the forces of reaction under certain circumstances. Instead: “The degree of freedom granted by the revolutionary dictatorship to its enemies will be directly proportional to the strength and progress of the national and international revolution and inversely proportional to the strength and advances of the counter-revolution.”(4) In actuality this relationship is not possible to maintain. The undermining of democratic rights in the name of the interests of the revolution only results in the compromising of the interests of democracy. Hence the erosion of the rights of association of the bourgeoisie only promotes the dilution of the rights of the workers to associate. This means the most generous democratic rights for the bourgeoisie far from undermining the credibility and survival of the revolutionary regime only generate the development of democratic impulses within the working class. A regime based on the conscious restriction of rights is likely to promote a situation of unaccountability and the possibility to form a government that is elitist. Only the flourishing promotion of democracy can ensure the creation of a revolutionary regime that is accountable to society and so able to advance the cause of socialism in democratic terms.

However, Karim argues that this standpoint represents a naïve position because it ignores the polarisation caused by the intensification of the class struggle and the generation of the question about which class rules society. He contends: “We still believe that in every revolutionary situation bourgeois democracy wills short circuit. In these situations the alternative is the direct counter-revolutionary dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or the revolutionary dictatorship, not democracy, of the working class. These two dictatorships will engage in armed confrontation before, during, and immediately after the workers revolution.”(5) It is entirely possible that this type of situation could develop, but this would be a last resort situation and not what is being preferred or advocated. The crucial point is that the role of democracy is the most effective expression of the class struggle. The articulation of democracy, in the form of the relationship of popular democracy to representative democracy – enables the balance of class forces to be understood accurately - and so provides the capacity to estimate the possibilities for the revolutionary transformation of society. The rejection of democratic methods of struggle means that the issue of who becomes the dominant force within society is resolved by the crude methods of armed might. This also means that any successful revolutionary regime is formed on the basis of the application of coercion. Hence the relationship of this regime to the role of democracy is questionable, and instead it is more likely to reject any accountability to the working class. The very lack of democracy will mean the aim of socialism is not likely to be promoted by this regime. It could be argued that these types of arguments motivated Kautsky's opposition to the October revolution. This is true, but Kautsky also rejected any favourable estimation of the democratic potential of the Soviets. The point is that the coercive intensification of the class struggle in Russia led to the end of the democratic potential of the Soviets. This potential was actually connected to the importance of the connected gains of representative democracy. The end of the importance of these methods of democracy did not strengthen the dictatorship of the proletariat. Instead the significance of coercion within society only led to single party rule and the formation of a regime that was not accountable to the working class. This is precisely why democracy is not a luxury of the class struggle, and is instead an indispensable expression of revolutionary principles. A revolutionary regime is not primarily upheld by the methods of dictatorship or coercion; instead its relationship to democracy and the creation of popular support, indicate whether it can aim to realise socialism. This point was accepted by the Bolsheviks when they introduced the New Economic Policy, and they accepted that the objectives of socialism had been undermined by the coercive and unpopular policy of war communism. Unfortunately this New Economic Policy was not complemented by the revival of Soviet democracy.

The primary problem with Karim's approach is that he considers the armed transformation of the class struggle has transcended the importance of democracy. But it is in the very interests of the working class that the dynamics of the class struggle do not assume the forms of armed struggle and instead correspond to the norms corresponding to the advance of democracy and its expression in terms of the increasing popularity of the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society. The only force that gains from the application of repression in this situation is the former ruling class which is desperately trying to withstand the prospect of the creation of a revolutionary regime. In this context, armed conflict is not an inner law of revolution, but instead should be its last resort. The peaceful transition to a revolutionary regime is also required in order to ensure economic and political stability, which is vital for the prospect of movement towards socialism. Thus the historical experience of the October revolution is not to be emulated, but instead its repetition is to be avoided. In this context the role of representative democracy is invaluable in relation to the promotion of a peaceful and democratic transition to socialism. Indeed, arguably, the vast majority of the working class would not want to support an alternative and violent process of revolutionary change.

However Karim seems to be making a valid point that the conception of a democratic and peaceful transition to socialism represents Euro-centric thinking. In many Third World countries institutions of representative democracy have not been established, and the overthrow of military dictatorship would seem to suggest that armed struggle is indispensable. Of course, it would be a dogmatic error to ignore the importance of different economic and political conditions that may influence the character of the revolutionary process. But it is a universal fact that democratic revolution, which generates the formation of democratic republics, would advance the cause of socialism in the Third World. The only social force that gains advantage from conditions of armed dictatorship are the reactionary cliques who dominate Third World countries. In contrast, the working class has everything to gain from democracy. For example, in Brazil the development of representative democracy means that the Workers Party can be held accountable by the electorate, and this political situation advances the promotion of alternatives. The Arab Spring was based on the universal yearning for democracy and this aspiration has become a permanent feature of the political situation in the Middle East. The economic development of China will result in the formation of independent unions and the inevitable call to end the one party regime.

Hence Karim's standpoint was based on nostalgia about the guerrilla struggle in Cuba and the apparent success of the role of armed elites. This period is gone. The application of armed violence is an expression of the effective monopoly of reactionary forces, and the idea of democracy is no longer associated with the ideas of Western capitalism. However what has to be done is to connect the universal popularity of democracy with the aim of socialism. This prospect can only be realised in terms of the intensification of the class struggle and the emergence of forms of direct democracy. The ideological problem is that the aim of socialism is still discredited by the failures of Stalinism. Socialism has not overcome its apparent connection to Stalinism. In this sense people often have illusions in democracy because they do not connect its purpose to the aim of socialism. Instead democracy is effectively limited by its association with capitalism. Hence it is necessary to establish the political independence of the working class if the aim of democracy is to establish definite class content. At present people may be increasingly critical of capitalism but they do not associate this criticism with the objective of socialism. The only manner in which the objective of socialism is to regain its credibility is if becomes inter-connected with the role of democracy. However, for this association to be realised requires continued rejection of the view that Stalinism was socialism. This process has begun in South Africa with the increasing rejection of the limitations of the ANC-SACP alliance. (6) But this development is limited by the inability to connect democracy with socialism.

In other words, the relationship of democracy to socialism is not a Euro-centric preoccupation, or an expression of the apparent opportunism of Ernest Mandel. Instead it is a theoretical connection that has been established by the very demands of the international class struggle. In this context, Mandel anticipated the importance of this connection, and contributed to the understanding of the strategic importance of the relationship of democracy and socialism. Hence the alternatives of Karim, which seem to represent Bolshevik orthodoxy, represent a rigid attempt to continue to uphold the historical lessons of the October revolution. However, this intention only succeeds in obscuring the vital relationship of democracy to socialism. What we should learn from the October revolution is how not to make revolution, and instead uphold a different strategy. This does not mean the vindication of reformism, which is about rejecting revolutionary change in favour of adapting to capitalism. Nor should we support an exclusively parliamentary process of transition to socialism. Instead we should strive to develop the democratic process of revolutionary change.

Karim argues that it is wrong and inflexible to conceive the Soviets as a perpetual organ of mass struggle. It is entirely possible that the Soviets can undermine the dynamism of the revolutionary process and in these circumstances it would be principled and creative to contemplate the possibility of developing new organisational forms of opposition to capitalism. What is of primary importance is the permanent mobilisation of the working class.(7) Indeed, the Menshevik leadership of the Soviets during the 1917 revolution led to tentative contemplation by the Bolsheviks of supporting the strategic possibilities of the factory committees. However, this prospect was never realised because the Soviets remained popular and mass organisations of direct democracy. Furthermore, it is foolish and adventurist to dismiss the potential of the Soviets because, as Lenin argued, they represent the possibility to develop the Commune state after the revolution. Lenin summarises why the Soviets are the most democratic and participatory organisation that means there is no principled alternative to their role in the development of the post-revolutionary society: “The Soviets are a new state apparatus which, in the first place, provides an armed force of workers and peasants; and this force is not divorced from the people, as was the old standing army, but is very closely bound up with the people. From the military point of view this force is incomparably more powerful than previous forces; from the revolutionary point of view, it cannot be replaced by anything else. Secondly, this apparatus provides a bond with the people, with the majority of the people, so intimate, so indissoluble, so easily verifiable and renewable, that nothing even remotely like it existed in the previous state apparatus. Thirdly, this apparatus, by virtue of the fact that its personnel is elected and subject to recall at the people's will without any bureaucratic formalities, is far more democratic than any previous apparatus. Fourthly, it provides a close contact with the most varied professions, thereby facilitating the adoption of the most varied and most radical reforms without red tape. Fifthly, it provides an organisational form for the vanguard, i.e., for the most class conscious, most energetic and most progressive sections of the oppressed classes, the workers and peasants, and so constitutes an apparatus by means of which the vanguard of the oppressed classes can elevate, train, educate and lead the entire vast mass of these classes, which has up to now stood completely outside of political life and history. Sixthly, it makes possible to combine the advantages of the parliamentary system with those of immediate and direct democracy, i.e., to vest in the people's elected representatives both legislative and executive functions. Compared with the bourgeois parliamentary system, this is an advance in democracy's development which is of world-wide, historic significance.”(8)

In this description of the role of the Soviets, Lenin describes the possible democratic character of the Commune state of the post-revolutionary regime of the workers and peasants. The state is accountable to the democratic aspirations of the people, and so its institutions are based on the principles of the recall of delegates by their constituents. However, Lenin is careful to emphasise that the achievements of bourgeois democracy will not be ended, and instead they will be connected to the importance of direct democracy. This implies that the multi-party system of liberal democracy will not be ended, and universal suffrage will be maintained. Only in the actual post-revolutionary period, because of the dissolving of the Constituent Assembly, are the virtues of Soviet democracy contrasted with the limitations of bourgeois democracy: “For the transition from the bourgeois to the socialist system, for the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Republic of Soviets (of Workers, Soldiers and Peasant Deputies) is not only a higher form of democratic institution (as compared with the usual bourgeois republic crowned by a Constituent Assembly) but is the only form capable of securing the most painless transition to socialism.”(9) The decision to dissolve the Constituent Assembly means that it can only be considered an inferior expression of democracy when compared to the role of the Soviets. This situation means that the Bolsheviks no longer contemplate the connection of representative democracy with the direct democracy of the Soviets. Instead the former is defined exclusively as bourgeois democracy, and the latter as an expression of proletarian democracy. However, there is nothing in Marxist theory which denies the possibility to unify representative and direct democracy. The former expresses the importance of competing parties and the role of universal suffrage in choosing governments. It is entirely possible that the Soviets could still function effectively in terms of incorporating these aspects of representative democracy. In contrast, the closure of the Constituent Assembly meant the dynamism of the Soviets was reduced to a formality because they became the justification of one party rule. The end of free elections based on universal suffrage meant a similar development within the Soviets. Hence the importance of the Soviets would actually have been enhanced by the ability of the Constituent Assembly to function in accordance with its electoral results. The co-existence of the Soviets and Constituent Assembly would have been preferable to the reduction of Soviets to becoming the passive institutions of one party rule. In this manner the Soviets became the instrument of the party elite, and their relationship to the role of participatory and direct democracy was tenuous. Hence the only manner in which the Soviets remained the instrument of 'proletarian democracy' was in terms of its expression of the exclusive domination of the Communist party. This situation may have been avoided if the leadership of the Soviets and Constituent Assembly had attempted to reach political compromise which maintained the importance of both representative and direct democracy.

In other words, the Soviets can have an important role in the democratic character of the post-revolutionary regime if they do not act to compromise the significance of representative democracy. The problem was that Lenin considered the results of the elections to the Constituent Assembly as a threat to the gains of the revolution, which were personified by the role of the Soviets. But dissolving the Constituent Assembly meant the Soviets institutionally became the justification of one party rule. Unintentionally Karim is right, the Soviets can act against the dynamism of revolutionary mobilisation, and this was proved by the regressive effects on the Soviets caused by the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. But the Soviets can still be popular, and institutions of direct democracy, if they recognise their limits, which would have meant compromise with the Constituent Assembly, and the formation of a democratic republic. This compromise is not unprincipled because the democratic republic is still based on the hegemony of the working class. The aim to develop the Commune state is not undermined in this situation. Instead the forces of counter-revolution have to accept the legitimacy of the Soviets if the Constituent Assembly is to continue to function. If the leadership of the Constituent Assembly had refused such a compromise, the prospect of civil war would have become inevitable. As it was the Soviet leadership was blamed for the development of civil war because they dissolved the Constituent Assembly. Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not recognise the necessity to maintain all forms of democracy if they were not to be blamed for the generation of the civil war. Instead the civil war occurred in conditions of the effective development of one party rule. The issue was defence of the workers state against the forces of counter-revolution and not adherence to Soviet democracy against the undemocratic character of reaction.

Karim does not recognise that one of the most important aims of the revolutionary party is to encourage the development of Soviet democracy if the overthrow of the bourgeois state is to occur, and in order to promote the formation of the commune state. Instead he can only envisage the tight control of the Soviets by the party if counter-revolution is not to occur: “After the seizure of power the leaders of the revolution realized the paramount importance of the party as that institution for the development and consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. And that power must rest with the party, based on the soviets.”(10) And: “Soviets which were not under the leadership of this party are not those of the revolutionary dictatorship but something more unstable; soviets which could in the long term point towards counter-revolution.”(11) This understanding reduces the importance of the Soviets to their domination by the Communist Party. In contrast, the Lenin of 1917 considered that the Soviets were vital for promoting the possibility of the Commune state on the basis of their expression of the highest levels of democracy. The significance of the Communist Party was only valid if it acted in conformity with these principles. Thus the Communist Party was reluctant to support the July Insurrection because it lacked the validation of the Soviet. The crucial issue was to reconcile the functioning of Soviet democracy with the revolutionary aspirations of the party. This was why the party leadership ignored Lenin's impatient call to seize power before the congress of the Soviets. (12)Instead they accepted the different advice that argued: “All power in the country must pass exclusively to the representatives of the Soviets of Workers, Soldiers, and Peasant Deputies on the basis of a definite programme and under the conditions of the government being fully responsible to the Soviets.”(13) This was the principled position, and it was undermined when the party acted arrogantly and without regard for the wishes of the Soviets in the past revolutionary period. The point is that only the effective functioning of Soviet democracy could ensure that the actions of the Bolsheviks were accountable to the wishes of society. But increasingly the party acted as an organisation indifferent to the views of the Soviets. Consequently the effective demise of the accountability of the party to the soviets meant the end of a possibility that the state could represent the character of the commune state. The importance of Soviet democracy had shown that the role of the party lacks legitimacy if its role is not connected to this aspect. The generation of one party rule meant the end of Soviet democracy, and so the state could not be a democratic republic or a commune state. The point is that the conception of the leading role of the party can only be principled and effective if it is connected to the genuine functioning of Soviet democracy. This possibility is only credible if the revolutionary party openly competes with other parties for the support of the people. Hence Soviet democracy is multi-party democracy, and one party rule is the end of Soviet democracy.

To Karim this standpoint is idealist because the only successful revolution is one led by the revolutionary party. (14) But the criterion of what is revolutionary cannot be established in its own voluntarist and elitist terms. The question of what is revolutionary is decided by the role of Soviet democracy, and therefore represents which party is able to express the dynamism and impulses of this development of popular democracy. The point is that Soviets will only arise in relation to the generation of mass discontent and the creation of a pre-revolutionary situation. Hence the opportunist leadership of the Mensheviks represented a constraint on the impulses of the Soviets to become a rival alternative power to that of the bourgeois provisional government. The Bolsheviks became popular because they expressed the democratic potential of the Soviets to create a commune state, and they obtained mass support because they connected this potential to the aim of the revolutionary transformation of society: “By seizing full power, the Soviets could still today – and this is probably their last chance – ensure the peaceful development of the revolution, peaceful election of deputies by the people, and a peaceful struggle of parties inside the Soviets; they could test the programmes of the various parties in practice and power could pass peacefully from one party to another.”(15) Note that Lenin makes no reference to the merits of one party rule. On the contrary he defends the perspective of the revolutionary seizure of power in terms of the realisation of the flourishing of Soviet democracy on the basis of the importance of pluralistic competition between parties. It is obvious that the aim of the democratic republic is considered to be identical to the establishment of the domination of Soviet democracy. The strategy of the Bolsheviks is in favour of the establishment of a situation in which Soviet democracy can flourish and assume full expression. The role of the party is defined in terms of this objective, and the other parties are criticised for undermining the realisation of the potential of Soviet democracy. Hence the central aim of the Bolsheviks in 1917 is to promote the generation of the democratic rule of the Soviets. This approach is also defined in terms of the acceptance of multi-party democracy. The above quote by Lenin also seems to suggest that the political power of the Bolsheviks is not indispensable for the capacity to realise Soviet democracy. Instead the aim of the Bolsheviks seems to be the realisation of the state power of the Soviets. The actual relationship of the Bolsheviks to this new political structure is an entirely secondary question. There is no hint of the necessity of the leading role of the revolutionary party. (Although this aspect could be implicit in Lenin's articles, it certainly is not to the forefront of his propaganda)

Karim argues that the primary aim is 'neither the establishment of absolute democracy nor the creation of soviets'. (16) Of course the question of objectives can be different according to the diverse circumstances of revolutionary situations. But the aim of the October revolution was the democratic rule of the Soviets. In this context the increasing preoccupation with the importance of one party rule meant the decline of Soviet democracy. The working class was no longer able to express its aspirations within the Soviets. This is precisely why the Kronstadt sailors called for Soviets without Bolsheviks. We can disagree with this view, but sympathise with the reasons that led to its articulation. The effective decline of Soviet democracy meant the Bolsheviks betrayed the very basis of their revolutionary standpoint. They were committed to Soviet democracy, and yet sacrificed this objective in the name of absolute power. This is precisely why the October revolution cannot be a model for future revolutions. Instead we have to learn from what went wrong, and above all the corrupting role of power.

The USFI regards the development of direct democracy as resulting in the effective demise of the role of parties. The creation of a classless society will meant the end of parties. This may be the logic of direct democracy. But it is prescriptive to suggest that this situation is likely or inherent in the situation. Indeed, we would argue that the application of direct democracy is not necessarily opposed to the role of parties. This was Lenin's position in 1917, and it could be argued that direct democracy will actually make the role of parties more meaningful and effective. Under regimes of liberal democracy we often have the rule of one dominant political party and effective multi-party democracy does not function. Direct democracy will enable people to form new parties without any obstruction in the form of a lack of wealthy sponsors. This may be the wish of people that they continue to be represented by parties. Indeed, the continuation of a multi-party system may be the most effective basis to prevent authoritarian regimes developing that would undermine the principles of the post-revolutionary society. However, the multi-party system would be more democratic than what exists at present. There would be proportional representation, and the right of recall of delegates. Democracy would be exercised in de-centralised terms, and so the revival of absolute power would be discouraged.

Karim contends that Trotsky suggested in the late 1930's that only parties that accepted the constitution of the Soviets would be allowed to participate within them.(17) This view may have been sufficient for the conception of a post-Stalinist society in the 1930's, but it is completely inadequate for the present. We have many advanced capitalist societies with a long experience of representative democracy and the connected right of free speech. In order to exercise that right within the post-revolutionary society it must be possible to form parties that support the restoration of capitalism. What would be unacceptable would be the attempt to exercise that view violently, or attempting to restore capitalism by means of armed counter-revolution. This approach would be against the peaceful character of the socialist constitution. However, it would be possible to attempt to realise electoral support for the right to restore capitalism within the soviets or Parliament. The only alternative to this right to strive for the restoration of capitalism would be the coercive suppression of this viewpoint. This situation would undermine the very democratic development of the post-revolutionary regime. In other words, the question of freedom means the existence of a situation in which people may hold views that we disagree with. However, the constitution would limit the freedom to advocate views based on hatred of people because of prejudice. The utilisation of existing legislation in this regard may be sufficient.

In conclusion Karim wants a society based on the permanent mobilisation of the working class in favour of socialist tasks and the promotion of international revolution. (18) He considers that any rejection of this perspective will result in the tendency towards the formation of a bureaucratised workers state. But what possibly motivated Mandel's alleged revisionism on the question of Soviet democracy was an implicit understanding that the development of one party rule compromised the functioning of Soviet democracy and facilitated the formation of a bureaucratic elite. The ultimate result of this situation was a betrayal of world revolution and the development of Stalinist despotism. Karim's approach is dogmatic. He believes that if we merely apply the methods and policies of Lenin and Trotsky it will be possible to generate revolutionary workers states. But history does not repeat itself. Instead it would be more fruitful to learn the lessons of the mistaken policies of the revolutionary regime, such as the effective rejection of democracy and the acceptance of one party rule. Karim would suggest that this standpoint is opportunist and makes concessions to bourgeois democracy. But the lessons of the past indicate that the demise of Soviet democracy seriously undermined the credibility of the workers state. We can only build workers states that are able to promote movement towards socialism if they are based on the highest standards of democracy.

Karim considers the one party or multiparty Soviet system to be distraction from the primary tasks of international revolution. To him all issues can be resolved if we build revolutionary parties that are able to establish principled relations with the rest of the working class. This point may not be false, but part of the role of leadership is to try and tell the truth. Part of this truth is historical accuracy. Mandel's approach is problematical because he tries to reconcile Soviet history with his advocacy of multi-party Soviet democracy. Karim can indicate that this approach is empirically false, and instead Lenin could define the dictatorship of the proletariat in terms of the role of the revolutionary party. The point is that we do not have to support Kautsky's criticism in order to indicate that the Bolsheviks undermined the importance of Soviet democracy. In that manner they created important questions about the relationship of democracy to revolutionary Marxism. Karim's dogmatic defensiveness is not an answer to Mandel's formulations. Instead we have to openly admit to the mistakes of the Bolsheviks concerning democracy in order to establish a credible conception of the relationship of democracy to socialism.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Darioush Karim: The Revolutionary Dictatorship of the Proletariat: Party of Socialists, Bogata, 1979 p42-50

(2) ibid p69

(3) ibid p80

(4) ibid p105-106

(5) ibid p111

(6) Bob Myers: Southern Africa, In 'Against Capital' (Editor Cliff Slaughter) Zero Books, Hants, 2016 p39-62

(7) Karim op cit p121-124

(8) Vladimir Lenin: Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power, Volume 26, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964 p103-104

(9) Lenin: Theses on the Constituent Assembly, volume 26 p379

(10) Karim op cit p128

(11) ibid p128

(12) Lenin, The Crisis Has Matured, volume 26 p83

(13) Lenin: The tasks of Our Revolution, volume 26 p61

(14) Karim op cit p135-136

(15) Lenin Tasks op cit p67

(16) Karim op cit p141

(17) ibid p157-159

(18) ibid p173-176

PART THREE – THE MARXIST CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY

Brain Roper introduces his work: 'The History of Democracy' with the comment: “Socialist participatory democracy, in my view, constitutes a realistically possible, feasible and desirable alternative to capitalism and representative democracy.”(1) This view is dogmatic, and is unable to establish the contemporary possibilities for the realisation of both democracy and socialism. In the context of advanced capitalism people will not expect a democratic version of socialism to be based on the effective disbandment of the institutions of representative democracy. Instead what will be more acceptable will be the fusion of the forms of representative democracy with the development of direct democracy. In this manner the gains of the evolution of democracy under capitalism will be combined with the generation of the forms of participatory democracy that have accompanied the class struggle, and which is connected to the attempt to realise socialism. We have learnt from the very experience of the Russian revolution that the attempt to repress representative democracy has not led to the flourishing of participatory democracy, and instead the result of these events has been the justification of one party rule. Roper would argue that representative democracy is associated with capitalism, but this relationship need not be permanent. Instead it expresses important democratic rights that have to be incorporated into the functioning of socialism if this system is to be truly democratic. However, this argument does not mean that direct democracy should be repudiated. Instead a combination of these two forms of democracy is vital. In this manner any one-sidedness and limitations can be overcome in the aim of uniting democracy and socialism.

Roper maintains that: “The reformist view that capitalism could be changed in an emancipatory and egalitarian direction either through, or at least while retaining liberal representative democracy as the institutional framework for governance rests on a closed view of historical development. The notion that somehow it would be possible to transform, or even radically alter, the capitalist infrastructure whilst retaining the same state form is fundamentally unrealistic in view of the historical persistence of inextricably close connections between democratic state forms and the underlying social and economic structures which sustain them. In reality what lies beneath this notion is the banal bourgeois assumption that there is no conceivably feasible and desirable future beyond capitalism.”(2) This description may explain the normal functioning of the economic and political aspects of capitalism. But the point is that these structures can undergo transformation because of the effect of class struggle, and so acquire new possibilities. In this sense it would be dogmatic to suggest that the institutions of representative democracy cannot become related to the participatory potential expressed by the development of popular forms of democracy. Hence the role of Parliament will become influenced by the emergence of the soviets, and the latter will take on features of the former such as a multi-party system. What will be crucial is that the dynamism of the revolutionary process establishes these new possibilities, and these will become expressed in the emergence of the new political system of socialism. In context the reformist adherence to the role of representative democracy is reactionary because this standpoint becomes justification of opposing revolutionary change. What is being defended in this approach is the domination of capitalism, via the role of representative democracy. Hence the ideological limitation is not defence of representative democracy, but instead the assumption that capitalism is a superior social system. However, Roper is not being dogmatic in his historical approach when he outlines how representative democracy is generally conducive to the furtherance of the interests of capitalism, as in relation to the American revolution.(3) But, this perspective is not contentious from a Marxist viewpoint. What is more controversial, and which defined the Lenin-Kautsky debates, concerns the relationship of representative democracy to the development of forms of democracy that are most conducive to the establishment of the popular sovereignty of the people in the transition to socialism. Roper is not entirely consistent in his approach because he admits that the 1793 constitution of the French revolution, which was based on the importance of representative democracy, was a great historical advance. This constitution upheld the right of universal male suffrage, sovereignty of the people, and equality before the law. (4) Most importantly: 'when the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties for the people and each portion thereof.'(5) Thus it was the very political practice of the French revolution which indicated the possible inter-connection of representative and direct democracy, or the relationship between the constitutional validity of popular insurrection in order to sustain the democratic forms of government. These formal rights were undermined by the development of Jacobin dictatorship and the terror which demoralised the people. This situation indicated that the progress of the revolution could not occur if power was monopolised by an elite, and so the ultimate result was the formation of a reactionary government.

The argument of Roper about the limitations of representative democracy is that its general functioning does not modify the general situation of the exploitation of labour and the inequality that characterises capitalist society: “Representative democracy, even in its most fully developed form, leaves untouched vast areas of our daily lives – in the workplace, in the distribution of labour and resources – that are not subject to democratic accountability, but are governed by the powers of property, 'market forces' and the exigencies of profit maximisation.”(6) We need to understand that it is not representative democracy that has led to these limitations within capitalism, but rather the policies of elected politicians and the imperatives of capital accumulation. The present policy of austerity is being implemented not because of the character of representative democracy but rather because of the influence of neo-liberalism upon the government. Indeed, the opposition in the Labour Party and the trade unions can utilise representative democracy in order to oppose this policy and to strive to promote an alternative. Ultimately, it is the electoral process that decides whether a different party with a new policy can become government. Hence the representative character of democracy actually provides some restriction on the implementation of pro-capitalist policies by governments. The working class is able to utilise the opportunities presented by liberal democracy in order to protest about policy and to also present alternatives. Failures to change policy are more to do with the bureaucratic limitations of the labour movement rather than the character of representative democracy. Hence the present parliamentary system is a gain in terms of the ability of the working class to influence society. If representative democracy was abolished the ruling class would be able to introduce new measures to intensify exploitation of the working class because trade unions would be banned. The extent to which representative democracy favours capitalism has never been fully tested because a revolutionary party determined to end capitalism has never been elected. This situation has more to do with the influence of ideology and the limitations of reformism than with the inherent restrictions of the possibilities under representative democracy.

Roper may reply and suggest representative democracy is limited because it does not promote industrial democracy and the ability of people to control the state. It generates the illusion of popular sovereignty but capitalism is firmly dominant within society.(7) This view has some validity, but the point is that it is the ideology of bourgeois political economy which primarily undermines working people acting collectively in order to establish industrial democracy. It is also hypothetically possible to vote for a workers government that would introduce measures to promote socialism and popular control of the state. This perspective is outlined by Ralph Miliband. (8) Furthermore, the very development of the class struggle would establish increasing confidence within the working class that they can control their own future. In that context people would reject any illusions that they should simply act in accordance with the views of the existing government. Thus people would promote their own forms of democracy and collectively act to overcome the various limitations of representative democracy. But this advance of the class struggle would not necessarily mean the end of representative democracy. People are aware of the history of Parliament, and would be wary of ending its role. Instead of supporting dogmatic calls for its abolition, the aim of the revolutionary process would be to reconcile the role of representative and popular democracy. In contrast, Roper upholds the inflexible call for the abolition of representative democracy. This perspective could have problematical outcomes that could undermine the very validity of democracy within society.

Furthermore, Roper is being dogmatic when he rejects the very suggestion that elections can express the democratic aspirations of the people: “Elections are according to liberals, the linchpin of representative democracy since they help to maintain the ongoing accountability of government to the citizenry. Yet they are clearly defective mechanisms in this regard. Parliamentary elections are held infrequently, and most parliamentary terms range from three to five years. The degree of real choice offered to voters is limited because the social structural constraints …. operate to ensure that all major parliamentary parties remained committed to the social and economic arrangements of capitalism. There is no right of recall built into the system: once elected, representatives can completely disregard the wishes of their constituencies with no fear of being withdrawn from office and replaced.”(9) These are obvious limitations, but the point is would democratic improvements be ensured by the abolition of Parliament? Instead it would be principled to support annual Parliaments on the basis of proportional representation, and with the right of recall of those elected. It would also be important to transform the state so that is no longer an elitist and bureaucratic apparatus, and to enhance the involvement of people in the electoral process by less reliance on TV broadcasts and more contact of candidates with the voters in their communities. But what would really transform the situation would be the development of agitation by working people to improve the political system.

Roper agrees with the above programme to improve the level of participation of people in the political system. But he seems to imply (but does not confirm) that this means the abolition of representative democracy: “As this implies, socialist participatory democracy centrally involves extending democracy from the political to the social and economic spheres through giving labouring citizens effective democratic and collective control over the means of production, resource allocation, workplaces, social institutions and all major state institutions.”(10) But whilst direct democracy is most compatible with increasing the capacity of working people to control economic activity, it is entirely possible that they will still want to be represented by an elected government in national and international terms. Hence the very democratic impulse to vote parties into power will not be ended, but instead the electoral process will be improved and the representative system will be made more accountable to the electors. Indeed, Roper's interpretation of Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune indicates that the institutions of parliamentary democracy were improved, and therefore not abolished with the establishment of a national assembly: “Workers power is to be exercised democratically through the establishment of district and municipal assemblies, which then send delegates to a national assembly. These assemblies are to be held accountable to their constituencies by the right of recall and frequent elections.”(11) It is also necessary to indicate that the multi-party system was taken for granted, and the fact that Marx's supporters were in a tiny minority did not make him reluctant to define the Commune as an example to be emulated.

With his dogmatic view it is not surprising that Roper is not critical of the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in the name of the higher form of participatory democracy represented by the Soviets. Hence he does not recognise that this situation led to the compromising of the capacity of the Soviets to be truly democratic. Instead of learning the lessons of the Russian revolutionary experience he instead complacently argues that the objective conditions to realise participatory democracy are more favourable under conditions of advanced capitalism: “Socialist participatory democracy, in which the majority is directly involved in the self-governance of society, will be vastly easier to establish and maintain in the twenty-first century, given the economically, culturally and scientifically advanced conditions created by contemporary capitalism, than it was in the relatively under-developed conditions prevailing in Russia during the First World War.”(12) But the point he ignores is that it is precisely the historical circumstances of advanced capitalism which have led to the enduring character of representative democracy. The task will be to connect this institutional form to the emerging participatory democracy established by the development of collective class struggle. Indeed, Roper effectively admits that this will be the only principled perspective because he does not deny the continued importance of representative institutions within socialist society. Hence in a contradictory manner he seems to both advocate the abolition of representative democracy and also its continuation in a modified form! However, what does seem a significant omission from his approach is any mention of the role of the multi-party system. Instead he seems to assume that people will be content with socialism in some non-political manner. This represents a complacent assumption, and in this context he also glosses over the issue of the democratic right to restore capitalism. These omissions mean his standpoint represents orthodoxy and not creativity concerning the question of the relationship of democracy to socialism.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Brian Roper: History of Democracy, Pluto Press, London, 2013 p2

(2) ibid p8-9

(3) ibid p119-152

(4) ibid p173-174

(5) ibid p174

(6) ibid p238

(7) ibid p238

(8) Ralph Miliband Socialism for a Sceptical Age: Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994

(9) Roper op cit p238-239

(10) ibid p240

(11) ibid p251

(12) ibid p274

PART FOUR – THE ARGUMENT FOR PARLIAMENTARY SOCIALISM

Ralph Miliband outlined the arguments for parliamentary socialism in his last work: 'Socialism for a Sceptical Age' (1) He insisted that a one party state would be unsatisfactory for people accustomed to the freedom of the multi-party system, and so suggests that a socialist government would have to abide by the rules of accepting the verdict of regular elections: “Where defeat, for whatever reason, seemed possible, a socialist government would have no option but to go to the polls and accept its results. The alternative, namely the refusal to hold an election, would amount to a pre-emptive coup which could only be sustained on the basis of rule lacking all legitimacy and with the prospect of bitter resistance.” (2) This is a viewpoint that represents the combination of principle and common sense. What is recognised is that the objective of socialism is not higher than the importance of genuine democracy. Instead authentic socialism can only be sustained by consistent democracy, and this is why the various one party regimes of the USSR and Eastern Europe could not express the character of socialism. He is also emphasising that socialism is based on the premises of representative democracy, and the role of regular elections, and competition between parties which is settled by the polls. He also makes the valid point that the election of right wing governments is made possible by the divisions and weaknesses of the left wing forces, and it is the duty of the socialists and labour movement to oppose the reactionary policies of these governments.

Miliband also outlines how the principled choice is not between representative democracy and participatory democracy: “In its strongest sense, participatory democracy means something like direct democracy, virtually without mediation, or with representatives totally controlled by their constituents. This is not a realistic view of what is possible. Representation is inherent in organizations at all but the most immediate and local level, and even there it will be found to be needed, and representation does involve some distance between representatives and represented.”(3) Consequently, the choice is how to combine representative and participatory democracy. What has been outlined seems to suggest that all that is required is agreement with the approach of Miliband. Indeed, that seems to have been assumed in terms of what has been outlined in the previous sections of this article. But there is a possible problem. The character of the process of change can express either 'socialism from above', or 'socialism from below'. We would argue that the most effective and principled perspective is that of socialism from below, which implies the primary importance of working people acting to bring about the possibility of socialism. The inferior alternative is that of 'socialism from above', whereby a left wing government introduces the measures in Parliament that will bring about the economic transformation of society. In this context the role of working people is to applaud the actions of the government. Miliband seems to support this approach. He argues that the introduction of measures of public ownership by a socialist government will generate the possibility to transform the economy in a socialist manner. (4) But this policy will ultimately be bureaucratic and statist if it is not connected to the dynamic development of working people to bring about industrial democracy within given industries. As Trotsky explained: “Thus, workers control becomes a school for planned economy. On the basis of the experience of control, the proletariat will prepare itself for direct management of nationalized industry when the hour for the eventuality strikes.” (5)

Such a development is only made possible because the class struggle has developed to an intense level, as Trotsky implies. In this situation the role of the revolutionary government may be to merely confirm in electoral terms what has been made possible by the mass movement of the working class. Miliband seems to imply that this strategy is unrealistic because the working class has not acted in a revolutionary manner in the advanced capitalist countries, but he also implies that the workers have been prepared to electorally support left wing parties with a radical programme. (6) Ironically, this means that in an unintended sense he supports Lenin's early view that the working class is only capable of trade union consciousness and support for reforms. The result of this standpoint implies his advocacy of 'socialism from above'. This point is reinforced by his call for the left-wing transformation of reformist parties, and his contrasting view that revolutionary parties have had little success. Hence the question of socialism is decided and defined in terms of the ability to develop party political instruments that promote this aim. The role of the class struggle seems to be vague and ambiguous. The concluding result of his standpoint is that the promotion of socialism is most likely to occur with the election of left wing governments that have this aim. He is aware that the history of Social Democratic governments has led to the acceptance of capitalism and the policy of retreat, but he is optimistic that this trend can be altered with the application of principled determination. Hence a left wing government should take action to control the judiciary and repressive agencies, and it would have to be prepared to defy the pressures from business and reactionary circles. However, Miliband also accepts that the ability of the government to promote measures towards socialism depends on its relationship to the labour movement and activists. This relationship would be one of the development of participatory democracy, but what would still be primary would be the resourcefulness and determination of the government. Indeed one of the major roles of activists will be to defend the government.

Hence the conclusion of this analysis is not surprising, which confirms the perspective of socialism from above: “The problem – and it is a problem – is that a strong executive power is absolutely essential, though not a sufficient, condition for the government to survive at all, and for it to do what is committed to do. Notions of popular power as a substitute for a strong executive simply do not match up to the tasks which a radical government would face. What agency but the state has the power to tackle the multiple blights of capitalism – exploitation of workers and consumers, ecological vandalism, impoverished social services, inner city decay, racial, gender and ethnic discrimination, gross inequality in every sphere of life, and s much more that is a part of the capitalist social order? Related to this, what agency other than the state can lead the drive towards a different, egalitarian and democratic, kind of society.” (8)

The problem with this effective rejection of 'socialism from below' is that the role of the left wing government cannot realise a commune state that will be able to promote socialism. Only the development of class struggle that expresses the highest levels of industrial democracy and participatory democracy can create the conditions for the transition to socialism. If the working class is no more than a passive cheer leader of a left wing government the result will be limited reforms, but a workers government will not be formed. Only when the working class is the most dynamic social force of a revolutionary process will it be possible to transform the existing bourgeois state and create a commune state. In these circumstances it will be possible to establish the democratic credentials of the revolutionary government in terms of free and open elections to a Constituent Assembly, or Parliament. This was the effective strategy of the 1917 October revolution, but which became distorted by the various events of 1918 and the civil war. In contrast, Miliband's approach is ultimately limited by a type of left-wing reformism because of his scepticism about the possibilities of class struggle. He considers that a state which is not a commune state can introduce measures tending towards socialism. This is an illusion. The basic revolutionary strategy of 1917, with democratic qualifications, still has its merits.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Ralph Miliband: Socialism for a Sceptical Age, Polity Press, Cambridge 1994

(2) ibid p85

(3) ibid p89

(4) ibid p99-101

1. Leon Trotsky: The Transitional Programme, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1974 p121
2. Miliband op cit p133

(7) ibid p186