**Understanding the Marxist Conception of Democracy**

It has often been argued that Marxists have had an authoritarian attitude concerning the issue of democracy. For example, that the Bolshevik regime was essentially the justification of the role of a one-party regime that was connected to the suppression of the role of other parties. But it can also be suggested that this development was not necessarily an expression of a Marxist understanding of the character of democracy and that instead the creation of the one-party state was the result of the polarised circumstances of the civil war that developed in Russia after the revolution. It is also necessary to indicate that the majority of the political parties in Russia after the revolution were opposed to the new Soviet regime and were inclined to support the forces of counterrevolution. However, this emphasis on the unfavourable political circumstances after the success of the October revolution does not resolve the issue of the relationship between Marxism and the principles of democracy. It could be argued that the apparently authoritarian character of the politics of the Bolsheviks was essentially the logical outcome of Marx’s conception of the character of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this context it could be argued that Marx did not effectively envisage the continued role of democratic elections within a socialist state, or that he did not consider the possibility that a genuine socialist government could be voted out of office. In this context the essential importance of elections within a revolutionary workers state would merely be to confirm the continuation of the proletarian government, and so it was not envisaged that the supporters of capitalism would be voted back into office. But it could also be suggested that Marx never denied the necessity to confirm the democratic accountability of the revolutionary worker’s state. Therefore, he essentially considered that the major revolutionary party would continue to receive the popular support of the workers, and so the democratic mandate of the people would continue to ensure the popular legitimacy of the regime. However, this perspective became to be complicated in relation to the circumstances of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks claimed to be the only authentic Marxist party and that rivals like the Mensheviks were opportunists that could not express the interests of the workers in a genuine manner. In other words, it was being suggested that only a monolithic one-party state could express the interests of the workers. This standpoint in a situation of the development of civil war meant that the result was an end to what had been considered to be the major aspect of the role of democracy, which was the importance of genuine elections in order to create a popular government. Instead, the Soviets, which had been the popular democratic institution of 1917, became merely the expression of continued support for the one-party regime of the Bolsheviks. In contrast the regimes of bourgeois democracy seemed to be more democratic in terms of the importance of genuine elections and the role of competition between rival parties. It seemed that regimes based on the economies of capitalism seemed to be more democratic than a society that aimed to create socialism. This apparently unfavourable comparison implied that a society based on the economics of capitalism was more democratic than a social regime that aspired to create socialism. The results of this contrast suggested that the aim of creating a socialist society had an authoritarian logic. But it could be argued that what had occurred was a complex political contradiction between Marxist theory and practice. In his study of the Paris Commune, Marx never suggested that a genuine workers state would be based on the rule of a single revolutionary party. Indeed, he accepted the importance of differences and competition between rival parties that claimed to be socialist, such as the followers of Blanqui and Proudhon. Thus, he seemed to accept that a genuine commune society could be created despite the very small influence of the Marxists in relation to this situation. The commune government was committed to a process of regular democratic elections and it was the forces of counterrevolution that imposed a reactionary authoritarian government in relation to the repression of the regime of the Paris workers. In other words, it was the socialists who considered that democracy was an important political principle whilst the forces of support for capitalism seemed to consider that this standpoint merely had an expedient character. What was important to the defenders of capitalism was the continued domination of this type of society even if this meant the effective repression of the forces of popular democracy. However, this issue became more complicated with the events of the Russian revolution. Firstly, the events of the 1905 revolution led to the creation of the role of Soviets which seemed to express the development of a new and more genuine form of democracy than the type of democracy which was practiced in the major capitalist countries like Britain. But then Soviet democracy became complicated by the October revolution of 1917 which suggested that only the Bolsheviks were able to express the interests of the workers and peasants. In other words, the formation of a one-party regime, in which the role of democracy was apparently essentially merely a formality, seemed to imply that genuine democracy had become subordinated to the interests of the role of the single revolutionary party. However, it could be initially suggested that this development was the result of the polarisation caused by the circumstances of the civil war. But the end of civil war did not create the conditions for the emergence of genuine multi-party democracy. Instead, the single party regime was consolidated. It was not possible for the workers to express any dissatisfaction with the rule of the Bolshevik party, and so the end of democracy enabled the development of the rule of a party elite. Therefore, the expression of discontent was limited to controversy within the Bolsheviks, but the effective repression of the Right and Left Opposition led to the consolidation of the rule of a small party elite. In other words, it seemed that the political logic of the role of a revolutionary regime was to undermine any possibility for the expression of effective democratic political discussion and the repudiation of any democratic accountability of the one-party state. The result of this situation was that the party leadership became an absolute political power and the reintroduction of universal suffrage in the late 1930’s merely served to provide formal democratic legitimacy for the absolute power of Stalin. It seemed that the political logic of revolutionary Marxism was authoritarian and that its premises became the basis of the justification of the absolute political power of the single party. Trotsky did contest this approach and called for the revival of genuine Soviet democracy based on the role of genuine competition between rival parties. However, it was not apparent that he also supported the right of bourgeois parties to be able to contest Soviet elections based on a programme for the restoration of capitalism. Therefore, it could be argued that his approach was still problematical when contrasted with the political practice of bourgeois democracy which was based on the role of competition between rival parties.

Furthermore, it generally seemed that people were often reluctant to vote in favour of Marxist parties in most elections in bourgeois democratic societies, with the exception of Italy and France. Therefore, it could be argued in convincing terms that people did not support the aims of Marxism when given the choice represented by the process of democratic election. Consequently, it seems that if the credibility of revolutionary Marxism is be upheld in the contemporary era it is necessary to develop the perspective that there is not a contradiction between the role of democracy and the aims of revolutionary Marxism. In other words, the authoritarian political practice of Stalin is a rejection of the genuinely democratic character of a principled form of revolutionary Marxism. However, in order to make a convincing justification of this viewpoint it may be necessary to suggest that the views and practices of revolutionary Marxism in the past have not been satisfactory in terms of the possible failure to promote the aims of a genuine form of democracy. This issue will be addressed in relation to a discussion of Lenin’s ideas about democracy, and by an evaluation of some recent Marxist books on this issue. What we have to establish is whether problems at the level of political practice are the result of the complexities of a given situation or instead are the logical outcome of a failure to develop an effective Marxist conception of democracy. In other words, is the development of one-party regimes the logical outcome of a Marxist approach or is it instead an effective rejection of the inherent democratic character of this standpoint. In this context we will have to establish whether Lenin’s views on democracy are the logical continuation of the approach of Marx. Primarily we will have to seriously discuss whether the authoritarianism of Stalin is a logical outcome of the apparent rejection of democracy by Bolshevism. It is necessary to establish that we cannot have any pre-conceived ideas about these issues and instead have to discuss them in non-dogmatic terms.

The point being made is that the perspective of the importance of the role of the class struggle raises important questions about the importance of democracy. In his work ‘The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky’ (Collected Works volume 28) Lenin outlines an understanding of the relationship of bourgeois democracy to proletarian democracy. He contends that the practice of the proletarian democracy of the Soviet state is genuinely more democratic than the supposed democracy of the bourgeois republic. He comments: “Proletarian democracy suppresses the exploiters, the bourgeoisie – and is therefore not hypocritical, does not promise them freedom and democracy – and gives the working people genuine democracy. Only Soviet Russia has given the proletariat and the whole vast labouring majority of Russia a freedom and democracy unprecedented, impossible and inconceivable in any bourgeois democratic republic…by replacing bourgeois parliamentarianism by the democratic organisations of the Soviets, which are a thousand times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois parliament.”(p107) However, this assumes that the Bolshevik party which dominates the soviets will respect the importance of democratic principles such as the right of other parties to be able to act to obtain the support of the people by the process of a genuinely democratic vote of the people in relation to the composition of the Soviets. The problem is that the polarisation within Russian society seemed to have undermined the possibility to realise this principle of the prospect of making genuine choices between different parties. Instead, the Bolsheviks would suggest that they are the only party that is genuinely committed to a defence of the revolutionary regime that has been established, and so this approach would possibly contradict the formal importance of the role of a multi-party democracy. Indeed, Lenin claims in an extended version of this article that: “Proletarian democracy, of which Soviet democracy is one of the forms, has brought a development and expansion of democracy unprecedented in the world, for the vast majority of the population, for the exploited and working people.”(CW 28 p246) This comment may be true in terms of the aims of the Soviet government to act in terms of the expression of the attempt to realise the interests of the people, but the problem is that there has been a polarisation within society that means the other political parties refuse to cooperate with the role of the Soviet political system. The result is that it has become an inevitability that the Bolsheviks have had to act in terms of being the exclusive expression of the interests of the people. This may not inevitably result in the denial of the application of the principles of democracy as long as the Bolsheviks act in a manner that is consistent with the interests of the workers and peasants. However, Lenin makes the point that this aspect relies on the consistent expression of a relationship of the role of the Soviets with the interests of the workers and peasants: “The Soviets are the direct organisation of the working and exploited people themselves, which helps to organise and administer their state in every possible way. And in this it is the vanguard of the working and exploited people, the urban proletariat, that enjoys the advantage of being best united by the large enterprises; it is easier for it than for all others to elect and exercise control over those elected. The Soviet form of organise automatically helps to unite all the working and exploited people around their vanguard, the proletariat.” (p247) But it is the very crisis of the economy that has led to the decomposition of the proletariat and so resulted in the decline of the level of cohesion of this class, and this has meant that its political importance has been replaced by the role of the party which has to act on behalf of the workers in this problematical economic situation. The economic situation means that genuine soviet democracy can no longer be realised in a consistent manner, and instead because of the development of crisis the party has no alternative than to act on behalf of the workers. But this must mean that the aspect of soviet democracy becomes a formality, or essentially an expression of approval for the role of the party. This observation is not meant as a criticism because the dire economic situation means that there is no alternative to this development of the rule of the party on behalf of the workers. It is the problematical economic situation that undermines the possibility to realise a genuine form of democracy. This situation is exacerbated by the refusal of the other political parties to cooperate with the role of the Soviet system.

However given the problems of the economic and political situation it is apparently a subjective and problematical comment for Lenin to claim that: “Proletarian democracy is a million times more democratic than any bourgeois democracy; Soviet power is a million times more democratic than the most democratic bourgeois republic.”(p248) In general circumstances this comment may be true because the economic progress of a workers state would create the objective conditions for the functioning of a credible type of democracy. But in the context of serious economic problems and political polarisation there is no alternative to the necessity for the revolutionary party to govern on behalf of the workers. But this very practical development means that the application of the principles of democracy has to be replaced by the importance of the realisation of efficiency in relation to the tasks of government and the organisation of the economy. In this serious economic situation, it is logical for Lenin to suggest that it is not possible to establish democratic principles for the employers. Instead, the situation must be developed in which the role of democracy is based primarily on being the expression of the aims of the workers state to try and resolve the serious economic and political problems. But ultimately the importance of the necessity to tackle economic issues meant that the aspect of the principles of the development of the role of an effective type of political democracy was undermined and ultimately rejected in terms of the importance of tackling the problems of the emerging type of society. However, the major problem was that a small working class could not establish the situation of the genuine accountability of the role of the party. This developing contradiction could only be resolved by the effective acceptance of the rule of the party on behalf of the working class. Such elitism would make the application of the role of democracy a problematical issue. Thus, it would seem that there was a genuine contradiction between the standpoint of the importance of the role of the revolutionary party and the application of democracy. Initially this meant that soviet democracy became problematical, and ultimately what resulted was the domination of the party that suggested that it was acting on behalf of the people but in actuality it could be suggested that an increasingly elitist character to this role was developed which culminated in the regime of Stalin. Hence there seems to be a contradiction between the importance given to the Marxist party in the process of transition to socialism and the apparently contrasting aim of the necessity of the role of a genuine form of democracy. It could be argued that under the unfavourable economic conditions of the situation in the aftermath of the Russian revolution that this issue could not be resolved in democratic terms. Indeed, the lack of political cooperation of the various opposition parties made the possibility of the development of an effective democratic system an impossibility. But it has become an important argument against revolutionary socialism that is opposed to the application of democracy within a possible socialist type of society.

This issue of the apparently problematical relationship of democracy to socialism is studied by Mike Makin-Waite in his book: Communism and Democracy’ (Lawrence and Wishart, Chadwell Heath 2017) He accepts that the issue of democracy has been controversial for the forces of revolutionary Marxism and that it could be considered that the rejection of the role of bourgeois democracy in the name of revolutionary principles has been a problematical aspect of the politics of this approach. Hence, he argues that a reassessment of the role of democracy in the character of a genuine socialist politics is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. But his conclusion is that the very elitist limitations in the history of socialism only indicate the necessity for socialist organisations to apply the principles of democracy in a consistent manner: “The overall argument…. is that it is crucial to integrate democratic principles and practices into projects for radical change. This is not because the current powers-that-be insist that things have to be ‘democratic’ in their limited sense of the word; nor because ‘democracy’ is ‘nice to have’. It is because democracy is absolutely indispensable to progressive radicalism. You cannot sustain progressive radical change without achieving it in democratic ways; and you cannot have consistent democracy without radically changing today’s social and economic settlements.” (p11) But the problem is what is an alternative to bourgeois democracy? This form of democracy seems to indicate the credibility and validity of the capitalist system, and so suggests that a socialist alternative is inherently anti-democratic. Therefore, how is it possible to type of democratic socialist society? Indeed, the author seems to suggest that there are serious problems in relation to providing an answer to this question. He comments that: “But the rival possibility of communism left the stage having proved even less capable of realising the ambitions it set for itself. Having long claimed to be a form of society superior to and historically beyond capitalism, it floundered and failed in all the areas most central to its effort: its internationalism; its attempt to develop post-capitalist economies and its democracy.” (p17) Hence the issue that has been indicated of being very important is whether the expression of what is considered to be revolutionary socialism is able to sustain a genuine democratic approach. Indeed, the author outlines that the failure to establish democracy in the so-called socialist societies was an important limitation that indicated important problems in relation to the aim of establishing a credible and principled alternative to capitalism. But he qualifies this observation and suggests that the practice of orthodox communism also expresses a commitment to democracy: “in spite of this problem of communist political culture, every decade between 1917 and 1989 saw some communists seeking to ‘recover’ and reapply the democratic content and impulse at the heart of the politics. Through the Popular Front of the 1930’s, to 1968 Prague’s Spring, and 1970 Eurocommunism, the need to promote democratic values and accountability as part of radical change kept re-emerging and ‘coming back’. This is not because democracy is some ‘essential’ presence, always there, which keeps ‘breaking through’. It was because the construction and maintenance of democratic processes is a necessary precondition for the implementation of socialist principles.” (p21) But the problematical aspect of this assessment is that it is assumed that the forces of Stalinism can realise the consistent and popular character of democratic principles. For example, the role of the Popular Front in Spain was not to primarily expand the influence and role of popular democracy but instead to undermine the development of what could have been a genuine revolution of the workers and peasants. The same point could be made about the situation in France. In other words, it could be argued that Stalinism in the 1930’s acted to defend the interests of bourgeois democracy against the possibility for the realisation of a system based on the role of proletarian democracy. Therefore, the assumption of a generally principled character to the world communist movement under the domination of Stalinism is a problematical assumption. Instead, it would be more convincing to suggest that Stalinism had an elitist character which meant that it was opposed to the realisation of the genuine democracy of the militant activity of the workers. But does this observation mean that effective socialist societies could have emerged in the Europe of the 1930’s if the opposition of Stalinism had not been present? There is no effective answer to this question, but what we do know is that both Stalinism and Social Democracy have acted to oppose the realisation of the success of the mass action of the workers in this period. Hence there was a general opposition of Stalinism to the expression of the role of popular democracy. This view does not mean that only Stalinism was able to undermine the development of genuine democratic socialism, but it did have an important role in this context. The point is that Stalinism has always been opposed to the realisation of the success of the popular struggles of the workers, and so in this manner it has rejected the necessity to establish regimes based on the realisation of a genuine process of emancipation. But possibly more importantly it was primarily Stalinism which established a differentiation of socialism from the objective of democracy. Socialism was something that could be realised by the role of an elite party, and so did not require the intervention of the people. It is this bureaucratic legacy that has often discredited the claim of socialists to support a doctrine of the genuine emancipation of the people. Instead, socialism became to be considered as an approach that justified the rule of an elite. In this context there seemed to be a contradiction between the objective of socialism and the role of a genuine conception of democracy based on the involvement of the people in the organisation of society. Instead, it seemed that the only feasible type of democracy was something that occurred within capitalist regimes, even if this was limited to the process of the election of a government by the votes of the people. In contrast socialism seemed to be the expression of the hegemonic domination of the role of a party elite. This meant that the democratic accountability of socialist regimes was not being realised, and often the reason given for this development was the apparent political limitations of this type of system. In other words, the approach of a participatory form of democracy as the basis of the economic and political organisation of society by the role of the people seemed to be an aim that was not likely to be realised because of the apparent unrealistic character of this approach. Instead, only the rule of an enlightened elite based on the practical aspects of capitalism seemed to be the highest form of social development that humanity could realise. In this manner the attempt to realise socialism became the justification of forms of authoritarian domination of an elite because of the unrealistic character of this objective. In other words, the problem was the utopian aim of socialism which meant that society could only become dominated by a party elite that was only able to formally uphold the aim of socialism in terms of its hegemonic domination of society. Thus, the type of parliamentary democracy that was developed within the context of a capitalist society whilst being of a limited and partial character was in fact the most that could be achieved because socialism was an unrealistic aim. Therefore, the reform of capitalism by the influence of the trade unions and social democratic parties actually indicated the highest level of social development that was both practical and feasible. In this context the various societies claiming to be socialist were inferior to this expression of reformed and modified capitalism because of the practical credibility of this type of social formation. The greatest level of progress that could be achieved by the workers was within this type of reformed capitalism because the influence of the people was greater in this type of society when compared to the situation in which a party elite was dominate in terms of the justification of the aim of socialism. But the very impracticality of this aim meant that the party had to control society in order to undermine the development of mass unrest because of the unsatisfactory character of this type of social formation. Therefore, the effective influence of the workers was greatest within advanced capitalism when they could organise in genuine trade unions and social democratic parties in order to achieve important forms of economic progress. In this context the aim of socialism became the expression of the role of a party elite that essentially considered that its interests would be realised within a society that was no longer capitalist. This character of social development was empirically indicated by the realisation of the domination of a party elite within the post-capitalist society of the Soviet Union.

This analysis would be essentially convincing if capitalism was able to sustain a consistent situation of the increasing improvement of the economic conditions of the workers. But periods of mass unemployment and recession continued to indicate that the interests of the working class were still connected to the attempt to realise a situation of economic improvement that was based on overcoming the limitations of capitalism. In this context democratic organisation of the workers in order to defend gains and to try and improve economic conditions could still generate the importance of the aim of trying to overcome the domination of capital which had created this situation of economic uncertainty. Consequently, the interests of the workers continued to promote the importance of democratic organisation in order to generate a situation of more effective mass activity in order to generate the possibility of making economic progress despite the limitations of the economic system of capitalism. This point has been indicated by the development of a situation of generalised unemployment and austerity since the 1980’s. Therefore, the democratic organisation of the workers in more effective trade unions and political parties would seem to represent their interests in this context of the increasing limitations of the present social formation. In other words, the character of democracy is not an abstraction but is instead a crucial aspect of the possibility to generate effective forms of opposition to the effects of the limitations of the present economic system. But an important problem is that the very legacy of Stalinism has discredited the credibility of the aim of the realisation of a socialist society. It would seem that this type of society is less democratic than capitalism, and so does not express the interests of the workers in an adequate manner. The political result of this issue is that the aim of socialism no longer seems to be a feasible possibility accept in this problematical form. But whilst the objective of socialism seems to lack credibility the actuality of capitalism is subject to increasing contradictions which means that it is declining in dynamism. The result of these aspects is a discontented working class that is not able to support or articulate a genuine alternative to the present system. In this context it is difficult to establish the credibility of the role of a principled Marxist party. The various Marxist groups are small and ineffective. However, they do not seem to recognise that a promising beginning to understand and come to terms with this complex situation would be an acknowledgement of the challenges that are posed by these unfavourable aspects of social reality. Instead, it is assumed that the contradictions of capitalism will ultimately create a more favourable situation for the realisation of political change. But this false optimism means that these groups are unable to overcome the various illusions that they have about their immediate prospects. They continually insist that the present situation will become more favourable for the realisation of genuine popular support for their standpoint, and so ultimately provide democratic justification for the revolutionary approach. Thus, even very small groups with very little popular support can generate illusions about the possibility of developing increasing political importance in the immediate period. But the problem is that the issue of democratic legitimacy seems to be with the parties that defend capitalism and so are able to win general elections. People do not vote in favour of capitalism at any given general election, but they vote to support parties that do defend the interests of this economic and political system. Thus, the situation has changed from when Marxist type parties seemed to have the possibility to win general elections and so introduce important modifications to the present system. The problem was that the parties of Social Democracy and Communism proved to be unsuitable in relation to the possibility to achieve genuine social change, but instead of the realisation of the role of genuine alternatives the result of this situation has been increased support by the workers for essentially bourgeois parties. It would seem that the era of the influence of the perspective of socialism is over. But it is the very continuation of the limitations of capitalism that indicates that this would be a pessimistic and premature conclusion. The apparent lack of a genuine alternative to the present system does not resolve its continuing economic and political problems. In other words, the reasons why capitalism should be replaced by socialism are still generated by the limitations of the contemporary mode of production. In other words, there is still a historic necessity for the development of a Marxist party which is able to understand the present economic system in convincing terms and as a result is able to elaborate a credible perspective for change. Obviously, the emergence of such a party would not automatically result in the realisation of social change but at least the democratic basis for change would have been established. This is because a credible party would attempt to establish convincing reasons why it is both possible and feasible to establish a superior and more democratic type of society. A society no longer based on the passive acceptance of capitalism by the people but instead the realisation of a situation in which people can genuinely become involved in the prospect of achieving genuine progress. But the lack of such a party in national and international terms means that capitalism will continue not because it has genuine popular support but instead as a result of the fact that there does not seem the possibility to establish an alternative. However, the very development of a credible and effective revolutionary party will establish the importance of the view that a democratic and popular alternative to capitalism has become a realistic possibility.

But it seems that the very character of the democratic process under capitalism seems to discredit the possibility for the success of the role of a revolutionary party that expresses the interests of the workers. When they contest elections, these parties obtain small amounts of votes and instead the parties that defend the capitalist system seem to be more popular and are able to obtain the necessary level of votes that enables them to become a governing administration. This situation has been the result of a prolonged period of political crisis of the socialist inclined parties which has resulted either in their acceptance of the limitations of the domination of capitalism, or else the increasing insignificance because of a continued insistence on the importance of revolutionary politics. It would seem that the very adherence to a revolutionary approach was the basis of the generation of the possibility to become an irrelevant political force. It would seem that the approach that was supported by the original forces of Marxism has become discredited over a period of time. Makin-Waite suggests that the approach of Marxism was that: “The best thing would be for the workers party to campaign for its programme through elections, and use the power resulting from success to……..In this way, the institutional forms which had characterised the emergence of liberal democracy, and which had initially established themselves as vehicles of bourgeois rule – parliaments, freely contested elections argument and dispute through the press and in public spaces – could become key elements in which the working class would reorganise society and the economy away from the class divisions and exploitation which the bourgeoisie depended on.”(p59) But this perspective was never realised because the very acceptance of the bourgeois democratic political system led to a modification of revolutionary perspectives in terms of support for more reformist type objectives. The view of Kautsky, that a socialist party would utilise electoral success in order to realise the transformation of capitalist society, was never achieved because the participation in elections became the basis to accept the dominant imperatives of the capitalist system. Therefore, a revolutionary approach became based on the rejection of the importance and credibility of the parliamentary institutions. But this perspective implied that the aims of revolutionary Marxism were opposed to the role of political democracy. Indeed, increasingly the emphasis of the approach of Marxists was on the importance of the aspect of struggle for change instead of an elaboration of the aspects of the possible socialist society: “The future would emerge from the dynamics of history and struggle: not from grandiose schemes and precise instructions on the best way to arrange all aspects of life and daily routine. Rather than promoting visions or blueprints of what the ideal society would be like, or appealing to the good sense and generosity of an imaginary fair-minded elite, there was a need to organise.” (p60) But this standpoint became to characterise the views of the most intransigent and revolutionary minded forces within the socialist movement. In contrast the people with a reformist approach began to elaborate views about the economic and political character of a socialist society. Furthermore, they outlined a perspective of how this change could be realised in terms of the role of obtaining majority support via the role of elections. If this aspect of electoral success could not immediately realise socialism it would at least result in the possibility of making progress towards the attainment of this objective. In contrast it became to be considered that the approach of the most intransigent Marxists was not connected to this importance of the role of democratic political structures within the major capitalist countries. It was argued that left wing reformist governments would be able to achieve definite progress towards the realisation of the socialist objective, which contrasted with the uncertainty of the approach of what became to be considered to be the adventurist character of intransigent mass struggle. This approach seemed to have been vindicated by the approach of Engels in the 1890’s.

But the increasing inability to realise the aims of socialism via the role of the electoral system led to rejection of the role of bourgeois democracy as the basis for the promotion of the realisation of the transformation of capitalism into alternative emancipatory system: “The later disillusion of sections of the socialist left with democracy results from the fact that it did not deliver their goal for them in the way that they hoped. Disappointment led to two possible conclusions: settle for what could be delivered by democracy, even if it fell short of socialism; or reject democracy as an essential element of socialist politics. The bitter realisation that democratic advance had not led to ‘inevitably’ to socialism pushed some comrades to towards impatient activity. For them ‘democracy’ would be, at best, a tactical means of advance towards socialism, to be used as useful, or to be dropped it not. This history explains how the twin errors of ‘gradualism’ and ‘insurrectionism’ became linked. The third possible position became relatively marginalised: to continue working for real socialism, but to insist that real socialism would need to be democratic or it would not be socialism at all.” (p73) But it is questionable whether the supporters of a revolutionary approach rejected the importance of the aim of democracy. Instead, they outlined an alternative conception of democracy which was expressed by the character of the struggles of the workers in the trade unions and other organisations of the workers. The issue seemed to be about how to establish the political ascendency of these alternative forms of democratic based mass activities. It could be argued that only in the instance of the October revolution has this approach been successful in terms of the realisation of the domination of the soviets of the workers. But generally, the institutions of bourgeois democracy have facilitated the realisation of a situation in which the domination of capitalism has continued. Therefore, it has been the general failure of left-wing politics to be able to utilise the possibilities of democracy within capitalism has been a problem because the very importance of democratic political institutions has become the basis to generate acceptance of the limitations of the capitalist system by left wing organisations. On the other hand, it has generally not been possible for the mass struggles of the workers to create durable and effective forms of alternative types of popular democracy, except in the unique situation of the Russian revolution. Thus, the failure of the various struggles for socialism has led not to the rejection of democracy before 1924 by the various Marxist forces, whether reformist or revolutionary. Instead, it was the elitism of Stalinism and its support for authoritarian rule of a hegemonic party that led to the effective rejection of the importance of democratic principles. However, the issue of what was democracy, and how could it be utilised to promote the realisation of socialism, became an enduring issue for the various socialist parties. On the one hand, what became the reformist parties adapted to the limitations of bourgeois democracy and so accepted the continuation of capitalism. On the other hand, the various revolutionary parties were inconsistent supporters of an alternative popular form of democracy, but this generally did not mean support for a type of society based on the effective hegemonic importance of the political participatory role of the people. Instead, this approach became the basis to justify one party rule. The approach that had been promoted by Luxemburg of a type of participatory democratic system based on the role of workers management of the economy became to be ignored because of the issue of the importance of Marxist parties in the process of change and the elaboration of strategies of transformation in which these organisations would have the primary significance.

This latter aspect was expressed by the apparent tension between the role of the party dominated Soviets after the Russian October revolution of 1917 and the Constituent Assembly elected by universal suffrage which led to the supremacy of the right wing of the Social Revolutionary party. Makin-Waite outlines how Lenin’s stance was that: “His position was that the soviets represented revolutionary proletarian democracy, while the Constituent Assembly was an institution of the old kind of parliamentary democracy – a liberal and bourgeois institution – whose legitimacy could no longer hold now that the proletarian revolution had progressed so much further.”(p100) This position may have been formally correct, but he did not sufficiently anticipate that the dissolution of the constituent assembly would create the conditions for the inevitable development of civil war. If there was the development of an agreement between the soviet government and the constituent assembly this would have meant that the excuses for the development of civil war would have lacked any credible justification. Indeed, Lenin did not seem to recognise that some form of agreement between the soviet government and the constituent assembly would express the basis of the development of a proletariat-peasant alliance as the basis for the organisation of society in economic and political terms. The view of Lenin that the soviets were a superior form of democracy may have been correct, but this did not mean that the decision to dissolve the Constituent Assembly was sensible and principled. Instead, the important issue was about how to create the political conditions to be able to establish the development of the proletariat-peasant alliance, and this meant that the understanding of the character of what constituted democracy had to be flexible and so not reduced to a polarisation between a rigid conception of proletarian democracy or bourgeois democracy. Instead, it was necessary to try and establish that a possibility for the interaction of these two different forms of democracy could be expressed in the situation of the general political supremacy of the Soviet government. This development would not mean an undermining of the hegemony of the Soviets but would instead indicate the possibility for the creation of a new type of democracy based on this process of political interaction between two different types of political institutions. But ultimately the lack of this development could only facilitate the development of a situation of the increasing domination of the hegemonic and elite revolutionary party. It was the increasing lack of the role of any type of effective democracy that enabled this situation of the hegemony of the Bolsheviks to become consolidated. It could be argued that there was no alternative to this situation because of the problems created by civil war and the adverse economic situation. However, the end of the civil war and the introduction of the New Economic Policy could have become the economic and political basis to revitalise the role of a genuine soviet democracy. But this did not occur, and if any-thing the domination of the single party was consolidated by the regime of Stalin. There was also no possibility for the role of differences within the increasingly monolithic party, which expelled the groups led by Trotsky and Zinoviev. Therefore Makin-Waite is right to conclude about this period of Bolshevik domination that: “Democracy should have been centrally important to the communist project. It had emerged from socialism, a movement which had been the main expression of the democratic impulse during nineteenth century industrialisation. From this it might have been assumed that communism – as socialism in its serious form – would have been more serious about democracy, seeking to deepen it rather than reject it. But this did not happen.” (p104) The major mistake in relation to the problem of increasing authoritarianism of Soviet society was caused by the failure to re-establish genuine Soviet democracy after the end of the civil war. It called be suggested that the demands of the civil war provided some justification for the effective development of one-party rule in order to create the conditions for victory over the forces of counterrevolution. But when this situation was over it could have been possible to enable the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries to become a part of the development of a genuine democratic political system. Instead, the authoritarian rule of the Bolsheviks became consolidated and ultimately led to the repressive domination of Stalin. Hence the problem was not with a supposedly anti-democratic character of the Soviets as some have argued but was instead the expression of the problematic issues involved in the consolidation of a regime based on the domination of a single party. Ultimately this development led to the undermining of the very credibility of the role of the Soviets. The party functioned on behalf of the Soviets, and the possibility to establish a type of Soviet democracy was undermined because of this development.

It could be suggested that this development was an indication of the lack of credibility of the role of the Soviets. But these organisations had emerged as an expression of the aspirations of the workers in the revolution of 1905, and this development was repeated in the situation of 1917. In the context of the process of mass struggle the Soviets had indicated their importance as an agency of the aspirations of the workers. But the issues involved by the development of the party acting on behalf of the workers meant that the popular character of the Soviets became undermined and instead the result was that the development of one-party rule in which the role of the Soviets was reduced to a formality. Kautsky, suggested that this development indicated that the Soviets were not suitable organs of a worker’s government and instead were essentially an expression of the role of the popular struggle of the workers within capitalism. He considered that there was still no effective alternative for the role of a parliament for the development of a situation in which a socialist government could be established with genuine popular support. But the point is that there is no choice between the role of parliaments or soviets, instead the issue of the importance of these different organisations would be established by the specific situation in different countries. However, even if the aim is to obtain the majority support of the electorate for the formation of a socialist government, the supporting role of Soviets could still be an important aspect of the realisation of this development. The point is that the role and importance of Soviets and parliaments can only be established by a serious understanding of the given political conditions.

But it is also necessary to emphasise that the issue of strategy has to be connected to the role of the influence of the ideology of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie over society. In this context there often appears to be popular support for capitalism which is confirmed by the role of the political system and its process of regular and democratic elections which often result in the election of parties that support the capitalist economy. This is an issue that it could be argued was always underestimated by the Bolsheviks in their analysis of contemporary capitalism. Instead, there was an emphasis on the importance of the opportunist role of Social Democracy in upholding the capitalist system by its rejection of a genuine revolutionary perspective of change. Hence it was being suggested that a principled revolutionary approach would result in the development of mass support for the attempt to change society. But it could be argued that this approach underestimated the importance of the influence of bourgeois ideology which generated support for the system within the working class. The point was that it was more complex to try and transform capitalism as a result of the political role of the workers because the ideological hegemony of the economic and political system of Western Europe was more established than had been the situation in Tsarist Russia. Revolutionary developments in Russia indicated the lack of support for the social formation and instead established the possibility of change. But capitalism in Western Europe was more established and accepted as the credible form of economic and political system. Therefore, a different political situation was present in Russia when compared to the countries of Western Europe. It was possible for revolutionary change to occur in Russia because of the lack of political legitimacy of the system which did not have any expression of the role of democracy. In contrast the development of democracy in Western Europe seemed to suggest the importance of the necessity to try and change aspects of society without the role of revolutionary forms of activity. The workers could obtain progress by means of increasing support in terms of the role of democratic elections. This approach was theorised by the works of Kautsky. But the result of this difference of political perspectives meant that the Social Democratic and Communist parties could not establish united fronts to promote the realisation of common objectives such as the necessity of opposition to the problem of fascism. On the one hand the adherence of Social Democracy to bourgeois democratic structures led them to adopt opportunist policies and on the other hand the sectarianism of the Communist parties meant they seemed to be indifferent to the necessity to defend bourgeois democracy from this system being undermined by fascist counterrevolution. The result was the ascent to power of fascism in Germany. Only Trotsky argued consistently for a united front approach in order to oppose the success of the fascist counterrevolution. Ultimately the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet Union led Stalin to support the popular front approach in order to try and undermine the development of the power of fascism in Western Europe. But this approach was not based on a defence of the principles of democracy, as expressed in the popular aspiration for radical change by the workers of France and Spain but was instead a support for the defence of bourgeois democratic regimes against the threat of proletarian revolution. In other words, a conflict was being expressed by the contradiction between the political system of bourgeois democracy and the alternative of proletarian democracy which was expressed in the role of the self-organisation of the workers in order to promote various forms of mass struggle. The counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism was required in order to oppose the possibility of workers militancy in France and Spain becoming the basis of the realisation of the process of proletarian revolution. In other words, the development of forms of proletarian democracy, as indicated by the aspiration of workers to end the domination of the capitalists within the economy, was something that could not be tolerated within a capitalist system. Instead, the very justification of bourgeois democracy, or the elected role of the socialist and communist parties, was utilised in order to oppose the development of the mass struggles of the workers, which resulted in the occupation of the factories in Spain and France, becoming the basis for the realisation of the political power of a new type of participatory democracy. Makin-Waite tries to deny the importance of this issue of the defence of bourgeois democracy versus the possibility of the ascendency of forms of proletarian democracy by suggesting that instead what was the major issue was the defence of democracy against fascist counterrevolution: “Spain was seen as the battleground between progress and reaction, between democracy and fascism, and between decency and the threat of barbarism.”(p140) But this understanding essentially denies the importance of the role of the popular struggles and aspirations of many workers in this situation. The impetus of the very process of the mass character of opposition to fascism was the vague aspiration to establish a different form of democracy, or a type of society that enabled the workers to take decisions about their economic and political activity. This was the basis for the effective generation of the possibility for revolutionary change, and it was also the reason why it was opposed by the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism. Makin-Waite defends this reactionary approach as the defence of democracy, but in actuality what was defended was the interests of a bourgeois democracy against the possibility to realise an alternative type of democracy, or proletarian democracy based on the important role of the economic and political organisations of the workers.

Defenders of the Stalinist approach would suggest that the prospect of the realisation of proletarian democracy was never a serious option in these situations of popular struggle in France and Spain of the mid 1930’s. But the mass activity of the workers in these countries indicated the possibility to establish the role of a new type of democracy based on the interests and actions of the workers. Obviously, this type of democracy would only have a temporary character and so would have to become consolidated into the development of a stable type of political system in which the possibility to realise the aspirations of the workers would have to be established in more coherent and effective terms. But the point is that the popular and mass actions of the workers in the 1930’s had the potential to become transformed into a new and more cohesive system of democracy. It will be argued by defenders of bourgeois democracy that there is no alternative to the situation of the competition of parties based on the principles of democratic elections. But there is no reason why this aspect should not be incorporated into a new type of democratic system such as expressed by the role of workers councils or soviets. The point is that it is the institutions of parliaments which acted to defend the interests of the capitalist system. Therefore, any genuine expression of proletarian revolution would have to seriously consider the continuation of the role of parliaments after the realisation of a process of social change. It has been the institutions of Soviets, or workers councils which have enabled the democratic aspirations of the workers to be realised in the most effective manner. Consequently, the task would be to combine the necessity of the continued importance of the role of different political parties with the significance of workers councils which are able to express the interests of the workers in a more effective manner. Parliaments are an institution of a bourgeois democratic system and so there should a critical attitude towards them by the supporters of a revolutionary Marxist approach. Ultimately the policy concerning parliaments should not be of a dogmatic character. There may be genuine support for such an institution within the post-capitalist society, and so it would require the role of democratic discussion and consultation in order to decide what approach should be considered to be necessary with regards to their continuation within a socialist formation.

However, it could be argued that this discussion of the institutions of democracy in a socialist society is irrelevant because in present terms the support for revolutionary organisations in democratic elections is minute. This situation is not likely to be altered except by the development of a process of successful revolutionary change. Only in terms of this development would revolutionary parties acquire a popular character. Hence the issue of the character of democracy has to be connected to the role of class struggle. Without the progress of a mass movement for change the various revolutionary parties are likely to remain small and ineffective. These organisations will lack popular support. In most situations the influence of bourgeois ideology will mean that parties that in some manner defend capitalism are likely to be popular and could possibly be elected as governments. It has been shown by experience that such a situation is not likely to change unless a situation of economic and political crisis develops. In this context support for a revolutionary type party could develop, but it requires the development of the class struggle for the possibility of the political power of this party and the workers to be realised. In this manner the general dynamics of the present democratic system become transformed by new political developments. In other words, the development of the class struggle establishes the possibility for the generation of the role of a new type of democracy. Whether this popular democracy is established depends on the prospects for the success of mass actions. It will be argued by defenders of capitalism that what has occurred is an expression of opposition to the only valid and viable expression of democracy. Therefore, what will result is a process of political opposition between two rival forms of democracy. Hence elections to the parliamentary institutions will be utilised in order to undermine the credibility of the various mass struggles. But if the revolutionary parties can convince people concerning the democratic validity of the popular political institutions created by the process of struggle, they may be able to convince people to transform society in terms of the establishment of the hegemony of these new forms of democratic political participation.

In other words, the ideological influence of the role of what can be described as bourgeois democracy is one of the most important aspects that seems to justify the capitalist system as being genuinely democratic and based on the role of the people in the making of political decisions. But in contrast the approach of popular democracy of the people has not been influential, except for brief periods of the role of a mass movement for change, as in relation to France in 1968. Instead, there has been the increasing importance of the role of various Euro-communist and social democratic parties which have tried to utilise the prevailing political system in order to realise progressive change. These developments have generally resulted in failure, but a credible alternative has not been created. Instead, there has been the increasing importance of mass protest movements which essentially do not have a perspective of the realisation of a new type of political and economic power. However, a left-wing government did emerge in Greece, but its radical objectives were undermined by the role of international economic institutions. This development only seems to indicate that the issue of the process of genuine revolutionary change has to have an international dimension that enables the possibility to challenge the domination of the forces of global capital. Only in this manner can the process of the attempt to transform a given national society become genuinely consolidated by its international development and the effective advance of the possibility of the progressive transformation of society.

However, given the difficulties involved in the attempt to establish both revolutionary and democratic change, Makin-Waite supports a less ambitious perspective for the transformation of society: “Radicals need to fully support democratic values, as well as the practice of representation that institutionalise them and safeguard them on an enduring basis. ‘Liberal’ institutions such as modern parliaments – although they first emerged as part of establishing bourgeois class rule, and were used to manage and dissipate opposition to it – do not necessarily or essentially institutionalise the rule of the few. These forms can – and should – be given a new political content, and are themselves a terrain of battle. They are not only a space in which ideas are contested and radical programmes are promoted, they are also important means through which, with majority democratic support, such programmes could be implemented. The practices and freedoms which representative democracy has promised but not always delivered have a crucial role to play in establishing and sustaining long-term settlements based on equality and solidarity.” (p275) But this general affirmation of the importance of liberal democracy does not establish how this aspect will promote the realisation of the possibility for political change that will establish socialism. In the period since the decline of Stalinism, and the increasing problems associated with the role of social democracy, the possibility for the realisation of a democratic process of radical change that facilitates the creation of socialism, seems to be an increasingly problematical development. Instead, the various parties supporting the capitalist system have tended to consolidate their political domination and this aspect is connected to the increasing decline in the level of influence and popularity of the organisations that promote the realisation of socialism. It would seem that democracy is a type of approach that can only benefit the defenders of capitalism. In this context the level of support for socialist organisations is increasingly declining, and it is also difficult to obtain the electoral success of the various reformist organisations. Thus, democracy seems to be a political process that is connected to the defence of capitalism. In this context the programmes of the various socialist groups lack credibility because they cannot establish any important level of mass support for their perspectives. Instead, the people continue to utilise their votes in favour of parties that uphold the supremacy of the capitalist system. In this context the various left groups tend to effectively reject the importance of a programme of social change and instead become the advocates of the aims of the various pressure groups, such as the ecological movement. It would seem that capitalism is dominant because it has the effective support of the people in terms of the electoral superiority of various bourgeois parties like the Conservatives in Britain. In this context it would seem that even the era of the importance of social democratic governments seems to be generally over, apart from the occasional exception. In other words, the role of a limited type of democracy has proved to be advantageous for the supporters of the capitalist economic system. The various forms of mass struggle often express the importance of an alternative and more genuine form of democracy in terms of the justification of the dynamism of mass movements of opposition to various aspects of capitalism. But these movements cannot be serious contenders for political power because they are not a party, and their aims do not express the objective of the socialist transformation of capitalism. Thus, there is a historic political crisis which is an aspect of the important failure to create a type of society based on the principles and role of a genuine participatory democracy. Instead, the capitalist system remains dominant because of the frequent expression of popular support in elections for parties that support this type of economy. Marxists often explain this situation in terms of the limitations of the often low-level of class consciousness, but why are these illusions not overcome with the potential development of class struggle? The point is that there must be something about the political system that people consider that it expresses something supportable and important. In this context the right to vote for different parties must be an aspect of the political system that people consider that is progressive and important. In contrast the one serious attempt to realise socialism led to the domination of a single hegemonic party and the aspect of economic and political domination that resulted from this situation seemed to imply that the system was inferior to that of a liberal democracy based on a capitalist economy. Ultimately it was the lack of democracy of the so-called socialist society that meant it was inferior to the apparent multi-party system of the major capitalist countries. For this reason, people became sceptical about the claims of these societies to be more progressive than capitalism. Thus, the issue of democracy has to be addressed by any serious supporter of socialism.

However, what has to be established in a credible manner is the view that a democratic alternative to the parliamentary system is possible. This type of political activity is questionable in democratic terms because people basically by the means of their votes bestow a type of absolute power onto an institution that is able to consistently act in terms of this unaccountable dynamic. Parliament or a congress rules on behalf of the people and is not a genuine expression of the involvement of the people in the activity of government and the development of legislative policy. Indeed, the effectiveness of a government that is established in this manner is based on its ability to utilise an elite sense of discretion in relation to the development of the role of policy. Thus, the role of the people is to act as a passive expression of the continuation of the domination of capitalism in terms of supporting parties that uphold this system. In this context the original socialist aims of most social democratic parties have become accommodated to this objective of the continuation of the capitalist social formation. Thus, any possible revolutionary aspects of democracy become negated, and instead democracy is something that is an important aspect of ensuring the continuation of the political superiority of capitalism. However, the workers have always expressed in terms of the aspect of collective solidarity in their economic activity the possibility of the realisation of an alternative form of democracy. This initially takes the form of trade unions which express defence organisations of the workers that are based on some type of expression of the democratic aspirations of the workers to try and realise their collective aspirations in an effective manner. This apparent potential alternative to the domination of the role of capital within the economy has to be discredited by the defenders of capitalism. It is argued that the trade unions are not democratic and instead represent sectional and elite interests of the most privileged workers. But what is actually apparent is that the trade unions generally express the democratic aspirations of the workers to achieve increasing influence concerning how the economy is organised. Thus, struggles over the level of wages express the indirect objective of the workers to modify the domination of the capitalist over the process of economic activity. In other words, there is a political contradiction within capitalist society between the aspect of the supremacy of the bourgeois democratic political system and the attempt of the workers to try and establish an effective level of democratic autonomy within society. Generally, the consistent supremacy of pro-capitalist parties in the political system means that the effective aspect of the alternative of the democracy of the producers is generally not realised. However, in exceptional revolutionary situations this aspect of popular democracy becomes expressed in terms of the realisation of workers control of the economy. It has to be the task of the parties of revolutionary Marxism to try and create a strategy that would connect the aspiration for workers control of the economy to the aim of the overthrow of the political supremacy of the capitalist class. If this perspective was successful it would mean that the objective of a genuine and effective form of democracy had been realised.

It has been argued that the approach of revolutionary Marxism is essentially authoritarian because it implies the justification of the domination of the exclusive party which rules in terms of being the exclusive interpreter of the aims of the workers. In other words, the aims of Marxism are not inherently democratic. Instead, the ultimate objective is to achieve the absolute power of the party and so in this essentially non-democratic manner the aim of the establishment of the domination of a new privileged elite is being justified. Therefore, the supposed attempt to realise socialism is essentially the expression of the domination of the role of the revolutionary party in these non-democratic terms. Hence only a capitalist society can be truly democratic. This observation is based on the apparent experience of the October revolution in Russia. However, this criticism is not credible because the approach of Marx and Engels was to aspire to facilitate the emancipation of the workers which would suggest the necessity for the development of a genuinely participatory form of democracy. Hence the development of authoritarianism was not the logical result of the application of Marxist theory but was instead its distortion because of the problems posed by an unfavourable economic situation. However, the popular conclusion that has been reached by many people is that Marxism supports the imposition of authoritarian regimes. Hence it is necessary to try and establish a form of democracy that would imply that Marxism is inclined to uphold the role of a type of popular democracy as the basis of a post-capitalist society.

One attempt to develop this type of approach has been that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantel Mouffe in the book: ‘Hegemony and Socialist Strategy towards a Radical Democratic Politics’ (Verso, London 1985) They suggest that the development of struggles for the economic progress of the workers was connected to the aspect of the aim to achieve democratic rights, as with the activity of the Chartists in Britain in the nineteenth century. In the contemporary period these struggles seemed to have been increasingly replaced by the activities of the various new social movements of oppressed sections of society. Indeed, the very success of the struggles of the workers to achieve the development of a welfare state in a capitalist society became the inspiration for the development of these new types of political and social movements. In other words what has been created is a form of radical democracy which could become the basis for the development of a new type of society based on the principles of participation by the people in defining the character of their activity. But this development therefore means that there is no exclusive subject for transforming society, and also the generation of struggles does not have the aim of revolutionary change: “There is no unique privileged position from which a uniform continuity of effects will follow, concluding with the transformation of society as a whole. All struggles, whether those of workers or other political subjects, left to themselves have a partial character and can be articulated to very different discourses. There is therefore no subject which, nor further any ‘necessity’ which is absolutely radical….and which constitutes an absolute guaranteed point of departure for a total transformation.” (p153) Thus the character of the various forms of mass struggle defines what is possible. They do not aim for the realisation of revolutionary change and the absolute rejection of the present system, but instead aim to realise the progress of the role of a popular type of democracy within the limits of capitalism. This reformist approach provides a unity of purpose for the workers and the other groups aspiring to realise a situation of democratic change. Therefore, whilst socialism would remain an important aim of these popular forms of struggles the actual primary objective would be to achieve the development of a situation in which the various aspects of a radical democracy could thrive and be generated. The aim is to establish the democratic participation of the people in the organisation of society.

But how could this objective be realised without the successful attainment of a socialist society? The point is that forms of popular democracy of the workers and other oppressed sections of society can only be a temporary situation within the context of the continuation of capitalism. This situation would either become the prelude to the realisation of socialism would enable an effective form of popular democracy to become consolidated, or else the domination of capital over labour would become consolidated, which would result in the undermining of the importance and dynamism of the forms of popular democracy that had emerged. The authors are right to suggest that the principles of workers self-management can only be an aspect of the radical democratic project that is being advocated by the supporters of the aim of revolutionary change. However, this aspect is of primary importance because it establishes in the most effective manner the development of an alternative type of popular democracy which can become the basis to overcome the domination of capitalism and so promote the possibility of change to a new socialist system. The authors consider that there is a plurality of subjects which means that the workers are not the exclusive agency of change. This perspective has merit, but only if it does not become the justification to deny the continued importance of the view that the effective realisation of forms of popular democracy requires the socialist transformation of society. Hence the workers will continue to have a primary role in this process of change because they are the group that is most concerned and interested in the achievement of this aim of emancipation which is connected to this development. But the authors consider that this perspective is problematical because: “For the defence of the interests of the workers not to be made at the expense of the rights of women, immigrants or consumers, it is necessary to establish an equivalence between these different struggles. It is only on this condition that struggles against powers become truly democratic, and that the demanding of rights is not caried out on the basis of an individualistic problematic, but in the context of respect for the right of equality of other subordinated groups.” (p167-168) But the aspect of leadership by one section of society, such as the workers need not imply the anti-democratic denial of the importance of the rights of other oppressed groups. Instead, this leadership is based on the understanding that the aim of the liberation of the workers is connected to the aspiration to liberate all the other exploited and oppressed sections of society. This aspect is connected to the understanding that the realisation of genuine democracy does not justify any form of domination of one oppressed group by another. Thus, the demand of the authors for respect of the autonomy of each oppressed section of society should not become the justification of a type of demarcation of the interests of one group when compared to the interests of another. Instead, the very attempt to establish a form of popular democracy should be what unites the various exploited and oppressed groups. But in this context, there will emerge a hegemonic subject of change and this should not justify the development of an authoritarian political relationship between different oppressed groups but instead they should be united on the basis of common objectives.

However, it could be argued that this perspective is essentially problematical because in terms of the present situation the supporters of capitalism are able to ensure the continued support of the economic system. There does not seem to be possible the emergence of forms of democratic mass struggle that will be able to represent the basis of an effective alternative to the domination of capitalism. The various protest movements do not seem to represent a feasible possibility for genuine social change even if they can sometimes obtain concessions from the representatives of the dominant social system. But if any movement of change is to develop it will have to express the principles and aspects of forms of democracy. The credibility of mass struggles has often been undermined by their increasing authoritarian character, and the failure of the October revolution in Russia was connected to the inability to develop a form of genuine popular democracy. Thus, capitalism continues because its supporters are able to claim that it is the only genuine democratic system. But this aspect is justification is based on an actual justification of the continued ascendency of the view that there is no alternative to the present system. It is not the role of forms of genuine democracy which sustain the domination of capitalism but instead the skill of a political elite to continue to be elected to positions of government. Therefore, it is the task of Marxists to promote the importance of forms of popular democracy that can facilitate the possibility of change. It could be suggested that without this development the prospect of such change occurring is not likely to occur. These forms of popular democracy do occur with each mass struggle, but this development is not sustained. But ultimately capitalism is not a genuinely democratic system and it is this aspect that will be an important aspect in the possible generation of forms of struggle of opposition to the ascendency of the role of capitalism. The present system is sustained by the apathy of the people, but the aim of socialism results in the development of what are forms of democratic types of organisation in order to realise this objective. This development can be consolidated in the creation of mass organisations of the workers which could become the expression of the aim of social change.

But it is necessary to address in a serious manner the issue of the present lack of popular support for the role of revolutionary parties when they contest elections in most countries. The small votes that result seem to suggest that these organisations will never obtain the level of democratic support that is required in order to generate the prospect of a popular process of social change. Instead, it would seem that most people are content to support capitalism in terms of the level of votes given to parties that defend the present economic system. To some extent this development can be considered to be the result of propaganda and the influence of the standpoint of bourgeois ideology. Hence the hegemonic influence of the justification of capitalism cannot be considered to be surprising because it is difficult for people to envisage an alternative social formation. But this viewpoint does not adequately explain the small level of support for revolutionary parties as indicated by their lack of votes in elections. It would seem that there is no democratic basis for the promotion of the aim of the transformation of the present society and the realisation of socialism. However, to some extent this aspect is because people still consider that traditional reformist type parties, like the Labour party, express their aspiration for social change. Hence there is some level of popular support for the realisation of the aim that society should be transformed in a progressive and egalitarian manner. Therefore, it would seem to be a necessary task to try and influence these reformist parties to adopt a more principled and genuinely socialist inspired perspective. These organisations will not themselves act to realise socialism, but they could facilitate the development of the political conditions that advances the basis to establish this objective. Ultimately mass organisations with the aim of the realisation of democracy and socialism will be necessary in order to make effective progress towards these objectives. Hence it is necessary to undermine the influence of bourgeois ideology and its justification of the present system. It has been failure in this context that has meant in the present period there has not been the development of what could be defined as effective popular and democratic support for the alternative of socialism. In other words, as long as the supporters of capitalism can suggest that the present economic and political system has democratic credibility then it will continue to be dominate. Thus, there is a necessity to develop the influence of the view that capitalism is not essentially democratic because it is based on the interests of the elite rather than the majority of the people. But success in this context requires the increased importance of revolutionary Marxism, and there is no historical guarantee of this possibility. Instead, the Marxist organisations have to engage more seriously with the concerns of the people and so in this manner establish a process of interaction. This will mean the increased importance of forms of participatory democracy, which could become the basis to promote the possibility of changing society. Obviously, there is no guarantee of success in this context, but the development of the role of popular democracy does create the condition for the generation of the conditions for the consolidation of this development with the connection of this aspect to a process of changing society.

It could be argued that this is an optimistic approach that is not likely to be successful. This is because people are generally content with the present political system of bourgeois democracy. But the economic situation continues to decline, and so mass unrest becomes increasingly important. Therefore, it is an aim of Marxists to connect a perspective of change to the development of forms of popular and democratic mass activity. There is no inevitable generation of progressive change if this process of struggle is created, but the democratic reasons why the transformation of society should occur will have been advanced by this process of development. This prospect does not mean that change will occur but the connection of a popular form of democracy to the aim of the transformation of society is advanced by this possible development. Such a type of mass activity does not automatically end the domination of capitalism, but the dynamics for the transformation of society will have been advanced. At the very least the democratic credentials of the capitalist system will have been undermined and alternatives will have become more feasible.