Democracy and the Left

Mike Macnair, August Nimtz, Aaron Smeaton, Peter Staudenmaier

On April 11, 2015, The Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel discussion on democracy and the Left at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as part of the seventh annual Platypus International Convention. In conversation were Mike Macnair, member of the Provisional Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and author of numerous works including Revolutionary Strategy *(2008); August Nimtz, author of numerous works including* Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough *(2000); Aaron Smeaton, a member of the International Communist Tendency and a contributor to leftcom.org; and Peter Staudenmaier, teacher at the Institute for Social Ecology, and veteran of anarchist, environmentalist, and anti-capitalist movements. The event was moderated by Jamie Keesling of Platypus. What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion. The audio recording of the event can be found at: <http://platypus1917.org/2015/04/22/democracy-and-the-left-2/>.*

Howard Chandler Christy, *Signing of the United States Constitution,* 1940.

Opening Remarks

Mike Macnair: The idea of democracy comes from the Athenians. Take Sara Monoson's book *Plato's Democratic Entanglements* (2000): Even Plato, a notorious opponent of democracy, was unable to escape from the democratic culture of Athens. Aristotle says democracy is the rule of the majority who are also the poor. Aristotle was an opponent of democracy and his definition is set up to result in the idea that democracy leads to tyranny. Athenian democracy was about everybody participating in political decision-making: *parrhēsia*, freedom of speech, making a crime of *hubris* (of putting yourself above other people, of saying, "Do you know who I am?"), trials by large citizen juries—a whole set of interlocking institutions, not just majority rule. All the *citizens* were entitled to participate but the resident foreigners, slaves, and women were not. In that sense modern democracy is profoundly different from Athenian democracy. But Athenian democracy is closer to "government of the people, by the people, for the people," to quote Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, than it is to the rule of the majority.

The working class as a class has no strength other than its collective organization. The dentists walked out of the National Health Service because they could take with them their capital assets and their skills (of which they had a specialist monopoly) and borrow money from the banks to set up in private business. The working class is not in a position to walk out individually. It needs collective action. That collective action is not the creation of a natural collectivity, a *Gemeinschaft* like a village or a family. A *constructed* collectivity creates a trade union, a workers' political party, a tenants' association. It's voluntary association.

That voluntary association needs to function on the basis of inclusive decision-making. Since the ascent of bureaucratic managerialism in the workers' movement, *not* having inclusive decision-making has dissolved the ability of the organization to hold and mobilize its members. The more the branches are unable to act without the authority of the full-time official the less possible it is to keep members turning out and paying their dues to keep the organization in existence.

We no doubt missed the recent anniversary of the Self-denying Ordinance, passed by Parliament on April 3, 1645 during the English Civil War. Under the Ordinance Members of Parliament could no longer be military commanders or public officials of one sort or another and still hold their seats in Parliament. That represented a fundamental change in the way of doing war governance. In place of the medieval system of appointing military commanders and public officials based on inheritance and patronage we moved, to quote Napoleon, into "la carrière ouverte aux talents," the system of meritocracy and managerial specialization. That marked the beginnings of the modern state. The working class needs to get beyond that modern state, beyond that meritocratic conception of equality of opportunity, to a conception of fully participative and democratic conception of running the society and the economy. Our Left is dominated by bureaucratic managerialism as are our workers' organizations. We need *our* self-denying ordinance.

We need democracy in an Athenian sense but not in a wholly Athenian sense. Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell proposed a global democracy in which everyone would have the right to issue electronic referenda. I imagine switching on my computer to find 25 million referenda. You can't get rid of aspects of representative or delegated democracy. In that respect Kautsky's book *Parliamentarism, Direct Legislation by the People, and Social Democracy* still has valuable things to say. Direct referenda democracy is not the solution. But we have to go beyond the conception of democracy as a means by which we "select the best 'guy' to do the job."

August Nimtz: Who gets included in the *dēmos*? This is a major issue in the history of democracy, especially once the working class comes into the picture. Marx and Engels stood on the shoulders of the Levellers. The Putney Debates, 200 years before *The Communist Manifesto*, were of crucial importance for Marx and Engels. For them, real democracy—the rule of the people—was incompatible with inequalities in wealth, incompatible with capitalism.

Marx started out as a radical democrat and came to communist conclusions because of the reality of how liberal democracy worked—or didn't work—in Europe, one of the few places it existed. Marx and Engels learned the lessons of the French Revolution, but what's often

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1989 and its significance for the Left

Gerd Bedszent, Patrick Köbele, Stefan Bollinger

*On February 6, 2015 the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a discussion at the Goethe-University in Frankfurt am Main on the subject of 1989 and its significance for the Left. The event's speakers were Gerd Bedszent, a former member of the East German [GDR] opposition group Initiative für eine Vereinigte Linke [United Left] and presently of the Exit! group; Patrick Köbele, chairman of the German Communist Party; and Stefan Bollinger, author of 1989—*Eine Abgebrochene Revolution *(1999) and a member of Die Linke's Historical Commission. The event was moderated by Markus Nieboditek of Platypus. What follows is an edited transcript of the translated discussion, an audio recording of which is available online at <http://goo.gl/XIrT7H>.*

Opening Remarks

Gerd Bedszent: Although it thought it was, "actually existing socialism" was not more advanced than capitalism. In 1917 a bankrupt and extremely repressive regime in Russia was overthrown. Under Bolshevik leadership, Russia's backward and feudal society was industrialized and made literate in a few decades. A health care system was established and other progressive measures taken. There were similar modernizing regimes that tried as late developers to catch up to Western industrialized nations, though many did not pursue socialist aims.

The Soviet Union and its allies defined themselves as alternatives to capitalism. Nevertheless, the fundamental break with the system of bourgeois economy—the system of "capital, landed property, wage labor, the state, foreign trade and the world market"—was never achieved. Key capitalist forms were adopted unmodified in the "political economy of socialism." The Russian revolutionary V. I. Lenin, a crucial influence for the early stages of socialism, praised the bureaucratic machinery of the German post office as a model for efficiency for a socialized national economy. The intended progress towards a classless society was in reality a regression to mercantilism characterized by massive state intervention in the private sector. The alliance of actually existing socialist states in Eastern Europe could not catch up with the advanced industrial countries of the West any more than other late developers. By the 1970s this had become clear as the gap with the West steadily grew. This was when "actually existing socialism" failed.

That life in the Eastern European modernizing dictatorships, especially early on, did not correspond to what a lot of people had imagined life would be like in an anti-capitalist society certainly does not need to be emphasized here. The Bolsheviks found themselves excluded from the world market and denied access to Western credit. For ideological reasons they could not finance themselves by exploiting Third World countries, and, anyway, that was impractical. Consequently, the modernizing project could only achieve its aims at the expense of their own population, particularly the peasants. The use of forced labor in Siberian prison camps was the 20th century counterpart of the terror of early capitalist regimes that crammed expropriated rural populations mercilessly into gaols and workhouses to create the first modern proletariat. The liberal British bourgeoisie got rid of its surplus poor by deporting them, first to North America and then to Australia. Up to the 1950s French Guiana was a notorious penal colony and even today prison labor in the U.S. is economically significant and profitable.

Today the repressed memory of capitalism's earlier phase extends from Robespierre's Committee of Public Safety to the Caesarism of both Napoleons and from the authoritarian Wilhelmine state to the culmination of absolute inhumanity under Hitler. The crucial difference between the developed Western capitalist nations and their Eastern European stepchildren was that the latter could never get beyond the dictatorial beginnings of early modern times. The reasons for this were, however, primarily economic, not political. The pro-Western modernizing regimes that established themselves in the mid-20th century after decolonization brought to power the most obscure characters, the catalog of whose human rights abuses could fill entire libraries.

So why did Eastern European "socialism" fail economically? The most common causes instanced are inefficiency, overgrown bureaucracy, and the lack of incentives to work, but these are unconvincing. In modernizing dictatorships during their construction phase the home market is administratively shielded from the pressure of the world market so that industry can be developed, infrastructure built, and workers trained and disciplined. If the desired level of productivity is achieved, then government regulation can be curtailed and the national economy reintegrated with the world market. The problem is that each newcomer has to achieve more capital to reach the necessary level. In the case of Eastern Europe, the Western lead could not be overcome. The home market had to be shielded from foreign competition and export products heavily subsidized. Ultimately, the economy stagnated. The induced disproportion between import and export prices threw the Eastern European economies into a debt crisis. They depended on Western credits and thus became vulnerable to political blackmail. Professor George Fuelberth, surely no anti-communist, recently noted in the daily *Junge Welt* that the Soviet Union and its allies represented a project to catch up with the industrialized world. But they lacked sufficient dynamism and were inevitably destroyed by capitalism. But the advanced capitalist countries were themselves struck by crisis in the 1970s. The prevailing Keynesianism, economic growth based on state indebtedness, came up against its limits. The increase in tax revenues from economic growth was insufficient, so state indebtedness grew. The transition to neoliberal ideology was a logical solution. Forcing deregulation, the state's retreat from the economy, the dismantling of governmental infrastructure, and austerity programs not only led to the impoverishment of growing sections of the population, but also, with the help of the World Bank and the IMF, created massive poverty in the Global South. Today this has reached apocalyptic proportions. In 1991 Robert Kurz described the Eastern bloc nations caving in to their Western creditors as "socially and economically, theoretically and practically, capitulation on a massive scale."

The social collapse of Eastern European regimes was thus foreordained. It did not matter if the free elections after 1989 were won by conservatives, liberals, or ex-communists (who had since become social democrats). The room for maneuver of these regimes was almost nonexistent. Economic stagnation had created a generation of economic functionaries that searched for and eventually found their salvation in the implementation of neoliberalism. The former electrician and union leader Lech Walesa who had already accepted massive wage cuts in the April 1989 negotiations with the Polish nomenklatura now turned neoliberal. In the Soviet Union the economist Vitali Nasjul suggested early on that the restructuring of the Soviet economy should be modeled on that of the Pinochet regime in Chile in the 1970s. After former Moscow party leader Boris Yeltsin seized power in August 1991, he undertook economic restructuring on Russian territory. When the Russian parliament put up opposition to the brutality of neoliberal economic reforms and to the criminal privatizations, Yeltsin allowed his troops to fire on the parliament building. The extension of social austerity policies was thereafter no longer impeded.

Neoliberal reform in Eastern Europe could only end in disaster. In Russia, for example, industrial production in 2000 had shrunk by 57 percent of what it had been in 1990. In the Ukraine in the 1990s the gross national product fell to 40 percent and agricultural production fell to one half of what it had been in 1989. In Poland industrial production dropped by a quarter in 1990 alone, whereas in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania the same took place the following year. Hungary lost one-fifth of its industrial capacity in 1992. Altogether, industrial production in the countries of Eastern Europe sank between 40 percent and 70 percent from 1990 to 1993. In Bulgaria employment shrank in the 1990s by 54 percent, in Romania by 46 percent, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia by 39 percent, in Hungary by 35 percent, and in Poland by 16 percent. Even in the territory of what had been East Germany (formerly the showcase for Eastern European socialism), industrial capacity shrank by approximately 70 percent. The agricultural workers' cooperatives survived, but between 1990 and 2000 they lost roughly 90 percent of their employees. Most East German cities have lost a third of their population since 1990. The "flourishing landscapes" Helmut Kohl promised in 1990 certainly came to be, only they are practically devoid of people.

What comes after the neoliberal disaster? Neither a return to a debt-financed welfare state nor to a modernizing dictatorship is a viable option. The rise of market radicalism was itself a reaction to the failure of Keynesianism. From the ashes of failed modernization projects no new beginning is possible under capitalism. The crisis constantly recurs and there is no solution in sight on the basis of the present system, nor is one likely to appear. Among the rejected and socially vulnerable, desperation rages, accompanied by periodic outbreaks of nationalism, racism, and religious delusion. There is a steady disintegration of social cohesion and an increase in struggle along national or religious lines. The installation by Western elites of a state-terrorist end-times *étatisme* might slow down these trends, but it cannot stop them.

It is not news that for the Left 1989 was a disaster. It had either oriented itself uncritically towards the Eastern European modernizing dictatorships or it simply lumped them all together in order to dismiss them en bloc. The Left has mostly refused to theoretically work through the economic changes of the most recent decades. Certainly it is not easy to admit to oneself that the main enemy, capitalism, is now dismantling itself and, in the process, dragging all of humanity down into the abyss.

Now I'm not trying to make the case for standing by with our hands in our pockets as capitalism collapses. Against the barbaric imperative of Western state-terrorism and the onrushing wave of chaos and social collapse, resistance is certainly called for. But the goal of the Left must be a society of solidarity, a society free from either the silent constraints of capitalism or repressive dictatorships. How to build such a society, I cannot say. One thing needs to be clearly stated, however. The laws of capitalist commodity production are not laws of nature. In principle they can be abolished. The alternative, which is certainly possible, is a fall into barbarism.

Patrick Köbele: 1989 was a defeat for humanity as a whole. Imperialism has now burst all bonds, so that the contradictions within it now threaten war and global destruction. Since 1989 a new era of imperialist wars has started, such as the present war in the Ukraine. There the objective is the containment of Russia by American and EU imperialism, which brings with it the danger of escalation. It is not only peace that 1989 threatened but also the danger of renewed neo-colonial oppression for large segments of humanity. Despite its weaknesses and ultimate failure, "actually existing socialism" nevertheless laid the foundation for liberating many nations from the colonial yoke. That has now been reversed.

From 1981 through the mid-80s I worked for Daimler-Benz. I apprenticed there and was the representative for the younger personnel. This was the time of the Metalworkers' Union's big struggle for the 35 hour week. At that time we felt that in the Federal Republic there was almost an even balance of power between capital and labor. Everyone, even the social democratic unionists, understood that the GDR was our invisible partner at the bargaining table. The very existence of "actually existing socialism" bolstered the position of workers in the capitalist countries. So, it is not that in 1989 imperialism came back. It was a constant presence, but the existence of "actually existing socialism" forced it essentially—with some notable exceptions—to deal with its inner contradictions without war and violence. It created a sort of farce of nonviolence, conjuring thereby the illusion for communists that imperialism had been rendered peaceful. Imperialism can never become peaceful, however. It can only be forced by a countervailing power to abstain for a time from violence.

Regarding the effect 1989 had on the international left, it created huge problems for communists like myself who identified with "actually existing socialism." But it is remarkable that it led to any greater crisis for the reformists who seemed so strongly entrenched in the Federal Republic, above all in organized workers movement. When the prospect of transcending capitalism is lost it necessarily leads to a politics accepting of constraints. In this corporatist country, this means the disarmament of the workers movement and of proletarian internationalism. This creates in turn a very dangerous basis for further development, because tied up with the notion of social partnership is the risk that the workers movement will allow itself to be used to further ruling class interests, especially in the international arena. We can already see sections of the workers movement identifying with the rulers rather than the European periphery.

To ask whether the Revolution of 1989 was initiated by the Left or the right is to presume that what occurred was somehow intended, whereas in fact it occurred because of rising but unfocused dissatisfaction. Of course, the dissatisfaction itself was justified. The problem is (and we experienced it with all the "color revolutions") that imperialist forces managed to channel popular discontent toward removal of regimes that were either anti-imperialist or uncooperative with imperialism, i.e. a counter-revolutionary process to undermine "actually existing socialism." Not all individuals acted intentionally toward this end, but such was the result of their actions. I can recall clearly on the 40th anniversary of the GDR I was standing on the VIP stand. At that point it was still possible to have high hopes and still regard the GDR as a socialist state. The illusions I had about this became clear to me that same evening. I was in the Palace of the Republic. When Gorbachev came in, everyone rushed to shake his hand. Although I was not conscious of it then, I am glad that I did not rush over. Gorbachev was nothing but a traitor. Of course, the question then is, how did a traitor come to lead the Communist Party of the Soviet Union? That is still a question that requires investigation. The Party played a big role in the shattering of "actually existing socialism." As it lost its vanguard character, it paved the way to defeat.

So, what was "actually existing socialism"? From my perspective, it was socialism, but in the end it proved too weak. Otherwise, it would not have failed. After all, one cannot simply blame imperialism for socialism's collapse. That weak socialism, during the course of its existence, contributed to the course of human development. It did so with regards to peace, liberation of the colonies, and the shifting of power in favor of the working class in the capitalist countries. I can only say that I look forward to a strong socialism. I do not regret even today that when I was politically active I stood on the side of "actually existing socialism." Of course, we in the German Communist Party made mistakes just as a boxer makes mistakes when swinging wildly. We used euphemisms to describe negative aspects of "actually existing socialism." But that does not change the fact that German communists could stand on no other side. We have to assume such solidarity as a position from which to analyze the mistakes that were made. The Party failed to create a different system of value, so the struggle with capitalism was waged on ground where capitalism is always better, consumerism. Surely there were many reasons why we lost the initiative with the masses. Still, I am proud that I stood, and still stand, on the side of "actually existing socialism."

Stefan Bollinger: I want to focus on the upheaval in the GDR and to try to propose some ideas in the form of a few theses. First: As a historian, I naturally look at the calendar. Today is February 6. 25 years ago the ministers in Bonn still had to work hard. On February 7, a cabinet meeting took place in which it was decided that the Federal government would establish a cabinet committee on German Unity. The period of long-term observation of and preparation for the massive exercise of influence on the society of the GDR was completed. The phase that began, at the latest by November 8, with Kohl's statement of clarification of government policy, which was followed by the 10-point plan. With his visit to Dresden it was put into practice. The solution was elegant enough: an economic, even a monetary union. This directly affected the mood in the GDR. Henceforth, the independent development of the GDR's last year, which had been connected with a democratic upsurge with round tables and grassroots democratic activism, was taken under the aegis of the Federal Republic.

Second: One must also note another process then taking place, one that made the Federal German decision possible in the first place. On January 26, 1990 in the Soviet Politburo a narrow steering committee decided how the Soviet Union would react to what was happening in Germany: We cannot support the maintenance of the GDR. This was a consequence of the agreement reached a month earlier in Malta with the United States. Hans Modrow, at the time Prime Minister of the GDR, was informed on the 30th that he now had the dubious task of flying back to Germany with a program called "Germany United Fatherland" and to commit his coalition government to this. The only ones to refuse were the comrades of the United Left. The Soviet Union then faced its own internal crisis and that in Eastern Europe. It decided for itself as a great power. A great power does not have friends only interests, an old adage that also seems to apply even to people with red party membership cards. And according to this principle, the question was decided. They hoped for the best possible terms, for Western credits to set economic reforms in motion. These took a very different direction from those promised five years earlier.

Third: Any discussion of the question of "actually existing socialism" and the GDR has to take the international peculiarity of the inter-German relationship into account. That "actually existing socialism" failed is certainly—one must constantly emphasize it—due to its own mistakes. Lenin, of course, was right: The task of "actually existing socialism" was twofold. In the first place, it had to struggle between systems and that meant accumulating the economic and military means to carry on the struggle, even as it developed the country, in order to create the conditions for its own population to recognize socialism and its achievements as its own and want to defend them. We did benefit from it but the will to defend it was lacking at a certain point. The rude awakening came a bit later.

Fourth: The futuristic state failed at the point when it could not keep its democratic and emancipatory promises. This, of course, was conditioned by the old society and by limited resources. One also has to remember that "actually existing socialism" emerged as the result of the wars triggered by capitalism that made the revolution possible. And though there was a national Communist movement that supported the process, still in most countries they needed the support of Soviet and occasionally Chinese guns (and later nuclear weapons) to retain power, because they were often minorities. These general conditions influenced the modality of how "actually existing socialism" was built and came to be structured. Its massive democratic deficits can largely be explained, though not justified, by these general conditions. Socialism without democracy is not real socialism. Still, historical conditions must be taken into account and these included a merciless struggle between systems, a struggle that varied in the forms it took but which contained from the beginning the danger of nuclear annihilation. "Actually existing socialism" was not developed on the basis of its own values. Instead, most of the basic needs of this society were the needs, requirements, expectations, and consumer goods that were realized in the most developed countries. Perhaps this was not true for the whole society, but the scale was set in the West.

Demolished statue of Stalin in Budapest, 1990. © Ferdinando Scianna/Magnum

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Fifth: It must be asked which GDR and which "actually existing socialism" we are talking about? The labels "totalitarianism" and "illegitimacy" do not help. This only devalues it and aligns it with Fascism. Still, the question of which "socialism" we are talking about is extremely complex. After the war, both East and West attempted to address locally the situation after the downfall of the Nazi regime on the basis of anti-fascism and the spontaneous organization of workers parties. This quickly got into the cross hairs of all the occupying powers and all the established parties, even the Communists. So much independence was not desired. Or, do we mean the time in which "actually existing socialism" was established? In the East, a growing minority played a crucial role in building socialism. These were people won over by the defeat of fascism: They came from Soviet POW camps, from Nazi concentration camps, or from exile. They were communists, socialists, democrats, and intellectuals. But their powers were increasingly confronted by the Stalinization of that society and party. Or, are we talking about the time of the reforms of the 1960s in which the goal was to build up material prosperity with the inclusion of all social classes and strata in the new economic system? Such reforms posed the question of how such an economic restructuring could work without democratizing existing political structures. As is well known, such an approach was crushed in Prague with tanks, but also in the GDR such approaches were scotched pretty quickly. Or are we talking about the "actually existing socialism" of the following years which wanted to create pragmatic and technocratic prosperity to maintain loyalty and to create a stable future but which actually ended in stagnation? Or are we talking about the very end, that most thrilling and exciting last year of the GDR when reforms and revolutions were attempted by citizens' movements and reformists within the governing party. They wanted a different, more democratic-socialist GDR and strove for an anti-Stalinist revolution to achieve it. At that time there was a greater clarity about what one did not want than about what one did. These attempts were not solely directed against a Stalinism of open repression and terror, which surely got milder in the 1980s (though it still operated within the old structures). In my opinion that is where "actually existing socialism" met its limits. It was structured as a centralized, bureaucratically administered socialism with an all-powerful and, worse, all-knowing Communist Party where in the end everything even down to the supply of imported jeans was determined in the head office of an overly centralized planned economic system. It worked from top to bottom rather than bottom to top. Then there was the security apparatus that saw enemies everywhere, even amongst those trying to improve society. Finally, the crisis management mechanism relied on the threat of violence. All that has to be kept in mind.

Q&A

If socialism and commodity production are contradictory as Gerd Bedszent claims, how then should one assess the citizens' movements of 1989? Was it a "counterrevolution" as Patrick Köbele puts it? Or would calling it "anti-Stalinist," as Stefan Bollinger does, be appropriate?

GB: The active opposition to the GDR in the early 1980s developed due to the influence of the West German Greens. Initially, the GDR leadership was on good terms with the Greens and permitted events for educational purposes, but later entry bans were imposed. The first truly oppositional movement, the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights, emerged around 1985. Some of its splinters developed into mass movements only to disappear just as quickly. In 1990, it merged with the Greens. The second opposition group was the Initiative for a United Left. This was the radical left wing of the GDR citizens' movement. It was the only group open to critical persons inside the SED, which was why the others refused to cooperate with it.

I was an SED member and studied economics in the GDR. In the fall of 1989 my professors suddenly started saying the opposite of what they had been saying. When, on top of that, a Party secretary told me to attend a speech delivered by Helmut Kohl, I decided to join the United Left. Their goal was to find an alternative economy similar to what had been worked on in Green circles. From the vantage of today, I would not deem this to have been successful. They were muddled ideas that largely recycled worn-out state socialist ideas. We wanted to cling to socialism and to improve it, even if it meant fighting a losing battle. I do not regret this and would do it again.

PK: There were good reasons for championing radical change in the GDR. Socialism should set free the masses' creativity and this requires vigorous debate. It is a shame that this did not take place despite our many protests. The transformation of "actually existing socialism" that we espoused put us in a difficult position. But there were also openly counterrevolutionary forces: the Lutheran Church and forces controlled and financed by the West. Meanwhile, the SED ideologically disarmed itself. So, various factors reacted with each other: the discontent of the population, the petrified structures of the SED, the economic question, the superiority of imperialism, and, last but not least, the betrayal of the USSR which effectively sold out the GDR. That was why I preferred the United Left to the SED/PDS. They opened the gate for social democracy. Kohl seized upon the ideological collapse to entice the masses with the Deutschmark and "shop window capitalism." People tended to lose sight of the GDR's achievements. It is difficult to convince people that even if they do not get a stereo system, at least they are not exploiting the Third World and do not have to worry about unemployment.

SB: The expression "anti-Stalinist revolution" implies the possibility of overcoming all structural deficits. It has been a perennial issue throughout the history of "actually existing socialism." It manifested itself historically in moments of crisis—in 1921, 1953, 1956, 1968, and 1980-1. Every time it takes the form of justified discontent amongst significant sections of the population, including the working class. Usually the questions involved a desire for consumer goods, or the management of the labor process, or a desire for democratic participation.

Discontents were instrumentalized by both sides in the Cold War. The ruling authorities in the East treated the discontent as a threat, while the West, of course, hoped for a "fifth column" in the struggle against Communism. The pattern repeated itself in 1989. Some of the more intelligent reformers were aware of this dynamic, but, still, dealing with it in practice proved difficult. Both the citizens' movement and the SED reformers wanted a more humane socialism. Only a few demanded the overthrow of the regime. That was the exception then, even if now many of those—particularly those in the citizens' movement—no longer wish to remember this pro-socialist phase. And, necessary political changes were initiated at that time. The party leadership had disappeared and the General Secretary was ill. In such circumstances the people simply called for a dialogue: "You ought to have open discussions." They were essentially asking for the same thing that was previously discussed in the 1987 joint paper drafted by West Germany's SPD and the East's ruling SED party to enable a reduction of hostilities between the two countries and the opening of discussion about systemic issues. This attempt to do something differently prompted many discussions and grassroots democratic activities. It forced new elections of company managers and shook up party structures. It brought new people and a new spirit into the party leadership. But, in the end, no one led this revolution. The citizens' movement reckoned that the seizure of power was not its job and the SED reformers proved to be too weak to reorganize the party.

The historic break manifests itself on two dates: November 4 and 9, 1989. On November 4, the movement for reform reached its peak at the Alexanderplatz with 500,000 people publicly calling for change and party functionaries actually talking to the people. Anyone paying close attention to these events sensed the difficulty they posed for the old SED functionaries. Five days later—I call it a "silent *coup d'état*"—the SED leadership decided to open the borders. They were unaware of the repercussions this would have. Even the border guards—including their Western counterparts—were not informed. While they discussed revising the rules for travel, people laughed at them. The leadership wanted to find an answer to this problem. Above all, they wanted to keep people off the streets. Also, they thought that when people see how bad it is in the West, they will gladly return to the GDR and desist from protests. On November 9, the revolutionary phase comes to an end and the West takes the GDR under its wing.

The development of the revolutionary and grassroots democratic movement led to two important events: First, a Round Table in early December that was supposed to give the GDR a new political foundation. Secondly, a draft constitution that was proposed on April 6, 1990, when it was already too late. I still think that this draft serves as a model for left and alternative forces of a legal system incorporating elements of direct democracy and allowing for participation in economic decision-making. At this point even though history had passed by what was outlined in the draft, it should still be of interest to the Left. There is something lasting we can still learn from this process.

Trotsky suggested that it was precisely the bureaucratization of the Party that threatened to squander the achievements of the working class. And, indeed, in 1968 the Stalinist parties of the West tried to undermine the student riots and strikes. Should not, then, the collapse of the GDR be understood in terms of the failure of the Left?

PK: The collapse of the GDR was not a retrospective confirmation of Trotskyism. There was no possibility of a "rollout" of the October Revolution on a global scale. The hope was in the German Revolution but it was smashed by the Social Democrats. What should the Bolsheviks have done? They could have said: "We cling to our former hope and keep going." Historically, this was not an option. Besides, Trotskyism cannot explain the achievements on a global scale of a supposedly degenerated socialism. This becomes clear when considering in hindsight the counterrevolution that took place 25 years ago.

According to Marx and Lenin the state arises out of a conflict of class interests and should wither away in the period of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." But this is in direct contradiction to what happened in Eastern Europe. Does the thesis of Marx and Engels need to be revised or are we dealing with a continuation, even strengthening, of these contradictions?

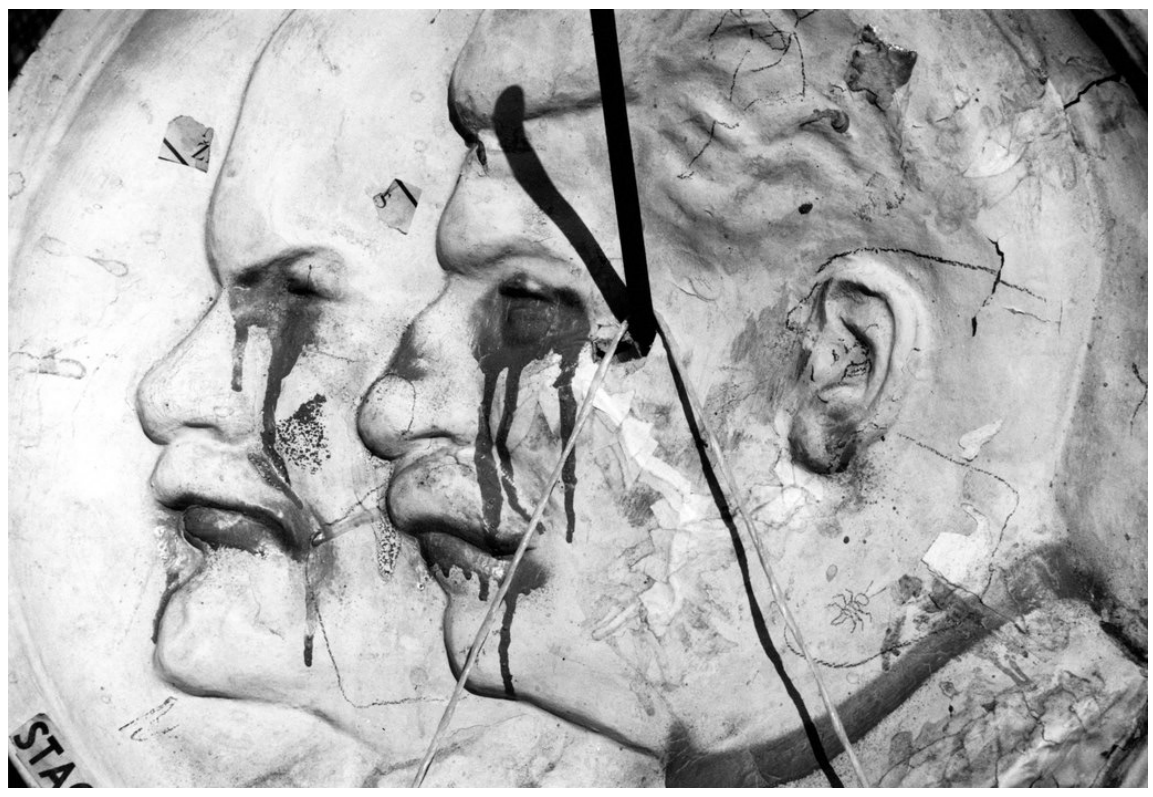
PK: Clearly Marx, Engels, and Lenin hoped for a shorter period of revolution. They assumed that the necessity of the state under socialism would be of shorter duration. But when attempting socialism in a hostile environment, the state necessarily has a defensive function. One should have no illusions: Imperialism will take every opportunity to destroy socialism. It will seek to exploit internal conflicts for the purpose of fostering counterrevolution. Socialism needs to defend itself against this, including intelligence services. However, it is crucial not to forget that socialism is still an oppressive societal model. There is a ruling class, namely the working class, and the bourgeoisie, which, though deprived of power, is not yet fully eliminated. One cannot stop with the expropriation of the means of production since there remain vestiges of capitalism in the ways people think and act. There is a danger that they can ally with capitalism and imperialism. To think of socialism the way Marx and Engels described communism is an illusion that leads to anarchist positions that I do not subscribe to. Our Chinese comrades described this as a problem of three generations. The first brought about the revolution and knows what's what. The second had experienced capitalism, but the third grew up in a socialist society where we encounter problems of consciousness. For the workers in Cuba "freedom" means opportunities for consumption.

SB: There were constant attempts to change people's system of values, particularly in the early years, and this worked well even if such changes did not extend to the whole society. Still, in a complex situation, enthusiasm and readiness to make sacrifices spurred people to action in the Eastern Bloc, including the GDR. Naturally, it was difficult to carry that spirit on to the next generation. By the 1970s there was a break among the younger generation. It derived from a weakening of the stereotype of the enemy but also from a heightened sense of the risks of military confrontation. Also, the younger generation preferred the consumer products and culture of the West. This was important in 1989.

The greatest difficulty though was in creating conditions in which citizens could exercise democratic rights. There were times when this was demanded by critical intellectuals and it was conceded by the leadership, but never permanently. An evolved form of such a reformist approach might have developed in Czechoslovakia. Of course, this might not necessarily have entailed the strengthening of socialism. At any event, Soviet tanks cut the experiment short.

In theory, the working class played the leading role in society, but the Party leadership thought: "Well, the working class is not ready yet. Therefore, we need to act on their behalf to help bring forward the best cadres from this class so that eventually they can take on this role." Certain conflicts occurred since the Party did not always accurately read the mood of the working class. That is what happened in the GDR in 1953. The conclusions the SED drew ran something like this: "We have full control over economic and social policies and we cannot allow the working class to revolt against its own state." This meant that prices could not be raised and you had to be extremely careful when tweaking the work norms. In the GDR we stuck with this until 1989 even though it did not contribute to economic efficiency. There were two perspectives at the time: One was the market-oriented one of the economic functionaries, the other looked at it from the point of view of the working class even if this class did not hold power directly. And if the leadership did not concede the working class perspective then one had to organize for free spaces. The workers fought for their autonomous spaces that reduced work pressure lower than it would have been if the market-oriented functionaries had had their way. In this way the workers achieved a degree of emancipation, but still this experience did not prepare them to lead society. In Marx's view there was supposed to be a brief transitional phase. That should have happened many times in 70 years but it never did.

GB: I began by explaining that the "socialist economy" was based both on commodity production and state planning. Socialism did not invent the public economy, it borrowed it from capitalism. It had existed during the wartime economy of both World Wars, during which the state had stipulated the production of enterprises and set prices and wages. The capitalists went along with this because they expected large profits at the end of the war. By contrast, "actually existing socialism" indefinitely prolonged the wartime economy. It eliminated domestic competition by determining wages and prices. Almost the entire economy was regulated by the state, leaving only small vestiges to the private sector. Furthermore, the state monopolized foreign trade. But, despite this, it was unable to free itself from the global economy, because the socialist state was itself integrated into this global economy and acted as a giant enterprise. Capitalist laws and mechanisms applied to it.



Defaced Lenin and Stalin, Parliament Square, Vilnius, 1991. © Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum

There was a kind of social legislation, but precisely because of this the socialist state was economically disadvantaged with regards to those states that did not have such excellent social legislation. It was a competition between different social systems. It was only a matter of time before capitalist laws imposed themselves. In this respect, the debts of the GDR are not so insignificant as they might seem. If one did not pay them, one would not be creditworthy and would be cut off from commercial relations.

Nowadays the experience of the GDR is looked down on. Is that a correct evaluation? What is the political heritage of the GDR and the Soviet Union? Will not all future attempts to seize power and establish a planned economy be discredited because of this historical experience? What does this history mean for us today?

PK: In this much needed discussion about the GDR we have to be careful we do not end up speaking like the class enemy. The nonsense that it was an illegitimate state disarms the working class. We need to examine when and why the masses of the GDR and the Soviet Union strongly identified with the state and socialism and why later this ceased to be the case. We should not make the mistake of discussing only the failures of socialism and not those of capitalism. We also need to demand a planned economy and the abolition of private property.

GB: It is difficult to generalize about the GDR because it underwent profound changes over the course of decades. If one is talking about the last phase in the 1980s, then this indeed marks a very depressing phase. Not because of political repression, which was, despite what is portrayed nowadays, only directed at the political underground and never affected more than a few hundred people.

Everyone knew that the economy was in a miserable state and that nothing could be done. Yet everyone claimed the opposite. In newspapers and on the radio the opposite was constantly asserted. If you went to Party secretaries and complained, they responded that you did not have the right political attitude. The late GDR was a society in which there was a fantastic amount of lying. In my work, I was forced to give false reports even though everyone knew that the numbers were fake. So, for me, 1989 was a liberation even though ultimately it unleashed a catastrophe.

SB: Yes, it was a time of stagnation and apathy but 1985 marked the beginning of a period of many discussions, including within the Party. Gorbachev's reform initiatives were closely followed, including when these failed in 1987-88 and turmoil ensued.

If the Left wants to pursue politics ever again, we need to come to grips with the history of "actually existing socialism." We cannot simply draw a line and hope that we are relieved of the burden of the past. We have to examine these experiences critically, including the form of planned economy and the Party, particularly a party that suppresses dissent. That was wrong then and it will be wrong in the future. Every generation needs to tackle these questions. This means having an understanding of the complexity of the history of "actually existing socialism," to deal with its injustice and its crimes but also to recognize its accomplishments. One needs to address the whole in its contradictory character. **IP**

Transcribed and translated by Sorush Va, Dorna Mousavi and Richard Rubin.

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different historical picture of democracy, one in which the proletariat is more than just an oppositional force.

MM: Marx was unable to finish *Capital* because he attempted to construct it on the basis of Hegel. Capitalism cannot possibly exist without the state. It is therefore impossible to derive the phenomena, particularly credit and money, simply on the basis of the pure unfolding of the commodity. Marx wrote a series of drafts and the last of these drafts is *Capital: Volume I*. The Hegelian method of presentation breaks down halfway through the book. The second half of the book is a description of the evolution of capitalism out of feudalism through the processes of what Marx describes as the primitive accumulation of capital.

A purely Hegelian approach to political economy leaves the Left with a "degenerative research program." (This is my view, not the Communist Party of Great Britain's view.) A progressive research program is productive, uses new ideas, develops in new directions, etc.; a degenerative research program goes further and further into conceptual problems without solving things. The "historical materialism" version of Marxism is a progressive research program, one which has more or less conquered pre-modern history. The Hegelian conception of a pure capitalism is a degenerative research program, one which is not going anywhere. For that reason I'm not worried about the fact that Marx wrote in very Hegelian terms in the *Grundrisse*, that he drew very sharp lines around the working class in pure capitalism. No such pure capitalism exists or has ever existed. Marx imagines a pure capitalism as a supposition in order to critique Proudhonism and Ricardian socialism. This point is made by Makoto Itoh and the Kozo Uno school, as well as by John Harrison.

But what about the dominant *mode of production?*

MM: When does capitalism become dominant? My guess is that it became dominant in 1763 with the Treaty of Paris when there was no longer any possibility of restoring feudalism in Britain. The cyclical return of crises emerges from 1763 onwards. But, if you're talking about the dominant mode of production then you're using G.E.M. de Ste. Croix's analysis, that of a dominant mode of production rather than a *pure* mode of production.

If we think about the working class simply as an oppositional force, politically, then we can project it back in history. We don't have to go to 1848 and we don't have to think about Bonapartism as a specific historical phenomenon. But if the working class is merely an oppositional force then how can the dictatorship of the working class represent freedom, represent the interests of all?

MM: That question is about more than just how big the working class is relative to the other classes.

AN: Lenin had to grapple with this question, and this is where I differ with Draper. The working class was very small in Russia. In 1905, writing in *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, Lenin raised the slogan of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" exactly because the combination of the proletariat *and* the peasantry was the *majority*. Lenin differed with Trotsky in arguing for an alliance of the proletariat and the peasantry.

The entire Jacobin tradition is obviously an ancestor of Marxism. Mike, if you take 1763 as a turning point, where do Jacobinism and the French Revolution fit into your historical narrative? Is the Jacobin tradition a liberal tradition, a bourgeois tradition, or something else? Was the French Revolution a necessary revolution?

MM: The French Revolution is the result of British world dominance. After it became dominant in Europe in 1763, the British bourgeoisie broke with its own Whiggism and became Tory in its ideology, imposing taxation and other powers upon the Americans. At the same time a proletarian movement against the slave trade emerged which resulted in the 1772 *Somerset v Stewart* case. This case triggered the American slave-owners' break with Britain because any runaway slave that got to the North was automatically free as long *Somerset v Stewart* remained in effect. The American Revolution was a political revolution, not a social revolution. America wasn't yet capitalist but it was a market society with market-organized production. Both the Dutch and French intervened on behalf of the American Revolution but the result was the British shutdown of the Netherlands as a financial sector, another bourgeois state in the U.S., and bankruptcy for France.

At that point, the French became, to quote the title of Richard Lachmann's book, "capitalists in spite of themselves." In 1789, the French elites were forced to transform themselves into capitalists and the French regime was forced to copy Britain. It got out of hand from the bourgeoisie's point of view—the revolution became dominated by the petty bourgeois, artisans, and peasants, so it permitted capitalist development but also held it back (as with the redistribution of land to the peasantry). Then, just as the Dutch were forced to export their revolution, just as Oliver Cromwell was forced to export the British Revolution, so too was Napoleon forced to export the French Revolution. That made it a world-shaping event.

Marx hadn't fully grasped the depth of this history when he first wrote about it in the early 1840s. He saw the French Revolution as *the* decisive turning point, not as a consequence of British world dominance. The French Revolution was a decisive turning point in the *Continental* experience but it wasn't as decisive a turning point in the history of the development of capitalism as Marx thought it was.

Thinking in the language of Jacobinism and the French Revolution was a god-awful trap for the Russians, for Lenin and Trotsky. The Russians debated Thermidor and Bonapartism in the 1920s. There was a fear that Trotsky would play the role of Bonaparte, and Stalin won the majority largely because of this fear.

Transcribed by Watson Bernard Ladd, Josh Price, and Danny Jacobs.

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underappreciated is the impact of the American experience on them. They read Alexis de Tocqueville and his traveling companion, Gustave de Beaumont. Marx was convinced that the U.S. was indeed a paragon of liberal democracy. Marx sometimes talked about the U.S. as a natural experiment because American society had little to no feudal past. But social inequalities—not the least of which was chattel slavery—were beginning to build. By 1844-45, Marx's analysis of the U.S. led him to communist conclusions: market economies lead to social inequalities over time. We need more than what even the best liberal democracy can offer.

Marx and Engels were the first socialists to argue that the fight for a socialist or communist society is *through* the fight for political democracy. They held political democracy to be of crucial importance, but as a *means to an end*, not as an end in itself. That approach was played out throughout their entire political career. Here Marx and Engels differed sharply with many anarchists who argued that the fight for political democracy is a waste of time. But how do you carry out this fight?

Marx and Engels devoted quite some attention to the question of electoral politics as a way to operationalize their views about political democracy. They insisted on participating in the electoral process and they drew important lessons from the 1848-49 revolutions. The bourgeoisie was increasingly getting cold feet about its own liberal revolution. Breathing down the bourgeoisie's neck, as described in *The Communist Manifesto*, was the emerging working class that wanted real democracy. In Marx's March 1850 *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*, he asks: How can the revolution be kept in permanence? The bourgeoisie will want to stop at *political* democracy. Our task is to overthrow class inequality; short of that, we can't realize democracy. The lesson of 1848-49 is that you cannot depend on the liberal bourgeoisie to carry out a consistent fight for political democracy. The working class has to organize itself independently of the bourgeoisie.

Also in the 1850 *Address*, Marx and Engels argue that the workers, organized independently of the bourgeoisie, had to run their own electoral candidates even if there was no prospect of getting elected. Elections were an opportunity for the workers' movement to get out its ideas, to propagandize, and most importantly, to count its forces. They didn't believe that elections in and of themselves would be the means for actually taking power. Only once the working class actually armed itself and formed militias could power be taken. They argued this in the 1850 *Address*, which served as the broad outline for Lenin's strategy in 1917.

The lessons of the Paris Commune—that the working class cannot make use of the bourgeois state to carry out socialist transformation, that the working class will have to come up with new state forms—informed the 1872 Hague Congress, the last effective meeting of the First International. At that Congress, Marx and Engels argued with the anarchists, Bakunin's followers, and succeeded in passing Resolution No. 9, winning a majority of the delegates to the position of independent working class political action. Resolution No. 9 constituted the germ for what would later become the mass working class parties within Europe.

Aaron Smeaton: I'm with the International Workers Group. We're based in Montreal and we come primarily from labor union backgrounds. Most of us have left those institutions with an understanding that something more needs to be done. Our eldest comrade worked for the Quebec Federation of Labor and constantly found himself being asked to sell people out. I worked for AFSCME as an employee, as a receptionist, during the 2011 Madison protests. I took constant calls from workers who were asking why we weren't calling a strike. AFSCME was acting as an institution separate from the people whom it was supposedly serving. Workers who were just waking up and had a ready-made political consciousness thought that the institution somehow served them and would stick up for them. They learned otherwise.

The question of real democracy should take people in struggles as its starting point. Democracy for the bourgeoisie is the freedom to lie, steal, and exploit. When the workers ask for democracy they're asking for an entirely different thing. Our hope is to move towards workers' democracy, towards proletarian democracy (as opposed to capitalist democracy) as it was formulated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

We look to the experiences of the Paris Commune and the St. Petersburg Soviet as beginnings that point the way forward for workers. Currently in Quebec there are student anti-austerity protests against cuts to the university system. A lot of younger people are starting to fight and yet, like the workers, they are stuck with institutions like student unions that are trying to limit them.

Democracy is the perfected form of capitalist rule. It's the system whereby the capitalists come to a consensus on their own decision-making. In a republic there are the real citizens, the capitalists who rule, and then there is the labor force. We were asked to respond to Engels's statement that "A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is." Ultimately, the overthrow of one class by another *is* an authoritarian act. You're not holding their hands; you're kicking them down and keeping them down. During the 2011 protests the ruling class descended on the protests within 12 hours of them starting. Within the first week the portable toilets showed up and you knew the Democratic Party was there. By the second week the media circus developed, draining the life out of the movement and sucking it dry.

Peter Staudenmaier: The 2011 protests in Madison were a sad but telling embodiment of the fact that democracy means such radically different things to different people. A democratically elected governor and a democratically elected state legislature made a democratically legitimate decision to deprive workers of their rights. Then people with a totally different conception of democracy, direct democracy, took over the capitol, the space where decisions are supposed to be legitimately made. It was a clash between two contrary notions of democracy: representative democracy and direct democracy. That divide has existed for 2,500 years now, going back to the Athenians, as Mike said.

On the Left we have a number of longstanding, unresolved debates about what democratic organization means. If you've been involved in workers' collectives or anarchist politics over the last decades you will have run into one of the most important of these debates: the conflict over consensus. Is democracy primarily built around consensus? Does democracy mean that we want to reach as big of an agreement as we possibly can or, in contrast, is democracy an agonistic model that allows for debate and disagreement, that gives us a forum to work through our disputes regardless of whether or not we happen to be approaching consensus?

Our task is to apply democratic principles in our political lives, to create and embody adequate organizational forms. In the environmental, anarchist, and cooperative movements there's a classic two-fold answer to how democratic organizations should look: spontaneous and small-scale. That vision has political appeal but it is often historically false. In history, workers' councils and various kinds of revolutionary organizations have emerged more or less spontaneously but have then managed to continue after the revolutionary context has been crushed or dissipated. Engels's dictum about a revolution being the most authoritarian thing imaginable has a lot of truth to it but it's equally crucial to recognize that revolutions bring forth unexpected democratic potentials and strong anti-authoritarian elements. People who haven't previously had the opportunity to actively participate in structuring their own lives suddenly have the opportunity to do so and, amazingly enough, a lot of them want to make use of it. Those opportunities usually don't last very long and usually the democratic potential that bubbles up for a time goes unfulfilled. That means we haven't yet figured out how to make it long-lasting, how to institutionalize it, how to build on it and extend it.

With that unfulfilled potential in mind I would propose a commitment to direct democracy as the core of a revived left politics. (I'm not saying that we should forget about representative democracy entirely. I don't have a lot of use for electoral politics but I have seen movements choose their moments and decide that tactically it makes sense—I'll buy that.) In a North American context democracy is already a nice word to which everyone pays lip service. We can use that as an anchor to try to pull people towards a much more radical, much more fundamental critique of our society. Direct democracy could also be an effective counterweight to the authoritarian strands that do arise in revolutionary situations.

The great revolutionary C.L.R. James wrote a pamphlet titled *Every Cook Can Govern* in 1956, the year that the Hungarian revolution, with its workers' councils, was crushed by Soviet tanks. James wrote, "democracy in Greece was itself constantly seeking to develop practically the best possible society." I like three things about that quote. One, he's not talking about a perfect utopia. He doesn't say that democracy will help us create the ideal society; he says that it will help us develop practically the best possible society. Two, James was a brilliant theoretician, but he points out that democracy is in many ways a practical matter. You learn it by doing it. Three, we can see democracy as a form of *constant seeking*, not as a set paradigm that we just have to apply in the proper way but as an ongoing process of continually changing our responses to a constantly changing social world.

Q&A

Think about the power that the Athenian ekklēsia *had! Many aspects of that power would be profoundly contrary to our modern political notions. The panelists brought up the Greeks in relation to democracy, but liberalism—liberal democracy—is a specifically bourgeois and modern phenomenon. Relatedly, the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a great extension of formal voting rights. In the beginning of the 19th century a small portion of the British population had the right to vote. When it was extended, people thought that it might lead to socialism, to radical transformation. The tyranny of the majority was the fear. A similar process took place in the U.S. and South Africa where white racists fought ferociously against giving people of African descent the right to vote. Yet in almost all of these cases the often tremendous extension of the suffrage did not actually turn out to have radical results. Why is that? This seems fundamental to the problem of getting to socialism.*

AN: Yes, the Chartists often referred to the U.S. as a part of their argument for getting the vote. There was more suffrage in the U.S. but the property owners didn't have to worry that their property was going to get confiscated by the unwashed mob. There has never been any fundamental social-revolutionary change through the electoral arena because when you're voting you're not actually taking power. You're registering a preference for a candidate or a particular policy. The ruling elites have realized that extending suffrage gives people a false sense of power. Johnson and Kennedy were very clear about the fact that the purpose of the Voting Rights Act was to get the demonstrators off the streets. There was a debate within the Civil Rights movement exactly on this question: Should we go along with this or not? Real transformations take place in the streets, not when that energy is channeled into the electoral arena. Property has to be taken.

AS: It's no accident that the extension of voting rights to women happened throughout Europe and North America in the early 1920s, right after the revolutionary period. Suffrage didn't lead to the changes that people might have hoped for because part of the reason suffrage was extended in the first place was to calm people down, to get people off the streets, to stop the protesting—not to create a democracy.

MM: I'm cautious about this argument. First, it was actually the workers' movement which fought for the extension of suffrage. Second, perhaps not so much in the U.S. but in Europe (England included), quite large-scale things (I won't say *socialism*) happened as a result of the extension of suffrage, things like public transportation systems, public health services, elaborated welfare systems, legalization of trade union action, etc. But the bourgeoisie didn't just leave the constitution as it was when they extended suffrage. Each extension of suffrage in England was accompanied by taking something else away, by increases in the power of judicial review over the decision-making of local authorities. The extension of suffrage in the 1867 Reform Act was accompanied by increased centralization of the armed forces and the police. The extension of suffrage in the 1920s was accompanied by the Firearms Act, requiring police registration of firearms. They didn't allow the working classes to get their grubby hands on parliamentary seats (or district council seats) under a constitution in which parliament had very extensive control. It was simultaneously necessary to reduce the power of the elected representatives and to increase the power of the monarchy, the executive, and the judiciary.

AN: During the Progressive Era, the U.S. Federal Reserve Act of 1913 ensured that the central banking system was insulated from suffrage.

What is the relationship between democracy and capitalism? Capitalism isn't a matter of elites or of wealth; it's a social system. The replacement of the "laboring classes" by the modern working class, by the proletariat, attended the shift from the 18th to the 19th century. How do you understand the changing career of democracy in light of the differences between the American and French revolutions of the 18th century and the revolutions of 1848?

AN: As Mike pointed out, throughout the 19th century it was the working class that fought for suffrage, for political democracy. The bourgeoisie got nervous about it. Marx observed that by 1848-49 the bourgeoisie had begun to look for Bonapartist solutions. The German bourgeoisie had the misfortune, as Marx and Engels would say, of coming into its own at exactly the same time as the working class was coming into its own. That delayed the liberal-democratic project there.

MM: There is a danger in saying that the working class emerges at the point when intellectuals start to recognize the working class as a class. The danger is treating the *name* as the moment in history. The Earl of Shaftesbury, the first opposition leader in 1679 to 1683, fled abroad to the Netherlands. Before he died, he said, 'I have ten thousand brisk boys from Bermondsey who will back me up in this struggle against the monarchy.' These "brisk boys from Bermondsey" were the London dockers. Peter Linebaugh's book *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* details the exploitation of free labor in the docks in the shipping industry. And his book *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* is about the formation of the London working class—in the *eighteenth* century!

I'm also more cautious about Bonapartism. What happened after the Levellers were suppressed? There was a need for Oliver Cromwell.

AN: It's the counterrevolution!

MM: Counterrevolution is present in the bourgeois revolution, as Perry Anderson pointed out in the 1970s. In fact, counterrevolution was present in the bourgeois revolution as early as the conversion of the Italian city-states into one-man rule in Signoria during the 14th and early 15th centuries. In order for there to be a bourgeoisie there has to be a proletariat– a small proletariat, an interstitial proletariat, but a proletariat. The fact that the bourgeoisie needs a proletariat means that it is always afraid of the proletariat. It was Marx's mistake to think that 1848 was the moment at which the bourgeoisie first became scared of the proletariat.

AN: The American Republican Party played a revolutionary role during the Reconstruction period. The bourgeoisie got rid of the slave-owner and brought a new working class into existence. But when the working class went into motion in 1877 with the general strike, the bourgeoisie became afraid and overthrew Reconstruction. It was a real counterrevolution.

AS: National Guard armories were built across the country around that time. Young men were recruited and given weapons to crush strikes.

PS: It's historically and politically wrong to say that there is some natural affinity between capitalism and democracy that facilitates their convergence in the course of the 19th century. A lot of people would like that answer to be true for obvious reasons but we should warn against it. It's too simple a historical tale of where and when both capitalism and democracy emerge. If it were true it would be politically fatal. The lesson of 1848-49 is: Don't trust liberals! They're not going to be reliable allies when the chips are on the table. A radical vision of social transformation has only a temporary, *seeming* alliance with the very different liberal vision.

AN: Interestingly, a veteran of 1848-49 named Carl Schurz came to the U.S. and became a key figure in the Republican Party. Schurz was a liberal and he crossed swords with Marx exactly because Marx wanted to keep the revolution permanent and Schurz wanted to cut it off. The Paris Commune was on his brain in 1873 when he began leading the charge to pull back from Reconstruction. The liberal press was afraid of another Paris Commune in the U.S.

Mike characterized the "brisk boys" as wage laborers but the question wasn't just about wage laborers or employers of labor. It was about the proletariat and the capitalists. The difference is that a capitalist cannot exercise the bourgeois function of money (which is to command the labor of others) without putting people out of work. He can't simultaneously invest without reducing the necessity for labor. That's what turns a member of the bourgeoisie into a capitalist. It's subjection to that that makes a worker a proletarian, specifically in industrial society. That's tied to the issue of suffrage in a fundamental way. Lord Shaftesbury had no idea about the pressure of systemic unemployment and neither did his "brisk boys." Even if there was unemployment it wasn't the result of the nature of the reproduction of society.

August, was Marx a democrat who came to communism or was he a liberal who came to communism? The question that liberals are posing, which is not in Athens, is about the self-transformation of society in and through the ongoing realization of the "common good" or the "will of society"—not through political freedom, but through social freedom, through civil society; not through the exercise of political authority, but independently of that. It's the question of society's self-realization in history. Peter, if you say that the aim of Athenian freedom is "to produce the best possible society," the ambiguity buried in that is that Athenian freedom is about perfecting a static concept of society. That's not the liberal notion.

MM: There *was* unemployment produced by technical innovations in 17th century England. In fact, both unemployment and the need to produce unemployment protection systems appeared as early as the Italian city-states. Wind machines and water machines are just as capable of being improved in order to reduce labor inputs as steamships are. They're less spectacular than steamships, but they're the same thing: capital. There is capitalism alongside feudal continuity. It's not that there was a period of petty commodity production and then capitalism grew up subsequently out of petty commodity production.

Was Marx a liberal? He certainly thought of himself as a democrat, but that doesn't equate liberalism in the question's sense. He was a Hegelian engaged in a critique of Hegel. Hegel was a constitutionalist, an advocate of the Anglicization of the German Constitution. The *Philosophy of Right* (1820) is essentially de Lolme's description of the late 18th century English Constitution, *philosophized*. To describe that as 'liberal' is anachronistic. The liberals thought of themselves as restoring Augustan Rome—an entirely different sort of teleology from Hegel's. This historicized reading of Hegel is incredibly narrow by comparison with what's circulating in the context of early 19th century constitutionalism. The interpretation which the question is offering is actually *just* Hegelian.

AN: Marx was a democrat. He described communism as the left-most wing of the democratic party. The most radical communists are the most radical democrats.

AS: The Cologne Communist League was a radical democratic organization, Jacobin in its origins. They were the left wing of democracy.

Robert Michels's book Political Parties *(1911) explored the impossibility of democracy not only within the Left but in society more generally. He took the German SPD, an example close to Mike's heart, as his exemplar. In Michels's view, inherent social forces constantly thwarted the attempt to make a party that was simultaneously mass, socialist, democratic, and militant. That certainly seems to be the historical experience we're dealing with, as Peter and Aaron discussed. Lukács argued that Michels described the SPD's particular experience very well but didn't describe the nature of the society—because, for Lukacs, the Leninist model (democratic centralism) stood as a true model that doesn't succumb to these social pressures. In the light of history, we have to interrogate that, too. Why have attempts to create mass, socialist, and democratic organizations on the Left been so singularly unsuccessful?*

MM: When Michels wrote *Political Parties* he was a revolutionary syndicalist influenced by Sorel and by the Italian Left around Mussolini. He followed Mussolini into Fascism. His description of the SPD has become orthodoxy in American political science departments because it serves the interests of the U.S. state. Michels's image of the SPD, drawn for polemical purposes, has little relationship to the character of the SPD before World War I. Michels's thesis is actually contrary to most of the work that has been done on the issue of authoritarianism in the practical functioning of the SPD. Matters were different after World War I broke out because the SPD leadership, when they decided to support the war, admitted the German political police into the affairs of the SPD. Then they did create a top-down, hierarchical regime.

The capitalist class rules through the support of the labor bureaucracy. I don't know if that's true in the U.S. but it's certainly true in Europe. The question of democracy and the organization of the workers' movement is not just a question for grouplets of the far Left; it's a question of how the working class relates to trade-union organizations, to its—Socialist, Labour and Communist—Parties. Democracy in the organizations of the Left and democracy in society at large become inseparable from one another in that context, despite the fact that we might say that the state is not voluntary but political parties are voluntary. The Conservative Party has recently reorganized itself in order to Stalinize its internal functioning, imitating the Labour Party's Stalinization of its internal functioning. The organizations of the working class influence the shape of politics in general.

AS: Labor unions in the U.S. do serve a specific function for the capitalist class, despite the fact that the dominant thought in some circles is that labor unions aren't necessary anymore. In 1950 the United Auto Workers negotiated the Treaty of Detroit with the auto manufacturers. They agreed not to have a third party, not have national health insurance, etc. That has had a lasting political impact. In these institutions, and particularly in state workers' unions, you are following rules that come down from the national level of the union. You have to tell people that they can't go on strike.

AN: Democratic centralism was effectively the norm of the Communist League even though the term 'democratic centralism' was not used. Marx asked [Andreas] Gottschalk to tender his resignation exactly because Gottschalk was not willing to carry out the line of the Communist League, the 17 demands. Fast-forward to the 1879 circular in which Marx and Engels critique the SPD. One of the issues was whether the rank-and-file had the right to critique the leadership. Marx and Engels understood that the SPD couldn't operate as democratically as they would have liked because of the anti-socialist laws, but as soon as those laws were eliminated, Engels became very critical of the way the SPD was operating, fearful that it was beginning to infringe upon internal democracy. In the case of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, democratic centralism was also related to the question of the Duma fraction. Is the Duma fraction actually responsible to the party? The party makes a decision at a congress but is the Duma fraction going to carry it out or not?

MM: In the SPD, Max Schippel wanted to vote for the labor expansion bill which the right wing was putting forward. He knew that the party was against him but that his constituents backed him. Centralism: Schippel had to resign.

Engels's point about the authoritarian character of revolutions has been discussed in terms of the necessity of taking property from the capitalists. However, all social revolutions have taken the form not only of a war of the people against the capitalists but also of a civil war amongst the lower classes themselves. Think of the Red Terror, or of leftist workers fighting fascist workers in the Spanish Civil War. How does Marx's concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat in a revolution relate to the question of democracy?

AN: Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: The "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"* (1986) is very useful. The history of every successful revolution shows that ruling classes don't go away easily. The victorious class has to impose its will on the defeated class. In the Civil War, Lincoln and his generals took measures to limit freedom of the press. If ever there was a need for a dictatorship, it was during the Reconstruction period when the defeated slave-owners began to organize the counterrevolution. The working class will similarly have to impose its will on the defeated ruling class after overthrowing it. We shouldn't make virtue out of necessity—but it's a necessity. You look forward to the time when you can begin to eliminate the dictatorship.

PS: When Marx spoke of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" he was referring in part to contemporaries who imagined that people like Blanqui would form a revolutionary dictatorship. Marx meant to indicate that he would rather *the proletariat* be the dictator.

AN: The phrase is used in documents around the *Manifesto*. They also use the phrase "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie." In June of 1848 Tocqueville put on his sabre and sash and crushed the workers of Paris. He described what he did as the imposition of a "parliamentary dictatorship." Never forget that Tocqueville was part of the counterrevolution!

MM: The best way to understand the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat is as the class rule of the working class over the middle classes. In order to create socialism the working class needs to lay collective hands on the means of production, which includes not only land, machinery, etc., but also technical information. To lay collective hands on technical information means to de-propertize it, largely by publishing it, by replacing all forms of private transmission through apprenticeship with state education systems, etc. As long as there remain private monopolies on technical information (which is what defines the middle class as opposed to the bourgeoisie) it will remain necessary for the working class as a class to exercise political control over the middle class as a minority. From that point of view, dictatorship of the proletariat means a class regime of the working class in transition to full communism or to socialism, entailing the disappearance of the middle class as a class through the disappearance of skills monopolies.

AN: That is Draper's line. I agree, but the dictatorship of the proletariat is more than that. At a certain moment you will have to *take* their property using force. There are four locations in the *Manifesto* where force is used to describe what happens during the transition period.

MM: I agree. This relates to electoral action. In electoral action the working class proposes laws. To propose laws is to assert that the rules have to govern society as a whole. For Marx, the Ten Hours Bill, the ten-hour working day, is the "modest Magna Carta," the *law* that the working class is proposing. In Marx's response to Bakunin he argues that the dictatorship of the proletariat is nothing other than the working class imposing laws on the society.

PS: I agree that in revolutionary situations there is always going to be—there always has been so far—a dynamic of violent confrontation and violent expropriation. Sometimes it's just a matter of getting our hands on the local armory so that they don't slaughter us. But I would argue against calling that 'authoritarian.' Why can't we call that *democratic*? It comes down to whether democracy is about agreeing and reaching consensus or whether it's an agonistic model in which we fight out real disagreements. Violence and expropriation are momentary phenomena that are forced upon us by the situation on the ground. We want to build them *out* of our post-revolutionary project to the extent that we can do so without being utopian.

Classes aren't historical actors. That idea is a residue of Marx's Hegelian training; it makes his system work well on a philosophical level but it doesn't work historically. Classes never take the stage, though my fellow panelists would argue that historical actors are representative of (or leading elements in) classes.

I want to revisit Mike's answer to the question of the historical specificity of the working class. It's not enough to point to the existence of unemployment throughout a long history of capitalism. In the Grundrisse, *Marx maintains the historical specificity of the proletariat and of the proletariat's political project in light of the specificity of capital as a self-perpetuating dynamic. The working class becomes a different kind of political category once labor becomes an open pit for capital to mine. This gives us a*

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