Monty Johnstone

Is the Marxist Tradition Democratic?

No area of struggle or debate is more crucial to Marxists than that of democracy. The appearance of a new collection of essays entitled *Marxism and Democracy* and published by Lawrence and Wishart (pb, £3.50) is calculated to arouse interest and anticipation among readers of *Marxism Today*. Its highly contentious viewpoints will leave none of them indifferent. Many of these ideas have been gaining currency in certain circles on the Left and call for full and serious consideration.

In his introduction, Alan Hunt sets the tone with his suggestion that 'socialists and Marxists can be charged with failing to take democracy seriously'. He raises the question 'whether the theoretical framework of Marxism, especially in its most potent form developed by Lenin, has been adequate to the task of confronting the problem of democracy' (p7). The reader is left in no doubt that he and most of the other authors believe that it has not. However, after having hacked away substantial elements of Marxism regarded by its founders as pivotal, they can hardly be said to have provided us with much of a coherent new theoretical framework to take its place.

Marxism is not a religion but a critical scientific method of understanding and changing the world. Alan Hunt is therefore perfectly right to deplore a defensive reaction to 'the challenge to crucial aspects in the existing state of Marxist theory' in terms of protecting 'Marxist orthodoxy' and thereby failing 'to take issue with the challenging theoretical and political problems posed' (pi 1).

However, it seems to me that an opposite tendency should also be rejected: that of erecting the scaffolding of a new orthodoxy, which presents a selective and one-sided version of traditional Marxism and particularly Leninism, to which it then proceeds to counterpose an equally selective and one-sided version of Gramsci or Rosa Luxemburg; which rides out to hunt down and expose 'economism' and 'reductionism' in the same catch-all spirit as was once fashionable in scenting out and denouncing 'revisionism'; and which exhibits a predilection for abstruse theorising rather than developing theory on the basis of a rigorous study of specifically located historical experience.

Such tendencies are reflected in varying degrees, I think, in a number of the essays in this book, which comprises papers first presented at a conference organised by the Sociology Group of the Communist Party in December 1978. They are focused on bourgeois democracy as it exists in advanced capitalist countries rather than on problems of socialist democracy.

Curious omissions

A most curious omission for a book challenging 'the theoretical framework of Marxism' is the failure to give proper consideration to the views of Marx himself. In a work abounding in quotations, including from Gramsci (to whom a whole chapter is rightly devoted) and the interesting but avowedly non-Marxist Foucault (extensively cited in Colin Mercer's paper), Marx is quoted in the whole book . . . twice! This is hardly accidental. It is in keeping with the suggestion that we are dealing with a topic on which Marx had little of importance to offer and Marxism needs to be rescued from 'a pervasive and disabling set of dichotomies' (p101). Indeed, without anywhere attempting to examine what Marx and Engels actually did write on the subject, Colin Mercer even speaks of Marx 'collapsing the word and reality of democracy into . . . its class form' and excluding 'its possible connotation with other determinants' (p10, 108). As against this phantasmagoria, Bob Jessop, referring to Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Law*', shows that in fact democracy for Marx involved the control of officialdom through specific mechanisms of representation and accountability culminating ultimately in the complete self-government of the people transcending the separation between state and civil society (p57). Such popular self-government, unbridled by bureaucracy, constituted the essence of Marx's democratic objective throughout his life. It was highlighted by him in 1871, in his *Civil War in France*, as the most important characteristic of the Paris Commune, which he and Engels saw as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Colin Mercer totally misunderstands Marx's *Critique*. It is only necessary to read this seminal work to see that it is simply not true, as he alleges, that Marx's 'primary focus' in it was on the 'class character' (p108) of democracy against Hegel whom he presents as a champion of bourgeois democracy. Marx's 'primary focus' was much more basic. It was the refutation of Hegel's monarchist and paternalistic positions, which opposed freely elected representative assemblies 'with the miserable arrogance of the Prussian civil service which in its bureaucratic stupidity looks down on the self-confidence of the people's own subjective opinion'. To this Marx counterposed his abiding conception of democracy as 'the sovereignty of the people'.

These were the same 'ultra-democratic opinions', as the Prussian censor called them, that Marx had expressed so forcefully the previous year in his first articles which, significantly enough, were on the freedom of the press. In them he made an eloquent plea for democratic liberties and a denunciation of all censorship as a 'law of suspicion against freedom' which remains unsurpassed to this day. 'Lack of freedom', he argued, was 'the real mortal danger for mankind . . . You cannot enjoy the advantages of a free press without putting up with its inconveniences. You cannot pluck the rose without its thorns'. For Marx, there was 'a basic defect in the nature of censorship which no law can remedy'.

These profoundly democratic principles were subsequently to constitute a fundamental part of his outlook as a fully-fledged Marxist, after he had come to envisage their extension and combination with the social and economic freedom that could only be obtained by a change in the class basis of society. As Hal Draper writes in his extremely valuable study of Marx's theory of revolution, 'Marx's socialism (communism) as a political programme may be most quickly defined, from the Marxist standpoint, as the complete democratisation of society, not merely its political forms'.

Lenin's 'economism'

If the present authors largely ignore Marx, a number of them are concerned to take Lenin to task for his alleged 'economism'. Their definition of this term is nowhere explicitly given. In the case of Barry Hindess, who contributes an essay on 'Marxism and Parliamentary Democracy', such criticism of Lenin flows from a rejection of the whole materialist conception of history and politics. He proceeds from positions developed by himself and his co-authors in *Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today*, where it is asserted that 'to deny economism . . . is to maintain that political and ideological struggles cannot be conceived as the struggles of economic classes'.

Barry Hindess rejects a priori the class character of democracy, since he disputes the possibility of causal connections — as distinct from possible conjunctural convergences — between political institutions, organisations and ideologies, on the one hand, and
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classes, on the other, even in the complex forms posited by historical materialism.

Alan Hunt does not commit himself on Hindess's views on the relationship between 'politics' and 'economies', which he sees as constituting 'perhaps the most basic theoretical problem confronting contemporary Marxism' (p1). The 'economism' for which he criticises Lenin arises from his having allegedly 'advanced a strict relationship between stages of economic development and their associated forms of state' (p9). To illustrate his thesis that for Lenin 'the political form is derived from and determined by the economic stage or level of development', he ascribes to him (p60) the following schema:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of production</th>
<th>Form of state</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capitalism</td>
<td>Parliamentary democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monopoly capitalism</td>
<td>'Bureaucratic-military state'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialism</td>
<td>Dictatorship of the proletariat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is highly misleading. Talk of such a 'strict relationship' is contradicted by Alan Hunt's own recognition of Lenin's emphasis that 'the rule of a class can take a wide variety of political forms', which in the capitalist case have included monarchical, fascist and parliamentary democratic systems (p8). Nor did the author of *State and Revolution* suggest that monopoly capitalism necessarily replaced parliamentary democracy by a 'bureaucratic-military state'. Indeed in the main imperialist countries like Britain, France, Germany and the USA he saw the two combined.

In his polemic in 1915-16 against Pyatakov's and Bukharin's 'imperialist economism', Lenin went to great pains to refute the idea that imperialism was an economic mechanism with strictly determined political consequences. Alan Hunt quotes Lenin's statement that the political superstructure of monopoly capitalism (imperialism) 'is the change from democracy to political reaction. Democracy corresponds to free competition. Political reaction corresponds to monopoly'. But he has failed to notice that, on the same page, the Bolshevik leader added: 'The achievement of democracy is in the same sense, and to the same degree, harder under imperialism (compared with pre-monopoly capitalism), as the achievement of a republic, a militia, popular election of officials etc (all immediate demands in the Party programme — MJ). There can be no talk of democracy being "economically" unachievable'.

These two passages complement each other. They bring us to the heart of Lenin's Marxism with its grasp of the dynamic relations between economically determined tendencies and conscious political intervention capable of acting on them. It was from this angle that he criticised those who could not 'solve the problem of how to link the advent of imperialism with the struggle for reforms and democracy' — just as the economism of blessed memory (combated by Lenin in the Russian labour movement at the turn of the century — MJ) could not link the advent of capitalism with the struggle for democracy'.

**Lenin and bourgeois democracy**

Lenin wrote in 1916 that 'the socialist revolution is not a single act, it is not one battle on one front, but a whole epoch of acute class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, i.e., on all questions of economics and politics, battles that can only end in the expropriation of the bourgeoisie ... In the same way as there can be no victorious socialism that does not practise full democracy, so the proletariat cannot prepare for its victory over the bourgeoisie without an all-round, consistent and revolutionary struggle for democracy'.

Alan Hunt is legitimately critical of some of Lenin's one-sidedly polemical statements after the October Revolution which presented bourgeois democracy as simply democracy for the bourgeoisie and its denial to the working class (p12ff). Nevertheless he goes too far when he says that 'what is absent from Lenin is any recognition of the contradictory character of bourgeois democracy' (p13).

Precisely in *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, written in October/November 1918, on which Alan Hunt bases his argument, Lenin wrote of 'the crying contradiction between the formal equality proclaimed by the "democracy" of the capitalists and the thousands of real limitations and subterfuges which make the proletarians wage slaves'. And when Lenin, in the same pamphlet, spoke of bourgeois democracy as 'a great historical advance in comparison with medievalism' and demanded its 'extension', he was recognising the positive elements in its contradictory nature.

It is true that from 1917 Lenin did equate the institutional form of parliamentary democracy with bourgeois rule and that of Soviets with working class power. These positions were taken up at a time when, in Russia in particular, the principal class forces were grouping respectively around these particular institutions. Marxism has no place for 'sacred cows', and Lenin may justifiably be criticised for making exaggerated generalisations from the contemporary situation. There is however no basis for attributing his views in that

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1. cf Lenin's reference to Marx's theory as 'a summing up of experience, illuminated by a profound philosophical conception of the world and a rich knowledge of history.' (Lenin, Collected Works Moscow/London 1960-70, hereafter LCW Volume 25 p407, Emphasis in original). The most extreme expression of the opposite viewpoint is that of Barry Hindess, one of the contributors to the present work, who wrote: 'The study of history is not only scientifically but also politically valueless'. (B Hindess & P Hirst *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* London 1975 p312). In the words of Henry Ford I: 'History is bunk!'


5. cf On the Jewish Question' (Autumn 1843) MECW Volume 3 pp46-174.


7. cf 'On the Jewish Question' (Autumn 1843) MECW Volume 3 pp46-174.


9. Ibid. My emphasis.


12. He contrasts them with Marx's approach in *The Class Struggles in France* MECW Volume 10 p79.


15. See M Johnstone, 'Lenin and Revolution', in E J Hobsbawm etc, editors *Storia del Marxismo* (Einaudi, Turin 1980), Volume 3 pp89-113, where the change in Lenin's position on this question in 1917 is critically analysed.
period to a fundamental 'essentialism' (to use Hindess's term) or 'economism' in his outlook. Indeed, up until then he had held, like Engels, that the democratic republic was the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. 16

**The dictatorship of the proletariat**

Equally mistaken is Alan Hunt's idea that for Lenin the dictatorship of the proletariat derived from a socialist mode of production. Quite the reverse is true. Lenin took over the concept from Marx and Engels for whom it meant the political supremacy of the proletariat used 'to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state, ie, of the proletariat organised as the ruling class'. 17 The dictatorship of the proletariat was established in Russia by the October Revolution as a means of progressively advancing through state capitalism under the control of the workers' state towards a socialist mode of production which Lenin saw as a long way off.

Alan Hunt goes on to assert that from Lenin's (like Engels') understanding of democracy as a form of state, it follows that political competition is a characteristic of the bourgeois state and is regarded as playing no necessary part in a workers' state' (pl6). Actually this follows neither in logic nor in historical fact! It is directly contradicted by many of Lenin's statements and actions both before and after the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship in Russia. On the eve of the October Revolution he was insisting: 'In free countries the people are ruled through an open struggle between parties and by free agreement between these parties'. 18 And, after the revolution, in January 1918, we find him arguing the superiority of the Soviet system on the grounds that under it 'if the working people are dissatisfied with their party they can elect other delegates, hand power to another party and change the government without any revolution at all'. 19 And in 1919 and 1920, on Lenin's initiative, the leaders of the opposition Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary Parties were invited as consultative delegates to the Congress of Soviets, where they were enabled to table resolutions critical of the Soviet government and make speeches attacking its policies. The subsequent suppression of these parties at the time of the Kronstadt Revolt of 1921 was conceived as an emergency measure to meet a dire threat to the Soviet state. Only after Lenin's death was it perverted by Stalin into a matter of 'Marxist' principle. 20

**Assessing Gramsci**

Gramsci's fecund ideas are of great importance for a Marxist study of democracy and deservedly receive considerable attention in this book. Ann Showstack Sassoon's chapter, 'Gramsci: A New Concept of Politics and the Expansion of Democracy', reflects her extensive studies of the Italian Communist leader and in general serves as a useful introduction to a large and complex subject. However, outlining Gramsci's ideas without a single reference to Lenin, she suggests an originality which is not always warranted, notably in the case of his critique of liberal democracy and his conception of new forms of representative democracy (in the shape of a Soviet system). Nor is it made clear how far Gramsci's ideas on popular democratic control over politics and social development, to which she refers without giving sources, should be related to the periods before or after the working class has taken state power, or to both.

More serious is the unwarranted way in which two other papers counterpose Gramsci to Lenin. Colin Mercer, who treats Gramsci as if he were the first Marxist with anything worthwhile to say about democracy, writes that 'Gramsci's "integral state" represents an advance on the Leninist analysis of the moment of "force" by giving a more adequate theoretical weighting to the moment of "consent"' (p 117). Gramsci's 'integral state' refers to an enlarged definition of the 'state' to include 'civil society' with its private institutions, which in prison he used along with the more usual one denoting only the administrative organs of political society. 21

The 'moment of "force"' is presumably the October Revolution which Gramsci welcomed as intensely popular and creative in character and described as a 'decisive turning point in the history of the art and science of politics'. 22 It was directly preceded by more than six months of intensive and successful struggle by the Bolsheviks to win a majority in the country. Explicitly and frequently repudiating the Blanquist idea of a minority imposing its will on the people, Lenin stressed that 'we Bolsheviks must patiently and perseveringly explain our views to the workers and peasants'. And he insisted that 'we have always known and repeatedly pointed out that the bourgeoisie maintains itself in power not only by force but also by virtue of the lack of class consciousness and organisation, the routinism and
down-trodden state of the masses'.

**Gramsci: Soviets v Parliament**

Alan Hunt contrasts Lenin’s ‘counter-opposition of bourgeois and direct democracy’, which ‘was the expression of state forms (constituent assembly v dictatorship of the proletariat)’ to ‘the counter-opposition in the tradition of Gramsci’, which he claims ‘is not the opposition between state forms but the struggle for hegemony that is fought out prior to the transformation of state power itself’.

This is inaccurate as far as both Lenin and Gramsci are concerned. Firstly, because Gramsci was at one with Lenin and the international communist movement of his day in continuously counterposing parliamentary to soviet state forms and in calling for ‘the success of the revolutionary effort directed towards installing a proletarian dictatorship embodied in the system of councils, outside and against parliament’. In prison he continued to express his belief in the soviet as against the parliamentary system. It is unhistorical and impermissible to attribute to Gramsci Western Communist positions only evolved after his time. As Togliatti said in 1958: ‘The study of new questions now confronting us in our daily political struggle requires new concrete factual notions which we do not find in Gramsci. He remains however a light that illumines our road. He went as far as he could’.

Secondly, Gramsci, like Lenin, saw the struggle for hegemony as belonging both to the period prior to and the period after state power had been won. ‘One cannot aim, before the conquest of the state,’ he wrote, ‘to change completely the consciousness of the entire working class. To do so would be Utopian, because class consciousness as such is only changed when the way of living of the class itself has been changed; in other words, when the proletariat has become a ruling class and has at its disposal the apparatus of production and exchange and the power of the state.’

Gramsci was to make an extremely valuable and original contribution in evolving the conception of hegemony in relation to Western Europe in conditions of developed civil society and parliamentary institutions quite different from what had prevailed in Tsarist Russia. In the last period of his life Lenin urged Western Communists to seek out ‘nationally specific’ forms of transition to revolution. Tsarist Russia. In the last period of his life Lenin urged Western Communists to seek out ‘nationally specific’ forms of transition to revolution. Lenin’s work reflected in his conception of a long haul ‘war of position’ as ‘the only form possible in the West.’ Gramsci’s ideas in this sphere do indeed mark an advance on Lenin, but they were developed on the basis of, not in opposition to, Lenin’s conception of hegemony. This was fully acknowledged by Gramsci who wrote in prison of ‘the theoretical-practical principle of hegemony’ constituting Lenin’s ‘greatest theoretical contribution to the philosophy of praxis’ (Marxism).

**Revolutionary process today**

Western Communists have since the days of Lenin and Gramsci, and in very different circumstances, developed the conception of a revolutionary process in which, as Alan Hunt and other authors show, already under capitalism the transformation of democracy is begun with mass struggle compelling it ‘to yield an expanding area to popular power’ (p15). Such a perspective is set out in broad outline in the present edition of the Communist Party’s programme, *The British Road to Socialism*. No one can doubt that it needs further theoretical elaboration, which has an important contribution to make to its practical credibility, development and realisation.

As Phil Jones writes in his essay: ‘There are real structural and political obstacles that operate to prevent the realisation of a wide range of projects with transformative potential. Such obstacles are in need of clear and careful investigation in which the conceptual apparatus of Marxism will doubtless play a vital role’ (p146). The major one of these seems to me to be the problem on which Popular Unity came to grief in Chile: how to meet and overcome the resistance of the ruling class seeking to protect its power and privileges before it is too late and — no doubt with help from outside — prepared from its entrenched and key positions in the economy and in what Gramsci called ‘the apparatus of state coercive power’ to resort to measures ranging from economic sabotage to armed rebellion. Bob Jessop, stating that ‘it would be necessary to democratise the repressive state apparatus in a number of ways’, appends a candid footnote: ‘I freely admit to the weakness of this statement on the RSAs (repressive state apparatuses — MJ) and hope to return to this question in subsequent work’ (pp74, 80).

**Marked contrast**

Stuart Hall’s excellent final chapter of the book stands in marked contrast to the others in terms both of its subject matter and of its theoretical method. Unlike them, it uses theoretical tools for undertaking a ‘concrete analysis’ of nationally and conjuncturally specific phenomenon in the best Leninist and Gramscian tradition, with which he identifies himself and on which he draws to good effect.

As in other recent writings of his, he is here studying and exposing the attempts of the radical Thatcherite Right in the present crisis to build up a populist base for a movement towards a more authoritarian regime (‘authoritarian statism’), whilst preserving parliamentary democracy. He shows how ‘“Thatcherism” has worked directly on the terrain of popular ideologies’ (p79). His essay demonstrates the...
crucial importance for the Left of ‘the deepening of democratic life and the widening of popular-democratic struggle’ on all fronts against the most serious threat from the ‘thoroughly renovated and “reformed”’ Right (p159).

**Class character of state**

Apart from Stuart Hall’s essay, *Marxism and Democracy* is largely lacking in concrete analysis of present day reality, partly because some of the contributors do not see this as the function of theory. A great deal is written about the transformation of the state in general — often in convoluted language and elite jargon, which is hardly a good basis for the wide participation in democratic debate that is called for! However, no serious attempt is made to examine relevant historical experience, and the specific problems that most require elaboration and elucidation are evaded or inadequately explored.

Barry Hindess, whilst making some useful points about forms of democratic supervision over the state apparatus, says that they ‘must be considered as, or as containing, political forces in their own right’ subject to constraints and control by political institutions (p47) but not by a dominant class. (He prefers institutional ‘reductionism’ to class ‘reductionism’!) In a number of other essays the class character of the state and the tenacity of the central state apparatus as a bulwark of capitalist power are ignored or blurred. This is very different from the position of the Communist Party in *The British Road to Socialism*, where ‘the grip of the ruling class over the various parts of the state apparatus’ is clearly stated.31 This traditional Marxist conception is not restated there out of dogmatism but as a result of the study of contemporary evidence which shows this still to be the case.

The authors of the present book rightly reject vulgar forms of ‘Marxism’ which reduce all political institutions to class essences and thereby crudely oversimplify and distort reality. Unfortunately however too many of them are throwing out vital organs of the Marxist baby by abandoning or minimising the notion of the dialectical relationship between classes and politics. Such a conception belongs to the core of Marxism, unless Marxism — like power in Foucault’s view — is denied any core, and is seen as an assortment of contradictory opinions on fundamental questions, some of which are demonstrably and diametrically opposed to those to which its founders attached the greatest importance. If their class conception of the state is abandoned, any analysis of democracy and its prospects is seriously impoverished, it seems to me, and is no more capable than traditional social democracy of dealing adequately with some of the most important problems confronting us in the struggle to expand democracy against a ruling class resorting to increasingly authoritarian methods.

There is certainly a pressing need for the creative development of Marxist political theory, and in no sphere more than that with which this book is concerned. However this can only be achieved by building on the foundations laid however incompletely by Marx and Engels, carefully studied at first hand and critically reappraised in the light of experience. It will not be advanced by ignoring or riding roughshod over them on a pale pink charger called ‘Reconstructed Marxism’, which turns out to be a gelding of dubious pedigree.

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31 *The British Road to Socialism* (London 1978) p45.
What is the basis for legitimate government? That is going to be the core organizing idea or question with which we're going to interrogate these different traditions that we examine, utilitarian, Marxist, social contract, anti-Enlightenment and democratic traditions. We're going to look at how does each one of those traditions answer the most basic questions about the legitimacy of the state. As I say, I think it's ultimately the most important question in politics. It's not the only question in politics. It's not the only way to organize a course in political philosophy.

There is a significant Marxist tradition in the study of the history of economics. Marx himself wrote extensively on his predecessors, albeit mainly in works that remained unpublished at his death. His approach has had a substantial impact in the field, particularly from the mid-twentieth century onward, although it may be fading now. The orthodox Marxist interpretation of classical economics focuses, as Marx did, on the labor theory of value and the notion of surplus-value. After discussing Marx's own writings (and the rather special case of Marxist writings on Marx as a historical figure), I shall take Ronald Meek's work, and in particular his Studies in the Labour Theory of.