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Ever since the birth of capitalism, there had been calls to end the class antagonism but until 1871, Engels acknowledged, ‘no one knew how this was to be brought about’.¹ Marx and Engels had come to one general conclusion: a change from capitalism required a revolution. They also thought that this abrupt, dramatic upheaval would be followed by a slower set of economic stages required to transform society. In the *Communist Manifesto* they suggested that workers would use their ‘political supremacy to wrest, *by degrees*, all capital from the bourgeoisie’ (emphasis added).² They acknowledged that workers would take measures ‘which appear economically insufficient and untenable but which, in the course of movement, outstrip themselves [and] necessitate further inroads upon the old social order’.³ This gap between the pace of political change and economic change stemmed from their rejection of utopian thinking. The material conditions had not only to be ripe for socialism but its construction had to be undertaken in a practical way. There would be no Day One of the perfect world.

Moreover, Marx and Engels did not think that the old elite would simply accept the stripping of their privileges even after a victorious revolution. There would almost certainly be some form of ‘slaveholder rebellion’ or at least attempts to engage in economic sabotage. A degree of coercion – this time by the majority over the minority – would be necessary to break that resistance. They therefore saw ‘a *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as a necessary intermediate point on the path towards *the abolition of class differences in general*’.⁴

Here confusion arises between how words are used in the nineteenth- and twenty-first-century contexts. Today most people understand the word ‘dictatorship’ as implying the personal rule of an autocrat. So when Marx uses the phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, this is taken to imply one-party rule presided over by a tyrant like Josef Stalin or a more benevolent dictator such as Fidel Castro. However, nowhere in any of Marx and Engels’ voluminous writing is there a shred of evidence to support this interpretation.

The original meaning of the term dictatorship stemmed from the Latin word *dictatura*, which meant a temporary, constitutional form of legal power that acted in energetic ways. Marx consistently used the term in this way, so he argues, for example, that the elected National Assembly in Germany in 1848 should ‘act dictatorially’ to guarantee the victory of democracy over the monarchy – in other words it had to act energetically to consolidate its rule.⁵ The term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ simply meant that the workers should take full political power to consolidate their revolution. Hal Draper, who wrote a book on Marx’s use of the term, concluded:

is not problematical if we adopt the only meaning of the term that corresponds to the way Marx actually used it: a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is a state in which the proletariat exercises dominant political power – a ‘workers state’ the ‘rule of the proletariat’. No more, no less.⁶

Before 1871, Marx still had no idea about what precise political form workers’ power would take. Then, on 17 April, he wrote to Louis Kugelmann suggesting that a ‘new point of departure of world-wide importance’ was underway.⁷ He was referring to the Paris Commune which had been proclaimed a few weeks earlier on 28 March. It had an enormous impact on Marx as it demonstrated through practical experience a possible model that could be followed. Twenty years later Engels summarised their mutual feeling:

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.⁸

The Paris Commune arose out of the defeat of Louis Bonaparte’s Second Empire during the Franco-Prussian war and his capture at Sedan in 1870. Prussia demanded large indemnities and stationed its troops around Paris to ensure they were paid. The newly formed provisional Government of National Defence were anxious to settle matters quickly and so wanted to disarm Paris. The prime minister, Louis-Adolphe Thiers, ordered the handover of artillery belonging to the National Guard, which had been paid for by public subscription, but this symbolic act enraged the population who mobilised to prevent it. A spontaneous revolution followed, but

one that grew out of a deep, structural crisis which followed the demise of Bonapartism.

The Paris Commune lasted just two months, but this brief revolt was accompanied by a number of remarkable measures which Marx celebrated in *The Civil War in France*. Foreigners were elected to office because it was declared that 'the flag of the Commune is the flag of the World Republic'.⁹ Full separation of Church and State was decreed and, as Marx put it, 'the priests were sent back to the recesses of private life, to feed upon the alms of the faithful in imitation of their predecessors, the apostles'.¹⁰ All debt obligations for three years were postponed and the interest written off. Pawnshops were closed because they acted as parasites on working-class poverty. Workplaces, which had been shut by employers, were to be reopened as cooperatives after plans were drawn up by their former employees. Night work and the hated workers' registration cards were abolished. The great symbol of French chauvinism, the Victory Column on the Place Vendôme, which had been cast from guns captured by Napoleon after the war of 1809, was demolished.

However while these were remarkable decrees, Marx was more interested in the specific forms through which workers might exercise political power. *The Civil War in France* was written to generalise this experience beyond the specificity nineteenth-century Paris. We may, therefore, legitimately use this book to outline political forms of a post-revolutionary state in the twenty-first century. This will mean adding to and adapting some of the features Marx considered to be significant.

CONTROL OVER ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES AND PAYMENT OF AVERAGE WAGE

The Commune introduced two key measures to deal with an issue that has confounded working-class politics ever since: how to keep control over elected representatives. It decreed, first, that electors would gain a right of recall over their representatives. The representatives would be bound by formal instructions, and should they at any point defy their mandates, they could be recalled and replaced with another. Second, elected representatives were to be paid the average worker's wage. The excuse that high wages were necessary to get the 'best and brightest' was abolished and replaced with a non-hierarchical principle that guarded against the corruption of

office. With a touch of irony, Marx drew a comparison with how businesses organised their affairs:

Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in search of workmen and managers in his business. And it is well known that companies, like individuals, in matters of real business know how to put the right man in the right place, and, if they for once make a mistake, to redress it promptly.¹¹

These two principles are even more relevant today as there has been a decline in popular sovereignty in Western democracies. Colin Crouch has characterised the current era as a 'post-democracy' where 'politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times'.¹² There is a crisis of representation because political parties periodically deceive the electorate and do not fulfil their promises. Western democracy is increasingly seen as a 'managed democracy' where the formalities of elections are maintained but where the electorate has little input into decision-making.¹³ There were popular demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of people in countries all over the world against George Bush's war on Iraq, but political elites continued to support that war, either overtly or covertly. There is a consensus on core politics between parties and so 'party-voter distances have been stretched, while party-party differences have lessened'.¹⁴

The two democratic principles of the right to recall and payment of the average wage could help to break this trend but, given the scale of the problem, they would have to be accompanied by other measures. To establish real democracy there would have to be an outright ban, backed by prison sentences for those who transgress, on all attempts to influence political decisions through the use of money. At present corporate lobbying has become an insidious way of undermining popular decision-making. In the 1980s, American financial corporations, for example, spent an estimated €5.1 billion lobbying for the removal of the Glass-Steagall Act.¹⁵ This Act restricted the speculative activity of banks and its removal helped to generate the casino economy which came crashing down in 2008. In a socialist society, all funding of political parties from private sources would cease as these turn elections into a contest over who

has the biggest 'war chest' to produce glossy propaganda. Yet even these measures cannot rectify the problem unless an even greater issue is tackled: the unelected arm of the state.

ELECTION OF STATE OFFICIALS AND DE-BUREAUCRATISATION

Marx argued that state officials should be elected and subject to recall. He also attacked the 'sham independence of judges',¹⁶ which masked subservience to political masters and suggested that 'like the rest of public servants, magistrates were to be elective, responsible and revocable'.¹⁷ The proposals were designed to deal with a deep contradiction which lies at the heart of Western democracy. Representative democracy – even with the limitations described above – is confined to a small space within the state apparatus. The parliament is surrounded by a huge administrative state which, as even the liberal academic Norberto Bobbio acknowledged, 'obeys a completely different logic of power, that descends from above rather than ascends from below, that is secret rather than public, based on hierarchy rather than autonomy'.¹⁸ This overwhelms the small spaces of representative democracy which become increasingly 'fictitious as centres of power'.¹⁹ The parliament functions as a stage where the citizen-consumer watches a political drama and debate but real, concrete power is exercised through the administrative apparatus that surrounds government ministers. Increasingly, the unelected, permanent political elite are plugged into international networks which shape their decision-making and make them even more remote from those they purport to serve.

Control of the unelected state is often in the hands of the sons and daughters of the wealthy – or at least, those who have been moulded to serve them. In France, this is virtually institutionalised through the appointment of the *enarques* (those who have attended the elite Ecole Nationale D'Administration) to key positions. Elsewhere, selection is based on access to postgraduate education, attendance at elite institutions or involvement in political networks. Even where recruitment is not directly drawn from the wealthy, top state officials are recruited on the basis of their proven loyalty to serving their needs.

Marx's argument for the democratisation of public administration, therefore, makes even more sense today. Top officials who are responsible for coordinating key agencies of public administration, such as education or transport, should be elected. Provision should certainly be made for transparency about candidate qualification

but these should by no means be confined to formal educational credentials and the rule about the average wage would also apply. Instead of CEO-type figures who have absorbed the ethos of business decision-making, a socialist administration would recruit people who are imbued with a public spirit; are willing to engage in self-sacrifice through attending hosts of meetings; and are motivated by a desire to encourage participation from those they work with.

Even these more radical proposals, however, are quite limited for modern society because the bureaucratic apparatus has grown enormously since the days of the Paris Commune. Today the lives of most people are dominated by their interaction with two deeply hierarchical spaces – the public sector and large corporations. Simply electing people to the top of each of these areas will not break the bureaucratic culture.

The de-bureaucratisation of public administration can only be achieved by unleashing the creative energies of those who work there because a bureaucratic hierarchy functions through control of knowledge, inducing passivity and cynicism in those below. A post-revolutionary state would reverse this relationship. Workers in public administration would enjoy forms of self-management in order to meet the targets and goals set by society at large. Instead of bureaucratic routinism, a premium would be placed on discussion and ideas within agencies and democratic engagement with elected councils of users. Like all other workers, public administration workers would enjoy the right to have regular workplace meetings which would decide how to carry out their functions. The decisions of coordinators or managers, who were elected at such meetings, would be made transparent and answerable to the wider assembly. The cult of secrecy, which is now overlaid with formal written codes and informal secretive verbal codes, would be abolished.

Marx's proposal for the election of judges requires particular attention as it challenges the very foundations of liberalism. Marx's primary target is 'the sham independence' that disguises a distinct class bias. Judges in modern capitalist societies are typically appointed by government parties and are drawn from the upper social class. They implement a law that places overwhelming emphasis on protecting the rights of property and this gives the rich an additional channel through which to promote their interests beyond their influence in the state bureaucracy. Conversely, the justice system is typically mobilised against workers who take industrial action through the use of injunctions. A post-revolutionary state would have to reverse this pattern by recruiting judges from a working-class background

and requiring them to implement a corpus of law that reflects the interests of this class. As a reflection of that different class basis, they would be elected and recallable.

It does not follow from this, however, that populist 'hanging judges' would rule the roost. For one thing, the culture of a post-revolutionary state would not be shaped by the same 'politics of fear' whipped up by the present-day corporate media. A more equal society would also remove the main reason for imprisonment in modern society – transgression against private property. Individual conflicts of interest would certainly persist and some will require adjudication, but there is no reason why judges would not be required to exercise genuine independence on these matters. The right to elect judges and recall them should, therefore, not be equated with a popular vote on individual judgments. It is rather a mechanism to ensure that, over a longer time frame, justice is linked to the greater democratisation of social life.

ABOLITION OF SPECIAL FORCES OF REPRESSION AND THE CREATION OF DEMOCRATISED, COLLECTIVE AGENCIES OF FORCE

Marx acknowledged that a post-revolutionary state could not immediately enter a realm of human freedom and that force would continue to play a role in society. The key issue, however, was the relative mix of force and freedom and who the threat of force was primarily directed at. Marx noted that the first decree of the Paris Commune was the suppression of the standing army and that the police was 'stripped of its political attributes and turned into a responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune'.²⁰

These measures are even more relevant today because, in a capitalist society, the threat of force is primarily directed at the poor and the working class. One of the first police forces was formed in Ireland to help seize tithes from a Catholic population for the Anglican clergy. Later, in 1829, the Metropolitan Police Act was passed to create a uniformed police force in London to deal with working-class riots and the intrusion of the 'blue locusts' into local communities was often met with fierce resistance.²¹ The benign image of the local bobby, who provides a 'service' rather than being part of a 'force', was consciously constructed over a long period to help disarm opposition.²² However, behind the image, the police are still shaped by the class society they serve.

Invariably, they are separated from local communities and develop a defensive solidarity within their ranks to protect themselves. Most

police action takes place beyond public scrutiny and some ‘forced community isolation’ is deemed necessary for police officers.²³ This gives rise to a feeling that they are in conflict with those they are supposed to serve and that they need to ‘coerce respect from the public’.²⁴ In addition, the sheer boredom of most police work leads to a search for ‘interest, excitement or sensation’ in their encounters with the wider population.²⁵ This often leads to the harassment of local youth or ethnic minorities who, according to the folk sociology prevalent in police ranks, are deemed to be prone to criminality. These features of police life lead to a distinct ‘cop culture’ characterised by high levels of sexism, racism and disproportionate support for right-wing politics.²⁶ Additionally, the law is constructed as a resource which gives the police huge discretion in its implementation. As Dorren McBarnet points out, police discretion provides ample room to get guilty verdicts in lower courts while more open outcomes are possible in higher courts where elites plead their cases.²⁷ The result is a two-tier system of justice, with the mechanisms of social control being used to create a burgeoning prison population.

As well as these routine features of police life, there are specialised units whose sole purpose is to break political opposition to the system. The political police in Special Branch units spy on left-wing organisations and sometimes infiltrate them to create divisions. The riot squad (‘public order units’) is deployed to break up large-scale mobilisation and strike fear into demonstrators. Increasingly, large-scale surveillance of the population is undertaken through the use of the US Patriot Act, the EU directive on Data Retention or the so-called ECHELON system, which routinely filters all telecommunication traffic passing through the UK for key words that indicate subversive thoughts.

These patterns, it should be stressed, do not arise primarily from the proclivities of individual police officers but from their structural role in a capitalist society. A post-revolutionary state could break up this structure and remodel the use of force so that it was primarily directed at the ‘white-collar crimes’ of the privileged. At a minimal level, the specialised units of political police, riot squads and mass surveillance would be abolished. The distinct features of secrecy and ‘forced community isolation’ of the current police and army would also be changed. There would be no need to isolate soldiers in barracks where drilling is designed to inculcate unquestioned discipline and square-bashing; saluting of officers and bans on political discussion would almost certainly be abolished. Beyond

that, the very idea of a standing army or a distinct police force might eventually come under question. Options range from arming the civilian population to greater use of volunteer units for local self-policing. These could be linked by organised networks and by a small core staff at a central level.

CHEAP GOVERNMENT AND A FREE MEDIA

Marx argued that the Commune ‘made that catchword of bourgeois, cheap government, a reality’.²⁸ This was originally a progressive demand which was directed at the luxury spending of the aristocracy. Subsequently, the cry of ‘cheap government’ has been given a more reactionary twist by neo-liberals who try to focus the frustrations of society on taxes. Yet if by ‘cheap government’ is meant a reduction of wasteful spending on bureaucracy, then a post-revolutionary society would make that a reality through a host of measures: cutting the salaries of ‘dignitaries’; eliminating public relations ‘branding’; dispensing with organisational consultants who charge exorbitant hourly fees; ending the practice of bureaucratic monitoring through benchmarking ‘outputs’; eliminating vast levels of paperwork; and most of all, by a reduction in managerialism.

The other catchword, a ‘free press’, could also be made a reality. Marx wrote in an era when state censorship was the main means of impeding the free expression of ideas but today the central issue is the corporate control of the media. Under capitalism, the greater your wealth, the better your chance to influence the opinions of others. Conversely, the poorer you are, the more your views are marginalised. Rupert Murdoch is able to influence millions because he is worth €9 billion, but thousands of trade unionists do not even get access to the airwaves because they don’t have money. So powerful has Murdoch become that one former aide to Tony Blair described him as ‘effectively a member of Blair’s cabinet’.²⁹

A post-revolutionary state would deprive millionaires of the right to own the media and no one would be allowed influence in society by virtue of their wealth. The print media and television networks would be taken into public ownership and thrown open to a variety of independent voices. Instead of a top-down media screaming at a nation of consumers, greater emphasis would be placed on interactive discussion and debate. Access to publicly owned media networks and printing presses could be allocated according to democratic criteria. Each group or creative network

could apply to take on media production for a period and would adhere to criteria which open it out to the different views in society.

BEYOND PARLIAMENTARIANISM – DEMOCRACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Marx noted that ‘the commune was to be a working body, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time’.³⁰ The aim he suggested was ‘self-government by the producers’.³¹

Universal suffrage was only forced on the ruling elite through workers’ struggles. In Belgium, for example, workers staged two general strikes in 1893 and 1902, while in Britain the Chartists and the Reform Movement fought for the right to vote. Socialists have, therefore, been to the fore in advancing democratic rights under capitalism and in defending those rights against dictatorship and fascism. This, however, does not imply that parliament remains a suitable vehicle for the radical form of democracy implied in a workers’ state.

First, parliamentary democracy is based on the separation of economic and political decision-making. Formally, parliament passes laws to govern a country and enacts only ‘accessory laws’³² to regulate the conditions under which production takes places, such as on health and safety. But this leaves the economy in private hands. The organisation of production and services affects our lives in countless ways, yet these are relegated to an economic sphere controlled by unelected large corporations. This separation between political and economic decision-making is now untenable because, without economic democracy, the formal power of a parliament to govern a country is diminished. A workers’ state, therefore, requires an extension of democracy into all aspects of the economy.

Second, parliamentary democracy is based on the separation between a tiny number of active decision-makers and a passive, ‘apathetic’ mass. The early theorists of democracy foretold an active citizenry who scrutinised decision-making and made informed choices via their representatives. Modern capitalism, however, discourages any such involvement and promotes a suspicion of ‘activists’ who break the norms of social peace. The ‘apathy’ that characterises most Western societies is not a natural condition that arises from disinterest but is induced by the structures of a society which daily demonstrate to people that they cannot exercise control over their lives. ‘Apathy’ is a rational – if somewhat weak – response to this state of affairs and is a form of withdrawal from political structures that offer no hope. Parliamentarians are supposed to

compensate for this apathy by developing a special expertise on law-making but even this turns out to be a fiction. Most parliamentarians transform themselves into engineers of public opinion, seeking, through sound-bites and press circuits, to create a political personality that garners electoral support. Actual policy-making is increasingly organised in specialised think-tanks and policy research staffs and is undertaken by a smaller number of parliamentarians who take on the role of policy-makers. If workers are to take genuine control of their society, they need to break the dichotomy of active decision-maker/passive consumer.

Third, the electorate in a parliamentary democracy is organised in discrete geographical constituencies that have no real social connections. Originally, the burghers of a free medieval town were elected from geographical areas which reflected organic social organisation. Even the Paris Commune was based on municipal councillors from geographical wards but this reflected more real social networks between people at the time. In modern society, however, social organisation does not map easily with the geographical electoral constituencies because it typically unites people with opposing class interests. The typical electoral constituency encompasses salubrious upper-class neighbourhoods as well as poor, densely populated housing estates and the elected deputy is supposed to represent the interests of both. The lack of social cohesion means that electors gain little leverage over their representative as they cannot come together to discuss issues beyond those that affect their direct local area. A more radical form of democracy, therefore, implies going beyond geographical constituencies.

Fourth, parliaments are not responsive to the changing moods and opinions of society. Typically, they are elected for a four- or five-year term and even when the government loses support they cannot be removed until their term ends. Deputies are also supposed to enjoy autonomy from popular pressure and to make up their own minds. In reality, they belong to top-down parties whose leaderships are committed to common core policies for running the state. These party machines function in a deeply hierarchical manner, with the party leader personally choosing ministers for governmental office. No public minutes are produced of cabinet decisions and a party whip ensures that the majority of deputies are used as voting fodder for the political elite. If workers are to control society, they will need institutions which reflect bottom-up debates that occur in real time.

Marx never worked out a political alternative that went beyond parliamentarianism and confined himself to the general principle

that it should be a 'working body' that had both legislative and executive functions.³³ In other words, it should not only decide laws but organise how they were implemented. This implied a reliance on the creative energies of many thousands of workers rather than a bureaucracy. But when Marx was writing *The Civil War in France*, workers were organised into small workshops that averaged between 20 and 30 employees. The short-lived nature of the Commune and the weakness of working-class organisation meant that a developed institutional alternative did not emerge. The later experience of the workers' movement in revolt, however, filled this missing gap.

Workers' councils have typically been formed during the highest level of struggles against capitalism and they also provide a model for how a new society can be organised. They arise in the course of general strikes, occupations or mass resistance and have their roots in forms of direct democracy where workers come together in mass meetings to elect delegates who are accountable to those meetings and are recallable. They have arisen in a number of countries at different times and have taken various organisational forms. In Russia, in 1905 and 1917, they were known as soviets; in Budapest in 1956, they were grouped around the Central Workers' Council; in Chile in 1973, they were known as *cordones*; in Iran in 1979, workers formed *shoras*.

Workers' councils only arise spontaneously from the needs of struggle and cannot be conjured into existence by a party or a group of intellectuals. They are not dependent on a pre-existing socialist consciousness but sometimes expand dramatically from the smallest of economic struggles. In 1905 in Russia, for example, they started with a typographers' strike over punctuation marks and, as Trotsky put it, 'ended by felling absolutism'.³⁴ They reflect a shared experience of workers in the labour process and tend to arrive at collective decisions in quick and sometimes unanimous ways that reflect the needs of struggle. During the Hungarian uprising in 1956, one delegate, Ferenc Toke, observed that during a key meeting, 'it was noticeable, that everybody, although they came from different factories, wanted exactly the same thing as if they agreed their view in advance'.³⁵ As organs of direct democracy, workers' councils unite the working class in direct struggle.

Such organisations can also form the political structure of a post-revolutionary society. Instead of geographical constituencies, workplaces, made up of both blue- and white-collar workers, form a natural forum for collective discussion because they are able to

convene meetings, pass resolutions and send direct mandates to delegates who go on to higher bodies. If they were linked with councils for non-worker delegates such as pensioners, peasants, students and unwaged parents, they could form the core element of a new democracy. By establishing a space for collective discussion, they could send directly mandated representatives to councils which govern society. These councils, in turn, could more easily reflect the changing opinions of workers directly. They would also naturally overcome the division between economic and political decision-making and extend democracy into all aspects of daily lives. Crucially, they would involve the mass of people in self-government by allowing them to take real decisions that lead to greater control over their lives and so reduce the structural basis of apathy.

The standard argument against direct democracy raised by political theorists such as Robert Michels is that while it worked in Ancient Greece, it could not possibly function in a modern urban society. Unlike the Athenian *polis*, modern city dwellers cannot assemble because they would not all fit into even the largest football stadium.³⁶ But there is no need to. If a delegate structure is rooted in an electorate with significant economic and political power, representatives can be made subject to popular mandates. Delegates representing hundreds or thousands of workers could be mandated from offices and factories. Smaller workplaces could combine to gain their quota of delegates. If each delegate had to periodically report back and was subject to recall, then direct democracy could be fused with genuine representation. Such structures allow for mass involvement in decision-making and create the foundation which combines legislative and executive decision making.

There is no dewy-eyed sentimentality in Marx's writings on the Paris Commune. The workers, he wrote, did not expect miracles and had 'no ready-made utopias' or 'ideals to realize'.³⁷ Their embryonic workers' state was only 'a lever for uprooting the economic foundations upon which rests the existence of classes and, therefore, of class rule'.³⁸ The only way this could occur was 'to set free elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society is pregnant'.³⁹ It is to those elements we must now turn to see how the economic foundations of a new society can be laid.