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MARXISM AND DEMOCRACY

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The question of democratic rights--both how the left can struggle against restrictions on ours and whether our protests against right-wingers are infringing on theirs--has featured prominently and controversially in the discussion on the left recently. As a contribution to it, **Alan Maass** looks at how the Marxist tradition has approached the question--starting with its founder, who showed, theoretically and practically, how the struggles for socialism and democracy are bound together.

THE PRESIDENT of the United States is an ignorant autocrat, willing to trample on any right he can, with an administration filled with bankers, generals and ideologues who "represent" the richest and most reactionary margins of society.

And he only managed to *become* president by relying on the Electoral College relic of 19th century slave owners, the disenfranchisement of many of the most vulnerable in society, and the total alienation of nearly half of those still eligible to vote after all the restrictions.

Welcome to the "world's greatest democracy."

It's understandable that people who oppose injustice might be cynical about "democracy" as practiced in the U.S. And when we hear lectures about our supposedly "inalienable rights" from political leaders who constantly try to do away with them, it can seem like they aren't worth much.

But it's a problem when skepticism about the existing political system tips over into something else: Individuals and organizations on the left disregarding or minimizing the importance of basic principles of democracy.

Students at UC Berkeley organized a strike after mass arrests in a Free Speech Movement protest (Don Kechely)

Add to this the fact that the "left"--it's really official liberalism, but don't expect the mainstream media to make the distinction--has become associated in popular consciousness with restrictions on speech and different forms of expression, particularly in schools and universities.

According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, the millennial generation is more likely than older generations to say that the government should be able to ban or otherwise prevent offensive statements against oppressed groups.

The intention of this sentiment may be positive--to prevent racism and bigotry from polluting the world. But fully 40 percent of millennials, according to Pew, are willing to let the state--not even an institution generally thought of as well intentioned, like a university, but the government, with all its obvious unfairness--be the judge of what gets forbidden.

This is dangerous ground. First of all, a ban doesn't stop the bigots--it doesn't banish their ideas from people's minds. The right has to be challenged politically by a left that can win the majority to a different vision.

Moreover, the state in particular, and many other institutions to boot, have a long history of using restrictions on democratic rights and practices *against* the very people who are meant to be protected.

Historically, socialists have fought not for the restriction of democracy, but for the widest possible expansion of it. Some of the most important struggles in our history--for the abolition of slavery, for the right to vote in the Jim Crow South, for the legal recognition of unions, for the freedom to assemble and protest--were partly or wholly about winning democratic rights and making them real and meaningful.

When we challenge the right--whether in protesting the policies and actions of a reactionary government, or in confronting individuals and groups which try to spread right-wing ideas and organize on the basis of them--we want it to be clear that our side is fighting for *more* democracy.

We can't pin any hopes to some shortcut of getting the "powers that be" to curb the right's influence or stop their actions. We need to defeat the right, politically and organizationally, by winning the majority of people to oppose them.

The eruption of mass struggle against the Trump presidency proves this is possible. But to make the possibility a reality, we need to rely on *our* rights--won by preceding generations through struggle--to speak out, dissent, persuade and protest.

FOR KARL Marx and Frederick Engels, socialism and democracy were bound together from the very first struggles they were part of in the middle of the 19th century.

As the American socialist Hal Draper wrote, the two things are woven together in Marx's theory, which "moves in the direction of *defining consistent democracy in* *socialist terms*, and *consistent socialism in democratic terms*."

This flows from the most essential building block of Marxism--that socialism must be the self-emancipation of the working class and can't be accomplished on its behalf.

Our goal is only possible as the act of the conscious masses of the majority class in society, and that requires the fullest expansion of democracy--whether workers achieve democracy on the basis of their own actions and organization or by relying on rights established under the existing system and defended by their mobilization.

The defenders of the capitalist system need the opposite. They need to straitjacket and contain mass involvement, whether within the political system or in struggles and movements outside it. So they seek to undermine or diminish or even abolish democracy. This applies not just to right-wing ideologues, whose contempt for actual freedom is obvious, but to liberals whose defense of status quo puts them in opposition to mass expressions of democracy that threaten it.

For Marx, this conflict--between the expansion of democracy and the limitation of it--was an essential part of the class struggle.

Some of the confusion arises because the government is routinely on the *wrong side* of the conflict--even though it's the place where democracy is supposed to "happen."

This is because the state, including its elected component, isn't neutral. Under a capitalist system, it's on the side of the capitalists--which means in the struggle for democracy, it's ultimately on the side of limitations and constraints.

As Marx and Engels famously wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."

That doesn't mean the state always does the bidding of each and every capitalist. First of all, there are conflicts among them, and some members or sections of the ruling class lose out.

Moreover, "managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" may mean restraining individual capitalists or sections of capital to protect the system that benefits them all. In cases where the war on workers or support for repression and oppression threatens to unleash unrest and instability, the state is there to manage the problem. Sometimes, the form of that management is to cite norms of democracy and political rights that supposedly apply to all people equally.

The point, though, is that the state plays this role in the service of the ruling class as a whole. Its first priority is to maintain the essentials of the status quo: most of all, capitalist rule over the whole working class.

THIS UNDERSTANDING of the state was developed further by the Russian socialists Bukharin and Lenin in the lead-up to the 1917 revolution.

They were especially concerned to contrast the bourgeois state under capitalism with the socialist vision of a workers' state.

One contrast to start with: Under capitalism, the part of the state that's subject to democracy is only a *part*, and not even the most important part. Beyond the elected government is the military and the bureaucracy, both of which are supposed to be subject to the control of an elected executive, but which have unaccountable powers that have been used against elected officials.

Further, the state under capitalism is concerned with *political* democracy, but not *economic* democracy. Under the classic models of representative democracy, even the most liberal governments have no formal power over private capital, which remains a collection of petty tyrannies.

And even the formally democratic part of the capitalist state is warped and constricted in all kinds of ways, owing to its central role in protecting and serving the minority ruling class that dominates society economically and socially, and therefore politically.

The British socialist Paul Foot captured the contradictions in writing about the supposedly sacred principle of "one man, one vote":

> An industrial magnet has one vote, and so does each worker he can fire or impoverish. A millionaire landlord has one vote, and so does every person he evicts. A banker has one vote, so does every person impoverished by a rise in [interest rates] or a financial takeover. A newspaper proprietor has one vote, so does each of the readers he deceives or seduces every day of the week.
>
> Are all these people really equally represented? Or does not the mighty, unrepresentative economic power of the wealthy minority consistently and completely overwhelm the representative power of Parliament?

SO MARXISTS maintain that democracy under capitalism isn't so democratic at all. But that doesn't mean we are agnostic about the form of political rule under capitalism. Obviously, it matters very much to socialists whether we live under a dictatorship or under a representative democracy, where elections take place and political rights exist, however qualified.

"Whatever its chronic weaknesses and paralyses," Foot wrote in a book on how the vote was won in Britain, "the parliamentary system and then rule of democracy it offers us are indispensable to any agitation for progress."

But part of that agitation for progress, Foot continued, is making the case for *more democracy*. "The weakness of representative parliamentary democracy lies in the fact that it is nothing like representative or democratic enough," he wrote.

As Hal Draper wrote in the first of his several books outlining the essentials of Marx's theory of revolution, Marx didn't let his disgust with the hypocrisies of the political system under capitalism overshadow his understanding of its advantages and importance.

"It was rather a matter of making a class analysis of the elements of bourgeois democracy: sorting out what was specifically bourgeois (for example, property qualifications for voting) from what furthered the widest extension of popular control," Draper wrote.

Socialists need to make that analysis at every step--about how, and by what means, we can best to move things in our direction in the overall conflict between the expansion or limitation of democracy.

This point is obvious when you make it concrete to our own times.

Socialist Worker has always argued that in almost all elections in the U.S., the choice for voters is limited to the candidates of two capitalist parties, the Republicans and the Democrats--which is to say, a far too narrow choice.

But no one can seriously believe that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s was directed at a trivial distinction in defeating Jim Crow restrictions on the vote.

Winning voting rights for African Americans was an essential part of a mass social struggle for racial justice, with huge class dimensions in its own right--and it opened the way for struggles that went even further for the whole population of the U.S.

To put it in Draper's words, the struggle for this "element of bourgeois democracy" pointed toward "the widest extension of popular control," well beyond the limits of the U.S. political system.

IT WAS exactly on these terms that Marx and Engels took their first practical steps as revolutionaries.

They came into political activity as part of the extreme left wing of the democratic struggle against the old aristocratic order in Germany and around Europe. In fact, the author August Nimtz makes the case that no two people contributed more to the struggle for democracy--and at a decisive period for that struggle.

Europe in the mid-19th century was a place of explosive struggles against the old ruling order--kings, tsars, dukes and lords who held power on the basis of hereditary titles. The economic power of capitalism had been born and developed within this order, and the rising bourgeoisie had grown in wealth and economic power. But it remained politically subordinate to the monarchs and aristocrats.

Just as the *Communist Manifesto* was published in early 1848, a wave of revolutions swept across Europe, everywhere throwing the rule of the old order into question.

Marx and Engels were totally committed to these rebellions against the old ruling class. But they were also merciless critics of those in the rising new order, representing the bourgeoisie, for their concessions and betrayals of the effort to replace autocracy with democracy.

After the revolutionary wave crested and fell back, leaving the old order intact, Marx nevertheless devoted a portion of his writing to analyzing the new constitutions proclaimed at the high point of the struggle in 1848.

Marx showed how the forces representing the bourgeoisie were willing to compromise on the promise of democracy. Even as they established expanded suffrage, freedom of the press and so on, they left loopholes. Thus, the constitution of the short-lived French Republic stated that freedom of association, opinion and the like could not be limited in any way except to protect "the equal rights of others and the *public safety*." Then as now, "national security" was the escape clause for would-be tyrants.

Marx concluded that the goal of the capitalist class was to provide only as much democracy and freedom as would guarantee their own power and legitimize the rule of their minority class as representing all the people. Even in the midst of the revolutionary struggles of 1848, the representatives of the bourgeoisie took care to restrict any further expansion of democracy as a threat to *their* rule.

But where the balance falls at any point depends not only on what the rulers of society are willing to live with, but what they're forced to concede--that is, what our side fights for and achieves.

The reason the struggle for democracy was so important to Marx and Engels was that the ruling class--both the reactionaries and the liberals who speak the language of change--want the minimum possible expansion of rights and political participation, while it's in the interests of the working-class movement to have a maximum, unlimited expansion.

In other words, struggles over democratic rights are part of the terrain of the class struggle. The goal of socialists is to *expand* democracy and freedom to the maximum extent within the political system--and to *extend* democratic forms and the principle of popular control outside it, into the economic sphere and every corner of society.

MARX'S VIEWS on the democratic struggle remained a cornerstone for socialists who came after him--maybe none more so than Lenin, who in an article written at the beginning of his political life in 1898, restated Marx's central principle on this question: "It is in the interests of the proletariat alone to democratize the political system *completely*."

It probably didn't hurt that Lenin lived under the worst tyranny in Europe--the rule of the Tsar. In a society where the most basic democratic rights and institutions didn't exist, there was no minimizing the importance of struggles to claim those rights or their connection to the wider social struggle.

Throughout his writings, Lenin emphasized the need to embrace all democratic demands--a republican government, popular elections, equal rights for women, self-determination for the subjugated nations of the Tsar's empire--as contributing to the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. As he wrote in 1915:

> The proletariat cannot be victorious except through democracy, i.e., by giving full effect to democracy and by linking with each step of its struggle democratic demands formulated in the most resolute terms...
>
> While capitalism exists, these demands--all of them--can only be accomplished as an exception, and even then in an incomplete and distorted form. Basing ourselves on the democracy already achieved, and exposing its incompleteness under capitalism, we demand the overthrow of capitalism, the

> expropriation of the bourgeoisie, as a necessary basis both for the abolition of the poverty of the masses and for the *complete* and *all-round* institution of *all* democratic reforms.

There can be doubt from that passage about the commitment of Marxists to "winning the battle of democracy," as the *Communist Manifesto* put it.

Socialists are harsh critics of the false and limited "democracy" that exists under capitalism. But this isn't to minimize it, but rather the opposite: To state the central importance of extending democracy to the fullest extent as part of the struggle for socialism.

The centrality of democracy to our vision of a future socialist society can't be stated often enough--especially with the meaning of socialism so distorted in most people's minds by the tyrannies, like the former USSR or China to the present day, that claimed to rule in its name.

Democracy, popular control, equal rights, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to protest--all of these things must be cornerstones of our struggle for a new world. Because if they aren't, then we aren't fighting for socialism.

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