**Lenin: Soviet Democracy in 1917**

**Paul Blackledge**

*“Apparently the chief question of the revolution both in Germany and Austria now is: Constituent Assembly or Soviet government? … The [social democrats] speak about "pure democracy" and "democracy" in general for the purpose of deceiving the people and concealing from them the bourgeois character of present-day democracy. Let the bourgeoisie continue to keep the entire apparatus of state power in their hands, let a handful of exploiters continue to use the former, bourgeois, state machine! Elections held in such circumstances are lauded by the bourgeoisie, for very good reasons, as being "free", "equal", "democratic" and "universal". These words are designed to conceal the truth, to conceal the fact that the means of production and political power remain in the hands of the exploiters, and that therefore real freedom and real equality for the exploited, that is, for the vast majority of the population, are out of the question. … It is sheer mockery of the working and exploited people to speak of pure democracy, ... This is tantamount to trampling on the basic truths of Marxism which has taught the workers: you must take advantage of bourgeois democracy which, compared with feudalism, represents a great historical advance, but not for one minute must you forget the bourgeois character of this "democracy", its historical conditional and limited character. … The bourgeoisie are compelled to be hypocritical and to describe as "popular government", democracy in general, or pure democracy, the (bourgeois) democratic republic which is, in practice, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the dictatorship of the exploiters over the working people. ... But Marxists, Communists, expose this hypocrisy, and tell the workers and the working people in general this frank and straightforward truth: the democratic republic, the Constituent Assembly, general elections, etc., are, in practice, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, and for the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital there is no other way but to replace this dictatorship with the dictatorship of the proletariat. … and establish democracy for the poor”* ***Lenin “’Democracy’ and Dictatorship” December 1918***

So dominant is the modern tendency to reduce the meaning of the term democracy to its liberal form that the phrase “Marxist democracy” is all too often dismissed as an “oxymoron”.[[1]](#footnote-2) This dismissive posture betrays a fundamental misreading of Marx’s and Lenin’s politics that is no mere error but functions to obscure the power of their critique of liberal democracy. Pivoting on the claim that Marx’s critique of capitalism culminated in Stalin’s dictatorship, Cold War liberals tended to posit their worldview as the free alternative to “totalitarian” Marxism. Ironically enough, beneath the bluster of ideological opposition, Communists agreed that Marx and Lenin led to Stalin, differing from liberals by their embrace rather than rejection of this movement. However, by agreeing that Stalin was Marx’s legitimate heir, the Communists necessarily broke with the content of Marx’s critique of capitalism.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The claim that Leninism led to Stalinism also involves a very significant elision: Leon Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism is typically dismissed as at best utopian. In 1937 Trotsky wrote that just as a socialist revolution was essential for the triumph of freedom in the West, socialism in Russia could only be realised through a new “revolution” against the Stalinist “bureaucracy”. Trotsky believed that the aim of this new Russian Revolution should be not merely to substitute “one ruling clique for another”, but rather to change “the very methods of administering the economy and guiding the culture of the country. Bureaucratic autocracy must give place to Soviet democracy. A restoration of the right of criticism, and a genuine freedom of elections, are necessary conditions for the further development of the country”.[[3]](#footnote-4)

This powerful critique of Stalinism is important not merely because it was made by Lenin’s closest collaborator in 1917 and the organiser of the October Revolution, but also because it was rooted in a deep understanding of Marx’s and Lenin’s democratic model of socialism.[[4]](#footnote-5) The true oxymoron, from this perspective, is the concept of “liberal democracy” itself, against which “Marxist democracy” is conceived as the really revolutionary alternative that, *mutatis mutandis*, harks back to classical Athens as its precursor.[[5]](#footnote-6)

According to Lenin, workers’ councils or soviets emerged in Russia in 1905 and again in 1917 as “universal mass organisations of precisely those classes that are oppressed under capitalism”.[[6]](#footnote-7) Soviets, by contrast with bourgeois parliaments, functioned as the living embodiment of a real democratic movement that marked the culmination of a process Marx had first recognised in the 1840s. As Lenin wrote in his 1917 *Letters on Tactics*: “I am deeply convinced that the Soviets will make the independent activity of the *masses* a reality more quickly and effectively than will a parliamentary republic”.[[7]](#footnote-8)

This claim was theoretically underpinned by Lenin’s profound rereading of Marx and Engels’s analysis of the state and parliamentary forms in his *The State and Revolution* (1917).[[8]](#footnote-9) The key insight that Lenin took from Marx was that socialism could only come through a revolution which would not only smash the old state but replace it with a new truly democratic form.

In the 1840s, Marx’s “discovery” of the proletariat coincided with his profound philosophical critique of state theory: for Marx, whereas the state was a form of alienation in its various constitutional guises, the proletariat offered the potential to overcome alienation by reabsorbing the functions of the state into society in a way that harked back to, but was profoundly deeper than, the Athenian democratic form.

Communism in this sense marked the *Aufhebung* (simultaneously the abolition, transcendence and preservation) of the state and civil society in a new framework in which socialist revolution and democracy are conceived not as radical alternatives but as two sides of the same coin.[[9]](#footnote-10) If this point tends to be obscured by superficial and usually anachronistic interpretations of Marx’s deployment of the concept of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, once we recognise that this concept was intended to illuminate the class content of political power rather than its supposed undemocratic form we can begin to see how Engels could write that “the democratic republic … is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat”.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Marx and Engels came to this conclusion through a deep critique of state theory mediated through an analysis of nineteenth-century revolutions.[[11]](#footnote-12) In 1859, Marx suggested that it was through his 1843 *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* that he first realised that “legal relations as well as forms of state are to be grasped neither from themselves nor from the so-called general development of the human mind, but rather have their roots in material conditions of life”.[[12]](#footnote-13) In this youthful essay, Marx extended Feuerbach’s criticism of religion to a critique of Hegel’s analysis of the state form. He argued that just as Feuerbach had shown Christianity to be the essence of religion that pointed to the possibility and indeed necessity of overcoming religion, so democracy, that is socialised humanity (our very nature), was the essence of all political constitutions and this social content pointed to the potential transcendence of these constitutions; that is to the transcendence of the state as an alien power over people.[[13]](#footnote-14)

According to Marx, whereas the social nature of humanity had heretofore been realised as an alien (state) power, democracy, or rather “true democracy”, potentially realises our essence such that “the political state disappears”.[[14]](#footnote-15) Almost three decades later he described the Paris Commune in very similar terms: the Commune represented “the reabsorption of the state power by society as its own living force instead of a force controlling and subduing it”.[[15]](#footnote-16) He conceived the Commune as a concrete historical realisation of the “true democracy” he had first analysed in 1843 when he argued that, though all forms of state are in fact founded on the democracy (the common people), it is only through true democracy that the state can become the “self-determination of the people”.[[16]](#footnote-17) Consequently, it is through true democracy or communism that the state is simultaneously preserved, abolished and transcended.

This perspective underpins Marx’s claim that American democracy was a “swindle”. He argued that the Federalists intended to, and succeeded in, maintaining the liberal primacy of property relations in a context of burgeoning revolutionary democracy – they “utilised democratic forms to frustrate genuine democratic control from below”.[[17]](#footnote-18) They did so by creating something radically new: a liberal democracy in which the people relinquished all but nominal control over their representatives.[[18]](#footnote-19) In liberal democracies formal democratic control over the political levers of power coexist with the reality of the “alienation of political power which was so foreign to the Greek conception of democracy”. By contrast with the Greeks, the Federalists created a constitution in which “primary producers are subject to economic compulsions which are independent of their political status”.[[19]](#footnote-20) This was anathema to Greek democracy in which, according to Aristotle, “the free born and poor control the government … as distinct from oligarchy, in which, the rich and better born” are in the driving seat.[[20]](#footnote-21) The modern democratic swindle is a swindle precisely because the rich maintain real control while the poor merely hold to the semblance of power.

This is not to say that Marx believed “that democracy was just a bourgeois plot … to ensure that bankers could protect their assets from wolfish governments”.[[21]](#footnote-22) On the contrary, he insisted that bourgeois democracy was “a major step forward for humankind” as compared with feudal and absolutist states.[[22]](#footnote-23) Lenin agreed: although “Bourgeois democracy … always remains, and under capitalism is bound to remain, restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and deception for the exploited, for the poor” it nonetheless represented “a great historical advance in comparison with medievalism.”[[23]](#footnote-24)

Despite being a historical step forward from feudalism it remained a “snare and deception” for the workers because parliamentary republics are both “structurally interdependent” with capital while simultaneously having a social basis in an atomised population. If the bourgeois state’s structural interdependence with capital sets the parameters of the politically possible within bourgeois democracies, the atomisation of voters in the ballot box reproduces those forms of general alienation and powerlessness that ensure that these parameters are seldom challenged by the demos.[[24]](#footnote-25) So whereas the Athenian democratic form ensured the people exercised real power,[[25]](#footnote-26) bourgeois democracies combine *de jure* formal equality with *de facto* “domination of the capitalist exploiters”.[[26]](#footnote-27)

Soviet democracy, by contrast, exceeded even the democratic pretentions of the Paris Commune because, whereas the Commune was based upon territorial units, because soviets were rooted in democratic control at work they could begin to overcome the separation of economics and politics characteristic of the bourgeois democratic swindle: “by making the economic, industrial unit (factory) and not the territorial division the primary electoral unit” soviet democracy was a “higher level of democracy” than the parliamentary form.[[27]](#footnote-28) Soviet democracy thus acts as the concrete form of Marx’s communism: “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”[[28]](#footnote-29)

Clearly the experience of Stalinism presents a profound problem for the Marxist claim that the soviet model amounted to an “extension of democracy” by contrast with bourgeois parliaments.[[29]](#footnote-30) One response to this problem has been to reject outright the model of the October Revolution because Leninism supposedly undermined sovietism.[[30]](#footnote-31) The weakness with this critique of Lenin’s politics is that it posits a too one-sided opposition between soviets and revolutionary parties. Of course these are distinct entities, but they are best understood not as alternatives but as complementary forms: socialists must be organised within soviets to ensure that their democratic potential is realised.[[31]](#footnote-32)

If the October Revolution was won through soviets led by Bolsheviks, this victory was itself predicated upon mass collective action on the part of the working class. As Lenin put it: “For the first time in world history, the revolutionary struggle attained such a high stage of development and such an impetus that an armed uprising was combined with that specifically proletarian weapon—the mass strike”.[[32]](#footnote-33) A decade earlier, Rosa Luxemburg argued that it was through mass strikes that the working class could begin to overcome its normally fragmented state to make possible workers’ power that overcame the bourgeois separation between politics and economics.[[33]](#footnote-34) Lenin’s view was that while the mass strike created the possibility of workers’ power, soviet power acted as the concrete realization of this potential.

The opposition between soviets and parliaments came to a head in 1917. Though the Bolsheviks had long demanded the election of a parliamentary Constituent Assembly, and though they continued to make this demand throughout 1917, after April 1917 they did so while simultaneously demanding “all power to the soviets”. Apparently Lenin saw no contradiction in this obviously contradictory position.[[34]](#footnote-35) The consequences of this contradiction became apparent immediate upon the elections to the Constituent Assembly: whereas the Bolsheviks were a majority in the All Russian Congress of Soviets, they held only 25% of the seats in the Constituent Assembly – which was dominated by the Socialist Revolutionary Party. There were conjunctural problems with this result – most importantly the election was held prior to a split between Left and Right SRs which meant that the Right SRs were over-represented in the Assembly while the Left SRs, who were then the Bolshevik’s coalition partners, were massively under-represented. But in essence the election reflected the fact that while the Bolsheviks were a majority amongst the urban proletariat, they remained a minority amongst the peasantry.

The question facing the Bolsheviks in January 1918 was should they succumb to this new power? To have done so would not merely have meant surrendering the gains of the revolution, it would have also meant bowing before what they believed was a less democratic form of representation. As Lenin argued, “In relation to the provisional government the Constituent Assembly represented, or might have represented, progress; in relation to the regime of the Soviets, and with the existing electoral lists, it will inevitably mean retrogression”.[[35]](#footnote-36) The logic of this argument was simple: when posed with a choice between soviets and Constituent Assembly, the Bolshevik chose soviets – and they did so for very democratic reasons.[[36]](#footnote-37)

In the ensuing civil war the Constituent Assembly became the beacon for counter-revolution. Though the Bolsheviks triumphed militarily, the civil war was a social catastrophe for Soviet Russia. Russia was a relatively backward country at the outbreak of the First World War, and war and then civil war made matters much worse. By 1920 the value of industrial production had declined to about 13 percent of its 1913 level, while between 1913 and 1921-2 the number of waged workers dropped from 11 million to 6.5 million with the number of industrial workers being more than halved.[[37]](#footnote-38) This incredibly harsh context meant that sheer physical survival became the primary goal both for ordinary Russians and for the new revolutionary regime. Far from Russian totalitarianism being a consequence of Lenin’s anti-democratic project, “the ‘objective’ social circumstances of Russia’s revolution and civil war contain sufficient conditions for the collapse of the mass revolutionary wave, without recourse to causal factors stemming from the ‘subjective’ deficiencies of Lenin’s early formulations”.[[38]](#footnote-39) This meant that the objective basis for soviet power – an organised and militant working class – largely disappeared in the years immediately following the Revolution. If soviets were the “universal mass organisations of precisely those classes that are oppressed under capitalism”, with the decimation of the proletariat the soviets became empty shells. This process was the precondition of Stalin’s rise to power, and his victory was consummated through the liquidation of the last vestiges of Lenin’s Bolsheviks.[[39]](#footnote-40)

Unfortunately, attempts to conflate soviet democracy with Stalinism fit the ideological need to limit democracy to its castrated bourgeois democratic form. By contrast, Marxist democracy stands in the tradition of, first, Marx’s critiques of the state and parliamentary forms, second, his celebration of the Paris Commune as a deepening of the parameters of democracy and, finally, Lenin’s and Trotsky’s analysis of the experience of the soviets or workers councils. For a brief moment in 1917 the victory of the soviets against the Provisional Government meant that the Russians were the “freest people in the world”.[[40]](#footnote-41) The soviet state expanded democracy to become, as Lenin put it, “for the first time … democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the money-bags”.[[41]](#footnote-42) Soviet Russia in 1917, like the Commune half-a-century earlier, had a radical democratic form whose social content was “the rule of labour over capital”. It was to this social content that Marx and Lenin referred when they spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and though civil war, famine and the isolation of the revolution led to the reification of this dictatorship under Stalin we should not forget the real hope for “true democracy” or communism that was briefly glanced through the Russian soviets in 1917.

**Suggestions for further reading**

Tony Cliff *Lenin* four volumes (London: Pluto Press, 1975-1979)

Neil Harding *Lenin’s Political Thought* two volumes (London: MacMillan, 1977-1981)

Paul LeBlanc *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1990)

Paul LeBlanc ed. *Lenin: Revolution, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2008)

Marcel Liebman *Leninism under Lenin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975)

Lars Lih *Lenin Rediscovered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006)

Tamas Krausz *Reconstructing Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015)

August Nimtz *Lenin’s Electoral Strategy* two volumes (London: Palgrave, 2014)

Alan Shandro *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony* (Leiden: Brill, 2014)

**Bio**

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1. Joseph Femia, *Marxism and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), pp. 288-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, pp. 49-52 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Richard Hunt, *The Politics of Marx and Engels Volume 1* (London: MacMillan, 1974), p. 255; Richard Hunt, *The Politics of Marx and Engels Volume 2* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), p. 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Vladimir Lenin, “Draft Programme of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)”, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 29, pp. 99-140, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Vladimir Lenin, “Letters on Tactics” in Lenin, *Collected Works* Vol. 24, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ralph Miliband, *Class Power and State Power* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 154-166 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Hal Draper, *The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” from Marx to Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), pp. 11-41; 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Vladimir Lenin, “A Contribution to the History of the Question of the Dictatorship”, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 31, pp. 340-361, p. 340 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 20; Avineri, *Marx*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Avineri, *Marx*, p. 35-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State”, in Karl Marx *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 88 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Karl Marx, “The First draft of The Civil War in France” in Karl Marx *The First International and After* (London: Penguin, 1974, p. 246; Fine, *Democracy*, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Marx, “Critique of Hegel”, p. 89 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution Volume 1* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 213 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, pp. 217; 201 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, p. 220; cf Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, *The Class struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), p. 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Brian Roper, *The History of Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), p. 217 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Vladimir Lenin, “The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky”, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 28, pp. 229-325, p. 243 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Paul Blackledge, “Left Reformism, The State and the Problem of Socialist Politics Today, *International Socialism* 2/139, pp. 25-56; Roper, *Democracy*, p. 239 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. CLR James, *The Future in the Present* (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), pp. 160-175 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Vladimir Lenin, “Draft Programme of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)”, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 29, pp. 99-140, p. 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Lenin, “Draft Programme of the Russian Communist Party”, p. 108; cf Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 111; Donny Gluckstein, *The Western Soviets* (London: Bookmarks, 1985), p. 229. On the tendency towards soviets in more recent struggles see Colin Barker ed. *Revolutionary Rehearsals* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in Marx *The Revolutions of 1848* (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 62-98, p. 87 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Alex Callinicos, “Socialism and Democracy” in David Held (ed.), *Prospects for Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), pp. 200-212, p. 201 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Alberto Bonnet, “The Political From at Last Discovered: Workers’ Councils Against the Capitalist State”, in Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini (eds.) *Ours to Master and to Own* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011), pp. 66-81, pp. 74-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Gluckstein, *Western Soviets*, p. 235 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Lenin, “Question of the Dictatorship”, p. 341 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike* (London: Bookmarks, 1986), p. 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Marcel Liebman, *The Russian Revolution* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 314 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Lenin quoted in Tony Cliff, *Lenin: The Revolution Besieged* (London: Bookmarks, 1986), p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. And so too did Rosa Luxemburg, despite her earlier criticisms of the Bolshevik policy on this issue (Rosa Luxemburg 1918, “The National Assembly” in Robert Looker ed. *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), pp. 262-265 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR: 1917-1991* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 89-110 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Peter Sedgwick “Introduction”, Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Nigel Harris, *The Mandate of Heaven* (London: Quartet Books, 1978), p. 272 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Mike Haynes, *Russia: Class and Power, 1917-2000* (London: Bookmarks, 2002), p. 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, in Lenin *Collected Works* volume 25, p. 461 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)