

# **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Autonomy**

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*It's very difficult to force into obedience whoever has no wish to command.*

J.-J. Rousseau

## **No critique beyond this point**

Any critique of democracy arouses suspicion, and even more so if this critique is made by those who wish a world without capital and wage-labour, without classes, without a State.

Public opinion dislikes but understands those who despise democracy from a reactionary or elitist point of view. Someone who denies the common man's or woman's ability to organize and run himself or herself, logically will oppose democracy. But someone who firmly believes in this ability, and yet regards democracy as unfit for human emancipation, is doomed to the dustbins of theory. At the best, he is looked down upon as an idiot; at the worst, he gets the reputation of a warped mind who'll end up in the poor company of the arch-enemies of democracy: the fascists.

Indeed, if "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", it seems obvious that in order to emancipate themselves, the exploited must not only do away with the power structures that enslave them, but also create their own organs of debating and decision-making. Exercising one's collective freedom, isn't that what democracy is all about? That assumption has the merit of simplicity: to change the world and live the best possible human life, what better way than to base this life on institutions that will provide the largest number of people with the largest freedom on speech and decision-taking? Besides, whenever they fight, the dominated masses generally declare their will to establish the authentic democracy that's been so far lacking.

For all these reasons, the critique of democracy is a lost or forgotten battle.

## **Set the controls for the heart of the matter**

Democracy claims to be the most difficult objective to achieve, and also the most vital, the ideal that all human beings desire: the theory and practice of collective freedom. Democracy is equated with organizing social life by common decisions which take into account everybody's needs and desires as much as can be.

But that ideal also claims that to be more than just an ideal, this process of common decision-making should happen in conditions of *equality* between us all. Mere political equality gives each citizen *rights* but not effective *powers*: real democracy implies socio-economic equality, with no more rich and poor, no more master and servant, no more boss and employee. So a fair total reorganization and sharing of riches will enable each of us to get a fair share in decision-making on big issues as well as on minor ones. We'll have a democracy that's not just formal, but real.

This is where we bump into a logical flaw.

Sharing is a basic and elementary necessary human attitude, but no-one seriously expects it to solve the social question. At best, it can alleviate it. No moralist or prophet has ever convinced the rich and the mighty to divide their wealth and power fairly between all human beings. We're entitled to ask where this social (and not just political) "fairness" is going to come from? Democracy can't achieve it on its own. This so-called "real" democracy lacks reality.

Democracy is a contradiction: it pretends to give and guarantee something essential which inevitably evades it.

Still, while most people go on at length about the failings of democracy, very few are willing to discuss its nature, because it appears as the best framework for human emancipation, and the only way to get it. Any resistance to exploitation, and any endeavour to create a world without exploitation, is faced with the hard fact of the exploiters' control over the exploited. The endless struggle against *factory despotism*, against boss rule on the shop floor and outside the factory, and also the struggle for rank and file control over a strike, go beyond the mere refusal to depend upon a boss, a local politician, or even a union or party leader. That negative has a positive dimension. It's the first step to direct, non-competitive, solidarity relations, which entail new ways of meeting, discussing and making decisions. No social movement, big or small, can evade the issue: *Who rules?* Otherwise, without procedures and structures different from top-down ones, the "lower classes" will eternally be treated as inferior. Be they called a *commune*, a *committee*, a *collective*, a *soviet*, a *council*, or a simple *general meeting*, every participant in these bodies realizes his individual freedom as well as his collective existence. Liberty and fraternity are lived through acts.

Now, do these forms create the movement or just express and structure it?

It's no use disclaiming our question on the grounds that these forms do both...

...because the nature of democracy is to treat the space-time of debate and decision, not as what it is, a component of social life (and therefore of all positive change), but as the prime condition of social life (and therefore of all positive change). That's what we'll be discussing

On the way, we'll also have to show how this blinding light is even more attractively deceptive because the *word* "democracy" itself is confused and confusing.

But first, a little historical meandering, to see what critique is *not ours*.

## The traditionalist or reactionary critique

In spite of their differences, the opponents of the French Revolution like Burke, late monarchists like Ch. Maurras, or the German thinkers of the *Conservative Revolution* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shared a common distaste for the Rights of Man, because they all dismiss the notion of the universality of the human species. "In my life, I've seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.; as for Man, I must confess I've never met him (..)" (J. de Maistre, 1796) They prefer the supposedly real abstraction of the soil, the nation, the people, the *Volk*, the natives, etc., to the more obviously abstract abstraction of the modern voting citizen. To them, human beings can only be "brothers" and "sisters" if they belong to a certain group or origin. That group can even be (German) labour in E. Junger's *The Worker* (1932), but it's still limited. Communism, on the contrary, is the possibility of the universal.

Our critique addresses the *State*, democratic or dictatorial. Reactionary critique addresses the *democratic State*. Fascism has a deep hatred of democracy and, if it comes to power, it does away with political competition, but what he hates about the democratic system is parliamentary procedures, not the State institutions which fascists seduce, conquer, occupy and fortify, thereby taking to their extreme potentials which exist in all parliamentary regimes.

Communism opposes democracy because it is anti-State. Fascism *only* opposes democracy, because it is pro-State. We take on democracy as a form of the State, whereas reactionaries take it on as a political form they consider too feeble to defend the State. Mussolini and Hitler destroyed parliamentarianism in order to create an almighty central executive and administrative power.

Communists have had to deal with parliamentarianism as one of the forms (and not a feeble one) of government and repression. Reaction denounces free will and bourgeois individualism to replace them with (old or new) forms of oppressive authority. They want less than individuals. The communist perspective aims to realize the individual's aspirations to a freedom that is both personal and lived with others. It wants more than the individual.

## **Nietzsche's critique**

In the eyes of Nietzsche, a society of masters ruling over slaves has been succeeded by the society of the average man, the man of the masses, where only slaves are to be found. *Zarathustra's* author stood for a new aristocracy, no longer based on birth, nor on money, nor (as the Nazi interpretation would have it) on power, even less on race, but on the free /mind/spirit/ who's not afraid of solitude. It's because he would like every one of us to rise above himself and above the "herd" that Nietzsche is hostile to socialism (he sees any collectivism as another type of gregariousness), and to anarchism (an "autonomous herd", as he calls it in *Beyond Good & Evil*).

For what concerns us here, the flaw in Nietzsche's vision does not lie in his elitism, which is undeniable (in that respect, the Third Reich did not distort his writings too much). More basically, a solution which is neither historical nor political, but mythical and poetic, can only have meaning and value as an artist's morals. Nietzschean politics can't be recuperated because it does not exist. He was not dealing with the social question. His ethics is only to be lived by the individual, at the risk of losing one's mind, as happened to the philosopher himself.

## **The individualist critique**

The democratic system is often blamed for crushing the individual under the collective. The poet and dandy Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) wrote: "Nothing more ridiculous than looking for truth in numbers (..) the ballot box is only the way to create a police force." And in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Kraus: "Democracy is the right for everyone to be the slave of all."

Whatever element of truth this point of view may contain, the partisans of democracy have their answer ready. They do not deny the pressure of democracy over the individual. They say the democratic system gives everyone a larger scope for freedom than he would get if his individuality was locked within itself, or if it had to go into an unpredictable congregation of individual atoms.

Some individualists are more social than others. They suggest an association of freely consenting individuals. This is precisely one of the variant of the democratic contract, perhaps one of the most progressive.

## **Ignoring democracy**

Before 1848, large sectors of socialism did not expect anything from democracy, because they stood *outside politics*. In spite of their quarrels, these schools of thought agreed on the generalization of associations, as a remedy to the "dissociation" (P. Leroux) brought about by the triumph of industry and money. All that was needed was to combine passions (Fourier), creative minds and productive abilities (Saint-Simon), or mutual bonds (Proudhon). Unlike the neo-babouvists

who'd inherited Babeuf's experience and advocated the seizure of political power by organized mass violence, all the above mentioned thinkers believed in the supremacy of morals: a new world would be born less out of necessity than by an ethical impetus. Some even hoped that socialism could be founded (funded, actually) by generous enlightened bourgeois, on a small scale at first, and then develop as the bulk of society would follow its example, political power having little or nothing to do about it: therefore there was no need for revolution.

This is neither a critique of politics nor of democracy.

The communist perspective is anti-political, not a-political.

## **The Revolutionary Syndicalist critique: circumventing democracy**

Though it may seem to have only a historical interest, this critique is still active today, in a different way from 1910 of course. The idea to absorb politics into the economy, i.e. to have a directly social democracy, is surfacing again in the current utopia of a seizure of local power so generalized that it would take away the substance of central political power (the State), and thus relieve us from the necessity of destroying the State. In *Changing the World Without Taking Power* (2002), J. Holloway argues that radical transformation is now so embedded in our daily lives that we're gradually transforming the fabric of society, without the need for a potentially dictatorial break. Evolution instead of revolution, what else? The "slow revolutions" notion, recently theorized by A. Bartra, partly inspired by the situation in Mexico and taken up by some radicals, amounts to **no** revolution.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, too, instead of addressing democracy, some hoped to go round it.

Proudhon believed that work gave the toiling masses a *political capacity*: let's find a new way of producing goods, let's make the bourgeois useless, the rest will follow, and the workshop will replace government. Democracy was neither accepted nor fought against, but directly realized by work, without any mediation.

About fifty years later, revolutionary syndicalism had a loathing for parliamentary democracy. The vehicle for change was to come from labour organized in *industrial* (as opposed to trade) unions, which would unite the whole class, skilled and unskilled. Proudhon had been the ideologue of craftsmen and small industry. Anarcho-syndicalism was adapted to the age of trusts and huge factories, but the principle was similar: a fusion between industry and government. After acting as an egalitarian body fighting the bosses and police, the union would later manage the economy during and after the revolution. Some syndicalists, like De Leon in the US, wanted parallel political and industrial action, but to them politics was clearly outside and against parliament.

Revolutionary syndicalism has been reproached for its elitism. It's true it emphasized the role of active minorities that would /spur/push/ the less advanced into action. But most revolutionary syndicalists aimed at an active class conscious *mass elite*, utterly different from what they saw as the passive mass of sheeplike social-democrat voters. Georges Sorel (1847–1922) thought that the labour union, unlike parliament and party life, bred "a fair and real organized equality", as all members were wage-labourers and in solidarity with each other. The "new political principle of the proletariat" is the "government by vocational groups" self-organized in the work place. "Resistance bodies will finally enlarge their scope and range so much that they will absorb nearly all politics" in a successful "struggle to suck bourgeois political organization dry of all life".

On one essential point, Sorel had a point: “Marx believed that the democratic regime has the advantage that as workers are no longer attracted to fighting the monarchy or the aristocracy, the notion of class becomes easier to grasp. Experience teaches us the opposite; democracy is quite good at preventing the advance of socialism, by diverting workers’ minds toward trade-unionism under government protection.” (1908)

Sorel, however, only scored a negative point against Marx, because experience was also teaching the opposite of what he was expecting: the union failed as well as the party, and union self-organization was often sucked dry of all life by bourgeois democracy.

“You can’t destroy a society by using the organs which are there to preserve it (..) any class who wants to liberate itself must create its own organ”, H. Lagardelle wrote in 1908, without realizing that his critique could be applied as much to the unions (including a supposed revolutionary syndicalist French CGT on a fast road to bureaucratization and class collaboration) as to the parties of the Second International. Revolutionary syndicalism discarded the voter and preferred the producer: it forgot that bourgeois society creates and lives off both. Communism will go beyond both.

## **Anti-parliamentarianism**

Understanding universal suffrage as the act by which that the workers swap their potential violence for a voting paper, is part of the essentials of social critique. Attacking elections has been a constant theme for the anarchists, and was not uncommon among socialists before 1914. All left factions and parties in the Second International agreed that any parliament remains under the control of the ruling class, and election day is always a set back for radicalism. After 1917, this remained a fundamental tenet of all varieties of communists. Even those who advocated tactical use of elections regarded the soviets, and not the Parliament, as the political basis and organ of a future revolution.

That being said, and it must be said, rejecting parliament does not sum up nor define our perspective, no more than despising the rich or hating money. Mussolini also wanted to bring down old bourgeois institutions, and he succeeded, up to a point.

## **The Bolshevik critique: dictatorship versus democracy**

In 1920, against Kautsky’s *Terrorism & Communism* published a year before, Trotsky wrote a book with the same title. Kautsky opposed democracy and mass freedom to civil war and systematic use of violence. Trotsky distinguishes between democracy as universal suffrage, and democracy as the mass of the people itself: to understand what is meant by “people”, one has to go into a class analysis.

Before parliamentarianism as we’ve known it since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Trotsky explains, there were examples of early conservative democracy: the agrarian democracy of the farmers in the New England town meeting, the Swiss self-government of the urban lower middle classes and the rich peasantry (praised by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, 1762). Then, as capital and labour became “the polar classes of society”, bourgeois democracy developed as “the weapon of defence” against class antagonisms. Trotsky reminds the reader what Western civilized democracy has led to: a world war.

As for Russia, Trotsky justifies terror and coercion methods on the grounds that they're the only methods available if the proletariat is to defend itself against a far more terrorist and blood-thirsty counter-revolution. "When the civil war is over (..) (B)y means of a systematically applied labour service, and a centralized organization of distribution, the whole population of the country will be drawn into the general system of economic arrangement and self-government."

Knowing that Trotsky was at the same time advocating forced militarization of labour, one can only read those lines as statesman talk justifying his own power over the common people. For what concerns us here, Trotsky only targets democracy because of what it's become under capitalism: an "imperialist democracy". So, "(..) we repudiate democracy in the name of the concentrated power of the proletariat". He is interested in the forms taken by democracy (and claims Bolshevism will later achieve a superior form), not in the democratic principle.

## **The anarchist critique: dispersing power**

Leninism is haunted by the seizure of power, anarchism by its obsessive fear. As a reply to authority and dictatorship, anarchism stands for the collective versus leadership, bottom v. up, horizontal v. vertical, commune v. government, decentralization v. centralization, self-management v. top management, local community v. mass electorate: a plurality of true democracies instead of a false one, and ultimately the State will be destroyed by universalized democracy. Lots of small scale production and living units will be dynamic enough to get together without any of them alienating its autonomy. Like the polis of Ancient times, the modern metropolis falls prey to oligarchic tendencies: myriads of federated co-ops, collectives and districts will be able to run themselves, and thus remain democratic. If power is split between millions of elements, it becomes harmless.

We won't solve the problem of power by spreading little bits of it everywhere.

## **Bordiga's critique: the opposite of democracy**

Amedeo Bordiga is one of the very few who took democracy seriously: he didn't look at its methods, but at its principle. However, he likened so much proletarian democracy to bourgeois democracy that he ended up missing the principle itself.

His starting point is that democracy consists in individuals regarding themselves as equals, each making his own opinion according to his free will, then comparing it with the opinion of others, before taking a decision (usually after a vote and according to majority rule: this is important, yet not essential to the definition). Parliament stifles the proletarians by forcing them into a political partnership with the bourgeois. Nothing original in that last statement, but the deduction that follows is not so common: Bordiga thinks worker democracy is *also* to be rejected, because it decomposes the proletarian fighting spirit into individual decisions. Democracy means a reunion of equal rights and wills, which is impossible in bourgeois parliamentarianism, and pointless in proletarian class activity: revolution does not depend on a mass of individual decisions getting together, nor on majority or proportional procedures, but on the ability of the organized proletariat to act as a centralizing body and a collective mind. (Bordiga calls it "a party", but his party is very different from the Leninist one, since it is not based on socialist intellectuals introducing



socialism into the working class from outside. To make things more complicated, Bordiga never openly criticized Lenin's conception of the party.)

"(..) the principle of democracy has no intrinsic value. It is not a "*principle*", but rather a simple *mechanism* of organization (..) revolution is not a problem of forms of organization. On the contrary, revolution is a problem of content, a problem of the movement and action of revolutionary forces in an unending process (..)" (*The Democratic Principle*, January 1922)

Indeed communist revolution is the creation of non-profit, non-mercantile, co-operative and fraternal social relations, which implies smashing the State apparatus and doing away with the division between firms, with money as the universal mediator (and master), and with work as a separate activity. That is the content.

What Bordiga fails to see, is that this content won't come out of any kind of form. Some forms are incompatible with the content. We can't reason like the end was the only thing that mattered: the end is *made* out of means. Certain means get us closer to the end we want, while others make it more and more remote and finally destroy its possibility. The content of communism (which Bordiga was right to emphasize) can only be born out of the self-organized action of "the vast majority" of the proletariat (*Communist Manifesto*). The communist movement is not democratic: neither is it dictatorial, if the dictator is one part of the proletariat oppressing the rest. Soon enough that part loses whatever proletarian character it had and turns into a privileged group telling people what to do. This is what happened in Russia, as some like Otto Rühle understood as early as 1920–21.

Bordiga lacks a critique of politics. He perceives of revolution as a succession of phases: first it would replace bourgeois power, then it would create new social relations. This is why he has no trouble believing that the Bolsheviks could have ruled Russia for years and, even without being able of transforming the country in a communist way, still promote world revolution. Yet power is not something revolutionaries can hold on to with no revolution happening in their country or anywhere else. Like many others, Bordiga equates power to an instrument. When Jan Appel was staying in Moscow as a KAPD delegate in the Summer 1920, he was shown factories with well-oiled machines that could not be operated for lack of spare parts: when the revolution breaks out in Europe, the Russian workers would tell him, you'll send us spares and we'll be able to operate these machines again. After October 1917, the Bolsheviks must have thought of themselves as something similar: a machinery still partly idle but preparing for world revolution. Unfortunately, power (and even more so State power) is not a tool waiting to be properly handled. It's a social structure that does not remain on stand-by for long. It has a function: it connects, it makes people do things, it imposes, it organizes what exists. If what exists is wage-labour and commodity exchange, even in the original and makeshift existence it had in Russia in 1920, power will manage that kind of labour and that kind of exchange. Lenin died a head of State. On the contrary, a revolutionary structure is only defined by its acts, and if it does not act it soon withers.

Like Trotsky, Bordiga theorizes the necessity to do violence to particular proletarians in the name of the future interests of the proletarians in general: as late as 1960, he would still justify the Bolshevik repression of the Kronstadt rising in February-March, 1921. He never understood that at the time he was writing *The Democratic Principle*, the Russian experience that he extensively used to back up his thesis was eliminating whatever revolution was left in Russia. Bordiga was attacking democratic formalism on behalf of a revolution that was already more formal than real.

Dictatorship is the *opposite* of democracy. The opposite of democracy is not a critique of democracy.

## Council communism: the quest for non-violence

The “German” Communist Left agreed with the “Italian” Left on the rejection of bourgeois democracy. The disagreement focused on *worker* democracy.

What has come to be known as “council communism” was one of the earliest critics of the failure of Bolshevism, and remains one of the best. But as time passed, council communists have tended to be wary about anything that might be a constraint upon the working class. Their critique of bureaucracy as the main obstacle to revolution led them to democracy. Not bourgeois democracy, needless to say, *worker* democracy, but in that respect both bourgeois and worker forms proclaim the same purpose: to prevent or limit encroachments on personal freedom.

We won’t reply (as Bordiga would) that individual freedom is an illusion and is irrelevant to communism. We only say that in any case such freedom *can’t be guaranteed* by the democratic principle.

What this quest for non-pressure boils down to is the desire to avoid the ill effects of conflicts. As it happens, the “protection” provided for by democracy only works in the absence of any serious crisis among the persons concerned, be they proletarians instead of bourgeois. As soon as debate is not enough to result into a decision willingly accepted by the group as a whole, the group can’t carry on as a mere confrontation of free wills (unless it’s only a friendly debating society). Either the group thinks that maintaining the community matters more than the disagreement. Or it splits. Or it forces a decision unto the participants. In all cases, the democratic principle has been suspended.

The ultimate result of turning free will into an absolute would be for a radical group to do nothing but circulate data and information: no theory, except the theory of exchange, the theory of the necessity of autonomy. No theory, except the theory that no theory must be imposed onto the working class. Such a non-theory would of course be inaccessible to criticism, which would help the group developing its own *informal* bureaucracy.

Bordiga’s theory of the party denies the problem. Councilism evades it by waiting for such an overwhelming proletarian majority that all conflict will be resolved without any verbal or physical violence. The “party or autonomy” alternative was born out of our past failures. A future revolutionary movement will have to go beyond that alternative.

## The critique of “formal” democracy

Traditional Marxist analysis has the merit /of stressing/to stress/ that democracy gives possibilities that only become realities for those able to use them: in a class society, the members of the ruling class will always be in a much better position to do so. Everyone is (nearly) free to publish a paper, but the ads necessary to finance a daily or a magazine won’t go to an anti-capitalist press. The ballot paper of Henry Ford is counted as one vote like the ballot paper of one of his workers, but Mr Ford will hold more sway on public affairs than any of his workers, or even of thousands of them.

Like some previous critiques, this one points to an essential feature of democracy, but its short-coming is to treat democratic forms as if they lacked reality, whereas they are real, with a reality of their own.

It's often said that the liberties allowed by a democratic regime are only cosmetic: that is true, but only part of the truth. Everybody knows that freedom of speech favours the business lawyer more than his cleaning lady. In an unequal society, knowledge, culture, politics and access to the public scene are also unequal. Yet, today as yesterday, by using and enlarging possibilities left to them, the workers, the common people have been able to better their lot, and thus they've given some content to liberties that aren't just empty shells. True, this betterment was caused more by direct often violent action than by democracy properly speaking: nevertheless, legal unions, litigation bodies, as well as local authorities, members of parliament or even governments favourable to labour have helped channel these demands, moderating them and pushing them forward at the same time. Democracy and reformism have led a couple's life for nearly 150 years now, although they've often been strange bedfellows.

Explaining that a worker's ballot paper only formally weigh the same as his boss's, only proves that so-called political equality does not make for social inequality. Yet reformists have never said the opposite. They say: "Since Mr Ford's ballot paper weighs a million times more than one of his workers', let's get together the votes of millions of workers and we'll be stronger than the Ford family. We'll turn into reality the appearance of power that the bourgeois have granted us." Against the might of capital, labour has the strength of numbers: speaking in public, having papers independent from the bosses' press, organizing in the workplace, meeting and demonstrating in the street, are *after all* easier in democracy, as the exploited and oppressed have experienced. In general, the mass of the population has more ways to improve its conditions of work and life with Adenauer than Hitler, with De Gaulle than Pétain, with Allende than Pinochet, with Felipe Gonzales than Franco, etc.

If parliament was *only* a sham, and freedom of speech *only* a deception, there wouldn't be any more parliaments, parties or political campaigns, and they wouldn't still rally voters, and even stir passions. (Unless we think this is due to continuous crafty bourgeois conditioning: but surely over a century of democratic regime should have acted as an eye opener...) Democracy is not a show,- not just a show.

## So Churchill was right?...

This brief survey seems to leave us with only one option, summed up by W. Churchill in the House of Commons on November 11, 1947: "Democracy is the worst form of government — except for all other forms, that have been tried from time to time."

It's significant that the best known definition of democracy should be based on a paradox, even a play on words. In fact, everybody makes fun of Churchill's phrase, and yet everybody accepts it, with one reservation: everybody thinks he has the solution to *really* get the best out of this lesser evil.

(It's also significant that the famous British statesman should have added cynicism to pragmatism in another phrase: "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." This second sentence is less often quoted: the scorn it displays for the actors — *extras* would be more appropriate — of democracy might discredit the first definition.)

Let's go back to the word itself.

## Westminster is not on the Acropolis

If we put back in its place, i.e. in history, this reality commonly called democracy, we realize how poorly the word is adapted to what it has labelled for a couple of centuries.

Modern times have given an utterly new usage to a notion born in Ancient Greece. Nowadays, the man in the street, the academic or the political activist, everyone uses the word *democracy* for 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens **and** 21<sup>st</sup> century Italy or Sweden. The people who would never dare talk about a prehistoric “economy” or “work” among New Guinea tribesmen see no anachronism in applying the same term to a system where citizenship meant an ability (theoretical but also partly effective) to *govern and be governed*, and to a system where, for 99% of the citizens, citizenship comes down to the right to be *represented*.

This gap was more readily admitted in the early days. James Madison, one of the founding fathers of the US Constitution, differentiated between *democracy*, where “the people meet and exercise their government in person”, and *republic* (a term of Roman and not Greek origin), where “they assemble and administer it by their representatives and agents”. With the passing of time and the rise of the modern bureaucratic State (which Madison opposed), democracy has become a mere synonym for power vested in the people.

Common wisdom bemoans the limits of a Greek democracy closed to women, slaves and foreigners, and rejoices over the openness of modern democracy to larger and larger sections of the population. The ideal of radical democrats is a *demos* that would welcome all human beings living on a given territory. They forget that the Ancient Athenian fortunate enough to enjoy citizenship was not a citizen because he was a human being, but because he happened to be a co-owner of the *polis*: he was a landowner, small or big. The democratic system emerged as a way to manage as smoothly as possible the contradictions within a community of male family heads, inexorably divided by a growing unequal distribution of fortune.

It’s only because it was limited to a group that shared something vital (a superior social position, albeit undermined by money differences) that Greek democracy could afford to be participatory (which did not save it from periodic crises). In Europe or the US today, nothing can be compared to the *demos* of Pericles’ time. When it’s applied to societies ruled by the capital-labour relationship, the word “democracy” tells us more about what these societies think of themselves than about their reality.

## A question of words?

If we wish to stick to the word *communism* and object to *democracy*, it’s not for tradition’s sake, but for historical motives. In spite of its imperfections, *communism* expresses the endeavour of the exploited and of the human species to liberate itself. The word and the notion were meaningful (that is, debatable and debated) in 1850 or 1900. The revolution that failed in Russia, and Stalinism later, loaded the term with a totally different meaning. As the S.I. once explained, captive words become like prisoners put to hard labour: they too are forced to work for the benefit of those who’ve captured them. Communism is not bureaucratic by nature.

On the contrary, *democracy* has been a distorted word ever since its return in the mouth of bourgeois revolutionaries from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and of most (but not all) socialists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The distortion does not consist in an outright lie like the Maoist

descriptions of life in China, but in a mental displacement of reality: as it identifies modern parliaments to Ancient agoras, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen to a 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athenian citizen, and as it suggests the modern one has a lot more power, it compresses history and confuses us.

## Exploitation and / or domination?

Do inequality, poverty and misery exist because a few privileged ones make decisions for us all? Or have these happy few got a near monopoly over decisions because they already are rich and therefore powerful? The question is sterile.

Mountains of books and articles have been and are still written to refute the alleged Marxist claim that “the economy” explains next to everything. Who ever made such a claim?

“According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining factor is the production and reproduction of real life. Other than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.” (Engels, letter to J. Bloch, September 21, 1890)

The “economy” surely does not explain power. Profit-making strictly speaking does not account for (local or world) wars. A similar socio-economic “infrastructure” can coexist with very different and opposed political forms. Capitalist Germany was successively run by a monarchist caste, by bourgeois, by the leaders of a nationalist-racist one-party State, then after 1945 by bourgeois in the West and by bureaucrats in the East, then again by bourgeois when the country was reunified. History provides us with many examples of non-coincidence between economic might and political authority, and of a modern State occasionally ruling against the bourgeois, forcing the general interest of the system upon reluctant industrialists or businessmen. Faced with a large strike in the Ruhr, Bismark himself compelled the bosses to grant a wage rise. Although usually in Europe money brings about power, in Africa and in the East, power is often the quick way to fortune, with family or clan misappropriating public funds or siphoning off foreign trade. Also, it’s not uncommon for political rulers to dispossess the rich, as we’ve seen in Russia over the last ten or twenty years.

Yet, in the vast majority of cases, political leaders and masters of the land, of trade and of manufacturing go hand in hand or come down to the same thing. Commanding men usually goes together with putting them to work. The two forms of control can clash with one another, but not for long: one consolidates the other. Power does not create itself. Political rule and possession of the means of production rarely coincide, but in modern society there’s neither exploitation without domination, nor domination without exploitation: the same groups have direct or *indirect* control over wealth and power.

The exploiter needs to be able to put pressure on the person he exploits: he only exploits what he has supremacy over. Domination is a precondition and a necessary form of exploitation. Let’s not try and decide which one logically or chronologically comes first. Exploitation is never just “economic” (I have someone work for me, in my place and for my benefit), but also “political” (instead of someone making decisions about his life, I take the decisions myself, for instance I decide when to hire and fire him). Society is not divided, as Castoriadis thought in the 1960s, between order-givers and order-takers. Or rather, this division exists, but these “orders” have to do with what structures today’s world: the capital-wage labour relation (which does not mean it determines everything). There is no need to oppose exploitation to domination. Human societies in general, and capitalism in particular, can only be understood by the link between exploitation

and domination. Firms are not just profit makers: they are also power structures, but they remain in business as long as they create and accumulate value, otherwise they go bankrupt.

## **Politics as the foundation of democracy**

If politics means taking into account society as a whole (including the reality of power), and not just as an addition of local or technical issues, then any social change is political, any social critique is political, and revolution has to do with politics.

Politics, however, is something else than this concern for the global, the general, the total, because it turns this totality into a new specialization, into an activity removed from direct social interests. That special dimension cannot ignore socio-economic hierarchies and oppositions. But it deals with them by shifting them on a level where the roots of these conflicts will never be changed, only their consequences.

Ancient Greece's real contribution to history was not the principle of democracy as a set of rules and institutions by which citizens make collective decisions. The innovation went deeper. It invented what democracy is based upon: a special time-space reserved for confrontation, and distinct from the rest of social life. In that specific sphere, a person is taken away from his private interests, from fortune and status differences, from his social superiority or inferiority, and placed on an equal footing with all the other citizens. Equality of rights alongside social inequality: that is the definition of politics. Society is fully aware of its inability to suppress group or class antagonism, so it transfers the antagonism onto a parallel level that's supposed to be neutral, where conflicts are acknowledged and softened in the best possible interest of the continuation of the system as a whole. It's this separation that Marx's early writings were dealing with. Direct or worker people's democracy maintains the separation while it claims to go beyond it by involving everyone in the democratic process, as if popular empowerment could solve the problem of power. Unfortunately, getting everybody inside a separate sphere does not suppress separation.

Any human group thinks of and reacts to the whole of its situation. But class societies, in a thousand ways and through trial and error, have divorced debating, managing and decision-making from the rest. Logically, these societies regard this dissociation as the "natural" and universally desirable best possible way of solving human conflicts.

Class divisions, in certain conditions, have created politics: doing away with class divisions will entail going beyond politics.

Democracy is not to be denounced and smashed, but superseded. Like other essential critiques, the critique of democracy will only become effective by the communizing of society.

As long as people content themselves with a "fair" redistribution of wealth, they inevitably also go for a "fair" redistribution of power. Only an altogether different world will no longer be obsessed with power, with taking it, sharing it, or scattering it. We'll solve the political question when we stop treating it as the prime issue.

## **Manufacturing consent... and dissent**

When writers like N. Chomsky expose the conditioning of public opinion by the State, media and lobbies, they fail to ask themselves *what* is being conditioned.

Opinion is thought of as a collective motley and fickle spirit that sometimes determines events and sometimes is tossed about by them, as if these events were within its reach one day, and out of reach the next. For instance, German opinion is reported to have been indifferent or hostile to Hitler in 1923, then to have listened to him after 1929, before moving away from him for good after the fall of the Third Reich. It's like these successive points of view had been taken regardless of what German individuals, groups, classes, unions, parties, etc., were doing each time.

Another example is the day there was a reversal of French opinion in 1968: the huge rightwing demonstration on the Champs Elysées, May 30, is described as the death knell for the rebellion in the streets and in the factories. Yet this shows what public opinion really is. In April, most future rebels had no idea they would be soon marching in the street or stopping work. A few days later, pushed on by the early street fighting and the initiative of a minority of workers, millions of people discovered what they wanted to do and could do. A couple of weeks later, the ebb of the strike wave (and for many, the satisfaction of seeing their demands at least partly met) wore out the revolt and enabled conservative forces to get a grip on themselves. Thus, from beginning to end, the shock of the largest general strike in history determined the flow of events, and successively made people aware of possible changes, enabled law and order supporters to resurface, and created despair among the rebels but also numerous rebounds over the next ten years.

Men's "social being determines their consciousness". Admittedly, it works both ways, but certainly a lot more this way than the other. After 1945, in France as elsewhere, the workers at the Billancourt Renault plant near Paris had been fed with Stalinist slander depicting (real or /invented/imagined/) Trotskysts as fascists and agents provocateurs in the pay of the boss and the police. The CP-led union, the CGT, had unrelentingly and usually successfully prevented work stoppages: "The strike is the weapon of big business..." In the Spring 1947, the Billancourt workers went on a two-week strike, partly managed by the rank and file, and elected a well known Trotskyst, Pierre Bois, on the strike committee. Yet they'd been "conditioned" by years of propaganda, and the tiny revolutionary minority could only answer back by poorly distributed leaflets, with the risk of being beaten up or sacked, as the CGT held sway over the running of the plant. If in such negative circumstances, a substantial number of workers dared lay down tools and designate a Trotskyst to represent them, it's not because they would have had access at last to Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed* or other critical analyses of the bureaucracy. More simply, the pressure of their conditions of work and life, and their own resistance to exploitation led them to disobey union orders, to fight alongside persons like P. Bois, and treat as comrades those they distrusted before. In some ways, there was more militancy on the premises in 1947 than in 1968: in 47, a few strikers debated about manufacturing firearms, and the union van was turned over by rebellious workers.

By the same logic, when the strike was over, with the CP being expelled from government and the beginning of the Cold War, the CGT took on a tougher anti-bourgeois line. One reason (or pretext) for the government getting rid of its CP ministers was the Stalinists' getting on the bandwagon and siding with the strikers. The worker bureaucracy got back its influence over the mass of the workforce. Not entirely, though: the Trotskysts tried to take advantage of the strike to launch a small union (called *Syndicat Démocratique Renault*), which struggled along for a couple of years before dying away. If very few workers had confidence in it, it's not because Stalinist slander would have retrieved the efficiency it had lost in the Spring 1947. The reason is more down to earth: the CGT was better in tune with the needs of the proletarians, pressed some

of their demands and structured their struggles. The CGT defended and represented them better than a union which was a small minority in Renault and had hardly any support in the rest of the country.

## From propagandist to educationist

Opinion is a set of (individual or group) ideas about the world. Representative democracy wishes each of us to form his ideas on his own, and only afterwards to compare them to other persons' ideas. Direct democracy prefers a collective making of ideas. But both think the only way to free thought is to be correctly educated or even better, self-taught, this self being here again preferably collective.

Because of the rise and fall of totalitarianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the word and the reality of propaganda are now commonly looked down upon. In 1939, S. Chakotin published *The Rape of the Masses* (translated into English in 1940; new edition by Haskell House, 1982): a disciple of Pavlov, he argued that totalitarian (especially Nazi) methods of mind control were based on the use of emotional urges to create conditioned reflexes. Chakotin was theorizing his own practice: he'd been in charge of anti-fascist propaganda for the German SPD in the early 1930s. He said he appealed to reason, not to the senses as the Nazis did, but that did not prevent him from devising crowd conditioning techniques for mass meetings. Chakotin's failure to beat the Nazis at their own game is a sign that Hitler's success was only marginally caused by crowd manipulation techniques. Germany turned to Hitler when the Weimar republic proved incapable of offering any other (radical, reformist or conservative) solution to its crisis.

Ed. Bernays, perhaps the first professional advertiser on public relations, had already described in *Propaganda* (1928) how an "invisible government" ruled democratic society. He claimed to be able to act on the collective subconscious with a combination of Freudism and crowd psychology, and invented advertising techniques that he sold to big business as well as politicians. In 1954, he was instrumental in destabilizing the (democratic) government of Guatemala that the US finally toppled. In those days, it was still a novelty to "sell" a candidate to the White House like a soft drink, and by similar methods. Unpalatable Bernays was ahead of his time, and heralded ours, when no party dares engage into propaganda: it *communicates*. Commercials don't sell goods, they sell lifestyles. Parties don't promote programs, they promote meaning and imagery.

Unlike the simplistic *agit-prop* of yesteryear, today's most advanced political advertising does not pretend to change our views: it presents itself as a helping hand that will allow us to make up our own opinions. Advertising now calls itself *information*, needless to say interactive information. Everything is supposed to be "bottom up". Modern management has become the ideal model of all relations. The "progressive" boss gives the staff a large margin of self-organizing in their work... as long as they reach the objective set by the company. The teacher aims at bringing out his student's autonomy. The psychologist (*counsel*, sorry...) repeats to his patient: *Be Yourself!* The contradiction remains the same in every field of activity and ends up in more control over staff (particularly thanks to computerization), more bureaucratic guidelines in schools, and more counselling.

How could it be otherwise? The critique of "education first" (or *self*-education first) was expressed as early as 1845:



“The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society between two parts, one of which is superior to society.” (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, III)

Nobody *believes* much of what commercial or political advertising says, yet it *works*. No driver watching a Peugeot TV commercial regards the new SW 407 as the best estate car ever made, and no voter expects the presidential candidate to keep all his promises, but people buy cars, take part in elections, and that’s what matters. The content of the message is far less important than popular participation in and acceptance of the whole system.

## **“The more information and discussion there is, the better..”**

Democrats, moderate or radical, all think that the inadequacies of democracy come from the fact that there is never enough of it: not enough good schooling, no enough quality papers, no enough serious talks on TV... and our information resources are never wide and varied enough.

Democracy is indeed based on (individual and/or collective) free will, but this freedom must be properly fuelled by the largest possible information and discussion.

This vision is to be expected from party professional organizers, teachers, media people, publishers and all those who make a living (and a sense) out of communication. But it is surprising that so many revolutionaries also should regard getting and exchanging ideas as the prime mover of history.

In Orwell’s *1984*, Winston is watched by a telescreen forcibly installed in his living-room and which he is forbidden to switch off. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, television is no longer the main popular screen it was in 1960 or 1990. On the Internet, at home or on portable cell phones, people have direct access to forums where thousands of talks take place between a government minister, an ecologist, a businesswoman, a gay activist, an unemployed, an antiglobalizer, or sometimes an anarchist. At the click of a mouse, I can get loads of data and differing views on what’s going on today in Peking or La Paz. A few more clicks, and I challenge these data and views in the company of an Internaut from Sydney or Montreal, and have my own views on these events circulated worldwide in a matter of minutes. This instant and universal availability also applies to the past. Unless I have a special fondness for the canals in Amsterdam, I no longer visit the International Institute of Social History to know about the Ruhr Red Army in 1920. Not everything is available on-line, but there’s more on the Internet now than on any single public library... or of course newspaper kiosk. Most of all, it’s not just there to be read, but exchanged and debated.

Since everything is made measurable these days, it’s likely someone will invent a system that monitors and quantifies all verbal exchange (including conversations on the web, on phones, etc.) taking place at one particular moment on this planet. Even taking into account the growth in population, the figure is likely to be higher than in 1970.

Modern man is a paradox. He keeps repeating he is increasingly being dispossessed (and he puts the blame on entities he calls the *economy*, *finance* or *globalization*) and yet, when his work-day is over, he feels he is repossessing his existence by reading about dispossession in the paper, or (better and more interactive) by chatting about it in cyberspace.

The less power we have over our lives, the more we talk about it. The contemporary citizen is dissatisfied with heavy and remote traditional democratic mechanisms. At the same time, he

is given a continuous instant democracy made of opinion polls, webtalk, participatory radio and TV, and tele-reality shows. He's not just asked his political preferences every four or five years: every day is now election day. Mixing Latin and Greek, we could say we now live in a home centred **dom**ocracy which gives us the liberty to change things from our own home: I help solve environmental world problems by buying energy saving light bulbs for my living-room.

People used to make fun of Speakers' Corner at Hyde Park as a symbol of socially harmless free speech. Today's generalized self-managed speech is universally and immediately circulated. In the workplace, in the classroom, in a couple, in a family, between professions, between performers and spectators, between cultures, religions, media, among neighbours, everywhere, everything ought to be discussed and all information to be shared, so that power should constantly flow and never crystallize, so no-one could monopolize it. The 1999 Kosovo war was the first with mass Internaut involvement. Everyone of us becomes a self-appointed reporter: *Don't hate the media: Be the media!*

To impose us *what* to think, democracy tells us what we have to think *about*. When Habermas extolled the virtues of the "public sphere" in 1962, he also bemoaned its undermining by commercial mass media. He could be more optimistic today, when universal debate seems to revive the "openness" he favours: a citizen is now a person with access to the press, to the media and to the Internet. Yet this new citizenship amounts to the liberty to voice our views on world affairs, i.e. on what is currently being said on world affairs by the press, the media and on the Internet. The public sphere passes off as a reality that can put a check on State power, but when did it really determine the course of events, or was able to stop the descent into catastrophes like 1914, Hitler, the second world war, or colonial and post-colonial massacres? Giving one's opinion is as relevant as opinions are decisive, and they're not decisive, not much. The liberal conservative Tocqueville was more to the point:

"(..) it is an axiom of political science in the United States that the only way to neutralize the impact of newspapers is to multiply them" (*Democracy in America*, 1835)

Most of all, democracy triumphs by telling us **where** to think. The 1900 paper reader could choose to buy a socialist or a rightwing daily, but he had hardly any influence on the structure and evolution of the press. The organization of the Internet is equally beyond the reach of a website browser or writer: for a start, he was never asked about the birth of the web itself. Saying the Internet was created by (and would not exist without) millions of Internauts, is as true as saying that millions of drivers are responsible for the development of the car industry. Making a principle of maximum information and discussion, is inevitably prioritizing the framework where information circulates and discussion takes place. Of course, everyone wishes the channels of communication to be as much "bottom up" as possible, but how could they be if the whole life of the communicators is "top down" organized? Society is *not* the addition of millions of publicly shared experiences or views.

"The idea of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas": this is as much true as in 1845. The difference is that billions of ideas are now being circulated and (nearly) universally available. But who has the power? The political system is still tuned to general and presidential elections, and the rest is an accessory to the rhyme. In 1900 or 1950, politics was talked about but *not made* in village hall debates. Neither is it made today on the Internet. Spectacle-induced passivity (as analysed by the S.I.) has taken the form of a constant show of activity.

How about taking direct democracy at its word?

According to its supporters, here is what direct democracy is aiming at:

1. The respect of a majority.
2. The expression of minorities, which are granted a large latitude of action.
3. The possibility of free speech, in order to avoid pressure and violence: "Let's talk first."
4. The primacy of a collective will, not the will of an individual or of a handful of persons.
5. The respect of decisions taken in common.

Let's take them one by one.

### **1. Majority rule.**

A lot of social movements have been launched by a minority, often a very small one. In the 1930s, at the time of large strikes by unskilled labour in the US, two sit-downs involving about 10.000 people were started in Akron by half a dozen workers. In 1936, at Goodyear, while the union was negotiating with the boss about wages, 98 unskilled workers laid down tools, followed by 7.000 others, which forced the management to yield after 36 hours. One might object that in all such cases, a minority only initiates actions soon taken up by a majority. True, but this very fact shows how little relevant the majority criterion is.

The participants in a picket line put their interests (and the interest of labour as whole) above the interests of the non-strikers: they do not respect the right to work of those who want to work. Democrats might argue that the strike is supported by a great majority of the workforce: that would be forgetting that democracy is also the protector of minorities. By the way, what is a majority? 51%? 60%? 95%? We are faced with the inadequacy of the self principle. "Let the workers themselves decide..." Who'll decide when a minority ceases to be a minority and starts becoming a majority, and when a majority gets big enough to be considered as the common will?

### **2. Minority rights.**

Any deep movement, whether for simple demands or more, will pull along in its wake a number of yet undecided persons and ask them to do what they did not previously feel like doing. When *piqueteros* go round the neighbourhood and ask for 50 people to come and reinforce their road block, the picket members are not acting as a boss summoning his personnel, or an army officer calling his soldiers to order: they expect other proletarians to fulfil their obligation to the *piqueteros* as well as to **themselves**.

There *are* differences between the bulk of the rank and file and its most active elements: for these elements to turn into a new ruling elite in the plant and possibly in society, it takes more than them initiating unrest on the shop floor. Bureaucratization is nearly always the result of reformism, not the other way round, and it can rise out of activist minorities as well as of consenting majorities. The existence of a majority and a minority is not a valid enough indicator helping us to assess a situation and to deal with it. The majority/minority duality functions in combination as well as in opposition. Nobody ever thinks about this in a vacuum. If you agree with a decision, you "naturally" tend to believe it comes out of a sufficient number of people. Those who disagree are inclined to believe the opposite: to them, this majority is not enough of a majority, they'd like another, a more numerous one...

### 3. Free speech.

It's pointless to wonder if speech takes place before, after or during the act of rebellion. In 1936, in the General Motors plant at Toledo, all the work force gathered for a general meeting but, as a participant said, "it was like everyone had made up his mind before a single word was uttered", and a sit-down strike started. Those workers were not brainless robots. Exchanging words then was unnecessary because it had taken place *before*, in hundreds of informal discussions and small meetings. The action that was born out of them spoke for itself.

If we equate democracy with exchange, these encounters can be called democratic, but it was not the democratic principle that made it possible.

On the other hand, in many conflicts, urging the participants to get together and speak can result in the movement becoming more aware of itself and stronger, or losing its momentum when it was just starting to gather speed. An expression which ceases to be action and experience dissolves into free-wheeling talk. In the same way, looking for "more information" can be an excellent way of forgetting the essential information: the common determination to fight on.

Unlike God's Word that was turned into flesh, human words express ideas, partake of events, strengthen (or sometimes weaken) our behaviour, but they do not create.

A strike or a riot is forced to take action and to choose between options. But it does not relate to them like a philosopher or scientist testing a set of hypotheses and then, by mere reasoning and with no outside interference, opting for the best. In a social movement, speech helps sort out what has been maturing in the participants' mind, in relation to their past and present.

Social critique usually rejects the secret ballot paper in favour of open public voting that does not cut up the continuity of the voters' action. The election moment separates each voter from the others and from the rest of his life (the polling booth is called an *isolator* in French). One of Thatcher's main anti-strike measures was to make it illegal to go on strike without a secret ballot procedure. Nevertheless, history provides us with many examples of people — and workers — being manipulated by a public show of hands, a game in which Stalinists had become experts.

The point we are making is that historical evolution is not the result of a majority rule based on a confrontation of opinions and on the maximum availability and sharing of information. This is NOT saying that information and discussion are pointless. No act is sufficient in itself, nor is its meaning so obvious that it would require no expression at all. In the General Motors, 1936, example mentioned above, verbal exchange did occur, but before the decision to strike, and it contributed to the decision. In such a case, respecting democracy would have meant forcing a discussion upon the workforce: this may have revealed the determination of the workers, or it may have deflected it. Debate is never good or bad in itself.

### 4. Common will.

Democracy always presents itself as a protection, as the means to secure non-violence among its participants, because democrats treat each other as equals.

Acting on behalf of others does not necessarily turn anyone into a leader. Most bureaucrats do not build up their authority by positioning themselves above the mass, rather by sheltering behind the mass. A bureaucrat pretends to have no personal ambition and to serve the interests of the rank and file. While we're certainly not looking for charismatic figures, there's no need to be afraid of individual initiatives either.

Insisting on community as a *principle* leaves us stuck with the *majority versus minority* intractable dilemma already discussed. Among those who share a common perspective, someone often becomes aware of an opportunity before the others: trying to convince the others that this opportunity must be seized won't be a purely intellectual exercise. Arguments are going to be thrown about and it's likely there will be a conflict of wills at some point. Ideas won't meet on neutral ground until one is recognized as the best because of its inner logical superiority. Truth belongs to no-one. It rushes and shoves. "Truth is as immodest as light (..) It possesses me" (Marx, 1843). Consistency-reaching is not a peaceful process. An essential idea shatters my certainties and does not come to me without some violence. If democracy means choosing between options with the only guidance of individual free will and not outside interference, then truth is not democratic.

Making it a principle of having any action decided upon by the whole group, and then any change of action also debated and re-decided upon by a new group meeting (or some general consultation), means no action. Those groups who say they operate on such a total self-management basis only self-manage their own speech.

### **5. Everybody's all for *respecting common decisions...* unless or until the decision is deemed wrong.**

In France, 1968, the Peugeot plant at Sochaux (at the time, one of the biggest concentrations of skilled workers in that country) went on a sit-down strike on May 20. When a great majority of the labour force voted to return to work on June 10, a minority re-occupied the premises, and was violently expelled by the police in the early hours of the 11<sup>th</sup>. At that moment, thousands on non-strikers were arriving by bus for the morning shift: instead of resuming work as they had intended to, they immediately joined the ex-occupiers and fought the police with them for the whole day. Two workers got killed. Rumours later said that some rioters had used guns, and that cops had been killed but the police would not admit it. True or (probably) false, these rumours show how tough the fighting was. The local working class lived the event as an outright confrontation with bosses and State. The return to work only took place on June 20, and labour got a better deal than had been granted nationally.

In other words, after voting to go back, a large proportion of the labour force not only decided not to go back, but rallied what had been until then a minority of isolated extremists. The first occupation had involved between 100 and 1.000 persons, out of a workforce of over 35.000, with 3.000 union members. True, the general meetings could be called non-democratic: they took place under the combined pressure of the CGT and the media. But the very fact of *contradicting* one's vote, and what's more, *without having had a proper meeting*, shows that, unlike what the democratic principle maintains, the debating and voting space-time is not decisive.

What happened was not simply a reflex of instinctive worker solidarity. At the Billancourt Renault plant, in 1972, the murder of a Maoist worker by a security guard hardly caused any reaction among his work mates, who were indifferent to what they saw as useless leftist trouble-making. In 1968, the Peugeot workers felt they had something in common with a radical minority that was not alien to them. Besides, a few years before, wildcat strikes had broken out at Sochaux, often initiated by young workers. Also, during the first 1968 occupation, a hundred radicals had set up a short lived "forum" that served as a medium for open discussions on a variety of controversial issues. The June 11 eruption did not come out of the blue: it had been prepared by past

informal debates and unofficial meetings, which (better than democratic procedures) paved the way for an apparently spontaneous outburst. “Faceless resistance” is not just canteen or coffee machine conversations: it serves as a springboard for open conflict.

Assessing these five criteria shows first that a lot of positive events have happened without or against them, secondly that they have often failed to prevent what they were supposed to prevent. None of the standards of direct democracy really works.

Actually, a defender of direct democracy won't ask for them to be fully implemented. He might even agree with most of the points we've been making, but he'll say democratic standards are not to be taken as absolutes: it's the guideline behind them that matters, the motive, the impetus: “But if ye be led by the Spirit, ye are not under the law.” (Saint Paul, *Galatians*, 5: 18)

That's the whole point: this tricky interplay between the letter and the spirit, the law and the Spirit. There was no contradiction for Saint Paul. There is one for democracy, because it is indeed the quest for formal criteria: it pretends to give us rules of conduct that provide the best possible freedom. So this sudden non-formality goes against how democracy defines itself. Democracy is not the *ad hoc* running of social life. It's communism that relies on the ability of fraternal (non competitive, non profit-seeking, etc.) social relationships to create the organization best fitted to them. Democracy is the exact opposite: it sets procedures and institutions as a prerequisite and a condition of the rest. It says society is based on its political organization (top down or bottom up). And then, when experience proves democratic standards don't work, democracy says we can do without them... or even that we must do without them. Democracy is there to solve conflicts, yet when they're too serious, it can't solve them any more. What's the use of a principle that can only be applied when social life runs smoothly and we don't need the principle? Democracy functions as far as society can remain democratic.

This *letter versus spirit* is a contradiction for democracy, but democratic rulers — left or right — can manage it. They know perfectly well that democracy has to be and will be suspended in times of crisis. Suspended partly, when Britain fought the IRA. Or totally, when the Algerian army cancelled the 1991 elections after the first round had been won by the Islamists, and took over power, with full support from Western countries. The bourgeois have no qualms provisionally turning into dictators... in the long-term interest of democracy: “no democracy for the anti-democrats”. Being a lesser evil, democracy sometimes ceases to be democratic to avoid a worse evil.

For radicals who believe in direct democracy, however, this contradiction is a trap: they won't get a full and permanent reality out of a system that can't provide it.

Prioritizing direct democracy does not produce direct democracy. Whatever positive content democracy (if we wish to keep the word) may have, can't be the result of democracy.

## **Contradiction in communist theory...**

Even a cursory reading of Marx is enough to realize he was at the same time a staunch supporter and an enemy of democracy. As his texts can be found in paperback or on the Internet, a few very short quotes will suffice here.

Marx argues that democracy is the culmination of politics, *and* that a political emancipation is partial, selfish, bourgeois emancipation, the emancipation of the bourgeois. If, as he writes, “the democratic State [is] the real State”, assuming we want a world without a State, we've got to invent a life with neither State nor democracy. However, when Marx presents democracy as “the

resolved mystery of all constitutions”, whereby “The constitution appears as what it is, the free product of men” (*Critique of Hegel’s philosophy of Right*, 1843), he is opposing real democracy to the existence of the State, and therefore supporting democracy.

Besides, Marx was only *indirectly* addressing democracy through a critique of bureaucracy, and targeting politics through the critique of the State, particularly through its theorization by Hegel: “All forms of State have democracy for their truth, and for that reason are false to the extent that they are not democratic.” (*Id.*)

One last quote, interesting because it’s written decades after the early works, and by someone who was coming close to admitting the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism: “One must never forget that the *logical form* of bourgeois domination is precisely the democratic republic (..) The democratic republic always remains the *last* form of bourgeois domination, the form in which it will die.” (Engels, letter to Bernstein, March 14, 1884)

Intuitions leave much room for interpretation, and the context often blurs the message. To understand these conflicting views, we must bear in mind that, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, a groundswell of social movements, from Ireland to Silesia, was pressing for radical democratic demands **and** social demands, both at the same time, combined and opposed, and this confrontation resulted in a critique of politics as a separate sphere. Let’s not idealize our past. The same thinkers and groups often mixed these demands and that critique. The purpose of *The German Ideology* was to prove that history cannot be explained by the conflicts of ideas or political platforms, but by the social relations by which human beings organize their lives and, above all, by the material conditions of their lives. Those pages are to be read in connection with *The Jewish Question*, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, *Contribution to the critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, *The King of Prussia & Social Reform*, the *Theses on Feuerbach* and other similar texts which address the democratic bourgeois revolution, but also the Rights of Man, and reject a revolution that would only have “a political soul”. For example, Marx sees 1789 and especially the 1793–94 Terror in France as the culmination of political will that deludes itself into believing it can change the world from the top. There’s little doubt that Marx wished to apply his “materialist” method not only to history, religion, philosophy and the economy, but also to the question of power and to politics as a field of special knowledge, as separate science and technique. Yet at the time he was describing the political sphere as another form of *alienation*, he was also pressing on with the completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution, and a few years later he became the editor of a liberal progressive paper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, subtitled “Organ Of Democracy”.

The deeper the communist movement goes, the higher its contradictions are. Marx happens to be among the few thinkers who come closest to a synthesis and therefore inevitably combine its most opposing elements, the dimensions our movement is at most pain to reconcile. It’s no accident that Karl Marx should have given one of the best approaches of communism (in particular, but not only, in his early works) *and* welcomed the advent of capitalism as a world system.

### **...and contradiction in proletarian practice**

If Marx was perhaps the writer who went the furthest in extolling *and* rejecting democracy, it’s because he was a concentrated expression of the forced situation in which the proletariat used to

live and still lives. Intellectual discrepancies mirror a practical dilemma which the proletarians have to solve to emancipate themselves.

Like others in his time, like R. Luxemburg later, like the German Left after 1914–18, Marx reflected a contradiction: the self-awareness and the “community culture” (*Selbstverständigung* and *Versammlungskultur*, as they were called in Germany around 1900), in the workplace and in the workers’ district, confront bourgeois democracy with proletarian community. But using one’s condition as a major weapon is a double-edged sword for the proletarians. Guy Debord may not be the most acute critique of democracy, but he points to something essential in *The Society of the Spectacle*, theses 87 & 88. The bourgeoisie was able to use its socio-economic power as the main instrument of its political ascent. The proletarians can’t use their social role to emancipate themselves, because this role is given to them by capital. So their only radical weapon is their negative potential... closely linked to the positive part they play in the reproduction of capital. The bourgeois won by asserting themselves on the basis of what they already socially were. The proletarians can only win by fighting against themselves, i.e. against what they are forced to do and be as producers (and as consumers...). There’s no way out of this contradiction. Or rather, the only way out is communist revolution.

It was enough for the bourgeois to get together and find the means to run society: so creating suitable decision-making institutions was enough (though it took centuries). It was not only for the sake of culture and knowledge that from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward the ascending elites promoted networks of debating and scientific societies, clubs, *public* libraries and museums, and of course a growing press: the rising merchant and industrial classes were building up a new type of sociability that helped them challenge monarchs and aristocrats. The proletarians also need to get together: but for them, *just getting* together is staying within capitalism.

For what’s it worth, democratic reunion is enough for the bourgeoisie. The proletariat needs something else. Proletarian self-organization which fails to develop into a self-critique of wage-labour reinforces labour as the partner of the capital-labour couple: the forced coupling goes on and so does the management of the couple, hence the peaceful coexistence of opposites called democracy.

The partial, confused yet deep communist movement that developed in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century initiated an equally confused yet persistent critique of democracy. Both movement and critique were soon pushed in the background by the rise of organized labour that tried to make the most of bourgeois democracy. Yet every time the movement re-emerged, it got back to basics, and revived some aspects of the critique of democracy.

There’s no need to be an expert in Marxology to know that most of these fundamentals fell into oblivion: some texts got hardly any response, while others were put aside by Marx and Engels and published much later. The “real movement”, as Marx called it, seemed to have very little use for these writings. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new proletarian shock waves led to a reborn critique that (re)discovered these long-forgotten intuitions, but failed to be up to them. Indeed, Bolshevik practice after October 1917 could fall within Marx’s critique of the French revolution and of Jacobinism. As for the worldwide 1960–80 earthquake, in spite, or rather because of its anti-bureaucratic stand, it turned out to be a zenith of democracy (though, unlike the post-1917 period, there was no revolutionary attempt to take over political power in the 1960s and 70s). The theoretical inroads made over 150 years ago have yet to be taken up.



## The democratic appeal

Democracy is attractive because it gives more than the right to select leaders now and then. Its appeal is to provide everyone with the means to go beyond the restricting circles of family, neighbourhood and work, and to interrelate, to meet others, not just those who are close, but all those living on the same territory, and possibly over the borders too. The democratic dream promises a potential universality, the earthly realization of a brotherhood and sisterhood that religion offers in its own way. Marx was not the only one to emphasize the intimate connection between Christianity and the modern State: the former sees each man as the bearer of an individual soul that makes him equal to others in spirit (everyone can be saved); the latter sees each man as politically equal to others (every citizen has a right to vote and be elected).

To fully appreciate the democratic appeal, we should bear in mind what existed before, when formal (i.e. political) equality was unheard of. Not just the ruling elite, but many thinkers and artists showed open contempt for the mass of peasants and workmen that were thought of as an inferior species. Most famous French writers treated the Paris Commune fighters as if they'd been outside or below human standards. Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, hatred of the workers was widespread among the middle and upper classes, in Germany for instance. 1939–45 was the definitive taming of the rabble: with few exceptions, the toiling masses of the world behaved in a patriotic way, so the bourgeois stopped being scared of a populace that looked like it was accepting law and order at last, and now nearly everyone in a Western-type democracy accepts at least verbally the notion that one human being is *worth* another. Yet this equivalence is achieved by comparing quantified items. In democratic capitalism, each human person is my fellow being inasmuch as his vote and mine are added and then computed. Modern citizenship is the bourgeois form of freedom.

## A system which is not its own cause... nor its own cure

Democracy is not responsible for what is or what might be regarded as its positive aspects. Universal franchise never created itself. Civil rights rarely came out of elections or peaceful debates, but out of strikes, demonstrations, riots, usually violent, often with bloodshed. Later, once installed, democracy forgets about its origin and says “the source of power is not to be found in the street”... where indeed it came from. Politics claims to be the basis of social life, but it results from causes that it merely structures. The advent of the Spanish republic in 1931 was caused by decades of strife, rioting and class war that the new regime proved incapable to control, and it took a civil war and a dictatorship to restore order. After Franco's death, the cooling down of social conflicts made possible the transition to a parliamentary system that (unlike in the 1930s) could work as a pacifier and conciliator.

Democrats contend that, contrary to dictatorship, democracy has the merit of being able to correct itself. This is true so long as the mere balance of power is upset. If the structure of political rule is in jeopardy, it's a completely different matter. As democracy has not got its cause in itself, neither has it got the remedy: the solution has to come from outside electoral procedures and parliamentary institutions. The subtleties of Capitol Hill political bargaining were unable to solve the crisis between North and South in the 1860s: it took no less than a bloody civil war, a forerunner of 20<sup>th</sup> century industrialized slaughter. It was not forums or ballot papers that

toppled Mussolini in 1943, but a succession of uncontrollable strikes. It was not a return to the Weimar republic that put an end to Nazism, but a world war. It was only when the French army illegally took over civilian power in Algiers, May 1958, that in Paris politicians were forced to institute a more stable political system, and started realizing the colonial era was over.

Democracy is a remarkable violence filter. But because it is born out of violence, it only overcomes its tragedies by giving way to more violence. Biologists say that one of the definitions of a life form is its ability at reproduction, organization and reorganization. How politically, socially (and intellectually) valid is a phenomenon that's unable to explain itself and to cure itself? How consistent is it? What sort of reality are democracy supporters talking about?

## **And yet it holds out...**

After nearly two centuries of electoral and parliamentary experiences, including endeavours to make some revolutionary use of the universal franchise by radicals from Proudhon to Lenin, and in spite of a thousand betrayals and renunciations of its own principles, modern democracy still soldiers on... and thrives.

In a large part of the world, and in what is known as the developed or rich countries, democracy remains a reality, and a desirable one, because it fits in with the inner logic of the industrial, merchant and wage-labour civilization, therefore with capitalism. Not all capitalism is democratic, far from it, as is shown by Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany, and now by China. But the Third Reich and the USSR yielded to their democratic rivals, and pluto-bureaucratic China's boom will only go on if it accepts substantial doses of freedom of speech. Capitalism is economic competition and there can be no efficient competition among capital (as well as an efficient labour market) without some competition in politics too. Democracy is the most adequate political capitalist form.

Whether we like it or not, democracy is an excellent expression of life under capitalism. It helps maintaining the degree of liberty and equality required by capitalist production and consumption and, up to a point, also required by the necessary forced relationship between labour and capital. While democracy is one of the obstacles that stand in the way of communist revolution, it does serve the interests of labour in its daily inevitable "reformist" action.

To put it bluntly, there's no practical critique of democracy unless there's a critique of capitalism. Accepting or trying to reform capitalism implies accepting or trying to reform its most adequate political form.

There's no point in sorting out bad (bourgeois) democracy and good (direct, worker, popular) democracy. But there's no point either in declaring oneself an *anti*-democrat. Democracy is not the Number One enemy, the ultimate smokescreen that veils the proletarian eyes, the unveiling of which would at long last clear the path to revolution. There are no "anti-democratic" specific actions to be invented, no more than systematic campaigns against advertising billboards or TV — both closely linked to democracy, actually.

The participants in millions of acts of resistance or of attack, be they strikes, demonstrations, flying pickets, insurrections, are well aware that these practices have little to do with parliamentary games, and indeed that they're the exact opposite of parliamentary games. Knowing it does not stop them from calling such practices *democratic*, and from regarding these practices as the only true democracy, because the participants consider as identical democracy and col-

lective freedom, democracy and self-organization. They say they are practising *true* democracy because they self-manage their struggle, do away with the separation between those represented and their representatives, and because the general meeting (unlike parliament) is an assembly of equals: so they often believe they are at last giving reality to what is /a sham/make belief/ in the bourgeois world. Each of them regards democracy as the fact of treating his workmate, the person marching beside him, erecting a barricade with him, or arguing with him in a public meeting, as a fellow human being.

It would be pointless for us to go into a head-on confrontation with him to try and persuade him to stop using the word “democracy”. Democracy’s shortcoming is to treat an indispensable element of revolutionary change as the primary condition of change, or even as its essence. So, in future troubled times, our best contribution will be to push for the most radical possible changes, which include the destruction of the State machinery, and this “communization” process will eventually help people realize that democracy is an alienated form of freedom. If democracy means giving priority to form over content, only a transformation of the social content will put back form where it belongs.

Whenever a movement keeps moving forward and confronting boss and State power, it is not democratic. Democracy is the separation between action and decision.

When, however, and this is bound to be often the case, the content of the movement is compatible with “industrial dispute” arbitration and conciliation, then it’s normal that form and procedure should come to the fore. In the eyes of nearly all participants, organizing the general meeting according to rules becomes more important than what the meeting decides. The meeting is seen as a cause of the strike, more exactly as the cause of its continuation: because it can put an end to the strike, it is now perceived of as its detonator. Reality is put on its head. Democracy is the supremacy of means over the end, and the dissolution of potentialities in forms. So when these workers ideologize their own behaviour as democratic, they are not “wrong”: they reason according to the actual *limits* of their behaviour.

When the fact of asking the rank and file for its opinion breaks the determination of the rank and file, it’s usually because this determination has already declined. In 1994, in one of its French plants, the energy and transport multinational Alstom terminated a strike by calling for a referendum: the personnel voted to return to work. The unions retaliated by having a second referendum: it confirmed the first. “Company (or plant) democracy” was not killing the conflict, it was finishing it off. In fact, after an initial militant phase, the strike had lost its vigour. By submitting to an individual secret ballot, the workers confirmed they had ceased to think of themselves as an acting collective. A community that agrees to give only individual opinions no longer exists as a community.

## **Communism as activity**

Equality is a vital tenet of democracy. Its starting point is the existence of *individuals*: it compares them from a criterion, and wonders if each of them is either inferior or superior to the other according to the chosen criterion. Old time democracy contented itself with “One man, one vote”. Modern democrats will ask for equal pay, equal rights in court, equal schooling, equal access to health service, equal job offers, equal opportunity to create one’s business, equal social promotion, some would say an equal share of existing wealth. As soon as we get into real social

and daily life, the list becomes endless and, to be comprehensive, it has to be negative at some point: equality implies the right *not to be discriminated* against on account of one's sex, colour, sexual preferences, nationality, religion, etc. The whole political spectrum could be defined by how much is included in the list. Rightwing liberals might limit equality rights to electoral rights, while far left reformists extend equality to a guaranteed substantial income, a home, job protection, etc., in an endless debate between personal freedom and social fairness. The rejection of, and the search for social (and not just political) equality are two sides of the same coin. The obsession with equality is born out of a world laden with inequality, a world that dreams of reducing inequality by giving more to each individual, more rights... and more money.

Equality protects individuals. We'd rather start by considering what the members of society are doing together, and what they have and don't have in common. Human beings lose their mastery over the running of their personal and group life when they lose the mastery over their conditions of existence, and first of all over the production of the material basis of these conditions. Our problem is not to find how to make common decisions about what we do, but *to do* what can be decided upon in common, and to *stop or avoid doing* whatever cannot be decided upon in common. A factory run according to Taylor's methods, a nuclear power station, a multinational or the BBC will never come under the management of its personnel. Only a bank that confines itself to micro-credit can remain under some degree of control by the people working there and by those who receive its micro-loans. When a co-op operates on a scale that enables it to rival large companies, its special "democratic" features begin to fade. A school can be self-managed (by staff and schoolkids) as long as it refrains from selecting, grading and streaming. That is fine, and it's probably better to be a teenager in Summerhill than at Eton, but that won't change the school system.

Whoever does not situate the problem of power where it belongs, is bound to leave it in the hands of those who possess power, or to try and share it with them (as social-democracy does), or to take power from them (as Lenin and his party did).

The essence of political thought is to wonder *how to organize* people's lives, instead of considering first what those to-be-organized people *do*.

Communism is not a question of finding the government or self-government best suited to social reorganization. It is not a matter of institutions, but of activity.

## **Self is not enough**

It seems only die-hard party builders could object to autonomy: who wants to be a dependant? Yet we may wonder why autonomy has become a buzzword lately. Trotskysts are not authoritarian any more. Any leftwinger now is all for "autonomy", like nearly every politician looking for working class vote talked of "socialism" in 1910. The popularity of this notion may be a sign of growing radicalism. It certainly also has a lot to do with contemporary daily life and the spaces of freedom it grants us: more open communication channels, new types of leisure, new ways of meeting, making friends and travelling, the "network society", the Internet, etc. All these activities have one thing in common: everyone is at the same time constantly on his own and constantly relating to everyone and everything.

No revolution without autonomy: quite! Autonomy is necessary. But it's not enough. It is not the principle on which everything can or must be based. Autonomy means giving oneself one's own law (*nomos*). It's based on the *self* (*auto*).

Is this what happens in real life?

Everybody wishes collective decisions. So do we. And the best way to get it is for each of us to take part in the decision-making. But once you and I are part of it, we still have to make the decision. Is this "self" strong enough? Autonomists have their answer ready; the individual self may be weak, but the collective self is strong. Who's being naïve here? Adding individual wills only transforms them into something qualitatively different if and when they act differently. So we're back to where we started. Aggregating selves widens the scope of the problem without solving it. The solution can only come, not from what autonomy is supposed to give us, but from what it is founded upon. Autonomy in itself is no more creative than any form of organization.

Many radicals believe in the equation *autonomy + anti-State violence = revolutionary movement* and see it vindicated for instance in the Oaxaca protracted insurrection. While this event is one of the strongest outbursts of proletarian activity in the recent years, it demonstrates that autonomous violence is necessary and insufficient. A revolutionary movement is more than a liberated area or a hundred liberated areas. It develops by fighting public and private repression, as well as by starting to change the material basis of social relationship. No self-managed street fighting and grassroots district solidarity, however indispensable they are, inevitably contain the acts and the intentions that bring about such a change. So it's *the nature of the change* we've got to insist upon: creating a world without money, without commodity exchange, without labour being bought and sold, without firms as competing poles of value accumulation, without work as separate from the rest of our activities, without a State, without a specialized political sphere supposedly cut off from our social relationships... In other words, a revolution that is born out of a common refusal to submit, out of the hope to get to a point of no return where people transform themselves and gain a sense of their own power as they transform reality.

October, 2008

### **P.S. 1**

The best concise pamphlet on the subject that we know of is *Communism Against Democracy*, Treason Press, Canberra, Australia, 2005, composed of two texts by *Wildcat* (Britain) and *Against Sleep And Nightmare* (US). Available on the Treason website.

See also J. Camatte, *The Democratic Mystification*, 1969.

### **P.S. 2 for (possible) political correctors.**

Most of the time, this essay uses "he" and "man" as a means to say "he & she", "man & woman". This is not out of neglect of the other half of our species. This *he* does not mean *male*. It's the grammatical *neuter* which encompasses both masculine and feminine. We're well aware that no grammar is socially or sexually neutral. A better society will create better words. For the time being, the old fashioned neuter form has at least the advantage of not giving us the illusion of false equality in speech. The reader who's gone that far would not expect us to believe in democracy in language.

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Gilles Dauvé  
A Contribution to the Critique of Political Autonomy  
October 2008

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