

The Democratic Principle

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Contents

| | |
|------------|-----------|
| I | 4 |
| II | 6 |
| III | 9 |
| IV | 11 |
| V | 15 |

The use of certain terms in the exposition of the problems of communism very often engenders ambiguities because of the different meanings these terms may be given. Such is the case with the words *democracy* and *democratic*. In its statements of principle, Marxist communism presents itself as a critique and a negation of democracy; yet communists often defend the democratic character of proletarian organizations (the state system of workers' councils, trade unions and the party) and the application of democracy within them. There is certainly no contradiction in this, and no objection can be made to the use of the dilemma, "either bourgeois democracy or proletarian democracy" as a perfect equivalent to the formula "bourgeois democracy or proletarian dictatorship".

The Marxist critique of the postulates of bourgeois democracy is in fact based on the definition of the class character of modern society. It demonstrates the theoretical inconsistency and the practical deception of a system which pretends to reconcile political equality with the division of society into social classes determined by the nature of the mode of production.

Political freedom and equality, which, according to the theory of liberalism, are expressed in the right to vote, have no meaning except on a basis that excludes inequality of fundamental economic conditions. For this reason we communists accept their application within the class organizations of the proletariat and contend that they should function democratically.

In order to avoid creating ambiguities, and dignifying the concept of democracy, so entrenched in the prevailing ideology which we strive relentlessly to demolish, it would be desirable to use a different term in each of the two cases. Even if we do not do this, it is nonetheless useful to look a little further into the very content of the democratic principle, both in general and in its application to homogeneous class organs. This is necessary to eliminate the danger of again raising the democratic principle to an absolute principle of truth and justice. Such a relapse into apriorism would introduce an element foreign to our entire theoretical framework at the very moment when we are trying, by means of our critique, to sweep away the deceptive and arbitrary content of "liberal" theories.

I

A theoretical error is always at the root of an error of political tactics. In other words, it is the translation of the tactical error into the language of our collective critical consciousness. Thus the pernicious politics and tactics of social-democracy are reflected in the error of principle that presents socialism as the inheritor of a substantial part of the doctrine that liberalism opposed to the old spiritualist doctrines. In reality, far from ever accepting and completing the critique that democratic liberalism had raised against the aristocratic and absolute monarchies of the *ancien regime*, Marxist socialism in its earliest formulations demolished it utterly. It did so not to defend the spiritualist or idealist doctrine against the Voltairean materialism of the bourgeois revolutionaries, but to demonstrate how the theoreticians of bourgeois materialism had in reality only deluded themselves when they imagined that the political philosophy of the Encyclopedists had led them out of the mists of metaphysics and idealist nonsense. In fact, like all their predecessors, they had to surrender to the genuinely objective critique of social and historical phenomena provided by Marx's historical materialism.

It is also important from a theoretical point of view to demonstrate that no idealist or neo-idealist revision of our principles is needed to deepen the abyss between socialism and bourgeois democracy, to restore to the theory of proletarian revolution its powerfully revolutionary content which had been adulterated by the falsifications of those who fornicate with bourgeois democracy. It is enough merely to refer to the positions taken by the founders of Marxism in the face of the lies of liberal doctrines and of bourgeois materialism.

To return to our argument, we will show that the socialist critique of democracy was in essence a critique of the democratic critique of the old political philosophies. Marxism denies their alleged universal opposition and demonstrates that in reality they are theoretically similar, just as in practise the proletariat did not have much reason to celebrate when the direction of society passed from the hands of the feudal, monarchical and religious nobility into the hands of the young commercial and industrial bourgeoisie. And the theoretical demonstration that the new bourgeois philosophy had not overcome the old errors of the despotic regimes, but was itself only an edifice of new sophisms, corresponded concretely to the appearance of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat which contained the negation of the bourgeois claim of having forever established the administration of society on a peaceful and infinitely perfectible basis, thanks to the introduction of suffrage and of parliamentary democracy.

The old political doctrines based on spiritualist concepts or even on religious revelation claimed that the supernatural forces which govern the consciousness and the will of men had assigned to certain individuals, families or castes, the task of ruling and managing the collective existence, making them the repositories of "authority" by divine right. To this, the democratic philosophy which asserted itself at the time of the bourgeois revolution counterposed the proclamation of the moral, political and juridical equality of all citizens, whether they were nobles, clerics or plebeians. It sought to transfer "sovereignty" from the narrow sphere of caste or dynasty to

the universal sphere of popular consultation based on suffrage which allowed a majority of the citizens to designate the leaders of the state, according to its will.

The thunderbolts hurled against this conception by the priests of all religions and by spiritualist philosophers do not suffice to give it recognition as the definitive victory of truth over obscurantist error, even if the “rationalism” of this political philosophy seemed for a long time to be the last word in social science and the art of politics, and even if many would-be socialists proclaimed their solidarity with it. This claim that the time of “privilege” was over, once a system with its social hierarchy based on the consent of the majority of electors had been set up, does not withstand the Marxist critique, which throws a completely different light on the nature of social phenomena. This claim may look like an attractive logical construction only if it is admitted from the outset that the *vote*, that is, the judgement, the opinion, the consciousness of each elector has the same weight in delegating power for the administration of the collective business. It is already evident that this conception is unrealistic and unmaterialist because it considers each individual to be a perfect “unit” within a system made up of many potentially equivalent units, and instead of appraising the value of the individual’s opinion in the light of his manifold conditions of existence, that is, his relations with others, it postulates this value *a priori* with the hypothesis of the “sovereignty” of the individual. Again this amounts to denying that the consciousness of men is a concrete reflection of the facts and material conditions of their existence, to viewing it as a spark ignited with the same providential fairness in each organism, healthy or impaired, tormented or harmoniously satisfied in all its needs, by some undefinable supreme bestower of life. In the democratic theory, this supreme being no longer designates a monarch, but confers on everyone the equal capacity to do so! In spite of its rationalist front, the democratic theory rests on a no less childish metaphysical premise than does “free will”, which, according to the catholic doctrine of the afterlife, wins men either damnation or salvation. Because it places itself outside of time and historical contingencies, the democratic theory is no less tainted with spiritualism than are the equally erroneous philosophies of revelation and monarchy by divine right.

To further extend this comparison, it is sufficient to remember that many centuries before the French Revolution and the declaration of the rights of man and citizen, the democratic political doctrine had been advanced by thinkers who took their stand resolutely on the terrain of idealism and metaphysical philosophy. Moreover, if the French Revolution toppled the altars of the Christian god in the name of Reason, it was, wittingly or not, only to make Reason into a new divinity.

This metaphysical presupposition, incompatible with the Marxist critique, is characteristic not only of the doctrine constructed by bourgeois liberalism, but also of all the constitutional doctrines and plans for a new society based on the “intrinsic value” of certain schemes of social and state relations. In building its own doctrine of history, Marxism in fact demolished medieval idealism, bourgeois liberalism and utopian socialism with a single blow.

II

To these arbitrary constructions of social constitutions, whether aristocratic or democratic, authoritarian or liberal, as well as to the anarchist conception of a society without hierarchy or delegation of power, which is rooted in analogous errors, the communist critique opposed a much more thorough study of the nature and causes of social relations in their complex evolution throughout human history and a careful analysis of their characteristics in the present capitalist epoch from which it drew a series of reasoned hypotheses about their further evolution. To this can now be added the enormous theoretical and practical contribution of the proletarian revolution in Russia.

It would be superfluous here to develop the well-known concepts of economic determinism and the arguments which justify its use in interpreting historical events and the social dynamic. The apriorism common to conservatives and utopians is eliminated by the analysis of factors rooted in production, the economy, and the class relations they determine. This makes possible a scientific explanation of the juridical, political, military, religious and cultural facts which make up the diverse manifestations of social life.

We will merely retrace the historical evolution of the mode of social organization and grouping of men, not only in the state, an abstract representation of a collectivity fusing together all individuals, but also in other organizations which arise from the relations between men.

The basis of the interpretation of every social hierarchy, whether extended or limited, is the relations between different individuals, and the basis of these relations is the division of tasks and functions among these individuals.

We can imagine without serious error that at the beginning the human species existed in a completely unorganized form. Still few in number, these individuals could live from the products of nature without the application of technology or labour and in such conditions could do without their fellow beings. The only existing relations, common to all species, were those of reproduction. But for the human species — and not only for it — these were already sufficient to form a system of relations with its own hierarchy — the family. This could be based on polygamy, polyandry or monogamy. We will not enter into a detailed analysis here; let us say only that the family represents an embryo of organized collective life, based on a division of functions directly determined by physiological factors, since the mother nourished and raised the children, and the father devoted himself to the hunt, to the acquisition of plunder and to the protection of the family from external enemies, etc.

In this initial phase, where production and economy are almost totally absent, as well as in later stages when they are developing, it is useless to dwell on the abstract question of whether we are dealing with the individual-unit or the society-unit. Without any doubt, the individual is a unit from a biological point of view, but one cannot make this individual the basis of social organization without falling into metaphysical nonsense. From a social perspective, all the individual units do not have the same value. The collectivity is born from relations and groupings in which the status and activity of each individual do not derive from an individual function but from a

collective one determined by the multiple influences of the social milieu. Even in the elementary case of an unorganized society or non-society, the simple physiological basis which produces family organization is already sufficient to refute the arbitrary doctrine of the individual as an indivisible unit free to combine with other fellow units, without ceasing to be distinct from, yet somehow, equivalent to them. In this case, obviously the society-unit does not exist either, since relations between men, even reduced to the simple notion that others exist, are extremely limited and restricted to the sphere of the family or the clan. The self-evident conclusion can be drawn in advance: the society-unit has never existed and probably never will except as a “limit” which can be brought progressively nearer by the disappearance of the boundaries of classes and states.

Setting out from the individual-unit in order to draw social conclusions and to construct social blueprints or even in order to deny society, is setting out from an unreal supposition which, even in its most modern formulations, only amounts to refurbishing the concepts of religious revelation and creation and of a spiritual life which is not dependent upon natural and organic life. The divine creator — or a single power governing the destiny of the universe has given each individual this elementary property of being an autonomous well-defined molecule endowed with consciousness, will and responsibility within the social aggregate, independent of contingent factors deriving from the physical influence of the environment. Only the appearance of this religious and idealist conception is modified in the doctrine of democratic liberalism or libertarian individualism. The soul as a spark from the supreme Being, the subjective sovereignty of each elector, or the unlimited autonomy of the citizen of a society without laws — these are so many sophisms which, in the eyes of the Marxist critique, are tainted with the same infantile idealism, no matter how resolutely “materialist” the first bourgeois liberals and anarchists may have been.

This conception finds its match in the equally idealist hypothesis of the perfect social unit — of social monism — based on the divine will which is supposed to govern and administer the life of our species. Returning to the primitive stage of social life which we were considering and to the family organization discovered there, we conclude that we do not need such metaphysical hypotheses of the individual-unit and the society-unit in order to interpret the life of the species and the process of its evolution. On the other hand, we can positively state that we are dealing with a type of *collectivity organized on a unitary basis*, i.e. the family. We take care not to make this a fixed or permanent type or to idealize it as the model form of the social collectivity, as anarchism or absolute monarchy do with the individual. Rather we simply record the existence of the family as the primary unit of human organization, which will be succeeded by others, which itself will be modified in many aspects, and which will become a constituent element of other collective organizations, or, one may suppose, will disappear in very advanced social forms. We do not feel at all obliged to be for or against the family in principle, any more than, for example, for or against the state. What does concern us is to grasp the evolutionary direction of these types of human organization. When we ask ourselves whether they will disappear one day, we do so objectively, because it could not occur to us to think of them as sacred and eternal, or as pernicious and to be destroyed. Conservatism and its opposite (i.e. the negation of every form of organization and social hierarchy) are equally weak from a critical view-point, and equally sterile.

Thus leaving aside the traditional opposition between the categories individual and society, we follow the formation and the evolution of other *units* in our study of human history: organized human collectivities, broad or restricted groupings of men with a hierarchy based on a division of functions, which appear as the real factors and agents of social life. Such units can in a certain

sense be compared to organic units, to living organisms whose cells, with their different functions and values, can be represented by men or by rudimentary groups of men. However the analogy is not complete, since while a living organism has well-defined limits and obeys the inflexible biological laws of its growth and death, organized social units do not have fixed boundaries and are continually being renewed, mingling with one another, simultaneously splitting and recombining. If we dwell on the first conspicuous example of the family unit, it was to demonstrate the following: if these units which we are considering are clearly composed of individuals and if their very composition is variable, they nonetheless behave like organic and integral "wholes", such that to split them into individual units has no real meaning and is tantamount to a myth. The family element constitutes a whole whose life does not depend on the number of individuals that comprise it, but on the network of their relationships. To take a crude example, a family composed of the head, the wives and a few feeble old men is not equal to another made up of its head and many strong young men.

Setting out from the family, the first organized social form, where one finds the first example of division of functions, the first hierarchies, the first forms of authority and the direction of individuals' activities and the administration of things, human evolution passes through an infinite series of other organizational forms, increasingly broad and complex. The reason for this increasing complexity lies in the growing complexity of social relations and hierarchies born from the ever-increasing differentiation between functions. The latter is directly determined by the systems of production that technology and science place at the disposal of human activity in order to provide an increasing number of products suited to satisfying the needs of larger societies evolving towards higher forms of life. An analysis which seeks to understand the process of formation and change of different human organizations, as well as the interplay of relations within the whole of society, must be based on the notion of the development of productive technology and the economic relations which arise from the distribution of individuals among the different tasks required by the productive mechanism. The formation and evolution of dynasties, castes, armies, states, empires, corporations and parties can and must be studied on the basis of these elements. One can imagine that at the highest point of this complex development a kind of organized unit will appear which will encompass all of mankind and which will establish a rational division of functions between all men. What significance and limits the hierarchical system of collective administration will have in this higher form of human social life is a matter for further study.

III

To examine those unitary bodies whose internal relations are regulated by what is generally called the “democratic principle”, for reasons of simplicity we will distinguish between organized collectivities whose hierarchies are imposed from outside and those that choose their own hierarchy from within. According to the religious conception and the pure doctrine of authority, in every epoch human society is a collective unit which receives its hierarchy from supernatural powers. We will not repeat the critique of such a metaphysical over-simplification which is contradicted by our whole experience. It is the necessity of the division of functions which gives rise naturally to hierarchies; and this is what has happened in the case of the family. As it develops into a tribe or horde, it must organize itself in order to struggle against rival tribes. Leadership must be entrusted to those most able to use the communal energies, and military hierarchies emerge in response to this need. This criterion of choice in the common interest appeared thousands of years before modern democratic electoralism; in the beginning kings, military chiefs and priests were elected. In the course of time, other criteria for the formation of hierarchies prevailed, giving rise to caste privileges transmitted by inheritance or even by initiation into closed schools, sects and cults. Nevertheless, in normal practice, accession to a given rank and inheritance of that rank were motivated by the possession of special aptitudes. We do not intend to follow here the whole process of the formation of castes and then of classes within society. We will only say that their appearance no longer corresponds to the logical necessity of a division of functions alone, but also to the fact that certain strata occupying a privileged position in the economic mechanism end up monopolizing power and social influence. In one way or another, every ruling caste provides itself with its own organization, its own hierarchy, and likewise, economically privileged classes. To limit ourselves to one example — the landed aristocracy of the Middle Ages, by uniting itself for the defence of its common privileges against the assaults of the other classes, constructed an organizational form culminating in the monarchy, which concentrated public powers in its own hands to the complete exclusion of the other layers of the population. The state of the feudal epoch was the organization of the feudal nobility supported by the clergy. The principal element of coercion of the military monarchy was the army. Here we have a type of organized collectivity whose hierarchy was instituted from without since it was the king who bestowed the ranks, and in the army, passive obedience was the rule. Every form of state concentrates under one authority the organizing and officering of a whole series of executive hierarchies: the army, police, magistracy, bureaucracy. Thus the state makes material use of the activity of individuals from all classes, but it is organized on the basis of a single or a few privileged classes which appropriate the power to constitute its different hierarchies. The other classes, and in general all groups of individuals for whom it was only too evident that the state, in spite of its claims, by no means guaranteed the interests of everyone, seek to provide themselves with their own organizations in order to make their own interests prevail. Their point of departure is that their members occupy an identical position in production and economic life.

As for organizations which provide themselves with their own hierarchy, if we ask what is the best way to ensure the defence of the collective interests and to avoid the formation of privileged strata, some will propose the democratic method whose principle lies in using the majority opinion to select those to fill the various offices.

Our critique of such a method must be much more severe when it is applied to the whole of society as it is today, or to given nations, than when it is introduced into much more restricted organizations, such as trade unions and parties.

In the first case it must be rejected without hesitation as without foundation, since it takes no account of the situation of individuals in the economy and since it presupposes the intrinsic perfection of the system without taking into consideration the historical evolution of the collectivity to which it is applied.

The division of society into classes distinguished by economic privilege clearly removes all value from majority decision-making. Our critique refutes the deceitful theory that the democratic and parliamentary state machine which arose from modern liberal constitutions is an organization of all citizens in the interests of all citizens. From the moment that opposing interests and class conflicts exist, there can be no unity of organization, and in spite of the outward appearance of popular sovereignty, the state remains the organ of the economically dominant class and the instrument of defence of its interests. In spite of the application of the democratic system to political representation, bourgeois society appears as a complex network of unitary bodies. Many of these, which spring from the privileged layers and tend to preserve the present social apparatus, gather around the powerful centralized organism of the political state. Others may be neutral or may have a changing attitude towards the state. Finally, others arise within the economically oppressed and exploited layers and are directed against the class state. Communism demonstrates that the formal juridical and political application of the democratic and majority principle to all citizens while society is divided into opposed classes in relation to the economy, is incapable of making the state an organizational unit of the whole society or the whole nation. Officially that is what political democracy claims to be, whereas in reality it is the form suited to the power of the capitalist class, to the dictatorship of this particular class, for the purpose of preserving its privileges.

Therefore it is not necessary to devote much time to refuting the error of attributing the same degree of independence and maturity to the vote of each elector, whether he is a worker exhausted by excessive physical labour or a rich dissolute, a shrewd captain of industry or an unfortunate proletarian ignorant of the causes of his misery and the means of remedying them. From time to time, after long intervals, the opinion of these and others is solicited, and it is claimed that the accomplishment of this "sovereign" duty is sufficient to ensure calm and the obedience of whoever feels victimized and ill-treated by the state policies and administration.

IV

It is clear that the principle of democracy has no intrinsic virtue. It is not a “*principle*”, but rather a simple *mechanism* of organization, responding to the simple and crude arithmetical presumption that the majority is right and the minority is wrong. Now we shall see if and to what extent this mechanism is useful and sufficient for the functioning of organizations comprising more restricted collectivities which are not divided by economic antagonisms. To do this, these organizations must be considered in their process of historical development.

Is this democratic mechanism applicable in the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. in the state form born from the revolutionary victory of rebel classes against the power of the bourgeois states? Can this form of state, on account of its internal mechanism of the delegation of powers and of the formation of hierarchies, thus be defined as a “proletarian democracy”? The question should be broached without prejudice, because if although we might reach the conclusion that the democratic mechanism is useful under certain conditions, as long as history has not produced a better mechanism, we must be convinced that there is not the slightest reason to establish *a priori* the concept of the sovereignty of the “majority” of the proletariat. In fact the day after the revolution, the proletariat will not yet be a totally homogeneous collectivity nor will it be the only class. In Russia for example, power is in the hands of the working class and the peasantry, but if we consider the entire development of the revolutionary movement, it is easy to demonstrate that the industrial proletarian class, although much less numerous than the peasantry, nevertheless plays a far more important role. Then it is logical that the Soviet mechanism accords much more value to the vote of a worker than that of a peasant.

We do not intend to examine thoroughly here the characteristics of the proletarian state constitution. We will not consider it metaphysically as something absolute, as reactionaries do the divine right of the monarchy, liberals, parliamentarism based on universal suffrage, and anarchists, the non-state. As it is an organization of one class destined to strip the opposing classes of their economic privileges, the proletarian state is a real historical force which adapts itself to the goal it pursues, that is, to the necessities which gave birth to it. At certain moments its impulse may come from either broad mass consultations or from the action of very restricted executive organs endowed with full powers. What is essential is to give this organization of proletarian power the means and weapons to destroy bourgeois economic privilege and the political and military resistance of the bourgeoisie, in a way that prepares for the subsequent disappearance of classes themselves, and for the more and more profound modifications of the tasks and structure of the proletarian state.

One thing is sure — while bourgeois democracy’s real goal is to deprive the large proletarian and petty-bourgeois masses of all influence in the control of the state, reserved for the big industrial, banking and agricultural oligarchies, the proletarian dictatorship must be able to involve the broadest layers of the proletarian and even semi-proletarian masses in the struggle that it embodies. But only those who are the victims of democratic prejudice could imagine that attaining this end merely requires the setting up of a vast mechanism of electoral consultation. This may be

excessive or — more often — insufficient, because this form of participation by many proletarians may result in their not taking part in other more active manifestations of the class struggle. On the other hand, the intensity of the struggle in particular phases demands speed of decision and movement and a centralized organization of efforts in a common direction, which, as the Russian experience is demonstrating with a whole series of examples, imposes on the proletarian state constitutional characteristics which are in open contradiction to the canons of bourgeois democracy. Supporters of bourgeois democracy howl about the violation of liberties, whereas it is only a matter of unmasking the philistine prejudices which have always allowed demagogues to ensure power to the privileged. In the dictatorship of the proletariat, the constitutional mechanism of the state organization is not only consultative, but at the same time executive. Participation in the functions of political life, if not of the whole mass of electors, then at least of a wide layer of their delegates, is not intermittent but continuous. It is interesting to note that this is accomplished without at all harming the unitary character of the action of the whole state apparatus — rather to the contrary. And this is thanks precisely to the criteria opposed to those of bourgeois hyperliberalism, that is, virtual suppression of *direct* elections and *proportional* representation, once, as we have seen, the other sacred dogma of the *equal* vote, has been overthrown.

We do not claim that these new criteria introduced into the representative mechanism, or codified in a constitution, stem from reasons of principle. Under new circumstances, the criteria could be different. In any case we are attempting to make it clear that we do not attribute any intrinsic value to these forms of organization and representation. This is translated into a fundamental Marxist thesis: the revolution is not a problem of forms of organization. On the contrary, the revolution is a problem of content, a problem of the movement and action of revolutionary forces in an unending process, which cannot be theorized and crystallized in any scheme for an immutable “constitutional doctrine”.

In any case, in the mechanisms of the workers’ councils we find no trace of the rule of bourgeois democracy, which states that each citizen directly chooses his delegate to the supreme representative body, the parliament. On the contrary, there are different levels of workers’ and peasants’ councils, each one with a broader territorial base culminating in the congress of Soviets. Each local or district council elects its delegates to a higher council, and in the same way elects its own administration, i.e. its executive organ. At the base, in the city or rural council, the entire mass is consulted. In the election of delegates to higher councils and local administrative offices, each group of electors votes not according to a proportional system, but according to a majority system, choosing its delegates from lists put forward by the parties. Furthermore, since a single delegate is sufficient to establish a link between a lower and higher council, it is clear that the two dogmas of formal liberalism — voting for several members from a list and proportional representation — fall by the wayside. At each level, the councils must give rise to organs that are both consultative and administrative and directly linked to the central administration. Thus it is natural that as one progresses towards higher representative organs, one does not encounter parliamentary assemblies of chatterboxes who discuss interminably without ever acting; rather, one sees compact and homogeneous bodies capable of directing the action and political struggle, and of giving revolutionary guidance to the whole mass thus organized in a unitary fashion.

These capacities, which are definitely not automatically inherent in any constitutional schema, are reached in this mechanism because of the presence of an extremely important factor, the political party, whose content goes far beyond pure organizational form, and whose collective and active consciousness and will allow the work to be oriented according to the requirements of a

long and always advancing process. Of all the organs of the proletarian dictatorship, the political party is the one whose characteristics most nearly approach those of a homogeneous unitary collectivity, unified in action. In reality, it only encompasses a minority of the mass, but the properties which distinguish it from all other broad-based forms of representative organization demonstrate precisely that the party represents the collective interests and movement better than any other organ. All party members participate directly in accomplishing the common task and prepare themselves to resolve the problems of the revolutionary struggle and the reconstruction of society, which the majority of the mass only become aware of when they are actually faced with them. For all these reasons, in a system of representation and delegation based not on the democratic lie but on a layer of the population whose common fundamental interests propel them on the course of revolution, it is natural that the choices fall spontaneously on elements put forward by the revolutionary party, which is equipped to respond to the demands of the struggle and to resolve the problems for which it has been able to prepare itself. We do not attribute these capacities of the party to its particular constitution, anymore than we do in the case of any other organization. The party may or may not be suited to its task of leading the revolutionary action of a class; it is not any political party but a precise one, namely the communist party, that can assume this task, and not even the communist party is immune to the numerous dangers of degeneration and dissolution. What makes the party equal to its task is not its statutes or mere internal organizational measures. It is the positive characteristics which develop within the party because it participates in the struggle as an organization possessing a single orientation which derives from its conception of the historical process, form a fundamental programme which has been translated into a collective consciousness and at the same time from a secure organizational discipline.

To return to the nature of the constitutional mechanism of the proletarian dictatorship — of which we have already said that it was executive as well as legislative at all levels — we must add something to specify what tasks of the collective life this mechanism's executive functions and initiatives respond to. These functions and initiatives are the very reason for its formation, and they determine the relationships existing within its continually evolving elastic mechanism. We refer here to the initial period of proletarian power whose image we have in the four and a half years that the proletarian dictatorship has existed in Russia, because we do not wish to speculate as to what the definitive basis of the representative organs will be in a classless communist society. We cannot predict how exactly society will evolve as it approaches this stage; we can only envisage that it will move in the direction of a fusion of various political, administrative and economic organs, and at the same time, a progressive elimination of every element of coercion and of the state itself as an instrument of power of one class and a weapon of struggle against the surviving enemy classes.

In its initial period, the proletarian dictatorship has an extremely difficult and complex task that can be subdivided into three spheres of action: political, military and economic. Military defence against counter-revolutionary attacks from within and without and the reconstruction of society on a collective basis depend upon a systematic and rational plan of activity which, while utilizing the diverse energies of the whole mass with the maximum efficiency and results, must also achieve a powerful unity. As a consequence, the body which leads the struggle against the domestic and foreign enemy, that is, the revolutionary army and police, must be based on discipline, and its hierarchy must be centralized in the hands of the proletarian power. The Red Army

itself is thus an organized unit whose hierarchy is imposed from without by the government of the proletarian state, and the same is true for the revolutionary police and tribunals.

The problems of the economic apparatus which the victorious proletariat erects in order to lay the foundations of the new system of production and distribution is more complex. The characteristic that distinguishes this rational administration from the “chaos” of bourgeois private economy is centralization. Every enterprise must be managed in the interest of the entire collectivity and in harmony with the requirements of the whole plan of production and distribution. On the other hand, the economic apparatus (and the groups of individuals that comprise it) is continually being modified, not only through its own gradual development but also by the inevitable crises in a period of such vast transformations, which cannot be without political and military struggles. These considerations lead to the following conclusions: in the initial period of the proletarian dictatorship, although the councils at different levels must appoint their delegates to the local executive organs as well as to the legislative organs at higher levels, the absolute responsibility for military defence, and in a less rigid way, for the economic campaign, must remain with the centre. For their part, the local organs serve to organize the masses politically so that they will participate in fulfilling the plans and accept military and economic organization. They thereby create the conditions for the broadest and most continuous mass activity possible, and can channel this activity towards the formation of a highly centralized proletarian state.

These considerations certainly are not intended to deny all possibility of movement and initiative to the intermediary organs of the state hierarchy. But we wanted to show that one cannot theorize that they must be formed by the application of groups of electors organized on the basis of factories or army divisions to the revolution’s executive tasks of maintaining military or economic order. The structure of such groups is simply not able to confer any special abilities on them. The units in which the electors are grouped at the base can therefore be formed according to empirical criteria. In fact they *will* constitute themselves according to empirical criteria, among which, for instance, the convergence in the workplace, the neighbourhood, the garrison, the battlefield or any other situation in daily life, without any of them being excluded *a priori* or held up as a model. This does not prevent the representative organs of the proletarian state from being based on a territorial division into electoral districts. None of these considerations is absolute, and this takes us back to our thesis that no constitutional schema has the value of a principle, and that majority democracy in the formal and arithmetic sense is only one possible method for coordinating the relations that arise within collective organizations. No matter what point of view one takes, it is impossible to attribute to it an intrinsic character of necessity or justice. For Marxists these terms have no meaning. Therefore we do not propose to substitute for the democratic schema which we have been criticizing any other schema of a state apparatus which in itself will be exempt from defects and errors.

V

It seems to us that enough has been said about the democratic principle in its application to the bourgeois state, which claims to embrace all classes, and also in its application to the proletarian class exclusively as the basis of the state after the revolutionary victory. Something should be said about the application of the democratic mechanism to organizations existing within the proletariat before (and also after) the conquest of power, i.e. in trade unions and the political party.

We established above that a true organizational unity is only possible on the basis of an identity of interests among the members. Since one joins unions or parties by virtue of a spontaneous decision to participate in a specific kind of action, a critique which absolutely denies any value to the democratic mechanism in the case of the bourgeois state (i.e. a fallacious constitutional union of all classes) is not applicable here. Nevertheless, even in the case of the party and the trade union it is necessary not to be led astray by the arbitrary concept of the “sanctity” of majority decisions.

In contrast to the party, the trade union is characterized by the virtual identity of its members' immediate material interests. Within the limits of the category, it attains a broad homogeneity of composition and it is an organization with voluntary membership. It tends to become an organization which all the workers of a given category or industry join automatically or are even, as in a certain phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat, obliged to join. It is certain that in this domain number remains the decisive factor and the majority decision has a great value, but we cannot confine ourselves to a schematic consideration of its results. It is also necessary to take into account other factors which come into play in the life of the union organization: a bureaucratized hierarchy of functionaries which paralyses the union under its tutelage, and the vanguard groups that the revolutionary party has established within it in order to lead it onto the terrain of revolutionary action. In this struggle, communists often point out that the functionaries of the union bureaucracy violate the democratic idea and are contemptuous of the will of the majority. It is correct to denounce this because the right-wing union bosses parade a democratic mentality, and it is necessary to point out their contradictions. We do the same with bourgeois liberals each time they coerce and falsify the popular consultation, without proposing that even a free consultation would resolve the problems which weigh on the proletariat. It is right and opportune to do this because in the moments when the broad masses are forced into action by the pressure of the economic situation, it is possible to turn aside the union bureaucrats' influence, which is in substance an extra-proletarian influence of classes and organizations alien to the trade union, thereby augmenting the influence of the revolutionary groups. But in all this there are no “constitutional” prejudices, and communists, provided that they are understood by the masses and can demonstrate to them that they are acting in the direction of their most immediate felt interests, can and must behave in a flexible way vis-à-vis the canons of formal democracy. For example, there is no contradiction between these two tactical attitudes: on one hand, taking the responsibility of representing the minority in the leadership organs of the unions

insofar as the statutes allow; and on the other hand, stating that this statutory representation should be suppressed once we have conquered these organizations in order to speed up their actions. What should guide us in this question is a careful analysis of the developmental process in the unions in the present phase. We must accelerate their transformation from organs of counter-revolutionary influence on the proletariat into organs of revolutionary struggle. The criteria of internal organization have no value in themselves but only insofar as they contribute to this objective.

We now analyze the party organization which we have already touched on in regard to the mechanism of the worker's state. The party does not start from as complete an identity of economic interests as does the union. On the contrary it bases the unity of its organization not on category, like the union, but on the much broader basis of the entire class. This is true not only in space, since the party strives to become international, but also in time, since it is the specific organ whose consciousness and action reflect the requirements of victory throughout the process of the proletariat's revolutionary emancipation. When we study the problems of party structure and internal organization, these well-known considerations force us to keep in mind the whole process of its formation and life in relation to the complex tasks which it continually has to carry out. At the end of this already long exposition, we cannot enter into details of the mechanism which should regulate consultation of the party's mass membership, their recruitment and the designation of responsible officers. There is no doubt that for the moment there is nothing better to do than hold to the majority principle. But as we have emphasized, there is no reason to raise use of the democratic mechanism to a principle. Besides its consultative functions, analogous to the legislative tasks of the state apparatus, the party has executive tasks which at the crucial moment of the struggle, correspond to those of an army and which demand maximum discipline toward the hierarchy. In fact, in the complex process which has led to the formation of communist parties, the emergence of a hierarchy is a real and dialectical phenomenon which has remote origins and which corresponds to the entire past experience of the functioning of the party's mechanism. We cannot state that the decisions of the party majority are *per se* as correct as those of the infallible supernatural judges who are supposed to have given human societies their leaders, like the gods believed in by all those who think that the Holy Spirit participates in papal conclaves. Even in an organization like the party where the broad composition is a result of selection through spontaneous voluntary membership and control of recruitment, the decision of the majority is not intrinsically the best. If it contributes to a better working of the party's executive bodies, this is only because of the coincidence of individual efforts in a unitary and well-oriented work. We will not propose at this time replacing this mechanism by another and we will not examine in detail what such a new system might be. But we can envisage a mode of organization which will be increasingly liberated from the conventions of the democratic principle, and it will not be necessary to reject it out of unjustified fears if one day it can be shown that other methods of decision, of choice, of resolution of problems are more consistent with the real demands of the party's development and its activity in the framework of history.

The democratic criterion has been for us so far a material and incidental factor in the construction of our internal organization and the formulation of our party statutes; it is not an indispensable platform for them. Therefore we will not raise the organizational formula known as "democratic centralism" to the level of a principle. Democracy cannot be a principle for us. Centralism is indisputably one, since the essential characteristics of party organization must be unity of structure and action. The term *centralism* is sufficient to express the continuity of party

structure in space; in order to introduce the essential idea of continuity in time, the historical continuity of the struggle which, surmounting successive obstacles, always advances towards the same goal, and in order to combine these two essential ideas of unity in the same formula, we would propose that the communist party base its organization on “organic centralism”. While preserving as much of the incidental democratic mechanism that can be used, we will eliminate the use of the term “democracy”, which is dear to the worst demagogues but tainted with irony for the exploited, oppressed and cheated, abandoning it to the exclusive usage of the bourgeoisie and the champions of liberalism in their diverse guises and sometimes extremist poses.

Amadeo Bordiga
The Democratic Principle
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<https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1922/democratic-principle.htm>