

Chapter VI

THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

The Socialist theoreticians of the period represented by the First and Second Internationals studiously avoided all discussion of the detailed form of organization and concrete policies of the proposed Socialist government. Not the methods of exercising governmental powers, but the means of acquiring them was on the order of the day. The "scientific" Marxian Socialist was satisfied to rest on the theory that when the revolutionary working class will be strong enough to "capture" the powers of government it will use them for the establishment of Socialism in such manner and by such means as the conditions of the struggle at the given time and place will determine. Beyond that he refused to speculate. In his famous letter of criticism of the Gotha program of the German Social Democratic Party, in 1875, Marx dismissed the subject with this terse sentence: "The program at this time does not have to deal with the period of transition (from capitalism to Socialism) any more than with the nature of the future state in the Communist Society,"¹ and for forty years there-

¹ "À Propos D'Unité," Paris, 1901, p. 37.

after a similar attitude was maintained by his followers.

All attempts to outline the structure and functions of Socialist government were decried as "utopian" and ridiculed as "music of the future." (Zukunftsmusik.)

The Russian revolution, immediately preceded by the short-lived Socialist government of Finland and followed by the equally short-lived Communist experiment in Hungary and the brief period of Socialist political power in Germany and Austria, has made the question one of concrete, practical and immediate importance.

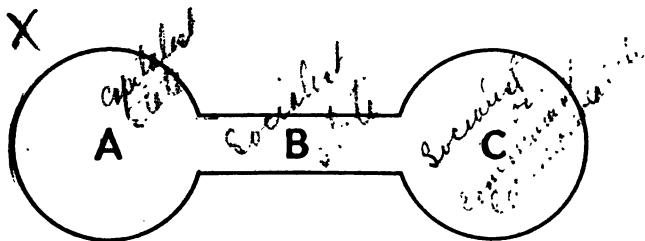
What is the historic form of a Socialist government?

Every attempted answer to the question must take into account the fact that political institutions are not viewed by Marxian students as static forms, nor as definitely demarcated historical periods. The Socialist political revolution marks the conscious beginning of the process of transformation into Socialism, but only its beginning.

The revolution, which is the working-class conquest of the political power, leaves the capitalists for the time being in possession of the economic power. On the day of the revolution the capitalist class still owns all essential means and instruments of wealth production and distribution. It manages the financial, industrial

and commercial institutions of the country and controls the whole intricate and delicately interwoven economic life of the people. The transfer of all industries from private capitalist ownership into communal property and public management; in short, the break-up of capitalism and the building up of a pure Socialist order, calls for a series of planful and fundamental industrial and political changes. Such changes will, of course, not be undertaken by the capitalist class. They can only be brought about by the workers. In order to accomplish them the workers must be in control of the government machinery and their control must continue until the task of socialization of the industries has been fully performed, all economic class divisions have been abolished, the working class itself has ceased to exist as a class, and the working-class government has given way to the classless administration of the Socialist régime. The consecutive stages of development roughly succeeding each other may be regarded from different points of view and characterized according to the angle from which they are viewed.

Considered merely in their historical sequence, the period preceding the Socialist revolution may be termed the period of capitalism; the period of transformation ushered in by the revolution is commonly designated as the "transitional" period, while the one established by the complete socialization of the industries is designated as the period of Socialism or Communism.



Thus, if we assume in the above figure that the open circle A represents the Capitalist system and the open circle C, the perfect Socialist régime, the corridor B, leading from one to the other, represents the period of transition.

The three historical periods under discussion may also be regarded from the point of view of their political functions. Thus viewed, circle A may be designated as the Capitalist State, Corridor B as the Socialist State, and circle C as the Socialist or Communist Commonwealth.

Here a word of explanation of the terms employed may be useful.

In the Marxian literature on the subject the word *State* is not used in its popular and loose interpretation as synonymous with *organized society*, but in the strictly technical sense as the organized force by which the government defends its existence and exercises the power of repression. In this sense it is not the

body of the people organized in a political community that constitutes the state, but the governmental machinery for the enforcement of law or the will of the sovereign (L'état c'est moi)—the bureaucracy, army, police, courts, jails, etc., a machinery capable of use not only independently of the people, but even against them.²

And since every government represents the economic interests of the dominating class, the state is necessarily its organ for the repression of everything hostile to such domination.

"The state," says Frederick Engels, "is an organization of the exploiting classes for the preservation of the existing methods of production and more particularly for the purposes of forcibly maintaining the exploited classes in the condition of dependence inherent in such methods of production (slavery, serfdom, wage labor)."³

And Karl Marx sums up the character of the capitalist state in the following language:

² This conception is by no means peculiar to Marxian Socialism. The coercive power of the state as the sovereign, its indispensable power to enforce laws and levy taxes, have been recognized by many bourgeois economists and sociologists, including Leroy-Beaulieu, Charles Benoist, Jeremy Bentham, Franklin H. Giddings, and J. W. Burgess. But the exactness or inexactness of the definition in no way impairs the validity of the Marxian argument. The coercive power of government undoubtedly exists and its operation is not effected by its label.

³ "Herrn Eugen Dühring's Umwälzung der Wissenschaften." Stuttgart, 1894, page 301.

“At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class-antagonism between capital and labor, the State power assumed more and more the character of national power of capital over labor, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism.”⁴

The transitional or Socialist state is no exception to the rule. It, too, represents the organized repressive force of government. But the government which it serves is the working-class government. Hence the function of the Socialist state is to maintain the proletarian government and to repress the forces of surviving capitalism aiming at its overthrow.

Only when all classes and class struggles have been abolished and there is no more need of a coercive instrument for the domination of one class by another, the repressive organs of the government, the army, police, etc., become useless. The state disappears. Government hereafter is a classless administration of the business of the whole people by their chosen representatives, a “commonwealth,” not a “state.”

“By actually becoming the representative of the whole society, the state renders itself superfluous. As soon as there is no longer any class in society to be held in subjection, as soon as the class rule and the class struggle for individual existence based on the

⁴“Civil War in France,” page 40.

modern anarchy in production are removed, and with them also the resultant clashes and excesses, there is nothing more to repress, nothing requiring a special repressing power, a state. The first act in which the state really appears as the representative of the whole society—the seizure of the instruments of production in the name of society—is at the same time its last independent act as a state. The interference of the state with social relations becomes superfluous in one field after another, and, as it were, falls asleep. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things and processes of production. The state is not ‘abolished.’ It dies.”⁵

Emphasizing the social forces behind the political forms of the successive historical periods under discussion, it may also be said that the first (circle A) represents the domination of the bourgeoisie, or capitalist class, the third (circle C) the ideal classless society of equals, while the intermediate period (Corridor B) represents the domination of the working class. Marx and Engels have at different times described the transitional period of working-class political domination as the “Rule,” the “Power” or the “Sway” of the workers. They have also characterized it as the *Dictatorship of the Proletariat*⁶ and the Bolsheviki

⁵ Frederick Engels, *Ibid.*, page 302.

⁶ For an interesting account of the evolution of the term see “Creative Revolution” by Eden & Cedar Paul, N. Y., 1920, page 134, et seq.

have chosen the latter phrase to describe the political character of the present revolutionary régime in Russia.

Considerable discussion has arisen about the accuracy of the use of the word *Dictatorship* in connection with the political rule of the working class in the period of transition. Etymologically and historically the propriety of the term is fairly open to doubt. Karl Kautsky inclines to the belief that Marx had not intended to use it in the accepted and literal sense. For, says he, taken literally, dictatorship means "the sovereignty of a single person, who is bound by no laws. A sovereignty which is distinguished from a despotism by being regarded as a passing phase, required by the circumstances of the moment, and not as a permanent institution of the state."

In his answer to Kautsky, Lenin denies that dictatorship even literally means the sovereignty of a single person (although he would, I believe, find it difficult to support his denial by historical proof), but admits the substantial correctness of the other parts of Kautsky's assertion. Lenin suggests the following as a proper Marxian definition of dictatorship: "Dictatorship is an authority relying directly on force, and not bound by any laws. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is an authority maintained by the proletariat by means of force over and against the

¹ "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat," London, page 43.

bourgeoisie, and not bound by *any* laws."⁸ (Italics mine.)

The phases of the definition which both Kautsky and Lenin accept, i. e., that dictatorship is an authority not bound by *any* law, clearly shows that the term is not technically applicable to the rule of the proletariat. A working-class revolutionary régime is not bound by the laws of the overthrown bourgeoisie. It may change, abolish or simply disregard them. It may and does adopt its own code of laws suitable to its requirements, either by legislative enactment or by revolutionary decree. But it proceeds on the basis of its own laws, not in defiance of *any* laws. Every important act of the revolutionary Soviet government of Russia rests on the direct or indirect sanction of some law or decree. To say that a class in power is not bound by any law because it can make and change the law at pleasure is to render the term perfectly meaningless, for every ruling class has that power, whether the form of government is that of a dictatorship or a "democracy."

But after all the etymological justification for the use of a name or term is only of academic interest. For practical purposes a word acquires the meaning which those who use it choose to give it. The dictionaries are replete with terms of perverted etymological origin. Marx and Engels have employed the

⁸ "The Proletarian Revolution," London, page 15.

term "dictatorship" in application to the period of working-class political rule, the Socialist movement has adopted it, and the Russian revolution has emphasized and popularized its use. Regardless, then, of etymological proprieties, the stage of social development which is introduced by the Socialist revolution, and which from certain points of view is called the "Transitional Period" and the "Socialist State," is from a somewhat different point of view also designated as the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat." In this sense also the period preceding the Socialist revolution, which we know as Capitalism or the "Capitalist State," may be characterized as the "Dictatorship of the Capitalist Class," and the cycle of social evolution may be envisaged as (A) Capitalist Dictatorship, (B) Proletarian Dictatorship, (C) the classless commonwealth of equals.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat, contrary to widespread popular assumptions, is not the antithesis of Democracy. In the Marxian view the two institutions are by no means incompatible.

The bourgeois textbook writers and lexicographers are in the habit of defining democracy as government by the people, or as a political system in which government is directly exercised by the people collectively, and even Karl Kautsky asserts that democracy "signifies the rule of the majority, and also the protection of the minority, because it means equal rights and a

share in all political rights for everybody, to whatever class or party he may belong.”⁹

Technically the definition is correct. Democracy is theoretically a system of political and legal equality. But in concrete and practical operation it is false, for there can be no equality, not even in politics and before the law, so long as there is glaring inequality in economic power. So long as the ruling class owns the workers' jobs and the press and the schools of the country and all organs for the molding and expression of public opinion; so long as it monopolizes all trained public functionaries and disposes of unlimited funds to influence elections, so long will the equal franchise be largely illusory. So long as the laws are made by the ruling class and the courts are presided over by members of that class; so long as lawyers are private practitioners who sell their skill to the highest bidder, and litigation is technical and costly, so long will the nominal equality before the law be a hollow mockery.

In a capitalist régime the whole machinery of democracy operates to keep the ruling-class minority in power through the suffrage of the working-class majority, and when the bourgeois government feels itself endangered by democratic institutions, such institutions are often crushed without compunction. We need not limit ourselves to the summary suppression

⁹ “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” page 133.

of established political and legal rights during the period of war "emergency" for proof of this assertion. The abolition of the rights of free speech and assemblage through the device of "martial law" in connection with important industrial struggles, the suppression of workers' publications and unseating of duly elected working-class representatives in peace time, afford ample illustration of its truth. Democracy does not secure "equal rights and a share in all political rights for everybody, to whatever class or party he may belong." It only allows free political and legal play for the existing economic inequalities. The democracy of every social régime is adjusted to the purpose of maintaining that régime. Democracy under capitalism is thus not general, abstract democracy, but specific *bourgeois democracy*, a democracy within the bourgeoisie or as Lenin terms it—democracy *for* the bourgeois.¹⁰

Similarly working-class democracy, i. e., the system of political and legal rights granted by the transitional Socialist state, is also a class institution. It signifies equality within the ranks of the producers, democracy for the working class. It is frankly a limited form of democracy, but it is a higher form than the democracy of the bourgeoisie, because it means the actual rule of the majority over the minority, while the latter represents the rule of a minority over the majority.

¹⁰ "The Proletarian Revolution."

In the technical sense democracy is also a form of political power and presupposes a class of the people against whom such power is wielded. "Democracy," says Lenin, "is a *state* which recognizes the subjection of a minority to the majority, that is, an organization for the systematic use of violence by one class against the other, by one part of the population against another."¹¹

Only when all class distinctions will disappear in the pure Socialist society, will actual equality, political and economic, prevail, and it will presumably not matter much to the members of that happy society whether their commonwealth will be technically styled a democracy or not.

¹¹ "The State and Revolution," London, 1919, page 85.