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# Karl Marx as Democratic Theorist\*

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*Karl Marx had relatively little to say about democratic political institutions, a fact which, this article argues, has obscured an understanding of him as a democratic theorist. Still, his writings, the author insists, rest on a notion of democracy in which individuals cooperate freely and equally in the activity of governing. This process-oriented view of democracy, the author concedes, is not the usual reading of Marx, but it is, she concludes, a more promising basis for a theory of socialist democracy.*

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My aim in this article is to show that the political writing of Karl Marx is compatible with and, indeed, supportive of an understanding of democracy as a process in which individuals cooperate as free and equal participants in the activity of popular rule. This says nothing of any intention on Marx's part to construct such a democratic theory, nor of his concern with the problems of democratic institutions in socialism. It is perhaps the absence of such concerns or their elaboration in Marx's work that has created ambiguities in his political theory and obscured the understanding of Marx as a democratic theorist.<sup>1</sup>

\*This article was written before the major events of 1989 in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The changes taking place there only make the argument more timely. I would like to thank Bertell Ollman, Doug Porpora, and Ron Replogle for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

1. For different approaches to Marx and democracy, see: Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Frank Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Alan Gilbert, *Marx's Politics: Communists and Citizens* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1981); Carol C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971); Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974); Ernesto Laclau and

Marx wrote relatively little about institutions of democratic decision making or of a possible socialist society. Most of his political writings referred to class struggles in capitalism and provided strategic arguments for the workers' movement. At the same time, they contained important theoretical arguments that provide a framework for the evaluation and justification of political institutions and practices. Analyzing historical circumstances, he drew out certain concrete relations for understanding social cooperation and the conditions of human social activity. From this effort to clarify the social relations of individuals in producing and reproducing their material existence, I hope to draw certain conclusions about a possible socialist democracy.

I shall focus my analysis on what I take to be Marx's basic political arguments. These arguments underscore the importance for Marx of a constitution that starts from the needs, interests, and activities of real individuals. This, I believe, presupposes an understanding of democracy as a decision process constituting popular rule. It is more common to construe Marx's notion of democracy as an endstate, a set of outcomes to be realized and eventually transcended. For while Marx praises democracy as a mode of cooperation, he emphasizes the state of affairs in which democracy obtains rather than the process of social choice. Such a reading provides a basis for what I call an outcome-oriented understanding of democracy, where democracy is associated with a set of goals expressive of the people's will or common interest. Individuals, on this account, participate in the democratic way of life by identifying with this popular will or desired end.<sup>2</sup>

The application of this understanding by Lenin and followers of state socialism needs no elaboration.<sup>3</sup> But even socialist critics of "real ex-

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Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Practice*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1984); Arthur Rosenberg, *Democracy and Socialism: A Contribution to the Political History of the Past 150 Years*, trans. George Rosen (London: Bell, 1939); Patricia Springborg, "Karl Marx on Democracy, Participation, Voting, and Equality," *Political Theory*, 12 (November, 1984); J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1960).

2. This idea of identification with one's community has had a strong influence on Marxists of various sorts. For example, Marxist humanist Mihailo Markovic writes: "Hegel correctly perceived that simple common co-existence and mutual restriction of selfish individuals do not constitute a true human community. He, therefore, tried to transcend this negative relationship of one individual with the next, seen as a limit, by the assumption of a *rational citizen* and a *rational community* in which the individual relates positively to the social whole, and through it to other individuals." Mihailo Markovic, *Democratic Socialism: Theory and Practice* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), pp. 17–18, 155–57.

3. See, for example, V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1943); Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller

isting” socialism have remained committed to the idea that democracy presupposes a unity of will and harmony of interests. They assume that the basic subject, not object, of social choice is the community.<sup>4</sup> This understanding, while providing a basis for Marxian theories of participatory democracy and communitarian critiques of liberal democracy, sets up some dangerous traps for democratic practice. It leaves these theories vulnerable to the very criticism Marx makes of the mystical “general interest” that looms large in Hegel’s and other ruling class theories. The goals posited as expressive of the people’s will may provide yet one more illusion of community above and apart from actual social relations.

For socialist democrats the issue is crucial. Acting to secure outcomes compatible with the putative interests of the working class or community, rather than acting to secure the equal and independent input of workers or citizens in expressing these interests, may put socialism and democracy strikingly at odds. Measures designed to develop human capacities through the political participation of workers and citizens are counterproductive unless they issue from a process in which the preferences of these workers or citizens carry equal weight. Consensus decision making, for example, often thought to promote “democratic” outcomes, may prove to be an exercise in coercion. This is especially so where some members of the decision-making body are in a position consistently to dictate the choice of others owing to special knowledge, skills, information, or the political power and “moral authority” that comes from party affiliation or social position.<sup>5</sup>

Self-management in Yugoslavia, for example, looked like an answer to

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(London: Verso Edition, NLB, 1980), pp. 252–65; and Neil Harding, ed., *The State in Socialist Society* (Oxford: St. Anthony’s/Macmillan Series, 1984), especially chs. 1 and 3.

4. The following provide examples of varying commitments to such an outcome-oriented view of democracy: Roy Medvedev, *On Socialist Democracy*, trans. Ellen de Kadt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977); Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London: New Left Books, 1978); C. B. MacPherson, *Democratic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), essay III; Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); David Harris, “Returning the Social to Democracy,” in *Democratic Theory and Practice*, ed. Graeme Duncan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Sheldon Wolin, “On Reading Marx Politically,” *NOMOS*, XXVI (New York: New York University Press, 1983).

5. Although a supporter of “unitary” democracy under certain conditions, Jane Mansbridge admits the dangers of consensus decision making. See, Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980); also, Elias Berg, “Democracy and Self-Determination,” in *Democracy, Consensus, and Social Contract*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum, et al. (London: Sage Publications, 1978).

the democratic concerns of many socialists critical of Soviet-styled political systems. It appeared to encourage opportunities for the development of human creative capacities, expression of shared goals, and a sense of community. Workers were to participate in decision making in the basic organizational units where they worked and in their communities through another network of self-managing communities. Consensus decision making was encouraged throughout the system in order to provide for the democratic harmonizing of various interests and as an alternative to competitive decision making. The results have been particularly discouraging.<sup>6</sup> Many have participated, but all too often only in reaffirming decisions already made at higher levels of collective choice not subject to popular control. Outcomes reached through self-management bodies such as workers' councils have been "harmonized" at each level of decision making through informal negotiation and bargaining among those in powerful positions, i.e., bankers, managers, and party and government officials. Such decision making has protected the status quo, blurred the lines of accountability, and provided an illusion of unity, concealing an unequal distribution of political and economic power. Rather than promoting much needed integration and solidarity across regional divisions, the extensive use of unanimous decision rules has encouraged regional communities to take increasingly defensive positions within the larger community, exacerbating national and ethnic tensions.<sup>7</sup>

I want to argue that this need not be the direction that socialist democracy takes from the work of Marx. Marx's concern with the empowerment of actual individuals in public life supports a process-oriented notion of democracy. Here the relationship of individuals in sharing decision-making power is expressed by terms of cooperation that could be the possible object of anyone's will. That is, Marx presupposes an independent and equal relationship of individuals in the process of social cooperation. Such a relationship of individuals is crucial to the "overthrow [of] all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected contemptible being."<sup>8</sup> It is essential to the respect for persons which Marx demands in his writings.

These process and outcome-oriented notions of democracy need not be mutually incompatible. The emphasis on outcomes or process *is* crucial

6. Julie Mostov, "Democracy and Decision-Making," in *Yugoslavia: A Fractured Federalism*, ed. Dennison Rusinow (Washington, DC: Wilson Center Press, 1988).

7. *Ibid.*

8. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 137.

where commitments to one or the other conflict. Arguments for procedural equality, civil rights, and independence in social choice have been largely associated with, and wrongly limited to, capitalism and the justification of bourgeois institutions. I agree that claims supporting institutional and procedural guarantees of equality and independence are limited to the extent that economic wealth or status deprives these guarantees of their equal value to all citizens. And theorists who view democracy in terms of outcomes can build a strong argument for rejecting any attachment to procedures which ignores questions of substance. The process-oriented notion that I am proposing, however, does not neglect the importance of goals implicating the distribution of social goods or relations of exploitation, but instead seeks to prevent new inequalities from emerging. Where the ends of democracy are pursued at the expense of the expression of difference, the commitment to outcomes conflicts with the requirements of democracy on a process-oriented view. It is this view, with its emphasis on relationships in the process of social choice, that I shall be tracking in Marx's writing. While this is a less common reading of Marx, it is one that holds greater promise today in dealing with the difficult questions of contemporary socialist practice. It provides less social control over outcomes, but a firmer guarantee of the free articulation of needs, interests, and preferences of all members of society.

One of Marx's earliest and few direct discussions of democracy is in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. It is an integral part of his attack on the dualism of state and civil society. Overcoming this dualism, which divides the individual into a public and private person, means overcoming the division of society that diminishes the power of individuals as purposive social actors. In a nondemocratic constitution individuals are defined by their formal roles and duties as members of the state, as public persons (citizens). Yet this formal, legal designation has little to do with the real life of private persons in what Hegel calls "civil society."<sup>9</sup> This separation of each individual into an abstract public person and an actual private person who is denied real access to the public sphere, i.e., to political institutions, prevents individuals from exercising their human capacities as decision makers. In the *Critique*, Marx refers to democracy as the constitution that overcomes this dualism.<sup>10</sup>

Democracy is the "self-determination of the people." In it, "the constitution appears as what it is, the free product of men."<sup>11</sup> Social

9. G. W. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 110, 161, 163, 189.

10. Marx, *Critique*, p. 29.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

cooperation, Marx argues, takes various political forms, but democracy is that form which truly corresponds to “human existence,” for it is based on laws created *by* social individuals *for* their own common good. In other political forms, laws are made for the good of the state and this good is declared the “general interest.” Public life consists in identifying with this general interest and upholding the law of the state. The actual individual takes part only through this mystical identification.<sup>12</sup> In a limited bourgeois democracy or “democracy within the abstract state,” the general interest remains a merely formal construction.<sup>13</sup> The individual remains artificially divided into an abstract citizen of the illusory political community and an isolated individual of the economy and family. This political state appears to grant autonomy to its citizens as participants in political decision making. Yet, Marx points out, autonomy is not a gift from the state. Political independence is acquired through the possession of property.<sup>14</sup>

Political emancipation under these conditions is limited, but Marx recognizes the significance of the struggle for such emancipation and the desire to participate in the legislature, to “actualize one’s existence as a member of the political state.”<sup>15</sup>

The vote is the immediate, the direct, the existing and not simply imagined relation of civil society to the political state. It therefore goes without saying that the vote is the chief political interest of actual civil society.<sup>16</sup>

Unrestricted suffrage becomes civil society’s means of gaining political existence and, thus, of abolishing the artificial division of human activity.

While Marx calls for universal suffrage, he rejects the economic basis of bourgeois decision making. Independence must be distinguished from political autonomy based on private property. It is not enough to have the right to vote, as long as the decision process can be manipulated by those with political power and privilege based on property, wealth, and social position. Marx takes this point further in “On the Jewish Question.” Removing religious restrictions on political participation does not emancipate people from their dependence on religion. Likewise, removing property qualifications for voting does not emancipate people from

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–40.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

private property.<sup>17</sup> Where the state abolishes political distinctions made on nonpolitical grounds, it does nothing to prevent the privileges of civil society from exerting their influence on the process of social choice.

In the bourgeois political state, individuals as citizens are said to have equal rights and share a common interest as members of the political community. As members of civil society, on the other hand, they are subordinated to this abstract common interest. Individuals as citizens may gain the right to take part in political decision making, but property relations determine the conditions under which choices are made. This division sets the individual in conflict with himself:

In the political community he regards himself as a communal being, but in civil society he is active as a private individual, treats other men as means, reduces himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.<sup>18</sup>

Marx does not reject political emancipation, just the idea that it is *full* emancipation. Within the limits of capitalist society, political emancipation presents “a great step forward,” but the material conditions of this society still deny the equal value of political participation and the sovereignty of the actual, not abstract, citizen.<sup>19</sup>

In this connection, Marx criticizes the notion of rights in bourgeois society. Liberty as opposed to the political freedoms of speech and association is a right based on the claims of individuals as members of civil society; a right of separation and a right to protect one’s material interests. In his words, “the practical application of the right of liberty is the right to private property.”<sup>20</sup> The exercise of this right is incompatible with forms of social cooperation that might empower all individuals as independent actors. It is a right that cannot be generally enjoyed. In this context, equality is limited to the equal right to property under law.

While Liberty and Equality as such were celebrated by the French Revolution, the rights of citizenship—freedom of speech, press, association, and assembly—which “can be exercised only in community with others” were denied in Marx’s view.<sup>21</sup> They were revoked in order to protect the liberty of property. The French Revolution did not free men, but

17. Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1967), pp. 222–24.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 227, 231.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 233.



gave them the freedom to hold, accumulate, and freely dispose of private property, the “freedom” necessary for the development of capitalism. Where political rights interfered, they were withheld in the name of a prior liberty, i.e., security of property.

Marx’s critique of bourgeois rights was aimed at this narrow conception of rights based on an argument from protection.<sup>22</sup> Political emancipation provided only an abstract community for equal citizenship and democratic decision making. It went so far as to promote the *idea* of a community of persons freely and equally determining the terms of their social cooperation, but only *as an idea*. Human emancipation required the concrete realization of this idea.

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels again take up the theme of going beyond political emancipation to the abolition of the political state as a separate sphere of activity. The working class struggle is a campaign for popular sovereignty as well as a struggle to remove the economic basis of exploitation and class distinctions themselves.<sup>23</sup> As outlined in the *Manifesto*, the successful struggle of the proletariat follows a process of industrialization and political centralization, the growth and increasing unification of worker and trade union struggles, the formation of workers’ parties, and increasing participation of individuals from other classes alongside the proletariat. The historical movement of the working class thus provides the conditions for popular rule.

The “battle of democracy,” however, does not immediately result in the abolition of private property, but provides the institutional conditions for implementing radical economic measures such as those suggested by Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto*. Winning the battle, is the first step in returning social power to the people.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class.<sup>24</sup>

In every form of class rule, a class or group of that class claims to

22. See, C. B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 23–43.

23. Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 472.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 490.

represent the interests of society as a whole.<sup>25</sup> But, while claiming to represent the interest of the whole, the ruling group or class merely expresses its own *particular* interest based on property, birth, education, religion, or position. The proletariat as a class, according to Marx, has no particular interest that is not at the same time a general social interest. This is not to say that workers as individuals have no particular interests or conflicts with one another, or that the interests of the proletariat as a class do not conflict with the particular interests of other classes or individuals. Rather, having nothing particular to protect in the way of property or privilege, the interests of the proletariat *as a class* are the most general human interests. The proletariat has nothing which is not at the same time a possession of all individuals by virtue of their humanity. Marx could be said to understand the general interest of the proletariat as the conditions necessary for independent social choice, i.e., as conditions of cooperation to which anyone could agree. They do not speak to any particular interest or systematically result in the dependence of any individual or group in the activity of social choice.

Here it is important to emphasize that the general interest becomes a set of conditions for social choice and not a set of policies. Whether it is possible to conceive of a set of conditions for social choice to which everyone, including the remaining members of the bourgeoisie, could agree is a challenge for practice. And yet another challenge is maintaining or reconstituting these conditions of choice while deciding and implementing policy.

Marx assumes that the development of capitalism will gradually bring an increasing number of people into the ranks of the proletariat. Their struggle then becomes a movement of and for the majority of the people. "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority."<sup>26</sup> The proletariat struggles to gain power, however, only to abolish the conditions for political rule. Yet, in taking measures to replace political power with new social relations, the proletariat still needs to organize itself as a state: to use its political supremacy to sweep away the old conditions of production and force a recalcitrant opposition to accept the policies of the proletarian majority. Having taken measures to wrest property and capital from the bourgeoisie, the proletariat could hope to continue to govern through a

25. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," Part I, in *Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 160–61, 172–74.

26. Engels and Marx, "Manifesto," p. 482.

democratic decision process with increasing support from the people and less as a ruling class.<sup>27</sup>

Marx does not entertain the possibility of proletarian democracy where the proletariat gain political supremacy as a *minority*. He cautions against the terrorism required for the imposition of communism before the conditions for majority rule exist.<sup>28</sup> Otherwise the proletariat finds itself under siege, exerting its energies in suppressing its opponents rather than developing the material and institutional conditions of socialist society. In the absence of the economic conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat, revolutionary programs call for “universal asceticism and social leveling in its crudest form.”<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, Marx says next to nothing in the *Manifesto* about the institutional conditions of democratic decision making, the means for resolving conflicts short of force, or the status of the opposition or minority in proletarian democracy. Thus, while envisioning an increasingly larger base for majority rule, Marx does not directly address the question of minority rights. This could and has been interpreted to mean that institutions for the expression and debate of alternatives would be unnecessary, even counterproductive or, more disturbingly still, that opposing views would not be tolerated.

While not wanting to suggest that a capitalist opposition would be guaranteed a full range of civil liberties during a revolutionary struggle, I do want to suggest that guaranteeing the political liberties of minorities in the processes of social choice is compatible with Marx’s thought on democracy and socialism and with his critique of rights in general. Holding that no one be put in a position of dependence, it follows that members of any minority should enjoy certain safeguards as long as they do not engage in practices that undermine the conditions of independent choice for others. Clearly, given Marx’s analysis of capitalism, this would not include rights of private property that confer the privilege of class rule. But it would not preclude civil liberties such as freedom of speech.

Marx includes in the *Manifesto* a strong criticism of bourgeois rights, as well as of legal and political institutions. As in “On the Jewish Question,” he does not ignore the economic and social advances made in

27. *Ibid.*, p. 491.

28. Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, pp. 189–96; and Marx’s critique of “barrackroom communism” in Marx and Engels, “From the Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men’s Association,” in *Anarchism and Anarcho Sindicalism: Selected Writings by Marx and Engels and Lenin* (New York: New World Paperbacks, 1972), p. 119.

29. Engels and Marx, “Manifesto,” p. 487.

capitalist society or reject the gains in political emancipation, but sets out to demonstrate their shaky foundations. Bourgeois morality, religion, and law, “so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests,” are guarantees of private property and possessive individualism.<sup>30</sup> This is individualism based on the possessive “egoist” of the private sphere and not the social individual interacting in public life.

As Marx and Engels write in the *German Ideology*, capitalist production is indifferent to “individuals as individuals.” The production process drains the “real life content” from individuals; it provides them with a means of subsistence, but stunts their development as self-directing persons. Proletarian revolution, on the other hand, makes all the instruments of production subject to each individual. The people together take control of material production and the development of their individual capacities.<sup>31</sup> Individuals develop their capacities not through isolated activity, but with others through social cooperation. Institutions of social cooperation, however, themselves become fetters where they take on an independent existence in relation to individuals, i.e., where cooperation is marred by the domination of some by others. Only in a community marked by conditions of equality and independence, Marx seems to be saying, can individuals “obtain their freedom in and through their association.”<sup>32</sup>

In both the *Manifesto* and the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels describe how political institutions and modes of cooperation develop along with changes in the division of labor, the mode of production, and technology. Bourgeois democratic practices developed in the context of a complicated network of economic organization, cooperation, and competition. They assumed that the proletariat would build on these practices and institutions and develop its own mode of cooperation through the experiences of the trade union movement and class struggle.<sup>33</sup> Where as before political rights had been extended only to some *men*, all men and women would enjoy social liberties in an association, “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>34</sup>

30. *Ibid.*, p. 482.

31. See, C. B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), essay III.

32. Marx, “The German Ideology,” p. 197.

33. In a letter to F. Bolte, November 23, 1871, Marx wrote: “The political movement of the working class has as its ultimate object, of course, the conquest of political power for this class, and this naturally requires a previous organization of the working class developed up to a certain point and arising precisely from its economic struggles.” *Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 520.

34. Engels and Marx, “Manifesto,” p. 491.

The significance of this picture of class struggle is not in its details, for Marx was careful not to speculate about the particular turns it would take or even the specific economic measures to be implemented in particular countries. Rather its significance for us is in the argument it provides about proletarian class rule as a democratic constitution. It suggests that proletarian democracy cannot be another form of arbitrary rule in which political activity is a separate sphere of concern. It cannot set up yet another illusory community which appears to represent the interests of all, but begins, in fact, to develop its own distinct interests as a political state.

The Paris Commune served as a rare opportunity for Marx to suggest a possible model of socialist democratic institutions.<sup>35</sup> The message again was not primarily in the particular details of the commune, but in the argument that socialism requires a uniquely democratic form of social cooperation. What Marx celebrated in the Commune was its break with traditional political institutions.

The institutional features of the Commune that Marx applauds are those that return decision making about public concerns to the sphere of social cooperation, and encourage both equal participation of all citizens and the accountability of public officials. He commends the election of municipal councilors, many from the ranks of the working class, by universal suffrage and the creation of a decision-making body that would serve as a truly working institution. Officials were to be servants of the commune; all administrators were to be paid workmen's wages. Separation of church and state was to be established and public education made accessible to all. At all levels of government, common affairs were to be administered by an assembly of delegates, accountable to their constituents. Any delegate who proved to be irresponsible or incompetent could be recalled. "Nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchical investiture."<sup>36</sup>

The social institutions initiated by the Commune were to be truly democratic, inclusive and expansive, making public decision making a social activity open to all. They would be democratic institutions of working class government, "under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor," i.e., "for uprooting the economic foundations of class society."<sup>37</sup>

The history of the Commune, however, underscores the problem of the economic, political, and international conditions for a proletarian

35. Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin, *The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune* (New York: International Publishers, 1968); Marx, "The Civil War in France."

36. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

revolution in Europe in the later part of the nineteenth century. Marx had become increasingly discouraged with the democratic movements in Europe following the failures of the 1848 revolutions, the victory of reaction in France and Germany, and ongoing conflicts within the international workers' movement. The popular democratic movement as separate from the workers' movement began to disintegrate as liberal democracy took hold of the political organization of capitalism. Marx was thus extremely skeptical, as he observed the events leading up to the Paris Commune.<sup>38</sup> He cautioned moderation, foreseeing that an armed struggle would be crushed by the combined French and German forces. When, indeed, the people refused to give up their arms and took control of the Commune, Marx could do nothing other than support their effort. For the effort was an example of the people taking power into their own hands, initiating the processes of popular rule.

While applauding the courageous struggles and innovations of the Communards, Marx was critical of their failure to strike a decisive blow to the bourgeoisie by not taking over the national bank or attacking the government at Versailles.<sup>39</sup> They still had to establish an economic base and cut off the financial lifeline of the bourgeoisie as well as to paralyze their political and military forces.

On one hand, Marx seemed to be saying that the proletariat must be prepared to be ruthless with all enemies, making immediate and large-scale appropriations of property and financial institutions. The establishment of popular democratic institutions would have to wait until power was wrested from the bourgeoisie and consolidated in the hands of the revolutionary working class. On the other hand, he cautioned against such a scenario, emphasizing the necessary historical, economic, and political conditions for socialist revolutions. And still he praised the new institutions of the workers democratic self-government. This sort of ambiguity has justified quite different readings of Marx's response to actual democratic practice and probable response to different roads of socialist development.

Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is often looked to as his most explicit discussion of socialist society. His treatment of the problem of distributive justice is important here as a discussion of the relationship between material conditions and political and juridical institutions.<sup>40</sup>

38. Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, ed. Hal Draper (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

39. Karl Marx, "Letters to Kugelmann on the Paris Commune," in *The Civil War in France*, pp. 86-87; "Marx to Ferdinand Domela-Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881," in *Selected Correspondence*, p. 410.

40. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York: International Publishers, 1966).

The “Gotha Programme” calls for the equal rights of all members of society to the undiminished proceeds of labor. Yet, argues Marx, an “equitable distribution” of the “proceeds of labor,” implies that reforms can be made ensuring an equilibrium between needs and rights. “Do not the bourgeois assert that the present-day distribution is ‘equitable’?” he asks.<sup>41</sup> This assumption, Marx continues, shows a striking misunderstanding of the difference between revolutionary change and liberal reform. It demonstrates little appreciation of the historical relationship between economic relations and political institutions. In a revolutionary program, bourgeois institutions of fair exchange cannot be merely replaced by a more equitable distribution of social goods. Rights are an expression of property arrangements. Revolutionary changes are not made by proclaiming equal rights to the proceeds of labor, but by wresting political power and then property from the ruling classes, by uprooting and radically changing the previously existing relations of production.

At the same time, the development of socialist property relations makes possible the realization of the content of rights, transcending the formal limits of distributive justice. Communist society, Marx argues, is not created, but develops out of capitalist society, out of the contradictions of capitalist economic, political, and ethical institutions.

Even as the process of revolutionary change takes place, liberal ideas of justice will continue to influence distributive institutions. Social practices and values are slow to change and inequalities rooted in past economic arrangements and social institutions are not abolished overnight. The exchange of equivalents, for example, will be a necessary feature of socialist society. “Accordingly the individual producer receives back from society—after the deductions have been made [for public goods and services]—exactly what he gives it. And what he has given to it is his individual amount of labor.”<sup>42</sup>

What distinguishes exchange in socialism from that in capitalism is that it is based solely on labor. “No one can give anything except his labor and . . . nothing can pass into ownership of individuals except individual means of production.”<sup>43</sup> So, for example, amounts of labor, measured by duration and intensity, may be exchanged for coupons which buy the products of labor for consumption. Education, social prestige, or political position cannot be directly translated into social buying power.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

43. *Ibid.*

Yet, as Marx points out, the use of an equal standard of measurement for proportional distribution of social goods treats unequals equally, disadvantaging those with less developed productive capacities and possibly greater needs. “This *equal* right is an unequal right for unequal labor. It recognizes no class differences, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, the distribution of social goods, even based solely on the exchange of labor and the equal rights of members of society to the proceeds of their labor, still creates a distribution of unequal power through the division of labor and acquired skills, professions, and productive capacities.

This defect is unavoidable in a socialist society still showing the birthmarks of the capitalist society from which it emerged. “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and the cultural development thereby determined.”<sup>45</sup> In the higher phase of Communism, Marx argues, where the division of labor no longer subordinates human activity and there is an abundance of social goods, the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right” can be left behind. Then can “society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!”<sup>46</sup>

For Marx, however, there is no need to dwell on a discussion of rights. He presupposes the inclusion of a schedule of rights in socialist institutions to the extent that there is a division of labor, scarcity of social goods, and the remains of old property and production relations. He strongly criticized the Gotha Programme for emphasizing distributive justice and bourgeois rights, however, at a time when it was clear to him that these notions were bankrupt under capitalism. His annoyance with rights talk here as in the “Jewish Question” and the *Manifesto* has caused its share of difficulties in socialist practice, providing seemingly strong grounds for neglecting or curtailing basic liberties.<sup>47</sup>

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., p. 10.

46. Ibid.

47. There is a substantial scholarly literature on Marx and the problem of justice. See, for example: Allen E. Buchanan, *Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982); Tom Campbell, *The Left and Rights: A Conceptual Analysis of the Idea of Socialist Rights* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Gerald A. Cohen, “Freedom, Justice and Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, 126 (Mar.-Apr. 1981); M. Cohen, T. Nagel, and T. Scanlon, *Marx, Justice, and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971).



Marx goes further to suggest that this emphasis is indicative of other problems with the Gotha Programme, which also stem from a lack of understanding of a materialist conception of history and political institutions. The call for “the establishment of producers co-operative societies with state aid under the democratic control of the *toiling people*,” suggests, according to him, that the socialist organization of labor arises from state aid. It appears that the state, *not workers*, calls them into being. Referring to the workers’ Ateliers in France, Marx notes that such producers’ cooperatives were established by state aid to manipulate the “toiling people” and break the unity of the workers movement. Workers’ cooperatives or other forms of socialist organization must be “the independent creations of workers.”<sup>48</sup>

According to the Programme, the German Workers’ Party seeks a free state; however, placing the “freedom” of this state beyond the control of society appears to be the real goal of the Workers’ Party. Reaffirming his earlier arguments about the state, Marx counters that “freedom consists in converting the state from an organ standing above society into one completely subordinate to it.”<sup>49</sup>

Rather than giving the outline of a radical political program, the Gotha statement makes demands at least formally recognized by most bourgeois constitutions. In Marx’s view, the authors of the Programme err in emphasizing these demands without explicitly calling for the material conditions that make the realization of their content possible, and err again in thinking that they could be merely introduced into the military despotism of German society. They neglect to see that these demands rest on at least formal recognition of popular sovereignty. And gaining popular sovereignty beyond the narrow confines of formal political equality requires attacking the economic basis of the Prusso-German empire.

Once again, Marx’s impatience with the Gotha Programme’s democratic demands is his impatience with its framers’ lack of desire to transgress the bourgeois level of emancipation and attack the economic and political institutions of the present-day state. Moreover, they fail to pose or deal with the question of the transformation of the state in communist society. In the period of revolutionary transformation of capitalist society into communist society, “the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat,” the class rule of the proletariat.<sup>50</sup>

This unfortunate phrase, which was far less disturbing then than now,

48. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” pp. 16–17.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

has invited less than democratic interpretations by revolutionaries eager to implement their programs as the vanguard of the proletariat. But we have no reason to assume that this phrase was to mean anything different here than proletarian democracy, as in the *Manifesto*. It would be entirely inconsistent in this text, where Marx criticizes the notion of a free state over and beyond the control of the people, for him to suggest that the proletarian state take on just such a form. Moreover, his understanding of the correlation between the level of right and the economic structure of society would seem to rule out less than formally democratic institutions in socialism.

As people would not be expected to relinquish the limited form of distributive justice engendered by the exchange of equivalents in the early movement toward communism, so too they would not be expected to relinquish political rights until social conditions were such that they were redundant, transcended by “higher forms” of social cooperation in a distant communist society. As Marx notes, political emancipation presupposes at least formal recognition of popular sovereignty; it follows that human emancipation presupposes the actual constitution of popular sovereignty.

I take this to mean that the institutions of social cooperation in socialism would require that the authority for binding decisions come from the people through a process of social choice distinguished by: 1) an equal effective vote for each person of age; 2) a recognized standing procedure for taking binding decisions; and 3) a condition of independence, such that no person or group has unilateral power over another person’s preference. It would seem, from our discussion of several texts, that Marx’s understanding of proletarian democracy is compatible with these conditions.

Marx, we recall, attacks the artificial separation of state and society, which divides the individual into an abstract citizen and an isolated private person. The proletarian revolution is a movement to overcome this dualism and empower the people as social agents. In removing the abstract character of political emancipation, however, the individual is not subsumed by the whole, but takes on the concerns of the community as her own. The conduct of public affairs is one more activity of social cooperation. Socialist relations of production create the basis for an association of independent individuals in which the arbitrary rule of privilege<sup>51</sup> or property is replaced by popular decision making about the production and reproduction of social life.

51. This injunction against the rule of privilege would appear to refer as well to the role of the Communist Party. In the “Manifesto,” Marx explicitly states, “The Communists do

Arguing that the movement of communism means creating the conditions for a distribution of social goods based on need, Marx insists that this goal is itself a process. "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things."<sup>52</sup>

It is worth reexamining Marx's work for this possible view of socialist relations. The recent publication of several thoughtful books on socialism and democracy underscores the importance of doing so.<sup>53</sup> Yet it often seems that Marx himself is an obstacle in these projects. One has to find a way around his writing. In offering a process-oriented reading of Marx's notion of democracy, I am hoping to avoid that, while stressing the relationship of individuals in the process of social choice as a necessary focus of democratic theory and practice.

This view requires that all individuals enjoy the material independence that affords each the opportunity to affect the activity of social choice. The independence condition answers to egalitarian principles of distribution, but it is also a necessary institutional guarantee of the free articulation of needs, interests, and preferences of all members of society. Socialism could thus be said to be that mode of social cooperation in which the relationship of individuals is defined by their needs as independent and equal social agents. It is a mode of cooperation in which individuals recognize and respect each other as persons capable of rational choice. The process of rendering authoritative social decisions corresponding to this mode of cooperation is one in which the contribution of each counts as an equally effective input, and no one's choice is rendered nugatory. On this account, the development of socialism is at the same time the full development of democracy. The struggle to take effective social control of the means of production and the coordination of common affairs is a struggle for equal and independent participation in the activity of popular rule.

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not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement," p. 483.

52. Marx, "German Ideology," p. 162.

53. For example, Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism*; Gould, *Rethinking Democracy*; and Philip Green, *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985).