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Against Democracy

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From a talk given in 1993, and found on Wildcat's page at http://wildcat.international/democracy-talk.html.

[This is the text of a introductory talk which was given to two discussion meetings held in London and Brighton in 1993. It's been typed up and made available to the communist public due to massive popular demand...]

The purpose of this little talk is to convince you that revolutionaries should oppose democracy in it all its forms.

Before we go any further, I want to get the argument about the use of words out of the way. A lot of people will agree with a lot of what I'm saying (or will think that they do!) but will say "Ah, Yes, but what you're talking about is bourgeois democracy. What I mean by democracy is something quite different." I want to suggest that when people talk about "real" or "workers'" democracy in opposition to bourgeois democracy, in fact they do mean the same thing that the bourgeoisie mean by democracy, despite superficial differences. The fact that they chose to use the word democracy is actually far more significant than they claim. This is why it is important to say "Death to democracy!". A less obscure analogy might be that of the word "development". Third Worldist lefties will generally say that they are in favour of development. When you say "Isn't that what the IMF want?", they'll say "No, we want real development". When you talk to them a bit more you find out that in fact they do want the same as the IMF... it's just that the IMF have got a more realistic understanding of what it means.

My basic contention here will be that however much you claim to be against property (as Lenino-Trotskyo-Stalinists do) or even against the state (as anarchists do), if you support democracy you are actually for property and for the state.

What is Democracy?

In the most general terms, democracy is the rule of rights and equality. It's pretty easy to see that this is capitalist. "Rights" implies the existence of atomised individuals in competition with each other. It also implies the existence of the state, or some quasi-state form of authority, which can guarantee people's rights. "Equality" implies the existence of a society in which people can have equal worth – that is, a society based on abstract labour. Democracy is often defined as the Rule of the People – the People always being understood as a mass of atomised citizens with rights.

On a very abstract level you can say that capitalism is always democratic. You can say that democracy expresses the essence of capital – if you like putting things in those sort of terms! – that equality is just an expression of the equivalence of commodities.

Marx made the ultimate abusive comment about democracy when he described it as “Christian”:

> “Political democracy is Christian inasmuch as it regards man – not just one man but all men – as a sovereign and supreme being; but man in his uncultivated, unsocial aspect, man in his contingent existence, man just as he is, man as he has been corrupted, lost to himself, sold, and exposed to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements by the entire organisation of our society – in a word, man who is not yet a true species-being. The sovereignty of man – but of man as an alien being distinct from actual man – is the fantasy, the dream, the postulate of Christianity, whereas in democracy it is a present and material reality, a secular maxim.” - Marx, *On the Jewish Question*

So what are the practical consequences of all this?

The most common ways that the democratic counter-revolution expresses itself in the class struggle is around the questions of *class power* and the *organisation* of that power.

By “class power” I mean the recognition of the fact that we are in a class war situation and that to advance our side in that war and ultimately win it we have to ruthlessly crush and exterminate our enemies. Obviously this implies despotic power in itself. You can’t respect the rights of a cop if you beating him to death! If a trade union leader tries to address a meeting and we respond by shouting him down or dragging him off the stage and kicking his head in, it’s absurd for us to say that we believe in freedom of speech. “The revolution will not be televised” – nor will it be monitored by Amnesty International...

In the same way that we don’t grant rights to our enemies, nor do we ask for rights from our enemies. This is obviously a complicated issue because, in practice, it’s often difficult to distinguish demanding something and demanding a right to it. I won’t try to deal with every aspect of this question. I’ll just look at the Right to Strike as an example. In general, as I think Hegel said, “for every Right there is a Duty”. So, for example, you have the Right to travel on public transport and a Duty to pay your fare. The right to strike implies that workers are allowed to peacefully withdraw their labour in return for respecting public order and generally not doing anything to make the strike effective. What else can it mean? After all, a right is something granted *by law* – you can hardly approach a cop and ask him to protect you while you burn scab lorries.

I think that, in general, demands for rights are an expression of the weakness of our class. Instead of saying to our enemies “if you lay a finger on us you’ll get your fucking head kicked in”, or even just kicking their heads in anyway, we tend to say “please respect our rights, we don’t really mean you any harm”. Of course, our class is in a weak position, and there’s no magic answer to this. But I think one step we can take is to recognise that middle-class do-gooders who campaign for rights are not on our side – even if some of them are nice lefty lawyers who sometimes get us out of a lot of trouble...

What I’ve said so far probably isn’t *that* controversial. What I have said so far concerns excluding certain categories of people. Wanting to exclude people from democracy is perfectly compatible with being a democrat – it’s amazing how many liberals will say that they unconditionally support freedom of speech and then suddenly change their minds when if someone says “well, what about fascists then?”

More controversially, I now want to talk about democracy "within in our own ranks" – that is, amongst proletarians in struggle. The usual "workers' democracy" argument, for example, will say "OK, we don't have democratic relations with the bourgeoisie but amongst ourselves there should be the most perfect equality and respect for rights." This is usually seen as a way of avoiding bureaucratisation and domination by small cliques and ensuring that as many people as possible are involved in a particular struggle. The idea is that if people are allowed the right to speak, the right to vote etc., then you can just go along to a meeting and immediately be part of this democratic collectivity and so immediately be involved.

What does democratising a struggle mean in practice? It means things like:

1. **Majoritarianism** – Nothing can be done unless a majority agree to it.
2. **Separation between decision making and action** – Nothing can be done until everybody has had a chance to discuss it. This can be seen as analogous to the separation between the legislative and executive arms of a democratic state. It's no coincidence that discussions within democratic organisations often resemble parliamentary debate!
3. **Embodiment of the view that no one can be trusted** – Democratic structures take the "war of all against all" for granted, and institutionalise it. Delegates always have to be revocable so they won't pursue their own hidden agenda which, of course, everyone has.

All of these principles embody social atomisation. Majoritarianism because everyone is equal and usually has one vote. The separation between decision making and action because it's only fair that you should consult everyone before acting – if you don't you are violating their rights. A particularly obnoxious example of the third thing – embodying the view that no one can be trusted – is the demand for "Faction Rights" put forward by Trots. Usually they call for this when some organisation is trying to throw them out. What this right amounts to is the freedom to plot and conspire against other members of what is supposedly a working class organisation. Obviously, no genuine communist organisation could *ever* entertain *any* idea of Faction Rights.

It is probably the second of these principles which is the most important and which needs to be stressed here.

These democratic principles can only stand in complete opposition to the class struggle since, by definition, the class struggle implies a break with social atomisation and the formation of some kind of community – however narrow, transient or vague this may be.

Major events in the class struggle almost never begin with a vote or with everybody being consulted. They almost always begin with action by a determined minority who break from the passivity and isolation of the majority of proletarians around them. They then try to spread this action through example rather than through reasoned argument. In other words, the division between decision making and action is always being breached in practice. Right-wing populists (and a few anarchists) complain that trouble-making activities are organised by self-appointed cliques of activists who represent no one but themselves... and, of course, they're right!

The miners' strike in the UK in 1984-5 provided many inspiring examples of how the class struggle is anti-democratic in practice. The strike itself did not start democratically – there was no ballot, no series of mass meetings. It began with walk-outs at a few pits threatened with closure, and was then spread by flying pickets. Throughout the strike there was an unholy alliance of the right-wing of the Labour

Party and the RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party) saying that the miners should hold a national ballot. The most militant miners consistently rejected this, saying things like: "scabs don't have the right to vote away another man's job" – which is a democratic form of words but I think you will agree that the attitude behind it certainly isn't. On occasions, members of the RCP were quite rightly beaten up and called "Tories" because of their support for a ballot.

There were also numerous examples of sabotage and destruction of Coal Board property, often organised by semi-clandestine, so-called "hit squads". Obviously, such activities, by their very nature, cannot be organised democratically – whether or not they are approved of by a majority of the strikers.

Community of Struggle

A concept which I've already used here, and which I'm quite attached to, is "community of struggle". Obviously, a question which will be asked is: "If a community of struggle doesn't act democratically, then how *does* it act?" There is no simple answer to this, except to say that the basis of action will be the trust and solidarity between the people involved and not their supposed equality or rights. For example, if we want to send someone as an emissary (well, I don't like the word "delegate") to spread the struggle we wouldn't insist on them being voted for by at least 51% of the meeting or on them carrying a mobile phone so we can recall them at a moment's notice and replace them with someone else. We *would* insist on them being trustworthy and reliable – one trusted comrade is worth a thousand revocable delegates! Of course, there would be a large political component to this trust – we wouldn't send a member of the Labour Party because their political views would automatically lead them to act against the interests of the working class.

Communist Society

Finally, I want to say a few words about the implication of all this for the nature of communist society.

The idea of communist revolution as a vast democratic reorganisation of society is a very strong one, even within political tendencies which we think might have something going for them. The council communists (such as Pannekoek) literally saw the workers' councils as parliaments of the working class. Even the Situationists had serious hang-ups about democracy – talking about "direct democracy" and so on. If you read "Enrages and Situationists in the movement of the occupations" you'll find them making various claims about how their actions expressed the democratic will of the Sorbonne Assembly while it's obvious that they were continually breaking with the decisions of the assembly or just asking it to rubber-stamp the things that they'd done.

In general, it's no coincidence that people who advocate democracy also tend to advocate self-management – that is, taking over chunks of this society and running them ourselves. The connection is a simple one – communism is about transforming social relations, not just about changing the political regime, which is what the democrats want to do.

In the case of the council communists, self-management was pretty obviously what they were about. With the Situs it was more a case of them not making a real break from their self-managementist origins.

Another example of this kind of problem might be the concept of "planning", which I know a lot of people are quite attached to. To me, "planning" implies that we

all get together and decide what we are going to be doing for the next 5 years and *then* we go away and do it. This sounds like another example of fetishising the moment of decision-making. So, as communist, that is to say: enemies of democracy, I think we should be very suspicious of the concept of planning. As opponents of social-democracy we need to reject *democracy* every bit as vigorously as we reject *socialism*.