

V. I. Lenin on Democracy

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Abstract

This thesis explores the meaning and significance of 'democracy' in the political thought of V. I. Lenin, the founder of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the leader of the world's first socialist state. Lenin's views on democracy have significantly influenced communist politics and Marxist democratic theory. As such, it is important to establish precisely what he said on the subject. This thesis contributes to the literature by offering a more focused, systematic and complete analysis of Lenin's pronouncements on democracy. It provides a fresh reading of the voluminous source material, whilst engaging with what the secondary literature has said as well. This thesis argues that Lenin should be recognised as a democratic theorist. Besides being committed to Marxism and the emancipation of the working class, Lenin is also concerned with the nature and value of democracy, including the theoretical and practical debates surrounding these issues. Lenin's views on democracy have been routinely misunderstood and caricatured. He offers a more coherent, sophisticated, complex, and original perspective than is typically thought. To begin with, Lenin provides an insightful interpretation of the concept of democracy itself. Lenin highlights its class essence. Democracy for him expresses the rule of a definite class. From this proposition Lenin derives several theses. First, democracy is a political means of class struggle, and it cannot resolve that struggle. Democracy, as a part of the political superstructure, is reflective of and determined by the economic base of society. Second, democracy for one class means dictatorship for another. These phenomena are in dialectical unity, not opposition. Third, democracy precludes freedom. It cannot 'free' everyone, precisely because it is a form of class rule. These claims express Lenin's view that democracy is a paradoxical concept, one containing inherent contradictions. Lenin's class-based perspective provides a unique lens through which to conceptualise democracy more critically. Lenin also offers a provocative critique of liberal democracy, or what he calls 'bourgeois' democracy. Lenin's critique amounts to three core claims. First, liberal democracy leaves the economic sphere, a crucial zone of political power, in the hands of the unaccountable bourgeoisie. Second, democratic rights are restricted by private property ownership and are therefore used to cement bourgeois domination. Third, the liberal state privileges the power of a wealthy propertied oligarchic elite, whilst effectively barring the working class from politics. Lenin's critique builds upon the ideas of Marx and Engels, though it is not a simple rehash. He provides an original examination of democracy under imperialism; and avoids some of the more controversial aspects of Marx and Engels' critique, specifically their principled rejection of individual rights. Last but not least, Lenin offers a bold vision of socialist democracy, or what he calls 'proletarian' democracy. The distinctive feature of his conception is the leading role of the Communist Party, the chief organ of the working class. Socialist democracy provides a range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural freedoms. The masses participate in the daily administration of the state. Political organs operate in accordance with democratic centralism. Democracy extends into the economy, as the workers manage their enterprises in accordance with a state economic plan. Lenin's vision features a tension between top-down control and bottom-up spontaneity. He inadequately addresses issues relevant to democratisation, such as the power and role of the Party, the protection of democratic rights, the balance between economic planning and workers' management, the autonomy of social and state organisations, and the contradiction between centralism and democracy. Nevertheless, Lenin's conception is flexible. It encourages a range of interpretations and applications.

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Introduction

Why Study Lenin's Views on Democracy Today?

What is the meaning and significance of 'democracy' in the political thought of V. I. Lenin, the founder of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the leader of the world's first socialist state? That is the central research question of this thesis. For many, however, the idea of devoting a dedicated study to this question may seem like a waste of time. Most would agree with the anti-communist Kolakowski (2005: 766) that Lenin is an 'ideologist of totalitarianism', not a democratic theorist.¹ In academic publications, as well as in mainstream discourse, Lenin is routinely presented as a vicious power-hungry dictator, responsible for establishing one of the most authoritarian organisations in the history of humankind, the Bolshevik Party, in addition to an equally authoritarian dogmatic creed, 'Marxism-Leninism' (Rockmore 2018: 8). He is also accused of founding what is supposedly one of the most murderous, repressive, and authoritarian regimes in human history, the Soviet Union. Under Lenin's rule, it is alleged that the Bolsheviks and their supporters killed millions, crushed freedom, and denied even the smallest shoots of democracy to grow in the fledgling soviet regime (Sebestyn 2017).

According to the dominant narrative, however, Lenin did not only oppose democracy during his lifetime. After his death, his devoted follower and successor J.

¹ It should be noted, here, that Talmon (1952) associates democracy with totalitarianism, instead of contrasting the two. For the most part, however, scholars tend to juxtapose the concepts, viewing them as two distinct political systems.

V. Stalin developed his authoritarian theory and practice in the name of ‘Leninism’.² Under Stalin’s rule, whatever remnants of democracy existing in the Soviet Union were crushed, and they were never to return. Mainstream scholars like to view Stalinism as the logical successor to Leninism, being its full realisation or culmination, so to speak. Under Stalin, Lenin’s thoroughly anti-democratic political theory came to complete fruition (Harding 1996). As Lars Lih points out, Lenin’s ‘political life’ has been routinely ‘reduced to a number of shocking statements, mostly from the time of the Russian Civil War, in which he demanded energetic repression’. Many scholars give the impression that ‘the whole vast drama of the Russian Revolution and its tragic outcomes were caused by one man’s intolerance and cruelty’ (Lih 2014: 13).

But that is not all. Lenin’s thought is also blamed for creating every one-party communist regime that arose after World War two. The allegedly anti-democratic features of these regimes are traced back to Lenin’s intellectual labours. The reasoning used to explain this connection is simple. Mao was a self-proclaimed Leninist. Ceausescu was a self-proclaimed Leninist. Hoxha was a self-proclaimed Leninist. Kim Il-Sung was a self-proclaimed Leninist, and so on. All of these communist ‘despots’ professed their adherence to Leninism. Because of this, Lenin is seen as the true founder of these regimes. He is deemed to be *ultimately* responsible for every murder, gulag, and repressive system instituted in the communist world. Lenin, in short, is the all-father of communist repression. He is the face of communist repression.

It should be unsurprising, given this reputation, that scholars of all stripes paint Lenin himself the arch enemy of democracy. His thought is said to provide an elaborate theoretical basis for authoritarianism (Brie 2018). His political doctrine features

² This thesis defines ‘Leninism’ as Lenin’s political doctrine, not the various Marxist-Leninist codifications of it.

prominently in textbooks on totalitarianism, alongside Fascism and Nazism (Aron 1968: 194; Buchheim 1986: 17-18, 51; Schapiro 1981: 34, 46-48; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965: 46-47; 104; Unger 1974: 6-7, 20-24, 27-29). His thoughts on democracy are, like those of his pupil Stalin, rarely taken seriously. Although some recognise that Lenin was committed to democracy, the dominant view is that he failed to realise this goal, both theoretically and practically. When textbooks on democratic theory bring Leninism up, it is usually to give an example of non-democratic thought (Whelan 2019: 33). His pronouncements on democracy have been written off by most as crude and vulgar, empirically and practically false. Talk to any ‘reputable’ politician or scholar and that is what they will say.

Why then, examine the meaning and significance of democracy in Lenin’s thought today? There are obvious political reasons. Whatever one may think of Lenin, it is difficult to deny that his pronouncements on the concept have been hugely influential in the history of political practice. Leninist regimes once ruled over half the world’s population, and they all claimed to be the harbingers of true, genuine democracy (Femia 1993: 1). Lenin himself proclaimed that the ‘proletarian democracy’ instituted in the Soviet Union was ‘a *million times* more democratic than any bourgeois democracy’ (CW 28: 258).³ In the early days of the Soviet Union many observers took his claim seriously (Femia 1993: 1). Even now, Leninist principles characterise the constitutions of several socialist countries. China, Cuba, Vietnam and Laos still proclaim their adherence to Lenin’s conception of socialist democracy. Moreover, a range of communist parties and Marxist movements throughout the world continue to view Lenin as a guide to their official position on democracy (Pateman 2020a: 535).

³ ‘CW’ refers to the English language edition of Lenin’s *Collected Works*, published in 45 volumes. The number after ‘CW’ refers to the specific volume, and this is followed by a page number.

This topic is not only of empirical significance. The practical influence of Lenin's democratic theory was matched by its intellectual legacy in the history of political thought. The often-trumpeted cold war *legend* – that Lenin was a pragmatic opportunist who cared little for theoretical problems – has no basis. From the very beginning of his political career Lenin made it clear that 'communists, adherents of Marxism, should...never forget the enormous importance of **DEMOCRACY** (Lenin's emphasis)' (CW 1: 290). Lenin's *Collected Works* are riddled all the way through with references to the term. It is a constant theme throughout his work, and he returned to the subject time and time again throughout his intellectual development. There can be little doubt that Lenin has written more on the concept of democracy than any other Marxist in the broad tradition. His influence upon the development of Marxist democratic theory has been unparalleled. He certainly had more to say on the subject than Marx and Engels.

As one of his hostile commentators rightly observes, it is Lenin's works, rather than those of Marx and Engels, which have 'provided the central and inescapable point of reference for all [Marxist] discussions of the state and democracy'. Indeed, 'many of the most important discussions since 1917 take Lenin as their starting point'. This is evident in the writings of prominent Marxist theorists such as Luxemburg, Kautsky, Althusser and Poulantzas (Hunt 1980: 9; see also Cunningham 1987: 44).

Lenin's theory of democracy became dominant within Marxism not only because he led the world's first successful socialist revolution. It is also because his writings on the subject are characteristically lucid and forceful. Lenin's principal work on democratic theory, *The State and Revolution* (1917, see Appendix), has been published, disseminated and read in the millions partially because its ideas are accessible to even the uneducated reader. It is one of the few works of Marxist theory that many amongst the politically conscious working class either know of or have read. Few would now

deny the historical significance of Lenin's democratic thought. Those who do would have to reckon with the millions of people who have read, spoken about, and acted upon his writings.

Some scholars have attempted to bury Lenin's ideas on democracy in another way, by arguing that they are irrelevant in the intellectual world today. According to this narrative, the more 'sophisticated' ideas of 'Western Marxism' have supposedly taken their place (Held 1987: 206). This claim underestimates the contemporary influence of Lenin's ideas. As Le Blanc rightly points out in his book *Unfinished Leninism*, 'Western Marxism's foundational figures happen to be two highly sophisticated and unrepentant Leninists – Lukacs and Gramsci', who conducted 'sustained efforts to utilise Lenin's revolutionary political thought in order to carry out tasks of party-building and revolutionary strategy'. These 'particularly influential intellectual and cultural contributions...are nothing if not vital expressions of Leninist perspectives' (Le Blanc 2014: 93, 92). What is more, both Gramsci and Lukacs have been recognised specifically for their ideas on democracy. Gramsci has been credited with producing 'what remains to this day the most detailed and interesting of Marxist proposals for industrial democracy' (Femia 1993: 79). As for Lukacs, Tokei (1990: 29) argues that he was 'deeply and constantly preoccupied with the problems of democracy and socialism' throughout 'his long intellectual career'. Even now, 'after the much-celebrated "collapse of communism"', intellectuals are still researching, utilising and even defending the democratic ideas of Gramsci and Lukacs (Le Blanc 2014: 93). The Leninist heritage of these so-called 'Western' Marxists makes an analysis of Lenin's views on democracy more relevant than ever.

There are also ideological reasons for examining this topic. The term 'democracy' has become one of the most prestigious and desirable political labels of the modern age.

In the capitalist West in particular it has acquired a philosophical halo of sorts. To be democratic today means to be good and respected, whilst to be non-democratic is to be bad and despised. Political ideologies and regimes have risen and fallen according to their democratic credentials, and Leninism will be no exception. Its status, relevance and appeal as a political philosophy of human emancipation depend upon these credentials.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are several political reasons for analysing Lenin's views on democracy. In recent years the growing de-legitimisation of capitalism, neo-liberalism, and the liberal democratic state, have brought Marxist criticisms to the forefront of contemporary discussions concerning the nature of democracy. As liberal democracy fails to empower the majority of the people, the working class will look for alternative forms of government that can better realise their interests. In one form or another, Lenin's criticisms and proposals will probably form a part of this debate.

Literature Review

Before outlining the argument of this thesis, it is worth briefly considering the historical evolution of the scholarship on Lenin's democratic thought. The following literature review focuses only upon those studies that devote significant attention to the subject. The studies that mention Lenin's democratic theory only in passing are mentioned in the body of the thesis.

One of the first scholars to study Lenin's democratic thought was Lucien Laurat, who in 1940 published his book on *Marxism and Democracy*. Laurat's study is consistently hostile. Lenin's interpretation of democracy is rejected as crude and

reductionist. His juxtaposition of ‘bourgeois’ to ‘socialist’ democracy is described as ‘confus[ed]’, and his conception of the latter is denounced as authoritarian, and responsible for Stalin’s supposed dictatorship. As Laurat argues, ‘after having proclaimed the soviet system as the model and incarnation *par excellence* of proletarian democracy, Bolshevism went on to suppress proletarian democracy altogether’. This in turn was due to ‘the totalitarianism of Lenin’ (Laurat 1940: 132-144). Subsequent treatments of Lenin’s democratic thought from the 1940s to 1970s basically repeated this argument, with small variations on the theme. In his article ‘Lenin’s Democracy, and Stalin’s’, Vishniak argued that Lenin’s works are filled with ‘invectives against democracy’. These invectives climaxed after the October Revolution, when he supposedly defined socialism as the ‘extreme opposite’ of democracy. Indeed, ‘that was his last conclusion about democracy and did not change it’. Until his dying days ‘Lenin despised democracy and frankly considered dictatorship a superior form of government’ (Vishniak 1946: 612, 615). Mayo (1955: 295, 294), for his part, argued in his *Democracy and Marxism* that ‘Leninism drove a section of the proletariat (the communist party) into open hostility toward democracy’. The studies by Meyer (1963: 57-78) and Sartori (1965: 424-25) are noteworthy in that they attempt to highlight the contradictions in Lenin’s democratic thought, to show that his ideas are incoherent and useless for democratic theorists. Meyer, for instance, argues that ‘Lenin himself has given conflicting answers’ to the meaning and significance of democracy ‘at different times...Indeed, as is so often the case, he subscribed to opposite views at the same time, without being aware of the contradictions in which he had involved himself’ (Meyer 1966: 66).

The main scholar to dissent from this narrative in this period was C. B. Macpherson (1966: 20, 22), who argued, in *The Real World of Democracy*, that Lenin’s socialist

vision- as implemented in Marxist ‘vanguard’ (i.e., one party) states- could be reconciled with democracy. Macpherson’s argument exploits the fact that the democracy has been interpreted in various ways, and it will be explored more later on. Suffice it to say here, however, his attempt to defend Lenin’s democratic credentials were met with hostility at the time. Lively (1975: 344-45) and Pickles (1970) refuted Macpherson’s arguments in their studies on democratic theory.

Upon reading these analyses of Lenin published from the 1940s to 70s, it becomes evident that they were a reflection of the cold war tensions of the time. In the battle between the capitalist and the communist worlds, academics were not neutral bystanders. They typically championed one side or the other, and this in turn undermined the objectivity of their analyses. In the Western countries, where ‘cold war liberalism’ dominated, it was common for scholars to uncritically endorse liberal democracy and capitalism, whilst denouncing everything communist as evil and despotic (Müller 2008). Because of this, the scholars analysing Lenin’s democratic ideas tended to caricature and dismiss them out of hand, thereby revealing their pro-Western prejudices and ideological bias. They were true cold war warriors, fighting for the victory of Western imperialism and capitalist democracy.

In the 1980s there was a slight shift in tone. Scholarly references to Lenin’s democratic thought became more charitable and balanced. Marcel Liebman led the way with his sympathetic portrayal of *Leninism under Lenin* (Liebman 1980). Liebman (1980: 195) was one of the first scholars to contend that ‘a *democratic* inspiration lies at the heart of Lenin’s vision’ of socialism in the *State and Revolution*. Following on from Liebman, some scholars recognised that Lenin did in fact offer several insights into democratic politics, particularly liberal democracy and the workers’ appropriate attitude towards it. Having said that, these very scholars still caricatured Lenin’s ideas,

by offering short analyses with sweeping statements and dismissive overall assessments (Pierson 1986: 80-83; Graham 1986: 215-227; Levin 1983; 1989). Pierson's *Marxist Theory and Democratic Politics* is a case in point. On the one hand, he argues that Lenin made some perceptive criticisms of what his rival Karl Kautsky had to say about the structural limitations of liberal democracy and the pre-conditions for socialist democracy (Pierson 1986: 76-77). 'But he showed...a still more rigorous commitment to a series of categorical imperatives on the state', imperatives that do not withstand theoretical or empirical scrutiny (Pierson 1986: 78). As a result, Lenin misconstrues the potentialities of liberal democracy, and he fails to 'provide a satisfactory account of politics, the state and democracy *under socialism*' (Pierson 1986: 81, 82-83).

As Westerners learnt more about the alleged crimes and abuses committed by the Soviet state, communist organisations and individuals who were previously supportive of Lenin began viewing his democratic legacy less positively. In 1980, for instance, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) published the edited volume *Marxism and Democracy* with the prominent socialist publishing house Lawrence and Wishart. Although the CPGB was officially a Marxist-Leninist organisation, the contributors to this volume sought to discredit Lenin's democratic thought; and blame it for the charge that Marxists did not take democracy seriously (Hunt 1980).

It was a different story in the socialist countries, of course. From the 1917 October Revolution to the fall of eastern bloc communism in 1990, the scholars in these nations produced a rich literature praising the correctness of Lenin's democratic thought, in a characteristically uncritical fashion (Spirkin 1968; Perfilyev 1970; Chkhikvadze 1972; Shakhnazarov 1974; Toporin and Machulsky 1974; Kiss 1982). As a general rule, however, Western scholars tend to ignore Marxist-Leninist publications, on the basis that they were supposedly propaganda, and that they violated the principles of objective

academic enquiry. If Marxist-Leninist publications were referenced, it was typically to criticise them. Those who were bold enough to reference these publications in a positive way were typically ridiculed for using untrustworthy sources. But at the *same time* as denouncing the ideological biases of Marxist-Leninist studies, Western scholars continued to publish their own biased studies on Lenin, under the bogus veneer of objectivity and neutrality.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s scholarly references to Lenin's democratic theory became more critical once again. The slogan 'Leninism equals dictatorship' became a popular refrain (Sartori 1987: 462-67; Dahl 1989: 53-54; Louw 1991: 139-47; Harding 1992: 155-89). In 1993, J. V. Femia (1993: 5, 10, 118-141) provided a damning indictment of Lenin's 'vanguard [socialist] model of democracy' in his book *Marxism and Democracy*, which has since become the authoritative and largely unchallenged exposition of Lenin's views, at least amongst anti-communists. Femia's (1993) *Marxism and Democracy* has served as a bible for those democratic theorists determined to show that Marxism is undemocratic. It essentially summarises and embellishes – in a clear and accessible format – the main criticisms of the most hardcore anti-Leninists. The book is, in essence, the culmination and crystallization of decades of 'Lenin bashing' and cold war domino theory hysterics. Indeed, it is a monument to these hysterics. It celebrates the very best that the Western cold war 'hawks' had to offer. Needless to say, Femia's arguments will be dealt with extensively in this thesis.

After the dust of the cold war settled, the anti-communist hysteria amongst academics lessened, and a *semblance* of balance returned once again in analyses of Lenin's democratic thought. On the one hand, some scholars continued to dismiss it as authoritarian apologetics (Glaser 1998: 137-39; 1999; Weale 2007: 20; Williams 2013: 18; Whelan 2019: 33; Schulman 2019; Brie 2018; 2020). Others, however, began to

note positive aspects, and treat Lenin's views on democracy more carefully (Nash 1990; Vanaik 1995; Priestland 2002; Marik 2008: 378-80; Le Blanc 2010; Pahnke 2019). A major breakthrough in this regard was made by Lars T. Lih, who offered a fresh reading of Lenin's most infamous work, *What is to be Done?* (1902, see Appendix) Ever since this work was published in 1902, legions of scholars had described it as the quintessence of Lenin's authoritarianism. The main interpretation, in short, was that this book disregarded the working class as a revolutionary force, and that it effectively justified the rule of a minority communist elite. Lih (2008: 32) demolished this myth, by arguing –à la Stalin, of all people – that Lenin did not in fact lose faith in the working class, and that he actually defended the self-emancipation of the working class in *What is to be Done?* Lih's study sent shockwaves through the anti-Leninist establishment, which is still dominant, though not as strong as it used to be. His seminal work paved the way for more sympathetic portrayals of Lenin's democratic thought (Chaattopadhyay 2009). Several studies have showcased the anti-dogmatic character of Lenin's political philosophy, as well as his commitment to the liberation of humanity from oppression (Krausz 2015; Negri 2014; Bórquez 2020; Shandro 2014; Le Blanc 2014). Nimtz (2014a; 2014b) demonstrates Lenin's commitment to participation in liberal democracy, as a key part of his socialist strategy. Pahnke (2019) argues that Lenin provides a penetrating insight into three possible future trajectories of liberal democracy: opportunism, national self-determination, and proletarian emancipation. Blackledge (2018) highlights the democratic thrust of Lenin's vision of socialism during the early months of soviet rule. Qinian (2018) defends the democratic credentials of Lenin's conception of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', whilst Shandro (2018) examines Lenin's attempt to forge a majority alliance between the peasantry and working class after the October Revolution. Magun (2018) utilises Lenin's democratic

theory as a point of departure to develop his own dialectical theory of the state. To add to all this, Lenin's work has recently appeared in a scholarly compendium of classical democratic texts, which is a rare honour for a man often described as a dictator (see Blaug and Schwarzmantel 2016: 278-282). Le Blanc (2014: 77) sums up the content of these more positive appraisals when he argues that 'Lenin's perspectives were profoundly and radically democratic'. Indeed, 'the hope for the future may lie with those who are able to utilise...the lessons from the Leninist experience in the struggles of the twenty-first century'.

As of 2021, however, there has still been no comprehensive monograph length treatment of Lenin's democratic thought. Some scholars have produced essays or chapters focusing upon isolated aspects of Lenin's views on democracy; whilst others have included brief, sketchy overviews of Lenin's democratic thought in more generalised studies of democratic theory. This has resulted in analyses being either focused on specific issues, and therefore incomplete, or all encompassing, but too short and lacking in detail, thereby resulting in caricatures. The fundamental principles and assumptions underlying and linking the various aspects of Lenin's democratic thought have been insufficiently analysed.

Argument

What, then, is the central argument of this thesis, and how does it contribute to the literature? In order to answer these questions, it is first of all useful to provide a genealogy of sorts. This thesis started out as an exhaustive exegesis and critical evaluation of Lenin's democratic thought. The plan was to outline Lenin's thoughts on the subject, and in the process of doing so, ask the basic question: 'is he right?' The main questions were: does Lenin provide a compelling definition of democracy? Is

Lenin's critique of liberal democracy convincing? Is his conception of socialist democracy democratic? Almost immediately after proceeding with this project, however, it became apparent that much of the secondary literature diverged considerably from what Lenin said. In some areas, scholars make small, excusable mistakes, but in other areas scholars make fundamental errors of interpretation. And there are not only a few fundamental errors. There are several fundamental errors. There are so many, in fact, that it is unideal to do both a worthy exegesis of Lenin's democratic thought and a critical analysis of his thought in a work of this length. It is difficult, in other words, to do justice to the question 'what does Lenin say?' and also do justice to the question 'is Lenin right?' within the word limit provided. The difficulty in answering the second question becomes all the more evident when one recognises that democracy is an 'essentially contested concept', one that people have disagreed about since its inception (Gallie 1956; Spicer 2019). Indeed, the literature on the meaning, nature and significance of democracy is massive, and so answering the question 'is Lenin right?' could easily take up another book. For many liberal scholars, the question of the meaning of democracy is a non-issue. They assume, in other words, that there is in fact a single 'correct' definition of democracy, and so they devote little attention to its meaning. This 'correct' definition is of course liberal democracy, the system of multiple parties, universal suffrage, the rule of law, and the division of powers, found in the western capitalist nations. One of the first things that Western undergraduate students are taught is that democracy is more or less identical with those features. Alas, those acquainted with Marxism cannot afford to subscribe to such unscientific dogmatics. This thesis endorses the Marxist teaching that no political concept can have a universal meaning or validity, and as such, it takes the contested nature of democracy seriously.

The significance of all this is as follows: Before one can answer the question ‘is Lenin right?’, it is first of all necessary to answer the question ‘what does Lenin say?’ Given that fact, this thesis offers a focused exegesis of the nature and significance of democracy in Lenin’s work. It contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive, near-exhaustive outline, one that lays out Lenin’s ideas in a systematic way, identifying the fundamental concepts and assumptions tying together each aspect of his democratic thought. It provides a detailed commentary of what the secondary literature has said about Lenin, and it subjects this literature to a critical analysis. The aim is to provide a fresh and definitive outline of Lenin’s democratic theory. Since the enterprise is theoretical in nature, the historical context will be examined only when it is necessary in understanding the view in question.

With that objective in mind, this dissertation makes several arguments. The central one is that Lenin should be understood as a democratic theorist. A democratic theorist is someone who takes the theoretical tenets of democracy seriously, and who provides a coherent, detailed theory of some aspect of democracy. Democratic theorists are concerned with the meaning of democracy, its relationship to other phenomena, and its value/significance. Lenin is not typically portrayed as a democratic theorist, even in sympathetic commentaries. His major works and ideas are rarely examined in textbooks on democratic theory, and if they are mentioned, it is usually as a put down. In opposition to that tendency, this dissertation argues that Lenin is deeply concerned with all the classical questions of democratic theory. Whilst he saw himself primarily as a committed Marxist and fighter for the emancipation of the working class, Lenin was also a democratic theorist. Indeed, in his view one cannot be a true Marxist without developing a complete understanding of the meaning, role and significance of this phenomenon to the working class. This simple yet significant fact has been either

denied or ignored by many scholars. To be clear, however, to say that Lenin is a democratic theorist is not to say that he is a democrat. The two things are distinct. One can develop an intricate theory of democracy, whilst also opposing its realisation or development. This thesis is concerned primarily with getting Lenin's thought 'right', and it treats his credentials as a democrat as a secondary issue. In order to elucidate the latter subject it is first of all essential to elucidate the former.

The second argument of this thesis is that Lenin offers a *single* theory of democracy. Some have argued that Lenin changed his views and advanced different conceptions over time, particularly in relation to socialist democracy (Harding 1981: 134-41; 1996: 150-169; Femia 1993: 77-78; Graham 1986: 211-212; Levin 1989: 157-165; Marik 2008: 375-378; Nash 1990: 22; Priestland 2002: 111-117). In contrast to these scholars, this dissertation argues that the same concept underlies all of his works. There is no fundamental conceptual development in Lenin's remarks on the subject. Lenin did not start off with one interpretation of democracy, and then change his views later on. Lenin offers one democratic theory, one definition of what democracy means. The reason for this is that from a young age Lenin based his world outlook on Marxism, an ideology that gave him a theoretical and analytical framework with which to understand the world. Lih emphasises that Lenin's lifelong commitment and loyalty to this doctrine cannot be underestimated. 'Lenin was truly in love with the ideas of Marx and Engels' (Lih 2014: 13). By utilising Marxism, Lenin developed a Marxist theory of democracy, one that remained unchanged, coherent and consistent throughout his career. Because Lenin utilises one interpretation of democracy, this thesis frequently joins together different works of his from different years. A statement on democracy from 1905 may be joined with one from 1917. To be sure, Lenin does emphasise different aspects of

democracy at specific historical junctures, but the concept underlying all of his pronouncements is the same.

The third argument of this thesis is that Lenin offers an *original, sophisticated, and nuanced* conception of democracy. It is useful here to define and explain these three descriptors in more detail. Something is ‘original’ if it is the first of its kind. Lenin’s account of democracy is original in several respects. He provides an original interpretation of the concept itself, as well as its various forms and applications. To say that Lenin’s democratic theory is original is not to say that he does not inherit any of its aspects. On the contrary, Lenin inherits several features of his democratic theory from Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. In order to understand Lenin’s theory, it is necessary to explore the works of Marx and Engels, and this dissertation does that. But Lenin does not merely reiterate the ideas of the founders. He develops and enriches them in several respects. Lenin’s democratic thought also draws upon thinkers who precede Marxism, and these too will be analysed in a comparative manner.

A concept is ‘sophisticated’ if it is developed to a high degree of complexity. Lenin’s democratic theory is sophisticated. He is careful to define the concept precisely and in accordance with his analysis of the concrete conditions. He avoids the use of unwarranted generalisations, and demands an empirical analysis of the phenomenon, taking into account not only democracy itself, but its surrounding socio-economic structure. It is precisely the sophistication of Lenin’s democratic theory that warrants a book-length analysis of it. Although his core ideas can be summarised succinctly, a full examination requires a detailed study.

Finally, a concept is ‘nuanced’ if it contains subtle shades of meaning or expression. Lenin’s democratic theory is far more nuanced than is typically thought. Although he often makes bold, seemingly universal assertions, he usually qualifies these statements

with several stipulations and reservations, thereby making them deeper and more particular.

These three arguments are of course interconnected. The argument that Lenin should be understood as a democratic theorist is based upon the argument that he develops a single, coherent conception of democracy, one that is original, sophisticated, and nuanced. Because of their interconnections, these three arguments do not appear in separate chronological order in this thesis. They instead intermingle with one another and permeate the entire analysis of Lenin's democratic thought. Of course, it is impossible to make these arguments without moving into the realm of evaluation, and so Lenin's claims will be judged for their rigour and logic. Primarily, however, this thesis aims at providing the most accurate overview of Lenin's democratic theory, and so an evaluation of it will only be partial.

Chapter Structure

This thesis comprises three chapters, each containing separate sections. Chapter one analyses Lenin's interpretation of democracy. It focuses upon his pronouncements on the meaning, characteristics, manifestations and essential forms of democratic rule. The first section outlines Lenin's definition of the concept, which, as will be shown, derives from his Marxist analysis. It explores Lenin's view that democracy privileges the power the interests of a definite class, and that there is therefore no such thing as a 'pure', 'above-class' democracy. Section two examines Lenin's view that democracy is a political category, meaning that it is both a form of class struggle and reflective of the economic base of society. Lenin defends democracy on instrumental rather than intrinsic grounds. Democracy, for him, is desirable only in so far as it facilitates the class struggle and provides a means to the attainment of socialism and communism, the

classless, stateless society of the future. Section three investigates Lenin's critique of the view that democracy and dictatorship are mutually irreconcilable concepts. Lenin argues that the two are instead in dialectical unity. Finally, section four examines Lenin's argument that democracy and freedom are not only different concepts, but also in opposition to one another. The core argument of this chapter is that Lenin views democracy as a paradoxical concept containing inherent contradictions. Lenin's perspective provides a unique lens through which to approach democracy more critically.

Chapter two explores Lenin's critique of liberal democracy, or what he calls 'bourgeois' democracy. Section one explores his criticism of the 'economic-state divide', which limits democracy to the narrowly defined public sphere. Section two explores Lenin's critique of liberal democratic rights, which, in his view, cement the rule of the bourgeoisie. Section three outlines Lenin's critique of the liberal democratic state, which he portrays as an institution of bourgeois rule. This chapter argues that Lenin's critique is not as crude or 'reductionist' as it is often presented. In fact, many of his arguments have been taken up in mainstream democratic theory, albeit in a repackaged form. Lenin's critique builds upon the ideas of Marx and Engels, though it is not a simple rehash. For one thing, Lenin provides an original examination of democracy under imperialism, and he also avoids some of the more controversial aspects of Marx and Engels' critique, specifically their principled rejection of democratic rights. Lenin's aim is to expose the exploitative core of liberal democracy to the fighting working class.

Finally, Chapter three examines Lenin's conception of socialist democracy, which he would put in the place of the liberal parliamentary state. Since this aspect of his democratic thought has been both the most widely discussed and also the most widely

misunderstood, this chapter necessarily forms the largest part of the thesis. Section one explores Lenin's insistence on the leading role of the Communist Party, the chief organisation of the working class. Section two elucidates Lenin's thesis on the working-class character of socialist democracy, the idea that socialist democracy manifests the rule of the working class. Section three explores Lenin's views on democratic rights under socialism. Section four examines Lenin's remarks on the various forms of mass participation, which comprise both direct and indirect democracy. Section five explores Lenin's conception of democratic centralism, the organisational principle of the socialist state. Finally, section six explores his much-overlooked conception of economic democracy. The principal argument of this chapter is that Lenin's vision is as sketchy as it is bold. Lenin's vision features a dialectical tension between top-down control and bottom-up initiative. It inadequately addresses issues relevant to democratisation, such as the power and role of the Party, the protection of democratic rights, the balance between economic planning and workers' management, the autonomy of social and state organisations, and the contradiction between centralism and democracy. Nevertheless, Lenin's conception is innovative and flexible. It encourages a range of interpretations and applications.

The chapter structure of this thesis involves some necessary repetition. The concepts established in chapter one are explored again in chapters two and three. The difference is that whereas chapter one offers a broad overview of Lenin's conception of democracy, as well as its relation to other social phenomena, chapters two and three provide more detailed analyses of the specific forms, specifically liberal and socialist democracy. It is helpful to outline the theory as a whole and provide the big picture before going into the specifics, hence why the thesis has adopted this chapter structure.

This thesis roughly separates exegesis from critical analysis. In the sub-sections of each chapter, a comprehensive exegesis of Lenin's views on a given aspect of democracy is followed by a brief 'reflections' section (see table of contents), one that establishes the meaning, coherence and significance of Lenin's views. To be specific, if Lenin's views 1) overlap with other significant thinkers; if 2) they are problematic or noteworthy in some respect; or if 3) they have been evaluated in a peculiar way in the secondary literature, then this will be mentioned and addressed in the 'reflections' section. Depending upon the subject being analysed, it may be necessary to explore only one or two of these points. If one of them has been neglected, then it is because there is nothing of significance to say on it. The reader may notice- to their potential annoyance or confusion- that the separation between exegesis and analysis has not been strictly maintained. In some cases, the author found it necessary and natural to provide some analysis alongside exegesis, and vice versa.

Whilst this thesis provides a more complete analysis of Lenin's views on democracy, it does not claim to be an exhaustive study. Due to space limitations, some fundamental questions were left out. Does Lenin think that the revolutionary transition from one form of democracy to another necessitates majority support? Does this transition have to take place in accordance with democratic principles? These means versus ends questions are important to Lenin and democratic theory, but they are not examined here because they primarily concern *strategies and methods* of democratic transition, rather than democratic institutions themselves. This thesis is concerned mainly with Lenin's views on democracy as a form of government.

Those acquainted with Marxist theory may also complain about the absence of a dedicated chapter on communism, Lenin's end goal. Fear not. The concept is explored throughout the first and third chapters, though there are two reasons why this thesis

does not include a dedicated chapter. First, Lenin said little about institutions under communism, let alone democratic institutions, and since this thesis is concerned with what Lenin says, rather than speculation on what he might have said, his views on communist democracy do not merit a chapter length examination. Second, and this should become clearer throughout the thesis, Lenin, like Marx and Engels before him, does not place a huge emphasis on the distinction between socialism and communism. This is something that some of his commentators get wrong: A popular legend in Marxist scholarship is that whilst Marx and Engels placed little value in the distinction between socialism and communism, Lenin divided them into two distinct, radically different stages. This claim has been overstated. The fact of the matter is that Lenin says that communism will look a lot like socialism. He does, however, identify some differences, and these are discussed in chapter 1.

As stated above, this thesis focuses upon Lenin's views on the meaning and nature of democratic government. Even on this, however, the analysis is far from adequate. The main reason is that Lenin's writings, speeches, and reports constitute a *vast intellectual treasury*, one that is nigh on impossible for the fallible and limited human mind to plumb comprehensively. In the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, armies of scholars spent decades studying Lenin's works, but they never managed to exhaust his views on any subject, including democracy. As such, whilst this thesis claims to provide a comprehensive examination of the fundamentals of Leninist democratic theory, it does not in any way claim to have provided a fully complete overview of the specific points. To claim that would be to dishonour Lenin's ideological legacy and his rich contributions to Marxism.

It is also essential to remember that this thesis focuses upon *Lenin's* views on democracy. It is not a survey of the vast literature on democratic theory, and so the

reader should not be upset if their favourite democratic theorist is not mentioned. This thesis does, however, claim to provide comprehensive coverage of what the literature has said about Lenin's views on democracy.

A Note on Sources and Methodology

The primary source used for this dissertation is the English language edition of Lenin's *Collected Works*, published by the Soviet Union's state publishing house, Progress Publishers, and released in English speaking countries with the publisher Lawrence and Wishart. This edition runs to 45 volumes; and is the most comprehensive English language collection of what Lenin said and wrote. Whilst there have been other editions of Lenin's translated writings, 'those by Progress Publishers and its related institutions in Russia have long been considered the most authoritative translations' (Marxist Internet Archive: n.d.). This is evidenced by the fact that many Western scholars use this translation, and few debates or controversies have spawned from its use.

Having said that, several issues arise from using this source. One of them, noted by Trotskyists, is that the collection was 'amassed after Lenin's death and during the rise and consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy'. According to the Trotskyist organisers of the online 'V. I. Lenin Library' - a subsection of the *Marxist Internet Archive* source used by many scholars- 'there is no doubt that political considerations were taken into account by the bureaucracy in determining the content of the various LCW versions' (Marxist Internet Archive: n.d.). Despite these concerns, there have been no detailed studies of what was and what was not omitted from these works, and so the accusations of censorship may be overblown. The implications of these potentially deliberate omissions for this thesis are hard to gauge, but they cannot be said to undermine its

rigour, since many studies- including those by Trotskyists- rely precisely upon the edition of Lenin's *Works* used here.

Secondly, issues of interpretation arise from the fact that Lenin's work has been translated from Russian into English. No translation can fully relay the meaning of the original language, and Lenin's *Works* are no exception. Lih (2008) convincingly shows that *What is to be Done?* has been widely misunderstood partially because key segments and terms have been incorrectly translated. This example shows that poor translations can and have fundamentally misconstrued what Lenin thought. Having said that, it is important to recognise that Lih's argument is a notable outlier. There have been few scholarly controversies over the accuracy of the English translation of Lenin's *Works*, and so the use of that widely used translation here does not constitute a violation of the accepted scholarly standards.

In terms of its methodology, this thesis undertakes an exegesis of Lenin's works that relies upon extensive quotations. The justification for this approach is twofold. First, this thesis argues that Lenin's thought has been routinely misunderstood and caricatured. In order to expose and correct these misunderstandings and caricatures, it is necessary to quote the source material directly. For too long, Western scholars have gotten away with making sweeping statements about Lenin without providing textual evidence to support it, or by taking quotations out of context. This thesis tries to avoid those tactics.

A second reason for frequently quoting Lenin directly is that he wrote (and spoke) in a distinctly non-academic and polemical style, one that is impossible to convey through paraphrasing alone. Lenin was an *intellectual fighter*. He sought to convey in his prose the struggle and revolutionary energy of the fighting working class. His language is therefore aggressive, fiery, and evocative. His thoughts on democracy itself

display these characteristics, and as such, his views on the concept can be fully grasped only by citing his views directly. Modern academic political theory is characteristically dry and, quite frankly, frequently boring, precisely because it eschews the fiery language Lenin employs. By quoting Lenin directly, this thesis hopes to infuse some life and energy into an academic discipline that is sorely lacking it.

Chapter 1: Lenin's Interpretation of Democracy

1.1 The Concept of Democracy

In its basic etymological sense, Lenin recognises that ‘democracy in Greek literally means the power of the people’ (CW 29: 479),⁴ and that ‘the very word “democrat” ... denotes an adherent of the sovereignty of the people’ (CW 8: 514). The essence of this slogan is that the *whole* of society governs itself, by deciding and executing the major public decisions.

Lenin considers democracy to be ‘a form of the state, one of its varieties’ (CW 25: 477). He defines the state as a body of political officials separated from society, and which has a monopoly over the means of violence. As the official expression of politics, the state mediates, fixes, and expresses social relations in a constitutional form. ‘[L]ike every state’, therefore, democracy ‘represents . . . the organised, systematic use of force against persons’ (CW 25: 477), the ‘domination “of one part of the population over the other”’ (CW 23: 58).⁵ However, the *democratic* state form has three distinguishing

⁴ Democracy actually means the ‘*rule* of the people’, not the ‘*power* of the people’ (Whelan 2019: 9). One should not read too much into this. Lenin clearly means the ‘rule of the people’ when he speaks about democracy. The fact that he uses the word ‘power’ rather than ‘rule’ on this occasion is of no significance to his theory as a whole.

⁵ Lenin is here quoting the Marxist P. Kievsky (G. Pyatakov).

characteristics. The first is political equality. It ‘signifies the formal recognition of equality of citizens, the equal right of all to determine the structure of, and to administer, the state’ (CW 25: 477). And by ‘all’, Lenin means adult citizens; not children or those excluded from the franchise. The second feature is majoritarianism. Democracy entails ‘the rule of the majority’, and the subordination of the minority to it. The third is free and fair elections. ‘Only . . . direct and equal elections can be called democratic’ (CW 18: 282).

But the state, in Lenin’s view, is not a neutral force. ‘The state is a product and a manifestation of the *irreconcilability* of class antagonisms’. It ‘arises where, when and insofar as class antagonism objectively *cannot* be reconciled’ (CW 25: 392). As such, ‘*every* state is a machine for the suppression of one class by another’ (CW 28: 107). Lenin spelt out the implications this had for democracy in his *State and Revolution*. ‘Democracy’, he argues here, ‘is a *state* which recognises the subordination of the minority to the majority, i.e., an organisation for the systematic use of *force* by one class against another’ (CW 25: 461). This passage establishes a clear Marxist definition of democracy. The essential aspect is its *class content*. Democracy reflects the antagonisms inherent in society by manifesting the fact that a particular class is ruling whilst another is being suppressed. It expresses that the ruling class owns the state and utilises it in its own interest. Democracy, as a form of political power, expresses the factual inequality of classes, and it does not and cannot change social inequality by acknowledging, on the political plane, the equality of people. As such, ‘if we are not to mock at common sense and history, it is obvious that we cannot speak of pure democracy as long as different *classes* exist; we can only speak of *class* democracy’ (CW 28: 242). But what is a class? The definition of this fundamental concept is often taken for granted in commentaries on Lenin and Marxism, even though there are

various interpretation of it. Lenin provides no ambiguity as to what a class is. Classes are groups of people defined by their location in the ‘system of social production, by their relation...to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it’. In essence, ‘classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy’ (CW 29: 421). In contrast to some analysts, who portray class as either a partially or wholly subjective category, determined by the individual’s perception of themselves (or their beliefs/ habits) (Rubin et al 2014), Lenin’s conception of class is objective. It is defined strictly by one’s location in the economic structure of society. By extension, therefore, the democratic rule of a class is empirically measurable.

Lenin argues that socialists commit a ‘theoretical and political error’ whenever they suggest that democracy consists of a particular set of timeless, universal characteristics. In his view, democracy may not only assume one definite institutional form. History shows that it has continually evolved since its inception, as one ruling class has supplanted another. The degree of democracy has also differed over time and space (CW 28: 464).

Democracy manifests formal majority rule. But for most of its history, Lenin argues, democracy has actually expressed the rule of a minority. In the exploiting societies, even under the most democratic conditions, the ruling class has barred the working majority from participating in politics and asserting its power (CW 28: 250).

With the inception of democracy in the ancient Greece, the majority of the population, which consisted of the toiling masses, was excluded from citizenship and politics. Lenin describes these democracies as a form of minority rule. For although

‘everybody took part...everybody meant only the slave-owners, that is, everybody except the slaves’ (CW 29: 480).⁶

Under modern capitalism things are slightly better: ‘in capitalist society...we have a more or less complete democracy in the democratic republic’. But even here ‘the majority of the population is debarred from participation in public and political life’. Owing to a variety of political inequalities that have their basis in the economic system, ‘this democracy is always hemmed in by the narrow limits set by capitalist exploitation, and consequently remains, in effect, democracy for the minority, only for the propertied class, only for the rich’ (CW 25: 460). Besides all this, Lenin argues that the bourgeoisie have always had various rules to debar the workers from democracy. In this context he wrote that. Indeed, by closely examining the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy, one can identify ‘restriction after restriction upon democracy’, including ‘in the technique of the representative institutions, in the actual obstacles to the right of assembly’, and ‘in the purely capitalist organisation of the daily press’. Although ‘these restrictions, exceptions, exclusions, obstacles for the poor seem slight...in their sum total these restrictions exclude and squeeze out the poor from politics, from active participation in democracy’ (CW 25: 465-66).

Whilst the exploiting forms of democracy therefore appear in the form of ‘majority government’, they actually mean the rule of the minority.

Lenin makes it clear that only a socialist revolution can terminate this contradictory state of affairs and thereby create a democracy in which the majority of the population actually rules. It is only this great social transformation that ensures the real rule of the

⁶ To be more precise here, Lenin should have mentioned that women and metics (foreigners living in ancient Greece) were excluded as well.

masses and their extensive participation in the state and social affairs. This, however, does not take place by simply extending democracy to people who were debarred from it earlier. The democracy of the socialist revolution also means the breaking down of the opposition of the exploiting classes who are in the way of the socialist transformation (CW 25: 439-40, 461). These classes may attempt to make use of the opportunities provided by democratic rights in the interest of their opposition. These manipulations are facilitated by the fact that, on the one hand, they have traditionally developed a great influence, and, on the other hand, that in the course of socialist transformation, several temporary difficulties arise. For example, among the working people, and especially among the non-proletarian working people, some wavering may appear. Making use of this, the bourgeoisie might influence the population quite effectively, and this may endanger the construction of socialism. A successful socialist transformation therefore demands and means the actual limitation of the democratic rights of the exploiting classes, which may as well be expressed in a formal way. However, these restrictions and limitations coincide in an immense expansion of democracy for the poor, the working masses, and it is this latter factor that determines the working-class character of socialist democracy (CW 25: 466). Indeed, ‘proletarian democracy is a *million times* more democratic than any bourgeois democracy’ (CW 28: 248). This is why Lenin, in the course of his debates with various critics, stated that those who do not notice or consider this fact do not decide on the questions of democracy from the point of view of the oppressed classes (CW 28: 248).

In Lenin’s view, democratisation culminates in communism, a society where there are no capitalists, classes, bureaucrats, or political restrictions. Here a ‘truly complete democracy’ will arise, one ‘without any exceptions’. But it is precisely here, Lenin argues, that democracy ‘disappears’ (CW 25: 467, 402). This is an idea that can be

found in several of Lenin's works. As he put it in 1916, '[d]emocracy, of course, is also a form of state which must disappear when the state disappears, but that will only take place in the transition from conclusively victorious and consolidated socialism to full communism' (CW 22: 144). Then, in his work on the *State and Revolution*, where he argued with opportunists, Lenin again dealt with the problem when he wrote of 'democracy *also* being a state and, consequently, also disappearing when the state disappears. Revolution alone can "abolish" the bourgeois state. The state in general, i.e., the most complete democracy, can only "wither away"' (CW 25: 397). Lenin goes on to deal with this problem in several chapters of his work.

By pointing to these passages, some claim that Lenin envisions the abolition of democratic procedures and the 'end of politics' under communism (Polan 1984). Since there are no classes, he supposedly believes that there will be no conflicts of interest, and that a universal harmony will emerge. Everyone will agree on everything, thereby making democratic methods superfluous (Sartori 1965: 424–425; Pierson 1986: 82–83; Levine 1985: 105–107; Marik 2008: 378–379).

This view has no basis. It overlooks the fact that Lenin makes a conceptual distinction between (i) democracy interpreted as a *state*, a form of rule, and (ii) the forms of democratic *government*, or what he calls *democratism*. This distinction has gone unnoticed because Lenin rarely uses the term *democratism*, and nor does he define it.⁷ This shadowy concept is an important one, however. Lenin employed it, for instance, in his *State and Revolution*, when he said that 'democracy is *not* identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a *state*' (CW 25: 461). He also utilised it whilst disputing the thesis of 'industrial democracy', though here he

⁷ To be clear, the term 'democratism' is the author's, not Lenin's. The aim, in using this term, is to make sense of Lenin's seemingly contradictory remarks on democracy.

emphasised another aspect. In opposition to those who thought that democracy consisted in the election of reliable economic leaders, he argued that their reasoning was ‘obviously artificial and incorrect...democracy is more than “nomination and seconding of candidates, elections, etc.”’ (CW 32: 81). For Lenin, the decisive and essential element of democracy is the issue of state rule, the class essence. But this rule is always expressed in the form of government, the various procedures and manifestations of democratism. These include, amongst other things, the voting system, the theory and practice of how leaders give an account of their work to their electors, the right of accepting and disseminating various ideas, and the ways of practising the rights of freedom. Democratism covers a wider field than democracy. The latter is a political category. It exclusively denotes a form of state. Democratism, by contrast, is not only a political category. It appears in other social fields as well, to denote procedures of management and systems of organisation. When democratism appears in the state sphere, it is a part of democracy. It denotes the degree—the narrowness or broadness—of the democratic state. The existence of a multitude, or even completeness, of the characteristics of democratism expresses the richness of democracy, whilst their lack means its poorness. These characteristics also differ quantitatively (Kiss 1982: 39–41). For example, Lenin notes that suffrage may be limited, based on census, or universal; and the election system may be proportionate or based on majority vote (CW 25: 336–337; CW 9: 52).

Lenin bases the separation of democracy and democratism upon his study of the historical facts. The latter, he argues, existed before the state in the classless tribal societies of primitive communism. Some of these (such as the Iroquois) featured a democratic government (what Lenin sometimes calls ‘primitive democracy’) in which everyone participated in the major decisions, under conditions of social equality and

limited freedom. This political form, however, was neither a kind of rule nor a state, since ‘in those times there was no state, no special apparatus for the systematic application of force and the subjugation of people by force’ (CW 29: 474). This meant that the democratism of primitive times was not a democracy in the scientific sense.

With the growth of slavery and the division of labour, society atomised into antagonistic classes. The state arose as the reflection and expression of this antagonism, and it became an illusory community standing above society and increasingly alienated from it. This organisation enabled the exploiters to rule in a democratic way. In the process, democratism assumed a state character, social equality became formal political equality, partial human freedom became political freedom, and majority decision became decision by the exploiting class.

Under capitalism, democratism exists in several non-state forms, such as in the trade unions. Predominantly, however, it appears in the political sphere, in democratic states, in the form of elections, the legislature, and political parties. It is this coincidence, in Lenin’s view, that explains the erroneous bourgeois conflation of democratism with democracy.

Democratism expands even more under socialism, where the workers’ mass organisations become predominant. At the same time, the proletarian state begins to wither away from the moment it is established, as the workers perform more state functions and coercion becomes superfluous.

Under communism this withering process ends, and democracy finally disappears. But democratism will persist and develop (CW 25: 461). It will provide general social equality, valid for every member of the community. It will mean universal, and not only political freedom, and majority decisions will more accurately express the interests of society—precisely because classes disappear. Governing and control over people will

give way to self-government based on the social activity of the entire citizenry (Levin 1983: 89; 1989: 158). As Lenin explains in his *State and Revolution*:

... someone may ... suspect us of expecting the advent of a system of society in which the principle of subordination of the minority to the majority will not be observed—for democracy means the recognition of this very principle.

No, democracy is *not* identical with the subordination of the minority to the majority. Democracy is a *state*. . . .

We set ourselves the ultimate aim of abolishing the state. . . . We do not expect the advent of a system of society in which the principle of subordination of the minority to the majority will not be observed. In striving for socialism, however, we are convinced that it will develop into communism and, therefore, that the need for violence against people in general, for the *subordination* of one man to another, and of one section of the population to another, will vanish...(CW 25: 461).

Under communism, the people will be free to develop their abilities and assert their positive actions. Social activity will increase, its forms of expression will grow, and its sphere will broaden. The forms of democratism will become more significant under these circumstances. The trade unions, for instance, will play a leading role in economic organization. Likewise, the soviets will not only remain, but expand, albeit without the need for bureaucrats, coercion, or political restrictions. Since all will govern in turn, the distinction between the rulers and the ruled will vanish. Differences of interests will persist and be respected. Whilst structural class antagonisms will come to an end, disagreements concerning the organisation and aims of society will not.

For Lenin, then, democracy is a phenomenon with inherent contradictions. It arose with the express purpose of oppressing classes, and so it does not automatically mean the rule of the majority of the population, that is, the working people. And this is why, among other things, Lenin generally differentiates between three types, or to be more precise, three phases in the development of democracy.

The first type of democracy is the one existing in the exploiting societies. Lenin characterises this type as being ‘democracy only for the rich and a thin layer of the proletariat’. Here, as he writes, ‘democracy [is realised] only as an exception, never complete[ly]’. The second type, or phase of development of democracy is the one that is practised during the transition from an exploiting society to communism: he refers to this period as the dictatorship of the proletariat. This is ‘democracy for the poor, for 9/10 of the population’, and it entails the ‘forceful suppression of the resistance of the rich’. Here ‘democracy [is] almost complete, limited only by the *suppression* of the resistance of the bourgeoisie’. Finally, Lenin describes the third type, or phase of development of democracy, namely, that of the communist society. Here democracy becomes ‘genuinely full democracy’, complete to the point that it ‘becomes a habit’, which in turn means that democracy withers away and gives its place to the distributive principle ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’. As Lenin himself states, ‘full democracy equals no democracy. This is not a paradox but a truth’ (Lenin 1972: 30; CW 25: 468).

To summarise the preceding discussion, Lenin maintains that there has never been and never will be such a thing as ‘pure’ democracy, since it is impossible for any state to be independent of classes and definite social patterns. As he put it, ‘no democracy in the world can eliminate the class struggle’ (CW 18: 335). That is why Lenin argues that *it is mistaken and unscientific to speak of democracy in general*. In his view, it is only

realistic to speak of democracy if one asks about the democracy of *what society, of what class, and of what type*. To reiterate, Lenin holds that there is no democracy in general; there are only different democracies defined by their class characteristics. Namely, there are ancient, bourgeois, socialist, and communist democracies. To be more precise, communist democracies cannot even technically be described as democratic, since with the withering away of the state only democratism remains.

Lenin identifies a core contradiction at the heart of democracy. On the one hand, democracy means the rule of the people, the entire adult population, but in its practical application democracy is a form of class rule that cannot meet this ideal. As the following sections and chapters of this thesis shall argue, this core contradiction informs Lenin's democratic theory more generally.

Reflections

A helpful way of understanding Lenin's interpretation of democracy is to contrast it against the one dominating in political science. As Grugel and Bishop write:

This mainstream view tends to be closely linked to the empirical theory which considers the actually existing democracies of the West as emblematic of democracy...the twin phenomena of liberal democratic institutions and a market economy are conflated with the very notion of democracy itself (Grugel and Bishop 2014: 20).

The implications of Lenin's approach can be best illustrated by recalling the well-known distinction between 'problem-solving' and 'critical' theory (Cox 1981).

As is well known, problem-solving theory is ahistorical. It is situated within the existing economic-political structure, which it views as a natural state of affairs that cannot change. Its primary aim is to ensure the smooth functioning of this structure by identifying and solving problems within it. Critical theory, by contrast, takes a historical perspective. It stands apart from the prevailing structure and asks how it came about. Critical theory thereby argues that every economic-political structure is human-made rather than natural, and therefore also subject to change and transformation. It sets itself the task of creating a structure that can facilitate human emancipation.

Empirical democratic theory is a problem-solving theory. It is deliberately ahistorical. It is situated within the capitalist economic system and its corresponding democratic superstructure, which it views as being both natural and immutable. It does not think that this structure can change, and it therefore defines democracy as liberal democracy. In doing so, it assumes that ‘all Western societies are democratic’ (Grugel and Bishop 2014: 32). It aims to criticise and ameliorate the institutional framework of liberal democracy, rather than identify alternatives to it.

Lenin, by contrast, is a critical theorist. By situating himself outside the capitalist structure he can take a historical perspective and distinguish between democracy and democratism. Lenin therefore argues that the institutional features of liberal democracy cannot be defined as democracy itself. He defines liberal democracy primarily according to its class essence. It is a particular historical form of democracy that may give way to a broader socialist democracy.

In order to adopt a scientific approach to the general notion of democracy, Lenin argues that it is necessary to detach the following two sides of the concept that are in close interdependence:

- a) Who holds the power, or, more precisely, in the hands of what class or classes is

state power to be found, as well as who is the master of the means of production in the given society?

b) What is the way in which power is exercised, what is the form of the political system, how is the state management of society achieved and to what extent do the popular masses take part in the managing of the state and society?

Lenin argues that these elements are in an organic connection, though the first of them has a decisive weight compared with the second, as it represents the objective element that ultimately determines the class character of democracy, and by this the actual limits of its achievement, both at the level of the political regime, and at that of the citizen's politico-juridical status.

The distinctive characteristic of Lenin's democratic theory consists in the fact that, by making a dialectical analysis of democracy, he does not give absolute value to any of these theses, but appreciates them in their interdependence, granting to each one a significance and part that it plays in the social process of asserting democracy. Many non-Leninist views, on the contrary, deny the question of who holds the power – and adopt as norms of appraising democratism the elements merely depending on the form of government or on the formal-juridical proclamation of the citizens' rights.

Lenin argues, on the grounds of his historical analysis, that an abstract 'pure' democracy does not exist. Democracy is a socio-historical category, the content of which changes from one order to another. Democracy always has a class character, being directly linked to the nature of political power. Democracy is determined by the essence of the social order and, eventually, by the form of production relationships in the given society. The true nature of democracy and democratic institutions is the result of the fight of the popular masses against social and national oppression. The fight for democracy is interwoven with the fight for progressive social changes.

Lenin's conception of democracy was hugely influential in the history of Marxism. Marx and Engels themselves never provided a systematic outline of what democracy meant. Marx provided his most detailed discussion of democracy in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the Right*, written when he was only 25 years old. His reflections consist of only a few pages, and he never revised or seriously developed these ideas afterwards (Femia 1993: 69). Hostile commentators have described his conception of democracy as incoherent (Kranenberg 1982), whilst others have found a profoundly insightful theory (Grollios 2017). Frederick Engels also never dealt with democracy in a systematic manner. Most of his remarks are located in his letters and historical commentaries on other subjects (Carver 1996). Neither he nor Marx took the time to focus upon the concept and its theoretical problems. This is not to say that Marx and Engels did not care about or for democracy. On the contrary, several studies have argued that they viewed the democratic struggle as a core objective for the fighting working class (Doveton 1994). The fact remains, however, that scholars have been left with little more than a few scattered passages and comments from the classical texts.

After the death of Marx and Engels, some of their followers, like Bernstein, attempted to define democracy as a 'neutral', 'pure', and 'classless' form of rule, and also to conflate it with liberal democratic institutions. Lenin made a decisive intervention by denouncing these 'Marxists' as opportunists and revisionists. He argued, with trademark clarity, that democracy has a class essence, and that it assumes different forms, depending upon the economic system and ruling class in question. In making this point Lenin drew upon Marx and Engels' teachings on the state, but he did not merely replicate their arguments. He developed them considerably. Essentially, Lenin inserted democracy into Marx's theory of history. In his famous Preface to his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1977) argues that human

society progresses through several stages of development: primitive communism, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and communism. Although in the Preface Marx outlines the *economic* features of these modes of production, he pays little attention to their *political* features, and a discussion of democracy is more or less absent. Lenin's contribution was to link a form of democracy with each economic mode of production. In his *State and Revolution* Lenin mentions that democracy progresses from ancient, to capitalist, to socialist, to communist forms of democracy, each denoting the rule of a specific stratum in society. So, whereas Marx provides a materialist conception of *economic history*, Lenin provides a materialist conception of *democratic history*.

Having said that, Lenin's outline is incomplete. Whereas Marx's Preface mentions primitive communism and feudalism, Lenin leaves these out entirely. Whilst Lenin discusses 'primitive democracy' elsewhere in his works, it would have been useful for him specifically to mention it as a political form of primitive communism, alongside the other forms of democracy in his *State and Revolution*. As for feudalism, Lenin never discusses the existence of democracy under this mode of production, which means that there is an unexplained gap in his historical timeline between the democracy of slavery and the democracy of capitalism. So, whereas Marx's materialist conception of economic history – as outlined in the Preface – is more or less complete, with no gaps, Lenin's materialist conception of democratic history, as represented in his *State and Revolution*, has two glaring holes.

An examination of the literature shows that the notion of democracy as a form of class rule was elaborated long before Lenin, or even Marx and Engels (Kalyvas 2019). It was Plato, and especially Aristotle, who, whilst analysing the history and political struggles of the Greek city states, expressed their recognition that democracy does not depend on the number of persons who govern and how they do it, but on which social

stratum is ruling within society. Plato characterises democracy as the opposite of the oligarchic form of state. He states that oligarchy is a regime in which only the wealthy few with property can hold office, whilst the poor are excluded. A democracy, by contrast, is a regime in which the poor grant the rest of the citizenry an equal share in both citizenship and the holding of political office, which are assigned by lot (Plato 1956: 261, 285).

Aristotle also defines democracy as a form of the state in which the free people hold political power. He further adds that a state is a democracy when the free people are in the majority and have control over government (Aristotle 1956: 283, 291, 293). In his *Politics* Aristotle repeatedly expresses his view that under democracy, as a result of the majority principle and of the participation of every free person in public affairs, the poor masses will rule over the state. That is, whenever all citizens are allowed to participate in the affairs of state, democracy will arise (Aristotle 1959: 311, 337).

Accordingly, the classic representatives of ancient thought, both Plato and Aristotle, not only used the term ‘democracy’ to denote by it the character of power, but – drawing the conclusions that necessarily follow – they also stated that where there is democracy, there must also be the rule of the poor, the majority (Dahl 1998: 12; Whelan 2019: 103-104).

As Macpherson (1966: 5) rightly argues, therefore, ‘democracy originally meant rule by the common people, the plebeians’, and ‘it was very much a class affair: it meant the sway of the largest and lowest class’. As a result, many of the privileged thinkers, statesmen and philosophers of the time ‘feared and rejected’ democracy. Plato, for instance, who was an adherent of aristocratic rule, rejected democracy on the basis that it would lead to an extreme equality among the people, to a decline in morals, and the tyranny of the poor over the well-to-do (Plato 1956: 313).

Although the ancient theorists outlined above defined democracy as a form of class rule, Lenin introduced novel principles. For one thing, these thinkers defined democracy narrowly as the rule of the poor. Lenin was more careful when formulating his conception. In his view, democracy is not synonymous with the rule of the poor. Democracy is a form of class rule, and it assumes the rule of the poor *only* after the socialist revolution and the seizure of state power by the ruling class. Before that, democracy denotes the rule of an exploiting minority.

Lenin's conception of democracy also bears similarities with a group of thinkers known as 'the elite theorists': V. Pareto, R. Michels, and G. Mosca. Like Lenin, they argued that democracy manifests the domination of a ruling class. Indeed, the term 'ruling class', a well-established term in modern political theory, owes itself not to Lenin, or even Marx, but Mosca (Drochon 2020: 185). Elite theories remain popular today, and as Chapter two of this dissertation argues, many of their ideas have been absorbed into mainstream theories of liberal democracy, albeit without the Leninist verbal baggage of 'proletariat' and 'bourgeoisie'.

Again, however, there are important distinctions between elite and Leninist democratic theory. For one thing, and unlike Lenin, the elite theorists did not deploy a Marxian class analysis and define the ruling class strictly as the dominant economic class. They defined the ruling class as broader group, one encompassing people from various classes, though they did recognise the significance of economic power (Drochon 2020: 187-188). Second, the elite theorists defined the ruling class by definition as a minority in society. In their view, every political system is a form of minority rule, and democracy is no exception (Femia 2001: Ch. 3). Such was the

pessimism of their democratic theory.⁸ Lenin, by contrast, argues that democracy manifests the rule of a minority elite only in non-socialist societies.

On the one hand, therefore, Lenin's conception of democracy avoids the 'majoritarianism' of the ancient Greek definition, which associates democracy simply with the rule of the poor majority. On the other hand, it also avoids the 'minoritarianism' of the elite theorists, who define democracy purely as the rule of a minority. Lenin's conception is nuanced and sophisticated, encompassing both the rule of the poor majority and the rule of a propertied minority, depending upon the mode of production and the form of democracy arising from it. Moreover, Lenin also made a novel contribution to democratic theory by distinguishing between democracy and *democratism*. The former denotes a form of state, whereas the latter denotes a family of methods or procedures, which may assume the form of a government. As such, Hunt's (1980) charge that Lenin endorses a crude, reductionist view of democracy is unjustified.

With regards to the specific points of Lenin's conception of democracy, many share his view that the democracy of ancient Athens was – contra Plato and Aristotle – elitist and minoritarian in character. This is a commonly known fact in democratic theory, and as such it cannot be attributed to Lenin (Whelan 2019: 9-10). Nevertheless, there are important tonal differences in their portrayals. The distinctive feature of Lenin's analysis is that he identifies the minority character of Athenian democracy as its core characteristic, indeed, its *defining* characteristic. He defines it as the rule of a slave-owning minority. This is the main thing he identifies, and he does not even bother examining the institutions of Athenian democracy. By contrast, many contemporary

⁸ As Drochon (2020: 196) argues, however, Michels did not conclude that democracy, as majority rule, was not worth struggling for. On the contrary, he defined democracy as the struggle against minority rule, against oligarchy.

studies of Athenian democracy skirt over its exclusive character, giving it little attention and downplaying its significance, whilst spending most of their time exalting its democratic processes. In doing so, they act as apologists for the Athenian state, and some even portray it as one of the greatest, most expansive democracies in human history (Pateman 2020a: 542). Hannah Arendt and her followers tended to showcase this tendency in their studies (Wedin and Wilén 2020). Lenin's analysis does not succumb to apologetics. He reminds his readers that Athenian democracy was a class democracy that suppressed the vast majority of its population. Lenin approaches Athenian democracy from the position of the slaves, the exploited, whilst many modern democratic theorists approach Athenian democracy from the position of the privileged male minority who enjoyed it.⁹ In this respect, Lenin's examination of ancient Athenian democracy remains fairly distinctive, and reflects his consistent adherence to the standpoint of the oppressed.

Lenin's characterisation of liberal democracy as the rule of the capitalist class is also by no means original. This thesis was advanced by Marx, Engels, and members of the bourgeoisie itself, though as section two of this dissertation shall argue, it was none other than Lenin who renewed this thesis with an unrivalled clarity. Today, as it has already been shown, elite theories and other critical perspectives routinely characterise liberal democracy in this manner, though they do not employ the same terminology.

Lenin's conception of socialist democracy has had a mixed legacy. In light of deindustrialisation and the diversification of the working class, many Marxists,

⁹ Of course, many (perhaps a majority) enfranchised Athenian citizens were small farmers or independent artisan craftsmen. Plato and Aristotle counted these elements amongst the 'poor'; and wanted to deprive them of their citizenship. These citizens could not, however, be described as the 'exploited' or 'oppressed' in Lenin's sense, since they were petty property owners and played a leading role in politics. Moreover, they stood above the slaves, who were the real 'working class'/oppressed/exploited of ancient times.

working with a narrow and erroneous definition of the working class as industrial labour, have abandoned the conflation of socialism with working class rule (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In other words, socialist democracy has been de-linked from its class moorings. However, in the Marxist-Leninist states that are actually practising socialist democracy, Lenin's class-based conception remains as relevant as ever.

Lenin's conception of communist democracy (or communist democratism) remains alive today in the theoretical programmes of the world's ruling communist parties. The Communist Party of China, for instance, has not abandoned Lenin's goal of abolishing the state and perfecting democracy. Paramount Leader Xi Jinping (2017: 4, 34) has frequently voiced the Party's goal of striving for communism. By creatively updating Lenin's democratic theory for the present era, China and the other Marxist-Leninist states have showcased its continuing relevance, at least for them.

Lenin views the transition from ancient to communist democracy as a teleological process, one that has a predetermined beginning, middle and end. Because of this, C. Pierson claims that his account 'suppresses the recognition that democracy was won only through popular...struggles'. This in turn fosters the erroneous notion that democratic gains are 'irreversible', and it 'jettisons' 'much of what is most valuable in the historical development of democratic politics' (Pierson 1986: 80-81). Pierson has got things the wrong way around. Lenin's teleological account of democratic process does not overlook the role of the class struggle. On the contrary, it is his belief in the *inevitability* of class struggle that makes his account teleological. Lenin views the class struggle as an inalienable feature of antagonistic society. It is the mechanism by which one form of rule gives way to the next. Whilst he argues that this struggle will inevitably arrive at socialism, the path to it is not necessarily linear, and gains are not irreversible. Democratic forms run the risk of regressing into lesser or even despotic forms along

the way. Lenin devoted much of his energies to organising the proletarian class struggle for democracy in Tsarist Russia, since he recognised that only this struggle could facilitate the bourgeois and socialist revolutions.

According to Pierson (1986: 82), the teleological claim that the transition to communist democracy 'is necessarily inscribed in the process of historical development' 'should be abandoned'. Even if there are good reasons to believe that these political forms may reign supreme in the future, it is impossible to prove this with certainty, and describe their arrival as an inevitable outcome of historical laws. This is a valid criticism, though it ignores an essential function of Lenin's teleology. It aims to give communists the conviction and confidence that a true and perfect democracy will arise in the future, even if it may seem like a long way off today. Lenin's teleology has given Marxist-Leninists the motivation to wage a consistent struggle for the deepening of democracy in the name and interests of the fighting working class.

G. Sartori is baffled by Lenin's thesis that the democratic state withers away under communism. His objection is that much of society is reliant upon the state. The rising global population and increasing complexity of modern societies has made bureaucracies more necessary, rather than less so. Under these conditions, the state will tend to want to increase its strength and influence, rather than decrease it. As Sartori argues, the role of the bureaucracy is even larger under the socialist state envisioned by Lenin, which takes on an unprecedented number of functions, including the economic ones that were previously performed by private individuals. As such, 'how a state on which everything depends and to which everything is entrusted, truly the most mastadonic, totalitarian, and monolithic state ever to exist, can set out on the road to extinction is, I confess, beyond my understanding' (Sartori 1965: 430). In connection with this, Sartori voices the age-old concern that whilst power corrupts, absolute power

corrupts absolutely. The historical record suggests that when the 'limited' liberal democratic state is replaced by a 'strong' socialist state, 'what is likely to happen is not that the latter will perish but that it will desire to live and need to expand more forcibly than ever, precisely because it is a dictatorship' (Sartori 1965: 430).

Sartori's objections fail to recognise that Lenin identifies an essential condition for his withering away thesis: a world-wide socialist revolution. The democratic state can begin to wither away only once every country has undergone the transition to socialism. At the very least, the advanced capitalist countries need to have begun this transition. If this condition is not met, then any process of withering away is out of the question. This was the conclusion defended by J. V. Stalin, Lenin's successor. Once he took power, he quickly realised that a worldwide socialist revolution would not transpire. The Soviet Union was surrounded by capitalist sharks. Under these conditions, when the country faced both internal and external threats, it would be utopian for the state to wither away in the manner Lenin envisaged.

Since a worldwide socialist revolution has not yet occurred, there is no basis for Sartori's view that Lenin's 'withering away' prediction is invalid. Since the objective conditions for the process have not yet been achieved, one cannot disprove this element of Lenin's democratic theory. It remains to be seen whether it is right or not.

Lenin's conception of communist democracy is lacking in clarity. When Lenin says that democracy 'withers away' under communism, he does *not* mean the destruction of majority rule. However, it is easy to interpret him as saying that. Many less than scrupulous commentators have made that mistake, thereby arriving at erroneous conclusions. As such, it is unfortunate that Lenin associates communism with the abolition of democracy. In order to be clearer on this issue, he should have said that communism means the abolition of the *democratic state*, not democracy per se.

Unfortunately, Lenin conflates democracy with the state, and so he lacked the conceptual tools to make that distinction (Hunt 1980: 15).

Indeed, Lenin's views on the status of democracy under communism seem to be inconsistent. On the one hand, he argues that democracy is a form of class rule, but on the other hand, he refers to a pure, classless, communist democracy on several occasions. Lenin (1972: 30) himself appears to recognise and confront this inconsistency when he says that 'full democracy equals no democracy. This is not a paradox but a truth'. In this passage, Lenin is fully aware that he refers to democracy in two opposing senses, but he does not see this as an issue. For Lenin, a key principle of the Marxist dialectical approach is the 'unity and conflict of opposites' - meaning that concepts can mean two seemingly contradictory things at the same time. Indeed, Marxists maintain that it is these internal contradictions that cause phenomena to evolve and develop over time. Whilst this perspective may seem incoherent from the perspective of formal logic, it may be more acceptable for Marxist dialectical logic.

1.2 Democracy as a Political Form of Struggle

Lenin views the democratic state as a political phenomenon, ‘a category proper only to the political sphere’ (CW 32: 26). In the Marxist doctrine of historical materialism, economics shapes politics. As such, the democratic state, as a political embodiment of class relations, is a *reflection* of underlying economic forces. ‘In the final analysis’, Lenin writes, ‘every kind of democracy, as political superstructure in general...serves production and is ultimately determined by the relations of production in a given society’ (CW 32: 81). This means that in a society with private ownership of the means of production, democracy will serve as an instrument for consolidating and advancing private property, while in a socialist society democracy is a means of strengthening socialist ownership and its various forms.

Lenin’s hostile commentators have criticised his conception of democracy for its economic determinism. He supposedly presents democracy as an epiphenomenon of the economic base, with no reciprocal affectivity or autonomy. This overlooks the fact that the historical forms of democracy can struggle *against* the prerogatives of the dominant economic forces, and even overturn them. Hunt, a leading exponent of this view, criticises Lenin’s economic determinism in relation to liberal democracy under imperialism, under state monopoly capitalism. Lenin allegedly argues that the imperialist economic base favours reaction and precludes the rise of democracy. ‘As a consequence, the analysis of bourgeois democracy is no longer for Lenin a pressing, current problem, but a past which has been historically overtaken by the onward march of monopoly capitalism’. But whilst this reactionary situation may have prevailed during the First World War, when Lenin proposed it, ‘the whole subsequent

development of capitalism throughout the remainder of the twentieth century reveals the falsity of Lenin's thesis'. This period has been characterised not primarily by reaction, but by 'the preservation of bourgeois democratic forms'. The regimes that preserved and expanded democracy were the ones that achieved a 'general economic and political victory' (Hunt 1980: 14). Even the rise of fascism in the 1930s and 1940s did not defeat bourgeois democracy. 'It follows that bourgeois democracy is not a question of the past, but a very pressing contemporary question for socialists and Marxists' (Hunt 1980: 15). Hunt blames Lenin's economic determinism for the charge that Marxists do not 'take democracy seriously' (Hunt 1980: 7).

This charge has little textual basis. To be sure, Lenin does view the economic base as the primary determinant of democracy. But this is not a rigid, one-way relationship. 'In actual life', he writes, 'democracy . . . will exert its influence on economic life as well, will stimulate its transformation; and in its turn it will be influenced by economic development, and so on. This is the dialectics of living history' (CW 25: 452-53). Lenin recognises that democracy can react back against the logic of the economic structure, and he applies this view to liberal democracy under imperialism. In his critique of Pyatakov's 'imperialist economism', as well as some representatives of Polish social democracy Lenin refused the view that under imperialism it is hopeless to struggle for democracy, simply because monopoly capitalism opposes it.¹⁰ On the one hand, he writes, 'the political superstructure...of monopoly capitalism (imperialism is monopoly capitalism), is the change *from* democracy *to* reaction. Democracy corresponds to free competition. Political reaction corresponds to monopoly'. Since imperialism 'strives towards violations of democracy, towards reaction', it 'is indisputably the "negation"

¹⁰ See *Reply to P. Kievsky (Y. Pyatakov)* (1916) (CW 23: 22-27); and *A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism* (1916) (CW 23: 28-76). Also see Appendix.

of *democracy in general, of all democracy*' (CW 23: 43). This is 'a contradiction between the economic system and the political superstructure'. Nevertheless, imperialism can be reconciled with democracy through two mechanisms: 'direct bribery', and an 'alliance of government and stock exchange' (CW 23: 47). With these mechanisms in force, democracy can flourish even under the domination of monopoly finance capital. Thus, it follows from what Lenin says that although imperialism and democracy contradict each other, the existence of democracy is not impossible under imperialism.

Lenin suggests that the political struggle might even force imperialism to realize certain aspects of democracy. Analyzing the events of the First World War, he wrote that 'the violation of democracy with regard to the small nations' could result in a revolt or mass radicalization. Under these circumstances it is not only possible but profitable for the imperialists to permit 'small nations as much democratic freedom as they can', even political independence if necessary, so as not to harm their domination. Therefore, 'to overlook the peculiarity of political and strategic relationships' and simply to highlight the anti-democratic essence of imperialism, 'is anything but Marxism' (CW 23: 51).

As should be clear, Lenin rejects the charge that imperialism precludes the development of democracy. He rejects the idea that democracy has no power to struggle against the economic base. Far from dismissing its importance, Lenin devoted considerable attention to the problems and features of imperialist democracy.

The alleged economic determinism of Lenin's democratic theory has been linked to another feature: class reductionism. Lenin supposedly believes that 'the specific historical forms of democracy constitute democracy for a specific class or classes and the denial of democracy for other classes' (Hunt 1980: 9). As such, according to K.

Graham (1986: 214-15), Lenin never suggests that liberal democratic institutions ‘might, in themselves, be of positive benefit for revolutionary purposes’. Lenin’s class reductionism has again been rejected in its application to liberal democracy. History shows that this form of rule, by granting universal suffrage and rights to all, has empowered the working class, not only the bourgeoisie (Hunt 1980: 16; Pierson 1986: 78, 80–81; Femia 1993: 50, 61). B. Jessop (1980: 59) describes this as ‘the political indeterminacy of formal democracy’. Instead of the class content of the liberal state being fixed and determined by property relations, it remains uncertain, vague, and open to contestation.

The claim that Lenin denies the possibilities for class struggles under democracy is inaccurate. Although his formulaic utterances can be interpreted in this ‘reductionist’ way, his concrete discussions advance a more nuanced conception of democracy. When Lenin says that democracy has a class character, he means that it *privileges* the political power and influence of a definite class. This does not mean that the subordinate classes are powerless. On the contrary, the various forms of democracy grant them more or less space to struggle for their aims and eventual rule.

Under capitalism, for instance, Lenin maintains that democracy is of various degrees. Hence the degree of development that democracy has obtained cannot be irrelevant to the working masses. They cannot overlook how large the field of action is ensured for them by the existing political system. The broader a democracy is, the more it ensures that the exploited classes can assert their interests and struggle for them more effectively than other political forms. As he writes, ‘democracy does *not* abolish class oppression. It only makes the class struggle more direct, wider, more open and pronounced, and that is what we need’ (CW 23: 73). For the exploited masses, therefore, ‘democracy is not just a diplomatic signboard, not a showy phrase, but their

own vital cause, a question of life and death' (CW 18: 127; CW 9: 51).

Lenin applies this view to liberal democracy under imperialism. Although the bourgeoisie reign supreme, 'the domination of finance capital . . . does not in the least nullify the significance of political democracy as a freer, wider and clearer *form* of class oppression and class struggle' (CW 22: 145). As such:

. . . all arguments about the 'impracticability', in the economic sense, of one of the demands of political democracy under capitalism are reduced to a theoretically incorrect definition of the general and basic relationships of capitalism and of political democracy as a whole.

. . . [A]ll the fundamental demands of political democracy are only partially 'practicable' under imperialism, and then in a distorted form and by way of exception. . . . But from this it does not by any means follow that Social-Democracy should reject the immediate and most determined struggle for *all* those demands (CW 22: 145).

In this passage Lenin recognises that the political sphere, and within this, democracy, has a relative independence, an inner logic. Under certain circumstances, especially as the result of political demands or in the case of changes in political power relations, the subordinate classes may achieve *limited* power. He acknowledges that liberal democracy does occasionally counterbalance the disadvantages of the exploited. It may ensure a freer assertion of various interests and a freer struggle for them. It may help the workers to promote their interests and power through political means. This is why Lenin, unlike the ultra-leftists of this time, *supported* the workers' participation in

bourgeois democracy (Nimtz 2014a; 2014b; Claudin 1977: 66–67; Krausz 2015: 100). His point, however, is that under capitalism the workers can empower themselves only ‘partially’, ‘exception[ally]’, and in a ‘distorted’ fashion. They should therefore formulate their demands ‘in a revolutionary and not a reformist manner’. Whilst utilising liberal democracy, they must also ignore the law when necessary, go ‘beyond speeches in parliament and verbal protests’, and draw ‘the masses into decisive action’. They should extend and intensify ‘the struggle for every fundamental democratic demand up to . . . the socialist revolution’ (CW 22: 145). The democratic struggle in itself will not liberate the proletariat. Only an ‘economic revolution’ and the destruction of private ownership can accomplish this. Imperialist democracy ‘cannot be overthrown by democratic transformations, even the most “ideal”’. Nevertheless, the democratic struggle may and does create better conditions for proletarian liberation, and ‘a proletariat not schooled in the struggle for democracy is incapable of performing an economic revolution’ (CW 23: 25). Thus: ‘the Marxist solution of the problem of democracy is for the proletariat to *utilise all* democratic institutions and aspirations in its class struggle against the bourgeoisie in order to prepare for its overthrow and assure its own victory’ (CW 23: 26; 74).¹¹

Lenin does not think that the democracies of the exploiting societies primarily favour the exploited classes, which, under democratic conditions, have a better opportunity to struggle. In his view, they actually enable the exploiting classes to exercise their power in a more effective way. In this sense, democracy in the exploiting systems conceals

¹¹ According to Liebman (1980: 428) and Meyer (1963: 57–78), Lenin’s analysis is undermined by a contradiction: If liberal democracy exclusively serves the interests of the bourgeoisie, why does he insist on the workers using it for their own advantage? Meyer and Liebman have discovered this ‘contradiction’ only because they have misread Lenin. Contrary to what they think, Lenin rejects the notion that liberal democracy exclusively serves the bourgeoisie.

the actual power relationships and turns the workers' attention away from the main problem, viz. the social ones. It is in this way that democracy may become the best political cover for capitalist society.

But by involving the working masses in the governance of the state, Lenin argues that democracy in socialist societies accelerates the realisation of a new type of life, one that is in the interests of the majority of society. He views the involvement of the broad masses of the workers in settling their affairs – a process which also increases their consciousness, their social responsibility and activity – as both the achievement and the precondition of the development of socialism and communism.

For Lenin, then, democracy is not an end in itself but a means to an end surpassing it. Democracy is both a means of struggling for socialism and its political expression. But it does not fulfil the tasks of proletarian emancipation, which is attained under a communist society. Democracy is therefore a *means to an end* surpassing it—communism—and it must be subordinated to this objective. It is in this context that Lenin evaluates democracy and the application of its procedures. As Vishniak (1946: 610) explains, 'Lenin was planning a socialist revolution, within the framework of democracy if possible, but in spite of democratic principles if necessary' (See also Meyer 1966: 61). After the October Revolution, for instance, Lenin argued that the workers' interests were "superior to the interests of a democratic constitution". He urged not to 'return to the old prejudices, which subordinate the interests of the people to formal democracy' (CW 26: 355). This is also why Lenin, when evaluating Trotsky's role in the trade union debate, recognised the latter's formal right to start a debate and formulate his own platform. Trotsky's actions, however, threatened the Party and the trade union movement with a split that endangered the socialist system. This was an instance when democracy and socialism contradicted each other. Lenin emphasised that

‘formal democracy must be subordinate to the revolutionary interest’ (CW 32: 86).

Since democracy is a purely political phenomenon, Lenin argues that the working class cannot rest satisfied with its realisation. It must extend its revolutionary activity of transformation beyond the political sphere to all fields of society. Political emancipation must become social emancipation. Lenin expresses this idea in *State and Revolution*, where he describes democracy as only ‘one of the stages on the road . . . to communism’. Democracy means formal equality, but the communist revolution goes beyond this. It strives towards equality for all ‘in *relation* to ownership of the means of production, that is, equality of labour and wages’. It strives to introduce the distributive principle ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’ (CW 25: 477). This, for Lenin, is the second contradiction of democracy. Although it means the rule of the people, in practice it is a form of class struggle that can never *become* the rule of the people. This objective can be reached only through the abolition of the democratic state.

Since democracy is a political category, Lenin warns against the illusions spread about it. Democracy by itself creates no material value. It produces neither material abundance nor welfare. It does not make the people cultured and happy. Democracy may, however, promote better decisions in the various areas of life. It may help in involving more people in the execution of decisions. It may persuade people to live a more rational and effective life by making use of the opportunities offered by socialism. Consequently, it may promote the faster advance of society. Lenin views democracy as a political means, and as such it has advantages and deficiencies. His message is to be aware of this when estimating its possibilities, and when evaluating the results achieved under it. Democracy should not be underestimated, but nor should the illusions that surround it.

Reflections

When Lenin describes democracy as a ‘superstructure’ that reflects and serves the economic ‘base’ of society, he utilises what G. A. Cohen (1982) calls a ‘functional explanation’. According to this concept, a phenomenon exists by virtue of its function, which is to serve something else. On Lenin’s view, democracy exists in order to serve the mode of production. B. Hindess criticises this use of functional explanation, specifically Lenin’s claim that the liberal democratic state functions in order to maintain capitalist property relations. This argument is supposedly incoherent because it lacks a sufficient explanation. In order to show that the economy functionally explains the state, Hindess argues, it is necessary to highlight the ‘mechanism’ that enforces this relationship. Lenin never does this, and as such, the notion of relative autonomy is ‘little more than a gesture towards a theoretical vacancy that always remains to be filled’. For Hindess, the ‘fundamental problem’ is not merely that Lenin leaves this ‘theoretical vacancy open’. ‘The problem is that it cannot be filled’. The slogans of relative autonomy and independence are a ‘gestural evasion’ of an unsolvable problem. For ‘there is no coherent way’ of arguing that politics is irreducible to the economy and the class structure on the one hand, whilst simultaneously being determined by the economy on the other. Worded differently, ‘there can be no coherent conception of...relative autonomy’ in the way Lenin defines it, since such a conception ‘must allow for elements of political life that are both effective and irreducible on the one hand and yet constrain their effectiveness to conform to the supposed ultimately determining role of the economic on the other’. Whilst Hindess concedes that there may be conceptions of relative autonomy that overcome this difficulty, he argues that no-one has been able to develop a conception that does so. Anyone who wants to ‘establish the mechanism

of the supposed ultimately determining role of the economy’ needs ‘to show how they are effective rather than merely assert that they are’. For this reason, Lenin’s ‘political analysis conducted in terms of an imagery of economic determination...must be fundamentally inadequate’ (Hindess 1983: 40-42). In order to show that the economy functionally explains the state, Hindess argues that it is necessary to identify the ‘mechanism’ that imposes the relationship, and this is something that Lenin does not do. Pierson, however, argues that Hindess’ criticisms are unjustified. ‘Although...there is an element of “essentialism” in Lenin’s conception of liberal democracy, ‘Lenin did attempt to show how the institutions of parliamentary democracy...necessarily articulated the political rule of the bourgeoisie’ (Pierson 1986: 64). Pierson is correct. Lenin’s examination of liberal democracy will be examined in more detail in chapter two of this thesis. Suffice it to say here, Lenin pays detailed attention to the ways in which particular forms of democracy articulate the power of the ruling class.

Lenin’s conception of democracy as a political form of class struggle touches upon a second area of democratic theory, one that takes the meaning of democracy for granted and instead focuses upon the moral justification for it. That is, instead of asking the question ‘what is democracy?’, it asks ‘what reasons are there for adopting it over the other forms of government?’. There are broadly speaking two ways of justifying democracy. Intrinsic arguments highlight the qualities inherent in the democratic process that make it morally desirable, regardless of the consequences. By contrast, instrumentalist arguments ignore or reject the intrinsic values and instead highlight the positive outcomes of using it as compared with other methods of political decision-making (Christiano 2018). Lenin’s justification for democracy is purely instrumentalist. Lenin rejects the idea that democracy has intrinsic value, and that it should be supported regardless of the consequences and goals it can promote. Democracy is useful only to

the extent that it serves a single objective: the construction of socialism and communism.

In making this point Lenin draw upon Marx and Engels. In his *On the Jewish Question*, Marx distinguished between ‘political emancipation’, or in other words democracy, and ‘human emancipation’, the achievement of equality in all spheres of life (MECW 3: 168). Likewise, Engels said that ‘democracy would be quite useless to the proletariat if it were not immediately used as a means of carrying through further measures directly attacking private ownership and securing the means of subsistence of the proletariat’ (MECW 6: 350). For Engels, like Lenin,

Democracy is...a contradiction in itself, an untruth, nothing but hypocrisy...at the bottom. Political liberty is sham-liberty, the worst possible slavery, the appearance of liberty, and therefore the reality of servitude. Political equality is the same; therefore democracy, as well as every other form of government, must ultimately break to pieces: hypocrisy cannot subsist, the contradiction hidden in it must come out; we must have either a regular slavery – that is, an undisguised despotism, or real liberty – that is, communism (MECW 3: 393).

On evaluating democracy, Engels does not expound a view that attacks democracy in general. He only attacks democracy as it developed in bourgeois society, and he sees that democracy may and does have an important role to play in emancipating the working class. Analysing Carlyle’s *Past and Present*, he states that democracy is a transition to human freedom: ‘Mankind is surely not passing through democracy to arrive back eventually at the point of departure...Democracy, true enough, is only a transitional stage, though not towards a new, improved aristocracy, but towards real

human freedom' (MECW 3: 466). Consequently, Engels views democracy as an inevitable development phase, but not an end in itself, as Carlyle considered it to be. Democracy is a process towards the elimination of all political movements, towards the real emancipation of humanity. Engels expressed this view again in March 1844, when dealing with the situation in England. Here Engels wrote that the future of England would soon be democracy, which he interpreted as popular rule. 'But what democracy?', he asks. Engels then says:

Not that of the French Revolution, whose antithesis was the monarchy and feudalism, but *the* democracy whose antithesis is the middle class and property. The whole of the preceding development shows this. The middle class and property are dominant; the poor man has no rights, is oppressed and fleeced, the Constitution repudiates him and the law mistreats him; the struggle of democracy against the aristocracy in England is the struggle of the poor against the rich. The democracy towards which England is moving is a *social* democracy (MECW 3: 513).

Engels argues that democracy in itself cannot resolve social problems. The poor cannot win a victory, cannot accomplish their struggle against the rich, for the complete elimination of social inequality in the field of democracy, i.e., of political life. Consequently, democracy is only a transition. As Engels formulated it:

Democracy by itself is not capable of curing social ills. Democratic equality is a chimera, the fight of the poor against the rich cannot be fought out on the basis of democracy or indeed politics as a whole. This stage too is thus only a transition,

the last purely political remedy which has still to be tried and from which a new element is bound to develop at once, a principle transcending everything of a political nature. This principle is the principle of socialism (MECW 3: 513).

Lenin's views on the instrumental value of democracy signify a reinvigoration and clarification of Marx and Engels' own views.

According to Pierson, however, Lenin's view that democracy is a means to the specific attainment of socialism and communism is problematic. 'It is difficult to see how and why, except by definitional fiat, socialism should be defined as *the* sole or overriding emancipatory historical project'. Lenin's tendency to reduce all forms of struggle for liberation to mediated forms of class struggle fails to comprehend the full range of emancipatory struggles and the open-ended nature of any historical emancipatory project (Pierson 1986: 82). This is an unfair criticism. Lenin does not reduce all forms of struggle to the class struggle. Whilst recognising the importance of other struggles, Lenin's point is that the attainment of socialism is an objective condition for their full success (Pateman 2020b; 2021, forthcoming). In other words, other struggles will benefit directly from joining the socialist struggle. In Lenin's view, the various struggles are not mutually exclusive, but connected. The use of democracy as a means to socialism does not therefore rule out the possibility of using it to advance other struggles.

With that said, Lenin's view that democracy is justified only as a means to socialism has potentially anti-democratic implications. If, for instance, the majority of the working class show insufficient interest in struggling for socialism, then democracy loses its value to the Leninist, who may be tempted to curb or even suspend it. As the preceding analysis has shown, Lenin himself confirms this possibility on several

occasions, and he does not shy away from it. For Lenin, the struggle for democracy is subordinate to the struggle for socialism. If democracy ceases to support this struggle, then it may be partially or even wholly eliminated. Communism, as an end goal, contains a democratic form of government, but the road to get there won't necessarily be smooth, and democratic 'sacrifices' may be necessary along the way. Whilst these sacrifices may be acceptable for a socialist, who has communism as their end goal, they may not be acceptable for a democrat.

1.3. Democracy and Dictatorship

Although few commentators have acknowledged it, Lenin was well aware of the ‘bourgeois’ definition of dictatorship, which defines it in opposition to democracy. As he described it in the epilogue to his early work, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (1905, see Appendix), ‘from the vulgar bourgeois standpoint the terms dictatorship and democracy are mutually exclusive’. Indeed, ‘the bourgeois understands by dictatorship the annulment of all liberties and guarantees of democracy, arbitrariness of every kind, and every sort of abuse of power in a dictator’s personal interests’ (CW 9: 131). Lenin rejects the ‘vulgar bourgeois’ interpretation of dictatorship. He instead argues that it is more accurate to define the term more generally as the exercise of absolute power. As he wrote it in 1906, ‘authority—unlimited, outside the law, and based on force in the most direct sense of the word—is dictatorship’. To be more specific, ‘[t]he scientific term “dictatorship” means nothing more nor less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force. The term “dictatorship” *has no other meaning but this*’ (CW 10: 244, 246). As Lenin emphasises elsewhere, ‘[d]ictatorship is domination of one part of society over the rest of society, and domination, moreover, that rests directly on coercion’ (CW 23: 69).

The view that dictatorship means the rule of a single person is, according to Lenin, ‘grammatically incorrect’, since it ‘may also be exercised by a handful of persons, or by an oligarchy, or by a class, etc.’ (CW 28: 235). This means that dictatorships can assume different political forms, depending upon who rules and how they rule. As he put it, ‘there is the dictatorship of a minority over the majority, the dictatorship of a

handful of police officials over the people; and there is the dictatorship of the overwhelming majority of the people' (CW 31: 347).

Lenin also argues that there is no such thing as dictatorship in general, since there is no abstract dictatorship that is a purpose in itself and independent of classes. Like democracy, dictatorship is a class phenomenon. It came about with the emergence of classes, and as such, every dictatorship is 'the *dictatorship* of a definite class (or of definite classes)' (CW 31: 343).

Lenin rejects the idea that it is megalomania that creates a dictatorship. He argues that classes in antagonistic societies can establish their supremacy *only* through a dictatorship (CW 28: 371). It is, in other words, an objective requirement of any class rule, rather than a subjective choice. As he put it, 'history teaches us that no oppressed class ever did, or could, achieve power without going through a period of dictatorship, i.e., the conquest of political power and forcible suppression of the resistance always offered by the exploiters' (CW 28: 458).

Although every form of class rule is a dictatorship, this umbrella term does not disregard the differences between the various kinds of government. In his analysis of the ancient slave societies, for instance, Lenin acknowledges that 'the forms of state were extremely varied', and that there was a 'difference between monarchy and republic, between aristocracy and democracy' (CW 29: 479). He recognises that the same variety in state forms exists under capitalism. As Lenin explained to Kautsky, however, whilst 'every schoolboy knows that monarchy and republic are two different forms of government... *both* these forms of government... are only variations of the *bourgeois state*, that is, of the *dictatorship of the bourgeoisie*' (CW 28: 237).

Lenin's view of the relationship between dictatorship and democracy should now be obvious. Dictatorship means the rule of a class, and the democratic state is a *form* of

class rule. Contrary to what Sartori (1987: 466) may think, this does not suggest that ‘democracy means to Lenin exactly the same thing as dictatorship’. It means, instead, that democracy is *ipso facto* one of the possible manifestations of dictatorship. Or, to express the same idea in different words, a dictatorship can express itself in a democratic form, amongst others. Therefore, Lenin argues that the restriction of the franchise ‘is not an *indispensable* characteristic of the logical concept “dictatorship”, it does not enter as an *indispensable* condition in the historical and class concept “dictatorship”’ (CW 28: 256). More specifically, ‘dictatorship does not necessarily mean the abolition of democracy for the class that exercises the dictatorship over other classes’. But it does entail ‘the abolition (or very material restriction, which is also a form of abolition) of democracy for the class over which, or against which, the dictatorship is exercised’ (CW 28: 235, 256). Lenin points to the states of antiquity as an early example.

...rebellions, or even strong ferment, among the slaves in ancient times at once revealed the fact that the ancient state was essentially a *dictatorship of the slaveowners*. Did this dictatorship abolish democracy among, and for, the slaveowners? Everybody knows that it did not (CW 28: 235).

Lenin argues that there are only two forms of dictatorship in modern societies. As he put it 1919, ‘the alternative is either the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or the dictatorship of the working class’. That is, ‘only one or the other of these two systems of government is possible—either the absolute power of the working class, or the absolute power of the bourgeoisie—there can be no middle, or third, course’ (CW 29:

262).¹² The bourgeois democratic dictatorship means the rule of the bourgeois minority over the working-class majority, and its purpose is to ensure the undisturbed maintenance of the exploitive capitalist system. The bourgeoisie does not want to admit that their rule is a dictatorship, however, and this explains why bourgeois politicians, ideologists and propagandists obscure this fact by describing their rule as a form of “popular government” or democracy in general, or pure democracy’ (CW 28: 370). Lenin argues that the workers must struggle against this dictatorship, not in order to realise a ‘pure’ democracy, but in order to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, a new type of democratic power brought about and maintained by the working class in order to build socialism (CW 28: 370): ‘Proletarian dictatorship is similar to the dictatorship of other classes in that it arises out of the need, as every other dictatorship does, to forcibly suppress the resistance of the class that is losing its political sway’ (CW 28: 464). At the same time, however, it is a new type of class oppression that differs from earlier forms. Whereas bourgeois, feudal and slave owning dictatorships forcibly oppressed the exploited majority of the population the proletarian dictatorship entails ‘the forcible suppression of the resistance of the exploiters, i.e., an insignificant minority of the population, the landowners and capitalists’ (CW 28: 464). In contrast to the bourgeois democratic state, which refuses to admit that it is a dictatorship, the proletarian state ‘openly and frankly tells the people the *truth* and declares that it is the dictatorship of the proletariat...and by this truth it wins over scores and scores of millions of new citizens who are kept down in any democratic republic’ (CW 28: 302).

¹² Because bourgeois dictatorships express the rule of a minority, Lenin argues that they can also manifest themselves in a non-democratic form. But since the dictatorship of the proletariat realizes the rule of the majority, he argues that it must by necessity be democratic.

When a dictatorship assumes a democratic form, Lenin argues, the ruling class always suppresses the democracy of the other classes (CW 28: 235). The extent of this suppression depends upon the class character of state in question, however. In the exploiter states, the ruling minority enjoy democracy primarily for themselves, whilst they impose a dictatorship upon the majority of the population. For example, the democratic republics of ancient Greece granted democratic rights only to a small group, and it imposed a dictatorship upon the rest. Bourgeois dictatorships may extend democratic rights to the masses, but the breadth of this democracy depends upon the strength, consciousness, and militancy of the working class, who must always struggle for these rights. No matter how much democratic freedom the working masses obtain, however, they will never be able to rule as a class, and as such the system remains as a dictatorship for them, the majority. By contrast, the dictatorship of the proletariat is the embodiment of the working majority, and it therefore has no choice but to extend democracy to the majority, whilst imposing dictatorship upon an insignificant minority (CW 23: 25).¹³

For Lenin, therefore, the juxtaposing of ‘pure’ ‘dictatorship-free’ democracy in general to ‘pure’, ‘democracy-free’ (anti-democratic) dictatorship in general, is mistaken. In his view, the study of history and social facts proves that there are no or only exceptional ‘pure’ phenomena in society; and neither democracy nor dictatorships are purposes in themselves, since they both bear class characteristics (CW 28: 242).

¹³ Given the existence of remarks such as these, it is remarkable that several commentators argue that Lenin’s conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat is *self-professedly* undemocratic (see, for instance, Sartori 1965: 430; Lovell 1984: 168-87; Draper 1987: 81-83; Mayer 1993: 256-57, 273, 275; Marik 2008: 377-78; Barany 1997: 11-12).

To be sure, Lenin recognises that dictatorships can manifest themselves in a non-democratic form, and for this reason he maintains that it would be a mistake to conflate the two concepts. But when bourgeois theorists contrast democracy and dictatorship in their abstract meanings, Lenin argues that they fail to distinguish the various modes of the realisation of democratic or dictatorial rule, and they instead oppose an abstract conception of democracy in general, which they declare to be positive, with an abstract conception of dictatorship in general, which they declare to be negative. By doing this, Lenin suggests that the opposition becomes a means of manipulation. It conceals the fact that in all periods of history (since the emergence of class rule) the ruling class has always asserted its absolute power. It also conceals the question of which class is in power and which class is being oppressed. Furthermore, it creates the illusion that democracy is not identical with the rule of one class but with the rule of the ‘people’ and all members of society understood in the general sense (CW 28: 249). In short, the ‘condemnation of dictatorship’ and the ‘defence of democracy’, is an important argument for justifying the rule of the exploiters (CW 28: 457).

In summary, Lenin denies that dictatorship precludes democracy, because democracy is one of the means by which the ruling class can exercise its absolute power. He also rejects the view that democracy precludes dictatorship, since the former is a possible manifestation of the latter. Democracy and dictatorship manifest themselves in different forms and procedures, and with a different effectiveness under different power relations. That is, the ratio between democracy and dictatorship depends upon which class is ruling, and it changes when a new class obtains power.

The Characteristic Features of Dictatorship

Lenin argues that every dictatorship is characterised by three features: (i) it is the rule, the dominance, of a definite class, which is untrammelled by the law; (ii) it means class oppression, which is based upon force; (iii) it involves the construction of a new society that comprehends every field of social life, which may cover an entire historical period. As this section aims to show in more detail, he believes that each of these features is compatible with democracy.

According to an influential interpretation of first characteristic, Lenin believes that dictatorships stand above and arbitrarily eschew the law (Lapenna 1967: 262; Lovell 1984: 174; Marik 2009: 378; Liebman 1980: 354; Kolakowski 2005: 762-63). This view has been dismissed for being an inaccurate description of liberal democracies, since they operate within a legal structure, and the ruling governments tend to abide by the law most of the time (Medvedev 1981: 42).

Only a superficial reading of the textual evidence supports this interpretation of Lenin. Although, in a few formulaic utterances, Lenin can be interpreted as suggesting that dictatorships are unlawful, a more broader analysis shows that his account of dictatorship provides no foundation for the arbitrary infringement of lawfulness (Shandro 2014: 385). What does Lenin mean then? He means that the ruling class can, in order to ensure the optimal satisfaction of interests, use all the means at its disposal, including force, without restriction. This does not mean that the ruling class must always employ all the means and forces and make use of all the available opportunities in order to ensure its power. Lenin actually suggests that during the 'normal' periods of class rule, i.e., in a relatively stable social system, this is usually not needed. In these periods, the masses pose no threat to the state, and even the most hostile elements know that they will be suppressed if they act against the ruling power. Under these conditions,

dictatorships need to use only some of the available means, and they usually deploy these within the limits of legality.

Lenin maintains that dictatorships may even keep and utilise laws from the earlier regime. For instance, proletarian democracy does not smash all the forms of bourgeois legality, but instead fills them with a new social content, and thereby makes use of these laws and rules in the interests of its own power. In his *State and Revolution*, Lenin suggests that the working masses will continue to uphold some of the pre-socialist laws even after it abolishes its dictatorship and establishes communism (CW 25: 476). On the other hand, during the course of the socialist revolution, Lenin maintains that the masses can turn some of the earlier laws of the bourgeoisie against its members. This suggests that most of the time –and seemingly contrary to his definition of dictatorship – the following paradox holds true: a dictatorship can fulfil its main functions in an optimal way by adhering to the rule of law.

Lenin's statement that dictatorships are untrammelled by law only suggests that the ruling class prioritises its interests above anything else, and that it will go beyond the limits of formal legality in order to realise its aims, if the situation makes it necessary (CW 27: 519). It was in this sense that he said that 'he is a poor revolutionary who at a time of acute struggle is halted by the immutability of a law. In a period of transition laws have only a temporary validity; and when a law hinders the development of the revolution, it must be abolished or amended' (CW 27: 519).

In the first place, if there is no law that can safeguard a particular interest, the ruling class will not wait until the government creates one. It will instead decide what actions to take in the given situation on the basis of its revolutionary (or counterrevolutionary) purposes. Lenin suggests that such a situation emerges when a class has just seized power and has not yet had the time to codify its revolutionary achievements. He argues

that this was the case during the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution. Having repudiated the laws of the deposed Tsarist regime and provisional government, the Bolsheviks encouraged the popularly elected judges to enforce the workers' will and implement its decrees. In the case that such decrees were not forthcoming or inadequate to the task at hand, the Bolsheviks encouraged the judges to employ their 'socialist sense of justice' and ignore the laws of the old governments (CW 29: 131).

Lenin argues that this situation may even arise when a class has ruled for a long time, since they cannot foresee every event of the class struggle, and they therefore cannot prepare laws for regulating everything. He also states that the ruling class might be prevented from optimally asserting its interests by its own earlier laws. In cases such as these, the state disregards the law and enforces extraordinary measures if its class objectives make them necessary. Under imperialism, for instance, Lenin argues that the bourgeois democracy regularly disregards legality for this reason. He points to the first months of 'republican freedom' in Weimar Germany as a notable example of this tendency. Rather than follow the law and acknowledge the legal right of all political parties to exist, the social-democratic government chose to repress the communists by murdering several of their leaders, including K. Liebknecht and R. Luxemburg. If innocent people like them could be arrested, placed under 'state protection', and 'assassinated by officers and capitalists with impunity', then 'the democratic republic where such a thing was possible is a bourgeois dictatorship'. It shows that the democratic state will ignore the law if doing so provides the best way of safeguarding the power of the ruling class (CW 28: 462-3).

Third, Lenin argues that dictatorships may disregard the law when the regime encounters resistance or experiences a crisis period. On these occasions, the state employs all means and forces without restriction, and it will not let the law get in the

way of its interests (CW 16: 306-7). On several occasions Lenin highlights the tendency of liberal democracy to disregard the law. In his article *Two Worlds*, for instance, he recalls how at the beginning of the twentieth century, Frank, one of the revisionist representatives of German social democracy, became indignant at Minister von Bodman's refusal to acknowledge that the German Social Democratic Party enjoyed equal rights to the bourgeois parties. According to Bebel, who lectured Frank at the party congress of Magdeburg, Bodman was 'quite right' not to recognise the parity of rights, since the minister was a 'representative of the existing system and social order', and 'the purpose of the present-day state, as a political institution, is to defend and support the existing state system and social order against all attacks from the Social-Democratic camp, to defend it by force too in case of need'. Bebel went on to say that 'we could not be "affronted"...by the Anti-Socialist Law' because it sought to defend the interests of the ruling class. Instead of complaining about this injustice, the workers should have flung themselves into battle and overthrown the bourgeois order. "We would have been traitors to our cause not to have done so...But it was not in our power"' (CW 16: 307). Lenin provides the following summary of Bebel and Frank's viewpoints:

Why was Frank so indignant? Because he is thoroughly imbued with faith in bourgeois 'legality', in bourgeois 'parity of rights', without understanding the historical *limits* of this legality, without understanding that all this legality *must* inevitably be cast to the four winds when the fundamental and cardinal question of the preservation of bourgeois property is affected. Frank is steeped in petty bourgeois constitutional illusions; that is why he does not understand the historical *conditionality* of constitutional institutions...Bebel brings down the

question from these constitutional illusions, which are characteristic of bourgeois democrats, to the firm realities of the class struggle. Can we allow ourselves to be 'affronted' because we, the enemies of the whole bourgeois order, are not accorded parity of rights on the basis of bourgeois law by a champion of this order?... I take it as an affront that a constitutional minister does not recognise the parity of rights of the socialists, argues Frank. You must not be affronted, says Bebel, because your parity of rights has been denied by a man who not so long ago was strangling you, riding roughshod over all 'principles', whose duty it was to strangle you in defence of the bourgeois order, who will put a stranglehold on you tomorrow... We would have been traitors if, having the opportunity, we had not throttled these enemies of the proletariat.

Then, Lenin concludes:

Two worlds of ideas: on the one hand, the point of view of the proletarian class struggle, which in certain historical periods can proceed on the basis of bourgeois legality, but which leads inevitably to a denouement, an open collision, to the dilemma: either 'smash' the bourgeois state 'to smithereens' or be defeated and strangled. On the other hand, the point of view of the reformist, the petty bourgeois who cannot see the wood for the trees, who cannot, through the tinsel of constitutional legality, see the fierce class struggle (CW 16: 306-307).

During the revolution and the period immediately following it, Lenin argues that the victorious classes may rule democratically without legal restraint, since the revolution

elevates new forms and organisations that do not, because they cannot, rest on the legality of the former regime. In his analysis of the 1905 revolution, Lenin wrote that the masses employed forms of creative activity that were unknown in political practice thus far. The first was *‘the “seizure” by the people of political liberty—its exercise without any rights and laws, and without any limitations’*. Second of all was *‘the creation of new organs of revolutionary authority’*, the soviets and the rural and town authorities which became the organs of power. The masses themselves established these organs *‘irrespective of all laws and regulations, entirely in a revolutionary way’*. These organs were, in essence *‘a product of the native genius of the people,...a manifestation of the independent activity of the people which had rid itself, or was ridding itself, of its old police fetters’* (CW 10: 243). Lenin notes that the masses *‘acted as a government when, for example, they seized printing plants...and arrested police officials who were preventing the revolutionary people from exercising their rights’*. He observes that *‘they acted as a government when they appealed to the whole people to withhold money from the old government’*, and also when they *‘confiscated the old government’s funds...and used them for the needs of the new, people’s government’*. In the third place, Lenin notes that the people used force against its tyrants, and as such, *‘in their social and political character, they were the rudiments of the dictatorship of the revolutionary elements of the people’*. In his evaluation of these revolutionary events, he states that *‘the organs of authority that we have described represented a dictatorship in embryo, for they recognised no other authority, no law and no standards, no matter by whom established’* (CW 10: 243-44).

In this situation Lenin notes that the democratic authorities were not able to effect legal regulation in every field in such a short time. Consequently, they had to enforce measures and rules that were based on the revolutionary sense of justice, on the

interpretation of the interests of the people and the new revolutionary power serving it, as well as on revolutionary necessity. In other words, they had to exercise a dictatorship, a power that was neither sanctioned nor restricted by laws.

The second characteristic of dictatorship outlined by Lenin is that the ruling class bases its power upon coercion, i.e., state violence and force, which it exercises against other classes and social strata (CW 29: 373). As he put it in relation to democracy, ‘the indispensable characteristic, the necessary condition of dictatorship is the *forcible* suppression of the exploiters as a class, and, consequently, the infringement of ‘pure democracy’, i.e., of equality and freedom, *in regard to that class*’ (CW 28: 256). Lenin argues that democracy is compatible with this characteristic of dictatorship because it also occasionally rules through coercion, which it codifies in laws and regulations. And this coercion always serves the interests of the ruling class.

The democratic state sometimes requires coercion, firstly, in order to guarantee the democratic exercise of power and direct the political process. It sometimes requires coercion, secondly, in order to restrict the freedom of action of the various groups and activities that threaten it. The state and coercion therefore express the limits of democracy, and they maintain the regulations formed on this basis. State coercion and democracy are indissolubly connected because, on the one hand, democracy is a part and form of state coercion, whilst, on the other hand, state coercion has a regulatory role. As such, the interrelationship between democracy and coercion will disappear only with the withering away of the state.

A common reading of this second characteristic is that dictatorships are based *purely* upon *direct* violence, and that they rule *primarily* through coercion (Sartori 1965: 431; 1987: 472; Mayer 1993: 273; Barany 1997: 12-13; Liebman 1980: 354; Kolakowski 2005: 763). Both of these views must again be dismissed, on the basis that they

inaccurately describe liberal democracies. To be sure, it is common knowledge that many liberal democracies have an army, judicial system, prison service, counter-intelligence network and secret police, all of which utilise 'violence in one form or another'. In the first place, however, they employ this violence within the existing framework of law and constitutional safeguards of that country, and as such, 'the violence cannot be described as *direct*, as it is under a dictatorship'. Secondly, democracies do not use violence as the main instrument by which government is carried on and a particular class retains power. Instead, classes retain their power mainly by employing various forms of argument and propaganda, by exploiting the media, by promoting religious ideology, and by competing in elections (Medvedev 1981: 42).

In actual fact, Lenin's use of the term 'direct coercion' disagrees with none of these objections. He rejects the idea that dictatorships rule solely through direct violence. He was much more careful when describing this characteristic. In his view, the extent to which a democracy uses force depends upon the historical circumstances, and the balance of power between the classes. When a regime is stable, as it may be most of the time, the ruling class can restrict its dictatorship to mostly peaceful, constitutional, everyday forms. When the class struggle sharpens, however, the government can maintain its position only by using extraordinary and extreme regulations that may even assume the form of civil war, and within this, terror.

After the October revolution, when the young soviet democracy was struggling to survive, Lenin argues that the socialist state was forced to employ the most extreme form of force, terror, in order to defend the dictatorship of the proletariat: 'This state of affairs forced us to make a ruthless struggle and use terrorist methods of warfare'. In his view, these emergency measures were 'necessitated by the acute Civil War'. Lenin argues that the rebellious petty bourgeois democrats 'used all kinds of methods against

us—civil war, bribery and sabotage. It was these conditions that necessitated the terror. Therefore we should not repent or renounce it' (CW 28: 207-8). Lenin dismissed the various criticisms of the 'red terror', for he saw it as a necessary reaction to the counter-revolutionary terror of the whites, which they had affected in the same period. In *A Letter to the American Workers*, for instance, he stated that the counterrevolutionaries and their 'servants accuse us of resorting to terror'. He then exposed their hypocrisy by pointing out that the bourgeoisie also used terror when they saw their democratic power threatened:

The bourgeoisie, whose domination is now defended by the socialists who denounce 'dictatorship in general' and extol 'democracy in general', won power in the advanced countries through a series of insurrections, civil wars, and the forcible suppression of kings, feudal lords, slaveowners and their attempts at restoration... socialists everywhere have thousands and millions of times explained to the people the class nature of these bourgeois revolutions and this bourgeois dictatorship (CW 28: 458; see also 71).

Whilst both the bourgeois and proletarian democratic dictatorships use force in order to safeguard their class power, Lenin argues that the severity of this force is different in each regime. In the former, the exploiting minority must exercise its power against the majority of the population, and as such, it can maintain this power only by applying the most ruthless forms of force on the widest scale (CW 25: 463). Lenin argues that only the overthrow and destruction of the exploiting society can remove this extreme form of state violence. The socialist revolution accomplishes this aim by establishing the rule of the working class, the majority. This is also a dictatorship, since 'during the

transition from capitalism to communism suppression is *still* necessary' (CW 25: 468). However, socialist democracy applies a form of suppression that differs from that of the exploiting societies. Since the regime suppresses an exploiting minority of the population, the whole affair is comparatively easy and will require less bloodshed. Moreover, 'it is compatible with the extension of democracy to such an overwhelming majority of the population that the need for a *special machine* of suppression will begin to disappear' (CW 25: 468).

Between 1915 and 1917, Lenin argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat would be victorious in several developed countries at the same time, and that this would make it impossible to restore capitalism. Although he acknowledged that the exploiting classes would resist for a time, he argued that they would eventually recognise the new situation. It was upon this assumption that Lenin thought that the dictatorship over the bourgeoisie would be a peaceful, non-violent one.

History, however, developed in a different way. Only the Soviet Union underwent a successful socialist revolution. Counterrevolutionary forces swiftly overthrew workers' power in Hungary, Bavaria, Slovakia, Finland and the Baltic countries. World capitalism stabilised around 1923, and the Soviet Union stood alone against the capitalist world. Several imperialist countries attacked from the outside, and they also roused and assisted the resistance of the overthrown exploiting classes within Russia, which they relied upon during the civil war of 1918-1920, as well as later on. In Lenin's view, this unprecedented emergency situation made it necessary 'to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat in its harshest form' (CW 28: 207).

Because Lenin places so much emphasis upon the role of absolute power and force in dictatorships, it is widely thought that that these are the only characteristics that he identifies. This view is greatly mistaken. Lenin explicitly rejects the idea that

dictatorship only means these things. As he very clearly put it, '[d]ictatorship does not mean only force, although it is impossible without force, but also a form of the organisation of labour superior to the preceding form' (CW 29: 373). The aim of the exploiting dictatorships is the construction of a social system that *guarantees* the undisturbed domination of the ruling class. Thus, whilst capitalist democracy is based upon force, this is not all it is. The bourgeoisie also wants to develop a set of social relations that maximises the accumulation of capital, whilst keeping the working class in a subjected state. In his greetings to the Hungarian workers Lenin expressed the same idea with regard to proletarian democracy. The chief feature of this form of government is not force, but the organisation of the masses for the construction of socialism, the abolition of classes, and elimination of exploitation. Of course, 'this object cannot be achieved at one stroke. It requires a fairly long period of transition from capitalism to socialism' (CW 29: 388).

But in contrast to bourgeois democracy, which attempts to develop a dictatorship over the majority, proletarian democracy strives to create communism, a stateless society in which everyone has a more or less equal say in the governance of political affairs. And since classes disappear under communism, dictatorship disappears as well. Socialist democracy is therefore the only form of government that gradually diminishes and eventually abolishes dictatorship, though Lenin makes it clear that this tremendous task may last an entire historical epoch.

The preceding analysis has reviewed Lenin's various references to the three essential characteristics of dictatorship. As it turned out, he argues that dictatorship means the absolute power of a class over other classes and its regular use of force against them. It should also be clear, given the characteristics of dictatorship outlined above, why Lenin opposes the juxtaposition of democracy and dictatorship. In his view, dictatorship is

the total rule of a given class covering the whole of society as well as a historical period. It is characterised by a definite class power, a definite form of government, and a definite state system. Lenin defines democracy as a form of state, one containing a particular form of government, i.e., one of the possible alternatives of the given state system. That is, he views democracy and dictatorship as categories expressing different relations to social life. They are not organically linked, they are not opposites, and they cannot be in contradiction. Their functions also differ: namely, dictatorship is the assertion of the power of a given class by any means, while democracy is one of the possible expressions of this, and thus it is a form that is subordinate to the above 'content'. That is why Lenin, when writing about workers' power, emphasises that 'the dictatorship of the proletariat, the proletarian state, which is a machine for the suppression of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat, is not a "form of governing", but a *state of a different type*' (CW 28: 107-08). That is why he is against any kind of counterposing of democracy in general and the dictatorship of the proletariat: a state system can only be compared to another state system and not to a form of state that might be one of the forms of various state systems. And this is why he stresses over and over again that it was improper to juxtapose a state system, i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat, only one side of which (viz. force) is always and exclusively emphasised, against democracy 'in general', viz. to bourgeois democracy, shown as the attractive rule of 'legality', 'freedom' and 'equality'. In Lenin's view, 'abstract democracy' has never existed and cannot exist at all in reality. This term has only been used to conceal bourgeois dictatorship. That is why he states that 'we shall not allow ourselves to be deceived by such high-sounding slogans as freedom, equality and the will of the majority', and that workers should treat as enemies 'those who call themselves democrats, adherents of pure democracy, adherents of consistent democracy and who,

directly or indirectly, oppose it to the dictatorship of the proletariat' (CW 29: 351).

Lenin's attempt to link democracy to dictatorship aims to aid the democratic struggle of the working class. His point is that the meaning of democracy has become gradually empty over the course of history. The word has lost its ominous meaning. It is no longer consistent with its etymology. It does not mobilise the workers to realise the people's rule, and it has become a means of misleading the masses. The term dictatorship, by contrast, has always been a more explicit, less mysterious concept, and this makes it far more evocative today. As he argues, 'dictatorship is a big, harsh and bloody word, one which expresses a relentless life-and-death struggle between two classes, two worlds, two historical epochs. Such words must not be uttered frivolously' (CW 30: 355). And it is precisely for this reason, Lenin argues, that the word should be used to describe democracy. It can help expose the class essence of the concept, destroy the illusions that have grown up surrounding it, and encourage the masses to struggle for a more genuine form of popular rule.

Reflections

Lenin's conception of dictatorship does have a partial historical precedent. The concept has not always had the pejorative connotation attributed to it by modern political science. 'Dictatorship' and 'dictator' are of Latin origin and as such they originally reflected the realities of the history of ancient Rome. Under the Roman republic the senate sometimes invested a 'dictator' with absolute authority during an emergency period, usually in response to the threat of war or rebellion. A 'dictatorship' referred to a (usually) limited period lasting from six months to seven years, during which the dictator exercised power on the basis of their exceptional mandate. From the fifth to

second century B.C.E., dictators represented not their narrow personal interests, but those of the Roman republic, i.e., the rights and powers of the Roman citizenry. It was only Sulla and Julius Caesar who became lifelong dictators, and they alone used their power to serve the interests of a narrow group, and only indirectly those of the ruling strata. During Roman times then, the term dictatorship did not have a negative connotation. It was a constitutional form of rule used to protect the Republic (Medvedev 1981: 39-40; Bobbio 2006: 159-60).

Another interpretation of dictatorship arose during the French revolution. Here the concept was extended to the revolutionary powers that sought to replace the autocratic *ancien régime* and constitution with a new democratic one. Just like their Roman counterparts, revolutionary dictatorships spring from a state of necessity and temporarily exercise exceptional powers. But a major difference is that the modern dictatorship invests itself with powers, rather than being granted this power by a constitution. An example is the French National Convention of 1793, which suspended the constitution in the same year, and which established a provisional revolutionary government until the arrival of peace. Instead of being the rule of a single person, the Jacobin dictatorship was the rule of a revolutionary group (Bobbio 2006: 162-63).

The dissociation of the concept of dictatorship from the concept of monocratic power must be emphasised because, as Bobbio argues, it marks the passage from the classic use of the term to the modern one used by Marx, Engels and Lenin. For the founders of Marxism, the term referred not to a person, or even a group of people, but to an entire class. What further distinguishes modern dictatorship from its classical form is the extension of power beyond the executive function to the legislative and constitutive functions. The modern dictatorship did retain the positive value of the original, however, and it also emphasised a commitment to democracy.

Marx and Engels used this modern definition when they established the well-known term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, which they define as the rule of the working class. Like Lenin, they view the proletarian dictatorship as an emergency form of rule that will last only for as long as classes remain (Marx and Engels 1950: 556; 1949: 410; 1959a: 31; MECW 6: 504-506). Engels emphasised its democratic character, saying that ‘if anything is certain, it is that our Party and the working class can only come to power in a democratic republic’. Indeed, he said that ‘this is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, ...In my opinion the only system fit for the proletariat is the one and indivisible republic’ (Engels 1959: 58-59).

Lenin expands Marx and Engels’ conception of dictatorship by arguing that it exists not only under socialism, but also under capitalism and the other exploiter societies. Whereas Marx and Engels saw dictatorship as an emergency and temporary form of rule, Lenin defines it in those terms only in relation to the proletarian dictatorship. In this way Lenin reduces the specificity of the term, and basically conflates it with a form of class domination.

The shift in the meaning of the word dictatorship and the ‘discovery’ of the contradiction between democracy and dictatorship happened only after the October Socialist Revolution. The Allied Powers took open measures against the emerging Soviet power, which proclaimed itself to be the dictatorship of the proletariat. Aside from aiding the counterrevolutionary forces, the Allied Powers also invaded Russia and occupied several of its territories. In order to justify this imperialist invasion, the Allied Powers presented the struggle between themselves and Soviet Russia as a struggle between democracy and dictatorship. The essential thing was to first construct the opposition between the two concepts. Karl Kautsky’s theoretical work, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, proved to be an influential text in this regard. Kautsky

tries to prove that dictatorship is not related to the rule of classes: that the dictatorship that arose in Russia did not mean the rule of the working class, and that soviet power violated the general criteria and rules of democracy. He also argued that Soviet power deprived the class enemy of the right of assembly and organisation. In other words, he accused it of passing measures that every revolution passes against its adversaries (Barany 1997: 10). On the one hand, therefore, Kautsky's ideas negated the proletarian character of the soviet state, whilst on the other hand they provided the foundation for a theory associating dictatorship with opposition to democracy. He correlated the latter with 'pure' and 'full' democracy, a concept that lacked a class character or a dictatorship. This made it possible to contrast the abstract concept of democracy with the abstract concept of dictatorship. Since the publication of Kautsky's book, the negative interpretation of dictatorship, in addition to the opposition between democracy and dictatorship, has become one of the most frequently voiced tenets of modern political science.

Basing himself upon this modern definition, the Soviet dissident scholar R. Medvedev has attempted to explain why it would be a bad idea to describe modern democracies as dictatorships. It supposedly reduces the value of the democratic institutions and legal safeguards which the working people have not always enjoyed, but which they fought for themselves by conducting a 'prolonged, bitter and often bloody struggle...in the name of democracy' (Medvedev 1981: 42-3). For Medvedev, 'the plain fact' that the capitalist class dominates the bourgeois-democratic republic 'does not necessarily imply that this power must be *dictatorial*', for in several democratic countries 'the observance of laws, the constitution and other judicial standards is by no means an empty formality'. Lenin's conflation of dictatorship with democracy ignores the principled differences existing between states where 'vicious

dictatorial regimes do exist’, and places like the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain, which are not dictatorships. One must therefore accept ‘that by no means all political power and every form of state government may be described automatically as a dictatorship’, and one must also realise that ‘democracy is more than simply one of the manifestations of “hidden” dictatorship’. In Medvedev’s (1981: 46) opinion, ‘the hallmarks of a true dictatorship are direct violence and the setting aside of the rule of law in a given country’.

Contrary to Medvedev, the textual and historical evidence does not suggest that Lenin’s conception of dictatorship ‘reduces the value’ of democratic institutions for the working people and their struggle. Whilst Lenin uses the term to expose the bourgeois character of liberal democracy, he also highlights its progressive character and achievements. In opposition to the ultra-leftists within the Bolshevik Party and wider communist movement, Lenin maintained that participation in bourgeois democracy was imperative in facilitating the self-emancipation of the working class (Nimtz 2014a; 2014b). Lenin even insists that the full development of this form of rule is a precondition for the socialist revolution, and that the workers should strive to maximise their freedoms under it (Claudin 1977: 66-67).

Lenin’s works on dictatorship not only inspired democratic struggles during his lifetime. After the October Socialist Revolution Leninism became the theoretical basis for much of the global socialist movement throughout the twentieth century, and millions of workers continued to draw upon Lenin’s ideas in order to inform their efforts to achieve democracy. The concept has been implemented in theory and practice by the Marxist-Leninist countries, albeit in a modified form. For example, the People’s Republic of China describes itself as a ‘people’s democratic dictatorship’ in its constitution, in reference to the fact that the regime provides democracy not only for

the working class, but also the progressive elements within the peasantry, petit bourgeoisie, and national bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, the constitution stipulates that this class coalition is led by the working class.

The dialectical relationship between democracy and dictatorship is the third contradiction Lenin identifies in the concept of democracy. On the one hand, democracy means the rule of the people, but on the other hand it is also a form of class dictatorship prohibiting the full realisation of that ideal. The overcoming of the dialectical relationship between democracy and dictatorship requires the self-transcendence of democracy itself.

1.4 Democracy and Freedom

In his preparatory notebooks for *The State and Revolution*, published under the title *Marxism on the State*, Lenin (1972: 25-6) wrote the following: ‘Usually the concepts “freedom” and “democracy” are considered identical and one is often used instead of the other. Very often, vulgar Marxists...reason precisely in that way. In fact democracy precludes freedom’. There are two claims here. The first is that democracy and freedom are different concepts; whilst the second is that they preclude each other. The following sections examine these two claims in turn.

The Difference Between Democracy and Freedom

Lenin maintains that democracy and freedom are not identical. He defines democracy as a political category denoting a form of state and a way of exercising power. As for freedom, Lenin argues that it has two meanings.¹⁴ On the one hand, it means a *specifically human dimension*, whilst on the other hand, it is the *totality of the democratic rights of freedom*. He usually refers to the former as ‘human freedom’, ‘actual freedom’, or simply ‘freedom’, whilst he refers to the latter as ‘political freedom’. Consequently, freedom has two different relations to democracy. Lenin maintains that the relation of democracy to human freedom differs from its relation to political freedom. However, in whatever sense he examines the term freedom, he does not identify it with democracy. Lenin distinguishes between them with regard to both their form and their content.

Lenin interprets human freedom as a positive condition, one in which every

¹⁴ Lenin tends to use the terms ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’ and ‘emancipation’ interchangeably in his writings.

individual has the resources to pursue and fulfil their goals. People achieve it when they obtain mastery over nature, society and themselves (CW 14: 187-88) These three aspects of freedom cannot be realised at once, and at the same time. The realisation of freedom is a historical process, in a triple sense. Firstly, the basic condition for ensuring control over nature is the increase and development of the forces of production, the increase in their effectiveness, and the recognition of the effects of human activity upon nature and society. Humanity can create these conditions only gradually, over the course of historical development. Through them, humanity can make nature serve its objectives, and society will increase its control over nature. But the possibility of controlling nature, based on the recognition and correct application of the laws of nature, can be realised only through the abolition of capitalism and the construction of socialist social relations. Humankind's complete mastery of nature can be realised only during the construction of communism, which provides the highest possible degree of social freedom (CW 8: 511).

A second condition of human freedom is the provision of an abundance of goods, which makes it possible to assert the communist principle 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs'. That is, control over nature must precede control over society.

The third precondition of human freedom is the communist, revolutionary transformation of society, which entails the following: the abolition of classes and the social division of labour; the annihilation of the institutions of the old exploiting system; the withering away of the socialist state, the disappearance of obsolete ideas, and the development of a new communist consciousness – that is, it means a total transformation covering every dimension of human existence. Of course, Lenin believes that this situation can be achieved only gradually, and over the course of a long

period of development. Whilst a few of these conditions (e.g., communist consciousness or morality) may and will appear in an embryo form under antagonistic social relations, their full evolution on a mass scale is made possible only under socialist circumstances. That is why he argues that socialism is a transition from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom (CW 8: 511).

Lenin views control over nature and society as preconditions for the realisation of ‘control over ourselves’, i.e., individual freedom, the realisation of individuals as social personalities. Since, however, this demands that the individuals be versatile and conscious in their activity, this will become characteristic of everyone only in the course of a gradual process. The evolution of individual freedom and its growth into a universal phenomenon does not only mean the accomplishment of the various aspects of freedom. It also indicates that the formation of such a society has come to an end in which the free development of society as a whole is based upon the free development of each individual.

According to Lenin, when people have realised their control over nature, society, and themselves, that is, when they have reached the realm of freedom, this qualitative change will not mean the end of further development. Leninism has frequently been accused of representing some eschatology, some secularised salvation that repeats the mistake in Hegel’s teleological philosophy, which identifies ‘an end’ at a given point of historical development. These kinds of ideas cannot be found in Lenin’s works. Although, to be sure, he views communism and the human freedom obtained under it as representing the end of human political and socio-economic development, he argues that when people obtain human freedom, only the ‘pre-history’ of human society comes to an end, and it is precisely at this point that *real history* begins. It is precisely here that the truly versatile, unrestricted phase of human development starts, which will in

turn allow individuals to activate and further develop their talents. This is the important motive force of true historical development (CW 25: 477).

Lenin views human freedom as a manifold totality, the unity of various aspects, each of which is an essential expression of the human being. It follows that this totality may not be impaired; otherwise human freedom cannot be complete. More generally, he views freedom as a *totality* expressing a *general, comprehensive, higher order* dimension of true human existence. In comparison to this, democracy as a political category is a narrower and more limited concept. In the second place, democracy is not only a partial expression of human life but also a formal one that can be realised only to an extent. Freedom, by contrast, is the actual and full realisation of a real human existence.

Lenin defines *political freedom* as the totality of political and civil rights. He argues that these protect the individuals' freedom from infringement by other people, social organisations and governments. They ensure one's entitlement to participate in the political and civil life of the state and society without repression or discrimination. Lenin views political freedom as inseparable from democracy, since 'all "democracy" consists in the proclamation and realisation of "rights"', which are proclaimed either *de jure* or *de facto* (CW 9: 461). When Russia was under the autocratic rule of the Tsar, for instance, Lenin argued that the working class' primary objective was '*political freedom*', which meant 'the direct participation, guaranteed by law (by a constitution), of all citizens in the government of the state, the guaranteed right of all citizens freely to assemble, discuss their affairs, influence affairs of state through their associations and the press'. The attainment of this objective was the workers' most important immediate task, for without it they would remain powerless in politics and 'inevitably remain a rightless, humiliated and inarticulate class' (CW 2: 118; see also CW 6: 27-

28, 162; CW 4: 239-40).¹⁵

Lenin also frequently emphasises the achievement of political freedom is the necessary first stage in the socialist revolution: ‘without the proclamation of these rights, without a struggle to introduce them now, immediately, without training the masses in the spirit of this struggle, socialism is *impossible*’ (CW 23: 74; CW 9: 442, 112).

In order for democracy to provide complete political freedom, however, Lenin argues that the people must be able to make use of their rights. To promise these rights in law, or even in a constitutional document, is not enough. The state must effectively enforce these rights and make them available to the people in practice. If they are not available in practice, then to that extent the society lacks political freedom, despite what its rulers and ideologists may claim, and the slogans of ‘political freedom’ will provide a façade for the lack of it. The extent to which the people can actually utilise their rights depends not upon the official proclamations of the state, but upon the balance of power between the various classes. In this regard, a constitution in itself proves nothing, for it is little more than ‘a sheet of paper with the people’s rights recorded on it’. A constitution provides no ‘guarantee of these rights being really recognised’. This is ultimately determined by ‘the strength of those classes of the people that have become aware of those rights, and have been able to win them. Let us then not allow words to delude us—that befits only babblers for bourgeois democracy’ (CW 9: 461).

Lenin maintains that even political freedom is not identical with democracy. He actually views the latter as a wider category than the democratic rights of freedom.

¹⁵ Of course, Lenin maintains that this ‘totality’ differs depending upon the historical period and the kind of democracy in question. For a discussion of his views on the difference between liberal democratic and socialist democratic rights, see Ch. 3 section 2.

Firstly, because democracy is a specific form of rule it is *also* realised, in important social issues, in the form of class dictatorship. That is, democracy is in unity with dictatorship. Secondly, because democracy as a form of the state also involves state coercion.

With regards to the organisational forms, Lenin views democracy as a wider category than political freedom insofar as it not only consists of rights, but also the principles and measures relating to the form of government of the state, its organisational structure, political system, etc. Democracy therefore means more than political freedom because it also includes the institutions and measures that are necessary for the assertion of rights and which also entail restrictions. That is, democracy is a more comprehensive category than freedom understood in the political sense.

The Contradiction Between Democracy and Freedom

The second claim of Lenin's already quoted thesis is that democracy precludes freedom, and that freedom is therefore in contradiction with democracy. Lenin bases this thesis upon several propositions. Firstly, he argues that democracy is not only partially identical with freedom taken in the political sense, but is also in conflict with it. This is because democracy, as a form of the state, using state coercion, inhibits certain social groups – such as those deprived of their political rights, or subverters, troublemakers, criminals etc. – from acting 'freely'. In the democracies of ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, he points out that the ancient laws 'defended only the slave-owners, who were alone recognised as citizens with full rights'. The political freedom of 'the ancient Greek republics [was only] ...freedom for the slave-owners' (CW 25: 465).

Whilst Lenin acknowledges that the liberal democracies formally grant civil and political rights to all citizens, he argues that structural disparities in economic and political power prevent the workers from fully enjoying these rights. Finally, socialist democracy grants rights to the working masses, the vast majority of the population, whilst suppressing the rights of the exploiting minority, that is, the bourgeoisie and their supporters.

Lenin points out that political freedoms can be more or less effective depending upon the kind of democracy in question. In a liberal democracy, for instance, it is the bourgeois minority that primarily enjoys ‘freedom of the press’, whilst in a socialist democracy it is the working class. As such, whilst a liberal may view the mere proclamation of a right such as freedom of the press as a guarantee that everyone can enjoy it, the Marxist will always ask ‘*what sort of freedom of the press? What for? For which class?*’ (CW 32: 504). More generally, whilst a liberal may always speak of political freedom in general, a Marxist always asks ‘Freedom from what yoke or from the yoke of which class? Freedom for which class?’ A person who speaks about ‘democracy and freedom...*without posing* these questions, without giving them priority, who does not fight against hushing them up, concealing and blunting them, is the worst enemy of the working people’ (CW 30: 121-22). Hence, Lenin argues that democracy, as a form of the state, can by no means be identified with political freedom. For some, primarily for the members of the ruling class, it means this. For others, for the classes that are suppressed and excluded from power, it means the lack of it.

Lenin also argues that democracy contradicts human freedom.¹⁶ The main reason for this is that political emancipation, i.e., political-legal equality attainable by way of

¹⁶ Lenin is not entirely consistent on this score. He sometimes confuses things by defining ‘complete freedom’ as ‘a fully democratic republic’ (CW 25: 310). This study deploys a charitable reading to reconstruct his actual theoretical position.

democracy, leads on the one hand to society's liberation in the legal, political sense, whilst on the other hand it results in the fact that the exploiting conditions remain unchanged, since political emancipation does not affect them. People become equal citizens in the formal sense, whilst they remain unequal in the material sense. The bourgeois democratic revolution was only a political one that realised the free movement of the bourgeoisie. But it did not revolutionise the whole of society. That is, political emancipation abolishes feudal privileges, but it does not abolish the social relations that are the sources of social inequality, and which allow some to dominate over others in the various non-political spheres of society. As a consequence, considering humankind's objective situation, humanity cannot be free. Mere political emancipation ensures some partial freedom, but at the same time it creates a situation that precludes and negates complete freedom. And as he put it, 'there is no freedom...where there is suppression and where there is violence' (CW 25: 467). This end demands the surpassing of class divisions, and it demands communist emancipation.

According to Lenin's historical perspective, human freedom and democracy are not only in contradiction because democracy precludes freedom, but also because human freedom precludes democracy. When, and to the extent to which, that society realises communism, the 'kingdom of freedom', and when there is no more external danger, nor any other disturbing factor (e.g., the contradictions arising from the disproportionate economic development of the socialist societies, that might threaten the new social order), that is, when people get used to living their public and private lives as free, conscious, active individuals and in a human way, then they will no longer need the state to exist, and democracy, its typical form in socialism, will become full and customary, and hence wither away. Lenin (1972: 25) expressed this perspective in

his *Marxism on the State* when he wrote that ‘when there is freedom, then there will be no state’.

Of course, Lenin’s point is not that democracy precludes every kind of freedom. He does not view the existence of democracy to be immaterial to the attainment of freedom. With regard to really attainable freedom, he recognises that the existence of democracy is a more positive state than a non-democratic system. Indeed, he views democracy as one of the roads and means to complete freedom. Considering the political sphere, democracy must by any means involve at least a certain minimum of political rights of freedom. Hence the relationship between democracy and freedom is not only negative for Lenin. In his view, they represent not only an opposition, but a kind of unity as well. Consequently, Lenin recognises that despotism, tyranny and democracy are not of the same value, and their relation to freedom is of course different.

As it has already been mentioned, Lenin suggests that *there may also* be a natural *positive relationship* between the struggle for extending the rights of political freedom and the attainment of complete human freedom. This struggle, if it aims at extending political freedom in the interests of the working class, of the workers, *may* promote the general liberation of these people. It was in this sense that Lenin wrote that ‘to develop democracy to the utmost, to find forms for this development, to test them by practice, and so forth—all this is one of the component tasks of the struggle for the social revolution’ (CW 25: 452).

In itself, however, Lenin maintains that the extension of political freedom is in no direct relation to the attainment of human freedom. This is because bourgeois democracy does not develop further in a simple, smooth, and direct way towards greater and greater democracy. The dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary so that the extension of democracy can bring society nearer to universal human freedom. But this

involves the limitation of certain classes' political freedom, sometimes only *de jure* but mostly *de facto*, especially during the transitional period, i.e., until the social structure characteristic of socialism has been realised and the foundations of socialism laid. The extension of political freedom can mean progress towards total freedom only through such mediations.

For Lenin, therefore, the extension of the rights of freedom of democracy does not in itself mean the growth of the elements of complete freedom. In the course of history, it has always been the case in democracies that some social classes have been free, whilst the rights of others have been restricted. For instance, under liberal democracy, even the most developed liberal democracy, “freedom” and “equality” never were, and never could be, anything but an expression of the equality and freedom of the *commodity owners*, the equality and freedom of *capital*'. (CW 29: 379-80).

It follows from this that the extension of the political rights of freedom in itself does not mean progress towards human freedom. This is a contradictory process in class societies. If in society there are antagonistic classes, the programme of extending freedom will necessarily increase the sphere of activity of one class and restrict the freedom of the other. For instance, if in capitalism democracy increases as a result of the workers' struggle, this is a step towards the kingdom of freedom. If, however, in socialism 'freedom is extended' without any differentiation, this will unavoidably lead to the strengthening of the anti-socialist forces, and thus the realisation of complete freedom will be delayed. That is why Lenin consistently opposed the demand for complete democracy and complete freedom, *instead of* the power of the working class. He argued that this demagogic slogan, which was proclaimed both during the soviet Russian civil war and before, during the Hungarian counterrevolution, empowered the reactionary forces and undermined the construction of socialism. Lenin started out from

this recognition when he opposed every effort at interpreting the measures aimed at extending socialist democracy as a 'liberalisation', i.e., as enabling the activities of the enemy forces of the socialist system.

For Lenin, therefore, *political freedom is a means*. He always evaluates this freedom from the aspect of the extent to which is it a means of struggle of the working class, and of the working people. 'For every revolution, socialist or democratic, freedom is a very, very important slogan. But our programme says that if freedom runs counter to the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital, it is a deception'. This is a particularly important point to remember When the question of overthrowing capitalism becomes the order of the day. When that time comes, those who speak of above class freedom and oppose the proletarian dictatorship 'are doing nothing more nor less than aiding and abetting the exploiters, for unless freedom promotes the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital, it is a deception' (CW 29: 351-52).

Consequently, Lenin views political freedom not as an end in itself, but as a means in the hands of certain classes. It cannot fulfil its progressive or reactionary role in society alone. It can do this only together with other phenomena, depending on and subordinated to them. For Lenin, it is only by assessing the class content of freedom, the conditions of its realisation, and its effects upon other classes, that one can decide the relationship between political freedom and the realisation of complete freedom.

According to Lenin, the distinction between the categories and problems of freedom and democracy is important for the following reason: It expresses the fact that Marxism does not confuse the part with the whole; namely, *political* emancipation with *complete* human freedom, or, taking another dimension, a *part* or *manifestation* of the *form of rule* with the form of rule itself. This distinction represents a revolutionary standpoint that is not satisfied with *partial liberation*, with political emancipation, and which holds

that true, complete freedom cannot be exchanged for political freedom. In Lenin's view, it is necessary to make use of democracy, broaden it as far as possible, and at the same time surpass it, in order to realise the kingdom of freedom.

Reflections

Lenin's distinction between democracy and freedom revitalises Marx's distinction between 'political' and 'human' emancipation in his work *On the Jewish Question*. Marx, however, tends to conflate political emancipation with democracy, whereas Lenin argues that the two are only partially identical and also in partial contradiction. In this sense, he provided a more nuanced and complex elucidation of their general relationship.

Lenin's distinction has been made by democratic theorists outside the Marxist tradition. As Brennan (2018) argues in his study on the topic, democracy and the political freedoms often associated with liberalism 'are not connected on a conceptual level. At least in principle, a non-democratic regime could fully realise liberal freedoms. Similarly, a democracy could run roughshod over its citizens' civil and economic liberties'. In agreement, the conservative economist T. Sowell argues that 'democracy and freedom are too often confounded'. He points out that Britain, for instance, was not vaguely democratic until 1832, 'but it had freedom before that'. Indeed, 'the fundamentals of freedom – limited government, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, free speech, jury trials – existed in Britain for many generations before the franchise was extended to most males'. And 'just as freedom can exist without democracy, so democracy can crush freedom. During the Reconstruction period in America, for instance, blacks in the south lost many of their rights when

democratically elected governments took over and ushered in the Jim Crow era' (Sowell, 1997: 52). C. B. Macpherson corroborates Sowell's point in his book *The Real World of Democracy*. As he points out, 'in our Western societies the democratic franchise was not installed until after the liberal society and the liberal state were firmly established. Democracy came as a top dressing'. That is, 'it was the liberal state that was democratised, and in the process, democracy was liberalised' (Macpherson 1966: 5).

In a key respect, however, Lenin's conception of the antagonism between democracy and freedom is more sophisticated than many of the standard outlines. It has become a common tendency for theorists to refer to 'democracy' and 'freedom' in abstract terms, thereby giving the impression that democratic freedom influences everyone equally. Lenin is more careful in his approach. By distinguishing between the various forms of democracy based on their class characteristics, he is able to show how the warring classes experience freedom differently, depending upon the form of democracy in question. This Marxist approach enables Lenin to speak not simply of freedom in general, but freedom for specific classes in specific forms of democracy. Lenin's thoughts on the relationship between freedom and democracy strikingly illustrate the high level of nuance and sophistication in his democratic theory. Lenin's core message is that democratic theorists should never refer to democracy and freedom in general, without class characteristics. Such an approach, he argues, always serves the interests of the ruling class in that society, because it obscures the disparities between the freedoms enjoyed by the ruling class and those granted to the subordinate classes.

Lenin's approach also provides a unique lens with which to critically examine the discourse on 'freedom' and 'democracy' in the liberal democracies, not only amongst demagogic politicians, but also the academics and ideologists portraying themselves as

‘neutral’ and ‘objective’. This lens is designed for the working class, a group which is told time and time again that it is ‘free’ under liberal democracy, and that it enjoys the same level of ‘freedom’ as the capitalist class, the rich. Working class people can use Lenin’s theory to reflect on their alleged freedoms and re-evaluate the extent to which they actually enjoy them. Lenin himself encourages this reflection throughout his works.

Lenin’s thesis on the contradiction between freedom and democracy signifies the fourth major contradiction he identifies in the concept of democracy. On the one hand, democracy is partially identical with political freedom, and it can aid the struggle for human freedom, but on the other hand it is a manifestation of the fact that neither political nor human freedom have been obtained. These objectives require the self-transcendence of democracy.

Concluding Remarks

In his introduction to the edited volume *Marxism and Democracy*, A. Hunt – who was then (in 1980) a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain- blamed Lenin for the charge that Marxists did not take democracy seriously. This claim was especially damaging because it came not from a liberal, who one would expect to denigrate Lenin, but from a person belonging to a supposedly Leninist party. Hunt, as well as the other contributors to this volume, argued that Lenin’s dogmatic, crude, and reductionist framework for understanding democracy represented a degeneration from Marx and Engels. It needed to be thrown out entirely and replaced with something more sophisticated. This chapter has brought Hunt’s charge into serious question. Lenin’s conception of democracy is original, sophisticated, and nuanced. Whilst other Marxists may not take democracy seriously, Lenin certainly does. He paid substantial attention

to the concept of democracy, offering a complex analysis of its class character, its historical evolution, its basis in the class structure of society, its instrumental significance as a form of class struggle, and its relationship to dictatorship and freedom.

Lenin provides an original contribution to democratic theory in arguing that democracy is a concept containing inherent contradictions. Democracy means the rule of the people, but it is also a form of class rule that cannot be identical with the rule of the people. Democracy is a means of class struggle, but it cannot overcome that struggle. Democracy is partially compatible with freedom, but it precludes the realisation of complete freedom; and democracy for one class always means dictatorship for another. These theses represent Lenin's view that democracy is a paradoxical concept, one that can realise its true form – the rule of the people – only through a process of self-transcendence.

Having said that, Lenin's theory is by no means complete. His materialist conception of democratic history provides insufficient attention to primitive and feudal forms of democracy; and as such it provides a sub-par accompaniment to Marx's more developed materialist conception of economic history. Lenin's thesis that democracy 'withers away' under communism is an unfortunate expression, open to misinterpretation; and his instrumentalist defence of democracy is susceptible to anti-democratic abuses. Democracy may be discarded if it does not serve communist objectives.

Nevertheless, these issues do not detract from Lenin's credentials as a democratic theorist. His ideas on the concept and problems of democracy merit a more careful consideration than they currently do. They provide a unique lens through which scholars and activists, particularly amongst the working class, can conceptualise democracy more critically.

Chapter 2. Lenin's Critique of Liberal Democracy

At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a growing trend amongst Marxists to support the 'parliamentary road to socialism', the view that the working class could use the rights and institutions of liberal democracy to win political power and thereby achieve socialism through purely constitutional means, and without a revolution. According to Eduard Bernstein, who was perhaps the most prominent proponent of this strategy, liberal democracy was not only the principal means of achieving socialism. It was also, in several respects, the chief political expression of socialism itself (Pierson 1986: 31-38). Bernstein formulated his defence of liberal democracy during the course of criticising the October Socialist Revolution. In his view, the new soviet regime in Russia had declined into despotism because Lenin and the Bolsheviks rejected the rights and institutions of liberal democracy in principle (Femia 1993: 94-103).

Lenin responded to the parliamentarians by denouncing them as opportunists and traitors to the socialist cause. In opposition to Bernstein and his ilk, Lenin insisted that every liberal democracy has a *bourgeois* essence. It perpetuates the economic and political dominance of the capitalist class, the minority, whilst suppressing the power of the toiling masses, the majority. He therefore denigrates the socialists who 'laud bourgeois democracy and call it "democracy" in general, or—what is still more stupid and still more crude—"pure democracy"' (CW 29: 311). He mocks the naive 'view of bourgeois society', that 'once there is "democracy", and once capitalist and proletarian

alike take part in the voting, this is the “popular will”, this is “equality” and an expression of the people’s will’. In Lenin’s opinion, true socialists ‘know what an abominable fraud this talk is’ (CW 28: 419-20). For despite the proliferation of ‘such catchwords as supposedly popular, national, general, extra-class...actually bourgeois democracy serves the interests of the exploiters alone’ (CW 29: 106; CW 28: 261, 252).

Following the rise to prominence of the Soviet Union, Lenin’s scathing critique of liberal democracy became the authoritative interpretation of the classical Marxist position amongst Marxist-Leninists, and it remained so at least until the federation collapsed 70 years later.

In spite of this lasting influence, Western scholars have seldom discussed Lenin’s critique in detail. One reason for this is that his indictment is often characterised as a crude, derivative, and uninspired rehash of the subtler classical Marxist critique (Meyer 1963: 67-8; Femia 1993: 52). Since it is widely thought that Lenin added nothing new to the ideas of Marx and Engels, scholars have seen little value in examining his writings on liberal democracy.

The textual evidence does not indicate that Lenin’s critique is derivative of the classical Marxist account. For one thing, Marx never produced a methodical, lengthy account of the modern state, and scholars have therefore had to stitch his theory together from various sources: observations on contemporary history, philosophical reflections, incidental remarks. Lenin, by contrast, provides a more detailed, systematic and comprehensive account of the state in several works. He has far more to say about liberal democracy than Marx and Engels combined, and these factors show that his critique is more rigorous and complete. For these two reasons, Lenin does not only restore ‘some of the basic lines’ of the Marxian critique of liberal democracy. He also clarifies and develops this critique in various respects, as the following discussion seeks

to demonstrate.

Another argument for dismissing Lenin's critique is that it no longer describes modern democracy. A. J. Polan contends that Lenin's 'critique of parliamentary democracy...was crippled by its own situation in historical time', because he developed it during a period when there were no democracies that genuinely represented the populace. The Russian Duma, for instance, lacked meaningful powers; it was subordinate to the appointed second chamber, and it had no prerogatives over key areas of state finance and military affairs. It was not seriously representative. The first electoral law ensured unequal representation of the social classes. Some 90,000 workers, on the one hand, and 2000 landowners, on the other, were each represented by one deputy. Worker representation was organised on the basis of factories, and because the government excluded the factories employing less than fifty men from the franchise, along with building workers, casual labourers and artisans, some 63% of the urban male working population had no vote (Polan 1984: 148-49).

Aside from this, Polan points out that New Zealand was the first democracy to establish universal suffrage, in 1907, whilst Denmark and Norway did so in 1915. These were the only institutions that predated Lenin's *State and Revolution*.¹⁷ As such, 'it can be said that, in a literal sense, *Lenin did not know what he was talking about*' (Polan 1984: 154-55).

Polan seems to recognise that he has overstated his criticism, for as he rightly admits, 'Lenin did not make the mistake of identifying the existing Duma with parliamentary institutions in general'. He did not view the Duma as a model of genuine liberal democracy. Instead, Lenin compared the Duma with what was possible under genuine

¹⁷ Polan concedes that male franchise did obtain in certain countries several years earlier- e.g. in France in 1884, and in Norway in 1898. In his view, however, 'these facts amount to extenuating circumstances for Lenin's argument'.

liberal democratic structures (Polan 1984: 149). He also recognised that there was a substantial degree of variation amongst democracies in the capitalist countries, and that some of these forms were more democratic than others (CW 9: 52).

The textual evidence shows that Lenin's aim is to identify and criticise the basic features that characterise even the most advanced democratic republics, irrespective of their various legal restrictions and institutional differences. For instance, he paid little attention to what he called the 'petty restrictions' on the suffrage that existed during his time. He instead directs most of his criticisms upon the effects of private property, class and wealth upon the democratic process, which is something that exists independently of the franchise. Lenin's arguments therefore have a general applicability to modern liberal democratic regimes, and they are not 'unrepresentative'.

But what is liberal democracy? In contrast to the genus from which it is derived, its meaning is fairly straightforward. It denotes a form of representative democracy, characterised by universal suffrage, elections between multiple parties, a separation of powers into different government branches, the rule of law, a capitalist economy with private property, and the provision of civil and political rights. The 'democratic' component refers to the state system of representation and universal suffrage, whilst the 'liberal' component refers to all the other characteristics outlined above. As Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009: 19) rightly emphasise, 'both the "liberal" and the "democracy" aspects have to be present for liberal democracies to exist'. And for this reason, Lenin's thoughts on *both* these components will be analysed here.

Lenin's critique of liberal democracy can be roughly divided into three main arguments. His first argument focuses upon the peculiarly modern division between the state and the economy; his second analyses the 'rights of man'; whilst his third criticises the state apparatus itself. The following sections examine and evaluate each of these

arguments in turn.

2.1 The State and Economy

Liberal democracy maintains a division between the state, which deals with political matters, and the economy, which is deemed to be non-political. This means that in the economic sphere, private individuals have the right to truck, barter and exchange (to borrow a form of words from Adam Smith) freely in the marketplace, and without external state interference. This includes the power to set up huge private businesses and corporations, some of which may command thousands of employees. Since these affairs are ‘private’ and protected by property rights, the government has limited powers to interfere in these things (Whelan 2019: 52-53). Lenin’s first critique of liberal democracy targets this state of affairs.

Lenin rejects the notion that the economic life of society is ‘non-political’, as well as the attendant view that the state should therefore not interfere in it. For Lenin, the way in which people produce the material conditions of their daily existence determines the shape and development of the entire society. The social activities and decisions made in the economic sphere are essentially political activities because they affect the lives of everyone in society. Economic power is therefore a form of political power. Yet because the private ownership of the means of production separates the political and economic spheres, the state has little control over the management and organisation of economic life. As such, ‘the major questions affecting the economic life of the working people—whether they are to live in starvation or in comfort—are decided by the capitalist—who is the lord, a god!’, when they should in fact be decided by the state (CW 30: 488).

Lenin argues that the democratic deficit in the economy is most evident in the workplace itself. Once the management has engaged a worker ‘it disposes of his services just as it likes, paying no attention to the worker’s habits, to his customary way of life, to his family position, to his intellectual requirements’. In order to achieve the maximum profit ‘all the imaginable abuses relating to working time are set into motion’ by the management, ‘and at the same time it introduces its “rules,” its “practices”, which are obligatory for every worker’. The organisational structure of the capitalist enterprise is ‘deliberately adapted to squeezing out of the hired worker all the labour he is capable of yielding, to squeezing it out at top speed and then to throwing him out!’ (CW 2: 105). This means that there is little room for democratic procedure. ‘The factory...demands that the worker surrender his will altogether...He must be just as obedient, enslaved, and without a will of his own, as the machine itself’ (CW 2: 106).

As a result of this authoritarian organisation in the economic sphere, ‘the working people are enslaved by capitalism’, and ‘democracy is restricted, cramped, curtailed, mutilated by all the conditions of wage slavery’ (CW 25: 491). Lenin makes it clear that the bourgeoisie’s enslavement of the proletariat is neither an accidental nor an avoidable feature of economic life in a liberal democracy. On the contrary, ‘it is obvious and inevitable that the latter should be enslaved to the former—inevitable precisely because of the capitalist character of the given production relations’. Under capitalism the means of production ‘passes into the hands of individuals and in their hands [it] serves as an instrument for oppressing and enslaving the working people, as a means of personal enrichment by the exploitation of the masses’ (CW 1: 216).

If the labourer attempts to gain more control over their work or dispute a pay cut, ‘the employer tells him to get out, [and] that there are plenty of hungry people at the gates who would be glad to work for low wages’. As a result of this disparity in property

ownership, the average worker is ‘*absolutely powerless* in face of the capitalist’, who has the power to ‘crush the worker completely, to drive him to his death at slave labour and, indeed, not him alone, but his wife and children with him’ (CW 4: 312). The working masses are ‘veritable slaves who must work continuously to profit another in order to obtain a crust of bread’. They ‘must for ever remain docile and inarticulate hired servants’ (CW 4: 314). The workers are ‘doomed to the penal servitude and the barrack-like discipline of arduous, monotonous toil, to a life of dire poverty and semi-starvation’ (CW 26: 407). Whilst there may be democracy in the ‘public’ political sphere, ‘in the economic sphere the bourgeoisie hold undivided sway and keep the workers “as quiet as lambs”’ (CW 1: 259; CW 30: 42).

In Lenin’s view, the division between the democratic state and authoritarian economy reduces the former to an empty ideal sphere, an illusory community where each citizen is an imaginary member of an imagined sovereignty. Politics, when divorced from the economic life of society, lacks a useful purpose or content. From the proletarian standpoint, the state is a distant and remote ‘alien institution’ that is unresponsive to their real concerns: the exploitation and wage slavery they suffer in the workplace. This in turn heightens their political alienation, for ‘even in the most advanced, cultured and democratic countries the overwhelming majority of the working people are downtrodden and crushed—crushed by the hell of capitalism, so that actually they do not and cannot take any part in politics’ (CW 28: 419). That is, ‘owing to the conditions of capitalist exploitation, the modern wage slaves are so crushed by want and poverty that “they cannot be bothered with democracy”, “cannot be bothered with politics”’ (CW 25: 465). The reason for this, as Lenin explains, is that ‘the most important questions’, including ‘everything that particularly interests the citizens...are decided by a small handful of capitalists’ (CW 30: 488). The labouring masses seldom

vote or join political organisations because they know that these activities will make no difference to their daily lives in the workplace. The capitalist class has effectively defiled the democratic republic ‘by servility to wealth to such a degree that the people are being overcome by apathy, indifference; *it is all the same to them*, because the hungry man cannot see the difference between the republic and the monarchy’ (CW 26: 127).

What is more, Lenin argues that the dichotomy between the state and the economic sphere conveys the impression that the latter cannot be brought under the collective control and discussion that, in principle at least, characterizes the former. As such, in a “parliamentary” republic... democracy... [is] limited to democratic *elections*, to the right of sending to parliament individuals who...represent the people and oppress the people’ (CW 24: 180). In Lenin’s view, a political system that ignores economic life and limits participation to voting once every few years can hardly be described as the ‘rule of the people’.

According to Lenin, the political-economic divide also undermines the core virtues that are commonly attributed to liberal democracy: ‘*freedom and equality*’. These ‘remain purely formal, signifying in practice *wage-slavery* for the workers (who are formally free and equal) and the *undivided rule of capital*, the oppression of labour by capital’ (CW 29: 379-80). To be clear, Lenin criticises these virtues not because he finds them inherently undesirable, but because the exploitative economic relations of private property negate them. In his view, true freedom, equality and democracy can be achieved only under a classless communist society, wherein the people own the means of production and democratically control the economic sphere of society. Until this state of affairs is obtained, ‘all arguments about freedom and equality should be accompanied by the questions: freedom for which class, and for what purpose; equality

between which classes, and in what respect?’ (CW 31: 393). If these questions are ignored, and ‘if nothing is said about the private ownership of the means of production, then the slogan of freedom and equality is merely the lies and humbug of bourgeois’ democracy, ‘whose formal recognition of freedom and equality conceals actual economic servitude and inequality for the workers, for all who toil and are exploited by capital, i.e., for the overwhelming majority of the population in all capitalist countries (CW 31: 393).

Like Marx before him, Lenin systematically distinguishes between the bourgeois democratic revolution, which grants purely ‘political emancipation’, and the socialist revolution, which paves the road for ‘complete emancipation’. He argues that the former is of crucial importance, for ‘without political liberty all forms of workers’ representation will remain a miserable fraud, and the proletariat will remain in prison as hitherto, without light, without air, and without the elbow-room it needs for the struggle to attain its complete emancipation’ (CW 6: 515). This means that ‘the bourgeois nature of the democratic revolution does not mean that this revolution can benefit only the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it is advantageous most of all, and necessary most of all, to the proletariat and the peasantry’ (CW 8: 539). Political emancipation itself is insufficient for true democracy, however, because it leaves the economic domain untouched. Only a socialist revolution, only the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, can provide the conditions for the ‘complete emancipation of the working class from all oppression and all exploitation’ (CW 9: 130).

Reflections

Lenin's critique of the political economic divide harkens back to Marx's critique of the state-civil society divide. In his work *On the Jewish Question*, Marx acknowledged that the achievement of the bourgeois democratic revolution, viz. political emancipation including political and legal equality and democratic government, meant a big leap forward, but it is as far as liberal democracy can go (MECW 2: 149 152 155). The reason is that political emancipation, i.e., political equality attainable by way of democracy, leads on the one hand to humankind's liberation in the legal-political sense, while on the other hand it leaves the exploiting conditions of the economy unchanged, since legal-political emancipation does not affect them. That is, the liberal democratic state formally abolishes distinctions of property, '*birth, social rank, education, occupation*' and so on, by declaring that these '*are non-political distinctions*', and by saying that every person is equal politically. At the same time, however, the liberal democratic state allows the aforementioned distinctions to exert a very real influence in the sphere of civil society, the sphere of everyday life. As such, rather than abolish 'these real distinctions', the liberal democratic 'state only exists on the presupposition of their existence; it feels itself to be a political state and asserts its universality only in opposition to these elements of its being' (MECW 3: 153).

What influence do the specific form of factual social inequalities have on human beings? The human disintegrates, on the one hand, into a citizen who is formally equal with other people, who is a communal being, who is asked as a communal being to partake in social affairs; and on the other into a member of society who is forced by social conditions to be egotistical and lonely, who opposes every objective of the community. That is, political emancipation in bourgeois society leads to the separation of the *citoyen* and the *bourgeois*. This means that in both consciousness and in reality the individual lives both 'a heavenly and an earthly life'. Their heavenly life is the

political community, in which the individual views themselves as a communal being, whereas their earthly life is that of civil society, in which the individual acts as a private person, regard other people as a means to their own ends, ‘and becomes the plaything of alien powers’. Marx’s use of the terms ‘heavenly’ and ‘earthly’ is deliberate. The individual’s heavenly existence as a citizen is just as unreal and illusory as heaven itself. The liberal democratic state stands over civil society like heaven stands over earth. It is distant from people’s real concerns in civil society, the sphere of life that affects them on a day-to-day basis. Just as the angels in heaven are unreal, so too is the communal citizen, who is really just a purely symbolic and ideal figure. In the liberal democratic state, therefore, ‘where man is regarded as a species-being, he is the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty, is deprived of his real individual life and endowed with an unreal universality’ (MECW 3: 153).

Since people are powerless to *collectively* decide their everyday civil society affairs, their supposedly communal political citizenship is false, and nothing more than a ‘political lion’s skin’ (MECW 3: 154). Consequently, under liberal democracy the state becomes the manifestation of society’s disintegration into political conditions and affairs on the one hand, and into the ‘private’ life-processes of society on the other, particularly economic production. Furthermore, under these conditions, this disintegration also manifests itself in the contradiction between the illusory communal being and the real social being. As a result, although political emancipation abolishes the state’s role in sanctifying religion and thereby makes religion a private affair, this does not terminate mystic belief, a basic characteristic of religion, since the material conditions of this society create the secular basis of this belief. In other words, citizens treat their political life, their heavenly life, not as the illusory life it is, but as their real

life, 'their true life. They are religious insofar as religion here is the spirit of civil society, expressing the separation and remoteness of man from man' (MECW 3: 159).

In liberal democracy, the human individual is considered to be sovereign, to be a supreme being. The individual in their alienated form, corrupted by capitalism, separated from other people, and dominated by 'inhuman conditions and elements'- that person is regarded as the truly sovereign being under liberal democracy (CW 3: 159).

How can one explain that such conditions develop in bourgeois society? As Marx expresses it, the reason for this is that only political emancipation has been realised. This revolution was a political one that realised the free movement of the egotistic individual, but it did not revolutionise the whole society. That is, the bourgeois revolution, which has accomplished only political emancipation, has freed only the 'unrestrained movement of the spiritual and material elements' of bourgeois society. This idea is expressed not only in the *Jewish Question* but also in Marx and Engels' common work *The Holy Family* (MECW 4: 116).

Liberal democracy has abolished feudal privileges, but it has not abolished the social relations that are the sources of social inequality, which transform human beings into egotistic private individuals. As a consequence, considering humanity's objective situation, they cannot experience complete democracy. Mere liberal democracy ensures some partial freedom, but at the same time it creates such a situation that precludes and negates complete democracy.

Marx and Engels argue that the factual slavery of liberal democracy is seemingly its greatest freedom, since people consider the movement of the estranged and unrestrained moving elements of their life (viz. property, industry, etc.) to be their own freedom, albeit this movement actually means – on the contrary – the complete slavery and

inhumanity of the individual. Hence liberal democracy that has set human beings free from their earlier feudal bonds and made possible the free movement of the elements of their life, contradicts complete democracy. The latter demands the surpassing of political solutions, that is, it demands real social emancipation.

In the course of examining the consequences of the state-society divide, Marx elucidates the contradiction between liberal democracy and complete democracy from another angle. In the process of political emancipation, the individual disintegrates into the *citoyen* who has equal rights and duties in public affairs, who is considered a communal being, and which necessarily follows from capitalist society, but also into an egotistic private individual, in its extreme case, the bourgeois.

The *citoyen* – who is a partial being, since their being is restricted to political life only – represents a total being merely in one field, i.e., partially, restricted to only one social sphere, and hence their communal being can be realised in certain respects only. Their life conditions as an individual as well as their social circumstances make them oppose their own communal being. Firstly, because their conditions restrict them even in their political functioning; and secondly, because democracy is restricted to the political sphere only. Moreover, people do not always have time to deal with politics, so if a person has to choose between their private interests and politics, they will probably choose the former, since they cannot make a living from politics, and since on the busy weekdays they must carry out activities through which they can keep themselves and their family afloat. Thus, public functions and every day actions separate; moreover, they even contradict one another. The human disintegrated into the *citoyen* and egotistic private individual cannot be a free person living a harmonious and full life. Consequently, considering the subjective side, i.e., the politically emancipated individual, liberal democracy is the negation of complete democracy.

There are some note-worthy differences between Lenin and Marx's criticisms. Whereas Lenin provides a class-based analysis, focusing upon the lack of economic democracy and its effects on the working class, Marx's critique of the state-civil society divide goes beyond that. Civil society, for Marx, encompasses more than the economy. It includes the various independent non-governmental organisations and institutions (various kinds of private clubs and associations) of the private sphere. In calling for the democratisation of civil society, Marx wants the distinction between the public and private essentially to vanish, in order for complete democracy to be realised. Indeed, unlike Lenin, Marx examines the supposedly undemocratic *psychological* effects of the state-civil society divide: selfishness, egotism and so on. Speaking of this aspect of Marx's critique of liberal democracy, Femia (1993: 29) argues that Lenin appeared to 'ignore it all together'.

Femia's analysis is not strictly accurate. Although Lenin does not imbue his analysis of the state-economic divide with a critique of liberal democratic psychology, and although he does not criticise an independent civil society explicitly, he does not promote autonomous civil society associations under socialism. In other words, whilst Lenin does not include the critique of autonomous civil associations in his critique of liberal democracy, he is ambivalent with regards to their status under socialist democracy, as Chapter three shall establish. This is important, because some commentators have described Marx's critique of the state-civil society divide as undemocratic. According to Femia (1993), Marx's desire to dissolve the individual into the collective, by destroying the private sphere, is destructive of the individual freedom supposedly required by democracy. Indeed, this is the central argument of Femia's book on *Marxism and Democracy*. Marxism, he argues, is despotic precisely because of Marx's desire to democratise civil society and destroy human privacy. In making this

argument, however, Femia actually merges two things that ought to be kept separate, i.e., liberty (or privacy) and democracy. In itself ‘democracy’ does not require ‘individual freedom’ (privacy). It has to do with the question of who makes the laws, not the question of how far the law has a right to interfere with the individual. Here the distinction between ‘democracy’ and ‘liberal-democracy’ is important. It simply does not follow that a desire to democratise civil society necessarily poses a threat to individual liberty or privacy - although it may do so in fact. To say, in other words, that the existence of a ‘protected private sphere’ is a ‘condition’, or pre-requisite, for democracy seems to make no sense. A protected private sphere may be a precondition for liberty, but not necessarily for democracy. For this statement to make sense it would be necessary to substitute ‘liberal-democracy’ for the word ‘democracy’. It does make sense to claim that a protected private sphere is a precondition for the existence of liberal-democracy, or of a ‘democracy’ that is also ‘liberal’.

Lenin’s critique of the political-economic divide remains relevant today and has become a popular topic of debate amongst democratic theorists of all ideological stripes, even though Lenin himself is not prominent in these debates. Several scholars have sought to expose the contradiction in liberal democratic theory and practice between the desire for equality in the political realm and the acceptance of despotism within the economy. In the view of many, there is no convincing reason as to why democratic procedures are suitable in the former but not in the latter (Asara 2020).

Bowles and Gintis (1986: 64-92) have criticised the notion that economic power does not require democratic accountability because it differs from political power. They argue that economic power is a form of political power, because business executives regularly make authoritative decisions on matters – the rate and magnitude of technological development, living standards, plant location – that significantly

influence either the local community directly involved, or society as a whole, or both. Capitalists are therefore political actors in everything but name. Likewise, several studies have shown that the political-economic divide cripples ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’, which are often proclaimed as the core virtues of liberal democracy. There can be only limited freedom where there is exploitation in the workplace, and there can be only limited equality where employers can more or less arbitrarily subjugate their workers. These values are incompatible with a political system that protects the right of property owners to coerce and oppress the propertyless. In essence, they claim that the bourgeoisie’s control in the economic sphere is a direct affront to democracy (Bowles and Gintis 1986: 64-92).

In his analysis of the ‘Marxist critique of liberal democracy’, Femia refutes three objections to the economic-political divide critique. The first objection is that the free market, to which capitalists must respond, is itself a democratic institution that accurately reflects the choices of each citizen in their capacity as a consumer. Femia’s response is that wealth determines market power. There is no equality of citizenship within the capitalist market (Femia 1993: 40).

A second objection is that the state is the highest locus of power in a liberal democracy, and it therefore formally and substantially subsumes the other spheres under its authority. If capitalists exert significant control over human and physical resources, then this is because the electorate consents to this control, which it could diminish or eliminate through legislation if it wanted to. Femia’s response is that even if economic relations are ultimately accountable to the majority, capitalists still exert a substantial degree of power and control on the micro level, the level of everyday life. Private corporations are structures of command and obedience. Wage labourers must do as they are told by their superiors in the hierarchy. Decisions reflect the imperatives

of profit-maximisation rather than the wishes of the workforce of the surrounding community. These decisions can destroy towns and lives, and the affected individuals and localities have little to no say in the matter. Whether or not society consents to this type of domination is irrelevant from the democratic perspective. A ‘democratic’ dictatorship is still a dictatorship (Femia 1993: 41).

A third objection is that that economic freedom provided by capitalism is an indispensable means towards the achievement of political freedom. The reason for this is that economic freedom prevents the concentration of power in state hands, thereby ensuring that economic power offsets political power. On this view, the preservation of democracy necessitates the reject communal ownership, however democratic it may sound. For if society attempts to be too democratic, then it shall end up being undemocratic. Femia’s response is that even if this argument were correct, it neither addresses nor undermines the claim that liberal democracy applies equality of power only within the narrowly defined political realm, which in turn ignores a significant area of power relations within the economic sphere. As such, ‘democracy and corporate capitalism are strange bedfellows, and those who try to justify the latter as a mechanism for ensuring the maximum diffusion of power leave themselves open to the charge of hypocrisy’ (Femia 1993: 41).

Lenin’s critique of the political-economic divide forms the basis of the theory of ‘economic democracy’, though again, the adherents of this theory rarely reference Lenin as a theoretical source. The concept of economic democracy is based upon the premise that liberal democracy contains insufficient democracy in the economic sphere, and that broader democracy requires the democratisation of the economic sphere (Dahl 1985).

Lenin’s critique of political alienation has also been explored by democratic theory.

Scholars have argued, with extensive empirical evidence, that people are becoming increasingly apathetic towards and disillusioned with a political system that has little say over key areas of their daily lives. It is well known that in the liberal democracies voter turnout has always been lower amongst the poor, amongst the working class. What is more, voter turnout has consistently declined in several liberal democracies since the 1980s. Although studies have identified a range of reasons for this decline, there is a general agreement that widespread feelings of disillusionment, indifference, and futility (the perception that one's vote will not make any difference) amongst voters has played a significant role (Hooghe and Kern 2017: 535; Whelan 2019: 230-31; 235-36). In other words, working people are voting less because they view politics as an arena that is distant from their daily concerns, and that politics is also powerless to influence them. These studies, which affirm Lenin's ideas, show the relevance of his criticisms today.

2.2 The ‘Rights of Man’

Since Lenin argues that the economic sphere is the real basis of political life, of which the state is only its reflection, he argues that the capitalist system of private property, competition and contract shapes the liberal regime and finds expression in the ‘rights of man’. Lenin has little time for the ‘pompous and grandiloquent bourgeois-democratic great charter of liberty and the rights of man’, based as they are upon fixed and abstract human capacities or qualities. Lenin follows Marx in rejecting the existence of this human essence. Every human, he writes, was ‘created by his conditions of life, by the given system of relations of production’ (CW 1: 409). Lenin specifically praises Marx’s sixth Thesis on Feuerbach. Paraphrasing Marx, he criticises the old “‘vulgar’ materialism’ for regarding ‘the “human essence” in the abstract, not as the “complex of all” (concretely and historically determined) “social relations”’ (CW 21: 53). Lenin rejects the ‘eternal and natural’ moral principles upon which natural rights doctrine is based. In his view, all ideas reflect and serve the transient economic structure of society, and this means that ‘there is no such thing as a morality that stands outside human society’. When the economic structure inevitably changes, political ideas and morals change along with them. This is why genuine Marxists ‘do not believe in an eternal morality’, and they make it their duty to ‘expose the falseness of all the fables about morality’ (CW 31: 291-94). Yet the ‘natural’ rights of man are based precisely upon this concept of ‘eternal morality’. They are timeless principles that are intended to suit all societies in all times. For Lenin, by contrast, the notion that everyone has a set of inalienable ‘natural’ rights is a fabrication, and nothing but ‘the sentimental pap of petty bourgeois morality’ (CW 1: 217). As he remarks in his *Conspectus of The Holy Family*, ‘the “Rights of Man” are not inborn, but arose historically’ out of the development of

capitalism (CW 38: 39). Bourgeois ideologists based these ‘universal rights’ upon the ahistorical ‘commandments of morality’ and ‘the commandments of God’, mainly in order to justify their privileged position and ‘further their own interests as exploiters’ (CW 28: 369; CW 31: 291).

With that said, Lenin, does not reject rights in principle. His main criticism is that they are ‘inscribed in a constitution which *sanctions private property*. That is the whole point’ (CW 29: 353; Townshend 1999: 72). Under capitalism, writes Lenin, ‘*all...democratic rights [are] without exception...conditional, restricted, formal, narrow, and extremely difficult of realisation*’ (CW 23: 74). Whilst liberal democratic constitutions proclaim these rights in writing, they overlook the fact that capitalist society is divided into antagonistic classes that possess different degrees of economic power (CW 9: 461). In a liberal democracy, the economically dominant bourgeoisie can utilise and enjoy their rights to a greater extent than the working class. Moreover, the bourgeoisie uses these rights to cement their political domination. This is why Lenin chastises the ‘declarations of numerous liberties and rights which the majority of the population, the workers and peasants, cannot enjoy to the full’ (CW 29: 109). If one examines ‘freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, or “equality of all citizens before the law”’, one ‘will see at every turn evidence of the hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy with which every honest and class-conscious worker is familiar’ (CW 28: 244).

Lenin believes that the ‘freedom of assembly’ achieved under capitalist democracy ‘marks vast progress compared with the feudal system, with medievalism, with serfdom’. Every socialist ‘admitted this when they took advantage of the freedom of bourgeois society to teach the proletariat how to throw off the yoke of capitalism’ (CW 29: 353-4). At the same time, however, the ‘workers know perfectly well’ that the right to ‘freedom of assembly’ is a ‘hollow phrase’, ‘even in the most democratic bourgeois

republic' (CW 28: 460). It is 'only freedom on paper, but not in fact' (CW 29: 353-4). For 'whilst the democratic republic declares the people free to organise', it has in fact 'always placed countless obstacles in the way of their organisation, obstacles that were connected with the private ownership of the means of production in a way that made them irremovable' (CW 29: 106). One of these 'obstacles' is that 'the rich have the best public and private buildings at their disposal, and enough leisure to assemble at meetings, which are protected by the bourgeois machine of power'. By contrast, the working classes, i.e., 'the overwhelming majority of the population—are denied all these things' (CW 28: 460). The workers have learnt from this that 'as long as the landowners are snugly installed in their mansions and magic castles, the right of assembly will not exist, and will mean, if anything, the right to assemble only in the world to come' (CW 28: 91).

Lenin recognises that "“Freedom of the press” is another of the principal slogans of “pure democracy”. And here, too, the workers know—and socialists everywhere have admitted it millions of times—that this freedom is a deception’ under capitalism (CW 28: 460-1). The simple reason for this is that the bourgeoisie is wealthy, whilst the working class is poor. The ‘so-called freedom of the press’ therefore ‘consists in all the most important organs of the press...being bought up by the capitalists, and being filled 99 per cent with articles by mercenary hacks’ (CW 31: 168). Lenin argues that ‘this freedom is a deception while the best printing-presses and the biggest stocks of paper are appropriated by the capitalists’. It is a sham whilst ‘capitalist rule over the press remains, a rule that is manifested throughout the world all the more strikingly, sharply and cynically the more democracy and the republican system are developed’ (CW 28: 460-1).

Lenin does not only argue that the bourgeoisie has a monopoly over the press. He

also believes that they constantly try to prevent the working class from developing their own, using such measures as ‘legal proceedings, the arrest (or murder by hired assassins) of editors, denial of mailing privileges, the cutting off of paper supplies, and so on and so forth’. Moreover, ‘the news services essential to daily newspapers are run by bourgeois telegraph agencies, while advertisements, without which a large newspaper cannot pay its way, depend on the ‘good will’ of the capitalists’. As such, ‘through skulduggery and the pressure of capital and the bourgeois state, the bourgeoisie is depriving the revolutionary proletariat of its press’ (CW 31: 196).

In Lenin’s view, the comparatively underdeveloped state of the almost invisible ‘working class press’ in the advanced capitalist countries ‘strikingly reveal[s] the utter fraudulency of liberty and equality under bourgeois democracy’ (CW 31: 196). Whilst liberals ‘call it democracy when the capitalists can buy out the press and the rich can use the press in their own interests’, socialists call it ‘plutocracy and not democracy’ (CW 29: 163). In this respect, Lenin argues that ‘the defenders of “pure democracy” prove to be defenders of an utterly foul and venal system that gives the rich control over the mass media’. These liberal scholars are ‘deceivers of the people, who, with the aid of plausible, fine-sounding, but thoroughly false phrases, divert them from the concrete historical task of liberating the press from capitalist enslavement’ (CW 28: 461).

Lenin argues that even freedom of thought is hampered under liberal democracy, for in practice this right means the ‘privilege of the capitalists’ to ‘dupe’ and ‘befuddle’ the ‘more backward sections of the working people’ with their ‘venomous lies’, ‘both through their press, which remains in the hands of the property-owners, and by all other means of political influence’ (CW 28: 414-15, 270-71). The practical application of freedom of thought is the ‘freedom for the rich’ to ‘*buy up* newspapers, to *buy* writers, to *bribe*, buy and fake “public opinion” for the *benefit of the bourgeoisie*’ (CW 32: 505;

CW 30: 338; CW 28: 370-71). As he bluntly put it elsewhere, ‘freedom of conscience (=freedom for capital to buy or bribe whole church organisations for the purpose of doping the masses with the opium of religion)’ (CW 30: 338-39). In fact, ‘[c]apitalism would not be capitalism if it did not...place in the hands of the bourgeoisie a gigantic apparatus of falsehood and deception to hoodwink the masses’ and ‘stultify their minds’ (CW 30: 267). The ability of the bourgeoisie to ‘fabricate the so-called public opinion’ is proven by the fact that ‘among the millions of copies of their newspapers and magazines you would be hard put to find any but an insignificant few that contain even a hint of anything favourable about the Bolsheviks...and they call it “democracy”’ (CW 30: 338, 211).

For Lenin, facts such as these show that ‘the conditions that make it impossible for the oppressed classes to “exercise” their democratic rights are not the exception under capitalism; they are typical of the system’ (CW 23: 72-3). This means that ‘even in the most democratic—*bourgeois*—republic...the blessings of democracy are, in fact, inaccessible to the vast majority of working people’ (CW 28: 370).

Lenin also implicitly criticises the *kind* of right that are on offer. Liberal democracy provides mainly civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech, thought, assembly, religion, and private property. What they neglect, in Lenin’s view, are economic and social rights. These provide the basic necessities of life, such as the right to food, housing, public education, employment, health care, social security, and a minimum standard of living. The former rights require the state mainly to withhold action, whilst the latter require the state to make active steps in providing them.

In Lenin’s view, true democracy requires not only civil and political rights, but

economic, social and cultural rights as well.¹⁸ People need both if they are to participate in politics as equals and obtain the highest degree of freedom. His problem with liberal democracies is that whilst they view the former rights as indispensable, they view the latter as optional extras. His point, however, is that the latter are just as important, since if people cannot obtain the necessities of life, then they will not be able fully to enjoy their negative rights. The bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie can do well without economic, social and cultural rights, since they can afford the best quality food, housing and private education. The workers, by contrast, suffer without these rights, since they find it harder to afford the basic life essentials. As the result of this, the bourgeoisie can enjoy its negative rights and participate in political affairs, in the same way that a small stratum of slave owners in ancient Greece could do so (since slaves did all the labour behind the scenes). The impoverished worker, by contrast, will typically focus upon other things, including their own survival. In this way, the liberal democratic disregard for positive rights cements the political and economic domination of the bourgeoisie.

Reflections

Lenin's claim that liberal democratic rights are not derived from some abstract human essence signifies a continuation of Marx's views. Marx denied the idea, promoted by liberalism, that the rights of man derive from some abstract human essence, or in other words, some innate capacities of human beings. Marx denied that such an abstract essence exists. Human nature, like ideology in general, reflects the economic mode of production, and it therefore changes in accordance with the mode of production. Marx

¹⁸ Whilst Lenin does not use the terminology of civil and political/ economic, social and cultural rights, his arguments express the same distinction.

expressed this view in his sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, where he wrote that ‘the essence of man is no abstraction inhering in each single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relationships’ (Marx 1967: 402). Since human nature changes over time, there can be no universal rights of man.

Unlike Lenin, however, Marx and Engels criticise liberal democratic rights *in principle* (Femia 1993: 33).¹⁹ They accuse these rights of confusing bourgeois humans with real humans. They are the rights of the egotistic capitalist, who only cares for making a profit and disregards collectivism. They are the rights of the atomised individual, who pursues only their selfish self-interest, to the detriment of the community. They are the rights of people who use and exploit others as a means to their own ends, rather than as ends in themselves. That is why Marx and Engels wrote that rights ‘are nothing but the recognition of the *egoistic civil individual* and of the *unrestrained* movement of the spiritual and material elements which are the content of his life situation, the content of *present-day* civil life’. Because of this, ‘the *rights of man* do not, therefore, free man...from property, but procure for him *freedom of property*; that they do not free him from the filth of gain, but rather give him *freedom of gainful occupation*’. The rights of man are nothing more than the recognition of individual selfish economic calculation and exploitative slave labour (MECW 4: 113).

Marx and Engels’ denunciation of liberal democratic rights is summed up in Marx’s infamous assertion that ‘the practical application of the right of liberty is the right of private property’. In other words, the liberties comprising the ‘liberal’ dimension of liberal democracy boil down to the right privately to own the means of production (Marx 1967: 235). According to Femia’s reading of this argument, Marx thinks that

¹⁹ Not everyone holds this view. Scholars have debated the question of whether Marx rejects the idea of human rights (see Fasenfest 2016), though there is insufficient space to explore this debate here.

true democracy can arise only when the distinction between the private and the public is abolished, and when the individual views their own interests as being identical to those of the collective. This can be achieved only by destroying the civil and political rights of liberal democracy. For these rights, which protect the individual's right to think and act as they desire, prevent the formation of a united and homogenous collective, one that has a single will (Femia 1993: 26-27).

Unlike Marx and Engels, Lenin does not reject all liberal democratic rights in principle. His main criticism is that they are unequally enjoyed under liberal democracy, because of their distortion by right to private property. This means that Lenin's arguments are less offensive to liberal democrats than is often suggested. That said, Lenin does not endorse the universal application of these rights under socialist democracy. As chapter three shall argue, he places limitations on their existence and protection.

Some of Lenin's criticisms are antiquated and no longer being advocated. In particular, his claim that the working masses cannot enjoy freedom of assembly is no longer a popular argument, at least in the modern liberal democracies. In these countries, the wealthy no longer control the main meeting places, and the masses are more or less free publicly to assemble and express their beliefs. No particular class benefits more to a substantial degree from this freedom than any other.

However, Lenin's arguments concerning freedom of the press remain continue to be voiced, and not only amongst Marxists. Empirical studies from a range of political perspectives have argued that by virtue of its wealth and economic power, the bourgeoisie has been able to dominate the major means of communication, regulate what information becomes widespread, and mould public opinion. In the UK and US for example, rich right-wing business magnates own the most popular newspapers, and

they pedal a conservative political line. The working class, by contrast, typically lacks the financial means to voice its thoughts as effectively. Whilst this does not negate the value of this freedom for the workers, it does make it harder for them to voice their varied political concerns and interests. It also means that the wealthy can use the press as a tool to gain support for their policies and political leaders, in order to cement their political domination. The implications of this fact are damaging, for it is widely thought that freedom of the press is a necessary condition for democracy (Mounk 2019).

Lenin's critique of the systematic distortion of 'freedom of thought' under bourgeois democracy is also popular today. Several studies have found that the concentration of media ownership in the hands of the wealthy distorts the democratic process (Baker 2007). In their landmark study *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, which has influenced many more recent studies, E. Herman and N. Chomsky (1988) contend that media corporations restrict the accessibility of competing views, and that this maintains a narrow range of elite opinion. They view this as the inevitable result of the close links between the media and corporations, and that the dominant sentiment is therefore restricted and limited to the opinions of the rich.

In his classical study *Politics and Markets* – which is still frequently cited today – C. Lindblom argues that businesses and their spokespeople systematically shape the ideas, evaluations and preferences of society with the aim of setting the boundaries of public debate and discussion. In liberal democracies, fundamental values and beliefs are created by a 'rigged, lop-sided competition of ideas' (Lindblom 1977: 1977: 218). Businesspeople use their monopoly over voluntary associations and the mass media consciously to mould the public consciousness in a way that suits their own interests. Political parties and politicians contribute to this indoctrination by routinely deferring to the interests of business. Lindblom does not suggest that the state and business

interests manage to suppress all anti-capitalist ideas. His argument is that the pervasive and complex forces of ideological dissemination reinforce the capitalist system, which means that most voters will favour pro-capitalist policies. In liberal democracies many people lose their ability to think critically, and as a result they view capitalism as not only desirable but also necessary and natural (Lindblom 1977: 207).

Studies have maintained this view in spite of the rise of the internet and electronic media. Whilst these forms have made the dissemination of views easier, they have not managed to undermine the capitalist monopoly over the major means of communication or the systematic shaping of ideas by private interests (Klaehn and Muller 2010). As Chomsky (2015) argued in one of his later interviews, ‘fundamentally, the system hasn’t changed very much’.

Lenin’s critique of the relative neglect of economic, social and cultural rights is also current. Democratic theorists from a range of perspectives have argued that these are necessary in order for people to reap the full benefits of democracy (Burchill 2007). As Nickel explains, ‘linkage arguments’ defend economic, social and civil rights on the basis that they are ‘indispensable’ for the exercise of the political and civil rights crucial to democracy. ‘For example, if a government succeeds in eliminating hunger and providing education to everyone this promotes people’s abilities to know, use, and enjoy their liberties, due process rights, and rights of political participation’. Lack of education, for instance, is ‘a common barrier to democratic participation’, and so too is a low income. ‘Education and a minimum income make it easier for people near the bottom economically to follow politics, participate in political campaigns, and to spend the time and money needed to go to the polls and vote’ (Nickel 2019). One need not be a Leninist in order to realise that those who are unhealthy, uneducated, unemployed, and homeless, will be at a political disadvantage in comparison to those who are

healthy, educated, and employed, and housed.

The distinctive feature of Lenin's critique is not so much its content, but its hard-hitting style and language. Lenin forcefully argues that liberal democratic rights have a *class character*. Liberal democracy provides freedom and equality primarily for the bourgeoisie, whilst it provides only partial freedom and equality for the workers, who comprise the majority of the population. His analysis is intended for the working class, to help them understand that the equality and freedom they 'enjoy' is qualitatively lower than that of the capitalist class. His point is that the liberal democratic rights of the working class are undermined by a single right that distorts them all: the right to private ownership of the means of production. Lenin's analysis, by focusing upon class, points to one clear solution: the replacement of rule by the capitalist class with rule by the working class. By contrast, many of the non-Leninist critiques of rights shy away from advocating this bold solution, precisely because they shy away from a class perspective.

2.3. The State

Lenin's third criticism of liberal democracy focuses upon the liberal democratic state machinery, and addresses a question that still engages Marxists to this day, namely, is the liberal democratic state 'an expression of the popular will, the sum total of the general decision of the people, the expression of the national will, and so forth; or is the state a machine that enables the capitalists of those countries to maintain their power over the working class...?' (CW 29: 484). Lenin recognises that 'the democratic republic "logically" contradicts capitalism, because "officially" it puts the rich and the poor on an equal footing' (CW 23: 47). He therefore takes seriously the view that 'political freedom, democracy and universal suffrage remove the ground for the class struggle', and that 'since the "will of the majority" prevails in a democracy, one must neither regard the state as an organ of class rule, nor reject alliances with the progressive, social-reform bourgeoisie against the reactionaries' (CW 15: 36). These arguments amount to 'a fairly well-balanced system of views'. It makes sense, Lenin explains, to believe that 'bourgeois parliamentarism destroys classes and class divisions, since the right to vote and the right to participate in the government of the country are shared by all citizens without distinction'. Whilst Lenin recognises the logic of this line of thought, though, he argues that it is historically and theoretically 'absurd'. The state is not an independent power standing above society: '*every* state is a machine for the suppression of one class by another' (CW 28: 107). Still, his account of the relation between classes and the liberal democratic state is not free of ambiguity. It is more nuanced than is often presented as being.

The Reductionist Model

Lenin frequently reduces the liberal democratic state to its '*bourgeois essence*', in spite of the other functions it performs (CW 28: 242). Lenin often asserts that the state in even 'the most *democratic* bourgeois republic is a machine for the oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie', 'an instrument of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the political rule of capital', a 'dictatorship of the sordid and self-seeking exploiters who are sucking the blood of the people' (CW 28: 235, 107, 275; CW 29: 311-12). Needless to say, the political 'suppression' of the proletariat 'means inequality for that class, its exclusion from "democracy"' (CW 28: 250). On Lenin's view, the capitalists and their representatives use the 'ready-made machinery' provided by the liberal representative state to 'maintain exploitation' and further their own interests, 'the selfish interests of an insignificant minority against the vast majority of all people' (CW 25: 408). Such measures include 'passing laws on "bonuses" (to be awarded to themselves), protective tariffs (i.e., another form of bonuses to themselves), concessions (a third form of bonuses to themselves), and so on, *without limit*' (CW 18: 130).

Although Lenin (CW 26: 338) acknowledges that 'democratic representation exists and is accepted under all parliamentary systems', he argues that 'this right of representation is curtailed' because the rich dominate the main political parties. The bourgeoisie can use its control over the media, communication, and culture to influence the public opinion and thereby gain publicity and support for their own parties. They can also use their wealth directly to fund large election campaigns and thereby increase their chances of winning seats and elections. The working masses, by contrast, lack the economic resources to do any of these things anywhere near as effectively (CW 28: 247).

Lenin (CW 28: 368) has no time for elections, which are ‘lauded by the bourgeoisie...as being “free”, “equal”, “democratic” and “universal”’. In practice they are ‘actually nothing but an artificial obfuscation, a screen for the fact that some own property and others do not’ (CW 28: 419). Elections do not express the popular will. They instead ‘serve as a means of gaining publicity for the bourgeois parties’ (CW 17: 294). As a result, ‘this universal suffrage, this whole machine, is “an instrument of bourgeois rule”, ‘a weapon of bourgeois domination’ (CW 28: 419; CW 25: 398; 1972: 61). For as long as private property exists, ‘all talk about universal suffrage, about the popular will and about equality at the polls will be a sheer fraud’ (CW 28: 414).

Because the bourgeoisie dominate the parties that win the elections, the working class has a minuscule presence in the government. The executive of the liberal democratic state, as the principle ‘organ of oppression’, ‘is almost directly a “committee” of one or another section of the bourgeoisie’, ‘a committee for managing the affairs of the capitalist class’ (CW 7: 110; CW 19: 241).

The workers are also ‘*barred* from participation in bourgeois parliaments’. Like the executive branch, these are staffed almost entirely by an ‘exploiting class’ of ‘modern slave-owners—the landowners and capitalists’, in addition to ‘big newspaper owners, financiers and bankers, who are shareholders or directors in joint-stock companies’. For this reason, Lenin describes the liberal democratic parliament as a ‘pigsty’ on several occasions, and he rejected the notion of this organ representing the interests of the working class: ‘To decide once every few years which members of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament – this is the real essence of bourgeois parliamentarism’ (CW 28: 247; CW 25: 408; CW 19: 241; CW 25: 427-28). In short, the workers are effectively ‘debarred from democracy by the “sacred right of property”’ (CW 28: 370).

Due to ‘the separation of legislative and executive powers’, which is a hallmark of liberal democracy, Lenin argues that it is the bureaucracy, rather than the legislature, which really designs, implements and controls the major policies (CW 29: 108). ‘The real business of “state” is performed behind the scenes and is carried on by the departments, chancelleries, and General Staffs’ (CW 25: 428). Meanwhile, the parliament is ‘given up to talk for the special purpose of fooling the “common people”’ (CW 25: 428). It is therefore clear that ‘the entire history of the bourgeois-parliamentary...countries shows that a change of ministers means very little, for the real work of administration is in the hands of an enormous army of officials’, ‘nine-tenths of [whom] are the sons and brothers of landowners and capitalists’ (CW 25: 372; CW 24: 100). Furthermore, this army is neither a democratic nor a ‘neutral’ force. ‘This army...is undemocratic through and through, it is connected by thousands and millions of threads with the landowners and the bourgeoisie and is completely dependent on them’. Indeed, ‘this army is surrounded by an atmosphere of bourgeois relations, and breathes nothing but this atmosphere. It is set in its ways, petrified, stagnant, and is powerless to break free of this atmosphere. It can only think, feel, or act in the old way’. Lenin argues that ‘the upper ranks of this army are, through the medium of shares and banks, entirely enslaved by finance capital, being to a certain extent its agent and a vehicle of its interests and influence’ (CW 25: 372).

The friends and family of the bourgeoisie use their “honourable” though profitless posts in the Civil Service’ mainly ‘as a springboard to highly lucrative posts in banks or joint-stock Companies’ (CW 25: 457). This would indicate that ‘every bureaucracy, by its historical origin, its contemporary source, and its purpose, is purely and exclusively a bourgeois institution’. It is ‘an institution which only ideologists of the petty bourgeoisie are capable of turning in the interests of the producer’ (CW 1: 420).

In Lenin's view, the historical facts prove that governments cannot overcome the bourgeois bureaucracy even when 'socialists' are elected to power. During the brief reign of the 'socialist' provisional government coalition in Russia, for instance, he argues that the 'heroes of rotten philistinism' (i.e., the bourgeois parties and their representatives) even 'succeeded in polluting the Soviets after the fashion of the most disgusting bourgeois parliamentarism, in converting them into mere talking shops'. Lenin remarked that 'in the government itself a sort of permanent shuffle is going on in order that, on the one hand, as many Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks as possible may in turn get near the "pie", the lucrative and honourable posts, and that, on the other hand, the "attention" of the people may be "engaged"'. Meanwhile the chancelleries and army staffs "do" the business of "state"' (CW 28: 428-29). Lenin notes that an article by *Dyleo Narodna*, the chief propaganda organ of the then ruling Socialist Revolutionary Party, openly acknowledged that the bourgeois bureaucracy remained in place after the 1917 Russian February Revolution. For 'even in the ministries headed by the "socialists"...the whole bureaucratic apparatus is in fact unchanged, is working in the old way and quite "freely" sabotaging revolutionary measures!' Lenin's summary of this state of affairs was that in their public utterances, the socialists attempted to fool the people by speaking of revolutionary democracy, whilst in reality they maintained the old bureaucratic army that served the bourgeoisie: 'Revolutionary-democratic phrases to gull the rural Simple Simons, and bureaucracy and red tape to "gladden the hearts" of the capitalists—that is the *essence* of the "honest" coalition' (CW 25: 429).

From Lenin's perspective, then, the '*bourgeois essence* of modern, i.e., *capitalist*, democracy' consists in the proposition that 'the government will always be in the hands of a small minority, nine-tenths of which consist of capitalists, or rich men' (CW 28:

242; CW 29: 248). It means that the state is ‘knocked into shape’ by ‘bourgeois bureaucrats, by bourgeois members of parliament’, and ‘by bourgeois judges’ (CW 28: 249). In the few cases where socialists get elected to power, they also serve the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Lenin does not suggest that the entire working class is prohibited from participating in the state. In order to maintain stability and maintain the illusion of popular rule, the bourgeoisie offers certain political opportunities of compensation for the most active elements of the lower classes. The political and social institutions of liberal democracy—‘press, parliament, associations, congresses, etc.—have created *political* privileges and sops for the respectful, meek, reformist and patriotic office employees and workers, corresponding to the economic privileges and sops’. These workers receive ‘lucrative and soft jobs in the government or on the war industries committees, in parliament and on diverse committees’ (CW 23: 117).

But what happens if the workers do not follow the siren song of the bourgeoisie and politicians, and do not allow the public affairs to be managed by their natural superiors? What happens if they attempt to have a say in politics not only indirectly, in the form of elections? What happens if they are not satisfied with the existing forms of representation, and they do not let themselves be deceived by capitalist promises? What happens if they do not allow themselves to be enslaved by bourgeois demagoguery and manipulation? In that case, Lenin argues, bourgeois democracy shows its other face: coercion, open violence, and terror. For ‘there is not a single state, however democratic, which has no loopholes or reservations in its constitution guaranteeing the bourgeoisie the possibility of dispatching troops against the workers’, or of ‘proclaiming martial law...in case of a “violation of public order”’. Liberal democracies frequently resort to coercive measures such as these whenever ‘the exploited class “violates” its position of

slavery and tries to behave in a non-slavish manner'. The "equality of all citizens before the law" is therefore an illusion, and the liberal 'shamelessly embellishes bourgeois democracy' when they argue that every social class is equal before the law. They fail to mention, for instance, how democracies deal with the workers when they go on strike (CW 28: 243-44).

Lenin also rejects the 'nursery tales of the kind that democracy means "protecting the minority"', since 'the ruling party in a bourgeois democracy extends the protection of the minority only to another bourgeois party, while the proletariat, on all serious, profound and fundamental issues, gets martial law or pogroms' (CW 28: 244).

Lenin argues that bourgeois democracy pursues a two-faceted policy towards the workers: on the one hand, it offers the 'carrot' of reforms and concessions, with which it can broaden the popular basis of its rule, or at least split and paralyse the opposition; on the other hand, it violently opposes the workers' efforts to organise political competition and secure its goals. In his view, then, bourgeois democracy is in a permanent state of limited civil war against the progressive individuals and movements. It escalates into open class-warfare the moment the bourgeoisie and its henchmen suspect a danger to the system and, even more so if the system is really endangered (CW 16: 350-51).

Several commentators argue that Lenin's critique of the bourgeois state is little more than a rehash of Marx and Engels' arguments. In the words of L. Colletti, one of his more sympathetic commentators, Lenin 'succeeds' in merely 'restoring some of the basic lines of Marx's critique of the modern representative state'. Whilst 'Marxist literature since Marx knows nothing that could even remotely compete with the seriousness of the critique of parliament contained in *The State and Revolution*', Colletti does not suggest that Lenin's text innovates upon this critique (Colletti 1972:

224-225). Indeed, when presenting their views in formulaic terms, Marx and Engels – like Lenin – reduce the liberal democratic state to its bourgeois essence. In a well-known passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, they argue that ‘the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie’ (Marx and Engels 1959b: 9). This is a phrase that Lenin repeats more or less verbatim several times. Like Lenin, Marx and Engels often argue that the state’s purpose is to suppress the working class and provide the optimal conditions for capitalist exploitation. Elections and parliaments do not change this state of affairs. They are part of the machinery of bourgeois domination, basically guaranteeing the capitalist class domination over the state (Marx and Engels 1959b: 329, 392).

There are, however, substantive differences between Lenin’s characterisation of the bourgeois democratic state on the one hand, and that of Marx and Engels on the other. For one thing, Lenin offers a far more detailed, systematic, and sustained analysis. Whereas Marx and Engels’ views on the state have to be patched together from scattered comments, Lenin dealt with more comprehensively on several occasions. Secondly, Lenin provides an original contribution. In his influential work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917, see Appendix), he argues that imperialism represents a distinctive *new* phase in the bourgeois-democratic revolution, one that had arisen after Marx and Engels’ deaths.²⁰ In Lenin’s view, ‘[i]mperialism is the epoch of finance capital and of monopolies, which introduce everywhere the striving for domination, not for freedom’. Furthermore, ‘whatever the political system the result of these tendencies is everywhere reaction and an extreme intensification of antagonisms

²⁰ According to B. Jessop (1982: 33), perhaps the most respected scholar of Marxist state theory, Lenin ‘does not treat [state monopoly capitalism] as a distinct stage of capitalism’. This is an astonishing claim. Lenin subtitled his famous book on imperialism ‘*the Highest Stage of Capitalism*’.

in this field' (CW 22: 297). As such, Lenin does not only believe that 'imperialism *is* the negation of democracy'. He believes that 'imperialism is indisputably the "negation" of *democracy in general, of all democracy*' (CW 23: 43). More specifically, 'the political superstructure of...monopoly capitalism (imperialism is monopoly capitalism), is the change *from* democracy *to* political reaction. Democracy corresponds to free competition. Political reaction corresponds to monopoly' (CW 23: 43).

Lenin's analysis of democracy under imperialism constitutes an original contribution to Marx and Engels' critique. In his *State and Revolution*, Lenin calls attention to three main processes under imperialism. He writes that at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, in the most advanced countries, 'the same process went on' as that in the three years after the French revolution of 1848, 'only more slowly, and in a more varied form, in a much wider field' (CW 25: 415). The first process is the 'development of "parliamentary power"'. The main product of this development is the 'indirect implementation of the omnipotence of capital', which is exerted via both 'bribery' and an 'alliance of government and stock exchange' (CW 23: 47). Indeed, there are a 'million threads which bind Parliament to the stock exchange and the capitalists' (CW 29: 561). Lenin argues that 'finance capital' in particular 'can "freely" buy or bribe the freest democratic or republican government and the elective officials of any, even an "independent", country'. In his view, 'phrases about "democracy" are used to cover up financial swindling and every kind of bribery'. Indeed, 'the particularly "subtle" brand of bribery the bourgeoisie practise with regard to writers, M.P.s, lawyers, and others is nowhere to be seen on so wide a scale as in the bourgeois parliament' (CW 31: 268). Lenin makes it clear that 'the domination of finance capital and of capital in general is not to be abolished by any reforms in the sphere of political democracy' (CW 22: 144-

45). On the contrary, ‘the more highly democracy is developed, the more the bourgeois parliaments are subjected by the stock exchange and the bankers’ (CW 28: 246).

Under imperialism, the ‘fence of the bourgeois parliament’ fools the masses with ‘hypocritical signboards concealing the financial and stock-exchange deals of parliamentary businessmen’. The primary role of this ‘venal and rotten’ ‘pigsty’ is to ensure ‘the inviolability of the bourgeois apparatus of state administration’ (CW 25: 429; CW 28: 108-9). In countries such as America and Switzerland, for instance, ‘the power of capital is everything, the stock exchange is everything, while parliament and elections are marionettes, puppets’ (CW 29: 487). The result of all this is the ‘alienation of parliament from the masses’, and the development of an increasingly formal system of representation (CW 29: 126).

The second characteristic of liberal democracy under imperialism is the diversification of the political process: the petty bourgeois and bourgeois parties struggle for state positions, thereby giving the workers the false impression that capitalism facilitates a struggle between a wide range of competing ideologies. With its pseudo-contestations, the ‘political show’ diverts the attention of the already active labouring classes from its struggle against capitalism. As Lenin put it, it is impossible, under imperialism, for the bourgeoisie to win the workers’ support ‘without a widely ramified, systematically managed, well-equipped system of flattery, lies, fraud, juggling with fashionable and popular catchwords, and promising all manner of reforms and blessings to the workers right and left’ (CW 23: 117).

In the third place, the executive develops its power by strengthening its coercive arms and broadening its authority. At the same time, the state introduces more restrictions and coercive measures against the workers. Lenin focuses in particular upon this process. ‘Imperialism’, he argues, ‘has clearly shown an extraordinary

strengthening of the “state machine” and an unprecedented growth in its bureaucratic and military apparatus in connection with the intensification of repressive measures against the proletariat’, in even the most developed liberal democracies (CW 25: 410).

Under imperialism, Lenin argues, the forces of monopoly capital have merged with the state to create a single mechanism for political oppression and economic exploitation, the primary purpose of which is to maintain capitalism. Whereas the previous stages of capitalist development demanded that private enterprise be left alone, this new phase of growth needs the state constantly to intervene by regulating the levels of demand and exploitation, by handing out subsidies and credit, and by providing the ideal conditions for capital accumulation. The imperialist democratic state is therefore an instrument of class oppression, no matter how democratic it appears to be. Although the working class may have won the right to vote and strike, and whilst a number of laws and welfare reforms have improved their quality of life, it would be a mistake to think that things were introduced to improve their conditions. On the contrary, the capitalist class gave in to these ‘concessions’ in order to pacify the masses and thereby retain their power.

Ultimately, Lenin derives the purposes and forms of the imperialist democratic state from the theoretical postulates of political economy, most notably the processes of capital accumulation, commodity circulation, and the character of the wage relation. In his view, individual capitalists cannot create the necessary conditions for the continual reproduction of capital by themselves, because the economic pressures from competition make these measures unprofitable. The economic logic of capitalism therefore demands that a supra-capitalist, the state, must regulate the labour market, maintain the social order, supply the necessary infrastructure, and advance the interests of the domestic capitalist class in the global market. The state is therefore the material

expression of particular requirements in the perpetuation of capital accumulation, as well as an instrument that the bourgeoisie directly controls. Whilst it still functions as an executive committee for deciding the common affairs of the bourgeoisie, like all executive committees it must occasionally make decisions that may anger those members who care only about their immediate self-interest. This analysis is founded upon Lenin's claim that all liberal democracies are class democracies. That is, they reflect and serve the interests of the capitalist class. The liberal democratic state functions as a filter that translates the needs of capital accumulation into laws, legislation and public policy. It exists for one reason: to maintain the political and economic dominance of the bourgeoisie.

Lenin's reductionist model views the liberal democratic state as a pure epiphenomenon of the economic base, with no reciprocal effectivity and it maintains that there is a perfect correspondence between the political superstructure and base. It views the liberal democratic republic as the archetypal form of bourgeois rule, 'hemmed in by the narrow limits set by capitalist exploitation', and therefore 'a democracy for the minority, only for the propertied classes, only for the rich' (CW 25: 465).

Femia attributes to Lenin the view that liberal democracy exclusively serves the interests of the bourgeoisie. This view, Femia explains, 'rests upon a number of scarcely plausible assumptions'; that 'the agencies of socialisation' possess a monolithic ideological orientation; that the state organs are merely the 'hired servants of the business/financial elite and pursue no corporate interests of their own'; and that elected parliaments are nothing more than 'talking shops' with no effective power to respond to democratic forces or to enact policies inimical to bourgeois interests. Femia argues that these propositions are empirically indefensible. The claim that bourgeois

democracy never aids the workers ‘ranks alongside economic determinism as an article of blind Marxian faith, rooted in first principles and little justified by historical experience’ (Femia 1993: 50, 61).

If Lenin’s reductionist model makes little contact with empirical reality, then why does he defend it? The answer, according to Femia, is that Lenin’s political analysis is founded upon his commitment to historical materialism, which maintains that the political superstructure functions in order to preserve the existing economic relations. For a ‘reductionist’ such as Lenin, the political domain is determined by underlying economic pressures. The class that owns the means of production also control the modes of political activity and their outcomes. Whilst the adherents of ‘economic reductionism’ can explain away contrary evidence by referencing false consciousness, real interests, and hidden conspiracies, these explanations are validated by the theory, but not by the observed facts. As such, the logic of economic determinism ‘*rules out* the specificity and independence of particular forces and struggles’. Lenin’s analysis of liberal democracy is based upon an *a priori* theoretical commitment that is not verified by historical experience. The ironic result is that whilst Lenin opposes idealism because it is based upon ideas, rather than reality, he himself displays the Hegelian tendency to make deductions about social conditions from abstract schemes, with no regard for the empirical evidence (Femia 1993: 50-51).

Femia argues that Marx and Engels developed a far more nuanced and sophisticated critique than Lenin. ‘Marx and Engels understood, even if Lenin did not, that bureaucrats, judges, and politicians develop distinctive personal and professional interests, which may, in given situations, cause them to side with the exploited against the exploiters’ (Femia 1993: 52). The Eurocommunist A. Hunt (1980: 13) is in full agreement with Femia. ‘What is absent from Lenin is any recognition of the

contradictory character of bourgeois democracy’, a recognition that can be found in Engels’ work.

The widespread claim that this ‘reductionist’ conception of liberal democracy constitutes the entirety of Lenin’s position is erroneous. In fact, it forms only one side of his conception. Contrary to the dominant scholarly narrative, Lenin also suggests that the democratic republic embodies practices and values that the masses can use to undermine the bourgeoisie’s supremacy. According to this second model, the liberal democratic state never has been and never will be a neutral mediator that stands above classes. But neither must it always, and under all circumstances, obey the commands or further the interests of the capitalist class.

The Relative Autonomy Model

Despite his more rigid formulations, Lenin acknowledges that the bourgeois state can enjoy a relative autonomy (Walicki 1995: 329). This flexible approach is particularly evident in his analysis of historical events. In *The State and Revolution*, for instance, Lenin quotes Engels as saying that the state can sometimes obtain a degree of ‘independence’ during the rare times when the two main classes balance each other out. Such an occurrence happened under the reign of Louis Bonaparte in France and Bismarck in Germany (CW 25: 397). With regards to France, Engels, in turn, was describing Marx’s analysis of the state in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. Lenin develops and clarifies their positions. He defines the state in this position of relative ‘independence’ as a ‘Bonapartist’ state, and he provides a theoretical proposition to cover such cases:

How is the possibility of this phenomenon to be explained in ‘sociological’ terms, i.e., from the standpoint of the class struggle? It is due to a balance

between the forces of the hostile or rival classes...the government may—provided there is a certain balance between the forces of these rivals—gain *greater* independence (within certain, rather narrow limits, of course) than when either of these classes has a decisive superiority. If...this government is historically linked by continuity and so on with especially “vivid” forms of absolutism, and if militarist and bureaucratic traditions in the sense of non-electivity of judges and officials are strong in the country, then the limits of that independence will be still greater, its manifestations still more open, the methods used in “picking” voters, and electors voting on orders from above, still more crude, and tyranny still more tangible (CW 18: 343).

In *The Beginning of Bonapartism*, Lenin argues that the Russian state became temporarily independent under the reign of Kerensky’s provisional government. During the early months of 1917, the workers (as represented in the soviets) and capitalists were evenly balanced out, and a civil war was imminent. On the one hand, the bourgeoisie were ‘ranting and raving against the soviets’, yet they were ‘powerless to disperse them’. On the other hand, the petty bourgeois leadership of the soviets made these institutions ‘powerless to put up serious resistance to the bourgeoisie’. As both the workers and bourgeoisie were equally weak, Kerensky’s government stepped in and temporarily obtained a degree of relative autonomy from both: ‘The power which the bourgeoisie in the government were unable to take entirely, and which the Soviets did not want to take, fell into the hands of...the Bonapartists’ (CW 25: 241). During this period Kerensky’s cabinet ‘displayed the chief historical symptom of Bonapartism’. That is, it enforced the ‘manoeuvring of state power...between two hostile classes and forces which more or less balance each other out’ (CW 25: 244). In doing so, it was

‘capable of making the most unscrupulous promises to all classes without keeping any of them’ (CW 25: 244). Kerensky’s ‘Bonapartist’ state thus asserted itself by the process of ‘divide and rule’.

Lenin’s largely ignored theory of Bonapartism understands that state officials may, under certain circumstances, develop independent interests that may cause them to serve the interest of no particular class. That is, the political and legal powers of the state may develop an integrity and logic of their own.²¹ For Lenin, the experience of Bonapartism in democratic Russia proves that ‘It would be a very big mistake to think that a democratic situation rules out Bonapartism. On the contrary, it is exactly in a situation like this... that Bonapartism emerges, given a certain relationship between classes and their struggle’ (CW 25: 245).

Even under these circumstances, however, the Bonapartist state, though not an instrument of class rule, is still a condition for this rule, since it must, in the long run, preserve the social order and law. As Lenin points out, ‘did not Napoleon III and Bismarck succeed...in appeasing the appetites of the big bourgeoisie? Did they not, by their “reforms”, tighten the noose round the neck of the working people for years to come?’ (CW 13: 143). As for Kerensky’s government, Lenin argues that it was ‘wholly backed by the Cadets and the Black Hundreds, by the landowners and capitalists’, whose long-term interests Kerensky served (CW 25: 241). For Lenin, then, even the relatively independent Bonapartist state is ultimately dependent upon capital:

Bonapartism...is a name applied to a government which endeavours to *appear*

²¹ As chapter three argues, Lenin argues that the state can become independent under socialism as well. In his view, this apparatus-particularly when it becomes bureaucratic-has the power to ignore the prerogatives of the masses and thereby undermine the construction of communism.

non-partisan by taking advantage of a highly acute struggle between the parties of the capitalists and the workers. *Actually* serving the capitalists, such a government dupes the workers most of all by promises and petty concessions (CW 25: 240, emphasis added).

The key words in this passage are ‘*appear*’ and ‘*actually*’. Whilst the state may *appear* to stand above all classes, and whilst it may appear to make decisions that oppose the interests of capital, in the long run it *actually* serves the interests of capital.

What Lenin seems to be saying is that in situations of class balance or stalemate, the state exhibits a relative autonomy. But ultimately its privileges are bound up with those of the dominant economic class, whose interest it promotes indirectly, through the maintenance of social and economic stability. Were the state to undermine the process of capital accumulation, it would simultaneously undermine the material basis of its own existence. This means that the state can satisfy the objective needs of the capitalist class without being the direct extension of its subjective will. But Lenin clearly believes that this is the exception and not the rule. When the bourgeoisie is united and strong, they are able to rule the liberal democratic state through their bureaucratic and political representatives. When the capitalists are divided and weak, however, the state will display a *relative* independence.

Whilst Lenin therefore believes that the liberal democratic state can pursue its own interests, this autonomy is only relative. For ‘in the final analysis, every kind of democracy, as political superstructure in general...serves production and is ultimately determined by the relations of production in a given society’ (CW 32: 81). This means that ‘it is the greatest delusion, the greatest self-deception, and a deception of the people, to attempt, by means of this state apparatus, to carry out...reforms’ that attempt

to critically undermine the power of capital. That explains why whenever socialists get into power, whether it be within a coalition or as a government, these socialists, whether they be ‘perfectly honest’ or not, always ‘turn out to be either a useless ornament of or a screen for the bourgeois government, a sort of lightning conductor to divert the people’s indignation from the government, a tool for the government to deceive the people’ (CW 25: 373).

For Lenin, then, the maintenance of private ownership – and by extension, capitalism – is a constitutive feature of liberal democracy, and government institutions are basically capitalist institutions, regardless of the other aims they may pursue. This means that the ‘pluralism’ provided by the multi-party system of liberal democracy is, to a significant extent, an illusion. For whilst the various political parties may have different ideas on various issues, none of them want to overturn capitalism itself. The most left-wing labour party and the most right-wing conservative party will both know that they have to maintain a profitable business environment and a healthy economy if they want to get into power. And as such, they will both cater to the bourgeoisie. When the various social democratic parties claim that they stand up for the interests of the working masses, they are consciously or unconsciously deceiving them, since they will never dare to seriously undermine the power of capital. For Lenin, therefore, the notion that voters have a meaningful ‘choice’ to make when they cast their vote and choose their party is a fairy tale. When it comes down to it, every party is a bourgeois party, and the multi-party system is actually a one-party system. This in turn shows that ‘a democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism’, since ‘once capital has gained possession of this very best shell...it establishes its power so securely, so firmly, that no change of persons, institutions or parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic can shake it’ (CW 25: 398).

When Lenin denounces liberal democracy as a sham, he is not saying that the state itself is literally helmed by capitalists and landowners. He is not saying that MPs, bureaucrats and cabinet ministers are members of the bourgeoisie. Although, in Lenin's view, some of these elements are usually in government, the bourgeois character of the state does not depend upon this, for the source of political power and control ultimately resides outside of the state, in the economic sphere. Government leaders and politicians must carry out the orders and demands of the capitalist class, regardless of whether or not the members of that class are themselves political officials, for capitalist development and political stability depends upon it. That is why, in Lenin's view, liberal democracy is incapable of providing government by the people, the workers. It 'always remains, and under capitalism is bound to remain, restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical, a paradise for the rich and a snare and deception for the exploited, for the poor' (CW 28: 243).

That said, Lenin suggests that people tend to perceive liberal democracy differently, depending upon their political positions, their class-consciousness, and their corresponding political standpoints. Through their direct experience the class-conscious workers recognise that they are powerless under liberal democracy, and that their interests are ignored and repressed on a daily basis. As such, they 'know and feel, see and realise perfectly well that the bourgeois parliaments are institutions *alien* to them, *instruments for the oppression* of the workers by the bourgeoisie, institutions of a hostile class, of the exploiting minority' (CW 28: 247). In even 'the most democratic capitalist republics in the world, the poor never regard the bourgeois parliament as "their" institution' (CW 27: 274). This is a 'simple, obvious and indisputable truth' that 'tens and hundreds of millions of people...know from their own experience, feel and realise every day' (CW 28: 249). This would explain why working-class people are

generally more sceptical and apathetic towards politics. They shun and discredit the value of political involvement precisely because they see that they have little power.

At the other end of the class spectrum, the capitalists also perceive the state as an instrument of bourgeois rule, since they are the ones who control it. 'The big bourgeois knows this from his most intimate acquaintance with the real leaders and with the most profound (and therefore frequently the most concealed) springs of every bourgeois state machine' (CW 28: 188-89). The only difference between the capitalists and the workers is that the former rarely acknowledge that the liberal republic empowers them, whereas the latter, who have less to lose, speak of this fact publicly.

But this is not the case for the middle class, who are positioned between the workers and capitalists. Since they are neither the rulers nor the oppressors, their standpoint blinds them to the class nature of bourgeois democracy:

The petty bourgeois, owing to his economic position and his conditions of life generally, is less able to appreciate this truth, and even cherishes the illusion that a democratic republic implies 'pure democracy', 'a free people's state', the non-class or supra-class rule of the people, a pure manifestation of the will of the people, and so on and so forth. The tenacity of these prejudices of the petty-bourgeois democrat is inevitably due to the fact that he is farther removed from the acute class struggle, the stock exchange, and 'real' politics; and it would be absolutely un-Marxist to expect these prejudices to be eradicated very rapidly by propaganda alone (CW 28: 188-89).

In essence, the political standpoint of the working class and big bourgeoisie enables them both to recognise the bourgeois essence of liberal democracy. But the same is not

true for the middle classes, the intellectuals, the ‘wretched men in mufflers who have kept away from life all the time’ (CW 26: 473-74). For these people, who are distant from the political class struggle, liberal democracy is a pure republic, one that stands above class interests. Their view is more subjective and less accurate, since it comes from a standpoint that is further removed from the object in question.

Reflections

Lenin’s critique of the liberal democratic state is more nuanced and sophisticated than his commentators typically acknowledge. As Colletti (1972: 224) rightly argues, his critique ‘is not a primitive and sectarian critique...the denunciation of parliament as a ‘fraud’’, even though the latter critique came to dominate the communist tradition. Above all, it is a “critique of parliament”, i.e., of *liberal* or *bourgeois* democracy...a critique of the *anti-democratic* nature of parliament’. Lenin’s critique is sophisticated because he does not claim that the state is wholly and completely subservient to capital all of the time. He recognises that under certain conditions officials can pursue their own interests, independently of classes, and, as chapter one of this thesis argued, Lenin supported workers’ participation in bourgeois parliaments out of his belief that they could secure some of their interests. The notion that Lenin ignored the contradictions of liberal democracy therefore has no basis. Lenin knew full well that liberal democracy provides the best opportunities of struggle for the fighting working class. His point is that they will never achieve true democracy until they abolish liberal democratic institutions and establish an entirely new state.

Lenin’s thoughts on the relative autonomy of the liberal democratic state build upon the ideas of Marx and Engels, and they were developed and fleshed out by subsequent

Marxists. Antonio Gramsci, a great admirer of Lenin, does not interpret the base/superstructure distinction as a linear, mechanical relationship between source and reflection or cause and effect. Although Gramsci maintains the view that the state is an organ of class domination, he argues that one cannot reduce all questions of political practice to those of economics. For whilst political activity arises from the terrain of economic life, it also transcends it, bringing into play individual aspirations and emotions whose calculations do not correspond to the laws of capitalism. Politics, in other words, exhibits distinctive principles and imperatives that are relatively independent of economic pressures. Many political acts derive from the aims of a particular organisation, and come about in order to give coherence to that organisation (Gramsci 1971: 140, 148).

Althusser (1970: 89-128) and his student Poulantzas, two other fans of Lenin, offered similar arguments. Poulantzas' notion of relative autonomy recognises that the economically dominant bourgeoisie does not always control the state, since this class, subject as it is to competitive pressures and differences of immediate interest, constantly divides into fractions. As such, the structurally determined function of the liberal democratic state is to serve the long-term interests of this fragmented and squabbling bourgeoisie. But the state can sustain this function only if it maintains a substantial level of independence from the various factions of capital. The main task of the state is to preserve social cohesion, which requires the state to reconcile and co-opt a wide variety of social forces, including 'fractions' of the working class itself. By thus defusing popular militancy the state reproduces the mode of production and therefore furthers the interests of those who benefit from capitalism. Nevertheless, because the relatively autonomous state gauges and responds to the balance of class forces, Poulantzas acknowledges that it sometimes gives concessions to the proletarian

struggle, often in spite of hostility from the bourgeoisie; though, to repeat, state intervention always tends to maintain and stabilise the *status quo*. The state, then, is neither an instrument to be possessed and wielded by a class nor a disinterested umpire seeking impartial solutions. Rather, it is a semi-independent force, operating within a system of functional constraints or imperatives whose purpose is to make sure that public policy maintains and develops the capitalist system. In short, the bourgeois state sometimes acts in the interests of the capitalist class, instead of directly following its orders. On this functional explanation, legal and state organs assume forms that optimally sustain capital accumulation, whether or not they pursue this end directly, and irrespective of the substantial reforms conceded to the dominated classes. Poulantzas realises that the liberal democratic state can further the interests of the working class, yet he also believes that it is class-reducible, which is why the liberal democratic state is a capitalist state. Whatever autonomy the state enjoys is restricted in the long run by the framework of bourgeois power (Poulantzas 1969; 1973: 287-8, 331-40).

Lenin's critique of liberal democracy is similar to that of the classical elitists mentioned in chapter one. In their view, the tendencies of modern society – most notably the increasing demand for expertise, the necessities of large-scale organisation, and the antipathy of the masses – ensure that a political elite will always rule in their own interests. Indeed, they argue that elite rule is basically inevitable within any modern democratic organisation, for this is part of the tactical and technical necessities of their organisation. The equally inescapable consequence is that the majority cannot rule, and the claim that liberal democracy can reduce or eliminate elite rule is a myth that exists only in theory, rather than in practice (Femia 1993: 62).

Some academic defenders of liberal democracy have absorbed elitist ideas. Perhaps the most prominent of these defenders is J. Schumpeter, who rejects the notion that liberal democracy reflects the will of a popular majority. He instead argues that the political process itself creates the will of the people, and that elections therefore express a predominantly fabricated will. Schumpeter argues that political elites manufacture this will in the same way that commercial elites manufacture consumer wants and desires. Both attempt to penetrate and shape the human subconscious; both create 'good' and 'bad' associations that are the most effective if they are the least rational. False slogans, conscious distortions, lies, deals behind closed doors, corruption, bribery, and rigid party discipline are all unavoidable features of the liberal democratic state. Although Schumpeter acknowledges that parliamentary competition encourages a degree of citizen choice, accountability, and responsible government, he also asserts that elites manipulate citizens, who seldom decide issues or policies themselves. Liberal democracy is therefore a system that *controls* and *limits* power, rather than a system that promotes popular rule (Schumpeter 1969: 263).

According to R. Dahl, another widely cited democratic theorist inspired by elite theory, liberal democracy generates '*inequalities in the distribution of political resources*'. He defines political resources as everything which a person or group can access and use to directly or indirectly influence the activities of other people. These include weapons, physical force, wealth, money, productive resources, goods and services, status, income, respect, honour, charisma, affection, information, prestige, knowledge, communication, education, media services, organisations, legal standing, position, control over beliefs and doctrine, votes, and many others (Dahl 1998: 177). Because liberal democracy creates 'inequalities in political resources, some citizens gain significantly more influence than others over government's policies, decisions,

and actions'. In his view, 'these violations...are not trivial. Consequently, citizens are not political equals – far from it – and thus the moral foundation of democracy, political equality among citizens, is seriously violated'. In Dahl's view, the question of whether it is possible to overcome the 'serious political inequalities among citizens' is a 'profoundly difficult question for which there are no easy answers' (Dahl 1998: 178-79).

Femia – a specialist on elite theory and Marxism – argues that liberal democracy constricts popular rule. Advertisements that employ the techniques of psychological manipulation based upon Freudian psychoanalysis have largely replaced the avenues of rational debate under modern capitalism. Unaccountable transnational corporations and bloated bureaucracies make decisions that determine the distribution of goods in society. Popular participation is limited to the odd election every few years. And the masses rarely influence the issues raised at referendums. Facts such as these show that the notion of popular rule has lost much of its meaning. Lenin is therefore right in arguing that there is a huge gap between the virtues of liberal democratic theory and liberal democratic practice (Femia 1993: 62-64).

Generally speaking, Lenin's critique of the liberal democratic state remains popular today. He discusses several issues that have been highlighted within the theoretical and empirical literature, across a range of ideological perspectives. There is extensive research to show that there is, in the present day, a close connection between government and the capitalist class. The bourgeoisie and the upper echelons of the political establishment are linked to each other by being members of the same class, products of the same schools, and members of the same clubs, who live in the same suburbs and intermarry. Working people, by contrast, are excluded from the government because they are excluded from this social circuit of suburb, school, and

country club. Several commentators accept that there is a close relation between capital and government, and that the wealthy have a privileged access to governmental positions in liberal democracies (Panayotakis 2020). Although many of these studies do not draw upon Lenin's intellectual labours, their ideas are similar.²²

For example, in his classical work *Politics and Markets*, Dahl's friend Lindblom points out that private businesses possess a privileged position within liberal democracies, one that enables them to exert a disproportionately large influence in comparison with other social interests, such as the working class. In the first place, the state's protection of the free-market economy allows capitalists to make decisions that directly affect the welfare of society. They decide where they build their factories, what kind of technology they use, and how to allocate natural resources and labour. And their choices affect the lives of many people. Capitalists are therefore public officials in everything but name. When they manage their businesses on a daily basis they are performing a public function. It is they who determine the economic security of the nation, the general standard of living, the rate of economic growth, the production process, the prices of consumer goods and services, and the jobs and salaries of millions. By virtue of this fact, the government must ensure that capitalists can carry out their tasks without hindrance (Lindblom 1977: 172-3).

Prospective governments must also promise to avoid inflation and unemployment if they want to win elections and be re-elected in the future. In capitalist systems, the government must consider how its monetary and tax policies will affect the activity and profit margins of private enterprise. Every government recognises that if they are to stay in power, businesses need to perform well. The state therefore provides the ideal

²² See, for example, the contributions to the issue on the 'The Crisis of Western Liberal/Representative Democracy?' in the *Chinese Political Science Review* (2019).

conditions for capital accumulation by giving economic hand-outs to individual businesses, subsidies for private research and development, fair trade regulation, patent protection, beneficial tariff policies and various other gifts. It does this because public officials view the capitalist class not merely as the representatives of a particular interest, but as the representatives of society. Capitalists are *de facto* public officials who perform the tasks that governmental officials view as indispensable. Whenever government officials ask themselves whether they should give a tax reduction to a private business for instance, they know that this question concerns not only the business in question, but also the welfare of society itself (Lindblom 1977: 175).

A state official who comprehends the demands of their job and the responsibilities that capitalist systems impose on businesspeople will grant them a privileged place. Capitalists do not have to pressure, dupe, deceive, or bribe officials in order for them to do this. Officials do not have to be capitalists themselves to do so, and nor do they have to admire capitalists to do so. Government officials simply understand that two groups of leaders – capitalists and the government – control public affairs in liberal democracies, and they must work together in order to be successful. Lindblom points out that this relationship is not equal, however. For the government must regularly defer and cater to business interests in order to maintain its own power. This means that ‘no conspiracy theory of politics, no theory of the common social origins uniting government and business officials, no crude allegation of a power elite established by clandestine forces’ is required in order to understand the political functioning of a liberal democracy. ‘Business simply needs inducements, hence a privileged position in government and politics, if it is to do its job’ (Lindblom 1977: 175).

Although Lindblom argues that businesses have a privileged position in liberal democracies, he does not suggest that there are no disagreements between them and the

government, and nor does he suggest that the businesses will win every dispute. On the contrary, businesses constantly demand favours from government, and they often oppose the policies that reduce their privileged position. Despite this contestation, however, the government and businesses rarely question the fundamentals of their mutual relationship. At most, they will squabble over issues of secondary (but by no means trivial) importance, such as the details of regulation and tax rates (Lindblom 1977: 179-80).

Although Lindblom acknowledges that capitalists have a privileged position within government, he does not view the democratic process as a sham. In his view, popular control is crippled, rather than paralysed (Lindblom 1977: 230). Whilst the state may be dependent upon capital, this dependence does not undermine democracy itself. Lindblom does not define the liberal democratic state as a capitalist state. And nor does he argue that the state predominantly serves the bourgeoisie. For him, the symbiotic relationship between business and government only persists because capitalism succeeds in furthering the *interests* of society at large. In agreement, Femia argues that this is a flaw in Lenin's Marxist critique of liberal democracy. 'It is by no means obvious that the 'privileged position of business' operates to the detriment of the workers'. On the contrary, 'there are good reasons for questioning this assumption. By protecting capitalism, the liberal state is probably maximising the material living standards of the great bulk of the population' (Femia 1993: 66). It is not clear what Femia's arguments concerning 'material living standards' have got to do with democracy, or with the merits and demerits of liberal-democracy. At first sight, anyway, it has to do with the merits and demerits of capitalism, or of a capitalist society. The fact that a particular type of society has a higher or lower standard of living does not make it more or less 'democratic.' And the fact that a society may be more or less

democratic than another, does not necessarily imply that the standard of living within it will be either higher or lower. Moreover, it is possible in principle that a society might be run by an authoritarian dictator (the antithesis of democracy), but that this dictator ‘delivers the goods,’ by ensuring that the material standard of living of those who are subjected to their rule is high. Contrariwise, one could have a genuinely democratic society in which the ‘price’ that is paid for this democracy is a low material standard of living. In other words, the exact nature of the connection that is supposed to exist between ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘standard of living’ is far from clear. Presumably, the defenders of capitalism and liberal-democracy such as Femia believe that the societies of the eastern Bloc before 1989 (e.g. East Germany) were not only ‘undemocratic’ (in the Western, liberal sense), but also had a lower standard of living than their neighbours, but the two issues, that of democracy and that of living standards, should be kept relatively distinct from one another, instead of being conflated. In any case, Femia’s argument has been challenged in recent years. According to V. Sebestyn, a staunch critic of Lenin, liberal democracy has not only failed to boost ‘prosperity’, i.e., ordinary people’s living standards, but it has also failed to distribute these increases in living standards fairly:

Millions of people...are doubting whether liberal democracy has been successful in creating a fair society and sustained freedom and prosperity, or can deal with gaping inequality and injustice. The phrases global ‘elite’ and ‘the 1 per cent’ are now used in a decidedly Leninist way (Sebestyn 2017: 2-3).

According to Femia (1993: 60), however, the Marxist can maintain the view that liberal democracy serves the bourgeoisie only by smuggling in the ‘dubious assumption’ that

the majority would be materially better off under an alternative, socialist system. Whilst Femia concedes that this may possibly be true in theory, he argues that the historical record suggests otherwise: ‘One need only consider the pathetic queues outside shops and restaurants that disfigured the daily lives of ordinary citizens in the resource rich Soviet Union’. Femia also points to the ‘undignified retreat from Marxist economics’ throughout the former and present communist world, ‘where market forces and private enterprise are being hailed as solutions to years of economic stagnation’ (Femia 1993: 60).

The claim that socialist countries have failed to improve the material well-being of their citizens is questionable. The soviet bloc regimes raised the living standards of their respective working classes far more quickly than the liberal democracies did. It is unfair to compare *current* living standards in liberal democracies to those in the communist states, since the former have been around for longer and have therefore had more time to develop (Ball 2020).

The claim that communist states retreated from Marxist economics is also questionable. China, one of the biggest economies on earth, has combined economic planning with the market, and the ruling Communist Party interferes in every aspect of private enterprise. These principles derive from the Marxist thesis on state control of the market (Cheng and Zhang 2021).

For Lenin, in any case, the question of whether liberal democracy serves the popular interest and provides rule by the people is beside the point. It is an issue of secondary importance that obscures the primary purpose of his critique. As it has been established, democracy, for Lenin, does not mean government *for* the people. Democracy means rule *by* the people. Democracy is not measured by equality of outcome, social levelling, or its delivery of goods to society. Democracy is measured by the extent to which the

majority of the population are the masters of politics. Lenin argues that liberal democracy falls well short of that goal, and he is not alone in saying so.

Lenin does not simply claim that liberal democracy manifests the rule of the capitalist class. He claims that it is the ‘best shell’ (CW 25: 398) for capitalist development, or in other words, it is the best possible political system for maximising the development of capitalism. This is so because liberal democracy, by providing formal equality between citizens, obscures the unequal and exploitative economic relations, thereby enabling capitalist exploitation to proceed uninterrupted. The doyen of Marxist state theory, B. Jessop (1978; 1980; 2018), has devoted significant attention to this claim, which, as he points out, has been defended by both the advocates and critics of capitalism. Liberals advance this claim on the assumption that capitalism is non-exploitative; and so liberal democracy, by maximising capitalist development, is a desirable form of government (Friedman 2008). Marxists, by contrast, advance this claim on the assumption that capitalism is exploitative, in order to discredit liberal democracy (Jessop 2018). Jessop qualifies Lenin’s claim, arguing that the affinity between capitalism and democracy is contingent, i.e., dependent upon the historical stage of capitalism and the form of liberal democracy corresponding to it:

First, formally rational capitalism is not the only basis of capital accumulation and other bases may be less compatible with liberal democracy. This is clearly the case with ‘primitive accumulation’ and imperialism and, as we shall see, also holds for more recent forms of political capitalism. Second, authoritarian rule that represses or otherwise restricts popular economic and political mobilization has been a crucial factor in capital accumulation (Jessop 2018).

To be charitable to Lenin, when he says that liberal democracy provides the ‘best shell’ for capitalist development, he is not referring to liberal democracy or capitalism in abstract terms. He is referring to the historically specific forms of imperialist democracy and imperialist capitalism. His claim is therefore not a general one, but one that is historically contingent. As proof of this fact, Lenin actually mentions that:

Of course, the bourgeoisie stood for and will stand for a monarchy, because the cruder armed protection of capital by monarchist institutions is more obvious and ‘closer’ to all the capitalists and landowners. However, under a strong pressure ‘from below’, the bourgeoisie has always and everywhere ‘reconciled’ itself to a republic, as long as it could maintain its economic domination (CW 26: 53).

Despite claims like this, however, Lenin does not specify how and when specific forms of liberal democracy benefit specific forms of capitalism. This is mainly due to the fact that liberal democracy was still emerging when he was writing, and he had limited data to work with. Marxist scholars like Jessop have nevertheless found Lenin’s ‘democratic shell’ thesis a useful starting point for exploring the ‘contingent affinity’ between liberal democracy and capitalism.

According to Meyer, ‘in reading Lenin’s works we get the feeling that he hardly appreciated in all its fullness the role which influence (“social factors of power”) plays in liberal democracies’. Instead of showing ‘the subtle ways in which big money takes hold of society and determines political decision-making, he tended to generalise from his observation of democracy in Prussia and Russia’, as well as ‘the wartime emergency governments in Europe during World War I’. Thus, ‘instead of the economic power of capital, it was the political organs of the police, the standing army, and the civil service,

that seemed to him to be the main power factors favourable to capitalism'. As such, Lenin 'viewed democracy not so much as a subtle way of ruling through influence, but more as a method of ruling by plain coercion'. On the occasions where Lenin did 'mention the influence of capital, he tended to brand this influence as corruption and systematic bribery' (Meyer 1966: 68-69). This is a valid remark, though Meyer underestimates the extent to which Lenin appreciated the subtler forms of capitalist influence. He placed great value in the 'subtle' alliance between the parliament and stock exchange under imperialism, viewing this mechanism as a major form of bourgeois power alongside bribery.

Lenin's critique of the liberal democratic state stands out in its forcefulness. The degree of spite, vitriol, and disgust exhibited in Lenin's language is unsurpassed in the literature. Who else has gone as far as to describe the liberal democratic parliament as a 'pigsty'? Who else has accused the state of 'sucking the blood of the people'? Who else has described elections as a 'sheer fraud'? Lenin's vivid descriptions of the liberal democratic state are *unrivalled* in their viciousness. Today, even the most radical academics – who feel compelled to qualify everything they say with 'careful' and 'modest' language – would not dream of using such emotive descriptors. Lenin's violent critique of the liberal democratic state strives to strip liberal democracy of all its veneers and pretensions. He tries to expose the state for what he thinks it is: an instrument of naked class oppression.

Concluding Remarks

Sartori (1987: 466) expresses the prevailing sentiment when he argues that Lenin ‘understands near to nothing of the liberal democracy that he so much despises and rejects’. Likewise, most of Lenin’s commentators agree with the soviet dissident Medvedev (1981: 82-83) when he argues that Lenin’s ‘linkage of the epithet “bourgeois” to the concept of “democracy” is not only inappropriate, it is actually wrong’ (Pierson 1984: 174; Hunt 1980: 9, 13; Nash 1990: 32; Claudin 1977: 68-69; Jessop 1980; Femia 1993: 66-67; Mayo 1955: 294; Liebman 1980: 428). By providing a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of Lenin’s critique, the preceding three sections have argued that both of these claims are questionable.

Contrary to the views of his critics, Lenin displays a sophisticated and detailed understanding of liberal democracy, one that can hardly be described as crude, simplistic or reductionist. Lenin does not simply rehash the ideas of Marx and Engels. Although he draws upon their insights, he develops them in several respects, whilst departing from them in others. Many of Lenin’s ideas have been taken up by empirical and theoretical studies, even though his name is infrequently invoked.

Lenin’s critique of the economic-political divide inherits the best of Marx and Engels, whilst bringing into sharper relief the anti-democratic effects of the lack of collective control in the economy. Lenin brings more attention to the material, rather than the psychological consequences of this divide.

Likewise, Lenin’s critique of liberal democratic rights is not – as has been alleged in the case of Marx and Engels – a critique of all liberal rights in principle, but instead

a critique of rights under capitalism, skewed as they are by the right to private ownership of the means of production. This suggests that his arguments on this score are not as alien to the liberal democratic tradition as they first appear.

Lenin's critique of the liberal democratic state revitalises Marx and Engels' classical statement that the modern state is a committee for managing the affairs of the bourgeoisie, though he also provides an updated analysis of the state under imperialism. Contrary to the views of several commentators, Lenin does in fact follow Marx and Engels in recognising the relative autonomy of the liberal democratic state, though he goes further than them in his insistence that liberal democracy provides the best shell for capitalist development.

Ultimately, Lenin's characterisation of liberal democracy as 'bourgeois' democracy is, as he himself argues, a matter of perspective. It is possible to accept all of Lenin's views on liberal democracy whilst still refusing to use the epithet 'bourgeois', because different people have different standards and expectations of how 'democratic' a state can and should be. For the unemployed person on the dole, relying on food banks to survive, or a worker in an exploitative minimum wage job on a zero-hour contract, the question of which political party wins an election will matter little to their day-to-day lives, and liberal democracy will seem more or less useless to them. For these people, and there are many of them, Lenin's characterisation of liberal democracy as 'bourgeois' may be entirely justified. If they do not say as such out loud, this does not mean that they do not think it. But for the privileged intellectual, who has never experienced destitution in their life, and who thinks that 'we are all middle class now' (Blair), and who benefits materially from the status quo, then liberal democracy does not deserve a 'bourgeois' label, despite its many shortcomings. The fact of the matter is that Lenin is not speaking for these privileged intellectuals, who shy away from bold

phrases and prefer instead to make ‘careful’ and ‘qualified’ statements, which often amount to little more than platitudes. Lenin is not trying to convince them. Lenin is speaking for the working class, the oppressed, those without a voice and without power. Lenin’s denunciation of ‘bourgeois’ democracy is justified to the extent that the *working class alone accepts it*. As for the upper classes who look down their noses at the fighting working class, Lenin does not care what they think.

Chapter 3. On Socialist Democracy

Whilst Lenin devoted many of his efforts to exposing the shortcomings of liberal democracy, his conception of socialist democracy has been frequently characterised as comparatively underdeveloped and half-baked (Hindess 1983: 43-44; Liebman 1980: 353; Pierson 1986: 82-83; Schulman 2019). According to the ‘Leninologist’ Meyer (1963: 59, 72), for instance, Lenin ‘seldom troubled to discuss it’. Femia agrees and argues that this is an issue that all Marxists have. He suggests that ‘such reticence owes much to the inescapable logic of economic determinism’. If politics reflects economics, then the problems of authority and power are of secondary importance. Marxists see no point in elucidating socialist political phenomena because these phenomena are shaped by the underlying economic reality. Since they view economic oppression as the ultimate source of all oppression, the elimination of the former obviates the need for an analysis of the latter. For ‘those who view economic liberation as liberation *tout court*, traditional questions about the specifically political expression of human freedom are more or less irrelevant’ (Femia 1993: 68).

It has been alleged that the commitment to ‘economic determinism’ has anti-democratic consequences *specifically* in Lenin’s case. Since Lenin supposedly believes that ‘democracy is about equal power’ (‘as almost everyone agrees’, writes Femia (1993: 123)), and because he views the economic sphere as the real source of power,

then he must likewise believe that genuine democracy emerges *automatically* when the inequalities in economic power have been abolished. Political arrangements are therefore, on these assumptions, irrelevant for Lenin. What counts for him is not the way people exercise their power, but who owns and controls the means of production. Where democratic procedures rest upon the system of private property, they merely confirm the wage slavery of the workers and the absolute dominion of capital. By contrast, where the masses control of the means of production, the state will be democratic, no matter what political forms and procedures it has in place. Lenin supposedly defined socialism purely in terms of state ownership of the means of production, and he therefore never saw the point in defending or even establishing the democratic credentials of socialist political institutions (Femia 1993: 123; Harding 1996: 16-66; Lovell 1984: 170-71).

The textual evidence, however, does not support this reading. Whilst, in Lenin's view, the economic basis of socialism provides *neccesary conditions* for a broader, more developed form of democracy, these conditions do *not* guarantee its realisation. In order for socialism to be democratic, he argues that it is imperative to create the necessary mechanisms and institutions of popular rule:

...while being based on economics, socialism cannot be reduced to economics alone. A foundation—socialist production—is essential for the abolition of national oppression, but this foundation must *also* carry a democratically organised state, a democratic army, etc. By transforming capitalism into socialism the proletariat creates the possibility of abolishing national oppression; the *possibility* becomes *reality* “only”—“only”!—with the establishment of full democracy in all spheres (CW 22: 325).

As the following sections should make clear, Lenin devoted significant ink and energy to outlining the characteristics of socialist democracy. There is no justification for the claim that ‘he seldom troubled to discuss it’.

There has been a tendency for scholars to argue that Lenin presented his peculiar conception of socialist democracy as a rigid blueprint or schematic abstracted from reality, in the manner of the utopian socialists (e.g. Polan 1984). Even J. Townshend (1999: 70), who provides a relatively sophisticated reading, argues that ‘Lenin’s conception of the Soviet state form...tended to ignore the importance attached to national institutions, customs and traditions by Marx’. This reading has little textual basis. Lenin actually rejects the idea that socialism can assume only one institutional form. He argues that the specific characteristics of socialist democracy will vary from country to country, depending upon the national characteristics:

All nations will arrive at socialism—this is inevitable, but all will do so in not exactly the same way, each will contribute something of its own to some form of democracy, to some variety of the dictatorship of the proletariat, to the varying rate of socialist transformations in the different aspects of social life. There is nothing more primitive from the viewpoint of theory, or more ridiculous from that of practice, than to paint, “in the name of historical materialism”, *this* aspect of the future in a monotonous grey (CW 23: 69-70).

According to another reading, compatible with the previous two, Lenin portrays his conception of socialist democracy as a ‘static’ model, one that is not intended to develop or change over time. The various institutions and procedures are presented as

being permanent, set in stone, and not subject to transformation (Polan 1984). This reading is also inaccurate and unhelpful. Whilst Lenin views socialist democracy as broader than previous forms, his thesis on the application of democracy in different degrees still applies to its problems of form and content. For Lenin, the new quality of socialist democracy cannot be an argument against its broadening and perfection. In his view, socialist democracy is a continuously changing, developing form of rule, within which democracy may be broader or narrower. The democratic exercise of power will not always adequately respond to the given opportunities or to the requirements of socialist society, and this is why he argues that the masses must continually perfect it.

But Lenin does not only view socialist democracy as a constantly developing form of rule. He views it as a temporary, transitional form of government as well. The reason for this is that the primary aim of socialism is the construction of communism, a classless form of society that contains a vastly more democratic structure. Lenin argues that the essential features of socialist democracy constantly develop during the evolution of society towards communism, though they prevail from the inception of socialism. On the one hand, the features of social-self-government relating to and anticipating the system of social self-government under communism develop within the womb of socialist democracy and strengthen as this form of rule moves towards communism. On the other hand, the features of worker self-government are not only the means to the workers' self-liberation, but their self-realisation as well. Once these facts are acknowledged, it is easy to see why the widespread 'static' presentation of Lenin's model is not very illuminating.

In the passage cited above Lenin describes socialist democracy as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. It provides a dictatorship for the defeated exploiter classes and democracy for the working people, under the leadership of the working class. In order

to appreciate the organic link between proletarian dictatorship and democracy it is important to elucidate the aims of the former. Apart from crushing the resistance of the exploiter classes, they include state guidance of society by the working class and the building of socialism. These aims determine the tasks and functions of the socialist state from its inception. Moreover, the task of crushing the exploiters is only of a temporary nature, as compared with the major long-term tasks of the socialist government. Lenin maintains that neither the tasks of suppression nor the creative tasks of the dictatorship of the proletariat can be accomplished otherwise than through the organised efforts of the working class. The degree and intensity of repression depends upon the degree of resistance offered by the counterrevolutionaries. If the overthrown exploiters cooperate with the workers' power, then they will be granted more freedoms, but to the extent that they oppose the workers' power, they will be repressed by all means necessary. Lenin does not only advocate the use of force against the ex-bourgeoisie. His 'emancipatory vision promised the deprivation of all and any democratic rights' to all *all* who oppose the socialist cause (Brie 2020: 28). Lenin sees no contradiction between socialist democracy and the repression of counter-revolutionary activities. He points out that several democratic revolutions have been compelled to resort to such measures (CW 28 71; CW 29: 354). The main thing is that in the long run, as socialism is consolidated, and as the people are imbued with the ideas of communism, the need for repression will lessen, and under communism, the classless society of the future, coercion in general will become superfluous, as every person participates in governance.

That said, Lenin does not believe that the various forms and stages of development of socialist democracy can assume any shape whatsoever. He identifies several essential features that should characterise them all:

- i) In contrast to the multi-party system of bourgeois democracy, socialist democracy enforces the uninterrupted *rule of one party, the Communist Party of the working class*.
- ii) Whilst maintaining the civil and political rights of liberal democracy, *socialist democracy grants a constantly increasing range of economic, social and cultural rights*.
- iii) Whilst liberal democracy debars the majority of the population from popular participation, socialist democracy has a mass democratic character. *The masses can participate both directly and indirectly in the management of political affairs*.
- iv) The state is organised upon the basis of *democratic centralism*.
- v) Whereas liberal democracy allows the bourgeoisie and market forces to dictate the economic life of society, *socialist democracy extends democratic control into the economy and the workplace*.

Of all of the features outlined above, the first has been the most controversial. It has become a popular academic tendency to claim that Lenin initially outlined a conception of socialist democracy that rejected the leading role of the Party. The text most often cited as evidence for this reading is his *State and Revolution*. This work supposedly outlines a grassroots council democracy that rejects the one-party system. According to Townshend (1999: 71-72), the *State and Revolution* advocates a competitive multi-party system in which no party has a leading role. Krausz (2015: 196), by contrast, insists that ‘the word *Party* does not exist as a concept in *The State and Revolution*’. ‘For Lenin, classes and parties no longer exist in self-governing socialism’. According to the promoters of this two-model narrative, Lenin only came to advocate a one-party

‘vanguard’ system after the October Socialist Revolution, and, even then, it was not his preferred conception. Thus, Lenin supposedly outlined two models of socialist democracy: a ‘participatory’ model, which is democratic, and a one-party ‘vanguard’ model, which is undemocratic (Miliband 1970; Harding 1981: 134-41; 1996: 150-169; Femia 1993: 77-78; Graham 1986: 211-212; Levin 1989: 157-165; Marik 2008: 375-378; Priestland 2002: 111-117; Nash 1990: 21). This ‘two model’ narrative is misleading. To be sure, prior to the Bolshevik Revolution Lenin may not have explicitly ruled out a multi-party system, but there is little evidence of him explicitly defending one either. There is even less evidence to suggest that Lenin advocated a *competitive* multi-party system, i.e., one in which parties compete for power. The fact of the matter is that Lenin always thought that his own Bolshevik Party had to retain a supreme position. This assumption comes across in *all* of his writings on the Party, even those written before the October Revolution. Although, before this date, Lenin never advocated one-party rule, he always presented the Bolsheviks as the leading force, one that had a privileged insight into the needs of the working-class movement. Moreover, whenever Lenin considered a multi-party system – and to reiterate, he did this only implicitly, never explicitly – he situated it within a framework of communist leadership. Within this framework other parties are permitted *only in so far as they accept the leading role of the Communist Party*. As J. V. Stalin (1954: 52) rightly points out (indeed, he was one of the first to point out), Lenin defends a one-party system even in the *State and Revolution*. In a brief but profoundly insightful passage, Lenin remarks that:

by educating the workers’ party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat, capable of assuming power and leading the whole people to socialism, of directing

and organising the new system, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people in organising their social life (CW 25: 409).

According to Miliband (1970: 314-14; see also Schulman 2019: 66), this passage is unclear on ‘whether it is the *proletariat* which is capable of assuming power, leading, directing, organizing, etc.; or whether it is the *vanguard* of the proletariat, i.e. the workers’ party, which is here designated. Both interpretations are possible’. It is difficult to see how Miliband could arrive at that view. In this passage Lenin clearly defines the ‘workers’ party’ as the ‘vanguard of the proletariat’. As Stalin rightly argues, *State and Revolution* advocates a de facto one-party system. This fact needs to be stated again because so many scholars refuse to acknowledge it. To repeat, *State and Revolution* – the text seen as Lenin’s most ‘libertarian’ work – explicitly defends the leading role of one political party, the Communist Party. If scholars want to show that Lenin defends a multi-party or non-partisan conception of democracy, they *cannot rely upon this text as evidence*.

Lenin defends *one* model of socialist democracy. This model is defined by the leading role of the Communist Party, but it *also* contains participatory elements. The attempt to distinguish between a one-party and participatory model, with the aim of praising one whilst denouncing the other, does little to illuminate the complexities of Lenin’s vision.

According to a popular narrative, Lenin’s one-party model is more or less *synonymous* with the political system established in the Soviet Union under his rule, and which subsequently characterised the self-professed ‘People’s Democracies’ espousing Marxism-Leninism. This narrative posits a direct causal link between Marxist-Leninist states and Lenin’s works. It maintains, moreover, that the Marxist-

Leninist state is the only possible realisation of Lenin's theory. No other political system is possible (Polan 1984: 49, 57, 129; Harding 1996; Dahl 1998: 100-01).

The actual relationship between Leninist theory and Marxist-Leninist practice is always more complex than this. On the one hand, Rothenberg (1995: 418) goes too far in arguing that 'not one of the actual states governed by socialists in the 20th century...approximated' Lenin's model. They certainly all qualify as 'Leninist' regimes in the basic sense that they based their political structures on Lenin's ideas and sought to implement Lenin's directives. Marxist-Leninist states have, to *various degrees*, faithfully realised Lenin's conception of socialist democracy. For better or for worse, Marxism-Leninism has provided the most accurate theoretical interpretation and practical realisation of Lenin's vision to date. This is one of the few arguments that Lenin's cold war critics get right. Contrary to the views of Trotskyist commentators, Marxist-Leninist states have not 'betrayed' the *fundamentals* of socialist democracy outlined by Lenin.

Then again, no Marxist-Leninist state has realised Lenin's principles to the letter, and indeed, few of them claim to have done so. Theory can rarely, if ever, be directly translated into practice without modification, and as such, one cannot hope to prove, as Polan (1984) tries and fails to do, that *The State and Revolution* is 'guilty' of the Gulag and every other supposedly 'authoritarian' component of Marxism-Leninism. Those who promote this myth need to recognise that Lenin never produced a blueprint outlining every institutional feature of socialist democracy. This is true even for the Soviet Union. Although the fledgling soviet regime was shaped by some of Lenin's preferences, many of its features and policies were the product of pragmatic responses to extraordinary political events, such as the invasion of Russia by the European imperialist powers and the resulting civil war. For this reason, D.

Priestland convincingly argues that it is misleading to ‘draw a simple causal link’ between a text such as *State and Revolution* ‘and the policies of the central committee of the CPSU’. Like all the other elements of soviet life, socialist democracy grew out of ‘Marxist-Leninist’ and other socialist ideas of a more local origin. But it also grew out of the historical circumstances. ‘Both combined to create a set of practices that could be used by politicians and others to further their interests’ (Priestland 2002: 112). Likewise, in his ‘innocent reading’ of *State and Revolution*, Townshend argues that texts do not decide to commit crimes. Only people select texts and choose whether to be influenced by them. As such, one can construe the text’s responsibility only in a causal, non-moral sense (Townshend 1999: 67). The significance of this point cannot be understated. For if, as Marcel Liebman thinks, the soviet state did in fact decline into despotism under Lenin’s nose, this does not prove that ‘Leninism failed to solve the problems of...socialist democracy’ (Liebman 1980: 430).

From the point of view of democratic theory, it is both possible and worthwhile to explore Lenin’s conception of socialist democracy on its own terms, and in relative isolation from the regimes that claimed to embrace it. B. Holden (1974: 48) is mistaken when he asserts that it is more worthwhile to ‘by-pass the question of the correct interpretation’ of Lenin’s theory and focus solely upon the soviet regime of ‘totalitarian and arbitrary rule’. This is an unhelpful, illegitimate way of outlining the principles of the Leninist model.

3.1. The Leading Role of the Communist Party

The Communist Party-the chief organisation of the working class- plays a central role in Lenin’s conception of socialism. He makes this clear not only in *The State and*

Revolution, but also in several other writings (CW 32: 98, 199). In Lenin's view, socialist democracy is possible only upon the basis of the Party's leading role. The party's leadership, in other words, is an essential condition for the maintenance and development of socialist democracy.

What does Lenin mean when he states that the Party has a leading role? It means, firstly, that the Party is not simply one of the leading organisations under socialist democracy. By virtue of its character, organisation, composition, and competence, it is the most important leading body on every level of management. Second, the Party is not simply an organisation in charge of individual fields. As the supreme representative of the working masses, it has an overall leading role. Third, the Party is not confined to being a specific general staff of the working class. It is an organisation that rallies the non-proletarian rank and file promoters of the communist transformation. Fourth, the Party makes a concerted effort to eliminate the division of labour between the leaders and the governed. On the one hand, it strives prospectively to eliminate the division of labour through the results of its activity. On the other, at least in the field of political leadership, it actually eliminates that division of labour by rallying the mass of its members for the management of society.

How does Lenin reconcile the rule of a single party with democracy? The answer given by most scholars – or what Lars Lih (2008; see also Chattopadhyay 2009: 27) calls the 'textbook interpretation' – is that Lenin has no faith in the working class. In his *What is to be Done?*, written long before the October Revolution, Lenin supposedly argues that the workers, having been subject to years of capitalist propaganda, have been brainwashed by bourgeois ideology, and so they do not know their own true interests. In other words, they suffer from 'false consciousness'. At best, the working class can develop a 'trade union consciousness': the propensity to fight for petty

reforms and wage increases under liberal democracy. The bulk of the working class cannot develop the revolutionary class consciousness necessary to conduct a socialist revolution. Armed as it is with Marxist theory, only the Communist Party possesses this revolutionary consciousness, and as such, the Party knows the workers' true interests better than the workers themselves. Since the Party has a privileged insight into the will of the working class, it must secure for itself a position of absolute power in order to enforce the rule of the majority. No competition can be tolerated, since any reduction in communist power will result in the popular will being put in jeopardy (Femia 1993: 118-123).

Lih argues that this narrative is baseless. Lenin does not think that the working class is doomed to suffer from false consciousness. In making this argument, Lih points to none other than Joseph Stalin (Lih 2008: 29). According to Stalin's interpretation of *What is to be Done?* many workers will initially suffer from a trade union-consciousness, but they will eventually, after a long period of struggle, discard this consciousness and fight for socialism. The Party's leadership is therefore unnecessary for the success of socialism, but in its absence the workers will experience several setbacks and defeats. They will experience avoidable sufferings and take far longer to reach the promised land. The Party must therefore provide leadership in order to accelerate and smooth the transition to communism (Stalin 1952: 104). It does so not by substituting itself for the working class, but by giving this class the confidence, guidance, and tools it requires to assume its role as the ruling class. The Party is, in other words, an *enabler* of proletarian rule, not a form of rule in itself.

This distinction between the Party *enabling* working class rule, and the Party itself ruling, is of crucial importance in understanding Lenin's thesis on the leading role of the Party under socialism. This thesis has been almost universally interpreted as 'the

monopoly of state power', one that violates political equality. Open pretty much any book on soviet history or Leninism, and that is what you will read (Medvedev 1981: 61; Wolfe 1965: 81, 89; Femia 1993 118-41; Miliband 1970: 314; Graham 1986: 212-14; Lovell 1984: 175; Meyer 1963: 102; Schapiro 1965: 361; 1970: 183; Liebman 1980: 281-82; Kolakowski 2005: 669, 759-60; Anderson 1995: 166-69; Polan 1984: 126-27). In so far as this interpretation postulates the absolute power of the Party, it bears little resemblance to Lenin's model. Lenin advocated a more complex relationship between the Party and masses.

The Party and the Masses

In Lenin's view, the Party cannot be the leading force of socialist society unless it cultivates close links with the working masses. 'Unbreakable ties with the mass of the workers, the ability to agitate unceasingly among them, to participate in every strike, to respond to every demand of the masses—this is the chief thing for a Communist Party' (CW 29: 563). The Party must live amongst the masses, understand them and know their sentiments, approach them and win their absolute confidence. The leaders must not lose contact with the masses under their direction, and the Party must learn how to combine persuasion with compulsion. In short, the Party's untiring efforts to get the workers to accept it as their leading force is part and parcel of the good relations between the Party and masses. 'Unless we do this the Communist Party will not lead the proletariat, the proletariat will not lead the masses, and the whole machine will collapse' (CW 33: 304).

To begin with, Lenin argues that the Party has to give the masses information about its important decisions and the reasons underlying them. The leaders must also tell the masses about how they will implement their resolutions, in addition to explaining their

results and effects. The Party, in short, must be as transparent as possible in its actions, and ensure that the masses are fully aware of its dealings, policies, and activities (CW 29: 459).

Lenin argues that the Party is not exempt from the rule that applies to all the leaders and leading bodies under socialism: the leaders are the delegates of the people, and they are also accountable to the people for their activity. For this reason, the Party must conduct its activity openly, so that the masses can control and evaluate it. The leaders must create a social atmosphere in which the workers are armed with institutional and other means for objectively evaluating their performance. Indeed, it is the Party's duty to encourage the people to exercise the right of control. This duty follows from the Party's leading position under socialism. In a letter to G. Myasnikov, for instance, Lenin argues that it is imperative to 'establish *ties* with non-Party people, and help non-Party people to *verify* the work of Party members' (CW 32: 509). He elsewhere states that communist officers are obliged regularly to give an account of their work done to the non-party masses (CW 32: 62-63). Speaking of the Party's results in administering the country in the early 1920s, Lenin reiterated the Party's obligation to rely on the trade unions as well as the non-Party workers and peasants' conferences. They evaluated the Party's policy, helped it make the necessary corrections, and promoted its realisation (CW 30: 187-88; CW 32: 429-31).

Lenin endorsed frequent Party purges as a way for the masses to hold communists to account and expel those who fail to represent them. Purges have been denounced in communist regimes as top-down nondemocratic methods for the Party leadership to eliminate their enemies and concentrate their own power. Lenin viewed them instead as a form of public election. He argued that the masses themselves should play a major role in the purges, by taking the opportunity to scrutinise and question Party cadres. In

doing so, they can exercise their democratic control over the organisation's composition and aims. Lenin found this procedure particularly useful when he thought that the Party had been infected with careerists (CW 33: 39-40).

Lenin rejects the idea that the Party can enforce its policies upon the masses. It should not try to indoctrinate the masses with principles and attitudes that ignore the workers' level of intellectual development and readiness to take democratic action (CW 28: 309). In Lenin's view, the manipulation of the masses by the Party cannot bring about socialist democracy. For him, it is anything but socialist democracy if the masses are driven in a direction that they did not choose and do not understand. It is a far cry from socialist democracy if the workers do not support the demands for which they are roused to action. Lenin argues that popular support is the truest indicator of the Party's successful work. Indeed, he views majority support for the party as an indispensable condition for socialist democracy. For in its absence the entire system will collapse (CW 30: 262). As such, the leading organs and their officials must consider the views of the working masses when making their decisions. They must listen not only to the ideas that align with their own, but also to the ideas that go against their own, and if feasible, implement them (CW 26: 260). Raising the issue in 1918, Lenin said that 'the majority will is binding on us always, and to oppose the majority will is to betray the revolution' (CW 28: 175).

At the same time, Lenin also maintains that socialist democracy is incompatible with the Party being led by the given state or intellectual mood of the masses. The main reason for this is that the masses often express mistaken views, and they have a lower level of political consciousness in comparison to the Party. As such, it is the Party's duty to do its best to raise the level of the workers' consciousness and rally them to realise their genuine aspirations (CW 31: 58; CW 28: 309).

The Party's task is therefore twofold. On the one hand, it must honour the masses' sovereignty, and seek to implement their demands. At the same time, it must try and imbue the masses with an advanced socialist consciousness, so that it can unleash the masses' latent energies in accordance with their consent and support. If the masses express mistaken views or wishes, the Party must explain to them why they are mistaken, and convince them of the correct cause of action. Under no circumstance can the Party simply disregard the masses' demands, no matter how backward they may be (CW 29: 396). This whole complex interaction between the Party and masses must occur in an orderly manner. Lenin's ideal is for the broad working masses themselves to control the Party's activity, view its achievements, and then give a positive evaluation of the Party's performance (CW 33: 442).

According to Alan Shandro, one of Lenin's more sympathetic commentators, the relationship between the Party and masses is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, the Party is tasked with encouraging both criticism and coercion, both discipline and debate, and so it has to exercise coercive force 'over the very people whose critical challenge it must invite and even encourage' (Shandro 2014: 309). This is problematic from the democratic standpoint, because it is ambiguous as to whether the Party's authority derives from its persuasiveness of its arguments and actions, or from the threat of coercion underling these actions. Because of this, the working class character of socialist state power 'is constitutively, and not merely contingently contestable' (Shandro 2014: 309).

Shandro does not quite capture the essence of Lenin's views on the dialectical relationship between the Party and masses. Stalin provides a more accurate interpretation in *The Foundations of Leninism*. Whilst, on the one hand, Stalin argues that Leninism opposes the 'theory of spontaneity', the doctrine that repudiates the

leading role of the Party, he argues that coercion is out of the question. The masses must be *won* round to the Party's position, primarily by learning through their own experience (Stalin 1953: 167-68). Stalin reiterates and develops this point in his *Concerning Questions of Leninism*, which he wrote in order to correct some misunderstandings of Lenin's thought. In section five, he speaks about the importance of establishing relations of '*mutual confidence*' between the Party and masses. The slogan conveys two key ideas. First, the Party must heed the masses' concerns, closely examine their instinctive actions, and base its policies upon the practical activities and requirements of the masses. In other words, the Party 'must not only teach the masses, but also learn from them'. In the second place, the Party should strive to constantly win the support, trust and confidence of the masses on a day-to-day basis, not through words alone, but also through its policies and practical work. Thus, the Party 'must not command but primarily convince the masses, helping them to realise through their own experience the correctness of the policy of the Party' (Stalin 1954: 46). Stalin then tackles the question of whether the Party can ever act in a way that overrides or ignores the wishes of the masses. His answer is unequivocal. The Party must never do this, no matter the circumstances. If a Party policy does not win the support of the masses, then the Party must hold back on implementing it, try and 'help the masses to become convinced through their own experience that this policy is correct' (Stalin 1954: 53). Stalin captures the essence of Lenin's position on the relationship between the Communist Party and the masses, between the Communist Party and the forms of socialist democracy. The Party cannot under any circumstances substitute itself for the masses. It must always respect their wishes and try its best to win them round to its policies. Moreover, it must learn from the masses, listen to their concerns, and shape its own policies accordingly. In short, the Party must lead the masses, but it must also

be guided by them. This dialectical tension between top-down guidance and bottom-up spontaneity is, for Lenin, the essence of socialist democracy.

Party Democracy

In multi-party regimes, where political parties do not rule directly, the internal organisation of the governing party is of little importance in establishing the democratic credentials of the political system. But in a Leninist one-party regime, where the ruling Party is in effect a permanent part of the governing apparatus, the internal organisation of this Party is of fundamental importance to democracy as a whole. It is often said that Lenin opposed inner party democracy, and that he wanted the Communist Party to become a ‘monolithic’, hierarchical organisation, one that tolerated no internal criticism or debate. The rank-and-file members had slavishly to follow the infallible proclamations of the ruling committee, who dictated all of the Party policies themselves. According to Meyer, for instance, ‘all discussion was suspect to him, because it was a waste of time and because it might threaten the unity of the party in action’. Indeed, ‘it was this that he sought to preserve under all circumstances, even at the price of gagging dissenting groups that might become a threat to the men in command’ (Meyer 1963: 96-97).

The textual evidence does not support this interpretation. By virtue of being the people’s vanguard, Lenin argues that the Communist Party must be a model for socialist democracy. It must show an example to be followed in establishing the most perfect forms of communist social-self-government. That is, the Party itself must organise itself upon democratic lines (Nash 1990).

For Lenin, Party democracy has twofold significance. In the first place, it ensures a genuine equality of the party members. The people in charge have the same rights and

duties as the rank-and-file members, and the activity of both is evaluated in a principled party spirit. This means that no one is allowed to seize a position of infallibility and untouchability, where one has rights but is free from the burden of duties.

Lenin argues that the communists should constantly strive to strengthen and develop Party democracy (CW 4: 230-31; 354; CW 7: 145-46 444). In his view, one of the important conditions of the party' functioning as a vigorous, active and creative organ should be that its basic units are independently active. He therefore demands that the higher-level organs must honour and encourage the independence of the lower party organisations. A strong revolutionary party must rely on the basis of lower organisations that are at one with the local masses, and which are familiar with the local conditions, for this allows the party to pursue an effective local policy. Lenin denounces all uncalled-for interference from above in the life of the lower party organisations, because he regards this interference as the curtailing of their independent activity and responsibility for the local policy. The consistency and accuracy with which he stuck to this theoretical stand can be illustrated by a writing of his, produced in 1907, ten years prior to the October Revolution. He remarked that that, the Party rules established its democratic internal organisation. The entire Party was, from the bottom up, established on an elective basis. The local Party cells were independent in their local actions, though the Central Committee had the power to lead all the Party's work. Crucially, this CC had no right to intervene in deciding the local organisations' compositions. Such an act would violate the Party rules, and undermine the Party's attempt to build itself 'from below upwards' (CW 11: 441-42).

In Lenin's opinion, the other major condition for transforming the Party into a dynamic, creative and active democratic organisation is the establishment of a new type

of relation between the Party membership and organisation: The Party members have to be roused to action. All their creative powers and energies must be called into play.

This requirement originates in the realisation of the fact that the Party is as an organisation with a specific composition. It is never simply a cross-section of society, i.e., the working class and the various other strata, and it does not proportionally represent these groups. The Party can fulfil its mission only if it is made up of the best and most precious working-class elements, the working people who are the most advanced with respect to their socialist consciousness and activity. It is a subjective condition for winning the non-Party workers' appreciation and loyalty. It is also a condition for the Party's successful functioning. It must consist of the people who are better trained than the average in order to be able to orient the people at large. By virtue of his belief that the Party is a 'vanguard', i.e., that it rallies the best elements of the working class, Lenin argues that the Party is able to induce the workers to action. Because the Party can rely upon its members' high level of theoretical preparedness, discipline, consciousness and readiness for self-sacrifice, it can appeal to the working masses. Lenin argues that the Party members are more conscious than the average people, take a bigger share from their service to society, and have more than once proved their commitment to socialism. For this reason, he believes that the Party members should have a considerable degree of leeway within the organisation. Each member should have the opportunity to take an active part in the discussion, definition, fulfilment and control of the major social programmes. All Party members should 'take part in the election of officials, committee members,...discuss and *decide* questions concerning the political campaigns of the proletariat, and...*determine* the line of tactics of the Party organisations' (CW 10: 502-503).

Lenin always strived to create a free party atmosphere that gave room for the membership to voice their opinions and ideas, and which also supplied the scope for their initiative and independent action. In 1910, for instance, when there was a bitter factional struggle within the party, he wrote that Party members could not and should not achieve unanimity on every detail of every policy. Instead, the Party had to facilitate ‘criticism and revision in accordance with’ the changing political and economic conditions, as well as the experience the Party gained in its struggle. Lenin emphasised that each Party member should view their criticisms, suggestions and proposed revisions ‘as a matter of their own self-determination, as a matter of elucidating their own policy’ (CW 16: 149-50). At the same time, Lenin pointed out that there are definite conditions for discussion within the party. Criticisms and revisions of policies could not undermine the Party’s unity in practical action, which had to be upheld at all times (CW 16: 150).

Lenin considers the Party as an organisation in which each member should have the right and the duty to act free of constraints, with full consciousness, and with the full employment of their creative powers. He wants all of the Party members to be equal, and to also possess equal rights and duties. In order to achieve that goal, the Party has to gather the competent working people who are able expertly and wisely to evaluate the state of affairs in every locality, workplace, and the whole country. The Party has to be able to work out the most effective guidelines, as well as the strength to put its plans into practice. In practice, this means that it has to support criticism and self-criticism in all areas. Indeed, Lenin argues that the Party’s ability to criticise itself and remedy its shortcomings is the surest guarantee of it serving the people it represents. Admitting that one has made a mistake, identifying the causes for it, and identifying a

solution to it, is a requirement of a vanguard Party serving the working masses (CW 31: 57).

Lenin opposed those who attempted to obstruct the exposure of mistakes within the Party on the grounds that the enemy might take advantage of that. Addressing the Third Congress of the Comintern, he declared that ‘we must not conceal our mistakes from the enemy. Anyone who is afraid of this is no revolutionary. On the contrary, if we openly declare to the workers: “Yes, we have made mistakes”, it will mean that they will not be repeated’ (CW 32: 477).

Lenin argues that all members – including those within the leading bodies – should adopt a personal, i.e., independent stance on each question (of course, their approach must be based on a communist conviction). Only this can ensure that the ensuing theoretical debate results in an ideological synthesis and decision that takes into consideration every viewpoint. Lenin views this as an inalienable right of all members. Even during the dramatic days of the Seventh Congress, when the decision to be made over Brest-Litovsk peace treaty caused a split in the Party, Lenin confined himself to calling on the members of the Central Committee to adopt a unified line. He then added that ‘this does not mean that all those in the Central Committee should be of one and the same opinion. To hold that view would be to go towards a split’ (CW 27: 149). Lenin argued that each member of the central committee had the right to voice their disagreement – representing, of course, the opinion of the local organisations that had delegated them. In his view, this should not make them unworthy of the Central Committee membership, and nor should it result in their expulsion (CW 27: 149-50).

Lenin went even further during the Party’s Ninth Congress. He proposed to augment the trade union representation in the Central Committee with those whose opinion was in variance with the official trade union line favouring a stricter discipline, one-man

management, and a more widespread and resolute application of administrative measures. By introducing representatives into the CC holding differing views, even if these views were ‘wrong on certain points’, the Party would contain within its ranks a broader range of opinion, more original proposals, and in doing so have a better chance of formulating a considered policy that met the demands of the diverse working masses (CW 30: 478-79).

In Lenin’s view, only an atmosphere of free discussion and debate within the Party can enable it effectively to gather and evaluate information, reveal any problems, assess the various experiments and criticise its mistakes. The Party must firstly gather as many pieces of information about its own life and the outside world as possible, process it, and thereby use this information in order to realise its various goals. The Party cannot perform this function unless every member views it as their duty to report on the opinions and sentiments of the masses.

Lenin argues that the free atmosphere within the Party also helps it to discharge its practical leading functions. On the one hand, it can reveal all the possible alternatives during the collective discussions, which is instrumental in arriving at the optimum decision. On the other hand, a free discussion offers the opportunity to convince each member of the expediency and necessity of a given mode of action. That in turn may enable every communist to become one with the Party’s activities, and thereby fulfil their duties with the utmost devotion.

Many commentators regard the Party’s Tenth Congress and the coinciding suppression of the Kronstadt uprising as a ‘turning point in the history of the Leninist Party’ (Liebman 1980: 299). They allege that the year 1921 marked the ‘downfall’ of democracy within the Communist Party and the state. They claim that, from that time on, the Party abolished debates, eliminated the influence of the Party rank and file, and

established the oligarchic domination of the higher party leadership (Wolfe 1965: 78; Marik 2008: 453, 456; Liebman 1980: 298; Harding 1981: 274; Kolakowski 2005: 747). Whilst scholars agree that Lenin was instrumental in supporting and implementing this development, they disagree over the reasons as to why he did so. According to one interpretation, Lenin's decision to quell party democracy was a pragmatic and temporary measure, one that he made in response to the civil war and the various other problems facing the socialist state (Medvedev 1981: 62-3; Liebman 1980: 303-04; Nash 1990: 25). Under these extraordinary conditions, Lenin argued there could be no time for sustained debate within the Party. A second reading holds that the banning of factions was the inevitable culmination of Lenin's ideological desire for a monolithic, non-democratic party organisation. The dire circumstances merely provided with him with an excuse to achieve what he always wanted (Kolakowski 2005: 767).

The textual evidence overwhelmingly supports the first interpretation rather than the second. Lenin is committed to inner party democracy. He opposes the idea that the Party should be organised along bureaucratic lines. But both readings are wrong in a more fundamental respect: The Tenth Party Congress did not call for an end to inner party democracy. The historical facts disprove this claim. True, the Tenth Party Congress – like all the previous congresses – took a resolute stand against the attempts at splitting the Party, against all kinds of factionalism. But as a matter of fact, the Congress that denounced and banned factionalism also made further steps to broaden inner party democracy, promote free discussion and criticism, and achieve united action based on the conscious and voluntary discipline of the membership. Lenin made it clear during the Congress that 'everyone has the right to straighten out the Party's line' (CW 32: 201). He argued that the struggle against factionalism must not hinder free criticism

within the party. Indeed, criticisms of the Party's mistakes remained necessary, and constructive proposals for improving remedying its mistakes had to be forwarded as soon as they were conceived, 'in the most precise form possible, for consideration and decision to the leading local and central bodies of the Party'. Furthermore, every critic had to directly test their own proposed solutions in practice, by engaging themselves in soviet and Party work.

Lenin emphasised that the analysis of the party line, the control of its fulfilment, and criticism must not be submitted for debate to a group set up on the basis of some 'platform'. He stressed the great difference between rallying behind certain political platforms and the submission of certain theoretical issues to a broad discussion. He described the first as factionalism, which had to be held back. On the other hand, he stressed that scientific research, including that aimed at assessing and, if necessary, improving the party's programme, had to be encouraged with all means (See CW 32: 207, 253, 265-68).

It was precisely the Tenth Party Congress that denounced most resolutely the Party organisation's militarisation. The congress resolution stated that members had to submit all major problems of the daily party life and politics to the plenary session of the Party organisation in order to develop inner Party democracy. The resolution also called on the higher Party bodies to hold open meetings. The framers of the public meeting agenda had to ensure that the raised questions were useful for the attending party rank and file. The resolution also stated that the leading bodies must work under the constant inspection of the party general public. The individual Party committees had to give an account of their activity not only to the bodies above, but also to those below them.

Reflections

Lenin's attempt to reconcile the one-party system with democracy signified a bold and original contribution to democratic theory. Before his interventions, it was generally assumed that democracy could only be a multi-party or non-partisan council system. Lenin broke new ground when he presented the domination of his Bolshevik Party as a necessary condition for socialist democracy (Femia 1993: 122). His essential justification for one-party rule is that the Party has the best insight into the needs of the working class, and that the Party alone can enable the working class to assume its position as the ruling class.

There are of course precursors to Lenin's one-party model. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels argued that the Communist Party was distinguished from the masses in the sense that it knew, better than anyone else, the 'line of march' of the communist movement (MECW 6: 497). Although Marx and Engels never explicitly endorsed a one-party system, they never categorically rejected one either. *Contra* Femia (1993: 123), it is by no means certain that 'Marx himself would almost certainly have recoiled' from Lenin's vision. The scholarly attempt to demarcate classical Marxism from Leninism must always fail. Lenin's one-party vision is a legitimate interpretation and development of classical Marxism (Harding 1996).

Femia compares Lenin's justification for one-party rule to Plato's defence of a political system governed by philosopher kings. Plato defended the rule of enlightened 'philosopher kings' on the basis that they had a privileged insight into the art of good governance. As such, 'Leninism is the lineal descendent of platonism' (Femia 1993: 127). This comparison is not entirely accurate. Unlike Lenin, Plato did not try and defend the rule of his enlightened group as democratic. Indeed, Plato was a staunch

enemy of democracy (Dahl 1998: 69). Femia (1993: 119-120) is on stronger ground when he compares Lenin to Rousseau, who distinguished between the ‘general will’ and the ‘will of all’. The ‘will of all’ consists of the actually expressed aspirations of the people. The ‘general will’, by contrast, is not necessarily expressed by the people. Nevertheless, it exists regardless of whether people endorse it or not. It denotes the objective truth, the genuine interest of the majority of society as opposed to the subjective selfish will of the individual. All individuals therefore have a duty to disregard their own interests and submit to the higher general will, which represents their ‘higher’ self. Those who fail to do so will be ‘forced to be free’. Rousseau identifies a ‘legislator’, a being with a divinely-inspired intelligence, as the agent that can lead the people to freedom. The legislator will help to establish a direct democracy, one in which every person endorses a single general will (Rousseau 1913: 15, 23, 86, 87). According to Femia (1993: 120), ‘the “legislator” is obviously the precursor of the vanguard party’. Indeed, in the same way that Lenin’s supporters like to ignore his defence of one-party rule in *State and Revolution*, Rousseau’s supporters like to ignore his defence of the Legislator in the *Social Contract*.

Needless to say, Lenin’s attempt to reconcile the one-party system with democracy is not popular. It is a *near* universally accepted tenet of democratic theory that the one-party system is incompatible with democracy. Leninism is presented as a despotic doctrine mainly because of its unashamed endorsement of the one-party system (Whelan 2019: 33). The main reason why commentators describe Lenin’s one-party system as undemocratic is that the majority of citizens cannot control the Party, which can rule without their consent. Democracy, by contrast, is a political system in which the majority controls their leaders (Macpherson 1966: 20; Femia 1993: 137-38). As Femia argues, ‘opinion surveys, usually based on leading or ambiguous questions, and

conducted in a void where choices are without consequences, offer no effective substitute for free elections' (Femia 1993: 140).

This claim is problematic in several respects. It assumes, firstly, that Leninist democracy imposes a system of Party domination over the people. The preceding section has argued that this view has no textual basis. Lenin said time and time again that the Party has to respect the masses, listen to their concerns, and even allow them to play a leading role in the Party purges. Through the latter measure the masses can directly influence the Party's policy and composition, and thereby enforce their will. So, the accusation that the Party has effective free reign, whilst the people are powerless to influence it, actually contradicts Leninism.

Second, the democratic requirement of majority control over the leaders is an ideal to strive towards and is not fully obtainable. It is always a matter of more or less majority control, more or less democracy, not simply a binary distinction between majority or minority rule (Macpherson 1966: 18). It is impossible for any government to prove that it has the support of a majority all of the time, since people's preferences and opinions shift constantly in light of the changing circumstances. In itself, a one-party system does not inherently prohibit majority rule, for it is theoretically possible for the majority to support the Party.

Third, when scholars claim that Leninist democracy violates the principle of majority control, they smuggle in the assumption that liberal democracy does in fact provide majority control, or at least more than Leninism, because it features free and fair elections. Whelan argues that this assumption is questionable. Although, to be sure, the majority in liberal democracies vote for their governments at elections, there are several reasons to suggest that these governments lack majority support a lot of the time. First, depending upon the electoral system in question, a government may be

elected without being voted in by a majority of eligible voters. Second, elections often have low voter turnouts, and so governments are voted in by a majority or plurality of those who vote, not necessarily the majority or plurality of the population in the country. Third, even when governments can claim to have been elected by a majority, they do not necessarily retain this support. Polls have shown that majority support for a government frequently dips below 50% soon after the party is elected. As such, it is frequently the case that governments rule without majority support for most of their tenure (Whelan 2019: 172-74). Moreover, in significant spheres of political power, such as in the economy, the majority have few effective means of controlling their leaders, the capitalist oligarchs. Liberal democracies have therefore fallen short of ensuring majority control over their decision makers. Ergo, if Leninist democracy also falls short of granting the majority full control over the Party, *this does not necessarily mean that it is less 'democratic' than liberal democracy*. To put the same point differently, the view that liberal democracy is more democratic *does not follow* from the argument that Leninist democracy fails to realise constant majority support for the Party. Holding elections once every four or five years is a *poor* indicator of majority rule. It indicates the support a party has for one moment in time, a moment that soon passes. As such, it is a travesty to claim that that putting a cross in a box every few years is a sign of majority rule.

Macpherson is one of the few scholars to concede that a one-party regime can retain majority support in the absence of multi-party elections. Such a regime has to fulfil the following criteria:

- (1) that there is full intra-party democracy;
- (2) that party membership is open; and

(3) that the price of participation in the party is not a greater degree of activity than the average person can be expected to contribute (Macpherson 1966: 21).

Holden, though, rejects these criteria. In a Leninist state, he argues, voter ‘choice is restricted within a party ideology’, Marxism. Since the Leninist party is a Marxist organisation, Marxist ideology limits what policies Party cadres can propose and support. In a true democracy, by contrast, Holden argues that there is no governing ideology. So even if a Leninist regime fulfils Macpherson’s three criteria, it will still be undemocratic (Holden 1988: 88).

Holden’s objection is unconvincing. He assumes that choice is not restricted by ideology under democracy. Whelan (2019: 3) argues that this has never been the case. Every democracy is founded upon some set of fundamental principles that are beyond revision, and which place definite limits on what ideas can be pursued:

Does the right to vote entail the right to vote on the basis of any preference whatsoever? The concept of a free vote suggests an affirmative answer, but the normative conception of responsible voting by properly motivated citizens suggests limits (Whelan 2019: 141).

According to Whelan, ‘*illicit preferences*’ are ‘preferences that may be deemed illicit in normative democratic theory’, and which a democratic state therefore has the right to suppress. These include (but are not limited to): 1) ‘*antidemocratic preferences*’, which ‘express a wish to reject or abolish the democratic system itself’; 2) ‘*contradictory preferences*’, such as ‘a preference for the overthrow by force of the government, for the defeat of one’s state by foreign enemies, or for the dismantling of

its defensive capability'; and 3) '*malevolent and envious preferences*', which call for 'the imposition of gratuitous harm on other people' (Whelan 2019: 141-48). By suppressing these kinds of preferences, typically in a constitution, the democratic state places ideological limitations on what policies can be pursued.

In ancient Athenian democracy, for instance, voters did not enjoy unrestricted choice. One structural limitation was that the political system was founded upon slavery, and the state had to make decisions with the health of this system in mind. Athenian democracy was therefore a one-party democracy in everything but name. Although there was no political party, the 10-20% who participated in politics did share fundamental principles.

Ideological limitations exist in liberal democracies too. As Whelan explains:

Liberalism...typically upholds reserved individual rights and other principles that limit the public agenda of a liberal-democratic state; in democratic theory people may have preferences for policies that violate these principles, but they will be constitutionally blocked from acting on them (Whelan 2019: 141).

Although voters can choose amongst competing parties each promoting different ideas, the perception of no ideological restrictions is illusory, since none of these parties can enforce policies that abolish capitalism.²³ Every government must maintain a healthy capitalist economy, or else face losing the next election, and this means that policies

²³ To be sure, communist parties that stand for the abolition of capitalism can stand for election in some countries, but these parties are essentially reformist, and despite their rhetoric, they pose no threat to capitalism. If an elected communist party did try and undermine capitalism, it would likely be prevented from doing so by the 'establishment', i.e., the army, civil service, and conservative media. For a brilliant illustration of how these forces would prevent an elected socialist government from realizing socialism, see *A Very British Coup* (Mullin 2006).

are restricted within a capitalist ideology. Indeed, a major criticism of modern liberal democracy – highlighted in chapter two of this thesis – is that all of the mainstream political parties (i.e., the ones with a realistic chance of winning an election) are essentially the same-at least when it comes to fundamental economic issues- and that there are only superficial differences between them.

Similar ideological limitations exist under Leninism. The party's guiding ideology is Marxism, and this restricts the range of policies. A return to capitalism is not an option, for instance. But Lenin repeatedly emphasised that Marxism is 'not a dogma, but a guide to action' (CW 17: 39-42; Pateman 2019). He encouraged Party members to debate over how to interpret, implement, and creatively develop Marxism in practice, in the same way that liberal democratic parties propose different ways of managing capitalism.

This fact has been borne out by the variegated history of Marxism-Leninism. How else can one explain the fact that Communist Party policies have differed considerably across countries and also over time? Hoxha's Albania, with its rigid system of economic planning, looks nothing like modern China, with its embrace of markets. China itself has changed policies drastically over the decades, from the Great Leap Forward to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the economic powerhouse of today. The policy variations exhibited by successive Chinese governments have been larger than those of liberal democratic governments, which find it hard to change course, even when new parties are elected. In the UK, for instance, it is generally thought that Tony Blair's labour government was a continuation of Thatcherism. In summary, choice is restricted within an ideology in all democracies. The only thing Leninism does differently is make this ideology more explicit.

Can a Leninist state fulfil Macpherson's three criteria for majority rule? It has been

shown that Lenin supports the first criterion, that of inner party democracy. However, he rejects the second criterion, that the Party membership should be open. In Lenin's view, only the brightest, most talented elements of the working class and revolutionary movement can join the Party. If a Leninist state, therefore, did open its Party membership to all, and without discrimination, it would cease to be Leninist. Macpherson's third condition for democracy, that party members should not be expected to perform an extraordinarily high amount of work, is hard to measure, and is more a matter of opinion. On balance, however, it is probably incompatible with Leninism. Lenin always argued that party members had to work harder than the average citizen, and put the party above all else. Their workload was likely beyond what the average person could be expected to contribute. Overall, then, Leninism cannot fulfil Macpherson's three criteria for majority rule.

But are Macpherson's criteria for majority rule convincing? Not necessarily. One could make a case for them being *too stringent*. Whilst it makes sense for inner party democracy to be a requirement, the notion that the Party membership should be open is questionable. In the ancient system of Athenian democracy, only 10-20% of the population could vote. The women, slaves and metics who comprised 80-90% of the population were excluded from participation, and effectively received a dictatorship. Despite this, however, scholars continue to present Athenian democracy as the world's first democratic system. In the words of Whelan (2019: 9-10), 'Democracy both as an idea and as a practice was first developed by the ancient Greeks...The 'people' for Greek democrats meant the full, voting citizens of the city-state, a minority of the adult population'. If the highly celebrated system of Athenian democracy could get away with disbarring the bulk of its citizens, surely a vanguard Party can get away with being a similarly exclusive organisation.

Even in liberal democracies, the universal franchise is a relatively recent phenomenon. For a long time, only wealthy propertied white middle-class men could vote. In the US, for instance, Blacks, women and other groups could not vote for a long time. Despite this, white male middle-class academics championed the US as the most democratic country in the world. Although, today, the suffrage has extended to all adult citizens, full inclusion has yet to be achieved. Oligarchs continue to exercise more political power and influence than the rest of society, effectively squeezing the poor out of politics.

History shows that equal power has been a *normative* characteristic of democracy, but *never an actual characteristic*. In Lenin's conception of socialist democracy, the Party is an exclusive organisation possessing a systematic power advantage over the rest of society, but this in itself does not show the model to be undemocratic in the sense of majority rule.

Ultimately, the question of whether a one-party state can provide majority rule is an empirical question, not a theoretical question. Majority rule is not a binary 'yes' or 'no', but a sliding scale. The degree of majority control in Marxist-Leninist regimes has changed over time and space. Simply to dismiss Lenin's model as a form of minority rule is to ignore the shortcomings of liberal democracy. It also ignores the difficulties in establishing whether a regime really does have majority support. To reiterate what was said above, *this support cannot be confirmed by multi-party elections once every few years*. It is therefore arrogant Western imperialist dogmatism to assert that one-party democracy is incompatible with majority rule. Likewise, it is arrogant Marxist-Leninist dogmatism to claim that the one-party system has fully realised that ideal. The entire notion of majority rule is complex and ambiguous, and therefore needs to be treated carefully. Bold sweeping statements and judgements (such as the statement that

the one-party system equals minority rule or that the multi-party system equals majority rule) must be avoided, in the name of honest scientific enquiry and objectivity.

Scholars have, however, reconciled Lenin's one-party model with democracy in another way. Having argued that Leninism violates the 'narrow' understanding of democracy as majority rule, Macpherson proceeds to identify another, broader conception of democracy. As he explains:

Democracy has very generally been taken to mean something more than a system of government. Democracy in this broader sense has always contained an ideal of human equality, not just equality of opportunity to climb a class ladder, but such an equality as could only be fully realised in a society where no class was able to dominate or live at the expense of others. If this broader concept of democracy as equality is admitted, the claims of a vanguard state appear in a different light (Macpherson 1966: 22).

So, whilst the Leninist regime may therefore be incompatible with democracy understood as government *by* the people, it is a democracy understood as government *for* the people (Macpherson 1966: 20).

Macpherson's defence has been widely rejected. His critics argue that democracy means equality of power over decision-making. It is government *by* the people. The question of whether it produces human equality and government *for* the people is an empirical question, irrelevant to the meaning of the concept. As such, Leninist democracy cannot be described as a democracy in the 'broad' sense (Pickles 1970: 22; Lively 1975: 136; Graham 1986: 229; Holden 1988: 83; Sartori 1987: 475-476; Femia 1993: 136). Indeed, Lenin himself did not define democracy in that sense.

Jane Mansbridge offers another way of defending Leninism. She highlights the distinction between *adversary* and *unitary* democracy. The former is the conventional method for deciding between conflicting interests. By instituting the formal procedures of majority rule and one-citizen, one-vote, adversary democracy strives for political equality. Unitary democracy, by contrast, is based upon common interest, unanimity, and consensus. It maintains that where political interests are similar, political equality is unnecessary. One group of people – ‘the oldest members, the intellectual Leninist, the most interested, or the best administrators’ – can exercise more power than the rest and with the consent of all (Mansbridge 1983: 3, 19; Femia 1993: 138-140). Since unitary democracy is characterised by, and indeed dependent on, the constant exchange of information, face-to-face relationships, and a community of similar interests and perspectives, Mansbridge argues that it is feasible only in a small association or society with a rudimentary division of labour (Mansbridge 1983: 30).

According to Mansbridge, Leninists ignore this size limitation and attempt to present the Leninist state as a unitary democracy. They supposedly emphasise the ideological unity of socialism, whilst claiming that the ruling Party incarnates the unanimous consensus of society. This claim, according to Mansbridge, is based upon the Leninist doctrine that all human conflicts are reducible to class conflicts. It allegedly maintains that once the means of production are taken into common ownership, antagonistic classes cease to exist. There is no exploiting property-owning class, and no exploited class of wage slaves who own only their labour power. In place of class conflict, a homogeneity of interests emerges throughout society. And since parties represent the opposing interests of mutually hostile classes, the rationale for a multi-party competitive system disappears. A single, unchallenged party can express a consensual popular will (Mansbridge 1983: 293-294; Femia 1993: 123-124, 138-140). Mansbridge

rejects this class reductionism. In her view, the citizens of a complex large-scale society would never approach unanimity on all issues, no matter the conditions (Mansbridge 1983: 30).

Few would disagree with that assessment, though to be fair to Lenin, he does not define socialist democracy in the unitary sense. To be sure, there is undoubtedly a unitary element in Lenin's conception, in that he thinks the Party represents the working class, but he is not dogmatic enough to claim that the workers agree on all the fundamentals of socialist construction. Instead of assuming that unity is there from the outset, Lenin is concerned in *fostering* it- and unity, for him, does not mean wholehearted support for communist policies, but *consent* to these policies, which is a much more manageable and realistic goal. Indeed, it is questionable whether even unitary village communities can achieve consensus, in the strong sense of everyone fully committing to its goals.

In Lenin's vision, the Party's aim is to listen to the people and formulate a policy that the majority of them will go along with, even if they do not necessarily wholeheartedly believe in it. His conception of socialist democracy is therefore majoritarian in nature. The democratic credentials of Lenin's vision depend upon the Party's ability to maintain majority support, which is a notoriously difficult indicator to gauge.

3.2 The Working-Class Character of Socialist Democracy

Lenin argues that democracy, as the rule of the people, means the rule of the exploited classes, the poor, who comprise the majority of the 'people' in antagonistic societies.

Under developed capitalism and socialism, the majority of the population is formed of the working class, and so he argues that the 'people' refers to the working class.

Lenin rejects bourgeois democracy on the basis that it proclaims the 'rule of the people' in words only, whilst in reality enforcing the rule of a bourgeois minority. Socialist democracy ends this contradictory state of affairs by guaranteeing the working class a leading position (CW 25: 409; CW 26: 365; CW 25: 65). Lenin's reasoning is easy to follow. During the construction of socialism and communism, 'the people' is constituted by the large mass of workers. It is only after classes are abolished that 'the people' can refer to the whole of the population. Until the ultimate construction of communism, therefore, 'the people' consists of classes and social strata with unequal standing. The social groups may have identical fundamental interests, but they differ in their partial interests. As a result, certain members of these groups will not embrace the tenets of the generally approved programme of building communism. During the transition period to communism, certain elements of the petty bourgeois and intellectual class might obtain a comfortable position. They may even declare that no more work needs to be done, and that the whole of society has reached the promised land. By virtue of their class circumstances, the working class will not reach this conclusion. They will manage to transform their own conditions only once they have constructed socialism and implemented the principle 'from each according their ability, to each according to their needs'. Only then will they agree that they have reached the promised land. The working class can achieve this end only when it transforms the whole of society, and when it thereby links the fundamental improvement of its own social standing with the raising of each social group. In this sense, the working class represents not only its own historical interests, but also those of every social class. This is another reason why Lenin states that the working class must be the leading force of the socialist and

communist transformation. ‘The dominating influence of the proletariat over the rest of the working people must be constantly maintained’ (CW 29: 115), since only this class possesses the necessary strength, organisation, and socialist consciousness (CW 28: 94). Under socialism, Lenin argues, the labouring masses other than the working class, i.e., the popular majority building communism, may realise their will provided that the working class maintains a leading role.

In Lenin’s view, therefore, socialist democracy is a specific rule of the people where the working class is the *chief representative* of the people’s sovereignty. What is the meaning of this fact? How is it manifested? And what are its consequences? From the point of view of Lenin’s social philosophy, the working class is a two-faceted class. On the one hand, it is a social class with empirically observable features and aspirations. In this respect, it is like all the other classes, in that it strives to empower itself in the present, whilst giving little regard to the future. On the other hand, the working class has the attainment of communism as its immanent, organic and direct class interest. The proletariat cannot meet its own class demands unless it achieves communism. Consequently, Lenin believes that this class is the subjective condition, vehicle and active promoter of social progress. Proletarian emancipation is at the head of human emancipation. As he put it in one of his early works, ‘what is the first and main “pillar” of Marxist theory? It is that the only thoroughly revolutionary class in modern society, and therefore, the advanced class in every revolution, is the proletariat’ (CW 10: 241).

According to Liebman (1980: 353-54), Lenin says ‘nothing’ about ‘the methods of government that would make the proletariat *itself* the real wielder of state power’. This remarkable claim ignores the wealth of evidence to the contrary. Lenin argues that the leading role of the working class under socialist democracy expresses itself in two

ways. Firstly, the working class take up leading positions within the state, and secondly, the state itself follows a workers' policy.

The Working-Class Composition of the State

Since, under capitalism, Lenin argues that the bourgeoisie and middle classes man most of the political posts, liberal democracy does not manifest the rule of the people, the majority. Under socialism, Lenin argues, these minority class elements are removed from their posts and replaced by members of the working class. In this literal sense, therefore, the proletarian character of socialist democracy reflects its predominantly proletarian composition (CW 28: 420). It is therefore erroneous to argue, as Balibar and Levine do, that 'Lenin is the only great Marxist theoretician not to advance a workerist conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat'. It is wrong to claim that he sought merely to democratise the state apparatus, whilst rejecting the notion of the working class dominating the state institutions (Balibar 1977: 114; Levine 1977: 79). This view cannot be maintained. Lenin is an unashamed workerist. He argues that the proletarian composition of the socialist state is guaranteed, firstly, because the working class, as the ruling class, is in the strongest position to access political posts. It is guaranteed, secondly, because the state bodies are obliged to demand that the majority of officials be from the working class. In the period immediately after the October Socialist Revolution, for instance, Lenin voiced the pre-revolutionary demand for the Party consistently to train and appoint to responsible posts people of working-class origin (CW 30: 311). He obliged the Party, the state bodies and the trade unions to keep a register of workers whom they considered as suitable for occupying responsible jobs. Lenin insisted that these organisations should try out the people in question, and, if they found them to be able, promote them to increasingly demanding positions (CW 30:

297-98). Lenin found it so important to draw into the central leadership rank-and-file workers that he applied this principle to the Party Central Committee as well. In 1921, in an outline of the speech at a meeting denouncing the 'platform of ten', Lenin wrote that it was necessary to 'take really proletarian elements into the Central Committee' (CW 42: 282). In his letter to the Party's Thirteenth Congress in December 1922, Lenin proposed to increase the Central Committee membership to dozens or even a hundred. He regarded it as important to enhance the Central Committee's prestige by selecting members mainly from among the proletariat. As he put it: 'It seems to me that our Party has every right to demand from the working class 50 to 100 C.C. members, and that it could get them from it without unduly taxing the resources of that class' (CW 36: 593). His justification for this proposal was that the workers would greatly improve the 'administrative machinery'. Indeed, they could 'deal better than anybody else with checking, improving and remodelling our state apparatus' (CW 36: 596-97). In the same letter Lenin attached cardinal importance to the increased workers' character of the central leadership. Aside from helping to avoid a personality cult or a split in the Party, he also argued that it would improve socialist governmental activity.

Lenin recognises that maximising the working-class composition of the state will not by itself make it representative. For although, in his view the workers all share a common interest that stems from their common economic position, the working *women* will have different concerns to the working men. As such, Lenin also stresses the importance of recruiting as many women as possible into government positions, so that they can ensure that the adopted policies take their views into consideration (CW 28: 180-82).

Lenin does not base the leading role of the working class upon some mystical teaching or some romantic adoration for the workers, which now and then comes into

vogue amongst left-wing intellectuals. His view originates in a thorough analysis of society and its class relationships. In his view, only the working millions can create a society that is free from exploitation, since it is their daily and historical interest to realise this goal. Lenin neither looks at the workers through rose tinted glasses nor attempts to make idols of them. As he put it in 1918, '[w]hen the worker became the vanguard leader of the poor he did not thereby become a saint...Having begun the communist revolution, the working class cannot instantly discard the weaknesses and vices inherited from the society of landowners and capitalists' (CW 27: 398). Indeed, the workers inherit many of the beliefs characteristic of their oppressed position capitalism, such as servility to 'greater powers', the belief that only the wealthy can rule the state, and a general disdain for politics. Such views cannot be swept away immediately after the socialist revolution. To think otherwise is utopian. Socialism must be built with the workers holding these mentalities, which 'tend to drag the proletariat down' (CW 28: 424-25).

In Lenin's view, the historic mission of the working class, that it is the gravedigger of capitalism and the leading force of the whole working people, does not in itself make it a 'pure socialist force'. The working class, as the builder of the new society that it is, cannot get rid of its pre-socialist blemishes overnight. Thanks to its class character, however, it does have the ability to overcome these blemishes. Accordingly, emphasising that the working class is not saintly and cannot instantly discard its weaknesses and vices, Lenin also says that 'the working class can vanquish the old world – *and in the end will certainly and inevitably vanquish it* – with its vices and weaknesses' (CW 27: 298). Furthermore, he suggests that it is their own revolutionary and society-building activity that enables the workers to cleanse themselves of the filth of the old world.

In the period immediately after the socialist revolution, Lenin argues, the Communist Party may only have a few trained proletarian leaders. And this makes it necessary to employ non-proletarian leaders who possess the necessary expertise. This may in turn create a paradoxical situation. It may well happen that the Communist Party struggles to empower petty bourgeois specialists by allowing them to supervise the realisation of minor tasks (but, of course, adhering to the socialist line). This is why after the October revolution Lenin argued that it was necessary to put every available expert, including those holding bourgeois views and those belonging to the capitalist class, in minor administrative posts (CW 29: 136). Understandably, the broad masses did not understand this policy, and it even led to oppositional factions emerging within the Party. But Lenin repeatedly tried to explain that the employment of bourgeois experts was a short-term practical necessity rather than a theoretical principle (CW 29: 24). In more general terms, he maintained that it was the working class, rather than the bourgeois experts, who would always take up the majority of leading posts and solve the general tasks of socialist construction. As he put it in 1919, whenever the soviet government encountered difficulties in its socialist tasks, it overcame them by turning to the workers, ever wider and broader sections of the workers. Although the workers lacked training the regime was not afraid, since they would soon transcend their shortcomings and emerge as competent administrators (CW 28: 403).

Whilst Lenin believes that the working class should dominate the state posts, he rejects the idea that this class should bar the other labouring groups from participating in state affairs. In fact, the exact opposite is the case. Throughout his works Lenin consistently rejects the doctrines that ignore the role of the broad masses in history. He argues that any radical social transformation must and does involve the participation of the broadest masses (CW 26: 364).

In Lenin's view, the strength of proletarian democracy depends on the mobilisation, consciousness and active attitudes of the masses. This is reflected in his statement that 'you cannot do anything without rousing the masses to action' (CW 26: 501). In his view, the strength of the state is in the consciousness of the masses. The state is strong when it informs the masses of everything, when the masses are able to form an independent opinion on every issue, and when they are able to act consciously at all times. State reliance upon the strength and awareness of the masses assumes a vast importance under socialism. Indeed, the success of socialism depends upon these factors. Therefore, as before the socialist revolution, the proletariat, as the leading force under socialism, has to struggle against the other classes in order to win the support of the masses. Lenin points out that this support is not won immediately and nor is it 'decided by elections'. It is instead through its own practical work of socialist construction that the working class will win over the masses (CW 30: 60).

Lenin argues that the proletariat must continue to rely on popular support after it has consolidated its dictatorship. This is because the working class cannot rouse the masses to build socialism unless the masses recognise the necessity of its leading role, in addition to the correctness of its goals. In this regard, Lenin argues that state power is the major instrument of winning over the non-proletarian masses (CW 30: 262).

The evolution of socialist democracy is a long process. During emergency periods the bulk of the working masses may fluctuate in their support for the working class, their vanguard. During these periods, the workers in leading positions may limit the participation of the masses in order to safeguard the construction of socialism. Lenin argues that this was the case during the Russian civil war, when the invading white armies stirred up anti-socialist sentiment amongst the labouring classes. Under these conditions the advanced workers were compelled to intervene. As he observed in 1919,

the soviets, which in theory represented the working people, were in practice ‘organs of government *for the working people* by the advanced section of the proletariat, but not by the working people as a whole’ (CW 29: 183). But socialist democracy cannot last long if the working class does not draw upon the other social strata. And for this reason, they make every effort to gain the support and participation of the broadest masses.

In Lenin’s conception the working class is in a dominating position. It has a systematic advantage over the other social groups. But Lenin does not portray this violation of equality as the violation of democracy. His point is that democracy has a class character, and it is therefore a political manifestation of class inequalities. In every democracy there has always been a ruling class that assumes a leading role, and which dominates over the others. In the democracy of ancient Athens, it was a small stratum of enfranchised slave-owning males that had this role, whilst in present day liberal democracy the bourgeoisie have it. The ruling class in any democracy has to maintain a leading role in order to maintain its dominant position.

Lenin also emphasises the fact that socialist democracy strives towards communism, a form of society in which political inequalities are minimal, whereas the exploiting democracies maintain or even strengthen the dominance of the exploiters vis-à-vis the other classes.

Lenin’s logic is that the class that is most interested in transcending political inequality should be in a more advantageous position to implement its policy goals. And in the historical struggle for the introduction and consolidation of bourgeois and socialist democracy, this class has always been the working class. The bourgeoisie has always shown an ambivalent attitude towards democracy. Throughout history they have frequently opted for monarchy or even fascism over democracy when it has suited their

needs better (CW 26: 53; CW 23: 71-72). As paradoxical as it may therefore sound, Lenin argues that social inequalities will not disappear unless the working class ensures its domination, i.e., its unequal socio-political role.

The Workers' Policy of the Socialist State

Lenin argues that the working class can maintain its leading role only if a workers' policy guides society. Owing to the two-faceted character of the working class, this policy also has two aspects. The first is the concrete needs following from the empirically observable existence of the working class, whilst the second is the construction of communism. Both of these aims require to be pursued in order for socialist democracy to function successfully. The process of finding a harmony between the workers' empirically observable interests and the requirements of communist construction is never automatic. Conscious efforts are required in order to achieve the optimum proportion. The Communist Party of the working class plays a leading role in this activity.

In accordance with his belief that socialist democracy will express itself in different forms, Lenin believes that the workers' policy will also appear in diverse concrete forms throughout the historical phases of society. It can be amended and updated in accordance with the changing times and historical conditions, if necessary. Lenin himself changed his own ideas on the workers' policy several times before and after the socialist revolution. When he decided to propose alterations or add new points, the determinate factors included the concrete historical conditions, the state of the working class, and the opportunities and requirements of progress. There are, however, principles that resonate throughout all of Lenin's major writings on the tasks of socialist

construction, as expressed in his draft programmes of the Communist Party. Without attempting to offer an exhaustive list, it is useful here to name some of them:

- (i) The indirect or direct, but certainly genuine, assertion of the working class's leading role in all fields of social life.
- (ii) The planned and proportionate development of the economy, which enables the socialist power regularly to develop the workers living standards. In the long run, i.e., under communism, every individual must be able to satisfy their needs and develop their creative capacities.
- (iii) The development of property relations, with the aim of making collective ownership the preponderant form of property.
- (iv) The high-level organisation of work, the elimination of the traditional, quasi-natural forms of the division of labour, and the liquidation of the antithesis of mental and physical labour by enabling the individual to pass from one profession to another. The elimination of the differences in social station and prestige that arise from the hierarchical relations between the workers and management, coupled with the democratisation of working conditions.
- (v) The assertion of the principle 'to each according to his work', in addition to the gradual transformation of socially useful work into the sole source of income. The regular raising of incomes, and the approximation of the highest and lowest incomes by a gradual levelling.
- (vi) The constant improvement and regular equalisation of living conditions. The expansion of social benefits, the intensification of the production of goods, the promotion of a genuinely human appropriation, the equalisation of the people's opportunities for consumption.

- (vii) The elimination of the isolation of the various social groups. The replacement of the sense of 'ego' with the sense of belonging to a group, as well as a unified society.
- (viii) The bringing of labour, the worker, and those who strive for the construction of communism, into the highest social esteem.
- (ix) The assurance of the individual right to participate directly or indirectly in the discussion and management of public affairs. The right to participate in the supervising activities by constantly broadening socialist democracy.
- (x) The diffusion of the working masses' plebeian outlook – its common sense, democratism, sense of justice, modesty, puritanism, love of life, etc. – among the public at large.
- (xi) The assurance of equal opportunities for every person to achieve self-realisation.

In accordance with the changing concrete conditions, it will be necessary to prioritise some of these policies over others. But Lenin does not view them as arbitrary. Firstly, they follow from the essence of the working class and its dual character. Secondly, even the politically uneducated workers voice these demands both before and during the period of socialist construction. The Party has the duty to define these policies concretely, and precisely, and it must lead the activities aimed at the assertion of these requirements. For Lenin, then, *the implementation of the workers' policy means the complete assertion of a system of values and political principles that are represented chiefly by the working people, and which are the manifestations of communist tendencies.*

Lenin believes that the mode, methods, and organisational forms of the realisation of these working-class expectations are determined by the concrete historical conditions of the day. In his view, therefore, the temporary emergence of tendencies

that seem to contradict some of these policies does not necessarily mean the abandonment of the whole platform. For example, it is imperative to implement the policy of bringing the people into an equal position. Yet during the early stages of socialist construction, it is also necessary to implement the principle of distribution according to the work done, in addition to pecuniary incentives, in order to raise productive efficiency. This in turn may provisionally stabilise or even increase the inequality of social groups (CW 29: 136). During this phase of development, however, paying some people more than others does not contradict the policy of obtaining greater equality. For by increasing the productive wealth and abundance of society this measure serves as an instrument for obtaining communism, which in turn provides the material basis for equality. Generally speaking, Lenin argues that the decisions and measures have always adequately to meet the concrete requirements of the concrete situation, thereby promoting the cause of the working class, the cause of communism.

It is useful at this point to formulate in other words Lenin's thesis on the leading role of the working class, which manifests itself in a policy that pursues the requirements listed above: *The interest of the working class is not simply one among the many class interests of the classes in socialist society.* The outlook, needs, viewpoints and opinions of the working people *are not simply one* among the possible approaches and views. The actions of the working class *are not simply one* of the forces that cooperate or conflict under socialism. *In the system of socialist democracy, the decisive and almost universally accepted stand is that of the working class. And as a rule, the actions of the working people are the examples to be followed by the remaining social groups.*

Lenin argues that the proletarian character of socialist democracy is at its clearest in the period immediately after the revolution, when the working class is the most conscious and active force of the new power. The other classes and social strata that

have an increasing share in the exercise of power will themselves be subject to change. Once the socialist power consolidates itself, and after the masses have transformed the political, economic and cultural spheres of society, the workers' power will enlist ever-broader sections of the non-proletarian masses into the management of public affairs. These changes may result in the widening of socialist democracy, since people from the most diverse social stations will become direct and active participants. In light of these changes in the social background of the power-holders and the broadening of democracy, the primarily *proletarian character* of socialist democracy will fade. Lenin believes that the replacement of the gradually disappearing proletarian character of socialist democracy by a classless character is a healthy process, one that is in line with the gradual obliteration of class distinctions. However, he does not believe that the class character of democracy withers away. Firstly, the class distinctions will not disappear until the ultimate construction of communism. Therefore, these distinctions and their consequences – including the resultant requirements concerning the building of the state – remain important. Second, there is no classless socialism, and consequently, *socialist democracy always has a class character*. It reflects the interests, views, norms, outlook, and sense of justice of the working class. Lenin argues that the working class has socialism and communism as its principal goals. All attempts at creating other forms of socialism have been made from different class platforms. Moreover, these programmes have failed in building a society free from exploitation. Socialist democracy is therefore the manifestation and the means of the implementation of the only true programme of the working class, one that is based on the doctrine of scientific socialism outlined by Marx and Engels. Lenin believes that the remaining classes can fulfil their interests only upon the basis of this platform, and the majority of their interests that are in line with the socialist cause will be realised. Socialist democracy is

based on this platform of class character. It calls everybody who agrees with this platform to take part in its implementation.

Reflections

Lenin's defence of the leading role of the working class has been given insufficient attention by his commentators. Nevertheless, it represents a serious attempt to realise the form of rule envisioned by Marx and Engels. Marx wrote that 'in regard to the world which is coming into being, the proletariat...finds himself possessing the same rights as the *German King*' (MECW 3: 187). And in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels famously said that 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy' (MECW 6: 504). Lenin adds some meat onto the bones of these statements by Marx and Engels.

Going further back in time, Lenin's conception also revitalises the interpretation of democracy envisioned by Plato and Aristotle. These thinkers defined democracy, the 'rule of the people', as the rule of the poor, since they constituted the majority in society. The interesting thing is that Plato and Aristotle based this view partially upon Athenian democracy, which could not be fully described as the rule of the poor. Athenian democracy was founded upon an army of slaves, who were denied even the most basic democratic rights. Lenin's measures for ensuring the proletarian composition of the state represents a serious effort to ensure that democracy really is the 'rule of the people', rather than the rule of an unrepresentative minority. In Lenin's view, the staffs, assemblies and governments of many liberal democracies are dominated by the rich, despite the fact that the working classes comprise the majority of the population. These democracies can therefore be described as the 'rule of the people' only in the formal

sense. By guaranteeing the working class the majority of state posts, however, Lenin aims to ensure that democracy, as the rule of the majority, is actually composed of the people who comprise the majority.

Lenin's workers' policy reflects his view that democracy means not only rule *by* the working class, but rule *for* the working class. Although democracy, for him, is primarily a form of state expressing majority rule, it is also a set of policies serving the interests of the majority. A potential danger here is that the Leninist may wittingly or unwittingly begin emphasising government for the people over government by the people. Put differently, the Leninist may choose to conflate popular support for the government's policies with popular power. This would be a dangerous move to make, because popular support cannot be conflated with democracy. Although there is obviously a close connection between 'support,' or 'consent,' and 'democracy', democratic decision-making procedures are only one means of securing support. There are other means also, which are not necessarily or in themselves democratic. For example, the authoritarian dictator who provides a high material standard of living might well secure mass popular support, and may even be regarded as ruling 'legitimately,' for that very reason – all in the absence of 'democracy.'

On this point, there is an issue that needs highlighting: it is difficult to measure the extent to which the majority of the population actually dictates the workers' policy. Since the Communist Party plays a leading role in devising it, the input of the working class will necessarily be limited. In order to ensure that the workers' policy genuinely reflects the majority will, the Party must maintain a close relationship with the masses; and be willing to modify unpopular policies in accordance with their demands. If the Party dogmatically imposes its line without doing this, then the majoritarian credentials of its policy can be called into question. Clearly, there are limitations on what revisions

the Party will accept, since the construction of communism cannot be jeopardised. On the other hand, however, a dogmatic line will reduce popular input and potentially undermine the Party's claim to represent the people. The degree of democracy is largely determined by the extent to which the majority of citizens determine and control the government's policies. As such, the Party's main task is to facilitate this mass control, which will likely require ideological flexibility and compromise on its own part. Specifically, the Party must enlist the masses in the task of formulating the workers' policy for the construction of socialism and communism, end goals that not every worker will endorse. The aims of socialism and communism must remain as broad as possible, since only this broadness will stave off mass alienation from the workers' policy; and ensure that the workers can contribute to its formulation. To the extent that the Party prevents the masses from influencing and shaping its workers' policy, the regime will be undemocratic.

3.3 Socialist Democratic Rights

Commentators have often interpreted Lenin's critique of bourgeois democratic rights as the rejection of constitutionalism and rights tout court, even under socialism (Polan 1984: 92; Vishniak 1946: 615). According to Silverman (1972: 12-13), for instance, Lenin thought that 'bourgeois democracy offered few liberties worth having', whilst Femia (1993: 36) argues that he saw democratic rights as the 'ideological supports of the bourgeois system and had to be destroyed along with it'.

This influential narrative has no textual basis. Constitutionalism, the idea of written constitutions, predated bourgeois democracy. It existed in the ancient states of Greece and Rome, and other civilisations. Liberals therefore do not have exclusive ownership over formal liberties. As chapter two of this thesis argued, Lenin's critique of rights does not challenge their existence, but their application under liberal democracy (Townshend 1999: 72). For one thing, he argues that they are made purely formal by the right to private property. The bourgeoisie, by virtue of their wealth and power, can make better use of these rights than the working class. They can use their monopoly over the media, meeting places, etc., to sway the public opinion, suppress any counter-narratives, and thereby cement the rule of their class. Whilst Lenin rejects the right to private property under socialism, he argues that the socialist person of communist society can emerge only by preserving and developing the other bourgeois rights, not by destroying them. Only the protection of bourgeois rights will allow the masses to determine their own destinies and thereby realise their innate human powers. Only then will the workers be able to 'display their abilities, develop the capacities, and reveal

those talents, so abundant among the people whom capitalism crushed, suppressed and strangled in thousands and millions' (CW 26: 407).

By abolishing the right to private ownership of the means of production, Lenin argues that socialist democracy does away with the formal character of the various political rights of freedom. Instead of merely proclaiming civil and democratic rights, it ensures their real assertion and actual enjoyment. Moreover, it 'guarantees them in practice first and foremost to those classes of the population who were oppressed by capitalism, i.e., the proletariat and the peasantry' (CW 36: 505).

Lenin argues that the democratism of socialist democracy is broader than liberal democracy because the majority of the population can effectively utilise and enjoy their rights for the first time: 'chief stress is shifted from formal *recognition* of liberties (such as existed under bourgeois parliamentarism) to actually ensuring the *enjoyment* of liberties by the working people who are overthrowing the exploiters' (CW 27: 155).

The notion that Lenin opposed freedom of the press is, as Marik (2008: 343) rightly mentions, 'a standard bourgeois attack' (see, for instance, Sartori 1987: 471). This claim grossly simplifies his position. Under socialism, Lenin (CW 28: 248) argues that 'freedom of the press ceases to be hypocrisy, because the printing-plants and stocks of paper are taken away from the bourgeoisie' and given to the masses (CW 26: 287). 'The same thing applies to the best buildings, the palaces, the mansions and manor houses'. The Socialist power removes these buildings from the exploiters and thereby makes 'the right of assembly—without which democracy is a fraud—a *million times* more democratic for the people' (CW 28: 248). All of these things are placed at 'the entire disposal of the working people and their organisations' (CW 36: 505). Socialist democracy therefore replaces 'freedom of assembly and the press for the minority, for the exploiters', with 'freedom of assembly and the press for the *majority* of the

population, for the working people' (CW 28: 371).

Lenin regards freedom of the press, speech and assembly as automatic features of socialist organisation. Although he views property rights as dispensable, he believes that the ultimate aim of socialism is not social ownership of the means of production, but the abolition of classes and every kind of oppression. He therefore views attempts to limit the free expression of the masses as antithetical to democracy, and this means that civil and political rights are an integral part of human emancipation, rather than an optional extra. Lenin advances a utilitarian justification for free expression. Like J. S. Mill, he believes that it will widen mental horizons and stimulate the growth of knowledge, both of which are essential to the development of the new socialist person. One cannot produce this superior being by crushing rights, and by attempting to control how people think and behave. Lenin recognises that a properly functioning socialist democracy requires a well-educated and well-informed citizenry, to the creation of which freedom of the press, speech and assembly may contribute.

But does Lenin's support of 'one's rights as man and citizen' not contradict the relativism of his materialist outlook, which reduces ethical principles to transitory economic relations? Do these rights not clash with his principled rejection of 'any morality based on extra-human and extra-class concepts'? (see Ch. 2.2) Not necessarily. From Lenin's materialist perspective, the equation of democratic rights with the good life is not a universal truth, derived from some abstract essence, but the result of historically created possibilities and needs. As such, Lenin's defence of bourgeois rights is compatible with his historical materialist outlook.

Of course, Lenin refuses the idea of automatically extending these rights to everyone. The long period following the downfall of capitalism and the construction of socialism is 'marked by the suppression of capitalist resistance' and the 'systematic

application of coercion to an entire class (the bourgeoisie) and its accomplices', since only this can ensure the survival of socialism. In his view, anyone who desires to restore the capitalist order or undermine the construction of socialism during this period is a threat to democracy, and they should have their rights rescinded. Lenin has no time for the petty bourgeois demands for capitalist property rights. He has no patience for 'their howls, their pathetic speeches, their clownish cries of "freedom"', because the 'freedom' they desire is the 'freedom for the capitalists to oppress the people' (CW 26: 402). The more the exploiters resist the socialist state, the more fiercely they will be repressed (CW 26: 403). Lenin makes it clear that the working class 'cannot achieve victory *without breaking the resistance of the bourgeoisie, without forcibly suppressing its adversaries*, and that, where there is "forcible suppression", where *there is no "freedom", there is, of course, no democracy*' (CW 28: 256-57). It follows from this that 'in order to emancipate the working people from the yoke of capital' it is necessary to 'deprive the capitalists of freedom of assembly; their "freedom" must be abolished, or curtailed'. 'To grant freedom of assembly to the capitalists would be a heinous crime against the working people; it would mean freedom of assembly for counterrevolutionaries' (CW 29: 354).

Lenin also has few qualms about the 'freedom of the press that the Bolsheviks have constantly been accused of having violated'. He is 'proud of having produced the first press free of the capitalists...a press that does not depend on a handful of rich men and millionaires—a press that is devoted entirely to the struggle against capital' (CW 29: 534). To maintain freedom of the press for the bourgeoisie would be political 'suicide', particularly in a socialist regime surrounded by a capitalist ocean (CW 32: 505).

In a bid to make Lenin appear as the enemy of democratic rights, hostile commentators have routinely abstracted these comments from their historical context

and also taken exaggerated their severity. According to Femia (1993: 36), for instance, Lenin argues that it is ‘absurd to grant rights to the bourgeoisie, and other counter-revolutionaries’ (see also Medvedev 1981: 159). This accusation has no basis. Whilst Lenin argues that the restriction of rights to the bourgeoisie is a *possible* feature of socialist democracy, he does not view it as a *necessary* feature. In 1918, for instance, the soviet government disenfranchised the bourgeoisie, but Lenin said that the restriction of the franchise was ‘a nationally specific and not a general question of the dictatorship’. The question can be settled only by taking into account the peculiar conditions of the nation in question. As such, it is mistaken to suggest that any socialist revolution should ‘be necessarily accompanied by restriction of the franchise for the bourgeoisie’. This measure, Lenin argues, ‘is *not absolutely necessary* for the exercise of the dictatorship’ (CW 28: 255-56). Its exercise is purely provisional. Once the extraordinary conditions necessitating it disappear, the measure will be abolished (CW 29: 125).

For Lenin, therefore, the measure of restriction of rights under socialist democracy depends upon the opposition of the exploiters, and on the danger their attempts at restoration involve. The limitation of the rights and opportunities of such people is nothing but a countermeasure against their hostile actions. And it is also a preventive measure against further actions that may damage the construction of socialism and cost human lives. If the exploiters cooperate peacefully with the socialist regime, then there is no reason to suppress their rights. But in a critical situation of counterrevolution or civil war, the socialist forces must bar the forces of counterrevolution from freedom and democracy (CW 28: 256).

Lenin had no time for the bourgeois intellectuals who claimed that the soviet government’s restriction of rights to certain groups undermined democracy and

freedom. He argued that this criticism was hypocritical, since several of the most successful and long-lasting bourgeois democratic revolutions took the very same measure in order to safeguard their own achievements. By contrast, the democratic revolutions that gave all groups equal treatment did not last (CW 29: 354).

Needless to say, Lenin argues that the civil and political rights enjoyed by the workers are not absolute values. Even these rights *have their limitations*. They do not enable citizens to say and do anything they like without punishment. Under socialism, rights exist and are granted to the extent that citizens respect the policies and methods of socialist construction outlined by the Communist Party. Those who attempt to exercise their ‘freedoms’ to undermine socialism or the leading role of the Party are counterrevolutionaries, and will be repressed with all means necessary. Whilst Lenin encouraged criticism of the regime, this criticism must be *constructive*. It must be aimed at improving established policies, highlighting mistakes, and addressing abuses in power. They should not be addressed against the regime itself. The construction of socialism takes place in conditions of extensive internal and external opposition, and so the Party and state must militantly oppose all actions that undermine this construction. Freedom of the press, association, expression, and so on, exist within a framework of a revolutionary one-party state, one that is struggling to survive in a sea of hostility. Under these emergency conditions, rights can never be unlimited. They cannot be used as weapons to undermine the Party and state. Lenin does not hide this limitation, and he makes no apologies for defending it.

Under liberal democracy, Lenin argues, the civil and political democratic rights are primarily negative freedoms. They offer liberty *from* something and not *for* something. Under socialist democracy the situation is different. Whilst maintaining a range of civil and political rights found in the bourgeois republic, it also introduces an ever-expanding

range of social, economic and cultural rights, such as the right to work, healthcare, education, and housing. Because the working masses are given increasing access to the basic material necessities of human life, they do not have to preoccupy themselves with merely surviving or just 'getting by'. And this means that the vast majority of the population can participate in the political life of society. They are not distracted by poverty, chronic sickness, or rumbling bellies.

For Lenin, then, rights under socialist democracy have a class character. They are designed primarily for the enjoyment of the working class, and they are denied to the exploiters and enemies of socialism. Lenin argues that socialist democracy facilitates the constant enrichment of democratic freedoms. Development in this respect may not be even. But the main tendency is the extension and improvement of these rights. Lenin recognises that the mere codification of the rights of the working people does not guarantee these rights in practice. Regulation itself is no guarantee that these rights will become live and organic parts of socialist democracy and life. These rights can become a reality only when the workers actively strive to create them. This means that the socialist consciousness and self-governing activity of the workers is of crucial importance in ensuring the optimal development of rights. In the second place, Lenin argues that the Communist Party also plays a fundamental role in assisting the efficient unfolding and mobilisation of this process. The Party induces all the conscious forces of society, the social organisations, the mass movements, and the socialist state, to act in this spirit.

Reflections

Lenin's conception of rights under socialism aims to enhance democracy in several

respects. Instead of merely proclaiming this or that right on paper, whilst failing to make it effective for some in practice, the state takes active efforts to ensure that most can enjoy them. Lenin argues that this marks a significant advance over liberal democracy, where the working class cannot make the most of the civil and political rights they supposedly have.

Lenin's insistence upon the provision of social, economic and cultural rights also attempts to advance over liberal democracy. His logic is that if the people are fed, housed, healthy and educated, then they will be in a better position to participate in the political life of society. Throughout the long history of democracy, Lenin argues that only a privileged minority has possessed the sufficient material resources to dedicate itself to extensive political participation. In ancient Greece, this minority was the wealthy slave-owning class, whilst in the liberal democracies of today it is the middle class and upper classes. Lenin's conception of socialist democracy tries to give the majority of the population – the working class – the necessary material requisites to dedicate itself to political life. The aim of this is the constant expansion and enrichment of democracy.

Whelan (2019: 33) argues that Lenin's refusal to grant rights to counterrevolutionaries is undemocratic, since 'the [democratic] principles of free speech and political equality imply tolerance of competing political opinions, and although one may have opponents whom one seeks to defeat, one cannot have enemies whom one seeks to destroy or eliminate, as in a revolution'. In his own analysis of Leninist democracy, Femia argues that this is not necessarily true. 'Traditionally, political democracy has not been associated with individual rights and humanitarian behaviour; it has simply denoted popular rule' (Femia 1993: 138). This is also Lenin's argument. He sees no violation of democracy in the refusal to grant rights to

counterrevolutionaries, since he argues that this has occurred in many democratic regimes. The supposedly 'universal', 'inalienable' rights of humankind have never been universal or inalienable, even in the places where they were presented as such.

An ambiguity in Lenin's socialist rights discourse is that the term 'counterrevolutionary' is subjective and vague. There is no objective way of identifying a phenomenon that fits this label. What one person sees as counterrevolutionary propaganda, another may interpret as constructive criticism. If the term counterrevolutionary is interpreted and applied too broadly, then the genuine supporters of socialism may get repressed along with the genuine enemies, which is something Lenin does not want. This will in turn make the populace too afraid to voice their aspirations and opinions. When this happens, the freedom of speech required by democracy will become a façade, and the knock on the door in the middle of the night may become the norm of daily life. Lenin's policy regarding the suppression of counterrevolutionaries is open to potential abuse by those who want to silence any opposition to the government. This problem could be reduced in severity if Lenin specified some kind of transparent democratic procedure for identifying counterrevolutionary activities.

Of course, this issue is not unique to Lenin's conception of socialist democracy. Every democratic system has dealt with it. In the democratic state of ancient Athens Socrates received a death sentence for his subversive ideas, whilst liberal democracies have also gone through periods of harsh ideological repression. During the 'red scare' of the US McCarthy era, for instance, many innocent people were persecuted for their communist ideas, which were basically outlawed in the country. Ultimately, the preservation of free public debate depends not upon formal rights, but upon a democratic culture and the widespread diffusion of democratic values and habits

(Whelan 2019: 14). The question of whether Lenin's model can facilitate this democratic culture is open to debate.

3.4 Mass Democracy

In contrast to bourgeois democracy, where political participation for the majority is limited to putting a cross in a box once every few years, Lenin argues that socialist democracy enlists the broad masses in the daily administration of their public affairs. To begin with, socialism is to a significant extent founded upon direct democracy. That is, the masses are free to express their opinions about public affairs, and the government does its best to heed their advice. Lenin highlights the special importance of workers' meetings in this regard. Here the participants have the opportunity to discuss diverse issues, weigh the important causes and effects of the proposed alternative solutions, and adopt resolutions. Challenging those who derided the workers' discussions at various meetings, Lenin wrote early in 1918 that meetings were an effective measure through which the workers could shake off their debilitating servile capitalist mentalities and gain their confidence as the leaders, masters and creators of the new state (CW 27: 270).

Lenin views the direct discussion of diverse issues as an integral part of socialist democracy. Because of this, several commentators have labelled his vision as a form of 'direct democracy', 'anarcho-syndicalism', 'utopian anarchism', 'libertarian anarchism', or 'grassroots democracy', at least in his *State and Revolution* (Daniels 1953: 22; Meyer 1963: 197; Sartori 1965: 426; Ulam 1965: 353; Fischer 1964: 122; Barfield 1971: 46, 47, 52; Theen 1973: 117, 118-19; Conquest 1972: 86-87; Liebman 1980: 194, 202; Anderson 1995: 165-66). These labels are misleading. They give the erroneous impression that the local mass institutions make all the major decisions, and that parliamentary, representative institutions hardly play a part. This reading has no

basis. Whilst Lenin believes that socialism can implement some of the possible features of direct democracy, he does not believe that it can implement all of them. And nor does he conceive of socialist democracy in anarchistic terms.

In Lenin's opinion, the idea of the citizenry deciding every major political question by voting is unrealistic and inefficient, as is the idea that there should be full rotation of all the leading offices (contrary to Meyer 1963: 190; and Polan 1984: 14). Under socialism, he argues that the whole of society needs full-time trained leaders. Lenin made this clear long before the October Socialist Revolution. In his *What is to be Done?*, Lenin identified the 'need for professional *journalists*, parliamentarians, etc., for the Social-Democratic leadership of the proletarian class struggle...direct legislation by the whole people...can be applied only relatively in modern society' (CW 5: 481). The working class must advance a group of leaders that can devote themselves to the task of constructing socialism. Accordingly, Lenin insists that socialist democracy cannot be confined to the workers' direct actions. It also involves elements of representative democracy: authority delegated to people's representatives, peoples' representative bodies, and administrative experts.

Why and how do the various forms of representative democracy manifest themselves? Firstly, when the workers participate in mass meetings and conferences in order to manage public affairs, Lenin argues that these events cannot become endless and unproductive sessions. The purpose of a meeting is the definition of targets and the ways and means of their achievement, as well as the election of those responsible for their fulfilment. But the fulfilment itself is naturally outside the duty of meetings. It takes place later and under different circumstances. Even when the masses are directly involved in governing over themselves, the decision-making process and implementation do not necessarily take place at the same time. And there is a difference

between those who pass the decisions and those who implement them. In other words, the direct democratic activity of the masses cannot be conscious and purposeful action by itself. In its 'primitive' form, the activity of the masses is spontaneous. Yet the workers have to transcend this spontaneity if they wish to produce real results. Therefore, when implementing a decision, the people have to divide labour amongst themselves and find the best determined forms of organisation serving the evolution of mass activity. This, in turn requires, full time representatives and leaders. Even if the group of decision-makers is identical with the people carrying out actual decisions, there is a significant difference between direct democracy in decision-making, and conscious, planned implementation, the latter being indirect in nature. Such a complex process requires the employment of indirect forms (CW 30: 428-29). As such, once the masses have awakened themselves, Lenin argues that they have to leave the phase of merely airing questions at workers' meetings behind. Whilst preserving the scope for meetings and broad discussions, the workers must introduce the strictest individual responsibility in the execution of assignments (CW 27: 213).

Second, whilst Lenin states that the direct democratic forms should define the chief objectives and draw up guidelines to implement them, he does not suggest that they should discuss the minute problems of execution. The various representatives and experts perform the latter task. This means that the masses do not participate in each phase of the process directly. They also assert their will only indirectly in the various ways and means of execution.

Third, Lenin argues that the mass meetings and other popular forms should authorise certain workers or groups of workers to put their decisions into practice and control their implementation. Here, the decision-makers are not identical with the people who direct the implementation. Since the latter become leaders, they have greater rights than

the former. They are superiors whose power originates in the masses, and the working people can exert only an indirect influence upon them (CW 27: 212-13). In the weeks following the October Socialist Revolution, for instance, Lenin took a stand against holding too many meetings, whilst calling for strict discipline and an unconditional subordination to the leaders (CW 27: 271).

Lenin's believes that socialist democracy must increase, develop and effectively use the workers' activity, whilst also assuring that the leaders can conduct effective work. In his view, the fulfilment of this binary requirement is the *sine qua non* of successful of leaders' work in socialist society and the construction of a new society.

Fourth, it is a vital issue of socialist democracy that the working people can assert their will not only in the bodies and institutions directly accountable to the masses. The same should also apply to the organs, such as the medium and high-level directing bodies of the state, economy and culture. In order to meet this requirement, the workers must be able to assert their interests from below upwards into every field of the life of society. But this cannot be solved through direct mass actions and its chief form, direct democracy, as exercised in small communities. Therefore, the masses' direct actions must be augmented with the forms of representative democracy. The latter allow the working masses to have a say in the diverse spheres of social life through their delegates, representative organs and other people's organisations. They may use these bodies for influencing and checking the entire process of government and the work of the various social institutions.

For Lenin, therefore, it is the institutions of representative democracy that enable the working people to make their exercise of power complete. They enable the working people to determine the targets, content and spirit of every activity in social life, as well as the basic modes and forms of procedure. In his view, the workers cannot fulfil their

decisions or exercise their power except through the transformation of the direct mass actions into the forms of representative democracy.

The State System

Because Lenin places so much emphasis upon the importance of representative institutions, Evans (1987: 11) argues that ‘his model of the socialist state was in essence a model of proletarian parliamentary democracy’, i.e., one that closely resembles the bourgeois parliamentary system. There is actually no basis for this interpretation. Lenin bases his conception of socialist representation upon Marx’s analysis of the Paris commune, a radical socialist revolutionary government that ruled Paris for three months in 1871. Whilst this model certainly contains indirect, representative elements, these bear little resemblance with the modern-day institutions of ‘parliamentary democracy’.

To begin with, the Parisian workers did not seize and utilise the existing bourgeois state apparatus. They created their own revolutionary form of government, the Paris commune. Moreover, the workers’ representative bodies, just like the staffs of the police, administrative, judicial and other institutions, were chosen on an elective basis. They were accountable to and removable by the people. Initiative in every field of social life originated in the commune. The rank-and-file elements performed every public function. Whilst representative posts remained, the officials could not rise to high offices, since communal officials solved all the major tasks. As such, the leaders were at all times under real communal control. Public functions ceased to be private property that the government handed to its stooges. In his *State and Revolution* and numerous other works Lenin describes the socialist state in a similar way. A detailed analysis of the features of his conception can show how misleading it is to describe his model as a form of ‘parliamentary democracy’.

(i) *The socialist state is a workers', and not a bourgeois state.* To begin with, Lenin argues that the working masses cannot merely take over and utilise the bourgeois parliamentary state system for their own purposes. Their first task is to 'smash' this state, raze it to the ground, destroy it completely, and replace it with a new state of their own creation. This new state is the soviet state.

In order to understand the origin and meaning of the word 'soviet' it is necessary to go back to Tsarist Russia during the year 1905. Until that time the term was used frequently in Russian to denote any kind of council. A 'council of war' or a 'council of ministers' were both 'soviets', and there were many other kinds of councils for which the word was used.

Early in 1905, some workers set up a committee to co-ordinate strike action and to force the employers to bargain effectively. This committee consisted of delegates elected by a show of hands at general meetings of the workers in the various factories of that town. As the year went on, workers all over Russia began to strike and demonstrate for better conditions and set up their own delegate committees or councils in their towns to lead the struggle. These councils came to be known as the Soviets of Workers Delegates. In each case they consisted of elected delegates from the workers in the factories. They led the struggle against the employers in the factories, and put forward political demands for freedom of speech, the press and assembly. They were fighting organisations, led demonstrations, and in certain cases actually seized complete municipal authority, passing decrees in the exclusive interests of the working people, the majority of the town dwellers (Sloan 1937: 132).

According to Vishniak (1946: 515), 'the soviet system was defended in theory...as a direct antithesis to democracy and as the denial of democracy'. This view is baseless.

Lenin praised the mass democratic character of the St Petersburg soviet that arose during the 1905 revolution. He remarked that it emerged not from the existing aristocratic state structure, but from the activities of the masses themselves. The soviets were created by the masses, they performed all their functions before the masses, they were accessible to the masses, and were the direct instrument of the masses' will (CW 10: 245).

The soviets sprang up again towards the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917. But unlike 1905, they were not confined to the workers in the towns. In the villages the peasants elected their own councils, through which they demanded the immediate confiscation of the landed estates and their division amongst the peasantry. And in the army the soldiers elected their own committees, in certain cases arrested their officers, and proceeded to govern themselves (Sloan 1937: 132).

Between February and October 1917, the workers, peasants and soldiers of Russia set up a vast network of elected councils or committees, called soviets, which led their struggle for better conditions of life. A completely new form of organisation came into being, covering the whole country and representing the vast majority of the population. The only people excluded were the landlords, employers of labour, high officials of government and other people associated with these categories; in short, a tiny proportion of the population. In its structure, this network of soviets bore a striking resemblance to democratic working-class organisations all over the world. Locally, there were the directly elected soviets. Nationally, the supreme authority was a Congress of delegates from all the local soviets. And, to co-ordinate the work of these soviets between the congresses, and to carry out its general instructions, the Congress elected an executive committee (Sloan 1937: 133-35).

Lenin repeatedly called for ‘all power to the soviets’ before the October Socialist Revolution. As Lih (2018: 73) observes, in his *State and Revolution* Lenin ‘argued that the soviets represented a higher form of democracy, as compared with “bourgeois parliamentarianism”’. It was only after the Bolshevik victory, however, that his Party could guarantee them a central place in the system of socialist democracy. As Lenin wrote in his address *To the Population*, the soviets were the new chief ‘organs of state authority, legislative bodies with full powers’ (CW 26: 297-298).

Lenin argues that the strength of socialist democracy depends upon the consciousness and active attitude of the masses. Bourgeois democracy is weak, in his view, because it considers a state to be strong to the extent that the executive machine drives the masses where the leaders will them. Lenin conceives the strength of socialist democracy differently. The strength of a state is in the consciousness of the masses. A state is strong provided that the masses are informed of all information, are able to form a strong opinion of everything, and at all times act consciously. State reliance upon the strength and awareness of the masses assumes a high degree of importance under socialism. The success of socialist construction depends upon it.

After the socialist revolution, Lenin said that the Party could govern only because it had mass support, and because it had enlisted workers for the daily administration of the state. In Lenin’s view, it was precisely the active attitude and devotion of the masses that facilitated the Party’s success in the Civil War and the repulsion of the foreign intervention. It was this support that facilitated the exposure of the conspiracies against the soviet power, assured the initial achievements in socialist organisation, and imparted a working-class character to socialist state organisation (CW 27: 433).

Addressing the Third All-Russia Congress of the Soviets, Lenin encouraged the soviets to be creative in solving their tasks. They had to learn how to rule by assuming the bourgeoisie's positions, making mistakes and learning from them (CW 26: 297-298). Years later, Lenin remarked that there had been a period of socialist construction when it was practically impossible to implement the Soviet decrees immediately and in their entirety. These decrees were, however, an excellent means of propaganda. They roused the masses to action and taught them the art of revolutionary governance (CW 29: 209).

The first takeaway, then, is that the soviet state is a *workers'* state, created by workers, rather than a bourgeois state, created by the bourgeoisie. It exists and operates upon the rubble of the liberal democratic state apparatus.

(ii) *Parliaments are working bodies*. According to Lenin, a distinctive feature of liberal democracy is the division of power between the legislative and the executive branches. This means that parliaments are purely legislative bodies. They discuss things. They pass laws. But they have little executive power or influence over the government. The real work of the state goes on 'behind the scenes', in the bureaucracy and 'general staffs'. Under socialism, by contrast, the division between the legislative and executive branches is abolished, and the representative bodies are both legislative *and* executive organs. This means that they can both discuss and directly oversee the implementation of the state decisions. As Lenin put it, '[t]he way out of parliamentarism is not, of course, the abolition of representative institutions and the elective principle, but the conversion of the representative institutions from talking shops into "working" bodies' (CW 25: 428). Under socialism, therefore, parliamentary institutions become effective, rather than formal, because there are no entrenched bureaucrats to hinder, undermine

or distort the policy implementation process. The parliamentarians themselves execute their laws, test the results, and account to their constituents. This ensures that parliamentary debates do not ‘degenerate into deception’ (CW 25: 429).

Liberal democracies are primarily representative, in that they possess few avenues for direct participation. In Lenin’s socialist model, by contrast, the fusing of the executive and legislative ensures that representative and direct democracy exist side-by-side. It strives to combine the strengths of both forms of democracy, whilst discarding their weaknesses (CW 26: 104).

(iii) *All state posts are subject to election and recall.* In liberal democratic systems the masses can vote in and recall their representatives only once every few years, during periodic elections. This results in limited accountability for the elected representatives. If someone gets elected and then starts doing unpopular things, citizens will find it difficult to remove them for a long time. This means that they are almost completely unaccountable to the masses. Lenin argues that socialism overcomes this democratic deficit by allowing the masses to elect a wider range of state officials, not just the MPs who sit in parliament. He includes even military officers, who are appointed by non-democratic methods in the liberal democracies, and who therefore serve bourgeois interests (CW 24: 374). ‘Not only must they be elected’, writes Lenin, ‘but every step of every officer and general must be supervised by persons specially elected for the purpose by the soldiers’ (CW 24: 100).

Lenin argues that the masses should be able directly and indirectly to supervise the performance and political attitude of the hierarchy of leaders, including the specialists and experts. In the case of promotions, decorations, or rewards, the central leadership’s opinion – which is perhaps based only on their evident loyalty – should not outweigh

that of the workers. If the masses are not satisfied with a leader's performance, then Lenin argues that they have the right to criticise them or call them to account. As he put it in the draft programme of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, socialist democracy demands 'the right of every citizen to prosecute any official, without previously complaining to the latter's superiors' (CW 6: 28).

According to Hindess' (1983: 44) reading of Lenin's model, a minimum of a hundred or so signatures could be sufficient to recall an official in a constituency of ten or more thousand people. As he points out, this could lead to the constant turnover of officials and ineffective, chaotic governance. Hindess' attempt to highlight the utopianism of this measure has no basis. Lenin (CW 24: 461) suggests that officials should be 'subject to recall at any time' only 'upon the demand of a majority of the electors' in a given constituency. He never suggests that a minority of voters can recall officials. Nor does Lenin suggest that citizens can remove an official for any reason. They can do so only in situations where the official has seriously violated their tasks, such as by breaking the law or undermining the construction of socialism. Under normal circumstances this rule does not hold true. Lenin argues that representatives take sole responsibility for the implementation of certain tasks. This means that the working masses must assure a measure of leeway for their leaders, and that at least for a certain period of time they cannot interfere with the leader's work. Viewed from this aspect, therefore, the principle of 'recall on demand' is an *a posteriori* category. The rationale behind this is that it is a precondition of successful democratic government. If, in order to avoid any misinterpretation, debate or mistake, the working masses predetermine each minute detail of the executor's tasks, the latter would lack all freedom of action, and they would be unable to cope with any unforeseen tasks. In Lenin's view, it is an indispensable condition of a firm government that the masses evaluate the leader's work

only retrospectively (CW 27: 212-13). By assuring a certain amount of freedom of action to the leaders, their authorisation to pass their own decisions in the spirit of the workers' resolutions means that the workers only have an indirect influence on the fulfilment of their decisions, and their resolutions ensure only the framework for the day-to-day work.

Lenin's insistence that all leaders should be subject to direct recall serves several purposes. In the first place, it reminds the leaders in responsible posts that they work under the eyes and control of the workers. Secondly, it makes the leaders aware that they are replaceable: if they are unable to properly perform their duties, the workers will recall them. As Lenin points out, there are always many talented people among the workers who, having joined the ranks of public management and acquired the necessary experience, may at any time step into their place. If the socialist vanguard constantly strives to locate and train these talented people by drawing them into the practical work of administration (and also providing a complementary theoretical education); if it always assures scope for popular action, then it will create a secondary echelon of management. This echelon can serve as a kind of back-up or reserve group, which may replenish or even replace the first group if necessary.

(iv) *All state officials earn workers' wages*. Because bourgeois parliamentary systems typically pay their officials more than the average wage, Lenin argues that they foster careerism, elitist attitudes, as well as a social division between the ruled and the rulers. Socialist democracy tackles these issues by paying all officials the salary of an average working person. Specifically, it entails 'the abolition of all representation allowances, and of all monetary privileges to officials, the reduction of the remuneration of *all* servants of the state to the level of "*workmen's wages*"' (CW 25: 425).

Paying even the highest-ranking elected representatives and administrators the same salary as the ordinary workers serves two purposes. Firstly, fewer people will seek a government post purely in order to make a career and get wealthy. A higher percentage will instead aspire to join the government in order to serve the people. Secondly, it reminds the officials that they are not superior to the masses, and that they should therefore treat their position as one that serves the people, rather than one that dominates over them.

Contrary to the dominant narrative, Lenin does not advocate this as a universal principle, fit for all periods of socialist construction. ‘Naturally, in a developed socialist society it would appear quite unfair and incorrect for members of the bourgeois intelligentsia to receive considerably higher pay than that received by the best sections of the working class’. But during the initial period of socialism, where some tasks require expertise, those possessing this expertise must be paid more than the rest, in order to attract them to the job. This was the case in Soviet Russia, where the state was forced to rely upon bourgeois experts to save the population from starvation. Under these conditions it was essential to ‘solve this pressing problem by means of this (unfair) remuneration for bourgeois specialists at much higher rates’ (CW 42: 78).

(v) *The state enlists the masses in administrative tasks.* Lenin celebrates this aspect of socialist democracy in his *State and Revolution*, where he analyses E. Bernstein’s book, *The Preconditions of Socialism*. Bernstein’s essential argument is that the concept of ‘primitive’ democracy, in which everyone participates in the tasks of administration, is unfeasible for even the smallest organisation in modern society. He supports his case by drawing upon S. and B. Webb’s historical analysis of the British trade unions. According to them, seventy years of development in ‘absolute freedom’ convinced the

trade unions that primitive democracy was unworkable, and they therefore replaced it with the ‘ordinary’ representative model. Lenin criticises Bernstein’s analysis for ignoring the historical context. The trade unions developed not under conditions of ‘absolute freedom’, but under conditions of ‘*absolute capitalist slavery*’. It was these conditions that compelled the unions to abandon primitive democracy, and to instead implement several concessions to the ‘prevailing evil’, including the ‘exclusion of the poor from the affairs of “higher” administration’ (CW 25: 492). Lenin argues that the socialist revolution abolishes this oppressive state of affairs. It creates the necessary conditions for the successful functioning of primitive democracy, since ‘the *mass* of population will rise to taking an *independent* part, not only in voting and elections, *but* also in the everyday administration of the state. Under socialism all will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing’ (CW 25: 492-93).

In opposition to Bernstein, Lenin argues that primitive democracy is both necessary *and* feasible under socialism. It is necessary because ‘the transition from capitalism to socialism is *impossible* without a certain “reversion” to “primitive” democracy (for how else can the majority, and then the whole population without exception, proceed to discharge state functions?)’ (CW 25: 425). That is, the tremendous task of constructing communism can only be successful if the broadest masses are able to participate directly in state affairs (CW 27: 135). After performing their daily labour, every worker should ‘perform state duties *without pay*’ (CW 27: 273).

Primitive democracy is feasible, Lenin argues, because capitalism has developed the state, means of production, and communication to the extent that even the least educated person can perform the essential state functions. These have ‘become so simplified and can be reduced to such exceedingly simple operations of registration, filing, and checking that they can be easily performed by every literate person’, and ‘be

stripped of every shadow of privilege, of every semblance of “official grandeur” (CW 25: 425-26). As such, ““primitive democracy” based on capitalism and capitalist culture is not the same as primitive democracy in prehistoric or pre-capitalist times’ (CW 25: 425-26).

Basing himself upon the idea that ‘there is no such thing as above-class courts’, Lenin argues that even the judicial system must be democratised and administered by the masses under socialism (CW 33: 313). ‘In capitalist society, the court [is] mainly an instrument of oppression, an instrument of bourgeois exploitation’. In many liberal democracies the judges are not accountable to the people. They often serve for life, and they serve the bourgeoisie by making decisions that punish the working class and favour the interests of big business. Under socialist society, by contrast, the ‘people’s court’ is ‘based on the principle of the participation of the working and exploited classes—and only of these classes—in administering the state’ (CW 27: 217). The ‘courts must be elected, proletarian courts’, within which even the ‘judges are elected by the local Soviets’ (CW 33: 313, 364). That is, the toiling masses have the power periodically to elect judges and juries amongst themselves, so that they can carry out all the essential judicial functions. ‘The new court’ is ‘needed first and foremost for the struggle against the exploiters who are trying to restore their domination, or to defend their privileges, or secretly to smuggle through and secure by deception some particle of these privileges’ (CW 27: 217). In the second place, ‘the People’s Courts should encourage the masses of workers and peasants to take an independent, speedy and practical part in ensuring enforcement of the laws’ (CW 33: 180).

In socialist mass democracy the personal representation of the common worker cannot and is not confined to the performance of unpaid duties solely in local organisations. On the contrary, Lenin argues that it is essential to include, in the *whole*

structure of government, not only career Party officials and managers but also rank and file people who are in close touch with production or other productive work, and participate in administration besides their everyday activity. In 1919, for instance, Lenin wrote a draft resolution on the composition of the all-Russia Central Executive Committee (A.C.E.C.) – the chief executive body of the soviet government – calling for an increase in the number of in workers and peasants (CW 42: 151).

Three years later Lenin raised the issue again. Commenting on the draft resolution of the A.C.E.C., he urged the Politburo to pass a decision ‘to recognise as essential that no less than 60 per cent of the members of the A.C.E.C. should be workers and peasants not occupying any official posts in government bodies’ (CW 42: 420).

(vi) *The masses participate in the checking and implementing of the resolutions.* In Lenin’s view, the masses’ active attitude in supervising the management of public affairs means that the workers may control the activities in every sphere of social life, either directly in person, or indirectly through their representative organs or other institutions and modes of control. He argues that the masses should be able to exercise their control through a variety of forms: from basic ad hoc checks to institutionalised forms of supervision. Moreover, ‘workers must enter all the government establishments so as to supervise the entire government apparatus. And this should be done by the non-party workers, who should elect their representatives at non-party conferences of workers and peasants’ (CW 30: 351).

From the early days of the revolution Lenin gave priority to the establishment of the Workers’ and Peasant’s Inspection. For instance, in 1919, in his notes for the Draft Decree on the Reorganisation of State Control, Lenin suggested the following amendments: ‘(1) formation of central (and local) bodies with workers’ participation;

(2) introduction by law of the systematic participation of witnesses from among the workers, with compulsory participation up to two-thirds women' (CW 28: 486). Further amending the draft, he proposed that '*all* working people...should serve in the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection' (CW 30: 300; CW 28: 486). In one of his notes to J. V. Stalin, who led the inspectorate, Lenin emphasised the importance of enlisting workers in every level of the people's control and also increasing their numbers (CW 30: 301).

Lenin also argues that the socialist leadership has to learn how to enlist, in the most effective way, people from diverse levels of education to the execution of various tasks. In his view, participation should vary in accordance with the skills and experience of the participants. Illiterate and underdeveloped individuals should begin as listeners or witnesses, but once they gain enough practical experience and confidence they can progress to more complex tasks (CW 30: 300, 415).

Lenin believes that the workers will take part in the controlling activities in large numbers only if they see its purpose. They will not participate on a mass scale unless they know that their controlling action is effective. They must know that the people they criticise will rectify their mistakes, remedy their shortcomings and improve the quality of their work. In Lenin's view, socialist democracy is superior to all previous forms of democracy partially because the various governing bodies heed the advice of the people's control and enforce the necessary measures in order remedy the problems. Every worker has the right to notify several organs, such as the Party, social organisations, and state bodies, about problems of public interest. This means that a rank-and-file worker or peasant may appeal directly to even the highest bodies. Moreover, these bodies are able to voice their opinion about any issue. They may open

an inquiry into any case, and they may take the required actions in order to overcome any identified problems (CW 30: 415).

According to Lenin, then, the evaluation of the experience of the work done, and the exposure of any various shortcomings, is part and parcel of the working masses' controlling activity. But he views people's control to be more than a post factum examination of phenomena. Its primary purpose is to make recommendations for the most effective improvement of work. As he explained in his *Draft Decision on the use of State Control*, the 'tasks of control are of two kinds'. There is 'the very simple task of checking on warehouses, goods, etc.', and there is 'the more difficult one of checking on the efficiency of the work; combating sabotage, completely exposing it; checking on the way the work is being organised; ensuring the greatest *efficiency* of work, and so on' (CW 28: 326).

In the draft of his article *How we Should Reorganise Workers' and Peasants Inspection*, Lenin goes even further. He argues that the Workers and Peasants' Inspection should analyse and generalise the experiences it collects about the state and society on a scientific level, and thereby use this information to modernise the state organisation. Lenin argues that control must now serve three purposes: it must expose corruption, wasteful work, and sabotage; it must analyse the experience of productive work; and it must generalise its most noteworthy experiences. In his outline of the programme for the joint activity of Workers' and Peasants' Inspection and the Central Control Commission, Lenin proposes the following division of labour: the members of these bodies should have the duty:

either of attending the meetings of the Political Bureau for the purpose of examining all the documents appertaining to matters that come before it in one

way or another; or of devoting their working time to theoretical study, to the study of scientific methods of organising labour; or of taking a practical part in the work of supervising and improving our machinery of state, from the higher state institutions to the lower local bodies, etc. (CW 33: 484-85).

It is imperative, in Lenin's view, that people's control is independent with regards to its checking, methods, inferences and suggested measures for improvement. In this respect, people's control (the importance of which has been largely overlooked in the literature) is *equal* to the leadership in weight. On the one hand, it is as an organic part of operative leadership, which functions as a sort of feedback. At the same time, it also counterpoises operative leadership.

People's control also has another long-term significance. It facilitates the transition to a society in which each individual takes an active part in administering public affairs. It paves the way, in other words, for the transition to a society which has made the state superannuated, one in which the state has withered away (Lenin 1972: 50; CW 27: 156). Of course, to say that the state has withered away is not to suggest that there are no forms of political organisation or hierarchy. In Lenin's view, the withering away of the state simply means the withering away of a separate body of officials, one that stands apart from society and rules over it. Under communism, every person will participate in politics to one degree or another, meaning that there is no separate body of officials alienated from the masses.

Mass Organisations

In the political organisation, education, representation and mobilisation of the masses, Lenin argues that the social organisations play an important role. In fact, a rule that

prevails throughout the period of socialist transformation is that the workers manifest their public activity *primarily* through the framework of mass organisations. In the interests of mobilising the masses and making the most expedient use of their energies, Lenin argues that it is imperative that the social organisations operate in an appropriate way, so that they can fulfil the functions for which they were created and ensure the support of the people. Every mass organisation seeks to meet specific interests that are expressed by the Party and state, and to carry out Party and Government decisions with the help of all the organisation's members. Mass organisations are thus a link between the Party and the people and between the state and the people.

Lenin emphasises that mass organisations realise a qualitatively new democracy in comparison with capitalist democracy. They are a form of public self-administration because their internal activities are based on the self-administration principle, and being non-governmental institutions, they perform important state functions either together with the state organisations or independently under the control of the Party and state bodies. The working people join in managing public and state affairs by taking an active part in the work of mass organisations – schools of public administration and communist education that develop the people intellectually, improve their training, and raise their cultural level so as to enable socialist society to advance towards communism.

Lenin argues that mass organisations are important also in regard to the socialist state's evolution into communist self-administration. The socialist state cannot transition to communist self-administration if the public self-administrative organs do not increase their activities, since under communism the administration of social life will be on a qualitatively new level, i.e., one involving the broad masses of the people.

Lenin therefore attaches paramount importance to further enhancing the mass organisations' role.

Lenin emphasises that mass organisations, as institutions of public self-administration, have their own forms and methods of work. The organisations are managed by their members on the basis of full equality. No one can interfere in their work, impose decisions on them, or determine the composition of the administrative bodies' managing personnel. The organisations adopt rules or statutes to regulate their activities.

Lenin argues that the mass organisations should take part in fulfilling state tasks in various ways. For instance, mass organisations and the state cooperate on the basis of equality, mutual assistance and exchange of information on all relevant questions. Mass organisations take an even greater part in the establishment of state bodies and in their activities owing to the socialist state's democratic nature and its willingness to cooperate with the public. When state bodies discuss issues that are of interest to mass organisations, the latter take part in the discussion. They also participate in the elaboration of policies and other normative enactments, take the initiative in passing certain acts and carrying out certain measures, and make proposals to the higher legislative bodies.

Lenin identifies the trade unions as one of the principal mass organisations of socialist democracy. As he notes, under capitalism it was a general rule that the unions should focus solely upon economic affairs, whilst the bourgeoisie managed the political side of things. This in turn 'proved to be a direct weapon in the hands of the exploiting class and its thugs for keeping down the proletariat' (CW 28: 419). But under socialism, a political system in which the working class has power, the unions can 'play a very great role' and become the 'chief political organ' (CW 28: 418).

In socialist society, Lenin argues that the trade unions represent a form of uniting the working class. He emphasises that trade unions are mass and not state organisations; they are bodies of workers' self-administration that, like all other mass organisations, enjoy a certain independence. But at the same time, Lenin also encourages them actively to participate in every part of the state apparatus (CW 28: 421). Aside from getting involved in the state organs, the trade unions also train the masses of workers for the tasks of political participation. They must help dispel the notion 'that state administration is the preserve of the privileged few, that it is a special art' (CW 28: 426-27).

Another mass organisation of socialist democracy is the 'peoples' militia', a detachment of armed citizens that enforces the will of the people, through coercion if necessary. In his article, *A Regrettable Deviation from Democracy*, Lenin opposes the idea that soldiers should be separate from the militia because they should 'perform their duty' in their own military organisation. To advocate this arrangement is to 'forget completely the principles of democracy and involuntarily, unconsciously...adopt the idea of a standing army' (CW 24: 385-86). In the liberal democracies, the standing army is used to maintain the oppressive rule of the bourgeois minority. One of their main functions is to repress the masses and suppress their revolutionary aspirations. The military is 'separated from the people and subordinated to classes alien to the people' (CW 24: 373). As such, the notion of maintaining a separate standing army under socialism 'is not a democratic point of view'. And 'a democrat is opposed to such a view on principle' (CW 24: 386).

In Lenin's view, the uninhibited rule of the masses can be guaranteed not by maintaining a standing army, but instead by merging the workers and army 'into a single militia consisting of all the people' (CW 24: 180). This will break down the

barrier between the people and army, re-educate soldiers ‘into militiamen citizens’, and re-educate ‘the population into public-spirited armed citizens’. Democracy will remain an idle deceitful phrase, or merely a half-measure, unless the *entire* people is given a chance immediately and unqualifiedly to learn how to handle arms. Without the systematic, regular, and widespread participation of the soldiers in the militia this will be impossible (CW 24: 386).

Lenin argues that ‘participation in the militia is one of the cardinal and basic principles of democracy, one of the most important guarantees of freedom’ (CW 24: 387). One reason for this is that the militia is an effective way of implementing revolutionary measures. And ‘[w]ithout revolutionary measures there can be *no* salvation’. In Russia, for instance, Lenin suggested that they could be used to do away with queues and end the disorganisation of the food supply (CW 24: 391). Furthermore, the militia is also a ‘prerequisite of effective municipal reforms in the interests of the working people’ (CW 24: 352). More generally, a people’s militia would educate ‘the *masses* in the practices of democracy’, manifest the rule of the poor, by functioning as their own police, and guarantee concrete workers’ control over production (CW 24: 353).

Whilst Lenin wants everyone to have the opportunity to participate in the militia, he insists that the method of recruitment is ‘not a question of fundamental importance’. He argues that ‘[t]here is no harm in the different districts adopting different procedures—in fact, it would make for richer experience, and the process of organisation would develop more smoothly and come closer to life’s practical requirements’ (CW 24: 352-53).

In Lenin’s view, a people’s militia is suitable only under certain conditions. During the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the early phases of socialism, a militia is

useful in sweeping away the muck of the old order, enforcing revolutionary measures, and defending the revolution. In a situation where counterrevolutionaries threaten the regime with organised military force, however, the militia becomes unsuitable, and must give way to a standing army. Such was the case during the Russian Civil War, when it became apparent that the militia was not a fit force to defend against the white army units. In this situation, the Red Army was formed instead, and the militia was absorbed into it. When, however, there are no longer any more threats to socialism, the militia can once again take the place of the army. Under communism, the militia will be the main coercive force, and the standing army will once again disappear.

In order to improve the work of social organisations, Lenin argues that it is necessary that the rank-and-file membership regard the organisation as their own. This requires that the mass organisations fulfil a double task. Firstly, they should promote and protect the rights of their members and work for their optimal satisfaction. Secondly, besides transmitting the ideals of the state and Party to the working people they represent, these organisations should also transmit their members' views on definite problems and national affairs. For the meaningful and efficient realisation of the functions of social organisations it is indisputable that these organisations function independently and according to their aims. During the debate over the trade unions, for instance, Lenin emphasised the necessity of using the mass organisations to counterbalance and check the power of the overbearing state apparatus, in order to protect the interests and power of the masses (CW 32: 25).

The autonomy of the mass organisations is therefore partial. On the one hand, they are subordinate to the Party and state, and have the duty to increase support for government policies. On the other hand, they must remain sufficiently independent to defend the interests and rights of their members.

The Limitations of Mass Democracy

Lenin does not think that mass democracy can be constituted and made all-embracing overnight. He suggests that the masses need to go through a long process of theoretical and practical development in order to achieve this end. Even before the socialist revolution, Lenin argued that this would be the case. He pointed out that the unskilled labourer or cook could not immediately administer the state without making mistakes. At the same time, he sought to destroy the prejudice that only the upper classes could do this job. He demanded ‘that *training* in the work of state administration be conducted by class-conscious workers and...that a *beginning* be made at once in training all the working people, all the poor, for this work’ (CW 26: 113).

Following the victory of the socialist revolution, millions of people were enlisted in the administration of public affairs. The Soviet power strived to enlist even broader sections during the difficult years of the Civil War. Addressing the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party in 1919, Lenin said that ‘the top layer of workers who actually administered Russia during the past year, who bore the brunt of the work in carrying out our policy, and who were our mainstay—this layer in Russia is an extremely thin one’ (CW 29: 159-159). In Lenin’s view, this was caused by the shortage of intelligent, educated and able leaders in Russia. ‘At this Congress’, Lenin continued, the soviet power would establish practical measures to utilise ‘ever new forces’ in the tasks of socialist construction, that that it would prioritise the enlistment of people who were ‘on, or even below, the average level’. If these people did not participate on a mass scale, the further development of socialism would be impossible (CW 29: 158-159).

By the end of 1919, Lenin observed that the battlefield victories, the results of socialist construction on the home front, and workers’ self-sacrifices convinced and

roused the hitherto unconvinced masses to activity. The labouring peasantry, the intelligentsia, and other social strata that took part in productive labour started to gradually heed the Party's call and rally behind the Soviet state. Lenin never viewed the remaining unconvinced and wavering elements as enemies, however. In his comments on these elements during the Seventh All-Russia Congress of the Soviets, he argued that 'every new section of workers and peasants that has not yet been drawn into our work is, nevertheless, our true friend and ally'. He then went on to say that the Party and state should seek to gain their support, and that this did not necessarily require converting them into true believers. the main thing was to make them understand that their assistance was required 'to save the country' (CW 30: 230).

Lenin argues that the establishment of mass democracy is not a spontaneous process. It does not take place automatically, and without organisation. Mass democracy can be attained only if the Communist Party displays conscious initiative and precisely defines the various tasks. It must display exemplary behaviour in its actions. It must organise the masses and rouse them to purposeful action. It must neutralise the hostile, non-socialist, mistaken and harmful tendencies. Without the leadership of the Communist Party there can be no mass democracy. Having said that, the Party should not impose its views upon the masses, or try to imbue them with ideas that ignore their current stage of intellectual development. The masses should not be manipulated or driven in directions they do not want to go (CW 28: 309; CW 31: 58).

In an effort to ensure that the soviet state could express the creative energies of the masses, Lenin tried to separate the Party's functions from it. In a letter to V. M. Molotov, he said that the Party should strive to guide the soviets' activities rather than substitute them. Whilst arguing that the Party organisations have a duty to direct the activity of the state organs, he rejected the view that the Party should attempt to replace

them or strip them of their distinctive character. It was necessary, he argued, to clearly distinguish the Party's prerogatives and functions from those of the soviets, and 'to increase the responsibility and independence' of the latter, 'leaving to the Party the general guidance of the activities of all state bodies, without the present, too frequent, irregular and often petty interference' (CW 33: 253). Lenin never gave a precise explanation of the relationship between the Party and state, and as such, this aspect of his socialist model remained under-developed. It is open to a wide range of interpretations and applications.

Opposing Bureaucracy

Under liberal democracy, Lenin argues that the leaders have no obligation to carry out everything that their constituents want. They do not have directly to implement their constituents' demands. There are also few opportunities for the masses themselves to monitor and check up on their leaders' work. As such, it is common for the leaders to become distant from the masses, and to also do and say things that violate the masses' preferences. Under socialism, Lenin explains, the situation is different. On the one hand, it remains the case that not all administrative functions have automatically been simplified by capitalist development. During the early phases of socialist construction some tasks will remain complex and therefore be restricted to those with the necessary expertise. Bureaucracy, in other words, remains necessary. To think otherwise is to succumb to utopianism. Having said that, Lenin argues these elements must be brought under workers' control. State officials should act under the supervision and oversight the workers, carrying out their instructions 'as responsible, revocable, modestly paid' servants (CW 25: 425-26).

Lenin also deals with this problem in his drafts for *State and Revolution*. In one of these, he writes that the socialist forces can maintain state power and its future activity only by transforming its machinery into a service for ‘the mass revolutionary movement’, and by bringing the state function ‘under its control’ (CW 25: 51). Thus, in the draft for the article *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Government*, Lenin argued that the masses must be able to choose their own leaders, be able to replace them, know and check their activities, and ‘put forward any worker without exception for administrative functions’ (CW 27: 212).

Under socialist democracy the various leading organs and their officials must take into consideration the opinions of the working masses; not only those which coincide with theirs, but also those which are at variance with theirs. Moreover, it is not the sole task of the officials of the socialist machinery to heed and act in accordance with the interests and will of the working masses. They also have continuously to strive to dismantle the differences between the leading organs and the workers. Lenin had this assignment in mind when, in 1919, he wrote that it was necessary to achieve ‘a maximum simplification of the apparatus which must be not only as close as possible to the needs of the masses, but also something they can readily understand and participate in independently’ (CW 30: 74). The functions of the civil service needed to be simplified to the extent that they were ‘within the scope and ability of the vast majority of the population, and, subsequently, of every single individual’ (CW 25: 457). This means that it is a duty of socialist leadership to direct, educate and spur to action the working people in such a way that they should be able to reach ever higher levels of development. Efforts must be made to render more and more people able to dispose themselves of the functions that are now carried out by a relatively limited circle of

‘foremen and accountants’. In the course of proceeding towards communism, the long-term target is to have those tasks solved directly by the people themselves.

Lenin argues that the leaders have a restricted mandate. They have the authority to carry out a specific field of activity: the expert assertion of the popular interest. Their mandate is valid as long as they serve this function. Furthermore, they have authority solely within the framework of executing a given task, one that effectively represents and serves the popular interest. Leaders are accountable to the whole people for their work, and their mandate does not insulate them from the many-faceted control of those who gave them it. The latter can still regularly decide whether the leader abides by the conditions of their restricted mandate. As he put it in 1918, in proportion as the state emphasises the importance of having individual leaders in definite administrative functions, the state should also emphasise and develop the various ‘forms and methods of control from below’, which should be able to prevent the mismanagement of soviet power and ‘weed out bureaucracy’ (CW 27: 275).

Lenin’s theory of the relationship between the leaders and the governed is based upon the premise that citizens are equal in both theory and practice under socialism. Since a leading position is not a virtue in itself, it cannot place its holder above the rest of the workers. The leaders and the governed have to observe the same moral standards. It is not the leading post itself that constitutes the basis for material and moral recognition, but only their actual accomplishments. A leader’s mandate lasts for a definite period of time. The government prolongs it only if it is in the working masses’ interests. The position never gives *carte blanche*. The masses may revoke the holder if necessary. As a rule, the leader in a given field does not enjoy a monopoly over decision-making. The leaders should not resolve social problems in an authoritative way. When making a particular decision over an issue, they must choose the solution

that best serves the objective of obtaining communism. Whilst expert direction and guidance are indispensable when it comes to making the correct decision, it is impossible to execute the programme without the performers, the masses. The achievements of socialism are therefore the materialisation of the efforts of both the rulers and the governed.

In particular fields and at particular times Lenin maintains that the division of labour between the leaders and the people will entail the subordination of the latter. But he emphasises that this subordination always has a specific field, time and task. In other words, it is of a technical character, and it is linked only with the performance of the given duty. This means that no leading organ should ever attempt to use its position to gain dominance over every field, or over every question of social life. The mandate of leadership in a given field does not authorise anyone to make decisions outside that field. In the long run, the unauthorised managerial actions will provoke the opposition of the other affected leading organs, and of the masses themselves. If abuses in power do occur, they must eliminate it effectively and without delay (CW 27: 212).

Whilst mass democracy is intended to minimise bureaucracy, Lenin acknowledges the possibility of it arising nonetheless. This may happen, in his view, because residual bourgeois ideology persists under socialism. This encourages people to act selfishly, pursue political posts in order to get a career, and attempt to increase their power over others. As such, the socialist state is not impervious to those who try to acquire a 'special' position. When the workers therefore establish the socialist state, they must safeguard themselves against their own deputies and officials (CW 25: 55, 481). In his discussion of *The Party Crisis*, Lenin warns that repealing the bureaucratic tendency is not an easy task. The struggle against it 'is a long and arduous one', but it is necessary in order to uphold the prestige and rule of the working class (CW 32: 52). If a socialist

state commits mistakes, thereby compelling the workers to protect themselves, Lenin argues that it is necessary to describe it as ‘a workers’ state with bureaucratic distortions’ (CW 32: 48). In his view, the term ‘workers’ state’ expresses the most essential point, namely, that the representation of the workers’ interests is the fundamental content of the state’s activity. The term ‘bureaucratic distortions’ is less essential. It expresses that the workers’ state is currently serving its purpose in a distorted form.

Lenin urged the workers to protect themselves against bureaucratic distortions by deploying safeguards against maladministration. But he *never* adopted a hostile attitude towards the socialist state and its administrative workers. Throughout his works Lenin consistently praises the administrative workers’ activity. He emphasises that each instance of bureaucratism is nothing more than a ‘distortion’ that does not constitute an essential aspect of the state. Lenin does not therefore regard a bureaucratic distortion as a chief characteristic of socialist democracy. He argues that one must judge the state according to its essential content and not by its distortions. At the same time, Lenin insists that it is everyone’s duty to combat these phenomena, and they should remember that this struggle should not weaken the socialist state and its organisations: ‘Those who allow the struggle against the distortions of the new system to obscure its content and to cause them to forget that the working class has created and is guiding a state of the Soviet type are incapable of thinking’ (CW 33: 26).

Lenin dealt extensively with the provisions to combat bureaucratic distortions. The main ones have already been mentioned: the principles of recall at any time, the payment of workers’ wages (or at least not exorbitantly high wages), the participation of the masses in state administration, and the replacement of parliamentary bodies with workers’ bodies, all aim to reduce bureaucracy. Besides this, Lenin also called for as

many rank-and-file people as possible to enter into managerial positions (CW 27: 489). He argued that it was imperative to replace the incompetent high officers with more able workers, and to transfer the former elsewhere (CW 42: 386). Lenin himself regularly demanded the removal from the leading posts of the people who were unable to be worthy representatives of socialist leadership. Once it becomes clear that a person in a responsible job is no longer able to discharge their task in a communist manner, they have to be relieved of their post, regardless of what merits they have (CW 35: 542).

Lenin's struggle against bureaucracy consumed his energies after the consolidation of the socialist state. He viewed it as the gravest danger to socialist democracy and the rule of the working class. Unfortunately, he did not think that things had got much better by the time of his death in 1924.

Reflections

Lenin's conception of mass democracy revitalises a tradition going back to ancient Greece that attempted to democratise the polis through participatory democracy, and which saw full participation in decision-making as part of one's own humanity. In the democratic state of ancient Athens eligible voters directly resolved the important legislative and executive tasks in frequent assemblies. Routine matters were delegated to the Council of Five Hundred, selected annually by a lot from candidates elected in the several districts of the city-state. All other officials (generals, tax collectors, etc.) were annually selected by election or lot. There was no permanent civil service, aside from a few low-level functionaries. The judicial tasks were carried out by huge juries, appointed in by the same method as the council. Apathy was frowned upon and civic competence was viewed as a requirement of citizenship.

Lenin's conception of 'primitive democracy' features the same essential features. The Greek assemblies are to the local soviets what the Council of Five Hundred is to the national soviet. As in ancient Athens, most officials are elected, including the judiciary. Although there are bureaucrats, in the form of specialists, technicians and experts, these are subjected to workers' control, and the workers themselves gradually perform more of the administrative tasks on a rotational basis. Lenin's conception of socialist democracy is founded upon the assumption that every worker will energetically devote themselves to participation in politics and to the construction of communism. Indeed, he views constant mass participation as a necessary condition for the successful functioning and development of the socialist political system. Citizens are not only able to take part. They are *expected* to, just like they were in ancient Athens. Furthermore, as society progresses towards communism, more and more government functions will be passed onto the mass social organisations, as the state (i.e., a body of officials alienated from society) gradually withers away.

There are, however, key differences between Lenin's model and the one implemented in Ancient Athens. As a nation, ancient Athens was small, in both population and physical size. It also depended upon slaves to perform routine productive labour. It was this exploitative economic basis that gave a small proportion of privileged male citizens the ability to engage in communal activities and deliberations. The slaves received no rights and were barred from politics, as were the women and metics. The ingenuity and boldness of Lenin's vision consists in its attempt to remove the exploitative, exclusive nature of the Greek model, by enlisting all the masses in politics, and to also implement this system in a large, modern, technologically advanced society. Whereas many have written off the ancient Athenian polis as a

utopian ideal of a bygone age, one that is impractical in the nation states of today, Lenin views it as a necessary component of the future socialist society.

‘Even on liberal democratic grounds’, writes Levin (1983: 89), Lenin’s vision ‘has much to recommend it. The most fundamental objection concerns not so much its democratic aims as its feasibility’. Like several other scholars, Levin argues that Lenin’s vision is ‘utopian’ and impractical. In particular, Lenin’s view that state functions can eventually be simplified to the point that everybody can perform them is, for Levin, unrealistic. In modern times state functions have become more numerous and complex, rather than less so. It is clear now that for a long time to come, a professional apparatus will be necessary for public administration. The notion of allowing everybody to participate in public administration via the rotation of office will be difficult to implement successfully.

The utopian aspects of Lenin’s vision have, however, been overstated by commentators. Lenin himself recognises that trained experts will remain necessary and crucial to the regime long after the socialist revolution. He recognises that state functions will not be simplified overnight. He also recognises that humans are morally flawed beings. Although, in general, he has high hopes in the socialist morality of the working class, he recognises that all people have vices and can become corrupt, particularly when given power. There are no ‘pure’ people in Lenin’s political theory. His conception of socialist democracy is designed with this assumption that there are many rotten people out there, many ‘fallen angels’. It is designed to mitigate and reduce the corrupt tendencies that will inevitably arise under socialism. Because of this, Lenin’s conception of socialist democracy is based more upon realism than is often

recognised.²⁴ It is founded upon a realist conception of human nature.²⁵ The model does not rely upon the good will of the worker in order to function. Altruism is a supportive, though unnecessary feature of Lenin's vision.

The question of whether Lenin's conception is democratic is another matter. In his *Lenin and the End of Politics* – a book celebrated by anti-communists – A. J. Polan argues that the conciliar state outlined in the *State and Revolution* is fundamentally authoritarian. He contends, moreover, that it is responsible for the supposed crimes of the totalitarian soviet bureaucracy and Gulag (Polan 1984: 128-30). In making this argument, Polan continues a long tradition. In 1940, for instance, Laurat (1940) argued that 'In his *State and Revolution*, Lenin certainly highly recommended the democratic virtues of the soviets, but their very structure offered far fewer democratic possibilities than that of modern parliamentarism'.

Polan's central claim is that Lenin neglects Max Weber's discovery that bureaucracy is an unavoidable, essential part of modern-day society. Weber showed that bureaucracy emerged from the instrumental, rational, scientific, secular spirit associated with the advance of the market economy, the division of labour, and technology, in addition to the growing complexity of society. Lenin's greatest shortcoming was his failure to read Weber. Instead of correctly identifying bureaucracy as the result of the factors Weber identified, Lenin, according to Polan, erroneously attributed it to a residual 'capitalist culture'. Lenin's failure to understand the causes of

²⁴ Geuss (2008: 23-29) is one of the few scholars to recognize Lenin as a realist, though he does not examine the implications this has for Lenin's conception of socialist democracy.

²⁵ Unlike a realist like Hobbes, Lenin does not think that people are inherently bad, but he does not think that they are naturally good either. He instead views people as being shaped mostly by their material conditions.

bureaucracy caused him to make an incorrect diagnosis of the problem. This meant that his solutions only worsened the problem.

Polan argues that Lenin's measures for the minimisation of bureaucracy are counterproductive. His aim to simplify administrative functions, pay officials a workers' wage, and make all posts elective and recallable will not solve the problem, because knowledge grants power. The knowledge holders in government posts will rule by virtue of their expertise and insulate themselves from popular control. The bureaucrat can 'extract concessions in return for the obedient fulfilment of his functions'. The controller will be aware of this power imbalance, and will therefore allow the bureaucrat to perform their tasks without supervision (Polan 1984: 70-71).

Because office holders are monitored constantly and always under the threat of being recalled, Polan argues that this may actually encourage, rather than deter careerism. Since the bureaucrat's position is temporary and unstable, they will look for dishonest ways to stabilise their power. This creates the 'possibility of corruption becoming an institutionalised feature of practice' (Polan 1984: 71-72).

In Polan's view, the fusion of the state's executive and legislative functions into a 'working body' furthers rather than undermines bureaucratisation. The abolition of this functional division conflates administrative and political tasks, creating a loss of accountability, ensuring that the 'mechanism of social operations' becomes 'impenetrable and devoid of any possibility of control' (Polan 1984: 80-83, 129; Read 2005: 275-76).

According to Polan, only Weber's liberal solutions to the problem of bureaucracy can maintain democracy. The political system has clearly to define and separate the state's functions and powers, so that state officials can become accountable for their actions (Polan 1984: 128-29). In modern day society, a bureaucracy monitored by a

vigilant parliament combined with a capitalist economic system is the best thing that democrats can hope for (Polan 1984: 82).

By rejecting Weber's prescriptions, Polan argues that Lenin's state involves the 'absence of politics'. It is one-dimensional. It allows 'for no distances, no spaces, no appeals, no checks, no balances, no processes, no delays, no interrogations and, above all, no distribution of power' (Polan 1984: 130). By excluding political processes, institutions and procedures that could control a burgeoning bureaucracy, *State and Revolution* became directly responsible for the soviet Gulag. The text denies the possibility of different human interests. It creates a framework of ideas, and anything pursuing anything outside this framework is not only illegal, but impossible (Polan 1984: 130).

After Polan published his critique in 1984 it quickly became a 'common sense' 'objection to Lenin', one that still 'appears to be endorsed almost by default'. One reason for this – besides the fact that Lenin has been widely demonised – is that Marxists have been unwilling directly to engage Weber and the problems he poses to their own worldview (Townshend 1999: 63-4).

Polan's assumption here seems to be that democracy is 'bottom-up,' whereas bureaucracy is necessarily 'top-down,' so non-democratic, or anti-democratic. This, however, is an unwarranted assumption. It is possible to have a bureaucratic structure, with rules and regulations, and 'officials' to administer the state, which is actually 'democratic.', particularly if the officials serve only for a limited/fixed period of time; are subject to election or re-election; and if the franchise for such elections is as wide as possible/non-exclusionary. Once the compatibility of bureaucracy and democracy is acknowledged, Polan's arguments do not prove that Lenin's conception of the soviet

state is undemocratic. At best, and contrary to what Polan thinks, his arguments only show that Lenin's vision is a *democratic state with bureaucratic features*.

But even Polan's arguments for the bureaucratic character of Lenin's vision are not as convincing as he presents them. J. Townshend rejects Polan's arguments in his 'innocent reading' of *State and Revolution*. According to Townshend, it is not evident that non-market driven industrialisation fully accounts for the rise of bureaucracy. In order to show this, all the other potential causes have to be discounted. Polan does not do this. He attempts to prove this thesis by uncritically drawing upon Weber. But even Weber attributes the growth of bureaucracy in the USA to the growth of foreign policy and defence needs, rather than industrialisation (Townshend 1999: 68). And these factors could also explain the growth of bureaucracy in the Soviet Union during the Civil War. Thus, even if *State and Revolution* did influence the soviet state, its commitment to industrialisation did not necessarily cause the rise of soviet bureaucracy.

Townshend argues that Polan's analysis is biased by his undefended assumption that the liberal parliamentary system represents the apex of democratic government. This view is improvable and ideological. It unfairly dismisses the longstanding radical democratic tradition, which seeks to highlight the shortcomings of parliamentary system and offer more democratic alternatives (Townshend 1999: 70). Whatever the faults of Lenin's model, they have to be judged against the failings of liberal democracy.

According to Townshend, Polan fails to show how Lenin's state leads to totalitarianism. Polan criticises Lenin's idea of the Soviet as a 'working body' because it confuses politics with administration. But there is no reason to suppose that within this working body a division of tasks could not exist in principle (Townshend 1999: 71). As the preceding analysis shows, Lenin repeatedly and explicitly insists that there

should be such a division (CW 27: 213, 271). His point is that the bourgeois parliament, where the bureaucratic executive is all-powerful, is a mere talking shop. The purpose of a working body is to ensure that the executive be accountable, that the legislature does not exist merely to legitimate the executive's power. The precise way in which this working body ensures accountability of the executive is another question. In Leninist Russia, the structure of the soviets resembled parliamentary institutions, in that fused executive and legislative committees reported back to plenary bodies of directly elected workers. Likewise, in certain parliaments such as the British, the head of the executive is composed of elected representatives. Lenin's commends the 'working body' aspect of the Paris commune because it provided an alternative to the bureaucratic executive that had developed in France under Louis Napoleon. Clearly, the specific nature of existing governmental institutions is vital in considering whether to reform or abolish them. The efficacy of popular institutions in maintaining popular control would be a matter of trial and error (Townshend 1999: 71).

Polan contends that experts will be difficult to remove from office because their knowledge grants them power. Townshend argues that there is little reason to assume this. The relationship between knowledge and power is contingent, rather than necessary. This equation presumes that the knowledge-holder is motivated by the quest for power. It also assumes that experts cannot be checked through procedures that may involve scrutiny by other experts, and by various sanctions in the case of work violations (Townshend 199: 73) The mechanism of people's control outlined by Lenin involves both of these procedures.

Whilst according to Townshend Lenin 'committed the sin of omission by not specifying sufficient safeguards against bureaucratic rule', his recommendations are compatible with 'liberal' proposals aimed at preventing such a result. Whilst Lenin's

proposals for simplifying state functions, paying officials average wages and instant recall were ineffective in preventing bureaucratisation in the Soviet Union, they are still legitimate responses to bureaucratic elitist attitudes, careerism, and the unaccountability of officials (Townshend 1999: 73-74).

Whilst making some valid points against the caricature of Lenin's democratic theory painted by Polan, Townshend's (1999: 71-72) analysis is based upon the erroneous assumption that *State and Revolution* rejects the one party-system in favour of one endorsing a 'multiplicity of parties'. As such, his criticisms of Polan may not be as convincing as they would otherwise be. The presence of a permanently established Party in the governing apparatus may well strengthen, rather than weaken bureaucratic tendencies, since Party cadres are more or less permanent government officials.

Another significant issue – neglected by Townshend due to his faulty analysis – is that Lenin fails to elucidate the relationship between the Party and state. On the one hand, Lenin emphasises that the forms of direct and indirect mass democracy cannot grow spontaneously. The Party must provide a leading role and offer guidance. On the other hand, however, Lenin argues that the Party should not usurp the soviets, and that it should respect their decisions and resolutions. His views on their relationship are therefore open to a wide range of interpretations. As the history of socialism shows, however, the balance of power between the Party and state has been a critical factor in determining the degree of democratization in one-party Marxist-Leninist states. Lenin does not rule out a situation in which the Party takes on more power than he would like.

One should hesitate, however, before portraying the Party as a despotic force and the state as a democratic force. This juxtaposition can only be made by demonstrating that the Party has no democratic legitimacy, or in other words, that the majority does not support it. If the Party is legitimate, then a more powerful Party and a weaker state

does not necessarily mean less democracy. On the contrary, it could be the case that a more powerful Party means more democracy, particularly in a situation where the Party is defending the sovereign state against an imperialist threat, such as a foreign invasion. In such a situation, where the Party is defending socialism against the restoration of capitalism, more Party power could mean more democratic power. In any case, however, the relationship between the Party and state is an aspect of Lenin's conception of socialist democracy that is in need of further development. The upshot of this lacuna is that Lenin's model encourages a range of interpretations and applications. He does not set in stone the relationship between the Party and state, thereby indicating that his vision is not as static and rigid as is often presented.

Lenin's conception of the role of mass organisations has come under fire for its undemocratic implications. According to one line of criticism, Lenin's emphasis upon the political functions of the 'mass organisations' represents his desire for the Party and state to take over all civil associations, and thereby overcome the modern separation between civil and political society (Pierson 1986: 82; Polan 1984: 92). According to S. Finkel (2007: 3), for instance, Lenin believes that 'the public sphere in a socialist society should be unitary and unequivocal'. He supposedly views all independent associations, trade unions and guilds as separatist divisions within society that must be absorbed by the state. The anti-communist A. Applebaum advances the same argument in her article on the 'Leninist Roots of Civil Society Oppression', which appeared in *The Journal of Democracy*, an anti-communist publication. In her opinion, 'Lenin believed that all organizations were inherently political: If they were not openly political, then they were secretly political'. This meant that all independent groups were viewed with suspicion. Lenin even viewed casual sports clubs and cultural groups as "fronts" for something more sinister'. It is therefore clear, for Applebaum, that 'this

profound suspicion of civil society was central to Bolshevik thinking', and that Leninism is committed to 'the systematic destruction of literary, philosophical, and spiritual societies' (Applebaum 2015: 23). Indeed, Lenin believed that the destruction of civil society was crucial to the 'totalitarian dictatorship' that he sought to create. Lenin 'disliked independent organisations...because they gave people the power to control their own lives, because they encouraged independent thought, and because they made people more critical of state power'. Applebaum blames Lenin's scriptures for the suppression of civil society organisations in communist regimes (Applebaum 2015: 22). In agreement, Levine points out that Lenin did not even recognise the term civil society. The term is 'totally absent from...any of Lenin's works after 1895', and it was therefore 'erased from his thinking' at the beginning of his political career (Levine 2015: 197-98, 196).

The problem here is that, as chapter two argued, political theorists have viewed the independent organisations of civil society as a crucial component of democracy since the eighteenth century. Marik argues that official institutions of the soviet administration cannot review the functioning of the state system as a whole, since they exist within the framework of the state itself. Independent reviews can be conducted only by non-governmental, voluntary public organisations, having the right freely to differ from the public authority, to criticise it, to propose alternative comprehensive policies and seek popular mandate to carry them out. 'In other words, there would be required...civil liberties associations, and various associations of groups of citizens' (Marik 2008: 379). Marik criticises Lenin's account of democracy for 'being silent' on the question of civic associations.

Since Tocqueville, the claim that an independent civil society is a precondition for democracy has become a widespread tenet of normative democratic theory and political

science. The main argument is that civil associations are bastions of independent power and opinion that provide a necessary counterbalance to the government. In the absence of genuinely independent associations, freedom of speech and association will never be genuine (Femia 1993: 43). As Whelan argues, however, a free civil society has not always been related to democracy in theory or practice. The right was not endorsed by Rousseau or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. As he argues, ‘a right of association...may have been imported into modern democratic thought from certain currents of liberal theory’ (Whelan 2019: 60). An independent civil society may be a desirable feature of democracy, but it is not necessarily a necessary feature.

On balance, Townshend (1999: 72) is right to conclude that ‘Lenin did not fully address the issue of the state/civil society relation’. The most likely explanation for this is that Russia lacked a powerful civil society both before and during his lifetime (Marik 2008: 380). On the flip side, by guaranteeing these organisations the ability actually to participate in and influence state affairs, Lenin is, in one sense, giving them more power and influence.

Lenin could have devoted more attention to the relation between civil society and the state. In the absence of a clear position on this issue, the people in leading state positions may choose to repress the independence of these organisations, in a bid to minimise opposition to the state. If independent civil associations are necessary for a flourishing democracy, then restrictions on this independence may curtail the degree of socialist democracy.

3.5 Democratic Centralism

Having outlined the basic forms of mass political participation, it is now time to see how the various local, regional, and national levels of democratic government are related to each other. There are broadly two ways of organising these levels. Firstly, there are unitary systems, in which the lower levels of government are subordinate to the centre, which is ultimately supreme. Secondly, there are federal systems, which feature a union of partially self-governing provinces, states and other regions.

In his *State and Revolution* Lenin rejects federalism as ‘a principle [that] follows logically from the petty-bourgeois views of anarchism’. In his view, Marx’s analysis of the Paris Commune was a defence of centralism: ‘Marx was a centralist’, and ‘there is no departure whatever from centralism in his observations’ (CW 25: 434). Likewise, ‘[a]pproaching the matter from the standpoint of the proletariat and the proletarian revolution’, Lenin maintains that ‘Engels, like Marx, upheld democratic centralism, the republic—one and indivisible’ (CW 25: 451).

Basing himself upon this interpretation of Marx and Engels, Lenin began promoting the term ‘democratic centralism’ in 1906. Femia promotes the popular notion that Lenin ‘begot’ the term, but Lih shows that this is a myth. ‘The phrase “democratic centralism” entered the party lexicon at the end of 1905’. Moreover, Lenin himself only used the term ‘in two strictly limited periods: 1906-7 and 1920-1’, and he did not clearly define the term in these periods. Lih concludes that the term was not central to Lenin’s thought, and that it is unhelpful in elucidating Lenin’s conception of Party and state organisation (Lih 2013). This view is questionable. It depends upon an analysis of Lenin’s writings that looks specifically for the term ‘democratic centralism’. It assumes that Lenin only talks about democratic centralism when he explicitly uses the term. However, it is

perfectly possible, and indeed, rather common, to describe a specific term without referring to it explicitly. People do this all the time, and Lenin was no exception. He frequently described democratic centralism without using the term, and thus the concept was central to his conception of socialist democracy. Lenin initially intended it to be the guiding organisational principle of the Communist Party. But after the October Revolution fused the Party and state together, he transformed the term into a constitutional principle for the state itself (Femia 1993: 136).

Democratic centralism is the unity of two aspects. By ‘democratic’, Lenin means that every representative state organ is elected, from the lowest to the highest, and that they are also accountable to the people. By ‘centralism’, he means that the directives and decisions of the higher governing bodies are binding upon the lower-level ones. Democratic centralism therefore stands for a unified, indivisible republic that centralises the power of the working class (CW 26: 118).

Following the victory of the October Socialist Revolution, Lenin criticised provincialism, local patriotism, and the various attempts to prevent the centre from managing things effectively. The local organisations had to get used to the idea of enforcing the centre’s policies. Naturally, this was a difficult idea for the local bodies to endorse, since the masses, who had long viewed ‘the central authorities as robbers, landowners, exploiters’, distrusted these authorities. Nevertheless, this distrust had to be overcome (CW 28: 400).

In his *“Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, written two and half years after the victory of the October Revolution, Lenin described it as one of the most important lessons of the recent period that ‘absolute centralisation and rigorous discipline of the proletariat are an essential condition of victory over the bourgeoisie’ (CW 31: 24).

At this point one could ask: is there not a contradiction between centralism and democracy? Does not the one impinge upon the other? Democratic centralism has repeatedly been characterised as incoherent, nonsensical and ‘fundamentally inconsistent’ for this reason (Femia 1993: 136). Its demand for both political control from above and popular initiative from below seems to make little sense. According to Klaus von Beyme (1975: 268), for instance, democratic centralism ‘is less an operationalized concept of concrete organisation than an ideological formula void of concrete meaning’. What these commentators fail to realise is that Lenin himself dealt this apparent contradiction on several occasions. He examines and rejects the view that the centralisation of the state suppresses democracy, along with the idea that it would be better to install a decentralised (i.e., federalised) system. In his opinion, it is actually the centralised state that can *assure* the most favourable conditions for democratic development and the assertion of the popular will. Lenin points out that Marx, for instance, sought to ‘oppose conscious, democratic, proletarian centralism to bourgeois, military, bureaucratic centralism’ (CW 25: 435). He argues that the same is true for Engels. He did not define ‘democratic centralism in the bureaucratic sense’. Rather, his conception of the term facilitated a significant degree of autonomous local self-government. Moreover, the various local organs would voluntarily combine into a united collective, one that eliminated ‘all bureaucratic practices and all ordering’ from above’ (CW 25: 452). Commenting on Engels’ *Critique of the Social-Democratic Draft Programme of 1891*, Lenin wrote that he disproved the idea that a federal republic provides more freedom than a centralised republic. As evidence for his argument, Engels pointed to ‘the centralised French Republic of 1792-98 and the federal Swiss Republic’. Both of these governments granted more autonomy to the local administrations than previous federal systems. As such, Engels established that ‘the

greatest amount of local, regional, and other freedom known in history was accorded by a *centralised* and not a federal republic' (CW 25: 453).

Centralism was also championed during Lenin's time by Bernstein. In contrast to Lenin, he thought that only a bourgeois bureaucratic state could implement it. Bernstein therefore opposed the destruction of this state, which he viewed as the embodiment of 'positive' centralism. Lenin criticised the defeatism of this position in *State and Revolution*. According to him, Bernstein in particular was so narrow minded that he could not fathom the idea of the communes voluntarily forming a centralised system in order to overthrow capitalism and construct socialism. He thought that centralism was possible only if the bureaucracy and army imposed it from on high (CW 25: 435). Lenin then challenged Bernstein's view by posing the following question: if the working class and peasantry takes state power, organises freely in communes, unites these communes for the purpose of crushing the capitalists' power, and transfers the means of production into the nation's hands, then 'won't that be the most consistent democratic centralism[?]' (CW 25: 434-35). In other words, if the working masses overthrow capitalism, establish socialist democracy, and concentrate political power into their own hands, then they will have automatically established a state with democratic centralism, but without a military- bureaucratic apparatus (CW 25: 490).

Lenin continued to repudiate the association of democratic centralism with bureaucracy and the suppression of democracy long after the socialist revolution. In his December 1917 article *How to Organise Competition*, he acknowledged that the different parts of Russia each faced unique problems, and that the local governing units should therefore remain independent in several respects. Lenin argued that 'stereotyped forms and uniformity imposed from above' was anathema to democratic centralism. Although the centre had the power to determine the general policies of the state, the

local units had the freedom to adapt these policies in accordance with the specific local conditions, and by utilising their own approach, methods, and forms of control (CW 26: 413).

Lenin returned to this issue in January 1918 in his draft for the article *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, where he argued that ‘it must be clearly understood how vastly different democratic centralism is from bureaucratic centralism’ (CW 27: 207). Discussing the relationship of democratic centralism and autonomy, he pointed out that they do not exclude, but actually mutually suppose one another. Democratic centralism presupposes a high level of local organisational independence in the political, social and economic spheres. Democratic centralism is the enemy of ‘bureaucracy and routinism’. Properly understood, it facilitates the creative, unrestricted growth ‘not only of specific local features, but also of local inventiveness, local initiative, of diverse ways, methods and means of progress to the common goal’. Indeed, ‘local distinctions’ and ‘specific economic formations’ will all manifest themselves in the development of socialism in the various regions. These in turn will be influenced by the consciousness of the masses in each region, as well as the ‘forms of everyday life’. In Lenin’s view, the more diverse this all is, ‘the more surely and rapidly shall we ensure the achievement of... democratic centralism’ (CW 27: 207-8).

Lenin argues that it is imperative to abide by the central directives, decrees and laws with due consideration of the local circumstances. But he also argues that the local organs should have the sufficient latitude to find new and adequate forms of solving their problems (CW 26: 285-86, CW 29: 158; CW 30: 190). Depending upon the time and place, the local councils should have the right to ‘amend, enlarge and add’ to the central government’s policies. ‘Creative activity at the grass roots is the basic factor’ of socialist democracy. ‘Socialism cannot be decreed from above. Its spirit rejects the

mechanical bureaucratic approach; living, creative socialism is the product of the masses themselves' (CW 26: 289).

Democratic centralism strives to ensure and grant a substantial degree of autonomy and leeway for the regional, local and workplace communities over the issues that have no substantial bearing upon the interests of the other communists or the entire society. The aim is to ensure that people can make and implement their conditions in a democratic way (Harding 1981: 173-78). Democratic centralism therefore invests power and responsibility in the people who best know the problems, are most interested in achieving an optimal solution to them, and are capable of checking up on the realisation of decisions. In other words, it strives to guarantee the working masses free scope in their places of residence and work.

It should be noted, however, that democratic centralism does not grant full sovereignty to the lower organs. First, the socialist power centre determines the authority of the lower organs by outlining the framework, form and mode of their activity. Second, their activity must focus upon asserting the socialist interests of society as a whole. Third, their autonomy must not encroach on the fundamental interests of the other socialist communities.

Democratic centralism is therefore incompatible with a fully decentralised pattern in which the centre plays only a token role. The local communities must develop in parallel with the maintenance of a centralised system of government. The socialist power centre: i) defines the general objectives of society; ii) carries out the overall management of the country's affairs by issuing adequate guidelines; iii) coordinates the various local-level activities; iv) reconciles conflicting interests; v) and supervises and asserts the common interest, whilst also observing the rules of living peacefully with each other under a system of socialist legality.

Democratic centralism does not entail a top-down, unilateral power relation between the higher and lower organs. It does not only mean that lower bodies have an obligation to the higher ones. Lenin points out that socialist democracy conducts elections at the lowest level. This means that the rank-and-file and lower bodies elect the delegates and higher-level units. Consequently, the officers and higher units are lawfully accountable to the lower bodies in their activities.

In Lenin's view, democratic centralism is significant for democracy in three respects. Firstly, it enables the working masses, as well as the local, regional and workplace communities, to assert their democratic decisions. It ensures this because the lower-level bodies elect the higher-level units and officers. Furthermore, when the rank-and-file workers make a decision, they are binding upon the officers they elect, and on each officer above them.

Second, democratic centralism allows the local socialist forces to assert their positive initiatives, and it prevents the local non-socialist forces from suppressing these initiatives. Moreover, the local bodies can directly influence society as a whole, instead of being confined within the limits of their given locality. One can therefore say that democratic centralism opens wide vistas for rank-and-file activity.

Third, democratic centralism maintains a power structure that precludes anti-socialist forces from dominating in any local or workplace community, let alone in the larger units. In decentralised political systems it is easy for the local leaders to abuse their power. And when they do this, there is often no higher organ to bring them into line. Such was the case in the early Soviet Union. In 1922, Lenin could still speak of the danger of 'local influence', stating that '[u]ndoubtedly, we are living amidst an ocean of illegality, and local influence is one of the greatest, if not the greatest obstacle to the establishment of law and culture' (CW 33: 365). By making the higher-level

organs sovereign over the entire nation, however, democratic centralism became the means of eliminating and avoiding the various mistakes and abuses at the local level.

Reflections

Lenin's conception of democratic centralism is an original doctrine. Although democratic centralist ideas are present in the works of Marx and Engels, and although the idea itself is rooted in the theory and practice of labour organising, 'it was Lenin who formulated the dialectical combination of the two into a principle of political organisation' (Angle 2005: 525).

Several commentators describe democratic centralism as antidemocratic, since the centralising aspect undermines and dominates over the democratic aspect (Waller 1981: 76, 80; Alam 2009: 37). Femia argues that this has been proven in practice by the implementation of democratic centralism in communist regimes. 'Disciplined centralisation, with its requirements of unanimity, was antithetical to free democratic debate... within society at large' (Femia 1993: 136). 'To insist', writes Polan as well, 'on monolithic unity in the implementation of policy is to discourage, if not destroy, those regions of nonconformity within which alternative viewpoints can flourish' (Polan 1984: 83-85).

Angle, by contrast, rejects the notion that democratic centralism is 'simply democratic absolutism'. First, 'it is the people's own articulations of its interests that form a critical part of the evidence weighed by the leadership'. Moreover, 'people can demand and assess legitimate leadership, and people can engage in active resistance to a regime that fails to meet the standards of legitimacy'. To be sure, 'the relation between democracy and centralism is fraught with tension and can easily fall out of balance', but under the right conditions a balance can be achieved. 'First, democratic centralist

theory must demand significant participation in the early stages of policy formation'. Second, there must be rule of law, 'to protect the equal voicing of opinions that democratic centralism...requires'. Third, 'in order for robust consultations to take place, the state needs to recognise, endorse, and protect plural social interests'. A balance between striving for pluralism and the commonality must be reached. Too much pluralism, and the commonality will disappear, but if too much emphasis is placed on commonality, then pluralism will be suppressed (Angle 2005: 527-528, 532-533). If these conditions are met, Angle argues, democratic centralism can resemble the 'decent society' envisioned by John Rawls, as well as the conception of 'input democracy' advocated by Robert Goodin. According to this conception:

First, consultation functions to generate inputs into the policy process. Second, the broader the consultation the broader the – the more varied, but also the more representative – the inputs. 'Equality of inputs' (or more weakly still, perhaps just 'equality of opportunity for inputs') is the distinctly democratic feature of input democracy (Goodin cited in Angle 2005: 538).

Lenin's conception of democratic centralism is compatible with, and indeed supportive of, the two criteria outlined by Angle. Lenin supports mass participation in the formulation of policy, and he supports a law governed system that grants equality of opportunity to influence. The important thing to note, of course, is that he endorses these principles *within the framework of a proletarian dictatorship*, which suppresses the rights and interests of the opponents of socialism. The right to mass participation, public criticism, and legal equality extends to the working class alone.

3.6 Economic Democracy

According to N. Harding, one of the most widely cited authorities on Lenin's political thought and legacy, Lenin opposed the extension of democratic procedures into the economy. In fact, 'at no point in his career, either in or out of power, did Lenin ever recommend that the principles that informed economic priorities, should be debated widely by the population as a whole, or...adjudicated by popular democratic decision' (Harding 1996: 153). The view that Lenin rejected economic democracy in favour of the rigid hierarchical organisation of economic life is widely accepted in the literature.²⁶ It would be more accurate to describe this view as a myth, however, since it could not be farther from the truth. It is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of Lenin's approach to politics and economics.

Lenin makes it clear time and time again that the organisation of the economic sphere determines all the other spheres of society. Indeed, he argues that this is the foundational tenet of historical materialism. Economic power is a form (or subcategory) of political power, since it too influences people's lives and determines their actions. In Lenin's view, the economy (and more specifically, the social relations of production) shape and determine not only the political form of the state, but the breadth and depth of democracy as well. The upshot of this is the following: the working masses can emancipate themselves and build the deepest and broadest possible democracy only if they take the means of production into their own hands and establish collective control

²⁶ See, for instance, Brinton 1970; Harding 1981: 191, 194, 262-63; Siranni 1982: 382; 1985: 77, 79-82; Vanaik 1995: 3083; Femia 1993: 84; Marik 2008: 408, 414; Evans 1987: 14-15; Ehrenberg 1995: 449; Lane 1981: 60; Bellis 1979: 214-17; Polan 1984: 61.

over the economy. Lenin emphasised this point from the beginning of his political career, including in his 1895 draft programme for the Russian Social-Democratic Party (CW 2: 108). A few years later he approved the democratisation of economic life through the workers' 'active participation on boards examining all kinds of factory affairs, in courts of arbitration, in all possible assemblies, commissions, and conferences for the elaboration of labour laws' (CW 4: 276).

One of Lenin's main criticisms of liberal democracy is that it fails to address this task. Whilst there is democracy in the narrowly defined political sphere, there is none in the economic sphere. The working masses are literal 'wage slaves' who have no control over a major area of their lives. And they therefore feel alienated and powerless on a daily basis. According to Lenin, socialism overcomes this shortcoming by progressively extending the forms, principles and procedures of democracy into the economic sphere. Under socialism, economic democracy is guaranteed by the fact that the means of production are publicly owned. The state owns the productive enterprises and uses them to further the interest of the workers. This economic basis provides the foundation for not only democracy in the economic sphere, but socialist democracy more generally. As Lenin put it in his speech *What is Soviet Power?*, proletarian democracy 'gives those who were formerly oppressed the chance to straighten their backs and to an ever-increasing degree to take...the whole administration of the economy, the whole management of production, into their own hands' (CW 29: 249).

In this passage Lenin makes two points. Firstly, socialist democracy involves the planned 'administration of the economy'. The people collectively administer and direct the economy through their state, Party and mass organisations. Secondly, socialist democracy involves *the* 'management of production'. The various productive enterprises are controlled and managed by the people who work there. Lenin repeatedly

emphasises that these features are not imposed from above by a ruling elite, since after the October Socialist Revolution ‘there was not and could not be a definite plan for the organisation of economic life. Nobody could provide one’. Nevertheless, he placed his faith in the creative energies of the working class. And as such, he believed that the extension of democracy into the economy could be achieved ‘from below, by the masses, through their experience. Instructions would, of course, be given and ways would be indicated, but it was necessary to begin simultaneously from above and from below’ (CW 26: 365). That is, the system of economic and workplace democracy was worked out by both the working masses and the state. The following section examines each of these features in turn, before examining their relationship to one another.

Workers’ Management

Once the workers successfully obtain control over the capitalists, and once they acquire the necessary technical knowledge, they can transition from workers’ control to workers’ management. Lenin makes this clear in his well-known polemic with the ‘renegade’ K. Kautsky, the pope of Orthodox Marxism. In Lenin’s view, Kautsky argued that the workers could achieve socialism purely through political democracy. He thought that the nationalisation of private enterprise would suffice in the economic sphere. Lenin responded by pointing out that the mere act of nationalisation does not ensure that the workers will have a greater say in managing their economic affairs. In order for this to happen, the masses must replace the old bourgeois owners and managers with their own (CW 28: 252-53). As Lenin emphasises elsewhere, ‘the road to socialism, the sole road [is] that of teaching the workers the practical business of managing gigantic enterprises, of organising big industry and large-scale distribution’ (CW 27: 302). In his view, it is imperative that ‘the workers must become the masters

in all fields; they must learn to be managers and to direct those who up to now...acted as stewards for the capitalists against the workers' (CW 29: 41). Private ownership and control of the means of production must be abolished, but this must be replaced with the 'democratic administration of the means of production captured from the bourgeoisie' (CW 23: 25).

As Lenin's critics hasten to point out, however, the system of one-person management remains in force under socialism (CW 30: 309). Indeed, they are right. Lenin argues that one-man management remains necessary for two reasons. Firstly, 'all administrative work requires special qualifications'. And whilst the workers may be seasoned revolutionaries, they are not all adept economic administrators. 'Anybody who studies real life and has practical experience knows that management necessarily implies competency'. Furthermore, 'a knowledge of all the conditions of production down to the last detail and of the latest technology of your branch of production is required'. In other words, the workers need 'a certain scientific training' (CW 30: 428).

Trained managers are particularly necessary in the period immediately following the socialist revolution, when the counterrevolutionary forces threaten to overthrow the workers' power by sabotaging the country, invading it, or beginning a civil war. Lenin argues that this was the case during the early days of the soviet power. During this period, when the country was experiencing a civil war and a famine, it was fundamental that the workers could stay fed. And this could only be guaranteed if competent managers were in charge. Under these conditions 'the preference for corporate management' highlighted an inadequate understanding of the tasks facing the republic. 'With management in the hands of incompetent people, with fuel not delivered in time, with locomotives, steamers and barges standing unrepaired, the very existence of Soviet Russia [was] at stake' (CW 30: 426, 429).

Having established the rationale for one-man management, Lenin considers ‘the question...of how far one-man managerial authority (which could be called dictatorial) is compatible with democratic organisations in general, [and] with the collective principle in management especially’. As he rightly recognises, ‘the opinion is very widely held that there can be no question of such compatibility, that one-man dictatorial authority is incompatible with democracy...and collective management’. Indeed, this is the main thrust of the narrative that highlights Lenin’s opposition to economic democracy. Lenin’s own position is that ‘nothing could be more mistaken than this opinion’ (CW 27: 211-12). This is because in contrast to bourgeois democracy, where the managers are appointed by the private companies and are hostile to the interests of the workers, under socialism every manager is a representative of the people. They are appointed either indirectly by the state or Party, which are representative organs; or the workers within the enterprises elect a manager amongst themselves. Moreover, the workers have the power to hold meetings, discuss their labour conditions, and determine the affairs of their enterprise (CW 27: 213). These mechanisms of popular control cannot be unproductive, however. Once the workers have chosen their manager, conducted their discussions have taken place, and decided their general policies, there must be discipline, which must be imposed by the manager. As such, the two functions of economic organization, that of democratic discussion, and that of execution of tasks, must be strictly delineated, for only this can enable ‘the economic mechanism to function really like clockwork’ (CW 27: 211).

Lenin points out that every democratic system involves full-time leaders. Liberal democracy, he explains, has an elected government that acts on the behalf of the people. In the government cabinet, individual ministers have complete control over certain areas (e.g., the minister of education, health, etc.). The people themselves do not decide

every political issue. Thus, ‘the dictatorship of individuals was compatible with bourgeois democracy’ (CW 27: 267-68). By the same reasoning, the system of one-man management is compatible with socialist democracy. The manager rules with the permission and on the behalf of the workers within the enterprise.

Secondly, the managers do not have a monopoly of power. They cannot impose whatever arbitrary rules or regulations they would like. Aside from being subject to constant supervision by the workers, the various state, Party and mass organisations also determine and monitor their activity. During the Seventh Congress of the CPSU, Lenin argued that ‘in the economic sphere... the socialist organisation of production’ should entail ‘management by *workers’ organisations* (trade unions, factory committees, etc.) under the general leadership of Soviet power, which alone is *sovereign*’ (CW 27: 156). In particular, Lenin states that it is imperative to ‘extend to the entire trade union movement those methods of the broader application of democracy’, including ‘the management of industry’, with the end goal of maximising its ‘participation in production management’ (CW 31: 374-75). As he makes it clear, ‘the trade unions must, in particular, be a school for training the whole mass of workers, and eventually all working people, in the art of managing socialist industry (and gradually also agriculture)’ (CW 33: 190). The managers therefore operate under the guidance and training of the peoples’ mass democratic organisations, and they are subordinate and accountable to the masses.

Lenin identifies the system of workers’ control as another check on the power of the manager. According to this concept, the workers of every enterprise have the power to monitor and supervise the activity of the manager, so as to ensure that they carry out the directives of the centre and do not abuse their power. Lenin outlines the precise tasks of this form of participation in his *Draft Regulations on Workers Control*:

Workers' control over the production, storage, purchase and sale of all products and raw materials shall be introduced in all industrial, commercial, banking, agricultural and other enterprises employing not less than five workers and office employees (together), or with an annual turnover of not less than 10,000 rubles.

...Workers' control shall be exercised by all the workers and office employees of an enterprise, either directly, if the enterprise is small enough to permit it, or through their elected representatives, who shall be elected *immediately* at general meetings, at which minutes of the elections shall be taken and the names of those elected communicated to the government and to the local Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies.

...The decisions of the elected representatives of the workers and office employees are binding upon the owners of enterprises and may be annulled only by trade unions and their congresses.

...More detailed rules on workers' control shall be drawn up by the local Soviets of Workers' Deputies and by conferences of factory committees, and also by committees of office employees at general meetings of their representatives (CW 26: 264-65).

In the first place, the workers have the power to supervise and monitor every stage of the production process, i.e., the 'production, storage, purchase and sale of all products and raw materials'. Secondly, workers' control encompasses the entire economic sphere of society. Every economic enterprise that employs five or more workers, and which makes a minimum amount of money, must be subject to workers' control.

Thirdly, the workers will exercise their democratic control directly in the small enterprises, and indirectly in the larger enterprises, via elected representatives. The workers of the larger enterprises will have access to the minutes of the meetings, so that they can gauge whether their representatives are truly expressing their opinions, complaints, and ideas. Fourth, the workers and elected representatives of the enterprise are sovereign, in the sense that their decisions are final and revocable only by the trade unions. Finally, the various state organisations themselves decide the rules of workers' control. The working masses therefore have the power to amend and shape the details of their workplace democracy.

Having said this, it would be a mistake to associate the concept of workers' control with a strong sense of labour direction or management. As Lane rightly points out, 'a common error perpetrated by commentators on Lenin is to attribute to him the idea of 'workers' control in a syndicalist sense – i.e., of workers in the plant having sovereignty over it'. In Lane's view, 'this is false...Lenin never saw workers' control as the initiation of fundamental decisions relating to production' (Lane 1981: 60). The task of workers' control is to make sure that the managers serve the socialist cause, by giving the workers the power to monitor, oversee, and supervise their activities (Rosenberg 1978: 89; Harding 1981: 183; Avrich 1963: 53).

According to Lenin, however, the system of socialist one-person management has little in common with the despotic system practiced under capitalism. This is because the managers themselves are workers; they derive their authority from the workers; they are chosen by the workers; they are controlled by the workers; and they serve the interests of the workers. This ensures that the management system always serves the interests of the working majority, rather than the bourgeois minority (CW 27: 268).

For these reasons, Lenin concludes that '[t]here is, therefore, absolutely *no* contradiction in principle between Soviet (*that is*, socialist) democracy and the exercise of dictatorial powers by individuals' (CW 27: 268). In fact, the notion that 'corporate management means management by the workers, and that individual management means non-worker management', is, in his view, nonsensical: 'The mere fact that the question is presented in this way, the mere fact that this sort of argument is used, shows that [some people] still lack a sufficiently clear class-consciousness' (CW 30: 427). In Lenin's (CW 27: 204) view, 'each factory, each *artel* ²⁷ and agricultural enterprise...is... one of the democratic bases of Soviet power'.

Lenin's major concern is that workers' management should never become an autotelic activity. The most basic aim of this measure is the improved quality of production. Addressing the Third Congress of Water Transport Workers in March 1920, Lenin said that workers' management would be useless if it could not keep the economy afloat. It was essential for the system to be practical. 'See to it that management is conducted with the minimum expenditure of forces; see to it that administrators...are capable men, that they all work and manage, and let it be considered a crime for them not to take part in the work of management' (CW 30: 428-429).

Some ambiguity remains, however. In the narrative that highlights Lenin's opposition to economic democracy, his supposed advocacy of Taylorism plays a prominent role (Traub 1978; Siranni 1985: 80; Beissinger 1988: 22-23; Sochor 1981: 247-49; Harding 1996: 275; Scoville 2001: 625; Wren and Bedeian 2004; Islam 1988: 43; Meyer 1963: 205-06; Liebman 1980: 336, 338). Taylorism is a scientific theory of

²⁷ In Russia, *Artels* were cooperative associations of craftsmen living and working together.

management whose main objective is to improve economic efficiency and labour productivity, typically by minimising worker control and maximising managerial control. In its application to the economic enterprise, the Taylorist method of labour organisation annihilates even the most rudimentary forms of workplace democracy, replacing them with an authoritarian management structure that is designed to achieve the maximum productive output. For those who claim that Lenin endorsed the wholesale adoption of this system, his conception of socialism does not merely overlook economic democracy; it is explicitly hostile to it.

According to one popular narrative, the Russian Author Y. Zamyatin (1972) anticipates the wider anti-democratic implications of Lenin's economic model in his dystopian novel *We*, which he allegedly wrote in response to the productivist forms of argumentation and economic organisation taking root within Leninist Russia (Layton 1978). The novel describes a world of harmony and conformity within a united totalitarian state, wherein Taylorist principles govern not only the economic sphere, but the society at large. Democracy is non-existent. Every aspect of life is regimented in a way that contributes to the maximum organisational and productive efficiency. McCarthy (1984: 124) has written that the references to Taylorism in *We* are 'specifically directed against Lenin'.

This narrative misinterprets Lenin's attitude towards Taylorism. To begin with, it is important to recognise that Lenin dedicates only two short articles to the Taylor system, which take up three pages within his 45-volume *Collected Works*. These insignificant documents, which can be more appropriately described as passing comments, can hardly prove that Lenin was infatuated with this form of scientific management.

Secondly, and more importantly, Lenin always took a *critical* view of Taylorism. He recognised it for what it was: a method of maximising capitalist exploitation. In his

first article on the subject, *A 'Scientific' System of Sweating* – which can hardly be described as a positive title – Lenin criticises Taylorism for being anti-democratic, and for being the most recent way of ‘exploiting the workers’ (CW 19: 594). He reiterates this criticism in his second pejoratively titled article on the subject, *The Taylor System—Man's Enslavement by the Machine*, where he states that the increases in efficiency achieved under Taylorism are ‘introduced to the detriment of the workers, for they lead to their still greater oppression and exploitation’ (CW 20: 153). Not once in these articles did Lenin suggest that Taylorism was a purely positive phenomenon. On the contrary, they clearly show that he was highly critical of it, particularly from the standpoint of economic democracy.

After the October Socialist revolution, however, Lenin does appear to advocate Taylorism on a few occasions, such as in his article on *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*. But the concerted efforts to present these remarks as evidence of his theoretical commitment to Taylorist methods are unconvincing, since this approach ignores the historical conditions. Lenin changed his perspective during this period because the severity of the social and economic crisis in post-revolutionary Russia, as well as the urgency of the problems that needed to be solved, limited the range of economic solutions. The objective conditions did not encourage experimentation with labour techniques that were diametrically opposed to those laid down by industrial capitalism. Lenin advocated Taylorism not on principle, but as a matter of practical necessity.

Even then, however, Lenin never advocated the wholesale adoption of Taylorism. The textual evidence suggests that he actually maintained his critical perspective. As Lenin put it in one of his post-revolutionary works, ‘the Taylor system, the last word of capitalism in this respect, like all capitalist progress, is a combination of the refined

brutality of bourgeois exploitation and a number of the greatest scientific achievements'. Lenin continued to view Taylorism as a form of capitalist exploitation. He expressly rejected the idea that socialists should adopt it wholesale. And he instead advised them to apply only 'what is scientific and progressive in the Taylor system' (CW 27: 258, 257). Now, it is obvious that to apply only 'what is scientific and progressive' is not the same as applying the entire system, including all of its exploitative elements. For Lenin, it involves adopting only those aspects that are compatible with economic democracy, whilst discarding the elements that contradict it. Thus, long before the socialist revolution Lenin called for the workers to combine the democratic forms of socialist economic organisation with the benefits in productive efficiency that Taylorism granted. The latter, he argued was paving the way for a system in which the working class would 'take over all social production and appoint its own workers' committees for the purpose of properly distributing and rationalising all social labour' (CW 20: 154).

Throughout his works Lenin argues that science should be utilised in the service of political and economic democracy. He rejects the positivist notion that the principles of science should actually govern the economic sphere, let alone society at large. The technocratic dictatorship outlined in Zamyatin's dystopian novel 'bears little resemblance to the ideal of Leninist thought' (McCarthy 1984: 124).

Lenin adopts an evolutionary view of political and economic development under socialism, which maintains that social phenomena emerge gradually, and only over an extended period of time. Whilst this view rejects the possibility of implementing fully developed workplace democracy straightaway, it supports the gradual democratisation of the economy alongside the democratisation of socialist society as a whole. Admittedly, Lenin never uses the term 'economic democracy' when speaking about

communism. But his conception of this classless form of society clearly presupposes it. He believes, for instance, that the state can only wither away to the extent that the workers assume a gradually larger degree of collective control over society, particularly in the economic sphere. When class antagonisms disappear, and when society provides an abundance of material goods, the need for one-man management will diminish, and the workers will be able to increase their control over the workplace. In fact, the communist distributive principle, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to their needs', is compatible with and supportive of a situation in which the workers have maximal control over the productive process. After all, in the absence of a coercive state apparatus, democratic methods will be required in order to decide what to produce, whose needs to serve, and how to distribute the wealth of society. Whilst Lenin maintains that workplace democracy cannot become fully developed under socialism, he almost certainly views this full development as a defining characteristic of communism.

Democratic Planning

In Lenin's view, the extension of democracy into the economic sphere should not only involve 'industrial democracy', i.e., the workers managing their own enterprises on an independent basis. This would amount to nothing more than a form of primitive anarchic syndicalism. If the individual economic units are able to produce what they like when they like, and sell at any price with no plan to guide them, then they will recreate the autonomous laws of the capitalist free market, along with all their unintended, anti-democratic consequences, such as periodic economic crises and under-employment.

Lenin believes that society must have control over the economy as a whole (CW 42: 71). It must be able to dictate the development of economic life down to the finest detail. Only then will the people really be able to govern themselves and master their political environment. Only then can the ‘rule of the people’ become genuine.

In order to achieve this end, Lenin argues that it is necessary to abolish the free market and replace it with a centralised system of state economic planning. In contrast to liberal democracy, which lets the free market dictate the economy’s overall development, socialist democracy must be organised on the basis of a *command economy*. The people delegate power to the state, the representative of the popular masses, which administers the economy on their behalf. The state defines the production targets and aims of the local enterprises. The planning system is therefore a form of indirect, representative democracy (CW 42: 96).

The Socialist state-planning organ has been characterised as an all-powerful bureaucracy, staffed by experts and distinguished by a hierarchical command structure. Power supposedly rests in a single staff of technocrats, and ultimately, a commander-in-chief, whose actions cannot be constrained by democratic procedure (Femia 1993: 83). This vision hardly resembles Lenin’s model. As he argues, ‘we are in favour of centralism and of a ‘plan’, but of centralism and plan of the *proletarian* state, of proletarian regulation of production and distribution in the interests of the poor, the working people, the exploited against the exploiters’ (CW 26: 118). Since the task of managing the economy at the national level requires specialist knowledge and experience, he does admit that many of the posts will be filled by appointment, rather than by election. Specialists and experts with a petty-bourgeois class origin will play a major role in formulating the various plans, at least during the early phases of socialist development. But the state-planning organ is neither ‘unaccountable’ nor anti-

democratic. Its principal leaders are chosen via election; it is authorised by the people; it serves the people; and it is accountable to the people. It follows the same rules as the other representative state organs in socialist society.

Lenin never suggests that experts are the only people involved in the state planning process. As far back as the very beginning of the twentieth century, he formulated the idea that the whole of society should take part in the planning process. In the Draft Party Programme proposed by Plekhanov, it was set down as a policy requirement that there be ‘planned organisation of the social process to satisfy the needs both of society as a whole and of its individual members’. Lenin wrote that this was ‘not enough’. Plekhanov’s formulation did not specify the involvement of the masses in planning. A system of economic planning could, in theory, be organised by the capitalist trusts and monopolies

Organisation of that kind will, perhaps, be provided even by the trusts. It would be more definite to say ‘by society *as a whole*’ (for this covers planning and indicates who is responsible for that planning), and not merely to satisfy the needs of its members, but with the object of ensuring *full* well-being and free, *all-round* development for *all* the members of society (CW 6: 52).

Long after the October Socialist Revolution Lenin argued that ‘it is most important...to give the workers and all working people generally practical training in the art of managing the economy of the whole country’ (CW 33: 191). He argues that it is imperative to ‘enlist an even greater number of workers...in the work of administering industry and the national economy generally’ (CW 30: 406). Lenin repeatedly stresses the necessity of training up the workers so that they can take over and manage this task

of economic planning themselves. By training the workers ‘side by side with the old specialists they will take their places, carry out the same tasks and will train for our civil business, for the management of industry, for the direction of economic activities’ (CW 23: 247). After all, Lenin states, ‘socialism can only take shape and be consolidated when the working class has learnt how to run the economy and when the authority of the working people has been firmly established. Socialism is mere wishful thinking without that’ (CW 28: 139).

In Lenin’s view, the workers’ mass organisations and their representatives must take an active role in managing the direction and growth of the socialist economy alongside the state. In his article *On the Role of the Trade Unions*, he highlights the importance of these organisations in participating in the planning process themselves. Firstly, ‘[t]he trade unions should help to staff all the state business and administrative bodies connected with economies: nominate their candidates for them, stating their length of service, experience, and so forth’ (CW 33: 190). Secondly, the unions should help to formulate the ‘economic plans and also programmes of production and expenditure of stocks of material supplies for the workers, in selecting the factories that are to continue to receive state supplies, to be leased, or to be given out as concessions, etc.’ (CW 33: 190). Thirdly, the trade unions must mobilise the working masses into the state positions concerned with economic planning, and teach them all the fundamentals of planning, so that they can take an active part in formulating them. The unions must familiarise the workers ‘with all details of industrial operations—from the procurement of raw materials to the marketing of the product’. By doing this, the unions will give them ‘a more and more concrete understanding of the single state plan of socialist economy and the worker’s and peasant’s practical interest in its implementation (CW 33: 191). Lastly, Lenin mentions that ‘the drawing up of scales of wages and supplies,

etc.’ is also ‘one of the essential functions of the trade unions in the building of socialism and in their participation in the management of industry’ (CW 33: 191).

Lenin does not claim a monopoly in setting out the role of the trade unions in the process of economic planning. On the contrary, he states that ‘[t]his list of the major functions of the trade unions in the work of building up socialist economy should, of course, be drawn up in greater detail by the competent trade union and government bodies’ (CW 33: 191). That is, the precise role of the unions in the task of democratic planning should be dictated by the state and mass democratic organisations themselves.

Long after the masses began to participate in managing the planned command economy, Lenin continued to argue that the workers’ democratic control over the economic planning process should continue to grow. In one of his speeches, he argued that ‘[w]e must go on extending the participation of the working people in economic administration and in building a new economy. We shall never bring the work of communist construction to its completion unless we cope with this task’ (CW 28: 426).

To summarise, Lenin emphasises that economic democracy requires limitations. He rejects the notion that the workers and trade unions can manage their enterprises without one-person management, and without state interference. Lenin argues that the slogan of ‘industrial democracy’, which encapsulates these ideas, is ‘half-baked and theoretically false’ (CW 32: 26). Lenin’s rejection of ‘industrial democracy’ should not, however, be interpreted as the rejection of democratic principles in the economy. Lenin’s point is that ‘we need not, in this question of democracy, go beyond the usual democratic practices’ (CW 32: 31). Instead of ‘industrial democracy’, which repudiates the necessity of authority and state control, it is more accurate to speak of ‘ordinary democracy (without any exaggerations, without denying the Central Committee’s right of “appointment”, etc., but also without any obstinate defence of the mistakes and

excesses of certain “appointees”, which need to be rectified)’ (CW 32: 47). Lenin wants to avoid the authoritarian extremes of top-down bureaucratic planning, on the one hand, and the libertarian extremes of anarcho-syndicalism, on the other. There needs to be balance between democratic control over the economy as a whole and democratic control in the workplace.

Reflections

It is remarkable that Lenin’s conception of economic democracy has been nearly universally dismissed. For it represents a serious attempt to reconcile centralised democratic planning of the economy with workplace democracy. Such a balance is of course difficult to achieve. Indeed, Femia argues that it is impossible. The state-planning organ, he maintains, will impose mandatory directives upon the individual enterprises, thereby depriving them of independent decision-making. Even if the plan itself is the outcome of democratic deliberation, once formulated it must be binding on all productive enterprises. The more participation and autonomy there is on the shop floor, the less predictable the economic performance. In the interests of accurate forecasting, and the avoidance of waste that is the inevitable result of getting a forecast wrong, the centralised planned economy must limit the extent of self-management. Worker control within the productive unit can therefore only be marginal. Decisions about inputs, outputs, prices and wages will, of necessity, be made at a higher level. In Femia’s view, those who wish to base socialism upon workers’ self-management must reject centralised planning and accept substantial market regulation of the economy, since market relations allow individual productive units to exercise a considerable degree of autonomy (Femia 1993: 83-85).

Femia's assumption is that more centralised planning means less economic democracy. But this is not necessarily true. The planning system outlined by Lenin is organised on a democratic basis. The working masses take part in the drafting, formulation, discussion and implementation of the various plans. Every stage of the process involves democratic procedures. In the interests of gaining accurate information about the people's needs and wants, the central authorities have an interest in heeding the views of the local economic units. Since the state-owned enterprises have the responsibility of implementing the national policies, the state has an incentive to cooperate with them and fulfil their requests wherever possible. After all, the failure to do this could result in poorer economic performance. As such, the state will be motivated to fulfil the requests of the local enterprises, rather than ignore them. More centralised planning does not necessarily translate into less economic democracy.

But 'it is naïve', Femia argues (1993: 88), 'to expect that the central plan can ever be the unadulterated product of some collective will'. History shows that authoritarian bureaucracies and planned economies are empirically connected. In the absence of the market, a bureaucracy becomes essential to the functioning of the economy. The reason for this is that in free market systems the consumers decide what is produced by voting with their wallets. In the absence of market regulation, some organ must allocate resources and goods according to some objective criteria. In a society of abundance, the goals of production can be decided in a democratic fashion, and only the manner of their implementation is a technical problem. But in a society of scarcity, decisions about what needs to satisfy, and to what extent, depend upon social and technical calculations concerning their cost. Thus, it is impossible to disentangle social and technical decisions, and in practice the distinction between the means and end vanishes. In a command economy with centralised planning, the bureaucratic experts will play a

dominant role in formulating the policies, since they alone can carry out the required cost-benefit analysis. Ultimately the domination of the bureaucracy will be based upon the complexity of countrywide planning and the expertise it demands. As a result of the huge size and numerous interdependencies of the socialist economy, the task of coordination and integration will be extremely difficult. In all likelihood it will be the task of skilled specialists, insulated from even the weakest forms of democratic control. Representative organs could decide the main aims of production in consultation with the planners, but there is no room for direct and extensive popular participation in a centralised command economy (Femia 1993: 88-89; Selucky 1979: 78; Polan 1984: 61-62).

These criticisms cannot be discounted. Trained specialists will, by virtue of their expertise, play a predominant role in the formation of the economic plans. Indeed, this is something that Lenin does not deny. But the upshot is that the various state, party and mass organisations will all play a part as well. Whilst these bodies may not possess the expertise necessary in order to assume a leading role, they can still provide general guidance with regard to the overall aims of the plans. Lenin also emphasises the importance of giving as many rank-and-file workers as possible a basic knowledge of economic management, so that they can also confidently express their views, either in their workplace meetings, or via the various economic agencies. This means that the planners will find it difficult to make any decisions they want. The state-planning organ may nevertheless assume a bureaucratic character, one that limits the degree of democratisation within the economic sphere. However, the degree of economic democratisation in Lenin's model should not be measured in a vacuum. It must be compared to the level of economic democracy existing in the liberal democracies,

which is of course very low. When such comparisons are made, the limitations and bureaucratic distortions of centralised planning may appear less severe.

Concluding remarks

J. V. Femia expresses the prevailing sentiment when he rejects Leninist democracy as a 'misnomer' and 'a travesty, negating everything that genuine democrats stand for. Lenin's vision, in his view, 'equates with despotism', and the 'People's democracies' that implemented his ideas were and are authoritarian regimes with no democratic content (Femia 1993: 5, 141, 10). This chapter, by providing a lengthier and much more in-depth analysis of the textual evidence, has at the least brought this strong claim into question.

Lenin offers a detailed, sophisticated, and nuanced conception of socialist democracy. His conception is not a static model, but of a constantly changing entity, increasing and decreasing in scope and quality in accordance with the consciousness and confidence of the working class. When Lenin advanced this conception, it signified an original contribution to Marxism and democratic theory.

Lenin's conception of socialist democracy is characterised by a dialectical tension between top-down control, manifested chiefly by the Party, and bottom-up initiative, manifested chiefly by the masses and their organisations. Either side can take precedence, depending upon the circumstances and conditions. Because of this flexibility, Lenin's vision encourages a range of interpretations and applications. Indeed, it has been implemented in the Marxist-Leninist 'People's democracies' in a variety of ways. The people's democracy of China is different to that of Cuba, for instance, and both of these are a world apart from Stalin's Soviet Union. The diversity in forms of socialist democracy is evidence of the fact that Lenin's model does not lend

itself to one particular mode of practice. Each of its aspects can be widened or narrowed, depending upon the time and conditions. The Party can take on a more or less dominant role, interfering more or less with the state organs; democratic rights can be enjoyed by more or fewer people, and be more or less restrictive; the state institutions and social organisations of mass democracy can be more or less expansive, more or less independent from the Party; democratic centralism can be more or less democratic, more or less centralist; economic democracy can give more or less control to the centre, or more or less control to the economic enterprises. There is a vast number of potential combinations of these principles of socialist democracy, and only some of them have been realised so far.

Because of this, the sweeping, generalised characterisation of Lenin's vision as 'undemocratic' is not very illuminating. Indeed, it is unjustified. Assessing the democratic credentials of any political system is a difficult process. Contrary to the views of Femia and an array of anti-communist scholars, this cannot be achieved simply by establishing whether there are multi-party elections and universal rights. Democracy, as the rule of the people, is a far more complex concept than that. Lenin's vision may be more or less democratic, depending upon which features are emphasised or de-emphasised in practice, but it cannot simply be democratic or despotic, in the sense of a binary either/or. It is clear, in any case, that Lenin was seriously committed to the realisation of democracy, as the rule of the majority, under socialism, and this commitment derived from his lifelong mission to help emancipate the working class. The essence of Lenin's mission has been captured perfectly by the Marxist historian Christopher Hill, who says this in the conclusion to his classical study, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*:

In its thought for the ordinary man Lenin's thought was fundamentally democratic. Many people before him had expressed the view that genuine democracy was impossible without socialism; but Lenin insisted on the converse, that socialism without democracy was impossible (Hill 1947: 218).

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to outline, in detailed and systematic fashion, the meaning and significance of democracy in the political thought of V. I. Lenin, a legendary leader in the history of Marxism and the working-class struggle. Whilst several studies have examined this subject, none has done so in the level of detail that the source material demands. This thesis has attempted to accomplish that task, by undertaking a more comprehensive and complete analysis of Lenin's works on democracy than has been undertaken hitherto. In doing so, it has provided a fresh reading of the source material and engaged with the secondary literature on the topic. The primary aim was to establish what Lenin actually said, rather than ask if he was 'right', though the latter question could not be avoided altogether in answering the former.

This thesis has argued that Lenin is a democratic theorist. He treats the practical and theoretical questions of the concept of democracy seriously, far more seriously than his critics realise or admit. Lenin offers a single conception of democracy. The same concept underlies all of his remarks on the subject. He did not develop one conception only to abandon it later on. Lenin's pronouncements display a remarkable consistency over the years. Lenin also offers an original, sophisticated, and nuanced democratic theory. His theory is original because he presents several novel ideas whilst also developing existing ones in new directions; it is sophisticated because he discusses democratic concepts with a high level of complexity; and it is nuanced because he avoids generalised statements and often qualifies judgements with stipulations. These three characteristics of originality, sophistication, and nuance pervade most of Lenin's discussions of democracy.

The first chapter of this thesis examined Lenin's interpretation of democracy as a concept. The first section argued that Lenin defines democracy as the rule of the people, a political system where everyone can participate in organising their public affairs. In its practical application, however, democracy is a form of class rule, and a form of the state. This means that it is a power organ, the organ of the ruling class. The democratic state may express either the rule of the exploiting minority, as in all the exploiting societies, or the rule of the exploited majority, as under socialist democracy. The evolution and fate of democracy are tied to that of the state. Its historical changes depend on those of the state. Throughout history there have been, are and will be ancient, capitalist, socialist, and communist democracies. Under communism democracy becomes complete, to the point that it causes the state to wither away. However, Lenin rejects the notion that democratic processes end under communism. He makes an important distinction between democracy, which is a form of state, and *democratism*, which denotes the institutional procedures and forms of democratic governance. Unlike democracy, *democratism* *also* exists in the non-state spheres, to denote the forms of democratic management functioning in social organisations. Under communism, Lenin argues that the democratic state withers away, since there are no classes to suppress, but *democratism* lives on, as the common people still make decisions using democratic procedures, via their non-state organs of self-management.

So, whilst democracy means the rule of the people, it is also a form of class rule that is incompatible with the rule of the people. This is the primary contradiction of democracy. Lenin made an important contribution to democratic theory by distinguishing between *democratism*, on the one hand, and democracy, on the other. The former is a form of government, whilst the latter is a form of state. In arguing that democracy passes through a sequence of historical stages, Lenin offers a materialist

conception of democratic history as a companion to Marx's materialist conception of economic history. However, Lenin pays insufficient attention to the primitive and feudal forms of democracy, thereby making his historical outline incomplete. Lenin's thesis that democracy withers away under communism is also an unfortunate expression, since he can be wrongly interpreted as saying that democratic processes will end under communism.

Lenin treats democracy as a political category, reflective of and dependent on the economic base of society. Every democracy serves the relations of production within a given society. When democracy expresses the rule of the exploiting classes under bourgeois social conditions, this provides an opportunity for the struggle of the working class, which the workers must make use of in the interest of their emancipation. They must also make every effort to extend democracy in a way that the resulting situation may become an advantageous starting point for the socialist revolution. Lenin argues that democracy as a form of the state denotes the rule of the people. Until its promise is realised, democracy should figure as a programme of struggle for the socialist revolution. After the socialist revolution has achieved a victory, democracy becomes a means in the hands of the working people, to be used in the interest of their social liberation. It also comes to mean continual interference in social relations in the interest of attaining socialism and then communism. Lenin argues that democracy is a political category. As such, it always expresses the contradiction between political equality and social inequality. It always expresses the immaturity of social conditions, as a result of which equality can be realised only partially, only politically, and only legally. That is why Lenin argues that democracy cannot be the final objective of the struggle of the working class. Democracy must be used as a means for surpassing politics, for surpassing everything related to the state, that is, for realising true social emancipation.

This is the second contradiction of democracy. It means the rule of the people, but it cannot overcome the class struggle. Lenin's instrumentalist justification for democracy builds upon Marx and Engels, and expresses his view that democracy is not an absolute value. Socialism comes first, and if democracy gets in the way of that then its principles must be set aside. This view is problematic from a democratic standpoint, and raises interesting questions about what political values the working class should prioritise the most in its liberation struggle.

Lenin argues that democracy is in dialectical unity with dictatorship. Democracy for one class necessarily means dictatorship for another. Contrary to the views of some commentators, Lenin argues that democratic dictatorships are compatible with both the rule of law and the use of peaceful, constitutional methods of class oppression. Democracy ceases to be a dictatorship only once it has withered away and becomes fully realised. This is the third contradiction of democracy. Its aim is to expose the class content of democracy, whilst also mobilising the working class to overcome their bourgeois dictatorship and establish democracy for themselves.

Lenin argues that democracy is not only distinct from freedom – whether that be understood in its political or human dimension – but also in partial contradiction with freedom. Democracy may aid the realisation of political and complete freedom, but it does so in a double-edged manner: the extension of freedom for one class necessarily means its restriction for another. Moreover, democracy and freedom can never co-exist in their complete forms. When freedom is obtained, democracy will wither away. That is the fourth contradiction of democracy.

It is evident, therefore, that Lenin views democracy as a concept with inherent contradictions. He argues that democracy can overcome these contradictions only through a process of self-transcendence, or in other words by ceasing to exist as a state.

Lenin's consistent class-based approach to democracy provides a unique lens through which to view the concept more critically. For that reason, it may be particularly valuable to the fighting working class, who encounter all kinds of demagogic slogans about 'pure' democracy.

The second chapter of this thesis focused upon Lenin's critique of liberal democracy, or what he calls 'bourgeois democracy'. Contrary to the views of some commentators, this critique is not a simple rehash of Marx and Engels. Lenin builds upon some of their arguments, whilst avoiding others.

First, Lenin criticises the economic-political divide for depoliticising the economic sphere and placing it beyond popular control. The workers are exploited by their capitalist work masters in their places of employment, and capitalists are free to make decisions concerning the organisation of enterprises and workers that impact many lives. This results in mass working class alienation from politics, as the workers recognise that political democracy cannot influence their economic activities, which form a key part of their daily lives. The result of this alienation is the delegitimisation of the political system and the strengthening of the capitalist class. Lenin's critique of the economic-political divide continues to be explored expansively in the extensive empirical and theoretical literature, thereby suggesting that he knew something of what he was talking about.

Second, Lenin argues that liberal democratic rights are skewed in favour of the capitalist oligarchs. They can use their wealth and economic power to reorientate freedom of thought and speech, two critical criteria for democracy. The rich can buy up the means of communication and mental production in order to shape public opinion in their own favour. Working-class perspectives are distorted by the bourgeoisie, or else find it hard to reach the mainstream and have an impact. This ideological control further

cements the political domination of the capitalist class. Lenin's critique departs from Marx's in the sense that it does not criticise all rights in principle, only their skewed application under capitalism. His less radical criticisms are, ironically, more amenable to liberal democrats, and they have been developed in the empirical and theoretical literature.

Third, Lenin argues that the liberal democratic state manifests the domination of the bourgeoisie. The capitalists use it as an instrument to further their interests and disempower the workers. The legislative, executive and judicial branches of the state are typically staffed by the capitalist class or its lackeys. Lenin builds upon Marx and Engels' analysis by describing the repressive features of the liberal democratic state under imperialism. He demonstrates how this state is subordinate to the forces of monopoly finance capital, who secure alliances with politicians through bribes and close working relationships. Contrary to the views of his commentators, Lenin recognises that the bourgeois state can achieve periods of relative autonomy from class interests, and that the working class can empower itself to a degree, given the right conditions. Nevertheless, Lenin maintains that liberal democracy is incapable of realising majority rule, the rule of the working class. He argues that the working class can and should use liberal democracy to advance their interests, but their ultimate aim must be to replace it with a new state. Whether this is achieved by a violent revolution or peaceful methods, Lenin does not mind. By one way or another, the liberal democratic state must be dismantled, if true, majoritarian democracy is to be attained.

Lenin's critique of the liberal democratic state shares similarities with other strands of democratic theory, particularly elite theory, and many of their arguments have been assimilated into 'mainstream' liberal theories of democracy, so the claim that he was theoretically confused has little basis. True, Lenin himself may not always be

mentioned in discussions of contemporary liberal democracy, but this does not show that he was wrong. It does, however, indicate that some intellectuals have anti-communist ideological prejudices, whilst others are simply ignorant. A distinctive feature of Lenin's critique is its ferociousness and hard-hitting style. His aim was to strip liberal democracy of its pretensions and expose its oppressive core to the fighting working class.

Chapter three examined Lenin's conception of socialist democracy, or what he calls proletarian democracy. His essential aim is to revitalise the ancient Greek conception of democracy as the rule of the poor, the working class- as it was defined Plato and Aristotle. A definitive feature of Lenin's conception is the leading role of the Communist Party, the chief organisation of the working class. Whilst, in an attempt to salvage a democratic Lenin, some commentators have tried to deny or qualify this feature of his vision, there is little evidence to prove their case. Lenin defends a one-party system even in *State and Revolution*, his most 'libertarian' text. Lenin argues that the Party's leading role is necessary because it possesses a higher level of consciousness than the rest of society. Only the Party can correctly articulate the interests of the working class and give them the tools and guidance to assume its position as the ruling class. As the most powerful organisation in the state, it is imperative that the Party organise itself along democratic lines, thereby giving its membership the opportunity to shape its policies and control the leadership. The Party interacts with the masses in a dialectical fashion. On the one hand, it cannot simply follow the intellectual mood of the masses and function as their humble servant. It has to provide leadership, and imbue the masses with a socialist consciousness. On the other hand, the Party cannot ignore the wishes and demands of the masses, no matter how regressive they may be. It has to respect these demands and even seek to implement them, as far as its own policies will

permit. The Party's primary goal is to maintain mass support for its decisions, by remaining in close contact with the masses and by giving them the power to control its composition and check its activities. From the perspective of democratic theory, the position and role of the Communist Party is both the most distinctive and the most significant aspect of Lenin's vision. The democratic credentials of socialist democracy depend largely upon the Party's capacity to maintain support and act as the masses' true representative.

A third feature of Lenin's vision is a wide range of democratic rights: not only the civil and political rights established under bourgeois democracy, but also an expanding range of economic, social and cultural rights. Lenin argues that rights under socialism retain their class character. They are to be enjoyed primarily by the working class, and they may be extended to the ex-bourgeoisie, depending on the extent to which they cooperate with the regime. Moreover, socialist democratic rights are not 'absolute'. They do not give people the freedom to undermine the socialist objectives. Constructive criticism is welcomed, but criticism aimed at undermining the regime will be repressed. The reason for this restrictive situation is that the socialist state manifests the dictatorship of the proletariat, a revolutionary form of government that arises in order to create a new communist society. Since this momentous task will inevitably be met with stiff international and internal resistance, 'free' actions and expressions will do more damage than they would do under more peaceful, stable conditions. In the interests of self-preservation and the construction of communism, subversive actions and proclamations cannot be tolerated. This is an aspect of socialist democracy for which Lenin provides no apologies. Clearly, the extent to which the workers enjoy the right to voice their opinions and thoughts will have a great bearing upon the regime's claim to represent the majority will, and hence be democratic.

A fourth feature of Lenin's model is a system of mass democracy, one in which the popular masses can participate in their daily public affairs, both directly and indirectly. The soviet state arises out of the rubble of parliamentary democracy. It is a soviet socialist state built by the workers for the workers, and it differs radically from its bourgeois predecessor. The legislative and executive branches are fused into working bodies, thereby bringing the latter under democratic control; officials are subject to recall at any time, and are paid workers wages. The masses are enlisted in the administration of the state, in a nationwide system of checking, filing and accounting. Leaders have a restricted mandate and act as the humble servants of their electors. Mass organisations, such as the trade unions and workers' militia, offer further means of political participation. Bureaucratic tendencies are militantly suppressed. Far from being independent, however, the forms of mass democracy are guided and harnessed by the Party in the service of socialist construction. The Party guides the state and sets its major objectives, but Lenin insists that the Party cannot replace the state. The status of the Party-state relationship, as well as the status of civil society organisations, remains undeveloped in Lenin's works, and both are in dire need of clarification.

A fifth feature of Lenin's vision is democratic centralism, an organisational principle that structures all political institutions, from the local to the national level. Democratic centralism combines freedom of discussion with unity in action. Whilst granting supreme power to the executive organs of the Party and state, it aims to give the lower-level units the autonomy to modify directives in accordance with the conditions and needs of their locales. Democratic centralism reflects the tension in Lenin's vision between creative grassroots initiative and direction from above. The balance between centralism and democracy is an important factor in determining the degree of democracy exhibited by the regime.

The sixth, usually overlooked feature of Lenin's vision is economic democracy. Socialist democracy is founded upon state ownership of the means of production. Economic enterprises are owned and controlled by the state, rather than private individuals. The principles of economic management enable the workers to control their managers and bring them to account. Centralised economic planning ensures that the enterprises produce in accordance with a plan, dictated by the national centre. Lenin saw no contradiction between centralised state control and workplace initiative. The workers and their organisations participate in the formulation of plans, and the local units have some leeway in implementing directives in accordance with their needs. Like democratic centralism, there is a balance to be struck between enterprise autonomy and state level control.

Lenin's conception of socialist democracy is characterised by a dialectical tension between top-down leadership and spontaneous bottom-up initiative. Depending upon the time and conditions, one side may be emphasised more than the other. As such, Lenin's vision encourages a wide range of applications, depending upon how each of its features are emphasised in practice. As proof for this fact, one only need look at the wide variety in state forms amongst the various Marxist-Leninist people's democracies. These regimes have all interpreted and developed Lenin's theses on socialist democracy in their own way. As such, the sweeping dismissal of Lenin's vision as undemocratic is unhelpful. Not only does this characterisation ignore the severe failings of liberal democracy outlined by Lenin himself. It also underestimates the difficulties in measuring the democratic credentials of a regime. These credentials cannot be established through the protection of multi-party elections and universal rights.

If one can summarise Lenin's contribution to democratic theory in one sentence, it is his view that *democracy is an inherently contradictory concept*. On the one hand, it

is the political form through which the masses, the majority, can struggle to realise their freedom, and it is also the chief political manifestation of this freedom. At the same time, since democracy is a form of class rule, it can never fully realise the lofty goal of popular rule, the ‘rule of the people’, even under the most advanced conditions, i.e., socialist democracy. Lenin’s view concerning the contradictions of democracy remains relevant today. In recent years, scholars from a range of ideological background have shown increasing scepticism towards the concept, in both theory and practice. This scepticism speaks to Lenin’s ideas in various ways.

In *Breaking Democracy’s Spell*, John Dunn (2014) argues that the public have become narcotised by its faith in democracy as the solution to all ills, and that as a result, it has come to overlook its dire shortcomings. Although appeals to the concept of democracy can offer devastating criticisms of authoritarianism, democracy itself has provided poorer guidance as to what should replace authoritarian structures. Democracy does not provide stable and effective governance. Indeed, many people overestimate the usefulness of democracy as a device for finding the right course of action. Far from causing economic growth in the Western nations, it may have simply been a coincidence that democracy coincided with this phenomenon. The obsession with democracy is blinding the people to existential threats such as ecological degradation, climate change, and economic instability. These issues require urgent action, but many people have been too blinded by short-termism and fickleness in order to even begin resolving them. Dunn’s argument echoes Lenin’s view that democracy in itself is not a universal panacea to human ills, and that the masses must transcend it in order to realise true human freedom. Like Lenin, Dunn argues that democracy cannot always be the primary principle in making political decisions. In dealing with some

pressing problems, such as ecological catastrophe, less democracy may actually be better than more.

In his book *How Democracy Ends* David Runciman (2018) provides a detailed overview of the widespread disillusionment with democracy, as manifested in lower voter confidence in elected governments, as well as the election of Donald Trump. The masses have become frustrated with a political system that has been unable to meet their needs or empower them. Although democratic systems have become durable, once given the chance to establish their roots, it is precisely the resilience of the durable 'mature' democracies that lies at the heart of their problems. For whilst they are able to stave off the worst symptoms of societal problems, such as open violence, they cannot tackle the underlying causes of these issues- such as structural economic disparities. The rise of social media and the internet has led to the rise of irrational debates that ignore the facts and obscure the important issues, as well as the spread of false information, thereby undermining people's ability to form balanced opinions of politicians and policies. Runciman's arguments coincide nicely with Lenin's critique of liberal democracy, with the main difference being that Lenin does not conflate this form of rule with democracy in general.

In her book *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, Bonnie Honig (2017) highlights the shrinking of the public sphere under liberal democracy since the rise of neoliberalism, arguing that this is detrimental to democracy as a whole. She argues that public 'things'- parks, subways, bridges, etc.- are fundamental to democracy, since the debates that citizens have over their use are a formative part of their political participation as citizens. In other words, collective democratic action depends upon public things, objects that are collectively owned. This argument coincides with Lenin's

critique of the economic-political divide under liberal democracy, though Lenin, unlike Honig, advocates the abolition of (neo) liberal democracy, not its reform.

In their book *How Democracies Die*, S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt (2019) show that coup d'états are not the only way of bringing democracies down. In the mature Western democracies, it is possible for democracies to be eroded from the inside, by elected officials, particularly if these officials reject the democratic 'rules of the game'; deny the legitimacy of their opponents; tolerate or encourage violence; and are willing to curtail the civil liberties of their opponents. All of these things can occur under democratic institutions, as the recent election of Donald Trump shows. *How Democracies Die* is a striking vindication of Lenin's view that the democratic credentials of a regime cannot be established via institutions alone, especially in the case of liberal democracy.

The pessimism on display in these recent studies of democratic theory and practice shows that a return to Lenin is appropriate and necessary. Lenin offers a unique lens through which to view democracy- in all its forms- more critically and also more holistically, precisely because he situates the phenomenon within the socio-economic structure of society. Lenin's theoretical insights can help to establish, more precisely, the significance of the concept of democracy, including its possibilities, limitations, and conditions for development. His ideas must form a part of the reinvigoration of the critical discourse on democracy today.

Of course, any assessment of Lenin's democratic thought must take into consideration his intended audience. Lenin was not trying to convince the dyed-in-the-wool liberal, the privileged intellectual miles away from the class struggle. Lenin was trying to convince the fighting working class, the class that lacks a voice, the class that is still struggling for its freedom against state monopoly capitalism, the class that will

bring about a brighter future for itself and all of humanity. The value and fate of Lenin's democratic theory will be decided by the working class alone.

Appendix

This appendix provides a chronological overview and summary of Lenin's principal works on the concept of democracy.

(1902) *What is to be Done?*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 347-530.

Without a doubt Lenin's most controversial text, WITBD is the work that most clearly distinguishes Leninism from the other varieties of Marxism. In WITBD, Lenin argues that the working class can emancipate itself only under the leadership of a revolutionary 'vanguard', a tightknit group of committed revolutionaries armed with Marxist theory. In Tsarist Russia, Lenin argued that this vanguard was the Bolshevik Party. WITBD laid the basis for Lenin's defence of the leading role of the Communist Party under socialist democracy. For a detailed examination of the controversies surrounding this text, particularly in relation to Leninism and democracy, see Lih (2008).

(1905) *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (1905), in *Collected Works*, vol. 9, pp. 15-140.

In this work, written during the 1905 Russian Revolution, Lenin clarifies the importance of democracy for the revolutionary struggle of the working class. Lenin deals with the character and traits of the bourgeois democratic revolution, the leading role of the working class and its party in the democratic revolution, the alliance of the working class and peasantry, the ways and means of attaining a democratic republic,

and the development of a bourgeois democratic revolution into a socialist revolution. Lenin argues that the victory of the democratic revolution is helpful for the working class, since it provides this class with the political freedom necessary to wage its struggle for socialism even more effectively. Lenin rejects the Menshevik thesis that the bourgeoisie should play a leading role in the democratic revolution, as well as the leftist thesis that it is possible to bypass the democratic revolution and head straight for the dictatorship of the proletariat (i.e. socialist democracy). Lenin defends the necessity of passing through the bourgeois democratic phase, but at the same time he argues that the working class must lead a transition straight from the democratic revolution to the socialist revolution, in a more or less uninterrupted manner.

(1916) *Reply to P. Kievsky (Y. Pyatakov)*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 23, pp. 22-27; *A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 23, 28-76.

In these two articles, written during World War I, Lenin identifies the essential elements of bourgeois democracy under imperialism, a stage of capitalist development in which the wealthy capitalist states become increasingly militaristic, subjugate foreign countries economically and politically, and erode the democratic gains the working class domestically. Lenin rejects the notion that democracy is a mere epiphenomenon of the economic base, lacking in independence and autonomy. He argues that political democracy has a relative independence enabling it to counteract and even overturn the dominant economic forces. Lenin applies this view to liberal democracy under imperialism. He rejects the notion that this form of democracy precludes the possibility of the working class empowering itself and achieving some of its limited demands. At

the same time, Lenin argues that the working class must wage its emancipation struggle in a revolutionary way, going beyond the bounds of parliament and bourgeois democratic legality.

(1917) *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 22, pp. 667-766.

In this classical work of Marxist theory, Lenin presents liberal democracy under imperialism as the highest phase of democratic development prior to the socialist revolution and the construction of socialist democracy. He argues that the economic (i.e. socialist) foundation of socialist democracy is contained within liberal democracy.

(1917) *The State and Revolution*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 25, pp. 381-492.

The most important work in understanding Lenin's views on the concept of democracy. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin provides his most detailed and comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. Lenin outlines his classical definition of democracy as a form of class rule. He identifies the various stages in the development of democracy, from slavery, through to capitalism, socialism, and communism. He introduces his thesis that democracy withers away under communism, as well as his distinction between democracy on the one hand, and democratism on the other. Lenin provides a detailed outline of the essential features of bourgeois and socialist democracy. He highlights the importance of democracy to the fighting working class, but also establishes that democracy by itself cannot guarantee their complete emancipation.

(1918) *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 31, pp. 17-118.

In this work Lenin defends the democratic credentials of soviet socialist democracy against the criticisms of Karl Kautsky, the ‘pope’ of Second International Orthodox Marxism. Lenin emphasises that democracy is in dialectical unity with dictatorship; and emphasises its class character. He argues that democracy does not provide freedom and equality to all, only particular classes. Lenin defends the superiority of proletarian democracy over bourgeois democracy.

(1920) *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 31, pp. 17-118.

In this work Lenin defends the importance of the working class participating in bourgeois parliaments, as a form of political education and enlightenment. He rejects the ultra-leftist idea that the working class should not participate in bourgeois parliaments in principle. He defends the use of both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics.

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