

MARXISM AND DEMOCRACY - NOTES ON EUROPEAN HISTORY

1. Introduction

To start, let me emphasize that I consider the theme of Marxism and Democracy a theme which cannot satisfactorily be posed within the framework of 'Marxism-Leninism'. The theme requires from us that we take a non-dogmatic and open position vis-à-vis currents of Marxism which have historically been sidelined by the current of Marxism-Leninism which for a long time predominated in the international communist movement. Here, the importance of the theme is comparable to themes such as environmental degradation, militarism, and women's oppression – which themes too can only be understood theoretically, if we pay attention to the investigative and theoretical work which in recent decades has been undertaken by progressive thinkers and activists who do not consider themselves to be 'Marxist-Leninists'. On the question of Democracy too there are a variety of sources which we need to rely on. Some authors were relatively close to Leninism (which is the case for Gramsci), others openly dissented with Lenin (which is the case for Rosa Luxemburg).

In my below presentation, I will refer to the work of two Marxist theorists only, namely to Antonio Gramsci and to Rosa Luxemburg. For those within the movement who are not acquainted with these two heroic figures, I should briefly introduce both personalities. The Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci emerged towards the end of the First World War as revolutionary organiser and the editor of the magazine called *l'Ordine Nuovo*. This magazine propagated the building of workers' councils at factory level, as the expression of the autonomous power of workers as producers. After the formation of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci for a period during the 1920s functioned as its General Secretary. In 1928, he was arrested and incarcerated by Mussolini's fascist regime. During his prolonged stay in jail Gramsci undertook intensive theoretical studies on aspects of social theory which in his view had not been fully theorized by Marxist teachers before him. These aspects all related to politics and culture, being aspects of a society's 'superstructure' in contrast with economic relations being a society's 'base'. Seriously weakened physically in consequence of his incarceration, Gramsci died shortly after he was released in 1937.

Gramsci's writings on workers' councils are important for the discussion on Marxism and Democracy. So too are Rosa Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's organisational principles and her critique of the Russian revolution. Luxemburg gathered her first experience as a revolutionary in the country of her birth, Poland. In Germany she joined the Social Democratic Party, and became a fierce critic of the 'parliamentarist' leanings of the Party's Rightwing leaders, foremost Bernstein, who opposed militant strike struggles. With foresight, she early started campaigning against German militarism and the threat of war, long before World War I erupted (1914). Like Lenin, she theorized imperialism as a new phase in the history of capitalism. But she did so from a theoretical position which was clearly differentiated from his, in that she focused largely on questions of international trade. Luxemburg's writings on Marxism and Democracy, although they do not have a systematic character, are exceptional. For whereas she fully endorsed the idea of the building of a workers' state on the basis of Workers and Soldiers' Councils, such as was attempted by the Bolsheviks in Russia, - she had clear reservations, and disagreed with the Bolsheviks' temptation to suppress (all) dissent.

Below I wish to discuss the question of Marxism and Democracy on the basis of the international working class movement's historical experience, more particularly the experiences gathered in the first two decades of the previous century. At that time the centre of the working class movement did lie in Europe. Inevitably, therefore, the thematic of this letter is 'Eurocentric'. Nevertheless, the significance of the experiences gathered in that period of history are everlasting. For it was probably during this particular period that workers' democracy was experimented on the widest scale. Moreover, even if many of the views expressed by theoreticians such as Gramsci and Luxemburg were no final views on the theme of Marxism and Democracy, it is still crucial to recognize that part of working class history has been sidelined by the prolonged predominance of Marxism-Leninism. I have divided my below discussion into two parts: * the question of factory councils, and * the question of people's civil and political rights under socialism. I am aware of the fact that in a comprehensive treatment of the subject other aspects of democracy and socialism need to be covered.

2. Workers' Councils

The first point to be made about this topic, is that the movement for the building of workers councils emerged from the experience of Russian workers in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. The Russian proletariat did not only succeed in constructing political power on the basis of factory councils and soviets. It also inspired industrial workers throughout different parts of Europe to do the same. Thus, in Hungary a Soviet state briefly functioned immediately after World War I. In Germany the movement for the building of workers councils was so powerful that in 1918 it led to the fall of the imperial government. And in Italy, about which I will say more below, factory councils dominated life in the industrial heartland of the country, i.e. the Northern city of Turin and its surroundings, for several years on end. To my knowledge, a general and comparative evaluation of the historic experience of workers council in Europe has never been made. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the experience was extremely rich, that it demonstrated the capacity of industrial workers to run society quite well, and that it showed the possibility of a radical and democratic alternative to bourgeois-parliamentary democracy.

Here I will focus on only one amongst these various experiences with workers councils, namely the experience of the Italian industrial working class. This experience was summed up well by Gramsci in a report which he dispatched to the Communist International in July of 1920 (appended to this letter)(3). The council movement here emerged in the wake of two workers' insurrections staged during World War I. These indeed were armed confrontations with the forces of state. According to Gramsci, during the second insurrection of August of 1917 alone, some 500 people were killed (4). Nevertheless, in no time the workers re-organized, and launched several waves of strike struggles. The strike struggles culminated in the historic April movement of 1920, when all the metal workers of Turin city struck for a whole month, while other categories of workers struck for ten days. According to Gramsci, in its last ten days this general strike encompassed the whole of the region around Turin (Piedmont). About half a million industrial and agricultural workers were mobilised, signifying that 4 million people were involved. Whereas other strike waves, such as the strike wave that had broken out over Italy in the first part of 1919, had reportedly been over the eight hour working day, - the April strike in Turin was focused on the issue of recognition of factory councils. It was followed later by factory occupations, which unfortunately did not last (5).

In order to understand the context in which factory councils could emerge, some more facts need to be stated on the composition of the working class in Turin city. Here, according to Gramsci, nearly three-quarters of the population of half a million consisted of working class families. Further, the process of production was 'perfectly centralized', in particular in the engineering industry which employed about 50 thousand shop-floor workers and 10 thousand clerks and technicians. The greater part of the workforce was made up of skilled workers and technicians. Moreover, both the engineering workers and the technicians were well organized. According to Gramsci, Turin possessed a single trade union organisation, which at the time he wrote his report had 90 thousand workers affiliated to it. What is also crucial to note in order to understand the reasons for the success (even if only temporary) of the factory council movement, is that the clerks and technicians in the factories solidly stood by the workers in their strikes. Moreover, workers in other sectors (such as in the woodworking and rubber industries) were generally willing to follow the lead of the militant metal workers (6).

Before elaborating on the methodology of workers' democracy developed in the factories, I should outline briefly what organisational structure the workers' councils had. This is explained well in a document entitled 'The Programme of the Workshop Delegates', which was written by a study group of the factory council movement itself. The group comprised mainly workers and included Gramsci. The document clearly bore the influence of Gramsci's thinking (7). According to this document, the delegates who were members of the factory councils, were appointed on a factory workshop basis. They represented all the workers in a given workshop, and held both trade union and other responsibilities at workshop level. The factory councils consisting of all the workshop delegates of a given factory in principle was convened every week. In between, factory level responsibilities were carried out by the executive committee of the council, which committee consisted of workers excused from work (for the term of duty). The committee met every evening to assess the work of the delegates, and was also entrusted with the task of bringing out a fortnightly factory bulletin. The powers and duties of the delegates, the councils and the executive committee, all were spelled out clearly in the unique 'Programme of the Workshop Delegates'.

With regard to the democratic functioning of the council system, the very most important point to be noted is that the delegates needed to enjoy the full confidence of their electorate. They were subject to 'instant recall'. This provision clearly recalls the experience of the Paris Commune of 1870, the first and short lived experiment in the building of a workers' state. Both Marx and Engels had highly praised the tremendous courage of the Paris workers in staging an insurrection against many odds. They had also stressed the unique rules which the Communards had devised for the functioning of the municipal government which they had elected after the take-over of power in the city. Thus, in Marx's famous writing 'The Civil War in France', Marx argued that 'universal suffrage' under the Commune system was to serve the people: 'The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short term'. In this latter respect, as well as with respect to payment (workers' wages!), the rules of the Commune were clearly differentiated from the formal democracy of the bourgeois parliamentary system (8).

Under the Italian factory council system that emerged in Turin subsequent to World War I, the workshop delegates elected to be members of the councils too were 'subject to instant recall'. If any were repudiated by a half plus one of his electorate, or by the majority of

the factory assembly, the delegate was 'obliged to seek renewal of his mandate'(9). As to voting, the Programme stated that it would take place by secret ballot. Further, it is also important to stress that no limits were placed on the right of workers to participate in elections to the factory council. Whether any person were organized in a trade union did not matter, it did not impact on his voting right. Candidates who stood for the elections of workshop delegates had to be trade union members – here there was a restriction on 'universal suffrage'. But this restriction did not exist with regard to voting rights. Given this electoral system, it is clear that the factory councils represented the whole proletariat in the factories where they functioned. The councils were the expression of the unity of the working class at the level of production. They not only represented all the manual workers, i.e. workers physically engaged in production, but other categories of waged employees, such as engineers, technical supervisors, and clerical staff, as well (10).

A particular comment is required regarding the relations between the factory councils and the trade unions. Gramsci, in his writings for *l'Ordine Nuovo*, insisted that the factory councils were a historically new phenomenon, and should be conceptually differentiated from trade unions (11). The latter, he argued, were institutions formed within the framework of capitalism. Unions served to represent the workers as wage slaves in negotiations with the representatives of the employers' class. Their historical mission was to strive for improvements in working conditions under capitalism. The factory councils instead were defined by Gramsci as the embodiment of the working class as producers. Their historical mission was to give guidance to production itself, and to function as the antithesis of the employer's authority. Ultimately their aim was to conquer public power and eliminate private property. Nevertheless, the programmatic regulations drafted by the council study group did not concern itself only with production control, but also with trade union work at the factory level. Factory delegates were entrusted with double functions, including the representation of trade union members. The modalities of discussions on agreements between trade unions and employer organisations too were elaborated in these regulations (12).

We cannot conclude this brief summary on the Italian factory councils without referring to some of their limitations. Although the council movement that emerged in the period from 1918 through 1920 helped the working class in the North of Italy develop enormous power, this movement - contrary to the proletarian movements in Russia and Hungary - did not result in the formation of soviets, of territorial bodies representing workers' political power throughout Italy. Moreover, although the factory councils in Turin and its surroundings strove to take over power from the capitalist owners, in reality a consolidation of exclusive workers' power over factory production did not take place, and the power of industrial capitalists over production was re-established after a temporary occupation of Turin factories (1920). Nevertheless, the experience of the Italian workers councils, and of Gramsci's magazine *l'Ordine Nuovo*, is of extraordinary importance. For in course of this movement, workers' democracy took a very concrete form. Moreover, the structure of workers' democracy was embodied in very concrete regulations, - regulations which can well continue to serve as key reference point for the debate on workers' democracy today!

3. Civil Rights under Socialism

I will now proceed to discuss the question of people's civil rights under socialism. All revolutionary opponents of the bourgeois form of democracy, including Lenin, Gramsci and Luxemburg, who participated in the debates of the international workers movement in the beginning of the previous century, argued that the world proletarian revolution would bring a

higher form of democracy. There was agreement, following Marx, that the new state would be a class state, just like the bourgeois states that were to be replaced by the workers' republics. Like the bourgeoisie, which has historically used dictatorial methods whenever its basic class interests were and are threatened, the working class too would have to defend its class rule and suppress 'counter-revolutionary' groups and sections of the population. Nevertheless, the new republic, the socialist republic representing the interests of the oppressed, would be more democratic in content than any of the bourgeois republics that would be replaced. The common position of Marxist theoreticians was: socialism would mean not that democratic rights would be restricted, but that in fact these would be extended far beyond what the bourgeois state had historically granted its citizens.

However, quite soon after the Bolshevik revolution was staged in Russia in 1917, a controversy arose over measures taken by Lenin's new government to consolidate their socialist rule. Surely, the Bolshevik revolution was hailed as the most radical rupture with economic exploitation that had ever been attempted. Surely, and for this reason, there were sustained attempts by imperialist powers to subvert the new revolutionary government. Surely, in order to consolidate revolutionary rule, some measures of repression, such as against members of the former autocratic ('tsarist') government were inevitable. Nevertheless, doubts did arise rather soon over a variety of measures taken against a broad range of political forces, including Left socialist and anarchist forces, which had programmatic differences with Lenin's Bolshevik Party. These measures included: * the dissolution, dismantling, of the Constitutional Assembly where the Bolsheviks were in a minority and were fighting the party of Socialist Revolutionaries; and * stern measures restraining others' civil rights, such as the banning of publications of rival political organisations, and ultimately the prohibition of those political organisations themselves.

An articulate critic of these measures was the Marxist revolutionary thinker Rosa Luxemburg, whose positions on many theoretical questions were very close to those of Lenin. To be clear from the start: like Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, as participant in the debates of the German Social Democratic Party, had outspokenly opposed the tendency of Rightwing leaders to neglected extra-parliamentary mass actions, and to primarily rely on participation in the German parliament (13). In her writings on the functioning of bourgeois parliaments, Luxemburg admitted that the parliament can be an arena of class struggle, that at crucial moments the mood of the masses 'penetrates' the bourgeois parliament, and that the extension of voting rights towards all sections of the working class was a historical achievement that should be valued by Marxists. Nevertheless, Luxemburg was well aware of the fact that parliamentary democracy is merely formal in kind, and that through revolutionary struggle it needs to be replaced by a new, and more comprehensive type of democracy (14).

Yet Luxemburg early raised pointed questions about the organisational methods used by Lenin's Bolsheviks. Thus, in a text published as early as in 1904, she critically commented on Lenin's book 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back'. Here she argued, that Lenin's propositions on party structure amounted to 'ultra-centralism'. She specifically took issue with Lenin's proposition that the party's central committee would have a determining power to intervene in all activities of the local chapters of the party. Thus, she questioned 'the omnipotent central power with its unlimited right of intervention and control'. Whereas she agreed with the principle of centralisation, she argued that centralisation should be of a 'coordinating, synthetic character, and not a regulative and exclusive one'. Whereas she understood that Lenin's policies were aimed at countering opportunism within the Russian labour movement, Luxemburg was afraid that his organisational approach would tend to

weaken the party's capacity to rely on the spontaneity of the masses. Lenin's principles would weaken the party's capacity to draw synthetic lessons from the experience of the Russian working class, gathered in the course of the working class' own independent combats (15).

In the context of this paper, there is no scope to reflect on Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's party organisational principles in detail. However, what is important to note is that her doubts concerning the Bolshevik Party's policies were not restricted to party organisational principles alone, but after the Bolshevik revolution were broadened and then came to comprise a whole series of issues relating to civil rights and political democracy. While imprisoned in Germany because of her opposition against militarism and World War I, she wrote a long pamphlet, entitled 'The Russian Revolution' (September, 1918), a pamphlet that was published posthumously, i.e. after she had brutally been killed by the German police. In this pamphlet she praised the Bolsheviks for their extraordinary courage, expressed understanding for the complications that they faced in the immediate post-revolutionary period. Nevertheless, Luxemburg stated strong reservations with regard to Bolshevik policies. Here I will skip her critique on the question of the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly (in view of an apparent contradiction in her own stance(16)), and will focus on two concrete issues relating to people's political rights.

The first one is that regarding voting rights. Luxemburg noted that the right of suffrage elaborated by the new Soviet government was very restricted, too restricted in her view. According to the interpretation given by Lenin and Trotsky to proletarian dictatorship, Luxemburg stated, the right to vote would be granted only to those who live by their own labour and 'is denied to everybody else'. She noted that under Russia's revolutionary conditions, the lives of many people had been uprooted, 'derailed without any objective possibility of finding any employment'. This applied not only to the capitalist and landowning class, but also to members of the middle classes, and even to the working class itself! Under these circumstances, a political right of suffrage on the basis of a general obligation to labour, she stated, is 'quite an incomprehensible measure'. Luxemburg thus pleaded in favour of the respect of the principle of universal suffrage, which, as indicated above, had historically been granted to members of the working class not by way of bourgeois charity, but in consequence of the working class' own determined struggles. She warned against 'a general disenfranchisement of broad sections of society', a measure with which she would completely disagree (17).

The second point is that regarding freedom of expression and freedom of association. Shortly after the conquest of power, the new Soviet government instituted measures banning publications of a whole series of rival political organisations. The list of prohibitions was indeed strikingly large, and included even the paper brought out by the socialist writer Maxim Gorky! Moreover, they were followed later by prohibitions on rival political organisations. Luxemburg in her pamphlet expressed her complete disagreement with these measures: 'It is a well known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable.' Luxemburg warned that the tendency of the Bolshevik Party to rely on extensive terror and measures of suppression for consolidation of their rule, ultimately would threaten the revolution itself. For the success of the revolution itself depended on the political life, it depended on the participation of the broad masses of the people. 'With the repression of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled.' (!!)(18)

Lastly, I wish to quote the way Luxemburg defined democracy in her pamphlet. Even though some of the statements she made on the Russian revolution in 1918 may be considered largely of historical interest, many of her views remain of actual value today in 2006. This counts in particular for the very manner in which she defined democracy. In a prophetic passage, she argued: 'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of 'justice', but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when 'freedom' becomes a special privilege' (19). Now that the historical period during which socialism was defined as one party rule has passed, there is all reason to reflect on the way Rosa Luxemburg defined socialism, and to re-reflect on her exceptional defence of people's civil and political rights under socialism, formulated at the very start of Lenin's and the Bolshevik Party's rule.

4. In Conclusion

By way of concluding this brief summary on Marxism and Democracy, I wish to forcefully state the need to break with the exclusivist tradition of 'Marxism-Leninism'. Such a break is an important condition, I believe, for the revival of Marxist thinking in the era of globalisation. After the success of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, and on the basis of Lenin's extraordinary success in capturing state power in favour of the Russian working class, - it was only natural for socialist activists worldwide to uphold the Bolshevik experiment, and gloss over its limitations, limitations in terms of the ideal of socialist democracy. Lenin's unique success, on the basis of the building, by the Russian industrial proletariat, of workers councils in both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, would seemingly invalidate all criticisms. In view of the efforts of imperialist countries to subvert the Russian revolution through multiple military interventions, it was only natural for socialists to rally to Lenin's cause. Even Rosa Luxemburg in her critical essay on the Russian revolution discussed above, referred to the absolute need to stand by the Bolshevik Party, at a time when the Russian revolution was under threat. Thus, the victory of the Leninist current within the international Marxist movement was predicated on the fact that the Russian revolution triumphed in a period when all other attempts to establish workers' rule (in countries of Western, Northern and Central Europe) failed.

Today, in the era of globalisation, when the undemocratic tradition of Marxism-Leninism has resulted in a worldwide setback for all currents of socialism, there is little reason to continue to gloss over the limitations of the Bolshevik experiment. Surely, Lenin's contribution to the history of Marxism, such as for instance his popular formulation of the theory of imperialism; his ideas on the unity of workers and peasants in the democratic revolution; and his enthusiastic and principled support for anti-colonial struggles in countries of the South – all these we can and should continue to appreciate. However, it is crucial for Marxists today to recognize that valuable historical currents of Marxism have been sidelined, that currents such as those represented by Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg have contributed their own, differential ideas to the tradition of Marxist thought. There is thus a need for the democratisation of the thinking of Marxist activists. For too long have dissidents and minority currents within the Marxist tradition been ignored, or even condemned in the name of an unflinching Leninism. Today, in the era of globalisation, Marxism can and should regain its former pre-eminence as a scientific critique of capitalist rule. However, it can only succeed in regaining this position, if we are ready to re-reflect on the contribution which a

variety of semi-Leninist, non-Leninist, and even anti-Leninist currents have historically made to the theory of Marxism. Only through an open re-appraisal of the experience of the international workers' movement in its flourishing period during and after World War I, in combination with further creative thinking on Marxism and Democracy, will it be possible to establish an appropriate and up-to-date perspective on the question of socialist democracy.

July 17, 2006

References:

- (1) on Gramsci's life, see for instance: John M. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford University Press, California, USA, 1967); and Alistair Davidson, *Antonio Gramsci. Towards an Intellectual Biography* (Merlin Press, London, United Kingdom, 1987);
- (2) on Luxemburg's life, see for instance: Peter Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Oxford University Press, United Kingdom, 1969);
- (3) see 'The Turin Factory Councils Movement' (Report despatched in July 1929 to the Executive Committee of the Communist International and published in *Communist International 1920*, no.14- see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings. 1910-1920* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, United Kingdom, 1977, p.310);
- (4) *ibid*, p.314;
- (5) *ibid*; see further Paulo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories* (Pluto Press, London, United Kingdom, 1975);
- (6) Antonio Gramsci (1977), *op.cit.*, p.311/312;
- (7) *ibid*, p.114;
- (8) see Karl Marx, 'The Civil War in France. Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association' (in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works. Volume Two* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1973), p.202);
- (9) Antonio Gramsci (1977), *op.cit.*, p.119;
- (10) *ibid*;
- (11) see eg. Antonio Gramsci, 'Unions and Councils' (from *l'Ordine Nuovo*, 12 June 1920 - Antonio Gramsci (1977), *op.cit.*, p.265);
- (12) *ibid*, p.119/120;
- (13) see eg. Rosa Luxemburg, 'Social Reform or Revolution' (*Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 1899) and 'The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions' (1905) – see *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (edited by Peter Hudis & Kevin B. Anderson, Cornerstone Publications, Kharagpur, West Bengal, India, 2005), p.128 and 168;
- (14) for Luxemburg's position on the formation of workers' and soldiers councils, see the programmatic document 'What Does the Spartacus League Want?' (in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (2005), *op.cit.*, p.354);
- (15) for Luxemburg's critique of Lenin's organisational methods and inner-party centralism, see the following two documents: 'Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy' (*Neue Zeit*, 1904) and 'Credo: On the State of Russian Social Democracy' (September/October, 1911) (published in English in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (2005), *op.cit.*, p.248 and p.266);
- (16) for this question, see eg. Peter Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg* (1969), *op.cit.*, p.452; and Peter Bierl, *Alle Macht den Raeten. Rosa Luxemburg: Raete Demokratie und Sozialismus* (ISP Verlag, GmbH, Koeln, Germany, 1993), p.9;
- (17) Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution' (September, 1918) (in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (2005), *op.cit.*, p.302-304);
- (18) *ibid*, p.304-307;
- (19) *ibid*, p.305.