

WHAT ARE ALL THESE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENTS ABOUT?

A WAVE WHICH IS STILL GOING ON

Serious democratic movements marked by riotous and even insurrectionary forms have appeared in Nepal (2006), Burma (2007), and Tibet (2008) then in Iran (2009), Tunisia (2011), Egypt (2011), then in the ill-fated Syria (2011) and recently in Ukraine (2013) and Hong Kong (2014)¹. These protest movements have, sometimes, won over a significant part of the population with slogans in favour of democracy and civil liberties. The proletariat – particularly urban youth and, in remarkable numbers in some countries, women – was present in quantity and quality, whether it was putting forward defensive demands or by active participation in confrontations with the forces of repression. However it never stood out on its own as a class and didn't generalise the use of its most formidable weapon, the strike (with the exception of Tunisia, where strikes took place in the public sector, but didn't spread to the private sector). It did not develop (nor inherit) autonomous workers' organisations which expressed its own political interests and, most definitely, did not succeed in winning other oppressed classes to a revolutionary perspective. We wrote – on the subject of Egypt – that *“the capacity for the working class in movement to draw towards itself sectors and individuals coming from other layers of civil society remains, in our view, a vital condition for its victory over the dominant classes. The problem is that at this stage the proletarian cause is masked by classic democratic demands and the power games within the dominant classes. Very quickly, the insurgents showed that they were incapable of considering themselves as an expression of a social class which is independent and without a country, a class which aspires not only to the overthrow of authoritarian and corrupt regimes but also the destruction of the state, of all states, and, above all, the revolutionary constitution of a centralised cooperative society, without classes, without money, without exploitation and without oppression.”*²

These movements don't necessarily have all the characteristics set out below, but these are the important markers for understanding them.

1) Democratic movements find the essential basis of their legitimacy in the street and in confrontations with various parts of the state. Most of the time they are spontaneous and emerge out of civil society without mediation of any sort, a direct expression of many accumulated discontents. They distrust any form of delegation.

2) These movements have a “political soul” which is clearly asserted and predominant. This is the fundamental difference from a proletarian political movement which proudly displays its “social soul”, its class identity. The aim of the democratic movement is invariably interclassist, but therefore not exclusively bourgeois.

¹ We've analysed them in various texts: “*Birmanie/Népal: Persistance de la révolution démocratique*” (Lettre no. 27, January 2008), “*Tibet : Lutte contre le colonialisme chinois*” (Lettre no. 28, May 2008), *Iran: Popular discontent rises to the surface* (2009), *Students fight the domination of Beijing and the Hong Kong oligarchy* (2014), *Tunisia: emergency state restructuring after an incomplete attempt at democratic insurrection* (2011), *Egypt : A historic compromise over an attempt at democratic change* (2011), “*Égypte: Un coup d'état au nom de la démocratie et du peuple*” (Document de travail no. 7, November 2013), *First strong points on the latest revolts in Arab countries* (2011), *For proletarians the “Arab Spring” has just started* (2013), *EGYPT: The army uses force to regain control of the government; the Brothers dig in for a long fight; the proletariat still isn't fighting for its own needs* (2013), *UKRAINE: A victorious democratic insurrection in Ukraine, led by nationalists. Workers torn between the two conflicting factions* (2014).

² See: *First strong points on the latest revolts in Arab countries* (2011).

Despite the radical expressions which cross them, these movements maintain politics as the art of mediation because their objective is always, at best, the realisation of reforms, restructuration of the system as it is, modernisation of the capitalist state, enlargement of its social base, and the overhaul of all or part of its intermediate bodies. Everything is aimed in the end at the modification of the organisation of society to adapt to the requirements of mature capitalism.

The system is not attacked at its social and economic foundations. The social relations and the capitalist organisation of work remain in place, most often inaccessible to the democratic movement. The symbols and the slogans adopted (“*We are the 99 %*”, for example), the demands put forward, the places chosen for confrontation like central squares, parks and the palaces of power are perfectly in tune with their interclassist motivations.

3) These movements are marked by their massive character, something completely in line with their interclassist and popular nature, but they are nowhere near majoritarian in terms of the population of the zone or country concerned. This massive character also shows itself in the outbreak of important and violent confrontations with the forces of order. But let’s not forget that mass violence against the repressive apparatus of the state is in no way, in itself, a product, or even a part of a proletarian revolution in progress. The most obvious recent examples were the military hijacking of the most dramatic and final episodes of the Maidan revolt in Kiev by gangs of armed fascists or the leading role in the Tahrir Square confrontations in Cairo was played by the Muslim Brotherhood.

4) The capacity of democratic movements to export themselves beyond borders is shown by their ability to also root themselves in some older capitalist countries where the state is in fiscal crisis, such as Spain or Greece. These countries, where the mechanisms and the institutions of old social democracy have been shaken both by the budgetary crisis and the crisis of valorisation have seen whole sections of civil society mobilise itself to restore “social and political bonds” by means of the integration into the state of instances of so-called direct democracy, of demands for profound changes in the political representatives of the dominant classes and “more transparency” in the running of the city. However, if the democratic movement *appears* global, to the extent that some have made it out to be the basis of a new worldwide revolutionary political cycle, it remains essentially national. Elements of global unification between the various national expressions are weak and basically formal, that is to say relative to the form of the movement not to its political content and in no case are there any organisational links. Each of these democratic movements expresses a need for renationalisation with a horizon of transformation which never goes beyond the border, “*global is local*”. Only the proletarian political movement has the intrinsic possibility of asserting itself in a truly international way. Only the proletarian movement is able to define a global political cycle of rupture with global capital, for itself, and only for itself, “*local is global*”.

5) Often radical in their forms of struggle, sometimes in their organisation, present day democratic movements are not so radical in their content. Contrary to their ancestors in 1848, they barely call into question the form of the state, and do not express the political demands of classes and semi-classes whose interests are not represented (or not represented very well) within it. Performing numerous political somersaults, the democratic movements of the past ended up winning almost everywhere at the expense of the poor as well as the expense of the rentiers and feudals in power. The modern democratic state with its corollary of institutionalised social democracy is established in the advanced capitalist countries. The multiplicity of more or less liberal formal constitutions doesn’t change the basic facts. So they contest only this or that particular aspect of political domination by the dominant classes. That is why the conception of the state that underlies the present democratic movements is reduced to the executive or, worse, just to the governing clique. It’s hardly surprising that the demands of today’s democrats are channelled into rearrangements of the dominant order because they have never called its existence into question. They do not try to preserve the radical and autonomous practices of individual and collective freedoms expressed during mass democratic movements.

No formalisation of individual and collective freedoms in the framework of the state is satisfactory because in the end it favours the stabilisation of the capitalist mode of production and the reinforcement of state domination over the subaltern classes. The formalisation of demands for freedom by democratic movements is the best path for ensuring that they are channelled into the dynamics of negotiation with the state and lose all their subversive potential. The only means for avoiding this impasse is for democratic movements to concretise their aspirations in a durable and autonomous fashion, satisfying the needs which gave rise to them by intransigent struggle. These needs, in addition, must not be reduced to the desire for more individual and collective freedoms for urbanised populations. The struggle for land led by the poor peasants in Brazil is an example of the vast field that democratic movements can represent in the absence of an independent struggle of the working class which is alone capable of centring on the objective of the revolutionary transformation of the world.

Democratic demands and struggles historically correspond to a phase in the domination of capital long surpassed. Bourgeois democracy imposes itself practically, as the political form of domination of the capitalist mode of production (CMP) which is most efficient and durable. However, this form of political organisation of the modern state hardly conforms to its initial principles (one man one vote; individual and collective political freedoms). Significant developments in the name of governance, of compromise with forms of pre-existing political organisation and the maintenance of the stability of the state have more and more “armoured” the concrete exercise of democratic power and taken it further away from the “citizen”. What’s more, in the central countries of the CMP, demands for more liberty and bourgeois democracy regularly surge out of the social body and, sometimes, borrow radical means of struggle and organisation. These demands coming from civil society often accompany the emergence of an ascendant proletarian political cycle as for example, 1968. In these periods, the proletarian response to these demands is relatively simple: it’s a question of absorbing them and profoundly transforming their nature to make them compatible with the communist perspective.

Today, the context is much more complicated because although the proletariat plays a not insignificant role in these movements, it hasn’t been able to crystallise its political strength in a manner independent of bourgeois formations. For all that, these movements are not devoid of interest for the future of the class struggle. They could, for example, give us an indication of what will happen in China and, also, the political and theoretical questions that they raise cannot be dismissed and simply reduced to their strict democratic content (nor should they be mistaken for a proletarian movement), or to their tangible results after the event: the reshuffling of the government pack and, more fundamentally, the process of modernisation of states. For us, it’s a question above all of explaining what democracy and all the democratic demands of the mature capitalist era of the unified world market actually mean.

Communists don’t call for the establishment of a democratic republic because their objective is the destruction of all states. Yet these democratic movements with their radical potential must not inspire either indifference or contempt on the part of communists, who certainly appreciate any improvement in objective conditions favourable to the development of the political independence of the working class. According to Engels, the democratic republic is the form of capitalist domination most favourable to workers’ demands. Nevertheless, libertarian aspirations within dictatorships shouldn’t stir up blind enthusiasm either, because these are not a matter of a movement of a self-conscious class. However, the reduction of the working class to the level of political combatant doesn’t mean that it has exhausted its capacity and its revolutionary strength, and that we have to look for another revolutionary subject. The objective conditions which make communism and the revolutionary transformation of the proletariat possible are always present. The proletarian movement is no longer condemned to once more go through a democratic stage. These particular moments, although repetitive, of the class struggle do not contradict the dominant historical tendency for direct confrontation between capital and its forms of political domination (including democracy) and the movement towards communism. When civil society channels and applies its practical critique to particular forms of the political dictatorship of capital, it is indispensable to encourage any attempt at autonomous proletarian organisation, any independent workers’ fight, even if it is minoritarian, a fight which carries within it the aspirations for freedom of sectors of civil society which try to emancipate themselves – without ever succeeding, because of their class position – from the state. The dynamic of permanent revolution leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat will depend on the consciousness and autonomous organisation of the proletariat.

Insurrectionary surges in which the class doesn’t stand out from the masses

Beyond the particularities of each of the movements and social and political formations within which and against which they fight, we can distinguish certain common traits which, on the one hand, allow us to analyse their political limits and, on the other, to underline their potential.

If in some cases (Ukraine, Iran, Nepal, Hong Kong), contestation starts out more explicitly on a directly political basis (contesting an election or a strategic choice, royalist coup with a background Maoist insurrection), in other cases it’s an economic and political background which creates immediate concerns and demands, of a defensive nature, against the high cost of living and poverty or for the “right to work” (a slogan well within the limits of capital), or even for “dignity” (the same). In many situations (Burma, Iran, Tunisia, Egypt), it’s the high price of food and/or energy, or the crackdown on the informal economy (Tunisia), in the context of higher than usual poverty or unemployment, which acts as the detonator of popular revolts. Rapidly or simultaneously, these demands are both about aspirations for freedom and political slogans for democracy, individual freedoms (political, cultural, and religious), against corruption and nepotism or the repression suffered by various classes and fractions of classes, slogans which gain the upper hand and crystallise the interclassist movements of civil

society. These are movements singularly lacking in cohesion, whose demands and practices remain for the most part fluctuating and incoherent (atheists shouting “*Allah ‘u Akbar*” in Iran is a powerful illustration of this). These movements do not extend to other oppressed groups affected by the degradation of the conditions of life and labour, or to the peasantry. In some cases, the national and colonial question (Tibet/China, Ukraine/Russia, Hong Kong/China) or the religious question (Copts/Muslims in Egypt) constitute obstacles to overcoming class divisions, or even favour nationalism, whether it’s neo-Nazi, Islamo-fascist or whatever.

Despite the pacifism which is ambient and globally dominant across “spectacular” demonstrations, (young) proletarians are very much present, particularly in violent confrontations. Facing a ferocious state repression causing deaths and injuries – by cops, army and militias – the rebellion shows its incapacity to respond on an organised basis. Despite their violent form, these initial riots have an eminently defensive character. Instead of being the unavoidable accompaniment to an independent political struggle, here the exercise of force by the proletariat serves as a substitute for it. Let’s recall again that the proletarian exercise of violence is in no way synonymous with going on the offensive, and even less with workers autonomy. What’s more, if they are there, the most combative elements of the class are absorbed by the direct confrontation against the forces of repression and/or by the regime’s cleansing operations. A notable exception was in Ukraine where the militarisation of the conflict led to a victory, precisely on the terrain of the extreme nationalists. But in Hong Kong, it was the exact opposite which happened: the ultimatum put by HKFS³ to the chief executive, without having any real means of enforcing it, contributed to the demoralisation of the movement and the isolation of its most determined fringes.

The presence of proletarians is not enough to give a strong social content to an insurrection. As proof of this, we only have to note that there has been no action on any scale or even no action at all in some cases, at the point of production – particularly in the crucial sector, for many rentier states, of hydrocarbon production. There were therefore very few strikes, with the exception of Tunisia. No councils or workers committees emerged. The critique of exploitation and wage labour was absent, replaced in the best cases (Tunisia, Egypt) with calls for the removal of bosses of workshops, heads of factory departments and head teachers, with calls for their replacement in the absence of any profound questioning of the organisation of labour. Some simple demands were sometimes satisfied and the economic order was not overturned. In Hong Kong, though, the blockade of traffic had economic consequences for the distribution and transport sectors, attracting the hostility of the capitalists in one of the most advanced productive territories and most densely populated places on the planet.

The confrontation is only with the government, or even just with symbols of domination. In many cases, the protests are personalised and crystallised around the fall of the head of state. At best, when this demand is achieved, a more radicalised section pursues the struggle to bring down the whole clique. Contrary to this scenario, workers’ insurrections have the priority of taking over barracks, factories, prisons and communications, and not so much with what seems to have become the fashion amongst alter-globalists and radical democrats – occupying the central squares of capital cities and places of government power.

This critique must be clarified. On the one hand, when *Occupy Wall Street* took over Zuccotti Park, we can’t even talk about a big square or anything important, making it something even less than other movements of the same type. On the other hand, occupations of great squares predate the latest wave of democratic movements (2006-2015). We only have to remember, for example, Tiananmen in 1989 (where there was a strong participation by workers), or the “March on Washington” in 1963 – the “*March for jobs and freedom*” where Martin Luther King was one of the organisers). We have not to criticize street occupation for itself but rather to explain that the occupation of big squares is more linked to a (sometimes non-violent) “political soul” of movements like *Occupy* and above all to lack of rooting in the neighborhoods.

A workers’ insurrection goes beyond the parliamentary democratic regime by the exercise of the proletarian dictatorship and aims at the destruction of the state, whereas democratic riots produce its reform and therefore, in the end, its reinforcement. These contestations were finally integrated by the legal route, confiscated by the hands of the political opposition or the army. The weak presence in the revolt of organised segments of the factory working class certainly contributed to the dilution of the class struggle by the democratic struggle for the rationalisation and modernisation of the domination of capital. In short, democratic movement has been perfectly capable of containing and channelling demands which are not precisely proletarian.

But we mustn’t blame the democratic movement of today for all the evils associated with the present weakness of the proletariat. We are not in June 1848, in Paris, where the proletariat struggled for its own ends but only to be defeated by a state reinforced by the February democratic movement. We are not in November 1918 in Germany where, faced with the democratic revolution principally imposed by the workers and soldiers and who,

³ Hong Kong Federation of Students.

in factories, strongly contested the capitalist order, when the big bosses and the ADGB union rapidly signed co-management agreements⁴ for the big workplaces involving the recognition of unions, raising of wages and reduction of the working day to eight hours, so as to weaken the movement and isolate the leading elements.

Movements which can be part of the process of liberation of the proletariat

It is possible, even imperative, to support the workers' side of struggles against dictatorship, including by promoting their quality as milestones in the real global movement for liberation of the proletariat. In its determined fight for democracy and against despotism, by the injection of class hatred, the working class can partially transform, or even put in peril, the outcome of normalisation and modernisation of the state, that is to say the state's adaptation to the general conditions of the world market and the dictatorship of mature capitalism. While proletarians are ready to defy the forces of repression with their bare hands and not retreat in front of police bullets, they bring to the contestation a determination which can shake a power which can only respond with explicit violence. For example, demands for direct democracy can constitute a sizeable obstacle to the autonomisation and specialisation of Politics. It's the same with the "*Resign!*" slogans, which we shouldn't reject out of hand. The capacity to "kick out" the bosses testifies to a certain level of the balance of forces within workplaces and tends to undermine the fear of capitalist command. In addition, anti-authoritarian expressions often seem to be linked to demand movements inside workplaces. The opening up of a period of instability leaves the way open to all kinds of demands, particularly those of workers, including those who haven't participated in the movement. This is why these struggles arouse the contempt of the bosses and the rulers of the strongholds of capital.

The presence of a factory working class is a hopeful factor. The urge to get out on the streets, expressed with rage and despair by tens of thousands of young poor, the weakening of the fabric of the state, hopefully long term, are all signs indicating that the class struggle is not extinct and that its potential remains fundamentally intact. The dynamic of collective action and the expression of strength in struggle constitute the gains of practical freedom against the established order and leave their mark on consciousness despite the democratic ideological cage of these movements. In general, the revolt of young people (urban, in schools and colleges), the mobilisation of women against their oppression, the refusal of repression and religion (notably in the context of the global reinforcement of political Islam) are extremely positive signs. In Iran, for example, certainly within an interclassist movement, the population has lifted the leaden cloak of the present regime and announced to the world that something else is underway, which could be of vital importance for the world working class.

Finally, the extension of individual and democratic freedoms can create objective conditions more favourable to class struggle. The working class is not indifferent to institutional and constitutional democratic changes. It rather has an interest in the loosening of the dictatorial vice in so far as it can be assured of freedom of movement, freedom of speech etc. It would be childish and in the end counter-productive to deny these partial advances but, on the other hand, we would show ourselves to be blind if we didn't see in them the potential for the restoration of capitalist order. Faced with a dilemma of this nature, the major criterion to apply, the principal factor which determines the judgement of revolutionaries is identical to that which inspires them whenever there is a defensive workers' fight: the degree of autonomous organisation gained by revolutionary minorities in the course of the struggle.

Another element to appreciate is the real degree to which these freedom movements allow the development of new practices corresponding to the needs of proletarians and all other categories of the exploited, re-establishing a link between the means of struggle and its emancipatory ends. Marx explained that:

*"When communist artisans associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means becomes an end"*⁵.

The development of practices satisfying workers' needs, in and by struggle, is a powerful lever opposing itself *de facto* to the problematic of obtaining better conditions accorded by capital and its state. Even if what has been taken by force can become an objective factor in the reinforcement of democracy, it remains nevertheless that the creation or the reinforcement of autonomous organisation constitutes the only real political victory.

⁴ The "Stinnes-Legien" agreement of 15 November 1918. Stinnes was one of the big bosses and Legien was the SPD leader of the ADGB.

⁵ Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Needs in Marx*, 1976. Quotation from Manuscripts of 1844 (see: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/needs.htm>)

Proletarians in radical democratic movements

First of all, in economic and social formations possessing dictatorial states, the class struggle can take specific directions. On the one hand, the absence of freedom of expression and political equality along with a lack of organs for integrating the proletariat, in a context where Politics leaves no “relative autonomy” to the Social and to its intermediary bodies (such as the unions and other associations), means that more often than not the working class perceives its condition as the product of dictatorship. What’s more, when it struggles against exploitation it sees it also as a specific political oppression. All proletarian combat thus represents itself as directly political and rapidly poses the military question. On the other hand, as a general rule, despotic regimes are relatively inadequate for the development of capital. Bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces continually appear in a fight for political democracy in the wake of the gigantic pressure exercised by the world market and by the competing movements of capital over the forms of political and social domination and over the specific modes of production which are incapable of resisting. It is thus the whole of civil society (capital and labour united) which expresses itself politically by demanding democracy and individual political freedoms. What we see is the proletariat, at the same time as defending its immediate interests, supporting the perspective of installing the political form adequate to the dictatorship of mature capital, the parliamentary republic⁶. It’s not surprising therefore that proletarians regularly throw themselves headlong into the most radical battles against dictatorships without elaborating and consolidating their political independence from the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois formations of the opposition. More rarely, radical and massive democratic movements emerge even inside the citadels of capital. They are most often linked to the problematics of individual freedoms, notably of women or so-called minorities subjected to specific oppressions. These movements are not fundamentally distinct from those in dictatorial countries. In a framework of an ascending proletarian political cycle, however, it is much simpler to make them converge with working class struggle.

Secondly, what are at issue during the emergence of democratic insurrections is the nature and the stage of the proletarian political cycle. Compared to the global pre-revolutionary wave of 1968-1977, the proletarian revolts which followed in the 1980s (Polish, Korean or South African workers) present a strong discontinuity – and common traits are apparent with the present-day movements. All of them found in radical democracy the high-point of their politics. At no point did they produce class organisations proper to the revolutionary proletariat. The destruction of the USSR and the integration of China (two dictatorships) into the world market, that is to say their survival in the mould of bourgeois democracy, are also characterised notably by this change in the proletarian political cycle. In its radical fight for democracy, by modifying the balance of forces, the working class accelerated the process of decomposition and profound transformation of the so-called socialist countries. On the geopolitical level, these insurrectional surges of the poor against the dictatorships on capital’s periphery were reinforced by the offensive of the countries of mature capitalism, under the flag of democracy against the barriers (old and new) to the growing unification of the world market. The propaganda war against China or the movement war in the Middle East are the distinctive signs of the USA’s involvement here.

State and democracy, freedom and communism

The regime most adequate to the modern capitalist state, its form historically determined to establish its class despotism is the bourgeois Democratic Republic. It is at the same time the most accomplished mode for the representation of the general interest of capital and the most sophisticated and the most efficient form of class domination of the modern age. It has the capacity such that it has: *“transformed the political classes into social classes such that ... the individual members of a people are equal in the heaven of their political world yet unequal in the earthly existence of society... Only the French Revolution completed the transformation of the political classes into social classes, in other words, made the class distinctions of civil society into merely social distinctions, pertaining to private life but meaningless in political life. With that, the separation of political life and civil society was completed.”*⁷

Democracy is coextensive with the state and, because of that any formalisation of individual and collective freedoms in the framework of the state is not satisfactory because the state is their active negation. The state regulates conflicts, channels and defines all expressions of the social individual and particularly those of independent proletarians. In democracy, the citizen, that is to say the isolated and egoistic member of the society of capital, is opposed to the proletarian and becomes their worst enemy. The proletariat does not inscribe on its red flag universal suffrage, separation of powers and equality before the law. The “free” secret ballot constitutes the

⁶ It may not be *formally* a republic. The “constitutional monarchies” of, for example, Britain and Sweden, can also do the job.

⁷ Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Part 5, 1843.

political democratic achieved expression of the individual by negating the struggles of civil society. Democracy stops at the gates of the factories, the command of capital calls for the submission of the worker to the machine, under a military discipline. *“The factory code in which capital formulates, like a private legislator, and at his own good will, his autocracy over his workpeople, unaccompanied by that division of responsibility, in other matters so much approved of by the bourgeoisie, and unaccompanied by the still more approved representative system, this code is but the capitalistic caricature of that social regulation of the labour-process which becomes requisite in co-operation on a great scale, and in the employment in common, of instruments of labour and especially of machinery.”*⁸

On this point, the unions – as organs of the state associated with the management of exploitation – contribute to the extension of bourgeois democracy into the social domain. Introducing elements of political equality in workplaces, they make workers into citizens in search of new rights supposed to push back the classic dichotomy between democracy in society and dictatorship in the factory. In reality, they feed the idea that emancipation is possible in the places of exploitation and therefore add a democratic mystification to the despotism of the machine and the overseer. The fight against democracy in the workplace thus becomes a crucial front in the class war. Pursued coherently, it marks out a clear line between the party of the workers and the party of capital. In the same way, the separation of powers is a separation between thinking, deliberation and action. This formal model cannot apply to organs of the class in struggle because it does not allow them to overcome the difficulties they will face. Only the perpetual raising of the level of consciousness of combative proletarians puts them in a position to maintain objective dynamic, ceaselessly renewed, of supersession, of development of the real movement.

The state demands that we delegate to it our fate and the satisfaction of our needs. This is the complete opposite of the aspiration for independence of the social individual which aims, by its movement of liberation, to found itself directly on its own freedom and that of everyone else, in an environment defined by socialised productive cooperation. Freedom as the affirmation of the individual separated from their community, linked to it only by juridical connections (rights and duties), marks the superiority of the isolated individual over the social individual (erased by philosophical postulate – liberty) and corresponds to a negation of class belonging and an imperative to collaborate with the exploiter. Under capital, the social being is denied politically as well as in material life, yet it is productive cooperation which rules. The individual is “free” against all the others and *“the practical application of the right to liberty is the right to private property”*⁹. The bourgeoisie has made the individual formally independent while tightening the bonds which make of it an object for capital, an instrument of its reproduction. *“It is precisely the slavery of bourgeois society which is, in appearance, the greatest of freedoms, because it appears as the perfect independence of the individual. What is considered as its own unrestrained freedom of movement – freed from general restrictions and human possessions – elements alienated from its life such as property, industry, religion etc. In reality, this freedom is the perfectly inhuman servitude of the individual.”*¹⁰

Bourgeois individualism seeks at the same time to make of the independence of the individual an end in itself and to perpetuate the separation of the individual from its nature, its social being. This opposition has to be regulated and standardised by laws emanating from a stable and separate body, the state. On the contrary, communism aims at the reconciliation of the individual with his species where social man finally produces his own history. The other individual is no longer an obstacle to freedom but finally represents the opportunity to realise their own. Equality as the affirmation of equivalence between individuals is a negation without supersession – therefore not dialectical – of the individual. It’s the admission of the social nature of man reified, quantified and reduced to the state of simple holder of commodities. Formal and contractual equality between capitalist and wage labourer hides the relationship of domination. For communists, the only trait common to individuals (beyond their physical constitution), is their belonging to the material human community, today divided into classes and only existing through antagonistic classes. A condition of existence of the CMP is the existence of two classes which are *“two very different kinds of commodity-possessors (...) on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to increase the sum of values they possess, by buying other people’s labour power; on the other hand, free labourers, the sellers of their own labour power.”*¹¹ The labourers are *“free in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves bondsmen etc., nor do the means of production belong to them, as in*

⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Ch 15, Section 4 – The Factory.

⁹ Marx, *On the Jewish question*, 1844.

¹⁰ Marx, *The Holy Family*, 1844.

¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Ch 26 – The Secret of Primitive Accumulation

the case of peasant-proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own."¹².

Therefore the communist revolution is not the plain and simple realisation of democracy rid of its bourgeois envelope. Communism is by its nature antidemocratic and anti-egalitarian. Against equal right which *"here is still in principle – bourgeois right. (...) It is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right."*¹³, communism affirms: *"From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs"*. Only in the course of the first phase of the communist revolution, when social production is still organised as it was inherited from the CMP, the proletariat will transit through the application of a strict egalitarianism (*"To each according to their work"*). But in the second phase of the communist revolution (or in the "lower stage of communism" if you prefer), it will progress to *"To each according to their needs"* conforming to the anti-egalitarian content of Marx who recognised the unique and differentiated real existence of every free social individual.

The permanent revolution today

If the working class can have an interest in a democratic step which facilitates its organisation and its struggles, for this to work it must establish a total demarcation with bourgeois democratic demands and it does not support, directly or indirectly, the process of restructuration of the state. Revolutionary proletarians must find their place in this kind of movement by promoting its social content. To do this it's necessary to put forward themes of struggle against exploitation in the factory, in workplaces generally, in working class neighbourhoods... of combat against all states, irrespective of their particular regimes, and of the political independence of the working class. Democratic demands must be transcended by the practice of a new social order, by the installation of new ways and modes of cooperative life inspired by the revolutionary process. Revolutionary proletarians don't ask the state for freedom, they take it. In this framework, the first enemy to be defeated is the one which creeps into the movement, whether it is social-democratic, Stalinist, liberal or fascist. Democratic movements constitute just a moment in the long term struggle to destroy capitalism. The compass which guides the working class is that of always promoting its own needs.

As Marx said to the Communist League in 1850, when commenting on the insurrectionary upheavals of 1848-9: *"The relationship of the revolutionary workers' party to the petty-bourgeois democrats is this: it cooperates with them against the party which they aim to overthrow; it opposes them wherever they wish to secure their own position."*¹⁴ And then:

*"While the democratic petty bourgeois want to bring the revolution to an end as quickly as possible, achieving at most the aims already mentioned, it is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far – not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world – that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers."*¹⁵

Therefore there is no alliance with petty-bourgeois democracy because it will turn things entirely to the advantage of the petty-bourgeoisie and completely against the proletariat. The coincidence of interests, partial, ephemeral and not declared, between workers and petty bourgeois democrats simultaneously calls for a constant work of weakening of the latter by the former.

How to do it?

- The working class, during a struggle against a dictatorship or authoritarian regime, puts forward freedoms which it can, or at least can aspire to practice directly and which are coherent with its general struggle against capital and the state (freedom of organisation in the factories, for example) ;
- The working class addresses itself to other oppressed classes to explain that to obtain their freedom they must also fight against the bourgeois perspective of the democratic state, a perspective which aims to transform and congeal these freedoms into rights granted and conditioned by social peace;
- When people aspire to satisfy their need for direct expression, the working class always puts forward struggle and organisation to transform its demands into living and above all direct practices, into movements which prefigure a new organisation, founded on social cooperation and the supersession of the state form;
- The strength of conviction of the working class is directly proportional to its proven capacity to be an independent social and political protagonist, in the places in which it is present: the factories, working class

¹² Idem.

¹³ Marx, Engels, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875. Ch 1.

¹⁴ Marx, *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*, March 1850.

¹⁵ Idem.

neighbourhoods, public transport, schools, hospitals etc. Its power of persuasion depends, in summary, on the exercise of its direct power to destroy capital and its state.

As Marx said in the text already cited:

1. *“During and after the struggle the workers must at every opportunity put forward their own demands against those of the bourgeois democrats.”*

2. *“They must demand guarantees for the workers as soon as the democratic bourgeoisie sets about taking over the government. They must achieve these guarantees by force if necessary, and generally make sure that the new rulers commit themselves to all possible concessions and promises – the surest means of compromising them.”*

3. *“Alongside the new official governments they must simultaneously establish their own revolutionary workers’ governments, either in the form of local executive committees and councils or through workers’ clubs or committees ... so that the bourgeois-democratic governments not only immediately lose the support of the workers but find themselves from the very beginning supervised and threatened by authorities behind which stand the whole mass of the workers”.*

4. *“The whole proletariat must be armed at once”* and an autonomous proletarian guard placed *“not under the orders of the state authority but of the revolutionary local councils set up by the workers.”*

The goal of this plan is clear: *“The destruction of the bourgeois democrats’ influence over the workers, and the enforcement of conditions which will compromise the rule of bourgeois democracy, which is for the moment inevitable, and make it as difficult as possible”.*

Conclusion

“Fortunately, the proletariat has accumulated an enormous experience on this terrain through the centuries. The lessons of the revolutionary wave of 1848, of the Paris Commune, of the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and others attempted and crushed, tell us that these demands are not to be feared by the insurgent working class. On the contrary, they can feed the general revolt and lead other social forces towards the camp of the proletariat, but only on the condition that the proletariat expresses and affirms above all its own independent politics of the supersession of the capitalist system and the progressive revolutionary destruction of the state.

Detaching demands for democracy and individual rights from the ideology which best represents them, modern liberalism, is also an imperative which the independent working class cannot avoid, under pain of having to scale down its own revolutionary plans.

This means that a bitter political and theoretical battle must be waged within the radical democratic movements with the aim that they dissolve themselves into the more coherent and more profound one of the communist transformation of society. The dissolution of these movements cannot therefore be brought about by the pure and simple removal of the demands for individual liberties which they put forward. Communism in movement is the long process of socialisation of relations between people who are free to choose their individual destiny. Thus, individual freedom of choice, when it is not founded on the exploitation and oppression of others is the condition for the full flowering of social relations, for the social being of man. The fullest individual freedoms, the greatest expression of collective will, socialisation of the means of production, destruction of the state and the supersession of capitalism are so many factors in the same equation. This equation will find its historic solution in the years or decades to come in China.”¹⁶

The formal radicality of democratic movements will only be superseded on condition that a proletarian political movement subsumes them, channelling their fragile impetus for transformation into the perspective of the revolution of social relations and the practical critique of capitalism. If this isn't the case, then their trajectory will doom them, in the end, to act for the restructuration and reinforcement of the bourgeois state. If the proletariat proves incapable of standing proud with its own politics and its own class organs within the democratic movements, the perspective of permanent revolution will not appear on the horizon of possibilities. The key, as always, is the political constitution of the proletariat into an independent class, therefore the formation of its centralised organs, even if they are minoritarian for a long time. It is these organs which must take on the historic task of practically experimenting with dual power, of dissolving existing social relations by force and creating a model of a new society, without bosses, state and capital, a society where the priority is the reelaboration and the satisfaction of the concrete social needs of workers and other oppressed people. Autonomous political organisation exalts the strength and maturity of the proletariat asserting itself as a class for itself. By its action, it prepares the exploited to destroy the state and its apparatuses while beginning in the fire of combat to put in place

¹⁶ *Iran: Popular discontent rises to the surface*, Letter no. 31, December 2009, pg 17.

indispensable measures for the transition towards the new society, towards a world in the image of the free social individual, cooperating and fully functioning.

Nevertheless, there are classes which are not the proletariat, and here, for example, we're thinking of the poor peasants in the countries on the periphery of the CMP. If they have the capacity to enter into struggle, to create their own organisations and to transform what was a democratic movement into a radical democratic movement, that is to say a movement which does not address itself to the state but which, on the contrary, puts into practice organisational means for realising its needs, they do not have to wait for the proletariat to be in movement to carry out their own actions. On the contrary, we can see in the actions of communes of anarchist peasants in Spain, in 1936-1937 attempts to try to resolve, there and then, complex questions relating to agricultural production: what to produce and how? How to organise production in a way which doesn't reproduce exploitation? What should be the relations between town and country?

That the communist transformation of the world is only viable if the proletariat enters into movement is incontestable, but the fact that the peasants have also applied the principle "*Don't demand (from the state), take, and organise accordingly*", an "operaist" principle which already existed in the days of the IWW, will enable proletarians in struggle to have an important base of support, not resting on "submission" to a proletariat bearing all the noble virtues, but on a similar practice allowing recognition and then supersession. Let's remember that communism is not the generalisation of the proletarian condition but its abolition, along with all other classes.

"This doesn't lead to the conclusion that nothing can be won within the framework of the state. Democratic demands should be seen like this: they are the result of the attempt to create a terrain of possible compromise with the state. Often put forward by independent proletarians, they are no less an illusion which revolutionaries must oppose. The conception and the practice of singular and collective freedoms of the individual only make sense if the individual fully assumes their social being by contributing to the organisation of a society built around association for productive cooperation, free from commodities, value, capital and, certainly, the state.

*Any movement which tends towards the autonomous and collective satisfaction of the need for freedom is setting out on the long road towards communism. On the other hand, if or when libertarian aspirations are deflected towards democratic demands addressed to the state, the perspective of communism is pushed further away. The perspective of communism is wiped away even if partial successes are won, as in the case of the enlargement or reinforcement of social democracy (the famous trade unionist gains of struggle). The recurrent deal which the state offers to rebels and proletarians is to cease agitation and the construction of a new order in return for the satisfaction of some demands."*¹⁷

MC/KPK, 20 May 2015

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¹⁷ "*Égypte: Compromis historique sur une tentative de changement démocratique*", (Brochure no. 3, October 2011) – paragraph different in English edition.