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## DISCUSSION

### KARL MARX AND THE FREEDOM OF THE INDIVIDUAL

THOMAS SOWELL

#### I. DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

A RECURRENT but vaguely defined concept in Marx is the post-revolutionary "dictatorship of the proletariat" which he envisioned. This phrase is often interpreted in the light of twentieth-century dictatorships, and particularly Soviet Russia. But to understand what Marx himself may have had in mind the model must be sought elsewhere. Engels declared: "Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat."<sup>1</sup> What is relevant here, of course, is not the historical Paris Commune but the Paris Commune as seen by Marx. The specific features of the Commune which caused Marx and Engels to regard it as the political prototype of the dictatorship of the proletariat were (i) universal suffrage,<sup>2</sup> (ii) criticism of the government by the people,<sup>3</sup> (iii) freedom of religion and separation of church and state,<sup>4</sup> and (iv) a non-militaristic outlook<sup>5</sup>—in short, the common denominators of Western democracy. Marx was by no means an enemy of "the open society."<sup>6</sup> His belief in free scientific inquiry<sup>7</sup> and his opposition to any governmental control of the content of education<sup>8</sup> showed an attitude very different from that which has led to state attempts to mold a "Soviet man." Marx sharply opposed any idea of the state as "a children's home" or of society as "a crowd of adults whose destiny is to be educated from above."<sup>9</sup>

In the light of contemporary political concerns, there is a strange ring to Engels' statement that "the democratic republic" is "the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>10</sup> But this only indicates the pitfalls involved in reading present-day issues and problems back into earlier thinkers. For Marx the concept of dictatorship

did not at all revolve around questions of civil liberties, one-party rule, etc., but around the question of *de facto* control of the institutions of society. Marx saw contemporary institutions as dominated by capitalists, through intellectual-ideological influence as well as economic power.<sup>11</sup> He assumed that the next phase of history would see similar domination by the working class. The Marxian concept of dictatorship of the proletariat expressed little more than the truism that a cohesive popular will would be overwhelming in a truly democratic state. The Paris Commune was significant, in Marx's view, for its enhancement of political democracy, since the political rule of the worker "cannot coexist with the perpetuation of his social slavery."<sup>12</sup> The particular social welfare measures of the short-lived Commune "could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people."<sup>13</sup>

Political freedom and democracy received remarkably little attention in the writings of Karl Marx, and nowhere a systematic discussion. Yet wherever he mentioned the subject at all, whether in his early writings of the 1840's or in his final works in the 1870's, his acceptance of democracy was unequivocal and largely uncritical. He showed no reservations, as, for example, J. S. Mill had, over the tendency of a majority to tyrannize over individuals, or to hamstring specialists by the political weight of their collective ignorance. There were two principal reasons why democracy should tend to recede into the background of Marx's writings: (1) the polemical nature of those writings, and (2) Marx's preoccupation with the socioeconomic, rather than the po-

litical, aspects of capitalism and of the society which he envisioned for the future.

Almost everything from the pen of Karl Marx was polemical; he wrote nothing that simply set forth his own views systematically. One consequence of this was that his differences with his opponents largely determined the subject matter and emphasis of his writings. His principal opponents were nineteenth-century liberals, non-Marxian socialists, and the anarchists—none of whom were authoritarians who would call forth reaffirmations of democratic principles on his part. While there were many economic differences on which to attack nineteenth-century liberals, on political issues Marx tended to skirt what has been aptly called an “inconveniently large expanse of common ground.”<sup>14</sup> A similar situation existed with respect to other socialists, most of whom were also democrats. They too believed in doing things “in the usual democratic way” as Engels said<sup>15</sup>—usual in the sense of being a common feature of socialist theories rather than a common fact of contemporary life. Against anarchists Marx and Engels were in the position of defending the “authority of the majority over the minority.”<sup>16</sup> Marxian passages defending the use of state power against individuals in this connection were later avidly quoted by Lenin in defense of an autocratic power which Marx had not contemplated.

More fundamental perhaps than the polemical situation was Marx’s emphasis on socioeconomic reconstruction and his skepticism as to what political freedom alone would mean. He had no patience with those who “confused political emancipation with human emancipation.”<sup>17</sup> The Marxian stress was not on “ideal rights” but on “material means.”<sup>18</sup> When man is free “in the materialist sense,” according to Marx, he is “free not through the negative power to avoid this or that, but through the positive power to assert his true individuality.” Thus “each man must be given social scope for the vital manifestation of his being.”<sup>19</sup> Marx saw this sort of freedom as requiring society at large to consciously reorganize its

social and economic life, *not* primarily with a view to greater economic “efficiency,” but in order to promote the personal development of each individual. This did not mean society’s attempting to mold the individual to some preconceived pattern of virtues but rather society’s providing the circumstantial preconditions for the individual to realize himself. Here as elsewhere Marx depicted his society of the future in a few bold strokes without details, and without analysis of the obstacles in the nature of man which stood in the way of its realization.

The self-realization of the individual was the highest goal of Marxian socialism. The “masses” or the working class were to be the instrumentality of the envisioned revolutionary change, but it was the individual as such who was to be liberated in the post-revolutionary scheme of things. The abolition of classes was not to be for the purpose of making all men uniform atoms in society, not to destroy variation, but to make the individual rather than the class the unit of variation. Here again Marx’s thinking was sharply at variance with that of such writers as John Stuart Mill who regarded the passing of class distinctions as the passing of distinctions generally, as the growth of uniformity.<sup>20</sup> With Marx, on the contrary, it is the existence of classes which promotes uniformity and suppresses individuality within each class, and therefore—in a society composed of classes—throughout society. In a class society, Marx declared, the significant social relationships in which individuals participate they participate in “not as individuals, but as members of a class.”<sup>21</sup> In the society Marx envisioned, “it is as individuals that the individuals participate.”<sup>22</sup> The Marxian aim was “the liberation of each single individual,”<sup>23</sup> the creation of “a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle.”<sup>24</sup> These points need special emphasis in view of the idea promoted by the U.S.S.R. (and repeated by its friends and foes alike) that there is something “Marxian” about sacrificing the individual to the needs of mass production.

## II. "FREE WILL" IN HISTORY

It is sometimes argued that Marx denied the freedom of the individual, if not in the political sense, then in the sense of a "free will." According to this view, Marx's theory of history is one of economic determinism, in which each individual is only the tool of economic forces, with the individual's own motivation being mainly economic.<sup>25</sup> This image of man is said to explain the manipulative totalitarianism of contemporary Marxism.

Actually, Marx's theory of history never pretended to determine—economically or otherwise—what individuals would do. The greatest latitude was allowed for the variety of personal motivation.<sup>26</sup> Marx's theory denies precisely the claim that individuals—great men—shape history; hence it does not find it necessary to go into their motives.<sup>27</sup> "For what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed."<sup>28</sup> The Marxian theory of history attempted to analyze the logic of the situation rather than determine the intentions of individuals. This has been obscured in part by the title, "materialist theory of history," which has sometimes been taken to mean that Marx assumes people to be "materialistic" in the popular sense of being avaricious. But Marxian materialism was *philosophic* materialism, largely of the eighteenth-century variety represented by Helvetius and Holbach, and has no connection with avariciousness.

The "economic" element in the Marxian theory is somewhat peculiarly defined. What Marx called "the economic structure" of society does not refer to the interrelations among *things*, such as manufacturing, mining, transportation, etc., but to the interrelations among men—the hypothetical table of organization of society at large.<sup>29</sup> It is the nature of these human relationships in production which forms "the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness."<sup>30</sup>

The human relations are reorganized with technological change, creating new problems and the possibility of new solutions.

In Marx's theory, there is no question of the "weight" of the economic factor vis-à-vis the weight of psychological, biological, etc., factors. It is only a question of the element making for change. For example, it might be argued that the existence of family units is better explained by biological or psychological factors than by economic factors. But that is not the question to which the Marxian theory addresses itself. It seeks to explain the changes which the family unit has undergone in different epochs, and it finds the answer in the impact of changing economic circumstances and the changed social structure. The materialist theory of history attempts to explain how the existing totality of institutions, ideas, social arrangements, etc., developed from the previously existing totality; it does not attempt to explain the complete question of their existence (why there are families at all) by assigning weights to economic, psychological, biological, etc., factors.

Still less is the Marxian theory one of economic motivation predominating to the exclusion of any sincere idealism.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, it pictures the socioeconomic changes as creating new problems and possibilities, to which different groups react differently according to whether their objective positions in the economic complex cause them to perceive more the positive or the negative aspects of new economic forces, and therefore cause them to take different views of the abstract rightness or wrongness of various alternatives. According to Marx, "each class attempts—from its own special point of view—to emancipate society."<sup>32</sup> Clearly this is not a denial of idealism but an attempt to represent the particular form this idealism will take as a function of social variables. Marx said that "one must not form the narrow-minded notion that the petty bourgeoisie, on principle, wishes to enforce an egoistic class interest."<sup>33</sup>

While Marx was prone to see social bias everywhere, especially in opposition to his

own ideas, he never went as far as Lenin did in asserting that "there can be no 'impartial' social science" under capitalism.<sup>34</sup> Marx's extensive and even picayune criticism of Ricardian economics, for example, never descended to the level of claiming that Ricardo was activated by bias as a rich stockbroker but criticized instead the "scientific inadequacy"<sup>35</sup> of his methodology. Similarly Marx declared that "it would be very wrong" to class such men as John Stuart Mill among the "economic apologists."<sup>36</sup> Individuals were not for Marx mere creatures of social circumstances, though classes as a whole were largely considered to be so.

### III. RUSSIA, MARX, AND DEMOCRACY

While Engels suggested the Paris Commune as a model of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Soviet Union has assumed that role for many. Its national peculiarities and paradoxes have been widely accepted as examples of the Marxian word made flesh. Thus, if the U.S.S.R. lacks political liberties, this has been regarded as evidence that Marxian thought is undemocratic. If Russia concentrates on heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods, this becomes a "Marxist" notion, despite Marx's complete silence on this subject. If the Soviets violate international agreements, this is explained by the "Marxist" precept that "the end justifies the means"—a precept not to be found in all Marx's voluminous writings. Moreover, these hasty assertions are often cited as examples of the influence of ideas on history and, therefore, a further point scored against Marx.

But there is little need to resort to Marxian doctrine to explain Soviet practices. There is nothing mysterious in the fact that a country which has never had a tradition of individual freedom still does not have one. Instead of this situation being a result of Marxian theories, Marxian theory was itself changed to accommodate the situation. The principles of the one-party state and of "iron discipline in the party" were included by Stalin among the "new contributions

made by Lenin" to "developing Marx's doctrine."<sup>37</sup> But far from being a development of Marx's ideas, these principles were a resurrection of the Blanquist theories which Marx and Engels had fought in their own time. Engels' description of the Blanquists was an unconscious preview of the Bolsheviks:

Brought up in the school of conspiracy, and held together by the strict discipline which went with it, they started out from the viewpoint that a relatively small number of resolute, well-organized men would be able, at a given favorable moment, not only to seize the helm of state, but also by a display of ruthless energy, to maintain power until they succeeded in sweeping the mass of the people into the revolution and ranging them round the small band of leaders. This involved, above all, the strictest dictatorial centralization of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government.<sup>38</sup>

For Marx there was a fundamental "difference between a secret political society and a genuine workers' organization."<sup>39</sup> Engels pointed out that the Communist League (for which he and Marx wrote the *Manifesto*) had been "thoroughly democratic, with elective and always removable boards. This alone barred all hankering after conspiracy, which requires dictatorship."<sup>40</sup> He described Blanquism as "the phantasy of over-turning an entire society through the action of a small conspiracy." In his later years Engels saw Russia as "one of the exceptional cases where it is possible for a handful of people to *make* a revolution" and thereby give "a certain justification" to Blanquist ideas.<sup>41</sup> He did not foresee that it would be called Marxism when it happened.

Blanquism was basically incompatible with the Marxian view of history and of the proletariat. Marx saw the coming of communism (in his sense) as the result of a long series of struggles, transforming conditions and men. The kind of society he envisioned required, as Lenin observed, "a person not like the present man in the street."<sup>42</sup> Marx saw this new sort of person

emerging as a natural result of the sobering process of a social struggle lasting perhaps a half-century.<sup>43</sup> The educational role of adversity and setbacks for the proletariat was a recurrent theme in the writings of Marx and Engels.<sup>44</sup> Lenin, on the other hand, believed that the proletariat would never autonomously develop the necessary outlook and purposeful unity: "Class political consciousness can be brought to the working class *only from without*."<sup>45</sup> Whatever the relative merits, in terms of realism, of the Marxist versus the Leninist conception of the working class, this crucial shift of assumptions necessitated a fundamental change, however covert, in the line of march toward communism, both before and after seizure of power.

Despite the points of contradiction between the original theories of Marx and the later "contributions" of Lenin, the undemocratic elements associated with contemporary Marxism were not due entirely to latter-day developments in Leninist theory and Soviet practice. In Marx himself there was a curious dualism between the democratic ideals of the intellectual and the ruthless will to power of the man. While the explicit Marxian precepts were democratic, Marx's own practices foreshadowed to some extent the conspiratorial, repressive pattern of modern Communism. Marx's consuming hatreds and ideological intolerance, his immersion in the intrigues and cut-throat power struggles of the First International, his *ad hoc* justifications of terrorism<sup>46</sup> and other concessions to expediency were faint foretastes of the Russia of Lenin and Stalin. There was more traditional than intellectual continuity in the history of Marxism.

Even on the intellectual plane there were features of Marxian thought that lent themselves to the Leninist transformation, notably (1) the doctrine of historical justification, and (2) the unshakable self-righteousness of representing the emergent "proletarian" outlook—which was independent of whatever outlook happened to be actually prevalent among proletarians.

Engels declared that Marxism took from Hegel the "great basic thought that the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made *things*, but as a complex of *processes*."<sup>47</sup> Among the corollaries derived from this was a rejection of eternal truths<sup>48</sup> and eternal values in judging either ideas<sup>49</sup> or institutions:

Each stage is necessary, and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb, it loses its validity and justification.<sup>50</sup>

With such flexible standards a man could remain a Marxist and at the same time be a Stalinist apologist, though it would be equally consistent for him to be a Trotskyite or a social democrat, depending upon how he assessed the current stage of history. Marx himself had even justified slavery in ancient Greece, though he opposed it in nineteenth-century America.

The establishment of a "proletarian" government oppressing not only other classes but the workers themselves—the dictatorship *over* the proletariat, as it has been called—was perhaps the most grotesque contradiction between Marx's vision and what actually happened. Yet even this owes something to the original Marxian assumptions. Marx and Engels habitually spoke in the name of a proletarian ideology and unhesitatingly dismissed as "bourgeois" the ideas they found actually to be dominant among workers.<sup>51</sup> The same practice was followed by Lenin.<sup>52</sup> Presumably the "proletarian" ideology spoken of represented what workers *would* believe in the absence of dupey, prejudice, etc. The Marxian conviction of speaking in the real interests of the mass of humanity was too invincible to be shaken by the apathy, hostility, and even—in the twentieth century—open revolt of real workers. These institutional blinders must be laid to the door of the originators of Marxian ideology.

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## NOTES

1. Frederick Engels, "Introduction," in Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (New York, 1940), p. 22.
2. "The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town and revocable at short terms" (Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 57).
3. "Indeed the Commune did not pretend to infallibility, the invariable attribute of all governments of the old stamp. It published its doings and sayings, it initiated the public into all its shortcomings" (*ibid.*, p. 67).
4. "The pay of the priest, instead of being extorted by the tax-gatherer, should only depend upon the spontaneous action of the parishioners' religious instincts" (*ibid.*, p. 64). Engels denounced a socialist writer who "incited his gendarmes of the future to attack religion, and thereby helps it to martyrdom and a prolonged lease of life" (*Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* [New York, 1940], p. 355).
5. "To broadly mark the new era of history it was conscious of initiating . . . the Commune pulled down that colossal symbol of martial glory, the Vendome column" (Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 65). Engels declared that militarism "carries in itself the seeds of its own destruction" (*op. cit.*, p. 194).
6. Cf. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950).
7. "Who should decide on the bounds of scientific research if not scientific research itself!" (Marx, "The Leading Article of No. 179 of *Kölnische Zeitung*," in Marx and Engels, *On Religion* [Moscow, 1956], p. 21).
8. "Defining by a general law the expenditures on the elementary schools, the qualifications of the teaching staff, the branches of instruction, etc., and, as is done in the United States, supervising the fulfillment of these legal specifications by state inspectors, is a very different thing from appointing the state as the educator of the people! Government and church should rather be equally excluded from any influence on the school" (Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* [Moscow, 1955], II, 35).
9. Marx, "The Leading Article of No. 179 of *Kölnische Zeitung*," *op. cit.*, p. 28.
10. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (New York, 1942), p. 486.
11. "The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas. . . . The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are, in general, subject to it" (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* [New York, 1947], p. 39).
12. Marx, *The Civil War in France*, p. 60.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
14. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York, 1950), p. 313.
15. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 24.
16. *Selected Correspondence*, p. 320.
17. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family* (Moscow, 1957), p. 128.
18. Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, p. 382.
19. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, p. 128.
20. "On Liberty," *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Marshall Cohen (New York: Modern Library, 1961), p. 269.
21. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York, 1947), p. 75.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
24. Marx, *Capital* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), I, 649.
25. Cf. M. M. Bober, *Karl Marx's Interpretation of History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), pp. 74-75; Henry Bamford Parkes, *Marxism—an Autopsy* (Boston, 1939), p. 165; and Alexander Gray, *The Development of Economic Doctrine* (London, 1956), p. 309.
26. "Partly they may be external objects, partly ideal motives, ambition, 'enthusiasm for truth and justice,' personal hatred or even purely individual whims of all kinds" (Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," *loc. cit.*, II, 390).
27. "It is not a question so much of the motives of single individuals, however eminent, as of those motives which set in motion great masses, whole peoples, and again whole classes of the people within each people; and this, too, not momentarily, for the transient flaring up of a straw-fire which quickly dies down, but for a lasting action resulting in a great historical transformation" (*ibid.*, p. 391).
28. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 476.
29. Marx, *Capital* (Chicago, 1909), III, 952, and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago, 1904), p. 11.
30. *Ibid.*
31. This theory is more like that of Charles A. Beard than that of Karl Marx. Marx characterized a similar contemporary theory of history as "facile anecdote-mongering and the attribution of all great events to petty and mean causes" (Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 159).
32. Quoted in Gustav Mayer, *Friedrich Engels* (London, 1936), p. 58. Schumpeter observed: "No amount of honest intention to place oneself on the

standpoint of the public welfare or of the nation's interest avails. . . . For the point is precisely that these words carry different meanings for different minds" (*Essays* [Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Press, Inc., 1951], p. 171).

33. "The Eighteenth Brumaire," in Emile Burns (ed.), *A Handbook of Marxism* (New York, 1935), p. 128.

34. V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1952), I, Pt. I, 75.

35. *Theories of Surplus Value* (New York, 1952), p. 204.

36. *Capital* (Modern Library), I, 669 n.

37. J. V. Stalin, "Lenin and Leninism," in Lenin, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

38. Engels, "Introduction," *loc. cit.*, p. 19.

39. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 291.

40. "On the History of the Communist League," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, p. 347.

41. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 437.

42. Lenin, "The State and Revolution," in Burns (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 753.

43. "We say to the workers: 'You have got to go through fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and national wars not merely in order to change your conditions but in order to change yourselves and become qualified for political power.'" (Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, p. 92).

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 301, 450, 464, 474; Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, I, 31; Marx, *The Civil War in France*, pp. 61–62, and "The Eighteenth Brumaire," in Burns (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 120–21.

45. Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1952), I, Pt. I, 287.

46. "Address to the Communist League," in Burns (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 66; *The Civil War in France*, p. 78.

47. "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, II, 386.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 387, and *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, Pt. I, chap. ix.

49. A significant example of this was the attitude of Marx and Engels to Robert Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier, the so-called Utopian Socialists. These socialist predecessors were referred to only in terms of high praise, but their latter-day disciples were mercilessly derided as doctrinaire believers in outmoded doctrines. The familiar assertion that Marx had "contempt" for the Utopian Socialists is completely unsubstantiated and contrary to evidence as regards the original Utopian Socialists themselves.

50. Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," *loc. cit.*, II, 361.

51. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 115–16, 147 n., 254, 461.

52. Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" *op. cit.*, pp. 292–93.