

# IDEAS OF LEADERSHIP AND DEMOCRACY

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Heinz Dieterich asked for an article on the role of leadership in Russia from 1903 to 1990, but one can not really begin in Russia in 1903. The Russian Social Democratic Workers Party, which later became the Communist Party of The Soviet Union (Bolshevik), can only be understood in the light of the 19th century German working class movement.

## 1. CONCEPTS OF LEADERSHIP IN 19TH CENTURY GERMAN AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY RUSSIAN MOVEMENTS

**1.1. Ideas in Manifesto of the Communist Party.** The working class in Germany first formed political parties during the period of the 1848 revolution. The most radical group was the Communist Party. Although this Party exercised little practical impact on the eventual course of the 1848 revolution, with hindsight we can see it's 'Manifesto' was the starting point for the socialist and Communist movements of the next 140 years. To understand issues of leadership in revolutionary Russia, and indeed the very goals of the Communist leadership in 20th century Russia, we must turn to what the Communists in Germany were saying 160 years ago.

The German Communists defined themselves as follows:

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*Date:* July 2008.

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties.

They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.

They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.

Of course in the 20th century, Communists did set up separate parties opposed to other working class parties, but they did often try and work in alliance with other working class parties.

The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The impact of these goals set out in 1848 continued to be guiding principles for Communists until the 1960s, when a very marked split, with definite nationalist overtones, took place between the Russian and Chinese Communists. It is arguable that this split was in the end fatal to the international movement.

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

One can see here, that the notion that the Communist Party were the avant-guard of the workers movement, an idea that is sometimes mistakenly attributed to the Russian Communist Vladimir Lenin, had already been made explicit in 1848.

The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.

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We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.

These passages are very important. In the first we see that the Communists considered that the proletariat was not yet a class. It was to be formed as a distinct class in society by the process of political struggle. It was only this process of struggle that would make a mass of individuals act in a collective way for their common interest. Both passages repeat the idea that the proletariat must conquer political power, that it must become the ruling class. But more surprisingly, the raising of the proletariat to the position of ruling class is identified with the winning of democracy.

Needless to say, respectable opinion today sees democracy as being very different from proletarian rule. But 160 years ago words had a rather different meaning. To the upper classes, democracy and mob rule were synonymous. What educated people then thought of democracy was still heavily influenced by the ancient Greek authors, who were more widely read than they are now. Aristotle had said that democracy did not mean majority rule. Instead it meant *rule by the poor*<sup>1</sup>! Marx, key author of the Manifesto and holder of a Doctorate in classical philosophy, well aware of Aristotle's definition, is using it in practice.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible.

Here we see laid down exactly what Communist Parties have attempted to do whenever they came to power. Note that by the 'State' the Communists meant the organised proletariat, not the State which existed prior to the revolution. This orientation distinguished them sharply from the Social Democratic

<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, The Politics, 1290b: 17-20: Democracy is when there is a majority of free, poor men who have authority to rule, while oligarchy is when it is in the hands of the wealthy and well-born, who are a minority.

Worker's Party which succeeded them. The characteristic feature of Social Democracy was its intention to use the existing state *for* the working classes rather than replace the state *with* the working classes.

The Manifesto goes on to put forward a vision of a political order in which all forms of class rule will vanish:

When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

Here are a set of concepts that became topical in the USSR in the late 30s and late 1950s. First we have the idea that political power is always class oppression "Political power ... is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another". It is then suggested that when private production is abolished, politics will use this oppressive character, since social classes themselves have ceased to exist. We will discuss later how adequate this concept turned out to be.

**1.2. Ideas in the Erfurt Program.** After the defeat of the 1848 revolution, the Communist Party broke up with its leading activists forced into exile. As time passed, a new workers movement came into existence, but this time, instead of calling themselves Communist they adopted the label 'Social Democrat', probably because they feared the repression that the earlier name would have brought. Under the government of Bismark, even socialism was outlawed, so they had an underground existence until in 1890 the Kaiser dismissed Bismark, and the latter's anti-socialist law was repealed. The German Social Democracy publicly founded itself at the 1891 *partie-tag* in Erfurt, adopting a new programme, named after that town. Although much shorter than the 'Manifesto' the Erfurt Programme, showed clear commonalities:

The interests of the working classes are the same in all countries with a capitalistic mode of production. With the extension of the world's commerce, and of production for the worldmarket, the position of the worker in every country grows ever more dependent on the position of the worker in other countries. The liberation of the working class, accordingly, is a work in which the workmen of all civilised countries are equally involved. In recognition of this, the Social Democratic Party of Germany feels and declares itself to be one with the classconscious workmen of all other countries.

The Social Democratic Party of Germany does not fight, accordingly, for new class-privileges and classrights, but for the abolition of classrule and of classes themselves, for equal rights and equal duties of all, without distinction of sex or descent. Starting from these views, it combats, within existing society, not only the exploitation and oppression of wageearners, but every kind of exploitation and oppression, whether directed against a class, a party, a sex, or a race<sup>2</sup>.

We see here echoes of 1848, but also a widening of view. Social Democracy now fought not only class oppression, but also all other sorts, including racial and sexual oppression. Like before, the party gave primacy to the struggle for democracy:

Proceeding from these principles, the Social Democratic Party of Germany demands, to begin with:

1. Universal, equal, and direct suffrage, with secret ballot, for all elections, of all citizens of the realm over twenty years of age, without distinction of sex. Proportional representation, and until this is introduced, legal redistribution of electoral districts

<sup>2</sup>Quoted from the English translation of the Programme given in Bertrand Russell's book on German Social Democracy.

after every census. Biennial legislative periods. Holding of the elections on a legal holiday. Compensation for the elected representatives. Abolition of every limitation of political rights, except in the case of legal incapacity.

Recall that these demands were put forward at a time when universal adult suffrage did not exist anywhere<sup>3</sup> so more was expected of universal suffrage then than today. But much is assumed rather than stated. It is assumed that elections are to a parliament, but the relationship between parliament and executive are not spelt out ( for fear of openly challenging the Kaiser). If we assume that the parliament is to appoint an executive, then the model of politics being put forward is that which, after 1945, became the norm in modern capitalist countries. We know in retrospect, that this turns out to be something very different from the 1848 goal of the state being the organised working class.

But the next demand is much more radical:

2. Direct legislation through the people, by means of the rights of proposal and rejection. Selfdetermination and selfgovernment of the people in realm, state, province and parish. Election of magistrates<sup>4</sup> by the people, with responsibility to the people. Annual voting of taxes.
3. Education of all to bear arms. Militia in the place of the standing army. Decision by the popular representatives on questions of war and peace. Settlement of all international disputes by arbitration.

The model of democracy demanded here is quite different. Instead of what is now called *representative* democracy, they demanded *direct* democracy. Laws are to be proposed and passed by the people rather than parliament. The people are to take control of the judiciary by electing magistrates, taxes are to be subject to direct popular vote. How can two such different models of politics be advanced in the same programme?

Because the outcome was a compromise. The rank and file demanded direct democracy. The party leadership was content with the indirect democracy of the first demand. Demands two and three, speak of a rank and file desire for Swiss style democracy and a Swiss style military system.

What is now called 'representative democracy' is, in classical terms, an amalgum of two principles:

- The democratic principle of universal suffrage
- The aristocratic principle of selection

Why do we use the term 'aristocratic' here?

It is a matter of the original meaning of words. In classical political science, aristocracy meant rule by the aristoi, or the best people.

Who are the best people to rule?

In one sense it is obvious. We all know that some people are wiser than others, some are more skilled than others, some people are more knowledgable and energetic than others. It would a good idea to have wise, skilled, knowledgable and energetic people in charge rather than the lazy, ignorant, clumsy or foolish. If you are on the seas you want your captain to be a qualified navigator, instead of landlubber who has never been to sea<sup>5</sup>. The combination of able rulers with the right to select them in elections, what representative democracy promises, seems a world beater.

Elections, alas, dont yield assemblies of disinterested philosophers. Plausible rogues and careerists, more like, but even the *best* has its *worse* side. Aristocracy was denigrated for good reason.

The idea that there are better people is unavoidably tied up with social class. For millenia, the phrase 'better sort of people', has meant upper class people. It is not difficult for the upper class to convince themselves, and the rest of society, that they are better than the poor. Better educated, and with leisure to think beyond their immediate survival, they acquire the skills needed for leadership. Rule by the best, has turned out to be rule by the upper classes. This was true even after universal sufferage. The polish that came with an upper-class education turned out to be just what was needed to make a candidate for

<sup>3</sup>It was first introduced in New Zealand in 1893.

<sup>4</sup>The original word in the original document is "Behörden" ("Bhoerden"). To translate this word as "magistrate" is not correct. It may be better to translate it as "administrations" because the words "Behoerde" and "Magistrate" have different meanings. Behoerde refer to some sort of body that has to implement decisions made by some other body, say, parliament, magistrate and so on.

<sup>5</sup>From Plato with his allegory of the helmsman to the Red Guards chanting of Mao that 'sailing the seas requires the helmsman', this has been the commonsense argument for aristocracy.

high office electable. This tendency applied even to left wing parties. By parliamentary standards, the representatives of Social Democracy were plebian. But by the standards of their proletarian electorate, these representatives were educated and sophisticated.

It was thus easy for the parliamentary leadership of Social Democracy to downgrade rank and file demands for direct democracy.

**1.3. The RSDLP programme of 1903.** Russian Social Democracy consciously modeled its aims on the Erfurt Programme.

We are not in the least afraid to say that we want to imitate the Erfurt Programme: there is nothing bad in imitating what is good, and precisely to day, when we so often hear opportunist and equivocal criticism of that programme, we consider it our duty to speak openly in its favour. (Lenin, A Draft of Our Party Programme, 1899)

The program actually adopted by the Russians in 1903 was very similar indeed, but modified to take into account specific Russian features. In particular it was explicitly republican, calling for the overthrow of Czarism. They stated as their immediate aim:

the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party makes it its primary and immediate task to overthrow the tsarist autocracy and set up in its place a democratic republic whose constitution would guarantee the following:

1) The sovereignty of the people, i.e., the concentration of supreme state power entirely in the hands of a legislative assembly, consisting of the representatives of the people and constituting a single chamber.

2) Universal, equal, and direct suffrage for all citizens, men and women, who have reached the age of twenty, in the elections to the legislative assembly and to the various bodies of local self-government; secret ballot; the right of every voter to be elected to any representative institution; biennial parliaments; salaries to be paid to the people's representatives<sup>6</sup>

Whilst more radical than the Germans in explicitly demanding a republic, it is significant that the Russians did not propose direct popular legislation. This was justified by Lenin, on the authority of the German socialist leader Kautsky, on the grounds that direct popular legislation was only advantageous if:

- (1) there was no antithesis between town and village or a preponderance of the towns,
- (2) there existed highly developed political parties;
- (3) there was no excessively centralised state power, independently opposed to people's legislation.

Lenin said that none of these conditions applied in Russia. Lenin's argument was not entirely coherent. The demands in the programme were for a system to come into being after czarism was overthrown, but by that point objections 2 and 3 would no longer apply. That leaves reason 1, and the fear that the proletariat would be outvoted by the peasantry in any system of direct legislation. But this too is incoherent, since the proletariat would be outnumbered by the peasantry in any system of voting, be it direct or indirect.

## 2. THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE OUTBREAK OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

The Russian Social Democrats broke from the leadership model set by German Social Democracy during the first world war. The most important reason for this break was the failure of the leadership of the German Social Democrats to abide by the agreed policy of the Socialist International on the question of war. The policy had been, that in event of war, all national parties would oppose war and call for international solidarity of the working class. But when war broke out, the German Social Democratic members of parliament voted to support the war. Similarly with the main body of the French Socialists and the British Labour party. The Russian Social Democrats adhered to the agreed policy and consistently opposed the war.

It is arguable that the reason why the Russians and Germans behaved so differently was related to the more oppressive character of Czarism as opposed to Kaiserism. Although both states were absolute monarchies, from 1891 the Kaiser had allowed more freedom for socialist activity than had the Czar. By

<sup>6</sup>Reproduced from the original text of the 1903 RSDLP programme reproduced in volume 24 of Lenin's Works which shows how the text was subsequently amended in 1917.

acquiring a substantial parliamentary representation, the Social Democrats in Germany acquired a stake in the existing state and were put under an ideological pressure to support it when it was 'threatened by Russian despotism'. The subjects of the Russian despot, felt no similar loyalty to his state. The Russian Socialists had, of necessity, gained experience in underground work, and were as a result oriented towards revolutionary action.

**2.1. The three new principles.** The outbreak of the February revolution in 1917 threw up mass democratic organisations, soviets and factory councils. These forms of participatory democracy led to the RSDLP substantially modifying its objectives in the summer of 1917. A new programme was adopted which inserted the following preface to the demand for a democratic republic:

The party of the proletariat cannot rest content with a bourgeois parliamentary democratic republic, which throughout the world preserves and strives to perpetuate the monarchist instruments for the oppression of the masses, namely, the police, the standing army, and the privileged bureaucracy.

The party fights for a more democratic workers' and peasants' republic, in which the police and the standing army will be abolished and replaced by the universally armed people, by a people's militia; all officials will be not only elective, but also subject to recall at any time upon the demand of a majority of the electors; all officials, without exception, will be paid at a rate not exceeding the average wage of a competent worker; parliamentary representative institutions will be gradually replaced by Soviets of people's representatives (from various classes and professions, or from various localities), functioning as both legislative and executive bodies.

There are three key ideas being put forward here:

- (1) That parliamentary representative institutions will be replaced by Soviet representative institutions.
- (2) That all representatives must be subject to recall.
- (3) That representatives will be paid no more than an average worker.

**2.2. Origin of the principles.** The first of these was a response to what was happening on the ground, the formation of councils (Soviets) of workers, sailors and soldiers. This form of spontaneous mass organisation occurred repeatedly during the 20th century in potentially revolutionary situations: Russia in 1905 and 1917, in the German fleet in 1918, Hungary and Italy after the first world war, Spain during the civil war, Portugal in 1975, etc. The experience is sufficiently general that we can assume, with a high degree of probability, that it will occur in most revolutionary situations. The RSDLP responded quickly to the emergence of this new form of mass democracy.

The second and third points though, came not from immediate Russian experience, but from an event that had occurred almost 50 years earlier, the uprising of the working classes of Paris following French defeat in the war against Prussia in 1870. The administration that the working classes set up, the Commune of Paris, embodied the principles of recall of representatives and of paying representatives no more than workers wages.

These three ideas were, and for the rest of the 20th century remained, the *nec plus ultra* of communist thinking on democracy. In the 21st century, with the benefit of hindsight we should be able to examine them critically.

Let us look at them one by one.

**2.2.1. Principle of recall.** This principle, derived from the Commune, was incorporated in the constitution of the USSR ( see further discussion later ), and in the constitution of Arizona. In neither case was it heavily used. If one has a popular assembly that meets regularly and questions its representatives to some higher body, and changes them if their answers are unsatisfactory, then it has some utility, but when we are talking of a person who may represent some 10,000 or 100,000 constituents, then it is less practical. It is then a mechanism with a great deal of inertia since it requires a significant fraction of the constituents to sign a demand for recall, and then requires a ballot.

Getting the signatures will be difficult unless malpractice is very evident. It acts as a safeguard against a representative who grossly abuses their position but no more than that.

2.2.2. *Principle of average wage.* The aim of this provision is both to economise on taxes, and to ensure that the representatives have a standard of living close to that of the mass of the population. The thought being, that if their own standard of living diverges too much, they will get out of touch with those they are supposed to represent. It is undoubtedly a correct idea, provided that representatives have their travel costs met out of the public purse, and provided that some accommodation is provided for them when attending multi-day meetings. But these necessary expenses can turn out to be the cover for all sorts of undercover luxuries. The expenses charged by members of parliaments in capitalist nations and federations are notorious for this. The problem is that elected representatives usually vote their own collective level of expenses, and these have a tendency to creep up. Because of these loopholes, it is not very effective as a means of ensuring that representatives are in touch with their constituents.

2.2.3. *Principle of soviet representation.* How did Soviet representation differ from parliamentary representation?

It did so in several ways. Probably the most important of which was that instead of being based on a universal franchise. The Soviets were, at least initially, spontaneously formed councils of people whose members a common social position: workers in a factory, sailors on a ship, soldiers in a regiment. As base bodies they were overwhelmingly drawn from the lower social classes, either industrial workers, or peasant conscripts. Although the Soviets of soldiers were mainly made up of men who had been farmers, they were now organised in their wartime role as soldiers. As such, they had concerns beyond those of a farmer, and, more importantly, they had the guns with which to enforce their concerns.

They were also bodies with mass participation, so that a significant part of the population was actively involved in debate, discussion and decision making. This gave them a character similar to the mass town assemblies of primitive democracy.

As we said, councils have been thrown up in many social crises. But not all such crises led to revolutions, and of those that did occur, none were as long lived as the Russian one. There were unusually favourable conditions in Russia in 1917 as compared to Italy in 1919.

Without an armed population or mutinous army, radical change, is unlikely to occur. The Communards had the National Guard, formed to defend Paris during the siege. The Russians had units of the army and fleet in mutiny<sup>7</sup>.

But councils of soldiers and sailors may form without the issue being a successful challenge to the existing state. Whether they do challenge the state depends on whether there is within them an organised and persuasive faction which sees the seizure of power as a principle objective.

### 3. FORMATION OF A REVOLUTIONARY ARISTOCRACY DURING THE CIVIL WAR

3.1. **Critical role of the revolutionary aristocracy in Paris and St Petersburg.** Take a polystyrene coffee cup of cold water and place it in a microwave oven. Turn the oven on for about 60 seconds. With luck, you will be able to pull out a steaming but calm cup of water. Carefully tip into this a teaspoon of instant coffee, then, if you have judged the timing right, the whole cup will spontaneously and violently boil over.

The microwave has super-heated the water to just above 100 degrees. The entry of the coffee granules *nucleates* the formation of bubbles of steam, and the whole mass boils over: a phase change.

Revolutions involve similar phase changes in mass behaviour, external events, for example the privations of war, raise the emotional energy of the population until it is superheated. Then some apparently minor event will cause a sudden and turbulent outburst. The stored emotional energy is then put to work breaking down old bounds on behaviour. This means that the whole process is at once deterministic and chaotic. The deterministic component is the slow buildup of energy: the war and Prussian siege of Paris in the case of the Commune. But the point of nucleation, is unpredictable.

Something so turbulent might seem undirectable, with its outcome unpredictable, but dealing with a relatively unpredictable environment is what animals have to do all the time to survive. The need to do this is why central nervous systems have developed. A nervous system allows a community of cells to survive by coherent behaviour. Human collectivities, firms, armies, nations can act in a relatively coherent fashion if they have some co-ordinating mechanism, councils and soviets are such emergent co-ordination mechanisms. The objective of any co-ordination mechanism, be it an animal nervous system, or

<sup>7</sup>It is arguable that even radical social democratic reforms, as carried out in Britain after 1945 were only possible because it was a 'khaki election' where a working class in uniform elected a predominantly working class body of MPs to parliament.

an army's command hierarchy, is to ensure the survival of its collectivity, but to do this the coordination mechanism must have rules to guide its behaviour. An animal will have instincts, honed by evolution, an army will have strategic and tactical doctrines inculcated during training, but a spontaneously formed soviet has not existed for long enough to have built up anything similar. Its participants can only call on the ideas and experience they had prior to the revolutionary crisis plus what they learn as they go along.

It is this lack of rules telling most participants how to react and interpret a rapidly changing revolutionary situation, that gives special influence to revolutionary aristocracies and avant-guard groupings like the RSDLP. These groups have a pre-existing organised command structure nested within the outer structure of the soviet. They had an aristocratic or meritocratic character collecting together some of the most determined, energetic and intelligent working class people, and lending to them a purpose and esprit de corps. When the conditions were right, they became in effect the officer and NCO classes of the proletarian army. Like an officer corps, their members were inculcated with doctrines on strategy and tactics. But unlike army officers, the RSDLP was not imposed on the soviets, instead they won their leadership role by acclaim.

It is a military truism that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. So it should be no surprise that the strategies drawn up by the factions of the RSDLP for the eventuality of revolution, were less than adequate as guide to action once the revolution broke out in 1917. The armies of the great powers had faced the same dilemma 3 years earlier. The technological revolution of the 19th century, machine guns, barbed wire, the Soixante Quinze etc, had rendered all their plans obsolete. 4 years of stalemate and unredeemed slaughter ensued, with armies in trench deadlock, until gradually new tactics were developed. But in 1918 the war erupted into movement again with Ludendorfs Kaiserschlacht great spring offensive, followed by the counter blows of Haig and Foch which drove the German army back to decisive defeat. The change came about by the development on the part of both Germany and Britain of new tactical doctrines, which emphasised the initiative of local commanders at all levels, along with the integration of all arms. It took the army commands 3 and a half years to realise the futility of their original approaches and develop new doctrines. The RSDLP on the other hand, responded with remarkable speed to the new situation and had, in half a year, devised a new strategy that led to the decisive victory in October 1917. It has to be said that this process of adaptation to the new situation owed a great deal to one person, Lenin, without whose insight and decisiveness, the RSDLP might have failed to take full advantage of the situation.

The struggle between the Provisional Government and the Soviets defined the Russian summer of 1917. The Bolsheviks saw the reality of this situation and shunned the Provisional Government as an instrument of bourgeois counter-revolution. They accepted that conditions in Russia were not ripe for communism, but that did not mean that the situation had to be abandoned to the bourgeoisie. The Bolsheviks, being in a minority in April, had to "carry on the work of criticizing and exposing errors, and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviet of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience."

In June half a million workers and peasants marched in Petrograd chanting the slogans of Bolshevism. The political temperature rose through the summer.

In July mass demonstrations broke out. The Kronstadt sailors and soldiers, and the rank and file of the RSDLP, wanted to seize power through mass action. Lenin went to Petrograd and cautioned "restraint, steadfastness and vigilance." The Provisional Government, regardless, put the full force of the army into action against the masses and the Bolsheviks.

In mid-July, Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*, an abstract analysis of the role of the state in a class society, and of the strategy for a Marxist revolution. This book provided the theoretical justification for the changes to the RSDLP programme in 1917: a revolution in Russia could not move immediately to communism, the Czarist state machine needed to be smashed and replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat. This theoretical analysis drew from the experience of the July Days. The Menshevik faction of the RSDLP compromised the Soviets. Lenin withdrew the call for "All Power to the Soviets." Since the Mensheviks ruled them, to transfer power from the Menshevik Provisional Government to the Menshevik Soviets would be worthless.

Unlike the discredited Kerensky government, the Bolsheviks had some answers to the problems the people faced: bank nationalization, nationalization of the commanding heights, abolition of commercial secrecy, compulsory organization of merchants and industrialists, and compulsory organization of the



population into consumer societies. These measures would avert the famine situation, and also provide mechanisms to socialize production toward the creation of socialism.

By September 1917, when the new programme was drawn up, things stood at a crossroads. The Bolsheviks had to move toward state power. No longer could dual power be sustained<sup>8</sup>, so in October the Petrograd Soviet, in which the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP predominated seized national power in the name of all the soviets.

In the Paris Commune too, decisive roles were played by avant-guard groups:

The members of the Commune were divided into a majority of the Blanquists, who had also been predominant in the Central Committee of the National Guard; and a minority, members of the International Working Men's Association, chiefly consisting of adherents of the Proudhon school of socialism. The great majority of the Blanquists at that time were socialist only by revolutionary and proletarian instinct; only a few had attained greater clarity on the essential principles, through Vaillant, who was familiar with German scientific socialism. It is therefore comprehensible that in the economic sphere much was left undone which, according to our view today, the Commune ought to have done. ... but what is still more wonderful is the correctness of so much that was actually done by the Commune, composed as it was of Blanquists and Proudhonists. naturally, the Proudhonists were chiefly responsible for the economic decrees of the Commune, both for their praiseworthy and their unpraiseworthy aspects; as the Blanquists were for its political actions and omissions. And in both cases the irony of history willed — as is usual when doctrinaires come to the helm — that both did the opposite of what the doctrines of their school proscribed.

....The Blanquists fared no better. 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 seize the helm of state, but also by energetic and relentless action, to keep power until they succeeded in drawing the mass of the people into the revolution and ranging them round the small band of leaders. this conception involved, above all, the strictest dictatorship and centralization of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government. And what did the Commune, with its majority of these same Blanquists, actually do? In all its proclamations to the French in the provinces, it appealed to them to form a free federation of all French Communes with Paris, a national organization, which for the first time was really to be created by the nation itself<sup>9</sup>.

If, in a revolutionary crisis such avant-guard tendencies necessarily come to the fore, and must to if the revolution is to act with decision, can they in the long run be compatible with the extension of democracy?

**3.2. Supplanting of mass democracy by the aristocracy.** With the October revolution the soviets became masters of Russia. Sweeping land reforms and nationalisations were coupled with social measures, such as freedom of divorce, rights for gay people and reorganisation of the education system. Coupled with the soviet take-over was a wave of enthusiasm among the working class, with hundreds more soviets created in the weeks following the revolution and, for the first time in history, mass participation in the administration of Russia. But this was not to last. Consider the state structure actually set up by the Russian revolution, shown in figure 1. Each 1000 city inhabitants, or 100 township inhabitants, was entitled to one delegate on their local soviet. This local soviet was responsible for running the local city or township affairs. The local soviets then sent delegates to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, one delegate per 25,000 inhabitants for cities, one per 125,000 for rural districts. The All Russian Congress was not in continuous session. It met a couple of times a year and elected the Central Executive Committee which in turn elected 17 Commissars who formed the government.

It is obviously a very hierarchical system tailor made to be dominated by the organised avant-guard. Any system of elections is aristocratic, and tends to concentrate the influence of a well organised and disciplined party. In a hierarchical system of indirect elections this is intensified. Consider the factors that control party influence in such a system. At each level of election two steps are necessary:

<sup>8</sup>The analysis in the previous 4 paragraphs draws on material published by Pragoti (<http://www.pragoti.org/node/1623>).

<sup>9</sup>From Engels' Introduction to Karl Marx's *Civil War in France*.

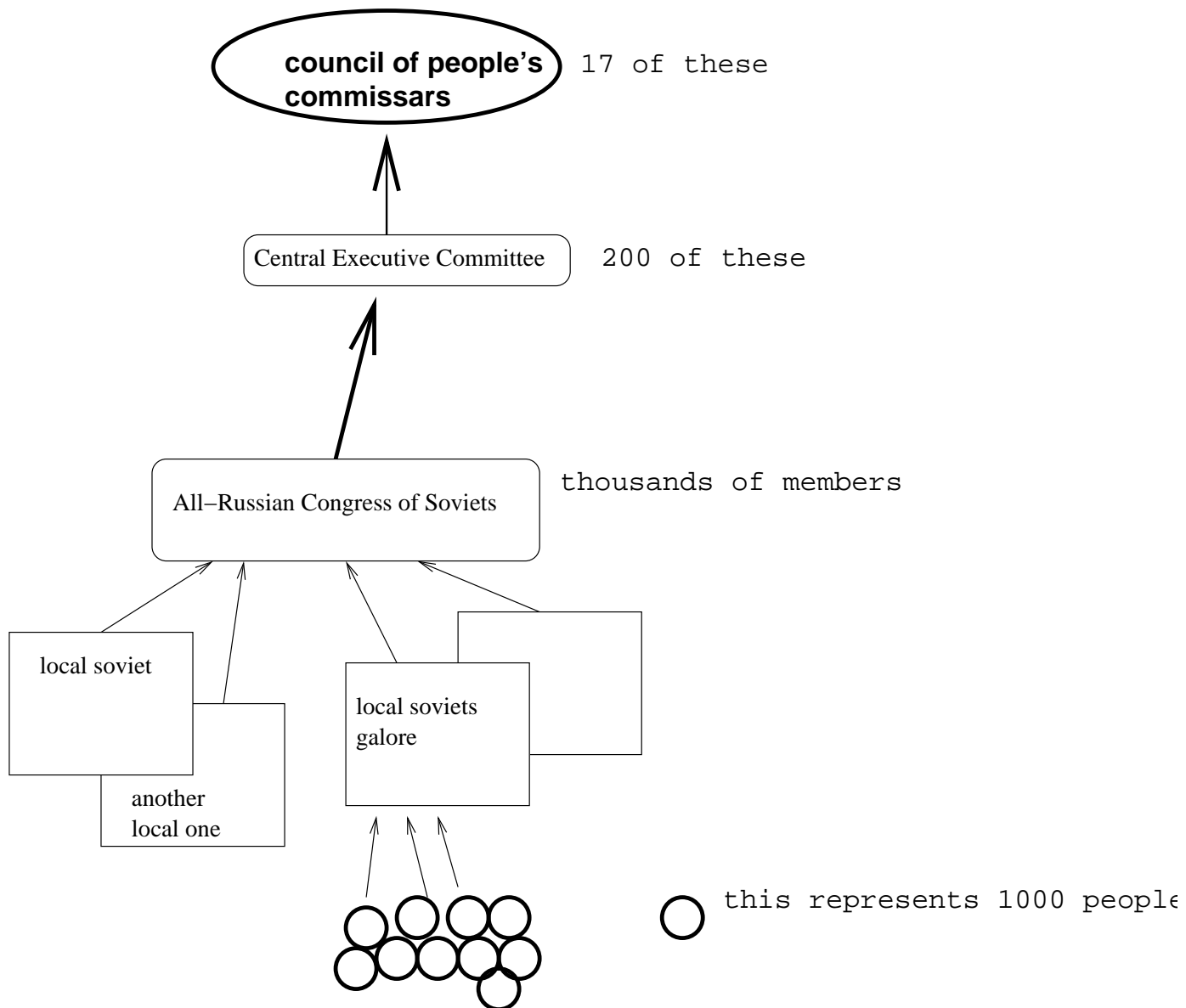


FIGURE 1. Structure defined by the 1918 constitution of Russia

- (1) A person must be nominated
- (2) They must then succeed in being elected

It is clear that if one considers a random non-party citizen, and a random RSDLP member, the RSDLP member is much more likely to be nominated as a candidate for election. Then, provided that the initial reputation of the RSDLP was reasonably high, the RSDLP member is more likely to win the election than an independent who stands against them. We can argue about just what the odds would be, but as a plausible example suppose that an RSDLP member is 50 times more likely to be nominated and 4 times more likely to be elected if nominated than a randomly citizen. This would give a 200 fold over representation of RSDLP members in the local soviets compared to their membership of the population. Thus if the RSDLP made up one in a thousand of the Russian population, they would already make up 20% of the local soviets. The same concentrating process operates at each level of election, raising the proportions of party members as we progress up the hierarchy, till at the top, the Council of Peoples Commissars was made up 100% of Bolshevik party members. This hierarchical concentration had occurred in 1918 even prior to the full outbreak of Civil war. Since the government was dominated by the one party, the only real political debate took place within that party, and if that party felt threatened, it could use its central power to ban opposition groups.

Physicists speak of the many possible universes implied by quantum mechanics<sup>10</sup>; realities parallel to our own, but with subtle differences: ones in which Lenin was killed in a train crash on his way back to Russia for example. If we conceptually integrate over all the parallel universes in which the soviets displaced the provisional government of Kerensky, we would find some in which the Bolsheviks rose to dominance, some in which the Socialist Revolutionaries rose to dominance. But, given the structure of the soviets, in the overwhelming majority of such alternatives, some one political party would have had ultimate power.

This transfer of executive authority away from the soviets, was an inevitable departure from working-class self-rule, one generated by the mathematical properties of soviet power. Formerly participatory organs of working-class power, the soviets were increasingly marginalised after a decline in Bolshevik support upon the demobilisation of the Tsarist army. Following big gains for the Left-SRs in the spring 1918 elections, where they won control of Tula, Iaroslavl, Kostroma, Sormovo, Briansk and Izhevsk, these soviets were all shut down by force.

Factory committees, to which the pre-October RSDLP had considered demanding 'all power', were displaced and one-man management of factories re-introduced. In 1918 Trotsky abolished the election of army officers, and re-introduced saluting, privileges, separate living quarters and the death penalty. Lenin and Trotsky assumed that free debate, industrial democracy and questioning authority are inefficient, unworkable, and unnecessary after an (incomplete) socialist revolution - Trotsky argued that internal struggle in the army was "not possible" on the grounds that its sociological composition was akin to that of the soviets. Soon managers started "electing" themselves to the soviets as Bolshevik Party representatives, and even that was untrue.

Engels remarked that it was an irony of history that the conspiratorial Blanquists who, on coming to power in Paris, took the greatest efforts to democratise France. The obverse irony, was that the RSDLP, nominally committed to the democratic spirit of the Paris Commune, should, within months of coming to power have established a highly aristocratic constitution, one which indeed, later followed the path earlier blazed by the English and French revolutions towards revolutionary monarchy.

**3.3. Kronstadt.** In 1921 sailors in the Kronstadt fleet base rebelled against the dictatorship established by the Communist Party (formerly the RSDLP). They put forward a list of 15 demands:

1. Immediate new elections to the Soviets. The present Soviets no longer express the wishes of the workers and peasants. The new elections should be held by secret ballot, and should be preceded by free electoral propaganda.
2. Freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, for the Anarchists, and for the Left Socialist parties.
3. The right of assembly, and freedom for trade union and peasant organisations.
4. The organisation, at the latest on 10th March 1921, of a Conference of non-Party workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt and the Petrograd District.
5. The liberation of all political prisoners of the Socialist parties, and of all imprisoned workers and peasants, soldiers and sailors belonging to working class and peasant organisations.
6. The election of a commission to look into the dossiers of all those detained in prisons and concentration camps.
7. The abolition of all political sections in the armed forces. No political party should have privileges for the propagation of its ideas, or receive State subsidies to this end. In the place of the political sections various cultural groups should be set up, deriving resources from the State.
8. The immediate abolition of the militia detachments set up between towns and countryside.
9. The equalisation of rations for all workers, except those engaged in dangerous or unhealthy jobs.
10. The abolition of Party combat detachments in all military groups. The abolition of Party guards in factories and enterprises. If guards are required, they should be nominated, taking into account the views of the workers.
11. The granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after them themselves and do not employ hired labour.
12. We request that all military units and officer trainee groups associate themselves with this resolution.
13. We demand that the Press give proper publicity to this resolution.
14. We demand the institution of mobile workers' control groups.
15. We demand that handicraft production be authorised provided it does not utilise wage labour.

<sup>10</sup>Wikipedia, as usual, gives a good summary [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Many-Worlds\\_interpretation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Many-Worlds_interpretation).

The Communist Party refused to accept these demands. Trotsky sent in 60,000 troops to crush the Kronstadt Soviet. Some units mutinied and joined the rebellion.. After a two week battle which killed thousands of civilians and as many as 10,000 Red Army soldiers the rebellion was crushed.

#### 4. MONARCHY - ITS STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

**4.1. What is monarchy?** Monarchy is not the same as hereditary kingship. It can readily evolve in that direction, but strictly speaking it is a Greek name meaning rule by one person - whosoever that person may be.

Oliver Cromwell was a real monarch, though he styled himself 'Protector' rather than king, as were Napoleon or Kim il Sung.

On the other hand Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is only a simulcrum of a monarch, actual rule being in the hands of her Prime Ministers like Thatcher or Blair.

**4.2. Why do revolutionary republics often become monarchies?** The contemporary view of history tends to be so shaped by the initially anti-monarchist sides of the English, French and Russian revolutions, as to automatically associate monarchy with conservatism, and forgets that it can be the outcome of revolution, or can defend it from outside threats. We can identify 3 main reasons why tyranny has in certain ways been associated with the popular cause.

- (1) It is clear from Aristotle, that in the ancient world Tyrants and Democracies were both viewed as a threat to the propertied classes. Ceasar, who was famously assassinated by senators putatively anxious to protect the Roman Republic from tyranny, died in fact because he proposed a land reform to would redistribute common land seized by the senatorial class to demobilised solidiers and proletarianised peasants<sup>11</sup>. Ceasar in this case rested his political power both on the voting support of the plebians and on a victorious army drawn from the lower classes. Cromwell stood, for the British aristocracy as another terrible reminder of the way a tyrant could arise with plebian military support. For the plebians viewpoint, only a strong man, with dictatorial power could hope to advance their interests against a powerfully entrenched upper class.
- (2) Next there is the issue of military leadership, and more generally of defence against an external enemy. Armies have always had a command structure in which each layer, be it regiment, division or army, is subject to a single commanding officer. Applied to national defence in time of war, or thread of war, this has implied a single commander in charge of national defence. This has indeed been the principle justification for a Presidency in bourgeois republics following the US model. If a state is faced with powerful external enemies then mobilisation for defence remains a central concern even when hostilities are suspended. These circumstances favour the development of a supreme national commander: Napoleon I, Fidel Castro or Kim Il Sung.
- (3) Finally there is the universal tendency of states with a cabinet of ministers (or commissars), many of whom will be political 'big beasts', to require a Prime Minister ( whatever the actual title ), who can break the deadlocks that can arise when powerful ministers argue and who can impose direction on the government. Since the Soviet aristocratic model of government ensured that there would be such a cabinet it could only be stable with a supreme leader.

**4.3. The tyranny in Russia.** All of these factors played their roles as the USSR went into the Stalin period. Initially his rise to power came for reason 3. Given the revolutionary aristocratic character of the soviet state, with a cabinet government populated by very able, determined and intelligent men, disputes and alliances arose, which could only be stabilised by the rise of a single leader<sup>12</sup>. Next, external threat from imperialism demanded mobilisation of the economy for defence, which again favoured a single leader. This, and the need to broaden the proletarian basis of support for the Communist Party, impelled the policy of extraordinarily rapid industrialisation. In the widespread plebian nostalgia for Stalin that we see in modern Russia, we see our first mechanism working – a longing by impoverished masses for a strong leader who can tame the oligarchs.

<sup>11</sup>On this see Michael Parenti's book *The assassination of Julius Ceasar*.

<sup>12</sup>Endless ink has been wasted on speculating whether things would have turned out better if Trotsky, Zinoviev or Bukharin had become king instead of Stalin. But retrospective arguments over the merits of different princes is something we can do without in the 21st century.

The achievements of the Stalin tyranny were undoubtedly impressive. A 21st century world, that looks on in amazement at China's rapid ascent to economic super-power under a system of 'market socialism', forgets the even faster industrialisation that planned socialism achieved in Russia during the 1930s and 1950s. And unlike the Chinese industrialisation, which has been socialist in name but capitalist in essence, the Russian industrialisation under the communists followed much more closely the prescription laid down in the communist manifesto and quoted earlier: "The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible." The centralised, state owned economy established in the USSR during the late 1920s and early 1930s, is now stigmatised as 'Stalinist', but was a perfectly orthodox implementation of the original Communist Manifesto.

The first world war has shown that modern warfare was a long run attritional process. In this, manpower was certainly important, but more decisive, was industrial capacity. In 1914, Russia had much greater reserves of manpower than Germany, but by 1917 Russia's larger armies had been driven to defeat by superior German industry, technology and organisation. Germany in turn was worn down and ultimately defeated by French and British Empire armies whose combined industrial backup<sup>13</sup>, was in the end superior. Millions of shells, tens of thousands of aircraft, inventions like tanks and the application of electronics to accurate counter-battery rangefinding were in the end decisive. From the late 20s to the very end of the USSR, the communist government believed, with good reason, that they might at any time find themselves at war with the hostile capitalist countries who surrounded them. In the 20s they remembered the consequences of defeat by Germany a decade earlier, the treaty of Brest Litovsk under which the Ukraine was seized by Germany. They could reasonably suppose that the consequence of another defeat would be even worse; just how much worse nobody realised until the Nazi's invasion revealed their genocidal intentions. The communist government was thus forced to give absolute priority to defence. But how could a largely peasant country with a few small pockets of industry and no international allies be defended against the most likely foe : Germany, perhaps in alliance with England and Italy?

The only answer was by transforming the USSR into an industrial superpower. This would not only give it a defence base, it would transform the society, making the working classes, upon whose support the communist government rested, a majority. It would also create the basis for the mass production of consumer goods, raising the general level of civilisation of the population.

Successive communist governments headed by Stalin and Khrushchov achieved this industrialisation and social change. The USSR had by 1941 become the world's second greatest industrial power. It had acquired the industry and skilled manpower that allowed it first to defeat the Nazi invasion and then go on to develop the nuclear weapons and missiles which kept it safe when faced with the hostility of the strongest military power in world history: the USA.

**4.4. The weakness of monarchy.** Although, as we said above, tyrannies have frequently been associated with revolutionary movements, and have considerable achievements to their names, they suffer in the long run from several weaknesses. The dominance of one individual can involve arbitrary and erratic leadership. The personality traits of the leader can have a big impact. What appears to others as erratic and irrational behaviour, can occasionally turn out to be a stroke of brilliance. For example prominent Bolsheviks thought Lenin had gone mad when he proposed taking power in 1917. But more often idiosyncratic behaviour is just what it seems. This is the great weakness of relying on one individual. There is a wisdom in crowds that it is hard for a single person to emulate. A large representative sample of people deciding collectively is going to be both much more consistent, and more consistently right, than one person is.

Furthermore, even were the one leader is as brilliant and steadfast as Fidel, what happens when they die or retire?

What is the guarantee that their successor, will not reverse course?

One thinks of the 180 degree turn in policy in China when Deng followed Mao.

In a system which concentrates great power at the top it only took one leader with a radically different outlook like Gorbachov, for the whole course followed by previous leaders from Lenin to Brezhnev to be overturned. In a society used to following centralised directives, and one in which the overwhelming

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<sup>13</sup>Including imports of material from the US.

majority socialist activists were within the ranks of the Communist Party, and thus bound by party discipline, it was very difficult to crystallise a socialist opposition to Gorbachov's turn towards liberalism. The dangers inherent in the succession to the revolutionary leader, are used in North Korea, for example, to explicitly defend the hereditary principle. The argument being that Kim Jong Il, brought up since childhood to be a leader is better fitted to the task than some arbitrary careerist. The experience of hereditary monarchies of the past does not lead one to believe that such a policy is likely to work for more than a couple of generations.

**4.5. Attempts by the tyrants to reform : Stalin and Mao.** Communist leaders have not been blind to the dangers that their system faced. They were aware that a revolutionary aristocracy could degenerate into a bureaucracy or oligarchy. In the case of Trotsky or Mao, awareness of this danger struck them when they were excluded from the inner circle of power, either permanently or temporarily in their respective cases. If the historical researches of Grover Furr<sup>14</sup> are to be believed, even Stalin became preoccupied with this danger. We cite Furrs article below, because it provides a key to understanding the 1936 constitution of the USSR which was significantly different from the 1918 one.

It called for secret ballot and contested elections. (Zhukov, Inoy 307-9)

Candidates were to be allowed not only from the Bolshevik Party but from other citizens' groups as well, based on residence, affiliation (such as religious groups), or work-place organizations. This last provision was never put into effect. Contested elections were never held.

In January 1935 the Politburo assigned the task of outlining the contents of a new Constitution to Avel' Yenukidze who, some months later, returned with a suggestion for open, uncontested elections. Almost immediately, on January 25, 1935, Stalin expressed his disagreement with Yenukidze's proposal, insisting upon secret elections. (Zhukov, Inoy 116-21)

Stalin made this disagreement public in a dramatic manner in a March 1936 interview with American newspaper magnate Roy Howard. Stalin declared that the Soviet constitution would guarantee that all voting would be by secret ballot. Voting would be on an equal basis, with a peasant vote counting as much as that of a worker; on a territorial basis, as in the West, rather than according to status (as during Czarist times) or place of employment; and direct – all Soviets would be elected by the citizens themselves, not indirectly by representatives. (Stalin-Howard Interview; Zhukov, "Repressii" 5-6)

Stalin: *We shall probably adopt our new constitution at the end of this year. The commission appointed to draw up the constitution is working and should finish its labors soon. As has been announced already, according to the new constitution, the suffrage will be universal, equal, direct, and secret.* (Stalin-Howard Interview 13)

25. Most important, Stalin declared that all elections would be contested.

*You are puzzled by the fact that only one party will come forward at elections. You cannot see how election contests can take place under these conditions. Evidently, candidates will be put forward not only by the Communist Party, but by all sorts of public, non-Party organizations. And we have hundreds of them. We have no contending parties any more than we have a capitalist class contending against a working class which is exploited by the capitalists. Our society consists exclusively of free toilers of town and country – workers, peasants, intellectuals. Each of these strata may have its special interests and express them by means of the numerous public organizations that exist.* (13-14)

....

He also stressed the importance of contested elections in fighting bureaucracy.

*You think that there will be no election contests. But there will be, and I foresee very lively election campaigns. There are not a few institutions in our country which work badly. Cases occur when this or that local government body fails to satisfy certain of the multifarious and growing requirements of the toilers of town and country. Have you built a good school or not? Have you improved housing conditions? Are you a bureaucrat? Have you helped to make our labor more effective and our lives more*

<sup>14</sup>Furr, G., *Stalin and the Struggle for Democratic Reform*, *Cultural Logic* 2005, <http://clogic.eserver.org/2005/furr.html>.

*cultured? Such will be the criteria with which millions of electors will measure the fitness of candidates, reject the unsuitable, expunge their names from candidates' lists, and promote and nominate the best. Yes, election campaigns will be lively, they will be conducted around numerous, very acute problems, principally of a practical nature, of first class importance for the people. Our new electoral system will tighten up all institutions and organizations and compel them to improve their work. Universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage in the U.S.S.R. will be a whip in the hands of the population against the organs of government which work badly. In my opinion our new Soviet constitution will be the most democratic constitution in the world.*

(Furr, op. cit.)

Furr contends that the aim of the 1936 constitution was to displace the party from its role as a parallel state, where political office depended on party office and that it was an attempt to replace the aristocratic constitution of 1918 with a more directly democratic one. In the event opposition by the central committee prevented contested elections being held, until eventually, Gorbachov allowed them some 50 years later. The fears of the central committee were twofold – the narrow fear was that contested elections were seen as a threat to the party leadership, but more generally they were seen as a threat to socialism. The fear was, that as soon as contested elections were held all sorts of counter-revolutionaries and capitalist restorationists would gain power, even if they did not openly present themselves as such.

In the light of what happened when Gorbachov did allow contested elections, these worries were quite reasonable. In the light of subsequent history it can be seen that the measures Stalin proposed would not have worked as he hoped. The paradox is, that both he and the central committee were right in different ways. It was necessary to dispense with party oligarchy, but it was also necessary to guard against capitalist restoration. The political problem for socialists, remains to come up with a form of constitution that solves both these problems.

The fact that Stalin was unable to get his way on an important matter like the constitution, revealed the limited power of communist tyrants. They were provisional dictators, *primus inter pares*, ruling by the central committee's acclamation. As such they could be sidelined, as Mao was in the early 60s, or dispensed with like Beria or Kruschov.

Mao, like Stalin, tried to act against the party oligarchy, in his case through the cultural revolution. This had the strength that it was based on a massive level of political participation by the population as a whole, particularly young people, rather than being limited to debates within the upper levels of the party structure. In consequences it did, for some years, produce real effects in terms of higher levels of popular political activity, and a restriction in the power of the party elite<sup>15</sup>.

## 5. DEGENERATION OF ARISTOCRACY INTO OLIGARCHY

We have argued that the USSR developed towards an undemocratic political system. Lets look in a little more detail at the causes.

**5.1. Monopolisation of power.** We have seen how the apparently highly democratic system of elections via councils or Soviets, was actually bound to lead to monopolisation of power by one political party. In the circumstances of the day, this was the Bolshevik party, but in slightly different circumstances, in a different country, some other revolutionary group would have ended up dominating. It was in the nature of the council political system that it acts as a non-linear amplifier, increasing a small predominance into an overwhelming one.

**5.2. Formation of a new class.** The RSDLP, like the German Social Democrats, and like Marx's original Communist Party, was an avant guard grouping. It mobilised the most class concious, most educated and politically aware workers, and bound these together with a section of revolutionary intellectuals. It was an aristocratic organisation in the best sense, the original Greek sense in which aristocracy meant rule by the *aristoi*, the best. It was a grouping of the most able and determined individuals.

Before comming to power, this group was also among the best in a moral sense. Those who joined the RSDLP took a real risk with their personal safety, in order to better the lot of others. They faced

<sup>15</sup>One can of course argue as Getty did in *The "Great Purges" Reconsidered: The Soviet Communist Party 1933-1939*, that a similar level of mass political participation was brought about during the purges in Russia during the 30s.

the prospect of imprisonment or exile to Siberia if their activities came to the notice of the Czarist secret police.

But after the revolution things changed, the Soviet Republic became the first realisation of Plato's idea of a republic governed by a philosophical aristocracy. The worker philosophers became rulers, they became a political class.

**5.3. Progressive function of this class.** This new political class, was, in the light of history, immensely progressive. They had the energy, determination and vision necessary to transform a backward peasant Russia into an industrial superpower. They had the self confidence to disregard the political and social elites of the old society, and create through a huge expansion of the educational system a new intelligentsia drawn, at least initially, from a much wider social background. When Russian society and economy was being revolutionised in a couple of decades, there was a brutal sense in Stalin's dictum that 'cadres decide everything'.

The mature Soviet Communist Party of the 1950s had a great preponderance of skilled workers and of engineers and managers, strata created by, and who in turn accelerated, the breakneck industrialisation of the 5 year plans.

**5.4. Degeneration with time, Khrushchev's reforms.** But we have to understand that the incentives for and against joining the CP were transformed once it took power. Whereas before, one joined it at peril, and the cautious self seeker would go nowhere near the Party. Now, party membership became the sine qua non of professional advance. There grew up the nomenclatura system, where certain lists of posts could only be filled by candidates at an appropriate level of seniority in the CP. Rather than being dangerous, joining the CP became the route to a better life, and so, every careerist was naturally drawn to it.

Aristotle taught that aristocracies have an inherent tendency to degenerate into self serving oligarchies. This lesson learned more than two thousand years earlier, certainly applied to the USSR.

Were it not for the periodic party purges, which occurred under Stalin, the lot of senior party figures would have been a happy one. Once started on the hierarchy they could see ahead of them a clear progression upwards. But the purges made this steady progression a dangerous game of snakes and ladders. At any point they might be denounced by the workers as a 'trotskyite wrecke'r, or by fellow comrades as being 'anti-party'. That meant the Gulag or worse. If the purges, like Mao's proletarian cultural revolution provided the proletariat with a rough and ready check on the aristocracy, it was a check that could not survive. With the deaths of Stalin<sup>16</sup> and Mao, the party oligarchy acted swiftly to put an end to such perils. Transitional leaders loyal to the traditions of the dead kings, Beria and Hua Guofeng, were swiftly dispensed with to be replaced by Khrushchev and Deng.

During the 1960s, the Maoists in China claimed that Khrushchev had restored capitalism in Russia. This fabrication owed more to internal Chinese politics than to Soviet reality. The Liu Shao Chi/Deng Xiaoping fraction of the CCP<sup>17</sup> could legitimately be accused of wanting to 'follow a capitalist road', since that is exactly what Deng did on coming to power. In order to criticise them the Mao / Chou en Lai fraction of the CCP attacked Khrushchev instead, denouncing him and the PCI leader Togliatti in a series of articles, probably penned by Chou, which attacked the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence with USA and the PCI policy of peaceful transition to socialism. As recent veterans of a 20 year revolutionary war, the hostility of the Chinese leaders to compromise with the imperialist enemy was understandable, but the accusations against Khrushchev were off by 45°. They had an element of truth, since those within the USSR favourable to compromise with capitalism would have backed Khrushchev, but, in other respects the Chinese criticism were quite wrong. Khrushchev certainly thought of himself as a communist and continued to carry out policies that only make sense in this context: narrowing of wage differentials, poly-technic education, attacks on religion, etc. Whilst it can not be said that when faced with a threat to communist rule in Hungary he did not hesitate, in fact he did hesitate, but when prompted by Mao,

<sup>16</sup>There has been a persistent controversy about whether his death was due to natural causes.

<sup>17</sup>The existence of this fraction in the CCP can be understood on two grounds. 1) there had long been a tradition in marxism, exemplified by Kautsky and Bukharin who had emphasised the necessity of a developed capitalism before the final transition to socialism, 2) the fact that the Chinese revolution had a national democratic character and in consequence progressive members of the bourgeoisie had supported it. This was quite different from Russia, and meant that bourgeois tendencies were more accepted in the CCP than they ever were in the CPUSSR(B).



he acted with as much determination as Lenin and Trotsky did in suppressing Kronstadt<sup>18</sup>. He was also willing to take huge risks in providing military assistance to Cuba, backing down only when the threat of nuclear war became imminent.

During the Krushov period there started to be open debate about how to modernise the economic system of the USSR, with two main threads of opinion coming to the surface:

- The Liberman school who advocated a greater role for markets – this could legitimately be depicted by the Chinese as being pro-capitalist
- The Cybernetic school, whose most prominent theoretician was Kantorovich. Their views were more nuanced, but despite certain ambiguities, this school has to be seen as having been a continuator of the communist tradition.

The Liberman school made some gains during the 60s. whilst the Cybernetic school never gained significant influence after the mid 60s. From then on, the 'official opposition' within Soviet Economics was the Liberman school of pro-market reforms. In due course the time came when their program was put into practice, but it was not under Krushov but 30 years later under Gorbachov that it happened.

**5.5. Why Gorbachovs reforms led back to capitalism.** Where Krushov was an industrial worker who had been a union activist before the revolution and joined the Red Army during the revolution, Gorbachov was the first leader of the generation born under the Soviet system. He came from a peasant family which had initially been hostile to the communists, his grandfather having been imprisoned for withholding grain from a collective farm. He won a scholarship to Moscow University to study law, but set himself the career goal of rising in the party hierarchy. He was the most prominent representative of the 'komsomol generation', a section of young managers and technocrats who used the communist youth organisation as a forum to discuss programme for political change.

The collapse of the Soviet and later the Russian economy under Gorbachov and then Yeltsin was an economic disaster that was otherwise unprecedented in time of peace. The world's second super-power was reduced to the status of a minor bankrupt economy with a huge decline in industrial production and in living standards. Nothing brings out the scale of the catastrophe than the demographic data which show a huge rise in the mortality rate brought about by poverty, hunger, homelessness and the alcoholism that these brought in their wake.

In determining what caused this one has to look at long term, medium term and short term factors which led to relative stagnation, crisis and then collapse. The long term factors were structural problems in the Soviet economy and required reforms to address them. The actual policies introduced by the Gorbachov and Yeltsin governments, far from dealing with these problems actually made the situation catastrophically worse.

**5.5.1. Long Term.** During the period from 1930 to 1970, and excluding the war years, the USSR experienced very rapid economic growth. There is considerable dispute about just how fast the economy grew, but it is generally agreed to have grown significantly faster than the USA between 1928 and 1975, with the growth rate slowing down to the US level after that<sup>4</sup>. This growth took it from a peasant country whose level of development had been comparable to India in 1922, to become the world's second industrial and technological and military power by the mid 1960s.

Observers have given a number of reasons for this relative slowdown in growth in the latter period.

It is easier for an economy to grow rapidly during the initial phase of industrialisation when labour is being switched from agriculture to industry. Afterwards growth has to rely upon improvements in labour productivity in an already industrialised economy, which are typically less than the difference in productivity between agriculture and industry.

A relatively large portion of Soviet industrial output was devoted to defence, particularly in the latter stages of the Cold War, when they were in competition with Regan's 'Star Wars' programmes. The skilled manpower used up for defence restricted the number of scientists and engineers who could be allocated to inventing new and more productive industrial equipment.

The USA and other capitalist countries imposed embargoes on the supply of advanced technological equipment to the USSR. This meant that the USSR had to rely to an unusually high degree on domestic

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<sup>18</sup>'We are all Stalinists now', he is alleged to have remarked afterwards. The Hungarian uprising was a much clearer cut counter revolutionary insurrection than Kronstadt, with widespread participation by ex-Horthyite fascists in the assassination of communist officials in the latter case.

designs of equipment. In the west there were no comparable barriers to the export of technology so that the industrial development of the western capitalist countries was synergistic.

Labour was probably not used as efficiently in Soviet industry as it was in the USA or West Germany. In one sense, of course the USSR used labour very effectively, it had no unemployment and the proportion of women in full time employment was higher than in any other country. But a developed industrial economy has to be able transfer labour to where it can be most efficiently used. Under capitalism this is achieved by the existence of a reserve of unemployment, which, whilst it is inefficient at a macro-economic level, does allow rapid expansion of new industries.

The Soviet enterprise tended to hoard workers, keeping people on its books just in case they were needed to meet future demands from the planning authorities. This was made possible both by the relatively low level of money wages, and because the state bank readily extended credit to cover such costs. The low level of money wages was in turn a consequence of the way the state raised its revenue from the profits of state enterprises rather than from income taxes.

Although Soviet industrial growth in the 80s slowed down to US levels, this by itself was not a disaster, after all the USA had experienced this sort of growth rate (2.5% a year) for decades without crisis. Indeed whilst, working class incomes in the USA actually stagnated over the 80s, in the USSR they continued to rise. The difference was in the position of the intelligentsia and the managerial strata in the two countries. In the USA income differentials became progressively greater, so that the rise in national income nearly all went to the top 10% of the population. In the USSR income differentials were relatively narrow, and whilst all groups continued to experience a rise in incomes, this was much smaller than had been the case in the 1950s and 1960's. This 2.5% growth was experienced by some of the Soviet intelligentsia as intolerable stagnation – perhaps because they compared themselves with managers and professionals in the USA or Germany. A perception thus took root among this class that the socialist system was failing when compared to the USA.

Again this would not have been critical to the future survival of the system were it not for the fact that these strata were disproportionately influential within the USSR. Although the ruling Communist Party was notionally a workers party, a disproportionately high proportion of its members were drawn from the most skilled technical and professional employees, manual workers were proportionately under represented.

The slowdown in Soviet growth was in large measure the inevitable result of economic maturity, a movement towards the rate of growth typical of mature industrial countries. A modest programme of measures to improve the efficiency of economic management would probably have produced some recovery in the growth rate, but it would have been unrealistic to expect the rapid growth of the 50s and 60s to return. What the USSR got however, was not a modest programme of reform, but a radical demolition job on its basic economic structures. This demolition job was motivated by neo-liberal ideology. Neo-liberal economists, both with the USSR and visiting from the USA promised that once the planning system was removed and once enterprises were left free to compete in the market, then economic efficiency would be radically improved.

For neo-liberal ideas to have triumphed like this speaks of a terrible poverty of proletarian political economy in Russia.

” . . . the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.” (Maynard Keynes)

The original social democratic movement developed on the basis of the ideas of a long dead economist, Karl Marx, after the 30 year lag described by Keynes. The 'practical reformers' of the Gorbachov presidency were echoing, some 30 to 40 years later the ideas of another economist von Hayek, whose

critique of socialism had been developed in the 30s and 40s. Soviet political economy had produced no intellectually thorough rebuttal to Hayek, so that those intellectuals like Andreyeva<sup>19</sup> who did attempt to publicly defend the legacy of socialism, lacked the kind of coherent critique of bourgeois political economy that Marx had provided to an earlier generation. Armed with nothing but nostalgia, and no alternative economic strategy, they could not mobilise a coherent opposition to neo-liberalism.

5.5.2. *Medium Term.* The medium term causes of Soviet economic collapse lay in the policies that the Gorbachov government embarked on in its attempts to improve the economy. The combined effect of these policies was to bankrupt the state and debauch the currency.

One has to realise that the financial basis of the Soviet state lay mainly in the taxes that it levied on turnover by enterprises and on sales taxes.

In an effort to stamp out the heavy drinking which led to absenteeism from work, and to poor health, the Gorbachov government banned alcohol. This and the general tightening up of work discipline, led, in the first couple of years of his government to some improvement in economic growth. It had however, unforeseen side effects. Since sales of vodka could no longer take place in government shops, a black market of illegally distilled vodka sprang up, controlled by the criminal underworld. The criminal class who gained money and strength from this later turned out to be most dangerous enemy.

Whilst money from the illegal drinks trade went into the hands of criminals, the state lost a significant source of tax revenue, which, because it was not made up by other taxes, touched off an inflationary process.

Were the loss of the taxes on drinks the only problem for state finance, it could have been solved by raising the prices of some other commodities to compensate. But the situation was made worse when, influenced by the arguments of neo-liberal economists, Gorbachov allowed enterprises to keep a large part of the turnover tax revenue that they owed the state. The neo-liberals argued that if managers were allowed to keep this revenue, they would make more efficient use of it than the government.

What actually ensued was a catastrophic revenue crisis for the state, who were forced to rely on the issue of credit by the central bank to finance their current expenditure. The expansion of the money stock led to rapid inflation and the erosion of public confidence in the economy. Meanwhile, the additional unaudited funds in the hands of enterprise managers opened up huge opportunities for corruption. The Gorbachov government had recently legalised worker co-operatives, allowing them to trade independently. This legal form was then used by a new stratum of corrupt officials, gangsters and petty business men to launder corruptly obtained funds.

5.5.3. *Immediate.* The Soviet economy had gone through the stages of slowdown, mismanaged crisis and now went into a phase of catastrophic collapse, quite unprecedented in peacetime.

Following a failed coup by sections of the armed forces and security services, Yeltsin, instead of helping restore the constitutional government of President Gorbachov, seized power for himself. Acting on the instructions of US advisers he introduced a shock programme to convert the economy from socialism to capitalism in 100 days.

In the old USSR there was no capitalist class. In the west governments could privatise individual firms by selling them off on the stockmarket where the shares would be quickly snapped up by the upper classes, or in the case of Thatcher's privatisation, by sections of the middle class. But in the USSR things were very different. There was no class of individuals wealthy enough to buy up state companies by legal means. Also the scale of the privatisation was so vast, that even in a market economy, the savings of the population would have been insufficient to buy up the entire industry of the nation. Logic alone would predict that the only way that industry could pass into private hands was through corruption and gangsterism. This is exactly what happened, a handful of Mafia connected oligarchs ended up owning most of the economy.

Neo liberal theory held that once enterprises were free from the state, the 'magic of the market' would ensure that they would interact productively and efficiently for the public good. But this vision of the economy greatly overstated the role of markets. Even in so called market economies, markets of the sort described in economics textbooks are the exception – restricted to specialist areas like the world oil and currency markets. The main industrial structure of an economy depends on a complex interlinked system

<sup>19</sup>"I Cannot Waive Principles," by Nina Andreeva Sovetskaiia Rossiia, March 13, 1988

of regular producer/consumer relationships in which the same suppliers make regular deliveries to the same customers week in week out.

In the USSR this interlinked system stretched across two continents, and drew into its network other economies : East Europe, Cuba, North Vietnam. Enterprises depended on regular state orders, the contents of which might be dispatched to other enterprises thousands of miles away. Whole towns and communities across the wilds of Siberia relied on these regular orders for their economic survival. Once the state was too bankrupt to continue making these orders, once it could no longer afford to pay wages, and once the planning network which had coordinated these orders was removed, what occurred was not the spontaneous self organisation of the economy promised by neo-liberal theory, but a domino process of collapse.

Without any orders, factories engaged in primary industries closed down. Without deliveries of components and supplies secondary industries could no longer continue production, so they too closed. In a rapid and destructive cascade, industry after industry closed down. The process was made far worse by the way the unitary USSR split into a dozen different countries all with their own separate economies. The industrial system had been designed to work as an integrated whole, split up by national barriers it lay in ruins.

## 6. ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY - DIRECT DEMOCRACY

**6.1. Dilema of monarchy or restoration.** The old communist regimes were essentially monarchies. Their continuance as socialist countries depended crucially on the character of the revolutionary leader. In this they had a similarity with the first failed Bourgeois revolutions. In England and France the revolutions culminated in the progressive tyrannies of Cromwell and Napoleon, and neither revolution survived the revolutionary tyrants. The communist system in Russia survived a considerable period after Stalin, but in China the post Mao leadership rapidly embarked on a pro-capitalist economic policy.

We have seen how Stalin attempted to guard against this by changing the constitution in 1936, and Mao resorted to the cultural revolution. But neither was willing in the end to relinquish the hold of the CP over power. In discussing proposals for a state of the Paris Commune type, proposed by the Shanghai left during the Cultural revolution, Mao rejected it for fear that it would be unable to suppress counter revolution – the same fears, according to Furr, that scuppered the full implementation of Stalins proposals for the 1936 constitution.

An alternative response is to settle on a hereditary monarchy, as Korea has done, and to an extent Cuba. But putting the relatives of the original leader in power is unlikely to work beyond one generation.

**6.2. Misrepresentation of democracy.** The problem lies in a misunderstanding of democracy. In proposing a new constitution in 1936, Stalin took over essentially unchanged the protocols of bourgeois democracy : direct elections to the legislature based on universal suffrage. This was seen both by him and later by Gorbachov as the essence of democracy. Stalin had originally proposed, and Gorbachov finally implemented, multi candidate elections. But as soon as this was done, the class character of the legislature changed immediately. Under Kruschov and Brezhnev there had been a deliberate quota system run by the Party to ensure a social balance of the legislature : such and such a percentage of workers, such and such a percentage of women, of peasants etc. But this could only work if all candidates were nominated by the CP. Remove that constraint, and the legislature was immediately dominated by male technocrats and managers, just like any other assembly in the bourgeois world. As always, those who were better educated and more articulate had a disproportionate chance of election. These people were just the ones who would stand to gain the most from the privatisation of the economy.

For multi-candidate elections to have worked for a socialist state, the franchise and the right to stand as candidates would have had to be limited to workers and collective farmers: essentially reverting to the restrictive civil rights under the 1918 constitution. But this explicit categorisation of people by class would probably be impossible in the long run.

The thrust of the argument so far seems to have been that no constitutional structure could have preserved socialism, but I dont believe that to be the case. The bourgeois revolutions in England and France were false starts that failed to develop a stable constitution. In the end the bourgeoisie found a formula that worked. I think that in the future we may look back on the Russian and Chinese revolutions in the same way. The key, I think, is to develop a form of participatory democracy that provides the sort

of stable platform for socialism that parliamentary government provides for capitalism. But to find these forms we have to look beyond the immediate historical experience of the last two centuries.

The ancient Greeks, after long experience, developed key mechanisms to prevent aristocratic domination of the state:

- All major political decisions had to be taken by the people as a whole in a plebiscite. Note that this is just what the Erfurt programme had demanded.
- The executive functions of the state were implemented in a randomly selected council. This randomly selected council had among its duties the selection of issues that were to be put to plebiscite. Note that random selection is, as every polling organisation knows, the only scientific way of getting a representative sample of the population.

If you think about it these mechanisms provide a solution to many of the problems faced by socialist polities. They ensure that no minority class can dominate the state. Major decisions by plebiscite are directly by the people preventing any minority class from imposing its objectives. Since the working classes, at least in a non-rentier state, are a majority of the population, they will predominate. A traditional objection to plebiscitary democracy is that it has been a tool of tyrants who, it is alleged, selected the agenda on which the plebiscites were to be held. But this objection falls if the agenda is set by a council that is itself socially representative of the population at large.

With these genuine forms the tendency of parliamentary systems to be dominated by the upper classes is removed, whilst at the same time the possibility of an entrenched revolutionary aristocracy or tyranny can not establish itself. But, suppose that the working classes, 'win the battle for democracy' in this sense; why should it lead to socialism. Might it not lead to a stable bourgeois republic like Switzerland, which has many of these constitutional features?

It all depends.

On two things. First the socioeconomic structure of the country and the relative weight within this of the working classes, and secondly on the level of political development of the working class movement.

A true participatory democracy can only be established in a country today as a result of massive political struggles against the entrenched system of power. and this in turn presupposes a highly organised mass movement, with a coherent democratic ideology. The original concept of an avant-guard movement, put forward by Marx and Kautsky still applies:

In order for the socialist and the worker movements to become reconciled and to become fused into a single movement, socialism had to break out of the utopian way of thinking. This was the world-historical deed of Marx and Engels. In the Communist Manifesto of 1847 they laid the scientific foundations of a new modern socialism, or, as we say today, of Social Democracy. By so doing, they gave socialism solidity and turned what had hitherto been a beautiful dream of well-meaning enthusiasts into an earnest object of struggle and [also] showed this to be the necessary consequence of economic development. To the fighting proletariat they gave a clear awareness of its historical task and they placed it on a condition to speed to its great goal as quickly and with as few sacrifices as possible. The socialists no longer have the task of freely inventing a new society but rather uncovering its elements in existing society. No more do they have to bring salvation from its misery to the proletariat from above, but rather they have to support its class struggle through increasing its insight and promoting its economic and political organizations, and in so doing bring about as quickly and as painlessly as possible the day when the proletariat will be able to save itself. The task of Social Democracy [as a party] is to make the class struggle of the proletariat aware of its aim and capable of choosing the best means to attain this aim. ( Kautsky, The Class Struggle )

The idea of a party as a force for mobilising and ideologically developing the mass movement remains valid. But in a participatory democracy leadership and command are two different things. A party can only get things done by influencing opinion, by persuasion. It can not rely on the power of command as the Soviet communists did after 1917. But it still needs a clear vision of the future, and clear political economy.