

Democracy Re-Analyzed

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The French revolution set men's hearts on fire with a passion for political emancipation—emancipation from the tyranny of the absolute state. The industrial revolution was only in its infancy. Men were possessed of an almost fanatic faith in the possibilities of progress, based upon the *individual* right to do as they pleased, unhampered by state control. The prejudiced and restrictive state was the real enemy, the stepmother of favoritism and monopoly. To love freedom was equivalent to hating the state. The French revolution fulfilled what might be called a negative function. It modified the complexion of the political state.

The American revolution, though grounded like the French in economic causes, was also a political emancipation, release from the yoke of absolutism, freedom for the *individual* to do as he pleased, unfettered by state interference. The meddling state was the real enemy. The French and American revolutions were successful protests against political sovereignty run mad. The American revolution, too, fulfilled a negative function. It shifted the seat of political authority. It modified the complexion of the political state.

The industrial revolution developed too slowly and unevenly to afford any stimulating hope of the creation of a new type of sovereignty that would ultimately come to rival the purely political control. The landlords and the newly-awakened business class had already gained the ascendancy in affairs industrial so that the mixed mass of underlings who were driven into wage-serfdom were scarcely equipped to do anything drastic about it. Their hopes turned inevitably to the political means as the method most likely to yield success. Not prepared to wage war successfully by frontal attack they did the next best thing and strove to ameliorate their hard status by flank movements. The war of the classes was fought out on the political field, the strategic objective being the control of the new state.

The control of the new state by the landlords and the rich business men afforded the capitalists those very opportunities to do as they pleased (unmolested by feudal restrictions), which they had revolted to achieve. By making the state their own, they attained to a freedom of action undreamed of theretofore. Though assisted in their revolutions by the straggling proletariat, they speedily availed themselves of the great success to thwart the aspirations of their humble fellows.

The workingmen saw no hopeful way out of their limited life except by imitating the tactics of their new masters. They sought political prestige. They learned to play the game of politics. For more than one hundred years the unprivileged groups spent their vast energies struggling up-hill for political enfranchisement. One may judge the nature and consequences of this roundabout and wasteful approach to progress by the fact that the working

classes of the whole world have become utterly disillusioned as to the value of the political means.

Political parties, representing the major business interests, have squandered the energies of the toilers in futile and oftentimes deceitful contests for the distraction and amusement of the too-simple-minded common folk. The whole vast creaking system of so-called representative government has been a mountainous obstacle in the way of proletarian progress. Only now, after more than a century of intense political activity, has the very simple and elementary right to the vote been granted to working-class men and women. If an ingenious contriver of ingenious mechanisms had deliberately set out to invent a system of "checks and balances," whereby every popular impulse in behalf of social progress was doomed to impotence, he would have contrived precisely the parliamentary system of circuitous representation.

What more fruitful consequences would have ensued had the French and American revolutions been guided along more direct economic lines (rather than along political), no man can know. So much, however, it is permitted us to assert with some degree of assurance. It has taken the world of labor one hundred and fifty years of fearfully expensive effort at political emancipation finally to realize the large futility of that method. Only latterly has this same world of labor awakened to the portentous fact that mass action, direct tactics, industrial conflict, are the only profoundly fruitful means of achieving self-direction and self-government (in an industrialized universe). Suppose that this insight into the deeper nature of social progress had guided the tactics of labor since the days of the revolutions? Can any one doubt how beneficent such tactics would have been?

However, men were doomed to self-delusion. In England, the long, dumbly inspiring tradition of political freedom (since the days of the Magna Charta) was so deeply impressed upon the hopes of common men that they simply knew not how to pierce the seven veils of illusion. On the surface, freedom looked like a political accomplishment. Thus we find that the Chartist movement, though inevitably bound up with economic implications, was objectively a political protest. The false and alluring psychology of the (political) "equality of all men before the law" hypnotized common men into believing that the possession of the right to vote would somehow or other become the open sesame to illimitable progress. Pathetic fallacy! Why, only as recently as the Great War, and primarily as a consequence of unimaginable sacrifice on the part of the working classes, was the elementary and comparatively insignificant right to vote granted to the whole adult population in England (England, the famous exemplar of liberty!).

So far as America was concerned, the worship of political freedom is more natural and easy to ex-

plain. In a land that was so fresh and virginal, sparsely populated, a new center of self-confident pioneers, an apparently new experiment in democracy—what more natural than an almost religious faith in a governmentalism founded upon an equality among able and self-reliant men? The land was man's for the asking. The most immediate problems of stress and strain related to sovereignty. Constitutionalism, aping the English system, was the chief concern of lawyers and landlords and successful little business men. In fact, the so-called representative system is the inevitable political counterpart of an industrial situation in which labor has not yet become self-conscious and purposeful, and in which the owners of ability and of property very naturally seek to provide perpetual safeguards in law and morals for their prerogatives and specialized rights. America was pre-destined to be the classic land of so-called representative government, precisely because wide economic opportunities, coupled with pioneer self-righteousness and a very useful mythology of individual liberty, existed in the America of the revolution.

It is a sufficiently ironic commentary on the limited nature of this representative paradise that even at this overmature day, the dear little ballot, so recently won by ten million women toilers, cannot be exercised to any fruitful purpose by the millions of male toilers whose political emancipation did not by any means begin with the American revolution! The political method has worked an infinite mischief among the working classes because (if for no other reason) they were hoodwinked into believing that self-interest is not the only effective basis of social progress. The penalty they have paid for their age-old misguidance may be studied to some purpose in the bitter disillusionment that marks the common toiler's present-day thinking.

The creative power of Bolshevism lies in its awakening of the toiling masses to a realization of the essential impotence of so-called representative government, and, on the other hand, of the marvelous potency of government by direct participation. Bolshevism, whatever its excesses in an unparalleled crisis, is the spiritual fountainhead of true democracy. For in our mechanized society, true democracy, so far as the welfare of the common run of men is concerned, consists in industrial self-government. The political means becomes a subsidiary aid to progress. The industrial means is central and all-important.

The lamentations of those critics who still linger under the sway of eighteenth century "representative government" are sometimes pathetic, often sincere, usually illogical, always feeble. It is a commonplace of history that in the struggle of groups for the possession of the state, the group that rose to power found it absolutely essential to self-preservation to impose limitations of thought and action upon the mass of those who were not direct participants in the privileged functions of the state. This is not an ideal to be proud of; it is simply an iron fact characteristic of the historic process. It looks, then, like a species of unpardonable ignor-

ance or hypocrisy for any critic to mock at a new experiment in democracy because it imposes limitations upon the unlike-minded. No state has ever been utterly free. The state, by historic definition, is a method of achieving advantages for a special group under its sovereignty. It marks a sufficiently encouraging progress to find a state which depends for its vitality and preservation upon the self-interest and direct participation of the largest and most useful group in society—the Proletariat.

Every type of state in history has been the property of a limited group. The capitalistic state is the property of The Exploiters. The socialistic state will be the property of The Exploited. So-called representative government has been a social failure because by its indirect methods it has managed to keep the exploited from representation. Direct government will bring genuine representation to the exploited, but as insurance against failure it will have to exclude from direct participation those groups within the nation whose historic practice it has been to keep the common run from self-government. This is a necessary tactic in political evolution. Just as the capitalistic state has created a hundred severe limitations upon the thought and action of the proletariat (exclusion of undesirables, control of immigration, banning of anarchists and physical weaklings, exclusion of women from the vote, the artificial determination of age twenty-one as the proper voting age, passage of acts of censorship and espionage, the complete extirpation of constitutional guarantees of freedom during wartime, etc.) so an emerging proletariat, striving to create a new philosophy and a new society, must impose certain limitations upon the freedom of thought and action of the "undesirables."

Let us not be soft-headed theorists. So far as is humanly possible, let us be tolerant and just (to a fault). However, it remains bitterly true that the transformation of political or industrial sovereignty entails drastic measures of social control which cannot meet the finest tests of theoretic idealism. When we are mindful of the partial and restrictive nature of *every* historic state, we can afford to be kindly disposed toward a new experiment in democracy that promises an increased measure of real freedom for the vast mass of toiling human beings. No state under feudalism or capitalism ever achieved more than a precarious reign of happiness for a tiny minority of the whole people. The industrial state springs from the needs and aspirations of the working classes. Their state is an immeasurable improvement upon the political state of the capitalists.

Opportunism means the surrender of the basic interests of the masses for the *temporary* interests of a small minority of workers, or in other words, it means the union of a portion of the workers with the bourgeoisie in opposition to the mass of the proletariat.

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Socialist jingoism is opportunism which has become so mature that the existence of this continued bourgeois abcess within the Socialist parties has become impossible.

N. Lenin.