

Democracy and Its Various Economic Formations

It would be a misleading simplification to assume that the leading theoreticians of political theory, beginning with Aristotle, failed to address the problem of the variety of forms of democracy. But their observations, their clarifications and most of all their value judgments do not proceed from an analysis of the relationship between economic base and democracy as a political superstructure, but only from naturalistic determinations (such as the size of the state) or from legal considerations (such as the status of a citizen). In this way, only very general categories or evaluations can arise, but there can be no adequate perception of how the concrete existence of the various forms of democracy emerge from primary socioeconomic developments. For these leading theoreticians of political theory, more difficult to grasp than the problem of the genesis of democracy was a knowledge of the growth and decline of a particular type of democracy founded within a particular economic formation. Any speculations by these past political theoreticians regarding a particular type of democracy remained abstract generalizations, which cannot possibly be understood as reflecting the "thing-in-itself," the self-movement of a specific societal totality.

Marx was the first to proceed from the elementary facts of social life. Even though he comes to speak of *polis* democracy, the original, and through many centuries, the most ideologically influential model as the paradigmatic form of democracy, the economic is still his primary presupposition. The commune "as state . . . is from one perspective an interrelationship of free and equal private property owners, their association against external enemies, and is at the same time their protector. The community consists of working land owners and allotment farmers. The independence of the allotment farmers originates through association as members of the commune, the guarantee of the *ager publicus* for the needs and renown of the community. Only members of the community can acquire landed property, but as a member of the community he is a private property owner. Thus, the individual's position as

a private property owner is closely linked to the social existence of the community: individual self-preservation means community self-preservation at the same time."³ The type of democracy which develops from this economic constellation is not merely based on general forms of human existence and human *praxis*—that are valid for every society—but is associated with a concrete form of social existence in which individuals actively participate. To be a citizen of the *polis*, an active participant in *polis* democracy, is not merely a determinate-specific category of the political superstructure, but every private citizen of the *polis* is inseparably connected with the economic foundation of societal being.

That conclusion had important consequences for the whole life of man in this type of social formation. Above all, social existence took precedence over individual private life. The real being of all citizens, their cooperation in democratic life, is intimately tied to a specific economic formation. As this economic foundation disintegrates—a consequence of the necessary development of productive forces—the existence and functional capacity of *polis* democracy is destroyed. Forces of political decay compelled this most highly esteemed and luminous model of democracy, above all in the classical models of Athens and Rome, into their own dissolution. Marx clearly recognizes these economic forces of decay: slavery as the basis of such a society. The struggle over democracy played itself out inside a privileged minority while the great active productive masses were in principle excluded from the democratic struggle as from all active participation in societal life.

If the original economic foundation of the *polis* is transcended, the relative equality of private allotments destroyed, a proletariat emerges which according to Sismondi's analysis lives at the expense of society, whereas under capitalism, society lives at the expense of the working classes. The relationships between labor, property, and membership in a political community, the principle of *polis* democracy, is in its origin a primitive form of social organization. According to Marx, early man lives in clans and membership in a tribe is the condition for the ownership of property. With the beginning of what Marx calls "the receding of natural barriers" the interconnection between clan membership and property vanishes. This Greek form of democracy loses, precisely as a result of its economic advancement, the civilizing effect of its exemplary humane qualities. The individual at this stage of historical development has not yet acquired a modern "unique" identity. A citizen of the *polis* holding an allotment, belonging to the tribe—those are the socioeconomic conditions of his existence and consequently the essential features of his identity. The secondary importance of the private life of the *polis* citizen is due to the fact that human existence and personal development is synonymous with the fulfilling of one's political duties, is coincidental with his functioning as a political subject in this form of democracy.

As far as political consciousness is concerned the great French Revolution, which represents the classical form of modern bourgeois democracy, was influenced to a large degree by the Greek ideal. Socioeconomically, however, it is the exact opposite. By stressing this contradiction, Marx simultaneously emphasizes that freedom and equality, the central ideological modes of expression of modern democracy, can receive extremely various formulations. Freedom and equality are molded by socioeconomic conditions, they are not idealized constructs, "not only esteemed in exchange which rests on exchange-value, but the exchange of exchange-values is the productive real basis of all equality and freedom."⁴

Despite all inherent contradictions, the factual realization of freedom and democracy during the French Revolution signifies enormous progress in the history of human society. Real human sociability, the objective real foundation of the species being of the human has entered into existence with the realization of freedom and democracy. Political categories which were assumed to be the natural barriers of social existence are negated. The social struggle through which this annulment takes place is directed in its modern form against the division of French society into estates which come into existence in and from feudalism. The feudality which young Marx calls a "democracy of unfreedom" imparts to the contradictions of society "an immediate political character" in which "the elements . . . of bourgeois life, as for example private property or the family or the shape and mode of work . . . in the form of lordship, of Estates, and the corporations were raised to the elements of political life. . . . These elements determined . . . in the form of the relation of particular individuals to the State, i.e. its political relation."⁵

The French Revolution radically destroys this entire feudal structure and in so doing reveals for the first time in history in purely sociological terms the actual relation between the state and civil society. Marx correctly points out that the historical mission of the French Revolution is to construct a unitary state on the ruins of feudal decentralization. Political life, irrespective of any bourgeois categories, becomes a subject of general public interest. For the first time in history, human reason is taken to be the most reliable architect in the planning of social existence, ending a century long dispute over the proper purpose of the "Kingdom of Reason."

However, as Engels later correctly states, this Kingdom of Reason proves itself to be the idealized Kingdom of the Bourgeoisie. Idealized is not to be understood as a politico-ideological critique, but as an objective scientific assessment of a real developing social structure. Marx himself says in the theoretical discussion of the above quoted passage concerning the transformation of an entire social formation that the state arose as an ideality through its overturning of feudalism and so establishes a fundamental contradiction between political life and the "complete materialization of bourgeois society."⁶ He

shows that this contradictory unity of state and bourgeois society, of ideality and materiality in the life of society and the life of every individual man, is the key to understanding the documents of this transformation which are the texts of the constitutions of the French Revolution.

These texts proceed from the correlative opposites of *homme* (bourgeois) and *citoyen*. *Citoyen* stands for the idealization of the citizen, who is detached from all material ties with socioeconomic existence while *homme* (man) is a member of bourgeois society. Marx also emphasizes that within this indivisible unity (insofar as every citizen is also a *homme*) the revolutionary constitutions degrade the status of citizenship by making it dependent upon so called human rights. In so doing, these constitutions implicitly recognize the real social supremacy of material, productive (private) men over the idealized citizen.

At the same time, these texts clearly depict the position of this bourgeois form of democracy in the great developmental process of humanity, the rise of the human species, the anthropogenesis of man. With a view to the social situation of the concrete individual created by bourgeois society, Marx says that his "personal freedom is not facilitated but rather that other individuals form a barrier to his own freedom."⁷ That is the fundamental social reality of capitalism: the egoistic and for that reason the merely partial/fragmentary man appears as the subject of the real *praxis* of society. Simultaneously, as a necessary component of this developmental stage, expressing the socialization of labor which takes place under capitalism, the species nature of man also reaches an objectively higher social level as compared to earlier less socialized formations. Consequently, this species nature, the real cooperative life of man, which evolves in Marx's lifetime in the cooperative labor factories, appears "as a contrast to his material life."⁸

Naturally, in the stormy upheavals of the great French Revolution all this is expressed with more exuberant pathos than later on in the prosaic moments of literary composition. Ever since the Renaissance, this recurrent reference to the ancient ideal of *polis* democracy is typical of this revolutionary enthusiasm. This is not literary or intellectual eccentricity. Marx states that it is necessary for the French Revolution to make heroism a part of everyday life. The great actors of the revolution needed ideals, even self-deceit "in order to hide the limited bourgeois content of their struggle from themselves and raise their passion to the heights of great historical tragedy."⁹ This historical enthusiasm often leads to a historically false identification of both Greek and bourgeois forms of democratization, with a careless ignorance of their societal contradictions. However, the revolution gains the victory and starts a real process in which the existing categories of bourgeois democracy become the ruling forms of both the capitalist state and civilization. The luminous symbol of the *polis* was overcome by social reality. Even after the victory of the revolution,

when these dreams of antiquity are used as a legitimating device, they appear as intentional deception. The socioeconomic reality of the living and acting allotment owner of Greek *polis* democracy can never be resurrected. His social being has nothing in common with that of commodity exchange or with bourgeois freedom and equality. The social being of bourgeois life, the world of commodity trade, finds its political expression in the superstructure of the modern capitalist state.