

## Democracy as the Community of Capital A Provisional Critique of Democracy

Leo Björk

The article as follows is a terse critique of democracy both as ideology and material reality. It has its points of departure in the pamphlet *Bordiga versus Pannekoek* from Antagonism Press, which riff-raff plan to publish in Swedish translation later this year. The mentioned pamphlet gives a passage of the differences and convergences of the Dutch-German and Italian communist left (Pannekoek and Bordiga stand as representatives of each side of left communism), in issues as party, class, self-management, trade unions and, which we here have seized upon, workers' democracy and proletarian dictatorship. The article is not near to be a complete critique of democracy, but at least in its modest number of pages, offers a draught to a more extensive analysis. In spite of the fact that it has been written with *Bordiga versus Pannekoek* as a reference it can without difficulty be read alone, but will later on also work as a proper complement to the pamphlet.

### Democracy as the Community of Capital A Provisional Critique of Democracy

Democracy is, as I take all forms of government to be, a contradiction in itself, an untruth, nothing but hypocrisy ... Political liberty is sham-liberty, the worst possible slavery; the appearance of liberty, and therefore the reality of servitude.

Friedrich Engels<sup>1</sup>

Just like Marx and Engels because of the experiences of the Paris Commune had to revise the concept in the *Communist Manifesto* of “win the battle of democracy” to “the working class cannot simply lay hold of ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes”<sup>2</sup>, the revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century lead us to—even though Marx theory in itself should have led us here, and even though it already have been understood from time to time by this or that theoretician and in this or that insurrection—that the establishment of a proletarian (political) power body is not enough, although it may be necessary. The authors of the pamphlet *Bordiga versus Pannekoek* give an account of Amadeo Bordiga's critique of democracy, as well as they point out his insufficient societal perspectives. Contrasting against his political perspective is the democratism and economism of the Dutch-German communist left.<sup>3</sup> The both starting points prove to be inadequate and to some extent complementary to each other. One conclusion is that the proletariat “aims neither to become the ruler of the state (rejecting a statist interpretation of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’) nor ruler of the enterprise (rejecting self-management), but abolishes its own conditions of existence and so itself as a class”. We will here approach the same issue but try to give some topics more attention, and also, in the light of the rejection of both the statist interpretation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and self-management, further stress what this aim of the proletariat is.

The pre-capitalist political doctrines were based on spiritual conceptions and religious revelations, and claimed supernatural forces had assigned the individuals diverse positions and tasks in society. The church explained for the peasants in villeinage that the feudal lord had been given his peculiar position by God. No sovereignty was above God, and thus the social order was made clear as the natural state of things. The political and economical power of the feudal lord had the right on its side. This metaphysics would at the time of the bourgeois revolutions, seemingly left the history with the appearance of the democratic philosophy. In the feudal society, the economical and political power was intimately connected on an individual level: the state apparatus was formed on the basis of the rich land owners. The ownership of the primary mean of production, the land, naturally offered geographical marked off areas for the exercise of the power of the state. But the dispersion of the commodity relations dissolved the feudal geographical units. With the development of capitalism the means of production were concentrated to the factory, the society was urbanised, the flow of commodities between capitalists and from capitalists to immediate consumption, and vice versa from the immediate producers to capitalists, became the critical point of the realisation of value. The bourgeoisie needed a new political mechanism to be able to exercise its dictatorship. It would be

---

<sup>1</sup> F. Engels, “Progress of social reform on the continent”, *The New Moral World* No.19, 1843 <[www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/10/23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/10/23.htm)>

<sup>2</sup> K. Marx, *The Civil War in France*, 1871 <[www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/)>

<sup>3</sup> We are here, as so often in comparisons, using a two somewhat vulgarised pictures of the two opposite pools of left communism. The Dutch-Germans of course was not pure democrats and economists, but they had a bias to it. Bordiga was not either the confirmed Leninist, which it sometimes makes a show of being, but he had, as with the Dutch-German left, a bias to it.

shown to be exactly the democracy. With the old metaphysics left behind a new one was introduced with the individual as the sovereign unit.<sup>4</sup> Bordiga explains:

[I]nstead of appraising the value of the individual's opinion in the light of his manifold conditions of existence, that is, his relations with others, it postulates this value a priori with the hypothesis of the "sovereignty" of the individual. Again this amounts to denying that the consciousness of men is a concrete reflection of the facts and material conditions of their existence

---

Without any doubt, the individual is a unit from a biological point of view, but one cannot make this individual the basis of social organization without falling into metaphysical nonsense. From a social perspective, all the individual units do not have the same value. The collectivity is born from relations and groupings in which the status and activity of each individual do not derive from an individual function but from a collective one determined by the multiple influences of the social milieu.

---

The divine creator—or a single power governing the destiny of the universe has given each individual this elementary property of being an autonomous well-defined molecule endowed with consciousness, will and responsibility within the social aggregate, independent of contingent factors deriving from the physical influence of the environment.<sup>5</sup>

This line of argument is analogous with Marx' statement "*It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.*"<sup>6</sup> Bordiga's conception of the party only enclosing a minority of the working class finds a correspondence in "[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas"<sup>7</sup>. Bordiga dwell on this issue in "Party and Class" and finds his solution in the party as bearer of the consciousness of the proletariat. Here may Bordiga's critique of democracy combined with Anton Pannekoek's "spontanism" give a somewhat different solution which place more confidence in the own consciousness of the proletarians. Martin Glaberman, following Marx and Antonio Gramsci, gives an answer as he realize that it lies a difference in what workers think, and what they really think.<sup>8</sup> In the sixth issue of *riff-raff* we also introduced the conception of practical reflexivity, which can be seen as a transcending of these two opposite pools, where Leninism (and Bordiga) tends to have practice without reflection and council communism reflection without practice. That is to say, the Leninist comprehends herself as being outside the objectivity she wants to change, she does not reflect on her situation as being a proletarian, whereas the council communist is reflecting as a proletarian but is scared to death of intervening in the class struggle and thereby substitute the struggle of the class. With practical reflexivity we comprehend understanding and change as moments of the same social process, not as the same thing, but still inseparable from each other. "*We do not stand outside and reflect upon some object, but are situated in this 'object'. Our theoretical project, riff-raff, is our 'practical reflexivity'...*"<sup>9</sup>

The bourgeois metaphysic sunderstands democracy as universal principle—as ideology—and it is thus expected to be a concept which comprises all aspects of society. It is represented as synonymous with market economy, tolerance, openness, etc. The democratic ideology is based on the illusion that the right mediating procedures give the individuals in society the greatest possible control of their lives.<sup>10</sup> Democracy thus mystifies our comprehension of the world. From Bordiga's critique of the Third international's "democratic centralism"<sup>11</sup>, we would say it is concealed that the democracy is an organisational

<sup>4</sup> Italian Communist Party (the real author is likely Amadeo Bordiga), "The Democratic Principle", 1922 (appeared in the no. 7 of Communist Program in September 1981) <[www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1922/democratic-principle.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1922/democratic-principle.htm)>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> K. Marx, Foreword to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859

<sup>7</sup> K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1845 <[www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/)>

<sup>8</sup> "The idea that in the UAW in World War II a majority voted to sustain the no-strike pledge, and while that vote was taking place an absolute majority of auto-workers went on strike. So what the hell do they believe: A no-strike pledge or they had the right to go on strike? It's contradictory. They believed you should have a no-strike pledge, but when the foreman looked at them that way, they walked off the job. That was what Marx was about. Marx says it doesn't matter what that worker thinks, or even the working class as a whole thinks, it's a matter of what they will be forced to do. They are forced to resist the nature of work.", *Revolutionary Optimist – An interview with Martin Glaberman*, Red & Black Notes, 2000 <[http://ca.geocities.com/red\\_black\\_ca/glaberman.htm](http://ca.geocities.com/red_black_ca/glaberman.htm)>

<sup>9</sup> riff-raff, "Past Decline and Beyond: An Introduction", *riff-raff* #6, 2004. See also Marcel, "Communism of Attack, and Communism of Withdrawal", *riff-raff* #7, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See "The Implosion Point of Democratist Ideology", *Le brise-glace* nr 2–3, 1989, for a similar line of argument.

<sup>11</sup> Bordiga instead proposed an "organic centralism", where "organic" express the continuity in time, and "centralism" continuity in space. He indeed meant that democratic mechanisms could work, and did, at present within the party, but democracy in itself could not be raised to a question of the communist program. See "The Democratic Principle".

mechanism, which is entirely conditioned by the content it operates with. Democratism is placed like a smoke screen: it makes us look for the decisions that are made about the conditions, instead of seeing how the societal conditions determine the decisions that are made. In every institution, in the governmental office as well as in the leftist organisation, the decisions are made outside of it before the chairman has slammed his gavel down on the table and declared the meeting opened: the institution mediates an inflow of interpersonal relations<sup>12</sup>. With this point of departure we can neither reject, nor praise democracy, but merely see it as an instrument in specific situations. *But to treat democracy as a form which can enclose essential different content, ultimately gives no more than a partially critique of alienation.* The content of democracy is inseparable from its form—something that is not especially amazing since the modern democracy emerged synchronously with the development of modern society—which we here hopefully can come a few steps closer. When the bourgeoisie incorporated democracy with political life, it was something exclusively meant for them selves. Democracy was not “democratic” (or rather it was neither more nor less democratic than the democracy of today)—politics was separated from the working class—it became that later on, with beginning in the second part of the nineteenth century, through the working class’ struggle to win influence. The democratisation of society through the worker’s movement was a part of the integration of the class in the state. A class who suppress itself is more tractable than a class that have to be oppressed from above. When worker’s social being increasingly is determined by capital, political-democratic activity becomes harmless. The influence on the politics that democracy has given workers is commensurate with their influence in their work. The democratisation can in this way be seen as a political aspect of the real subsumption of labour under capital.

A critique of capitalism for its lack of democracy imply nothing more than a critique of capitalism in its present concrete form—by no means a critique of capitalism as such. It is a *political* critique, not a *societal* ditto. Our aim is not economical democracy—self-management—that is to say, the extension of democracy to economy. Such a perspective implies that democracy will start to operate with an unchanged content: capital will be managed in a democratic way instead of by independent capitalists. But the management does not change the general laws of movement of capital. A company managed by workers will, as an example, be under the same pressure of the market mechanisms as the typical capitalist-owned company. The production is limited to the generally prevailing work organisation and technique: the technology the workers have at their disposal is a capitalist technology, the competitive work organisation is a capitalist work organisation. It is not the capitalist who rule capital, capital rule the capitalist. In the same way, it can never be the workers who rule capital, it will always rule them. The workers can destroy capital through destroying them selves, but never control and rule it beyond the logic of capital. Every attempt to take over capital, to direct it in a direction which will serve the whole of humanity, is in practice contra-revolutionary as it obstructs all attempts of creating communism. This self-management perspective, which has been a recurrent tendency in council communism (as well as in the anarchist tradition), can possibly be tracked to the council communists’ analysis of the “Soviet” union. They focused on the bureaucracy, and tended to depict party discipline and leaders as the reason to the failure of the October revolution to make up with capitalism. Against the hierarchical they enthroned its opposite: struggle from below, condemning of leaders, etc. Such a critique of Leninism is of course necessary (something that Bordiga lacked of), but revolution becomes, without a complete view of capitalism, easily a question of those who lead and those who are being led. Instead of bureaucracy one proposes self-management. Bordiga, on the contrary, was not especially interested in the bureaucracy or in any other specific political forms of “degenerated” Russia; he merely tried to point out that the mode of production to its content was capitalist. According to him, it was not state capitalism, only capitalism. Bureaucracy merely was a privileged political stratum, and he opposed the obsession with finding individuals who could be defined as capitalists or as any kind of substitute for them. This, he argued, lacked of Marx’ comprehension of capital as above all an impersonal force. The first perspective runs risk of removing the capitalist mode of production from theory, whereas the latter directly tackle the capital relation. But that is not to say that Bordiga’s theory on Russia is correctly as a whole, just that it has a more interesting point of departure.<sup>13</sup>

According to Bordiga the content of communism appears in doctrinal analysis and critique, it is something to be easily understood with an adequate use of the Marxian method; if we just hold our theoretical tools right, we can chisel a

<sup>12</sup> This is somewhat rough to say, the decisions is of course not absolutely determined in advance. But the interesting point is that the institution is not autonomous of the context it is within. The democratic institution is no sovereignty, but a part of the totality of capitalism, and with this is the latter a precondition of the former.

<sup>13</sup> For further reading about the views on Russia of the Dutch-German and the Italian communist left, see “What was the USSR?: Towards a theory of the deformation of value under state capitalism, part III, Left communism and the Russian revolution”, *Aufheben* no. 8, 1999.

victorious tactic and so form a disciplined uniform party and fire a centralised attack on capital. Certainly you neither create revolutions nor parties, according to Bordiga<sup>14</sup>; they emerge dynamically with the development of class and capital. But with the understanding that communism is latent described between the lines in *Capital*, you can be too sure of the possibility of predicting it. The real movement that form the program, which continuously have to be investigated, is broadening to a thorough homogeneous representation. Thus revolution is comprehended as a more or less planned process. The social forces, the numberless subjects, the representative organs, the schizophrenia of the proletarians as both workers and humans, just to mention some of the things that form the muddled composition of the movement, rather give us a picture of revolution as an opaque complexity. If revolution by Bordiga is understood as homogeneous and planned, with occasional heterogeneous and chaotic deviations, it is by us understood as heterogeneous and chaotic with a homogeneous core, which emerge from the communist tendencies of class, and with planned partial moments. Speaking with Marx: *the party of anarchy* against the party of order. Since the birth of the class, it have in its striving been on the way beyond capital, but no one knows—not even Marx knew—what our final destination will be until the class has created it. There is no in advance marked out road to the communist utopia, the class have to mark out its own way in struggle. With Bordiga's attitude it is easy to adopt a one-sided political perspective. With our conception it is inevitable with a critique of the same perspective. Bordiga undoubtedly have an understanding of communism as the movement of class and sees the revolutionary project as a *complete* transformation of society. He, however, canalise the real movement through the party, with the obvious risk to leave the fields outside the proletarian dictatorship untouched.

The force in society with power to blast capital to pieces is not the establishment of democratic electoral and decision mechanisms in production, no matter if it feeds or strangles capital, but *the refusal of the proletariat*, in its rudimentary and more developed forms. Thus the burning question is not *who* is managing but *what* is to be managed.<sup>15</sup> Bordiga state this critique against council communism—which he rejects as a form of anarcho-syndicalism<sup>16</sup>—but with his perspective the critique comprises above all only the strict political spectrum. Against the bourgeois division between decision-making and executive mechanism, he enthrone the Russian experiences, where “*Participation in the functions of political life, if not of the whole mass of electors, then at least of a wide layer of their delegates, is not intermittent but continuous*”<sup>17</sup>. Here he finds an essential content: the characteristic of the struggle of class is the movement. We here let it be unspoken how well Bordiga's analysis of the Russians' progress towards bourgeois democracy is in accordance with reality. The interesting part is the critique of the axiom of democracy: the dividing of life into separate realms which are alienated from one another. Whereas the capital relation in itself implies such a separation, the democracy is a deepening which is passed on by heredity from its preconditioned mode of production. Capital is laying the foundation of the relations productive–reproductive, work–leisure (something that was concretised first in the nineteenth century), economics–politics, etc. Democracy in its turn creates another separation in an already secluded field: it further divides the alienated political life. The activity to form ourselves and the world is restricted by formal procedures. If you want to change your surroundings, you should turn to the politician. It's his task. And if you choose to go the democratic way, the politician is available only one day every fourth year. Your own task is determined as wage worker, housewife, unemployed, student, etc. The possibilities for creative activity are defined within the narrowest scopes. The communist critique of democracy starts from that decision and action must be integrated with each other in a total process of human life. Communism presupposes the dissolution of the mediations.

Class struggle is by many socialists seen as a struggle for power. But what power? It is mostly understood as the political power or as the power over the means of production. It is spoken of a formal power which mystifies the proletarians' real conditions of existence. Struggle is reduced to a fight of principles. This applies to a one-sided economical perspective of self-management, as well as to a political perspective where the greatest importance is attached to the seizing of power. The struggle of the class emerges from our immediate needs, from necessity. The constant contradiction in our lives, which is especially evident when illustrated from and manifested in the places of work, between our lives and our creativity and the striving of capital for continuous and accelerating capital accumulation, between our, as humans, from outside assigned posi-

<sup>14</sup> “Partito e azione di classe” (‘Party and class action’), *Rassegna comunista* No.4, 31 May, 1921  
<[www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1921/classact.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1921/classact.htm)>

<sup>15</sup> Amadeo Bordiga, “Seize Power or Seize the Factory?”, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1975  
<[www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1920/seize-power.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1920/seize-power.htm)>

<sup>16</sup> Bordiga could reject them like this, as he associated worker councils with trade unions and economism (in comparison with Germany had the worker councils in Italy to greater extent been attached to the trade unions). Bordiga did not oppose trade unions, but he demanded the leadership of the party. Thus, when the council communists demanded the power of worker councils, he saw it as economism similar to anarcho-syndicalism.

<sup>17</sup> Italian Communist Party, “The Democratic Principle”.

tion, in relation to the machinery, in the work organisation, and our striving for a break with alienation and overcome the obstacles put in the way for us to take control of our creative activity. We are permitted to exist, but are denied life in itself. The proletarians' real situation shows us that struggle is about the power over our *life activity*. The freedom strived for in such a struggle is not a juridical, moral or metaphysic freedom. It is the real freedom in our daily lives. The freedom to decide what, and how much, to produce, and above all *how* to produce. That is, how and in which social contexts we realize our creative activity.<sup>18</sup> Such a freedom in our daily activities means the conquering of *human* life. The communist project thus implies breaking with all isolations and separations of our lives, that different aspects of our existence is divided into separated activities; where the production of our means of existence is the ultimately determining activity. This is the meaning of *communism as the material human community*. The democratic point of view merely catches the need of conquering *political* and *economical* life.<sup>19</sup> Democracy proves to be insufficient when faced with alienation, and appear in conflict with communism, as a mediation between humans in a society where we are isolated from one another—in other words, as a mediated community in a world of capital. Against democratism and self-managementism, we therefore must understand communism not as the *extension of democracy to economy*, but as the *abolition of both* as we know them today.

April 2005

---

<sup>18</sup> Paul Cardan, *The Meaning of Socialism*

<sup>19</sup> K. Marx, "Critical Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian'", *Vorwärts!*, No.63, August 7 1844  
<[www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/08/07.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/08/07.htm)>