



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' Revisited: Marx, Engels and Popular Sovereignty

van Ree, E.

DOI

[10.53765/20512988.46.3.527](https://doi.org/10.53765/20512988.46.3.527)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

History of Political Thought

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/policies/open-access-in-dutch-copyright-law-taverne-amendment>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Ree, E. (2025). The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' Revisited: Marx, Engels and Popular Sovereignty. *History of Political Thought*, 46(3), 527-552.
<https://doi.org/10.53765/20512988.46.3.527>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

THE 'DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT' REVISITED: MARX, ENGELS AND POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

Erik van Ree^{1,2}

Abstract: This article revisits the idea of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels at the hand of the concept of 'sovereignty'. Proletarian dictatorship was conceptualized, first, in terms of popular sovereignty and of a democracy striking down bourgeois armed rebellions; and, second, in terms of a narrow, class-based sovereignty: a proletarian state placing the bourgeois class as such under a violent, oppressive regime. Marx's and Engels' proletarian dictatorship combined two incompatible notions of sovereignty: democratic parliamentarism and 'the proletariat organized as ruling class', into a tense 'hybrid sovereignty'. This ambiguous vision is contextualized as a typical nineteenth-century construct and explored for its conceptual coherence and incoherences.

Keywords: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, dictatorship of the proletariat, popular sovereignty, workers' state.

Introduction

Karl Marx introduced the term '[d]ictatorship of the working class' in his 1850 *Class Struggles in France*,³ in a solemn formula: 'This socialism is the *declaration of permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest'.⁴

The formula hardly changed over the decades. Twenty-five years later Marx wrote in his 'Critique of the [German Social-Democratic] Gotha programme': 'Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*'.⁵

Unfortunately, neither Marx nor his friend Friedrich Engels ever formally defined the concept of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Wilfried Nippel concludes that the two friends offered only 'apodictical positions tied to particular situations' and 'casual remarks', which cannot be processed into any

¹ Faculty of Humanities University of Amsterdam. Email: e.vanree@uva.nl

² The author thanks Terrell Carver, Han Hak, Paul Raekstad, Ian Thatcher, and three anonymous reviewers for their critical comments.

³ *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850* (January/October 1850), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York, 1978) (hereafter *MECW*), Vol. 10, p. 69; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (Berlin, 1960) (hereafter *MEW*), Vol. 7, p. 33. Italics in original.

⁴ *MECW*, Vol. 10, p. 127 (*MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 89). Italics in original.

⁵ *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 95 (*MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 28). Italics in original.

‘consistent concept’.⁶ This might be too pessimistic. As far as one can tell, Marx and Engels saw eye to eye on the question. Even if we are not in a position to reach definitive conclusions, their observations are sufficiently clear to allow us to make sense of the general direction of their thinking. Then again, Nippel is right to characterize their concept of proletarian dictatorship as inconsistent. I will argue that it uncomfortably incorporates two incompatible notions of sovereignty.

This article uses the concept of ‘sovereignty’ as a lens to help us understand what Marx and Engels may have had in mind when they proposed proletarian dictatorship as a transitional state order on the way to communism. Theoretically, sovereignty, classically defined by Jean Bodin as the ‘highest power of command’, is indivisible.⁷ After all, there can be no two highest powers. Some of the new literature indicates the complexities of the concept: in practice, power may be divided over more than one centre, each carrying sovereignty over a particular area, while neither possesses the unalloyed, overall ‘highest’ power.⁸

‘Hybrid sovereignty’ exists in many varieties, in reality as well as on paper.⁹ In one form particularly relevant here, we have a sovereign parliament, elected on universal suffrage by the whole ‘demos’, but parliament is allowed to run its democratic course only within boundaries set by another, higher sovereign principle.

For contemporary, real-life examples of this form of hybrid sovereignty, we may turn to Israel and Iran, even though the elements of parliament and the higher principle in these two cases are balanced and articulated very differently. Israel is a democracy insofar as all citizens including Palestinian Israelis have the right to vote. But the 2018 Nation-State-Law defines the country as ‘the

⁶ Wilfried Nippel, ‘Diktatur des Proletariats — Versuch einer Historisierung’, in *Zyklus 5, Jahrbuch für Theorie und Geschichte der Soziologie*, ed. M. Endress and S. Moebius (New York, 2019), pp. 71–130, p. 121. See also: Wilfried Nippel, ‘Kein Urheberrecht: Marx, Engels und die Diktatur des Proletariats’, in *Die Diktatur des Proletariats. Begriff — Staat — Revision*, ed. Mike Schmeitzner (Baden-Baden, 2022), pp. 19–42, pp. 38–9.

⁷ See Andreas Kalyvas, ‘Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power’, *Constellations*, 2 (2005), pp. 223–44, p. 224. For a historical overview of the development of the concept of sovereignty: Dieter Grimm, *Sovereignty: The Origin and Future of a Political and Legal Concept* (New York, 2015).

⁸ See Raf Geenens, ‘E pluribus unum? The Manifold Meanings of Sovereignty’, *Netherlands Journal of Legal Philosophy*, 2 (2016), pp. 15–36. Richard Tuck conceptualizes the whole system of modern representative democracy as one in which the formally sovereign people do not rule but outsource government to a second centre of elected governors: Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge, 2016), in particular pp. ix–xi, 249).

⁹ For the term ‘hybrid sovereignty’ see Naser Ghobadzadeh and Lily Zubaidah Rahim, ‘Electoral Theocracy and Hybrid Sovereignty in Iran’, *Contemporary Politics*, 4 (2016), pp. 450–68.

nation-state of the Jewish People', with the right to national self-determination remaining 'exclusive to the Jewish People'.¹⁰ Israel, then, has two quasi-sovereigns: the body of all Israeli citizens and the abstract 'Jewish People', with the latter potentially overruling the former. Iran has a parliament elected by universal suffrage, but the Council of Guardians trumps it. Iran thus combines 'the contradictory principles of divine and popular sovereignty, but with ultimate authority delegated to jurists'. The jurists represent the divine element.¹¹

Andreas Kalyvas developed the theoretical case of a post-revolutionary condition where the revolutionary masses have constituted an elected parliament as the sovereign power. But speaking for the abstract nation, the masses remain in business as the higher principle of sovereignty, potentially overruling the elected parliament.¹² Kalyvas' theoretical construct is strikingly close to what Marx and Engels probably envisioned: a democracy based on universal (male?) suffrage, but all the same, somehow, acknowledging the proletariat as the higher, predominant principle, resulting in a hybrid of two theoretically incompatible elements.

As we will see, proletarian dictatorship (*Diktatur*) to Marx and Engels meant no more and no less than one-class rule (*Herrschaft*): government by one class. But they were caught in two minds when it came to defining what exactly one-class rule entailed. Their works offer two fundamentally incompatible interpretations of *Herrschaft*, and by consequence of *Diktatur*, corresponding to two different concepts of sovereignty.

In the first interpretation, proletarian rule would have resembled a radical version of the present Labour Government in Britain: there is only one ruling party, but its exclusive rule rests on an electoral majority, while the other parties remain in full possession of their rights. On losing its majority, the governing party steps down. This arrangement works just as well if, as was the case in most European countries at the time of Marx and Engels, the working class comprises only a minority of the population, in which case a peasant majority would be needed to help the proletarian party to an electoral majority.

The dictatorial aspect of proletarian rule in this first interpretation comes to light when the communist democracy strikes down a bourgeois minority's armed rebellion by force, i.e. when it defensively takes recourse to emergency rule but with a view to restoring democratic rule when the crisis has been tackled. In this interpretation, then, *rule*, government, belongs exclusively to one party, but *sovereignty* still belongs to all, the whole demos.

¹⁰ See Amal Jamal, 'Jewish Sovereignty and the Inclusive Exclusion of Palestinians: Shifting the Conceptual Understanding of Politics in Israel/Palestine', *Frontiers in Political Science* (9 November 2022) [DOI: 10.3389/fpos.2022.995371], p. 9.

¹¹ See Ghobadzadeh and Rahim, 'Electoral Theocracy'. Quotation p. 450.

¹² Kalyvas, 'Popular Sovereignty'.

Alternatively, one-class rule expresses a narrow, exclusive one-class *sovereignty*: not only the government, but the state itself belongs to one class. Other social classes are excluded from participation in the state. Compare the one 'class' rule of the free men in ancient Athens; apartheid South Africa; or — an arrangement Marx and Engels were directly familiar with — the condition of census suffrage. The term 'workers' state', a term to my knowledge not found in Marx's and Engels' works, excellently expresses the notion of state and class collapsing into one.

What does exclusion from the state mean, if Marx and Engels never suggested that bourgeois individuals would lose the vote? Being included in the democratic state means not only being entitled to vote but also enjoying the rights of freedom of expression and organization and equal protection under the law. Deprived of this, citizens will lose the possibility of democratic participation in the state and thereby be effectively shut out from the collective subject of popular sovereignty even if they can vote. As we will see, with Marx and Engels the bourgeois would lose their political freedoms as well as their equal protection. Not only armed rebels, but the bourgeoisie as such, *any* form of bourgeois opposition, would be made the object of repression. Democracy for some, dictatorship for others. Marx and Engels, then, combined two, really, incompatible notions: one, a parliament elected by universal sovereignty, and two, an exclusively proletarian state, an anti-democratic notion at odds with sovereignty residing in the whole demos.

If Marx and Engels never answered the question of how a democracy based on universal suffrage may go together with a one-class state, they did at some length discuss two forms of democracy possibly useful for the proletariat: parliamentary democracy and the radical Commune state, both resting on universal suffrage. But the question of the institutional forms of democracy (the right to recall of elected representatives, imperative mandate, no division of powers, etc.) falls outside the scope of this article.

So do the questions of the 'smashing' of the bourgeois state apparatus, the possible role of a workers' party, and the 'withering away of the state'. Attention in this already overburdened article will remain narrowly focused on the question of sovereignty, i.e. on the relations of power between the proletariat and society's other social classes, the proletariat and the demos as a whole.

I

A Nineteenth-Century Concept

With its deep ambiguity, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was a typically nineteenth-century construct. It emerged at a time when the notion of popular sovereignty was well established, but when a stable common understanding of what this entailed had not yet crystallized. The ambiguity we observe with Marx and Engels reflected ambiguities in the political practices and thinking of their days.

If indeed sovereignty refers to the highest power of command, popular sovereignty refers to a state order in which ‘ultimate authority’ resides in the people, the body of citizens.¹³ But who count as the citizenry? In nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, women were routinely excluded from the suffrage. The semi-universal male suffrage in the United States had a racist bias. In the course of the nineteenth century, France (1848), Germany (1871) and several other European countries introduced universal male suffrage.¹⁴ But seen over the whole century, the default condition long remained the census suffrage favouring a minority of wealthy men.

Under these conditions, two scenarios would have been available to Marx and Engels. As democrats angered by the privilege of wealth, they would have insisted on including the working classes in the state through the introduction of universal suffrage — a position which indeed they took and never retracted. But precisely because excluding categories of the population from participation in the state did not yet constitute a taboo, it remained possible for nineteenth-century revolutionaries to consider an alternative option: *excluding elite classes* from the popular sovereignty. Perhaps the most well-known statement to this effect was the French revolutionary Emmanuel Sieyès’ 1789 ‘What is the Third Estate?’, which in so many words excluded those not belonging to the Third Estate, i.e. the aristocracy, from the nation.¹⁵

In a nineteenth-century context, Marx and Engels’ idea of the one-class, proletarian state represented just another narrow reading of popular sovereignty. Narrowing down the demos to only some classes participating in the popular sovereignty, while excluding others, was a common enough practice in the nineteenth century; Marx and Engels were only reversing the roles.

Also, institutionally, popular sovereignty could take many forms. The idea that only representative democracy and universal suffrage legitimately express popular sovereignty, gained momentum only gradually during the nineteenth century. Any institutional form expressing popular consent could legitimately be taken to articulate popular sovereignty, even an autocratic monarchy provided it was originally established by the assembled people.¹⁶

The variety of institutional arrangements which today would no longer count as democratic but at the time were supposed to be compatible with popular sovereignty was wide. The ‘Bonapartist’ system, represented by Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, combined a strong executive — a single leader — with

¹³ Donald S. Lutz, *Popular Consent and Popular Control: Whig Political Theory in the Early State Constitutions* (Baton Rouge/London, 1980), p. 38.

¹⁴ For a table see Giovanni B. Pittaluga, Giampiero Cama and Elena Seghezza, ‘Democracy, Extension of Suffrage, and Redistribution in Nineteenth-Century Europe’, *European Review of Economic History*, 4 (2015), p. 324. See also: Adam Przeworski, ‘Conquered or Granted? A History of Suffrage Extensions’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 2 (2009), p. 295.

¹⁵ <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/280> [accessed 31 March 2025].

¹⁶ Geenens, ‘E pluribus unum’, pp. 24–9; Lutz, *Popular Consent*, p. 38.

a reduced parliament and with popular sovereignty narrowed down to plebiscites.¹⁷ In the revolutionary milieu circulated the scheme of educational dictatorship, most famously associated with Gracchus Babeuf and Louis Auguste Blanqui, with a vanguard organization assumed to be speaking for the people.¹⁸

Furthermore, until late in the nineteenth century, the term ‘democracy’, denoting a representative state based on universal suffrage, was rivalled by the notion of ‘mixed government’, which Henk te Velde characterizes as a form of ‘divided sovereignty’.¹⁹ In a mixed constitution, ‘democracy’ stood not for the whole demos but for the element of the common people, balanced by the monarchical and aristocratic elements, as with Britain’s House of Commons, House of Lords and King. The idea was that, if unchecked by restraining forces, a pure, exclusive government of the common people would degenerate into mob rule.²⁰

Marx and Engels were never attracted to ‘mixed government’ and they certainly did not share the negative associations imposed upon the popular element. Relevant here is, however, that a notion of democracy as a system

¹⁷ Markus J. Prutsch, ‘Caesarism in the Nineteenth Century’, in *Dictatorship in the Nineteenth Century: Conceptualisations, Experiences, Transfers*, ed. Moisés Prieto (London, 2021), pp. 30–4. For Boulangism see Patrick H. Hutton, ‘Popular Boulangism and the Advent of Mass Politics in France, 1886–90’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1976), pp. 85–106; Bertrand Joly, ‘Les projets constitutionnels du boulangisme’, *Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des chartes*, 2 (2008), pp. 515–41; Frederic H. Seager, *The Boulanger Affair: Political Crossroad of France 1886–1889* (Ithaca, 1969), pp. 74–5, 253–4.

¹⁸ For Babeuf see Laura Mason, *The Last Revolutionaries: The Conspiracy Trial of Gracchus Babeuf and the Equals* (New Haven, 2022); Robert Barrie Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (Stanford, 1978). For Blanqui see Dough Enaa Greene, *Communist Insurgent: Blanqui’s Politics of Revolution* (Chicago, 2017); Alan B. Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui* (New York, 1957).

¹⁹ Henk te Velde, ‘Democracy and the Strange Death of Mixed Government in the Nineteenth Century: Great Britain, France and the Netherlands’, in *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History*, ed. Jussi Kurunmäki, Jeppe Nevers and Henk te Velde (New York/Oxford, 2018), p. 45.

²⁰ See David Held, *Models of Democracy: Second Edition* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 52; Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, ‘“Democracy” from Book to Life: The Emergence of the Term in Active Political Debate to 1848’, in *Democracy in Modern Europe*, ed. Jussi Nevers and te Velde, pp. 16–41; Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, ‘Introduction’, in *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750–1850*, ed. Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (Oxford, 2013), pp. 1–3; Joanna Innes, Mark Philp and Robert Saunders, ‘The Rise of Democratic Discourse in the Reform Era: Britain in the 1830s and 1840s’, in *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions*, ed. Innes and Philp, pp. 114–28; Jörn Leonhard, ‘Another “Sonderweg”? The Historical Semantics of “Democracy” in Germany’, in *Democracy in Modern Europe*, ed. Kurunmäki, Nevers and te Velde, pp. 66–87; te Velde, ‘Democracy’.

resting exclusively on the common people, *existed*, even if it was decried as mob rule. This interpretation of what constituted democracy, then, could be made available for reuse with a positive spin.

Altogether, what we have here is a conceptual and institutional landscape full of ambiguities. Popular sovereignty was a powerful concept, almost impossible to discard for any revolutionary; but at the same time, it allowed a wide variety of institutional arrangements we today would never classify as democratic and some of which were class exclusive. Marx's and Engels' ambiguous understanding of proletarian dictatorship as universal-suffrage democracy *and* as a political system effectively excluding the bourgeoisie from the state, then, echoed the ambiguities of nineteenth-century political philosophies and state order.

II

Coherence and Continuity

Even as they were contextually embedded in nineteenth-century Europe, there was a degree of coherence to Marx's and Engels' ideas about proletarian dictatorship. That dictatorship's conceptual architecture combined two reasonably rounded and coherent concepts — the universal-suffrage democratic republic and the one-class, proletarian state — but coming together in a tense whole, lacking overall integration.

According to Darrin McMahon, throughout history it has been the rule rather than the exception for egalitarian concepts to be combined with anti-egalitarian notions. As a rule, equality comes with inequality:

equality claims are regularly invoked to contest or contain established hierarchies. But they invariably carry hierarchical assumptions of their own — ideas about who is equal and who is not, and what a just arrangement of the two would be . . . hierarchies based on equality claims can shade quickly, like hierarchy itself, into domination.²¹

Quentin Skinner famously cast doubt on the very notion of idea coherence. Referring to the 'mythology of coherence',²² this scholar warned against mistaking 'scattered or incidental remarks' for a doctrine.²³ According to Skinner, there just *is* no determinate idea but only a 'variety of statements'.²⁴ But if it is possible for an intellectual historian to impose coherence upon a body of

²¹ Darrin M. McMahon, *Equality: The History of an Elusive Idea* (New York, 2023), p. 11. For McMahon on Marx and Engels, *ibid.*, pp. 262–76.

²² Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 1 (1969), p. 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38. For the New Intellectual History personified by Skinner, Reinhart Koselleck and Michel Foucault, see Elías José Palti, *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change: Skinner, Pocock, Koselleck, Blumenberg, Foucault, and Rosanvallon* (Cambridge, 2024), Introduction. Palti, *Intellectual History* (pp. 242–3)

thought where really there is none, by the same token the opposite is also possible: historians seeing only scattered fragments but overlooking that which holds them together. There is also such a thing as the imposition of *incoherence*.

There is no theoretical reason why an idea obviously echoing conditions of time and place could not at the same time be constructed coherently and be applicable in many other contexts as well. The example of the natural sciences proves, at the very least, that such a thing is *possible*. In such cases, rather than being helpful, comprehensive contextualism — the reductionism of an all-determining context absorbing the idea like a sponge — makes us lose sight of the coherence behind the fragments.

With the postmodern primacy of language and the discarding of the author as a centred subject, coherence has become a counter-intuitive proposition for many intellectual historians. Postmodernity seems to echo the Buddhist view of the mind as a loose collection of fragments only weakly monitored by an illusionary sense of self. However, to avoid disintegration, the individual mind to a point *must* be centred. Ideas are tools to work on the world, and without a modicum of coherence effective work becomes impossible. Without it, the mind itself goes.²⁵

Concepts can be seen to cohere when, first, they are not logically inconsistent, i.e. when they are not mutually incompatible; and when, second, they have cohesion, i.e. when they hang together in a mutually supportive way.²⁶ For an example pertinent to the issue at hand, the democratic republic and the self-defensive state of siege are mutually coherent propositions. So are, for that matter, the notions of the proletariat as single possessor of the state and of the bourgeois losing their civil rights.

Comprehensive contextualism not only makes it difficult to account for conceptual architectures but also for the persistence of ideas over time, as well as for their spread to other places beyond the context of origin with a degree of continuity. The very existence of intellectual traditions becomes problematic.²⁷

strikingly rephrases the position of the necessarily fragmented nature of historically formed ideas: as ‘fully historical entities’, concepts have an ‘unerasable residue of irrationality’ at their centre, an ‘irrational core’ that prevents concepts being coherent and being articulated as ‘organic wholes’.

²⁵ See Erik van Ree, ‘Karl Marx’s Posthumous Success’, *Ideology Theory Practice* (2 August 2021), <https://www.ideology-theory-practice.org/blog/karl-marxs-posthumous-success> [accessed 7 February 2025].

²⁶ See Robert Alexy and Aleksander Peczenik, ‘The Concept of Coherence and its Significance for Discursive Rationality’, *Ratio Juris*, 1 (1990), pp. 130–47; Susan Haack, ‘Coherence, Consistency, Cogency, Congruity, Cohesiveness, &c.: Remain Calm! Don’t go Overboard!’, *New Literary History*, 2 (2004), pp. 167–83.

²⁷ See for this point Peter E. Gordon, ‘Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas’, in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford/New York, 2014), pp. 32–55. For the supposed non-

It has been helpfully suggested that concepts have a stable ‘core’, with wide application and which may persist over a considerable period, and a much more messy, more directly context-specific ‘margin’, adapting itself as the concept travels through time and space.²⁸

The references to proletarian dictatorship in Marx’s and Engels’ writings were concentrated in three periods: 1850–2, 1871–5 and 1890–1.²⁹ These concentrations correspond to the aftermath of the European revolutions; to the aftermath of the Paris Commune, identified by both Marx and Engels as a real-life proletarian dictatorship; and, after Marx’s death, to the years when the German Social-Democrats began scoring their impressive electoral successes, thus raising hopes for a possibly peaceful transition. But as we will see, over these different periods and contexts Marx and Engels did not fundamentally change their minds over the ‘proletarian dictatorship’ as a hybrid of democracy and class state. There was no obvious conceptual drift. There is no theoretical reason why there should have been.

III

The Proletarian Dictatorship in Marx and Engels: As Reflected in the Literature

To my knowledge, the most extensive and sophisticated studies of Marx’s and Engels’ understandings of proletarian dictatorship are those by Richard Hunt, David Lovell, Hal Draper, John Ehrenberg and Wilfried Nippel.³⁰

persistence of ideas with a stable meaning see Donald R. Kelley, ‘What is Happening to the History of Ideas?’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1 (1990), pp. 3–25; Melvin Richter, ‘*Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2 (1987), pp. 247–63. For the problems of translating concepts from one language to another see Margrit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier, ‘History of Concepts and Global History’, in *Global Conceptual History: A Reader*, ed. Margrit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier (London, 2016), pp. 1–27; Willibald Steinmetz, ‘Forty Years of Conceptual History — The State of the Art’, in *Global Conceptual History*, ed. Pernau and Sachsenmaier, pp. 339–66. For the question of the possible *validity* of ideas outside their context of origin see Martin Jay, *Genesis and Validity: The Theory and Practice of Intellectual History* (Philadelphia, 2022), Introduction.

²⁸ Arianna Betti and Hein van den Berg, ‘Modelling the History of Ideas’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 4 (2014), pp. 812–35; Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, ‘Making Sense of Conceptual Change’, *History and Theory*, 3 (2008), pp. 351–72. See also Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea. The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University* (Cambridge MA/London, 2001), Introduction.

²⁹ Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 1, *Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy* (Pittsburgh, 1974), p. 297; Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, Vol. 3, *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’* (New York, 1986), pp. 385–6.

³⁰ Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*; John Ehrenberg, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat: Marxism’s Theory of Socialist Democracy* (New York/London, 1992); Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1; Richard Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 2, *Classical Marxism, 1850–1895*

Hunt and Draper offer point-by-point analyses of all ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ *loci* in Marx’s and Engels’ works. The term (or equivalents) turns up only sporadically in the works of either man. Hunt has eleven *loci*.³¹ Draper has twelve: eight for Marx, six for Engels, and one in a joint publication.³² But this use is frequent enough to conclude that the term represented no mere slip of the tongue.

Also, Marx proudly suggested he fathered the concept. In a 5 March 1852 letter to Joseph Weydemeyer he famously wrote that while others before him discovered the significance of the class struggle, ‘[m]y own contribution’ was to show ‘that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat* . . . that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*’.³³

According to Lovell, Marx envisioned two main missions for the proletarian dictatorship. The short-term one concerned the crushing of bourgeois armed rebellions. The more momentous, long-term mission was to see through the socio-economic and political transition to the classless, communist society, to be achieved through wholesale expropriation and other means.³⁴

The natural, initial approach to an understanding of what Marx may have had in mind when he introduced the term in 1850 is to establish what, at the time, the term dictatorship meant in common parlance. The classical, Roman *dictatura*, to which modern notions of state of siege/emergency and martial law hark back, was a form of unconstrained one-man rule, but legally

(Pittsburgh, 1984); David W. Lovell, *From Marx to Lenin: An Evaluation of Marx’s Responsibility for Soviet Authoritarianism* (Cambridge, 1984); Nippel, ‘Diktatur des Proletariats’ and ‘Kein Urheberrecht’. See also: Uwe-Jens Heuer, ‘Demokratie/Diktatur des Proletariats’, in *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Vol. 2, *Bank bis Dummheit in der Musik*, ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug (Hamburg, 1995), pp. 534–51; Theodor Bergmann, ‘Diktatur des Proletariats’, in *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Vol. 2, ed. Haug, pp. 720–7.

³¹ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, pp. 297–336.

³² Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, pp. 385–6.

³³ *MECW*, Vol. 39, pp. 62, 65 (*MEW*, Vol. 28, p. 508), italics in original. According to Nippel (‘Diktatur des Proletariats’, p. 96), it is not certain that Marx fathered the concept in the German-speaking world: ‘Presumably the term was in the air at that time.’

³⁴ Lovell, *Marx to Lenin*, ch. 2. Compare Mehmet Tabak’s distinction between the ‘coercive’ and ‘constructive’ aspects of the proletarian dictatorship: Mehmet Tabak, ‘Marx’s Theory of Proletarian Dictatorship Revisited’, *Science & Society*, 3 (2000), pp. 333–56, p. 335. Lovell’s distinctions allow us to see that the Marx-Engels proletarian dictatorship combined the functions of what Carl Schmitt called *commissary* dictatorship, i.e. protecting the democratically legitimated order through emergency measures, and *sovereign* dictatorship: the forceful introduction of constitutional change: Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to the Proletarian Class Struggle* (Cambridge, 2014). Compare Hunt’s distinction between preservative, continuing, constituent and constituent-educational dictatorships: Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, pp. 287–9, 296.

established for a limited period of time, for the purpose of dealing with an emergency situation. Roman antiquity also knew the unlawful one-man dictatorship, personified by Sulla and Caesar. With the French Revolution, dictatorship acquired new meanings, such as the educational dictatorship of a revolutionary group, and the coercive rule of either one man, a committee, or a popular body, for the purpose of either opposing or securing a democratic revolution.³⁵

Importantly, Nippel observes that, quite irrespective of their constitutional legality or illegality, *all* notions of dictatorship circulating at the time rested on some form of ‘unrestricted exercise of power’.³⁶ Whatever Marx exactly had in mind, then, the fact that he opted for the term dictatorship in the first place, suggests that he was contemplating some form of extraordinary power. Contemporary common understandings of dictatorship make it unlikely that Marx’s concept of it can be *reduced* to democracy. At the very least, it must have represented a repressive qualification of democracy.

Marx and Engels began using the term ‘dictatorship’ and ‘dictatorial’, with positive connotations (but without specifically referring to the proletariat), in their comments on the 1848 revolutions in the German states. Democratic revolutionaries, Marx and Engels among them, demanded that the liberal Camphausen Cabinet in Prussia and the Frankfurt *Nationalversammlung* take their roles as provisional revolutionary structures seriously; ignore and cast aside absolutist laws and institutions; and restructure the state on the basis of universal male suffrage and popular sovereignty. The revolutionaries realized that this required, in Draper’s words, ‘energetic coercive action’.³⁷

This provides context for Marx’s famous September 1848 observation: ‘Every provisional political set-up following a revolution requires a dictatorship, and an energetic dictatorship at that. From the very beginning we blamed Camphausen for not having acted in a dictatorial manner.’ That Camphausen, Marx added, had failed to smash the institutional positions of the ‘defeated party’ allowed the latter to risk an ‘open fight’.³⁸

Draper makes the important observation that Marx did not propose for the Camphausen government to ‘establish a “dictatorship” in some formal sense,

³⁵ See Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, chs. 1 and 2; Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, pp. 285–90; Gerd Koenen, ‘Karl Marx und die “Diktatur des Proletariats”’. Eine historische Kontextualisierung’, in *Karl Marx im 21. Jahrhundert. Bilanz und Perspektiven*, ed. Martin Endress and Christian Jansen (Frankfurt/New York, 2020), pp. 181–212, pp. 182–5; Nippel, ‘Diktatur des Proletariats’, pp. 72–9; Nippel, ‘Kein Urheberrecht’, pp. 19–22. On the Roman concept of dictatorship, see Claude Nicolet, ‘Dictatorship in Rome’, in *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 263–78.

³⁶ Nippel, ‘Diktatur des Proletariats’, p. 79.

³⁷ Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, p. 63.

³⁸ ‘The Crisis and the Counter-Revolution’, *MECW*, Vol. 7, p. 431 (*MEW*, Vol. 5, p. 402).

as if a dictatorship were some special form of government'. In other words, there would be no temporary transfer of power, as in Roman times, to one man or to a committee. Rather, what Marx envisioned was, again in Draper's words, 'the *dictatorship* of the Democracy'.³⁹ 'The "dictatorship" for which Marx called, was that of the elected representative body of the German Democracy', which would 'energetically repress the counterrevolution'.⁴⁰

With Hunt, Draper and Ehrenberg, the 'proletarian dictatorship' idea, introduced by Marx in 1850, continued to mean essentially the same thing as the 1848 democratic emergency dictatorship: a democracy repressive in self-defence. The proletarian-democratic state will only strike *back*, i.e. when the bourgeoisie violently rises against democratically instituted programmes of expropriation. Striking down armed rebels is the duty of any self-respecting democracy.⁴¹

Draper insists that with Marx and Engels, proletarian class-rule would be expressed 'by a majority of the people's representatives under universal suffrage' and through 'democratic institutions'.⁴² The proletarian-democratic government would have to apply 'some form of coercion' only to rebellious counter-revolutionaries.⁴³ Likewise, Ehrenberg points to Marx and Engels' 'fusion of democracy and dictatorship',⁴⁴ while the democratic workers' state would have to 'repress a small minority'.⁴⁵ This reading of proletarian dictatorship as repressive-defensive majority rule is easily supported by quotations from Marx's and Engels' writings, for example by Engels' famous 1891 characterization of the 'democratic republic' as the 'specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat'.⁴⁶

IV

Diktatur and Herrschaft

It is acknowledged in the literature that proletarian dictatorship referred to exclusive rule by one class. Hunt emphasizes the proletariat's need for a majority alliance, but there was no avoiding the 'ultimate, purely proletarian

³⁹ Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, p. 60. Italics in original.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5. For very similar analyses of Marx's and Engels' 1848 notions of democratic-assembly emergency rule see Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, pp. 291–7; Nippel, 'Diktatur des Proletariats', pp. 79–91; Nippel, 'Kein Urheberrecht', pp. 22–5. Also Koenen, 'Karl Marx', pp. 185–8.

⁴¹ See for example Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 2, p. 337.

⁴² Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, p. 115.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁴⁴ Ehrenberg, *Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁶ 'A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891' (June 1891), *MECW*, Vol. 27, p. 227 (*MEW*, Vol. 22, p. 235).

government'.⁴⁷ For Draper, Marx's and Engels' proletarian dictatorship represents 'a state in which the proletariat exercises dominant political power — a "workers' state"';⁴⁸ and according to Ehrenberg, Marx believed in the 'unshared rule of a single class' and 'exclusive political power' for the proletariat.⁴⁹ The proletariat only needed a majority coalition of oppressed classes to solidify its rule.⁵⁰

These authors furthermore argue that proletarian dictatorship means *no more* than exclusive 'rule', *Herrschaft*.

*For Marx and Engels . . . 'dictatorship of the proletariat' meant nothing more and nothing less than 'rule of the proletariat', the 'conquest of political power' by the working class . . . 'Dictatorship of the proletariat' did not refer to particular characteristics, methods, or institutions of proletarian rule — it meant the proletarian rule itself, and nothing more.*⁵¹

Dictatorship was a 'mere synonym for the conquest of political power by the proletariat'.⁵² Hunt is equally emphatic: 'Marx and Engels used *Diktatur* as a synonym for *Herrschaft* and assumed, under either label, a democratic governmental structure.'⁵³

This argument against the 'dictatorial' essence of the proletarian dictatorship has considerable *prima facie* plausibility: *Diktatur* and *Herrschaft* indeed represented synonyms for Marx and Engels. The terms were interchangeable: nothing obviously changes in the meaning of any passage in the two men's writings on proletarian rule/dictatorship if we replace the one term with the other either way.

In June 1850, Marx wrote a letter to the editor of the *Neue Deutsche Zeitung* in response to a journalist, Otto Lüning's review of Marx's *Class Struggles in France*. As Marx wrote, 'you reproached me for advocating the *rule and dictatorship of the working class*, while you propose, in opposition to myself, the *abolition of class differences in general*'. Marx went on to explain that proletarian rule was only a transitional stage towards the abolition of all forms of rule. He referred to the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* for the idea of the workers as 'ruling class', leading to the abolition of the workers' 'own supremacy [*Herrschaft*] as a class', and to the *Class Struggles in France* for the thesis of the 'class dictatorship of the proletariat' as the transition to the classless soci-

⁴⁷ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, pp. 300–1. Quotation p. 300.

⁴⁸ Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, p. 269.

⁴⁹ Ehrenberg, *Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, pp. 43–4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵¹ Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, p. 213. Italics in original. See also pp. 224, 319.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁵³ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, p. 314.

ety.⁵⁴ Apparently, the terms rule and dictatorship signified one and the same thing to him.

Draper plausibly concludes that ‘the Manifesto’s formulation “rule of the proletariat” was equated in [Marx’s] mind with “dictatorship of the proletariat”’.⁵⁵ Likewise, Nippel concludes: ‘That is to say, only the term dictatorship is new, not the point itself.’⁵⁶

For another instance of interchangeable use of rule and dictatorship we turn to Engels’ reference in his 1872–3 *The Housing Question* to ‘[the proletariat’s] dictatorship as the transition to the abolition of classes . . . — views such as had already been expressed in the *Communist Manifesto* and since then on innumerable occasions’.⁵⁷ Actually, the Manifesto had *not* mentioned the dictatorship but the rule of the proletariat. But, again, for Engels, these terms obviously referred to one and the same thing. This is confirmed by the following passage in the same work:

Since each political party sets out to establish its rule [*Herrschaft*] in the state, so the German Social-Democratic Workers’ Party is necessarily striving for *its* rule [*Herrschaft*], the rule of the working class, hence a ‘class domination [*Klassenherrschaft*]’. Moreover, *every* real proletarian party, from the English Chartists onward, has put forward . . . the dictatorship of the proletariat as the immediate aim of the struggle.⁵⁸

Hunt quite plausibly comments that ‘Engels seems here to have shifted to *Diktatur* simply . . . as a synonym’.⁵⁹

However, the terminological argument identifying dictatorship with rule is, really, a red herring; it does not bring us any closer to establishing what proletarian dictatorship meant to Marx and Engels. For even if by dictatorship they really meant rule, if indeed the two terms were synonyms, we can just as well turn this around to say that proletarian rule, really, referred only to the workers’ dictatorship. If the two terms define each other, we are left with nothing.⁶⁰

Finding out what the term *Herrschaft* generally meant at the time Marx and Engels were using it does not provide an exit from this definitional quandary. Volume 10 of the *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, appeared in 1877.⁶¹ Most of the six meanings provided in the volume’s lemma *herrschaft* are irrelevant for us. Of those that are relevant,

⁵⁴ *MECW*, Vol. 10, p. 387 (*MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 323). Italics in original.

⁵⁵ Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, p. 224.

⁵⁶ Nippel, ‘Diktatur des Proletariats’, p. 94.

⁵⁷ *MECW*, Vol. 23, p. 370 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, p. 266).

⁵⁸ *MECW*, Vol. 23, p. 372 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, pp. 267–8). Italics in original.

⁵⁹ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, p. 314. Italics in original.

⁶⁰ See for this also Lovell, *Marx to Lenin*, pp. 43–5.

⁶¹ See ‘Die Bände des DWB erschienen von 1854 bis 1971’, <http://dwb.uni-trier.de/de/das-woerterbuch/die-baende-des-dwb/> [accessed 1 August 2024].

one is *gewalt über etwas* [power over something]. The others are *botmässigkeit*, *imperium*, *dominatus* and *potentatus*, all of which again refer to power.⁶² This brings us not much further: *Herrschaft* refers to power. Proletarian rule means proletarian power. Simply put, identifying dictatorship with rule begs the question of what rule meant to Marx and Engels.

V

Universal Suffrage, Popular Sovereignty

Let us, then, find out what kind of state order Marx and Engels may have had in mind when referring to the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, even if only in very loose, general terms. We know in any case what it did *not* signify to them: there are no indications in either man’s writings that the proletarian programme included limiting the suffrage to the popular classes or even to the industrial proletariat alone. Their commitment to the principle of popular sovereignty was strong enough to preclude any tinkering with the vote.

Marx first referred to *Volkssouveränität* and to a democracy embodying the ‘whole demos’ in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, written in 1843–4.⁶³ He and Engels did not regard the proletarian revolution as contrary to the democratic revolution; rather, the former would pass through the latter. The *Demands of the Communist Party in Germany*, co-authored by them in March 1848, formally demanded a German republic with universal suffrage.⁶⁴ The establishment of democracy was the proletarian revolution’s first aim. With democracy in place, the proletarian party would win an electoral majority, which, again, would open the way for the rule of the proletariat.

As Marx succinctly expressed it in August 1852: ‘Universal suffrage is the equivalent of political power for the working class of England, where the pro-

⁶² ‘1DWB — Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm’, <https://www.dwds.de/d/wb-1dwb> [accessed 1 August 2024]. Capitals are lacking in the lemmas.

⁶³ *MECW*, Vol. 3, see especially pp. 28–31; ‘whole demos’, p. 29 (*MEW*, Vol. 1, especially pp. 229–32). See for discussions of this work Mikkel Flohr, ‘Karl Marx’s Critique of the State as an Alienation of Society in his 1843 *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of State*’, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2023.2173268> (2023); Bob Jessop, ‘Marx and Engels on the State’, in *Politics, Ideology and the State: Papers from the Communist University of London*, ed. Sally Hibbin (London, 1978), pp. 40–68, pp. 41–6; Can Mert Kökerer, ‘Marx’s Three Different Conceptions of Political Change under Capitalism: Direct Democracy, Proletarian Revolution, or Self-Government under Proletarian Leadership’ [DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12741>], *Constellations* (2024), pp. 1–15, pp. 4–6.

⁶⁴ See *MECW*, Vol. 7, p. 3 (*MEW*, Vol. 5, p. 3).

letariat forms the large majority of the population . . . Its inevitable result, here, is *the political supremacy* [Herrschaft] *of the working class*.⁶⁵

Importantly, Marx and Engels did *not* suggest that once the proletariat had established themselves as the ruling class, the bourgeoisie would be deprived of the vote: the proletarian dictatorship would retain the system of universal suffrage. Marx indicated at a banquet in September 1871 that he regarded the Paris Commune as a 'proletarian dictatorship'.⁶⁶ Engels followed him.⁶⁷ At the same time, the former characterized 'universal suffrage' as a particularly laudable element of the Commune system.⁶⁸ Marx characterized the Commune as a 'government of the people by the people'.⁶⁹

After Marx's death in 1883, Engels became even more convinced of the value of representative democracy. In his 1891 critique of the draft German Social-Democratic party programme, the same text in which he defined the democratic republic as the specific form of the proletarian dictatorship, he suggested including the following formula in the party programme: '*concentration of all political power in the hands of the people's representatives*'.⁷⁰

The interpretation of proletarian dictatorship as democratic emergency rule, i.e. the need for a communist majority government to face down armed bourgeois rebels, represents a powerful theme in Marx's and Engels' writings. The former laid out these considerations in a July 1871 interview with the New York paper, *The World*, as follows: 'The English middle class has always shown itself willing enough to accept the verdict of the majority so long as it enjoyed the monopoly of the voting power. But . . . as soon as it finds itself outvoted on what it considers vital questions we shall see here a new slave-owners' war.'⁷¹

In the first draft of his 1871 *Civil War in France*, Marx wrote that the Commune form allows for the class struggle to be waged 'in the most rational and humane way'. The 'sporadic slaveholders' insurrections, which while for a moment interrupting the work of peaceful progress, would only accelerate the movement, by putting the sword in the hand of the Social Revolution'.⁷² Hunt plausibly argues that this implied 'that the "sword" would *not* be used in

⁶⁵ 'The Chartists', *MECW*, Vol. 11, pp. 335–6 (*MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 344). See for another example Engels in October 1847: 'In all civilised countries, democracy has as its necessary consequence the political rule of the proletariat', in 'The Communists and Karl Heinzen', *MECW*, Vol. 6, p. 299 (*MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 317).

⁶⁶ 'Record of Marx's Speech on the Seventh Anniversary Celebration of the International', *MECW*, Vol. 22, p. 634 (*MEW*, Vol. 17, p. 433).

⁶⁷ 1891 introduction to Marx's *The Civil War in France* [1871]: *MECW*, Vol. 27, p. 191 (*MEW*, Vol. 22, p. 199).

⁶⁸ *The Civil War in France*, *MECW*, Vol. 22, p. 333 (*MEW*, Vol. 17, p. 340).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, *MECW*, Vol. 22, p. 339 (*MEW*, Vol. 17, p. 347).

⁷⁰ *MECW*, Vol. 27, p. 227 (*MEW*, Vol. 22, p. 235). Italics in original.

⁷¹ *MECW*, Vol. 22, p. 606 (*MEW*, Vol. 17, p. 643).

⁷² *MECW*, Vol. 22, p. 491 (*MEW*, Vol. 17, p. 546).

ordinary times of “peaceful progress”’.⁷³ In 1878, Marx formulated a similar thought:

If in England, for instance, or the United States, the working class were to gain a majority in *Parliament* or *Congress*, they could, by lawful means, rid themselves of such laws and institutions as impeded their development . . . However, the ‘peaceful’ movement might be transformed into a ‘forcible’ one by resistance on the part of those interested in restoring the former state of affairs; if . . . they are put down by *force*, it is as rebels against ‘lawful’ force.⁷⁴

Only occasionally, as in Engels’ 1873 ‘On Authority’, was it suggested that potential rebels would have to be kept from mounting resistance *proactively*. Engels defined revolution as an imposition of the will of one part of the population on another by force of arms, and ‘if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries’.⁷⁵

Draper’s and Ehrenberg’s democratic-dictatorship readings of Marx and Engels beg a significant question, the pertinence of which these authors do not seem even to be aware of: apart from striking down armed rebellion, universal suffrage and majority rule do not give automatic licence to the repression of minorities, bourgeois or otherwise. Did Marx and Engels accept equal rights for all, including the bourgeois, understood as individuals and as a minority? To be sure, they would continue to have the vote. But what about other rights like freedom of speech and organization? To his credit, Hunt is only too aware of this dilemma:

[Democratic] institutions do not automatically include protection for dissenting minorities or individuals, and by the same token Marx and Engels’ clear support of majority rule does not automatically mean that they supported political rights for dissenting minorities . . . the conclusion is easily formed that a tyranny of the majority was precisely what they had in mind.⁷⁶

Hunt concludes, in a carefully constructed argument, that majority tyranny, i.e. majority rule disrespecting minority rights, was after all *not* what Marx and Engels had in mind, thus saving the democratic credentials of their proletarian dictatorship. For Hunt, it is of the essence that Marx and Engels never explicitly advocated curtailing the rights of individual bourgeois.⁷⁷ But it is surely as revealing that the two men did not find the question of the individual rights of members of the privileged classes important enough even to mention

⁷³ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 2, pp. 199–200. Italics in original.

⁷⁴ ‘The Parliamentary Debate on the Anti-Socialist Law (Outline of an article)’, *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 248 (*MEW*, Vol. 34, pp. 498–9). Italics in original.

⁷⁵ *MECW*, Vol. 23, p. 425 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, p. 308).

⁷⁶ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 2, pp. 182–3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–211, in particular p. 195.

or to discuss. This aspect of the matter, to which we will return later, remains importantly understudied in the literature.

It bears noting in passing that we are here sidestepping the fundamental question of whether the communist transition, i.e. the programme against which Marx and Engels expected the bourgeoisie to rebel, is democratically acceptable just because supported by a democratic majority. The answer to this question depends on whether or not one accepts the right to own property as a human right. If yes, then the communist transition, resting on wholesale expropriation, *as such* might represent a case of majority tyranny. Interestingly, the *Communist Manifesto* famously characterized communist nationalization as ‘despotic inroads on the rights of property’.⁷⁸

VI Proletarian Majority Rule

Through the years, Marx and Engels insisted on the need for the government to fall under the control of the proletariat *alone*. Examples abound in the early fifties: in 1850 Marx expressed the hope that the proletariat would ‘seize the revolutionary dictatorship’.⁷⁹ According to Engels, the revolution could only end with the ‘complete rule of the proletariat’.⁸⁰ In April 1852, Engels called on the working class to claim ‘the dictatorship of France’.⁸¹ For a much later example, in 1883 Engels characterized the state as an organism ‘by means of which the victorious working class can exert its newly conquered power, keep down its capitalist enemies and carry out [the] economic revolution of society’.⁸²

How did political power for the proletariat alone go together with majoritarian democracy? According to Hunt, proletarian dictatorship would have represented a form of ‘majority rule by the proletariat’.⁸³ But this formula obscures more than it reveals. For Marx and Engels, proletarian majority rule could well mean a proletarian *minority* voted into power by the peasant majority. That was even the most common way for them to frame proletarian majority rule. Again, from a democratic point of view this formula does not represent a problem.

The *Manifesto* announces that Germany is ‘on the eve of a bourgeois revolution’, and that this ‘bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but the *prelude*

⁷⁸ *MECW*, Vol. 6, p. 504 (*MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 481). Italics added.

⁷⁹ *Class Struggles in France*, *MECW*, Vol. 10, p. 98 (*MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 62).

⁸⁰ ‘The Campaign for the German Imperial Constitution’ (July 1849 and later), *MECW*, Vol. 10, p. 237 (*MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 196).

⁸¹ ‘Real Causes why the French Proletarians Remained Comparatively Inactive in December Last’, *MECW*, Vol. 11, p. 218 (*MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 228).

⁸² ‘On the Death of Karl Marx’, *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 478 (*MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 345).

⁸³ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 1, p. 305. See also p. 319.

to an immediately following proletarian revolution'.⁸⁴ Thus, Marx and Engels imminently expected the *proletarian* revolution, as the immediate follow-up of the democratic revolution, which, again, might come any day. But in 1848, the German proletariat represented only a tiny section of the population. Apparently, then, Marx and Engels accepted that the new German state would be ruled by the proletarian *minority*.

Arguably, if we count in the agricultural wage workers, the working class represented a majority of the British population in the mid- and late nineteenth century; but no other European country, let alone in the rest of the world, had a proletarian majority. Marx and Engels themselves were only too aware of that problem, as Draper observed: 'Marx was very conscious of the fact that the majority of the French people were not proletarian . . . What determined the class character of the Commune, for Marx, was the *hegemony of the proletariat* in the revolution; that is, the fact that the other class elements in the revolution looked to it as the vanguard and leader.'⁸⁵

In other words, if the proletariat obviously could not score a majority on its own, a popular alliance headed by the workers' party just might. In this scheme, the coalition of popular classes would not be in power but serve to support the workers' exclusive power. Even under conditions where it represented a minority, the proletariat was to rule on its own: alone.

Marx never discussed this issue *in extenso*, but in the few cases where he did pay attention to it, he made himself clear enough. In *Class Struggles in France*, for example, he defined the '*constitutional republic*' existing in France as 'the dictatorship of [the peasant's] united exploiters'. As opposed to this, he noted: '*the social-democratic, the Red republic*, is the dictatorship of his allies'.⁸⁶ A bit cryptic perhaps, but unequivocal: the Red republic is not the dictatorship of the peasant plus his allies: the workers; but exclusively that of these allies, in other words, the dictatorship *of the proletariat*. Marx hoped the peasants would support a *proletarian* government.

Likewise, Marx defined the 1871 Paris Commune as a 'working men's Government [*Arbeiterregierung*]'. The 'working men [*städtischen Arbeitern*]' would have had to become 'the natural trustees [*natürlichen Vertreter*]' of the peasants.⁸⁷ Once again, the workers would be the power; as the new government, it would be their job to shield the peasants.

In his 1874/5 comments in the margins of Mikhail Bakunin's *Statehood and Anarchy*, Marx wrote that it would be enough for the proletariat to form a substantial *minority* to seize power in a country, provided that the proletarian government implements policies favourable to the peasant majority. These passages are important enough to quote at some length:

⁸⁴ *MECW*, Vol. 6, p. 519 (*MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 493). Italics added.

⁸⁵ Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, p. 271. Italics in original.

⁸⁶ *MECW*, Vol. 10, p. 122 (*MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 84). Italics in original.

⁸⁷ *Civil War in France*, *MECW*, Vol. 22, pp. 334, 338 (*MEW*, Vol. 17, pp. 341, 346).

where peasants . . . form a more or less considerable majority, as in all the states of the West European continent . . . there the following may happen: either the peasants prevent or bring about the downfall of every workers' revolution . . . or else the proletariat . . . must, as the government, take the measures needed to enable the peasant to directly improve his condition, i.e. to win him over to the revolution . . . A radical social revolution is . . . only possible . . . where . . . the industrial proletariat accounts for at least a significant portion of the mass of the people. And for it to have any chance of victory, it must be able *mutatis mutandis* at the very least to do as much directly for the peasants as the French bourgeoisie did in its revolution for the French peasantry at that time.⁸⁸

Briefly, then, Marx hoped for the proletarian revolution to help the proletariat to sole, exclusive power, even where they made up a mere 'significant portion' of the population, i.e. a substantial minority. There would be no such thing as a worker-peasant majority *government*. However, in order to stay in power, and for proletarian rule to be democratically legitimized, the minority government depended on the electoral support of the peasant majority.

VII The One-Class State

As indicated above, present in Marx's and Engels' works, too, is another, second vision of proletarian rule that goes beyond the idea of majority proletarian government and democratic/dictatorial emergency rule: the notion of narrow, class-based sovereignty. In that alternative vision, not only the government but the state itself will be a one-class arrangement, from which other classes are excluded. It is to that vision that we now turn. Nothing suggests that Marx and Engels realized they were operating with two different, incompatible visions.

For the alternative reading of proletarian rule as a one-class *state*, we turn first to a famous passage of the *Communist Manifesto*, quoted *ad nauseam* but seldom properly understood:

the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class [*herrschenden Klasse*], to win the battle of democracy. The proletariat will use its political supremacy [*Herrschaft*] to wrest, by degrees, 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.⁸⁹

In this passage, two things are happening. First of all, the organized proletariat will establish democracy. But second, Marx and Engels identify the state with the organized proletariat. The organized class straightforwardly *is* the state. Beyond merely forming the government, the class makes the state identical

⁸⁸ *MECW*, Vol. 24, pp. 517–18 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, pp. 630, 633).

⁸⁹ *MECW*, Vol. 6, p. 504 (*MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 481).

with itself. Even if the authors do not elaborate on what this means concretely, there is no escaping the conclusion that if the state is *identical* with one class, on an abstract level, logically, the other classes fall outside the state. That, again, is in direct contradiction to the idea of democracy, understood as a representation of the whole demos, not of one class.

Thus, the *Manifesto* offers two incompatible formulae — democracy and the proletarian state — in a single package. The two things are logically incompatible, in the way a part can never be the whole. In this respect, the fact that the authors furthermore defined the proletarian movement as the ‘self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority’⁹⁰ makes no difference: even if it is a majority that would identify itself as the state, the implied exclusion of the non-ruling minority from the state remains and turns democracy into majority tyranny.

The notion of an exclusively proletarian state echoes a theory of the state briefly alluded to in the *Manifesto*, and which defines political power as ‘merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another’.⁹¹ If the state, as such, is an organization in the hands of one class to oppress another, this latter class is excluded from the state by definition. Far from being an instrument of the whole electorate, including the non-ruling minority, the state constitutes an organization to which a social class, whether the proletariat or the bourgeoisie, is being subjected without having any part in it. Class tyranny.

This exclusivist concept of the state was not the only one Marx and Engels developed, but it stayed with them.⁹² In a March 1875 letter to August Bebel, the latter defined the state as ‘merely a transitional institution of which use is made in the struggle, in the revolution, to keep down one’s enemies by force . . . so long as the proletariat still *makes use* of the state, it makes use of it, not for the purpose of freedom, but of keeping down its enemies’.⁹³ The democratic, social-contract state is supposed equally to protect the freedom of all citizens, but in Engels’ blunt formula the state has a sole possessor, the proletariat, who uses it as a cudgel to strike down another class.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *MECW*, Vol. 6, p. 495 (*MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 472). Italics added.

⁹¹ *MECW*, Vol. 6, pp. 505–6 (*MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 482).

⁹² In an alternative, non-instrumentalist view, democratic and Bonapartist-autocratic institutions allow modern states to develop autonomously from bourgeois class dictates. This alternative theory allows for a not strictly class-tied interpretation of democracy and is consistent with Marx’s and Engels’ other vision of proletarian rule as a democratic republic. See for example Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge/Paris, 1985), ch. 7; Michael Levin, *Marx, Engels and Liberal Democracy* (Basingstoke/London, 1989), chs. 2, 3, 5; Ted B. Meckstroth, ‘Marx and the Logic of Social Theory: The Capitalist State’, *Science & Society*, 1 (2000), pp. 55–86.

⁹³ *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 71 (*MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 7). Italics in original.

⁹⁴ See for similar formulas about the state of the bourgeoisie, Engels’ 1877–8 *Anti-Dühring*, *MECW*, Vol. 25, p. 267 (*MEW*, Vol. 20, p. 261); and his 1884 *The Origin*

Engels did not change his mind on this even in the last period of his life. He repeated the formula in his 1891 introduction to Marx's *Civil War in France*: 'the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy'.⁹⁵ In his 1895 introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, Engels famously concluded that universal suffrage proved more promising for a Social Democratic take-over in Germany than the barricades.⁹⁶ But this shifting perspective on the revolution was not accompanied by a change of mind concerning the future state as the possession of the proletarian class.

VIII

Crushing the Bourgeois Resistance

But what did excluding the bourgeois class from the state mean in practical terms? Would the individuals making up the bourgeoisie be accorded equal civil rights and protection in the proletarian state, that is, apart from the vote that we know was not to be taken from them?

In Hunt's words, Marx and Engels 'specified that it was the *resistance* of the bourgeoisie that must be crushed or stamped out and not the bourgeoisie *per se*'.⁹⁷ This is however a difficult point to make, if only because the communist transition was predicated upon the wholesale expropriation of the private owners. Even if this need not necessarily be a violent process, it will bring the bourgeois class as a social formation to an end.

What were Marx and Engels referring to when they insisted on the need for repressing bourgeois resistance? Lovell astutely observes that this is not clear: 'if Engels recognized the main task of the proletarian dictatorship . . . as the suppression of bourgeois resistance, what was it that constituted "bourgeois resistance"? Is the very existence of the remains of the displaced bourgeois class a case of resistance?'.⁹⁸

Indeed, often enough Marx and Engels announced the need to place not merely those individuals among the bourgeoisie engaging in armed rebellion under an oppressive, violent regime, but all of them comprehensively: the bourgeoisie *as a class*. For example, the April 1850 statute of the 'Universal Society of Revolutionary Communists', signed by Marx and Engels among

of the Family, Private Property and the State, MECW, Vol. 26, p. 275 (MEW, Vol. 21, pp. 170–1).

⁹⁵ MECW, Vol. 27, p. 190 (MEW, Vol. 22, p. 199).

⁹⁶ MECW, Vol. 27, pp. 515–23 (MEW, Vol. 22, pp. 518–26).

⁹⁷ Hunt, *Political Ideas*, Vol. 2, p. 201. Italics in original.

⁹⁸ Lovell, *Marx to Lenin*, p. 87.

others, advocated ‘the submission of [all privileged] classes to the dictatorship of the proletarians’.⁹⁹ In his Bakunin notes, Marx wrote:

[A]s long as the other classes, above all the capitalist class, still exist, and as long as the proletariat is still fighting against [the capitalist class], [the proletariat] must use *forcible* [gewaltsame] means, that is to say, governmental means; as long as [the proletariat] remains a class itself . . . [classes] must be removed or transformed by force [*gewaltsam aus dem Weg geräumt/ ihr Umwandlungsprozess gewaltsam beschleunigt werden*].¹⁰⁰

The term *gewaltsam* that Marx uses to describe the governmental means to be applied against the bourgeoisie as a class, can be translated by violent as well as forcible. Being the *herrschende Klasse*, Marx continued, would mean that ‘the proletariat . . . has gained sufficient strength and organisation to use general means of coercion [*allgemeine Zwangsmittel*] in its struggle against [the economically privileged classes]’.¹⁰¹

Even if only the ‘resisting’ section of the bourgeois would be targeted, the democratic litmus test for Marx’s and Engels’ intentions is whether or not the proletarian state would accept the legitimacy of *peaceful* anti-communist resistance. Would the proletarian state allow the bourgeoisie to mount a legal opposition against the communist transition? Marx and Engels never in so many words answered that question. But their position implies that resistance must be banned *as such*: they were in the habit of insisting that ‘the’ resistance of the bourgeoisie would have to be crushed, without any qualification — resistance *tout court*.

For just some examples of general statements in this direction, Engels wrote in May 1883 that ‘the proletarian class will first have to possess itself of the organised political force of the State and with this aid stamp out the resistance of the Capitalist class and re-organise society’.¹⁰² Ten years earlier, Marx had pointed out that after victory the workers must not lay down their arms, as they will face the task ‘to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class’.¹⁰³ In his Bakunin notes, Marx characterized the bourgeoisie as ‘the strata of the old world who are struggling against [the workers]’, and over whom the workers must therefore establish their ‘*class rule*’.¹⁰⁴

Depriving the bourgeoisie of the right to resist and to struggle against the new order — even peacefully — amounts to depriving these individuals of the right to co-determine the future of the nation and the state. Even while not

⁹⁹ *MECW*, Vol. 10, p. 614 (*MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 553).

¹⁰⁰ *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 517 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, p. 630). Italics in original.

¹⁰¹ *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 519 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, p. 634).

¹⁰² ‘Death of Karl Marx’, *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 478 (*MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 344).

¹⁰³ ‘Political Indifferentism’ (December 1872/January 1873), *MECW*, Vol. 23, p. 393 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, p. 300).

¹⁰⁴ *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 521 (*MEW*, Vol. 18, p. 636). Italics in original.

being deprived of the vote, effectively they would no longer participate in the popular sovereignty.

IX

What If the Balance Is Lost? Concluding Thoughts

We are stuck, then, with proletarian dictatorship as a disjointed project, uneasily combining elements of popular, all-demos sovereignty, and of one-class, proletarian sovereignty, a project perfectly fitting in the nineteenth century, when popular sovereignty was not yet clearly and unequivocally identified with universal-suffrage democracy.

We do not know how Marx and Engels brought the two strands together in their imagination. Probably, they envisioned a democratic republic with a parliament based on universal suffrage but somehow combined with a working class welded into Commune-type organs and imposing a violent, coercive regime upon the bourgeoisie to prevent that class from rebelling. This tense arrangement accommodates two potential sovereigns, the demos and the working class, locked in a condition of unstable, hybrid sovereignty.

If the proletarian ruling class relies on a democratic electoral majority, there is no guarantee that the majority will continue to accept one-party proletarian tutelage. The dangerous question Marx and Engels left unanswered is whether the proletarian government would voluntarily step down if the peasant majority voted it down. Nowhere do they indicate that workers' governments must allow the rest of the population peacefully to depose them. Frederic Bender supposes that their 'class dictatorship of the proletariat' would involve 'democratic forms only to the extent that the latter did not jeopardize proletarian rule'.¹⁰⁵ This might or might not be the case. In the absence of evidence, we are not in a position to know.

At this point, Marx's and Engels' concept of the proletarian dictatorship breaks down into its two, democratic and dictatorial components. The incompatibility of popular sovereignty with a proletarian state order becomes undeniable. If electoral defeat is accepted the workers' rule goes, if not, democracy and popular sovereignty go.

Who would be in final charge in the case of a conflict between the proletarian minority and the peasant majority represented a purely theoretical question for Marx and Engels, which they could well afford to leave unanswered. But it would not remain a theoretical question for long.

It is precisely this question that the Bolsheviks faced when they lost the November 1917 elections. The ruling Soviets with their workers' majority now faced a Constituent Assembly which, given the composition of the Russian population, was elected for the most part by peasants. Faced with the

¹⁰⁵ Frederic L. Bender, 'The Ambiguities of Marx's Concepts of "Proletarian Dictatorship" and "Transition to Communism"', *History of Political Thought*, 3 (1981), pp. 525-55, p. 530.

Assembly's refusal to acknowledge the workers' dictatorship, the Bolsheviks closed down that popularly elected organ.

The same question came up once more in the German revolution of November 1918, but with the opposite outcome. Workers' and soldiers' *Räte*, councils, seized power and established a coalition government consisting of the moderate *Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (the majority SPD: MSPD) and the radical *Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (the independent SPD: USPD). Interestingly, leading Social Democratic politicians, for example Hermann Müller (MSPD) and Hugo Haase (USPD) oddly but plausibly characterized the coalition government as a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' — for the simple reason that it was a provisional government of workers' parties not legitimized by an elected parliament.¹⁰⁶

The MSPD insisted on early elections for a German *Nationalversammlung* based on universal suffrage. The workers' *Räte* would be abolished. This is how things went. The elections took place in January 1919. The councils did not survive.

The USPD took a divided position. Prominent radicals such as Ernst Däumig and Richard Müller opposed universal suffrage as well as parliamentary elections, which they argued, correctly, would put an end to exclusive workers' rule. Instead, Däumig and Müller advocated a pure workers' council dictatorship. The (dominant) USPD moderates, most prominently Haase and Rudolf Hilferding, supported parliamentary elections. However, they advocated a mixed system, combining parliament as the superior institution with the councils guaranteeing special powers for the workers.¹⁰⁷ In other words, Haase and Hilferding developed their own variety of hybrid sovereignty. In practice this came to nothing.

What at first sight was a purely academic, even obscure question — how did Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels envision the balance of workers' rule and universal suffrage? — turns out to have been a most acute, imperative problem in real-life revolutionary situations. Nor did the question lose its relevance after the wave of European revolutions subsided in the early twenties. The ideal of the 'workers' state', self-organizing workers collectively taking charge of society, always remained popular among the radical left and experienced a strong revival in the nineteen sixties and seventies. It remained just as problematical as the dictatorship of the proletariat had been with Marx and Engels. For, *however conceived*, there is no way a class state, a state

¹⁰⁶ See Mike Schmeitzner, 'Ambivalenzen des Fortschritts. Zur Faszination der proletarischen Diktatur in der demokratischen Revolution 1918–1920', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (2013), pp. 113–45, pp. 118–19, 121.

¹⁰⁷ For these debates see *ibid.*, pp. 119–25, 130, 140; Axel Weipert, 'Die USPD-Linke 1919/20. Reines Rätssystem und Generalstreik in der "zweiten" Revolution', in *Die USPD zwischen Sozialdemokratie und Kommunismus, 1917–1922*, ed. Andreas Braune, Mario Hesselbarth and Stafan Müller (Stuttgart, 2018), pp. 157–72, pp. 159–64.

exclusively representing one class of the population, can be reconciled with democracy, universal suffrage and popular sovereignty. Ironically, precisely the attractive and persistent ideal of the workers' state turns out to represent a fundamentally anti-democratic element in Marxism.

Erik van Ree

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM