

Democracy in Troubled Times

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ABSTRACT: The paper examines liberal democracy as a contradictory social formation. On the one hand, liberalism co-evolved with capitalism and its alienating, exploitative, and oppressive structures dynamics. On the other hand, just because capitalist property relationships were alienating, exploitative, and oppressive, workers and colonised people were forced to fight back. The democratic side of liberal democracy is largely a result of these struggles. From this perspective, democracy is not so much a particular political form as it is a deeper set of social relationships. The protection and deepening of democracy today must root itself in the history of struggles to reclaim collective control over universally required life-resources.

KEYWORDS: Liberalism; Democracy; Marxism; Rights

Introduction

Research conducted over the past three years by political scientists Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounck has found that people in the West are growing indifferent towards liberal-democratic institutions and norms. (Foa and Mounck, 2016; 2017). In a follow up essay in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2019, Foa and Mounck worry that the historical dominance of the West may be coming to an end. China and Russia appear to have successfully combined authoritarian statism and a market economy and pose a global threat to the liberal-democratic order: Whether democracy or autocracy rules the world in the 21st century is thus likely to depend on a number of pivotal countries that could end up as part of either camp. If countries such as India, Nigeria and Indonesia manage to build

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stable and affluent democracies, the principles of liberty and equality have a chance to maintain and extend their influence in the coming decades. But if these crucial “swing states” turn autocratic while becoming rich, democrats will have a harder time making their case (Foa and Mounck, 2019).

But what “case” would “democrats” make to countries like Nigeria, India, and Indonesia, all victims of colonial domination and imperialist exploitation at the hands of liberal democracies? Foa and Mounck do not tell us whether that “other” history of the West, the history known only too intimately by the non-Western victims of colonialism and imperialism, is democratic or not. And if it is part and parcel of the development of Western democracy, why would it be reasonable for its victims to choose it?

We could ask the same question of the working class in the West who form a subset of those grown weary of liberal-democratic platitudes: why *should* they care about “democracy” if democracy means nothing more than voting for one set of politicians from traditional parties who have consistently failed them? Is cynicism and indifference not a rational response to decades of betrayal? If “democracy” cannot prevent plant closures, soaring inequality, and destruction of the social and cultural infrastructure that any worthwhile human life requires; if it tolerates racist police violence and attacks women’s hard won rights to control their bodies; if it lets bigots create social policy and allows desperate migrants to die in the Mediterranean, why should anyone care to preserve this “democracy?” Foa and Mounck do not pose these questions, and thus they do not pose the one question that they really need to ask: did liberal democracy ever really respond to the majority of people’s needs? And if it did not, was it ever fully democratic? The answer, I think, is “no,” but it’s complicated.

On the one hand, considered domestically, there are certainly democratic aspects of liberal-democratic societies. However, these have always been hemmed in, if not outright undermined by capitalist property relations, certain implications of liberal property rights, liberal assumptions about what is good for human beings, and gross inconsistencies in how relevant social interests are counted and ranked. On the other hand, in its relations with indigenous cultures, liberal democracy has been neither liberal nor democratic. Outright colonial violence gave way, after formal decolonization had been achieved, to the dominance at a distance via unfair trade regimes, indebtedness, and the threat—and sometimes actuality—of armed intervention. Nevertheless, despite these contradictions, I will argue that it would be wrong for proponents of radical social change to abandon the democratic elements of the history of liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is a contradictory expression of democratic values; a partial realization within which radical critics and activists have to work, not dismiss outright. As on-going struggles against authoritarianism and austerity in America, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, France, Egypt, Brazil, Ecuador and Iraq prove, liberal-democratic institutions and public institutions still matter to people. Defending and strengthening them is a starting point for more radically transformative struggles.

The tactics, strategies, and immediate goals of different struggles depend upon local conditions. My focus here will be North America (and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom and Western Europe). Of course, there are important differences hidden by this geographical abstraction, but these countries form the historical heartland of liberal-democratic capitalism, and all have faced challenges from a resurgent right-wing populism. Hence there is a shared, three-part task for the left in these countries: to understand the difference between democracy and liberal-democracy, to spell out the social conditions that full democracy requires, and to agree upon a set of realizable policy objectives that can build a history of short term successes. Short-term success can help win the initiative from right-wing charlatans and fuel momentum for struggles for deeper social changes.

Democracy Against Liberal Democracy

I begin with a simple question and a simple answer. “What is democracy?” “Democracy is ‘rule of the people.’” This definition tells us what democracy is as a form of rule distinct from monarchy or aristocracy. Unlike those political systems, democracy does not restrict political power to a hereditary or economic elite. However, what it does not tell us, is what set of social conditions must be satisfied if ‘the people’ are to actually govern their own affairs. Some of those conditions are obvious. They must have equal rights to participate in the political system (by speaking in favour of one party or policy, or voting, or standing as a candidate for office). These political rights presuppose other, more basic civil rights: the right to speak publicly about political problems, to organize support for a party or create a new one, to assemble freely in public and disseminate information—all the familiar rights enshrined in written constitutions or common law. Since the late nineteenth century these civil and political rights have been supplemented by growing body of social rights. Social rights are claims on the total wealth of society due to individuals as a matter of membership in the civic body. They undergird the legitimacy of the welfare state and the use of tax dollars to fund public institutions. *Liberal democracy* identifies

the conditions of self-government (rule by the people), with the set of civil, political, and social rights required by free citizens to exercise their agency as members of a body of citizens.

At the same time as liberal democracy secures the conditions for the participation of citizens in the political process, it also erects limits to popular power by distinguishing between public and private spheres. Political power -- the rule of the people -- is limited to the *res publica*, public things. In matters which are purely private, the person, not the people, rule. Since democracy assumes that everyone is a rational and self-governing agent (and it must make this assumption, or else concede to aristocratic critics that democracy is impossible) some distinction between public and private is necessary. No one who regards themselves as rational, free, and equal is going to concede to the community as a whole the right to decide what they as an individual should think, feel, believe, judge, find funny, beautiful, sexy, or morally right and wrong. If democracy extended popular rule into the mind of the individual, it would be as insufferably totalitarian as any autocratic state.

The traditional liberal democratic “liberties” thus define a private space within which individuals are legitimately free to think and choose. The problem is not the general distinction between the public and the private, but the proper scope of the public. As Jacques Rancière has shown, the history of democracy is a history of the expansion of the scope of the private (Rancière, 2006, 62). The feminist slogan “the personal is political” is an excellent example of Rancière’s point. One of the great accomplishments of feminist struggle has been to reveal to the public the political stakes involved in zones, which have traditionally been understood as private life, like the family. If the family is private, then public law would cease having any force beyond the door of the private home. Within the four walls of the house, the father ruled—autocratically, and often with violence. The feminist argument did not imply that everything about family or intimate life was necessarily public, but that there were public, political implications to how the boundary was traditionally drawn. By shielding family life from political-legal regulation, it allowed fathers to harm women and children. By re-drawing the lines between public and private, ways of silencing women and children were overcome, and their agency-- their scope for action-- was increased. Democracy was advanced, because a formerly silenced set of people could now speak more freely.

The situation is the same when we turn from family life to the economy. Traditionally and still today, liberal democrats insist that the economy is an

essential part of the private sphere. Liberals differ as to the degree to which it is permissible to regulate economic life, but no one is such a left-egalitarian liberal that they reject market competition as the ultimately appropriate means of developing and distributing society's resources. All liberals recognize poverty as politically disabling; many support progressive taxation and public services as means of redistributing wealth to expand the agency of poorer people, but none see (more or less) free markets as themselves barriers to democracy. On the contrary, all liberal democrats assume that democracy and free markets imply each other. But if democracy means rule of the people, and we assume that democracy and free markets imply each other, then it must be the case that the people ultimately rule free markets.

Liberals will say that the people do in fact rule in the free market economy, but they rule as individuals. Labour is regulated by contract law and people decide what is produced by the purchases that they make as consumers. If I choose where to work and what to buy, then the liberal picture seems correct: as a collective, the people rule the public realm, and by choosing where to work and what to buy as individuals, they rule the private realm too. Hence, the conditions of democracy coincide with the conditions for liberal democracy: popular power with regard to public affairs, private power with regard to private affairs. The boundaries are fluid, but not completely: fixed individual rights set a limit to how far the public can encroach on the private.

This picture conceals a structural problem with liberal democracy, one undiagnosed by its most important theorists, even though its effects are everywhere manifest. Liberal private property rights not only protect personal property for use, but also private property in the life-sustaining resources that everyone requires. It makes sense that items that we need as individuals like a coat or smartphone are protected by law as mine, because there would be even more social conflict if everyone could simply seize from everyone else anything that they happened to desire. In the case of personal property, rights to keep that which one has legitimately acquired reduce the role of physical power in the distribution of goods. However, where individuals of a minority class are allowed to own the basic resources from which everything that we need is produced, the technology that is used in the production process, distribution and transportation networks on top of that, and the financial system that advances the funds needed to start and keep production going, property rights not only confer power over the things that they own, but also over the lives of the other citizens that depend upon accessing and using those resources.

This structure of dependence has deep roots. One of the major spurs towards capitalist development in Europe were new social relationships that allowed a class of landowners to enclose formerly common land (See Wood, 2002, 95-124). The peasants that formerly had access to the commons were forced to sell their labour in order to survive. These new social relationships were codified and legitimised by new conceptions of individual rights, the cornerstone of which was the right of individuals to own and control universally required life-resources. As Marx argued, these property rights divided society in two: politically (male) citizens were formally equal, but socially, in terms of the resources that everyone could access, people were substantively unequal (Marx and Engels, 1976, 167). This inequality is the sign of a structural division of society into classes. The ruling class rules not because it has more political rights than workers, but because the resources they control make their political rights more valuable: since they control the conditions of everyone's lives, they are able to determine what people do for a living, whether or not they will have a job, and what the terms of employment are.

For example, in September of 2019, Nematik, a firm producing aluminum engine blocks in Windsor, Ontario, informed its workers that it would close in 2020, despite the fact that the company had signed a legally binding collective agreement that committed it to stay open until 2022. When workers resisted and blockaded the plant for 13 days, the company sought and won an injunction to force them back to work. Their legal right to protect their property overrode the legal right of the workers to have the contract enforced. What this incident shows is that the law, when it comes to private property, has co-evolved with class power, and *is* a respecter of persons: those who own and control the property. Hymns to the rule of law notwithstanding, when it comes to the property of the ruling class, it is money and class interest that rule the way the law is made and enforced. The general implication for democracy is that the social power of the class that owns and controls universally required life-resources undermines the value of the political rights of working people, contradicting the principle of equality and rule of the people that ought to govern a democratic society.

If enclosures were the primary impetus to capitalist development domestically, then slavery and colonization were its primary international drivers. Here human beings themselves became private property and were put to work on plantations and mines that produced capital for export back to Europe. Some of the greatest theorists of liberalism, paramount amongst whom was John Locke, saw no contradiction between the principle that all people were morally equal and that some people could legitimately be enslaved and worked to death (Jahn, 2012,

685-705). That the slave trade and colonization were systematically directed by slave companies chartered by the state did not keep liberals up at night worrying whether their vaunted “liberty and equality” was materially contradicted by the total deprivation of liberty and complete extinguishing of equality for enslaved and colonized people. Like European workers (but in even worse conditions) enslaved people found themselves totally deprived of need-based access to the means of life and thus utterly dependent on their ability to keep working to the satisfaction of the owner for their survival.

Thus, the dark secret that liberal-democracy conceals is this structural dependence of workers on the owners of universally required life-resources. The effects of this structural dependence are modulated by the concrete identity of the members of the working class. Women, for instance, experience this dependence differently than men (and women in one region differently than women in another). Likewise, the enslaved of the colonies experienced a more murderous form of exploitation than workers in Europe. But the root of the problem, from the perspective of democracy, is the same: equality and political rights and power is undermined by the *legal and legitimate* ownership and control of universally required life-resources. No society that allows a minority class to control everything that others need (including their ability to find paid employment to earn the wages that they need to exchange for the goods they need to live) can be fully democratic. Conditions existing at the heart of the reproduction of human life, particularly working conditions, where people work to produce everything that shapes the world as human, are structured by dictatorship rather than democracy. At work, the boss rules the workplace with total authority.

Democracy Against Liberalism and Capitalism

I said above that workers and enslaved peoples were totally dependent upon the ruling class for access to the goods that their lives required. This claim is only partially true. In fact, no adult human being is ever *wholly* dependent on another for their lives, and this deep truth about human beings is essential to understanding how an initially undemocratic liberal capitalism became democratic (and how the promise of democracy can ultimately be fulfilled). People are not like rocks or sand dunes, totally dependent on physical forces that erode them and sculpt them into different shapes. Even in the most abjectly unfree social conditions we remain social self-conscious agents capable of understanding that the conditions in which we live are *forced upon us* and not freely chosen. Once people become conscious of the ways in which need-deprived and unfree forms

of life are imposed upon them, they can (and ultimately will) fight back. Because human beings are essentially social self-conscious subjects and not mere things, we struggle for changes once we become conscious of our power to change institutions. Undemocratic liberal-capitalist society has become more democratic because the exploited, alienated, and oppressed have fought back for three centuries.

The history of these fightbacks is too complex and variegated to discuss in any detail here (See Noonan, 2006 and Noonan, 2019). Instead I want to focus on the common ground (which is not always brought to light even by the best critics of capitalism) on which all opponents of liberal-democratic capitalism stand. While the directly experienced conditions of life of different groups of oppressed people differ, the conditions that permit and legitimate ruling class power are the same. Whether it is a sexist society asserting that women are incapable of rational thought and thus have no need for education and no right to participate in the political system, or a racist colonial government insisting that the indigenous people over which they rule are somehow morally and intellectually inferior and thus rightfully dominated, or judges who conclude that workers are legally free to not sign a labour contract and thus cannot claim that they have any rights in the workplace against their bosses – in all of these cases, the subaltern group is treated as a thing, and not as social self-conscious agents. Their thinghood, however, is not a function of a philosophical mistake, but a social system in which they really are reduced to the status of things: objects that work to produce wealth and pleasure for the ruling class. When different groups of oppressed people stand up and say “No longer!”, they prove that they are not objects but human beings.

They, thus, expose that a philosophical mistake has in fact been made. However, their goal is not to revise philosophical principles, but to change the society that has been justified by a false philosophy. At the same time, if we focus on the underlying capacity to fight back and change society, we see that all of these different struggles have a common goal: to create the social conditions in which every person can live fully and freely as a human being. This goal is the deep promise of democratic society. It has animated peasants in ancient Greece fighting against the traditional aristocracy, as well as modern Greek workers fighting against austerity. It motivated Mary Wollstonecraft to argue that the “Rights of Man and Citizen” should apply to women. It motivated Toussaint L’Ouverture to organize his fellow enslaved human beings into the world’s first anti-colonial, anti-slavery revolution. And it motivates Black Lives Matter activists today to

resist police violence. The historical context, the actors, the specific problem, and the language through which the struggle is organized differ in every case, but the material and moral core is the same: people fight back against social structures that deprive them of that which they require to live and develop freely as human beings.

These struggles mark out a crucial difference, typically ignored by defenders of liberal democracy, between democracy as a social system and way of life, and democracy as a political system defined by regular elections and constitutional rights. When we say *democracy*—rule of the people— we have to be saying more than the fact that people get to vote for governments who then enact whatever policies they want, which are justified in the people’s name. It must mean more than the exercise of intermittent political power, because the idea of “rule” is a normative idea. It does not refer simply to a power to act but implies that political power ought to be exercised in accordance with certain standards rooted in our objective interests. Rule of the people does not mean, therefore, that people elect a government and authorize it to *call* whatever they enact “the will of the people.” First, governments are almost never elected by actual majorities. Second, and more deeply, given the separation of the economic system from the political system that I discussed above, political power rarely if ever serves the common life-interests of people that have driven struggles for democracy. The example of the climate crisis helps to explain my point.

If elected governments continue to make decisions that allow unbridled exploitation of the earth’s resources through industries powered by fossil fuels, then these decisions are materially irrational. They are inconsistent with the future of our societies. If the people really “ruled,” and they understand at least the basic conditions of their on-going existence, then (unless everyone has a death-wish) they would not make decisions that undermined their future. The decisions, however, are not freely taken by the people acting together as a self-governing collective subject aware of their own conditions of life. Instead, the decisions are *responses to* the reified power of market forces. Political parties claim to act according to the will of the people but are really serving those forces. On one level, of course, laws issue from legislatures, and therefore political power. However, they are not the result of robust, all-round, *democratic* deliberations which take into account the need for any sound law to cohere with fundamental conditions of life and life-development. The reason that laws and policies (or, more often, roll backs of earlier regulatory policies) fail to take account of the natural and social conditions of on-going life and life-development is not first and foremost because

of climate-denial and mis-information (which convinces only a small number of internet shut-ins and far-right fools), but because of the actual structure of social dependence typical of capitalist society.

In the short term, people think: “I need to work. I need to drive my car to work. It will be cold soon and I need to heat my home.” Work, transportation, and heating are not extravagant luxuries but basic life-necessities. When life-necessities are commodified, people become dependent on wages to survive. Driven to survive, they work and pay their bills. They can see that there is a coming climate catastrophe *tomorrow*, (this was the highest ranked issue on a list of public concerns for the October 2019 Canadian election) but do not see how they can change their patterns life *today*. We thus carry on, which is not irrational; but in carrying on, we allow economic forces to keep driving us towards the cliff, which *is* irrational. But to conclude that failure to act is democratic, just because the party in power has been elected, makes a mockery of the idea of popular rule. The people, as human beings who need a life-sustaining environment, are precisely *not ruling*. We are being led to disaster by reified market forces and the small ruling class that derives short-term social benefit from them.

Solidarity in the Struggle for a Democratic Society

Despite my philosopher’s talk of rational and irrational, material conditions and foundations, the solution is not theoretical but practical. If the drivers of climate catastrophe and the hollowing out of democracy are the power that market forces generate and the maneuvers of the ruling class to maintain their power and privilege come what may, then the solution has to be to eventually overcome class rule and the power of market forces. That is easy to say, and much more difficult to do. We have had splendid examples of mass popular mobilisation in the last ten years, including revolutions against long-standing dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, that nevertheless failed to transform the deep structure of dependence that keeps people in thrall to market forces. After the millions in the streets went home, local ruling classes, in open alliance with the United States, re-established their power (quietly, in Tunisia, and through a coup in Egypt).

In North America and Europe, the texture of struggle is different of course, but the same sort of problem besets movements like the *Gilet Jaunes*. They have been mobilising tens of thousands of people for months but have not made any decisive changes to the underlying structure of French society. Yet it is the underlying structure that must be changed, because it is this structure that keeps people dependent on labour and commodity markets. This dependency in turn

causes workers to make rational short-term decisions (say, to be a welder on an oil sands pipeline because it is a well-paying job) that then generate irrational patterns of social policy and choice over the long term. Greta Thunberg is to be commended for her verve in calling politicians to account for their inaction on climate change, but what her argument lacks is an understanding of how this structure of dependence keeps people voting for politicians who do nothing, all the while saying that preventing climate catastrophe is top of their political concerns. Clearly, then, the most important need, if societies are to be democratised in the deep way that I explained in Section Two, is a set of realizable demands that reduce the dependence of people on labour and commodity markets.

One key problem that the socialist left faces is that while they understand the need to change this structure of dependence, they cannot say, with any degree of precision, how a socialist economy will function. The same structure of dependence that they understand so well means it is highly unlikely that workers will fight for a revolutionary socialist future whose present reality exists only in academic argument and whose past is associated in the popular imagination with totalitarianism and technological backwardness. However, there is another legacy of workers' struggles that is real, not academic, that worked, that still exists, and which can function as a mediation that reduces dependence on labour and commodity markets in the short term, while creating time and space for more radically transformative projects over the long term.

That other legacy is the robust set of public institutions and public goods that a century of working-class struggle has created. Public health care, education systems, libraries, parks and common green spaces, galleries, cultural centres, and public pensions are all rooted in the principle of distribution according to need, not the ability to pay. It is true that this principle has been eroded by neo-liberal user pay schemes, and that these institutions are bureaucratic not democratic. It is also true that the existence of these institutions owes as much to capitalists' desire to ward off more radical struggles as much as workers' fights for freedom from labour and commodity markets. But at the same time, they are *real* and they *work* (imperfectly, but they can be democratised and improved *right now*). As they improve, workers' dependence on market forces decreases and their scope for action correspondingly increases. As their scope for action increases, they are able to fight for more.

The more for which they ought to fight has to be plausible and realizable and not some mere abstraction. Nationalization of disused productive assets and

re-opening of closed plants under public ownership are demands that can be realized within the existing institutional framework, but they also contest the status quo and push it in more deeply transformative directions. We have seen a small but real uptick in the willingness of workers to contest the power of capital to decide their futures. The most recent example was a 13-day blockade of the Nemaq engine casting plant in Windsor. As with the closure of GM's facility in Oshawa, workers did not simply shrug their shoulders and start looking for other work but fought back. A court injunction threatened massive fines if the union did not return to work, so they eventually settled for a fairly weak agreement on the part of the company to submit a final decision on the closure date to binding arbitration. In Oshawa, Unifor has accepted a very modest GM proposal to keep a few hundred workers employed in a small section of the closing plant.

In response, more imaginative and demanding people like Sam Gindin have come up with realizable proposals to take over the plant and use it to create electric cars (Gindin, 2019). The details are not essential here, the important point is that, as with the case of expanded and democratized public institutions, this plan can be executed right now, using institutions and legal mechanisms that currently exist. If successful, it creates a working example of a public enterprise operating under workers' control, producing ecologically sound technologies for the national market. Democracy is thus expanded into the economic system in a way that unleashes a counter-logic to capitalist exploitation and alienation.

Successful experiments along these lines, combined with expanded public services paid for by taxes on capital and wealth rather than wages and consumption, change the power dynamics between labour and capital. Capital can at the very least be put on the defensive for the first time in forty years. To the objection that what we need is revolutionary socialism and not a showcase plant or two under public ownership I offer the following response: indeed we do need revolutionary socialism, but getting there is the problem. Socialism is a society, and societies, like energy, are neither created nor destroyed; they just change form. Workers cannot live on slogans and abstract demands, and thus cannot simply abandon existing forms of employment on the basis of a vague hope that some undefined alternative economy might work out better for them. At the same time, it is clear that the existing economy is not working for workers and will almost certainly get worse. Liberal-democratic capitalism is an increasingly exhausted social form, but it is a form that has been shaped by the needs of capital *and* the struggles of workers against those reified forces. Those struggles have created a legacy of (contradictory) public institutions that can form a concrete basis for

further struggles, justified by the value of democracy constantly invoked by the ruling class in theory but denied by them in practice.

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