

[WSM_Forum] Re: Difference between Leninism and Marxism

From: **wsm_forum@yahoogroups.com** on behalf of **trotfinder** (grahamt@sol.dk)

Sent: 10 January 2006 04:53AM

To: WSM_Forum@yahoogroups.com

Hi all esp. Bjorn

Bjorn writes

Bjorn: "So Lenin speaks of a distinction between socialism and communism, whilst Marx did not. Would you agree?"

Yes.

Bjorn: "Marx also made a distinction between two post-revolutionary phases in his 'Critique of the Gotha Programme'. Where first, says Marx: 'we have to deal with here [...] is a communist society [...] still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it comes.' only after this is it possible to create full communism."

The matter has been dealt with many times in the "Socialist Standard" - see the SPGB online archive.

Suffice it to say Marx was speaking of two phases in communism (the word he preferred to use for a classless society of common ownership); he wasn't talking of two different forms of society.

Lenin, on the other hand, spoke of state monopoly capitalism either as the way forward for Russia or else as being "socialism". Soviet State capitalism was obviously not socialism/communism and equally nothing workers should wish for.

Bjorn: "I'm curious, as to Marx's definition of 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Since I have not found any definition in Marx's works. Perhaps you have and you can point them out to me?"

For Marx it was nothing more than the working class winning the battle of democracy, to ad-lib "The Manifesto".

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat is discussed by Hal Draper, in an article available here:

<http://marxmyths.org/hal-draper/article2.htm>

Graham

<http://letshavesocialismnow.blogspot.com>

The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ in Marx and Engels

Source: Chapter 1 of *The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ from Marx to Lenin*, by Hal Draper, Monthly Review Press, 1987.

Copyright: reproduced with permission of Hal Draper’s estate at the [Center for Socialist History](#). All rights remain with the author’s estate.

1 The ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’ in Marx and Engels

The phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ first appeared in a series of articles by Marx, later titled *The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850*, published in what was then Marx’s own London magazine. The first article, written in January 1850, came off the press in early March. The expression or its equivalent appeared not once but three times – in each of the three installments (or chapters) that comprised the original series.

This work was Marx’s attempt to sum up the political meaning of the European revolution of 1848-49. Marx had taken an active part in this revolution in the German arena, as editor of the leading organ on the revolutionary left, at the same time closely following the turbulent developments in France and Vienna in particular. The revolution was now over, and Marx was thinking over its lessons.

The first question is: when it appeared in print in the spring of 1850, what did the phrase mean to Marx and to his contemporaneous readers?

The key fact, which was going to bedevil the history of the term, is this: in the middle of the nineteenth century the old word ‘dictatorship’ still meant what it had meant for centuries, and in this meaning it was *not* a synonym for despotism, tyranny, absolutism, or autocracy, and above all it was *not* counterposed to democracy.

1. Short Sketch of ‘Dictatorship’

The word ‘dictatorship’ in all languages (*dictature*, *Diktatur*, etc.) began as a reference to the *dictatura* of the ancient Roman Republic, an important constitutional institution that lasted for over three centuries and left its enduring mark on all political thought. This institution provided for an emergency exercise of power by a trusted citizen for temporary and limited purposes, for six months at the most. Its aim was to preserve the republican status quo; it was conceived to be a bulwark in defense of the republic against a foreign foe or internal subversion; indeed it was directed against elements whom we might today accuse of wanting “dictatorship.” It worked – at least until Julius Caesar destroyed the republican *dictatura* by declaring himself unlimited “dictator” in permanence, that is, a dictator in our present-day sense.^[1]

The modern analogue of the Roman *dictatura* is the institution of martial law (or “state of siege”). This device has the three distinguishing features of the Roman one: it is based on constitutional legality, not tyranny; it is temporary; it is limited, especially in its ability to impose new laws or constitutions. Again and again, institutions of the martial-law type have provided for some form of crisis government or emergency regime. Few claim that these institutions are *ipso facto* antidemocratic, though of course they can be perverted to antidemocratic uses like everything else.^[2]

The old meaning conditioned all European political thought and language right into the nineteenth century, though the application of the term tended to blur in some respects. Most consistently it kept referring to an emergency management of power, especially outside of normal legality. The one-man aspect of its meaning was sometimes primary, but it was often muffled, particularly by rightists attacking the dominance of a popularly elected body.^[3]

In the French Revolution – like all revolutions a bubbling cauldron of political terminology – the Girondins liked to denounce the “dictatorship of the National Convention” (the zenith of revolutionary democracy at the time) or the “dictatorship of the Commune of Paris” (the most democratic expression yet seen of a mass movement from below).^[4] For over a century no one would blink when the British Parliament was attacked as a “dictatorship” on the ground that it held all power, though this usage dropped even the crisis-government aspect of the term.

The history of ‘dictatorship’ on the left begins with the very first socialist-communist movement, the first fusion of the socialistic idea with membership

organization: the so-called “Conspiracy of the Equals” led by Babeuf in 1796, in the backwash of the failed French Revolution. In an influential book published in 1828, Babeuf’s lieutenant Buonarroti described the activity and politics of this movement in some detail, thereby producing a textbook of Jacobin-communist politics that helped educate (and miseducate) the “Blanquist” leftists of the next two decades. (It was quickly published in English by left Chartists.)

Buonarroti described the conspirators’ discussion on the transitional revolutionary government to take power after victory. While eschewing the term ‘dictatorship’ because of its one-man meaning, he left no doubt that the revolutionary government was to be the dictatorship of the small band making the revolution, which had the task of educating the people up to the level of eventual democracy. This concept of Educational Dictatorship was going to have a long future before it. There was not the slightest question of a ‘dictatorship’ of, or by, the working-people, corrupted as they were by the exploitive society to be overthrown. The revolutionary band of idealistic dictators alone would exercise the transitional dictatorship, for an unspecified period of time, at least a generation.^[5]

This was also the entire content of the concept of dictatorship held by Auguste Blanqui and the Blanquist bands of the thirties and forties. In addition, the Blanquists (and not only they) advocated the “dictatorship of Paris” over the provinces and the country as a whole – which meant, above all, over the peasants and the rural artisanry; for had not the provinces shown in the Great Revolution that they tended toward counterrevolution? In the name of The People, the revolutionary saviors would defend the revolution against the people.

Incidentally, the ascription of the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ to Blanqui is a myth industriously copied from book to book by marxologists eager to prove that Marx was a putschist “Blanquist,” but in fact all authorities on Blanqui’s life and works have (sometimes regretfully) announced that the term is not to be found there. More important, the concept of political power exercised by the democratic masses is basically alien to the Blanquist idea of Educational Dictatorship.^[6]

By the nineteenth century political language had long included references to the “dictatorship” of the most democratic assemblies, of popular mass movements, or even of The People in general. All Marx did at the time was apply this old political term to the political power of a *class*.

But Marx's usage in 1850 was significantly conditioned not merely by the long history of the word but particularly by its history in the revolutionary period he had just passed through.

2. 'Dictatorship' in the 1848 Revolution

Revolutions are by nature periods of crisis management and emergency power, in which the old legalities totter or tumble. This is true on both sides, for counterrevolutions are no greater respecters of legality. The revolution of 1848 saw the imposition of a "dictatorship," that of General Cavaignac, which was the herald of its modern history. But the necessity of some sort of dictatorship (in the terminology of the day) was recognized on all sides and freely discussed by the most disparate political tendencies from right to left.^[2]

The essential meaning of 'dictatorship' at this time can be seen best in the case of Louis Blanc, one of the pinkest social-democrats in the early history of the movement. He constituted the left wing of the provisional government that took power in the February Revolution. This government naturally assumed power extralegally, through an announcement before a mass demonstration. Even Lamartine, its right-wing leader who was anxious to lead the revolution into conservative channels, called himself and his colleagues "dictators" for this reason. Louis Blanc *advocated* the continuance of the "dictatorship," through the postponement of elections, in order to allow for a period of re-education of the people. Not only at the time but in a book published ten years later, Blanc advocated that the provisional government should "regard themselves as dictators appointed by a revolution which had become inevitable and which was under no obligation to seek the sanction of universal suffrage until after having accomplished all the good which the moment required." Blanc not only wanted a longer postponement than did the revolutionary workers' clubs of Paris, he also advocated the old idea of the "dictatorship of Paris" over the country.^[3]

Obviously 'dictatorship' was not the property of "extremists" and wild-eyed revolutionaries. Far from being counterposed to democracy, it was viewed – favorably or hostilely – as an aspect of the movement of the Democracy.

Everyone had his own idea of what the proper sort of 'dictatorship' should be. Wilhelm Weitling had long advocated a messianic dictatorship with himself as the messiah, and in 1848 he openly advocated a dictatorship with a "single head"; a

couple of weeks later, Marx attacked and rejected Weitling's proposal in the same forum that Weitling had used.^[9] Bakunin, involved in the revolutionary movement in Bohemia, later recounted that his aim was the establishment of a "government with unlimited dictatorial power," in which "all will be subjugated to a single dictatorial authority," through three secret societies based on "strict hierarchy and unconditional discipline." This was only the first version of Bakunin's lifelong fabrication of various forms of a "secret dictatorship" exercised by "Invisible Dictators."^[10]

These concepts of 'dictatorship' (and others) were plainly antidemocratic, just as most concepts of 'government' were anti-democratic. But, like the word 'government,' 'dictatorship' could be filled with various contents, denoting some extralegal sort of emergency regime; and it was. In the "June days" of 1848, when the Paris working class erupted in the greatest revolt that modern history had yet seen, the panic-stricken provisional government replied by entrusting the power of military "dictatorship" to General Cavaignac, who used it for an educational bloodletting on a mass scale even after the fighting was over. (The term 'dictatorship' was not used officially, but was common in the press and on everyone's tongue; the official term was "state of siege.")

To be sure, Cavaignac's dictatorship was not a modern dictatorship, but it was the prelude to the modern history of the term. It provided the juridical basis for the state-of-siege provision put into the French constitution of November 1848, which in turn led to the law of August 9, 1849, still in force in the twentieth century as the basic law of "constitutional dictatorship" in France. It provided the model for martial-law institutions in Berlin and Vienna later in 1848. It cleared the way for the dictatorship of Napoleon III, which did not call itself a dictatorship but merely the Second Empire. It made dictatorship a European institution.^[11]

During this revolution Marx was the dominant figure on the extreme left of the revolution in Germany, as editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne. Like everyone else, the *N. R. Z.* referred to dictatorship. But the first mention of 'dictatorship' in its columns was not by Marx but occurred in a quotation from the head of the provisional government that had taken power in the revolution behind the mass surge of revolt – and which was determined to prevent the revolution from overthrowing the Crown and its absolutist government. The prime minister, Camphausen, a Rhenish capitalist, strenuously argued that if the provisional

government and its assembly took sovereign power in the name of the popular rule, this would be a “dictatorship” – the dictatorship of the Democracy indeed. If the new government democratized the elite system of voting, this would be dictatorship too.

Now the main line championed by Marx’s *N.R.Z.* was the simple proposal that the National Assembly declare itself sovereign, repudiating the absolutist government and appealing to the people. No one doubted that this raised the question of revolutionary legality. That is what revolutions are for. The term ‘dictatorship’ on all sides simply reflected this problem, as Camphausen had exemplified by his attack on the dictatorship of the Democracy. It was in this context that the *N.R.Z.* advocated that the ‘dictatorship’ of the popular assembly put through a whole series of democratizing measures to revolutionize Germany’s autocratic society. Marx wrote:

Every provisional state setup after a revolution requires a dictatorship, and an energetic dictatorship at that. From the beginning we taxed Camphausen with not acting dictatorially, with not immediately smashing and eliminating the remnants of the old institutions.

There was no question of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ here because Marx’s policy in this revolution was to champion the initial assumption of power not by the working-class movement (which was just getting organized) but by the liberal bourgeoisie, whose historical task it was (as Marx then saw it) to uproot the old regime of Crown-bureaucracy-feudalists and establish a bourgeois democratic society, in which the proletariat could develop its own movement and its own class struggle looking toward eventual victory. But the German bourgeoisie, in large part precisely because it saw a revolutionary proletariat pressing behind it, refused to play out this drama, and instead clung to the absolutist government’s power as its bulwark against the future proletarian threat.

The most important lesson that Marx learned from the revolutionary experience was that the German bourgeoisie could not be relied on to make its *own* revolution, the bourgeois democratic revolution which would eventually lay the basis for the proletarian socialist revolution. The two tasks would have to be telescoped, unlike the pattern that France had exemplified. A German revolution would have to be pushed forward and still forward, from stage to stage, pressing leftward, until power could be taken by the extreme left, the revolutionary proletariat. This is, the concept which Marx summarized as “permanent (that is, ongoing or continuous) revolution,”

“a revolution which does not come to a halt until the proletariat has taken power.” It is this conclusion that introduced the question of proletarian power (or, same thing, proletarian ‘dictatorship’) into Marx’s writings of 1850 analyzing the defeated revolution.^[12]

3. The Fear of the ‘Dictatorship’ of the People

For decades Europe lay in the shadow of the defeated revolution. In the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, the ruling classes had trembled before the specter of a Communist revolution, and one of the lesser consequences fell on their mode of language. Above all, talk of the threatened (and just averted), “dictatorship” or “despotism” of the people became journalistic commonplace. Of course the idea of the “despotism of the people” goes back to Plato’s and Aristotle’s horror of democracy as a threat to established society; but in the 1850s this fear became pandemic.

The London *Times* thundered against giving the vote to the majority of the people on the ground that this would in effect disenfranchise “the present electors” by making the lower classes “supreme.” Manchester capitalists denounced a strike as “the tyranny of Democracy.” The liberal Tocqueville, writing in 1856 about the Great French Revolution, regretted that it had been carried through by “the masses on behalf of the sovereignty of the people” instead of by an “enlightened autocrat”; the revolution was a period of “popular” dictatorship, he wrote. It was perfectly clear that the “dictatorship” he lamented was the establishment of “popular sovereignty.”^[13]

In 1849 Guizot, the last prime minister to serve under a French king, published an interesting book, *On Democracy in France*. In a great passage, the historian-statesman complained: everyone claims to be for democracy nowadays, including monarchists and republicans as well as leftists; but democracy means chaos, class war, and popular despotism. Popular despotism means that the people impose their will over those classes which, though a minority, have the mission of ruling society. The newfangled notion that sovereignty should flow from elections is totally un-French. “Popular tyranny or military dictatorship may be the expedient of a day, but can never be a form of government.”

Guizot assumed what everyone knew: democracy meant All Power to the People. This meant the dictatorship of the people. This dictatorship he was against.^[14]

Early in the same year, a Spanish conservative became famous all over Europe for a speech made in Spain's parliament that said bluntly and even crudely what few others dared to put into words so frankly. Juan Donoso Cortés had been one of the Spanish political leaders who had helped put General Narvaez into power as a virtual dictator even before the European revolution had broken out. In his "Speech on Dictatorship," Donoso had no compunction about asserting that power belonged in the hands of the propertied bourgeoisie by right of "intelligence" and by right of the saber. As for legality: 'When legality suffices to save society, then legality. When it does not suffice, dictatorship.' Yes, he admitted, the word 'dictatorship' is a "fearful word," but the word 'revolution' is "the most fearful of all."

It was only a question of what kind of dictatorship you favored: "it is a question of choosing between the dictatorship of the insurrection and the dictatorship of the [present] government," and *he* chose the latter. Then came his high point:

It is a question of choosing between the dictatorship from below and the dictatorship from above: I choose the dictatorship from above, since it comes from a purer and loftier realm. It is a question of choosing, finally, between the dictatorship of the dagger and the dictatorship of the saber: I choose the dictatorship of the saber, since it is nobler.

The greatest dictatorship of all existed in England; for (mark this!) the British Parliament could do anything it wanted: "Who, gentlemen, has ever seen so colossal a dictatorship?" asked the Spanish reactionary triumphantly. It was something of an anticlimax for Donoso to reveal that God is a dictator also. This speech was quickly translated into many languages and published all over the world.^[15]

At the time, less attention was given to an important book on the European revolution published in 1850 by Lorenz von Stein, who eight years before had written one of the very first studies of the burgeoning of socialism in France. Stein's analysis of "dictatorship" was complex, and cannot be summarized here; suffice it to say that he discussed it wholly in terms of class power, in particular in the context of the new proletariat's class struggles. He saw the question of "dictatorship" in terms of Louis Blanc, whom he accepted as the spokesman of the French working class.

"Social dictatorship," wrote Stein, "became the slogan of the proletariat" (meaning Blanc), "and popular representation the slogan of the Democracy and the

property owners” (meaning the bourgeois democracy led by Lamartine). Louis Blanc’s followers, the social-democrats, could decide to “overthrow the government, replace it exclusively by Social Democrats, and therewith establish the rule of the proletariat.” The social-democrats’ idea of popular sovereignty became the idea that “a Provisional Government should uphold a dictatorship until it has carried out all measures it considers necessary.” “The struggle of the classes for control of the state was here clearly formulated.”

Aside from the fact that he took Louis Blanc’s rhetoric seriously, Stein presented the most sophisticated of the antirevolutionary analyses of the revolution. In some passages he seemed on the verge of using the very term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ but it did not actually appear.^[16]

Marx went over the same ground, in his own way, but with much the same acceptance of the current vocabulary. Like Stein, Guizot, and everyone else, he not infrequently used ‘despotism’ in much the same way as ‘dictatorship’: in combinations like “class despotism” (applied to bourgeois-democratic regimes), “parliamentary despotism,” the industrial “despotism” of the factory, or the “despotic inroads on the rights of property” to be made by a workers’ state. The term ‘class despotism’ which he used quite often in the 1850s was virtually a variation on ‘class dictatorship.’^[17]

In *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution 3*, I have made a detailed survey of how the word ‘dictatorship’ occurs in the writings of Marx and Engels, but the conclusion is not startling: they used the term in ways as various as everyone else did in their day, particularly in metaphorical ways, many of which are still current. They might refer to the “intellectual dictatorship” of the medieval church, or of the popes; or to a financier as “dictator” of the *Crédit Mobilier*. The petty states of Germany were under the “dictatorship” of Prussia or Austria; the Berlin government submitted to a “Franco-Russian dictatorship”; all Europe was under a “Muscovite dictatorship”; and just as the referee is the dictator on a soccer field, so too it was standard for the editor of a daily newspaper to be called “dictator” of the press room, even though he was subordinate to owners. Marx exercised the same “dictatorship” as editor of the *Cologne daily* he put out during the hectic days of revolution in 1848-49.^[18]

The term ‘military dictator[ship]’ was less elastic; in fact, as far as I know, Marx and Engels never used this term about anyone or any regime toward which they felt kindly. I suspect this was true of the general usage too.^[19]

But on the other hand, Marx applied the term ‘dictator’ pejoratively to a number of political figures who exercised no dictatorship at all: in these cases the term merely stressed some sort of *domination* in another form. Among these cases we find the Irish leader Parnell, Bismarck, Lord Palmerston, and a few others. This usage, fairly common in the press, should remind us of how often Franklin D. Roosevelt was called a “dictator” long after the meaning of the term had hardened.^[20]

More to the point are the cases where Marx or Engels attacked efforts toward personal domination inside the working-class or socialist movement; the word ‘dictatorship’ was indeed apt to crop up in the denunciation. The two best cases in point are those of Bakunin and Lassalle, both seekers after personal dictatorship inside the movement, and both attacked for this reason by Marx or Engels. Bakunin’s schemes for a “Secret Dictatorship” of his coterie (in the name of anarchist “libertarianism,” of course) were the basis of the Bakuninists’ drive to take over the International from about 1869 on; and by that time Marx came to understand that “This Russian evidently wants to become dictator of the European working-class movement.” The International published a brochure written mainly by Engels and Lafargue, exposing “the organization of a secret society with the sole aim of subjecting the European workers’ movement to the secret dictatorship of a few adventurers ...” This brochure, for years derogated by unreliable historians, has been confirmed in all essential respects by the accumulation of evidence on Bakunin’s dictatorial aspirations.^[21]

Ferdinand Lassalle was for several years defended by Marx *against* the Communist club in the Rhineland which rejected Lassalle’s bid for membership. It is now known that Lassalle did not bother to conceal his “hankerings for dictatorship” of the workers’ movement, at least not from associates whom he regarded as inferiors. Marx found this out only in 1856. Then in an 1862 visit to Marx, Lassalle revealed more of his dictatorial ideas, his hostility to “individual liberty,” and his propensity for behaving “as if he were the future workers’ dictator.” Marx told him that they were poles apart, agreeing “on nothing except some far-distant ultimate ends,” and chaffed him as an “enlightened Bonapartist.” The accuracy of this assessment was fully confirmed when research turned up Lassalle’s attempt in 1863 to use the newly organized Lassallean social-democratic organization to make a deal with Bismarck: the Lassallean socialists would support a “social dictatorship” by the Crown in exchange for concessions. In this letter Lassalle pointed to his own personal “dictatorship” in the organization as evidence of the willingness of the

“working class” to support dictatorship. The general nature of Lassalle’s machinations with Bismarck were known in the movement at the time, and were reported to Marx. It is hard to see why the myth of Marx’s “personal” hatred for Lassalle had to be invented to account for hostility to a man with such politics.^[22]

In a number of other cases Marx expressed his opinion on efforts at *personal* dictatorship in the movement. Of Auguste Comte, whose sect called itself Positivist and was active in working-class circles, Marx wrote that he was a “prophet” of “personal *Dictatorship*” – “author of a new catechism with a new pope and new saints.” In England, where H. M. Hyndman founded a self-styled Marxist group, the Social Democratic Federation, his dictatorial conduct as boss of the organization was notorious. Hyndman, wrote Engels, had alienated associates particularly by “his impatience to play the dictator.” In what was left of the Chartist movement by 1855, Ernest Jones thought to stem decay by concentrating all organizational power in his own hands. Marx wrote the news to Engels that Jones “has proclaimed himself dictator of Chartism,” stirred a storm of indignation against himself, and showed himself an “ass” in his effort “to play the dictator himself.”^[23]

These examples of the use of ‘dictatorship’ indicate the spectrum of meaning common in the nineteenth century. Indeed, much of this spectrum still conditions the term today; metaphorical uses are still common. But when Marx first wrote down the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ it was a very specific sort of metaphorical usage.

4. ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’: First Period

Quite early, by 1844, Marx came to the conclusion that, to achieve a communist transformation of society, the proletariat first had to conquer political power. This idea played a basic role for him, and various terms expressing it dot his writings: not only ‘conquest of political (or state) power,’ but ‘rule of the proletariat’ in particular; the outcome would be a ‘workers’ state’; in terms of the British movement, this meant ‘proletarian ascendancy.’ We are going to see that, under given circumstances, one of these terms was *also* going to be ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’^[24]

Marx recognized that this aim, the political ‘rule of the proletariat,’ was not at all unique to his own theory; on the contrary, he liked to stress that *all* other real

working-class movements set this as their goal. This is strongly stated in the *Communist Manifesto*:^[25]

The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: constitution of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of bourgeois rule, conquest of political power by the proletariat.

Above all, Marx knew and appreciated that the left Chartists (e.g., Harney) regularly advocated the “ascendancy” (or rule, or political power) of the proletariat.^[26] These Chartists, like Marx, had no trouble with the alleged problem raised by modern marxologists: *How can a whole class rule?* The answer was the same for Marx and the Chartists as it was for their opponents, for (say) the liberal historian Macaulay, who feared universal suffrage on the ground that it would put “supreme power” in the hands of a class, the class of labor, hence generating a “despotism,” by which he openly meant a despotism over the bourgeoisie.^[27]

We are going to see, then, that Marx used the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in exactly the same way as he used ‘rule of the proletariat’ and the other labels for a workers’ state. But under what circumstances did he tend to do so? A major clue is found in the fact that Marx’s and Engels’ use of the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ clustered in three periods and was in fact notably absent in between. These three periods were the following:

Period I: 1850 to 1852, the postrevolutionary period after the upheaval of 1848-1849.

Period II: 1871 to 1875, the postrevolutionary period after the Paris Commune.

Period III (naturally involving Engels only): a sort of echo from 1875.^[28]

In view of the career of the word ‘dictatorship,’ there is now no very difficult problem about Marx’s willingness to replace ‘rule’ with ‘dictatorship’ in certain contexts. But a review of these contexts is enlightening.

Locus 1. In the first chapter of his *Class Struggles in France*, Marx mentioned that in the course of the revolution in France, “there appeared the bold slogan of

revolutionary struggle: *Overthrow of the bourgeoisie! Dictatorship of the working class!*” Since there is absolutely no record that “dictatorship of the proletariat” appeared as a slogan at all, I suggest that Marx is not saying here that *it* appeared; he is only placing it in apposition with the slogan that did appear, the first-mentioned slogan, namely “Overthrow of the bourgeoisie!” In effect he is explaining what the first-mentioned slogan meant. In the same passage, by the way, Marx freely used “bourgeois terrorism” and “bourgeois dictatorship” interchangeably with bourgeois “rule” to characterize the “bourgeois republic.”^[29]

In the second chapter, Marx mentioned that the proletariat was not yet sufficiently developed to take power itself. “the proletariat ... [was] not yet enabled through the development of the remaining classes to seize the revolutionary dictatorship ...” In writing this, Marx, as often, excluded the idea of a seizure of power by a minority in the Blanquist fashion.^[30]

In the third chapter (written in March 1850 and published in April) Marx dissected the pink socialism of Louis Blanc and reported that as against such social-democratic reform currents, “the *proletariat* increasingly organizes itself around *revolutionary socialism*, around *communism*, for which the bourgeoisie itself has invented the name of *Blanqui*.” It is important to note what this clearly states: Blanqui’s name was inventively applied to the communist tendency by its enemies, the bourgeoisie – and not by Marx himself.^[31]

Marx’s chapter goes on to say that this revolutionary socialism “is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*” and thence to the revolutionizing of all society. Please note that Marx’s emphasis is on the term ‘class dictatorship.’

Marx’s reference to Blanqui is a shorthand reference to the then well-known use of Blanqui’s name as a revolutionary bogey by the counterrevolutionary politicians. At a crucial point in April 1848, when a workers’ demonstration against the government was building up, the right-wing Provisional Government leaders organized a massive campaign to circulate the story that Blanqui and his friends were preparing to overthrow the government and take over. (One of the first well-organized “red scares.”)

Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution 3 gives some space to Louis Blanc's own historical account of the use made of Blanqui's "name as a sort of bugbear." Blanc referred to "the part so cleverly assigned to M. Blanqui, the better to frighten the bourgeoisie" – a role assigned, or invented, by the government majority anxious to put an end to revolutionary pressure from below. This is the meaning of Marx's reference to the communist bugbear "for which the bourgeoisie itself has invented the name of Blanqui."^[32]

The repeated claim that in this passage Marx was himself equating the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' phrase with Blanqui is a remarkable distortion that is almost standard among marxologists, not infrequently based on outright mistranslation.^[33]

Locus 2. In April 1850 the phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat' again cropped up, *in connection with* the Blanquists but not as their expression.

At this time, still expecting that the quiescent revolution would burst out again on the Continent, Marx and his comrades of the Communist League, in London exile, looked for cooperative relations with other revolutionary groups. One of these was the left wing of the Chartists, led by Harney, already in close touch with Marx's circle. Among the French, the only group Marx considered to be revolutionary was the Blanquist tendency, which had no prominent leaders and few ideas but did have some influence in the emigré community. Talks took place among these three tendencies looking toward the establishment of a sort of united-front organization for revolutionary cooperation. A number of programmatic points were jotted down – not by Marx or Engels – for consideration under the heading "Société Universelle des Communistes Révolutionnaires." [The full story of SUCR is set out for the first time in Chapter 12 of *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution 3*, which gives particular attention to the myths spun about SUCR by such writers as Nicolaievsky.]

All we really know of SUCR is that some sort of preliminary agreement was reached to discuss this proposal. All the participants signed the paper with the programmatic points. There is no evidence that any organization resulted. Indeed all the evidence indicates that the idea remained strictly on paper and never got off the ground. By October Marx – who had meanwhile come to the conclusion that the revolutionary situation was over for that period – repudiated the SUCR project.^[34]

For what it is worth, then, we can report that the SUCR program set down this article first of all: “The aim of the association is the downfall of all the privileged classes, to subject these classes to the dictatorship of the proletarians, maintaining the revolution in permanence until the realization of communism ...” ^[35]

The “dictatorship of the proletarians” is a formula that Marx never used elsewhere; this is only one of several reasons to believe that the program was drafted not by Marx but by August Willich, a member of the Communist League close to the Blanquists personally. ^[36] There is no mystery about why this phrase, as well as “revolution in permanence,” appealed to these people. The attractive appeal of these terms to Blanquist types who did not understand their content suggests a hypothesis on why, and under what circumstances, Marx occasionally used the term dictatorship of the proletariat. ^[37]

The same hypothesis explains why the term makes its appearance *in connection with* the Blanquists but not *by* the Blanquists. Ordinarily Marx’s term for the idea would be, as we have seen, ‘rule of the proletariat,’ ‘political power of the working class,’ etc. *But when it is a question of counterposing this class concept to the Blanquist-type dictatorship, it is dressed in the formula ‘class dictatorship.’* Class dictatorship is then counterposed to Blanquist dictatorship, to make the contrast.

Particularly in united fronts with the Blanquists, it was only such a formulation that would be acceptable to Marx. On its basis he could undertake to do what was necessary to re-educate his partners. Joint collaboration with these partners took place on a formulation that preserved the class character that was fundamental for Marx, while at the same time no doubt making the Blanquists happy with its revolutionary flavor.

To understand this, the reader must put aside the modern aura that makes ‘dictatorship’ a dirty word for us; for this aura did not yet exist. How do you counteract the primitive notion of dictatorship that was so common precisely among the people who wanted to be good revolutionaries? You tell them: *Dictatorship? That means rule. Yes, we want the rule of the proletariat; but that does not mean the rule of a man or a clique or a band or a party; it means the rule of a class. Class rule means class dictatorship.*

This is how the term came from Marx’s pen in 1850: an instrument in the re-education of the Blanquist and Jacobin-revolutionary currents around Marx’s own

circle. The marxological myth which had ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ pegged as a “Blanquist” idea had history turned upside-down. ‘Dictatorship of the proletariat’ came into existence as an attempt to show would-be revolutionaries that there was *another* way of being revolutionary, Marx’s way.

This understood, we can restate our basic thesis on the meaning of the term *to Marx*. For Marx and Engels, from beginning to end of their careers and without exception, ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ meant nothing more and nothing less than ‘rule of the proletariat,’ the ‘conquest of political power’ by the working class, the establishment of a workers’ state in the immediate postrevolutionary period.^[39]

The subsequent career of the term provides proof after proof of this thesis; at the same time no evidence turns up to gainsay it. This is the claim to be tested in the light of the facts.

5. The First Period – Continued

The next appearances of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ were echoes from Locus 1.

Locus 3. Otto Lüning, the socialistic editor of a leftist paper in Frankfurt, wrote a four-installment review of Marx’s *N.R.Z. Revue* articles on *The Class Struggles in France*. It was published in June in Lüning’s *Neue Deutsche Zeitung*.^[39] What Lüning criticized above all was the “red thread” that wound through Marx’s conception of society and history: “the cleavage of present-day society into different classes” with contradictory interests. Lüning’s kind of socialism believed in class harmony and reform. He therefore repeatedly underlined that Marx advocated the taking of political power by the working class: for Marx the aim of the revolutionary movement is “*the revolutionary rule, the dictatorship of the working class.*” But what Lüning keeps attacking is the “rule.” He finally reveals that his sharpest disagreement is with Marx’s emphasis on “the transference of rule from one class to another” *instead of* on “the destruction of class differences.”

At no point did Lüning indicate any special interest in the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ which he himself mentioned in passing. Throughout he was intent on repudiating the aim of a working-class state, of class rule, as well as (later in his review) attacking the very idea of a class interpretation of history. Obviously

Lüning's views had a great future as the format for anti-Marxism, but it was not 'dictatorship of the proletariat' that drew blood.^[40]

Marx, who at first intended to write a longer analysis of Lüning for the *N. R. Z. Revue*, *compromised* on a letter to the editor in the latter's paper. Marx's letter was short and sententious and replied only to Lüning's claim that Marx had written *only* about 'rule of the proletariat' and not about the further aim of abolishing class differences. It referred to the charge about "the rule and the dictatorship of the working class" but, just like Lüning, was interested only in the "rule" idea. The letter listed a series of references and citations to Marx's writings in which the "abolition of class differences" had been prominently discussed, including the very passage that Lüning was reviewing.^[41]

What stands out, in Marx's letter as in Lüning's attack, was that the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was not specially involved – for either of them. Both assumed that it had no special content other than 'rule of the proletariat.'

Locus 4. Lüning's associate editor and brother-in-law was a good friend and comrade of Marx's, Joseph Weydemeyer. In 1851 Weydemeyer had to flee government harassment in Germany, and finally decided to emigrate to the United States. Soon after his arrival in November, he began writing for the radical German-American press, while corresponding with Marx. His first article appeared in the New York *Turn-Zeitung* for January 1, 1852, an issue which also offered the first installment of Engels' *Peasant War in Germany* as well as Weydemeyer's announcement of his own forthcoming weekly.^[42]

The title of Weydemeyer's article was "Die Diktatur des Proletariats" (The Dictatorship of the Proletariat). The article was solely concerned with the subject of the *rule* of the working class as expounded in the *Communist Manifesto*, which is the source of the contents of the piece. The term in the title is not even repeated in the body of the article until the last passage, which speaks of the need for any revolution to have "a dictatorship at its head," and then presents the idea of the dictatorship of "the proletariat which is concentrated in the big cities," not the proletariat *tout court*. Obviously Weydemeyer did not grasp the idea of a class dictatorship, however many times Marx had underlined that term.

Now as he wrote an article condensing the teachings of the Man (as was clearly Weydemeyer's aim), why did the title term occur to him? The answer, not very

conjectural, is that he had only recently stood close on the sidelines as his associate Lüning had lifted a lance against “the rule, the dictatorship of the working class.”^[43]

Marx must have recently received a copy of Weydemeyer’s article (though there is no record of this) when on March 5, 1852, in response to his friend’s letters, Marx wrote him a lengthy bit of advice on how to deal with issues in the German-American press. It was in this context that Marx criticized the refusal by writers like Karl Heinzen to recognize the existence of classes in society. Marx wrote that no credit was due to him for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the class struggle among them.

What I did that was new was (1) to show that the *existence of classes* is simply bound up with *certain historical phases of the development of production*; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*.

If the reader substitutes the usual ‘rule of the proletariat’ for the striking phrase here, the content of this statement will be perfectly clear. There is nothing whatever in this passage to indicate that Marx thought he was making an unusual pronouncement. Then why did he use ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ instead of his usual term? Well, this is precisely what is explained by the fact that Weydemeyer himself had just given that term special visibility. Marx’s letter was simply echoing the title of the article by Weydemeyer, who was himself echoing the recent exchange in the *NDZ* between Marx and Lüning. Marx was throwing in a phrase that had special associations for his correspondent. Writing a personal letter, Marx could let this be understood. When taken out of this context and held up to view as if it were an extraordinary statement, its significance is distorted.^[44]

6. The Second Period of ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’

In the two decades before the Paris Commune, there was not a single case of Marx’s use of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’^[45] As always, he kept referring to the ‘rule of the proletariat,’ ‘conquest of political power,’ ‘workers’ state,’ and similar expressions to denote the assumption of state power by the working class. Accidental? It is entirely explainable in terms of the thesis offered above. During these two decades, in which the left movement was at a low ebb, Marx’s work and

activities did not involve him in any connection with Blanquist elements. There was no need for him to deal with their conception of dictatorship.

For the same reason the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ did not appear in *The Civil War in France*, the defense and analysis of the Paris Commune that Marx wrote for the General Council of the International. At this time, and until the Communard refugees started trickling into London, the Blanquists had refused any ties with the International; it was not “revolutionary” enough for them.

In *The Civil War in France* Marx argued that the Commune was a working-class government,” “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour.” The Commune was a *workers’ state* of brief duration and naturally with all kinds of limitations and inadequacies. Marx’s characterization of the Commune was so sweeping in this regard that there can be no doubt that, for him, it was accepted as an example of the *rule* (or “dictatorship”) of the proletariat.

At the same time *The Civil War in France* filled pages with a description and celebration of the extraordinary advance in *democracy* represented by the Commune government form and actions. The Commune “supplied the Republic with the basis of really democratic institutions”; its measures “could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people.”^[46]

It is clear that, in Marx’s eyes, the Commune took no “dictatorial” measures – if the present-day meaning of the word is used. Indeed, there had been a proposal inside the Commune to do just that, as the military situation grew more and more precarious before the military power of the Versailles government. The Blanquist-Jacobin majority of the Commune proposed to set up a dictatorial body to be called (shades of Robespierre) a Committee of Public Safety, with special arbitrary powers. The debate over “dictatorship” (this is how it was put) was acrimonious; when the proposal was adopted, the Minority walked out of the Commune. This split would have attracted more attention from historians than it has if the final Versailles assault on the city had not commenced at virtually the moment of the split, making it academic as all pitched in to the military defense. But in hindsight it is important to note that the antidictatorial Minority represented most of the International people as well as the Proudhonists, and in particular it included all the figures who had any special connection with Marx or showed any tendency to look to his ideas (for

example, Serrailier, who was practically Marx's personal representative; Frankel, Longuet, Varlin).^[47]

Since the Paris Commune clearly had no "dictatorial" trappings in the modern sense, it has always represented a problem for those who maintain that Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' meant something specially "dictatorial" as compared with a mere workers' state. When we find that Marx (not only Engels) had no compunction about calling it a "dictatorship of the proletariat," this fact itself speaks volumes about our basic thesis.

After the fall of the Commune, Blanquist Communards among others found their way to London, where they began working with Marx, especially on refugee aid; several were co-opted onto the General Council. No evidence is needed to understand that Marx naturally discussed his views with them, as with others; but there is good evidence nevertheless. In other words, as in the 1850s, Marx tried to "re-educate" them from his standpoint.^[48] The Blanquists just as naturally set out to turn the International into a Blanquist sect. With this two-way influence, it is of the greatest interest that now we find Marx – once again after twenty years – using the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' And we will also now find the Blanquist refugees using it too! – in their case, for the first time.^[49]

Locus 5. The first post-Commune meeting of the International was the London Conference of September 1871. At its end there was an anniversary celebration of the International's founding, bringing the participants together in a social occasion – a banquet plus "toasts" (short speeches). Marx was voted into the chair and forced to make a short speech.

A correspondent of the *New York World* sent in a longish dispatch about the banquet ("The Reds in Session") with a considerable summary of Marx's talk. About the Commune, Marx reiterated his view that "the Commune was the conquest of the political power of the working classes." Its aim was to remove any "base for class rule and oppression": "But before such a change could be effected a proletarian *dictature* would become necessary." (The verbs are those of the reporter's paraphrase.)

Thus Marx's first use of the term since 1852 took place before an assemblage heavily weighted with Blanquist Communards, where "the name that set the whole assembly in motion like an electric shock was Blanqui's" (in the words of the

dispatch). Apparently Marx even used the French form of the term (*dictature*). He was once again confronting the Blanquist mind with his own conception of *class* dictatorship.^[50]

Locus 6. Marx's next use of the term came in an article written around the turn of the year 1872 into 1873, as a polemic against Proudhon and anarchism, not so much on anarchism itself as on the anarchist stance of principled hostility to revolutionary political activity. It was published in December 1873 in an Italian socialist annual under the title "Indifference to Politics."

The article begins abruptly with a long section, all in quotation marks, which purports to represent what an antipolitical Proudhonist or anarchist would say if he set down his views frankly. The 'dictatorship' term occurs in the course of this fictitious speech; for the speaker is shown attacking the idea of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in the same way as he attacks any idea of political action or political power.

In this way the Proudhonist is represented as asserting: "If the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms, if the workers substitute their revolutionary dictatorship for the dictatorship of the bourgeois class, they commit the terrible crime of violating principle, for" (continues Marx) "the workers do not lay down arms and abolish the state but rather "give it a revolutionary and transitional form."

As usual, the 'dictatorship' phrase is used here as only another formulation for workers' political power; but there is a special interest. Here Marx makes the thought plain by counterposing two class "dictatorships"; the "dictatorship of the bourgeois class" is made coordinate with the "revolutionary dictatorship" of the working class. This usage underlines that Marx thinks of class dictatorships (either one) in terms of the class nature of political power, rather than in terms of special governmental forms.^[51]

When the Hague Congress of the International (September 1872) decided to transfer the center to New York – a proposal Marx made, no doubt, in order to stave off the coming push by the Blanquists to take over the movement for their own purposes, having helped save it from Bakunin – the Blanquists reacted by announcing their split from the International and their open reconstitution of a Blanquist sect. By this time their programmatic ideas had undergone a degree of

“Marxification,” though not on their basic notion of revolution by a putschist band. In pamphlets, *Internationale et Revolution* (1872) and *Aux Communeux* (1874), they set down their ideas. As Engels wrote to a friend, the 1872 brochure “quite seriously explains all our economic and political principles as Blanquist discoveries.” This is a jocular exaggeration, but indeed the Blanquists threw in the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ as a new formulation (new for them) for the coming Blanquist seizure of power. [The passages in the Blanquist brochures which talked about “dictatorship” are quoted and discussed in *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution 3*; they would be digressive here. Suffice it to say that other passages in the brochures still made it clear that, however new their phraseology, they still advocated the assumption of revolutionary power by a minority band, in the traditional Blanquist sense.] This led to Engels’ first use of the term under his own name.^[52]

Locus 7. Hard on the heels of Marx’s Italian article, Engels used the term in Part III of his work *The Housing Question*. It occurred in two passages.

In the first Engels discussed the Blanquist pamphlet of 1872, which, he claimed, “adopted, and almost literally at that, the views of German scientific socialism on the necessity of political action by the proletariat and of its dictatorship as the transition to the abolition of classes and with them of the state – views such as had already been expressed in the *Communist Manifesto* and since then on innumerable occasions.” This shows strikingly that Engels saw nothing in the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ which was not already in, say, the *Manifesto* – which said nothing about any “dictatorship.”

The second passage is interesting for a similar reason. Here Engels was polemizing against a Proudhonist, who attacked the very notion of class political power, or “class rule.” Engels replies: why, *every* political party wants to establish its rule in the state; a socialist workers’ party likewise strives for the rule of the working class.

Moreover, *every* real proletarian party, from the English Chartists onward, has always put forward a class policy, the organization of the proletariat as an independent political party, as the first condition of the struggle, and the dictatorship of the proletariat as the immediate aim of the struggle.

What leaps to the eye is Engels' assumption that 'dictatorship of the proletariat' has no *special* meaning other than the establishment of the "rule" of the working class. "Every" real working-class party stands for it: this statement can make no sense to anyone who believes that there is some special "theory of proletarian dictatorship" in Marx and Engels, involving special notions about "dictatorial" measures.^[53]

Locus 8. The clearest explanation of the meaning of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' came soon (1874) in an article by Engels devoted precisely to the Blanquists' adoption of the term, in their brochure *Aux Communeux*. This article, "Program of the Blanquist Refugees of the Commune," is, far and away, the best analysis of the Blanquist tendency ever published, but this is not our present subject. Its statement on *our* subject goes as follows:

From the fact that Blanqui conceives of every revolution as the *coup de main* of a small revolutionary minority, what follows of itself is the necessity of dictatorship after its success – the dictatorship, please note, not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small number of those who made the *coup de main* and who themselves are organized beforehand under the dictatorship of one person or a few.

One can see that Blanqui is a revolutionary of the previous generation.

There could be no more instructive differentiation between – on the one hand – Marx's conception of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as the rule ('dictatorship') of a majority class or class movement, and – on the other – the traditional conception of dictatorship, the idea of the "previous generation," as the dictatorship of the party or revolutionary band, hence entailing the dictatorship of the latter *over* the proletariat.^[54]

Locus 9. The confrontation with the Blanquists, we see, produced several contexts for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' during the first half of the 1870s. The term had cropped up, and this no doubt accounts for the fact that it was used by Marx in an important document in 1875.

As the two German socialist parties – the so-called “Eisenachers” led by Bebel and the Lassalleans – prepared to unite at a congress in Gotha, a draft program made for the occasion was filled with concessions to the Lassalleans. Marx, incensed, sent a letter to Eisenacher leaders, critically analyzing the program and attacking the Lassallean formulations and ideas. This “Critique of the Gotha Program” was neither a personal letter nor a public article, but a restricted circular of political discussion.

The passage referring to ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is one of the most often-quoted loci, but also one of the barest. It came in a section where Marx first attacked the Lassallean formula “free state.” No, wrote Marx, we do not want to make the state “free,” but rather to put it under democratic control. “Freedom consists in transforming the state from an organ set above society into one thoroughly subordinated to it, and today too the state forms are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the ‘freedom of the state.’” This was a blow struck against “the Lassallean sect’s servile belief in the state.” Marx next objected to confusing the terms “present-day state” and “present-day society.” The latter is capitalist society, and *different* present-day states may have capitalist society as their social basis. He then raised a question about the “future” state beyond bourgeois society:

The question comes up, then: what transformation will the state undergo in a communist society? In other words, what societal functions will remain there that are analogous to the present state functions?

His answer was lamentably brief:

Between the capitalist and the communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. To this there corresponds a political transition period whose state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.

The one thing this short statement makes clear is that Marx did not think in terms of more or less dictatorial forms of the transitional period represented by the workers’ state. Especially in the twentieth century it was not uncommon to read that, according to Marx, a workers’ state might *or might not* be a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” depending presumably on how severely dictatorial it had to become. This interpretation is excluded by Marx’s words: the workers’ state “can be nothing

but” a dictatorship of the proletariat; in other words, the two terms are synonymous. In this connection, it is worth noting that, soon after the passage quoted, Marx warned against confusing the “state” with the “government machine.” This has to be applied to the previous statement that in the transitional period *the state will be the dictatorship of the proletariat*. For Marx this was a statement about the societal content of the state, the class character of the political power. It was not a statement about the forms of the government machine or other structural aspects of government or policies.^[55]

This was the last appearance of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in Marx’s writings.

7. The Third Period of ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat’

When Marx died in 1883, the term had not come up for eight years; and another seven years passed before it appeared again under Engels’ name. During this fifteen-year hiatus, the old Blanquist problem that had originally elicited the term had completely changed. When the term re-emerged, it was as an echo from 1875, that is, it was due to the publication of Marx’s “Critique of the Gotha Program.”

In 1890 the German Social-Democratic Party was preparing to adopt a new party program, replacing the Gotha Program of 1875. (The new program was going to be adopted by the Erfurt Congress of 1891.) Engels was determined to use the pre-Congress discussion to make known to the movement what the party leadership (specifically Liebknecht, Bebel being in prison) had done its best to suppress, namely Marx’s views on Lassalle and Lassalleanism. Engels disinterred the manuscript from Marx’s papers and, with some difficulty, managed to get it published in the party press.^[56]

Locus 10. In October 1890, as he was pulling the critique out of the archive, he sat down to write a letter to a comrade discussing the materialist conception of history. This is one of the letters in which Engels explained that this conception does *not* present economic factors as alone operative in history. Look at Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, he advised, “which almost exclusively concerns itself with the *special* role that political struggles and events play, naturally within the framework of their *general* dependence on economic conditions.” Pointing to other analyses by Marx, he added:

Or why then do we fight for the political dictatorship of the proletariat, if political power is economically powerless? Force (i.e., state power) is also an economic power. [Letter to C. Schmidt, October 27, 1890]

Once again, we see, Engels assumed, as a matter that did not even require discussion, that ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was a mere synonym for the conquest of political power by the working class. Once again, if the term is assigned a narrower or more special meaning, this rather casual reference by Engels ceases to make sense.^[57]

When Marx’s “Critique” was published in the *Neue Zeit*, it was a “bombshell” (as Engels said). The main reason for this was its criticism of Lassalleanism, but the reference to the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat” was equally denounced by the right wing of the party. One leader of the parliamentary group repudiated it on the floor of the Reichstag. For a while the entire party leadership boycotted Engels personally for daring to make Marx’s views known to the party membership and the public. Never before had the right wing’s hostility to Marx come out in the open as it did now.^[58]

Locus 11, Meanwhile Engels was working on a new edition of Marx’s *The Civil War in France*. In March he finished his new introduction to that analysis of the Paris Commune. This was in effect an essay on the Commune: once more he dissected the Blanquist approach to revolution –

the viewpoint that a relatively small number of resolute, well-organized men would be able ... to maintain power until they succeeded in sweeping the mass of people into the revolution and ranging them round the small band of leaders. This involved, above all, the strictest, dictatorial centralization of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government.

Like Marx, Engels reviewed the Commune’s implementation of real democracy. And then, at the very end, he paid his respects to the right-wingers who were attacking Marx’s “Critique”:

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the phrase: dictatorship of the proletariat.

Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In calling the Commune a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ Engels was echoing Marx’s banquet speech of 1871, which until quite recently was virtually unknown to the marxological industry. Hence for a very long time it was customary for writers to assert that this was Engels’ own invention – for how could the Commune be a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ if it did not take some sturdily “dictatorial” steps? Plainly these marxologists will have to argue that Marx – like Engels – did not understand “Marxism”; only they do, having virtually invented it.¹⁵⁹¹

Locus 12. Three months later, Engels had another bombshell ready for the “Social-Democratic philistine” wing of the party: a critique of the draft Erfurt Program. He was taking the opportunity, he said, “to strike at the peaceable opportunism of the *Vorwärts* [the party organ]” and at the reformist view that bourgeois society would of itself “grow” into socialist society. (By the way, the myth that by this time Engels had become an advocate of “peaceable” gradualism was invented, after his death, by the very people against whom this campaign was directed.)

Engels’ critique of the draft program especially raised the question of including a demand for the democratic republic as one of the “democratic” planks, and argued that a peaceful assumption of power was not possible in Germany. This emphasis was directed head-on against the trend toward reformist adaptation to the German imperial state which was developing in the party. He wrote:

If anything is established, it is that our party and the working class can come to power only under the form of the democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the great French revolution [the Paris Commune] has already shown.

It was another chance for Engels to get in a lick for the phrase that had recently upset all the Social-Democratic philistines; in a different year he might have said, “specific form for the workers’ state.” But the important thing was that he was explaining the relationship between the *governmental form* (democratic republic) and the class content of the state (dictatorship of the proletariat). The Paris Commune [Because of the expression “great French revolution,” the assumption has

often been made that Engels meant the French Revolution of 1789; but the idea that he, or anyone else, could view 1789 (or 1793) as a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is too absurd to entertain. The specific reasons why this interpretation is untenable are presented in *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution* 3.^[60] had shown in revolutionary practice that a workers’ state (dictatorship of the proletariat) could and probably would be based on the forms of the democratic republic.^[61]

Engels’ coupling of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ with the term ‘democratic republic’ has been another target for the marxological campaign to turn ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ into a special slogan about dictatorship. Much of this campaign depends, unwittingly, on the *later* pattern according to which the term ‘democratic’ was used as a shorthand form for ‘bourgeois-democratic,’ especially but not only in the Russian movement. But neither Marx nor Engels ever *limited* the word ‘democratic’ to the meaning of ‘bourgeois-democratic.’ Indeed, no one has ever tried to show that they did; we are again dealing with an unthought-through assumption, based on the naive belief that one’s own political jargon had arisen with Adam.

But the main difficulty has not been inability to see that ‘democratic republic,’ to most people, meant a republic that was democratic, and not some special term that only the sophisticated initiates could understand. The main difficulty, as before, is the assumption that a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ *has* to be “dictatorial” in the modern sense, and therefore could not be clothed in straightforward democratic forms.^[62]

Engels, who thought that a ‘democratic republic’ meant a democratic republic, had a proposal to make in his critique of the draft Erfurt Program, especially for those who argued that the demand for a democratic republic could not be openly placed in the program because the government would utilize it as a pretext to harass the party. We can get around that, he suggested: “in my opinion what should go in and can go in is the demand for the *concentration of all political power in the hands of the people’s representation.*”

This is a classic formulation of the meaning of thoroughgoing democracy: “the concentration of all political power in the hands of the people’s representation.” It would stand for the illegal “democratic republic,” which is “the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Engels, the advocate of that revolutionary dictatorship which so appalled the right wing, was arguing with them that they

should say something about their goal of a democratic republic *instead of adapting themselves to the legality of the kaiser's regime.*^[63]

8. Engels vs. Plekhanov: Pointer to the Future

The last echo of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ that comes to us from Engels’ last years points straight ahead to the next period, in which the term parted company with Marx and Engels.

In 1893 a young Russian Social-Democratic émigré visited Engels. Plekhanov, the leader and theoretician of the relatively new Russian Marxist group, had given him a letter of recommendation. A third of a century later, A. M. Voden wrote up his memoirs, including his “Talks with Engels.” Just why ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ came into the conversation is not clear from Voden’s account. The two were discussing the relations between Narodniks (Russian Populists) and the Russian Social-Democrats, including Plekhanov’s attitude. Voden writes:

Engels asked how Plekhanov himself stood on the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat. I was forced to admit that G. V Plekhanov had repeatedly expressed his conviction to me that when “we” come to power, of course “we” would allow freedom to no one but “ourselves” ... However, in response to my question who exactly should be taken to be the monopolists of freedom, Plekhanov answered: the working class headed by comrades who correctly understand Marx’s teachings and who draw the correct conclusions from those teachings. And in response to my question on what comprises the objective criteria for a correct understanding of Marx’s teachings and the correct practical conclusions flowing therefrom, G. V Plekhanov limited himself to the statement that it was all laid out “clearly enough, it seems” in his (Plekhanov’s) works.

If Voden’s report was accurate (and there is no reason to doubt it), then it is clear what the leader and teacher of Russian Social-Democracy – destined also to be the leading theoretician of Russian Menshevism – was teaching his movement. When “we” seize power, democratic rights (“freedom”) would be withdrawn from opponents, and a dictatorial regime would be imposed with the dictatorship in the hands of the victorious party or just its leadership. There is no mystery about where Plekhanov – himself a Narodnik only a few years before – had gotten these notions:

this conception of dictatorship had long been the unquestioned orthodoxy of the Blanquist and Bakuninist elements who had long provided most of the training of Russian (and other) revolutionaries. He did not get it from Marx's old term; the relationship was the other way 'round – this was the standard conception which he imposed on Marx's term when he heard it. And what did Engels think of this, when told by Voden? We learn this in Voden's memoirs, which continue as follows:

After inquiring whether I personally on the other hand was satisfied with such an objective criterion [that is, Plekhanov's], Engels expressed the opinion that the application of that sort of criterion would either lead to the Russian Social-Democracy's turning into a sect with its unavoidable and always undesirable practical consequences, or it would give rise in the Russian Social-Democracy – at least among the émigré Russian Social-Democrats – to a series of splits from which Plekhanov himself would not benefit.

In short, thought Engels, Plekhanov's perspective would wreck the movement, either by a split or (what amounts to the same thing) sectification. There is an indication in Voden's memoirs that there was more to report about Engels' hostile reception to this account of the Russian leader's views. Engels remarked that Plekhanov seemed to him a Russian analogue of H. M. Hyndman. Voden footnoted that Plekhanov took this as a compliment, and it is likely that Voden had no idea of what it meant. Hyndman, the leader of the British "Marxist" sect which Marx and Engels used to denounce in the most cutting terms, was furthermore viewed by them as a sect dictator, whose dictatorial patterns had split the movement more than once.

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this little-known episode, as a symbol and as an educational beam of light on the meaning of the question. In just a few years the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party was going to become the first socialist organization in the world to include the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in its program – though Marx and Engels had always refused to propose such a step. The term was written into the party program by Plekhanov, who by that time was perhaps the most prestigious theoretician of Marxism outside Germany.^[64]

Thus the new era of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was launched on its way – not by Lenin (as the usual myth has it) but by the future leader and theoretician of Menshevism.

Thus the antidemocratic interpretation of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’ repudiated by Engels when it was reported to him, was going to blossom in the Second International and particularly in the Russian movement.

Footnotes

All references are to *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, Volume 3, published by Monthly Review Press in 4 volumes, 1976-1990.

1. The Roman *dictatura*: 14-16.
2. Martial law, etc.: 16-19.
3. In the 20th century: 20-21. Survey of pre-1789 usages: 23-26.
4. The French Revolution: 27-32; Marat: 33-38; Robespierre: 39-40.
5. Babouvist movement: 44-51. Marx and Babouvism: 183-89.
6. Blanquists; the myth of the Blanquist origin of the term: 51-60.
7. Early Utopians, esp. Cabet: 60-64. D ezamy Morrison, etc.: 65-68. Cabet in 1850: 177-81.
8. Louis Blanc: 69-73.
9. Weitling: 60-61, 83-85.
10. Bakunin in 1848: 86-89.
11. Cavaignac’s dictatorship: 74-82.
12. Marx in the 1848 revolution: 92-105.
13. This paragraph: 107.
14. Guizot: 108-09.
15. Donoso Cort es: 109-11.
16. Stein: 112-16.
17. ‘Despotism’ in Marx: 117-21.
18. This paragraph: 121-25.
19. Military dictatorship: 125-29.

20. A number of such figures, including the “dictators” of the Democracy: 129-41.
21. Bakunin: 142-49; some Bakuninists: 154-56.
22. Lassalle: 150-54; Schweitzer: 156-60.
23. Comte, Hyndman, Jones: 161-65.
24. This paragraph: 169-71.
25. *Communist Manifesto*: 171-73.
26. Chartists: 173-74.
27. Concept of class rule: 174-77.
28. Periodization: 168-69.
29. Locus 1, first chapter: 271-73. (For the use, in this work, of ‘dictatorship’ alone: 266-71.)
30. Locus 1, second chapter: 273-74.
31. Not summarized here is *KMTR*’s extensive discussion of Blanqui and Blanquism with relation to Marx; in *KMTR* 3, see Chaps. 9-10, 17-18, and Special Note B.
32. Blanqui as bogey: 276-79.
33. Locus 1, third chapter: 274-76.
34. SUCR’s collapse: 294-304.
35. The full text: 281-82; discussion: 282-86.
36. Willich and SUCR: 319-22.
37. On the Blanquist group involved here: 286-94.
38. Basic thesis: 323-25.
39. Lüning and *NDZ*: 329-33.
40. Lüning’s views and critique: 334-41.
41. Marx’s letter to *NDZ*. 341-44.
42. Weydemeyer: 370-73.
43. Weydemeyer’s article: 373-77.

44. Marx's letter: 377-79.
45. The occurrence of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in Marx's *Herr Vogt is* discussed in 380-84.
46. Marx's analysis of the Commune: 412-19.
47. The split in the Commune over 'dictatorship': 422-26.
48. Blanquists and the International: 427-31. The case of Vermersch: 442-26.
49. Blanquist split: 432-35.
50. Banquet speech: 447-51.
51. Locus 6: 451-54.
52. The Blanquist pamphlets: 432-38.
53. Locus 7: 454-57.
54. Locus 8: 462-64.
55. Locus 9: 464-69.
56. Republication of Marx's "Critique": 475-76.
57. Locus 10: 474-75.
58. Commotion in the party: 476-82.
59. Locus 11: 483-86.
60. The interpretation: 488-89.
61. Locus 12: 486-88
62. 'Democratic republic': 489-93.
63. Engels' proposal: 494.
64. Voden's memoirs: 495-97.