

Who will make socialism?

Democracy has been essential to socialism since the time of Marx, writes **Alan Maass**.

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A mass meeting in the Putilov Works in Petrograd during the 1917 Russian Revolution

AS THE late British socialist Duncan Hallas used to say during the Cold War era, one of the most powerful ideological weapons for the rulers of *both* the ex-USSR and the U.S. was the claim that Russia in these years was a socialist society.

In the USSR, this was state doctrine. Myths about how a system that relied on police state repression was actually controlled by the working masses were taught to children in school, in much the same way that grade school students in the U.S. learn how Americans control what their government does by voting for their representatives.

In the U.S., the myth of Russia's socialism served another purpose--as an object lesson of what happens when people try to change society, or even just stray from the principle of allowing the capitalist free market to operate unhindered. The Big Brother system in the USSR supposedly "proved" that revolution produced a new elite, probably worse than the one it replaced, not to mention long lines for bread and dull gray clothes.

The message: If you didn't like it here, you could--as anyone who sold a newspaper like *Socialist Worker* heard in those days--"Go back to Russia."

It's now nearly two decades since the USSR collapsed for good, but the association of socialism with the authoritarian regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe lives on in many people's minds.

It certainly doesn't help that dictatorships in the here and now--like China, the sweatshop capital to the world--still claim to be socialist. China is alternately celebrated and feared in pro-business publications like the *Wall Street Journal* for its free-market success stories, yet the country's ruling party still calls itself "communist."

Then there's the spectacle of some socialists in the U.S. who defend Libya's tyrant Muammar el-Qaddafi and denounce the democracy movement that rose up against him. Yes, Libya is under attack by the U.S. and its NATO allies, who want to impose a pro-Western regime in place of Qaddafi--but that's no excuse for painting the Libyan police state as "progressive."

Tyranny, repression, sweatshops and exploitation, incredible wealth existing alongside dire poverty--these are the polar opposites of what the revolutionary socialist tradition stands for. For Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, socialism was about democracy, equality and freedom--a society that emancipates the working class, and moreover by "the act of the working class itself."

Those last words warn not only against dictators who hijack the language of socialism, but also those who--with the best intentions, or at least with a record of doing some good for the mass of the population--claim to be making a new society *in the name of* the working-class majority.

For example, Venezuela has accomplished very important reforms under President Hugo Chávez, whose government has devoted large sums from oil revenues to providing food, education and health care for the poor. Though his reputation was recently tarnished by his appalling defense of Qaddafi, Chávez's championing of what he calls "21st-century socialism" has won him supporters on the left around the world.

But at the same time as he's pushed ahead with the "Bolivarian missions" against poverty, Chávez has concentrated political power with himself and the small circle around him--not promoted mass democracy. In conflicts with groups of workers, he's been willing to use the power of the state to prevail.

Conditions for workers are certainly better than under the U.S.-backed oligarchy that ruled before, but does Chávez's Venezuela represent what we could call the "self-emancipation of the working class"?

As the U.S. socialist Hal Draper wrote in a famous article called "The Two Souls of Socialism":

What unites the many different forms of Socialism-from-Above is the conception that socialism (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) must be handed down to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control in fact.

The heart of Socialism-from-Below is its view that socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands, mobilized "from below" in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history.

THIS CONFLICT between what Draper calls "socialism from above" and "socialism from below" is an old one. Back in the 19th century, Marx and Engels developed their ideas about revolutionary socialism in part as a response to what they believed were the inadequacies of other theories of socialism.

Specifically, Marx and Engels were critical of the utopianism of the socialists who came before them. Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen could critique the problems of industrial capitalism as it developed in the 19th century, but their response was to counterpose an ideal world--ideal according to them, anyway--to what existed around them. There was no connection between the aim of their imagined utopia and their understanding of how to achieve it.

This inevitably meant an elitist attitude. As Owen--the best of the bunch in many ways--put it: "This great change...must and will be accomplished by the rich and powerful. There are no other parties to do it." Owen stated that his goal was for all of society to be governed "as the most advanced physicians govern and treat their patients in the best arranged lunatic hospitals."

Marx reacted sharply against the paternalism of this attitude--the conceit of "socialists" who claimed to have "the solution to all riddles lying on their desks, and the stupid outside world had only to open its mouth wide for the roasted pigeons of absolute knowledge to fly into it."

But he and Engels also began to outline a different way of thinking about socialism, focused not on "dogmatically anticipating" the new world, but rather on "finding the new world" in what existed in the old--especially in the *struggles* of the old.

In their time, the chief struggle was not for economic equality, but elementary democratic rights and personal liberty. Marx and Engels were developing their ideas first in the 1840s, when most of Europe, including their native Germany, was still dominated by a backward political order, ruled by kings and princes and emperors and dukes.

When Marx was shut out of finding work as an academic, he took a job as editor of a newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which quickly became a voice of the extreme left wing of democracy supporters. In one of his first article, Marx championed a free press and the end of all state censorship.

At the time, Marx was still forming his ideas about economic questions. As Draper wrote, he "was the first socialist thinker and leader who came to socialism through the struggle for liberal democracy."

EVENTUALLY, MARX and Engels came into more contact with socialist ideas--and more importantly, with the social force that they came to believe would champion socialism as the alternative to capitalism: the working class, still in its earliest stages of development

Marx and Engels focused on how the working class--unlike other toiling classes, such as the peasantry, then the majority of the population in Europe--is forced by the conditions of work to cooperate, laying the basis for cooperation in resistance as well. Moreover, because capitalism brings workers together in large numbers, it's easier for workers to discuss and make collective decisions about what needs to be done. And the cooperative arrangements of work lay the basis for how workers can take control, ultimately over the whole of society.

So rather than imagining a better world disconnected from the question of how to get there, the whole stress of Marxism is on how the process of "getting there" determines the shape of the better world.

The principle of democracy remained indispensable in the socialism of Marx and Engels. For one thing, basic democratic rights are of huge practical importance for the working-class majority to organize its struggles under capitalism. Plus, the working class would have to gain, through its own experience and collaboration, the confidence and the consciousness to found society anew. Workers needed democracy, the two men believed, as an essential component in the process of becoming "fit to rule" a new world.

Thus, in the debates of the left in the 1840s and after, Marx and Engels bitterly opposed those who believed a determined band of revolutionaries could substitute themselves for a mass movement--that a minority could establish socialism, whether by the example of a utopia or through conspiracies.

"In our time," Engels wrote in 1846, "democracy and communism are one." In the *Communist Manifesto*, published on the eve of the great wave of European revolutions in 1848, Marx and Engels declared that "the first step in the revolution by the working class" would be "to win the battle of democracy."

Against the "socialism from above" orthodoxy of their day, Marx and Engels gradually won the day with many radicals. Thus, in a journal published in 1847, a group of German revolutionaries influenced by Marx and Engels declared:

We are not among those communists who are out to destroy personal liberty, who wish to turn the world into one huge barrack or into a gigantic workhouse.

There certainly are some communists who, with an easy conscience, refuse to countenance personal liberty and would like to shuffle it out of the world because they consider that it is a hindrance to complete harmony. But we have no desire to exchange freedom for equality. We are convinced...that in no social order will freedom be assured as in a society based upon communal ownership...

[Let us put] our hands to work in order to establish a democratic state wherein each party would be able, by word or in writing, to win a majority over to its ideas.

Principles like these are a million miles from the tyranny of a society like China. To the genuine socialist tradition, socialism and democracy are inseparable.