

On the Concept "Bourgeois-Democracy"

By HERBERT APTHEKER

New York City

MARXISTS HAVE VIEWED bourgeois-democracy in a two-fold, intertwined manner. They have seen it as a system under which, *and whereby*, the capitalists maintain themselves in power; they have also seen it as a system of concessions and reforms, wrung from the bourgeoisie, of great importance to the exploited and something to be treasured—and expanded—by the exploited.

From the historical point of view, Marxists have seen bourgeois-democracy as a conglomerate of freedoms and checks and balances developed by capitalism in the course of its revolutionary struggle against feudalism, and in the course of national liberation struggles, as that of our own country against Great Britain. Also, Marxists have seen these ideas and institutions as threatening the

very class which brought them into being, as capitalism has aged and as opposing classes have matured.

From the tactical point of view, Marxists have tended to emphasize the extremely limited nature of bourgeois-democracy. We have first of all insisted on the fundamental ruling class character of the State and its whole system of persuasion and compulsion; we have also concentrated upon the avoidance of the realities of economic matters in the "freedoms" guaranteed by bourgeois-democracy. We have also insisted that even in the strictly political and civil rights areas, bourgeois democracy is exceedingly partial, because of the impact of the capitalist State, and of the private ownership of the means of production. We have stressed, too, its vitiation in terms of

racism, and male supremacy, and in terms of corruption, deceit, demagoguery, etc.

More recently, and especially since the rise of fascism, the emphasis has shifted to the preciousness of bourgeois-democratic rights in the struggle against fascism, and there has been a real effort to overcome the one-sidedness of the previous position, in the face of new conditions.

Yet an ambiguity has persisted in our position on this question of bourgeois-democratic rights; the old emphasis on their partial nature remains—and the truth of their partial nature remains. Again, there persists the idea of bourgeois-democratic rights as means towards the achievement of Socialism, but of comparative unimportance or even irrelevance once Socialism is achieved. There persists an avoidance of coming to grips with these rights in their own terms and a grappling with the question of their meaning and their values quite apart from the role they may play in advancing the cause of Socialism.

The whole problem has been highlighted, of course, by the revelations of the XXth Congress relative to severe limitations on Socialist democracy, the development of extreme bureaucracy and forms of personal tyranny. It is highlighted, too, by the tremendous advances of Socialism throughout the world, and by the manifest fact that problems of civil rights and of parliamentary functioning in socialist systems (in existence

and impending) are pressing for solution.

It is my opinion that the manner in which we have dealt with the historic appearance of what we have called bourgeois-democracy has been exceedingly one-sided, and that this is an important reason for the difficulties we are having and have had on this question.

We have, first of all, tended to follow bourgeois historians in ascribing too much of a passive, or follow-the-leader role to the masses in bourgeois revolutions. We have been prone to accept a reading of history which sees the "enlightened" and the educated and the propertied as maneuvering the masses. Certainly, we have spoken of concessions and reforms, but our general orientation in this regard has been largely to accept the completely subordinate role of the masses in great bourgeois-democratic upheavals, and not least in the reading of the American Revolution. Such a view of history—certainly of American history—is false. From the earliest period, from the colonial revolts of the 17th century, let alone the American Revolution, there was a much greater degree of creative and active participation by the broadest masses, many of them unpropertied, than historical literature yet makes clear.

In line with this we have tended to go along with the bourgeois rendering of American history which sees it as a relatively uninterrupted

series of triumphs, cheaply won, by the clever and more or less omnipotent rich. This accounts for our exceedingly one-sided and mechanical presentation of the U.S. Constitution and the struggle which led to its adoption—a presentation which largely copied the economic determinism of Beard; and I cite this as but one example.

We have also tended to go along with bourgeois chroniclers in their ignoring of a real reactionary tradition in American history, against which fierce struggle has been necessary. For example, we tended to ignore—as do bourgeois commentators—the very real danger of a military dictatorship that faced the Founding Fathers in the 1780's and the fact that in the making of the Constitution they consciously sought to guard against this. We have also tended to ignore the danger of a reversion to a monarchical form of government—a very real danger, that is, in the 18th century—and the efforts of the Fathers to guard against this. When we seek to understand the "checks-and-balances" system of the Constitution this must be taken into account; and if it is taken into account then one will not have the extremely negative view of this system of checks and balances which has hitherto characterized our literature.

Furthermore, we have accepted much too readily the characterization of the basic civil and political rights as "bourgeois" democratic.

This has inevitably, whatever our intentions at different periods, tended to convey the idea of depreciating the "real" importance of these rights; it has also supplied fuel to the fire of imperialist ideologists who equate capitalism with democracy and insist that Marxists do, too, by their term "bourgeois-democracy." These ideologists are dishonest, of course, in this, but there is a kernel of substance in their caricature which makes it appealing and hence useful to them.

The fact of the matter is that to the bourgeoisie, from the days of their classical political economists, and this goes back to the days when the bourgeoisie was revolutionary, politics was always something that had to exclude the masses. In fact, in that classic literature, the very word "People," referred to those with property; those without property were not People. We have not sufficiently noticed that the best and the most radical of the philosophers of the early bourgeois epoch—even Paine, even Jefferson—viewed government as a function of the property and its essential duty as the protection of that property. We have not paid sufficient attention to the fact that even the great Voltaire said that the masses were stupid and always would be and that they needed "three things—the yoke, the goad, and some hay."

The fact is that from the very beginning there was an acute contradiction between the need of the bour-

geoisie for mass support in their revolutionary enterprises and the willingness of the bourgeoisie to adopt programs that would gain such support. The fact, further, is that this contradiction took *active* form on the part of *both* components of the contradiction.

When one speaks of bourgeois-democratic rights he means the right to vote and hold office for all; the right to form trade-unions and to strike; the right to a free education; equality before the law; freedom of speech and press and religion; certain economic rights in terms of social security, health regulations, wage-protection legislation, etc.

These may properly be called bourgeois-democratic in that some or all of them, to a greater or lesser degree, can exist or do exist in capitalist societies. But two points must be noted: 1) None was *given* by the bourgeoisie; on the contrary each was obtained (when and if they were obtained) through the most intense and prolonged *mass* struggle *against* the bourgeoisie or at least against significant elements of the bourgeoisie. And 2) each has been maintained (if it has been) only through eternal and vigorous vigilance on the part of the *masses* against encroachments by the bourgeoisie—encroachments which are intensified with fascism, but do not begin with fascism. Thus, historically, these so-called bourgeois-democratic rights have been obtained despite (to a large degree) the intense

opposition of the bourgeoisie; and they have been maintained and expanded despite the very intense opposition of the bourgeoisie.

These freedoms, then, *are not of capitalism*, as the *New York Times* is fond of claiming; historically they derive at least as much from the struggles of the masses against the capitalists as they do from the struggles of the capitalists against feudal lords or slaveowners or colonial overlords. And even in the latter struggles, the creative, active participation by the masses—not simply in terms of following the lead of the bourgeoisie—was decisive.

Here another problem in historical dialectics arises: The fact is that there is a fundamental continuity in the struggles of the oppressed and the exploited which persists and, as it were, transcends particular social forms. That is, the struggles of a Spartacus, a Wat Tyler, a Nathaniel Bacon, a Denmark Vesey, a William Sylvis, a Martin Luther King have in them a common desire to remove the burdens of oppression, to achieve some form of human dignity, which make of them a unit despite the fact that they appear in eras of ancient slavery, medieval feudalism, early colonial capitalism, modern commercial slavery, and monopoly capitalism. In these cases the programs varied, of course, as the time and conditions varied, but in them all was a common striving for something we can call freedom. I do not mean only varying levels of freedom;

I mean that each of them had *in common* a desire for something that may be called freedom.

This brings to the fore the fact that Marxism has tended to ignore the question of sheer authority, of sheer power. Marxism has tended to view the reality of authority and power in terms of the economic base, the material base from whence the power and the authority have hitherto sprung. But Marxism has not—to my knowledge—sufficiently concerned itself with the facts of authority and prestige and power which have a logic and an appeal of their own. I think this is why Marxists have tended to ignore the works of such bourgeois scholars as C. E. Merriam, H. D. Lasswell, G. E. Catlin, Bertrand de Jouvenal, and many others who have concentrated on power itself as the key to politics. By the way, this appears in earlier writings, too, of course, notably that of John Adams and

James Madison. We may and should reject this as idealist and tending to ignore or minimize the material and class realities of society and of politics; but in rejecting the basic theme we must not ignore the insight offered as to the reality of power *per se*, and the influence it exerts over people's activities, quite apart from the class or material origins of that power.

Were we to do this it would assist in discovering the means of preventing such aberrations as the XXth Congress reported; it would also give added importance to the question of civil liberties under any form of society—including that of Socialism.

These are manifestly some fragmentary thoughts provoked in the course of an inquiry which it is hoped to pursue further. Perhaps they will be of some service in stimulating additional investigation in these very knotty areas of history and political theory.