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Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

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This study deals with the origin and history of the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” in Marx and Engels. It asks: What aid this term mean *to them*?

The larger subject behind it is “The State and Democracy” in Marx’s writings. But study of this subject is shadowed by the belief that Marx advocated a “dictatorship.” This is reinforced by the two types of exegetes who today carry on the cold war over the corpus of Marxism: the bourgeois ideologues who think they must prove Marx an authoritarian in order to defeat Moscow; and the Soviet schoolmen whose assignment it is to wrap Stalinism in quotations from Marx, Both these camps are anxious to prove the same thing. In fact, Marxian exegeses, once the property of a few socialist scholars, bids fair to become a minor world industry,

The larger issue, then, is the image of Marx for the modern world. For me, Marxism is the gateway to *a revolutionary socialism which is thoroughly democratic and a democratic socialism which is thoroughly revolutionary*. Hence the need for the investigation which follows.

[1]

There is no survey of the use of the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” in Marx and Engels which is even near complete. The first question is what the word “dictatorship” meant in the middle of the 19th century.

This happens to be a word that assumed its present meaning in relatively recent times. *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* dates this transformation to the “decade following the [First] World War.” Till well into the 19th century the word remained primarily a reference to the institution of “dictatorship” in the Roman Republican constitution. The Roman *dictatura* was a constitutional provision for a temporary one-man ruler named, for a particular crisis, with limited powers. The modern institution which corresponds to it is “martial law” (on the Continent, “state of siege”) as a form of crisis-government.

By the time of the French Revolution, even the “one-man” connotation had weakened somewhat. The Girondins, for example, attacked “the dictatorship of the Paris Commune;” there were references to the “dictatorship of the Convention.” We have here the “dictatorship” of a popular, relatively democratic body.

The primitive communist movement led by Babeuf in the last episode of the revolution picked up and used the word; between a one-man dictatorship and a dictatorship of the revolutionary leadership, they decided in favor of the latter. From this time to Marx, the idea of a revolutionary dictatorship was virtually standard in the early socialist and communist movement, being accepted in one form or another by Weitling, Saint-Simon, Bakunin, Proudhon and Louis Blanc, as well as the Three B’s of the period, Babeuf, Buonarroti, Blanqui.

While Blanqui and the Blanquists, like others, advocated a revolutionary dictatorship, it is not true that Blanqui or his followers anticipated Marx in using the term “dictatorship of the proletariat,” as has been asserted in some hundreds of books, each copying from the other. It has been established by Maurice Donmanget and Alan Spitzer that there is no record whatsoever that Blanqui ever used the term. The claim stems largely from R.W. Postgate’s *Out of the Past*, not a line of whose purported evidence stands up under investigation. Everybody repeated the conclusion and no one bothered to check it.

These earlier advocates of revolutionary dictatorship clearly meant a dictatorship of one sort or another *over* the proletariat. As we shall see, Marx formulated the term “dictatorship of the

proletariat” precisely as a counterposition to this idea, which was the orthodoxy of the day.

[2]

How does Marx use the word “dictatorship”, apart from the term “dictatorship of the proletariat”?

Writing to Engels March 31, 1851, Marx details his money troubles and adds: “And besides all that, they have me exploiting the workers and striving for a dictatorship! *Quelle horreur.*” Plainly he was not aware that he was for a dictatorship. In 1857 Marx writes of England that Palmerston’s administration was a “dictatorship” since the beginning of the war with Russia. This, for his *New York Tribune* readers, refers to the war-crisis powers and activities of a government otherwise not very “dictatorial”.

But let us look especially at the same work in which he is first going to use the term “dictatorship of the proletariat”, namely, *The Class Struggles in France 1648-1850*. We have room only to point to three out of many passages.

(1) Here Marx first makes the distinction between the dictatorship *of a class* and dictatorship *over a class*: “But Cavaignac was not the dictatorship of the sabre over bourgeois society; he was the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie by the sabre.” Alongside Cavaignac existed also a sovereign Assembly; in fact, Marx refers elsewhere in the same work to “the dictatorship of Cavaignac and the Constituent Assembly,” giving us the “dictatorship” of a representative body again, like the “dictatorship of the Convention.”

(2) When in the next stage of the events the “Party of Order” used its parliamentary majority to scrap universal suffrage, Marx comments:

By repudiating universal suffrage, with which it had hitherto draped itself and from which it sucked its omnipotence, the bourgeoisie openly confesses, “*Our dictatorship has hitherto existed by the will of the people; it must now be consolidated against the will of the people*”. [All emphasis in quotations as in the original.]

This reference to a “dictatorship” based on universal suffrage reflecting “the will of the people” is another indication of the aura of the word.

(3) Explicitly distinguished from a “dictatorship of the proletariat” is Marx’s description of a possible government of “the social-democratic party”, i.e. the party of the pink-socialistic Louis Blanc, whom he despised, and the timid democrats of the “Mountain,” who were an even sorrier lot. (This was then called the “Red” party, but let us not be confused by terminology.) In a remarkable sentence Marx refers simultaneously to two “dictatorships” in connection with a discussion of the “exploiters” versus the “allies” of the *peasant*:

The constitutional republic is the dictatorship of his united exploiters; the social-democratic, the Red Republic, is the dictatorship of his allies.

Obviously this does not mean what we mean by “dictatorship,” but rather a *domination*, a *social rule*.

When in his writings Marx advocates the *domination* or *rule* of the working class, the term he usually employs is *Herrschaft*. This represents the view he adopted, probably around 1845 and first expressed in *The German Ideology*, that to achieve communism the proletariat must *take political power*. This is the view which is occasionally going to “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

In 1847 Engels wrote in an article, “In all civilized countries the necessary consequence of democracy is the political rule of the proletariat, and the political rule of the proletariat is the first presupposition of all communist measures.” In his preliminary draft of the *Communist Manifesto*, he answered the question, “What will be the course of this revolution?” as follows:

First of all, it will establish a *democratic constitution* and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat.

And in the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels say “that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.” When this has been accomplished and the proletariat abolishes “the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions,

have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.”

Although the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” does not appear in the *Manifesto*, the passages quoted here appear in our story later.

But the first “dictatorship” which Marx advocated was, in point of fact, not that of the proletariat. This was in the midst of the 1848 revolutionary upsurge in Germany when Marx, editing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne, was lambasting the ludicrous pusillanimity and empty phrasemongering of the bourgeois National Assembly in Frankfurt, which was afraid to take any strong action against the Crown and the absolutist regime.

Its ministers, wrote Marx, were bleating about standing on Constitutional Principle while the absolutist counterrevolution organized itself. But what was going on was a revolution, which had first to *establish* constitutional principle. One had to fight with energy now so that there would be a constitutional principle to stand on.

Every provisional state setup after a revolution requires a dictatorship, and an energetic dictatorship at that. From the beginning we reproached Camphausen [the prime minister] for not acting dictatorially, for not immediately shattering and eliminating the remnants of the old institutions. So while Herr Camphausen lulled himself with constitutional dreams, the defeated party strengthened its positions in the bureaucracy and in the army – indeed here and there even ventured on open struggle.

The “dictatorship” or “dictatorial measures”, for which Marx is calling, then, is by the elected representative body of the German Democracy over the old regime. What exactly were the “dictatorial measures” he advocated, and what would the “dictatorship” of the Democracy have looked like? This is already partly indicated: “immediately shattering and eliminating the remnants of the old institutions” by (Marx goes on to say) *mesures de salut public* energetically and boldly carried through. His use of the French Revolution’s term is intended to suggest the “dictatorship of the Commune.”

But still, what are these “dictatorial measures” exactly? They are spelled out several times in *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Germany in 1848*. This passage can stand for all:

... if the Assembly had been possessed of the least energy, it would have immediately dissolved and sent home the Diet – than which no corporate body was more unpopular in Germany – and replaced it by a Federal Government, chosen from among its own members. It would have declared itself the only legal expression of the sovereign will of the German people, and thus have attached legal validity to every one of its decrees. It would, above all, have secured to itself an organized and armed force in the country sufficient to put down any opposition on the part of the Governments.

But instead the Assembly of old women failed to take up the cause of, and recognize, the revolutionary uprisings that had broken out, or “to call the people to take up arms everywhere in defence of the national representation,” Always. “they shrank back from decisive action.” The old governments of the German states “had counted upon a very dictatorial and revolutionary action on its part” but in fact the Assembly gave them little cause to worry.

In short, Marx’s first call for a revolutionary “dictatorship” was for an energetic regime by the nearest thing to a representative democracy that Germany had, literally a “dictatorship” of the Democracy.

[3]

We now come to the loci in which Marx and Engels used the term “dictatorship of the proletariat”. There are eleven in all (counting a work with more than one such passage as only one). They cluster in three periods: (1) 1850-52, i.e. after the revolution of 1848; (2) 1872-75, i.e. after the Paris Commune, and (3) 1890-91, this last period being, we shall see, a sort of echo from 1875.

In both the first and second periods, and most clearly in the very first locus, Marx used the term particularly *in connection with* the Blanquists. [1]. What exactly was the nature of this connection? Marx’s attitude toward Blanqui and his movement remained essentially the same from 1844, when Marx first became

a socialist, to the end. This attitude combined complete rejection of the Blanquist putsch, to be made by a conspiratorial group with great admiration for Blanqui as a devoted and honest revolutionist; it combined great respect for Blanqui as a socialist militant with no respect for his ideas on how to make a revolution. In revolutionary periods Marx sought joint *action* with the Blanquists and other revolutionary currents – a “united front” – in spite of political disagreement. Such united-front contact took place especially in 1850 and again after the Paris Commune. In both cases these were “united fronts” or joint action in London, between Marx and Engels and Blanquist *refugees* from the fighting in France.

In these contacts, Marx and Engels, rejecting the Blanquist concept of dictatorship, *counterposed to it* their own formulation of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

This is what Engels explained in retrospect when, in 1874, he set down explicitly the difference between the Blanquist and the Marxist idea:

From Blanqui’s assumption, that any revolution may be made by the outbreak of a small revolutionary minority, follows of itself the necessity of a dictatorship after the success of the venture. This is, of course, a dictatorship, not of the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but of the small minority that has made the revolution, and who are themselves previously organized under the dictatorship of one or several individuals. [This passage is referred to below as Locus 7.]

One can hardly demand a clearer line of demarcation between the Blanquist dictatorship of the active revolutionary minority and a *class dictatorship* or domination, the rule “of the entire revolutionary class.” This emphasis on *class* dictatorship is what we find in the first locus.

The first use of “dictatorship of the proletariat” is in Marx’s articles, later assembled under the title *The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850*, in his new London magazine *Neue Rheinische Zeitung, Politisch-Ökonomische Revue*. The first article (in the first issue) was written in January and published in early March.

After the defeat of the June 1848 workers' uprising, says Marx, "there appeared the bold slogan of revolutionary struggle: *Overthrow of the bourgeoisie! Dictatorship of the working class!*" [Let us call this Locus 1a.]

There is a problem here. Marx writes that "the bold slogan" appeared: "Overthrow of the bourgeoisie!" But then there immediately follows the slogan of the "dictatorship of the working class." Is Marx intending to say that this slogan "appeared" among the revolutionary workers too? But it is quite certain that it did not. I suggest he is not literally claiming that this hitherto-unknown slogan "appeared," but rather he is explaining, in apposition, what the "bold slogan" of overthrow of the bourgeoisie means – in the first place, what it means to him, Marx. In reality he is launching the slogan himself, putting words to the inchoate working-class aspiration expressed in the revolution.

In the second article (written at the beginning and published towards the end of March) Marx comments that the proletariat was "not yet enabled through the development of the remaining classes to seize the revolutionary dictatorship" and therefore "had to throw itself into the arms" of the social-democrats. [This qualifies as Locus 1b.] He is here not only excluding the idea of establishing the "revolutionary dictatorship" by a band of conspirators, but also even by the proletariat as long as it does not yet have the support of other classes. As elsewhere in the same work, as previously in the *Manifesto*, the "rule" or "dictatorship of the proletariat" is firmly linked to the idea of majority support.

The third article (written March 5-15 and published in mid-April) said:

the proletariat rallies more and more round *revolutionary socialism*, round *communism*, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of *Blanqui*. This 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*, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations. [Locus 1c.]

It is ironic that this, by Marx himself, is the only contemporary passage on record which links Blanqui's name with "dictatorship of the proletariat"! It is *Marx* who does the linking. Of course, he is not saying it is Blanqui's slogan: he is saying that the bourgeoisie has attached Blanqui's name to this revolutionary socialism, emphasizing the *class* character of the revolutionary regime.

[4]

We can now suggest why the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" makes its appearance *in connection with* the Blanquists but not *by* the Blanquists, Ordinarily Marx's expression for this idea was "rule of the proletariat," "political power of the working class," etc., as in the *Manifesto*. When, however, 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.

In united fronts with the Blanquists, it was only such a class formula that could be acceptable to Marx, Such a united front was formed in early 1850 when Marx still considered a new revolutionary upsurge to be imminent. He set about developing a framework for joint action by revolutionary groups from various countries, an embryonic International, through representatives in London, including the left-wing Chartists around Harney, the Communist League of the German émigrés, and the French revolutionary refugees "who wanted to differentiate themselves from the bourgeois democrats [and therefore] usually called themselves Blanquist" (as Arthur Rosenberg puts it in *Democracy and Socialism*).

In April there was formed a Société Universelle des Communistes Révolutionnaires on the basis of a brief *Programmatic Agreement* signed by Marx, Engels and August Willich for the Communist League, Harney, and two Blanquist émigrés. The constituent organizations retained their independence while joined in practical collaboration. Article 1 of the Agreement read:

The aim of the association is the downfall of all the privileged classes, to subject these classes to the dictatorship of the proletarians by maintaining the revolution in permanence until the achievement of communism, which is to be the last organizational form of the human family. [Locus 2.]

This is in Willich's handwriting, and perhaps the exact formulation is his too.

At the very same time that this agreement was made, Marx and Engels published in *NRZ-Revue* an open criticism of the Blanquist conspiratorial illusions which their French allies held, characterizing them as "forestalling the process of revolutionary development, pushing it artificially into crises, making a revolution on the spur of the moment without the conditions for a revolution ... They are the alchemists of the revolution," etc. This educational critique of *Blanquism*, at the very moment after they had entered into a united-front agreement with *Blanquists*, was a deliberate effort by Marx and Engels to utilize the new relationship to "straighten out" their allies, to influence their views.

While it is doubtful if the SUCR ever really got off paper in the first place, in any case it died for good after September, when Marx concluded that the revolutionary wave was spent and that reorientation toward a new period was necessary.

Marx's *Class Struggles in France* next evoked an echo within Germany. In Frankfurt, the *Neue Deutsche Zeitung* was co-edited by Joseph Weydemeyer and Otto Lüning (who were also brothers-in-law). Weydemeyer had been a supporter and personal friend of Marx since 1845 and was anxious to publicize Marx's writings: Lüning was a sympathizer of the so-called "True Socialists". The *NDZ* in June carried a long review in four installments summarizing Marx's work, written by Lüning. In addition, in one critical passage Lüning put the spotlight on Marx's idea of "the revolutionary rule, the dictatorship of the working class". (Lüning's words). A transitional dictatorship was necessary, he agreed, yet "class rule is always an immoral and irrational state of affairs," and the aim should be "not the transference of rule from one class to the other but the abolition of class differences."

It should be noted that he did not direct any objection to the *Diktatur*; he was speaking of any *Klassenherrschaft*, any class rule. In the July 4 issue Marx had a brief letter to the editor (*Erklärung*). [Locus 3.]

....you reproached me with advocating *the rule and the dictatorship of the working classes*, while as against me you urge *the abolition of class differences generally*. I do not understand this correction. You knew very well that the *Communist Manifesto* ... says: [Here Marx quotes the same passage we referred to in section 3.] You know that I advocated the same view in the *Poverty of Philosophy* against Proudhon ... [This refers to the last page or two of the book.] Finally , the very same article which you criticize ... says: [Here Marx quotes our Locus 1c.]

One of the interesting features of this communication is that Marx (like Lüning himself) is not aware of any special point, to be explained or defended in the use of *Diktatur*. It does not seem to be a problem. The passage in the *Class Struggles* with its “dictatorship of the proletariat” is assimilated in his own mind with his formulations in the *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere, confirming the oft-expressed view that the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” is to be equated with the *Manifesto*’s formulation “rule of the proletariat,”

That this exchange with Lüning centers not around “dictatorship” but the basic idea of working-class rule emerges clearly from Lüning’s subjoined note on Marx’s reply. He agrees that Marx’s correction is “well-based”. But he still complains that:

Herr Marx himself, but even more his supporters, constantly put the accent on the rule of the class, the abolition of which they let peep out only reluctantly as a later concession. In contrast I wished to place the abolition in the foreground, as the goal and aim of the movement.

As far as Marx’s passages are concerned, most particularly the one Lüning picked up, it is easy to dispose of his complaint, but more interesting is his side-blow against the “supporters” of Marx who put too great stress on the “rule”. It is true that Lüning’s petty-bourgeois socialism was naturally uneasy at any idea of working-class rule, whether in the foreground or background, but it is still interesting to see in his words a reference to that one of

Marx's "supporters" who was his own co-editor and brother-in-law and with whom he had no doubt often discussed – namely, Weydemeyer.

Weydemeyer now becomes the link with the next locus, which is one of the two most often cited: Marx's letter to Weydemeyer of March 5, 1852. This is the one and only time that the term crops up in Marx's private correspondence. Why does it make its appearance at this time? There is an episode to be filled in.

After escaping from Germany and finally deciding to emigrate to America, Weydemeyer arrived in New York on November 7, 1851. The first article of his published in the US (written in December) appeared in the January 1, 1852 issue of the New York *Turn-Zeitung*.

Its title was *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*.

This is probably the only article with such a title till at least 1918. It is all the more interesting since the article is not really about the dictatorship of the proletariat for the most part. Most of it is a condensation of a good part of the *Communist Manifesto*. There is a reference to *die Diktatur des in den grossen Städten konzentrierten Proletariats*, only in the last paragraph.

For present purposes the most important thing about Weydemeyer's article is simply its existence. Indications are that when Marx penned his famous letter of March 5 to Weydemeyer, he had just recently received the latter's own article on *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*.

This letter, moreover, is devoted to giving his friend suggestions for material for subsequent articles, in the course of which he advises on the treatment of certain American opponents. The reference to "dictatorship of the proletariat" comes in here. The next paragraph says: "From the foregoing notes take whatever you consider suitable." In other words, Marx has been jotting down notes to be used by Weydemeyer for his, Weydemeyer's, own articles.

What Marx wrote was that he did not claim credit for discovery of classes or the class struggles:

What I did that was new was to prove: 1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in 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* [Locus 4]

In using “dictatorship of the proletariat” here, instead of his usual “rule of the proletariat,” etc., Marx was echoing Weydemeyer, who himself was echoing Marx in 1850. Marx was throwing in a phrase that had special connotations and associations for his correspondent. His use of it in a private letter in passing depended on a certain amount of “understood” background. In this sense Weydemeyer was not just the recipient of the famous letter but its begetter.

[5]

For the next 20 years, no sign of the term appears in any writing, public or private, by Marx or Engels. (Or by anyone else, including Blanquists.)

During these decades there was little contact between Marx and the Blanquists; it is no accident that during these same two decades the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” does not show up. The Blanquists talked as usual about the revolutionary dictatorship of their band or of “Paris,” and the Marxists talked as usual about the “rule of the proletariat” or “political power of the working class.” What we have seen is that the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” as used by Marx is the reformulation of the latter when counterposed to the former.

When Marx wrote his great defense and analysis of the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France*, he still had no contact with the Blanquists. The term “dictatorship of the proletariat” does not appear in this work. There are three features of it important for the rest of our story:

Marx presents the Commune as “a working-class government ... the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour.” This and other formulations

are so sweeping that a government so described must be, for Marx, that which he elsewhere called “dictatorship of the proletariat”.

What determined the character of the Commune, for Marx, was the *hegemony of the proletariat* in the revolution, that is, the fact that all the other class elements in the revolution looked to it as the vanguard and leader.

At the same time, lengthy sections of *The Civil War in France* are devoted to painting in glowing colors the thoroughgoing *democratic* character of the Commune; universal suffrage, all officials and judges elective and revocable, abolition of the standing army, end of all “hierarchic investiture”, depoliticalization of the police, communal democracy from below replacing the shattered centralized state, etc. All this Marx summed up by saying that the Commune “supplied the Republic with the basis of really democratic institutions ... its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people.” (In contrast, the Blanquists regarded the Commune’s democratic measures as a weakness and a mistake. The contrast between these two diametrically opposed analysis of Commune democracy was contained *in ovo* in the two different formulations on the “dictatorship.”)

With the defeat of the Commune, the influx of Communards to London included many Blanquists and their leaders. Here for the first time many of them came into prolonged contact with Marx, his circle, and the General Council of the International. There was considerable impact on them for several reasons; the role of Marx’s *Civil War In France* as a champion of the Commune in the eyes of the scandalized official world; Marx’s massive relief work for the refugees: the addition of a number of Blanquists, especially Vaillant, to the General Council, working with Marx; the Blanquists’ joint fight with Marx against the Bakunin faction; friendship with Marx’s two French sons-in-law, Longuet and Lafargue.

For these reasons, and perhaps also because the experience of the Commune reinforced the same direction, the ideas of the London Blanquists underwent a degree of “Marxification”. Their political formulations were largely affected, if not their essential

putschism. This was displayed especially in two programmatic statements they issued, in 1872 and in 1874, both of these containing references to “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Publicly as well as privately Engels stated more than once during period, rather exultingly, that the new Blanquist program had dressed itself in Marxist ideas. Once was in his *The Housing Question* (1872):

... when the so-called Blanquists made an attempt to transform themselves from mere political revolutionists into a socialist workers' faction with a definite, programme – as was done by the Blanquist fugitives in London in their manifesto *Internationale et Révolution* [1872] – they ... 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.” [Locus 5a]

Here we have Engels stating categorically and publicly that when the Blanquists (in London anyway) *did* use “dictatorship of the proletariat” for the first time in 1872, they took it from Marx, not the other way round as Postgate believed. Twice more in this period Engels described the “Marxification” of the London Blanquist program. Furthermore, the passage on “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the 1872 program *Internationale et Révolution* of the Blanquists virtually says itself that this is a new view for them “axiomatic since the 18th March”, i.e. since the Paris Commune.

As for Marx and Engels: first use of the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” in this period is by Engels in his book *The Housing Question* (1872) originally three newspaper articles. The term occurs twice; we have already given Locus 5a. In the second passage Engels polemizes against a Proudhonist as follows:

Friend Mülberger thus makes the following points here: 1. “We” do not pursue any “class policy” and do not strive for “class domination.” But the German Social Democratic Workers' Party, just *because* it is a *workers' party*, necessarily pursues a “class policy”, the policy of the working class. Since each political party sets out to establish *its* rule in the state, so the German Social-

Democratic Workers Party is necessarily striving to establish its rule, the rule of the working class, hence “class domination”. Moreover, *every* real proletarian party, from the English Chartists onward, has put forward a class policy, the organization of the proletariat as an independent political party, as the primary condition of its struggle, and the dictatorship of the proletariat as the immediate aim of the struggle. By declaring this to be “absurd,” Mülberger puts himself outside the proletarian movement and inside the camp of petty-bourgeois socialism. [Locus 5b.]

What stands out is Engels’ obvious assumption that “dictatorship of the proletariat” has no *special* meaning other than the taking of power in the state by the socialist workers’ movement. It appears here as one of three or four terms used indiscriminately: “class domination”, “rule of the working class,” etc. We are also told that *every* real proletarian party stands for it, including the Chartists – a statement which can make no sense to anyone who believes there is some special “theory of proletarian dictatorship” apart from the basic idea of the need and goal of working-class political power.

That the term was also on Marx’s mind now was evidenced the following year, in an out-of-the-way place: an article written January 1873, for an Italian journal, directed against Proudhonism and anarchism (title: *L’Indifferenza in Materia Politica*). Since the passage in this article was cited in Lenin’s *State and Revolution* it has been often referred to, but without explanation of its peculiar context. For the passage is not exactly set down by Marx in his own name.

The article begins abruptly with a long section all in quotation marks, purporting to represent what an anti-political Proudhonist would say if he set down his views bluntly. The tone is satiric:

“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 [*leso-principio*]; because, in order to satisfy their wretched, profane everyday needs, in order to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, instead of laying down arms

and abolishing the state they give it a revolutionary and transitional form ...” [Locus 6]

Marx, of course, implies he himself proposes that “the workers substitute their revolutionary dictatorship for the dictatorship of the bourgeois class,” but the whole thing is said in passing. We do get the direct counterposition of two *class* dictatorships, one the alternative to the other, thereby putting the accent on the social basis of the power rather than on the political forms of the regime.

The next use of the term is by Engels in 1874, and we have already quoted it in section 3 above [Locus 7]. It appeared in Engels’ article on *The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Paris Commune* in the *Volksstaat*.

This period of tension with Blanquism no doubt accounts for the fact that the term, being around, gets used in an important document written by Marx the following year – his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, attacking the Lassallean formulations in the unity program being proposed for the merger of the two existing German socialist parties. This document was a sort of circular addressed to the “Eisenacher” leaders.

This passage on “dictatorship of the proletariat” is one of the two most of ten-quoted loci, yet it is one of the barest. Its context is an attack on Lassalle’s now-well-known fetishism of the state; Marx is arguing that “Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ standing above society into one completely subordinated to it.” He raises the question of the dying-away of the state in the future society, and adds:

Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. There corresponds to this also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*. [Locus 8.]

That’s all, but a passage on the next page is very relevant, Marx has that the state will be a dictatorship of the proletariat. We now get a very sharp reminder that when he says “state” he does not mean the “government machinery”. To say that the *state* is a rule or dictatorship of the proletariat is a *social description*, a

statement of the class character of the political power. It is not a statement about the forms of the government machinery.

The last thing to note is that Marx does not propose that the party program call for “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The missing demand which he does press is that for the *democratic republic*, though he reluctantly agrees that government repression rules out its open inclusion. (Nor did Marx bring in “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a term when the program of the French Marxist party was drafted in his London study in 1880).

[6]

There now ensues another hiatus of 15 years – no mention of “dictatorship of the proletariat” in any writing by Marx or Engels, public or private.

The next time we meet it is in a letter by Engels to Conrad Schmidt, October 27, 1890, explaining that historical materialism does not say that only economic factors are operative in history:

If therefore Barth supposes that we deny any and every reaction of the political, etc., reflexes of the economic movement upon the movement itself, he is simply tilting at windmills. He has only to look at Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire ... Or Capital ...* Or why do we fight for the political dictatorship of the proletariat if political power is economically impotent? Force (that is, state power) is also an economic power! [Locus 9.]

Here “dictatorship of the proletariat” is tossed in with the utmost casualness as a mere synonym for the conquest of political power.

Why did the term recur to Engels now, after a 15-year gap? Perhaps because he was already looking back at Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* in anticipation of the coming Erfurt party program discussion. For not long after, Engels proceeded to get Marx's 1875 critique published for the first time, with results leading to our next two (and last) loci.

Engels knew that its publication would be “a bomb” because of its attack on Lassalle, whose legend had grown. The target was also the rapidly developing opportunist trends in the party. On

both scores there was indeed a violent reaction. One of the things that was seized on was the fact that the newly published document used the term “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” In the Reichstag itself, the social-democratic deputy Karl Grillenberger arose to repudiate Marx and say for the party that

the Social-Democratic party rejected the suggestion which Marx had made for its program. Marx was annoyed by the fact that the German Social-Democratic party has worked out its program as it thought fit in view of conditions in Germany, and that therefore for us any revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is out of the question.

The veneer of “Marxism” which lay over the top strata of the party had broken through. It is doubtful whether the good Reichstag deputy shuddered more over the word “dictatorship” or the word before it.

Eighteen days after, Engels finished his introduction to a new edition of Marx’s *The Civil War in France*, the last words being “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” This line of thought takes off from another attack (similar to Locus 7) on the Blanquist concept of “the strictest dictatorship, and centralization of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government.” In contrast Engels offers the Paris Commune, reviewing (as did Marx) its great expansion of democracy and control from below. Then follows a criticism of “the superstitious belief in the state” typical of Germany, and the need “to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap-heap”. Then the last paragraph:

Of late, the Social Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: 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. [Locus 10.]

Three months later he had another “bomb” ready for the “Social-Democratic philistines”: a critique of the new draft program (Erfurt program). In this, as he wrote Kautsky, he “found an opportunity to let fly at the conciliatory opportunism of the *Vorwärts* [party organ] and at the *frisch-fromm-fröhlich-freie* ‘growth’ of the filthy old mess ‘into socialist society.’”

Here Engels raises very sharply the question of the demand for the democratic republic, which had been omitted from the program. In the course of this he remarks:

One thing that is absolutely certain is that our party and the working class cannot achieve rule except under the form of the democratic republic. This latter is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution already showed. [Locus 11.]

True, he agrees, the program cannot openly come out for the democratic republic in so many words, but ways must be found to say as much:

... what in my opinion can and should go into the program is the demand for the *concentration of all political power in the hands of the representation of the people*. And that would be enough in the meantime, if one cannot go any further.

So “concentration of all power in the hands of the representation of the people” stands for the forbidden “democratic republic”, and this in turn is “the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” The advocate of that revolutionary dictatorship which perturbed the “Social-Democratic philistines” is arguing with them that they should hint at their goal of a democratic republic instead of adapting themselves to the kaiser regime’s legality.

With this episode of 1891, prefiguring the future, comes to a close the story of the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” as far as Marx and Engels are concerned. But of course, as we know, this is only the first chapter in the history of that phrase. [\[2\]](#)

Footnotes

[1.](#) Of the 11 Marx-Engels loci on “dictatorship of the proletariat”, Lenin’s *State and Revolution* gave the ones here numbered 5a, 6, 8, 11, adding no.4 in its second edition. Kautsky’s reply pretended there was only one in Marx. Ernst Drahn, *Karl Marx und Fr. Engels ueber die Diktatur des Proletariats* (1920) knows only of loci 4, 8, 10. Max Beer’s *An Inquiry into*

Dictatorship (*Labour Monthly*, August 1922) mentions only 1a, 1c, 4, 6, 8. Sherman H.M. Chang's *Marxian Theory of the State* (1931) quotes 1a, 1c, 4, 5a, 6, 8 – exactly one half the available passages, the most to date. The opposite record is held by Stanley W. Moore, *The Critique of Capitalist Democracy; Introduction to the Theory of the State in Marx, Engels, and Lenin* (1957), which never reveals that the term is to be found in Marx or Engels at all.

[2](#). This is a much condensed version of a study which will be published shortly (about September) in No. 6 of *Études de Marxologie* (Paris), edited by M. Rubel, and which will present full reference notes, considerably more detail, and some additional sections. The spring issue of *Labor History* (III, 2) contains a translation of the article by Weydemeyer on *Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, referred to here, and my introduction to it. – *H.D.*

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