

Socialism and Democracy

What is democracy? Why should it be considered a good thing? Why should an individual accept a democratically-arrived-at decision with which they disagree? These are the questions Keith Graham sets out to answer in the first, more philosophical, part of his book (*The Battle of Democracy* - Wheatsheaf Books, £8.95).

The simplest definition of democracy is that it is decision-making by the whole people ("rule by the people". as the Greek words from which it is formed mean) involving procedures such as free and open debate, free access to information, one person one vote, and the accountability of public officials and elected representatives. Graham argues that such a decision-making system can be regarded as desirable because one key aspect of the nature of human beings is their ability to reflect and weigh up options before deciding what to do. In other words, a system in which the people as a whole freely decide what to do is the only decision-making system worthy of humans as self-determining ("free") agents.

The idea of democracy is also bound up with that of equality, if only in the sense that it is a decision-making procedure in which every human deemed capable of making a reasoned decision has a vote of equal weight. Pursuing this further, Graham shows that ensuring each person an equal as possible say in the decision-making process requires a high degree of social equality and not mere equal political rights. This introduces the idea that it is not only political democracy that is desirable for humans as self-determining agents but a democratic society. As Graham makes clear in the second, more political, part of his book where he discusses the views of Marx, Lenin and others on democracy, this democratic society would have to be "a world where private ownership of the means of production, buying and selling, the wages system have all been abolished, in favour of the communal ownership of the earth's resources". In other words, the philosophical justification for democracy is also, even more so in fact, a philosophical justification for socialism - though, of course, as Graham is quick to point out, Marx himself did not justify establishing socialism on such "an appeal to abstract, timeless principles to do with the nature of human beings".

Graham's discussion of the views of Marx and Lenin on democracy - in which he convincingly makes the point that "the terrible fate which befell Marx was that he was Leninised" - corresponds exactly to our own position on this subject: Marx stood for the establishment of a democratic, classless society as a democratic act on the part of the wage and salary working class as a whole. In contrast, Lenin saw the agent of social revolution as a minority "vanguard" of professional revolutionaries who, on winning power, would establish their own undemocratic, even if supposedly temporary, rule over the rest of society. Graham's discussion of the differing views of Marx and Lenin also allows him to clarify the reform versus revolution dilemma, often seen as a choice between gradual, constitutional change and violent insurrection. He can also set out, for the first time in a book of this sort, the case for a revolutionary but essentially peaceful use of existing political institutions as the means of

establishing socialism.

Marx's presuppositions enable a distinctive challenge to be made to the two alternative positions on the question of constitutionalism as we have been considering them. In one way, the most important political development for Marx takes place prior to any revolution and outside parliamentary institutions, namely in the growth of working class consciousness. This is distinct from Kautsky's parliamentary constitutionalism, where the entry of a party into parliament, which may form alliances with non-revolutionary groups and the like, is seen as the chief means to revolution . . . On the other hand, Marx's position is distinct from Lenin's. The state is not to be smashed but taken control of, so that it cannot be used against a revolutionary working class: and some of the institutions of a parliamentary system, notably universal suffrage, will be something to foster for a majoritarian like Marx, though not for a vanguardist like Lenin. In the light of Marx's presuppositions, there do seem to be oversimplifications in the terms used to express the original dilemma of the route to the new society. There need be no straight-forward, exclusive and exhaustive choice between constitutionalism and violent seizure of power. Certain elements within existing institutions may be valued, and action taken in conformity with them, while others may not. Connectedly, the aspiration to a peaceful transition need not be identified with an attempt to effect it by piecemeal means, an identification which both Kautsky and Lenin are prone to make. It is consistent with Marx's presuppositions to recognise parliament as an institution geared to the needs of capitalism, and therefore inappropriate as the vehicle for a fundamental transformation, but yet to regard its connected electoral practices as coinciding, to some extent, with the principles governing that transformation, and to that extent adding the possibility of a peaceful transition. This is not tantamount to the view parodied by Lenin as the expectation that the ruling class will meekly submit to the working class, as minority to majority. It does, however, limit violence to the role of counter-violence in the event of resistance when a clear majority for revolutionary change is apparent, rather than seeing the use of violence as itself a primary means of change, even in the absence of majority support.

Leninists sometimes try to argue that this is only a question of tactics, that they too share the ultimate goal of a truly democratic society (socialism) but that because a majority of workers can never be expected to acquire a socialist understanding within capitalism ("the ruling ideas of an epoch are those of the ruling class", as Marx put it), a minority must act on their behalf. Graham answers this by pointing out that, in the case of socialism as the democratic society, there is a very real sense in which the end determines the means to achieve it.

What is the nature of the transformation which, according to Marx, it is the role of the proletariat to bring about? In place of the compulsion to work which is characteristic of their position in capitalism, there will be a free association of people. In place of the exploitation of one section by another there will be common ownership of the means of production. In place of the political domination of a bureaucratic elite there will be widespread participation and revocable delegation. Leaving aside all question of the

realism of Marx's proposals, these are the arrangements which he regards as meeting the real interests of the proletariat. But these are arrangements which in their very description are incapable of attainment without the voluntary co-operation of the proletariat itself. Whereas you can make people do what they do not wish to do, you cannot make them adopt a set of social relations which require their voluntary co-operation if they do not voluntarily co-operate (Graham's emphasis).

In other words, democratic organisation and methods are not just one among many possible means to establish a democratic society; they are the only such means. Leninist minority action can only lead, as historical experience has confirmed, to some form of minority rule - in fact to a more undemocratic society than the sort of capitalism we know in countries like Britain.

The Battle of Democracy. is a very useful book about the nature of democracy written by a socialist. It is hoped that it will spark off a wide-ranging discussion about the desirability and feasibility of "a world-wide society of common ownership" and of the means of bringing it into being. ALB