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Book Review: The History of Democracy: a Marxist Interpretation by Brian S. Roper

Abstract

Brian Roper's book on the history of democracy from a Marxist perspective is an ambitious one. Roper starts with Athens and Rome and then, as capitalism rises, examines the revolutions in England, America and France and after that the 1848 revolutions across Europe. He then looks at the Paris Commune and The Russian Revolution. In doing this, Roper describes three distinct but related forms of democracy - Athenian democracy which was a form of participatory democracy limited to sections of society; liberal representative democracy which, while nominally open to all, is actually limited to operating within narrow propertied confines; and socialist participatory democracy whose aim is to encompass all areas of society.

Keywords

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BOOK REVIEW:

Brian S. Roper, *The History of Democracy: a Marxist Interpretation* (Pluto Press, 2013)

John Passant*

Brian Roper's book on the history of democracy from a Marxist perspective is an ambitious one. Roper starts with Athens and Rome and then, as capitalism rises, examines the revolutions in England, America and France and after that the 1848 revolutions across Europe. He then looks at the Paris Commune and The Russian Revolution. In doing this, Roper describes three distinct but related forms of democracy – Athenian democracy which was a form of participatory democracy limited to sections of society; liberal representative democracy which, while nominally open to all, is actually limited to operating within narrow propertied confines; and socialist participatory democracy whose aim is to encompass all areas of society.

Roper is seeking to understand how we arrived at the liberal democracy found in most developed Western countries today. The battle of the labouring citizens for a voice holds the key to understanding that and the fact that democracy is not static.

The question for radicals and revolutionaries must then be 'Is liberal democracy all there is?' For more conservative thinkers it might be 'Have we reached the end point of democracy's development?' Roper gives a resounding 'no' to both these questions. He traces the development of participatory democracy in Athens (albeit one that excluded slaves and women) in the context of struggle from below. He argues that the golden era of Athenian democracy arose not from farsighted leaders but from the battles of the non-slave labouring citizens for a greater say in their own governance. It is a theme that is repeated down the aisles of history. Thus the Roman Empire, argues Roper, despite challenges from below, was not so much democratic as republican, a case in which a small propertied group or groups ruled over the majority of the poor and middling classes. This finds echoes, according to Roper, in the later bourgeois revolutions, as the propertied classes sought ways to govern freed from the dictatorship of monarchs but are able at the same time to control and guide the pressure from the masses without threatening their own property and economic rule.

Liberal democracy was the solution, as it both extended democracy and limited it. While over time and as a consequence of struggles from below it saw more and more classes and excluded groups like workers and women enter the democratic sphere, it denied and denies democracy in day to day affairs, at work especially. Liberal democracy thus protects the bourgeoisie and its extraction of surplus value (or, put crudely, profit) from workers by giving those workers some minor say in the political expressions of their own exploitation.

An important part of Roper's argument is that democracy is a work in progress. It is not static but arises from the wishes of various classes, as classes, for freedom. But the nature of the freedom that a CEO wants and a worker wants can turn out to be very different, as the examples of the Paris Commune and Russian Revolutions that Roper discusses show. Here, however fleetingly, the labouring masses did create their own democratic institutions of government – participatory democracies - only to be beaten by counter-revolution in both cases. The longest surviving revolutionary government, in Russia from October 1917, was defeated through the failure of working class revolutions in the more developed countries of Europe, the destruction of the Russian working class in the Civil War, economic blockade and foreign intervention. The rise of Stalin represented a new bureaucratic state capitalist class coming to power and, like the early capitalist regimes in Europe

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that it mirrored, to be able to force Russia from feudal to capitalist relations it ruled with a bloody and dictatorial fist.

Does this mean that liberal representative democracy is the zenith of human civilisation and socialist participatory democracy is finished? Far from it. In one memorable line, Roper, at page 2, quoting Eagleton, states that 'those with their heads truly in the sands or the clouds are those hard-nosed realists who behave as though chocolate chip cookies and the International Monetary Fund will be with us in another 3000 years time.'¹

The global financial crisis, the revolutions and counter-revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa, the struggles against austerity in Southern Europe, especially Greece, the threat of environmental destruction, all show a global capitalist system in constant change and, arguably, decline. Roper argues that socialist participatory democracy, drawing on the strengths of Athenian and liberal representative democracy and built by a mass movement from below to establish its own democratic institutions which transcend the limited democracy of today, offers hope for humanity in its next steps forward. The struggles for democracy across the globe right now show that that we might be on the edge of discovery of that socialist participatory democracy or at least at this stage groping in the dark towards it. Socialist participatory democracy is, as the Paris Commune, the Russian revolutions and more recent outbreaks of workers' democracy in Hungary in 1956, Iran in 1978-79 and Poland in 1980-81, based in the workplace, with democratic decision making and the recall of delegates at any time with representatives paid the average wage. Production can then be organised democratically to satisfy human need, not to make a profit.

A more thoroughgoing discussion of socialist participatory democracy, glimpses of which we get in the historical situations mentioned above, would have further strengthened the book and bolstered the argument that liberal democracy is not fixed and eternal and that an alternative, full democracy, can be seen or envisioned in the interstices of society today. Also missing, and this is surprising for someone so influenced by Marxist feminist ideas, is an analysis in any depth of the role of gender in the struggle for democracy.

Some will complain that the book is too simplistic or paradoxically too complex, others that it should also deal with the history of political thought in the eras examined. What Roper wants to do, however, is show the broad sweep of democracy's history and draw out lessons for today and into the future. This necessarily involves a process of abstraction and generalisation that will not satisfy all the experts in the history or politics of particular epochs. Roper's book is an attempt to apply Marxist thinking to the development of democracy across history, rooted firmly in the changing economic and social contexts of each society under examination and the struggles of the oppressed for a say in running their lives.

In one sense the book is not original. It draws on concepts and ideas familiar to all those versed in the Marxist tradition. Its originality lies, however, in two areas. The first is the fact that it applies this analytical framework to democracy as it develops in key societies over time, something that has arguably not been attempted in over 40 years since the publication of George Novack's *Democracy and Revolution: from Ancient Greece to Modern Capitalism* (New York, Pathfinder Press, 1971.) The second original contribution is the insight that all that is solid in democracy can melt into air and that the current limited democracy can explode in a festival of the oppressed masses into real democracy, a society in which everyone can and does govern.

Roper has succeeded in showing us the possibility of a truly democratic future.

¹ Terry Eagleton 'Utopia and its opposites', in L Panitch and C Leys (eds) *Socialist Register 2000* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000) 31, 33.

