

MARXISM AND POLITICS¹

by Eugene Kamenka²

Politics, many of its students believe, is quite simply about who gets what, when and how - it is about the allocation, or the authoritative allocation, of goods in a social system. On this view, politics, government and administration are closely linked and much conceptual effort, indeed, has gone into explaining why we nevertheless distinguish them.

An older tradition, deriving from Aristotle and revived in recent years by Bernard Crick, draws a much sharper distinction between politics or political government on the one hand and other forms of government or administration on the other. For Aristotle, political rule was that which is exercised among citizens who are free and equal in birth. It is sharply distinguished from family relationships, economic hierarchies, monarchical or tyrannical government and even the rule of the demos or the people. Politics, in short, is the science of freedom, the public activity of free men, who come to agreement through discussion, compromise, conciliation and bargaining, through reconciling diverse interests and defining particular common interests. It marked off the Greek world, or more accurately parts of the Greek world, from the empires surrounding it. It is fundamentally different from the universal dependence and subordination of all except the emperor in what Aristotle and others have seen as satrapy or Oriental Despotism. There, politics and constitutions are replaced by administration, public discussion between free citizens by the concept of service, of fulfilling one's duties. Of course, even in such societies, there may be forms of palace politics, but they are indulged in in restricted circles and in a semi-clandestine fashion; they are not elevated into a public principle of social life.

Both classical Marxism and Soviet-inspired Marxism-Leninism have no concept of politics in this sense as part of the socialist society, though Lenin, in the period between 1917 and 1924, paid some lipservice to it and may have actually believed that as material and educational standards rose, a workers' democracy based on discussion between free and equal citizens would become possible. Trotsky and the Left Opposition at least half strove, against Stalin, for party democracy as opposed to

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2 Professor of the History of Ideas, Institute of Advanced Studies, Australian National University

democratic centralism by violating the ban on fractions and seeking genuine party discussion at all levels. But crucial aspects of classical Marxist doctrine, and of their own interpretation of Marxism, I shall argue, were against them and continue to be against their successors. The concept of mobilisation, by which the state and the party act on society, continues to replace the concept of politics in all non-dissident, non-revisionist communist thinking. The attempt to re-establish politics, indeed, has been the central issue between dissidents and "suppressed revisionists" on the one hand and their suppressors on the other.

"The conflict of rights and duties", Marx wrote in the 1840s, "is a contradiction that belongs only to bourgeois society." Similarly, the conflict of interests was for him a contradiction that belonged only to the pre-history of mankind, to the societies of alienation, exploitation and class division. In his early writings, his belief that rational democracy, rational law or rather rational freedom and true universality were possible, rested on a confused contrast between particularity and universality as qualitative and not quantitative distinctions. Particularity, specificity and consequent conflict, divisiveness and disharmony were, for the young Marx, products of external determination, of heteronomy, of alienation. The truly self-determined was also the truly universal and the truly free, internally coherent and rational, incapable of coming into conflict with that which was simply itself once more. In his doctoral thesis, Marx resolved the contradictions between the Epicurean atom as free and the attraction and repulsion between atoms with breathtaking sophistry: in being repelled or attracted by another atom, the atom is simply repelled or attracted by itself, since one atom is indistinguishable from another. It thus remains self-determined and therefore free. In the end, Marx took the same view about people once they were truly rational and self-determined - conflict of interests between them became a logical impossibility.

Only a few years later, Marx resolved with the same sophistry the contradiction between the political state or community as a legislative power and as a representative power:

The legislative power is representative here in the same sense as every function is representative, in the sense, for instance, that the cobbler, in so far as he fulfils a social need, is my representative, in the sense that every specific social activity, as a species of activity, represents only the species, i.e., a character of my own being, in the sense that every man represents the other. He is a representative in this case not through something else, which he symbolises, but through that which he is and does.

This is Marx's vision of the moral and historical end of man: the rational state which is the state of a human essence that is qualitatively and essentially universal. As such, it is self-distinguishing, but absolutely precludes separation or conflict. We do find in it a division of functions, but one that arises "naturally" and spontaneously. Since each function is a manifestation or activity of the human essence, since each truly represents man's universal being, all functions are naturally harmonious components of a united social life. There is no call for an external power to apportion or to harmonise their various roles; there is no need for a coercive political state outside or above the society that rationally arranges itself. The conflict of rights and duties, of "private" and "public" wills, of individual and society, disappears from the arena of history.

The conception of rational law and of a rational state with which Marx was still working in 1842 and the early part of 1843 quickly disappeared from his work to be replaced by a concept of a truly free and co-operative society in which people participate in free and co-operative activities. For Marx, they thus became truly universal, seeing in all their human fellows merely representatives of themselves, performing general human functions, having general human interests. In such a society, a society based on the "free labour" of the creative artist, there is no systematic conflict of interests and no politics: the choices that have to be made are technical choices of how best to use resources for agreed common ends. Insofar as Marx continued to believe that the overcoming of alienation and the beginning of the true history of mankind would be attained with communism, he continued to reject the conception that politics was necessary for freedom, that a society based on voluntary associations of workers could not resolve all discussion into technical consideration of means. Whatever communist administrators may believe and act on privately, they still pretend publicly that all social and economic decisions are "rational", technical decisions, "scientific" in character.

Marx's lack of a theory of politics is linked with, but also accounts for, the widely recognised principal weaknesses of Marxist social theory - the tendency toward class and economic reductionism, toward seeing all significant social conflict as reflecting or derived from one central and resolvable conflict - that between economic classes or between productive forces and relations of production. Revolutions are messy and bloody attempts at social reorganisation that have well-known, widely recognised and long-lasting negative features and effects. Honest men and women would not readily embark on pervasive revolution and social

reconstruction if they did not believe that such total reconstruction was possible, that there was a single factor or action from which all else would follow, which would make possible the millenium. Marxism, for a period, offered that hope. Private property and the division of labour were the necessary and sufficient base of all alienation, exploitation and social conflict. Abolish them and conflict and divergence of interests would disappear. Politics would become unnecessary; government would cease to be coercive; law would be replaced by (self)-administration.

It is precisely the inability of classical Marxism to get to grips with the concept of public political life, with political freedom and political democracy, with politics as the science of freedom, that accounts for its constantly decreasing legitimacy and relevance in established Marxist-Leninist states. The concessions that have to be made and are being made in official Marxist-Leninist theory amount to a limited and controlled, but basically incoherent, acceptance into Marxist theory of basic aspects of conventional democratic theory. The state, we are told, is in the conditions of socialism no longer a class state but the state of all the people; even in class societies state and law serve some general, non-class functions, those of promoting and self-guarding interests common to the whole society or necessary to any society at all. Political functions are now divided, in contemporary Soviet theory, into executive, expert and representative functions, to be performed by different people and treated virtually as separate inputs into a system of social administration.

The problem may also be illustrated by considering Marxist-Leninist attitudes to law. E.B. Pashukanis was a good and perceptive Marxist, utterly true to the thought of Marx himself, in developing the view that law was a "bourgeois" phenomenon to be contrasted with socialist administration. Law, he argued, as understood in the western legal tradition and in the phrase "the rule of law" was a system of adjudication or of bargaining between equal and equivalent rights and duty-bearing individuals; it involved presumptions against status, hierarchy and the elevation of the public over the private or of the state over the individual. It was a system of horizontal relations between people and interests that were formally treated as equal. Administration and socialism, for Pashukanis, on the other hand rejected this equality and multiplicity of abstract interests and individuals: they elevated the socio-technical norm, social policy and technical requirements over so-called individual rights. They created a vertical system of subordination and sub-subordination that distinguishes administration from law.

Pashukanis' interpretation of law is not that adopted in Marxist-Leninist theory today All communist

societies have taken over the formal categories and structures, institutions and procedures of the Roman-based western civil law system, though they have allowed it fullest play in the unplanned economic sphere - at the time of the New Economic Policy in Russia and in China now as part of modernisation - and in unpolitical aspects of civil life. But since the 1960s, they have increasingly elevated the role of law in society and the importance of socialist legality by bureaucratising the concept and the content of law. Law is now increasingly defined as "steering society", as representing the command of the state and the general social interest. The most striking feature of Marxist-Leninist theory of law is the glaring absence within it of a theory of justice as opposed to a theory of legal correctness, of "legality". The trend, in short, paralleled but carried to the same extremes by western Marxists is to elevate public law over private law where those terms are used in the German sense noted and developed by the early Radbruch, contrasting the vertical elevation of policy and social interest in the public law with the determination of rights and the elevation of particular interests and individuals in private law. All societies and legal systems face a problem of reconciliation and accommodation, of compromise, between these trends or approaches. But Marxist-Leninist theory, like classical Marxism, does not admit that the problem exists. That is why it still has no theory or conception of politics as the science of freedom.