The role of the soviets in Russia’s bourgeois revolution: the point of view of Julius Martov

(A. Buick, 1976)

The basic principle defended by Marx throughout his forty years of socialist activity can be summed up in the clause of the General Rules of the First International that « the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working classes themselves ». This is a rejection of the view that socialism can be introduced for the working class or that the working class can be led to socialism by some enlightened minority.

Those who set themselves up as leaders of the working class fall into two groups. First, there are the parliamentary reformists who tell the workers: « vote for us and we will introduce socialism for you ». And then there are the various « vanguards » who see themselves leading the workers in a violent assault on the capitalist state. Both groups, despite being bitter antagonists, share a common standpoint: a denial that the majority of workers are capable of understanding and of organising themselves, without leaders, in order to achieve it.

But to deny this is to in effect deny that socialism can be established. For socialism, as a fully democratic society based on the common ownership of the means of production(1), demands, in order to function, the voluntary co-operation and conscious participation of the immense majority of the population. It is a society which simply cannot be established by a minority, however enlightened, determined or benevolent. Leaders, whether reformist parliamentarians or insurrectionist vanguards, cannot establish socialism; all they can and have established is some form of state capitalism.

During and after the first world war a number of working class thinkers and militants (such as Luxemburg, Gorter and Pannekoek) came to recognise that the traditional Social Democratic policy of seeking to win a parliamentary majority on an electoral programme of reforms of capitalism could never lead to socialism but only to state capitalism. They re-asserted that only the working class, socialist-minded and democratically-organised, could establish socialism. However, under the impact of the events of November 1917 in Russia, they imagined that the form of working class organisation to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism has been found in the workers’ « soviets » or councils that had come into being after the overthrow of the Tsar in March 1917.

It is understandable, and perhaps excusable, that in the early days of the « soviet regime » people outside of Russia should have been mistaken about its nature. War-time censorship and the lies of the capitalist press, together with the exaggerations of some of its supporters, meant that little accurate information about what was happening in Russia was available. On the face of it, in November 1917 the Congress of Soviets, a body of working class delegates from all over Russia, had deposed the capitalist Provisional Government and itself taken control of governmental power;
capitalist rule had been overthrown and a socialist regime established – at least this is what appeared to have happened.

But those who had some knowledge of Marx’s theory of social development ought to have quickly had some doubts. Without denying that capitalist political rule had been overthrown or that power had passed into the hands of people calling themselves socialists, they could have questioned whether the outcome could be socialism. Quite apart from the fact that socialism could only have been established as a world system, neither the economic nor the political conditions for a socialist revolution existed in Russia in 1917. Russia was an industrially backward country, with an overwhelmingly peasant population engaged in individual, rather than socialised, production. The workers and peasants of Russia certainly were discontented, but wanted «Peace, Bread and Land» (as the slogans put it) rather than socialism properly-understood.

To be fair, those who supported the Bolshevik coup d’état because they believed it to have been a soviet or workers’ council revolution did eventually – by about 1921 – come to recognise the real nature of the Bolshevik regime as a minority dictatorship forced by economic circumstances to continue the development of capitalism in Russia. But these «Left Communists» (or «Council Communists» as some of them later called themselves) still continued to believe in workers’ councils as the form of working class organisation for establishing socialism.

One man, however, was not taken in by «sovietism»: Julius Martov. Martov was one of the second generation of Russian Social Democrats who, at the turn of the century, worked to build up the Social Democratic movement inside Russia. With Plekhanov, Lenin and others he was one of the editors of the journal Iskra which had been launched in 1900 to counter the nebulous theories of «economism». When, however, the Iskra group, together with the rest of Russian Social Democracy, split over the organisation question Martov was amongst the minority (or «Mensheviks», from the Russian word for minority) who opposed Lenin’s proposal for a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries which was supported by a majority (or «Bolsheviks»). Martov favoured the traditional Social Democratic idea of a mass, open – and, let it be admitted, reformist – workers’ party. Unlike most Mensheviks, however, Martov was an opponent of the first world war, being a member of the small group of «Internationalists» who took up a working-class position on this issue. He was a respected writer (even by Lenin) on Marx and socialist theory and, indeed, it was because of his criticism of the Bolshevik regime from a Marxian point of view that he was forced into exile in 1922, where he died a year later.

Some of the articles he wrote in the period 1919-23 were published in English translation in 1939 under the title The State and the Socialist Revolution (2). Reading these articles it is easy to see why he was such an embarrassment to the Bolshevik government. Not for one moment was he taken in by their claims that the «soviet regime» represented the «dictatorship of the proletariat» as envisaged by Marx (3). For him, it was a cover for the dictatorship, albeit revolutionary, of the Bolshevik Party.

It is instructive to see why the Bolsheviks were, for a few years, advocates of workers’ councils. The «constitutional’ basis for their seizure of power in November 1917 had been a decision of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets to depose the Provisional Government of Kerensky and set up instead a «Provisional Workers and Peasants Government». Thus the Bolsheviks popularised the slogan, in the rest of Europe as well as in Russia, of «all power to the soviets» (i.e., workers’
councils). After they had dissolved the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 they were forced, in order to justify this action, to step up their propaganda in favour of the soviets as an alternative to parliament. The election of a Constituent Assembly, which would decide the future constitution of Russia, had long been a demand of all Russian revolutionaries, including the Bolsheviks. Elections, even though held after the Bolsheviks take-over of power, gave the Bolsheviks only a quarter of the seats, a majority going to the peasant party, the Social Revolutionaries. Lenin gave a number of reasons why the Assembly had had to be dissolved such as out-of-date electoral lists and a split in the Social Revolutionary party between the presentation of candidates and the election. But all these could have been remedied by fresh elections. This the Bolsheviks wished to avoid since they were fully aware that the result would be more or less the same. They determined to hold on to power, while still wishing to be regarded as democrats. Hence Lenin proclaimed that the soviet system was a higher form of democracy than the «bourgeois» parliamentary system.

Martov knew this to be hypocrisy. Lenin favoured the soviet rather than the parliamentary system because he knew that he could get a majority under the former but not the latter – a sure sign, we may add, that the soviet system was not more representative or democratic than the election of a central assembly by universal, direct, equal and secret ballot.

The reason for this was that the soviets – the soviets as they really existed in revolutionary Russia as opposed to the ideal workers’ councils of Left Communist theory – as loose makeshift bodies were easily manipulable by a well-organised group such as were the professional revolutionaries of the Bolshevik Party under Lenin’s leadership. Indeed it could be said that it was precisely because they were the best-organised and disciplined group that the Bolsheviks finally emerged as the government of revolutionary Russia following the collapse of the Tsarist regime – and they came to power by successfully manipulating the soviets.

The soviet system served the Bolsheviks’ purpose because elections to the All-Russia Congress of Soviets were neither universal nor direct nor secret. The Congress was composed of delegates from local soviets who were in their turn delegates from local factories. Its members were thus only indirectly elected. Urban areas were over-represented. There were no set procedures for the election of the delegates to the local soviets; in most cases they would have been chosen by a show of hands at a general assembly of the workforce of a factory, with all the drawbacks of this method of election.

We mention these points not to defend parliamentary democracy but to show how the soviet system was far from being the highest form of political democracy.

It is of course a reasonable point to say that in a revolutionary situation such as existed in Russia in 1917 democratic perfection was not to be expected. The soviets were only makeshift representative organisations which had come into being precisely because working class opinion had been denied expression under the Tsarist regime. They thus played a useful role, filling a void until such time as a more permanent, and structured, system of representation could be set up. To praise their makeshift, unstructured character as being a sign of their ultra-democratic nature is to make a virtue out of necessity and to forget that this made not just for flexibility but also meant that it was easier for a determined minority to manipulate them.
A second argument put forward by the Bolsheviks in favour of the soviet system was that it gave power to the more determined revolutionary elements in Russia whereas to have let power pass into the hands of a parliamentary government responsible to a Constituent Assembly elected by universal suffrage would have led to a slowing-down of the revolutionary process. This is undoubtedly true, but it shows clearly that the Russian revolution was essentially a bourgeois rather than a socialist revolution.

The socialist revolution can only be a revolution carried out consciously by the immense working-class majority acting in their own interests. In these circumstances any system of representation – whether soviets or parliament – would give a majority for the revolution. This is not necessarily the case during a bourgeois revolution, however, where the revolutionaries can find themselves impeded by the lack of revolutionary will of the masses. Martov describes a typical bourgeois revolution thus:

« The role of active factor in the overturn belonged to minorities of the social classes in whose interest the revolution developed. These minorities exploited the confused discontent and the sporadic explosions of anger arising among scattered and socially inconsistent elements within the revolutionary class. They guided the latter in the destruction of the old social forms. In certain cases, the active leader minorities had to use the power of their concentrated energy in order to shatter the inertia of the elements they tried to wield for revolutionary purposes. Therefore, these active leader minorities sometimes made efforts – often successful efforts – to repress the passive resistance of the manipulated elements, when the latter refused to move forward toward the broadening and deepening of the revolution. The dictatorship of an active revolutionary minority, a dictatorship that tended to be terrorist, was the normal coming-to-a-head of the situation in which the old social order had confined the popular mass, now called on by the revolutionaries to forge their own destiny ». (The State and the Socialist Revolution, p. 16).

That an enlightened minority of revolutionists were justified in ignoring the views of the unenlightened majority in order to carry through the revolution was an idea that had first made its appearance, in the form of Jacobinism, during the French bourgeois revolution. It was inherited by utopian Communists such as Buonarotti, Weitling and Blanqui. And it was, as Martov points out, an element in Bolshevik thinking too.

The Bolsheviks supported the soviet system because it enabled them, as a determined revolutionary minority, to come to power:

« The ‘soviet regime’ becomes the means of bringing into power and maintaining in power a revolutionary minority which claims to defend the interests of a majority, though the latter has not recognised these interests as its own, though this majority has not attached itself sufficiently to these interests to defend them with all its energy and determination. » (p. 19).

This, Martov goes on, applied equally to the partisans of the soviet idea (workers’ councils) outside of Russia. They too saw workers’ councils as a short-cut to power, as a means of by-passing the need to have majority socialist understanding amongst the working class before trying to overthrow capitalism:
« The mystery of the ‘soviet regime’ is now deciphered. We see now how an organism that is supposedly created by the specific peculiarities of a labor movement corresponding to the highest development of capitalism is revealed to be, at the same time, suitable to the needs of countries knowing neither large capitalist production, nor a powerful bourgeoisie, nor a proletariat that has evolved through the experiences of the class struggle.

« In other words, in the advanced countries, the proletariat resorts, we are told, to the soviet form of the dictatorship as soon as its elan toward the social revolution strikes against the impossibility of realizing its power in any other way than through the dictatorship of a minority, a minority within the proletariat itself.

« The thesis of the ‘finally discovered form’, the thesis of the political form that, belonging to the specific circumstances of the imperialist phase of capitalism, is said to be the only form that can realize the social enfranchisement of the proletariat, constitutes the historically necessary illusion by whose effect the revolutionary section of the proletariat renounces its belief in its ability to draw behind it the majority of the population of the country and resuscitates the idea of the minority dictatorship of the Jacobins in the very form used by the bourgeois revolution of the 18th century. Must we recall here that this revolutionary method has been repudiated by the working class to the extent that it has freed itself from its heritage of petty-bourgeois revolutionism? » (p. 21-22).

The view that a revolutionary minority could and should establish its dictatorship in order to try to introduce socialism is of course a denial of the basic principle upheld by Marx that « the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself ». That this view should be popular amongst revolutionaries in Russia was no coincidence. For, as we have seen, the Russian revolution – as the process of overthrowing, root and branch, the Tsarist social order – was essentially bourgeois. The soviets had a role to play in this bourgeois revolution: to allow the determined revolutionary minority to come to power. After noting how in July 1917, when the Congress of Soviets was dominated by the vacillating Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, Lenin had thought of abandoning the slogan « all power to the soviets » in favour of an open demand for « all power to the Bolshevik Party », Martov goes on:

« The consequent course of the Russian revolution cured Lenin of his passing ‘lack of faith’. The soviets fulfilled the role expected of them. The rising tide of bourgeois revolutionary enthusiasm set in motion the worker and peasant masses, washing away their ‘meanness’. Lifted by the wave, the Bolsheviks possessed themselves of the government apparatus. Then the role of the insurrectionary element came to an end. The Moor had accomplished his task. The State that came into power with the aid of the ‘Power of the Soviets’ became the ‘Soviet Power’. The Communist minority incorporated into this State made itself secure, once for always, against a possible return of the spirit of ‘meanness’ » (p. 28).

The coming to power of the Bolsheviks did not represent, as they themselves believed, progress from Russia’s bourgeois revolution to its « proletarian revolution ». It was, says Martov, echoing what Marx had said about the so-called Reign of Terror in France in 1794, « a point in the process of the bourgeois revolution itself ». Commenting on the passage in Marx’s 1847 article in which this phrase occurred (4), Martov says:
« One might say that Marx wrote this specially for the benefit of those people who consider the simple fact of a fortuitous conquest of power by the democratic small bourgeoisie and the proletariat as proof of the maturity of society for the socialist revolution. But it may also be said that he wrote this specially for the benefit of those socialists who believe that never in the course of a revolution that is bourgeois in its objectives can there occur a possibility permitting the political power to escape from the hands of the bourgeoisie and pass to the democratic masses. One may say that Marx wrote this also for the benefit of those socialists who consider utopian the mere idea of such a displacement of power and who do not realize that this phenomenon is ‘only a point in the process of the bourgeois revolution itself’, that it is a factor assuring, under certain conditions, the most complete and radical suppression of the obstacles rising in the way of this bourgeois revolution » (p. 59-60).

It only remains to add that, unlike in 1794 in France where the determined minority were replaced by the traditional bourgeoisie after having done their dirty work for them, in Russia the determined minority remained in power and that it was from amongst their ranks that evolved the ruling and exploiting class of the capitalist Russia they had no alternative but to develop.

So, from a bourgeois revolutionary point of view, the Bolsheviks were justified in maintaining their minority dictatorship. Where they were wrong was in imagining, and propagating amongst the workers of the rest of Europe, that this had something to do with « socialism ». Their sympathisers in the West, including the Left and Council Communists, were equally mistaken in imagining that the soviets (or workers’ councils), which had served as a cover for the Bolshevik minority to come to power, were the form of working class organisation for socialism in advanced capitalist countries.

Certainly, workers’ councils or something akin to them, as workplace organisations of the workers, are bound to arise in the course of the socialist revolution. But to claim that they are the only possible form of working class self-organisation is to go too far, is in fact to make a fetish of a mere organisational form. What is important in working class self-organisation, however, is not the form but the principle.

The principles of democratic self-organisation – which are in fact democratic principles generally – can be applied, given a sufficient democratic consciousness, to any working class organisation, including even organisation to contest elections and to control central parliaments and local councils. There is no reason whatsoever in theory why a workers’ socialist political party could not be organised on the same basis as has been proposed by Left Communists for workers’ councils: no leadership and so no division into leaders and led; the candidates, including those elected, just like the delegates to the ideal workers’ council, could be subject to continual control and, if need be, instantly recalled; they could be strictly mandated to fight for socialism and not to pursue reforms of capitalism. In other words, there is no necessary connexion between the principle of democratic working class self-organisation and organisation at the place of work. As stated, what is important is not the form of organisation but the democratic – and socialist – consciousness of the working class. This can express itself in a great variety of organisational forms, including a mass political party. Indeed, this was the form Marx himself expected it to take.

Martov, whose writings are unfortunately not generally known, must be given credit for having demystified a little the idea of workers’ councils by showing the essentially bourgeois revolutionary role that the soviets played in Russia in 1917.
Common ownership is not the same as State ownership. Since the State is a feature only of class societies State ownership is a form of sectional or class monopoly of the means of production. In socialism the State is replaced by the democratic administration of social affairs, including production which would be directed solely to satisfying human needs, with the resulting disappearance of production for sale, profits, wages, money, banks and all the other paraphernalia of buying and selling.

The State and the Socialist Revolution, translated by Integer, International Review, New York, 1939. Integer gives as the source of the articles translated:

« The first two sections of this book, The Ideology of Sovietism and The Conquest of the State, were written early in 1919. They form a compact whole and should be read as such. The first essay appeared serially in the periodical Mysl of Kharkov. The introductory section of the second was first published in the issues of July 8 and September 1, 1921, of the Sozialistisches Vestnik (Berlin). The remainder of the second essay appeared for the first time in Mirovoi Bolshevism (World Bolshevism), Berlin, 1923, from the text of which the entire present translation was made. The final section, entitled Marx and the Problem of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat was first published in 1918 in the Workers International of Moscow, edited by Martov ».

For Marx the « dictatorship of the proletariat » was the political form of the period during which the working class would be transforming capitalism into socialism. He advocated that it take the form of a fully democratised State controlled by the working class. See H. Draper, ‘Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, New Politics, Vol. 1, Number 4, Summer 1962.

« Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritische Moral ». A recent English translation of the passage in question reads: « If the proletariat destroys the political rule of the bourgeoisie, this will only be a temporary victory, only an element in the service of the bourgeois revolution itself, as in 1974, so long as in the course of history, in its movement, the material conditions are not yet created which make necessary the abolition of the bourgeois mode of production and thus the definitive overthrow of bourgeois political rule » (Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, edited by T. B. Bottomore and Maximilien Ruhel, Penguin Books, London, 1963, p. 244).