

Marx's three different conceptions of political change under capitalism: Direct democracy, proletarian revolution, or self-government under proletarian leadership

Can Mert Kökerer

The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Correspondence

Can Mert Kökerer, Department of Sociology, The University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street Chicago, IL 60637, USA.
Email: kokererc@uchicago.edu

The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking. For this reason dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already saw—with ruse. (Benjamin, 1978, p. 162)

Scholars have interpreted Marx's conception of political change within the framework of his critique of capitalist society in myriad ways. Three main interpretations have prevailed in Marx scholarship in the last few decades with regard to his conception of political change under capitalism. The first interpretation, which is epitomized by Althusser's (1965) division of Marx's intellectual development into an early and late period, claims that his earlier philosophical and radical democratic analyses give place to a more scientific conception of capitalist society (see Cantin, 2003). The philosophical and ideological interests of the Young Marx, which provides "a radical-democratic interpretation" (Habermas, 1989, p. 126), according to this understanding, are superseded by the scientific and materialistic analyses of the Old Marx. Whereas the Young Marx entertains the possibility of achieving human emancipation through radical democratic politics, they highlight "the incompatibility of such writings with the historical insights and doctrines of the mature Marx" (Kranenberg, 1982, p. 23). From the second half of the 19th century, they claim, Marx no longer pays attention to those political concepts and philosophical questions influenced by Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel, but is rather interested in providing a scientific analysis and critique of the capitalist mode of production for revolutionary communist politics.

The second and third groups of scholars directly oppose this division of Marx into an early and late period through the Althusserian concept of epistemological break, although their emphases on the development of his conception of

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2024 The Authors. *Constellations* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

political change under capitalism diverge significantly. The main argument of the second group (Avineri, 1968; Draper, 1974; Femia, 1993; Fromm, 1961; Grollios, 2011; Springborg, 1984a, 1984b) is that Marx's earlier notion of democracy as the locus of human freedom is to a large extent encompassed by his later understanding of communism. They stress that "in his Critique of Hegel, what Marx terms 'democracy' is not fundamentally different from what he will later call 'communism'" (Femia, 1993, p. 70). Rather than finding an epistemological break in Marx's earlier and later writings, they claim that "in spite of certain changes in concepts, in mood, in language" (Fromm, 1961, p. 79), the mid-1840s onward, Marx uses very similar terms with his earlier account of democracy to describe what communism would look like after the overthrow of capitalist society. They go as far as to maintain that "the Communist Manifesto is immanent in the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (Avineri, 1968, p. 34). Thus, there occurs only a change in the terminology he employs during this period "in the direction of defining consistent democracy in socialist terms, and consistent socialism in democratic terms" (Draper, 1974, p. 102).

The last group of scholars (Abensour, 2011; Bidet, 2001; Chrysis, 2018; Cohen, 1985; Doveton, 1994; Garo, 2001; Hunt, 1974; Kouvelakis, 2001; Levin, 1989; Mercer, 1980; Mostov, 1989; Niemi, 2010; O'Malley, 1970; Rubel, 1983; Schumpeter, 1942), in turn, agree with the second group's critique of the Young–Old Marx thesis; but they diverge on the terms of the transition from his understanding of democracy to communism. As opposed to the former's interpretation of the transition as a terminological issue, they argue that there exists instead a continuity in his understanding of democracy and communism throughout his life. They "emphasize how continuity from his earlier thought provides a framework for understanding Critique of the Gotha Program as consistent with his earlier democratic beliefs" (Niemi, 2010, p. 41). His critique of Hegel's conceptualization of monarchy and bureaucracy in 1843, through which he arrives at the idea of democracy as the locus of human freedom, is interpreted as a precursor to his more developed understanding of human freedom, which would be realized under communism as a result of the revolutionary agency of the proletariat. They maintain that "what they [Marx and Engels] envisaged for the future society, from its very beginning, was a kind of participatory democracy" (Hunt, 1974, p. XIII). According to them, the transition does not occur in his terminological uses but rather signifies an expansion of his earlier understanding in conjunction with his intellectual development amid sociopolitical changes in Europe and beyond. Thus, the transition involves "a switch in Marx's choice of subject matter" (Doveton, 1994, p. 564), which in turn expands his earlier understanding of human freedom under democracy toward more elaborate conceptualizations of proletarian revolution and communism.

This article demonstrates that these dominant interpretations of Marx's understanding of political change under capitalism have failed to trace the development of Marx's political thinking throughout his intellectual life. As opposed to the first interpretation's breaking of Marx's lifetime into an early and late period, this article argues that this philosophical versus scientific division of Marx does not capture the persistence of his lifelong interest in what Koselleck (1985) calls "the makeability of politics" in conjunction with the critique of capitalist society. By distinguishing "human action from what actually occurs in the long term" (Koselleck, 1985, p. 208) in terms of socioeconomic changes, Marx foregrounds the necessity to be attentive and responsive to ongoing sociopolitical transformations to envision political change under capitalism. Thus, Marx does not arrive at an ultimate, scientific conception of political change, unlike what the first interpretation posits, but rather conceives of political change as dependent on historical context. As Carver (2018) demonstrates, it is necessary to take into account Marx's "activist context" in his sometimes collaborative and sometimes conflictual relationship with other political actors of his time such as the liberals to have a more sophisticated understanding of his own politics. Here, the other two interpretations seem to implicitly or explicitly assume the preponderance of political change in Marx's theoretical thinking throughout his life. On the one hand, the second interpretation asserts that Marx starts off with an understanding of political change in the form of participatory democracy, which remains more or less the same despite the terminological changes in the direction of communism. The third one, on the other hand, argues for a continuous expansion of Marx's conception of political change that arrives at the ultimate form of proletarian revolution to achieve communism. However, neither the former, which asserts a more or less invariant conception of political change by Marx, nor the latter, which emphasizes Marx's arrival at an ultimate understanding of political change, grasps the peculiarity of the transformations of Marx's

conception of political change under capitalism. As a response, this article argues that Marx neither starts off with nor arrives at an ultimate understanding of political change that would be valid and applicable to all historical moments independent of the context.

This article presents Marx's three different conceptions of political change under capitalism. It reveals the transformations of Marx's understanding of political change from his earliest treatment of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* through his analyses of the 19th-century revolutions in France to his later *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1972a) of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. First, in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1970), Marx conceptualizes the people as the political agent *par excellence* who would bring about and sustain human freedom in a democratic form of government. Drawing on the Athenian model of democracy in which the common people directly participate in political institutions, Marx hints at the supersession of the centralized state through democratic takeover and repurposing of the existing order.

Second, starting from the winter of 1843/1844, Marx no longer considers the people as the agent for achieving human freedom. In *On the Jewish Question* (1972b) and *Introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1972c), Marx ceases to consider the people's political agency under democracy as the locus of human freedom. Through the introduction of the concept of revolution to describe the transition from capitalist to communist society, Marx emphasizes the revolutionary agency of the proletariat. This reorientation toward revolution rather than political institutions culminates in a programmatic statement in *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1972a) in which he, along with Engels, argues that the proletariat would emancipate the whole society and put an end to human estrangement and exploitation of one class by another one. His exposition of the revolutionary agency of the proletariat constitutes the core of his arguments in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 1972b) as well as his historical writings about the sociopolitical changes in France (e.g., *Class Struggles in France 1848-1850* (1964); *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1963)) and *Capital* (1976). Marx's critique of capitalist society points to the possibility of overcoming the inner contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, along with the exploitation of the working class by capitalists, through the revolutionary action of the proletariat. Accordingly, he conceives of the proletariat as the bearer of human freedom for all individuals in capitalist society whose struggle against the exploitative system would result in, first, the expropriation of capitalists and then the creation of a communist society in which equality, solidarity, and human creativity would flourish.

Finally, the emergence of the Paris Commune in 1871 marks a significant transformation in Marx's understanding of political change under capitalism. Unlike his earlier imagination of communism achieved via the revolutionary action of the proletariat, soon after the establishment of the Commune, he begins exploring the potential of participatory democracy to realize communism. Although he continues to talk about the working class as the leader of the Communards during the spring of 1871, he no longer foregrounds its revolutionary agency at the cost of popular participation in self-government. The creation of a plethora of participatory institutional mechanisms as well as experimentations with novel conceptions of citizenship, gender equality, political accountability, and local autonomy by the Communards pushes him to reconsider political change as no longer springing from the revolutionary action of the proletariat, but rather the direct participation of the common people in self-government via institutional mechanisms under the leadership of the proletariat. The proletariat no longer in itself forms a revolutionary agent; instead, it attains an elected, responsible, and revocable leadership position in the process of collective self-government, which would create communism thanks to its emerging institutional structure based on popular participation.

As a result, Marx initially conceptualizes the people as the emancipatory agent of a given state based on the Athenian model of democracy against the monarch and bureaucratic administration. Later, he emphasizes the revolutionary agency of the proletariat to bring about communism through the centralized control of the state apparatus and public ownership of the means of production. However, following the Paris Commune, Marx reconceptualizes political change as springing from the common people's participation in self-government under the elected, responsible, and revocable leadership of the proletariat.

1 | DIRECT DEMOCRACY

In *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx directly confronts Hegel's understanding of the monarch as the sovereign of the state as opposed to the sovereignty of the people "based on the wild idea of 'the people'" (Hegel, 1952, p. 183). Here, the issue of representation constitutes the core of Marx's critique. He argues that the monarch "is sovereign in so far as he represents the unity of the people, and thus he is himself merely a representative, a symbol of the sovereignty of the people" (Marx, 1970, p. 28). In sharp contrast with Hegel, "Marx opts for thinking the political realm from the perspective of the sovereignty of the people" (Abensour, 2011, p. 48). Thus, the monarch cannot be the actual sovereign of the state, since his position as the monarch is due to the sovereignty of the people, i.e., he only represents the people's sovereignty.

It is within this framework of conceptualizing popular sovereignty as opposed to monarchical sovereignty that Marx develops his idea of democracy and "undertakes a quite passionate defense of democracy" (Springborg, 1984b, p. 48). True democracy (*wahre Demokratie*), according to Marx, is the only true form of government in the sense that the people, i.e., "the whole Demos" (Marx, 1970, p. 29), determine its own political constitution.¹ Unlike the monarchical form of government in which the individual in civil society belongs to the political constitution that is determined by the monarch, in democracy "the constitution not only in itself, according to essence, but according to existence and actuality is returned to its real ground, actual man, the actual people, and established as its own work" (Marx, 1970, pp. 29–30). In a true democracy, popular sovereignty "must be constitutive, constitutional in the full sense of the term"² (Raulet, 2001, p. 9). Thus, true democracy is "that state of society in which the individual is no longer juxtaposed against society" (Avineri, 1968, p. 34). It signifies a "full reconstruction of social and political life"³ (Kouvelakis, 2001, p. 17). Marx views democracy as that form of government in which the people realize their political agency by creating their own particular constitution and mode of government, which is based on "human existence, while in the other political forms, man has only legal existence" (Marx, 1970, p. 30). For Marx, "only democracy can satisfy universalist needs" (Levin, 1989, p. 16) of human beings.

The individual in democracy does not have a dual existence in the separated form of the political community and civil society. The political individual has no longer "his particular and separate existence beside the unpolitical, private man" (Marx, 1970, pp. 30–31) as they do in monarchical or republican forms of government. Thus, "in true democracy the political state disappears [*der politische Staat untergehe*]" (Marx, 1970, pp. 30–31), and the political constitution signifies the self-determination of the people.

Here, it is important to note that when Marx talks about democracy in opposition to monarchy, he has in mind the ancient Athenian (Abensour, 2011, p. 33) and, to a lesser extent, Roman experiences with self-government (see de Ste. Croix (1975) for a detailed discussion of Marx's engagement with Athenian and Roman histories). He maintains that these ancient people "were the sovereign people" (Marx, 1970, p. 38) who shaped "the content of the state" (Marx, 1970, p. 31), unlike the modern state in which there exists a distinction between the political and non-political spheres. Moreover, ancient Athenian and Roman societies did not create bureaucracies, which were prevalent in other ancient societies (e.g., Egypt), and are preponderant in modern society. As Marx states, "no one ever heard of the Greek or Roman statesmen taking an examination" (Marx, 1970, p. 51). This is a crucial point for Marx because human emancipation in modern society necessarily requires the abolition (*Aufhebung*) of bureaucracy. For him, bureaucracy is "the institutional incarnation of political alienation" (Avineri, 1968, p. 48). As opposed to Hegel's characterization of the bureaucratic class as the universal class, Marx's "anti-bureaucratic impulse" (Abensour, 2011, p. 41) reveals that its abolition should happen "through the particular interest really becoming universal" (Marx, 1970, p. 58) in the democratic form of government. His understanding of true democracy directly counters "state politics as the profession and privileged exercise of power by bureaucracy in the interest of private proprietors" (Chrysis, 2018, p. 180).

For Marx, only in a democratic form of government in which the people as the sovereign agent actualize their own political constitution and state, human emancipation can be achieved. In democracy, "the governing power, the practice by which the political universal applies to the social particularity, should not be anything other than the actual

expression of the will of the people⁴” (Renault, 2001, p. 30). Marx’s conceptualization of true democracy “announces the abolition of bureaucracy as a specialized body of political domination and advances citizens’ *vita activa* through the diffusion of politics throughout the entire social body” (Chrysis, 2018, p. 109). The political constitution, which is “a true expression of the people’s will” (Marx, 1970, p. 58), can only be determined by the political agency of the people, not by the monarch and bureaucratic agents.

As a result, this Athenian model of self-government and participatory democracy in which the *demos*, who is selected by lot to one-year term offices, directly participates in the government of the city-state, constitutes the core of Marx’s understanding of democracy and political agency. As Hunt (1974, p. 83) stresses, within his discussion on democracy, “no other political structure in the Western tradition so closely resembles Marx’s ideal as Periclean Athens.” Instead of being ruled by the bureaucratic class specialized in administrative tasks, this model functions on the basis of amateur citizen participation in government and administrative offices, which precludes bureaucratization. The individual is both part and parcel of the whole, i.e., the *demos* in the *ekklesia* (assembly), *dikasteria* (popular courts), *boule* (council), and *nomothetai* (lawmakers), and actively engaged in the day-to-day administration of the city-state. Therefore, Marx’s conceptualization of democracy as based on the unity of the universal and the particular seems to be heavily influenced by the ancient model of democracy (Femia, 1993, p. 76), which he employs not only to challenge Hegel’s understanding of monarchical sovereignty but also to present it as the source of human emancipation. The people’s “historical intervention⁵” (Bidet, 2001, pp. 75–76) in establishing and sustaining democracy, as opposed to nondemocratic forms of government, would bring about human emancipation in modern society.

2 | PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION

Marx continues his critique of the separation of the political community and civil society in *On the Jewish Question*. Yet, he replaces the concept of democracy with the concept of species-being (*Gattungswesen*)⁶ in discussing human emancipation. This indicates the beginning of a shift in his conception of political change which over time results in a distinct understanding of political change as emerging from the revolutionary agency of the proletariat, as will be discussed below. In this essay, human emancipation emerges from the abolition of the distinction between the abstract citizen and the egoistic individual. In addition, while he talks about true democracy in general terms in his previous work, here, Marx focuses on the really existing democratic forms of government in the 19th century, i.e., England and the United States, which are conditioned by the separation of the political and private individual, and “exposes the weaknesses and limitations of existing democratic practices” (Pierson, 1986, p. 16). Thus, Marx pays attention to the historical context of existing democratic governments as he reorients his conception of political change. Finally, Marx does not talk about a particular emancipatory agent here, but rather describes what human emancipation would look like when the separation of the individual’s life into political and civil spheres is negated.

Marx uses the concept of species-being in order to contrast the abstract existence of the individual as part of an imaginary whole in the political community to their isolated material existence in civil society:

The perfected political state is, by its nature, the *species-life* [*Gattungsleben*] of man as *opposed* to his material life. All the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist in *civil society outside* the political sphere, as qualities of civil society... Man in his *most intimate* reality, in civil society, is a profane being. Here, where he appears both to himself and to others as a real individual he is an *illusory* phenomenon. In the state, on the contrary, where he is regarded as a species-being, man is the imaginary member of an imaginary sovereignty, divested of his real, individual life, and infused with an unreal universality. (Marx, 1972b, pp. 33–34)

As a direct consequence of political emancipation from religion, the individual now has a double existence. They act in political life as “the public person,” whereas in civil society they exist in differentiation from the others as “the

private person" (Marx, 1972b, p. 35). The democratic state is emancipated from religion by "relegat[ing] religion among the other elements of civil society" (Marx, 1972b, p. 36) as the private matter of the individual, who practices their own religion "in a profane manner" (Marx, 1972b, p. 37). In the democratic state, the individual does not realize their species-being in the real world, but only in the imaginary world of the political community as an abstract citizen. They are completely separated and isolated from others in civil society where they exist in their real life.

Unlike his characterization of human freedom in terms of the self-determination of the people in the form of democracy in his previous work, Marx considers the democratic state as characterized by the transference of the individual's true nature, species-being to the imaginary realm of the state. Meanwhile, in their actual life, they continue to exist as egoistic, isolated human beings. Therefore, in political democracy,

man, not merely one man but every man, is there considered a sovereign being, a supreme being; but it is uneducated, unsocial man, man just as he is in his fortuitous existence, man as he has been corrupted, lost to himself, alienated, subjected to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements, by the whole organization of our society—in short man who is not yet a *real* species-being. (Marx, 1972b, p. 39)

The political revolution that emancipates the state from religion at the same time "regards civil society... as the *basis of its own existence*, as a self-subsistent *precondition*, and thus as its *natural basis*" (Marx, 1972b, p. 46). The individual's abstract imagination as a citizen in the political community becomes fully subsumed to their real existence in the form of the egoistic individual, who "is identified with *authentic man* [*eigentlichen Menschen*]" (Marx, 1972b, p. 46). Whereas they are conceived as a species-being only in imagination as an abstract citizen, their egoistic and isolated existence as a private individual in civil society constitutes their real-life experience. Thus, Marx rejects the idea of political emancipation as the final form of emancipation of the individual. Instead, he insists on the need for human emancipation through the recognition and organization of the individual's "own powers (*forces propres*) as social powers" (Marx, 1972b, p. 46). It is only through the self-realization of the species-being in the real world that human beings can become social beings throughout their actual existence among one another.

As mentioned above, Marx does not deal with the question of political agency in this work. Yet, he revisits the question of political agency in its relationship with human emancipation in *Introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. His exposure to "the French working class in Paris, where he emigrated shortly after completing the *Critique*" (O'Malley, 1970, p. LIII), facilitates a change in his understanding of emancipatory agency. In addition to his reorientation toward the analysis of the existing forms of democratic government starting from the winter of 1843–1844 after which he arrives at the impossibility of achieving human emancipation within the context of the democratic state, Marx here starts to explore the revolutionary potential of the proletariat as the universal class for human emancipation for the entire humanity. Thus, as soon as he identifies "the proletariat as the agency of liberation early in 1844, Marx ceased to use the term 'democracy' as the label for either the political movement or the type of society he favoured" (Levin, 1989, p. 18).

In this work, Marx "develops a problematique which is undeniably irreducible to that of *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*"⁷ (Renault, 2001, p. 24). The main agent for human emancipation now takes the form of a particular class, which "associates and mingles with society at large, identifies itself with it, and is felt and recognized as the *general representative* [*allgemeiner Repräsentant*] of this society" (Marx, 1972c, p. 62). Marx, "for the first time" (Avineri, 1968, p. 58), depicts the class war conducted by a particular class, which would bring about human emancipation for the entire society (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 26). He argues that "for a *popular revolution* [*Revolution eines Volkes*] and the *emancipation of a particular class* [*Emanzipation einer besonderen Klasse*] of civil society to coincide, for one class to represent the whole of society, another class must concentrate in itself all the evils of society, a particular class must embody and represent a general obstacle and limitation" (Marx, 1972c, p. 63).

Human emancipation occurs in opposition to and struggle with the oppressing class (*der Stand der Unterjochung*) through the revolutionary action of the liberating class (*der Stand der Befreiung*). The latter, which is the proletariat, declares "*I am nothing and I should be everything* [*Ich bin nichts, und ich müßte alles sein*]" (Marx, 1972c, p. 63) against the

bourgeoisie. Through its revolutionary action the proletariat “announces the *dissolution of the existing social order* [die *Auflösung der bisherigen Weltordnung*]” (Marx, 1972c, p. 65). Marx assigns the proletariat, whose poverty is “*artificially produced*” (Marx, 1972c, p. 64) by the disintegration of society, with the task of abolishing all forms of servitude and bringing about human emancipation for the entire society. Thus, he “sees in the proletariat the contemporary, and final, realization of universality” (Avineri, 1968, p. 59).

Furthermore, Marx in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1972d) amalgamates the concept of species-being and the revolutionary agency of the proletariat. Rather than focusing on the dual existence of the individual in the political community and civil society as precluding the self-realization of species-being, he now discusses species-being within the framework of capitalist production. For Marx, the capitalist production process results in the alienation of the individual from their species-being:

In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life-activity [seine *Lebenstätigkeit*], estranged labour estranges the *species* [*Gattung*] from man. It turns from him the *life of the species* [*Gattungsleben*] into a means of individual life [Mittel des individuellen Lebens]. First it estranges the life of the species and individual life, and secondly it makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species, likewise in the abstract and estranged form. (Marx, 1972d, p. 75)

His understanding of species-being now revolves around the question of alienated, estranged labor (cf. Wood, 2004, pp. 18–19), which estranges the individual’s conscious life-activity and makes it appear “only as a *means to life* [*Lebensmittel*]” (Marx, 1972d, p. 76). During the capitalist production process “estranged labour tears from him his *species life*, his real species objectivity” (Marx, 1972d, p. 76). The individual’s species-consciousness is “transformed by estrangement in such a way that the species life becomes for him a means” (Marx, 1972d, p. 77). Their species-being becomes something alien to the individual, which also leads to their estrangement from other individuals.

Marx argues that capitalist production results in the alienation, estrangement of the worker whose sole way to achieve emancipation from their servitude is through the revolutionary action of the proletariat. By emancipating the worker from their servitude to capital, the proletarian revolution would bring about not only the workers’ emancipation but also human emancipation. For “the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation—and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and every relation of servitude is but a modification and consequence of this relation” (Marx, 1972d, p. 80). Thus, Marx views the possibility for human emancipation in modern society solely through the emancipation of the proletariat from the capitalist production process, which estranges it from its species-being throughout its life-activity.

He entangles proletarian emancipation with human emancipation, “as the enslavement of the proletariat is paradigmatic to all forms of human unfreedom” (Avineri, 1968, p. 60). It is through the revolutionary action of the proletariat that communism, which “is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the *actual* [*wirkliche*] phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and recovery” (Marx, 1972d, p. 93), would be established. Once private property and capitalist society are abolished through the proletarian revolution, a new individual in harmony with their species-being and “*profoundly endowed with all the senses* [*tief allsinnigen*]” (Marx, 1972d, p. 89) in their coexistence with others would begin to arise under communism. Only then “the demands of the proletariat, its interests as universal class, coincide with the actuality of communism which, as the positive abolition of private property, is precisely the catalyst of the new world which is coming into being” (O’Malley, 1970, p. LIX).

Finally, *The German Ideology* signifies the culmination of Marx’s association of the proletariat as the universal class with emancipatory agency. Marx, along with Engels, develops his theory of the proletarian revolution as a result of the tension between the universal development of productive forces and social relations of production. As this tension grows in capitalist societies, “the propertyless mass” (Marx & Engels, 1972a, pp. 161–162), that is, the proletariat puts an end to the most advanced form of human domination in the guise of the domination of the capitalist class over

the working class “by means of a revolution” (Marx & Engels, 1972a, p. 168). The aim of the proletarian revolution is “the appropriation of a totality of productive forces and in the thus postulated development of a totality of capacities” (Marx & Engels, 1972a, p. 191), and therefore the creation of universal control over the means of production by all. Through its revolutionary action against capitalists and appropriation of productive forces, “private property comes to an end” (Marx & Engels, 1972a, p. 192), and the proletariat “succeed[s] in ridding itself of all the much of ages and become fitted to found society anew” (Marx & Engels, 1972a, pp. 192–193). Here, the direct target of the proletarian revolution is the control of the state which is under the domination of the capitalist class. By “overthrow[ing] the State” (Marx & Engels, 1972a, p. 200), the proletariat would start building a communist future, which would have human unity and freedom as its basis in shaping the future organization of social relations.

Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* describe the aims of the proletarian movement to overthrow capitalist society and replace it with communism. They discuss to what extent modern society is characterized by the stark contrast between the bourgeoisie as the owners of the means of production and the proletariat as the members of the working class. They demonstrate how capitalists have an innate tendency to constantly revolutionize the productive forces in order to accumulate more capital, which in turn increases the size and power of the working class. Thus, they maintain that “not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians” (Marx & Engels, 1972b, p. 478).

They characterize the proletariat as the universal revolutionary agent of history, which represents the immense majority of the population in modern society. Elaborating on the understanding of the proletariat as the emancipatory agent in capitalist society, they emphasize the internationalist character of the proletariat’s revolutionary agency. Because of the growth of industrial capitalism, which pushes more and more middling classes such as artisans, merchants, and tradesmen to the proletarian ranks, the proletariat in modern society “is recruited from all classes of the population” (Marx & Engels, 1972b, pp. 479–480). The proletarians create a movement, which “is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority” (Marx & Engels, 1972b, p. 482). As the first step, their revolutionary movement aims “to win the battle of democracy” (Marx & Engels, 1972b, p. 490), which would put them into the ruling position. For this reason, the proletariat should “labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries” (Marx & Engels, 1972b, p. 500). By winning this battle of democracy, “the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of the production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible” (Marx & Engels, 1972b, p. 490). After overthrowing the rule of the bourgeoisie through its domination of the state, the proletariat would then create the conditions under which there would appear “an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx & Engels, 1972b, p. 491).

Throughout his analyses of revolutionary struggles in France, Marx continues to employ the understanding of the proletariat as the revolutionary agent of history. He further distinguishes his understanding of the revolutionary agency of the proletariat from petty bourgeois attempts to foreground democratic struggles, which “wished to remove autocracy and establish representative institutions, but were wary of allowing power to descend to the working classes” (Levin, 1989, p. 30). Having experienced the failures of the 1848 revolutions across Europe, “Marx had become increasingly discouraged with the democratic movements in Europe” (Mostov, 1989, p. 207). Although his reorientation toward the existing forms of democratic government and discovery of the proletariat constitute the beginning of this novel conceptualization of political change, after the defeat of the revolutionary struggles in 1848, he further foregrounds the proletariat as the universal emancipatory agent and increasingly loses his interest in democracy as a political concept. Thus, the term democracy, “after 1848, becomes much less significant in their [Marx and Engels’] political lexicon” (Doveton, 1994, p. 558).

During the late 1840s and early 1850s, he expands on his discussion of the revolutionary agency of the proletariat by defining it as “a class in which the revolutionary interests of society are concentrated, so soon as it has risen up, finds directly in its own situation the content and the material of its revolutionary activity” (Marx, 1964, pp. 42–43).

Here, he calls revolutions “the locomotives of history” (Marx, 1964, p. 120), which transform the existing social orders with novel ones. The proletarian revolutions as the emerging revolutionary force of history,

criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, recoil ever and anon from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: Hic Rhodus, hic salta! Here is the rose, here dance! (Marx, 1963, p. 19)

The proletariat's subordinate position vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie conditions its revolutionary potential, which leads to the overthrow of the capitalist order. Here, the English proletariat occupies a key role in Marx's consideration of the proletariat as the universal agent of history. Because England is the most advanced industrial country, the proletariat's direct opposition to capitalists is present in the most crystallized and developed form there. Other societies, which are yet to be industrialized, will follow the lead of England in the formation of the capitalist order, which will necessarily be characterized by the exploitation of the immense majority of their populations, that is, the working class by the bourgeoisie. The proletarian revolution spearheaded by the English working class in response to “a new crisis” (Marx, 1963, p. 135) would attain a universal significance, since when it comes “to the head of the people that dominates the world market, to the head of England” (Marx, 1963, pp. 113–114), the workers of other nations would join in their collective anti-capitalist struggles and aim to establish a communist future. Thus, Marx continues to employ an internationalist understanding of the revolutionary agency of the proletariat in his political conception during this period.

This association of the proletariat with revolutionary agency continues throughout the 1860s. Even though *Capital* signifies a fundamental turning point in Marx's understanding of the capitalist mode of production as he explains in detail the inner dynamics of the capitalist production process based on the exploitation of labor and expropriation of surplus value by capitalists, his consideration of political change under capitalism is still expressed in similar terms with those he used since the winter of 1843/1844. Marx reveals how the inherent tensions between the development of the means of production and social relations of production in capitalist society lead to the growth of “the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production” (Marx, 1976, p. 929). The processes of “the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which” (Marx, 1976, p. 929) they can no longer be compatible with the capitalist private property regime. At that moment, the proletariat emerges in the historical arena as the sole revolutionary force to overthrow the capitalist system and replace it with its own rule. Referring directly to his discussion of the proletarian revolution in *The Communist Manifesto* through a footnote, Marx declares that the proletarian revolution results in “the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people” (Marx, 1976, p. 930).

3 | SELF-GOVERNMENT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

Marx's understanding of political change fundamentally changes following the emergence of the Paris Commune in spring 1871 (see Lefebvre, 1965, for a compelling account of Marx's ideas about the Commune). It is well known that Marx expresses his skepticism about the success of a possible working-class revolt in France just months before the proclamation of the Paris Commune (Avineri, 1968, p. 200; Johnstone, 1971, p. 447; Marx, 1989a, p. 39; Marx, 1989b, p. 57; Mostov, 1989, p. 207). Within his framework of historical change, the French proletariat does not constitute a likely candidate for pushing forward the revolution. For Marx, this could only be realized by the proletariat of the most developed country, England. As he famously declares, “England alone can serve as the lever for a serious economic Revolution” (Marx, 1985, p. 117). However, once Parisians revolt against and topple the central government following

the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, Marx begins to explore the promise of the Commune on its own historical terms. In his letter to Dr. Kugelmann written on April 17, 1871, that is, while the Commune was in existence, he justifies this change in his orientation:

World history would indeed be very easy to make, if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances. It would, on the other hand, be of a very mystical nature, if “accidents” played no part. These accidents themselves fall naturally into the general course of development and are compensated again by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very dependent upon such “accidents,” which include the “accident” of the character of those who at first stand at the head of the movement. (Marx, 1940a, p. 87)

Following the accident of the Paris Commune, Marx pays specific attention to “those who at first stand at the head of the movement,” that is, the proletariat. He discusses the promise of their leadership role in popular self-government in Paris through their delegated and responsible exercise of authority. In addition, by emphasizing (Rubel, 1983, p. 101) the Commune’s “break with traditional political institutions,” Marx suggests “a possible model of socialist democratic institutions” (Mostov, 1989, p. 206) and “a positive model of revolutionary democracy” (Doveton, 1994, p. 576). Thus, he discusses the relationship between popular participation and proletarian leadership in the institutional order of the Commune.

Here, Marx’s analysis of the Commune in *Civil War in France* (1940b) revolves around the question of the function of the state apparatus following the Communard takeover (Abensour, 2011, pp. 84–85). He stresses that the institutional foundations of the state as they exist under capitalism cannot constitute the basis of a communist future. He maintains that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purpose” (Marx, 1940b, p. 54). This point is repeated and directly quoted in his 1872 Preface to *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 1972b, p. 470) where he emphasizes the point’s “pro[of] by the Commune.” As Lefebvre (1965, p. 33) argues, “the Marxist theory of the withering away of the state, which was present in embryo in Marx’s earliest works, followed, rather than preceded, the experience of the Commune.”⁸ The *sine qua non* of a communist future is therefore a novel institutional order characterized by popular self-government under the leadership of the proletariat, which must be created in different terms than the centrally and bureaucratically run state machinery.

Marx discusses the Communards’ abolition of the preceding centralized forms of administration and government and creation of participatory institutional mechanisms (Abensour, 2011, pp. 86–87). He supports these novel institutions because they “return decision making about public concerns to the sphere of social cooperation, and encourage both equal participation of all citizens and the accountability of public officials” (Mostov, 1989, p. 206). The Commune displays a combination of popular participation in self-government and the leadership role of the proletariat in the exercise of their delegated, responsible, and revocable authority. Here, it is important to directly quote Marx’s take on the relationship between popular participation and proletarian leadership in the institutional order of the Commune:

The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. Instead of continuing to be the agent of the Central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen’s wages... Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the state was laid into the hands of the Commune. (Marx, 1940b, p. 57)

Marx emphasizes the employment of universal suffrage by the Communards in directly electing their councilors based on the ward system. The universal eligibility for voting constitutes a significant extension of democratic political practices. Thus, popular participation through institutional structures creates the conditions of responsible elected officials. Along with this responsibility through election, the introduction of accountability mechanisms, which renders those councilors “revocable at short terms,” plays an important role in Marx’s conception of political legitimacy. Marx considers the authority of those councilors as derived from the direct participation of the Communards who delegate the exercise of their authority only for a predetermined period of time and purpose while reserving their ultimate authority to recall them. Thus, the institutional order of the Commune is constructed on the basis of the people as a whole’s conditional delegation of the exercise of their authority to elected, responsible, and revocable agents who in turn can exercise their authority insofar as the former authorize them to do so.

Here, Marx attributes to the proletariat a crucial role in the revolutionary transformation process. The proletarians constitute the majority of councilors and therefore have a leading role through their majoritarian representation. However, they are directly accountable to the Communards who retain their right to recall and elect different representatives. In addition, accountability mechanisms are not limited to the representatives. All administrative officials, including “magistrates and judges [who] were to be elective, responsible and revocable” (Marx, 1940b, p. 58), are “turned into the responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune.” Again, Marx conceptualizes political legitimacy in the form of the Parisians’ conditional delegation of the exercise of their authority to elected, responsible, and revocable agents. Thus, he states that “never were elections more sifted, never delegates fuller representing the masses from which they had sprung” (Marx, 1986a, p. 483). Finally, the equalization of the wages across all government and administrative officials with that of “workmen’s wages” facilitates the proletarians to run for offices. By rendering participation in government and administrative offices as a feasible activity this novel institutional order enables the proletarians to participate in political institutions as representatives and officials.

This institutional order based on popular participation transcends the boundaries of Paris. Marx describes to what extent popular self-government would be instituted all around France:

The Paris Commune was, of course, to serve as a model to all the great industrial centres of France. The communal *régime* once established in Paris and the secondary centres, the old centralised government would in the provinces, too, have to give way to the self-government of the producers... The rural communes of every district were to administer their common affairs by an assembly of delegates in the central town, and these district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents. The few but important functions which still would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally misstated, but were to be discharged by Communal and therefore strictly responsible agents. The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by the Communal Constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the state power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence. While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society. Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers in his business. (Marx, 1940b, pp. 58–59)

Accountability mechanisms of the Commune would be reproduced in other industrial and rural centers, which would institutionalize popular self-government under the leadership of the proletariat. The central government would also employ a further mechanism of accountability by requiring the elected, responsible, and revocable delegates of each

locality to be constrained by the direct mandates of their constituencies. Considering that the vast majority of the French population lived in rural centers, the peasantry as the dominant social group of most localities would directly participate in the election as well as control of their proletarian leaders. On the one hand, the peasantry would actively participate in the politics of their localities by discussing, deliberating, and making decisions about how to organize their own government. On the other hand, since the institution of direct mandates would empower them with the decision-making power in national politics, the peasantry would get progressively educated in the politics of the entire country, and therefore their political empowerment would transcend the boundaries of their immediate localities. Thus, unlike his infamous claim about the peasantry in France as being “a sack of potatoes” (Marx, 1963) some 20 years prior to the establishment of the Commune, Marx attributes a crucial role to the peasantry as part of the French people for the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society under the leadership of the proletariat.

Furthermore, Marx argues that the remaining functions of the central government would be “restored to the responsible agents of society” who derive their delegated, temporary, and revocable mandate directly from the people as a whole. In this way, the government would be “emptied of that kind of power that made it into a force independent vis-à-vis society” (Avineri, 1968, p. 209). It would now be filled “with a new social content [which] entailed truly democratic forms” (Draper, 1974, p. 102). For this reason, the Commune “published its doings and sayings, it initiated the public into all its shortcomings” (Marx, 1940b, p. 67), which enabled the common people, both urban and rural, to be informed about their delegates’ activities in a transparent manner. As a result, Marx argues that the Paris Commune is fundamentally different from “the mediaeval Communes, which first preceded, and afterwards became the substratum of, that very state power” (Marx, 1940b, p. 59), because it came into existence not only by abolishing the centrally and bureaucratically run government and administration but also by putting forward a network of local self-governing entities under the leadership of the proletariat. In this institutional order, local liberty of municipality would no longer be “a check upon the now superseded state power,” but rather provide “the basis of really democratic institutions” (Marx, 1940b, p. 60).

In addition to the people’s conditional delegation of the exercise of their authority to proletarian leaders, the Commune, according to Marx, is the epitome of “a working class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour” (Marx, 1940b, p. 60). This becomes possible only through the Commune’s institutional order based on popular participation, which serves “as a lever for uprooting the economical foundations upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule” (Marx, 1940b, pp. 60–61). Whereas just one year before the proclamation of the Commune, Marx, as mentioned above, argues that the English proletariat could alone be a lever for revolutionary transformation, now he views the Commune itself, through its combination of popular participation and proletarian leadership, as a lever for communist revolution. Thus, for Marx, the Commune “was an instance of the extension of democracy to its sociological foundations and created through the democratically oriented collective action of workers” (Niemi, 2010, p. 47).

The proletariat’s role as the leader of the Communards takes place within a broad coalition of various social groups (Marx, 1986a, pp. 492, 496). The proletariat is “openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative, even by the great bulk of the Paris middle class—shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants—the wealthy capitalist alone excepted” (Marx, 1940b, p. 62). This acknowledgment of the emancipatory agency of the proletariat by the people of Paris as a whole crystallizes in the institutional order that facilitates popular participation in conjunction with the elected and revocable leadership of the proletariat. Here, the Commune is both “the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly national government...., at the same time, as a working men’s government, as the bold champion of the emancipation of labour” (Marx, 1940b, pp. 64–65). The working existence of the Commune leads to “the invention of an emancipatory political form proper to the proletariat” (Abensour, 2011, p. 88). The proletariat acquires a new historical mission of “bringing praxis closer to the truth, realizing the truth of social praxis, putting an end to the state and politics⁹” (Lefebvre, 1965, pp. 390–391).

The institutional order of the Commune is predicated on the Communards’ conditional delegation of the exercise of their authority to their responsible, elected, revocable delegates drawn from the proletariat through whose leader-

ship the capitalist class would be expropriated. Thus, the Commune's short working existence "could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people" (Marx, 1940b, p. 65). The Commune "demanded forms of local self-government that would make possible the greatest measure of initiative and popular participation at grass-roots level" (Johnstone, 1971, p. 457). Its government is based on the idea of "the people acting for itself by itself" (Marx, 1986a, pp. 463–464). As a result, Marx notes that "working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society" (Marx, 1940b, pp. 81–82).

Marx's understanding of the Commune as the lever for overthrowing capitalist society and replacing it with a communist one leads him to further get involved in democratic politics through the institutional leadership of the proletariat. A close reading and analysis of Marx's writings for the period between 1870 and 1883, including his correspondences, published and unpublished manuscripts and pamphlets, letters, journalistic pieces, and interviews, demonstrates to what extent Marx constructs his new political positions, ideas, and proposals by directly drawing on the experience of the Commune. The combination of popular participation and proletarian leadership gives birth to a peculiar institutional articulation during this period.

Marx explicitly states the necessity to create and support proletarian political parties in Europe and the United States as early as the summer of 1871 (Johnstone, 1971, p. 452; Marx, 1986b, p. 601). The experience of the Commune proves "the idea that the workers had to organise themselves in their own party" (Gaido, 2021, p. 108). This idea constitutes the core of the resolutions of the London Conference of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) in the fall of 1871, which later were amended to the General Rules and Administrative Regulations of the IWMA in the fall of 1872 at the Hague Conference (Marx, 1988a; Marx & Engels, 1988, p. 243). Marx explains that "it is not just today that the Association asks the workers to engage in politics, but all the time" (Marx, 1986c, p. 617). Therefore, the Conference resolutions, which were written by Marx and Engels, declare that "this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to insure the triumph of the social Revolution and its ultimate end—the abolition of classes" and "in the militant state of the working class, its economical movement and its political action are indissolubly united" (Marx & Engels, 1986, p. 427). Thus, they call for the establishment of proletarian political parties, especially in Europe, which would play the leadership role in the democratic politics of their countries (Marx, 1989c, p. 535; Marx, 1989d, p. 239; Marx, 1989e, p. 575). The proletarian political parties would become the centers of revolutionary action whose goal would be to unite and get the support of the majority of the citizenry in order to conquer the political power of their countries by transforming political institutions "from the instrument of deception which it has been hitherto into an instrument of emancipation" (Marx, 1989f, p. 340). As a result, Marx institutionalizes the leadership of the proletariat through the idea of forming and developing independent proletarian political parties, which would be the leading forces of revolutionary action through their representation of the wide strata of their societies. As he clearly expresses in an interview with *The Chicago Tribune* correspondent in early 1879, "those revolutions will be made by the majority. No revolution can be made by a party, but by a Nation" (Marx, 1989e, p. 576).

The promise of popular participation under the institutionalized leadership of proletarian political parties in facilitating and bringing about communism is directly connected with the IWMA's decision to move its General Council from London to New York in 1872. In his remarks on the Hague Congress of 1872, Marx acknowledges "the existence of countries like America, England, and if I knew your institutions better I might add Holland, where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means" (Marx, 1988b, p. 255). Again, as his reference to his lack of knowledge about the institutions of Holland suggests, he attributes the revolutionary potential of these parties to the democratic institutional order of these countries which concerns him for the rest of his life. Especially the United States, for Marx, "is becoming the world of workers par excellence" (Marx, 1988b, p. 255). As the English proletariat suffers in "the hands of the venal Trades Union leaders and professional agitators" (Marx, 1991a, p. 299), he argues for the relocation of the General Council from London to New York. Even though the IWMA ceases to *de facto* function by 1874, and disbands itself in 1876, Marx continues to think that "there's a pretty fair storm brewing over there, and the transfer of the centre of the International to the United States may yet, post festum, be presented with a quite exceptional opportunity" (Marx, 1991b, p. 251).

His interest in the institutionalized leadership of the proletariat through their own political parties is not specific to the United States, the UK, and the Netherlands. Beginning with the Franco-Prussian War (Marx, 1989g, p. 3), and intensifying following the proclamation of the Commune, Marx starts to consider the German proletariat as a potential leader in the revolutionary struggle in Europe. Here, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, in line with his conception of proletarian political parties as the leaders of revolutionary action, constitutes the most effective political force in continental Europe. Thus, Marx “saw the German Social-Democratic Workers’ Party as a bastion for rallying the forces of the international working class, as its vanguard contingent” (Vasilyeva, 1988, p. XXXI).

In addition, Marx’s direct confrontation with Bakunin and anarchists, and their expulsion from the IWMA, demonstrate to what extent he conceives of the proletariat’s institutionalized leadership role through popular participation as the *sine qua non* for the success of the communist revolution. By denouncing Bakunin and his followers in Geneva, Marx argues that one must be “so stupid or so naïve as to attempt to deny to the working class any real means of struggle. For all arms with which to fight must be drawn from society as it is” (Marx, 1988c, p. 394). As opposed to Bakunin, who “deduces that the proletariat should rather do nothing at all... and just wait for the *day of universal liquidation* the Last Judgement” (Marx, 1989h, p. 521), Marx proposes the creation of proletarian political parties, which would enable the proletariat to play a leading role in the revolutionary transformation of their societies.

Finally, Marx’s attempts to distance the IWMA from English trade unions and representatives of working class in the House of Commons showcase the necessity to form independent proletarian political parties for revolutionary purposes. He maintains that “the English working class had gradually become ever more demoralized as a result of the period of corruption after 1848, and had finally reached the stage of being no more than an appendage of the great Liberal Party, i.e. of its oppressors, the capitalists. Its direction had passed completely into the hands of the venal Trades Union leaders and professional agitators” (Marx, 1991a, p. 299). Therefore, he emphasizes the necessity for establishing an independent proletarian political party in England which would be the leading revolutionary force through its engagement with political institutions.

Marx’s understanding of political change through the emancipatory agency of the proletariat as the leader of popular self-government takes a further articulation in his discussion of the dictatorship of the proletariat in *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Marx continues to consider the necessity to imagine a communist society “as it emerges from capitalist society” (Marx, 1972a, p. 529):

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. (Marx, 1972a, p. 538)

“The period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other” constitutes the core of his understanding of political change towards the end of his life. By calling this period of political transition “the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat,” Marx confirms the leadership of the proletariat within the framework of the people as a whole’s conditional delegation of the exercise of their authority to the former (Lefebvre, 1965, p. 37). As Ypi’s (2020, p. 281) analysis of Marx’s use of the concept of dictatorship in its historical relationship with the Roman institution of dictatorship as well as its French revolutionary employment by the Jacobins suggests, in Marx’s view, “the dictatorship of the proletariat embodies the democratic rule of the oppressed majority of people” whose institutional rule gives “more radical form” to existing freedoms. Here, the proletariat acts “on behalf of the majority of the people, from whom it derived its mandate” (Johnstone, 1971, p. 454). Therefore, Marx’s understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat “has a profound democratic character, in line with the radical interpretation of freedom as both self-liberation and as just rule, and aspiring to realise an ideal of freedom as public willing” (Ypi, 2020, p. 281).

The proletariat continues to play the leadership role in Marx’s conception of the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. The people delegate the exercise of their authority for a determinate period of time and purpose to the proletariat, that is, “the period of the revolutionary transformation of” capitalist society into communist society. As opposed to relying on “an elite of professional politicians, technocratic institutions, or bureaucratic managers

to achieve its desired political objectives," the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat "signals that authentic freedom is progressively vindicated in the process of making oneself free and in the practices and institutions of collective will formation established to express that freedom" (Ypi, 2020, p. 282). Accordingly, the proletariat becomes the elected, responsible, and revocable delegates of the people as a whole with a popular mandate to end the private ownership of the means of production and exploitation of labor.

4 | CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that Marx's discussions about political change under capitalism can be grouped into three distinct periods. His earliest treatment of the subject in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* considers direct democracy as the main source of human emancipation against the bureaucratic state. Second, from the winter of 1843/1844 to the spring of 1871, Marx reorients and meticulously constructs a novel understanding of political change through the proletarian revolution. Finally, the experience and aftermath of the Paris Commune push him to foreground self-government under the leadership of the proletariat as the lever for political change under capitalism. Marx's conception of political change under capitalism alters in conjunction with and responds to the political occurrences in his time. Thus, Marx's dialectical interpretations of the contradictions of capitalist society do not hypostatize in the form of a single path toward communism.

Marx's exposition of the institutional articulation of popular participation and proletarian leadership toward the end of his life seems to be the most relevant one among these conceptions of political change. The conception of self-government under the leadership of proletarian leadership emphasizes the necessity to envision political change through institutional forms based on popular participation, control, and accountability. In the absence of effective proletarian movements in contemporary societies, it showcases the need to reimagine emancipatory agency in terms of its relationship with institutional structures. Marx's positioning of the proletariat as the leader of popular self-government opens up the possibility of articulating the people in its plurality composed of the working classes, precariat, immigrant laborers as well as other social and political groups in the political transformation process through their participation and active control in institutional structures. Yet, it is important to be careful here and reiterate the main argument of this article in order to avoid hypostatizing one or the other conception of political change that Marx employed, as it has been very frequently done by his followers, for instance, most recently Garo (2023)'s reappropriation of communism. Marx's critique of capitalist society is an ongoing process that foregrounds and articulates different aspects of emancipatory struggles that directly emerge from and respond to the present conditions of capitalist society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Theory Collective at the New School in November 2021. For comments and suggestions on earlier drafts, I would like to thank Neil Brenner, Dan Brudney, Anton Ford, Michael N. Forster, Andreas Glaeser, Chris Hong, Brian Leiter, Niklas Plaezter, Dominiquo Santistevan, Jeff Weintraub, and the two anonymous reviewers.

ENDNOTES

¹ Although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is worthwhile to note the influence of Rousseau's idea of *la volonté générale* on Marx's understanding of true democracy at this early stage of his engagement with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* since *Du Contrat Social* was one of the main works he studied during the summer of 1843 while writing this work (O'Malley 1970, p. XLV).

² "doit être constitutive, constitutionnelle au sens plein du terme" (author's translation).

³ "reconstruction d'ensemble de la vie sociale et politique" (author's translation).

⁴ "le pouvoir gouvernemental, l'acte par lequel l'universel politique s'applique à la particularité sociale, ne doit pas être autre chose que l'expression actuelle de la volonté du peuple" (author's translation).

⁵“intervention historique” (author’s translation).

⁶Even though Marx uses this term in *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, he does not build his theory of human agency on an understanding of species-being. He starts doing that in *On the Jewish Question* and *Introduction to Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* where his main objective is to demonstrate the necessity for human emancipation in order to actualize species-being.

⁷“développe une problématique qui est indéniablement irréductible à celle du Manuscrit” (author’s translation).

⁸“la théorie marxiste du dépérissement de l’Etat, en germe dès les premières œuvres de Marx, a suivi et non précédé l’expérience de la Commune” (author’s translation).

⁹“rapprocher le praxis de la vérité, de réaliser la vérité de la praxis sociale, de mettre fin à l’Etat et à la politique” (author’s translation).

REFERENCES

- Abensour, M. (2011). *Democracy against the state: Marx and the Machiavellian moment*. Translated and edited by M. Blechman & M. Breaugh. Polity.
- Althusser, L. (1965). *For Marx*. Verso.
- Avineri, S. (1968). *The social and political thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1978). Paris, capital of the nineteenth century. In *Walter Benjamin reflections: Essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings* (pp. 146–162). Schocken Books.
- Bidet, J. (2001). Le même et l’autre, ou la dialectique. Réflexions à partir du texte de Solange Mercier-Josa Additif à « Entre Hegel et Marx ». In E. Balibar & G. Raulet (Eds.), *Marx Démocrate: Le Manuscrit de 1843* (pp. 69–78). Presses Universitaires de France.
- Cantin, É. T. (2003). Review of eds. Etienne Balibar and Gérard Raulet *Marx Démocrate: Le Manuscrit de 1843*. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 36(2), 473–475.
- Carver, T. (2018). *Marx*. Polity.
- Chrysis, A. (2018). ‘True democracy’ as a prelude to Communism: *The Marx of democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cohen, I. J. (1985). The underemphasis on democracy in Marx and Weber. In R. J. Antonio & R. M. Glassman (Eds.), *A Weber–Marx dialogue* (pp. 274–299). University Press of Kansas.
- de Ste Croix, G. E. M. (1975). Karl Marx and the history of classical antiquity. *Arethusa*, 8(1), 7–41.
- Doveton, D. (1994). Marx and Engels on democracy. *History of Political Thought*, 15(4), 555–591.
- Draper, H. (1974). Marx on democratic forms of government. *The Socialist Register*, 101–174.
- Femia, J. C. (1993). *Marxism and democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Fromm, E. (1961). *Marx’s concept of man*. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.
- Gaido, D. (2021). The first workers’ government in history: Karl Marx’s addenda to Lissagaray’s *History of the commune of 1871*. *Historical Materialism*, 29(1), 49–112.
- Garo, I. (2001). Hegel, Marx et la critique du libéralisme. In E. Balibar & G. Raulet (Eds.), *Marx Démocrate: Le Manuscrit de 1843* (pp. 89–104). Presses Universitaires de France.
- Garo, I. (2023 [2019]). *Communism and strategy: Rethinking political mediations*. Translated by G. Elliott. Verso.
- Grollios, V. (2011). Marx and Engels’ critique of democracy: The materialist character of their concept of autonomy. *Critique*, 39(1), 9–26.
- Habermas, J. (1989 [1962]). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Translated by F. Lawrence. MIT Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1952 [1820]). *Hegel’s philosophy of right*. Translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford University Press.
- Hunt, R. N. (1974). *The political ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and totalitarian democracy*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Johnstone, M. (1971). The Paris commune and Marx’s conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. *The Massachusetts Review*, 12(3), 447–462.
- Koselleck, R. (1985 [1977]). On the disposability of history. In *Futures past: On the semantics of historical time*. Translated by K. Tribe. MIT Press.
- Kouvelakis, E. (2001). Du « libre usage » de la dialectique : Une dialectique pour la révolution ? In E. Balibar, & G., Raulet(Eds.), *Marx Démocrate: Le Manuscrit de 1843* (pp. 11–22). Presses Universitaires de France.
- Kranberg, S. (1982). Karl Marx and democracy. *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 24(1), 23–35.
- Lefebvre, H. (1965). *La Proclamation de la Commune: 26 Mars 1871*. Gallimard.
- Levin, M. (1989). *Marx, Engels and liberal democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marx, K. (1940a [1871]). Letter to Dr. Kugelmann, April 17, 1871. In *Karl Marx: The civil war in France* (pp. 86–87). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1940b [1871]). *The civil war in France*. International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1963 [1852]). *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1964 [1851]). *Class struggles in France, 1848–1850*. International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1970 [1843]). *Critique of Hegel’s ‘philosophy of right’*. Cambridge University Press.

- Marx, K. (1972a [1875]). Critique of the Gotha program. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels reader* (pp. 525–541). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. (1972b [1843]). On the Jewish question. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels reader* (pp. 26–52). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. (1972c [1844]). Contribution to the critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of right*: Introduction. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels reader* (pp. 53–65). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. (1972d [1844]). Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels reader* (pp. 66–125). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. (1976 [1867]). *Capital. Volume I*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Penguin Books.
- Marx, K. (1985 [1870]). The general council to the Federal Council of Romance Switzerland. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 21 (1867–1870)* (pp. 116–123). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1986a [1871]). First draft of *The civil war in France*. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 22 (1870–1871)* (pp. 437–514). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1986b [1871]). Record of Marx's interview with *The World Correspondent*, July 3, 1871. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 22 (1870–1871)*. (pp. 600–606) International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1986c [1871]). Record of Marx's speech on the political action of the working class, September 20, 1871. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 22 (1870–1871)* (pp. 616–617). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1988a [1872]). Amendments to the general rules and administrative regulations of the International Working Men's Association adopted by the General Council in the summer of 1872. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 23 (1871–1874)* (pp. 198–204). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1988b [1872]). On the Hague Congress: A correspondent's report of a speech made at a meeting in Amsterdam on September 8, 1872. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 23 (1871–1874)* (pp. 254–256). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1988c [1873]). Political indifferentism. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 23 (1871–1874)* (pp. 392–397). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989a [1870]). Marx to Engels, 8 August 1870. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 44 (1870–1873)* (pp. 38–40). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989b [1870]). Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 1 September 1870. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 44 (1870–1873)* (pp. 56–58). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989c [1873]). Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 27 September 1873. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 44 (1870–1873)* (pp. 534–536). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989d [1878]). Mr. George Howell's history of the International Working-Men's Association. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 24 (1874–1883)* (pp. 234–239). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989e [1879]). Account of Karl Marx's interview with the *Chicago Tribune* correspondent. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 24 (1874–1883)* (pp. 568–579). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989f [1880]). Preamble to the programme of the French Workers' Party. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 24 (1874–1883)* (p. 340). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989g [1870]). Marx to Engels, 20 July 1870. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 44 (1870–1873)* (pp. 3–5). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1989h [1874–1875]). Notes on Bakunin's book *Statehood and anarchy*. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 24 (1874–1883)* (pp. 485–526). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1991a [1878]). Marx to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 11 February 1878. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 45 (1874–1879)* (pp. 299–303). International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1991b [1877]). Marx to Engels, 25 July 1877. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 45 (1874–1879)* (pp. 250–253). International Publishers.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1972a [1846]). The German ideology. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels reader* (pp. 146–200). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1972b [1848]). Manifesto of the Communist Party. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx–Engels reader* (pp. 469–500). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1986 [1871]). Resolutions of the conference of delegates of the International Working Men's Association: Assembled at London from 17th to 23rd September 1871. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 22 (1870–1871)* (pp. 423–431). International Publishers.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1988 [1872]). Resolutions of the General Congress held at the Hague, from the 2nd to the 7th September, 1872. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 23 (1871–1874)* (pp. 243–253). International Publishers.
- Mercer, C. (1980). Revolutions, reforms or reformulations? Marxist discourse on democracy. In A. Hunt (Ed.), *Marxism and democracy* (pp. 101–138). Lawrence and Wishart.
- Mostov, J. (1989). Karl Marx as democratic theorist. *Polity*, 22(2), 195–212.

- Niemi, W. L. (2010). Karl Marx's sociological theory of democracy: civil society and political rights. *The Social Science Journal*, 48, 39–51.
- O'Malley, J. (1970). Introduction. In *Karl Marx critique of Hegel's 'philosophy of right'* (pp. IX–LXVII). Cambridge University Press.
- Pierson, C. (1986). *Marxist theory and democratic politics*. The University of California Press.
- Raulet, G. (2001). Préface. In E. Balibar & G. Raulet (Eds.), *Marx Démocrate: Le Manuscrit de 1843* (pp. 7–10). Presses Universitaires de France.
- Renault, E. (2001). Le Droit dans la Critique de la philosophie hégélienne du droit. In E. Balibar & G. Raulet (Eds.), *Marx Démocrate: Le Manuscrit de 1843* (pp. 23–36). Presses Universitaires de France.
- Ricoeur, P. (1986). *Lectures on ideology and utopia*. Edited by G. H. Taylor. Columbia University Press.
- Rubel, M. (1983). Marx's concept of democracy. *Democracy*, 3, 94–105.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (1942). *Capitalism, socialism, and democracy*. Harper Perennial.
- Springborg, P. (1984a). Karl Marx on democracy, participation, voting, and equality. *Political Theory*, 12(4), 537–556.
- Springborg, P. (1984b). Marx, democracy, and the ancient polis. *Critical Philosophy*, 1(1), 47–66.
- Vasilyeva, T. (1988). Preface. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected works, Vol. 23 (1871–1874)* (pp. XV–XXXV). International Publishers.
- Wood, A. W. (2004). *Karl Marx* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Ypi, L. (2020). Democratic dictatorship: Political legitimacy in Marxist perspective. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 28, 277–291.

How to cite this article: Kökerer, C. M. (2024). Marx's three different conceptions of political change under capitalism: Direct democracy, proletarian revolution, or self-government under proletarian leadership. *Constellations*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12741>

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Can Mert Kökerer is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Chicago.