

Social Republic

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Introduction

Marx refers to the social republic during two periods: the 1848 Revolutions and the 1871 Paris Commune. In both of these contexts, Marx uses it to refer to a republic where the working class holds political power. However, in the former context he uses the social republic to refer to the working class taking charge of the bourgeois republic and turning it towards social emancipation; in the latter context he adds the idea that the working class transforms the political institutions of the bourgeois republic in order for it to be an appropriate vehicle for achieving social emancipation.

Other terms used by Marx to distinguish his preferred republic from the bourgeois republic, include the “republic of labour” and the “red republic”. All of these terms should be seen as roughly equivalent to the better-known phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat”.¹ In the conclusion, I briefly consider some interpretive and political advantages of using the social republic compared to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The 1848 Revolutions

The term social republic came to particular prominence amongst radicals during the 1848 Revolutions. It formed half of the popular slogan “the Democratic and Social Republic (*la République démocratique et sociale*)”, which became the rallying cry for socialists and republicans fighting for a republic that would both institute universal male suffrage and go beyond political reform and address the social question (Agulhon 1983, 164–165; Jennings 2011, 56; Sperber 2005, 206–207; and Pilbeam 1995, 215–218).

Marx argues that when the French Republic was declared in February 1848 each class interpreted the republic in its own way. The working class wanted a “*social republic*”, the petty bourgeoisie a “*democratic republic*”, and the bourgeoisie a “*bourgeois republic*” (Marx 1979 [1852], 109, 181–182).² Marx argues that the underdevelopment of the working-class in 1848 meant that the workers’ social republic stood little chance against its competitors, and it was therefore decisively crushed during the June Days uprising. Marx thus claims that the “*social republic* [only] appeared as a phrase, as a prophecy” of things to come (Marx 1979 [1852], 181). Instead, the starring role in the revolutionary drama was played by the victorious bourgeois republic. Marx maintains that this republic secured the economic and political interests of the capitalist class, and thus merely replaced the rule of the king with the rule of the bourgeoisie. He condemns the “*bourgeois republic* [as] the state whose admitted purpose is to perpetuate the rule of capital, the slavery of labour.” (Marx 1978 [1850], 69).

The Paris Commune

The events of the Paris Commune provided a striking example, for Marx, of the working-class finally being in a position to take political power. He thus notes that while the “cry of ‘Social Republic’” in 1848 could only signify a “vague aspiration after a Republic that was not only to supersede the monarchical form of class-rule, but class-rule itself”; in 1871 the “Commune was the positive form of that

Republic” (Marx 1986a [1871], 330-331). The social republic appears a number of times in Marx’s discussion of the Commune, most prominently in a short section of the first draft of *The Civil War in France* entitled “Republic only possible as avowedly Social Republic” (Marx 1986b [1871], 497), where he claims that,

a Republic is only in France and Europe possible as a “Social Republic”, that is a Republic which disowns the capital and landowner class of the State machinery to supersede it by the Commune, that frankly avows “social emancipation” as the great goal of the Republic and guarantees thus that social transformation by the Communal organisation.

Marx here makes four main points about the social republic: (a) political power is held by the non-capitalist and non-landlord classes;³ (b) it aims at social emancipation; (c) the state is replaced by a Commune; and (d) social emancipation is facilitated by the state’s transformation into a Commune. It is this final point, that the social republic “guarantees...social transformation by the Communal organisation” that is the key innovation in Marx’s idea of the social republic. Marx argues that using the existing political institutions of the bourgeois republic would frustrate the aim of social emancipation. As he says, the “working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes”, since the “political instrument of their enslavement cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation.” (Marx 1986a [1871], 328; Marx 1986c [1871], 533).⁴

Marx argues that the social republic differs from the political institutions of the bourgeois republic, by (i) replacing representative government with popular delegacy, through imperative mandates, representative recall and frequent elections; (ii) subordinating the executive branch to the legislature; and (iii) placing the state’s organs under popular control by making them elected, accountable and deprofessionalised (Leipold, forthcoming). Marx argues that through these institutions the Commune had “supplied the Republic with the basis of really democratic institutions.” (Marx 1986a [1871], 334).

Conclusion

I suggested in the introduction that ‘the social republic’ plays a similar role in Marx’s thought as the more famous term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. Viewed from contemporary eyes, there is some interpretive and political advantage to the social republic over the dictatorship of the proletariat, since the latter term has fallen prey to two subsequent developments that have obscured its initial meaning. First, the term ‘dictatorship’ has evolved from originally referring to the Roman Republic’s constitutional provision for an individual to be temporarily granted extensive (but still limited) power during state emergencies, to describing autocratic rule that is permanent and constitutionally unconstrained (Draper 1986, 3:11–16; Nippell 2012). Second, the ‘dictatorship of proletariat’ has become inextricably associated with the one-party state and the restriction of political and civic freedoms. The social republic avoids this ideological and historical baggage. It allows us to see more clearly that Marx believed that achieving social emancipation required properly democratic institutions.

Notes

1] Marx uses the terms interchangeably, writing (in reference to the peasant) “The *constitutional republic* is the dictatorship of his united exploiters; *the social-democratic, the red republic*, is the dictatorship of his allies.” (Marx 1978 [1850], 122).

2] Marx also refers to the bourgeois republic as a ‘pure republic’, a ‘constitutional republic’ and a ‘parliamentary republic’.

3] We might here detect a further change in Marx’s conception of the social republic, since it is now identified with a broader selection of popular classes (i.e. peasants, artisans and elements of the petty bourgeoisie) rather than just the working-class.

4] Marx and Engels present this as an innovation in their thought in their 1872 preface to the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1988 [1872], 175).

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Social Unionism

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The first attempt of workers to associate among themselves
takes place in the form of
combinations.
Karl Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847)¹

In capitalist society today, *the common names both the means of production
and the forms of life.*
Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (2017)

Social unionism is a question of combination; and a combination is a matter of building alliances, coalitions between different entities that are unified around a common (cause).

(In 1847, in the final chapter of the Poverty of Philosophy Marx made a case for worker combinations against Proudhon, socialists, and economists. Combination was how workers first connected among themselves, and permanent combinations in the form of trade unions acted as protective shields, both of which made combining a political act. And yet, Marx hesitated: unless a new society arises, there will be no real change. That hesitation, how the two moments are going to be, well, combined, is a foundational probe and it is where this entry takes its cue. After nearly two hundred years of unionism, and almost five decades of social unionism, with numerous attempts to unite labor movements together with social movements, the question of combination still lurks around Marx's initial hesitation. If the post-2010 movements of swarming multitudes and tentacular encampments on city squares were prefigurative of the-social-and-the-political-to-come, what role would combining play, if any?).

Combination is an act of merging through the recognition of otherness. To combine presupposes discerning eyes, cuts, and separations. A consideration of who is