

https://ernestmandel.org/spip.php?page=article&id_article=305

On the Opportunist Utilization of Democratic Slogans

- Works -

Date de mise en ligne : samedi 12 octobre 2024

Date de parution : 1er juillet 1946

Copyright © Ernest Mandel - Tous droits réservés

From **Fourth International**, [Vol.7 No.11](#), November 1946, pp.346-349.

Transcribed & marked up by [Einde O'Callaghan](#) for the **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

Opportunism and sectarianism appear as symmetrical tendencies in the revolutionary movement and arise from the same incomprehension of the relations between Leninist strategy and Leninist tactics. Moreover, they have the unhappy characteristic of favoring each other's growth. All past revolutionary parties witnessed the generation of centrist deviations in the course of the struggle against sectarianism, and vice versa. The history of the Third International between 1919 and 1923 is only a tragic repetition of successive experiences of this kind. Our movement will be unable to escape the same experience. The task of its leadership is to carefully educate the cadres, in order to prevent individual members from paying the costs of going through once again all the dolorous experiences of the past, and in order to check the infection when it appears.

The sectarians often use Leninist arguments against opportunism in order to smuggle into the revolutionary movement their own incomprehension of consistent Marxist politics. The opportunists, for their part, often hide their own theoretical nakedness behind a fig leaf of Leninist arguments against sectarianism. Obviously that does not lessen in the least the correctness of these arguments when used by a Bolshevik party, that is to say, in the framework of a correct political orientation and program of action. But it does impose on the revolutionary polemicist the obligation, when explaining a tactical problem, to carefully weigh his general argument in order to accompany each blow against ultra-leftism with a blow against the right. Otherwise, he himself runs the danger of moving too far in the opposite direction. The history of the workers' movement teaches us that this danger is particularly great for those tendencies and people who specialize in the "struggle against sectarianism." For if it is true that "sectarianism complements opportunism like a shadow," there are many people who, starting to war with this shadow, soon find themselves allied with opportunism of the worst kind – in struggle against the revolutionary program itself.

The Leninist, in approaching the question of the utilization of democratic slogans, proceeds from his general objective estimate of the epoch in which we live, and from the program of the socialist revolution which flows from it. The tactical question involves solely the way in which the masses must be led to accept *this* program ... and not how to occupy them in another way as long as they do not "understand" this program ! For the Leninist, democratic slogans are viewed solely as instruments for the *mobilization* of the working masses.

The opportunist poses the question of democratic slogans in an entirely different way. "For the moment," the question of proletarian revolution "is not yet posed," or "is no longer posed." It would be better "to stop talking about it for several years," and turn toward "more concrete" problems. Then, these "more concrete" problems must not be constantly posed *in relation* to the proletarian revolution, as the Leninist tactic demands, but are to be posed *independently* of the revolutionary program. In other words, for the whole of this period, the masses, incapable of struggling for revolutionary demands, will struggle solely for democratic demands, at least on the terrain of politics. Later, when the consciousness of the masses will have "matured," once more the proletarian revolution will again be placed on the agenda. A little excursion to Europe will show the opportunists across the Atlantic that their argument is, on every point, similar to that of the Stalinist leaders – the faithful echo of which is also heard in the ranks of the Continental centrists.

Thus, the fundamental difference between the Leninist conception and the opportunist conception of democratic slogans consists in this : For the Leninist, democratic slogans are only instruments to promote the unleashing of revolutionary actions of the masses, with the aim of creating dual power ; for the opportunist, these slogans serve as pretexts for shelving *sine die*, the revolutionary mobilization of the masses, and replacing this with clever, electoral, parliamentary, and faction maneuvers inside the "mass organizations." The Leninist characterizes the present stage as one of propagandistic and organizational preparation of the masses for revolutionary tasks ; the opportunist characterizes the period as a "vacuum," an "interlude," a necessary "intermediate stage," and so forth.

"Democratic Illusions" of the Masses

From these different premises flow different conclusions. For the Leninist, the democratic illusions of the masses, secondary products of conjunctural, accidental historical factors, cannot to any degree constitute obstacles to their revolutionary *action*. On the contrary, the special possibility of utilizing democratic slogans flows at present from the fact, that in face of the authoritarian tendencies of the bourgeoisie, these slogans *facilitate* the mobilization of the masses *against capitalist property and the capitalist state ...*, that is to say, for the final objectives of the proletarian revolution ! The opportunist, on the other hand, interprets the existence of democratic illusions among the masses as signifying that they will for a whole period have their "eyes fixed" on the Parliaments, and will refuse to act outside the parliamentary framework. As far as the opportunist is concerned, the democratic illusions of the masses renders them incapable of carrying through revolutionary actions.

All the experience of the past two years in Europe has clearly shown how mistaken are the opportunists in posing the question in this way. After a short "honeymoon" with a parliamentary regime – more decadent, rotten and paralytic than ever before, the masses have everywhere completely lost interest in what transpires within the precincts of the "Roman senators." Not one important issue arose in Europe, and *above all a democratic issue*, toward which the masses were not ready to spontaneously take the road of *extra-parliamentary actions*, embryonic revolutionary actions. Of course, the Stalinists and Reformists wanted to prevent the unleashing of these actions. But it devolves on our opportunists to explain why, as a result of the "incomprehension" of the masses, these movements must be maintained within the framework of bourgeois democracy ...

When Humbert of Savoy hesitated to abdicate, the workers of Milan wanted to reply with direct action. Criminal would have been the sectarian who in face of royal hesitations would have launched the slogan, "Neither Monarchy Nor Republic, Long Live the Soviets !" In practice this would have meant saying to the masses : "Do not concern yourself with the fact that they are preparing a hempen noose for your throat. Study our literature patiently and act only when you understand that we, we alone, possess the monopoly of science." But all the more criminal would have been the slogan : "Demand rapid action from the Constituent Assembly. Let the Communist and Socialist Parties immediately vote for the dismissal of the king," etc., etc. That would have meant to stifle in its infancy the masses' will to action, to push them back into the parliamentary framework, after they themselves had already emerged from it. The only precise way to pose the problem was to call upon the masses for a general strike and the organization of committees of struggle against Humbert and the monarchy, for the Republic ; that is to say, call upon them to create organs of revolutionary power proceeding from democratic slogans. Whoever, under such conditions, refuses to formulate slogans of action, refuses to tie the democratic slogans to the slogan for committees, is not a leader, but a dead weight on the movement. Malicious opportunists will object : "But you yourself, in your struggle against the sectarians, have insisted on the absence of political maturity of the masses at the present stage ; on their incapacity to consciously pose the problem of passing to the struggle for Soviets." That is true. But the whole task of the Fourth International consists in *resolving* and not simply *posing* ... the contradiction between the objectively revolutionary situation and the backward consciousness of the masses in relation to this situation. False as it is to close one's eyes to this contradiction (as the sectarians do), and continue to recite communist litanies ; it is just as false to permit oneself to be hypnotized by a transitory state of mind of the masses (as the opportunists do), and to base a political line not on the task of *helping the masses raise themselves to the height of their historic tasks*, but on the necessity of *descending with one's program to the level of the most backward layers of the masses*.

A particular expression of the contradiction between the maturity of the objective conditions and the lack of maturity in the subjective conditions for the proletarian revolution is the contradiction between the consciousness and the experience of the masses, between the way they think and the way they act. The level of political consciousness of the Italian proletariat is certainly lower than in 1920, when the ideas of internationalism and proletarian dictatorship were much more widespread and accepted by the masses than they are at present. On the other hand the *actions* of the masses occur on a much higher level than those after the first world war, having taken at their beginning, in 1943 the form of the creation of Soviets and armed militias. The masses continue to vote for the SP and CP, they continue

to belong to these organizations, to the extent that they do not relapse into a political skepticism ; but when the moment of action comes, whether it be against Mussolini, against the high cost of living, or against the monarchy, they act much more in accordance with the Trotskyist program than with the directives of their treacherous "leaders." Of course, as long as this contradiction remains unresolved, even the broadest and most decisive actions are condemned, in advance, to failure. But it is not the "democratic illusions" which block the road toward the Fourth International for the masses, but, in reality, the whole past heritage of the workers' movement, their illusions about the "revolutionary" role of their present "leaders," the weight of inertia and tradition, the material weakness of the Trotskyist organizations and their narrow field of operations – it is all these factors combined which prevents a quick passage of the masses toward the European sections of the Fourth International. We ourselves are firmly convinced that during the present period of workers' struggles, the revolutionary party will strengthen itself with sufficient rapidity and firmness to guide the proletariat to victory, before it will be decisively beaten. But in order to arrive at this goal the party must, above all, maintain its own physiognomy and its own banner, without becoming mixed up in any way with the sycophants of rotten bourgeois democracy.

Algebraic Character of Democratic Slogans

Consistent with themselves, the opportunists who proceed from the impossibility of struggling at the present stage for the proletarian revolution, deduce from this that the immediate struggle must be for "the defense of bourgeois democracy" against the authoritarian attempts of the bourgeoisie. The death agony of bourgeois democracy simply incites the opportunists to try to keep it alive with the help of insipid and charlatanistic recipes ; whereas, such being the case, for the Leninist it is a question of finishing off the dying with the help of democratic slogans.

In his tenacious struggle against the Stalinist sectarians of the *Third Period*, Trotsky did not fail to note, in passing, that in no way was the question involved of defending the "rotten democracy of Weimar" against the Nazis ; it was precisely the decay of this "democracy" that produced and will always produce new Hitlers. It was solely a question of defending the nuclei of *workers democracy* which existed within the framework of bourgeois "democracy," of proceeding from this defense as from a springboard, in order to pass over to the offensive, with the aim of finishing off, after Hitler, the Weimar regime, after Kornilov, Kerensky.

It seems superfluous to repeat all this, but it is precisely from these considerations that the *algebraic* character of the democratic slogans flows. When we try to mobilize the masses against the monarchy, an obstacle on the road to the complete disintegration of bourgeois power, we do *not* tell them that a bourgeois republic is "preferable" to a bourgeois monarchy. The *class nature* of the republic for which we call upon the masses to struggle is deliberately left open – not because we are thinking of the "possibility" of creating a republic "neither bourgeois nor working class" – but because this category of slogans corresponds exactly to one stage of the real struggle, the stage in which the masses already consciously launch themselves *against* an obstacle without clearly knowing *for what* they are struggling. We attempt to facilitate their understanding of the *positive goal* of their struggle by tying the slogan for the Republic to the whole of the transitional program, that is to say, to a series of slogans which pass beyond the framework of capitalist society. The following stage will be given by the living historic process itself. If, in the course of the struggle for the "Republic," committees appear, we will oppose the power of these committees to any "democratic republic" ; then we will be for the "Republic of the committees." If committees are not constituted in this phase of the struggle, we will immediately separate ourselves from the attempt to stabilize any bourgeois republic, we will show the masses that it was not the continuation of their misery under a new label that they had desired, and they will understand us very well. But in launching at each stage the appropriate slogan, we remain irreconcilably hostile to every form of the bourgeois state, and to each one of its institutions, *without ever concealing this hostility*, without ever veiling it in the name of any "tactic" whatever.

The opportunists, on the other hand, clearly indicate the origin of their conceptions when they invoke the principle of

On the Opportunist Utilization of Democratic Slogans

"lesser evil," and seriously suggest that a bourgeois republic "is better" than a monarchy, or that a state with a single chamber is "preferable" to a state with both a Chamber and a Senate. It is obvious that during the discussions on constitutional questions we must always popularize the most radical and the most advanced solutions – just as in a debate upon a military budget, we will criticize details, demand a decrease of the length of service, an increase in pay, etc. But that doesn't prevent us from rejecting the *whole* bourgeois constitution just as we will always reject the *whole* military budget, whatever "reforms" are introduced into it.

It is very true that it is "easier" for the proletariat and for its party to make progress under a republic than under a monarchy, with one parliamentary assembly than with two. But the problem which poses itself to the proletariat at present is not one of choosing "easy" and ideal frameworks for its struggle ; but a problem of defending itself, of defending its very existence as a class, against the cataclysms causing growing misery, unemployment, fascism, and war. These cataclysms oppressing the working class stem from one fundamental cause, capitalist decadence, as much in a monarchial country like Italy as in the Spanish Republic, as much in a regime with two assemblies (the majority of Balkan countries before the war) as under a one-assembly regime (as in Germany). Those who, when confronted with these cataclysms endemic in decadent capitalism, appeal to the masses to spend their precious energies solely to create a different framework in which they will be bled, do not deserve the name of revolutionists. Firmness of principles, the adoption of a tactic which, whatever its flexibility, remains a *principled* tactic, this is what characterizes Leninism as opposed to unprincipled opportunism which by a series of "tactical" *salto mortale* lands outside of the revolutionary program.

Since the opportunists, by attaching an "intrinsic, progressive" value to decadent bourgeois democracy, consider the democratic slogans as a parliamentary or programmatic platform to rally the votes or sympathy of the masses, rather than as means designed to unleash *actions* of the masses, they naturally end up with abandoning the political independence of the proletariat. It is upon this question that the separation of the Leninists from the opportunists best expresses itself. For the Leninists the fundamental strategy remains that of the class struggle. The democratic slogans take on a new importance *solely in the measure* that they aid the revolutionary party to mobilize the proletariat *against* the bourgeoisie ; where they serve as a supplementary means, the importance of which we are the first to recognize, of *widening* the gulf which ideologically separates the workers from the capitalists. Also of exposing the whole infamy of the putrefying capitalist regime, one of whose most abject traits consists precisely in the more pronounced disappearance of the most elementary democratic rights. But all this is valid only *on the condition* that the democratic slogans are included in open propaganda and agitation against capitalism as such, that the proletariat guards its political independence, and that it resolutely attacks the *bourgeoisie* as the class responsible for the absence of liberties.

The opportunists, on the contrary, proceeding from their analysis of a "retreat" or of a "lack of maturity," see in the proletariat no more than an empty "cement" of "all the people" struggling for the "most elementary democracy," while keeping carefully silent about its class character. They do not mention the responsibility of the *bourgeoisie*, of *capitalism* as such, and send the masses into action against some scapegoat, whether it be foreign "imperialism," the "reaction," or the king. At a time when even the bourgeoisie of backward and colonial countries is incapable of struggling for even a minimum of "democracy," and installs under the benevolent eye of foreign imperialism the most ferocious dictatorship when the masses are too weak to resist, the opportunists try to find bourgeois "fellow travelers" in the imperialist countries themselves, which are moving supposedly in the direction of "genuine democracy." To try to unite under the same banner, in the epoch of decadent capitalism, the capitalist who struggles for the "liberty" to exploit unhampered "his" workers, and the worker who struggles for the liberty to cast off all exploitation, is, as the transitional program states, to transform the democratic slogans into a noose about the neck of the proletariat. In practice this "noose" materializes as a "bloc," or a "front," or a "popular movement," in the name of which the proletariat is invited to join with his class enemy "for the defense of democratic rights." It is sad to have to repeat elementary truths of this kind to "revolutionists" who continue to call themselves "Trotskyists" ...

Opportunism and Sectarianism

How can we avoid noticing the striking symmetry between the reasoning methods of the sectarians and the opportunists on the question of democratic slogans ? For the sectarian, the "present epoch" does not permit the use of these slogans ; for the opportunist, the "present epoch" permits, on the political plane, *only* the use of these slogans. For the sectarian democratic slogans are to be rejected *as such* ; for the opportunist they are *in and of themselves* "progressive." For the sectarian, democratic slogans "reënforce" the democratic illusions of the masses ; for the opportunist these illusions again burnish the crest of the democratic slogans because they render the struggle

for the revolution impossible "for the moment." The sectarian accuses the Leninist of "preferring" democratic slogans to Soviets ; the opportunist accuses him of "tying" the democratic slogans to the Soviets. For the sectarian the task consists in "first educating the masses" while avoiding action ; the opportunist, fundamentally, repeats the same idea, but instead of proposing an antidote as the remedy, he proposes the homoeopathic method ; he will "educate" the masses by repeating their own errors. In practice, the sectarian will escape to his study chamber and the opportunist to the parliamentary tribune. When it is too late both will charge the masses with their own sins. Full of self-satisfaction, both will accuse the masses of a chronic incapacity to understand an "intelligent" tactic, and will never themselves learn anything from events.

These mechanical and schematic conceptions, common both to sectarianism and opportunism, are fundamentally opposed to the dialectical method of the Bolsheviks, which expresses the elementary law of contemporary history, that of combined development. The struggle for the proletarian revolution is passing, even in the most advanced countries at present, through the struggle for the most elementary democratic demands ; but these demands can be realized, even in the most backward countries, only through the victory of the proletariat and the overthrow of capitalism.

However, as long as one *establishes* only the existence of contradictory factors in reality, one does not pass beyond the empirical stage of thought – itself the source of so many opportunist errors. Marxism begins where thought discovers the *fundamental tendency* under the surface of innumerable contradictory movements. That is why the Marxists recognize the importance of democratic slogans, even in the most advanced countries, when they are integrated into the *whole* of the transitional program. That is why a Marxist must *subordinate* these slogans to the whole program in the sense that one subordinates a supplementary task to a fundamental task. That is why he recognizes the *episodic* and *transitory* character of these slogans, which can transform themselves, in twenty-four hours, from motors into brakes on the mass movement. On the other hand, as long as we live under the regime of decadent capitalism, in pre-revolutionary conditions, the mobilization of the masses for the creation of dual power remains the principal task. For us, democratic slogans are only one means among others for solving this task – and nothing more.

July 1, 1946 [didim escort](#), [marmaris escort](#), [didim escort bayan](#), [marmaris escort bayan](#), [didim escort bayanlar](#), [marmaris escort bayanlar](#)