

Ludwig von Mises: Socialism versus European Democracy¹

Why did democracy fail on the European continent? What forces prevented Europe from maintaining popular government? Who were the gravediggers of European parliamentarism? There can hardly be any questions more pressing. The nations that have been lucky enough to preserve their democratic way of life are eager to learn what caused the failure of European democracy. They want to be prepared for the defense of their own freedom, and are therefore eager to know the enemy whom they may one day have to fight at home.

Public opinion has viewed the European history of the last hundred years mostly in the light of Marxian legends that badly distort the facts. According to this interpretation the bourgeoisie abandoned the cause of freedom and established the dictatorship of capital. Big business and finance became aware that democracy, the rule of the majority, must necessarily lead to socialism.

Eager to maintain their position as an exploiting class, the capitalists and entrepreneurs plotted against democracy. They hired scoundrels to fight against the people. Their sycophants disparaged democracy and popular government, and their armed mercenaries succeeded in overthrowing the majorities that aimed at government by the people. Modern tyranny is an outcome of capitalist machinations. The only sincere and unswerving supporters of democracy are the socialist proletarians.

Every page of European history contradicts these statements. Let us review the most significant facts and see whether they verify the Marxian interpretation.

French Experience

In February of 1848 the French dethroned Louis Philippe, the Orleans king. They substituted universal manhood suffrage for the special privilege of only 250,000 electors. All adult male citizens of France, roughly 9,400,000, now had the right to vote. On April 23 about 84 percent of them made use of their newly acquired right. They voted quite freely; nobody was in a position to prevent their voting as they pleased, and nobody ventured to try.

The outcome of these elections was a National Assembly in which 90 percent of the deputies unconditionally supported private ownership of the means of production. It was a smashing defeat for socialism. The socialists were forced to realize that only a small minority of the nation approved their plans. Their illusions were dispelled: the sovereign people had decided against them.

But they were not prepared to yield to the verdict. Hoping to seize power by violence, they rose up in arms. Of course they were defeated.

The Paris revolt of June 1848 was the most frivolous rebellion ever instigated. A small minority of armed men tried to defy the vast majority of the nation and establish a reign of terror and tyranny. The June conflict was not, as the socialist propagandists like to say, a "cowardly massacre of innocent proletarians by the soldiers of reaction"; it was the defense of democracy against the assault of a small minority. General Cavaignac and his troops safeguarded democracy for the moment against the conspiracies of those who aimed at minority rule.

The experience of June 1848 had momentous consequences. A specter has haunted Europe ever since — not the specter of communism, as the Communist Manifesto asserted in 1847, but the specter of terrorist dictatorship by a fanatical minority. The majorities, anxious to preserve democracy, became aware of a new danger; they knew they had had a narrow escape. From then on they began to see that the socialists — the Reds, the men of the extreme Left — were deadly foes of freedom, more dangerous than even the Church, the Bourbons, and the aristocrats. They became terribly frightened.

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This was the anxiety that Louis Napoleon, the adventurous nephew of the first Napoleon, turned to his own advantage. He was a stranger; nobody knew him in France, and he knew nobody; he had seen the country only through prison bars; and he spoke French with a German accent. But the majority of the nation voted for him because they expected that he would overcome what they considered the greater danger, the terrorism of the fanatics. Thus the antidemocratic rising of the socialists led to the second empire. It alone was responsible for all the disasters that the rule of Napoleon III and Eugénie brought upon France and upon Europe.

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The mournful events of June 1848 were duplicated by the Paris Commune in the spring of 1871, which gave fresh evidence of the socialists' unflinching support of dictatorship, minority rule, and terrorism. Again the army and its commanders had to defend the rights of the majority against the plots of a minority. It was a civil war for the cause of parliamentary government against tyranny.

All the arguments brought forward to justify these two rebellions were essentially antidemocratic. They run this way: The socialist proletarians are the elite, the vanguard of the backward masses. They know better than the misguided majority what will best serve the interests of the nation; they are borne on the wave of the future. They therefore have the sacred duty of overthrowing the majority and establishing their own dictatorial power. Democracy is a thin disguise for the rule of exploiters. It should be styled "plutodemocracy." The leaders of the elite have the duty of profiting by any opportunity to seize power. Right is anything they call by that name.

These tenets are familiar to our contemporaries; they are the doctrines of Georges Sorel, of the French supporters of Action directe, of Lenin, of Mussolini, and Hitler. It is not our task to criticize them; we have only to emphasize that they are not democratic. The signers of the American Declaration of Independence were an elite too, but they were the representatives of the great majority of their fellow citizens. They were an elite because their countrymen had elected them to safeguard the national welfare. They were not a junta of conspirators eager to rob their countrymen of self-determination. This was democracy.

Of course majorities are not infallible; all mortal men may err. But it is the essential feature of democracy that it denies a minority the right to impose its own will on the majority. He who believes that the majority is wrong must try to change his fellow citizens' minds by persuasion. If he fails, he must hold his peace; he has no right to rise up in arms.

The worst consequence of the antidemocratic spirit is that it divides the nation into hostile camps. The citizenry lose confidence in the working of democratic government. They fear that some day one of the antidemocratic minority groups may actually succeed in seizing power. Thus they think it necessary to arm and defend their rights against the menace of an armed minority.

French social and political conditions and thinking have been deeply influenced by the menace of socialist usurpation. This fear was the largest factor in the revival of French militant Catholicism; it fanned the flames of aggressive nationalism, Boulangism, and the anti-Dreyfus campaign. It had its share in the evolution that ended with the capitulation of 1940. There were very few friends of democracy left in France by that time. The rest of the nation was in two hostile camps; both the communists and the nationalists violently opposed democracy.

From France the fear of revolutionary socialist assaults spread to the rest of Europe. The French experience motivated Bismarck's efforts (1878–1890) to put down the Social Democrats by the same oppressive methods that their own champion Karl Marx approved in the acts of the Paris Commune and recommended in writing.

Bismarck was a foe of democracy; he was defending not popular government, but a scarcely disguised German absolutism. He was right, however, in believing that the struggle against the Marxists is a struggle against a minority seeking to oppress the majority by violence. True, the German voters who voted the socialist ticket did not want revolution. But the Marxist authors boasted of their party's revolutionary aims and advocated its dictatorship. Bismarck, the Junker, chose the wrong means of sweeping away Marxism; it is futile to fight ideas with police. But,

paradoxical as it may sound, in this campaign the champion of the Hohenzollern autocracy was fighting for freedom against the determined advocates of oppression.

The Bolshevik Mind

The frustration of the revolutionary attempts in France forced new tactics upon the friends of socialism. As they did not want to renounce their ambitions entirely, disappearing from the political scene, they had to acquiesce in the peaceful methods of democracy. They organized political parties and ran for seats in parliament. There were socialist groups in every parliament of continental Europe. The socialists became an important factor in most of those countries. Some optimists were prepared to believe that the Marxists had renounced their spirit of usurpation, giving up their revolutionary inclinations and hoping to realize their plans by parliamentary and democratic methods alone; but this was an illusion.

The thirty years preceding the First World War saw a tremendous success of socialist ideas. Sidney Webb (Lord Passfield), the distinguished leader of the British Fabians, was quite right when in 1889 he emphasized that "the socialist philosophy of to-day is but the conscious and explicit assertion of principles of social organization which have been already in great part unconsciously adopted," and that "the economic history of the century is an almost continuous record of the progress of socialism."

But this success of socialism was not an achievement of the Marxist parties, united from 1889 onward in the second International Workingmen's Association. New socialist parties sprang up, parties firmly opposed to Marxism. There were Catholic socialists, nationalist socialists, and many other parties seeking social reform and pro-labor policies. There were governments eager to restrict capitalism and embark upon social legislation. Foremost among them was the German government, whose new social policy, inaugurated at the end of the seventies and solemnly announced in the old Kaiser's imperial message of November 17, 1881, shaped the pattern of the later American New Deal.

The Marxists saw themselves outdone by governments and rival parties; they began to realize that notwithstanding their electoral successes their prospects of sweeping the masses with them were but small.

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A socialist party always tries to achieve its own brand of socialism, not the simple victory of any socialist group. The socialists do not advocate socialism and planning in general, but only a system of socialist planning in which they themselves are supreme. They regard the rule of another socialist party not as a partial success for their own aspirations, but as a greater evil than the capitalist market economy. The mutual animosity of Stalinists and Trotskyites, of the Marxian socialists and National Socialists, is in a class by itself. It is easy to see the reason for this hatred: as long as there is still a market economy, socialist minorities enjoy civil liberties and are free to propagate their doctrines; in a socialist community they are deprived of this opportunity. Where all assembly halls, newspapers, periodicals, and printing offices are in government hands, and where every citizen depends on the whims of the rulers, there is no room left for opposition activities. It is mechanically impossible to criticize those in power publicly; dissenters are exiled or driven underground.

Such considerations helped preserve and revive the spirit of socialist usurpation. The radicals denounced parliamentary tactics as treason to the fundamental tenets of socialism. Socialists, they said, should expect nothing from electoral victories and the support of majorities; they should not adopt bourgeois methods but strive unswervingly for revolution.

In Western and Central Europe the Marxians were prudent enough not to express such opinions in public. It would have jeopardized their chances in election campaigns. They discussed these questions in the inner circle and dealt with them in their writings, which few non-Marxists read.

But the majority of the Russian Marxists, the Bolsheviks, openly adopted the principle of the revolutionary elite: a group of professional conspirators must snatch the reins of government and subdue the majority of the nation. Lenin's and Bukharin's writings preach the gospel of forcible oppression, dictatorial rule, and totalitarian extermination of dissenters. They too, of course, were ignored by the Western European public until 1917.

It is not necessary to dwell upon the Russian events in the fall of 1917. The Bolsheviks failed lamentably in the electoral campaign; the parliamentary majority was radically opposed to their plans. But they were an armed body of fighters; they dispersed parliament, and firmly established their rule — the rule of an elite, say they; the rule of a gang of murderers, say their adversaries. The knell of European democracy had sounded.

There are people who honestly believe that the Bolsheviks are right, that socialism is a blessing and that capitalism is all wrong. It is not the task of this essay to investigate that problem. We have only to underline the obvious fact that Bolshevism does not mean democracy.

German Experience

The outcome of the First World War had destroyed the old prestige of the Hohenzollern family, of the Junkers, the officers, and the civil servants. The democracy of the West had shown its political and military superiority. The war, which according to President Wilson had been fought to make the world safe for democracy, appeared as an ordeal by fire for democracy. The Germans, beginning to revise their political views, turned toward democracy. The term democracy, almost forgotten in Germany for half a century, became popular again in the last weeks of the war. The Germans saw democracy as not only a return to the civil liberties — rights of man — suspended for the duration of the war, but above all the substitution of parliamentary government for monarchical near absolutism. These points, as every German knew, were implied in the official program of the Social Democrats. People expected that the Social Democrats would now put into practice the democratic principles of their program, and were ready to back them in their effort at political reconstruction of the Reich.

But from the ranks of the Marxists came an answer that no one outside the small group of professional Marx experts could have foreseen. "We class-conscious proletarians," the Marxians declared, "have nothing in common with your bourgeois concepts of freedom, parliamentarism, and democracy. We want not democracy, but the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., our own; we are not prepared to grant you bourgeois parasites the rights of man, the franchise, or parliamentary representation. Only Marxists and proletarians shall rule henceforth. You are perplexed: you say you had always thought we were sincere in formulating and advertising the democratic points on our program. That is your fault; if you had studied the writings of Marx more carefully you would have been better informed."

These revelations were a terrible shock not only to the rest of the nation — the majority of the Germans — but also to the greater part of the people who had long voted the Social Democratic ticket. The eyes of the Germans were opened. Now they learned that everything the Social Democrats had professed for fifty years was a lie. All their talk had had but one end in view: to put Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in the place of the Hohenzollerns. Democracy was evidently a mere term invented for the deception of fools. In fact, as the conservatives and the nationalists had always asserted, the advocates of democracy meant to establish mob rule and the tyranny of demagogues.

The communists grossly underrated the intellectual capacity of the German nation. The very idea of boasting after fifty years of prodemocratic agitation that they had never honestly wanted democracy — of telling the Germans: 'You dupes, how clever we were to take you in!' — this was too much even for the old members of the Social Democratic party. Within a few weeks political Marxism — not socialism as an economic system nor Marxism as a sociological doctrine — had lost all its former prestige. The idea of democracy became hopelessly suspect. From that time on the term democracy was, to many Germans, synonymous with fraud. The immense majority solidly rejected communist dictatorship.

The communists were a small minority only; the independent socialist party, which was ready to back them, was not much larger. But they were strongly entrenched in Berlin, they had armed troops of ex-soldiers and ex-sailors from the Imperial Navy at hand, and they could count on the support of masses of young bravos in the capital. The revolutionary government — the people's representatives — was a group of incompetent leaders from the right wing of the Social Democrats. They too were opposed to communist dictatorship, fully realizing that the majority of the old party members rejected it. But they sat in the government palaces, helpless, defenseless, passive, and frightened out of their wits. The communists were in a position to overthrow them, seize power, and block the elections for the constituent assembly. Dictatorial totalitarianism was imminent.

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By October and early November 1918, the nationalists were in a state of utter desperation. But they were quick to see the situation and seize their opportunity. They were quicker than the Marxists in sensing the radical change of mood brought about by the menace of communist dictatorship, and they were ready to profit by it to stage a comeback. They knew what their policy for the immediate future must be. Their most urgent need was to prevent a Red dictatorship and wholesale communist extermination of the nonproletarians.

The nationalists, adamant foes of parliamentary government and democracy, decided to support the cause of freedom and democracy momentarily so that they might overthrow them later. They were ready to cooperate with the right-wing socialists in carrying out the first part of this program, and to support the government that they detested. For purely tactical reasons they offered the nation a program of liberalism and democracy. Marxist methods found imitators; the nationalists had profited from reading Lenin and Bukharin. And, faithful to the revolutionary tactics of the Bolsheviks, they armed for the fight.

In January 1919, the rising of the communists and independent socialists in Berlin was defeated by the not-yet-disbanded cavalry division of the ex-Kaiser's guards and by volunteer corps made up of nationalists and demobilized soldiers who were not too eager to go back to humdrum civilian work. This battle did not end the civil war; it continued for months in the provinces, and broke out afresh time and again in the capital. However, the victory won by the troops in January 1919, at Berlin, safeguarded the elections for the constituent assembly, the session of that body, and the promulgation of the Weimar Constitution.

William II used to say: "Where my guards set foot, there is no more question of democracy." The Weimar democracy was of a peculiar sort. The horsemen of the royal guards had fought for it and won it. The Constitution of Weimar could be deliberated and voted only because the nationalist enemies of democracy preferred it to the dictatorship of the communists. The German nation received parliamentary government as a gift at the hands of deadly foes of freedom who were only waiting for a chance to take back their present.

Both the nationalists and the communists saw the Weimar Constitution simply as a battleground in their struggle for dictatorship. Both armed for civil war, and each, trying repeatedly to open the attack, had to be put down by armed resistance. But the nationalists became daily more powerful, while the communists were paralyzed. It was not a question of votes and seats in parliament; the centers of gravity of these parties lay outside parliamentary affairs.

The nationalists were openly supported by the greater part of the intellectuals, white-collar workers, small business, entrepreneurs, and farmers, and they also enjoyed the secret sympathy of a good many workingmen who still voted for the Social Democrats. They could act freely, were familiar with the problems of German life, and could adjust their actions to the changing political and economic conditions of the whole nation and of each province; the communists, on the other hand, had to obey orders issued by Russian leaders who did not know Germany, and were forced to change their tactics overnight whenever the central committee in Moscow ordered them to.

No intelligent or honest man could endure such slavery. The intellectual and moral quality of the German communist leaders was consequently far below the average level of German politicians. They were no match for the nationalists. The communists' only role in German politics was that

of saboteurs and conspirators. After January of 1919 they no longer had any prospect of success, though of course the ten years of Nazi misrule have revived German communism.

The Germans would have chosen democracy in 1918, if they had had to choose. But as things stood they had only the choice between the two dictatorships, Left and Right. Between these two dictatorial parties there was no third group ready to support capitalism and its political corollary, democracy. Neither the right-wing Social Democrats and their affiliates, the Democratic Party, nor the Catholic Center were fit to adopt "plutocratic" democracy and "bourgeois" republicanism. Their past and their ideologies prevented it.

The Hohenzollerns lost their throne because they rejected British parliamentarism; the Weimar Republic failed because it rejected French republicanism as embodied in the Third Republic from 1870 to 1930. The Weimar Republic had no ideal except to steer a middle course between two parties that were striving for dictatorship; parliamentarism, to the supporters of the administration, was not the best system of government, but only an emergency measure, an expedient. The right-wing Social Democrats wanted to be moderate Marxists and moderate nationalists. The Catholic Center tried to combine moderate nationalism and moderate socialism with total Catholicism and yet maintain democracy. Such eclecticism is doomed; it does not appeal to the younger generation. In any conflict with a resolute adversary it is bound to succumb.

The Nazis had a clear program: they meant to establish a German socialist commonwealth and render this system economically self-sufficient by conquering "living space." Only defeat in the present war will convince the Germans that this program is detrimental to them.

No Democracy without Democrats

It is not necessary to elaborate with further examples drawn from the history of smaller European nations. What happened in France, Russia, and Germany happened there too.

It is a bold distortion of historical fact to say that the Left, the socialists, were eager to establish popular government and that the Right, the bourgeois capitalists, defeated these attempts. Neither the Marxists nor the other socialists ever aimed at democracy. What they wanted was their own dictatorship. Today, of course, the German and French Marxists are deeply mortified that their rivals have supplanted them. They scorn dictatorship and indulge in democratic talk. But they would hardly care to establish democracy if they came into power again.

Victors in civil wars are cruel and vindictive; their revenge is merciless. (History knows only one exception: the behavior of the Northerners after Appomattox.) The public rightly resented the atrocities committed by the soldiers of Cavaignac and Gallifet and by the German nationalists in Berlin and Munich in 1919. But these crimes by no means disprove the statement that the socialists and communists meant to overthrow democracy.

Nobody is prepared to learn by experience; the German Marxists are no exception. They lay their failure to the fact that they were not brutal enough to follow the example of the Russian Bolsheviks and thus missed the opportunity to root out the seeds of reactionary counterrevolution. This interpretation ignores the fact that the majority of the nation was strictly opposed to Marxist rule. All the Marxist parties in the Reichstag together were in a minority through the whole fourteen years of the Weimar regime. Besides, almost all those who voted for by far the strongest Marxist group, the right-wing Social Democrats, were decided opponents of proletarian dictatorship.

The communists tried in the winter of 1918–19 and again later to seize power through revolutionary uprisings; they were defeated. If the leaders of the moderate Social Democrats had tried to establish dictatorship by a coup d'état, they would have been deserted by their voters and smashed, and the nationalists would have succeeded in getting full control even sooner. It was impossible to stop the evolution of Nazism by violent repression. The only way left to fight Nazism was to refute its dogmas and offer the nation a better program. This is where the

Marxians failed lamentably. They were unable to expose the glaring fallacies of Nazism because they themselves were antidemocrats.

European democracy broke down because there were no democrats left in continental Europe. The place held in America by the Gettysburg Address was occupied in Europe by the Communist Manifesto. No further comment is necessary.