



Marxism, U.S. Democracy, and Lenin’s Commune Against Capitalism

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Abstract

In his 2016 essay “An American Utopia,” Fredric Jameson appropriates Lenin’s concept of “dual power” to ruminate on its potential meaning in the present U.S. context. Jameson’s remarks on “dual power” and U.S. politics offer a starting point to explore both the most recent developments in the U.S. and to revisit Lenin’s *State and Revolution* fruitfully to review the concept of “the commune” as a post-capitalist political theory. Lenin’s work transcends anodyne demands for abstract democracy. Indeed, my intervention aims to explore the limits of “democracy” in U.S. political discourse, demanding a reconsideration of Leninist political theory. In so doing, the conditions of struggle in the U.S. potentialize the dialectical development of struggles to extend democracy (reform) with struggles to overcome democracy (revolution).

Keywords Marxism · Lenin · Democracy · Socialism · Political theory

1 An American “Commune”?

In his 2016 essay “An American Utopia,” Fredric Jameson appropriates Lenin’s concept of “dual power” to ruminate on its potential meaning in the present U.S. context. He dismisses communist parties and socialist aspirations as something “no one believes in anymore.” The social democratic parties and coalitions offer reform, while the labor unions are too weak to counter the state. Laboring under the same cynicism and pessimism that he attributes to the working class, Jameson ponders which types of mass organizations, parties, institutions, or social movements in North America qualify for the moniker of “dual power.” He dismisses the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement as merely an uprising, or “a spatial event” that relied too much on information technology to extend itself beyond the physical space of

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Zuccotti Park near Wall Street in downtown New York City. He embraces the Black Panther Party, which reshaped U.S. Black radicalism in the 1970s, and the historical maroon societies of self-liberated Blacks in the era of enslavement, but ignores Occupy Wall Street's mutual aid response to the widespread damage wrought by Hurricane Sandy to the Atlantic coast in 2012, and does not mention the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings in 2014 (Jameson 2016, 4). Jameson's remarks on "dual power" and U.S. politics offer a starting point to explore both the most recent developments in the U.S. and to revisit Lenin's *State and Revolution* fruitfully to review the concept of "the commune" as a post-capitalist political theory that transcends anodyne demands for abstract democracy. Indeed, my intervention aims to explore the limits of "democracy" in U.S. political discourse, demanding a reconsideration of Leninist political theory.

After dismissing Occupy Wall Street, Jameson turns to contemplate the judicial system and the healthcare system as potential sites of dual power. In doing so, he fails to note the judicial system's function in harming Black and Brown people through police killings, racist profiling, over-policing, and mass incarceration, e.g., its well-known historical role in assassinating, imprisoning, and decimating the Black Panther Party, linking state repression of organizations that deploy radical critiques of capitalism with those that militantly confronted systemic white supremacy (Burden-Stelly 2017). When he underlines the healthcare system as a latent site of dual power, he remarks presciently, "it may not be impossible to imagine crisis situations in which physicians are able to wield social power of considerable significance, in a kind of epidemiological dual structure" (Jameson 2016, 17). Such speculation about the judicial and healthcare systems invokes spaces and histories that reveal latent aporias in Jameson's thinking. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings in 2014, a national protest against racist police and vigilante abuses that reshaped national discourse about the state's control of Black people, is manifestly absent. Indeed, because history required that he name the Panthers in this essay, it is puzzling that he failed to center the struggle for Black freedom in the contemporary moment.¹

This bewildering absence haunts Jameson's American utopia imaginary. Ignoring the struggle against white supremacy is a particularly non-Leninist approach to revolutionary politics (Wendland-Liu 2021). It is a symptom of the U.S. academy's view of #BlackLivesMatter generally, as rhetoricians Donna Hunter and Emily Polk found in their 2016 study of academic engagement with both Occupy and #BlackLivesMatter. The divisions registered by white reluctance to engage the latter revolutionary militancy derives from racial and class privilege of those who feel more comfortable teaching about the former while ignoring the latter. In addition to noting Occupy Wall Street's network of cultural and institutional affiliations with university radicals, "the overrepresentation of white males in coveted tenure positions illustrates the white privilege that Black Lives Matter challenges. This contradiction makes collective support of the movement more difficult" (Hunter and Polk 2016,

¹ Jameson also explores religious organizations and the Mafia, but concludes the military is the U.S. answer to Lenin's soviets.

443). While this analysis accounts for some dimensions of the absence, it fails to speak to the historical relation of racism to capitalist development and its mulish persistence despite recurring crises (Wolff 2020; Burden-Stelly 2020).

Unfortunately, this absence registers as an economism that Jameson shares with other North American Marxists, such as the late Ellen Meiksins Wood. In delineating the economic from the “extra-economic,” Meiksins Wood mistakenly disentangles the concepts of race and gender from their capitalist and economic moorings and limits them to the political dimension. She writes, “capitalism’s structural indifference to the social identities of the people it exploits makes it uniquely capable of discarding extra-economic inequalities and oppressions” (Meiksins Wood 2002, Kindle Locations 5545–5546).² She insists that capitalism has overcome the “scarcity” of extra-economic goods and errs in arguing that capitalism has become “indifferent” to racism or gender-based inequalities. Lenin regarded these “extra-economic” goods as central and constitutive of capitalism and could not be separated from the system itself. In a 1916 article on the national question, Lenin argues that “while being based on economics, socialism cannot be reduced to economics alone,” giving special attention to global struggles for national liberation, in which he included the African American freedom struggle (Lenin 1964e, 325; Prashad 2020; Wendland-Liu 2021).³ Indeed, the reductive economism of western intellectuals has led to an ideological elision of class struggle (Losurdo 2016, 101–115).

Other contemporary U.S. Marxists, however, refuse to divest capitalism of its racist building blocks and mechanisms, and, since the 2014 and 2020 #BlackLivesMatter uprisings in the U.S., this view has gained a new hearing (Davis 2020; Burden-Stelly 2020; Kelley 2017; Singh 2016; Prashad 2016; Marable 2015). Before the term “racial capitalism” became centered in U.S. public discourse, scholar E. San Juan Jr. theorized racism’s dynamic and constantly reassembled relation to capitalism. He argues that the core concept of “race” has a “signifying power [that] comes from the articulation of a complex of cultural properties and processes with a mode of production centered on capital accumulation and its attendant ideological apparatuses.” Further, “[t]his system *depends* primarily on material inequality in the appropriation and exploitation of land, labor, power, and means of production by a privileged minority of European origin” (San Juan Jr. 2002, 143, emphasis added). The “racial problematic” endures as a set of practices that over-determines the class process of exploiting labor and capitalist accumulation and development (West 1988, 17). Theoretical dislocation of the present concreteness of racism to the historical past erases the special conditions of super-exploitation faced by women of color, men of color, and gender non-normative people of color. Such an omission as that which Jameson inflicts operates like the Marxist version of “all lives

² Meiksins Wood pursues this line of thinking for two reasons: (1) she is battling identity politics, and (2) attempting to project a socialist economics while preserving a political democracy. The former appears to be a response to the academic left’s retreat from class, while the latter signals her disapproval of the states who claimed socialist systems as goals.

³ Here and throughout, as many non-specialists in Russian history and language must, I am forced to use English translations of Lenin’s collected works.

matter,” because it allows the necessary relation of racism to an exploitative class process function without critique or confrontation. The anti-racist uprisings of 2020 served as a heroic defense of Black lives, but also an elemental form with which class struggle appears in the U.S.

The second opening that Jameson’s remarks induce are his references to the healthcare system as a potential site of “dual power” during a major epidemiological crisis. While physicians and other healthcare professionals and mutual aid associations in countries like China, Vietnam, Laos, and the left-led state of Kerala, India moved swiftly to intervene in the COVID-19 pandemic, in the U.S., these same professionals were paralyzed by the failed national leadership that downplayed and then politicized the crisis.⁴ Essentially, they were blocked from playing a “dual power” role by the federal government’s ties to capitalism which insists on profit as the motive for action and demands the labor of the working class to function (Tricontinental 2020). Still, the global COVID-19 pandemic prepared the radical terrain of the current stage of the 2020 anti-racist uprising and the struggle against the fascist threat by revealing on a mass scale some critical truths about capitalism. The pandemic exposed a central contradiction of capitalism, its ideology, and its democratic state. Workers cannot mix bodily in the workforce without risk of infection, death, and extension of the pandemic, leading to the deaths of over 800,000 U.S. people by the end of 2021. The exploitation of the labor power of workers, the extraction of surplus value, and the functioning of the state, however, cannot occur without the physical presence of tens of millions of workers in productive spaces. For large sections of capital, profit and the accumulation of capital depended on making people return physically to work. Thus, the uneven, contradictory, callous, and inept response to the pandemic levied by the U.S. ruling class, exacerbated by the deliberate stupidity and irrationality of the near-fascist Trump administration (Tricontinental 2020).

The pandemic unveiled a new entity known as “essential workers,” or laboring people upon whom the functioning of the system, the provision of basic needs of food, shelter, and health depend. Some of the “essential workforce” is highly skilled healthcare professionals and economically secure financial professionals. Many millions are underpaid, undereducated workers, however, and are disproportionately Black and Brown people. Of the 55 million U.S. workers identified as “essential,” approximately half are nonwhite, are likely to be unprotected by a union contract and collective bargaining power, and are paid significantly less than a living wage. In fact, in the food, agriculture, and facility services industries, where workers of color disproportionately outnumber white workers, workers of color earn far less than their white counterparts (McNicholas and Poydock 2020). These workers are typically maligned, abused, and abandoned through racist oppression and other

⁴ Notably, smaller population, high-income countries like New Zealand, South Korea, and Norway successfully averted the worst of the pandemic through strictly enforced quarantine policies (or suspension of democratic freedoms) and strong social safety nets (included national health systems) that could offset a temporary economic stoppage. This civil society measured were founded on shared cultural commitments to collective well-being and respect for science-driven public health policies (Gulley 2020).

forms of marginalization but in this moment of pandemic proved essential to the rudimentary systemic operations and the lives of the capitalists and the most privileged members of society.

Linked to this discovery of essential labor is the revelation of what Marx calls the secret, hidden truth of capitalism—that labor power produces the value expropriated by capitalists. Within days of the announcement of “stay-at-home” orders, when millions were fired, laid off, furloughed, put on temporary leave, or simply moved to online remote work that initially proved far less productive than normal operations, the wealth of current and expected values evaporated. Mass unemployment and stingy relief for workers combined with threats of withholding unemployment payments to force workers back to dangerous workplaces exposed the racist–classist nature of state power and its capitalist logic as the essence of U.S. democracy. Put another way, these contradictions proved U.S. democracy incapable of addressing the pandemic, the economic collapse, and the violence of white supremacy.

This set of contradictions opened the door for major working-class struggles over health and safety in both the private and public sectors. When the Trump administration ordered students to return to classrooms in the fall of 2020, threatening to punish schools that refused, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association mobilized their members to demand federal standards for health and safety for teachers, school staff, children and their families (Goldstein and Shapiro 2020). They created science-based health and safety standards and shared them on a national scale with their members, other school workers, and school families, forcing, in many cases, school districts to scale down plans to open in-school classes. In Chicago, for example, a coalition of neighborhoods, families, and teachers fought to maintain virtual classroom settings, rallying in person in the streets and car caravans throughout the summer (Issa 2020). This willingness and ability to assert power stems in part from a shift among the Chicago teachers to social movement unionism which proved crucial to their success in their 2012 and 2019 strikes. Social movement unionism, according to teacher and union activist Lois Weiner, sees teachers “[take] leadership in organizing a coalition that looks to mobilize more support within the immediate neighborhood and the larger community” (Weiner 2012). Likewise, the nurses’ union, longtime proponents of the social movement unionism model, mobilized its membership and coalition partners to pressure state and federal authorities for personal protective equipment and expansion health services for infected patients. Nurses marshaled their skills to produce much of this equipment when federal authorities politicized the pandemic and dragged its feet on delivering the equipment.⁵

As the pandemic crisis extended from weeks to months, revelations about the police-protected lynching of Ahmaud Arbery and the police killings of Breonna

⁵ Normally, U.S. labor unions limit their mobilization of workers to “economic” demands related to wages, benefits, and conditions of work. Extra-economic activities have some origins in the social unionism concept that reemerged in the 1990s. Some labor unions saw a need to build broader alliances by tying their specific struggles to community demands for reform and working-class power (Hurd et al. 2003). Social unionism may also be fruitfully explored as an “incipient” form of dual power.

Taylor and George Floyd ignited another insurgency movement for Black lives beginning in May 2020. The North American uprising, surging from May through August of 2020, against racist police brutality quickly advanced from a protest over the targeting of Black people with violent police repression to become a blistering criticism of white supremacy, capitalist exploitation, and the domination of state instruments of power by the equally corrupt, racist, and fascistic Trump administration (Kellner 2018). Thus, the uprising became a mass demand to reshape power relations more broadly, wrest control of resources and coercive power from the dominant racist–capitalist minority, and reorder the state’s machinery to serve the needs of the majority of the people. In addition, the generalized demand to “defund the police” and replace policing with community-controlled forms of social welfare, public safety, and reparations and restoration indicates the preparation for “dual power” in ways with which Jameson seems unequipped to contend.

A radical criticism of the police, the vanguard of state repression and violence against the working class, offers a starting point to construct a clear form of dual power. “Any real agenda for police reform must replace police with empowered communities working to solve their own problems” (Vitale 2017, 66). Approaches to police reform that strengthen the legitimacy of the police through “sensitivity training” and even individualized punishment of “bad apples” strengthen the state’s coercive power without necessarily transforming the state from a capitalist state to a proletarian state. Incipient conceptions of this necessity were articulated in criticisms of the failure of police reform. One legal activist stated, “[r]eforms do not make the criminal legal system more just, but obscure its violence more efficiently” (Purnell 2020). Because state coercive power is history and structurally rooted in white supremacy, the police, reformed or not, will play a violent role in maintaining white supremacy, and Black and Brown people will remain in danger. Activists and organizations, defining themselves as “abolitionists,” called for defunding the police and replacing most policing with community-controlled social resources, such as non-police responses to domestic violence, non-criminalized interventions in drug “offenses,” eliminating carceral resources and infrastructures in schools, ending immunity from prosecution for police offenders, and massively shifting resources from the police to community services (Corder and Perez 2020).

Such demands, however, when left to state bureaucracies, laws, or other “democratic” processes, become easily swamped by fears of crime and structural inequalities of wealth and power that are fostered by reliance on the state for protection and legitimacy. If these demands cannot be protected from police or right-wing terrorist violence, the state’s ability to regain its contested monopoly on power, supported by a wave of media framing of police as the only force for order and protest as the harbinger of anarchy, is fortified. This functioning contradiction results from the nature of capitalist and white supremacist power, but also the over-reliance on legitimated democratic forms, even from the socialist camp. Protests and subsequent events in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Seattle, Washington revealed these contradictions in detail and point to what “dual power” might look like on the level of public safety. Minneapolis police in the 1980s and 1990s were notorious for their racist targeting of nonwhite communities with violence and impunity. Violent police actions contributed to the growth of crime and violent clashes with police. In the early 2000s,

connections between the police union and white supremacist motorcycle gangs added to the evidence that Minneapolis police were unafraid and uninhibited in their use of extra-legal forms of violence and coercion to maintain their power (Michaels 2020). Attempts at reform through democratic and legalistic processes met with powerful resistance, though city officials convinced the department to accept extra resources for new racial sensitivity training. In 2020, the slaying of George Floyd by five Minneapolis officers only became international news after a digital recording of the incident surfaced sparking international protest and the reemergence of the #BlackLivesMatter in the streets (Cooley 2020).

Initial calls for reform by the city's leaders essentially rehearsed the same appeals to smother protest by promising restraints on police excesses that had shaped the urban experience in the 1980s and 1990s. A separate campaign to defund the police department and "reboot" it based on community control and new definitions of public safety was met with massive resistance from conservatives who cried anarchy, media which distorted the aims of the reforms, and even among reformers themselves who feared going too far. The bureaucratic process served as an excuse to block change, for some officials who insisted that even mild reforms would "require navigating a complex labyrinth of city and state laws, police union contracts, and budget issues" (Bush 2020). Congress's refusal to address police reforms after the 2020 elections secured Democrats a thin majority signaled the failure of liberal democracy to the decisive advantage of the coercive elements of the state, the capitalist class vested in property rights, and nefarious right-wing political forces.

While these struggles unfolded, in Seattle in early June 2020, #BlackLivesMatter protesters occupied the East Seattle police precinct building, forced the police force to flee, renamed the building the "Seattle People's Department," and established an "autonomous zone" in a portion of the city's Capitol Hill neighborhood. Participants named this takeover the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ). Thousands of people sympathetic to the #BlackLivesMatter struggle and angered by police violence the previous month, including an attack on a 7-year-old child and other protest spectators, attended to the occupation of the zone. In this action, they operationalized alternatives to policing and repressive state power. According to one account, "[j]ust as historic protests after Floyd's death served as a release valve for deep rage against racist policing and relief from months of pandemic lockdown, the CHAZ was a flowering of hope that drew thousands in a season of death" (Gupta 2020).⁶ The zone mirrored past attempts at autonomous social experiments, such as Occupy Wall Street. Occupiers built kitchens, educational facilities, child care centers, and other resources for the inhabitants. Occupiers made intentional comparisons between themselves to the Paris Commune and many referenced Lenin's political theory outlined in *State and Revolution*. They believed they were creating a non-state alternative form of community and institutional power.⁷ In response to this occupation, the city's liberal government

⁶ Initially, CHAZ participants called it the Capitol Hill Organized Protest, or CHOP.

⁷ The prominent statue of Lenin in Seattle's Fremont neighborhood and its radical labor history, which earned it the moniker "the Soviet of Washington" during a general strike in 1919, drew CHAZ's political lineage to mind (Winslow 2018).

combined its forces with the police, the right-wing militias, an unsympathetic media, a hostile business community worried about property values, and the increasingly authoritarian federal law enforcement apparatus to force its closure.

The Trump administration responded to the anti-racist uprising with fascist tactics. It threatened city and state governments to crackdown on protesters with violence and imprisonment or face waves of federal troops entering their cities. It encouraged police departments to use excessive force, resulting in extreme violence against protesters, including deadly assaults by police vehicles, the use of tear gas and brutal violence against protesters. Trump personally encouraged right-wing, white supremacist militias to join the police adding to the brutality of the moment. In May 2020, he tweeted, “when the looting starts the shooting starts,” implying both that anti-racist protesters were mere criminals and that he supported police and civilian violence directed at them (Southern Poverty Law Center 2020). This appeal to the militant right wing combined with Trump’s dismissal of the COVID-19 pandemic as a “hoax,” his appeals to racist rhetoric and policies, notably attack nonwhite immigrants, blaming China for U.S. economic struggles and the pandemic, and his abuse of the U.S. media cultivated conspiracy-driven, paranoia among his followers leading to the January 6th riot at the U.S. capitol building (Wendland-Liu 2020a, b, c). While the social forces leading the uprising were decisive in defeating Trump’s bid for reelection, democracy itself is insufficient for eliminating the fascist threat. Racist inequalities and brutalities, general powerlessness and exploitation, and ongoing health emergency and climate crisis, and the fear of war did not resolve themselves when Trump temporarily fled to his compound in Florida. Since Trump’s electoral defeat, U.S. democracy has provided no reforms for these systemic elements of capital accumulation or the fascist threat.

The ongoing fascist threat, the collapse of the legitimacy of Washington’s leadership of global capitalism, and the transparency of the facile U.S. claim to model democracy and human rights on the world stage demands an intervention. My alternative “American utopia” reading of the three recent major revolutionary events—the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, the #BlackLivesMatter rebellions of 2014, and the May–July 2020 uprising against racist police brutality—insists on announcing the ongoing conjunctural rupture in ruling-class hegemony in the U.S., a crisis of capitalist state power, and mass critiques of state forms of rule or reform. The criticisms of the state by these movements and their organizational forms center on shifting administration of economic, juridical, and political governance from the state to the people. The need for an ongoing struggle to politically empower “essential labor,” the urgent need for social solidarity to survive the pandemic, and crisis of U.S. ruling-class legitimacy, many North American radical and Marxist theorists remain entrenched in democratic theory, hoping it will offer a salutary response. This latter view depends fundamentally on the formation of majority *influence* on existing state forms or the modification of those forms to retain their legitimacy (rather than a shift to people’s *rule* or working-class *control*). By contrast, the combination of riots, permanent protest, staged occupations, and the persistent demand for social solidarity and the enhancement of working-class

capacity to govern demonstrates increasing political sophistication through mass affective affiliation with resistance.

2 Marxism and Democratic Theory

It is easy to point to multiple examples of how the U.S. government has deployed rhetoric of “democracy” to justify its imperialist domination of global affairs or to maintain a political status quo domestically. We need not explore these examples much to understand how cynical and empty these usages have been. Ongoing U.S. military, economic, and political interventions, which have destroyed so many hundreds of thousands of lives, enacted in the name of democracy have proven to be little more than a mockery of the same. By contrast to this empty rhetoric of democracy, many North American Marxists adopt the same language of democracy to name the horizon and goal of socialism—but with, they claim, a deeper or substantive meaning (Wolff 2000). Thus, they contrast socialist or radical democracy with capitalist or bourgeois democracy.⁸

Meiksins Wood in *Democracy Against Capitalism* poses what she sees as the *political* concept of democracy against the *economic* concept of capitalism. She does so to deliver a socialist critique of capitalism that shares some Leninist features. Wood argues that democracy refers to all “extra-economic goods” or “political goods” (Meiksins Wood 2002, Kindle Locations 5545–5546). Political struggles around “extra-economic goods,” she avers, “remain vitally important, but they have to be organized and conducted in the full recognition that capitalism has a remarkable capacity to distance democratic politics from the decisive centers of social power and to insulate the power of appropriation and exploitation from democratic accountability” (Meiksins Wood 2002, Kindle Locations 5413–5415).⁹ Meiksins Wood imagines the socialist transition as contained within “democratic accountability.” She further distinguishes democracy associated with socialism and a limited version associated with capitalism—thus, the political form, being separate from capitalist economics, can simply be *extended* for a greater portion of the population, open a socialist transition, and remain generally unchanged (Meiksins Wood 2002). Her formula is not a complex one: she seeks to project a socialist economics, while preserving political democracy created by capitalist social formations. Ironically, her political stance, apart from its egalitarian economics, shares an ideological positioning with the neo-conservative thinker Francis Fukuyama who insists that democracy aims to hold accountable the state (Fukuyama 2016), suggesting the ideological

⁸ Exploring the motives of North American Marxists in adhering to political democracy, whether they lie in a disapproval of, opposition to, or disillusionment with the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, or other states who claimed socialism as a goal is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹ Meiksins Wood insists that capitalism has overcome the “scarcity” of extra-economic goods, and she errs in arguing that while pre-capitalist formations depended on their scarcity (massive civic inequality based on race or gender, for example), capitalism has erased that particular distinction. Lenin regarded these “extra-economic” goods as central and constitutive of capitalism and could not be separated from the system itself.

convergence of these otherwise diverging points of view. Neither emphasize the class character of the state or political order.

Other North American scholars, who stop short of Lenin's injunction to move beyond the limits of democracy, join the call for extensions of democracy based on a perceived division between the political and economic constructed ideologically and structurally within capitalism and its state functions. For example, Wolff, despite establishing Marxism's ambiguity toward democracy, describes *S&R* through this lens, writing that its theoretical aim is "a *complete or full democracy*." Wolff adds that Marxism's contribution to democratic theory lies primarily within its demand to expand the definition of democracy to include economic processes that Marxists define as class (Wolff 2000, 113, n. 1, emphasis added). Resch asserts that "socialism without democracy is a sham, and socialism without some market mechanisms is impossible to sustain." He applies the formula, constructing an opposition between "participatory democracy" and capitalist democracy, the former holding the latter accountable through an extension of the number of people who oversee economic processes (Resch 1992, 14, 30–31). Townshend tactically advocates a reconstruction of Lenin to dismiss his demands to overcome democracy to prevent liberals from using his revolutionary ideas to shelve all of the Marxist tradition. When the liberals succeed in scorning Marxism like this, Marxists are denied the ability to make more reasonable demands like "expanding democracy" or to raise reasonable questions about the class structure that limits this expansion (Townshend 1999, 70–71). The mystical figure of *democracy*, of a particularly extensive sort, renders a system of liberation. A common feature here is the theory of extension: make democracy include economic processes overseen by larger groups of people, and, with some terminological variation, liberation follows in the form of participatory or even socialist democracy. It is, thus, essentially, economic in its aims and aspirations.

While Lenin had advocated a struggle for democracy,¹⁰ he rejected the implicit conciliation with dominant discourses wherein democracy lies at the *end* of history. Simply put, democracy subverts the revolutionary content of Marxist theory by offering the working-class-only limited participation in bourgeois civil society, a role closely linked to the maintenance of its subordination as an object of the capitalist class's agency via the democratic state. In a Leninist strain, Jodi Dean argues, "democratic theory presents ideals and aspirations as always already present possibilities. In so doing, it brings utopia inside, eliminating it as an external space of hope." Adherence to democratic theory is a concession that ensnares socialist hope. Deans continues, "by internalizing the hope that things might be otherwise, democratic theory destroys that hope: potential problems are solved in advance, through democratic channels. *We already know how to get there. We already have*

¹⁰ In October 1917, Lenin argued in "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power," that "*revolutionary democracy*" relies on the majority of people to subvert the power of the capitalist class and the ultrarightists. Still, this revolutionary democratic project functioned as an opening to more fundamental post-capitalist changes. It could not be the end itself (Lenin 1972). Further, he argues that capitalism and its democratic state creates undemocratic conditions for the working class, which can be better provided by revolutionary socialist governance (Lenin 1964c).

the procedures." (Dean 2009, 78, emphasis in the original). Revolutionary transformation is foreclosed. For this reason, Dean, discontent with a negative critique of democracy and capitalism, looks to the "communist horizon" (Dean 2012).

Contemporary Marxist democratic theory, then, circumvents an issue that Lenin foregrounds: the necessity of looking past democracy itself for a radical future. Democracy operates appropriately under capitalism; it is, at its most advanced, nothing but the limit of political maturity under capitalist conditions (Marot 2014). Its proper function is a contradiction between its ideals and the reality of uneven power relations, mismanagement, incompleteness, and failure. Appeals for democracy as the endgame invite persistent inequality, incomplete social development *in perpetuum*, a halt in historical movement, a submission to the state as it is. Dean argues that placing democracy as the final goal of the socialist struggle "presupposes democracy is the solution to the problems of democracy." Thus, "it is a dead end for left politics" (Dean 2009, 94). Democratic theory, as Lenin argued, "keeps everything within the bounds of the bourgeois parliamentary republic" (Lenin 1964c, 489).

The tension within Marxist theory over the capitalism–democracy–socialism triad invokes Lenin's metaphor of democracy as "the shell of capitalism." He wrote, "A democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism" (Lenin 1964c, 393). Capitalism inhabits this shell to conceal its relations and hide its core truths within the cover of dynamic political activity, campaigns, and debate. It is the appearance of freedom and dynamism that "insulates" the real power of capitalist domination of the state. The "shell" metaphor describes something more than just an obfuscation, however. Capitalism's essential political form is a reflection and synthesis of the contradiction between the dictatorial power of the capitalist class and its massive resources for coercive functions, and the emergent, resistant power of the exploited and oppressed. Class relations guarantee that despite its numerical disadvantage, however, the capitalist class enjoys domination in most circumstances within this structure.

Democracy proved progressive over "slavery" (Lenin's interchangeable term for early racial slavery, European-led colonialism, early capitalist development, and autocratic Tsarism).¹¹ Following a historical stage model of social development, Lenin regarded democracy (and capitalist relations of production) as worth fighting for in 1905 and the early stages of 1917 (Lenin, 1962, 1964a). By April 1917, however, democracy stood as a barrier to what could be: an end to the war, land for the peasants, and proletarian leadership of governing entities. Here, Lenin revealed the general impossibility of extricating democracy from bourgeois class politics. Bourgeois ideology and governing tactics make room for "good governance, flexibility, achieving a complex multi-level system, characterized at the same time by bottom-up approaches and soft law alongside hard law," which constituted liberal democratic theory and practice (Sammaddar 2018, 179). These instruments for securing capitalist class hegemony recognize and fear the specter of working-class resistance

¹¹ Losurdo notes that this conflation of forms of slavery—racial, wage, colonial—were commonplace in European Social Democratic thought, beginning with Marx himself (Losurdo 2016, 60–62; 125–127).

and adopt the tactics, forms, and modes necessary to secure broader cultural and political consent for bourgeois rule. If the shell of democracy hides capitalist exploitation, the totality of this structure refuses any substantial departure between democratic theory and capitalist exploitation.

3 The Limits of Democracy and the Possibilities “Revolutionary Self-government”

The limits of democratic theory invite a return to Lenin. I do so here in the spirit of Indian Marxist Aijaz Ahmad who urged a return to Marx because historical materialism’s insistence on the centrality of class struggle under capitalism offered the clearest way to both interpret present realities and invite revolutionary transformation (Ahmad 2012). It is in the spirit of this search for clarity from within the Marxist tradition that I offer this reading of Lenin’s *State and Revolution* (*S&R*) and its injunction to overcome democracy in the struggle to establish a replacement for the capitalist state. I do not offer this reading as if Lenin or Leninism is the most authoritative thread of Marxism or a universal approach socialist theory, but rather as a vehicle for exploring a political means by which U.S. Marxist theory may move beyond the discursive limits of self-congratulatory democratic pretense. Axiomatic is Lenin’s call for a break with a democratic theory, because this latter condition remains mired in the contradiction of political democracy’s necessarily *permanent* limitations, a structural totality that is capitalistic. Democracy functions as a determining political frame that is the inseparable instrument of capitalist totality, constituted by the class needs, power, laws, ideologies, cultures, and interests of the bourgeoisie. Lenin maintained that even once a proletarian state is established representing the most complete form of democracy, its democratic state apparatuses, its class content, its function, must also be replaced (Lenin 1964c). The socialist task is, thus, to use the tools of democracy to push that totality to its limits (its “end”), to transform the power of the working class and other oppressed classes from resistance to creativity in new organized political and economic forms, and to subordinate democratic instruments (the state) to working-class power, and then ultimately see them vanish.

After the first 1917 revolution and his return to Russia, Lenin experienced a profound disillusionment and frustration with the class nature of democracy. He thought (perhaps optimistically) that bourgeois democracy had been accomplished in Russia under the liberal provisional government, but it refused (by the necessities of its existence and the logic of capitalist relations) to meet the needs of the people (Lih 2011, 231). The dire predicament of war, poverty, starvation, and disease demanded the working class take steps toward a new stage of revolutionary development. Lenin posited that the post-tsarist democratic state denoted a capitalist class dictatorship. That is, the capitalist class manages and deploys state machinery through a governmentality of pluralist political parties and voting procedures to enforce its rule over the exploited and oppressed classes. The socialist-oriented majority, composed of the exploited working class in alliance with the oppressed and exploited peasantry, had to subordinate this machinery, dismantle it, and replace

it with original, self-created forms of political organization. Two agencies emerged in the struggle against tsarism, one with dictatorial power and one with “incipient” power (Lenin 1964d, 38–39). In contention for supremacy stood the reactionary bureaucratic power of the capitalist state (democracy) and the revolutionary institutions of the working class and the peasants.¹² Social Democratic theory, heretofore, conceded the terrain of this struggle to the capitalist class and its democratic state, urging compromise, quiescence, and submission on the working class and its allies in a truly revolutionary moment.

As 1917 wore on, the famous slogan “all power to the soviets!” signaled the Bolshevik demand for compulsory transfer of political power from the state to the working class, peasant, and military soviets. It represented the call for the beginning of a transition from democracy to a post-democratic, working-class hegemony of the political order. Lenin recognized the tremendous political significance of the soviets in 1905 when he saw the strike committees press for deeper development of the revolutionary demands, and function as a site in which broad revolutionary working-class and peasant unity would crystalize (Shandro 2007). Shandro contends that through the soviets in 1905 had both “disrupted the hegemony of the liberal bourgeoisie and gained for itself some political experience” and “it had erected a new institutional form through which the diverse revolutionary-democratic forces could mesh together in a coalition of the masses, the worker-peasant alliance, and assume state power” (Shandro 2007, 325). With this historical experience in mind, Lenin feared that if the working class failed to step forward immediately to claim revolutionary power, the state under the provisional government would never address the concrete needs of the mass of people. Further, if the Bolshevik Party endorsed the existing regime, it would sacrifice hard-won revolutionary credentials by asking the worker-peasant alliance to suspend its forward momentum, relinquish its purchase on power, and starve and suffer. The historical motion toward working-class power drives revolutionary necessity. “It is impossible to stand still in history,” he warned his opponents who insisted on adhering to the gains made under a revolutionary democracy (Lenin 1964b, 324).

Lenin argued that once the national democratic revolution had won power from the Tsarist regime, the revolutionary forces should transition to a “commune” political project, a political formation that represents an advance over revolutionary democracy, as well as over the “dual power” of the subordinated soviets. Lenin explored the role of the “commune” in relation to the specific conditions of the Russian Revolution in April 1917 in a short article called “The Dual Power,” the terminology Jameson referenced in his exploration of U.S. political dynamics in his 2016 essay. The first Russian revolution of 1917 produced a unique situation whose specific character was “highly remarkable” and something “[n]obody previously thought.” This uniqueness was the duality of power. It was the simultaneously contested power of the state—dominated by the capitalist class

¹² Leninism, even as it insists on the leadership role of the Communist Party before the establishment of socialist forms of political power, did not equate the Communist Party with the revolutionary agency of the working class (Shandro 2007, 312; Dean 2016, 121).

articulated by the police, parliament, laws, the army, schools, and media—and the soviets, the people’s institutions that operated as “an entirely different kind of power” from the Russian state. This second power, in this early stage, was “incipient” and erroneously inclined to compromise with the bourgeois state. It was, however, also characterized by its non-reference to existing law and its willingness to exercise power through armed force and extra-legal self-activity of the masses of the working class and the peasants. Soviets deployed power to maintain public safety and order (which the state could no longer guarantee), replaced state bureaucracies “by the direct rule of the people themselves,” and imposed direct forms of popular control over bureaucracies and political entities through mechanisms like the “recall” and the payment of working-class wages (Lenin 1964d, 38–39).

This discourse needs careful attention. Lenin regarded the soviets in the form developed after 1905 as “incipient,” or early-stage forms of dual power. He also suggested they emerged under specific conditions, but called on the revolutionary class to operationalize them in ways that matched the people’s needs and realities. Jameson’s discussion of the lack of “dual power” configurations in the U.S. misses this feature. Lenin saw incipient dual power entities as endemic, if sublimated, to any capitalist formation, the specific forms in which the revolutionary class will create them depends precisely on the historical development of the revolutionary class, in combination with the needs, the history, and the cultures of the people from whom they emerge. Theoretically, he elicited the dialectic between structure and agency, between systems and human action whose application is universal, if the specifics of place and time reshape the form and content of the institutionalized agency of the exploited and oppressed class. Thus, Jameson’s judgments and selections about what could constitute dual power entities in the U.S. perforce discard the social unionism of the teachers’ and nurses’ unions as an incipient form, and completely miss the organizing and mobilizing that underline the #BlackLivesMatter struggles. Institutions or formations that comprise this incipient power do so when they assert a claim to power ordinarily claimed by the state. This incipient power threatens the dominance of capitalists in the economic and political spheres.

According to Lenin, when incipient power is made permanent it forms a basis of “dual power” and offers concrete alternatives to capitalist power. During the revolutionary democratic struggle, the revolutionary forces obtained “certain special methods of making history which are foreign to other periods of political life.” These “methods” entailed, first, the “*seizure by the people of political liberty*” (Lenin 1964a, 349–350). They claimed rights, public space, actions, and creative means to redefine their relationship to the state and its institutions, one another, and to capitalism. This qualitatively new form of social action created “new organs of revolutionary authority,” the soviets. The soviets achieved these two features because the people built them “irrespective of all laws and regulations,” essentially defying the coercive power of the state. Lenin described the soviets as “a product of native genius” that was a “manifestation of the independent activity of the people which has rid itself, or was ridding itself, of its old police fetters” (Lenin 1964a, 350). In Lenin’s view, this dual power served as a material and institutional foundation for the commune, the mode of political organization beyond democracy.

Lenin first outlined the commune, based on the Paris Commune, the ultimate, original occupy protest-*cum*-nascent workers' governing entity, as an institutional and permanent form of political power to contest the authority and legitimacy of the bourgeois parliament and state bureaucracy. In this creative space, Lenin saw the soviets operating as mechanisms for workers and peasants (and other revolutionary forces and allies) to amplify demands, collectively cultivate approaches to administer enterprises, manage resources, build new social institutions, and protect their communities. In *S&R*, Lenin developed this idea more explicitly. "The Commune, therefore, appears to have replaced the smashed state machine 'only' by fuller democracy.... But as a matter of fact this 'only' signifies a gigantic replacement of certain institutions by other institutions of a fundamentally different type." The difference is so complete that it "a case of 'quantity' being transformed into 'quality'" (Lenin 1964c, 419). It was "accessible to the masses, sprang directly from the masses; and was a direct and immediate instrument of the popular masses, of their will" (Lenin 1964a, 351). The image Lenin discloses of this alternative form of collective, socialist power reveals it to be utterly and inalterably other from democracy. This alternative form of governing power rests on the actions, participation, and movement of the majority of people who were formerly exploited, oppressed, and propertyless.

The soviets had not finished their transformative work with the eventual assumption of sole governance (after the second revolution), however. The revolutionary process necessarily continued through the subordination of the capitalist-dominated state to a new form of institutionalized revolutionary self-government led by the worker-peasant majority. By necessity, this meant eliminating "the imperialist and military machinery," police and repressive forces, the dismantling of parliamentary forms of power consolidation, and the disintegration of bureaucratic administration tied to capitalist economic needs. In their place, socialist power would elevate the soviets as the source of administration, ownership, planning, and resource distribution, as well as control of coercive machinery such as police and other public safety instruments. This subordination of the capitalist state entailed "revolutionary democracy" or the production of "democracy in a new way" (Lenin 1964c, 412, 416, 444). Lenin referred to this process as the establishment of revolutionary self-government and considered it as a necessary precursor for the dissolution of capitalist power but not as the equivalent of socialism.

The evolution of this new complex of power remains a preparatory ground for the radical transformation, which Lenin identified as the "overcoming of democracy." In his thought, one detects a pause in the theorized momentum of the revolution to take stock of democratic theory. Here, Lenin posed an equivalence of democracy and the state. Democracy is a form of state that operationalizes coercive force and ideological hegemony through its police, institutions, and bureaucratic apparatuses to suppress the majority, to form a bloc of power and institutionalization that depends not only on the individuals or capitalist class fractions that dominate it but also on the imaginary beliefs in and consent to the necessity of its perpetuation for the good of all. Because the state becomes democracy becomes capitalism itself (Lenin 1964c, 396), the revolutionary goal is the "withering away of democracy," the "abolition of democracy." "No, democracy is *not* identical with the subordination of the minority

to the majority. Democracy is a *state* which recognizes the subordination of the minority to the majority” and, by reinforcing a permanent inequality, provides to the capitalist class, via its positioning vis-à-vis the social relations of production, the tools to mobilize coercive and consensual power to prevent this numerical disadvantage from allowing it to be subdued (Lenin 1964c, 456). In other words, democracy is the set of political conditions that enable an omnipotent minority to secure the consent of the far weaker, disorganized, less conscious majority for a system that requires the majority’s exploitation to survive.

This “commune” form, as a potential post-state, post-democratic socialist instrument of political power, theoretically functions more effectively within the socialist economic project of public ownership of enterprises, resources, institutions, and communities through the elimination of capitalist private property relations, commodity production, and the class process of the expropriation of surplus labor power. Here, we discover how Lenin rubbished the common belief that public ownership of the means of production through the socialized existing state machinery and institutions is the limit of socialist construction. Unless the new entities are administered and planned by the spontaneously developed and coordinated forms of worker and community associations that make sense culturally and technically to U.S.-based working-class people, to make a cross-cultural comparison, they remain state capitalist, a project of imposition. In such a situation, the class struggle within a capitalist bourgeois democratic framework persists, demanding more advanced development of socialist institutions.

While the specific institutional form of the soviet was unique within Lenin’s moment and place, some Marxists continue to theorize its generalizable necessity for a socialist revolution. For example, scholar Ranabir Samaddar, who discusses the concept of “dual power” through the lens of anti-colonial struggles, explains further. Dual power is not a “counter-power” concept or a reflection of the bourgeois state. Rooted in the local and strategically oriented, it is not equivalent to the Communist Party, though the role of the Communist Party in initializing and organizing alternative institutions is indispensable from Lenin’s point of view. Instead, it is a multi-sited, interlinked network of power struggles that expose the class nature of the bourgeois state, the illegitimacy of its rule, and the need for new institutional frameworks for displacing that power to liberate the working class and its oppressed allies. The ruling class is unable to rule in the usual manner; and the people no longer allow themselves to be ruled in that manner and make new forms of power. Samaddar indexes this ideological and chronological break with capitalist rule. “[D]ual power means dual time,” he writes. It defies linear conceptualizations of “transition” and the contemporaneity of historical time. Indeed, it opens a new era within the space and time of the old era, requiring new political terminologies, philosophical stances, class relations of power, and international relations (Samaddar 2018, 181).

This duality of time poses a complex problem. This complexity is best exemplified by what appears to be a contradiction over the struggle for democracy and a break with that struggle to establish the post-capitalist political and economic order. Reconciliation of these two temporalized concepts is unnecessary. Instead, a return to Lenin on the question of the capitalism and the democratic state enable a move to theorize “the question of democracy, from the inside of the determined moment,” to

follow Badiou (2007, 9). This means the location of the fluid moments between the end of democracy and the beginning of revolution and to “[hold] open a gap” (Dean 2016, 121) that appears to be blocked by neoliberal ideologies of the end of history or fascistic tendencies of the ultra-right. To return to Lenin is to take seriously the necessity of the struggle for democracy, the development of the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class in that struggle, and its creation of historically and culturally relevant independent institutional forms of dual power in preparation for its post-capitalist and post-democratic supremacy. While democratic theory as an end has no future, revolutionary theory as a beginning has no history.

4 Conclusion: What's Next?

State and Revolution inscribes a commitment to socialist revolution against the atrocities of “the all-European filthy, bloody morass” of total global war, a general crisis of imperialist capitalism, and an openly racist and colonialist counterrevolution (Lenin 1964c, 415). More than a denunciation of capitalism and reaction, *S&R* theorizes and calls forth the technical–institutional tools, ideological apparatus, and value systems for the creative transcendence of the capitalistic and imperialist violence. It registers a new claim in its theoretical rupture with capitalism, with the totality of its political forms, its ideological and cultural hegemony, and its global economic processes. It should, thus, be read as both a specific critique of this balance of forces in Russia and a theorization of the dialectics of the political development of capitalism. *S&R*'s critique of democracy, may enable us to imagine new radical and socialist possibilities in the present conjunctural crises in the U.S. deepened by pandemic, economic collapse, an anti-racist uprising, and the threat of fascism. If the primary purpose of democracy in the U.S. political system is to produce reforms during a crisis that are meant not to empower the marginalized, oppressed, or exploited but rather to extend the legitimacy of capitalism and its rule by the capitalist class, then *S&R*, authorizes a transcendence of that political cul-de-sac.

If the “liberal world order,” as represented and led by the U.S. “does not (sufficiently) address issues of cultural identity, distributive justice, ecological integrity, moral decency, and solidarity,” then Lenin's political challenge is worth our return (Scholte 2019, 68). Indeed, recent research shows that non-democratic systems that account for class and class struggle provide new models for what I term a post-democratic society. According to political science scholar Zhongyuan Wang, for example, the Chinese system dispenses with Western concepts such as multi-party systems, expensive election campaigns, and endless media demagoguery in a guise of democracy in favor of seeking actionable and accountable modes of representation, service, and mobilization that open more fundamental connections to the people's needs and interests (Wang 2020). By contrast, Western imperialist desires to impose class-based and ethnically indoctrinated democratic political rituals on states and peoples who do not share dominant European historical roots has produced a massive catalogue of historical failure, violence, dictatorship, and recurring militaristic intervention (Yang 2021).

Thus, struggles in the U.S. outlined in this essay potentialize the dialectical attempt to articulate democracy (reform) with the attempts to overcome democracy (revolution). The experiences of “essential workers,” the teachers’ unions, the healthcare crisis, or of Minneapolis and Seattle do not yet approximate what Lenin championed as “an incipient power” (Lenin 1964d, 39), the forerunner of the commune, a new, people-defined power that substitutes, subverts, and supplants the capitalist democratic state. They do, however, provide glimmers of hope. Class struggle, the demand for justice combined with the practical activity of the oppressed and the embryonic political forms of dual power, transform the oppressed and exploited into a revolutionary subject. Through this uprising, in its resistance to racist police brutality—the truncheon of the racist–capitalist class that dominates the U.S. state—the working class and its allies seek to extend democratic rights, secure power, build a bridge to an emancipated future, and reconstruct themselves as their own rulers.

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