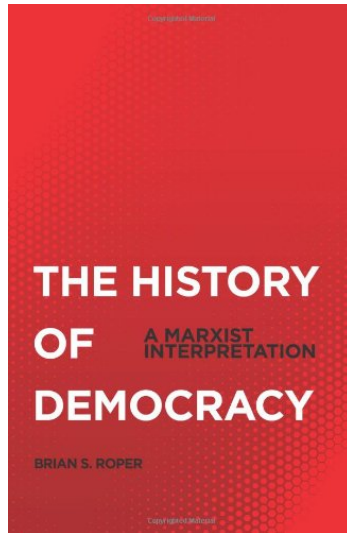


Review: Brian S. Roper, *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation*

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Brian S. Roper, *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation* Pluto 2013 £20

Democracy in developed economies has been under attack for the past forty years. In many countries, the post-war period saw the establishment and extension of representative democratic institutions, mainly through local government bodies. The 1970s and early 1980s saw experiments in participatory democratic forms with local service users having a direct input into how public services were delivered. For example, in England, local authority housing tenants in some cases were members of housing committees alongside local councillors¹.

However, the neoliberal age has brought with it a rolling-back of these democratic institutions. As public services have been privatised they have been taken out of the democratic control of both local and national electorates. The new bodies, whether in the pri-

vate or not-for-profit sectors, are run by unelected boards, subject to little if any scrutiny and able to hide behind commercial confidentiality when asked to account for their actions. On an international level the 2008 crisis has shown a willingness by the world elites and markets to ditch democratically elected governments in favour of technocrats, as happened in Greece and Italy.

This is not an unexpected by-product of the neoliberal project but is one of its central tenets. The neoliberal project is profoundly suspicious of democratic control², seeing action through the state as a less efficient mechanism of resource allocation than the market and also subject to influence by vested interests. A leading neoliberal theorist, Hayek saw democracy not as a principle but as ‘...essentially a means, a utilitarian device for safeguarding internal peace and individual freedom’ and as such it was not to be fetishised³. In contrast, David Harvey argues neoliberals prefer ‘governance by experts and elites’⁴. Harvey identifies a contradiction at the heart of the neoliberal project, between the individual’s freedom to choose and the rights of individuals to form collectives (e.g. trade unions or anti-privatisation campaigns), which may ultimately challenge the neoliberal process. ‘This creates the paradox of intense state interventions and government by elites and experts’ in a world where the state is supposed not to be interventionist⁵.

It is into this context that Roper’s new book provides an important analysis and source of ideas on how the world could be different. This is not an abstract utopian treaty but a materialist analysis of the demo-

¹ Richardson, A. (1983), *Participation*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Plc, London.

² Allen, K. (2006), ‘Neoliberalism, Democracy and the State’, *New Left Journal*, No. 2 Winter, pp. 3-5.; Harvey, D. (2005), *A Brief history of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

³ Hayek, F. (1997), *The Road to Serfdom*, Routledge, London, p. 52

⁴ Harvey, (2005), p. 66.

⁵ Harvey, (2005), p. 69.

cratic pulse throughout human history. As Roper himself states: ‘This book contributes to the collective search for a democratic alternative to capitalism by clarifying the role that democracy has played, and is likely to play, in a variety of historical and societal contexts’⁶. This is an ambitious task and one that Roper, in the main, achieves.

To address that aim Roper brings the full weight of Marx’s historical materialist method to his analysis; there are ‘at least seven key respects [in which] historical materialism provides valuable methodological resources that can be employed fruitfully in considering democracy’s past, present and future’⁷. These include an insistence: ‘that any particular democratic state form can only be properly analysed as part of a dynamic totality that is internally complex, mediated and contradictory’⁸. Utilising historical materialism allows Roper to reclaim Marx, as an extreme democrat and advocate of personal liberties, from the distorted authoritarian tradition of the Stalinist and state capitalist societies (including China).

Following the introduction which sets out the aims and methods employed in the book, the analysis is largely chronological. Roper starts with the forms of democracy in ancient Athens and Rome, as it is in these two societies that two different democratic traditions originate. Roper argues ‘...that there are two fundamentally distinct but still inter-related traditions of democratic thought and practice’:

One originated in [ancient] Athens...and was subsequently revived and further developed in popular movements by (among others) the Levellers, Diggers, Chartists, Communards and, Russian workers and peasants in

1917.⁹

The second tradition draws on the much more limited experience of democracy in Roman civilisation, with its oligarchic nature. This tradition forms the basis of modern representative democracies, along with the constitutional settlements following the English, American and French revolutions. In summary, the ‘former is the democratic tradition of the labouring citizens; the latter is a tradition of the propertied classes’¹⁰. It is these two traditions that Roper traces through the centuries from ancient times, culminating with a chapter that analyses the Paris Commune (1871) and the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, as examples of socialist participatory democracy.

Drawing on these examples Roper states that socialist participatory democracy involves ‘control over production and distribution...through the institutional mechanism of a network of councils and assemblies...the right of recall, frequently held elections, regular mass assemblies...extension of liberal democratic citizenship rights...democratization of the judiciary...the establishment of a popular militia to defend the revolution’, with the aim to: ‘ensure the accountability of delegates to the constituencies who elect them’¹¹. In this way, Roper’s summary draws on themes and ideas generated in the historical periods he has analysed throughout the book; showing that socialist participatory democracy combines the best elements of the previous 2,500 years of democratic experiments and experiences. Importantly Roper shows how such a form of democracy can be brought into existence, through the self emancipation of the working class. There are two notable weaknesses in the book. First, at times the analysis can get bogged down in historical detail without

⁶Roper, B. S. (2013), *The History of Democracy: a Marxist interpretation*, Pluto Press, London, p. xi.

⁷Roper (2013), p. 2.

⁸Roper (2013), p. 7.

⁹Roper (2013), p. 35.

¹⁰ibid

¹¹Roper, (2013), p. 275.

making it clear why the detail is relevant. For example, the chapter on the English revolution focuses on a significant amount of military detail. Given the role of the New Model Army in the overthrow of the king and the establishment of a republic, some military analysis is necessary. However, the over-emphasis on the military means there is not enough space to discuss the impact and relevance of the radical democratic ideas of groups such as the Diggers¹². This focus on detail across the book as a whole also manifests itself in a rather abrupt end with only one page of a conclusion.

This is the second weakness, with a limited discussion of workers' control and the role of workers' councils in developing socialist participatory democracy. Regular readers

of this publication have the benefit of Tina McVeigh's article on these topics in issue 8¹³. Hopefully *The History of Democracy* will be a success and allow Roper to add a fuller conclusion chapter to a second edition. Such a chapter could include an analysis of workers' councils during the twentieth century and current prospects, including the participatory budgeting practices (for example in Porto Alegre) and arguments about reclaiming the state¹⁴.

Of course that could be argued not to be a historical but a current concern and so outside the aim of the book. Either way Roper has provided the classical Marxist tradition with an extremely valuable historical overview of where human society has come from, potentially where it can go and how we can get there.

¹²For more on the Diggers see: Foot, P. (2005), *The Vote: How it was won and how it was undermined*, Viking Penguin Group, London; Manning, B. (1996), *Aristocrats, Plebeians and Revolution in England*, Pluto Press, London.

¹³McVeigh, Tina. (2013), 'Their Democracy and Ours: the transformative potential of the workers' council', *Irish Marxist Review*, Vol2 No8.

¹⁴Wainwright, H. (2003), *Reclaim the State: experiments in popular democracy*, Verso, London.