

POLITICAL CRITICISM OF POLITICS



Käthe Kollwitz, The Weavers' Walk (1897) google images

As in other topics already dealt with in our texts, we are going to analyze the question of the necessary critique of politics. This critique is even more necessary because it is in no way identified with the unilateral rejection of the state and politics adopted by the anarchist current, which corresponds to apolitical **indifferentism**. This frivolous rejection is taken up today by certain modernizers, who thus abandon the class struggle and the revolutionary perspective as a negative political affirmation. That is why we have entitled this text "Political Critique of Politics". At a time when there is increasing talk of the "crisis of democracy" to justify the emergence of populism and the return of supreme saviors, it is worth recalling the criticisms of revolutionary Marxism of the State, democracy and politics.

Marx against politics

Marx devoted himself early on to the critique of politics, principally in two complementary works: Critique of Hegelian Political Right (1842-43) and On the Jewish Question (1844). The first of these two studies examine the political state in opposition to civil society. To resolve this contradiction, the State develops a perfect religious cult of itself, which in reality conceals the alienated essence of non-social man: the individual.¹ The composition of the political State is thus like that of religious alienation. The second study attacks the so-called "rights of man and the citizen" as a bourgeois, egoistic and independent individual. These two works confirm that Marx was radically anti-statist, anti-political and therefore anti-democratic.

"The members² of the political state are religious because of the dualism between individual life and generic life, between the life of bourgeois society and political life; they are religious insofar as man considers as his true life the political life situated beyond his own individuality; they are religious in the sense that religion is here the spirit of bourgeois society, the expression of that which alienates and separates man from man. Christian democracy is political democracy insofar as man, not only a man but every man, is a sovereign being, a supreme being, but man neither cultivated nor social, man in his accidental existence, such as he is, man as, through the whole organization of our society, he has been corrupted, lost to himself, alienated, placed under the authority of inhuman conditions and elements, in a word, man who is not yet a true generic being. The imaginary creation, the dream, the postulate of Christianity, the sovereignty of man, but of the real man, all this becomes,

¹On this question, we refer readers to our text in the journal **Critical Matters** No. 6: "Human community vs. individual identity" as well as on our website: <https://materiaux.critiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>.

²On the website : <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1843/00/km18430001c.htm#:~:text=Religieux%2C%20les%20membres%20de%20l,sa%20propre%20individualit%C3%A9%3B%20religieux%2C%20ils>

in democracy, a concrete and present reality, a secular maxim." K. Marx: On the Jewish Question.

Politics is usually defined as the "art" of directing the affairs of the state, that is, of organizing society in accordance with the interests of the ruling class. To do this, it is necessary to manage the disjuncture between, on the one hand, civil society as an atomistic sum of separate individuals and, on the other, the political sphere as the abstract representative of class domination. Classically, for those who deny dialectics, the political sphere is thus opposed to the economic sphere, without perceiving their interactive relations. The superficial debate then divides those for whom politics must take precedence over economics or vice versa. But this is still a vision of separate and autonomous spheres that act independently of their synthesis in the abstract totality that is the political state. Marx thus criticizes the so-called "political emancipation" in the name of the only real one: "human emancipation".

"Human emancipation is only achieved when man has recognized and organized his own forces as social forces and thus no longer separates social force from himself in the form of political force." K. Marx.³

The Marxist critique thus points both to "political alienation" as "false" emancipation, because it is split and inverted, and to the State as a "political abstraction", because it is completely detached from concrete survival. For this abstraction, the political state, to function as well as possible in the global reality, there must be adequate mediation between the various economic, political, juridical and social imperatives. This indispensable mediation is democracy, because it has the advantage of representing the people as a fictitious reality that unifies the separate spheres within a **representative** political state. This illusory representation of the people is the foundation of democracy as political mediation between the atomized citizen and the abstract state. This mediation also acts through intermediary bodies, such as unions, political parties and associations, which structure the political arena and allow for a relative degree of conflict between the different interests involved. It is the place where politics is played, the politics of the political, the politics of the spectacle. Democracy is thus the essence of politics; the best means of organizing society in terms of the reproduction of social relations (wage labor) and production (the value that is valorized) while presenting itself as the product of a majority sum of individual wills. The citizen can then see himself as a constituent atom of the State, and the State can claim to represent the interests of all.

"Democracy is the very substance of capitalist dictatorship, so strong and self-confident that it can afford to present itself under the guise of consensual free choice. It is democracy that is truly the strong state. Thus, a simple decision-making mechanism, which in itself is as good as any other, takes on the fetishized form of the embodiment of truth. Moreover, this mechanism is based on the simple sum of the individual opinions of the voters, up to 50% + 1. No thought is given to the quality of the determinants of the actors, to the collective force they represent to the context and to the issues at stake, which are often more fundamental and ultimately prevail over the majority number. Sometimes, the simple act of going to the polls is more important than the election result itself, because it materializes commitment and belief in the system as a whole." Matériaux Critiques N°3: "Contribution to the critique of democracy", May 2021.

The various populisms raise the contradiction between the people and their representatives

³Quoted by E. Renault: Critique of religion, politics, and philosophy in G. Duménil, M. Löwy, E. Renault: Reading Marx, p.118, PUF, Paris, 2009.

and want to resolve it through a "more direct democracy", based on the recurrent call to give an opinion. These are referendum projects, citizens' initiatives or participatory projects (when the elected representatives continue to participate in this "vote"). It is the trap of all populism to see with horror how the representatives of the people become autonomous in the representative sphere of politics. Yet this is the very essence of democracy as an emanation of popular sovereignty. An elected official is only a representative of these fictitious people and not, as the vulgate believes, of his own voters. They are only accountable to the constitutional state, to which they must also swear allegiance and submit (and in doing so they necessarily betray "their" voters!).

This is the insurmountable contradiction of all populism: to represent is to betray by becoming the State. Even in its "charismatic leader" version, it is the leader who is the unique embodiment of the people but, at the same time, of the State. The version of plebiscitary democracy cherished by the populist movements of the left and the right only accelerates this mechanism of representation by multiplying the appeals of the citizens to the people, knowing, moreover, that it is the State that puts the question to a vote and that, in the final analysis, it is therefore its superior interests that will always prevail. This is clearly reflected in the fact that the State and its government are under no obligation to follow the outcome of the consultation, as in the referendums on the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport or the European Constitution.

"The basis of the alienation of political democracy - the secular religion of the State and of the citizen - lies in the alienation of social labor, in the separation of the citizen from his membership in civil society. Social emancipation can only consist in the elimination of political dissociation, not in democracy but in the critique of the foundations of democracy, not in the free state but in the liberation of the political state." A. Tosel: Marx's Critique of Politics, in: E. Balibar, C. Lupton, A. Tosel: Marx and His Critique of Politics, pp. 22-23, Maspero, Paris, 1979.

Abstentionism: a communist principle

Faced with the social need to overcome democratic mediation, there is no solution within the framework of its existence, that is to say, in the field of politics, parliamentary and electoral. Only the politicization of the class struggle in a revolutionary sense can open the way to this necessary overcoming. The class struggle is always a political struggle, even if it is not entirely free of the miasma of bourgeois politics and the remnants of false consciousness. In the famous phrase of the Manifesto of 1848: *"But every class struggle is a political struggle..."*⁴ Thanks to revolutionary politicization, Marx-Engels overcame the division between economic struggle and political struggle by uniting the workers. The First International (the A.I.T. from 1864 to 1876) already defended this same perspective:

"In its struggle against the collective power of the possessing classes, the proletariat can only act as a class by constituting itself into a political party, opposed to all the old parties formed by the possessing classes. This constitution of the proletariat into a political party is indispensable to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its supreme objective: the

⁴Marx-Engels: Communist Manifesto, p.29, Marxist Science Publishing, Paris, 1999.

abolition of classes." K. Marx: Statutes of the International Workingmen's Association, Marx-Engels: Texts on Organization, p. 102, Spartacus, Paris, 1970.

Marx's aim is to show that there is no revolutionary working class per se, but that the constitution of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject is part of a properly **political** dynamic that crystallizes in the moment of transition from the "class-in-itself" to the "class-for-itself". It is the vindication of revolutionary politics as the only strategy to destroy the State and politics.

At this moment, "The condition for the emancipation of the working class is the abolition of all classes, just as the condition for the emancipation of the Third State of the bourgeois order, was the abolition of all states and all orders. The working class replaces, in the course of its development, the old civil society, an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will no longer be any political power properly speaking, since political power is precisely the official summary of antagonism in civil society." K. Marx: The Poverty of Philosophy, pp. 135, 136, Economic Works I, La Pléiade, Paris, 1972.

This is why revolutionary politics excludes, as a matter of principle and from the outset, the use of bourgeois tactics and maneuvers, among which what Marx called **parliamentary cretinism** stands out to criticize the compromises of the parliamentarians and leaders of the German Social Democratic Party.

"The unforgivable crime of the Social Democrats was that they definitively abandoned revolutionary principles, settling into legality and never moving from it, even when the relationship of forces in the country soon turned in their favor and the decisive social crisis had finally arrived. They crowned their treachery by accepting the violence of the ruling classes and sending the proletariat to take an active part in the carnage of the imperialist war." R. Dangeville : Introduction to Marx-Engels: La social-démocratie allemande, 10/18, Paris, 1975.

Faced with this generalized corruption of social democracy, an abstentionist communist faction was born in 1918 within the Italian Socialist Party to lead the struggle against opportunism and parliamentary cretinism. The reality of parliamentarism as an organization of democratic mystification is that which annuls any possibility of revolutionary participation in the parliaments, independently of the good or bad will of its representatives. Revolutionary parliamentarism is a material impossibility even before being a mystification. That is why anti-parliamentarism (abstentionism) is a communist principle.

"Parliament is the form of political representation proper to the capitalist regime. The fundamental critique of Marxist communists of parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy in general shows that the right to vote cannot prevent the entire governmental apparatus of the state from constituting the committee for the defense of the interests of the ruling capitalist class. Moreover, although this right is granted to all citizens of all social classes in elections to the representative organs of the State, this is nevertheless organized as a historical instrument of the bourgeois struggle against the proletarian revolution." A. Bordiga: Theses presented on behalf of the abstentionist communist faction of the Italian Socialist Party at the Second Congress of the Communist International, July-August 1920. ⁵

⁵On the website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/bordiga/works/1920/07/bordigaic1920b.htm>

Anarchist apolitism is not a critique of politics.

The abstentionism of the anarchists is not really a critique, except in the form of moral disinterest and disgust in the face of a particularly rotten and corrupt sphere. But it is also an often-individual point of view that is not part of a class struggle.

"Anarchists are anti-parliamentarians on principle, because they declare themselves opposed to any delegation of power from one individual to another; the same is true of syndicalists, who are opposed to the political action of the Party and have a completely different conception of the process of proletarian emancipation. As for us, our anti-parliamentarism is linked to the Marxist critique of bourgeois democracy. I will not repeat here the arguments of critical communism which unmask the bourgeois lie of political equality placed above economic equality and the class struggle" (Speech by the representative of the Italian abstentionist faction, in the pamphlet: The Parliamentary Question in the Communist International, p.27, "Programme Communiste," Marseille, 1967.)

It is a rejection of the State and of politics, leaving to the State the monopoly of the determination of political action, for which he is qualified as indifferentist.

"The master preached indifference in economic matters to ensure bourgeois freedom or competition, our only guarantee; the disciples preach indifference in political matters to ensure bourgeois freedom, their only guarantee. Like the early Christians, who also preached political indifference, but used the powerful arm of an Emperor to transform themselves from persecuted into persecutors, the modern apostles of political indifference do not believe that their eternal principles also require them to renounce the goods of this world and the temporal privileges of bourgeois society." K. Marx: On Political Indifference, 1873: Marx-Engels: Texts on Organization, p.118, Spartacus, Paris, 1970.

Anarchists may not be interested in politics, but politics does interest them and, in certain circumstances, leads them to act in the worst bourgeois sense, that of participating in capitalist wars or even, to the libertarians' dismay, becoming ministers in a bourgeois government. It was, of course, the revolutionary events in Spain in the 1930s that dramatically demonstrated the reactionary and dangerous nature of anarchist apolitism. Not only did they compromise at all levels of the structure of the republican state; they sent their best militants to the front of the capitalist war, far from the workers' centers where the political struggle was to be waged, but above all, and this is not sufficiently emphasized, they abandoned the struggle against the Stalinist counterrevolution under the pretext of loyalty to an anti-fascist popular front. Thus, the great majority of them abandoned the road of revolution to follow the road of democratic counterrevolution. This submission to Stalinist and republican policy did not prevent them from being violently repressed themselves by the State in which they faithfully participated, and which repressed and murdered its best militants. (C. Berneri⁶, F. Barbieri...) at the same time as the other minorities who still maintained a revolutionary point of view.⁷

"Berneri's articles constitute a valuable contribution to the study of the development of the Spanish tragedy. The criteria for government action, criticisms which ipso facto are also directed at the C.N.T. and the F.A.I., coming from an anarchist, and therefore from someone who cannot be suspected of harboring any prejudice towards anarchism, carry a great deal of weight. They confirm point by point what Marxists have never ceased to repeat. They do not nullify the criticisms that

⁶ To learn more about this revolutionary: Le Maitron: Berneri Camillo: <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article155630>

⁷ On this question, we refer the readers to our text of the review **Matériaux Critiques** N° 6: "Some notes on the Spanish war" as well as on our site: <https://materiaux.critiques.wixsite.com/monsie/textes>

anarchists have rightly made of social-democratic and Stalinist sophistry about the State, but they show that anarchists have not been more successful than those whom they wish to criticize (...). Anarchism's traditional aversion to politics served admirably the purposes of the bourgeoisie, which said no more than that the trade union leaders should take charge of production, as long as it was understood that the State would not be touched.... " A. Hennaut: Anarchism in the Revolution, 1938, Bulletin of the League of Internationalist Communists of Belgium, in: H. Chazé: Chronicle of the Spanish Revolution, p.88, Spartacus, Paris, 1979.

The bankruptcy of anarchist apolitism does not mean the end of this disdainful attitude towards politics. It can still be found in the confusionist fraction of what by default calls itself ultra-left, but which is also falling back into the paths of new-fangled modernist reformism. The abandonment of the terrain of politics, like that of the class struggle, does not mean that these realities are extinguished. They continue to endure and to determine the relation of forces between classes. The only way to fight politics and the state is through uncompromising revolutionary politics.

"Communists categorically deny that the working class can conquer power by obtaining a parliamentary majority. Only revolutionary and armed struggle will enable it to achieve its aims. The conquest of power by the proletariat, the starting point of the work of communist economic construction, implies the violent and immediate suppression of the democratic organs, which will be replaced by the organs of proletarian power: the Workers Councils. Thus deprived the exploiting class of all political rights, the system of government and class representation, the dictatorship of the proletariat, can be realized. The suppression of parliamentarism is, therefore, the historic objective of the communist movement. We say more: the first form of bourgeois society to be overthrown, before capitalist property and before the bureaucratic and governmental machine itself, is precisely representative democracy...." Bordiga: Theses presented by the abstentionist communist faction of the Italian Socialist Party at the Second Congress of the Communist International, The Parliamentary Question in the Communist International, p. 41, "Programme Communiste," Marseille, 1967.

Apolitism, the pseudo-radical posture of certain cenacles, is nothing more than a nostalgic reaction to the degeneration of the political sects due essentially to their activism. It is not revolutionary politics as critical negativity, but the microscopic reproduction of the apolitical symptoms of the gregarious and religious spirit. It is the transposition of state religiosity into a fictitious ideological community. It is, in fact, the lack of -revolutionary- politics that produces this rejection of politics. This was well understood by certain fractions of the historical communist lefts that the counterrevolution tried to stifle by keeping them divided, although their revolutionary base, reflecting the epoch, was essentially the same. In a single political critique, they rejected the old reformist parties organized around parliaments and elections, as well as the trade unions responsible for keeping the proletariat on the terrain of wage labor and economic "progress". The demand of the moment was not to abandon the political struggle but to respond to needs by forging new revolutionary parties and organizations that would finally develop a tactic and strategy in line with the needs of the world communist revolution.

"It is a question, then, of a party which is a nucleus, which knows what it wants, which is solidly established and has proved its worth in battle, which no longer negotiates, but is continually in struggle. Such a party when it has broken with the old traditions of the trade union movement and the party, with the reformist methods of which the trade union movement is a part, with parliamentarism.

The Communists must break with all this; with these methods the others have blocked the road of the revolution, and not only by the effect of what we have just pointed out, but also by their assertion in places which the bourgeoisie leaves open and which it uses as traps in which it captures and transforms revolutionary energy." Jan Appel.⁸

It should be emphasized that Appel stresses here the question of the minefields that the bourgeoisie organizes to trap the proletariat. Since then, of course, these have multiplied in a vast political-media space where simple proletarian expression is impossible because it is directly distorted and used against those who have ventured into this rotten terrain. The concept of integrated spectacle (Debord) manages to capture this spatio-temporal reality where the political hegemony of the counter-revolution is totalitarian. Once again, this is what activism and immediatism fail to grasp, trapped as they are in their routine and in their desire to intervene whatever the conditions. The use, for example, of a medium such as television implies total submission to the one-sidedness of a terrain reserved exclusively for the political discourse of the authorities and their designated opponents. This is reflected in law by the fact that a "savage" speech on television can be assimilated to a coup d'état.

"Television is a world in which one has the impression that social agents, even if they appear important, free, autonomous and sometimes even with an extraordinary aura (one only has to read the news), are puppets of a necessity to be described, of a structure to be clarified and brought to light." P. Bourdieu: On Television, p.42, Liber-raisons d'agir, Paris, 1996.

This is the case of certain places, events and situations, in which the mere fact of being present, let alone "critically" present, means endorsing the general logic of a terrain incompatible with revolutionary critique.

"If the spectacle, taken under the restricted aspect of the "mass media", which are its most crushing superficial manifestation, may seem to invade society as a simple instrumentalization, this instrumentalization is in reality nothing neutral, but the very instrumentalization that suits its total self-movement. " G. Debord: The Society of the Spectacle, p.26, Folio/Gallimard, Paris, 1992.

Only the terrain of the class struggle, and particularly the productive territories, are the places where the revolutionary strategy in favorable times can unfold in its necessary radicality, with a tactic in accordance with its revolutionary objective.

Fj, Ms & Mm

Translated by IsaCR.

⁸Jan Appel (pseudonyme Hempel) was a delegate of the K.A.P.D. at the third congress of the I.C. 1921. It is about his intervention in the discussion about Radek's report on the tactics of the Internationale. D. Authier: La gauche allemande (Textes), p.43-44, Invariance, Brignoles, 1973. This work was republished, enlarged, in 2003 by Nuits rouges under the title: Ni parlement, ni syndicats: les conseils ouvriers.

Bibliography

Works :

- D. Authie, La gauche allemande (Textes), Invariance, Brignoles, 1972.
- E. Balibar, C. Lupton, A. Tosel : Marx et sa critique de la politique, Maspero, Paris, 1979.
- P. Bourdieu, Sur la télévision, Liber-raisons d'agir, Paris, 1996.
- H. Chazé, Chronique de la révolution espagnole, Spartacus, Paris, 1979.
- G. Debord, La société du spectacle, Folio/Gallimard, Paris, 1992.
- G. Duménil, M. Löwy, E. Renault : Lire Marx, PUF, Paris, 2009.
- K. Marx, Critique du droit politique hégélien, éditions sociales, Paris, 1975.
- K. Marx, Sur la question juive, La fabrique éditions, Paris, 2011.
- K. Marx, Misère de la philosophie, Œuvres Économie I, La Pléiade, Paris, 1972.
- Marx-Engels, Textes sur l'organisation, Spartacus, Paris, 1970.
- Marx-Engels, Manifeste du Parti Communiste, éditions science Marxiste, Paris, 1999.
- Marx-Engels, La social-démocratie allemande, 10/18, Paris, 1975.

Web sites:

- Matériaux Critiques, sur le site : <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>
- Marxists.org – Karl Marx, la question juive, sur le site : <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1843/00/km18430001c.htm#:~:text=Religieux%2C%20les%20membres%20de%20l,sa%20propre%20individualit%C3%A9%3B%20religieux%2C%20ils>
- Marxists.org -A. Bordiga : Thèses présentées au nom de la fraction communiste abstentionniste du parti socialiste italien au II^e congrès de l'Internationale Communiste, juillet-août 1920, sur le site : https://www.marxists.org/francais/bordiga/works/1920/07/bordiga_ic_1920_b.htm
- Le Maitron : Berneri Camillo sur le site : <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article155630>
- Le Maitron : Hennaut Adhémar sur le site : <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article172110>
- Fragments d'Histoire de la gauche radicale -Ligue des communistes internationalistes (1932-1940) : sur le site : <http://archivesautonomies.org/spip.php?rubrique662>

Magazines :

- Programme Communiste : La question parlementaire dans l'Internationale communiste, Marseille, 1967.