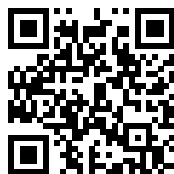




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The Crisis of Democracy

José Carlos Mariátegui



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This document was compiled by José Carlos Mariátegui, shortly before his death, to be published in what would become his book "The Morning Soul and Other Seasons of Man Today." Also included in this pamphlet are Mariátegui's conference notes as they help form a more complete understanding of his thinking on this subject.

The Crisis of Democracy

The very proponents of democracy — the term democracy is used as an equivalent to the term bourgeois-liberal democratic state — recognize the decadence of this political system. They agree that it is old and worn out and accept its repair and restoration. But, in their opinion, what is deteriorating is not democracy as an idea, as a spirit, but democracy as a form. This judgment on the meaning and value of the crisis of democracy is inspired by the incorrigible inclination to distinguish body and spirit in all things. From the old dualism of essence and form, which retains its old classical features in most minds, various superstitions arise.

But a realized idea is no longer valid as an idea but as a realization. The form cannot be separated, it cannot be isolated from its essence. The form is the realized idea, the acted-out idea, the materialized idea. To separate the idea from the form is a

theoretical and dialectical artifice and convention. It is not possible to deny the expression and the corporeality of an idea without denying the idea itself. The form represents all that the animating idea is worth in practice and concretely. If one could retrace history, one would find that the repetition of the same political experiment would always have the same consequences. Once an idea has returned to its purity, to its original virginity, and to the primitive conditions of time and place, it would not give a second time more than it gave the first time.

A political formula constitutes, in short, all the possible yield of the idea that engendered it. This is so true that Man, practically, in religion and in politics, ends up ignoring what is essential in his church or his party in order to feel only what is formal and corporeal. The same thing happens to the proponents of democracy who do not want to believe it old and worn out as an idea but as an organism. What these politicians really defend is the perishable form and not the immortal principle.

The word democracy is no longer used to designate the abstract idea of pure democracy, but rather, as I said at the beginning of this article, to designate the bourgeois-liberal democratic state. The democracy of contemporary democrats is capitalist democracy. It is democracy-form and not democracy-idea. And this

democracy is in decline and dissolution. Parliament is the organ, it is the heart of democracy. And parliament has ceased to correspond to these ends and has lost its authority and its function in the democratic organism. Democracy is dying of heart disease.

The reaction explicitly confesses its anti-parliamentary aims. Fascism announces that it will not allow itself to be ousted from power by a parliamentary vote. For fascism, the consensus of the parliamentary majority is a secondary thing: it is not a primary thing. The parliamentary majority is a luxury item, not a basic necessity. Parliament is good if it obeys; bad if it protests or scolds. The fascists propose to reform the political charter of Italy, adapting it to its new uses. Fascism recognizes itself as anti-democratic, anti-liberal, and anti-parliamentary. To the Jacobin formula of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity it opposes the fascist formula of hierarchy.

Some fascists indulge in theoretical speculations, defining fascism as a revival of the spirit of counter-reformation. They assign to fascism a medieval and Catholic soul. Mussolini often says that “*indietro non si torna*” (there’s no going back) yet the fascists themselves are pleased to find their spiritual origins in the Middle Ages. The fascist phenomenon is only a symptom of the situation. Unfortunately for

more acute stage, because in Italy the revolutionary situation was more violent and decisive.

- The process of fascism. Its rise. Its systems. Its methods.
- Fascism in Germany, France, Hungary, etc. Lugones in Argentina.⁵

Source text and translation: José Carlos Mariátegui Archive

⁵Mariátegui’s notes break off here. - *Prairie Fire Publishing*

the class struggle and the growth of the social war have accentuated this crisis of democracy.

The proletariat is attempting a decisive assault on the State and political power in order to transform society. Its growth in parliaments is threatening to the bourgeoisie. The legal instruments of democracy have proved insufficient to preserve the democratic regime. Conservatism has had to resort to illegal action, to extra-legal means. The middle class, the intermediate and heterogeneous zone of society, has been the nerve of this movement. Lacking a class consciousness of its own, the middle class considers itself equally distant and hostile to capitalism and the proletariat. But some capitalist sectors are represented in it. And since the current battle is being fought between capitalism and the proletariat, any intervention by a third element must be to the benefit of the conservative class.

Capitalism and the proletariat are two great and unique fields of gravitation that attract dispersed forces. Whoever reacts against the proletariat serves capitalism. This is what happens to the middle class, from whose ranks the fascist movement has recruited its proselytism. Fascism is not an Italian phenomenon, it is an international phenomenon. The first country in Europe where fascism appeared was Italy because in Italy the social struggle was at a

parliament, fascism is not its only, or even its main, enemy. Parliament suffers, on the one hand, the assaults of the Reaction, and on the other, those of the Revolution. Reactionaries and revolutionaries of all climes agree in their disqualification of the old democracy. Both sides advocate dictatorial methods.

The theory and practice of both sides offends the modesty of democracy, even though democracy has never behaved with excessive modesty. But democracy yields alternately, or simultaneously, to the attraction of the right and the left. It does not escape from one field of gravitation but ends up in the other. It is torn apart by two antithetical forces, two antagonistic loves. The most intelligent men in democracy strive to renew it and amend it. The democratic regime stands out when subjected to an exercise of internal criticism and revision, superior to its years and its ailments.

Nitti¹ does not believe that we should speak of a democracy per se, but rather of a social democracy. The author of "The Tragedy of Europe" is a dynamic and heterodox democrat. Caillaux² advocates "a

¹Francesco Saverio Nitti. Member of the Historical Radical Party, a center-left party in Italy, and prime minister of Italy from June 1919-June 1920

²Joseph Caillaux. Member of the French Radical Party and one-time prime minister of France from June 1911-January 1912.

synthesis of Western-style democracy and Russian Sovietism.” Caillaux is unable to indicate the path that would lead to this result. But he explicitly admits that the functions of parliament should be reduced.

According to Caillaux, parliament should only have rights and not perform a mission of higher control. The complete direction of the economic state should be transferred to new bodies. These concessions to the theory of the union state express how outmoded the old conception of parliament is. By abdicating part of its authority, parliament is embarking on a path that will lead to the loss of its powers. This economic state, which Caillaux wants to subordinate to the political state, is a reality superior to the will and coercion of statesmen who aspire to grasp it within their impotent principles. Political power is a consequence of economic power.

The European and North American plutocracy has no means of the dialectical exercises of democratic politicians. Any of the “trusts” or industrial cartels of Germany and the United States influence the politics of their respective nation more than all democratic ideology. The Dawes plan and the London agreement were dictated to their illustrious signatories by the interests of Morgan, Loucheur, etc. The crisis of democracy is the result of the simultaneous growth and concentration of capitalism and the proletariat.

institution of democracy is parliament. The crisis of democracy is a crisis of parliament.

We have already seen how the two great contemporary powers are capital and labor and how, above parliament, these forces compromise or fight. Theorists of democracy might assume that these forces are, or should be, proportionally represented in parliament. But this is not the case. For society is not divided neatly into capitalists and proletarians. Between the capitalist class and the proletarian class there are a number of amorphous and intermediate layers. Moreover, just as the entire proletarian class is not fully conscious of its historical and class needs, so the entire capitalist class is not endowed with a clear consciousness. The mentality of the big industrialist or the big banker is not the same as that of the average rentier or the small merchant.

This dispersion of social classes is reflected in parliament, which thus does not clearly represent the two major interests at stake. The political state is the integral representation of all social strata. But the conservative force and the revolutionary force are polarized into two unique groupings of interests: capitalism and the proletariat. Within the parliamentary system there is only room for coalition governments. Now there is a tendency towards factional governments. Today, the intensification of

Bourgeois society, for example, has no other origin than the birth of industry. In medieval society, the bourgeoisie was the industrial class, the artisan class. As the bourgeoisie grew richer, as industry developed, the privileges of the aristocracy and the nobility became unbearable. The worker and the bourgeois then merged into a single class: the people. The bourgeoisie was the vanguard of the people and was the leading class of the revolution. Worker and bourgeois agreed on the desire to abolish the privileges of the aristocracy. The fall of the aristocracy, of the medieval regime, was therefore determined not by abstract ideals but by concrete reasons of the appearance of a new form of production: industry. Under the democratic regime, under the bourgeois regime, new forms of production were created.

Industry developed extraordinarily, driven by machinery. Enormous industrial enterprises emerged. The expansion of these new productive forces no longer permits the survival of the old political molds. It has transformed the structure of nations and demands the transformation of the structure of the regime. Bourgeois democracy has ceased to correspond to the organization of the formidably transformed and enlarged economic forces. This is why democracy is in crisis. The typical

The springs of production are in the hands of these two forces. The proletarian class struggles to replace the bourgeois class in power. It extracts successive concessions from it. Both classes agree to their truces, their armistices and their compromises directly, without intermediaries.

Parliament is not accepted as an arbiter in these debates and in these transactions. Little by little, parliamentary authority has consequently been diminishing. All political sectors tend, at present, to recognize the reality of the economic State. Universal suffrage and parliamentary assemblies agree to cede many of their functions to trade union groups. The right, the center, and the left are more or less pro-syndicalist. Fascism, for example, works for the restoration of medieval corporations and forces workers and employers to live together and cooperate within the same union.

The theorists of the “black shirt” in their sketches of the future fascist State, describe it as a union State. The social democrats strive to graft trade unions and professional associations into the machinery of democracy. Walter Rathenau³, one of the most conspicuous and original theorists and architects of the bourgeoisie, dreamed of a splitting of the State

³German industrialist, writer, politician, and brief German foreign minister from February-June 1922.

into an Industrial State, an Administrative State, an Educational State, etc. In the organization conceived by Rathenau, the various functions of the State would be transferred to professional associations. How has democracy reached the crisis that all these anxieties and conflicts are showing?

The study of the roots of the decline of the democratic regime cannot be contained in the last paragraphs of an article like this. It must be replaced by an incomplete and summary definition. The democratic form has gradually ceased to correspond to the new economic structure of society. The bourgeois-liberal democratic state was an effect of the rise of the bourgeoisie to the position of the dominant class. It was a consequence of the action of economic and productive forces that could not develop within the rigid barriers of a society governed by the aristocracy and the Church. Now, as then, the new play of economic and productive forces demands a new political organization. Political, social, and cultural forms are always forward-looking, always temporary. They invariably contain within their core the germ of a future form. Stagnant, petrified, the democratic form, like those that preceded it in history, can no longer contain the new human reality.

Conference Notes on “The Crisis of Democracy”

The symptoms of a crisis of the democratic regime were already perceptible before the war⁴. What has been the driving force behind this crisis? The parallel growth and concentration of capitalism and the proletariat. Economic life, the economic forces of countries, have passed into the hands of these two great powers, in which the State has acquired a position not as an arbiter but rather as a mediator. The conflicts, the contrasts between one force and the other, have been resolved only by the State through transactions, through direct commitments between them.

In these transactions, the State has played only the role of a mediator. Within the forms of the old society, the forms of a new society have been brewing and incubating. The nation, by virtue of the new social reality, has ceased to be a predominantly political entity and has become a predominantly economic entity. This substantial transformation of the nation has determined the crisis of the political State. History teaches us that the forms of social and political organization of a society correspond to the structure, to the tendency of the productive forces.

⁴Mariátegui is referring to World War I.