# Commune, Council, Party: Marxism and Direct Democracy

**Instructor:** Mason Herson-Hord

**Course Description:** Ten week course. The course is a deep study of Marxist political theory and its dynamic, contradictory relationship to the politics of direct democracy.

While Marx himself championed the sweeping democratization of society, he rarely discussed the particulars of a future democratic political structure in any detail. His disciples among subsequent generations of revolutionaries had to bridge the ambiguities of Marx's political theory with the practical necessity of determining how power is to be organized in real movements seeking to change the world. This led to a sweeping diversity of ideas and experiments in how proletarian democracy was to be institutionalized, with profoundly mixed results. As the British Marxist Ralph Miliband observed, "the exercise of *socialist* power remains the Achilles' heel of Marxism." We will explore Marxist thought and practice through history as it grapples with this fundamental question: what are the *political* forms of the class struggle?—and do some grappling with it ourselves. Marxist theory may not have produced the most definitive answers, but its contradictions and its tensions with direct democratic practice are uniquely fruitful in helping us think through these problems ourselves when it comes to the project of building a genuinely democratic society.

Course reading assignments primarily feature primary source materials drawn from the writings of revolutionary theorists and activists, while lecture materials provide their historical and intellectual context. The Marxist theorists assigned include Marx, Engels, Lenin, Bukharin, Pannekoek, Sylvia Pankhurst, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Mao, C.L.R. James, and a number of others, while historical material will cover the Paris Commune, the rise of social democracy, the Russian Revolution, the German Revolution and the broader international post-World War I council

movement, the Chinese Revolution, the Eurocommunist turn, and the more recent radical democracy movements of India, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, and Syria.

Students will seek to challenge and rethink their ideas through discussion and reading of works spanning one hundred and fifty years of radical thought on revolution, political power, class struggle, and democracy. The objectives of this ten-week course are to develop a robust theoretical understanding of Marxist political thought, a grounding of its historical influences and impacts, and a critical perspective on its contradictions, problems, and insights.

## Syllabus

**Week 1: Direct democracy and 'socialism-from-below'**

- "The Two Souls of Socialism" by Hal Draper
- "Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece and Its Meaning for Today" by C.L.R. James

**Secondary readings:**

- "Marxism, Anarchism, and the Genealogy of 'Socialism from Below'" by Tom Keefer
- *The Tyranny of Theory: A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism* by Ronald Tabor
- "Is There a Marxist Theory of the State?" by Norberto Bobbio
- "Should Socialists Want to Keep the State?" by David McNally

**Week 2: Marx's ambiguous embrace of participatory forms**

- "The Second Address" from *The Civil War in France*, by Karl Marx
- Excerpted version of *The Civil War in France*, by Karl Marx, from *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan
- "*The Communist Manifesto*: Insights and Problems" by Murray Bookchin

**Secondary readings:**

- *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* by Kristin Ross
- "The Paris Commune, Marxism, and Anarchism" by Iain McKay
- "The Paris Commune and Marx's Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" by Monty Johnstone
- *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin*, by Hal Draper
- *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs Marx in the International Working Men's Association*, by Wolfgang Eckhart

**Week 3: Lenin and *The State and Revolution***

- *The State and Revolution* by V.I. Lenin, Chapters 1-4
- "Lenin's *The State and Revolution*" by Ralph Miliband
- "Toward a Theory of the Imperialist State" by Nikolai Bukharin

**Secondary readings:**

- *Evolutionary Socialism*, by Eduard Bernstein
- "The April Theses" by V.I. Lenin
- "The Youth International: A Review", by V.I. Lenin
- *The Russian Revolution, 1917: A Personal Record*, by Nikolai Sukhanov

**Week 4: What is the workers' state?**

- "Wither the State" by Mason Herson-Hord
- *The State and Revolution* by V.I. Lenin, Chapters 5-6
- "A Prophetic Letter to Luigi Fabri: Errico Malatesta on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" by Errico Malatesta

**Secondary readings:**

- *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control: The State and Counter-Revolution* by Maurice Brinton
- *Lenin's Government: Sovnarkom 1917-1922* by T.H. Rigby
- "Resolutions of a general meeting of the crews of the First and Second Squadrons of the Baltic Fleet, held March 1, 1921" ("Demands of the Kronstadt Insurgents")
- *Critique of the Gotha Program*, by Karl Marx

**Week 5: A Marxist alternative in the council movement**

- "Revolutionary Commune" by Karl Korsch
- "Workers Councils" by Anton Pannekoek
- "The Council Idea and Its Realization" by Ernst Däumig
- "We Fought in Bremen for the Council Republic" by Karl Jannack
- "A Constitution for British Soviets: Points for a Communist Programme" by Sylvia Pankhurst
- Selection from *Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* by Cornelius Castoriadis

**Secondary readings:**

- "From Workers' Councils to Democratic Autonomy: Rediscovering Cornelius Castoriadis' Theory of Council Democracy" by Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen
- *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, edited by Dario Azzellini and Immanuel Ness

**Week 6: Organization and democracy in the struggle for socialism**

- Excerpt from "Chapter VII: Spontaneity and Organisation" in *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* by Paul Mattick
- "Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy" by Rosa Luxemburg
- "What Lenin Really Said" by Paul D'Amato, review of *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context* by Lars Lih
- "Trotsky's Conception of Self-organisation and the Vanguard Party" by Ernest Mandel
- "Listen, Marxist!" by Murray Bookchin
- "The Revolution Is Not a Party Affair" by Otto Rühle

**Secondary readings:**

- *Lenin Rediscovered:* What Is to Be Done? *in Context* by Lars T. Lih
- *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* by V.I. Lenin
- *Our Political Tasks* by Leon Trotsky
- "The Party and Class" by Anton Pannekoek

**Week 7: Democracy and party in the Chinese Revolution**

- "Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?" by Mao Zedong
- "The Mass Line: What It Is and How to Use It" from *Liberation Road*
- "Whither China?: Yang Xiguang, Red Capitalists, and the Social Turmoil of the Cultural Revolution" by Jonathan Unger
- "Whither China?" by Yang Xiguang
- "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the Reversal of Workers' Power in China" by the Progressive Labor Party

**Secondary readings:**

- *Maoism and the Chinese Revolution: A Critical Introduction* by Elliott Liu
- *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* by Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun
- *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* by Yiching Wu

**Week 8: How democratic is dual power?**

- "Councils and Parliaments: The Problems of Dual Power and Democracy in Comparative Perspective" by Carmen Sirianni
- "Eurocommunism, Socialism and Democracy" by Henri Weber
- "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism" by Murray Bookchin
- "Democracy or Dictatorship" by Richard Müller

**Secondary readings:**

- *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, by Nicos Poulantzas, edited by James Martin

- "Community Control, Workers' Control, and the Cooperative Commonwealth" by Howard Hawkins

**Week 9: Pathways to democratization within the state?**

- "Elections," Chapter 8 of *The Politics of Social Ecology* by Janet Biehl
- "Politics and Institutional Design of Participatory Democracy: Lessons from Kerala, India" by Patrick Heller and T. M. Thomas Isaac
- "After Winning the Election Do We Govern the Place or Transform It? Kali Akuno on the Lessons of Jackson MS So Far" (video)
- "Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre: Toward a Redistributive Democracy" by Boaventura de Sousa Santos
- "Building the Commune: Insurgent Government, Communal State" by George Ciccariello-Maher
- "The Communard Union, Chávez's Ideas in Action: A Conversation with Juan Lenzo" by Cira Pascual Marquina

**Secondary readings:**

- *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* by George Ciccariello-Maher
- "The Communal State: Communal Councils, Communes, and Workplace Democracy" by Dario Azzellini

**Week 10: Out of and beyond Marxism: The radical democracy movement**

- Chapter 1-3 from *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* by John Holloway
- "Armed Struggle Without Revolution: The Organizing Process of the National Liberation Forces (FLN) and the Genesis of Neo-Zapatism (1969-1983)" by Adela Cedillo (from *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982*, edited by Fernando Herrera Calderón and Adela Cedillo)
- "Chiapas: The First Post-Modern Revolution" by Ana Carrigan
- "The Ideological Transformation of the PKK Regarding the Political Economy of the Kurdish Region in Turkey" by Güllistan Yarkin
- Strategy document of Detroit Build and Fight

**Secondary readings:**

- "Community, Democracy, and Mutual Aid: Toward Dual Power and Beyond" by John Michael Colon, Mason Herson-Hord, Katie Horvath, Dayton Martindale, and Matthew Porges
- *Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory, and Strategy for Collective Liberation* by CounterPower
- "Dual Power in the Selva Lacandon" by Christopher Day