THE DIFFICULT VIRTUE: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF THE GENERAL WILL AND ITS CONCRETE FIGURES*

LA VERTU DIFFICILE: RÉFLEXIONS SUR LE CONCEPT DE VOLONTÉ GÉNÉRALE ET SES FIGURES CONCRÈTES

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ABSTRACT
The concept of the general will is a central yet problematic category in the history of political theory. This article offers a critical genealogy of the general will, from Rousseau's ethical idealism to Hegel's realist dialectic and Marx's critique of both. By analyzing the theoretical impasses of liberalism and Jacobinism, the text highlights how the general will cannot be conceived merely as an abstract moral imperative, nor as a mere aggregation of private interests. The study revisits Hegel's proposal of the bureaucracy as the material bearer of universality and contrasts it with Marx's identification of the proletariat as the class capable of universal emancipation. The analysis culminates in Gramsci's theory of the historical bloc, which integrates pluralism and hegemony into a renewed conception of the general will, overcoming both Rousseau's utopianism and Hegel's corporative realism. The article argues that any democratic theory must confront the challenge of articulating the universal not as an abstract norm but as a historical and social reality mediated by concrete actors.
KEYWORDS: general will; pluralism; hegemony; marxism; democracy.

RÉSUMÉ
Le concept de volonté générale constitue une catégorie centrale plus problématique dans l'histoire de la théorie politique. Cet article propose une généalogie critique de la volonté générale, depuis l'idéalisme éthique de Rousseau jusqu'à la dialectique réaliste de Hegel, en passant par la critique marxienne des deux. En analysant les impasses théoriques du libéralisme et du jacobinisme, le texte montre que la volonté générale ne peutê ter conçue ni comme un simple impératif moral abstrait, ni comme une simple somme d'intérêts particuliers. L'étude revisite la proposition hégélienne de la bureaucratie comme porteur matériel de l'universalité, et la confronte à l'identification marxienne Du prolétariat comme classe d'émancipation universelle. L'analyse culmine avec la théorie gramscienne du bloc historique, qui intègre pluralisme et hégémonie dans une nouvelle conception de la volonté générale, dépassant à la fois l'utopisme de Rousseau et le réalisme corporatiste de Hegel. L'article soutient qu'aucune théorie démocratique ne peut éviter le défi d'articuler l'universel comme réalité historique et sociale, médiée par des acteurs concrets.
MOTS-CLÉS: volonté générale; pluralisme; hégémonie; marxisme; démocratie.

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INTRODUCTION

Rousseau's distinction between the *general will* and the *will of all* marks a pivotal chapter in the history of political theory. This differentiation not only highlights one of the fundamental traits that separate democratic thought from liberal thought, but also introduces a set of complex problems that no theoretical framework inspired by democracy can afford to disregard. Two of these problems deserve particular emphasis: first, where does the common interest that underlies the emergence of the general will originate? And second, when and how are the concrete figures – the "material bearers" – constituted in whom this general will is embodied?

Before addressing the various answers given to these questions, it is important to clarify that, in our view, no liberal theory has successfully incorporated the concept of the general will as the expression of common interest, in the sense Rousseau assigns to these terms. Liberalism has consistently presupposed a conception of society as a mere aggregate of individual interests. Furthermore, the epistemological expression of this individualistic anthropology is evident in the fact that liberal thought – in its "pure" form, from John Locke to Karl Popper – reveals a profound elective affinity with empiricism. We take *empiricism* here in a broad sense, referring to any philosophical position that denies the ontological (*objective*) reality of totality or universality, and consequently identifies appearance with essence, phenomenon with substance. This may manifest itself in various ways, from the outright denial of any universal essence (as in nominalist tendencies) to the claim that knowledge cannot conceptually grasp anything beyond immediate sensible perception (as in skepticism and/or agnosticism).

Based on this individualistic anthropology and this empiricist epistemology, liberalism can only admit – borrowing Rousseau's terminology – the formation of a will of all. That is, liberalism accepts (and indeed promotes) the convergence of private or singular interests (the only ones empirically ascertainable), which, without ceasing to be private, may agree upon pursuing something that benefits all (or the majority) as individuals. The resulting consensus is therefore procedural: the common good appears to be ensured, or at least potentially guaranteed, by establishing formal rules to regulate the inevitable conflicts between individuals primarily motivated by private interests. A recurring problem in liberal theory has been to determine how such a convergence of private interests could occur in a society conceived as anthropologically individualistic and competitive. This issue has received

various answers within the liberal tradition: Adam Smith's notion of the invisible hand, the sophisticated marginalist arguments of Buchanan and Tullock, John Stuart Mill's justification of unequal voting as a condition for defending minorities and individual freedom etc.

The liberal tradition appears incapable of acknowledging the existence of general will without transcending its own premises. In contrast, no democratic theory can avoid affirming the objective – *socially* objective – existence of universal or universalizing interests and wills. Democracy is not merely a formal method of government, as argued by thinkers such as Joseph Schumpeter and Norberto Bobbio; it also implies a substantive consensus concerning specific contents – namely, a conception of society that allows for the realization of political ideals such as *equality* and *freedom*. From Aristotle to the Marxists, passing through Montesquieu and Rousseau, it has often been noted that democracy is incompatible with extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth and property. No substantive consensus can exist unless it is possible to articulate a common interest that transcends the possessive appetitiveness of individual private interests. Moreover, the very demand for equality at the political level leads democracy to require, as its formal or procedural rule, the inalienable principle of popular sovereignty – a concept that can only be understood as the self-government of society by society itself. Popular sovereignty thus implies the formation of a collective subject acting collectively unless it is driven by general will.

In this sense, while liberal though thas been (*and remains*) tormented by the problem of reconciling the maximum expression of individual interests with the achievement of the common good, modern democratic thought faces an equally arduous task: the theoretical construction of the concept of the general will, without which it is impossible even to conceive of a substantively democratic society. This construction involves a double movement: first, it is necessary to identify the conditions of possibility for the general will at an essential level of reality (not merely at the level of immediate appearances), since what empirically manifests is always singular will and interests; and second, to prevent the general will from dissolving into the realm of empty abstractions, it is also necessary to identify its concrete figures – its *material bearers*.

The aim of this text is to analyze some of the attempts to answer these questions. If there is a guiding thread running through these pages, it lies in our conviction that the central concepts of Marxist political theory can only be fully understood as an attempt to overcome the impasses of classical democratic thought, while simultaneously recovering its valid elements against the criticism – often legitimate – raised by Hegel.

1 ROUSSEAU AND THE PROBLEM OF THE GENERAL WILL

For Rousseau (1997a), *virtue* – the capacity to prioritize the public interest over private interest – is the ethical precondition for the democratic society he envisions in *Du contrat social*[1]. His debt to Montesquieu (1989) is evident in this respect. However, the connection between them runs deeper: on one hand, there is the aristocrat seeking to restore the rights of the feudal nobility against the excesses of absolutism; on the other, the plebeian who, starting from a devastating critique of the *bourgeois* society of his time, proposes the normative ideal of a radically democratic society. Both Montesquieu and Rousseau share the idea that political regimes vary according to the broader social order. For Montesquieu, the nature of regimes results from and expresses historically variable principles, whose constitution and stability depend on a multitude of social and natural factors – from the distribution of wealth and property to the size of territory and the climate. Both the anti-absolutists Baron and the democratic plebeian, *both non-liberals*, understood that political order cannot be discussed as if it must conform to an ahistorical human nature, as did Locke (1988) and Hobbes (1991). Different forms of social organization produce different political regimes. For this reason, both authors assignan essential role to customs – what Hegel (1991) would call *Sittlichkeit*, and what in modern terms might be described as the set of symbolic or ideological values – in the formation and stability of political regimes.

Once customs are considered, the role of education inevitably comes into play. Both Rousseau and Montesquieu (though certainly Rousseau more so) emphasize the importance of education in shaping the social order upon which different political regimes rest. This is particularly evident in the case of virtue, the foundational principle of the democratic regime. Montesquieu (1989, p. 68-69) defines virtue as a form of self-renunciation, implying “The supremacy of the public interest over the private interest”. Since achieving such renunciation is arduous, he believes that it is in republican government that the full force of education is most necessary. For him, the emergence of the *volonté générale* (a concept present in his work only implicitly) fundamentally results from an asceticism promoted by education. However, Montesquieu (1989, p. 24-25) also recognizes that certain material conditions – not only the small size of the territory but, above all, a relative equality of wealth – are prerequisites for maintaining the virtuous principle and, therefore, the stability of democratic

[1] Originally published in 1762.

republic: “In a true democracy, equality is the equality of enjoyment, not of possession. There must not only bean equal division of lands, but they must be small”.

Rousseau develops this argument further, in a way that is significantly more sophisticated and complex. In *Discours sur l’Inégalité*[2], he offers a deeply critical portrait of his contemporary society, identifying the excessive division of labor and private property as the root causes of an unjust and despotic social and political order. The principle underlying this un equal and conflictual order, according to the Genevan philosopher, is the dominance of *amour-propre* (selfishness or vanity) as the fundamental motive of human actions. However, Rousseau (1997a, p. 31-32) clarifies:

> Self-love (*amour de soi-même*) is a natural sentiment that prompts every animal to seek its own preservation, and which, when guided by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. *Amour-propre* is a purely relative sentiment, born in society, which makes one esteem oneself more than others and inspires all the evils men inflict upon one another.

In this way, Rousseau admits the *plasticity* of individual drives. Depending on the conditions of socialization, humans may combine or modify their impulses in different ways. In societies founded on inequality, individuals subordinate *amour de soi-même* to *amour-propre*, becoming selfish and motivated solely by private interest. But in a society where equality prevails, *amour de soi-même* can be moderated by pity and elevated to virtue – the predominance of the public interest over the private.

Unlike Hobbes’ and Locke’s static anthropological assumptions, Rousseau sees the human being as capable of transformation according to the society in which they live. It is precisely this plasticity that serves as the condition for the flourishing of the *volonté générale*. Rousseau assumes two basic conditions for a just social order – the outcome of a legitimate social contract. First, he requires a relative balance of wealth; *concretely*, the subordination of property rights to the common good. Second, and more relevant here, Rousseau (1997b, p. 50) asserts the indispensability of the *volonté générale*:

> The general will alone can direct the forces of the State according to the purpose for which it was instituted, which is the common good. For if there were no point at which all interests agree, no society could exist. And it is solely on this common interest that society must be governed.

[2] Originally published in 1755.

While Montesquieu merely observes that democratic republics – museological for him – are based on virtue, Rousseau makes the construction of the *volonté générale* the core of his political project. He seems to assume that each individual carries within them a latent faculty capable of elevating their actions to the level of the common interest. This faculty atrophies when inequality – driven by the predominance of *amour-propre* and the desire for property – becomes dominant. In this sense, Rousseau's thought resonates with what Lukács (1978, p. 176-179), following the young Marx, called the potential presence of the generically human in each singular individual – a potentiality actualized in *catharsis*. However, unlike Marx, Rousseau does not ground the common interest in a specific base that generates an objective community of interests. The material base enters only negatively, by creating conditions (inequality on wealth and property) that prevent its realization.

Essentially idealist, Rousseau presents the predominance of the *volonté générale* as an ethical imperative, akin to Kant's categorical imperative. Thus, in *Émile*[3] and *Du contrat social*, he relies on pedagogy to contain *amour-propre* and awaken the common interest in individuals. This ethical approach leads him to oppose the public and private in an excessively polarized way, failing to recognize the mediations between singular private interests and the universal. Without these mediations (such as professional or class-based interests), the relationship becomes one of antagonism, to be resolved only by moral exhortation or the intervention of a legislator. Marx's famous questions, *who educates the educator*, summarizes this impasse. Moreover, as Marx (1976, p. 3-5) points out, Rousseau can only defend his democratic model by maintaining an insurmountable division between *citoyen* and *bourgeois*. Defending the *citoyen* against the *bourgeois* does not resolve the theoretical contradictions nor eliminate the utopian character of his proposal.

These difficulties are most evident in Rousseau's inability to define the material bearer of the *volonté générale*. In a sense, it is the virtuous individual or, collectively, the assembly of such individuals. For this reason, the *volonté générale* can neither be delegated nor represented. Yet since the private element remains present, what tends to occuris what Freud (1963, p. 119-127), in another context, called the *return of the repressed*: the permanent possibility that individuals, losing their virtue, will act according to their repressed private interests.

In a "realists" shift – though one that contradicts the logic of his system –, Rousseau (1997b, p. 336-339) acknowledges that the material bearer of the common interest may, at

[3] Originally published in 1762.

least temporarily, bean external legislator – someone who forces individuals to be free. It is no betrayal of Rousseau, then, when Robespierre and Saint-Just define the Jacobin regime as the despotism of liberty against tyranny. The defeat of Jacobinism – the failure of the *citoyen* in favor of the *bourgeois*, culminating in the Thermidorian Reaction and Napoleonic Empire – attests to the utopian nature of Rousseau's democratic model.

2 HEGEL'S REALIST TURN

A thinker profoundly opposed to any form of ethics based on the proposal of an abstract *sollen* – it suffices to recall his harsh critique of Kantian ethics and of Fichte's metaphysics–, Hegel was perhaps one of the first to identify the aporias in Rousseau's conception of the *volonté générale* and to attempt a more realist foundation for his concept. Against the subjective idealism of the Genevan philosopher, Hegel sets forth a position that remains idealist, but one grounded in an *objective* idealism. It is precisely this objective content that Hegel proposes to lend to the concept of the *volonté générale*, stripping it of any connection to individual arbitrariness or the formalism of a mere ethical ought. In the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, where he attempts to conceptualize the modern State, Hegel (1991, §§258-259) writes:

> Rousseau has the great merit of having derived the principle of the State from the will; but the will in his case is merely the individual will in its universal form, not the truly universal and rational will. Consequently, for him the State is a contract, a product of the arbitrary will of individuals, of their opinion and explicit agreement.

And further insisting on the transindividual objectivity of the universal will, Hegel (1991, §29) continues:

> We must therefore distinguish between what a person wills and what is willed in and through him, the rational content which is present in his willing. The rational is thein-itself of the will. It is not enough to know what one wants; it is also necessary to know what the wil lwants as such.

Though the terminology is abstruse, Hegel here articulates a concrete problem: the *volonté générale* must have an objective basis; its genesis must lie in something that transcends individuals and their singular volitional projects. The constitution of the general will must not result from an ethical postulate but must instead upon the objective community of interests produced and imposed by the movement of reality itself – independently of

individual consciousness or subjective desires. Hegel locates the first source of this universalization in what He calls the *System der Bedürfnisse* (system of needs), or more precisely, in the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, the *bourgeois* civil society.

At first glance, there appears to be little difference between Hegel's civil society and the world of market economics as described by Adam Smith in *The wealth of nations* – a work that, incidentally, Hegel studied carefully. In describing the characteristics of this sphere, Hegel (1991, §199) observes:

> In this dependency and reciprocity in labour and the satisfaction of needs, selfishness turns into a contribution towards the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else. Through the necessity imposed by universal interdependence, the concrete person is led to pass through this mediation and compulsion o funiversality; and thus it happens that by means of his activity and by satisfying his own needs, He simultaneously produces and promotes the satisfaction of the needs of others.

However, Hegel's essential innovation over classical liberal thought begins at the point where he analyzes the possibility of this universality *in-itself* transforming into universality *for-itself* – in other words, becoming conscious of itself and acquiring a concrete, self-conscious form. We need not rehearse what is already well-known: for Hegel, the supreme incarnation of this self-conscious universality (*in-sich-und-für-sich*) is the State itself, the *Wirklichkeit der sittlichen Idee* (the reality of the ethical idea), the *Wirklichkeit des substantiellen Willens* (the reality of the substantial will), the *Wirklichkeit der konkreten Freiheit* (the reality of concrete freedom), and so forth.

What matters most for our purpose is to highlight the fact that – unlike Rousseau, Who radically opposed the singular/private sphere (the *bourgeois*) to the universal/public sphere (the *citoyen*) – Hegel seeks mediations that, even within civil society (conceived as the domain of particularity), initiate the process of forming a universal for-itself (self-conscious universality). Above all, Hegel's (1991, §260) realism leads him to perceive, against Rousseau's exacerbated dualism, that "Neither the universal has validity and existence without the particular interests, consciousness and will of individuals, nor do individuals live as private persons oriented solely to their interests and unrelated to the universal will".

This dialectic between universal and particular finds its first concrete manifestation in the *Korporationen* (corporations or guild-like professionals associations). Going beyond classical liberalism, Hegel (1991, §252) notes:

> Labour in civil society is divided into different branches, and this division of labour produces anequality in principlebetweenindividuals in respectoftheir particular needs and abilities. This equally in itself, as something common to all, attains existence [fürsich] in the corporation.

Employing a terminology drawn from the feudal world but investing it with a profoundly modern meaning, Hegel (1991, §255) calls these professional associations – these collective subjects already formed within the world of production relations (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) – *Korporationen*. He defines their relation to civil society on the one hand, and to the State on the other, as follows:

> Civil society is the battlefield where everyone's private interest meets everyone else's, where one's private interest is satisfied but only by mediating it through the universal, and where the subsistence and welfare of the individual and his family are obtained only through the work and activity of all. In this clash of private interests with one another and with the general interests of the community, the particular associations [i. e., the *corporations*] serve to mediate between the individual and the State. The members of the corporations acquire in their corporate activities a sense of the common interest and learn to see it as their own. In this way, the corporation becomes a second family for its members. The disposition to conduct oneself as a member of the State is engendered in the corporate spirit, for in this spirit the particular is rooted in the universal; hence it is in the feelings that the strength and depth of the State are anchored.

This long quotation warrants some commentary. It clearly shows how Hegel does not merely operate with a dichotomy between the singular (private) and the universal (public) but explicitly introduces the category of the *particular*: the corporate interest functions as a field of mediations between the singularity of purely private interests and the universality embodied in the State. The relation between public and private ceases to be a relation of exclusion – an *either/or* – and instead becomes a dialectical relation of *Aufhebung*: a sublation that simultaneously preserves, negates, and elevates what is sublated.

Moreover, the discovery and legitimation of this field of particular mediation leads Hegel – despite the apparent anachronism of his project of a constitutional monarchy, with its estates, corporate chambers, and so forth – to present a much more concrete understanding of the necessary institutional pluralism of modern society than Rousseau. It is not inaccurate to say that the State described by Hegel in the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*[4] is, in its general features, analogous to the actually existing modern State: a State that could be defined as liberal-corporative and bureaucratic.

[4] Originally published in 1762.

But precisely here lies the problematic point: while Hegel's realism: leads to anaccurate description of the dialectic between singular, particular, and universal in modern State, the price paid for such realism is the loss of the democratic dimension contained in Rousseau's utopian-ethical conception of the *volonté générale*. This is first manifested in Hegel's (1991, §279) rejection of the concept of *popular sovereignty*:

> Popular sovereignty belongs to the confused notions which a rise from the wild idea of the people. The people without its monarch and without the organization of the State is a formless mass, and does not possess any of the determinations which are to be found in an organized whole.

Hegel's observation seems correct: without the mediation of concrete and particular associations and institutions, singular individuals are reduced to an amorphous mass. Permanent assemblyism as the sole possible form of organization – as Rousseau appears to presuppose – is seen by Hegel (1991, §331) as something irretrievably belonging to the past, to peoples who "live in a state of savagery and have not yet attained the true totality of an organically developed State". However, from this diagnosis Hegel proceeds to deduce the necessity that sovereignty exists as the person of the monarch. In this specific point, the overcoming of Rousseau's abstraction leads to a return to a concept that has its roots in Jean Bodin, or at least in Bossuet. If Hegel had stopped at the mere "deduction" of the monarch's sovereignty, He would not be a *modern* thinker. His modernity lies, rather, in the fact that the concrete manifestation of sovereignty – its transformation into actual governing power – is located in the bureaucracy, often designated as the *allgemeine Klasse* (general class).

For Hegel (1991, §303), the bureaucracy becomes the material bearer of the *volonté générale*: "The general class, which is more immediately devoted to the service of government, must have, in its very determination, the universal as the essential aim of its activity". Where as the corporation by branch of activity are formed and legitimized through the defense of particular interests – seen as first level of universalization in relation to singular private interests –, the bureaucracy appears as a special kind of corporation, one that immediately identifies, in its action and motivation, the singular/private with the universal. Hegel (1991, §294) continues:

> Public service demands the sacrifice of the individual's arbitrary satisfaction in pursuit of subjective aims; but it recognizes the right to attain such satisfactions precisely through the fulfillment of duty. In this lies the union of particular and general interests, which constitutes the concept of the State and gives it stability.

By attributing to the bureaucracy the condition of the *allgemeine Klasse*, Hegel (1991, §294) explicitly rejects the Rousseauian conception that "Everyone ought to take part in the discussion and resolution of the general affairs of the State, since all are members of the State and the affairs of the State are affairs of all". For Hegel, this would mean introducing the democratic element into the organism of the State without any rational form.

General public affairs, by contrast, become the monopoly of the bureaucracy, which is not elective but selected according to merit and competence. Its role is to receive the particular demands and suggestions from corporations, municipal chambers, and so forth, and to promote the satisfaction of those compatible with the common interests, whose interpretations (let us recall that, for Hegel, the common interestis *in-itself*, objective) is its principal task. The concrete figure of the *volonté générale* is thus not to be found in the assembly of virtuous individuals or in the enlightened mind of the legislator (or of Jacobins clubs), but in the grey layer of anonymous bureaucrats.

As we cansee, Hegel's solution implies – in the name of realism – a renunciation of Rousseauian democratic idealism. Yet it poses two demands that can no longer be ignored by any theory seeking both to remain faithful to Rousseau's democratic utopia and to overcome its undeniable impasses. Let us summarize these demands.

First, the common interest cannot be conceived in a Manichean way as the opposite of private interest. A field of mediations must be assumed, articulating the singular and the universal dialectically through the movement of the particular. Furthermore, the movement of universalization leading to the *volonté générale* cannot result from an ethical appeal to individual virtue; it must be conceived as the consciousness of interests becoming common (or universalized) within objective reality itself.

Second, the material bearer of the *volonté générale* must be an organism in which private interest is not repressed by the common or universal interest but is instead identified with it – or, more precisely, one in which private interest is expanded and potentiated until it is converted into universal or common interest.

3 MARX AND THE CIVIL-BOURGEOIS SOCIETY AS A CLASS SOCIETY

Marxist political theory can be interpreted, to a substantial extent, as an attempt to combine the basic proposal of Rousseau's democratic theory – the idea of popular sovereignty

as the society's self-government (which, at its limits, implies the extinction of the State as an entity isolated from the social) – with Hegel's two "realist" requirements.

Marx's first significant political text is the *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*[5], which remained un published for almost a century and was written in 1843. In this work, the young German thinker comments on and critiques several paragraphs from Hegel's *Philosophie der Rechts*[6], doing so from a radical-democratic perspective in which echoes of Rousseau's *Contrat social*[7] are clearly audible. The core of Marx's critique is to demonstrate the falsity of Hegel's thesis that the State (or governmental) bureaucracy is the material bearer of the general will. Bureaucracy is not a "general class", nor do its actions emanate from a general will, for the simple reason that the "real society" described by Hegel does not recognize a common interest. The highest possible degree of universalization within civil society – the sphere in which individuals live their real lives – is, according to Hegel, merely the cooperative spirit; that is, the overcoming of singular interest by particular interest. If society is not the war of all individuals against all individuals, as Hobbes supposed, it is certainly, in Hegel's account, the terrain of conflicts between all corporations and all other corporations – the clash of competing "corporative" interests.

Within this framework, even though the bureaucracy may arbitrate between particular interests (unlike the magistrates of Hobbes and Locke, who arbitrate between singular interests), it does not embody any substantive universality, nor any genuinely common interest. It merely represents one particular interest among others. Marx (1975a, p. 52-53) articulate this clearly:

> The universal standpoint, the universal interest, be haves towards the particular only as a particular, while the particular behaves towards the universal as the universal. The bureaucracy must therefore protect the imaginary universality of the particular interests, the spirit of the corporation, in order to protect the imaginary particularity of the universal interests, its own spirit. The State must accordingly behave as a corporation, while the corporation must behave as the State. The bureaucracy is thus the State as a corporation.

At this point, Marx had not yet arrived at what would later becomeone of his fundamental discoveries: that the civil-*bourgeois* society is not only divided into corporations but into social classes. Consequently, the State – as an imaginary universality – does not represent the particular interests of a single corporation (the bureaucracy), but the common

[5] Originally written in 1843-1844; first published in 1844.
[6] Originally published in 1820.
[7] Originally published in 1762.

interests of a particular class. Yet, within the framework of Hegel's own problematic, Marx indicates that the reign of particularity in civil-*bourgeois* society imposes the reign of particularity within the State as well; this, in turn, renders impossible the emergence of a general will. What Hegel calls the *universal* is nothing more than the reciprocal balancing of different particularities through bureaucratic arbitration. Corporatism and bureaucratism are, for Marx (1975a, p. 56), two sides of the same medal: "The spirit of the corporation creates the corporation in civil society and the bureaucracy in the State. Thus, when the spirit of the corporation is attacked, the spirit of the bureaucracy is attacked".

The young Marx (1975a, p. 56) sought precisely to overcome this bureaucratic spirit and to have society itself genuinely appropriate the power of government. For him – as for the Rousseau of the *Contrat* –, "All forms of State have democracy as their truth, and so long as they are not democracy, they are false". Or, in contemporary terms, they are not *legitimate*. Marx's intention was to reclaim the democratic ideal against the bureaucratic-corporative State, while explicitly recognizing that Hegel had accurately described the empirical reality of his time.

However, in proposing the overcoming of the "actually existing" State in the name of democratic utopia, Marx (1975a, p. 69) does not simply return to Rousseau. He offers a solution that consists in directing against Hegel the very demands that Hegel himself raised against Rousseau:

> In the bureaucracy the identity of the State interest and private interest is established in such a way that the State interest becomes a private interest opposed to other private interests. The abolition of the bureaucracy is only possible if the general interest becomes real – and not, as with Hegel, merely in thought, in abstraction – a particular interest, and if the particular interest becomes really the general interest.

Thus, the point is not to assume civil-*bourgeois* society as a natural given (as in the liberal-individualist or corporative-hegelian mode), but to truly transform this civil society so that the requirement for the predominance of the general will is no longer an ethical postulate, as in Rousseau, nor an empty abstraction, as in Hegel, but instead something grounded in concrete material bases.

Marx's subsequent work, written between 1843 and 1844, the *Zur Judenfrage*, essentially deepens the ideas summarized above. Here, however, the polemical intention is expressly directed against the Rousseauian legacy and against the illusions of Jacobinism. Marx (1975c, p. 58-59) is clear: political emancipation is insufficient insofar as, by

maintaining the distinction between public and private, it affirms man as universal being – or affirms the predominance of the general will – only in the realm of abstraction, and only in a formal way. An insurmountable dualism persists between the spheres of public and private life. As Marx (1975c, p. 59) writes:

> The perfected political state is by its nature man's life as a species in contrast to his material life. All the presuppositions of his egoistic life remain in civil society, outside the sphere of the state [...]. Where the political state has achieved its true development, man leads a double life, not only in thought and consciousness but in reality, in life: a heavenly life and earthly life. In the political community he regards himself as a communal being, but in civil society He is a private person, treating other men as means, degrading himself into means, and becoming the play thing of alien powers.

Herewe are in the full realm of *alienation*. The German philosopher demonstrates that the public/private duality necessarily leads to a "return of the repressed" – that is, to the emptying of the ideal community and to the practical collapse of the imaginary general will. Marx (1975a, p. 71-72), referring to the Jacobin period of the French Revolution, asserts:

> At those moments when political life has its particular self-feeling, it seeks to suppress its precondition, civil society and its elements, and to constitute itself as the real life of the species. But it can only do this by coming into violent contradiction with its own conditions of life, by declaring the revolution to be permanent, and therefore, by the necessary and equally violent and contradictory downfall of this activity, which ends with there-establishment of the worldly elements of civil society: property, religion, etc.

Observing that, in purely political emancipation, the *citoyen* is treated as the servant of the egoistic man, Marx advocates for *human emancipation*, an expression that will soon be replaced by *socialist revolution* or *communism*. The triumph of civil-*bourgeois* society over the political State – the triumph of the *bourgeois* over the *citoyen* – can be seen, in a terminology not of Marx's own, as the triumph of liberalism over democracy. By proposing human emancipation or communism, Marx sought to give concrete and effective dimension to democratic ideals. He did not criticize formal democracy (liberalism) for being democratic, but rather for failing to be so fully and in reality.

It was therefore a matter of resuming the problem of constructing the general will on another level: not through there pression of the private by public, nor through their antagonistic coexistence, but through overcoming the social bases that reproduce private reality as the central motive of human action and condemn the public sphere to the realm of the imaginary. The key to the – let us say – *enigma* of the impasses ofthe general will lies in civil-*bourgeois* society. Marx (1970, p. 9) would soon discover – starting with the

Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844 – that, to use his own expression from 1859, "The anatomy of civil society is to be sought in political economy". We can only briefly recall the central idea that Marx reached: only with the constitution of a new form of society – founded on the social ownership of the means of production, on the self-government of associated producers, on the end of class antagonism, and on the extinction of the State as a separate entity – can the antinomy between the *bourgeois* and the *citoyen*, between the public and private dimensions of human life, be truly overcome, and the effective predominance of the general will be established. At this point, although his solution differs substantially from Rousseau's, Marx converges with the Genevan philosopher on one essential point: a legitimate political form necessarily presupposes the construction of an equally legitimate social order.

Marx differs from Rousseau, however, in that – accepting Hegel's realist challenge – he seeks to indicate, within civil-*bourgeois* society itself, the constitution of a possible material bearer of the projector the general will. That is, a social class whose particular interests contain the potential for universalization. Although still in an abstract manner, Marx (1975b, p. 245-246) already perceives the existence of this class in his 1844 text *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*: *Einleitung*. Let us consider the passage:

> A classwith radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right, because no particular wrong but wrong generally is perpetrated against it [...]; a sphere which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself by the complete redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.

With entirely different concrete solutions, Marx was following here the methodological path suggested by Hegel: on the one hand, the possibility of a general will presupposes objective foundations – in this case, the being of the proletariat, distinct from its mere appearance. On the other hand, this possibility only becomes actuality because there exists a stratum (in Hegel, the bureaucracy; in Marx, the proletariat) in which the pursuit of particular interests leads to the realization of the common or universal interest.

Focused on uncovering the anatomy of civil-*bourgeois* society through the study of political economy, the mature Marx did not return in detail to the problem of class consciousness – that is, the process by which the in-itself of the proletariat as a universal

classis converted into the for-itself of a class consciousness oriented toward the general will. We believe that Marx assigned a decisive role to the various proletarian organizations (unions, parties, etc.) in this conversion. However, *none of these texts authorize the belief that the party was for him the bearer of the general will*. Even when Marx was still politically close to Blanquism (in the period from 1848 to 1850), he tended to conceive of the workers' party as the ensemble of organizations through which the working class organized and expressed itself. Claudín (1976, p. 46-59) offers an excellent overview of this, beyond the scope of these lines. One can say that, for Marx, the material bearer of the general will is the working class itself. This perhaps finds its clearest expression in the famous statement that the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves.

4 LENIN: A JACOBIN PROPOSAL

A Jacob intendency is clearly manifest in Lenin's conception and, more generally, in that of the Bolsheviks. To be sure, the Russian revolutionary leader deserves credit for attempting a more detailed examination on the levels of formation of class consciousness than Marx himself had undertaken. He did not limit himself to the simple opposition between class in-itself and class for-itself but introduced the idea of different gradations within this for-itself; that is, different levels of class consciousness. Between the singular consciousness of the individual proletarian and the universal ("social-democratic") class consciousness, Lenin introduced the level of trade-unionist consciousness, which, in some respects, is similar to Hegel's corporative spirit. For Lenin (1976, p. 164), this trade-unionist consciousness involves only "the relations of workers in a given trade with their particular employers, and its goal for Sellers of labor power to learn how to sell commodity at the Best possible price, and to fight the buyers on the purely commercial terrain of these transactions".

We are thus operating at the level of corporatist particularism, which – to use theterminology of the young Marx – does not go beyond the bounds of the existing civil-*bourgeois* society. By contrast, what Lenin (1976, p. 69-70) calls social-democratic consciousness expresses:

> The working class not only in relation to a specific group of employers but in relation to all classes of contemporary society, in relation to the State as an organized political force, [with the goal] not only of obtaining advantageous conditions for the sale of labor power, but of destroying the social regime that forces the dispossessed to sell themselves to the rich.

The notion of *totality* is introduced here by Lenin in a *dual sense*: on the one hand, the working class must raise to consciousness the objective totality in which it is inserted; without this, it cannot know itself in the full extent of its determinations. On the other hand, by becoming aware of the particular problems of all classes, the proletariat can incorporate into its political Project the demands of all the strata opposed to autocratic oppression and capitalism, becoming what Lenin (1976, *passim*) calls the *hegemonic class*. Or, in the terminology we have been using: it could, from the vantage point of its specific class consciousness, give form to a general will that embodies the common interest of society.

Up to this point, Lenin's description could be understood as a contribution toward concretizing and rendering more realistic Marx's general formulation, accounting for the fact that the appearance of the proletariat does not always coincide with its being. The problem arises when Lenin seeks to identify the factor that elevates the proletariat from its particular consciousness to its true universal consciousness, and that simultaneously embodies and functions as the material bearer of this universal consciousness. As is well known, this factor would be the vanguard party, a small detachment of professional revolutionaries who, armed with the "correct" theory of social movement, lead the proletariat in its struggles. Lenin justifies the introduction of this external agent based on his theory that, spontaneously and through its own partial struggles, the proletariat is incapable of rising to "proper" socialist consciousness. As Lenin (1976, p. 32) points out: "The workers could not arriveat social-democratic consciousness on their own. This could only be brought to them from the outside".

We are thus situated, in a certain way, within the same problematic as Rousseau and the Jacobins: insofar as the split between *bourgeois* and *citoyen* (or public/private) also runs through the interior of the proletariat itself; and insofar as Lenin does not believe that the awakening of this class's universal consciousness can occur through an immanent overcoming of corporatist-particularist consciousness, it becomes necessary to resort an external element to "force it to be free". The Rousseauian *législateur* is transfigured into the vanguard party, which – in Lenin's formulation – substitutes the proletariat as the material bearer of the general will. We cannot elaborate further on this matter here, but it does not seem to us that Rosa Luxemburg and the Mensheviks were mistaken when they characterized Lenin's theories as manifestations of Jacobinism and Blanquism.

5 GRAMSCI: HISTORICAL BLOC, HEGEMONY, PLURALISM

In his attempt to define what himself called the *collective will*, Gramsci (1977) departs from the Leninist theory concerning the levels of class consciousness; however, he perhaps goes beyond, at least in its core, the Jacobinism implicit in the theory of the party formulated by Lenin. For Gramsci (1977, p. 1560-1561), the elevation from corporate consciousness to universal consciousness is not the result of something imposed from the outside, but the outcome of an immanent and dialectical process, which he calls *catharsis*:

> The term "catharsis" maybe employed to indicate the passage from the merely economic (or egeoistic-passionate) moment to the ethical-political moment – that is, the higher elaboration of the structure into a superstructure in the consciousness of men. This also signifies the transition from "objective to subjective" and from "necessity to freedom".

Implyingt he moment of the leap from economic determinism to political freedom, Gramsci's catharsis is the process through which a class ceases to be a purely economic-objective phenomenon (a class-in-itself) and becomes a conscious subject of history (a class-for-itself). If a social class fails to accomplish this catharsis, it cannot become a leading class capable of organizing a *historical bloc* – in other words, it cannot achieve *hegemony* in society.

Gramsci's concept of leading, national, or hegemonic class represents both a concretization and a dialectical overcoming of Marx's notion of the universal class. Marx and Engels – and with them, the dominant tradition of the Marxism of the Second International – tended to assume that the proletariat as such embodied the general interest, an assumption based on the idea that, through the process of capital concentration and centralization, the working class would eventually become the overwheling majority in society. Gramsci (1996, p. 1224), however, approaches the issue differently. For him, the identification between the particular and the general in the proletariat is not an immediate process:

> In order to be able to govern as a class, the proletariat must strip itself of every corporative residue, of every prejudice or syndicalist encrustation. What does it mean? It means that not only must the distinctions between profession and profession be overcome, but the certain prejudices that may subsist, and indeed do subsist, within the working class as such must also be overcome. [Workers] Must think as workers who are part of a class that seeks to lead the peasants and the intellectuals, a class that can only triumph and build socialism if it is aided and followed by the vast majority of the social strata. If it fails in this task, the working class will not become a leading class.

Certainly, due to its objective position within the capitalist mode of production, the proletariat is seen as the central pole aggregating this broad alliance of classes and strata. But it is precisely through contributing to the formation of a historical bloc that the proletariat can transcend its particular consciousness and elevate itself to the level of the collective will. Thus, whereas for Marx the material bearer of general will was the proletariat as a whole, and for Lenin it was essentially the vanguard party, for Gramsci this material bearer appears as the very historical bloc: a collective subject composed of multiple classes, within which several layers of egoistic-passionate interest shave been overcome *cathartically* – not merely corporate-professional interests, but even strictly class-based ones.

The Gramscian formulation makes it possible to reconcile the predominance of the general or collective will with the institutional and organizational pluralism – something explicitly rejected by Rousseau's model. Referring to Gramsci, Ingrao (1977, p. 40), also a Marxist and Italian, affirms:

> Today we speak of hegemony and of pluralism. I would put it more precisely: hegemony of the working class within pluralism; a struggle for a working-class hegemony that is expressed through pluralism. It is a formula that does not merely indicate leadership by the working class based on consensus; it is a formula that already points to a specific political and state form of consensus.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Gramsci, realism in recognizing the necessary pluralism of modern society combines with the preservation of Rousseau's democratic ideal – that of a society founded upon the predominance of the general will. In revisiting some attempts to elucidate the concept of the general will and identify its concrete embodiments, we have tried to indicate how the overcoming of previous theoretical impasses was almost always followed by the emergence of new ones. With Gramsci, it seems to us that a theoretical solution becomes possible, one that indissolubly links democracy, pluralism, and socialism. Yet it is true that one could immediately object: where there is democracy, there is no socialism; or, where socialism claims to have existed, democracy was absent. Faced with this, we can only respond with a sincere invocation of hope.

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