

## Non-Politicised Elections

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In Engels's key work, 'Dell' Autorità', which was originally published in Italian in the midst of the struggle with the Anarchists (who were popular in Italy) and their 'anti-authoritarian' push. Engels writes: 'All socialists are agreed that the political state [*Stato politico*], and with it political authority [*l'autorità politica*], will disappear [*scompariranno*] as a result of the coming social revolution, that is, that public functions [*funzioni pubbliche*] will lose their political character [*carattere politico*]. But what, exactly, does political character mean?

The answer is simple enough: by political character both Engels and Marx mean the reality of class struggle and its manifestation in the state. Thus, the manifesto observes, immediately after mentioning the political character of public *Gewalt* (power) absorbed into the state: 'Political *Gewalt*, properly so called, is merely the organised *Gewalt* of one class for oppressing another'. I do not need to reiterate the details of Engels's work on the state as a separated public power here (emphasis on separated), except to point out that if public *Gewalt* – with the senses of power, force and even violence – loses its political character, it ceases to be a manifestation and instrument of class struggle and thus coercion. Clearly, public *Gewalt* is not necessarily separated from society, for it may take other forms.

The formulation may be relatively simple, but the implications are far-reaching. On this matter at least, Marx offers a couple of hints. In his cryptic notes on Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*, Marx refers to what may be called non-political elections. How is this possible? Are not elections inherently political? This is so for those who have been indoctrinated by the Western liberal tradition, in which elections are the manifestation of regulated class conflict within the bourgeois state. So let us see what Marx suggests, all too briefly. He begins by pointing out that the character of an election depends in its 'economic foundation [*ökonomischen Grundlage*]', on the 'economic interrelations [*ökonomischen Zusammenhängen*] of the voters'. That is, if economic relations are antagonistic, and if classes have formed and are engaged in class struggle, then elections will be 'political'. What if this situation does not apply and economic relations are not antagonistic? Then 'the functions have ceased to be political [*die Funktionen aufgehört haben, politisch zu sein*]'.

Marx then specifies the sense in which he uses *politisch*, or, rather, its absence. First, there are 'no ruling functions [*keine Regierungsfunktion*]'. I have stressed the sense of rule and reign that are part of the semantic field of *Regierung*, since 'government' or even 'administration' (also senses of the word) are too weak and do not capture Marx's sense. This meaning appears in the second point: 'the distribution of general functions has become a routine matter [*Geschäftssache*] which entails no domination [*keine Herrschaft*]'. By this point, Marx is not speaking about the period of the proletarian dictatorship, but afterwards, when antagonistic contradictions have ceased. Now we come to third point, where he observes: 'elections have nothing [*hat nichts*] of today's political character [*politischen Charakter*]'. If political character means what pertains to antagonistic economic relations and class conflict, characteristic of the bourgeois state and its electoral system, then without that context, elections will lose, will have nothing of the political character of today – not only in Marx's context where the

bourgeois state was gradually being implemented across Western Europe, but also in those parts of the world today that are influenced by this tradition, either in Europe itself or in some of its former colonies.

Do non-political elections already take place today? Let me offer an example drawn from elections in China. Elections are held more regularly than in bourgeois states, both direct and indirect. Thus, elections internal to the Communist Party are held at all local branches. In a village, in a small company, in a school – wherever there are three or more party members a branch is formed and elections are held for local posts, especially the local branch secretary. Why three? Only then can you have elections to such a post. In society as a whole, elections are held for the local National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC). These elections are held annually, are direct and include candidates from all nine political parties.

At higher levels – from the provincial to the national – elections are indirect. That is, people are elected from the lower and local bodies, and are subject to assessment as to whether they have the appropriate skills and experience. Thus, the national NPC and CPPCC require significant electoral processes each year. Thousands of representatives from across the country, from all classes, minority nationalities, religious groups and other sectors of society, are elected to the two bodies. I cannot go into more detail here, but the question remains: do these elections have a political character? No, for the system is known as a 'multi-party cooperation and political consultative system [*duodang hezuo he zhengzhi xieshang zhidu*]', which designates that the system of elections that is not based on class conflict but on non-antagonistic relations among the different groups and their representatives.

Thus, in many respects elections have already lost their political character in China.