

Friedrich Engels and the Foundations of Socialist Governance: Synopsis

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The following is a synopsis of my book on Engels and socialist governance. It arises from a distinct need to understand: the socialist country I know best – China – clearly has a more mature and increasingly superior form of governance than that of capitalist states that derive their form from Western Europe. I found that needed to make sense of my awareness and the empirical reality on the ground in China. So I have returned to the roots of the Marxist tradition, to the texts of Marx and Engels. I wanted to find out what they had to say about the type of governance that might unfold after a proletarian revolution.

You may say, as many do: Marx did not write a systematic work on the state. You can glean occasional comments from here and there and write perhaps an article (as I have done). But with Engels it is an entirely different story. As my research deepened, I came to realise that it is Engels who provides rich resources indeed for understanding socialist governance. Of course, Engels is the real driver for our approaches today for understanding hitherto existing states – including the capitalist state. But he does much more than that: he also provides the basic philosophical principles for what may be called socialist governance. This book is an effort to explicate this theory in light of all the relevant material. Yes, *all*: this effort means that the book has some quite detailed analyses of key texts, but this is the only way to gain a complete sense of what Engels tried to convey.

Let me state up front what Engels proposes concerning socialist governance. It entails that public power (*Gewalt*) loses its political character and focuses on the administration of the stuff of life and conduct of the economy for the good of the whole community (*Gemeinwesen*). This means that such a public power stands in the midst of society, rather than separate from and opposed to it. Far from being simpler and local (as the Anarchists would have it), this approach is even more complex and detailed than anything we have seen before, so much so that it constitutes a whole new level of authority, sovereignty and power. This is not all, for in extensive research later in life, especially into the German 'Mark', Engels argued for a dialectical transformation, an *Aufhebung* to a whole new qualitative level of original or baseline communism and its democracy. These concise points require a significant amount of explanation and exegesis of Engels's texts in order to show how he arrives at such formulations.

A question remains: why 'socialist governance' and not, for example, socialist politics or the socialist state? Those infused with Western liberal assumptions and indeed Western Marxism may find that the terminology of 'governance' belongs more to the domain of management studies and such like. However, I have chosen the term 'socialist governance' carefully. Why? To begin with, for Engels the idea of a socialist state would be an oxymoron. Since he saw any form of the state as a separated public power,

and since he proposed that in a socialist system a public power would – by contrast – be enmeshed within society, I could not use the terminology of a ‘socialist state’. Further, since both Engels and Marx define politics in terms of the manifestation of class struggle and propose depoliticised elections and consultations in a socialist system, ‘socialist politics’ would also not be appropriate. Hence the terminology of socialist governance, which captures best the basic principles Engels espoused. One final reason: the English translation of three important volumes by Xi Jinping is *The Governance of China* (*zhiguolizheng*). The Chinese may also be translated as ‘management state affairs’ or ‘governing a country’. This book’s title is also meant to reflect such a usage, and indeed a notable continuity from Engels to China today.

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Chapter Synopsis

Chapter 1: Introduction and Synopsis

The introductory chapter sets the scene by identifying the reason why this study has been undertaken and how I do so. As to why, it constitutes a search for understanding the nature of socialist governance today, especially in China. As to how, I return to the foundational texts of the Marxist tradition, finding that it is Engels in particular who provides the most comprehensive framework. After a brief word on the inadequacies of the existing and relatively sparse secondary literature, the chapter offers a detailed synopsis of each of the chapters to follow. I close with a word on the method of citations, in

which I cite the original language source first and then the English translation for ease of reference – even if the translations offered are mostly my own.

Chapter 2: The State as a Separated Public Power

The next chapter deals initially with Engels's programmatic observations on hitherto existing states, which would set the subsequent agenda for Marxist studies of such states. Apart from noting the key features of this analysis, which involves the core idea of the state as a 'separated public power', the chapter focuses on Engels's shifts between seeing such states as semi-autonomous, as instruments of a particular class in power, or as shaped in their very nature by the class in question. Engels moves between these three overlapping approaches, depending on the point he seeks to make, but he tends in more detailed work to opt for the third: that the nature of the state is determined by the class in power. This position emerges particularly in a relatively ignored work, 'The Role of Force in History' (1887-1888). Here Engels offers an analysis of Bismarck in Germany that is a close companion to Marx's 'Eighteenth Brumaire' (1852), with the specific point that the bourgeoisie was able to shape the state in its image indirectly, even when it did not hold the reins of power. Even more important is the emergence of a core category, *Gewalt*. The word is difficult to translate: its semantic field includes the senses of force, power and violence, so I leave the word untranslated. This provides a rather new angle, not only on his proposal that hitherto existing states may be defined as a 'separated public *Gewalt*', but also that a 'public *Gewalt*' exists that is not separated, and that it is necessary for the workers' movement to exercise socialist *Gewalt*.

Chapter 3: Socialist Gewalt and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

This point leads to the third chapter, concerning socialist *Gewalt* and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The key finding of this chapter is Engels's emphasis on proletarian *Gewalt*, in both the revolutionary process and in the early stages of the construction of socialism when power is gained through a revolution. The concrete manifestation of this socialist *Gewalt* is the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Engels (like Marx) defines carefully not as an individual dictatorship (as with Bakunin) or by a small band (Blanquist), but as a collective dictatorship by the majority, the workers. On this basis, Engels's important contribution was to go beyond Marx and identify the Paris commune with the proletarian dictatorship. The context was a struggle with the moderates of the increasingly large German Social-Democratic Party, who tried to dispense with the dictatorship of the proletariat in its program and work within bourgeois democracy. In light of later tendencies in European communism to downplay the proletarian dictatorship and idealise the Paris commune (for example, with 'Eurocommunism' and the tendency among some Western Marxists), Engels's explicit argument that the commune was the exercise of the proletarian dictatorship, even that it did not go far enough in exercising such a dictatorship, is a timely warning. The chapter concludes by analysing Engels's explicit usage of 'socialist *Gewalt*' itself, both before and after a revolution. Crucially, Engels points out that political power also has economic influence and potency (*Potenz*).

Chapter 4: Abolition or Dying Away of the State?

The fourth chapter focuses on the 'dying away' of the state, in contrast to its 'abolition' as promulgated by Bakunin and the Anarchists in the late 1860s and 1870s. Given the many misunderstandings that surround the idea of the 'dying away' of the state, this is the longest chapter in book since it analyses in significant detail all of the relevant material. It begins by studying the wider context in the 1840s among German socialists, finding that while they spoke of the abolition (*Abschaffung*), annihilation (*Vernichtung*) and dialectical transformation (*Aufhebung*) of private property, money and inheritance, they rarely, if ever, spoke of doing so to the state as such. (A detailed analysis of all appearances of these three terms appears in the Appendix.) Instead, they envisioned alternative structures, either of a new state or of a new form of social organisation. This is true even of Proudhon, who deeply influenced these early German socialists. There is one notable exception: Max Stirner in his liberal anarchist work, *The Ego and Its Own* (1845), urged that the state should be abolished and annihilated. Thus, only when Engels and Marx (and others like Moses Hess) engage with Stirner do they speak of the abolition of the state, finding Stirner's proposals wanting since they focus on an act of pure will.

It is only in 1850 that Engels (and Marx) speak directly of the 'abolition [*Abschaffung*]' of the state for the first time. Notably, this is a critical response to what had become a popular slogan in all manner of circles, including bourgeois ones where such an 'abolition' entailed a bourgeois order in which they would be left alone to pursue their private gain. Crucially, this piece – which borrows the language of the slogan – identifies Stirner as the source and introduces the need for a delay in such an abolition. This delay is an early result of the method hammered out in the years before and expressed clearly for the first time in the Communist Manifesto of 1848: the primary concern should be socio-economic matters. Thus, a communist revolution would have these as its main task, while any 'abolition' of the state would follow as an outcome of such activity. This would be the position, refined and sharpened, that both Engels and Marx would hold in the struggle with Bakunin, who first formulated a somewhat coherent Anarchist position in the late 1860s and particularly in 1870s.

For Bakunin, the state was the prime cause and foundation of all exploitation and oppression, whether political or economic. Thus, the first task of a revolutionary movement upon attaining power should be to abolish (*Abschaffung*) the state, as a willed and conscious act. Bakunin struggled to show why the state should have this foundational role, at times connecting its quasi-sacred status with the role of the Christian church. But for Engels and Marx, this approach simply did not make sense: in light of their approach, the state was a secondary phenomenon, arising from economic conditions and class struggle. Thus, a communist revolution would need to enact wide-sweeping changes to the means and relations of production before aspects of the superstructure, such as the state, could be addressed. In this context, we find an increasing emphasis that one of the final results of the process of constructing socialism, after other tasks had been achieved and the counter-revolution had been defeated, would be not the 'abolition' of the state, but its falling away, disappearance, going to sleep – the terms all appear in

works of this time. Finally and as a way to sum up this position, Engels coined in the third edition of *Anti-Dühring* of 1894 the famous slogan: 'the state is not abolished, it dies away'. The influence of this slogan is due to its appearance in the extracted material that appeared as 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', which was read and studied by all Communists of the second and third generations.

Chapter 5: Towards Enmeshed Socialist Governance

The fifth chapter begins by addressing a contradiction that has arisen in light of the previous two chapters: between socialist *Gewalt* and the dying away of the of the state. The initial narrative of the former passing to the latter, which is part of Engels's approach, addresses neither how authority and *Gewalt* would continue, nor the nature of governance in a communist society. Dealing with these questions is the focus of this chapter, although I undertake the task with an important caveat: Engels, and indeed Marx, never experienced the actual exercise of power after a communist revolution. They were fully aware of this reality, warning that such analysis can be undertaken only scientifically, only from actual experience. As Engels points out on a number of occasions, he and Marx were not in the business of creating utopian systems for the organisation of future society.

The chapter has two main sections. The first part analyses a number of brief statements by Engels and Marx that may be collated as follows: public *Gewalt* loses its political character and becomes the administration of things and conduct of forces and relations of production, for the genuine good of society. The statements are notably brief, even formulaic, for the good reason that they had in their context no extensive data on the actual practice of socialist governance. There was, however, an abundance of information from another source: pre-state forms of social organisation that existed in many parts of the world. It was precisely to this source of information that Engels devoted considerable energy in the 1880s. Here he found complex and many-layered types of what he carefully called 'social organisation', which was not separated from but stood 'in the midst of society'. They were not separated from society, not manifestations and means of class struggle, and thus did not constitute a state. Here, I seek to develop a terminology based on Engels, which speaks of the 'enmeshed governance' of 'baseline communism', with its attendant and indeed first form of human democracy. This is all very well, based as it was on the available historical and anthropological material of the time, but what relevance does it have for the enmeshed governance of socialism, let alone communism? To answer this question, I focus on the remarkable work from 1882, 'The Mark'. Here Engels outlines his research into this feature of German social life, from its earliest days to the present. The point – directed explicitly at peasant farmers – is that the communism of the future would entail a dialectical transformation (*Aufhebung*) of this baseline communism. Far from a hankering for the rural socialism of the European Middle Ages, or for an idealised 'primitive communism', or even for a secularised version of the religious return to Paradise, this dialectical transformation would both negate this baseline communism and transform its core features into a qualitatively different reality. Given that such a form of governance would stand in the midst of society, it cannot be called a 'state'; indeed, we reach the limits of the language derived from the Western

European tradition, for with this type of enmeshed governance it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of the separation of state and society.

Chapter 6: Concluding Observation: What Is In a Name?

The concluding chapter to the book summarises Engels's basic principles concerning the nature of socialist governance: 1) Public power (*Gewalt*) continues but loses its 'political character'; 2) Governance entails the administration of things and the management of the processes of production for the sake of the true interests of society; 3) The many organs of governance would not be separated from society but stand in the midst of society; 4) This reality may be seen as a dialectical transformation, an *Aufhebung* of baseline communism. I ask whether these principles are being realised, even partially, in socialist countries today. I also examine what such a governance may be called, since 'state' is – understood as a separated public power – is not appropriate in Engels's term. And I ask how we may understand the question of continuity and discontinuity. On this matter it is important to strike a realistic balance: to suggest that Engels and indeed Marx foresaw, or perhaps should have foreseen, all of the developments in later efforts to construct socialism is simply unrealistic; to propose that later historical realities departed significantly from the original thoughts of the founders is even more extreme and not sustained by the evidence. Far better is a balanced approach. Thus, there is clearly significant continuity, much more than one might expect, between the initial philosophical foundations and the historical realities of socialist governance. At the same time, in the actual construction of socialism, from the Soviet Union to China, one would expect to face new problems for which new solutions were and are needed – albeit based on the initial principles and the method through which they were derived. As Engels put it in 1890, 'So-called "socialist society" is not, in my view, to be regarded as something that remains crystallised for all time, but rather being in process of constant change and transformation like all other social conditions'.