

Socialism in Power: On the History and Theory of Socialist Governance (Synopsis)

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This monograph concerns the historical development – in practice and theory – of governance in socialist systems. With more than a century of such practice from many parts of the world, including the Soviet Union, China, and the DPRK (North Korea), it is possible to gain much from careful study of their political systems. This book sets out to examine these developments.

At the same time, these countries were and are part of the Marxist-Leninist tradition, so it is necessary not only to make use of the method developed by this tradition, but also to begin with the works of Marx and Engels. This is the task of the opening two chapters, in which I emphasise in particular the influence of Engels in establishing the basic principles of socialist governance. From here, I devote three chapters to the Soviet Union, which was the first country in human history to experience socialism in power. The second half of the book moves to East Asia, with an initial chapter devoted to the DPRK (North Korea), before focusing in the remaining chapters on China, which arguably has the most developed form of socialist governance.

Why is this book important? To begin with, the century in question reveals that the form of governance that emerged was and is unlike any other form that had hitherto appeared. This new form is not a version of the Western European “nation-state,” not an empire or colonising power, and not a federation. This book in one respect is an examination of what exactly this new form is.

Further, there are still too few works available in English that provide a fair assessment of the experiences of socialism in power. The main reason for such a scarcity is the imposition of a Western liberal framework, and thus the model of the Western capitalist nation-state, on socialist development. As this book will show, such a model is an ill-fit indeed for countries with very different histories, cultures, and traditions of governance. This Western liberal model has also influenced a few too many Western Marxist dismissals – for reasons too many to enumerate here – of any actual experience of socialism in power. By contrast, the works that do seek to understand socialism in power on its own terms are still relatively few. This is the gap in knowledge I seek to fill. I anticipate that the readership will primarily be drawn from those who do not live in socialist countries, but it may be that scholars in such countries are also interested.

Some crucial features of the way this study is framed need to be highlighted. First, there is a qualitative difference between a Communist Party seeking power through revolutionary processes and the actual exercise of power. As Lenin observed, gaining power through a proletarian revolution is relatively easy; seeking to construct socialism after taking power is exponentially more complicated. Hence the title of the book, *Socialism in Power*. Second, the tradition of socialist governance is a living tradition, a constant work in progress. It is neither a given, which one can know in advance, nor unchangeable. Third, the agenda for this work in progress is set by the Marxist method. This last point should be obvious, but it needs to be emphasised: the agenda is not set by Western liberal criticisms, but by the Marxist method itself in relation to the developments of socialist governance. By Marxist method I mean Marxism as a guide for socialist construction. In this light, there is an important distinction – common in China and elsewhere – between basic principles and specific judgements made in light of specific circumstances. Obviously, the latter are not permanent, but are determined by specific cultural traditions, histories, and

problems that need to be solved. What about the basic principles? These remain, but they are not immutable, unchangeable in time and place and simply applied. Instead, they undergo a process of innovation and development, being enriched in the process.

A final note: *Socialism in Power* builds on a couple of my earlier works, namely, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Springer 2021), and *Friedrich Engels and the Foundations of Socialist Governance* (Springer 2021).

Chapter Synopsis

The following offers an abstract of each chapter. Some of the abstracts are more well developed, since I have undertaken substantive research on these matters. This is the case with chapters 2, 3, 5 and 9. The remaining abstracts offer guidelines for the focus of research, but will obviously develop and be refined in light of that research.

1. Introduction: Method and Overview

The introductory chapter situates the book in light of available scholarship, identifies the method, and provides a synopsis of the book as a whole.

2. Marx's Ambivalence: State, Proletarian Dictatorship and Commune

This chapter concerns what Marx thought might happen to the state under socialism in power, after a communist revolution. The first part concerns Marx's observations on hitherto existing forms of the state, especially absolutist, bourgeois, and imperialist forms (which he experienced in Prussia and England). The second and third parts concern his proposals for what may follow, focusing on the dictatorship of the proletariat and the (Paris) commune from 1871. The material on the proletarian dictatorship and the commune reveals some tensions that Marx was unable to resolve, turning on the question as to how the proletarian dictatorship relates to the commune. Marx did make a beginning in terms of a sequence, with the proletarian dictatorship introducing certain measures that would pave the way for the commune, but he never resolved the problem. Clearly, Marx realised that socialist governance was necessary, but he was also reticent to spell out in detail what such governance might involve – not least because he knew full well that he did not have the experience and thereby evidence to undertake a scientific study of what happens to the state under communism.

3. Friedrich Engels and the Foundations of Socialist Governance

In this chapter, I summarise the argument of an earlier monograph on this topic (*Friedrich Engels and the Foundations of Socialist Governance*), since it was Engels who provided the basic principles for what socialist governance might be. The chapter begins with a summary of Engels's well-known theory of forms of the state that had existed thus far, which may be formulated in terms of the state as a "separated public power." Of more pertinence for socialist construction are his subsequent proposals. These begin with the explicit identification (not found in Marx) of the Paris commune as the dictatorship of the proletariat, as well as the important role of "force [*Gewalt*]" in the initial exercise of proletarian power. Engels also sought to clarify the crucial theory of the "dying away of the state." In response to the Anarchists, who proposed that the first act of socialist power would be the "abolition [*Abschaffung*]" of the state, Engels clarified a position already implicit in the "Manifesto of the Communist Party": the state would die away of its own accord as one of the last results of socialism in power. It would not happen quickly, but would take a long time indeed. The final part of the chapter elaborates on Engels's principles of socialist governance. These are: 1) public power (*Gewalt*) continues but loses its antagonistic "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 (*Aufhebung*) of baseline communism.

4. Lenin: Before and After October

Lenin occupies a unique position, since he experienced both seeking power and exercising power, both the struggle before October and the difficulties of socialist construction after October – albeit too briefly. Notably, it was after October that revolutionary fervour and even idealism met the sober realities of socialist construction. In this context, we find that Lenin strengthened Engels’s identification of the proletarian dictatorship with the commune. In Lenin’s clear formulation, the dictatorship of the proletariat – embodied in the soviets – was qualitatively superior and thus the highest stage of democracy achieved thus far. The hard edge of this dictatorship – recall Engels’s emphasis on *Gewalt* – was directed at the counter-revolutionary forces during the Civil War. As for democracy, this was specifically for the vast majority of urban and rural workers that had been excluded under earlier political forms, although it also required measures to cajole the laggards among the workers. It also became clear early on that the nature of socialist democracy required not a form of multi-party bourgeois democracy, but the continued leadership of the Communist Party – a reality embodied in the practice of democratic centralism. Further, Lenin argued that Marx’s “initial phase” of communism (in “Critique of the Gotha Programme”) was actually the stage of socialism. This long period would not only lay the foundations for communism, but it would also require a proletarian state form. What of the “dying away” of the state? Lenin took to heart Engels’s emphasis that such a process would be long and protracted, one of the final acts of socialist construction, and that one simply could not say when it might happen. Lenin saw these developments as part of the final stage of communism, when even socialist democracy would eventually die away, along with classes and the state that arose from classes.

5. The Practice and Theory of the “Socialist State” in the Soviet Union

Lenin had only a few years to experience the actual practice of socialist governance, so he was able to see only its nascent forms beginning to emerge. It was – perhaps surprising for some – in the context of Stalin’s long tenure that real developments took place on the ground. This chapter begins with a factual presentation of the Soviet Union’s governmental structures (legislative bodies and regional organisations), political parties, and forms of socialist democracy. The fullest expression of these realities is the constitution of 1936, concerning which there was considerable theoretical development at the time. Here we find a distinct appreciation of the importance of a strong state, which was required for the construction of socialism in a country that had – before the October Revolution – become a “failed state” as the result of war, famine, and social breakdown. It was the distinct achievement of the Bolsheviks not merely to construct a new form of governance from the ashes, but also to establish a positive view of the role of the state for all subsequent socialist systems. This reality was manifested at many levels: economic policy; a comprehensive welfare system; the world’s first “affirmative action” program for minority nationalities, so much so that the many nationalities became part of the very structure of the state; support for anti-colonial struggles around the world (as a new development in global revolution); and dealing with internal and especially external enemies. By the second half of the 1930s, it became clear that these developments – not without significant turmoil in the process of comprehensive and rapid reconstruction – were bearing fruit. At this time, we find early explorations of the nature of socialist

democracy, the development of non-antagonistic class relations (workers, farmers, and intellectuals) during socialist construction, and clarity concerning the leadership of the Communist Party as an inescapable feature of a socialist political system. How to define this new system? It was not a federation, nation-state, empire, or colonising power. We may perhaps speak of a “multi-national state,” but they preferred to speak of an “entirely new, Socialist state [*sotsialisticheskoe gosudarstvo*], without precedent in history.” As for the “dying away” of the state, Lenin’s position was affirmed: this would be one of the final results of communism.

6. Retreat or Consolidation? On the Soviet Domestic State

Out of many policies enacted in the Soviet Union – including minority nationalities policies, international anti-colonial struggles, and proactive human rights – the question of welfare or domestic policies provides a distinct insight into the developments and problems of socialist governance. In the 1920s, the Soviet Union enacted a series of laws that ended centuries of domestic family practices: marriage was made a civil procedure, no-guilt divorce could be requested by either partner, de facto relationships were recognised, the category of illegitimacy for children was abolished, maintenance of children of divorced couples was decided by the courts, and abortion was made freely available. By the 1930s, some of these laws were either repealed or revised. Was this a retreat from the radical measures of the 1920s? Some would suggest so, but I offer a different perspective: it was a consolidation of new domestic situation based on three factors. First, the laws of the 1920s attempted to alter relations within households and thus the domestic space. These measures – where they could be enacted – led to a spate of new and unexpected problems, generated mostly by men who misused the laws. By the 1930s and in response to pressure from women, the emphasis had shifted to the state’s role in providing domestic services, especially those pertaining to safe and adequate conditions for mothers, medical care, maternal leave, subsidies for children, child care, and crèches for the children of working parents. Second, the measures of the 1930s arose in response to the massive education program for girls and women, and the fact that by this time 42 percent of the workforce was made up of women. Third, many of the laws of the 1920s could not be enacted in full due to the low level of economic development in the Soviet Union. The economy would only be established on a new footing in the 1930s, with the “socialist offensive” entailing large-scale industrialisation and collectivisation of farming. Thus, it was on a solid economic basis that the consolidation of the 1930s was possible.

7. The “Korean Style” of Socialist Governance in the DPRK

With a focus on the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK), this chapter signals the move to East Asia. Of potential case studies for analysis, who do I focus on the DPRK? Not only is it the most enduring of all the socialist countries, but it also appears at first glance to be the most unique, with many a caricature to be found concerning the “hereditary” leadership of the “Hermit Kingdom.” In this case, it needs to emphasised even more that the agenda should not be set by external criticisms but by those who actually know about the DPRK’s system. My sources are from Chinese experts and those in the DPRK. I have also undertaken two research visits to the country. What do we find? The DPRK reveals significant continuity in governance and political theory to other socialist countries, while at the same time revealing distinct emphases in its “Korean style.”

The first part of the chapter provides factual material concerning the three levels of government: the People’s Assemblies, from local bodies to the country-wide legislative body; the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK); and the elected leader. Actual governance takes place through the Supreme People’s Assembly

and its presidium, and locally through state organs, assemblies, and committees. The political party system is – like China – a multi-party consultative system (and not an antagonist one such as found in capitalist countries). The political leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea is a given, but significant political participation comes from the Korean Social Democratic Party and the Chondoist Chongu Party (based on the indigenous religion of Chondoism). In terms of democracy, the DPRK seeks to practice substantive socialist democracy, which is embodied in electoral and consultative democracy, and the advanced integration of state and society. Thus, voting is compulsory and all may stand for election – independents are regularly elected to the parliament. Mass organisations are numerous and widespread, with everyone enrolled and participating in one of these organisations or political parties. Obviously, these structures provide many avenues for proposals, feedback, and public opinion.

The second part concerns political theory. Formally, this theory is embodied in three terms: *Juche*, or a people-first philosophy in which the masses are masters of their destiny through the struggles of revolutionary construction, independence, and self-sufficiency; *Songun*, which arose in response to the immense challenges of the 1990s, and identifies the military as the prime revolutionary force that is able to drive economic recovery and preserve sovereignty; *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, as an integrated whole that returns to the people-centred emphasis of *Juche* and emphasises the creativity of the masses and the autochthonous nature of Korean-style socialism. Within this continuously unfolding political philosophy, I emphasise a number of features: (1) there is a great emphasis on the unity of opposites (the terminology comes from dialectical materialism), with the unity in practice and ideology running through all levels of society and state – or, as the Chondoist-inspired slogan puts it, “believe in the people as in heaven”; (2) the DPRK shares with other formerly colonised countries a strong sense of anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic sovereignty based on mutual non-interference; (3) while the DPRK is part of the socialist tradition, it emphasises much more the autochthonous nature of its development; (4) it seeks to maintain revolutionary fervour as the driving force of politics, economics, society, and culture; (5) the leadership of three generations of the Kim family is not seen as hereditary (a system based on property, privilege, and exploitation), but on the need to ensure the continuation of revolutionary leadership in practice and theory, and – crucially – needs to be affirmed by the people's trust. In many respects, this distinct leadership style is the “glue” that holds the whole project together,

8. The Governance of China: On Electoral and Consultative Democracy

The remaining chapters provide detail on key features of China's system of socialist governance. Since I have published an overview of this system in chapter 8 of *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Springer 2021), I will provide a brief summary of the seven components of the system in the opening section of the present chapter. The main concern, however, is the dialectical inter-relation of electoral and consultative democracy, and the subset of the latter in base-level (grassroots) democracy. I begin with the dual legislative bodies, the people's congresses and the people's political consultative conferences. While most attention is usually directed at the highest level of such bodies (NPC and CPPCC), my interest is the local and regional levels of these bodies, since they embody the two main components of electoral and consultative democracy. Of these two, I focus further on consultative democracy, since this approach has deep cultural and historical roots in China's experience of the last century. Of relevance here is the reality of nine political parties in China and how they seek to work together in a non-antagonistic manner (a key category from dialectical materialism) and engage in intensive and extensive consultation. Consultative democracy is also a much wider practice than the

institutionalised forms of political parties and people's political consultative conferences, for we can see it at work on a day-to-day level in the "mass line," mass organisations, and base-level (grassroots) democracy. In many respects, consultative democracy may be described as a substantive democratic practice. The chapter concludes by assessing how electoral and consultative democracy interact with one another, and how the emphasis is on a constant work in progress rather than being a fully achieved system.

9. How Does The Communist Party of China Lead?

Perhaps the most distinct difference between socialist democracy and capitalist democracy is the leadership of the Communist Party. After more than a century of socialism in power, it has become very clear that a constituent feature of socialist democracy is the continued leadership of the Communist Party. But how does this leadership work? Does the CPC simply state its will and expect all to obey – as caricatures of "authoritarian dictatorship" would have us believe? The answer is no. Instead, CPC leadership functions indirectly, through the statutory procedures of governance. Explaining how these statutory procedures work requires two steps. The first is to trace the historical development, from the separation of the CPC and the government (Deng Xiaoping), the stipulation of the components of socialist democracy (Jiang Zemin), the specification of "statutory procedures" entailed in rule of law and levels of governance (Hu Jintao), and the identification of these procedures as country-wide "democratic centralism" (Xi Jinping). The second step is to analyse how the statutory procedures relate to rule of law, for the two terms are normally used in conjunction. I am also interested in examining three dialectical conjunctions (contradiction analysis): the strengthening of the CPC's leadership through rule-of-law statutory procedures, and vice versa; how the principle of "taking the people as centre" – or "people-first" – is embodied in the statutory procedures of CPC leadership; and the mutual enhancement of this leadership and socialist democracy.

10. Governing the Country According to Law: The Case of the Hong Kong SAR National Security Law

This chapter elaborates further on the question of law, now in terms of the close connection between "governing the country according to law [依法治国 *yifazhiguo*]" and human rights. This chapter's initial task is to provide an overview of what precisely rule of law means in a Chinese context, and how it is inescapably connected with Chinese Marxist human rights. However, the main task of the chapter is to analyse a specific case study of how the rule of law functions and has been enacted as a way to enhance human rights. The case study concerns the rule of law solution to the unrest and riots in Hong Kong SAR in 2019-2020. Drawing on Chinese research, the chapter analyses the longer history behind the unrest and the many factors that played a role. With this background, I examine the way the problem was resolved. After long and detailed preparation, with much feedback and debate, the NPC approved in 2020 a revised national security law that included Hong Kong. After the law was enacted, the significant achievements of the security law were to put an end to the unrest in a relatively short time without deploying the military, and to ensure the promotion of socialist human rights through the law. The chapter closes by considering the theoretical implications of this solution for socialist governance.

11. Stability, Harmony, and Safety: Minority Nationalities Policy

This chapter offers a theoretical analysis and a case study. To begin with, I analyse how three key terms related to the common good – stability, harmony, and safety – may and indeed have been reinterpreted in a Marxist framework. This initial theoretical task entails a presentation – for non-Chinese readers – of the semantic fields and history of the three terms: *wending* (稳定), with the sense of stability over a range

of phenomena, including physics, emotions, economics, and society; the long history of *hexie* (和谐), with an emphasis on the harmonious combination and proper coordination of various parts, and so also peaceful relations and concord; *anquan* (安全), with the preventative sense of safety from harm, and thus from social unrest and turmoil, and the proactive sense that the entirety of humanity lives in harmony with its natural environment, as well as the material and emotional feeling of safety in society, family, and relationships. The three terms obviously overlap, as in “safe country and a harmoniously stable society,” but I am most interested in seeing how they are understood in light of the dialectical materialist emphasis on non-antagonistic contradictions, and indeed how they may contribute to a further development of this emphasis.

In elaborating on the implications of stability, harmony, and safety for government policy, I use the specific case study of minority nationalities policy. After a brief background on the long and complex histories of the 55 minority nationalities in China, I focus on some recent periods of instability and breakdown of social harmony, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang. How are these examples – of separatism, extremism, and terrorism – perceived and what has been the policy response? First, and most obviously, the threatening of stability, harmony, and safety is seen as a challenge to core assumptions concerning the social good and the government’s ability to manage contradictions. Second, the unrest and turmoil is seen as an undermining of human rights in the following sense: since the core Marxist human right concerns socio-economic well-being, and since this well-being provides the foundation for stability, harmony, and safety, the outbursts of violent unrest are manifestations of inadequate promotion of human rights. This leads to the third point: directly addressing the uneven and unequal development of the economic base in remote border regions, which have lagged behind the rapid development of eastern regions in earlier phases of the reform and opening-up. For Marxist analysis, poverty and limited economic opportunities provide fertile ground for separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Thus, the core policy response is to focus on developing the economic base, so as to cut the roots of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. The remarkable economic development of Tibet and more recently Xinjiang reveals the effects of this approach. I close this analysis by emphasising the dialectical nature of minority nationalities policy itself: the enhancement of autonomy – from economy through to culture – for minority nationalities will lead to greater social harmony, stability, and peace.

12. Trust in the Chinese Government

A notable feature of Chinese governance continues to perplex some foreign observers: approval, trust, and confidence in the government consistently hovers around 90 percent of the population. These results come from international surveys, such as Ipsos, Edelman, Ash Center, and so on. This chapter seeks to analyse why these results continue to show widespread popular support of and trust in the Chinese government and public institutions. The argument has four steps. First, I analyse the surveys in terms of their criteria and concern with international comparisons. Second, I provide a historical analysis to show that this trust and confidence in governance was not always the case. In fact, during the “wild 90s” with their labour unrest, income disparity, environmental pollution, and corruption, there was a noticeable gap between the people and the government. This is certainly not the case now, so I analyse how each problem has been tackled and how they should be understood in terms of Marxist dialectics. Third, I deal with the sense of “cultural confidence,” in relation to the distinct awareness in China of the strength and superiority of its system of governance. The final part returns to the question of the common good, which not only exists in Chinese society, but has actually been enhanced through socialist development. This

awareness of and need for the common good, shared by people and fostered by the government, lies at the root of trust and confidence in governance.

13. Conclusion: The Superiority of a Work in Progress

The concluding chapter draws together the main insights that have arisen through this study, stressing the continuities and identifying the new developments. In doing so, I emphasise a number of points. First, it is clear that governance and the common good are inescapably connected. But how is the common good to be understood? For the Marxist tradition, and indeed for cultures in East Asia, the common good is primarily social, and it is only through the social that the individual may flourish. Second, how can the common good be fostered? The answer, from the history I have examined, is a strong and active state, albeit not one in the traditional sense. As Losurdo has pointed out, this reality arose from contexts of either failed-state conditions (Russia) or anti-colonial struggles for national liberation (Asia, but also Africa). In these contexts the state continues to be seen positively, as a vital feature of all dimensions of socialist construction. Third, the reality of socialist political systems is an ongoing one. This should be obvious, but unlike the half century of stagnation of Western nation-states, the nature of socialist governance is a work in process, a constantly elaborated and renewing tradition. It is in this sense that one may begin to understand the increasing confidence in countries such as China that the socialist political system has not merely a latent superiority in comparison to capitalist political systems, but that this latency is now becoming apparent and is being realised.