

THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF THE DIALECTIC

On Roland Boer's *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners*

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Abstract: This article begins by dwelling on the forms and causes of Western “historical nihilism” toward the Chinese socialist project. I then analyze issues attendant to Deng’s appeal to “liberating thought,” particularly as regards the importance of the development of the forces of production and the dilemmas this presents for socialists. This segues into a discussion of contradiction analysis, which is theoretically central in Boer’s book. Through the discussion of the difference of such analysis from forms of “either/or” logic dominant in the West, I arrive at the significance of the category of the “concrete universal” (Hegel) for the understanding of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” After unpacking some of the central issues posed by the “reform and opening-up,” I dwell on the question of socialism in China. I emphasize some of the complications inherent in the combination of socialist planning and the market economy, including the issue of the conception of a future or prospective “communist” stage. The discussion concludes by dwelling on issues of law and political structure, with particular emphasis on the innovative importance of “rule of law” in the socialist context, as well as on the importance of contradiction analysis for understanding the dialectic of sovereignty and globalization.

Keywords: Boer; socialism with Chinese characteristics; Marxism-Leninism; political economy; philosophy

“By now it is clear that China has stepped onto the centre of the world stage.” The phrase, quoted from the conclusion of Roland Boer’s *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics* (2021, 315) is indisputably a statement of fact: economy-wise, China had overtaken the US as the world’s leading economy in terms of GDP in purchase power parity (PPP) in 2017 and is projected to lead the world in market exchange rates sooner than expected, as it significantly outperformed the US in economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (Elegant 2021). Politically, it is showing a more assertive face both nationally (as witness the government’s recent anti-monopoly probes and heavy fines against giants in the Big Tech industry) (Matsuda 2021) and internationally (as witness its unflinching response to the predictable accusations of the newly elected Biden administration at the US–China Summit in Anchorage, Alaska) (Wei and Davis 2021). At the same time, Western pundits’ predictions of either economic stagnation after the galloping growth of the past three decades or of full conversion to both economic and political liberal capitalism have clearly not come to pass. Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, poverty alleviation, focus on growth in poorer and more remote regions, the fight against corruption and the improvement of the environmental and intellectual quality of life have emerged as the country’s top priorities, while Marxism-Leninism has received far more than lip service from the Communist Party of China (CPC), as witness, to take only one example, the 2017 initiative to establish Schools of Marxism as independent institutions directly under the administration of universities (Qu 2017).

The timing of the publication of Boer’s book, then, is anything but accidental. Indeed, it seems to be itself part of what the author acknowledges as the imperative of building “cultural confidence,” a goal set out by China’s leadership given its concern that “the status and quality of China’s philosophy and social sciences is incommensurate with China’s global status” and that concerted effort should be made to “address this imbalance” (Boer 2021, 312). As an already established, internationally reputed Marxist scholar fluent in Chinese, Boer is almost uniquely equipped to step up to such a challenge on the international scholarly stage. Accordingly, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics* is both an in-depth examination of the basic theoretical, practical, and historical constituents shaping the Chinese socialist project and a defense of this project against a number of Western prejudices, including the prejudices specific to Western Marxism. As a scholar who is fully versed in both Soviet and Western Marxism, as well as in the largely untranslated and voluminous body of Chinese Marxist literature—classical and contemporary—Boer undertakes the difficult “task of the translator,” providing non-Chinese readers, and particularly Marxists, with a valuable and timely opportunity to rethink and re-evaluate. In my view, this study, as well as the work that has preceded and is likely to follow it, is poised to provide a welcome challenge to ideas that have now for some time seemed impotent and stagnant: for not merely

has Marxism in the West been an enterprise bound within the sphere of cultural critique alone, but it has also shown signs of an increasing absorption (as “cultural Marxism”) within late capitalist “identity politics” and its preoccupation with the hypostatized, quasi-sovereign self.¹

Boer has opted, in my view wisely, to restrict the more explicitly critical dimensions of his book in favor of a more analytical treatment of Chinese thought and practice. Of course, dealing with the causes of Western state *and* Western Marxist denunciations of Chinese socialism is inevitable, particularly in our unfortunately neo-Cold War-ish conjuncture. Boer examines negative Western reflexes toward China through the lens of what the Chinese call “historical nihilism” (2021, 10)—an interesting phrase in its own right, if one thinks of “nihilism” in the Nietzschean light of a waning of creative, affirmative energy and its substitution by the reactive logics of *ressentiment*. Section 1.4.1 accordingly provides a synopsis of the varieties of such Western forms of reality-evasion, under the rubrics of “China apocalypse” (insistent predictions of an always imminent but unrealized collapse of the country’s political and economic system); “dystopian fiction” (accusations of “cultural genocide,” “authoritarian dictatorship,” etc.); “conspiracy theory” (the Western Marxist “betrayal narrative” of China’s allegedly secret conversion to full-fledged and exploitative capitalism, under cover of the red banner) (see Losurdo 2003, 38–42); “orientalist mystery” (the idea of an inscrutable and secretive China that keeps reality under the veil for both its own people and for observers abroad); and “sectarian intolerance,” the tendency to outright “block out” “empirical facts” (Boer 2021, 12) as mere propaganda and thus as an instance of egregiously “partisan” thought (with all the implications that the counter-position is somehow “neutral” or “non-partisan,” of course).²

In the next section, Boer outlines some of the fundamental—and fundamentally problematic—presuppositions behind such distortions, laying them at the door of “the assumed framework of Western liberalism and its perspectives” (Boer 2021, 13). This framework includes the ideas of a constitutive tension between the state and civil society, the identification of politics with antagonism between opposing political parties or factions, the conflation of democracy and the multi-party electoral system, the reduction of human rights exclusively to civil and political rights, the assumption that the division between a working and a middle class is universal, and finally, the confusion of market economy with capitalism as a mode of production.

As to the culprits for such persistent and distorting biases, the impact of colonial superiority complexes is certainly not to be underestimated. But what Boer calls “the deforming effect of utopian messianism” (Boer 2021, 14)—an effect Domenico Losurdo brilliantly anatomized almost two decades ago (Losurdo 2003, 45–47, 49–52)—is equally important. All the more so, I would add, because messianism, particularly in its international form of a task to convert the unenlightened

of other nations, constituted an important current within Soviet revolutionary culture, which provided a certain symmetry to Cold War structures of opposition, providing the opposite number to the United States' own mythology of election and mission.³ No wonder, then, that China is frequently disparaged via lingering Western Marxist attachments to a revolutionary romanticism, which for the most part amounts to disenchantment with revolution *in advance* of revolution (and in fact, *in the absence* of revolution within the West). The Western tendency has therefore been, as Boer puts it, to reduce the agenda of “revolutionary socialism” almost exclusively to the study of pre-revolutionary periods—ones marked by passionate fervor, utopian visions of the future and excitement with imminent and rapid change—instead of expending intellectual energy on the more pedestrian but also highly complex tasks posed by socialist construction. Sadly, Raymond Williams's famous observation that achieved socialism should be viewed as an affair “vastly more complex, not vastly more simple, than capitalism” (Pinkney 1993, 221; Jameson 2005, 163, 249) is still all too readily brushed aside when it comes to the response to China.

The critical account of Western limitations on the subject of Chinese socialism in Chapter 1 prepares the ground for the shift of focus from Western to Chinese Marxist sources in Chapter 2. Boer dwells on Deng Xiaoping, the architect of the 1978 Reforms and hence of the drastic economic and social shifts in the People's Republic of China (PRC). He divides his examination of Deng's thought into the tasks of “liberating thought” (in turn divided into liberation *from* and liberation *to*, or, in Western parlance, negative and positive freedom); those of also effecting the “liberation of the forces of production”; and the methodological imperative of “seeking truth from facts.” The negative dimensions of liberating thought revolve around the complex struggle against dogmatism, backward habits, and deadening allegiance to bureaucratic authority (Boer 2021, 27). Most central on the positive side of the liberation of thought, on the other hand, is innovation and its contribution to the liberation of the forces of production. Once again, the dialectic of freedom from dogmatism and faith in the theoretical potency of Marxism-Leninism is of foundational importance. The less easily comprehensible side of Deng's thought pertains to his application of “contradiction analysis,” but a more developed discussion of this will have to wait for the book's third chapter.

As for “seeking truth from facts,” it is less of a tautological assertion of the efficacy of empiricism than a Western reader might expect. For “facts,” empirically ascertainable reality, are not in themselves “truth.” The latter is derived from the study of the internal relations between “facts,” and such relations are governed by the complex laws of dialectical and historical materialism, particularly understood through the optics of contradiction analysis. A case in point is Deng's approach to the famous and central dialectic of relations and forces of production within the so-called mode of

production, and more specifically within the socialist mode of production. Deng, as Boer shows, found that for underdeveloped countries, as China remained for some time even after the socialist revolution, the dialectic obtains an overdetermined form: the forces of production have not yet been sufficiently developed to allow a more than mechanical application of the spirit of socialism to relations of production.

On closer inspection, it appears that it is never possible to grab the bull by both horns at the same time: in Western countries, “where productive forces are already quite developed,” socialist construction focused overwhelmingly on the question of ownership, “even to the point of insisting that such ownership” (meaning socialized ownership) “is the very definition of socialism.” In less developed economies, where successful socialist revolutions had taken place, the liberation of productive forces was felt far more acutely as a task (Boer 2021, 38). Because socialist construction can in fact competently tackle only one prong of the contradiction at a time (and depending on the state of the national economy), each path entails its own risks of distortion. Too much focus on the relations of production (as, I would suggest, was by-and-large the case with Soviet socialism) may well gestate “new contradictions between the forces and relations of production, with stagnating economic initiative and lack of improvement”; while too much focus on the development of the forces of production entails the risk of intensifying social inequality, as was admittedly the case in China, particularly in the period of intense liberalization in the 1990s (38–40).

Deng’s emphasis on the development or “liberation” of forces of production was therefore a constrained choice. But in practice there are *only* constrained choices. Poverty, especially in rural China, was still such that a rediscovery of the reasoning behind Marx’s early critique of “primitive communism”—of socialism as equitable distribution of ascetic means of survival and little more (Marx 1975, 294–296)—was imperative. But the constrained nature of the choice did not dictate inevitable failure: for—and here is the appropriate moment to begin raising what is perhaps the foundational dimension of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”—“things that contradict each other also complement one another” (Deng, cited in Boer 2021, 40). If Western cultural habits predispose us to see dilemmas in terms of “either-or,” in the Chinese cultural context they are far more easily perceivable in terms of “both-and” (Boer 2021, 40)⁴: hence the central dimension of a distinctly Chinese path to socialism is the idea that “planned and market economies [. . .] do not cancel each other out [. . .] for both enable the liberation of productive forces” (Boer 2021, 39–40). Contradictory forces are simultaneously synergistic forces, and their two sides (the two sides of the two horns of the bull of a dilemma, so to speak) are equally important for socialist planning. After all, as Boer sensibly remarks, if “communism entails the principle of ‘from each according to ability, to each according to needs,’⁵ then one requires the necessary conditions for such an eventuality” (Boer 2021, 43).

The book's third chapter—and it is one of key theoretical significance for the study as a whole—takes up the simultaneity of contradiction and complementarity (or “contradiction analysis”) as the ground of Chinese dialectical thought. Here, Boer locates the origins of contradiction analysis in Lenin's marginal annotation to Bukharin's *Economics of the Transition Period* ([1920] 1929)—a text of great importance to Chinese Marxism, as it shaped Mao's vastly significant “On Contradiction” ([1937] 2007).⁶ Lenin remarked: “[a]ntagonism and contradiction are not at all the same thing. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain” (Lenin [1920] 1929, 391). The implication, clearly, is that contradiction is a far broader phenomenon than antagonism; only a limited subset of contradictions are antagonistic in nature. This is because contradiction, unlike antagonism, is a law that permeates all nature, for the development of natural phenomena presupposes their spontaneous self-movement, which in turn is the result of a struggle of opposites that remain, at the same time, in unity (Boer 2021, 57).⁷ Hence, as Boer points out, citing Shirokov and Iankovskii's 1937 *Textbook of Marxist Philosophy* (a primer of great import for Mao and the Chinese communists of the period), contradictions not only remain within socialism but “the development of socialism would be impossible” without them (Boer 2021, 65).

As Boer shows, Mao further developed the difference between contradiction and antagonism by dwelling on the conditions for the transformation of the former into the latter: contradictions become antagonistic only when they have reached a “definite stage” of development (Boer 2021, 68). But the direction is not unilateral, either: if, under concrete circumstances, some non-antagonistic contradictions can develop into antagonistic ones, the reverse may also come to pass (Boer 2021, 69). One of the serious implications of such thinking has to do with the need to reassess the nature of socialist construction in relation to contradiction. For unlike what many would conclude in the Soviet Union, socialist revolution does not necessarily put an end to antagonistic contradictions. Rather, *some* contradictions may develop into antagonisms even within socialism. Thus, in “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People” (Mao [1957] 2007), Mao foreshadows Raymond Williams's observation cited above: instead of eliminating or simplifying contradictions, socialism allows them to proliferate in new forms: they develop “within and between workers, peasants and intelligentsia, between governance and people, centralism and democracy, collective and individual, and so on” (Boer 2021, 70).

Vitaly, the chiliastic expectation, if not for the disappearance of contradictions under socialism, at least for the disappearance of antagonistic ones, is here “pragmatically” negated in a manner quite foreign to the messianic strains of Western Marxism. But precisely because of this, the political acquires an importance it frequently lacks in Marx himself. The development of antagonistic contradictions—and thus of counter-revolutionary possibilities—within socialism is amenable to political acumen in their

handling: foresight, effective tactical and strategic action, an ability to monitor social developments with vigilance and care instead of passively presuming that, the revolution over, things can only get smoother along the way, are all factors that may work to prevent the transformation of contradiction to antagonism. In Mao's related remark, "socialist society grows more united and consolidated through the ceaseless process of correctly handling and resolving contradictions" (Boer 2021, 71).

Finally, Mao's emphasis on the necessity of grasping the concrete circumstances in which contradictions develop and change forms crucially paves the theoretical way for a valorization of the concrete over the abstract. "There is no such thing as abstract Marxism," Mao powerfully remarks. "What we call concrete Marxism is Marxism that has taken on a national form, that is, Marxism applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China and not Marxism abstractly used" (Boer 2021, 75). The contrast with the still predominating views of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as a phrase intended to mask and normalize Chinese "aberrations from the Orthodoxy" of Marxism is dramatic: for Mao, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is not simply a variant of some abstract universal;⁸ it is socialism in the only form in which socialism can exist, that of "concrete universality."⁹

It is important to remember here that, as Robert Stern remarks apropos of Hegel, the abstract universal is opposed to the particular and individual, while the concrete universal is not (Stern 2009, 153). In the words of Hegel himself,

[T]he universal is [. . .] the totality of the concept; it is what is concrete, not empty but, on the contrary, has *content* by virtue of its concept [. . .] It is of course possible to abstract from this content, but what we have then is not the universal element of the concept but the *abstract universal*, which is an isolated and imperfect moment of the concept, void of truth. (Hegel 2010, 532; italics in the original)

Indeed, Hegel later warns explicitly against a purely quantitative and hence vulgar reduction of the "size" of the universal (in our case, "socialism") as opposed to the particular (in our case, "China"):

[I]ts nature is totally misunderstood if such determinations are retained in it in their former abstraction—if the *wider extent* of the universal is understood to mean that the universal is a *more*, or a greater quantum, than the particular and the singular. As absolute ground, it is the possibility of *quantity*, but no less of *quality*, that is, its determinations are no less qualitatively distinct. (Hegel 2010, 545; italics in the original)

In sum: the universal provenance of "socialism" as a concept is, if it is not to become "isolated and imperfect" and thus "void of truth," guaranteed *only* by

concrete, nationally delimited attempts, from the Paris Commune to the Cuban Revolution.

The concrete—both as challenge and as source of inspiration—is where the next chapter of Boer’s study takes us: in the voluntary agreement of the families of Xiaogang village, ravaged by the Great Famine of the late 1950s, to subdivide collective land among themselves and to sell surplus produce for family benefit. Here are the modest and local beginnings of the world-historical shift marked by the reform and opening-up, at least in Boer’s interpretation of the importance of its grassroots origins.¹⁰ Boer’s first gesture is to subdivide the question of the reform in terms of Chinese attempts to respond creatively to the apparent contradictions between town and country; between collective and individual; and between equality and inequality under socialism (Boer 2021, 86). Regarding the first issue, Boer remarks that the origins of the reform in rural China parallel the origins of the revolution itself, in a mode of “continuity-in-discontinuity” (87). Regarding the “more substantive philosophical question” of the contradiction between the collective and the individual (and its practical instantiation in terms of “one big pot” of food versus “household responsibility”), the author is quick to point out that translating this contradiction in terms of one between socialist collectivism and capitalist individualism is problematic, to the degree that it presumes a simple identity between socialism and the collective or capitalism and the individual. Marx’s philosophy posited no such simple binary opposition, as it assumed that the “full flourishing and fulfillment of the individual can take place only through the collective” (87).¹¹ Furthermore, “household responsibility” is not reducible to “individual responsibility,” a fact reinforced by the legal persistence of village ownership in land, as well as the community basis of decision-making in the village (88). Finally, and regarding the contradiction between equality and difference, Boer revisits the critique of abstract egalitarianism from Marx to Zhou Enlai and argues for the compatibility of the “household responsibility” principle with the socialist (rather than fully communist) principle of “for each according to work”¹² and with the principles of democratic centralism (the importance of preventing the “authoritarian centralism” of referring all decisions to a bureaucratic center).

The remainder of Chapter 4 pursues the questions of reform and opening-up in the context of Chinese experience. First, Boer evokes Lenin’s observation that the real dilemma from the standpoint of the masses is not of that between reform and a more radical alternative but that of revolution and reform or no reform at all (Boer 2021, 91): “in a socialist system,” the author observes, “reform is absolutely necessary in order to construct socialism” (92). Second, he touches on the structural necessity of what we could call “permanent reform” (in a playful nod to its better-known counterpart, “permanent revolution”). The examination of worsening social conditions, as well as of the corruption of the Chinese Communist Party

and the gradual weakening of its bonds with the Chinese people during “the wild 90s” shows that the reforms of 1978 effectively opened the path for reforms of the reforms (though, as with “negation of the negation,” this does not mean a return to a prior stage but the further development of the dialectic, of course). In the words of Xincheng Zhou:

once a contradiction is resolved, new contradictions will arise, which need to be solved through reform. It is in the process of constantly emerging contradictions and resolving them through reform that socialist society has developed. Therefore, reform is an eternal topic in socialist society. Reform is only ongoing, not complete. (96)

Zhou’s words serve as a useful reminder of how far we are here from the messianic expectation of a speedy resolution of contradictions under socialist rule, and therefore, how far we also are from Western contempt for endless reforms. “Permanent reform” does not undialectically mean that things have “gone badly” and that therefore the state and the party need to impotently “backtrack” on previous choices; it means that new contradictions have replaced older contradictions in a manner that is, from within the Chinese, non-utopian and non-messianic standpoint, entirely normal. Of course, this leaves open the question of whether there can ever be a “higher” or “communist” stage for socialism for such a Marxist philosophy; I will return to this question later on. For now, let me observe that it was already a question for non-Chinese Marxism well before the Chinese Revolution.¹³

Regarding the matter of “opening-up,” Boer addresses its implications for international relations with capitalist states (a matter of both opposition and complementarity), as well as in terms of deploying Western capitalist “know-how” for socialist interests (once again, an issue posed prior to the Chinese Revolution, for instance, in the Soviet Union itself).¹⁴ Equally central is the contradiction and complementarity between the realities of globalization and the doctrine of national sovereignty, since post-reform China has managed not simply to benefit from globalization so as to enhance its economic sovereignty vis-à-vis Western states, but, in a way, to thereby change the very meaning of “globalization,” which until China’s rise was largely synonymous with forms of Western neo-imperialism.

The analysis of class contradictions allows Boer to address the interplay between national and international Chinese concerns: first, nationally, the question is whether the increase of wealth has led to the formation of a “bourgeoisie” (Boer’s answer is no, fundamentally because in China, a separate “bourgeois class” has, at least not yet, obtained political power for itself); the complementary question is whether income disparities have generated a new proletariat (again, the answer is negative, because the contradictions created by reform have been addressed by secondary and tertiary reforms to prevent the calcification of oppositions between

town and country, specialized and unspecialized labor, rich and poor workers). “Given,” Boer remarks, that contradictions

will be a feature of the long socialist stage, these contradictions will be manifested in terms of different classes for a long time to come [...] But they are not to lead to polarization and class conflict, upon which capitalist states and their political systems are erected. (Boer 2021, 101–102)

A similar perspective governs the discussion of “international class antagonisms,” particularly in the form of comprehending the relationship between China’s mainland and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) or Taiwan region. On the one hand, Boer admits, both Hong Kong and Taiwan have capitalist systems and have readily become sites “of Western efforts to interfere with China’s internal affairs” (2021, 103). On the other, they are results of Deng’s “one country, two systems” approach, itself a product of “contradiction analysis.” The idea, in other words, is that there is a degree of mutual benefit that can offset, or contain, the antagonistic contradiction—especially since political and territorial power are separated from capitalist financial power in both territories. The sovereign state “is the determining and dominant category” in the contradiction; therefore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Macao have to be understood as “subordinate” to state unity, for all their ideological tensions with the mainland of China.

Along with Chapter 3, the fifth chapter is, in my view, the book’s theoretical pillar. After all, it is only here that the fundamental question “in what sense is contemporary China substantively (rather than simply rhetorically) a socialist state?” can be raised. Boer responds to the question by presenting the criteria according to which the “institutional form” of the market is understood in contemporary China: “whether it is conducive to the development of the productive forces of a socialist society, to the enhancement of the comprehensive national strength of a socialist country, and to the improvement of people’s living standards” (2021, 124–125). In my view, these criteria do *not* answer the question “What makes it [the use of the institutional form of the market] socialist”: first, because the criteria adduced already assume what needs to be proven, namely, that contemporary China remains a socialist society within a determinate definition of socialism. Hence, whereas it is very difficult to dispute that the market form has been conducive to the development of productive forces, it is far less simple to deduce that these remain the productive forces of socialist society, at least classically conceived (I will return to the thorny issue of definition shortly). Second, because although it is true that in the “Communist Manifesto” of 1848 Marx and Engels also posed the issue of the development of the forces of production as a fundamental task of the revolution (noting, as Boer rightly emphasizes, that “the proletariat

will use its political supremacy [. . .] to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible”) (121), it is equally true that they stipulated the centralization of “all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class.”¹⁵ Third, because as vital as national sovereignty is for a socialist state, its enhancement is in no way proof of the existence of a socialist economy; and finally, because the improvement of people’s living standards is also not direct proof thereof (Japan, Singapore, or China’s Hong Kong SAR, for instance, have all attained high levels of prosperity as capitalist economies).

As I see it, Huang Nansen’s “five features of the foundational socialist system” to which a market economy is expected to contribute (Boer 2021, 125) do not resolve the question either. Certainly, the preponderance of public ownership and of criteria of social benefit distinguishes the contemporary Chinese economy from most of its contemporary capitalist counterparts in the West—particularly so in the protracted era of neoliberal privatizations. The extent and length of China’s massive state campaign against poverty, to take another example, is fundamentally unthinkable as a state commitment from a Western capitalist perspective. But on their own, such features seem to me to fall short of what Marx, at least, is likely to have had in mind when envisioning socialism. This becomes clear in the fact that the current economic system relies heavily on a “recognition of the importance of the law of value” (Boer 2021, 117), which regulates the allocation of resources and distribution of products (Boer 2021, 122, 130). In the first volume of *Capital*, however, Marx did not envision such a law as an operative principle in his “community of free individuals” (Marx 1996, 89), which, most commentators would agree, is his vision, however sketchy, of socialist society:

We will assume [. . .] that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour time. Labour time would, in that case, play a double part. Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the proper proportion between the different kinds of work to be done and the different wants of the community. On the other hand, it also serves as a measure of the portion of the common labour borne by each individual, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. The social relations of the individual producers, with regard to their labour and to its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, and that with regard not only to production but also to distribution. (Marx 1996, 89–90)

There is no reference here to any operation of a “law of [exchange] value” as a regulative principle regarding the allocation of resources and the distribution of the social product. This is because Marx questions the “objectivity” or “naturalness” of such value. Political economy, he notes soon after the passage quoted,

has never once asked the question why labour is represented by the value of its product and labour time by the magnitude of that value. These formulae, which bear it stamped upon them in unmistakable letters that they belong to a state of society, in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him, such formulae appear to the bourgeois intellect to be as much a self-evident necessity imposed by Nature as productive labour itself. (Marx 1996, 91–92)

Indeed, it seems to me that Peter Hudis is correct in noting that, at least as far as the Marx of *Capital* is concerned, the “future socialist society” is defined by the fact that “products are ‘directly objects of utility’ and do not assume a value form. Exchange value and universalized commodity production come to an end” (Hudis 2019, 764). This is not to say that Marx was right in this respect, of course; he certainly had no inkling of the problems of stagnation, work avoidance and under-performance that present themselves when attention within socialist construction is placed exclusively on the side of eliminating private ownership or doing away with “the fetishism of commodities.” It is to note, simply, that there are significant points of divergence between contemporary Chinese definitions of socialism and classical Marxist views, which need to be registered with candor.

Perhaps more vital, at least from a Western perspective, is the engagement with the development of Chinese thought on the relationship between the market economy and socialism, which has led to the development of the notion of a “socialist market economy” (Boer 2021, 115)—a concept almost certain to raise eyebrows in a Western Marxist context. As Boer, along with Chinese Marxist thinkers, argues, there is no historical identity between capitalism and the market economy, not only because the latter has existed for far longer than the former, but also because capitalism is not incompatible with forms of a planned economy. The account of the evolution of a different approach to the question presupposes, as a first step, the “de-linking” of the market economy from capitalism. Boer begins with Zuyao Yu’s 1979 essay “An Attempt to Discuss a Socialist Market Economy,” in which it is stipulated that, in accordance with Deng’s directive, it is possible to construct a market economy that would enhance rather than subvert the functions of socialist planning. Initially, or at the stage of “the breakthrough,” as it is known, such an economy was thought of as restricted by an “auxiliary role,” being a “supplement” to the planned economy (117). Gradually, balances shifted, marking the period of “transition” (1982–1989). By 1986, Deng would state that “we should no longer say that a planned economy is primary,” having questioned the idea that socialism and a market economy are fundamentally opposed. By 1993, a full and mature transformation had taken place, deploying a distinction between particularity (the market economy as an “institutional form”) and generality (the socialist system as a whole). In the words of the Third Plenary Session of the Fourteenth

Central Committee of the CPC: “The socialist market institutional form is integrated with the basic socialist system. The establishment of a socialist market economic institutional form is to make the market play a fundamental role in the allocation of resources under the state’s macro-control” (118).

The distinction between “institutional form” and “system” involved here might first appear pedestrian, but it is important: there are numerous enough differences between market behavior in the West and in China suggesting that indeed, “market economies may appear to be similar, but it is both the arrangement of the parts in relation to each other and the overall purpose or function of the market economy in question that indicates significant differences between them” (Boer 2021, 119). Think, for instance, of the dramatic differences in health-related manufacturing readiness that made themselves globally clear after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; or of the uncanny accuracy with which the Chinese state can predict and steer the direction of national economic growth when compared to its Western counterparts. Such examples suggest that although the fit between Dengian and classical Marxist definitions of socialism is questionable, “market economies” may differ significantly enough to pose the question of differences between the overall systems in which they work.

But this is not to suggest that China’s economic system—ironically, the “particular,” of which the “institutional form” of the market is at this stage the “universal”—remains static. Rather, the very nature of the “system” develops and changes once the institutional form is integrated with it. This change does not, as China-detractors often presupposed, take it back to the original position the revolution negated—capitalism. Given that “a highly centralized and rigidly planned economy” (Boer 2021, 128) is not *necessarily* synonymous with the *general* form of state economic planning, the integration of a market economy and state socialist planning ultimately results in a “dialectical transcendence” of both terms, and therefore of their apparent contradiction as well. Hence, Boer refers to Xi Jinping’s 2013 position that “the market economy in the socialist system was no longer to play a basic role but a decisive role” in allocating resources (131) and suggests that this is no “return” to liberalism (after all, such an expectation is not at all justified by the concrete priorities of Xi’s leadership), but “a qualitative transformation of planning itself” (131). For planning loses its meaning as the antithesis to the chaos of anarchic market forces and becomes something like the organic outcome of myriads of operations of micro-coordination made by the immediate stakeholders of the production process. In Zhou and Wang’s words,

the combination of a market economy and socialism is a new form of exploring socialist practice, which overcomes the dual disadvantages of a traditional planned economy and a capitalist market economy and which realizes the twofold transcendence of a traditional planned economy and a capitalist market economy. (131)

Despite, then, my disagreement with the idea that the benefits of a “socialist market economy” are in any way compatible with the classical Marxist understanding of socialism, I agree that the phenomenon in question is equally incompatible with classical capitalist ideas about the function of the market. China effectively calls into question the very ground of the opposition between capitalism and socialism as it was understood in the period from the late nineteenth century until at least the middle of the twentieth. And this is so for a very basic Hegelian reason: the “negation of the negation” is not affirmation of what was originally negated. We could say that capitalism as a system was negated *irreversibly* by the Chinese Revolution; however paradoxical it might at first appear, it is in fact the very decisiveness of this negation that has allowed the confidence in “de-linking” the capitalist system’s overarching logic. Contemporary China is hence neither socialist nor capitalist in “classical” terms; the very nature of the debate in the West is based on misunderstanding of the internal dynamics of “dual transcendence” that develop on the grounds of the double negation made possible first, by the Communist Revolution, and second, by the reforms first launched in 1978. “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” is, when viewed in terms of the logic of the development of historical forms, *both* “post-classical state socialism” *and* “post-capitalism” at the same time.¹⁶

In my discussion of the third chapter of Boer’s study, I pointed out that in my view the understanding of historical and dialectical materialism in terms of ever-arising contradictions both highlights the importance of politics in the sense of an “art of governance” (or management of new contradictions in such a way so as to prevent their transformation into antagonism) and tends to undermine investment in the classical Marxist idea of a discrete and higher stage of “communism,” wherein the fundamental contradictions of social life will have been either resolved or neutralized and depoliticized. I must, then, make clear that I would remain cautious of correlating the Chinese concept of “*datong*” with the idea of a higher or communist stage thus conceived. In my view, although it is indisputable that Mao referred to this concept, this does not cancel out or supersede the fundamentals of contradiction analysis in Mao’s own work or that of his successors. In fact, it is difficult to see even classical Chinese sources as endorsing the correlation between *datong* and a hypothetically terminal communist stage of social development: the Confucian reformer, Kang Youwei, for instance, may well speak of the possibility of overcoming, at some historical point, the boundaries of “nation, class, race, sex, family, occupation and private ownership” (quoted in Boer 2021, 148), but he also notes that “misfortunes arise” even after humans attain “the time of peace” (quoted in Boer 2021, 149). As Boer acknowledges, the case remains that “the closer one comes to *datong* the greater is the risk of chaos returning, but also the need for differences” (2021, 148–149; italics in the original). If it is thus very difficult to

extricate the classical Marxist hypothesis of a communist stage from Judeo-Christian narratives of *a future, final, and irreversible* conciliation of contradictions, the prospective future evolution of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” needs to be considered in the light of more cautious and more pragmatic traditions in Western thought, from Plato to Machiavelli and even to Nietzsche.

This is not to suggest any simple identity of Chinese thought with this non- or anti-Christian strain in Western traditions, however. *Xiaokang* falls neither within the category of “idealism/utopianism” nor within that of “pessimism.” It involves active belief in the ever-increasing betterment of social conditions and of overall state prosperity and stability *despite* its simultaneous cautiousness and pragmatism. Once again, the poles of a contradiction are simultaneously synergistic and complementary. It is instructive, to illustrate how this is so, to reflect a bit more on another and older classical text cited—“The People Are Hard Pressed” from the *Book of Songs* of the tenth century BCE. The premise, to cite that text, that “*perhaps* a little ease [*xiaokang*] *may* be got” (emphases added) for the people (and similarly, “a little rest,” “a little relief,” “a little repose,” “a little tranquility” [Boer 2021, 153]) is fully compatible with the premises of contradiction analysis, i.e., with the idea of a non-antagonistic complementarity, within the Chinese context, of both melioristic vision and pragmatic cautiousness.¹⁷ If this sounds too exotic for a discussion of the prospective character of a “communism with Chinese characteristics,” it might be useful to remind readers of the words of a Westerner like Bertolt Brecht, who studied classical Chinese thought quite extensively:

Praise of Communism

It's sensible, anyone can understand it. It's easy.

[. . .] It's good for you; find out about it.

[. . .] It is not madness,
but the end of madness.

It is not chaos

but order.

It is the simple thing

so hard to bring about. (Brecht 1965, 73)

Brecht's verses, as is patently clear, end in an apparent paradox. Communism is both “simple” and very difficult to “bring about.” Why is this so? It is so because the “simple” is by no means as “natural” as it appears, for what is indeed natural is contradiction and internal complexity. The simple is higher than the complex because it is the result of having mastered and tamed complexity, as is the case with any writing that manages to communicate complex ideas in an effective and straightforward manner, or, to take an example from painting, as is

the case with the apparently “simple,” even-childlike appearance of cubist works. My proposition is that, if such a thing as a “communist” prospect is to be entertained within the Chinese context, this must take the deceptively “simple” form of the ancient text from the *Book of Songs*: the insistence that it is *always* possible, “perhaps,” if one tries hard enough, to make the people’s lives a “little” better, to improve matters “a little.” Instead of being *a future, final, and irreversible stage of human history*, however, communism would in this case be *an infinite undertaking*. And it would be such in the Hegelian sense of affirmative infinity as opposed to “bad infinity”:

In the ought the transcendence of finitude, infinity, begins. The ought is that which [...] will display itself as a progress to infinity [...] The infinite is the negation of negation, the affirmative, *being* that has reinstated itself out of restrictedness. The infinite *is*, in a more intense sense that the first immediate being; it is the true being; the elevation above restriction [...] It is the very nature of the finite that it transcend itself, that it negate its negation and become infinite. Consequently, the infinite does not stand *above* the finite as something ready-made by itself, as if the finite stood fixed *outside* or *below* it. [...] In so far as the finite itself is being elevated to infinity, it is not at all as an alien force that does this for it; it is rather its nature to refer itself to itself as restriction [...] and to transcend this restriction, or rather, in this self-reference, to have negated the restriction and gone above and beyond it [...] [in the bad infinite] [w]hat we have before us is an abstract transcending which remains incomplete because *the transcending itself* has not been *transcended* [...] This bad infinite is in itself the same as the perpetual ought; it is indeed the negation of the finite, but in truth it is unable to free itself from it; the finite constantly resurfaces in it as its other [...] The progress to infinity is therefore only repetitious monotony, the one and the same tedious *alternation* of this finite and infinite. The infinity of the infinite progress remains burdened by the finite as such, is thereby restricted, and is itself finite. (Hegel 2010, 105, 109, 113; italics in the original)

Hegel’s true or affirmative infinity does not posit itself as lying above or beyond the finite, in some metaphysical realm. It is rather the immanent overcoming of the finite, through the ceaseless negation of a finitude that it recognizes as its own, as embedded within it: a little more ease, a little more rest, a little more relief, a little more repose, a little more tranquility may perhaps be obtained if one faces the finitude of the given with enough commitment and persistence.¹⁸ Whereas bad infinity—the “uninterrupted flitting over limits which it is powerless to sublimate”—is, despite its apparent sublimity, “poor,” to the extent that for it, the “step-by-step elevation on the ladder of the quantitative is betrayed by the admission that in that

vain labor there is no getting closer to the infinite goal” (Hegel 2010, 192–193), true or affirmative infinity is distinctly this worldly, or, to move back to the contemporary Chinese context, it is “empirically verifiable, rather than falling into the realm of vague promises and rumour” (Boer 2021, 157). In the beautiful formulation with which Boer describes He Xiu’s thought, it is the “seen” that comprises “the most ideal world,” in stark contrast to Western “theological and philosophical assumptions concerning ontological or external transcendence” (Boer 2021, 147). The communist horizon (rather than “stage”) has no existence other than as the pursuit of a modest goal that will simultaneously always remain difficult to attain; or, in Hegelian terms, an immanent transcending of the abstract ideals of transcendence. As Boer himself puts it in the next chapter: “transcendence [if one is to take ‘communism’ as a synonym for such transcendence] does not rely on an outer and imagined reality, but is very much inner” (Boer 2021, 168).¹⁹

Chapter 7 launches the turn of Boer’s study, as he notes later, to issues of the “superstructure” (Boer 2021, 191), particularly ones of law and politics. Its subject is of particularly vexed importance in contemporary anti-Chinese propaganda (as it has been in several other instances, especially after 1990), for it is no secret that “human rights” have been weaponized, as contemporary parlance would have it, as instruments of Western imperial politics globally.²⁰ Obviously, however, the non-Western or counter-hegemonic response to the frequent cynicism and double-standard approach of Western states (especially the United States and its close allies) cannot be that of a negation of “human rights” on the grounds of their reduction to geopolitical *realpolitik*. Therefore, an alternative framework for thinking about human rights is vital, and Boer’s analysis proceeds with an examination of such a framework.

Up to a point, Boer’s argument seems to me quite straightforward, so it is possible to summarize it quite briefly here: first, Boer argues, following not only Marxist legal theorists but Marx and Engels themselves, that the notion of “right” prevailing in the West is founded on private property, most immediately private property in the self and subsequently, in the possession of others (women, children, slaves) as private property (Boer 2021, 165, 169–171). On the contrary, Chinese but also more broadly non-Western right is founded on anti-colonial and counter-hegemonic collective sovereignty (165, 171–177). Second, the long enjoyment of colonial and imperial power has made Western states easily prone to “false universals,” i.e., to the forgetting or disavowal of the concrete social and historical underpinnings of their normative ideals (here, there is a straightforward analogy with the critique of Marx and his epigones against the abstract universality of bourgeois right, and hence between the Marxist perspective on international relations and Marxist analyses of the role of the superstructure within the class struggle [166–169]).

Part of what is particularly engaging in this approach is how much it reveals about the disjunctive nature of global experience around the middle of the twentieth century: clearly, there were legitimate reasons why Western states were keen to search for international means of limiting the power of national sovereignty after the catastrophic deluge of World War II; however, it is just as indisputable that this same catastrophe weakened the long-term grip European powers had on the national self-determination of vast populations beyond European borders and thus provided the ground for the struggle for human dignity and recognition in the non-Western world. Such are the ironies of dialectic, after all. Therefore, as Boer convincingly points out, Western attacks on national sovereignty have not been *merely* determined by intra-European catastrophe; they have also worked as ways in which to seek to perpetuate Western hegemony after the wave of anti-colonial revolutions. To do so, they seek to legitimate so-called “regime change” through the invocation of an intended restoration of “human rights” that has virtually everywhere been belied by dire realities after Western intervention (Boer 2021, 174).

There are objective historical reasons for this disjunction between attitudes toward sovereignty and the concept of right, then—as well as for the codification of this disjunction in terms of the antagonistic attitudes of different states toward, on the one hand, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (supported overwhelmingly by former colonial powers) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (supported by states formerly colonized or semi-colonized [Boer 2021, 184]). But while the disjunction is real, the effort to overcome antagonistic differences for the greater good of all humanity is very much legitimate and worthy of support as well. The issue is well posed by Sun Xiangchen’s argument that it is imperative to avoid “the dual trap of hegemonic universalism and a regionalism that rejects such universalism” (167). The struggle against Western “false universals” is imperative, but it should by no means lead to the elevation of local and regional circumstances to a “counter-universal,” equally dogmatic and arrogant in its presumed monopoly of truth. Rather, a thought rooted in contradiction analysis ought to be able to dwell not simply on the historically inherited disjunctions I pointed to above, but also on areas of convergence. It ought to be possible, to quote Boer, “to identify not so much common ground but a basis for mutual understanding and contributions to the universal of human rights from different contexts and perspectives” (184).

Let me briefly dwell on one particular example of what this might involve, gleaned from the author’s own discussion: in the context of his critique of post-war Western attitudes toward sovereignty, Boer mentions the idea that “‘rights’ are not granted by a sovereign state, for then they can be removed.” He illustrates this idea through reference to Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (Paine [1971] 1998) and its assertion that rights are “natural” and hence also inalienable rather

than granted by the state. Boer interprets this as a “secularized theological approach” (2021, 177), having already drawn attention to the dangers inherent in the conversion of politics to secular theology (173). No doubt, he is right on multiple counts: from a historical materialist standpoint, the idea of “natural” and therefore universal rights is an illusion typical of “false universals,” i.e., of the naturalization of a particular class position and ideology. But they are not *merely* that, just as Thomas Paine is not *merely* a representative of “Western thought” but also an uncompromising and courageous revolutionary. His apparent self-deception as to the nature of rights involves a very concrete historical and political logic: the protection of revolutionary democracy from counter-revolution, and hence the institutionalization of rights on a basis other than that of a sovereign power that might fall into the wrong (monarchical, despotic) hands.

Clearly, we need to be cautious about Paine’s argumentative means, but less so about his political ends. Granting sovereignty limitless power to not only bestow but also to take back rights is not a step forward from the limitations of Enlightenment universalism. We need to distinguish between the derivation of rights from sovereign power and the legitimacy of their prospective disappearance back into its folds. Or, to put it otherwise, we need some version of the “inalienability” of basic human rights, without its grounding on the spurious complex of “nature,” private property, and property relations. This could take the form of the institutionalization of a self-limiting sovereignty, a power that willingly restrains itself from engulfing civil society by positing “rule of law” as its own willful self-supersession. I believe that China’s handling of the recent crisis in Hong Kong SAR is a fine example of such self-limitation and a salutary alternative to how the USSR handled similar crises in so-called “satellite states.” And I would like to bring to the table of cross-cultural and inter-Marxist dialogue on the best path forward toward the defense of human dignity the words of Ernst Bloch’s important and thoughtful study on this matter:

The generality of the law was in fact a claim that was originally revolutionary; it was a progressive bourgeois law, one backed by thoroughly human impulses founded in Rousseau and before him as an essential determination of classical natural law [...] It is not necessary to emphasize that from the perspective of their real content, even bourgeois revolutions are revolutions [...] it is necessary to emphasize that so long as they are revolutionary, even ideologies are elective affinities in the human fight for identity—they are not simply museum pieces. To be sure, there is an enormous quantity of false consciousness in them [...] Nevertheless, they are full of anticipation, are moved by the wish and dream of a classless society, and the enthusiastic revolutionary impulse always goes beyond the simple ends of classes. In most respects the bourgeois revolution was

unquestionably more bourgeois than revolution, but [...] it still contains that promise and that concrete, utopian form of a promise which the real revolution can hold onto. This is the stipend of human rights [...] Freedom, equality, fraternity, the orthopedia of the upright carriage, of human pride, and of human dignity point far beyond the horizon of the bourgeois world. (Bloch 1996, 136–137, 172, 174)

Bloch's broader suggestion that there remains a component in bourgeois right that is not reducible to the property relations of capitalism (we may describe it, as he does, as the cluster of rights that constitute human dignity as something inalienable) seems, as I noted above, to have been taken up in a fertile and constructive manner by the Chinese state in recent years. In his next chapter, Boer presents us with a detailed and helpful summary of the history of the debates that led the country to adopt "rule of law" from Western juridical and philosophico-political traditions, while reframing it within the different political and social context of the country. As he shows, the 1990s witnessed serious debate on the advisability of constitutionally adopting a Western term over the pre-existing nomenclature of "legal system." The views that prevailed (rightly so, in my view) were first, that the existence of a legal system does not in itself guarantee rule of law, including the principles of the supreme authority of the law, justice, stability, universality, openness and equality, checks on political power, and the protection of human rights; and second, that under rule of law the priorities set by governance, society, economy, and ecology remain subject to legal checks instead of being allowed to institute potential states of emergency or exception (Boer 2021, 219). After providing us with the background to these debates in far more ancient disagreements between Confucianists and Legalists regarding the best way of advancing civic virtue and state stability, Boer grounds the historicity of the adoption of a concept from Western jurisprudence in more recent and traumatic events such as the Cultural Revolution, where a number of excesses were committed under the assumption that leader charisma trumps legal checks and balances, and hence under the banner of "rule of a person" instead of "rule of law." A debate accordingly began in 1978 and lasted until 1997, with the preponderant view being, in the end, that "rule of law is clearly superior to the rule of a person," while, at the same time, such rule of law needs to be grounded in the nature and character of socialist democracy (214).

This resolution seems to me very much fundamental, both because it boldly addressed the structural and legal threat of despotism within the legal and political minimalism often advocated by Marxism²¹ and because it did not succumb to the empty formalism of assuming that "rule of law" is itself impermeable to the pressures of property relations and of the power of money. Hence, in contemporary

China, “rule of law” first means that the people rather than capital are masters of the country; second, that they are equal without exceptions before the law, irrespectively of social or political position (the tenacity of anti-corruption campaigns instantiates the seriousness of this principle); third, that both electoral and consultative democracy (presented analytically in terms of their mechanisms in the first half of the chapter) have a substantive and not a merely formal impact on decisions; fourth, that the powers of the CPC, but also those of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), are not untrammelled by checks and balances; and finally, that rule of law is to be understood as including the rule of virtue, that is to say, that it is not merely based on sanctions but is also proactive in fostering “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faithfulness” (Boer 2021, 215, 212). Of course, Western thought, trained in the juridico-political traditions of the post-Westphalian tradition, would be likely to ask where sovereignty lies in such an arrangement: is rule of law or the party the supreme power? To this, Boer responds through Li Lin and the “both-and” of contradiction analysis: rule of law and party rule can presuppose and reinforce rather than antagonize each other (215–216). Further, the practical (as opposed to the historical) legitimacy of the CPC depends on ruling not by fiat but by considering “all the components of the socialist democratic system—electoral, consultative, and grassroots democracy, minority nationalities policy, rule of law, and human rights” (217).

But how did a socialism shaped in the mold of twentieth-century Marxism-Leninism reach this stage without undergoing counter-revolutionary overthrow of the type experienced by the USSR? How did a state that, in Western eyes, had been synonymous with the “cult of personality” after the Cultural Revolution manage the transition to checks and balances within a socialist framework? This is largely what the penultimate chapter of Boer’s study, on the theoretical underpinnings of this long and still officially unfinished process, undertakes to explain. The initial stages of the account provided are, predictably, those of Marx and Engels’s critical response to bourgeois democracy, with particular emphasis on Engels’s contribution in equating its counterpart—socialist democracy—with the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The author also addresses, via Marx and Engels, the importance of the principles of centralism in state management and the organization of political life within socialism not in terms of antagonism between organized private interests but in terms of cooperative and consultative principles (Boer 2021, 234–237). Lenin’s impact in envisioning proletarian democracy as a transitional stage for as long as the state had not yet “withered away,” along with his contribution, through the theorization of the “Party of the new type,” to principles of “democratic centralism” in state administration are outlined next (237–241). The pre-Chinese revolutionary sequence ends in Stalin, particularly in relation to

the conception of the state role of the communist party and to a distinctly Marxist approach to human rights (as in the 1936 Constitution of the USSR) (241–244). The principles of the dictatorship of the proletariat (interpreted as “democratic dictatorship” because of its theoretically broader social base) and of democratic centralism (mediated through the “mass line”) comprise two of the three categories through which Mao conceived of Chinese democracy; the third is “new democracy,” a form specific to the political implications of the anti-colonial coalition of class forces that supported the Chinese Revolution (245–247). This last remains important given the political role of the eight non-communist parties that are officially accepted in China to this day as having a consultative role in the CPPCC (197, 245–247).

So far, however, and although we can note important shifts of accent from classical and from Soviet Marxism, the principle of rule of law seems to remain at best a nascent possibility. The transition from the former to the latter appears to have come, at least at the theoretical level, in the form of identifying a limitation in Mao’s thought, which he inherited from his classical and Soviet predecessors: as is well-known, both operated under the assumption that the state form would begin quickly to “wither away” within socialist relations and hence found no reason to dwell on whether the state could effectively be administered with the *same* principles of democratic centralism as the party (which is to say, through principles of subordinating freedom of criticism to unity [Boer 2021, 240]). Deng, as Boer notes, began to interrogate this assumed equivalence between intra-party and state administration by reflecting on a phenomenon Western thought has barely conceived: the coupling of authoritarianism with *decentralization* (abundantly illustrated by several feudal states); and hence, of the possibility of inversely combining centralization and the enhancement of democratic procedures (Boer 2021, 252). Gradually, the idea emerged that there is a difference between the highly disciplined nature of the Communist Party and the democratic institutional forms of country-wide governance. As a result, it is “not enough to assert the dialectical unity of the two terms or assume that democratic centralism can simply be applied from the Party to the country” (Boer 2021, 251). In historical practice, this meant adopting institutional measures to allow the separation between the party and the government, which involves a process of obtaining consent, after careful study and deliberation at party level, for party proposals “in the administrative organs and people’s representative bodies” (Boer 2021, 254). Under Jiang Zemin, this was supplemented and strengthened through emphasis on rule of law and on the “need for electoral, consultative and grassroots democracy as parts of a larger whole” (Boer 2021, 255). Under Xi Jinping’s current leadership, the process of fully elaborating the institutional articulations between party governance and national government remains under way, with the year 2035 set as the target year

for fully establishing the procedural mediations between democratic centralism at the level of the party and at that of national governance.

It is important, finally, to note that the still ongoing development of socialist democracy should not be confused with Western “social democracy”; the latter remains understood as a political position subordinated to the competitive pluralism of liberal democracy and constrained accordingly by the capitalist mode of production (Boer 2021, 259). In contradistinction, China’s socialist democracy, following the principles of contradiction analysis, does not construe the sphere of civil society and its relationship to the state as antagonistic (260).

In his final chapter, Boer focuses, in my view advisedly, on Xi Jinping’s own contribution to the revitalization of Marxist thought in contemporary China by dwelling on his speech in honor of Marx’s 200th anniversary. For a long time, Western intellectuals have disparagingly interpreted official discourse as mere “lip service” to Marxism, ignoring the complex tasks of historical and practical legitimation, as well as of conscious policy such (largely untranslated) texts tackle. Boer surveys all nine of the topics Xi addressed: the development of human society, within which Xi integrates the pursuit of communism in terms of “one-by-one phased goals” (Boer 2021, 280); the duty for adherence to the “people’s standpoint” in evaluating national progress (281); the thorny problem of the dialectic between relations and forces of production, within the discussion of which Xi stated the CPC’s commitment to not abandon “the dominant role of public ownership and the leading role of the state sector”—a commitment that is amply verified by empirical evidence during his tenure 282–284); the insistence on a democratic system tried and tested in China rather than submission to the false universals of Western democracy (284–286); the importance of cultural differences in shaping the character of the economic base rather than simply reflecting its accomplished nature; the importance of combining the collectivist ethos of socialism with “rule of virtue” and “rule of law” (286–289); the important distinction of the goals of socialist planning from those of a capitalist “welfare state” and its efforts to merely curb severe social inequalities with a safety net for the poorest (289–290); the importance of ecology and of sustainable development for contemporary Marxism (290–291);²² the complex character of globalization from the Chinese perspective, given the simultaneous importance of national sovereignty and cultural self-confidence (291–294); and finally, the task of CPC members to follow Marx and Engels’s directive of actively representing the interests of the whole of society rather than private, family or narrowly partisan interests (294–296).

The chapter concludes via reference to Xi’s citation of Engels’s letter to Werner Sombart on Marxism being a method rather than a doctrine, later revitalized in Lenin’s slogan that Marxism is “not a dogma but a guide for action” (Boer 2021, 296). Such precepts lead Xi to posit both adherence to “the basic principles of

scientific socialism” and the rejection of Marxism as an “immutable and frozen dogma” (297). In its current historical phase of development, China has belied virtually every prediction and expectation of Western “experts” by combining rapid economic growth with a decisive turn against the excesses of market liberalization and private monopoly power. It has therefore proven that for it, the idea of socialism as a “work-in-progress,” as a constantly transforming and open-ended project, is not mere theory but indeed a guide to action. In providing non-Chinese readers with an extensive, erudite, and sustained examination of several of the key aspects of this still-evolving project, Boer has offered us the opportunity to not merely understand China better, but to re-examine our own societies under a more probing light; decades after the proclamation of an “end of history,” the dialectic obstinately shows us that it has not yet said its final word. Evoking Zhou Enlai, we might well admit that, on the major theoretical questions on the Chinese but also global future of socialism, it’s “too early to say”²³ because there is much more to learn.

Notes

1. Perry Anderson’s critical diagnosis (1976) is thus, if anything, more topical today than when originally made:

Western Marxism [...] was progressively inhibited from theoretical confrontation of major economic or political problems, from the 1920s onwards [...] The result was that Western Marxism as a whole, when it proceeded beyond questions of method to matters of substance, came to concentrate overwhelmingly on study of *superstructures*. Moreover, the specific superstructural orders with which it showed the most constant and close concern were those ranking “highest” in the hierarchy of distance from the economic infrastructure [...] it was not the State or Law which provided the typical objects of its research. It was culture that held the central focus of its attention. (Anderson 1976, 75–76; italics in the original)

2. It is instructive to read this typology in conjunction to the one Boer, in collaboration with Ping Yan (Boer and Yan 2021), developed regarding the dismissal of China within contemporary “Western Marxist” circles: its conception in terms of “capitalist socialism,” “bureaucratic capitalism,” “neo-liberalism ‘with Chinese characteristics,’” and “state capitalism.”
3. See, for example, Stites (1991); and, on the surprising continuities between pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and post-revolutionary mysticism in Russia, see Rosenthal (1997) and Young (2012).
4. But not simply or merely the Chinese context; see Boer’s remarks on the importance of precisely this insight in Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature* (Boer 2021, 59).
5. It is important, indeed, to recall that Marx’s famous slogan explicitly presupposes not only the abolition of the antithesis between mental and manual labor in communist society, but also the increase of “productive forces.” See Marx (1989, 87).
6. See Mao’s reference to Lenin’s remark on Bukharin in Mao ([1937] 2007, 101); and see Basavupunnaiah (1983).
7. See Lenin (1961, 359–360). Importantly for the development of Mao’s thought, Lenin remarked, in the same essay, that “[t]he unity (coincidence, identity, equal action of opposites) is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute” (1961, 360; and see Boer 2021, 59).

8. It is instructive here to bear in mind Mao's criticism of the Trotskyites, who fail to distinguish between contradiction and antagonism and therefore have "elevated contradiction into antagonism." As Mao correctly sees, this view inevitably led Trotsky and his followers to reject the possibility of socialism in one country as impossible and as a source of the distortion of "the spirit of socialism," advocating instead international revolution (Mao 2004, 665–666). Some of the old animosity toward the idea of socialism as concretely founded on the economic, social, cultural, and political conditions in a specific country still prevails in much of the Western Marxist ridicule of the concept of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."
9. Later in the book, Boer expresses this point very succinctly and clearly: "a universal can be a universal only through its particularity" (2021, 167).
10. The Western reader might be tempted to compare this moment with the founding of the Chinese Communist Party on a small red boat on Nanhu Lake and at the same time wonder at how differently things could have turned out if the Xiaogang initiative was penalized as "counter-revolutionary" instead of being seriously reflected on.
11. See Marx (1975, 275–278); on communism as "the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being," see Marx (1975, 296; italics in the original).
12. In "The State and Revolution," Lenin goes to some length to remind his audience of Marx's critique, in *Critique of the Gotha Program*, of Lasalle's idea that in socialist society the worker may receive "the full product of his labor" before pointing out that after "a deduction is made of the amount of labour which goes to the public fund, every worker [. . .] receives from society as much as he has given to it" (Lenin 1964, 470). Indeed, Lenin remarks,

[The] socialist principle "He who does not work shall not eat" is fully realized [. . .] But this is not yet communism and it does not abolish "bourgeois law," which gives unequal individuals [. . .] equal amounts of products. (Lenin 1964, 472)

On the biblical origins of this principle and its adoption in the 1936 USSR Constitution, see Boer (2017). It should be emphasized, nonetheless, that, as Lenin's view of the persistence of "bourgeois law" within socialism concerns equal compensation of unequally situated individuals for equal work, it cannot easily be reconciled with the wealth disparities created by the mode of economic development in contemporary China.

13. In "The State and Revolution," for instance, Lenin remarks something frequently overlooked or forgotten:

[I]t has never entered the head of any socialist to promise that the higher phase of communism will arrive; as for the great socialists' *forecast* that it will arrive, it presupposes not the present productivity of labour and *not the present* ordinary run of people. (Lenin 1964, 474; italics in the original)

14. See Greenstein (2014).
15. Boer acknowledges that this remains a question in the last chapter of the book (2021, 283) and answers it in terms of the dominance (or preponderance) of public ownership in China. This, nonetheless, certainly differs from the Manifesto's demand for centralizing *all* instruments of production in the hands of the state. In addition, the *public* character of an industry is not in itself a reliable indication of its *socialized* character. There are public industries and services within the capitalist system, for instance, but they are not therefore islets of socialist relations of production.
16. I note here that in his 1988 book *Planning and the Market in Socialist Societies*, Marxist economist Yorgos Stamatidis opted to speak of both the then USSR and post-reform China as "contemporary postcapitalist transitional societies," acknowledging their double difference from both classical socialism and from liberal capitalism.

17. This seems to me to be the spirit of Deng's insistence on the "lowering the standards" of "Chinese-style modernizations" (Boer 2021, 143, 152): it is by no means a concession to underachievement, for, in reality, "Chinese-style modernizations" have been unprecedentedly rapid and effective. The logic of minimizing the extent of achievements sought and made is not conciliation with the finitude of the Chinese socialist project but the exact opposite. There is *always* a "little more" that "may" be done.
18. "The infinite includes the finite within itself, and consequently [. . .] it is the unity of itself and its other [. . .] This unity of the infinite and the finite, and the distinguishing of them, are inseparable, in the same way as the finite and the infinite" (Hegel 2010, 124).
19. On this, see also Boer (2021, Section 10.4.1, 280).
20. See, indicatively, Derrida (2005); Bricmont (2006); Douzinas (2007).
21. See Balasopoulos (2021, 147–154).
22. On this increasingly "hot" (forgive the pun) subject, see John Bellamy Foster (2000, 2020).
23. On the often-misinterpreted remark by Zhou Enlai (who was not referring to the French Revolution of 1789), see Ratcliff (2016).

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