

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

Roland Boer

School of Marxism, Dalian University of Technology, China

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, although the book itself begins with a preface that outlines that main theoretical and methodological matters that underlie this study. I also offer a synopsis of the chapters.

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

This chapter concerns what Marx had to say concerning existing forms of the state and what might happen to the state under socialism in power, after a communist revolution. The chapter is divided into four sections, the first of which deals briefly with Marx's observations on hitherto existing forms of the state. The second section turns to my main concern, which is what happens after a proletarian revolution. Here I deal with the dictatorship of the proletariat – a term coined by Marx and defended (as we shall see in the next chapter) assiduously by Engels. The third section deals with the commune, based on the experiment in Paris in 1871. The material on the proletarian dictatorship and the commune raises a number of problems, which Marx did not solve and indeed left for Engels to seek a solution. The final section focuses on Marx's fascinating struggle in trying to deal with forms of governance under communism. That he realised such governance is necessary is clear, but that he was also reticent to spell it out in detail is also obvious – not least because he knew that he did not have the experience and thereby evidence to undertake a scientific study of what happens to the state under communism. In other words, the chapter is of necessity theoretical.

2. *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*, Springer 2021), since it was actually 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 emphasised that 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, although it would not be separated from but stand in the midst of society; 2) Since it is not based on class conflict, it would lose its "political character"; 3) Governance entails the administration of things and the management of the processes of production for the sake of the true interests of society; 4) This reality may be seen as a dialectical transformation, an *Aufhebung* of baseline communism.

3. 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. The chapter is structured around this threshold. It begins with Lenin's pre-October reflections on the state, democracy, and what forms governance might take after a proletarian revolution. At this stage, Lenin was restricted to interpreting the texts primarily of Engels but also Marx, along with the experiences of revolutionary struggle. The second section provides an overview of the practical experiences of the early days of Soviet power, identifying the transitions towards institutionalisation, leadership of the Communist Party, and socialist democracy. The third section examines Lenin's theoretical deliberations on what was happening, seeking to discern the shape of socialist governance in light of rapidly developing conditions. Here, I address – through close attention to “The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power” – the leadership of the Communist Party, including leadership over and training of the masses of workers and peasants, the need for iron discipline, and the concomitant development of worker democracy. I also address developments in the theory of socialist democracy as the highest form of democracy, and the category of democratic centralism – which would come to have profound influence in the communist tradition. I close by asking what has happened to the state as – following Engels – a separated public power, and identify the unexpected beginning of a long process of the state's “dying away” from the first moments of the proletarian revolution.

4. The Soviet Union as a Multi-National and Anti-Colonial State

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 in the context of Stalin's long tenure that real developments took place on the ground. These three decades, from the early 1920s to 1953, constitute one of the most formative periods for socialist governance. Given its importance, I devote two chapters to the topic. The present chapter deals with the central role of multiple – and especially minority – nationalities in the structures of socialist governance. It begins specifying why we should use “nationality” and not “ethnic group,” and sets out the historical of debates among Marxist parties at the turn of the twentieth century – especially those in Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Caucasus. Stalin's deeply influential essay, “Marxism and the National Question” of 1913, was a response to these debates. In this essay, he argues against the proposal that “cultural-national autonomy” should be the determining feature of a federated socialist country; instead, class should be the unifying feature, so much so that the totalising unity of class would provide a more genuine and comprehensive foundation for fostering hitherto unexpected levels of diversity. It was precisely on this principle that the world's first comprehensive policy for minority nationalities was developed in the Soviet Union after 1917. After providing some detail concerning these policies, the chapter then examines how this focus on many nationalities within the Soviet Union led to a crucial insight: in the same way that the liberation of nationalities was enabled through the October Revolution, so also should colonised peoples seek liberation through anti-colonial struggles of national liberation. The final part of the chapter examines how this insight developed in the 1920s, and how it was enacted through the many dimensions of assistance and indeed fostering of national liberation movements throughout the world. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the internal problem generated in the Soviet Union with the constitutional ride to autonomous republics to secede, and how subsequent socialist countries have not followed this example.

5. *Soviet Democracy and a “Socialist State”*

This chapter focuses on how the basic features of socialist democracy in the Soviet Union began to emerge in the 1920s and especially 1930s. There are four features: 1) the first and faltering attempts to promote electoral democracy, and especially the campaign for universal, multi-candidate, and contested elections in the later 1930s; 2) the substantial and abiding contribution to consultative democracy through the primary party organisations (PPOs) in the workplace, collective farm, and neighbourhood; 3) in relation to the 1936 constitution, the identification of freedom from exploitation (and thus socio-economic well-being) as a core human right, along with proactive and substantive rights; 4) and the inescapable and dialectical role of the leadership of the Communist Party in socialist democracy. These features would come to be developed much further by other socialist countries. The chapter also deals with the increasing usage of the term “socialist state,” as a qualitatively different form of the state. The concern here is with Stalin’s reflections in response to debates concerning the state’s withering away, and his identification in an all-important speech to the eighteenth congress of 1939 of a second stage of socialism in which socialist state structures have attained relative maturity and stability. After summing up the features of such a “socialist state,” I address the contradiction in which the terminology of “socialist state” began to be deployed precisely when it was becoming clearer that the distinction between state and society was blurring and could no longer be applied. In short, the organs of governance were increasingly standing – as Engels already suggested – in the midst of society.

6. *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 has also been the target of the greatest amount of Western caricatures and misrepresentations. In this case, it needs to be 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 primary sources are Korean scholars, as well as a handful of observers who have actually visited the country and studied it carefully (as I have done on 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 bulk of the chapter presents details on the practices of socialist governance, after providing some historical background to the emergence of the DPRK’s governing structures. First is electoral democracy, which is embodied in the interaction between the people’s assemblies and the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland. The Democratic Front includes all political parties, mass organisations, and religious groups, and it is here that multiple candidates for elections are put forward, debated, and selected. Only then do elections of the proposed candidates take place for the people’s assemblies, including the Supreme People’s Assembly, which is the highest legislative body in the country. The second is consultative democracy, where the mass line comes to the fore. I analyse in some detail the Chongsanri method in agriculture and the Taean work system in industry – both named after the places where they were first developed. These methods entail a dialectical approach: the greater the substantive involvement of collective farmers and shop-floor workers in problem-solving and realistic planning, the more significant is the ownership and implementation of decisions and plans by the Party committees and planning commissions. The third concerns the leadership of the Workers’ Party of Korea, and here I use the example of the State Affairs Commission (SAC). The country’s leader is the chair of the SAC (but

not of the SPA and its Standing Committee), which has significant and wide-reaching powers. How does the SAC relate to the whole system of socialist democracy in the DPRK? It is accountable to the SPA, and the whole system, as one scholar puts it, “regulates the order in which the state power is established and exercised.” In other words, the significant power of the SAC requires not merely a high level of accountability, but also a robust system of statutory processes through which the WPK leads.

The final part of the chapter provides an overview of 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 notably people-centred, emphasising the creativity of the masses and the concern with improving everyday lives of common people. The chapter closes with some considerations 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.”

7. Whole Process People’s Democracy in China

This chapter focuses on a speech by Xi Jinping from late 2021, concerning “whole process people’s democracy [全过程人民民主 *quan guocheng renmin minzhu*].” It begins with an overview of the development of socialist democracy in China from the beginnings with the anti-colonial struggle of the nineteenth century, through Mao Zedong’s new democracy, democratic dictatorship, and democratic centralism, through to the full panoply of components that were established during the reform and opening-up. The main concern is to identify the emphases in developing socialist democracy from the time of the CPC’s Eighteenth National Congress in 2012 and then the tasks at hand today. There are three main features that arise from this material.

First is the importance of the mass line as the foundation of people’s democracy, along with explicating the meaning of the “people’s heart” or “people’s will” in a socialist context, and the crucial role of democratic supervision. All of this may be seen in terms of “the people as masters of the country [为人民当家作主 *wei renmin dangjia zuozhu*].” The second concerns a signature emphasis of Xi Jinping’s tenure as general secretary: developing further a comprehensive rule of law. On this topic, I provide a brief background to socialist rule of law, before dealing with the project of strengthening the constitution and the need for a robust and constantly updated legal system that focuses on incorporating the virtuous or “good laws [善法 *shanfa*]” that are necessary for a socialist legal system. Third is the leadership of the Communist Party, without which socialist democracy would not exist. Here I focus on the development of rule-of-law “statutory procedures [法定程序 *fading chengxu*]” through which the Party’s proposals become the will of the people, and how Xi Jinping has ensured the development of democratic centralism for country-wide governance. The conclusion to the chapter seeks to define socialist democracy in light of these three topics as a dialectical conjunction of Communist Party leadership and the people as masters of the country, mediated through the full range or “whole process [全过程 *quan guocheng*]” of democratic and rule-of-law statutory procedures. I also ask how democracy may be evaluated in any of its forms. A final note: this chapter is theoretical, but the three main topics – people’s will, rule of law, and Communist Party leadership – will form the topics for case studies in the next three chapters.

8. *The People's Will: Stability, Safety, and Harmony in Xinjiang*

Arising from the three main themes of the previous chapter – people's will, rule of law, and Communist Party leadership – this chapter provides a case study relating to the people's heart or will as an inescapable feature of socialist democracy. It does so by focusing on a distinctive feature of China's socialist system in terms of the political and cultural assumptions of stability, safety, and harmony, and then analysing the situation in relation to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The first part provides an overview of the semantic fields of stability, safety, and harmony, and then pays more extensive attention to an important CPC Central Committee from 2006, entitled *Decision on Some Major Issues Concerning the Construction of a Harmonious Socialist Society*. Coming in the wake of the “wild 90s,” the *Decision* analyses the many contradictions that had arisen and provides a full-spectrum policy response that has particular relevance for the many problems in Xinjiang.

The second part of the chapter tackles the situation in Xinjiang, in light of personal experience and scholarship. It begins with a presentation of two geographical features with immense strategic, political, and economic significance: the Hu Huanyong Line and the Hexi Corridor. This material sets the context for overview of the historical development of the preferential policies for minority nationalities (the Uyghur nationality is one of 55 in China), after which I deal with the main emphases in of these policies in terms of culture, education, governance, and economic development. The latter in particular had until recently lagged considerably in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where poverty still remained a distinct problem in remote and rural areas. This leads me to deal with the Marxist approach to human rights, for which the core right is socio-economic well-being and common prosperity. The residual poverty in Xinjiang had provided opportunities for the spread of Islamic radicalism in the 1990s, leading to a rise in terrorism, extremism, and separatism. The response has two related steps: first, a resolute focus in restoring stability, safety, and harmony through anti-terrorist and deradicalisation measures; tackling the root cause in terms of economic development, improved job training and opportunities, and education. Here I also address the patterns of growth of Xinjiang's population and the improved choices available to educated and working Uyghur women, as well as the profound effect of the Belt and Road Initiative, which has enabled Xinjiang at last to overcome absolute poverty and set out on the road to common prosperity. Only on the basis of high-quality and balanced development are stability, safety, and harmony possible in the long term.

9. *Governing the Country According to Law: The Hong Kong National Security Law*

The second case study that arises from my treatment in chapter seven concerns the rule of law, with a particular focus on the Hong Kong National Security Law that was promulgated in June 2020 and came into effect at the beginning of 2021. I do not see the need to reprise my earlier treatments of rule of law itself, so will address directly the situation of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR). The chapter begins with an overview of the longer history of Hong Kong as a part of China stolen by the British Empire in the nineteenth century and its development as a trade hub – of all manner of commodities legal and illegal – and use as a lever to destabilise the rest of China, economically, politically, and culturally (through religious missionaries). The second part deals with the long and complex negotiations of the 1980s and 1990s concerning Hong Kong's long overdue return to the mainland, with an emphasis on the continual obstructions by the British imperial negotiators. This leads to a treatment of the innovative “one country, two systems” solution proposed by Deng Xiaoping, with reference to three SARs, in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan island. Next, I move to the structural and

economic problems of Hong Kong SAR since 1997, which developed a warped economy characterised by oligopoly capitalism, vast income disparities, sluggish economic growth, a polarised political landscape, and an educational system that sought to promote decaying Western liberal assumptions.

These compound problems and tensions provided the causes of the “Hong Kong storm [风波 *fengbo*]” that burst forth in 2019-2020, with unrest, riots, violence, and widespread destruction. This was also fanned by foreign interference that sought – once again – to use Hong Kong SAR as a destabilising lever, now in terms of a “colour counter-revolution.” The final part focuses on the comprehensive analysis and measures taken, including economic, political, educational, and media reform, although my particular concern is with the Hong Kong National Security Law itself. This was a comprehensive rule-of-law solution to the immediate problems, and, with effective implementation, brought the unrest to a rapid end. The conclusion considers the longer term goals of Hong Kong SAR’s democratic reforms and economic development, and indicates that the pioneering project of “one country, two systems” has already gained valuable experience for the time when Taiwan island too becomes a special administrative region.

10. *Party Building: Strengthening the Construction of a Marxist Party*

The final case study that arises from chapter seven concerns Party building, which is a key feature of effective leadership by the Communist Party. For a Party of almost 100 million members, the level of organisation for such an active Communist Party is beyond the imagination for those who live in countries with populations smaller than even the CPC. Building and strengthening the Party, improving its theoretical knowledge in Marxism, leading on all fronts, building honest and clean governance, ensuring deep links with the masses, engaging actively with and deeply involved in communities and workplaces – these and many more are the tasks and responsibilities of Party branches. The resources for these tasks are also immense, so I need to be selective.

In this chapter, my interest is in local or grassroots Party branches, since these are the foundation of the whole Party: “Attaching importance to and strengthening the construction of Party branches is the distinctive feature of a Marxist party.” The first part analyses in some detail the *Regulations for the Work of Branches of the Communist Party of China*, which was issued in trial form in 2018 and is currently undergoing comprehensive testing and the gathering of feedback from concrete experience. While providing an overview of the *Regulations*, I am particularly interested in five topics: a) the dialectical nature of Party branches, in the sense that resolute and unified adherence to the Central Committee is coupled with full-scale democratic practices, energy, and creativity; b) the ten types of Party branches, which require some explanation and occasionally draws on personal experience; c) the tasks and responsibilities of such branches, especially since the *Regulations* signalled a root-and-branch renewal of the base-level, the very foundations of the CPC; d) comprehensive democratic practices, in terms of elections, consultation, and democratic supervision that has a “spicy taste”; e) and the increased responsibilities of Party branch secretaries, which I leave for a separate section later in the chapter.

The second section of the chapter selects one type of grassroots Party branch out of a large number: the enterprise Party branch. I do so by drawing on the immense resources at the premier site, 党建 *Dangjian*, which simply means *Party Building*. After a brief overview of the site’s content and structure, I begin by analysing some examples of branches in non-public enterprises, before turning to the comprehensive Marxist educational activities of grassroots branches in state-owned enterprises. Since the centenary of the CPC was celebrated on 1 July, 2021, the material I have researched primarily concerns historical study

and activities in a number of different branches. The final topic of this section deals with the fact that the working masses – industrial workers, miners, railway employees, and so on – are the members of enterprise branches, and that a major responsibility concerns the well-being of the staff and working masses in the enterprise.

The third and fourth sections concern the Party branch secretary and the role of trade unions. The branch secretary is a major concern of the *Regulations*, but I have held the treatment to this point since there has been a distinct focus on improving the skills and qualities of such secretaries. After dealing with the *Regulations* on this matter, I turn to two insightful pieces, the first of which identifies the main problems that arose from appraisals of branch secretaries and the solutions in terms of identifying potential secretaries, nurturing and training them, and assisting branch secretaries in the many tasks of theoretical improvement, engagement with production and decision-making in the enterprise, and assisting branch members in all respects. The other study is an anonymous first-hand account of a new Party branch secretary and the challenging tasks of renewing the growing the branch. The final section of the chapter broaches the topic of trade unions in a socialist system, especially since such a role is somewhat more difficult to understand for those who are accustomed to the antagonistic nature of class-based struggles in capitalist systems. Here, I draw on a key document from the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, which should be a must-read text for all who are interested in the topic.

11. *Conclusion: On Communism and the Common Good*

The concluding chapter draws together the main insights that have arisen through this study, stressing the continuities and identifying the new developments. In terms of continuities, I begin with the development of enmeshed governance, in the sense that – as Engels pointed out – the organs of governance stand in the midst of society. This emerging reality comes to the fore already in the early days of the Soviet Union, with the development of worker democracy through Primary Party Organisations. We also find it in the Chongsanri and Taean methods, in agriculture and industry, in the DPRK, and through the deep enmeshment of grassroots Party branches in China. The second continuity concerns depoliticised elections and indeed the whole process of electoral democracy in socialist countries, with the result that the criteria for election become competence, experience, and merit. Through both categories – enmeshed governance and depoliticised elections – we find the characteristic dialectic of socialist governance in terms of consultative (including grassroots) and electoral democracy. The next topic moves to new developments, in light of concrete practice, beyond Marx and especially Engels. In particular, it became clear already in the Soviet Union that the leadership of the Communist Party is an inescapable feature of socialist governance and democracy. While the Soviet Union had, for historical reasons, a singular political party, in the DPRK and China there are multiple political parties in light of the united front experience of anti-colonial struggle for national liberation. For the Communist Party to lead in an effective and legitimate way, socialist rule of law is a must. This distinct approach to rule of law began in the Soviet Union, is to be found also in the DPRK, and has achieved its fullest development in China, where the constitution and complete rule-of-law procedures apply for CPC leadership. The final section broaches the question of the common good, in terms common prosperity, the “two combinations” of two person mindedness (仁 ren) and the many Marxist permutations of “common,” and unity in diversity. I close by asking how different systems of governance and democracy may be evaluated.