

Socialist Democracy with Chinese Characteristics

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Socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics: does it exist today and, if so, how does it work? I have of course glossed the phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” coined by Deng Xiaoping in 1982.¹ This slogan has generated its own controversy, with some decrying it as a screen for reintroducing capitalism and others seeing it as a consistent development of Mao’s emphasis on the “sinification” of Marxism.² That is not my direct concern here, although I do wish to keep open the ambiguity of the term, for it signals the sheer experiment that continues in China and is part of the immense complexity of constructing communism once one has seized power.

As for “socialist democracy,” the choice is quite deliberate, for it seeks to counter two common rhetorical moves made by proponents of bourgeois democracy. The first is to remove the epithet, to speak of “democracy” as a universal human right. As Lenin pointed out some time ago, this universalisation of “democracy” and “freedom” conceals the specific class and national interests of those who advocate it. That such “democracy,” along with “freedom,” is an imperialising slogan should be obvious, a slogan besmirched with the hypocrisy of its proponents and met with cynicism by those subjected to the propaganda.³ The second move is to propose that “Chinese democracy” is opposed to the realities of China. In this sense, it is the catch-all name of a disparate movement,

1 “In carrying out our modernization programme we must proceed from Chinese realities. Both in revolution and in construction we should also learn from foreign countries and draw on their experience, but mechanical application of foreign experience and copying of foreign models will get us nowhere. We have had many lessons in this respect. We must integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete realities of China, blaze a path of our own and build a socialism with Chinese characteristics – that is the basic conclusion we have reached after reviewing our long history.” Deng 1982.

2 “China must assimilate on a large scale the progressive culture of foreign countries, as an ingredient for enriching its own culture. Not enough of this was done in the past. We should assimilate whatever is useful to us today not only from the present-day socialist and new-democratic cultures but also from the older cultures of foreign countries, for example, from the culture of the various capitalist countries in the Age of Enlightenment. However, we absolutely cannot gulp down any of this foreign material uncritically, but must treat it as we do our food—first chewing it in the mouth, then subjecting it to the working of the stomach and intestines with their juices and secretions, and separating it into essences to be absorbed and waste matter to be discarded—before it can nourish us. So-called wholesale Westernization is wrong. China has suffered a great deal in the past from the formalist absorption of foreign things. Similarly, in applying Marxism to China, Chinese Communists must fully and properly integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution, or, in other words, the universal truth of Marxism must have a national form if it is to be useful, and in no circumstances can it be applied subjectively as a mere formula.” Mao 1940 [2005]-c, pp. 367-68. The debate over scientification/Westernisation versus sinification/indigenisation continues in political science today; see Guo 2013. See also Kluver 1996, p. 63.

3 “In a word, the insistence on democratization for all, and right now, has led to a clichéd intoning of the words freedom, human rights, and democracy, which provide ever more ragged clothing for the export of formulaic Western political values throughout the world.” Ogden 2007, p. 50.

of a theoretical elaboration, of a situation that is yet to come. The effect is to characterise China as “undemocratic.” Dictatorial, totalitarian, despotic – these and other terms do their best to ensure that democracy and modern China are kept as far apart as possible.⁴

My agenda is quite different, for I wish to explore the subtle issue of socialist democracy, with the epithet and with a focus on China. The following argument has three stages, the first of which reprises Lenin’s core reflections on democracy and freedom, of both bourgeois and socialist types. The second investigates the core texts by Mao Zedong, particularly “On New Democracy” and “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship.”⁵ I distinguish three key categories: new democracy, democratic centralism, and democratic dictatorship, each of which is not yet socialist democracy. With these categories in mind, I explore, finally, whether any of them are still relevant in contemporary China. Here we find that democratic centralism remains the official position, albeit still on the path to socialism. Not convinced, I ask what this means both for Mao’s own analysis and for socialist democracy itself. Is it perhaps multiple, appearing in various forms, rather than singular and yet to come?

Lenin and the Partisanship of Democratic Freedom

I begin with the Lenin, for in many ways he sets the scene for the development of Mao’s thoughts on democracy. Lenin offers the first effort to redefine democratic freedom after a successful communist revolution. The key is real or actual freedom, which is the ability to effect “*radical* change in the entire political system.”⁶ Yet, a crucial question remains: what happens after the exercise of real freedom, after the revolution? The beginning of an answer is that the revolution is not merely the moment – with however long a process leading up to that moment – when the old order has been overthrown and power has been seized by the revolutionaries. It includes that vital and far more difficult period after the

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4 Fung 2000; Wu 2013. For a telling counter, see Wang 2006; Ogden 2007.

5 Mao 1940 [2005]-c, 1949 [1961]-b.

6 Lenin 1912 [1964], p. 418. This is over against formal freedom, in which freedom is constituted by systematic exclusions generated by the unexamined framework of the bourgeois system. Both Lenin and Trotsky deployed this terminology: Lenin 1918 [1965]-b, p. 74, 1918 [1965]-c, p. 246, 1919 [1965]-e, p. 380, 1919 [1966], pp. 111-12, 1920 [1965], p. 408, 1920 [1966]-a, p. 145, 1920 [1966]-b, pp. 393, 395; Trotsky 1976, pp. 113-14.

revolutionary overthrow when all things have to be made anew.⁷

The full answer requires a through reformulation of real freedom and democracy. A beginning may be made with what at first may appear to be a jarring juxtaposition: democratic freedom is partisan. Is this not precisely the accusation hurled at the bourgeoisie, that their prattle about “freedom” conceals specific class interests? Does it not become another version of formal freedom? Not at all, but let us see why. Already in 1905, Lenin wrote, “They who serve the cause of freedom in general without serving the specific cause of proletarian utilisation of this freedom, the cause of turning the freedom to account in the proletarian struggle for socialism, are, in the final analysis, plainly and simply, fighters for the interests of the bourgeoisie.”⁸ This is a bold claim: “freedom in general” is to serve the cause of proletarian freedom, for only in this way will actual freedom be realised.

Six factors play a role in Lenin’s argument.

1) In the appropriation of Western political terminology during the revolutionary process after February 1917, “democracy” became associated with the labouring masses of workers and peasants, who were the “people” (*demos* and thereby *narod*). The opposite of democracy was not the autocracy or dictatorship, but the classes of the old aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Thus, terms such as “democratic elements,” “democratic classes,” “revolutionary democracy”, along with “democracy” itself, had distinct class dimensions. Democracy thereby became synonymous with the range of socialist parties, while those of the bourgeoisie (Kadets) and the old aristocracy (Octobrists and others) were anti-democratic.⁹ Lenin played no small part in that process of redefinition, which brings me to the second point concerning concealment:

2) Bourgeois claims to foster “pure democracy” or “freedom in general” conceal their class interest. By contrast, one must not conceal the partisan nature of proletarian freedom, for it is “*openly* linked to the proletariat.”¹⁰

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7 As he observes already in 1916: “The socialist revolution is not one single act, not one single battle on a single front; but a whole epoch of intensified class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, i.e., battles around all the problems of economics and politics, which can culminate only in the expropriation of the bourgeoisie.” Lenin 1916 [1964], p. 144.

8 Lenin 1905 [1963], p. 502.

9 Kolonitskii 2004.

10 Lenin 1905 [1966], p. 48. As Lenin writes in his exploratory notes for the Extraordinary Seventh

3) Bourgeois freedom is predicated on the individual, while proletarian freedom is collective. The catch here is that this supposed individuality of bourgeois freedom is in fact a collective position that is, once again, systematically concealed and denied. However, if one begins explicitly with the collective, then freedom begins to mean a very different type of freedom.

4) This apparently individual, bourgeois freedom operates within a society that holds as sacrosanct private property, a society “based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like parasites.”¹¹ In other words, bourgeois freedom serves the cause of capitalism in which the vast majority are systematically denied freedom. The only viable form of freedom, a “freedom without inverted commas,” is that which emancipates labour from the yoke of capitalism and replaces it with a communist system.¹²

5) It is possible to use the terminology of universals: bourgeois freedom constitutes a false universal, based upon a particular which is concealed, namely the power of capital, while proletarian freedom is a genuine universal, based not upon greed or careerism but upon the interests of the vast majority that unites the best of the past’s revolutionary traditions and the best of the present struggle for a new life.

6) Even this terminology becomes inadequate and falls away in light of the final point, which aligns with Lenin’s argument in *The State and Revolution*.¹³ Here he argues that since all freedoms are partisan and since proletarian freedom constitutes the only true freedom, freedom

Congress of the Russian Communist Party in March, 1918: “‘Liberties’ and democracy *not* for all, but *for* the working and exploited masses, to emancipate them from exploitation; ruthless suppression of exploiters.” And in explanation, “NB: chief stress is shifted *from* formal *recognition* of liberties (such as existed under bourgeois parliamentarism) *to* actually ensuring the *enjoyment* of liberties by the working people who are overthrowing the exploiters, e.g., from *recognition* of freedom of assembly to the *handing over* of all the best halls and premises to the workers, from recognition of freedom of speech to the handing over of all the best printing presses to the workers, and so forth.” Lenin 1918 [1965]-a, p. 155.

¹¹ Lenin 1905 [1966], p. 48, 1919 [1965]-c, p. 354.

¹² Lenin 1906 [1962], p. 264, 1919 [1965]-c, p. 352.

¹³ This argument may be formulated in five steps: 1) the state is the result of the irreconcilability of class conflict; 2) the state is a weapon, a special coercive force in the hands of bourgeoisie to oppress the workers; 3) given this nature of the state, the working class must smash the state apparatus; 4) in order to do so, it uses that apparatus to destroy the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie through the dictatorship of the proletariat; 5) only when that process is complete does the state begin to wither away. See Lenin 1917 [1964]-b, 1917 [1966], p. 102, 1919 [1965]-f, 1919 [1965]-a. See also his close integration of the argument from *The State and Revolution* and the argument concerning freedom and democracy: Lenin 1919 [1965]-d, pp. 457-67, 1919 [1965]-b, pp. 107-9, 1920 [1966]-b, pp. 392-96.

and democracy will themselves disappear with the construction of communism. In a (significantly parenthetical) observation, Lenin writes: “(Let us say in parenthesis that ‘pure democracy’ is not only an *ignorant* phrase, revealing a lack of understanding both of the class struggle and of the nature of the state, but also a thrice-empty phrase, since in communist society democracy will *wither away* in the process of changing and becoming a habit, but will never be ‘pure’ democracy).”¹⁴ This comment follows his point that while classes exist there can only ever be class democracy rather than “pure” democracy. But why are the parentheses significant? They give voice to an as yet unrealised situation, after the bourgeois state, after bourgeois freedom and democracy have been destroyed. In that situation, not only does class conflict disappear and not only does the state wither away, but so also do freedom and democracy in the sense that they become not a goal to which one must strive but *an everyday habit*.

We may describe this argument as an effort to redefine freedom in a sense that is not bourgeois. The problem is that such a task had never been undertaken after a successful overthrow of bourgeois power, so Lenin and the communists found themselves in uncharted waters (and subject to intense criticism not only from the international bourgeoisie but many fellow socialists¹⁵). As he reiterated over and over, the actual seizure of power is the easy part, but the task of constructing communism is far more complex than anything that has gone before. Yermakov puts it well: “They were part of a search for a correct road to the unknown.”¹⁶ And Lenin repeatedly reminds his fellow Bolsheviks of the many mistakes made, of the evils and “many sins” they have committed, of the need to try anew each time. As he writes in a New Year greeting in 1919: “Greetings and New Year salutations to the Communist group. With all my heart I wish that in the new year we shall all commit fewer stupidities than in the old.”¹⁷

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14 Lenin 1918 [1965]-c, p. 242.

15 Lenin 1919 [1965]-c, pp. 340, 350-53. Throughout 1917-23 (see the *Collected Works*, volume 26-33), Lenin returns again and again to this burning issue, especially in response to widespread international criticism of the apparent lack of freedom.

16 Yermakov 1975, p. 107. Lenin moves between the lapidary and the metaphorical: “It is no easy matter to create a socialist system” (Lenin 1918 [1965]-d, p. 77); “Our society is one which has left the rails of capitalism, but has not yet got on to new rails” (Lenin 1922 [1966], p. 278).

17 Lenin 1919 [1970], a p. 180.

Mao and Democracy

These initial elaborations by Lenin set the theoretical context for Mao's own thoughts. I would like to focus on three dialectical (or at least near dialectical) features of Mao's writings on democracy: the redefinition of "new democracy"; democratic centralism; democratic dictatorship. These will then provide the heuristic framework for my reflections on socialist democracy in China today.

New Democracy

New democracy marks Mao's effort to reshape, within the Marxist tradition, the understanding of the bourgeois revolutions and their resulting forms of bourgeois democracy. This issue had vexed the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia, especially after the revolutions of 1905 when the tsar had conceded some ground and granted limited parliaments (Dumas). Should one now foster the fragile plant of bourgeois democracy, even allowing the bourgeoisie to take the lead, since it is the first stage that eventually leads to the socialist revolution? Most of the Mensheviks and a good number of Bolsheviks thought so, tied as they were to a fixed stages theory of revolution. Or should communists take the lead in the bourgeois revolution, pushing its contradictions and seizing the opportunity for a socialist revolution? Lenin certainly thought so, especially after his reengagement with Hegel in 1914.¹⁸ The difference may be cast in terms of objective and subjective positions, with the former tending to objective historical unfolding and the latter to subjective intervention to recreate the very conditions under which such stages may be understood.

Mao takes this argument a step further, distinguishing between old bourgeois democracy and socialist democracy. In between appears new democracy, which begins as a mediation only to become a full dialectical argument. Old bourgeois democracy is that of the "mature" revolutions, those to be found in Western Europe and North America, while socialist democracy is in a process of becoming, not yet suitable for China. Mao wrote his two keynote pieces on new democracy in early 1940,¹⁹ when the burning issue was a united front against the Japanese. In this context, new democracy was a clever political tactic to force the Guomintang to

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¹⁸The clearest statements are to be found in his *Letters from Afar* and *The April Theses*: Lenin 1917 [1964]-a, 1917 [1964]-c. The best studies on this matter are by Anderson 1995, pp. 123-70; Kouvelakis 2007; Bensaïd 2007. Note, however, my qualifications of those arguments through a careful study of all Lenin's texts on Hegel, in Boer 2013, pp. 103-33.

¹⁹ Mao 1940 [2005]-c, 1940 [2005]-b.

alter its political shape in response to moves by the communist party to join all political groups in that united front. The result would be the first step on the path to a communist revolution and the overcoming of the Guomintang itself.

Now we come to Mao's dialectical point, astutely aware as it is of the conditions under which it is made. He begins with what appears an objective stages theory of revolution, in which a mature bourgeois revolution leads to a socialist one. But then he overturns it by means of the rhetorical strategy I noted earlier, distinguishing between old bourgeois and socialist democracy. New democracy cuts a new path: it is not the older style that leads to the dead-end of bourgeois democracy. That is the outcome of any policy that gives the treacherous bourgeoisie space to consolidate their revolution, a consolidation that involves supporting workers and peasants when it suits them, but then betraying them at the moment power is attained.²⁰ Instead, new democracy seizes the bourgeois revolution and turns it into the first step to socialism, precisely because the communist party leads this initial revolution. The initial idea may be Lenin's, but the clarity and strengthening of this argument comes from Mao. He goes yet a step further: "Without communism to guide it, China's democratic revolution cannot possibly succeed, let alone move on to the next stage."²¹ That is, the democratic revolution has no hope of getting off the ground without communist leadership.

Instead of an opposition between bourgeois democracy and socialist democracy, with the latter trumping the former, Mao encircles the former and claims it for communism. He may identify the moment of that turning with communist leadership after the May Fourth Movement, he may even urge new democracy as multiparty governance aimed at confronting the Japanese, but he has turned the bourgeois democratic revolution into part of the communist agenda. This is not through an objective stages theory, but through a subjective reshaping of the conditions by which we understand bourgeois democracy.

Democratic Centralism

Initially, Mao's reflections on democratic centralism may seem less dialectical, even though they have more far-reaching implications. Democratic centralism seeks to bring together "in a certain form" the

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20 Marx 1850 [1978]; Mao 1940 [2005]-c, pp. 348-49.

21 Mao 1940 [2005]-c, p. 350. See also Mao 1937 [1999]-b, pp. 645-46, 1937 [1999]-a, pp. 654-55.

two seeming opposites of democracy and centralization.²² How so?

There is no impassable gulf between democracy and centralism, both of which are essential for China. On the one hand, the government we are asking for must be able truly to represent the popular will; it must be supported and embraced by the broad masses throughout the country, and the people certainly must be free to support it and have every opportunity to influence the government's policies. This is the meaning of democracy. On the other hand, the centralization of administrative power is also necessary, and once the policies demanded by the people are handed over to their own elected government through their representative body, the government will carry them out and will certainly be able to do so smoothly, so long as it does not go against the general policy line adopted in accordance with the people's will. This is the meaning of centralism.²³

This lapidary description makes sense only with a couple of crucial assumptions. Mao does not mean here bourgeois democracy, with its pseudo political parties that are actually factions of the same party. Rather, he means a government based on the vast masses of peasants and workers, precisely those who are excluded from bourgeois democracy. However, there is a crucial exclusion: the former rulers and reactionaries who have been ousted from power. They are certainly not to be included, unless of course they undergo a slow process of reform and become part of the new system. It should be clear by now that this is a development from Lenin's argument concerning democracy, which I outlined above. The bourgeois and aristocratic rulers who had become so accustomed to power are not to be part of the new democracy, simply because they are not the majority. Here too we see the justification for government by the communist party, as the party that represents the majority of the people.²⁴ All the same, Mao has a warning: "so long as it does not go against the general policy line adopted in accordance with the people's will." Any communist government that goes against the people's will risks its own future. Yet, note how he phrases his observation: it is a policy line adopted in line with the people's will. It is not ultra-democracy, operating purely from the bottom up, but democratic centralism, in which decisions made by the government express the

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²² Mao 1937 [2004], p. 122.

²³ Mao 1937 [2004], p. 122

²⁴ He also applies it to "new democracy," insofar as the government represents the will of all revolutionary classes. Mao 1940 [2005]-c, p. 342, 1940 [2005]-a, p. 443.

people's will, seek out the people's opinions and responses, but also seek to educate the people.²⁵

I mentioned earlier that this does not seem at first like a dialectical argument, for it appears to be a mean between democracy and centralism. However, two moments in his writings suggest otherwise. At one point, Mao writes: "the system of democratic centralism in which the minority is subordinate to the majority, the lower level to the higher level, the part to the whole and the entire membership to the Central Committee."²⁶ Each formulation is rhetorically balanced, moving from part to whole and back again. In order to express the will of the people, the minority (higher level, part, Central Committee) must be subordinate to the majority (lower level, entire membership), and vice versa. Except that to put it this way is not quite to capture the dialectic: the leadership is subject to all in the same way that the all is subject to the leadership.²⁷ Mao is of course simplifying matters here a little, for the various interwoven layers included the bureaus of the Central Committee, the area Party committees, the regional committees, and so on. Now the dialectic's complexity increases exponentially, becoming what Tian Chenshan calls "focus-field," the incredibly subtle overlays and interactions between the various parts of government and people.²⁸ And this applies only to the party! Mao's text that I quoted above refers to inner-party workings,²⁹ so

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25 A good example is the need to educate people in the workings of democracy when they have been too used to centralism under former rulers. In his "Role of the Chinese Communist Party" from 1938, he points out that the history of patriarchalism and small-scale production means that the party itself is not yet familiar enough with democratic processes, with full engagement with the peasants and workers, with voting and representation in the party leadership: Mao 1938 [2004], pp. 533-34. On "ultra-democracy," see Mao 1929 [1995], pp. 198-99.

26 Mao 1942 [1965], p. 44. More prosaically and practically: "We should never pretend to know what we don't know, we should 'not feel ashamed to ask and learn from people below' and we should listen carefully to the views of the cadres at the lower levels. Be a pupil before you become a teacher; learn from the cadres at the lower levels before you issue orders ... Since our decisions incorporate the correct views of the cadres at the lower levels, the latter will naturally support them. What the cadres at the lower levels say may or may not be correct; we must analyse it. We must heed the correct views and act upon them. The reason why the leadership of the Central Committee is correct is chiefly that it synthesizes the material, reports and correct views coming from different localities. It would be difficult for the Central Committee to issue correct orders if the localities did not provide material and put forward opinions. Listen also to the mistaken views from below; it is wrong not to listen to them at all. Such views, however, are not to be acted upon but to be criticized." Mao 1949 [1961]-a, pp. 378-79.

27 For a discussion of a wonderful example of such a process, see Ransome's description of the decision making process in response to a proposal from the Central Committee in the Jaroslavl Soviet of the USSR: Ransome 2011 [1921], pp. 28-34; Boer 2013, p. 171.

28 Personal communication; Tian Chenshan is professor at Beijing Foreign Languages University.

29 See also Mao 1949 [1961]-a.

one may imagine what this means for the country as a whole.

The second moment is a clear deployment of the dialectic:

Democracy and freedom are both relative, not absolute; both come into existence and develop in the course of history. Within the ranks of the people, democracy is relative to centralization and freedom is relative to discipline. All these are contradictory facets of a unity; they are contradictory and at the same time united. We should not place one-sided emphasis on one aspect while negating the other. Within the ranks of the people, freedom is indispensable, and so is discipline; democracy is indispensable, and so is centralization. Such a unity of democracy and centralization, or freedom and discipline, constitutes our system of democratic centralism.³⁰

Without following Mao all the way into his famous discussions of contradictions, the point here is that the contradictions are constitutive of unity. The people can develop their rule only through the constant interaction between democracy and centralism. Is this condition to become perpetual, an end in itself? Ultimately, no, for democratic centralism is not an end but a means, not abstract ideals but concrete realities. In that situation, democratic centralism becomes a means to what lies beyond.

Democratic Dictatorship

The third feature of Mao's treatment concerns democratic dictatorship, which he defines as "democracy for the people and dictatorship over the reactionaries."³¹ It flows on from my earlier discussion of democratic centralism, especially since democratic dictatorship becomes a constant theme in Mao's later writings. The difference is that while democratic centralism concerns the relations between the various layers of leadership and the people, democratic dictatorship focuses on the relations between the people and their enemies. This is clearly a class distinction, with the reactionaries and their accomplices the class enemy of peasants, workers, and petty-bourgeoisie.³² Nonetheless, democratic dictatorship becomes the overarching category within which the others fit. New democracy (with its

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30 Mao 1957 [1992], p. 314

31 Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 418. See also Mao 1957 [1992], pp. 316-17

32 The national bourgeoisie form an in-between group, for they can be included within the category of the people, yet they require education to become a full part of the road to communism: Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 421. After the revolution, they may form the new class enemy that then needs to be overcome, albeit in terms of a new contradiction within the people: Mao 1957 [1992], p. 312.

alliance of revolutionary groups) and democratic centralism concern the working of democracy itself, among the people. By contrast, those outside democracy are not subject to the same approach. Given that Mao has discussed both elements of democracy in other places, his focus in pieces that discuss democratic dictatorship is on the latter term.

How should one treat the reactionaries and their useless hangers-on? He is quite explicit that the state machinery, once in the hands of the people, should become an “instrument for the oppression of antagonistic classes,” whether inside China or outside.³³ After all, they have learned precisely this lesson from the reactionaries, who used to exercise reactionary dictatorship over the people. They will now suffer their own medicine. The state apparatus, which includes the army, police and courts, are to be used for precisely this purpose. Of course, these very same instruments, now in the hands of the people, function to protect the people, to maintain state power, and to assist in the development of communism. If this requires violence, then so be it – but only as a last resort, only if reactionaries seek to restore their rule. In fact, if they avoid rebellion and sabotage, and if they are willing to work under the new arrangement, then they will even have land to do so. Alongside propaganda and education, the new hegemony may require force in order to get them to do what they have never done – work.

The key statement from which I have drawn these points, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” was written on the eve of communist victory in June, 1949.³⁴ It looks ahead to the process of consolidating power, of establishing the new government, of economic and social reconstruction. In this situation, the question that arises is how these principles may be deployed. I think especially of a situation after the former rulers, the reactionaries, have been truly vanquished and have fled the country. To be sure, plenty remain behind and the process of overcoming them continues for a long time, especially as new contradictions arise. But can these principles also become a tool for struggles among the people themselves, or perhaps within the party, in which one accuses one’s opponents of being reactionaries, bourgeois, bent on destroying the revolution? The danger is always there, as Mao candidly admits in 1955.³⁵ It is a danger particularly after the struggle with

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33 Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 418. For his discussion of external reactionaries, see Mao 1957 [1992], p. 313.

34 Mao 1949 [1961]-b.

35 Mao 1957 [1992], p. 317.

the old enemy has abated, after that contradiction – manifested in the dictatorship of democracy – has been resolved somewhat. The mistake is then to see the contradictions among the people in the same light, as happens at times during rectification campaigns and the purging out of counter-revolutionaries. Such contradictions have a tendency to arise when the external enemies have turned tail, but Mao insists that the only way to resolve contradictions among the people is through democratic centralism, not dictatorship.

At first sight, democratic dictatorship seems like a minor variation on Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat. The latter makes use of the state machinery to crush its class enemies, the bourgeoisie and old aristocracy that had for so long deployed the state to crush the proletariat. Democracy is thereby partisan, becoming a universal by abolishing those who oppose it. For Mao, this is how contradictions between the enemy and the people may be resolved, while contradictions among the people should be resolved by means of democratic centralism. A dialectic this may be, enacted by means of Mao's legendary pragmatism. Yet, he also introduces a crucial difference. I mean not the fact that he includes the petty-bourgeoisie or even – with some qualifications – the national bourgeoisie, but that he replaces "proletariat" with "people." Democracy concerns the people, those who have for so long not had a voice. "People" means not merely the vast numbers of peasants and lesser number of workers, who comprise 80-90 per cent of China's population, but even more the very idea of a people. Those who are the people are the heart and soul of China, the recently voiceless majority, and their enemies are not people. Reactionaries and their perpetual dinner guests do not even count as people. Democracy is not for them. This is a rather breathtaking dialectical reinvention of the term "people" itself. "People" is partisan, focused on the majority who simultaneously comprise the whole. It calls the bluff on old bourgeois democracy's claim to "democracy" as representation of the whole people, for "whole" excludes precisely the people it claims to represent.

Chinese Democracy

I would like to close by asking what bearing these reflections by Mao (and Lenin to some extent) have on the current situation in China. Is it new democracy or democratic centralism, understanding them as subsets of democratic dictatorship? The answer is both straightforward and not. Simply put, democratic centralism remains the key term in the constitution of the CPC: "The Party is an integral body organized

under its program and Constitution and on the basis of democratic centralism.”³⁶ It would seem that the operation of government largely follows the lines I discussed earlier under that category. As Yang and Li put it, “the CCP as the state-founder holding absolute state power is at the same time a representative and electoral apparatus reflecting public opinion.”³⁷ In this light, myriad patterns may be discerned, of which I select but a few: village elections with multiple candidates, urban district councils, indirect elections to county-level people’s congresses, comprehensive consultation with regional committees, rotation of power, toleration and listening to criticism (with some limitations), room for labour strikes, significant experimentation, the testing of public opinion with new measures, multiple political parties,³⁸ private entrepreneurs in government roles, interest groups, and so on.³⁹ Not only do these provide many avenues for suggestions and proposals to government bodies, but they also provide ample opportunity for floating new proposals in order to gain feedback. Of course, the various features have changed over time, so much that the state-society model characteristic of Western analysis fails to capture what happens in China. Instead, a state-party-society triangulation may better capture this complex interweaving of the government with the state and society.⁴⁰ Inevitably, the government’s top councils and committees are some remove from everyday opinions and sentiments, so these mechanisms are intended to provide many lines of communication. It is not difficult to see that any party like the CPC that fails to maintain such a diverse system would not be able to maintain its

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36 Zhao 2011. The official description closely follows Mao’s definition of democratic centralism: “It is a combination of centralism on the basis of democracy and democracy under centralized leadership and represents a high degree of centralization based on a high degree of democracy.” Zhao 2011.

37 Yang and Li 2013, p. 81

38 These have been part of China’s political scene since 1925 and continue to provide valuable feedback to the government. Apart from the CPC, China has eight other officially recognised political parties that work alongside the CPC: Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang (RCCK); China Democratic League (CDL); China National Democratic Construction Association (CNDCA); China Association for Promoting Democracy (CAPD); Chinese Peasants and Workers Democratic Party (CPWDP); China Zhi Gong Dang (CZGD); Jiu San Society; Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League (TSL). Finally, there are those known as Personages Without Party Affiliation. See “China’s Political Party System” 2007. See also Mu 2008.

39 For specific examples, from the internet to village elections, see Jing 2002; Lin 2007; Yang and Li 2013, pp. 62-63, 76-79; Ogden 2007; Li and Zhong 2007. In my significant experience in China, I have found that political debate is open and wide ranging indeed, far wider than in bourgeois democracies. Typically, criticism of the “political authorities” is widespread, but it coincides with a sense that the government has made China much better today than it was. Ogden 2007, pp. 62-66.

40 Lin 2001; Yang and Li 2013, pp. 75-76.

legitimacy as the government.

Even with all the variations and developments, this approach seems to be in line with Mao's reflections on democratic centralism, except for one crucial point. He argued that such a political structure was a means to an end, not an end in itself. One of the best expressions of this position is as follows:

Our present task is to strengthen the people's state apparatus – mainly the people's army, the people's police and the people's courts – in order to consolidate national defence and protect the people's interests. Given this condition, China can develop steadily, under the leadership of the working class and the Communist Party, from an agricultural into an industrial country and from a new-democratic into a socialist and communist society, can abolish classes and realize the Great Harmony (*datong*).⁴¹

Eventually the contradictions must be overcome, especially those between democracy and centralisation, freedom and discipline. Does not the dialectic, as Mao frames it, move from unity through contradiction to unity once again? If that is the case, the current situation may be seen in three ways: a) China is still on the path to the Great Harmony, and is thereby in the phase of democratic centralism; b) Mao was wrong in the sense that one cannot do without contradictions even within emerging communism; c) democratic centralism is one form that socialist democracy may take, for there are multiple forms rather than one ideal. Let me say a little more concerning each possibility.

The first opts for a periodization, a set of stages on the long road to communism. In this light, Mao's observation from 1940 seems pertinent to China today:

This is another solemn declaration in the manifesto of the Guomindang's First National Congress and it is the correct policy for the economic structure of the new-democratic republic. In the new-democratic republic under the leadership of the proletariat, the state enterprises will have a socialist character and will constitute the leading force in the whole national economy. But *at the same time* the republic will neither confiscate capitalist private property in general nor forbid the development of such capitalist production as it does not "dominate the

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⁴¹ Mao 1949 [1961]-b, p. 418. *Datong*, the Great Harmony or Unity, is the idea in traditional Chinese thought of the period after all strife is over and everyone lives in peace and harmony. Mao repeatedly invokes this idea and melds it with communism. Related is the more recent slogan of *xiaokang*, a society that is communitarian, healthy, and without polarisation. See Ogden 2007, pp. 56-58.

livelihood of the people,” for China’s economy is still very backward.⁴²

Economically, most enterprises are operated by the state with socialist structures, yet capitalist production plays a significant role. The balancing act is to maintain control over those developments so that they do not dominate. Some would argue that the government and people have been swamped by capitalism since the opening up by Deng Xiaoping, but others observe that the situation is far from full-blooded capitalism.⁴³ Politically, the situation is less new democracy and clearly democratic centralism. This sense of being on the long path to communism was reiterated recently by President Xi Jinping at the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party in 2012. China, he urged, has developed “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” but it is still in the primary stage of socialism.⁴⁴ One may note here a nod to both Deng Xiaoping and Mao, although Xi Jinping has been invoking the latter far more in his efforts to revamp the party.

The second option – that Mao was mistaken – is obviously less amenable to the government position, although the official line is that the Cultural Revolution was a mistake. Mao’s effort to advance beyond the primary stage and draw near to communism is regarded as a disaster. Perhaps a mistake of old age, it was a premature burst for which China was simply not ready. Nonetheless, one may find justification for this option within Mao’s own writings, particularly the argument that contradictions are bound to arise out of unity. The dialectic – unity-contradiction-unity – does not cease, for new divisions of the unity happen after former contradictions are overcome. If we entertain this position, then Mao’s effort at a unity beyond the contradictions of democracy and centralism has generated a new form of that contradiction, which is the reality of China in its current form.

Both of these options may be combined in a position that Lukács

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42 Mao 1940 [2005]-c, p. 343. The second sentence was added under Mao’s direction as the authoritative edition of the *Selected Works* was being edited. It does not appear in the original publication of this text.

43 Arrighi 2007. Note also Liu Xiaoming: “Some people regard what China is doing is practicing capitalism. In fact, what we are doing now is socialism with Chinese characteristics. I think Deng Xiaoping has a very good line about this. He said, market economy or planned economy is just means of economy, not a benchmark to determine whether this country is a capitalist or socialist country. Since capitalist societies have both market and planned economy. Why should socialist country not have a planned economy and market economy?” Liu and Salah 2002.

44 Yang 2012.

first proposed: communism is a state of becoming rather than being.⁴⁵ The sheer complexity of building communism (as both Lenin and Mao emphasised), the continued opposition of capitalism, the long struggle for global communism, the trial and error as one seeks the correct road to the unknown – these and more insist on becoming rather than being. While much may recommend such a position, not least the need for a goal and for a political myth that embodies that goal, it has the danger of falling into the trap of a romanticised and idealised view of communism and the revolution.⁴⁶ As a counter-weight to that danger, I would like to close by entertaining the possibility that democratic centralism is indeed one form that socialist democracy may take.⁴⁷ This argument removes the romanticism surrounding an as yet unattained communism, in which a full socialist democracy can be realised, indeed, in which the various forms of democracy pass as categories. Instead, it enables us to consider the various examples of revolutions and constructions of socialism that have and continue to take place. Some lasted longer than others, and some continue to seek out new paths. Yet they offer various instances of socialist democracy, constantly reshaped due to changing conditions and outside pressures. Let me use Mao's three categories to group these variations. Under democratic dictatorship may be located the authoritarian communism of Stalin's era in the USSR, in parts of Eastern Europe, and in North Korea in our own day. By contrast, the forms of socialism in South America, especially in Venezuela, Bolivia and formerly in Nicaragua, may be seen as new democracy, drawing together various more or less radical classes together in a united front. What then of democratic centralism? Here I would include the former Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Laos, and of course China. Obviously, I am not interested in assessing how much or how little they meet the ideal criteria of socialist democracy, but whether and how and in what form they manifest different types of socialist democracy. The implication is that each of the key forms Mao outlined is in fact a form of socialist democracy. It is not so much the near or distant future, but has been and continues to be practised in various ways. This is not, of course, to preclude yet other forms that may arise.

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45 Lukács 1970 [1924], pp. 72-73.

46 This is a position particularly germane to Western Marxists, enabling them to dismiss any successful communist revolution that has taken place. See further, Boer 2011.

47 After I wrote this sentence, I found that the first white paper on China's political party system argues for the same position "China's Political Party System" 2007. See also Liu and Salah 2002.

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