

“Democracy as a Means Relies on Dictatorship” Commemorating the 200th Birthday of Frederick Engels

Talk by Fred Engst¹ (2020), translated from Chinese

Engels' thoughts on democracy in his later years are worthy of our study in connection with the history of the past 100 plus years. I find that there are at least two kinds of people that talk about democracy: one kind talks about “what it is,” and the other talks about “what it should be.” The difference between these two kinds of people is like that between a photographer and a painter. Those who talk about “what it should be” are like painters, they like to talk about democracy based on their desires. I don't have such a developed imagination. I am more like a photographer, and pay more attention to what democracy is in reality.

1) The Condition of Democracy

Plainly speaking, democracy on political grounds depends on dictatorship. Dictatorship of a class can exist without democracy, but democracy cannot exist without dictatorship.

I guess many would find this argument strange, because they often conflate class dictatorship with authoritarianism and dictators.² They do not realize that authoritarianism or the rule by a dictator is merely one specific form of class dictatorship, and ignore that a class's dictatorship is a necessary condition, a premise, or the most fundamental guarantee for the democracy of a class. The substantive content of class dictatorship is an inalienable right to defend the ownership relations of property through state violence. This defends either the private ownership of the means of production by bourgeois individuals, such as land and corporations, i.e. their power to coordinate, the power to distribute products, and the power of the bourgeoisie to have the ultimate say—or the ownership by the proletariat of those powers, and the ultimate say belonging to the proletariat. This belief in inalienable rights to the means of production dictates that the class dictatorship's strict prohibition of alteration in the ownership relationship is beyond all challenges, even through the most democratic means possible.

There is no democracy without dictatorship. According to my observation, the meaning of this proposition is twofold:

- 1. Dictatorship regulates the scope of democracy.**
- 2. Dictatorship guarantees the operation of democracy.**

For example, without the dictatorship of the proletariat, peasants in the Mao era would not have been able to elect leaders of village collectives, and the 18 households of Xiaogang Village would not have been able to so frequently change the leaders of their production team every

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² In the Chinese version, the author used the English word “dictator” in parenthesis here for the Chinese word “独裁” (dictatorship/ autocracy).

few days. Without the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (from here on “GPCR”) would not have been possible, it would not have come round for rebels to post Big Character Posters criticizing leaders of all ranks, and it would have been even less possible for two factions of the masses to intensely struggle against each other inside their factories. However intense the factional struggle in the GPCR was—even to the point of armed combats—the workers were always paid their usual salaries. Without the dictatorship of the proletariat, this would not be allowed politically, nor could it be sustained economically. If the workers who engaged in factional struggles on both sides had lost their pay, they certainly would have been “well behaved”. Therefore, without the dictatorship of the proletariat, proletarian democracy could not exist, as the core mission of the dictatorship of the proletariat is in fact to defend the system of public ownership by the whole people³—which is in fact the defense of the masses’ right to manage the country.

In the same way, without the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, that is, without the defense of the system of private enterprise by the military, the police, and the courts, the bourgeoisie would not politically be able to limit democracy to the scope of what is allowed by the system of private enterprise, or to prevent the people from interfering with the internal operations of mega corporations, or to prevent people from attempting to “communalize” wealth and property through democratic means. Without the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the heads of financial conglomerates would not be able to willfully shower cash on political candidates to realize a plutocracy in which the votes received correspond to the money spent. The bourgeoisie approves of a democracy in which money buys power, thus conceiving the political right to spend money at will to be their “human right.”

³ Translators’ note: The socialist ownership by the entire people forms a political imperative and economic foundation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat is the negation of all exploitative social relationships through the systematic and methodical limitation of bourgeois right, through carrying on the struggle within the socialist society after the proletariat violently overthrows the bourgeoisie and becomes the society’s ruling class (see *Fundamentals of Political Economy* published by Shanghai People’s Press 1974, translated and edited by George C. Wang, pp. 283, the book is available at: <http://www.bannedthought.net/China/MaoEra/PoliticalEconomy/FundamentalsOfPoliticalEconomy-Shanghai-1974-English-OCR-SinglePage.pdf>). Socialist ownership by the entire people is not to be confused with the sort of “public ownership,” that exists under capitalism. In contrast, socialist ownership by the entire people is preconditioned on the socialist public ownership system in which the state owns the means of production and the proletariat and laboring masses firmly control the lifelines of the national economy (e.g., agriculture, mining, energy, postage, and transportation) through their state apparatus, the proletarian state. After the proletariat’s seizure of political power, the proletariat continues to carry on the struggle against bourgeois right (*Lenin Collected Works*, Vol.29, pp 495), to advance socialist transformation in the transition between capitalism and communism. In the experience of the Chinese Revolution, after the proletariat seized power under the leadership of its own party, the Chinese Communist Party, and established the People’s Republic of China, the realization of the socialist public ownership system was carried out through the confiscation of big industrial capital by the proletarian state and the gradual socialist transformation of medium and small enterprises through political mobilization and redemption (buy-outs by the state). In rural areas, collective ownership by production teams and other local units was developed as a step towards higher-level agricultural cooperation and socialist public ownership (*Fundamentals of Political Economy*, pp. 254-259, 271).

2) The Idea of Democracy

Therefore, any discussion of democracy cannot be separated from an understanding of its premise – the system of ownership. Under different systems of ownership, the form of democracy must also be different.

The fundamental idea of a bourgeois view of democracy is that of checks and balances. Therefore, the bourgeoisie spend a large amount of energy on designing a legal system loaded with trivial details. That's because in a capitalist society, one of the most fundamental contradictions within the ruling class is how to guarantee orderly economic competition among the bourgeoisie. In the political sphere, their multi-party parliamentary system and separation of power into three branches serve this end. Although every capitalist wants himself to have the final say, and become a power-monopolizing dictator, he is nevertheless more afraid of others becoming dictators and sabotaging the "equal" competition among capitalists. In order to guard against the emergence of authoritarianism or dictators, checks and balances through a multi-party parliamentary system and separation of the three branches of powers are choices that are least bad. Capitalists use their money to promote politicians' electoral campaigns to determine how to manage a capitalist state.

But mutual checks and balances in the political sphere are incompatible with the mutual coordination necessary in a process of socialized production. That's why in a capitalist society, democracy must be limited to the political sphere, and there is no democracy to speak of in the economic sphere. It is there that the bourgeoisie most fully endorses the system of "one-dollar one-vote" shareholding in which shares received corresponds to the money spent. For example, within a capitalist conglomerate, the open and smoldering struggles among factions can be extremely intense, but parliamentary checks and balances do not exist. Nor does a separation of powers into three branches exist, and other institutionalized forms of checks and balances do not easily emerge. There, contradictions between leadership and the led are generally impossible to handle through democratic means. Despite implementing a democratic system in the political sphere, the bourgeoisie still carries out an arbitrary dictatorship in the productive sphere. What the employed proletarians experience in their everyday life is not democracy, but their despotic bosses.

The fundamental idea of a proletarian view of democracy is to convince people with reason. Hence it emphasizes the need to "let a hundred flowers bloom, and let a hundred schools of thought contend." Through the free airing of ideas by presenting facts and reasoning things out, it allows for a more complete unity between thought and action. In the system of public ownership by the whole people under the dictatorship of the proletariat, production still must be carried out efficiently, and at the same time the masses must conduct criticism and exert supervision over their leaders. Therefore, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, democracy is not limited to the political sphere but also emanates within all the respective spheres of the economy. On the one hand, there is a need to obey those who coordinate the effective operation of all respective areas rather than being in a state of "each man for himself;" on the other hand, the masses need to be able to criticize, supervise, and even recall the coordinators of these areas. The question of how to achieve this from the perspective of socialized mass production forms the

core content of democracy under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, under the system of public ownership by the whole people, there is a need to consider how to use the democratic means of convincing people through reason to handle contradictions between leaders and the led. This is much more complicated than the democracy of ‘checks and balances’ under capitalism, and more difficult when democratic practices previously unexplored are extended to the area of socialized mass production.

The biggest contradiction among the people under the dictatorship of the proletariat—that between the vanguard leadership among the proletariat and mass supervision, i.e., the contradiction between democracy and centralism—cannot be resolved by abolishing either side of the equation. Without vanguard leadership, the scattered proletariat would not be able to hold on to power (as evident in the prolonged factional clashes and violent armed struggles during the GPCR). However, a dictatorship without mass supervision is not a dictatorship of the proletariat. The proletariat must explore how to deal with the relationship between these two aspects step by step through practice.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution constitutes the greatest practice in exploring democracy under the dictatorship of the proletariat. It provides a big step forward in handling the contradiction between the party’s leadership and mass supervision, providing valuable experiences and lessons for people afterwards. Those who deny the democratic practices during the GPCR do not genuinely understand the essential content of democracy under the public ownership by the whole people. Their hope—that proletarian democracy can simply copy the bourgeois system of checks and balances—cannot work, as such a system is designed to manage and coordinate power struggles of mutually independent capitalist conglomerates. This is of no avail to resolving the question of how to use the democratic practice, of convincing by reason in areas of large scale socialized production under the dictatorship of the proletariat’s system of public ownership by the whole people. Within the proletariat, only those who are deeply influenced by bourgeois ideas would form a diametrically opposing group, endorse a bourgeois system of checks and balances, and substitute the interest of the class with factional interests, and then from there threaten the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. the public ownership by the whole people.

3) The Means of Democracy

Every class has at least two types of methods for resolving its own internal contradictions: One is authoritarianism by a minority within the class, the method of dictatorship, another type is the democratic method.

To implement democracy within a class, the majority must respect the opinion of the minority, and the minority must submit to the decision of the majority. Such democracy settled by these two aspects is only appropriate in resolving non-antagonistic contradictions. Faced with antagonistic contradictions, democracy cannot be sustained.

Here’s a small example. Let’s say in a WeChat group, if there were not any basic rules of conduct agreed upon by all, and people with different views or positions promote mutual insults and attacks. Then such a group certainly will be torn apart. In the end, either one side of the

argument will exit the group, or one side will kick out the opposing party. There cannot be peaceful existence by both sides.

A bigger example, for instance, is the American Civil War. At a time when there was no grounds for compromise then, the dispute could not but be resolved without violence. This is the inevitable conclusion of two opposing interests in a class society. Opposing class interests are impossible to peacefully coexist for long, nor can they be dissolved through democracy, and consequently democracy in the political sphere is but a mechanism for reconciling the contradictions within the ruling class under the precondition of a class dictatorship.

In contrast, the question of who is right and wrong in matters of science cannot be answered through the means of democracy nor through means of violence. Instead, only the results of experiments can serve as proof, and people can only be convinced by reason. Hence we can see that the pursuit of democracy is driven by interests; without differing interests, then there is no need for democracy.

In fact, in modern class society, the democratic rights that people can enjoy are proportional to their identification with the social system. The greater the democratic rights of the common people, the more universally the people identify with the current system. For example, the status enjoyed by the common people during the GPCR as the masters of their own destiny was one extreme; the rights enjoyed by the Labour Party in the UK is another extreme. The more consolidated a class's rule is, the more likely it uses means of democracy to deal with all sorts of contradictions internal or external to that class.

If the working masses want to “enjoy” the democracy of the bourgeoisie, the overwhelming majority of them then must identify with capitalism, to see it as “natural,” just like the ideas that “those with greatest abilities accrue the most,” “all debts must be repaid,” and “property should be inherited” are seen as natural. The more complete the working masses' identification with capitalism, the more assured the bourgeoisie feels about them (like with the Labour Party in the UK), and the more abundantly can they “enjoy” bourgeois democracy, with some of them possibly becoming members of a ruling party, like the Labour Party in the UK. Therefore, as long as the majority of the masses have not seen through the true nature of bourgeois democracy—that it is an effective mechanism to reconcile contradictions within the bourgeoisie—then the bourgeoisie's “democratic” rule in form seems to resemble “the people's political power.”

As soon as class contradictions sharpen, and the masses' democratic demands exceed what private enterprise system can tolerate, the bourgeoisie will use direct violence to defend its political power and the true nature of “people's political power” will come to light, as in the Paris Commune, Spain in the 1930s, and Chile in the 1970s. During those times, the bourgeoisie did not bother to moderately handle these contradictions. Instead, it worries about, first of all, the threat to the capitalist system, and thus in order to maintain its own rule they had to use the force of arms to suppress the challenges from the working class.

4) The Exercise of Democracy

In a period in which the bourgeoisie can still use democratic methods to resolve all sorts of its internal contradictions, the working class must use this sort of period to strengthen its ability to organize and raise the masses' democratic consciousness, for example, through democratic elections in unions, etc., to better resolve the working class's own internal contradictions, to increase unity, and advance a realistic struggle for more rights.

In over a hundred years, the working class in advanced capitalist countries, taking advantage of bourgeois democracy, has obtained various rights, such as the eight-hour workday, the rights to unionize and strike, social security, and medical care. Black people and other non-white people in the United States have raised their political and economic status through prolonged struggles, making it increasingly difficult for the ruling class to transfer the class contradiction into a racial contradiction.

These struggles have to greater or lesser extents been absorbed into the overall interest of the bourgeoisie. That is to say their gains have not violated the overall interest of the bourgeoisie. They are nonetheless fruitful in raising the class consciousness of the working class and its ability to organize. As democracy becomes deeply rooted in people's minds, racism, xenophobia, and sexism within the working class becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, and capitalism becomes increasingly pure. Racial, gender, and other non-class relations are substituted by increasingly exposed class oppression; the space in which the bourgeoisie can domestically transfer crises thus become increasingly small.

The working class's democratic demand to oppose racial, gender, and class oppression is in fact the instinctual demand of the masses desiring mastery of their own destiny. It is in fact a demand for attempting to transform the system of ownership. This is the reason that the bourgeoisie strongly condemns the so-called "tyranny of the majority." Unlike Russian populism over 100 years ago, which carried a tinge of the doctrine of "returning to the ancients," a big component of today's so-called "populism" are those democratic demands that do not respect private enterprise rights, raised by the masses in capitalist society. For example, the Greek sovereign debt bailout referendum—strongly condemned by the Western powers—violated the principle that "debts must be repaid." The other examples include "the 1% versus the 99%" Occupy Wall Street Movement. The bourgeoisie instinctively tosses all those sorts of democratic demands by the masses that endanger the system of private enterprise into a bucket called "populism," going so far as to also toss racism, xenophobia and other reactionary trends into the same bucket in order to stigmatize demands that endanger the system of private enterprise. Therefore, populism in today's context is essentially a form of resistance by the lower classes of the common people against the existing system of ownership.

In the process of struggling for democracy and liberation, the working class must also consciously overcome the tyrannical way the bourgeoisie has contaminated it, and learn how to use democratic methods to overcome internal differences. It must elevate its struggle from one of "resisting oppression" to one of "eliminating oppression," that is, from a motivation of merely "changing the dynasty" to the aim of "liberating mankind." Thus, a democratic immersion is vital for the maturation and unity of the working class. In contrast, the rampant factional skirmishes and violent armed struggles during the GPCR reflected the working class's immaturity. They are the consequence of the lack of long-term democratic training. In the

advanced capitalist countries, within the working classes that have had a long democratic immersion, internal armed struggle might exist, but it is rarely seen. Internal fighting among the organized workers is nearly impossible. “Workers don’t fight workers” is the most basic form of class consciousness among hardscrabble workers.

5) The Function of Democracy

Then can the masses’ demand to attempt the transformation of the system of ownership be realized through democracy?

Some think that the working class can only acquire liberation after it acquires democracy, totally ignoring the fact that in India, the self-proclaimed largest democracy in the world, the liberation of the working class is not in the foreseeable future. They do not admit that the working class can only acquire democracy that allows it to control its own destiny after it overthrows capitalism, not the reverse. They fantasize that the working class can gradually raise its status until it becomes the ruling class through democratic means. Cruel facts of history, however, prove that changes in the system of ownership so far have never been realized through democratic means. Instead, they have only been realized through violence or *coup d’état*. That is because the transformation of a system of ownership is an antagonistic conflict; and trying to transform a system of ownership through democratic means is like forcing something to do what it is not meant to do, like trying to cook rice with a washing machine. It is beyond the functional boundaries of democracy.

Those scholars within China who have never experienced the actual operation of bourgeois democracy or joined themselves in this democratic process often have all sorts of unrealistic fantasies about democracy in the Western developed countries, (allow me to make a vulgar metaphor) like virgins excitedly discussing sex life.

They do not realize that implementing universal suffrage under capitalism requires two necessary conditions. First, as mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of the working class must still identify with the system of private enterprise, and consequently would not raise democratic demands to transform this system of ownership. Second, the degree of capitalist monopolization has not reached its highest form, state-monopolized capitalism, therefore power struggles within the bourgeoisie have to be realized through universal suffrage, or otherwise there would be civil war.

They think that the lack of democracy is a result of persistent feudal forces, but cannot see that, except in a few backward countries, in the emerging industrialized countries there are few feudal remnants. The lack of democracy in these countries, generally speaking, is not a result of persistent feudal forces, but a manifestation of the increasingly sharp conflicts between capital and labor during rapid industrialization. This is a result of the bourgeoisie’s inability to defend capitalism with democratic means, and its inability to easily transfer crises to ease the domestic class contradictions as the great powers do. The greater the dearth of democratic rights among the masses more or less indicates the degree to which the lower classes cannot accept the inequality in the current system, and consequently a democratic system poses an increasing threat to the ruling class in power.

The masses' democratic movements in regions that lack democracy therefore have a naturally revolutionary character. However, the proletariat must not renounce its political aim for the sake of acquiring democracy of the sort recognized by the bourgeoisie, for getting more votes, like the Communist Party of Nepal did, abandoning its decade-long armed struggle after obtaining the initial victory of a bourgeois revolution. In contrast, the Communist Party of the Philippines has consistently united the armed struggle in the countryside with the parliamentary struggles in the cities for over half a century. During the decade-long dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) tenaciously led the people in the struggle for democracy and against autocracy. After Marcos' rule was overthrown, the CPP energetically participated in the parliamentary struggle as well as led the increasingly robust armed struggle. If the CPP abandoned armed struggle, its ballot share in parliament would temporarily increase. But it did not abandon armed struggle just for votes. That is because they understand that the parliament is only one of the battlefields in which the masses are resisting the bourgeois regime, and that it is not the most important one. How to combine the struggle for democracy and the anti-capitalist struggle tests the members of revolutionary parties in all of these kinds of countries.

Some would certainly refute these observations of mine, or complain that my snapshot is not complete. Maybe they are painters, and do not like the content of my photography. From an aesthetic perspective, my photo of democracy is indeed not as beautiful as their paintings of democracy. That's alright, I rather enjoy some of their paintings. Wouldn't it be a joy if reality were like the beauty that they paint?

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