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Friedrich Engels and the Foundations of Socialist Governance



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For Zang Fengyu, an old friend

Preface

What a difference a crisis makes. As I write this preface, the year that was (2020) challenged the world with the COVID-19 pandemic. And which countries stood tall, mobilizing effective measures to contain the pandemic until vaccines could be produced? China, Vietnam, Cuba, Laos, and other socialist countries. Clearly, their political systems have matured to a point at which they can make rapid decisions, enact mechanisms for the speedy deployment of specialists and core personnel, redirect industry to produce much-needed equipment, and count on society-wide cooperation and support. I hardly need to point out that—with very rare exceptions—countries that draw upon the Western liberal tradition, with its bourgeois (capitalist) political structures and its cultural assumptions of the primacy of the private individual, have foundered and struggled mightily to put together anything that looks like a coherent approach to the pandemic.

What is it about the political structures of socialist countries that has enabled such a success? This book is at least part of an answer: we need to go back to the roots of the Marxist tradition to identify the initial principles of socialist governance. The one who made such a contribution was Friedrich Engels. Yes, Engels, the man who so often plays second fiddle to Marx has far more to offer on this question than many may expect. This is as true of the theory of hitherto existing forms of the state as it is of the form of socialist governance that should develop after a proletarian revolution. This is what the book offers: a careful reading of oft-neglected texts by Engels, with a view to determining the principles of socialist governance.

Why ‘socialist governance’ and not, for example, socialist politics or the socialist state? Those infused with Western liberal assumptions and indeed Western Marxism may find that the terminology of ‘governance’ belongs more to the domain of management studies and such like. However, I have chosen the term ‘socialist governance’ carefully. Why? To begin with, for Engels, the idea of a socialist state would be an oxymoron. Since he saw any form of the state as a separated public power, and since he proposed that in a socialist system a public power would—by contrast—be enmeshed within society, I could not use the terminology of a ‘socialist state.’ Further, since both Engels and Marx define politics in terms of the manifestation of class struggle and propose depoliticized elections and consultations in a socialist system, ‘socialist politics’ would also not be appropriate. Hence, the terminology

of socialist governance, which captures best the basic principles Engels espoused. One final reason: the English translation of three important volumes by Xi Jinping is *The Governance of China* (*zhiguolizheng*). The Chinese may also be translated as ‘manage state affairs’ or ‘governing a country.’ This book’s title is also meant to reflect such a usage and indeed a notable continuity from Engels to China today.

The research embodied in this book has benefited from guidance, suggestions, criticism and encouragement of many. They include Zhang Shuangli, Domenico Losurdo, Yang Huilin, Hong Xiaonan, Fang Yumei, Liu Guixiang, Yan Ping, Dick Boer, Yu Min, Zhou Dan, Stefano Azzarà, and particularly an old friend, Zang Fengyu. All through, Christina has been intimately involved with the thoughts developed here, as we discuss almost daily her projects and mine—all in light of our common project.

Christiansfeld, Southern Jutland,
Denmark
February 2021

Roland Boer

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About the Author

Roland Boer is a professor of Marxist philosophy in the School of Marxism, Dalian University of Technology, China. He is the first non-Chinese citizen to be employed in a School of Marxism in China. Among numerous publications, he is the author of the five-volume work, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth* (Brill, 2007–2014). In 2014, the work was awarded the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize. Most recently, he has published *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—A Guide for Foreigners* (Springer, 2021).

Abbreviations

IWMA	International Working Men's Association.
MECW	<i>Marx and Engels Collected Works</i> . 50 volumes. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975–2004.
MEGA	<i>Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe</i> . First series (MEGA ¹) published 13 volumes from 1927 to 1941, at the Marx-Engels-Verlag in Berlin. Second series (MEGA ²) began in 1975, republishing the earlier volumes and expanding the collection. Initially published by Dietz Verlag in Berlin until 1990, and then by Akademie Verlag in Berlin. The planned collection of 114 volumes remains incomplete.
MEW	<i>Marx-Engels Werke</i> . 44 volumes. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956–2018.
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands</i> .

Chapter 1

Introduction and Synopsis



Abstract The introductory chapter sets the scene by identifying the reason why this study has been undertaken and how I do so. As to why, it constitutes a search for understanding the nature of socialist governance today, especially in China. As to how, I return to the foundational texts of the Marxist tradition, finding that it is Engels in particular who provides the most comprehensive framework. After a brief word on the inadequacies of the existing and relatively sparse secondary literature, the chapter offers a detailed synopsis of each of the chapters to follow. I close with a word on the method of citations, in which I cite the original language source first and then the English translation for ease of reference—even if the translations offered are mostly my own.

Keywords Friedrich Engels · Socialist governance · Citation method · Secondary literature · Synopsis

1.1 Opening Remarks

It has been apparent to me for some time that the governing system of the socialist country I know best—China—is more mature and increasingly superior to the bourgeois states that derive from Western Europe. How to make sense of this awareness and the empirical reality on the ground? One may consider how a socialist system like that of China responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, or one may delve deep into the structures of governance, society, and economy, as I have done in a work entitled *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—A Guide for Foreigners*. Or one may give anecdotal accounts of personal day-to-day experiences, which I have also done from time to time.