

A Theory of the Socialist State

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Is there a theory of the socialist state? We can draw together a theory from a careful study of the experiences and statements of the Soviet Union and China, the two places where a socialist state has begun to emerge. Why? They are the two largest countries where socialism has been and is in power, after a successful revolution. Let me put the proposal in a series of theses, premised on the point that a socialist state is not a federation, not a nation-state, not an empire, not a colonising power, whether externally or internally, but an entirely new state formation.

1. A socialist state is based on the international category of class, which enables a new approach to the 'national question'. Only through a resolute focus on class is the recognition of and equality between nationalities fully achieved. To be clear: by 'national question' I mean not the 'nation' as it is understood now (as an imagined community) but the question of nationalities (*minzu*), which should not be translated as 'ethnic minorities'. In each state a number of nationalities exist together. One may approach such a reality either by prioritising 'cultural-national' factors (what may be called 'culturism') or by focusing resolutely on class. Only with class does one enable the dialectical position in which class unity produces not merely recognition and equality, but a whole new level of diversity. In other words, a socialist state enables a new approach to the dialectic of the universal and particular.

2. This dialectic is embodied in the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasants. This is a totalising unity based on class that produces new levels of diversity, and it requires a linking of liberation from class oppression with liberation from national oppression. When this link is made, the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat becomes clear: it is the necessary foundation for the equality between and indeed diversity of peoples of different nations, after liberation has been achieved. The dictatorship of the proletariat does so by guaranteeing the rights of national minorities.

3. A socialist state is the source and embodiment of what may be called affirmative action (*polozhitel'naia deiatel'not'*). This was first enacted in the Soviet Union on a vast

scale and has been followed, with modifications, by all socialist states since – especially China. The program involves a comprehensive effort at social, cultural and economic *recreation*. Nationalities, no matter how small, are identified, named and established in territories, where local language, culture, education and governance are fostered. Dispersed minorities with no territory are provided with strong legal protections. I use the term ‘recreation’ quite deliberately, for it is very much a creative act entailing the creation of groups, peoples and nations – to the point of creating new nationalities out of groups that had never dreamed of such an existence. The process involves the deliberate intervention by socialists into the process of producing and developing a new society, among which national groups played a central role.

4. A socialist state undertakes cultural revolution. By this I mean the raising of the many people of the state to a new socialist level. In the Soviet Union ‘cultural revolution’ meant ‘the cultural development of the working class and of the masses of the working peasantry, not only the development of literacy, although literacy is the basis of all culture, but primarily the cultivation of the ability to take part in the administration of the country’. In China, we need to reclaim the meaning of cultural revolution in this sense, and not in terms of the period of the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, cultural revolution means Marxism’s influence on and infiltration into social and cultural assumptions. This is increasingly clear in China, where Marxism is becoming a cultural force, indeed a part of the long history of Chinese culture.

5. A socialist state is anti-colonial. This crucial insight first appeared in the Soviet Union: the October Revolution and the affirmative action program of the Soviet Union functioned as a microcosm of the global struggle against colonialism. This insight is a logical extension of the argument I noted earlier, in which a focus on class provides a distinct, dialectical, approach to the national question that leads to the world’s first affirmative action program. Once this logic is applied to national minorities, it also may be applied to gender, religion, and then anti-colonial struggles. The logic is clear: socialism has led to a new approach to nationalities, liberating them and fostering them through the affirmative action program; further, socialism is opposed on a global scale to capitalist imperialism; therefore, global socialism engages in and fosters anti-colonial struggles

throughout the world. No wonder the Soviet Union actively supported anti-colonial struggles around the world, so much so that what we call post-colonialism, as both an era and a theory, could not have happened without such anti-colonial action. This also applies to China, whose socialist revolution was also an anti-colonial revolution, finally throwing off European semi-colonialism (which dated from the nineteenth century) and Japanese colonialism. China's involvement today in formerly colonised countries in the world is a continuation of this anti-colonial policy by the most powerful socialist state in history.

6. A socialist state must deal with counter-revolutionary forces within and especially international efforts to undermine it (the two are often connected). Whenever a socialist revolution happens, we do not find international capitalist countries saying, 'Wonderful! Go ahead, construct your socialist country. We will leave you in peace; indeed, we are enthusiastic bystanders'. Instead, historical reality reveals consistent efforts to undermine and overthrow socialist states, including the fostering of counter-revolutionary forces within. We need only recall the 'civil' wars in Russia and China, the international blockades, sabotage, efforts at destabilisation in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and the international pastime – found even among international Marxists – of 'China bashing'.

7. The communist party is integral to a socialist state. This is a relationship of transcendence and immanence: the party arises from and expresses the will of the masses of workers, farmers and intellectuals, while it also directs the masses. From the masses, to the masses – as Mao Zedong stated. If the relationship is broken, the party loses its legitimacy and the project is over. Thus, the party undergoes constant renewal and reform in order to maintain legitimacy. If a communist party accedes to a bourgeois or liberal democratic system, it is soon out of power, for bourgeois democracy is one of the most effective weapons against socialism.

8. A socialist state develops socialist democracy. Integral to socialist democracy is the communist party in terms of transcendence and immanence in relation to the masses. In contrast to Greek democracy, liberal (or bourgeois) or illiberal democracy, socialist democracy includes the majority of the population – workers, peasants and intellectuals. Socialist democracy is a constantly evolving process and may, as Mao Zedong pointed out,

include – among others – stages of new democracy, democratic dictatorship and democratic centralism. The latter is the reality in China today.

9. In a socialist state we find the growth of socialist civil society. This is in contrast to bourgeois civil society, which entails a basic alienation between private individual and the state, as well as a systemic exclusion of the majority. Instead of this alienation, socialist civil society operates in a new way, in the dialectical space between official discourse and individual expression, in which the individual finds freedom through the collective. Indeed, socialist civil society is based on a redefinition of freedom, which provides a new universal based on the particularity of the majority, in an explicitly open way. This freedom This is a *freedom from* bourgeois civil society and *freedom for* the socialist project. Eventually, the category of freedom itself will become an everyday habit.

A final question: will the socialist state ‘wither away’, as some elements of the Marxist tradition suggest? Perhaps, but only in a future situation in which the majority of countries are socialist. However, even in this situation is more realistic to see that the socialist state will take on new features so that it becomes a communist state.