

Why Is Chinese Governance Better?

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Recently, Martin Jacques observed that Chinese governance under the CPC is a better, more efficient and higher form of governance than we have seen thus far. To begin with, Jacques is correct. This is particularly obvious if we compare it with liberal, or bourgeois, democracy, which is now obsolete and quite clumsy. The latter arose in a specific context, in eighteenth and nineteenth century Western Europe, and may have been appropriate in that part of the world in the wake of the bourgeois revolutions. It has also been transplanted to some former colonies in North America, Australia and New Zealand. But the system is rather crude, with nearly every feature of public life politicised, with antagonistic political engagement in which one policy is promulgated by a particular political party only to be undone by the next. Chaotic, clumsy and outdated.

As is usually the case with Martin Jacques, he tries to explain this reality by going back into China's more distant past. Strangely, he skips past the central role of Marxism in shaping the current practice of governance in China. So let us see what such a focus indicates.

Here I draw on a book I am writing on Engels, for it is precisely Engels (more than Marx) who provides the philosophical basis for socialist governance. The book has taken longer than expected, since I need to work carefully through material few consider. In the final chapter, I examine Engels's ideas concerning what a socialist form of governance might be.

There are two main points.

First, the organs of governance 'stand in the midst of society'. Engels draws this insight from his careful study in the 1870s and 1880s of what he calls 'pre-state' societies, but which may also be called 'base communism' and 'base democracy'. Why 'pre-state'? For Engels, the state is a 'separated public power', which arises from class conflict and stands over against society. By contrast, base communism does not have this separation. All the various organs of governance – and there are many – stand in the midst of society. They are woven within social structures, being part and parcel of society as a whole. In my

book, I have developed the category of 'enmeshment' to understand how this might work: society, state and economy are not separated from one another, but rather enmeshed within one another.

One might respond: but Engels is dealing with ancient societies, in a historical and anthropological way, so these insights are not relevant for how socialism today functions. The answer: in a crucial but under-studied piece called 'The Mark', Engels points out that this type of base communism would be dialectically transformed under socialism, so as to become the type of society and governance that would be appropriate.

This point I have realised for some time, but the second is relatively new: 'public functions will lose their political character and be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society'. This text is quoted from Engels's 1873 piece, 'On Authority', in which he castigates the impractical proposals of the Anarchists, especially under Bakunin's leadership. But the core idea of political character disappearing and being replaced by an efficient administration focused on the public good is crucial (it appears elsewhere in Engels's work and is voiced by Marx).

Let us begin with political character. Under bourgeois democracies, a whole spate of areas are political footballs: education, health, environment, public transport, immigration and refugees, economic policy, and so on. They are the subject of election campaigns, of bewildering changes in policy with changes in the party in power, of implementation and winding back. But if they lose their political character, they cease to be tossed back and forth depending on the whims of political parties.

In place of this political character is efficient administration focused on the public good. Let me give three examples drawn from China. In education, the long-term plan is to improve the already impressive educational system in all respects. This entails careful research, significant funding, trials of new methods in some areas before extending them to the rest of the country, and so on. For this reason, people with whom I speak in China find it unbelievable that the Australian government – as one example – has been reducing funding for education for quite some time now.

Another example concerns public transport, which is reasonably well-known internationally. Simply put, the Chinese rail system is now the best in the world. Three

levels of high-speed train operate across the country, while the slower 'green skin' trains ply local routes. In cities across China, world-leading metro systems are being implemented at a breath-taking pace. One that I know well is in Beijing, where they are working towards increasing the total kilometres covered from about 500 km to 1,000 km. Currently, it caters for 6 billion passenger trips per year, but this will increase. Again, this is seen as a public good, requiring long-term planning and efficient implementation.

Finally, environmental policy and action, which is called in China 'ecological civilisation [*shengtai wenming*]'. The term refers to the modes of life and their relation to the environment: only when this is sorted out can we speak of *wenming*, which is not so much 'citification' (as the Latin origins of 'civilisation' suggest) but the just, peaceful, healthy and stable nature of culture. In China, the realities of climate change are not politicised; instead, they need to be addressed directly. I have seen this with my own eyes, in what may be called the greening of China. The country leads the world in reforestation, the water, plants and air of major cities have been improving year on year, and green technologies are leaping ahead. Again, this is efficient administration for the public good.

So yes, Chinese governance is clearly the highest form we have seen thus far, precisely because of the CPC and the socialist road. We should of course be careful: Engels's formulations are not the final word on the matter. He had never experienced the actual process of constructing socialism, let alone a successful communist revolution. But it is rather striking how he and Marx provide the philosophical basis of socialist governance in terms of the disappearance of its political character and the development of efficient and careful administration for the public good. That the Chinese have developed these much further, in light of their conditions and the actual experience of constructing socialist governance, should be clear.