

## Is a Socialist Civil Society Possible?

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**Abstract:** This article begins by pointing out that what many scholars call “civil society” is actually bourgeois or liberal civil society. The reason is that the original German term (used by Hegel and Marx) was “*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*,” which actually means “bourgeois society.” It has been mistranslated as “civil society”. The article has two subsequent parts. The first part criticises the idea of bourgeois civil society by engaging with Hegel, Marx and Domenico Losurdo (the leading Italian Marxist philosopher). With their insights, we see that bourgeois civil society is based on the alienation of the private individual and the citizen of the state (Hegel), the economic tensions of capitalism (Marx), and the exclusion of the majority from freedom (Losurdo). The second part makes some initial proposals for what a socialist civil society might look like. It begins with the point that socialist civil society is based not on the bourgeoisie, but on workers and peasants. It then examines what freedom means in a socialist civil society (with insights drawn from Lenin and Yang Guangbin). Finally, it proposes that socialist civil society arises in the space in between official or ideological positions and the hesitations that individuals may have about the official position (here I draw some insights from China).

The term “civil society” is largely assumed to be a neutral term. In current usage, it is supposed to mean the realm of human activity outside the state and outside the economy. However, the term is far from neutral. We need to remind ourselves that the original term is *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, or bourgeois society. So what “civil society” really means is bourgeois civil society. It is inescapably tied up with the development of capitalism and the seizure of power by the bourgeoisie. In light of this development, I ask the question: is a socialist civil society possible? To

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answer this question, I begin with the problems of bourgeois civil society, working through Hegel, Marx and Losurdo. Then it becomes possible to see what a socialist civil society might be.

### Bourgeois Civil Society

Hegel's influential insight into *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (bourgeois civil society) is that it constitutes a new development with capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> Influenced by Adam Smith, David Hume and Thomas Paine, Hegel assumes that this bourgeois civil society contains everything that is outside the state – economics, voluntary associations, religion, education, health, the law and even the police. Hegel defines *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* as “an association of members as self-sufficient individuals [*Einzelner*].”<sup>3</sup> The individual is the key, so any voluntary social connections are those formed by individuals “who have their own interest as their end.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, this is the source of a distinct problem, for such an

2 Although the Latin term, *societas civilis* (a translation of Aristotle's *koinonia politike*) has a long history, its meaning was quite different, for it was coterminous with the political life of the polis or republic. For a useful survey of the term's history, albeit with a benign reading, see Jürgen Kocha, 'Civil Society from a Historical Perspective', *European Review* 12, no. 1 (2004): pp. 65-79. The following draws on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1820 [1991]). The best study of Hegel's political and social thought, with a distinct focus on alienation, remains Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). See also the astute depiction of the alienating dimension of bourgeois society in Hegel's thought in Anders Bartonek, 'Labour Against Capitalism? Hegel's Concept of Labour in Between Civil Society and the State', *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 6(2014): pp. 113-124 (115-119). The following are also worth consulting: Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Zbigniew Pelczynski, ed. *The State and Civil Society: Studies in Hegel's Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Ian McNeely, 'Hegel's Württemberg Commentary: Intellectuals and the Construction of Civil Society in Revolutionary-Napoleonic Germany', *Central European History* 37, no. 3 (2010): pp. 354-364; Jeffrey Church, 'The Freedom of Desire: Hegel's Response to Rousseau on the Problem of Civil Society', *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (2010): pp. 125-139.

3 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 198; #157.

4 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 224; #187.

individual is deeply alienated: one is torn between being a self-interested individual in association with other individuals (bourgeois civil society) and an individual subject to a given entity (the state).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the individual is caught in between, with the state pulling one way and private concerns in another.<sup>6</sup>

On a number of occasions, Hegel returns to this underlying theme, especially while elaborating his various proposals to overcome such alienation. The most significant (and for Hegel alarming) manifestation of this alienation appears with the family. He precedes his treatment of bourgeois civil society with the argument that the family provides a primary form of social glue, historically and logically prior to bourgeois civil society and its various mediatory mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> Yet the family fares ill before the onslaught of bourgeois civil society, for it “disintegrates” into “the world appearance of the ethical, i.e., *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*.”<sup>8</sup> Or in more frightening detail:

But *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* tears the individual [*Individuum*] away from family ties, alienates the members of the family from one another, and recognizes them as self-sufficient per-

5 See Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*; Bartonek, ‘Labour Against Capitalism? Hegel’s Concept of Labour in Between Civil Society and the State’, p. 115-119. Thus, it is simplistic to suggest that egoism and conflict arise from self-interest. Agnes Ku, ‘Beyond the Paradoxical Conception of “Civil Society Without Citizenship”’, *International Sociology* 17, no. 4 (2002): pp. 529-48 (531).

6 Therefore, Hegel does not fit neatly into the somewhat artificial distinction between liberal and Marxist approaches to civil society. The former sees bourgeois civil society in opposition to the state and thereby requiring protection from state intervention, or at least that it requires institutions within the state to enable such protection. I discuss Marxist approaches in a moment. For example, in her effort to distinguish the two types, Agnes Ku enlists Hegel, somewhat ambiguously, for both sides. Ku, “Beyond the Paradoxical Conception of ‘Civil Society Without Citizenship’,” p. 529-37. See also John Keane, ‘Despotism and Democracy - The Origins Development of the Distinction Between Civil Society and the State’, in *Civil Society and the State*, ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988).

7 Here the conservative dimension of Hegel’s thought appears, especially in terms of gender roles. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, pp. 206-207; #166.

8 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 219; #181.

sons. Furthermore, it substitutes its own soil for the external inorganic nature and paternal soil from which the individual [*der Einzelne*] gained his livelihood, and subjects the existence [*Bestehen*] of the whole family itself to dependence on *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* and to contingency.<sup>9</sup>

In short, "*bürgerliche Gesellschaft* affords a spectacle of extravagance and misery as well as of the physical and ethical corruption common to both."<sup>10</sup> The only solution, for Hegel, is the state, which he regards as an ancient reality, an unquestioned and self-sufficient entity. Indeed, the state pre-exists its historical appearance, being nothing less than the Idea itself and embodiment of reason.<sup>11</sup> Even really existing bad states still partake of the ideal and abstract state.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is the rational destiny of human beings to live within the state; we are citizens of a state by default and not of our own choosing or by contractual arrangement.<sup>13</sup> For Hegel, the state must overcome what he fears and what the family and all other forms of human association cannot do – unite a people in response to the individualism he sees emerging everywhere around him. Yet the very need to attribute so much to the state indicates the unresolvable problem. Thus, for Hegel bourgeois civil society is not the space for freedom of expression and association; instead, Hegel reminds us that civil society is not only the distinct product of a modern social formation (the middle class and capitalism), but also an inescapably alienated reality, torn between the demands of the private individual and the abstract and distant entity known as the state.

9 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 263; #238.

10 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 222; #185.

11 "The state is the actuality of the substantial *will*, an actuality which it possesses in the particular *self-consciousness* when this has been raised to its universality; as such, it is the rational in and for itself. This substantial unity is an absolute and unmoved end in itself, and in it, freedom enters into its highest right, just as this ultimate end possesses the highest right in relation to individuals [*die Einzelnen*], whose *highest duty* is to be members of the state." Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 275; #258.

12 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 279; #258.

13 Hegel clearly goes against a contractarian notion of the state, which he argues applies only to bourgeois society.

Marx's response to Hegel was both appreciative and critical, although for my purposes two features are important.<sup>14</sup> To begin with, Marx agreed with Hegel that bourgeois civil society is inescapably alienated, in terms of the tensions between state and bourgeois civil society, and in terms of the individual who is torn between being private individual and citizen of the state. However, he disagreed with Hegel concerning the role of the state.<sup>15</sup> Hegel somewhat desperately saw the state as the last bastion of unity in relation to the dog-eat-dog individualism of bourgeois civil society. In response, Marx enhanced the tensions between the two, arguing that the state is administered in opposition to bourgeois civil society. Ultimately, this tension is a dialectical one between particular and universal. Those who wield power in the state are assumed to do so on the authority of bourgeois civil society (through elections), and they are supposed to act in light of the general interest. However, since the class divisions of bourgeois civil society are transposed into a political register, the power of the state can only be exercised for the sake of particular, rather than universal, interests. It is simply impossible to represent the general interests of an atomised and divided civil society. Thus, the bourgeois state is opposed to and wields power against bourgeois civil society.<sup>16</sup>

The second important feature concerns Hegel's resort to an abstract and ideal state. This is, for Marx, a religious or theological solution, in which the state is an abstract creation of flesh-and-blood human beings. Thus, Hegel begins with the abstraction of the state and its components and

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14 Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, pp. 3-129 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1843 [1975]).

15 For an able exposition of this argument, see David Adam, *Karl Marx and the State*, *International Marxist-Humanist: Journal of the International Marxist-Humanist Organisation* 6 September(2010). <http://www.marxisthumanistinitiative.org/alternatives-to-capital/karl-marx-the-state.html>; William Niemi, 'Karl Marx's Sociological Theory of Democracy: Civil Society and Political Rights', *Social Science Journal* 48, no. 1 (2011): pp. 39-51.

16 See further, Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, pp. 146-174 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1844 [1975]), p. 154.

then seeks to fit the realities of every day bourgeois society within those abstractions.<sup>17</sup> The answer to these problems comprises the major step of standing Hegel on his feet and focusing on bourgeois civil society, which Marx understood in Hegel's sense of including the economy. This focus unfolded into Marx's detailed studies of economics, culminating in his extraordinary work, *Capital*.<sup>18</sup> Marx's insights are many, but my concern is the nature of bourgeois civil society. The cause of the alienation identified by Hegel is actually due, argued Marx, to the tensions between the forces and relations of production, to the systemic patterns of exploitation and production of surplus value, and to the class conflict that ensues. Above all, Marx revealed clearly that this type of civil society is inescapably capitalist and bourgeois, indeed that it serves the interests of the bourgeoisie and not the workers. The question is then how we overcome this type of civil society. The younger Marx may have proposed a somewhat idealised overcoming of the alienation between state and bourgeois civil society, in which what is alienated becomes one in direct participatory democracy.<sup>19</sup> The mature Marx saw that the path involved revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat – to which I return below.

After Marx, the definition of bourgeois civil society made a profound shift by making a distinction between economics and civil society. For Hegel and Marx, bourgeois civil society very much included the economy, but for subsequent proponents of civil society, the economy had to be excluded. This distinction enabled civil society to gain the appearance of neutrality and universality, in which individual expression, civic association and political engagement could take place. This move was en-

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17 See further, Roland Boer, *Criticism of Earth: On Marx, Engels and Theology* (Chicago and Leiden: Haymarket and Brill, 2012 [2014]), pp. 153-160.

18 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 35 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1867 [1996]); Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. II, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 36 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1885 [1997]); Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. III, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 37 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1894 [1998]).

19 Marx, *Comments on James Mill, Éléments d'économie politique*; Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

abled by back-translating the English term, “civil society,” into German. Instead of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, “bourgeois society,” it became *Zivilgesellschaft*, “civil society,” a suitably neutral term that removed the specificity of class associations.<sup>20</sup> The tendency to use terms such as “public sphere” or “public square” evinces a further effort to neutralise the class associations of the term.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most significant proponent of this idea of civil society has been Jürgen Habermas, who has argued that the “liberal goal” of bourgeois civil society is that all enforceable and publically sanctioned decisions “can be formulated *and justified* in a universally accessible language.”<sup>22</sup> Here Habermas unwittingly reveals a problem with bourgeois civil society: this clearly liberal project must be determined and policed, identifying what can be accepted and what must be rejected.<sup>23</sup>

At this point the work of Domenico Losurdo provides another insight, moving a few steps beyond Marx.<sup>24</sup> Losurdo provides a crucial connection between bourgeois civil society and liberalism, as both ideology and practice. Liberalism, with its focus on the freedom of the private individual, provides the ideological underpinnings of bourgeois civil society.

20 Kocha, *Civil Society from a Historical Perspective*, p. 67.

21 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere - An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991); Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992); Margaret Somers, ‘Narrating and Naturalizing Civil Society and Citizenship Theory: The Place of Political Culture and the Public Sphere’, *Sociological Theory* 13, no. 3 (1995): pp. 229-274.

22 Judith Butler et al., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 26. This is consistent with his earlier statement on the nature of democracy: “only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legitimation that has been legally constituted.” Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contribution to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT, 1996), p. 110.

23 See Aakash Singh, ‘Habermas’ Wrapped Reichstag: Limits and Exclusions in the Discourse of Post-secularism’, *European Review* 20, no. 1 (2012): pp. 131-147.

24 Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011 [2006]).

The result is that Losurdo enables us to tackle the claim that bourgeois civil society is open to all, indeed that it involves freedom for all to express their views. However, the slogan of “freedom for all” relies on a definition of “all” that excludes a majority.<sup>25</sup> In other words, liberalism and thereby bourgeois civil society restricts who counts as part of the universal. If you do not fit its definition of “all,” then you do not count. Losurdo points out that liberal freedom is not merely limited in extent (which would then simply entail an extension of such freedom) but that it is structurally geared to exclude significant groups from “freedom,” indeed that it requires such exclusions in order to constitute “freedom” and “democracy.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, liberalism and repression are two sides of the same coin; bourgeois “freedom” and “democracy” are inseparable from exclusion and dispossession, for the former relies on the latter to function. Now we can see the implications of Habermas’s efforts at policing the boundaries of bourgeois civil society.

The history of liberalism and bourgeois civil society provide myriad examples, but let me select two examples from Losurdo’s study. First, the American slave owner, Thomas Jefferson, wrote in *The Declaration of Independence* that “all men are created equal.” But this phrase relied on a crucial restriction of the sense of “all,” which did not include slaves, women and “inferior” folk. One cannot understand “American liberty” without slavery and dispossession, for they grew together, one sustaining the other.<sup>27</sup> However, the perception of liberty is subtle and the line always shifts; as some groups are included over time, such as

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25 For a comparable articulation of this point, see Yang Guangbin, ‘The Socialist Dimensions of Democracy – with Comments on the Myth of the Bourgeoisie and Democratic Politics’, *The Social Sciences in China* 33, no. 3 (2009): pp. 53-72(56).

26 For example, see John Stuart Mill, ‘On Liberty’, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J.M. Robson, vol. 18, 213-310 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1859 [1977]), p. 224; Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. Richard Tuck, trans. John Clarke, 3 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005 [1625]), I.3.8; II.5; III.7. John Locke, *Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 180.

27 For another angle on this development, see Yang, *The Socialist Dimensions of Democracy*, pp. 57-58.



slaves, workers and women, others are excluded. Thus, during the so-called Progressive Era, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, numerous “democratic” reforms took place: direct election to the Senate, secret ballot, primaries, referenda, and so on. Yet they all took place during a rise in ferocity of the Ku Klux Klan terrorist squads and a push to assimilate Indigenous people and deprive them of their residual lands. As a second example, what is the meaning of the claims for “human rights,” “liberty,” and “freedom” in the foreign policy of the United States? Losurdo deploys Cecil Rhodes’s formula for the British Empire: “philanthropy + 5 per cent,” where “philanthropy” is synonymous with “human rights” and 5 per cent the profits to be made by waving the flag of “human rights.” The response to these points is usually one of hypocrisy: they do not live up to their ideals. Losurdo’s point is that the very possibility of the “freedom” and indeed “democracy” of bourgeois civil society directly is dependent upon systemic dispossession of the majority – whether workers, peasants, or colonial subjects. He calls this “the community of the free and its dictatorship over peoples unworthy of liberty.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, this type of civil society is another form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

Bourgeois civil society turns out to be rather different to what its proponents suggest. It is an alienated product of bourgeois social formations and rampant individualism (Hegel), a location of thorough economic exploitation and contradictions (Marx), and a zone that operates by means of a universal of exclusion (Losurdo). This type of civil society is hardly desirable.

### **Socialist Civil Society**

In light of these problem with bourgeois civil society, what might a socialist civil society be? It should be clear by now that there is no such thing as a neutral and universal “civil society” applicable to all situations. Instead, there is either bourgeois civil society or socialist civil so-

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<sup>28</sup> Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, p. 248.

ciety. So let me outline a few preliminary ideas: socialist civil society is consciously class based; it redefines the sense of freedom; and it operates knowingly at the complex intersections between two levels, those of official and unofficial discourse.

To begin with, since bourgeois civil society is a product of capitalism and the bourgeoisie's rise to power, and since its underlying ideology is liberalism, socialist civil society will be based on a very different class formation – workers and peasants. The possibility of socialist civil society is based on the fact that a communist party is able to seize power and thereby enact the political power of the workers and peasants. In this new context, the old exploiting classes have lost their power, with the result that they may oppose the new order (in which case they need to be dealt with resolutely), opt out of the new order and leave the country, or consign themselves to take a very different and subordinate role. In this new situation a space opens up for what may be called socialist civil society. This entails a process in which the formerly excluded are now included, the formerly voiceless learn to gain a voice, the formerly devalued are now valued. One example of this process is the old communist practice of criticism and self-criticism, in which workers and peasants were encouraged to express their views on the government and management of the economy and society. To be sure, such criticism often became ritualised and empty, but the principle remains valid and very much alive today. In our digital age, this type of criticism finds expression in social media, web forums, and the complex mechanisms of feedback to governments enabled by such media. Of course, it is predicated on one condition: that such criticism is constructive rather than destructive, seeking to improve the system rather than destroy it.

Further, socialist civil society develops a very different understanding of freedom. I do not mean here the revolutionary freedom of being able to change the coordinates of social existence, which is found in revolutionary periods when "everything is possible." Instead, I am interested in the period after the revolution, when socialism has achieved power. The coordinates have already been changed, and the old order has passed

or is in the process of passing. Constructing a new society in such a situation, as Mao Zedong pointed out, is infinitely more complex and difficult, a point that also applies to practice of freedom in socialist civil society. The following factors are the most important.<sup>29</sup>

1) At its basis, the freedom of socialist civil society is partisan. This should be clear from the preceding point, given that it is a civil society primarily for workers and peasants. But immediately the question arises: how is this different from bourgeois civil society, with its limitations and policing of who is allowed to be free? Formerly, the vast majority of people, the workers and peasants, were excluded from the exercise of freedom. The bourgeoisie did so in the name of “freedom in general,” but in doing so, they served their own class interests.<sup>30</sup> Instead, this “freedom

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29 The basis for the following points relies on none other than Lenin, in a series of observations in which he developed the category of proletarian and peasant freedom. See V.I. Lenin, ‘Party Organisation and Party Literature’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 10, p. 44-49 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1905 [1966]), p. 48; V.I. Lenin, ‘The Victory of the Cadets and the Tasks of the Workers’ Party’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 10, pp. 199-276 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1906 [1962]), p. 264; V.I. Lenin, ‘The State and Revolution’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 25, pp. 385-497 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1917 [1964]); V.I. Lenin, ‘Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 26, pp. 87-136 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1917 [1966]), p. 102; V.I. Lenin, ‘The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 28, pp. 227-325 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1918 [1965]), p. 242; V.I. Lenin, ‘Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)’, March 6-8, 1918, in *Collected Works*, vol. 27, pp. 85-158 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1918 [1965]), pp. 152-157; V.I. Lenin, ‘First All-Russia Congress on Adult Education’, May 6-19, 1919, in *Collected Works*, vol. 29, pp. 333-376 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1919 [1965]), p. 354; Lenin, ‘First All-Russia Congress on Adult Education’, May 6-19, 1919, p. 352; Lenin, ‘The State: A Lecture Delivered at the Sverdlov University’, July 11, 1919.; V.I. Lenin, ‘The Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 30, pp. 93-104 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1919 [1965]); V.I. Lenin, ‘First Congress of the Communist International’ in *Collected Works*, vol. 28, p. 455-477 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1919 [1965]), pp. 457-467; Lenin, ‘Draft Programme of the R.C.P.(B.)’, pp. 107-109; Lenin, ‘First All-Russia Congress on Adult Education’, May 6-19, 1919, p. 355; V.I. Lenin, ‘On the Struggle of the Italian Socialist Party’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 31, pp. 377-396 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1920 [1966]), pp. 392-396. I have also drawn on the perceptive insights of Yang, ‘The Socialist Dimensions of Democracy.’

30 This point is expressed by V.I. Lenin, ‘A New Revolutionary Workers’ Asso-

in general” should be deployed specifically for the excluded majority, for only this is genuine, actual freedom. Even more, where such freedom does not empower the majority, the workers and peasants, it is not freedom at all. This is the implication of the famous phrase, “dictatorship of the proletariat,” first introduced by Marx, and then elaborated in detail by Lenin and Stalin.<sup>31</sup> The arresting implication is that the precondition of socialist civil society arises from the very partisan nature of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and of the peasants – as Lenin and especially Mao Zedong made clear. For Mao Zedong, of course, this became the category of democratic dictatorship, in which “democracy” itself was a socialist term.<sup>32</sup>

2) Indeed, this is the second feature of socialist freedom: the need to recover and claim the inherently socialist sense of the term democracy. Let me go back to period leading up to the October Revolution of 1917, when much new political terminology entered the scene in Russia.<sup>33</sup> A key term was “democracy,” which was understood to refer not to bourgeois democracy, but to the labouring masses of workers and peasants. These were the “people,” the vast majority (*demos* in Greek and thereby *narod* in Russian). The opposite of democracy in this situation was not the

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ciation’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 8, p. 499-510 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1905 [1963]), p. 502.

31 See the initial statement in Karl Marx, “Notes on Bakunin’s Book *Statehood and Anarchy*,” in *Marx Engels Collected Works*, pp. 485-526 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1875 [1989]); Karl Marx, ‘The Civil War in France’, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 22, pp. 307-377 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1871 [1986]). See further, Derek Sayer, ‘Revolution Against the State: The Context and Significance of Marx’s Later Writings’, *Dialectical Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (1987): pp. 65-82; Adam, ‘Karl Marx and the State’, pp. 6-10. It would subsequently form a key category in Lenin’s thought, initially elaborated in Lenin, ‘The State and Revolution.’

32 Zedong Mao, ‘On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship: In Commemoration of the Twenty-Eighth Anniversary of the Communist Party of China (June 30)’, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 4, pp. 411-424 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1949 [1961]). The term was first proposed by Lenin, ‘The Revolutionary-Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry.’

33 Boris Ivanovich Kolonitskii, ‘Democracy’ in the Political Consciousness of the February Revolution’, in *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches*, ed. Rex A. Wade, pp. 75-90 (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Russian autocracy or dictatorship, but the classes of the old aristocracy and the newer bourgeoisie. Terms such as “democratic classes,” “democratic elements,” “revolutionary democracy,” along with “democracy” without an epithet, had distinct class dimensions. Democracy was synonymous with the range of Russian socialist parties, while those of the bourgeoisie (Kadets) and the old aristocracy (Octobrists and others) were anti-democratic. But we need not restrict ourselves to the Russian revolution, for, as Yang Guangbin has observed in the current era, “the essence of democracy is therefore socialist in nature.”<sup>34</sup>

3) Let us return to the question of partisanship, with the point that it is openly partisan. By contrast, bourgeois claims to “pure democracy” and “freedom for all” pretend to be for everyone, but they are not so (as Marx and especially Losurdo show so well). That is, the effort to proclaim universal freedom is actually a screen, seeking to conceal the specific class nature of the freedom of bourgeois civil society. This means that one must be open about the partisan nature of proletarian freedom. It is openly linked to and focuses on the workers and peasants.

4) As Hegel already observed, 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 in which the individual finds a new space. In other words, while bourgeois civil society prioritises the individual seeking his or her own self-interest, socialist civil society assumes the collective as the starting point.

5) This apparently individual, bourgeois freedom operates within a society that holds private property as sacred, with the basis being private property in land.<sup>35</sup> Bourgeois freedom and democracy is predicated

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<sup>34</sup> Yang, *The Socialist Dimensions of Democracy*, p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘The Manifesto of the Communist Party’, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6, pp. 477-519 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1848 [1976]).

on property rights, which the bourgeoisie clearly does not wish to relinquish.<sup>36</sup> In other words, this is the power of money, with vast differences between the very wealthy and the masses of people living in poverty. In other words, bourgeois freedom serves the cause of capitalism in which the majority are systematically denied freedom. In this situation, socialist freedom, a freedom without inverted commas, is what emancipates labour from the yoke of capitalism and replaces it with a socialism. Only when workers and peasants are free from systemic capitalist exploitation are they able to be truly free.

6) The nature of socialist freedom relies on a new definition of the universal. While bourgeois freedom constitutes a false universal, based upon a particular which is concealed, namely the power of capital, socialist 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. The over-riding socialist sense is that one seeks to contribute to the collective good, no matter how small or great one's contribution may be.

7) Socialist civil society may be described as both freedom *from* and freedom *for*. It is freedom from bourgeois civil society, with which it is incompatible. This reality is revealed by the function of liberal or bourgeois democracy, which has become an effective tool for excluding any type of viable socialism. Indeed, when a communist government concedes to institute a bourgeois democratic system, it soon finds itself out of power and all that it has worked for is lost. By contrast, socialist civil society is freedom *for* the construction of socialism.<sup>37</sup> This does not mean that some elements of the bourgeoisie may not become part of the process of constructing socialism, if not communism, as long as they divest themselves of bourgeois class identity, cease to resist the construction of socialism and work for the new project.

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36 Yang, *The Socialist Dimensions of Democracy*, pp. 64-65.

37 As succinctly expressed by Zedong Mao, 'On Correctly Handling Contradictions Among the People (February 27)', in *The Writings of Mao Zedong 1949-1976*, ed. John K. Leung and Michael Y. M. Kau, vol. 2, pp. 308-351 (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1957 [1992]), p. 333.

I suggest that we may see some elements of this socialist civil society in China, as, for example, with relatively widespread religious and internet freedom. One may see worshippers in churches, mosques and temples throughout the country. One may also witness the lively discussions on social networking and internet discussion forums by the 900 million or so users of the internet China (more than in any other country in the world).<sup>38</sup> All of this is predicated on freedom *for* the common project of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Those who use religion and the internet – whether inside or outside China – to undermine such a freedom, indeed to undermine the socialist project, soon find that such activity is not tolerated.

8) Eventually, this new type of freedom will become a habit, a feature ingrained into daily social life, so that people are no longer conscious of what freedom and unfreedom might be. This is a crucial transformation, but it takes a long, long time and very much for the future. This step entails moving beyond the partisanship of socialist freedom, but it can only be achieved through such a form of freedom. It is simply impossible to do so through bourgeois freedom. Instead, through socialist freedom, eventually freedom and democracy become not a goal to which one must strive but *an everyday habit*.

Thus far I have addressed two main features of socialist civil society, in terms of its class nature and the understanding of freedom in such a context. These are very much initial theoretical points, drawn from the actual experiences and problems of constructing socialism in places like the Soviet Union and China. So also with the final point, concerning the complex interplay between official and unofficial discourses.

For example, when a young person seeks to join the communist party, he or she may have a range of reasons: a good friend has done so; it will provide opportunities for a better job; a grandfather or grandmother who

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38 For a useful recent study on internet use, although it must be read with a critical eye, see Cui Di and Wu Fang, 'Moral Goodness and Social Orderliness: An Analysis of the Official Media Discourse about Internet Governance in China,' *Telecommunications Policy* 40(2016): pp. 265-276.

was deeply influential led them to join; a desire to contribute, in however small a way, to the greater common good. Some of these reasons may be acceptable in terms of the official discourse, while others may not. The documentation produced for such an application will of course mention the acceptable reasons and leave out those deemed less acceptable. However, the intriguing fact is that everyone knows that these two levels are part of the process.

Or take the example of a stalwart of the party such as the writer Sun Li (1949-2010), concerning whom there has been much debate.<sup>39</sup> He is a person whose lifetime of service to the communist party means that he or she was widely regarded as faithful, honest and direct. At the same time, he wrote letters to his wife, Yu Xiaohui, expressing some criticisms and misgivings. Which is the real position of such a person? A faithful and upright member or a critic with misgivings? The answer is neither, but both. Indeed, it is precisely in the intersection between the two that socialist civil society finds its function. And a clear consciousness of this in-between nature of the situation is crucial for such a civil society.

Once again, an intellectual who has been a member of the communist party for many years may express some concerns about a recent decision, or perhaps the direction of policy, or engage in research concerning problems – such as housing, environmental pollution, demographic changes as people move from the countryside to the city – that arise from the rapid pace of development and change. However, when one asks about the reason for being a member of the party, the reason given is that the person in question has a desire to contribute to the common project. When one asks about the misgivings and criticisms, the reply is that this is the role of the intellectual. In other words, the very condition of being a member of the party is that one entertains such misgivings. The two sides are necessary rather than contingent.

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39 For instance, see Zhang Longfu, 'Between Life Sensibility and Social Rationality: A Psychological Analysis of Sun Li's Illness and His Novella Tie Mu Qian Zhuan', *Qingdao Daxue Shifanxueyuan Xuebao (Journal of Teachers College Qingdao University)* 29, no. 3 (2010): pp. 60-68.



This reality also applies to those who work for the many “ideological” institutes, schools and units, ranging from the national to the local level. Initially, we may distinguish between ideological and academic work, with the former working at the behest of the dominant interpretation of Marxist ideology and the latter undertaking research concerning that interpretation. However, the situation is a more complex. For example, the many research institutes and granting bodies seek to fund research that is academic rather than ideological, so that such academic work may contribute critical perspectives to ideological matters. Foreigners are at times brought into such work to provide yet further perspectives. But this means that the ideological and the academic are inextricably entwined with one another. Even more, those who work in these ideological organisations know full well what they are doing, working in a situation which is at the intersection between the ideological and the academic. Once again, we are at the point where it is the space in between, or, rather, the dialectical interaction between the two is the reality.

I have given four hypothetical examples of what may be called the space in between, or the dialectic between the two perspectives. I suggest that it is precisely in this dialectical space that we find signs of socialist civil society. Such a civil society is not the expression of misgivings or criticisms, but the close and dialectical connection between them and the official position, or indeed membership, involvement and contribution to the greater project. This situation pertains as much to the new young member, the old stalwart, the intellectual, or indeed the one who works for one of the many ideological units. This is a fascinatingly complex matter, but it was a constitutive feature of the best years of the Soviet Union and may also be said to present in a systemic manner in China. I do not see this as a sign of the weakness of socialism, but rather a strength. The strength of the system relies on the distinction between the two levels of discourse, and especially a dialectical interaction between them. In this dialectical intersection we may locate another dimension of socialist civil society.

### Conclusion

I have provided a preliminary outline of what a socialist civil society may be, predicated on the point that civil society is not neutral but partisan. What is so often presented as “civil society” is in fact bourgeois civil society, with its individualism, alienation, exploitation and constitutive inclusions in the name of a false universal. By contrast, socialist civil society is predicated on the dominance of workers and peasants (even as they are transformed by socialism in power), by a thorough redefinition of freedom, and by the subtle dialectical interplay between official and unofficial discourse.

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