

## What does “democracy” mean?



**XI JINPING** recently addressed the general assembly of the United Nations restating the Chinese people’s aspiration for “peace, amity and harmony”. So far so good. He went on to espouse the causes of human rights, equity and justice, the life and dignity of every individual, the need for a greater sense of happiness, and for “non-discriminatory development”. He called for an end to military measures and invasions, and then stated boldly that “Democracy is a right for every country to enjoy” because “Democracy and freedom . . . are the common values of humanity”.

Now, I don’t know about you, but my head was spinning by the end of his fifteen-minute address. What could the good man mean? Was this just Beijing’s attempt at ‘motherhood and apple pie’? Or, the announcement of a dramatic shift in the policy, practice, and outlook of the Communist Party of

China, and of the party-state over which Xi Jinping rules?

I don't think so.

Xi is simply continuing the Bolshevik tradition of alluding to the 'essence' of his dictatorship rather than its brutal reality.

The origins of this confusion lie in the old communist notion of the "dictatorship of the proletariat". This idea sprang from the view that under the rule of the bourgeoisie, regardless of the political set-up, the employers always remain in charge – it is always the dictatorship of private property and privilege, regardless of any claims about democracy. Consequently, when the workers or 'the people' (as in The People's Republic of China), have taken power it is the dictatorship of the mass of the population – it is a democratic dictatorship.

Of course, this will sound oxymoronic to western ears, but it is not entirely mad or contradictory. It is certainly true that in democracies like Britain, France, or the United States, there is no possibility of abolishing the role of private property or the privileges that it confers. You can vote for who you like, but the domination of the society by commerce and capitalism will, for the foreseeable future, reign supreme. Communist dictatorships are similar in the sense that the common property held by the state 'on behalf of the people' is inviolable – there is no possibility of altering the basic economic set-up. The democratic dictatorship of the communist party will always hold sway.

This is why the dictatorship in East Germany was, without a hint of irony, always referred to as the DDR, the German Democratic Republic. In a similar manner, the government's in Hanoi, Havana, and Pyongyang, also claim the mantle of democracy for their dictatorships without the slightest hesitation.

Are they lying? Well, not exactly. Truth is a pliable notion for dictators like Xi Jinping. Truth for such people is always in the service of 'the greater good'. From the time of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, to today's

tyrants, what is true is that which serves the interests of the dictatorship, which are indistinguishable from the needs of the people. When Mao Zedong said “Serve the People!” he knew that this was the same as saying, “Serve the Dictatorship!”. For Mao the people and the state were inseparable concepts. Whilst not being identical, the people and the state were coterminous. This is exactly what Xi Jinping continues to think. So, the word democracy has a different meaning, for communist party bosses and elective dictators, from the way it is deployed in the west.

It is at this point in the argument that we should boldly award western democracy its class content. It is, of course, *bourgeois* democracy. It is based upon the sanctity of contracts, the rule of law, and the inviolability of private property. None of which exists in China.

The nature of China’s ‘capitalism’ is a subject for a different discussion, but it is clear that Beijing’s ‘rule of law’ can be overturned whenever the party and their police deem it necessary. Contracts may be violated without judicial review or challenge, rights withdrawn, and property redistributed by party officials from time to time in accordance with the policies and desires of the party at a moment’s notice. Party and state officials are able to abrogate anybody’s freedom and curtail their ‘rights’ in an arbitrary fashion. Consequently, freedom of expression, opinion, organisation, religion, art and cultural activity, is closely controlled and never free in China.

In contrast *bourgeois* democracies have been built in the west upon the foundation of the rule of law. In a state like Britain, and a country like England this took at least a century and a half before there was any talk of democracy. Law and its application to individuals without regard to their wealth or social status had to be established in theory, well before it could even be aspired to in practice.

*Bourgeois* democracy arose in a series of complicated struggles in which the growth of large

cities posed the ruling oligarchies of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with problems that could not be overcome without the positive and active engagement of larger and larger sections of the population. Both the removal of religious restrictions and the extension of citizenship with the right to vote and stand for election were involved. In 1829 the Catholic Relief Act was passed by Parliament in London. It is known as 'Catholic Emancipation', because it permitted Roman Catholics to become MPs for the first time since the sixteenth century.

This was followed by the great reform acts of 1832, 1867, 1884, 1918, and 1928 which steadily extended citizenship to the entire population. During the struggles of the 1860s and 1870s trade unions were legalised, as ordinary working people began increasingly to exercise their rights as citizens. These measures together with the abolition, first of the slave trade in 1807, and then of chattel slavery itself in 1833, laid the foundation for the mixed character of *bourgeois* democracy. Britain practiced dictatorship and apartheid in her colonies, 'Czarism' in her Indian Empire, and naked repression from Ireland to Kenya and beyond, but 'Perfidious Albion' was also a leader in establishing *bourgeois* democracy at home in England, Scotland, and Wales.

What is 'mixed' about *bourgeois* democracy is that although it arose in defence of commercial society and was developed by aristocratic grandees, mine and factory owners, jurists, philosophers, and intellectuals of all sorts, it was spurred on by the resistance of working people to the arbitrary power of the propertied classes. *Bourgeois* democracy was also informed by the almost instinctive practice of democracy within the institutions and circles of protest and organisation established by working people. From the earliest days of illegal trade unions, underground political clubs and reform campaigns, artisans, and labourers opted for democratic procedures and protocols amongst themselves in their struggles with the rich and powerful.

The result has been the establishment of societies in the west in which democracy does not simply mean the election of government by free elections, but also of guarantees of religious freedom, freedom of speech and publication; the right to establish voluntary organisations of all sorts, largely free from state interference and repression. To be sure the mass media and elections are often manipulated by those with deep pockets and cabals of those with entrenched positions. However, the right to challenge vested interests remains, and is widely practiced by protest campaigns, demonstrations, and organisations established with the explicit aim of limiting or resisting the arbitrary authority of the rich and powerful.

So, *bourgeois* democracy is founded upon the rule of law, in which in theory all are equal before the courts both civil and criminal. It is fenced around with a vast and active civil society of clubs, charities, unions, and cultural campaigns of all sorts which engage substantial sections of society in the lively consideration of government practice and policy. Active citizens who always seek to modify, erode, or weaken the inevitable tendency of those with money and built-in influence to have everything done in their own way, and for their own advantage.

So, *bourgeois* democracy is the hybrid result of the needs of the propertied classes for reliable means of stabilising societies composed of crowded and rumbustious cities – societies characterised by brutal inequality and unfairness – by incorporating as many people as possible into citizenship in which real rights are conferred, and the means for their robust exercise and defence are maintained.

In recent decades much of this has been undermined by globalisation (which has limited the trade and fiscal options of national governments), and by state intrusion into the management and objectives of charities and the voluntary sector more broadly. Civil society is being parasitized by the state, it is withering on the vine. Democracy is undoubtedly being threatened in the west by a concatenation of causes.

This has muddled policy to such an extent that western leaders and planners at the highest level seem utterly unaware that the rule of law is the foundation of democracy – a necessary but not sufficient condition. This ignorance has led politicians in London and Washington to plan and hold elections in Iraq and Afghanistan, when they must have known, full well, that the rule of law simply did not exist in the war-torn circumstances following invasion and occupation. In place of a full commitment to establishing the rule of law they opted in both countries for sham democracies; the election of governments of émigré movers and shakers, sitting atop corrupt oligarchies and non-existent state institutions.

So, democracy is not simply about elections or the election of governments and their leaders. Dictatorships can be elective as they are in Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Elections are frequently held in Cuba, and I have no doubt in Vietnam, but these ‘democracies’ like those advocated by Xi Jinping, by Vladimir Putin, or Recep Erdogan, are not based upon the rule of law, or upon the free development or practice of civil society.

Whatever the shortcomings, hypocrisy, or even criminal irresponsibility of leaders in London, Washington, Berlin, or Paris, they are not dictators, and do not have free reign; they are never able to rule without scrutiny by opposition parties, by the courts, by the press and broadcasters, by ‘citizen journalists’, by trade unions, charities, and campaigns of all sorts.

Consequently, there is a fundamental difference between the democratic dictatorships of Moscow, Beijing, Ankara, Tehran, Hanoi, Pyongyang, or Havana, and the *bourgeois* democracies of London, Paris, Berlin, and Washington. There is no doubt that in attempting to deploy the term “democracy” in defence of political arrangements that suppress freedom of speech and organisation – arrangements that crush free religious and cultural expression – the

elective dictators are attempting to efface the real nature and superiority of democracy in the west.

We must remain vigilant, and never allow the likes of Xi Jinping to get away with the brutal swindle of claiming democratic legitimacy for their arbitrary rule.