Letter to Liangen

Here, Chen states his theory that though over time democracy undergoes important changes, such changes are unlike those in the economic system, in that they concern not the fundamental content of democracy but only the extent of its realisation. Chen criticises Lenin and Trotsky for dismissing bourgeois democracy as a mere form of bourgeois political control and for counterposing it to proletarian democracy; and thus for paving the way not only for Stalinist dictatorship but also for the Fascists, who copied the Bolshevik example. He sketches an economic theory of Fascism in an attempt to explain the nature of its political system. Chen’s defence of bourgeois democracy is not an end in itself but an intermediate stage – made necessary by the ubiquitous crosscurrent of dictatorship – in the struggle for a more extensive democracy. Source: Zhuanji wenxue zazhi she (eds) 1967, pp. 68–71.

... I have seen that you [and other friends in Shanghai] unanimously [disagree with my views], so in spite of my illness, I shall make a brief reply to you. The roots of your error are as follows. First, you fail (like Lenin and Trotsky) to understand the true value of bourgeois democracy. You see democracy simply as a mode of bourgeois rule, as hypocrisy, as deception. You fail to understand democracy’s true content, which is: no institution apart from the courts has the right of arrest; there may be no taxation without representation; the government has no right to levy taxes unless they are agreed by parliament; opposition parties are free to organise, speak, and publish; workers have the right to strike; peasants have the right to till the land; there is freedom of thought and worship; and so on. These rights and freedoms are what the people wanted; they are the ‘bourgeois democracy’ that people today enjoy as a result of more than seven hundred years of bloody struggle, they are what Russia, Italy, and Germany want to overthrow. The only difference between ‘proletarian democracy’ and bourgeois democracy is in the extent of its realisation; it is not that proletarian democracy has a different content. Ever since October [1917], the vacant and abstract term ‘proletarian democracy’ has been used as a weapon to destroy actual bourgeois democracy, and it led to the emergence of today’s Soviet Union under Stalin – Italy and Germany are only following suit. Now you too are employing this hollow phrase as a weapon with which to attack the bourgeois democracies of Britain and America on Hitler’s behalf. Second, you fail to understand the different class functions of Fascism and of the British, US, and French imperialists. (Imperialism is the product of an alliance between the financial oligarchy and the middle classes; only up to a certain
point does it tolerate the proletariat’s organisation and propaganda. Fascism is the fusion of the financial oligarchy with the lumpenproletariat and the radical right-wing of the petty bourgeoisie; it wholly eradicates the proletariat’s organisation and propaganda.) You fail to see that the economic system of Fascism, unlike that of British and American imperialism, rather than becoming with each passing day more and more international, has reverted to becoming more and more national, to a process of self-contained and self-supporting feudalisation; instead you think that the only difference is in the political system. Political systems are propelled by class-based economic motors, they’re not born of nothing. Even if we only consider the political system as an abstraction, is the difference between the German, Italian, and Russian GPU system and the British, American, and French parliamentary system merely tiny? Third, you fail to understand the importance of ‘intermediate struggles’. If we have our eyes only on the final battle and argue that Fascism can be destroyed forever only in the course of that last battle, that only then can the problem be resolved, then there is no point in intermediate struggles such as the anti-Fascist movement, the strike movement, the movement for the convocation of a national assembly, and so on. Instead, we can sit back and wait for the final struggle to drop from the sky. And there’s a fourth point. It is an utter illusion and sheer fantasy to assume that after the defeat of Britain and France a revolution will arise to overthrow bourgeois rule everywhere. (I refer you to my letter to xx.)1 These four errors are all founded in one general error, which can be summed up as ‘Closing your eyes to the actual course of historical events, blindly resorting to abstract formulae’. Even the formulae of the natural sciences can sometimes be demolished: those of the social sciences are far more fragile. History does not repeat itself. To consider old prescriptions as a sort of panacea and to apply them to the complex and increasingly volatile events of today is like matching horses’ jaws to cows’ heads.

Since the start of the war, Xinhua ribao in Chongqing has made a great point on the basis of Lenin’s theories about the last war of denouncing the hypocrisy of the democratic states of the British and French bourgeoisies, of opposing inter-imperialist wars, and of labelling both sides as aggressive bandits; but between the lines, it actually sides with Hitler. I have carefully studied your letter and come to the conclusion that it is identical with what the dead dogs are saying, not merely in its ideas but in its very words and phrases. Recently I read the pamphlet Poxiao [‘Daybreak’],2 which is of course based on the thinking of Leon Trotsky. It goes so far as to let Fascism off completely and to

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1 xx is probably Xiliu.