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# A New Path from Marxist Democracy to People's Democracy: An Analysis Based on Lukács's The Process of Democratization

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**Abstract:** In *The Process of Democratization*, Lukács attempted to remedy a theoretical lacuna in Marxist political science. By summing up the lessons of the Soviet model and the failed reforms in Eastern Europe, he reaffirmed the intrinsic link between socialism and democracy. At the same time, Lukács distinguished Stalinism and Leninism. In his view, while the Stalinist model achieved certain results in economic construction, its prolonged neglect of domestic democratic development represented a departure from the fundamental spirit of Marxism. For Lukács, the superiority of socialism lies not only in its capacity to liberate productive forces but also, and more importantly, in the continuous development and deepening of democracy. Democracy itself is an essential attribute of socialism. Accordingly, he proposed practical paths such as putting people first, integrating democracy into daily life, paying attention to public opinion, perfecting inner-party democracy, and adhering to the materialist conception of history. He argued that socialism should be a direct democracy with broad popular participation, and that economic development and democratic construction must advance simultaneously and support each other. Although some of his ideas in the book are not fully matured, they nonetheless offer theoretical reference and intellectual inspiration for socialist countries seeking a democratic path suited to their own realities.

**Keywords:** Marxist democracy; *The Process of Democratization*; People's democracy

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## 1. Introduction

*The Process of Democratization* is an indispensable classic for the study of Western democratic theory and for understanding the practice of socialist democracy in the twentieth century. The work has a clear chronological trajectory. Lukács completed the manuscript between March and November 1968, and the original German title was *Demokratisierung Heute und Morgen* ("Democratization Today and Tomorrow"), which directly expresses its central concern with the realities and prospects of contemporary democracy. However, owing to the international political environment of the time, ideological controls, and the complex situation within the Eastern European socialist bloc, this important manuscript – the fruit of Lukács's late reflections – could not be published during his lifetime. It remained sealed away for many years and saw the light of day only after the author's death. In 1985, the complete manuscript was

published for the first time in full in Germany, allowing the scholarly community to gain insight into Lukács's systematic thinking on socialist democratization and filling an important gap in the study of his later thought.

The genesis of this work is deeply rooted in the international political and socialist realities after the Second World War. After the war ended, the world order rapidly transformed into a bipolar Cold War system of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, with the socialist and capitalist camps locked in a comprehensive struggle. The socialist bloc, centred on the Soviet Union, long adhered to a highly centralised planned economy coupled with a rigid bureaucratic political management<sup>[1]</sup>. Although this system could concentrate resources to promote post-war reconstruction in its early stage, its drawbacks became increasingly evident over time, rigidity, lack of vitality, and absence of democratic mechanisms, leading directly to sluggish growth of productive forces in socialist countries and severely constraining popular initiative and social creativity.

Confronted with this predicament, in the 1950s and 1960s, various Eastern European socialist countries launched reform explorations aimed at breaking free from the shackles of the Soviet model and finding more dynamic paths of socialist development suited to their own histories, cultures, and national conditions. However, most of these reforms ultimately failed to achieve substantial success because of the inertia of the existing system, external intervention, and insufficient theoretical preparation, plunging socialist development into an unprecedented bottleneck and crisis. Based on this diagnosis, Lukács devoted himself to writing *The Process of Democratization* in 1968, hoping that through a deep analysis of the Soviet political and economic system, while adhering to the fundamental principles of Marxism, he could formulate a scientific theory capable of truly promoting the sustained development and revitalisation of socialism, thereby charting a direction for the future of socialism.

## **2. Main content**

### **2.1. Comparison with earlier Soviet and Eastern European Marxist Theory**

Compared with traditional Marxist interpretations in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Marx's own thought contains a notable theoretical gap: he did not systematically construct a political science, nor did he leave behind a specialised treatise on politics. As a result, Marxism long lacked a complete theoretical foundation in the field of political science. Precisely because of the absence of a scientific political theory to guide them, socialist countries repeatedly fell into a predicament where theory and practice were disconnected.

As the first country to practice socialism, the Soviet Union developed a distinctive Bolshevik political theory, but its inherent defects were obvious: it conflated the categories of state, government, and politics, substituting political questions for state functions, and from this derived the conclusion that "the withering away of the state means the withering away of politics"<sup>[2]</sup>. This argument is logically untenable: it neither accurately reveals the dialectical relationship between politics and the state nor provides effective guidance for real political practice. It is precisely against this theoretical impasse that the Hungarian thinker Lukács, in his late work *The Process of Democratization*, attempted to compensate for the absence of Marxist political theory by offering a political interpretation of Marxism, thereby constructing a universally explanatory Marxist political science.

Lukács placed the principle of democracy in an anthropological perspective. He did not treat democracy merely as an abstract value claim but rooted it in the inner needs of human social practice and daily life, emphasising democracy's foundational significance at the level of human existence rather than simply reducing it to a system of values. Crucially, he drew a clear distinction between Leninism and Stalinism, arguing that Stalinism was not a normal continuation of Leninism but a deviation from the fundamental direction of Marxism – indeed a departure from its essential core – constituting a major theoretical error in Soviet socialist development<sup>[3]</sup>. Yet Lukács did not thereby reject Leninism or the socialist road itself; he firmly opposed equating Stalinism with socialism and criticised any tendency to use that equation to negate socialism altogether. As a staunch defender of socialism, he always believed that the genuine development of socialism must be predicated on the institutional construction of democratisation. In this sense, *The Process of Democratization* is

not only a work of political philosophy but also a practical programme offering theoretical direction and methodological support for socialist reform.

In the book, Lukács redefined the core meaning of socialism, breaking through the then-dominant paradigm of productivity-first economism. Starting from the complex nature of modern society, he argued that political democracy must be elevated to the same strategic height as economic productivity. He emphasised that the superiority of socialism is manifested not only in the liberation and development of productive forces but also in the deepening and expansion of democratic forms<sup>[4]</sup>. In his view, democracy is an essential characteristic of socialism; the central mission of socialism is to serve as the institutional vehicle that guarantees a broader and fuller democracy for society. Socialisation of the means of production and state ownership of property are not the ultimate goals of socialism, but only important paths towards achieving this democratic aspiration. Thus, socialism and democracy achieve a deep theoretical convergence. In constructing a Marxist political theory, Lukács took the separation of civil society (also called “species-being”) from the state as the core theoretical premise. Following Marx’s line of thought, he pointed out that the crux of political questions is the origin and locus of power, emphasising that power must originate in civil society and belong to civil society, and that the politicisation of civil society is a necessary condition for the realisation of genuine democracy. Within this framework, the universalisation of democracy becomes the foundation for the validity of Marxist political theory, and the replacement of the traditional class category with civil society becomes the sociological basis for his theoretical innovation. In sum, in *The Process of Democratization*, Lukács not only put forward a highly forward-looking theoretical programme for socialist democratic reform but also, to a certain extent, filled the theoretical gap in Marxist political science, providing an extremely important intellectual resource for later efforts to clarify the intrinsic relationship between socialism and democracy.

## 2.2. New explorations of the democratic question (Marxist Political Science)

In Lukács’s theoretical system, the question of democracy is never an isolated political issue but a core proposition closely linked to the economic base and social structure<sup>[5]</sup>. *The Process of Democratization* is precisely his new exploration of the essence of democracy and the paths to its realisation from the standpoint of Marxist political science. Lukács explicitly argues that the construction of democratic politics and the development of the economy are inseparably interconnected; they are mutually dependent and mutually constraining. To discuss democracy in isolation from the economic base would only turn democracy into a castle in the air.

In the book, he repeatedly elaborates a central idea: genuine, lasting, and universal democracy can only be realised in a socialist society; and for democracy to take root and endure in a socialist society, the premise is the abolition of private ownership of the means of production<sup>[6]</sup>. From the perspective of the relationship between productive development and human needs, only when the productive forces are highly developed and material wealth is sufficient to satisfy the basic living and development needs of all members of society, so that people no longer pursue private property because of the scarcity of the means of subsistence, will the roots of class differentiation and conflicting interests gradually dissolve, and the social soil for universal democracy appear. On this logical basis, Lukács argues that any discussion of democracy must necessarily delve into the economic dimension. To analyse democracy apart from the economic base is neither consistent with historical law nor capable of revealing the true nature of democracy. He consistently adheres to the Marxist fundamental thesis that the economic base determines the superstructure, and firmly holds that economic development is the primary prerequisite for the realisation of democracy. Therefore, when analysing the relationship between economy and democracy, he always takes Marxist theory as his fundamental guide, refusing to abstractly discuss the value of democracy in isolation from the socio-economic structure.

At the beginning of the work, Lukács surveys two representative democratic forms in human history – ancient Greek polis democracy and modern bourgeois democracy – as a point of departure for analysing the essence of democracy. Ancient Greek polis democracy was based on the close economic ties among the citizen body. Citizens of the polis, sharing common economic life and social interests, performed their corresponding political duties and thereby formed a direct democracy of participation in public affairs. However, with the emergence and development of private property, internal divisions of interest among citizens intensified, and this democratic model based on the economic bonds of the

community gradually disintegrated. Modern bourgeois democracy, by contrast, is founded on commodity exchange and the market economy. Through the propagation of such ideals as freedom, equality, and rights, it moulds the pursuit of material interests into the mainstream value of society, constructing a corresponding democratic discourse. In Lukács's view, this kind of democracy is essentially a false democracy still based on private property and class antagonism<sup>[7]</sup>. The so-called freedom and equality often become instruments for the ruling class to maintain its own interests and realise capital profit; ordinary people find it difficult to genuinely participate in political decision-making or enjoy substantive democratic rights, and the value of democracy is not truly realised.

Based on his critique of historical and existing democratic forms, Lukács reaches a clear conclusion: genuine democracy can only be fully developed and long sustained in socialist society, and socialist society can only finally move towards the communist ideal by continuously advancing the process of democratisation. In *The Process of Democratisation*, he offers a systematic and detailed conception of the path to socialist democratisation, forming a distinctive theoretical framework.

### **2.3. Reflections on the socialist development model**

On the central question of the path and model of socialist development, Lukács engages in a profound and systematic reflection in *The Process of Democratization*. He basically accepts Lenin's critical stance on bourgeois democracy, explicitly excluding bourgeois democracy from viable socialist development models and firmly opposing the mechanical application of the capitalist democratic system to socialist construction. In his view, a crucial reason why the reforms in Eastern European socialist countries in the mid-to-late twentieth century repeatedly failed and could not achieve the expected results was precisely that some countries, in their reform explorations, had to varying degrees introduced or adhered to the logic and framework of bourgeois democracy in an attempt to solve systemic problems, ultimately deviating from the essential requirements of socialism.

Lukács sharply points out that bourgeois democracy is fundamentally a political form serving the ruling class of the bourgeoisie. Although it ideologically makes every effort to proclaim freedom, equality, and universal rights, creating a political illusion of sharing by all, its underlying logic is always centred on the protection of private property and the interests of the ruling class<sup>[7]</sup>. The so-called democratic rights are essentially instruments for maintaining class rule and consolidating capitalist privilege. He clearly states in the book that capitalist democracy, based on private ownership of the means of production, and socialist democracy, rooted in the conscious, purposeful creative labour of human beings, not only lack any inherent continuity or commonality but are in fact fundamentally different in value orientation, social foundation, and paths of realisation.

From the perspective of human emancipation, the more tightly economic forces control social life and individual behaviour, the more the autonomy and conscious agency of human beings in labour and social activities are suppressed, the smaller the space for conscious, purposeful labour becomes, and the more remote the possibility for humanity to break free from reification and achieve its own emancipation. It is based on this theoretical logic that Lukács concludes: in the process of constructing socialist society, the path of bourgeois democracy is completely unworkable; any attempt to rely on capitalist democracy to solve the problems of the socialist system will ultimately betray the original intentions of socialism and harm the fundamental interests of the people<sup>[8]</sup>.

Through his profound observation and reflection on the practice of Soviet socialism, Lukács recognised that relying solely on the Stalinist model to develop socialism is equally unsustainable, and that democratic construction and economic development are two indispensable pillars of the socialist cause. He thus explicitly argues that developing socialist democracy and developing the socialist economy enjoy equal importance – neither can be neglected, and they must advance in coordination. Lukács firmly believes that socialism and democracy are not mutually exclusive but can be organically integrated and complement each other. The future of socialism lies in unswervingly advancing its own process of democratisation, and, based on socialist democratisation, deepening socialist reform, perfecting the socialist system, and ultimately moving steadily towards communism<sup>[9]</sup>.

The ideal socialist development model he envisions is, at its core, to develop a democracy that truly belongs to the people within the socialist framework, to realise the simultaneous and coordinated advancement of socialist democratic politics and economic construction, so that economic development provides the material foundation for democracy, and democratic construction provides the institutional guarantee for economic development – thereby blazing a new socialist path that is both distinct from capitalist democracy and transcends the traditional Soviet model.

### 3. Conclusion

The Process of Democratization expresses Lukács's reflections on the socialist development model and offers a new blueprint for socialist development. He placed his hope for the revival of Marxism in the process of socialist democratisation, and the blueprint he constructed for the future development of socialism is elaborated in detail in this work. Although some of the views in the book are not fully developed, for example, regarding the implementation of democratisation in people's daily lives, or the integration of socialist economy and democracy, his ideas on socialist development and the related perspectives provide useful reference for the reform of socialist countries<sup>[10]</sup>. On the question of how to achieve the healthy development of socialism, we need to trace back to the source, return to the path of Marxism, and search for the correct direction. Lukács also proceeds from the Marxist perspective, arguing that the development of socialism requires returning to Marxism, taking the path of socialist democratisation, and combining it with the concrete conditions of each country in order to realise the ultimate goal of human emancipation.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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