

MILÁN PAP

The „Socialist Democracy” of the Kádár Era

A Study of an Ideological Concept

-Abstract of PhD Dissertation-



EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF LAW

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Supervisor:

MÁRTON SZABÓ

professor emeritus

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1. Research questions

There is a special relationship between democracy and dictatorship, as it is well-known, regarding the debate of contemporary political science on the adjectival versions of democracy. This will be the main question of my dissertation, studying the nature of the ideology of the Kádár era. Being slightly perplexing, the fact that the communist regime declared itself as a dictatorship, while the ideological texts claiming the system as democratic. Party intellectuals of the Kádár era were writing and arguing about democratic mechanisms of the political system, democracy of the communist party, democracy of the trade unions and cooperatives, industrial democracy or the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat.

The ideological concept of socialist democracy involved political expectations and long-term plans to transform society. It points out, how the transformation of the lives, jobs, local social relations and the democratization of everyday life in the socialist era was imagined. Socialist democracy thus represents an organized political and social transformation, a process in which the public debate was encouraged and, in the meantime, limited by several topics (Communist party rule, the historical knowledge on the revolution of 1956, alliance with the USSR and the communist bloc etc.). However, the political language of socialist democracy also appealed to "ordinary people", "local people", the typical subject of the socialist regime. Thereby, reducing the likelihood of social conflicts and mass movements against socialist system would have been based ideologically. Socialist democracy, saying it in the language of political science, managed democracy was a form of democracy which was projected itself into the future of socialism.

My dissertation attempts to study of the concept of socialist democracy and the related adjectival forms of democracy in the Kádár era, as one of the key concepts of ideologization, based on the source party's decisions, writings of public intellectuals and texts of main theoretical journals of the communist party. With the discursive analysis of the ideology of the Kádár era, I have three distinctive goals:

1. Understanding of a dictatorial regime, which no longer used the instruments of totalitarian regimes, while formed a utopian purpose of managing social change.

2. Going beyond the paradigm of the separation democracy and dictatorship. Along the three decades of the Kádár regime, democracy and dictatorship was shown in its complex relationship.

3. Finally, I examine whether the concept of socialist democracy has any relationship to the reform-minded thoughts and, if any, to the political thinking of the regime change in the end of the eighties.

2. Theoretical background and methodological framework

Democracy is one of the most contested political concepts in the modern political thought. Hence, in the 20th century there was no political regime which would have denied its own intentions for democracy, the rule of the people. Yet, democracy got into the focus of prolific ideological debates during the century. Even the fascists, as well German Nazis, used the term in the adjectival form of 'authoritarian democracy', or 'organic democracy'.¹ The totalitarian and authoritarian forms of Communism, provides a wide range of democracy concepts, as 'Soviet democracy', 'proletarian democracy', 'people's democracy', 'socialist democracy', even the chimera of 'democratic dictatorship'.

The meaning of democracy, as the 'rule of the people', was never disavowed in the Socialist ideological language. In the East and the West, the lexical meaning of democracy coincided during the Cold War, yet the opposition between the conceptualization of liberal democracy in the West and the communist variants was apparent. Walther Dieckmann revealed that, there is no contest between the formal definitions of democracy in the East and the West, but between their presuppositions of democracy. These presuppositions give the differences of democracy conceptions, and the difference is carried by the elements of the contextual uses of democracy. Studying the concept of democracy, two elements and their interpretations can cause the contestation between ideological conceptualizations. The different interpretations of *demos* and *kratein* bear the phenomenon what Dieckman calls ideological polysemy, the semantic contestation of ideologies over 'flag words' of politics.² Similarly, Walter Bryce Gallie has a description of essentially contested concepts as internally complex entity and in its constituent elements variously describable.³ In the weighting the

¹ Dylan J. Riley: *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe. Italy, Spain, and Rumania 1870- 1945*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2010.

² On 'ideologische Polysemie' and 'Fahnenwörter', see Walther Dieckmann: *Sprache in der Politik. Einführung in die Pragmatik und Semantik der politischen Sprache*. 2. Aufl. C. Winter, Heidelberg, 1975.

³ The classic text on essentially contested concepts, Gallie, W.B.: Essentially Contested Concepts. In W.B. Gallie.: *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*. Chatto & Windus, London, 1964, 157-191. On the critics and uses of Gallie's theory, see David Collier- Fernando Daniel Hidalgo- Andrea Olivia Maciuceanu: Essentially contested concepts: Debates and applications. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(3), 2006, 211-246.

different elements, socialist theories for example prefers equality over freedom, describing the demos, as the group of essentially equal humans. In the ideologies, these semantic contestations are not the same as in a descriptive analysis. Ideologies are not just for theorizing the structures and mechanisms of modern societies, but giving some blueprint for political act. Thus, ideologies need concepts to act politically, concepts which can be fixed in its contextual meaning. This process was called ideological de-contestation by Michael Freeden, amending Gallie's theory by the theory of concepts in political use. De-contestation is the temporarily stabilization of the meaning of the concept and the ideological morphology of basic political concepts. Freeden described the purpose of de-contestation "Indeed, the major functions of the de-contestation of political concepts are not connected, on our understanding, to underscoring the truths of logical purism or value perfectionism, but to supporting courses of political action and enabling the development of organizational practices, to the psychological need to restrict uncertainty, and to the communicative need to employ common linguistic conventions, whether agreed or imposed. In the course of that process a thought-of choice becomes a thought-of certainty, but certainty is no indicator of truth, and the form de-contesting adopts is itself elastic and indeterminate."⁴

I intend to follow the contextual de-contestation and "re-decontestations" of the concept of democracy in the post-war history of Hungary. The concept of *socialist democracy* marked a variant of communist idea on democracy in the post-Stalinist era. Though, the ideological foundations and principles of socialist democracy based on the same ideological narrative as the Stalinist democracy concept, *socialist democracy*

⁴ Michael Freeden: *Ideologies and Political Theory. A Conceptual Approach*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, 140. Further texts on de-contestation as ideological process by Freeden: Practising ideology and ideological practices? In Michael Freeden: *Liberal Languages. Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005. pp. 236-261.; Editorial: Essential Contestability and Effective Contestability, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (1), 2004. pp.3-11.; What Should the "Political" in Political Theory Explore? *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 13 (2), 2005. pp. 113-34.; Ideology and Political Theory, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11 (1), 2006. pp. 3-22. On similar theories of ideological de-contestation, see Aletta Norval: The Things We Do with Words-Contemporary Approaches to the Analysis of Ideology. *British Journal of Political Science*, 30 (2), 2000. pp. 313- 346., and Alan Finlayson: Rhetoric and the Political Theory of Ideologies. *Political Studies*, 60 (4), 2012. pp. 751-767.

offers a different form of comprehensive social transformation. As the source of official communist ideology, I studied the resolutions of the communist party and party programs. In addition to the party documents, I also examined the two theoretical journals (*Társadalmi Szemle*, *Pártélet*) of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, monographic publications, essays and standards of political education.

3. Summary of the chapters

In the first chapter (*Concept, political language, ideology*), I examine the theoretical background and methodological framework of a political-ideological language of an “already existing socialism”. Ideology as conceptualised in my work in the way of Michael Freeden harness the method of historical conceptual analysis. I regard socialist democracy as a core concept of socialism ideological language. Doing this, I outline three structural characteristics of socialist democracy: its logic of being a counter-concept of Western norm of parliamentarian democracy, its tendency toward the institutionalisation of socialist society, and its nature of future-focused utopia of social harmony, a kind of communism.

The next section (*Ideology and the Kádár regime*) I contrast the above-mentioned advantages of conceptual analysis with the literature of the history of Kádár era. What is most important is aiming here to conceptualise the modes and manners of ideologization, that is the way by politicians, intellectuals and other specialists “talk the language of socialist democracy”.

Socialist democracy can be interpreted as a concept of political power, of system and of movement. In the following, historical chapters the concept of socialist democracy is analysed in these frameworks. In these sections I examine the way of an ideological concept from the consolidation of communist power after the revolution of 1956 to the vision of a modern system and socialist society.

In the third chapter ("Normalization" and reform. *The concept of democracy in the early Kádár era*) the first period of Kádár era and its ideological characteristics is discussed. The first dogmas of socialist democracy are laid down by the party leadership, signing its leading role in “the building of the socialism”. In the first years of the Kádár era, the party is regarded as the only objective force which is capable to manage the movement of modernising Hungarian society. After the 1956 revolution, the concept of socialist democracy's semantic core is fixed by power relations between communist political elite and society. Later, this ideological discourse and its concepts also has a semantic enrichment.

However, the concepts are not only re-defined by settling in new semantic fields, but differentiated and refined as well. This entails a process of

institutionalization: old-new institutions are created, such as the Patriotic People's Front, the workers' councils as a forum for workplace democracy, the democracy of the co-operative in the rural areas, or social work of voluntary citizens in the context of local politics.

Through the institutionalization of different conceptual fields, socialist democracy is emerging in a semantic position that will cover spaces of life in socialist society. The fourth ("Peasant Democracy." *Co-operative democracy in the Kádár era*), the fifth ("The "Council Democracy." *Local democracy in the Kádár era*) and the sixth chapter ("Workers Democracy". *Factory democracy in the Kádár era*) I discuss the different layers of the meaning of the concept of socialist democracy in the context of workplace, co-operatives, and local everyday life. The concept of worker, as one of the main socio-political concepts of "existing socialism", had carried a multifaceted meaning in the ideology of the socialist Kádár regime. The worker was the general owner of the means of production, as well as the agent of this production. Indeed, the worker of the socialist system had ideologically appeared as self-governing and self-conscious participant in the life of the company, the co-operative as peasant worker and in his/her communal life, and the member of the ruling class of socialist society. The overdetermination of the concept of this ideal social actor had involved the multiplication of the tasks of the institutions of socialist democracy. Thus, besides of being the place of production process, socialist company and socialist co-operatives emerged ideologically as the field of a sphere of workers' and peasants' self-determination and communal life. This image of the socialist democracy fit into the macro-ideological system of Soviet "developed socialism", the last long-range ideological experiment of state socialisms.

In the seventh chapter (*The society of self-interests and social harmony. The socialist democracy as a concept of political science*) I examine the approximation of ideology and social sciences, mainly the new science of politics. Political science, integrating Western theories and official Marxism-Leninism is a mode of a systemic approach of the whole society of modern socialism. What is more, political science is regarded as the tool of refining the works of system which is called socialist society. A very differentiated system-idea is discussed here, which, theoretically, gains its energy from citizens'

participation and voluntariness. Socialist democracy in this conception gives the ideologically formed scientific notion of the mentioned energy by which the society and the socialist system can pull itself out of a mire by its own hair.

In the last chapter (*Epilogue: Democracy without adjective*), I study the years of the systemic crisis of the late eighties. These years are the period of thinking of another type of society and politics, but not the variants of the socialist one. Some still has his faith in the renewal the party, but the majority intellectuals form a space of free speech and liberal thoughts. The intensifying political debates re-politicise the public and give ways of contesting conceptions of democracy, this time without the ideological adjectives of socialism.

4. Findings

1) After the revolution of 1956, the Stalinist notion of people's democracy fairly discredited in communist social planning. The new Kádár regime, conforming to Khrushchev's new political direction, wanted to put a greater emphasis on the self-managing forms of socialist society. In this context, communist ideologists re-conceptualized the old notion of socialist democracy, as a counter-concept to the Western formal concept of democracy.

2) Socialist democracy was outlined as a concept of movement which projected the social transformations in the communist way into the future. As the authors of state party periodicals described, socialist democracy meant a perpetual movement of the society with the leadership of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. The era of socialist democracy, therefore, indicates both ideological principles along with the institutional structure of a society and the end-point of socialist development.

3) After the forced and sometimes violent period of collectivization (1958-62), according the studied texts of ideology, "democratising" efforts aimed to transformation of the "consciousness" of a basically agrarian rural society. This would have been a socialist modernization of traditional peasant life and values. The goal of cooperative democracy was the integration of rural society in a homogeneous socialist society where the ideal type was the factory worker. The peasants thus would have been become a part of the working class.

4) The most advanced form of socialist democracy was the democracy of the working class. It was expected as an argument of the leading role of the working class (as the Marxist-Leninist ideology goes). Moreover, the democratization of the workplace could have been contributed to the modernization and rationalization of production. During the sixties, seventies and early eighties, the democracy of the workplace, represented a declarative-legitimising, that is a strictly political, and a scientific idea of modernization.

5) Following the model of democracy in the sector of co-operatives or factories, socialist democracy had its conception regarding local forms, that is the section of everyday life outside the workplace. The development of local democracy, was expected the democratic development of local councils and citizens' voluntariness.

6) Socialist democracy was a theory of social harmony in social science from the late seventies, the period of the second comprehensive reform of the Kádár era. These years were the beginnings of political science in Hungary, as the scientific theory of development of socialist democracy. The discourses of socialist democracy were based on the argumentation of the majority will of the socialist society in the complex political-economical structure of "developed socialism", and not only the will of the party as a form of political representation of this majority. Understanding of these interests and will of majority legitimized wide-volume social science researches and key role of social scientist in the new reform era.

The socialist system was in need an ideology of mass mobilization, not in the political, but in the everyday life of socialist citizen. Socialist democracy as a process of reconciliation of interests thus became a part of citizens' everyday life by their daily practices and democratic education.

7) Democratic discourses from the end of the eighties and of the regime change did not stem from the ideological language of socialist democracy, but from its negation.

The failure of the vision social organised society and the end of discourses on socialist democracy went together. Erasing the political limits of public discourses brought the liberalisation of defining the concept of democracy. After all, this discursive process can be described, as a wide-range freedom of speech and definition of the future by new concepts and interpretations of democracy.

5. Selection from the literature of the dissertation

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