The People According to the Chinese Communist Party: Reinterpreting the Party’s Political Theory

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Abstract
This article argues that the Chinese Communist Party has adopted a unique understanding of the people. Unlike the liberal view, which generally considers the people a nonpolitical and positive entity, the party views the people as essentially political. The party’s political understanding of the people, this article argues, is consistent with the very nature of the people. Viewed from the political understanding of the people and representing the people, the party’s theories of “contradictions among the people,” of the “mass line,” and of distinctions among different classes and individuals are consistent with self-governance by the people. The party’s theories are not inherently totalitarian, antidemocratic, and arbitrary, as liberal theorists argue.

Keywords
the people’s self-governance, contradictions among the people, the mass line, distinctions among different classes and individuals, pluralism, political representation, political leading party

Today, the idea of the people’s self-governance has achieved a consensus position among political thinkers. Liberal thinkers, first of all, have all emphasized the inevitability of democratic politics and the legitimacy of the people’s

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self-governance. Tocqueville, for example, argued that the trend toward democracy is irresistible (De Tocqueville, 2000 [1831]). Lincoln asserted that a legitimate government should be a “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln, 1863).

Liberal theories also tie the people’s self-governance to the ideas of pluralism, democracy, and equality. In liberal theories, pluralism is a core value of liberal society. A liberal society should ensure that citizens’ various private beliefs will not lead to the dominance of any comprehensive doctrines. In addition, liberal theories also argue that the people are entitled to elect their representatives and each member of a people should enjoy equal status.

On the face of it, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) theory resembles liberal theories. It not only views the people as the legitimate foundation of political power, it also ties the idea of the people to liberal values. Just as liberal theories connect the idea of the people to the ideas of pluralism, democracy, and equality, the party’s theory acknowledges the existence of disagreements among the people, embraces representative democracy, and equality. The party’s theory admits the inevitable existence of “contradictions among the people” (Mao, 1977i [1957]), provides for national and local legislatures (the National People’s Congress system) and elections, and, in the Chinese state constitution, stipulates equal protection.

But fundamentally, the party’s theory differs from liberal theories. While accepting the liberal values of pluralism, democracy, and equality, the party’s theory emphasizes the unity of the people, calls into question liberal parliamentarianism and elections, and draws distinctions between different classes and individuals. In these respects, the party’s theory resembles that of Carl Schmitt, a theory usually considered illiberal.

Just as Schmitt’s theory of the people has been criticized by liberals, so too has the party’s theory. According to these critiques, the party’s theory of the people’s self-governance is totalitarian, antidemocratic, and arbitrary. It is totalitarian because it overemphasizes the unity of the people and refuses to recognize the values of free political competition and free speech. It is antidemocratic because it refuses to recognize the institutional value of parliamentary democracy and electoral democracy. It is arbitrary because it treats different classes and individuals differently in both the revolutionary and postrevolutionary periods. From a liberal perspective, the party’s theory violates its own commitments to pluralism, democracy, and equality.

In this article, I present a new interpretation of the party’s theory that distinguishes it from liberal theories. I argue that the party has adopted a political understanding of the people, of representing the people, and of itself as a vanguard. Viewed from the perspective of such a theory of the political, the party’s theory is fully consistent with the people’s self-governance. The liberal
charges against the party’s theory as totalitarian, antidemocratic, and arbitrary cannot be sustained.

Before starting a detailed analysis, it needs to be emphasized that, although I provide a theoretical defense of Schmitt and the party’s political theory, I do not mean to endorse Schmitt’s deplorable political practices or the current Chinese party-state regime. My analysis remains purely theoretical. And a theoretical defense of Schmitt and the party’s theory is very different from defending Schmitt’s political choices and the party’s political practices. Real-life politics, after all, is often contingent and usually does not follow from theory alone. While this article aims to show that Schmitt’s and the party’s theory provide a legitimate foundation for modern politics, it has no intention to defend the legitimacy of a particular political entity, whether it is the German Weimar republic, the Nazi regime, or the contemporary Chinese party-state.

In the following section, I first map out the similarities and differences between the party’s theory and the liberal theories of the people and then summarize the liberal critiques of the party’s theory. Then I reexamine the party’s theories of “contradictions among the people,” of the “mass line,” and of the distinctions among different classes and individuals. I argue that the party’s theory is consistent with the people’s self-governance. In the third part of the article, I defend the party’s theory against the liberal charge that it is totalitarian, antidemocratic, and unequal.

The People in the Party’s Theory and in Liberal Theory

The Liberal Interpretation of the Communist Party’s Position

The party’s theory and liberal theories seem to share a common view of the nature of self-governance. Both view the people’s self-governance as the only legitimate form of politics and embrace the values of pluralism, democracy, and equality.

First, both theories consider pluralism or disagreements among the people as inevitable and potentially valuable. Liberal theories view disagreements among the people as “the defining feature of modern democracy” (Mouffe, 1996: 246). It is unwise and impractical for a society to try to eliminate such disagreements. The CCP, in a similar vein, argues that “there have always been contradictions among the people.” For the party too, it would be naïve to deny the existence of disagreements and contradictions among the people or to try to eliminate all of them (Mao, 1977i [1957]).

Second, both view democracy, or representative democracy more specifically, as an essential aspect of the people’s self-governance. Liberal theorists
generally tie the concept of self-governance to parliamentary democracy, while the party has embraced the National People’s Congress (NPC) system to facilitate the people’s will-formation. The Chinese Constitution states clearly that “the National People’s Congress and the local people’s congresses at various levels are the organs through which the people exercise state power” (Constitution of the PRC, Art. 2). Liberal theorists advocate electoral democracy and citizens’ right to vote. Likewise, the Chinese Constitution states that “the National People’s Congress and the local people’s congresses at different levels are instituted through democratic election” (Art. 3) and “all citizens of the People’s Republic of China who have reached the age of 18 have the right to vote and stand for election” (Art. 34).

Third, both theoretical approaches embrace the value of equality among the people. While liberal theorists generally view the people as consisting of individual citizens who possess equal rights, the party also supports equal protection and nondiscrimination. The Chinese Constitution stipulates that “all citizens of the People’s Republic of China are equal before the law” (Art. 33).

The Schmittian Aspects of the Party’s Position

The similarities between the party’s theory and liberal theories should not, however, lead us to think they are the same. If we take a closer look at the party’s theory, we find a substantial resemblance to Schmitt’s theory, which emphasizes the unity of the people, criticizes parliamentary democracy, and calls for distinguishing between friends and enemies.2 That alone is enough to suggest that any resemblance to liberal theory must be carefully scrutinized.

First, the party emphasizes the need for unity of the people, just as Schmitt emphasized the need for homogeneity of the people. “The unification of our country, the unity of our people and the unity of our various nationalities,” the party argues, “are the basic guarantees for the sure triumph of our cause” (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 384).

Emphasizing the need for the unity of the people, the party’s methods of dealing with disagreements among the people differ from those prescribed by liberal theories. While liberal theorists generally embrace competitive democracy,3 the party advocates a method called “unity-criticism-unity.” According to this method, free competition among ideas and advocates is not the appropriate way to deal with contradictions among the people. Nor is it the proper method for forming the people’s will. The correct way, instead, is “starting from the desire for unity, resolving contradictions through criticism or struggle, and arriving at a new unity on a new basis” (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 389–90). While liberal theorists generally embrace unlimited free speech and deliberation, the party advocates a method called “criticism and self-criticism.”
Accordingly, free speech and deliberation are not always consistent with forming the people’s will. Citizens, especially party members, should be encouraged to engage in active criticism and self-criticism; they should be discouraged from engaging in speech that contradicts the public interests of the people and the unity of the people.

Second, the party refuses to view liberal parliamentarianism and secret voting as consistent with people’s self-governance, just as Schmitt criticized parliamentary democracy as an outdated form of politics and secret voting as incapable of representing the people’s will (Schmitt, 1985 [1923]: 17). The party asserts that liberal parliamentarianism cannot work in China (Xi, 2014b). It also claims that secret voting is different from an expression or a formation of the people’s will. The party insists that secret voting should not play a decisive role in either electing officials or making policies (Renmin ribao, Jan. 21, 2014).

Having no confidence in liberal institutions such as parliament and secret voting, the party defines the National People’s Congress system and its electoral methods as fundamentally different from liberal parliaments and elections. While liberal institutions advocate free discussion, free competition, and secret voting, the party views the leadership of the party as an indispensable part of both the NPC system and the electoral system. The NPC system, according to the party, is “an integration of the party’s leadership, the people as masters of the state, and the rule of law” (Xi, 2014a). The Chinese election system, similarly, is considered by the party to combine party leadership and the expression of public opinion. Under both the NPC system and the Chinese election system, party leadership is the decisive factor in electing officials and making policies (Cohen, 2008).

The party indeed views the Chinese NPC system and election system as only different forms of what it calls the “mass line.” This is the theory and method by which the party relates to the people. According to the party, the NPC system and election system are systematic arrangements through which the party consults with and leads the masses. The NPC system and the Chinese electoral system enable the party to collect information from the masses. With the help of these systems, the party receives the opinions of the masses, which constitute the raw material for the formation of the people’s will. The NPC system and the Chinese election system require party committees at each level to have substantial discussions and to make decisions concerning the people’s will. The point of both systems is to ensure that the party’s proposals are transformed “into law or the will of the state” and its nominees are elected to state posts (Wu, 2014). The party never simply defers to an objective popular will that finds expression through elections and representation in the NPC.
Third, the party makes distinctions between the people and their enemies, as well as among different classes and individuals. Just as Schmitt argued that the “specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (Schmitt, 2007 [1932]: 26), Mao Zedong and the party stress that the first important question for the people’s revolution is, “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?” (Mao, 1977b [1926]: 13). The CCP views itself as a Marxist-Leninist party and views certain classes, mainly the working class and the peasant class, as “friends” of the party. It views other classes, mainly the landlord class and certain types within the capitalist class, as enemies of the party. The party is built around a distinction between members and non-members, rather than around an idea of equal citizenship.

The contemporary party has, no doubt, become more liberal in practice. In part, that has meant less emphasis on Marxist-Leninist theory with its focus on class-based distinctions among citizens and the friend/enemy distinction. Yet the party still makes distinctions among individuals. It still treats party members and non-party members differently, although not as friends versus enemies. The party imposes stricter discipline on its members than is required under formal state law. Certain behaviors that are not punished under state law—such as adultery—are nevertheless forbidden under party discipline. Correspondingly, party members still enjoy certain advantages in state politics. They are more likely to get promoted than non-party members, and certain state positions are open to party members alone. These differences are not simply factional differences, as they would be labeled by liberal theory. Rather, they rest on the party’s understanding of itself as a vanguard party active in the formation of the people themselves as a collective subject capable of decision making.

The Liberal Critique of the Party

The Schmittian side of the party’s theory has led many liberal theorists to claim that the party’s theory is inconsistent and self-contradictory. Under their view, the party’s theory is totalitarian, antidemocratic, and arbitrary. Accordingly, they charge that the party’s theory violates its own commitments to plurality, democracy, and equality.

First, liberal theorists criticize the party’s theory of contradictions among the people as potentially totalitarian and inconsistent with its commitment to plurality. For them, the party’s emphasis on the need for unity puts too great a burden on the concept of the people. It makes “the people” a totalitarian entity that leaves little room for dissenters. In addition, the party’s methods of resolving disagreements or contradictions among the people, namely
“unity-criticism-unity” and “criticism and self-criticism,” put too strict a limit on free political competition, speech, and public deliberation. Liberal theorists generally view free political competition and free speech as essential to self-governance. Under the party’s theory of unity-criticism-unity and criticism and self-criticism, however, political competition and free speech no longer play a decisive role in forming the people’s will. They are not considered a means to inform the people, nor helpful to the people’s exercise of choice. Similarly, the party does not believe that a “marketplace of ideas” would help the people in the search for truth.

Second, liberals view the party’s theory of representing the people as antidemocratic and contrary to its own commitment to democracy. The NPC system, they argue, has degenerated into a rubber stamp that only follows the instructions of the party (BBC, Oct. 8, 2012). The Chinese election system, similarly, has degenerated into window dressing for the party’s power (Almén, 2013; Burns, 1994; Chan, 2004; Manion, 1985; Burns, 1989; Landry, 2008). For liberal theories, the Chinese NPC system and election system are fundamentally inconsistent with the people’s self-governance. Under the Chinese NPC and election systems, all substantial discussion and decisions are made in secret committees of the party. The people themselves, critics allege, have no real influence on making public policies and electing officials.

Third, liberals consider the party’s distinctions among different classes and individuals to be arbitrary and partial. They contend that a system of representation should remain impartial and not discriminate against any citizens absent a compelling reason set forth in law. The party’s theory, however, makes distinctions among different classes and individuals without publicly providing any reason. For liberals, these distinctions constitute unequal treatment. Such inequality in treatment makes the party unqualified to represent the Chinese people. Rather than representing the whole Chinese people, the party represents the interests of only certain individuals and groups. Most of all, it represents its own interests.

Reexamining the Party’s Theory of the People

Is the party’s theory of the people and of its own political role totalitarian, antidemocratic, and arbitrary, as liberal theorists claim? Does the party’s theory violate its own commitments to pluralism, democracy, and equality? Or is the party’s theory more consistent with a persuasive concept of self-governance than is liberal theory?

Before addressing these questions, we need to reexamine the party’s as well as Schmitt’s general understanding of the people and of representation of the people. A reexamination of the party’s theories of contradictions among
the people, of the mass line, and of the distinction among different classes and individuals shows that the party has adopted a political understanding of the people, of representing the people, and of the political party that claims to represent the people. At the same time, a reexamination of Schmitt’s theory shows Schmitt also views the people as essentially political, which is consistent with the very nature of the people.

Contradictions among the People and the Party’s Understanding of the People

To grasp the party’s understanding of the people, we must look closer at the theory of contradictions among the people. At issue is the place of unity and difference in conceptualizing the people as a political entity.

Under the party’s theory, social contradictions are first of all inevitable. Contradictions exist not only between the people and their enemies but also among the people. For Mao and the party, it would be naïve to deny the existence of contradictions within the Chinese people. As Mao argues, within the Chinese people there are still

the contradictions within the working class, the contradictions within the peasantry, the contradictions within the intelligentsia, the contradictions between the working class and the peasantry, the contradictions between the workers and peasants on the one hand and the intellectuals on the other, the contradictions between the working class and other sections of the working people on the one hand and the national bourgeoisie on the other, the contradictions within the national bourgeoisie, and so on. (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 385)

Although in some respects the party’s theory of contradictions among the people resembles the idea of pluralism found in liberal theories, in several other respects it differs significantly. The party, first of all, understands contradictions among the people as a form of difference within unity. Under liberal theories, pluralism is defined in terms of conflicting interests or different values. Liberalism generally refuses to tie pluralism to the unity of the people. The party, however, views the unity of the people as coexistent with contradictions among the people. The party emphasizes that contradictions among the people are mainly nonantagonistic, unlike contradictions between the people and their enemies. “The fundamental identity of the people’s interests,” the party argues, “underlies the contradictions among the people” (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 386). It is always possible to seek the unity of the people, even when there exist disagreements and contradictions within the people.
Second, the party emphasizes that the people, or the party as the representative of the people, should be aware of contradictions within the people and mobilize themselves to deal with that situation. Liberal theories generally hold that disagreements among the people should be dealt with by legal procedures and rules. There is no need to constantly mobilize the people in the face of disagreement. The party, however, believes that the people and the party should address contradictions by constant recourse to political activities such as unity-criticism-unity and criticism and self-criticism. The goal of these activities is substantive, not procedural. Absent a political response, the party fears contradictions within the people may degenerate into factional struggles or even antagonistic contradictions between the people and their enemies. As the party puts it, “in ordinary circumstances, contradictions among the people are not antagonistic. But if they are not handled properly, or if we relax our vigilance and lower our guard, antagonism may arise” (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 391).

Consider, for example, the contradiction between the Chinese national bourgeoisie and the working classes. Generally speaking, the party views this contradiction as “a class struggle within the ranks of the people.” In China, the national bourgeoisie is often willing to stand with the working class and the peasants, and against the imperialists, the landlords, and the bureaucrat-capitalists, which the party defines as enemies of the people. However, the party points out there are also antagonistic elements hidden in the relationship between the national bourgeoisie and the working class. The nonantagonistic nature of the contradictions between the national bourgeoisie and the working class can only be maintained if the party and the people pursue substantial political activities to deal with the tension. As the party puts it,

> the contradiction between the working class and the national bourgeoisie will change into a contradiction between ourselves and the enemy if we do not handle it properly and do not follow the policy of uniting with, criticizing and educating the national bourgeoisie, or if the national bourgeoisie does not accept this policy of ours. (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 386)

The party’s theory, to summarize, adopts a Schmittian, political understanding of the people. Schmitt views the people as a political entity that possesses what he calls a “public” and “decisionist” character. The people must possess a public and common identity to sustain itself. To do so, it must be able to imagine itself as a united community, which means that it must be able to overcome any differences that arise, treating them as mere appearances. Such a people must be able constantly to mobilize itself in order to realize its decisions in concrete life.
This Schmittian approach is exactly how the party understands the people. For the party, the people must have a common identity, or “the fundamental identity of the people’s interest,” even in the face of apparent contradictions or disagreements. Identity always trumps difference. This does not mean that the identity is already there waiting to be discovered. It means rather that the people must always mobilize and politicize itself to actively deal with contradictions as they arise. The people must always achieve their own unity. Accordingly, the people should never “relax [their] vigilance” and “lower [their] guard” in dealing with contradictions among the people (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 391).13

The Mass Line and the Party’s Understanding of Representation

The party has not only a political understanding of the people but also a political understanding of representing the people. A reexamination of the party’s theory of the mass line shows that the party views representation as an essentially political activity. Here too, the party takes a Schmittian approach. Mao summarizes the meaning and operation of the party’s mass line:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses”. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge. (Mao, 1977e [1943]: 119)

At first glance, it seems that little distinguishes the mass line from the liberal understanding of representation. Liberal theorists, after all, also emphasize the necessity of “from the masses, to the masses” in representing the people. Furthermore, in some liberal theories of electoral democracy, representatives are also “from the masses”—they are elected by the masses. After representatives are elected by the masses, they should also “go to the masses”—they should follow and promote the opinion of the masses or their will. They literally “go to the masses” when they seek reelection.

But there are fundamental differences between the party’s mass line theory and liberal theories’ understanding of representation. The party’s understanding of “from the masses,” first of all, requires party cadres, or
representatives of the people, to lead the masses, rather than passively wait
for the masses to express their opinions. The masses’ opinions are not there
to be discovered; they do not form themselves. In addition to collecting
information, the party requires party cadres or representatives of the people
to make political judgments with the aim of identifying the fundamental
will of the people. Following the mass line, apart from taking “the ideas
of the masses,” the representatives of the people should also “concentrate
them” and “through study turn them into concentrated and systematic
ideas.” If the party or representatives of the people only follow the existing
opinions of the masses, the mass line could degenerate into a de-political
form of work that the party calls “tailism”:

Tailism in any type of work is . . . wrong, because in falling below the level
of political consciousness of the masses and violating the principle of
leading the masses forward it reflects the disease of dilatoriness. Our
comrades must not assume that the masses have no understanding of what
they do not yet understand. It often happens that the masses outstrip us and
are eager to advance a step and that nevertheless our comrades fail to act as
leaders of the masses and tail behind certain backward elements, reflecting
their views and, moreover, mistaking them for those of the broad masses.
(Mao, 1977f [1945]: 316)

The party’s understanding of “to the masses” is also different from liberal
theories’ understanding of passing laws that express the opinions of the
masses or the people’s will. Rather than viewing “to the masses” as mechani-
cally following and enforcing the will or opinion of the masses, the party
again views the process as a political one that requires political judgment and
political decisions. For the party, “going to the masses” means the representa-
tives or party cadres are to take substantial political actions to ensure that the
people actualize what has become the party’s will in concrete life. In this
process, the representatives or party cadres are not to give up their political
decisions easily once they have been made—although, of course, a change of
opinion is not ruled out completely. The representatives or party cadres
should “hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correct-
ness of these ideas in such action” (Mao, 1977e [1943]: 119).

Accordingly, the representatives or party cadres bear the responsibility of
leading and persuading the masses; they should “propagate and explain these
ideas until the masses embrace them as their own” (Mao, 1977e [1943]: 119).
According to the party, if the representatives or party cadres only mechani-
cally enforce the preexisting will of the people and fail to take responsibility
for persuading the masses, the mass line would degenerate into a form of
work that the party calls “commandism”:
Commandism is wrong in any type of work, because in overstepping the level of political consciousness of the masses and violating the principle of voluntary mass action it reflects the disease of impetuosity. Our comrades must not assume that everything they themselves understand is understood by the masses. Whether the masses understand it and are ready to take action can be discovered only by going into their midst and making investigations. If we do so, we can avoid commandism. (Mao, 1977f [1945]: 316)

In summary, the party views representation as an essentially political activity. Under the theory of the mass line, the party first requires its cadres to make a political judgment to identify the people’s will—to “study” and “concentrate” the masses’ ideas. Then it requires its cadres to carry out substantial political activities to actualize those ideas—to “hold fast to them and translate them into action” (Mao, 1977e [1943]: 119). The party explicitly refuses nonpolitical representation, which generally treats representing the people as a matter of discovering an objective, already-formed people’s opinion and mechanically following that opinion. The party criticizes this form of representation as reflecting “the disease of dilatoriness” and “the disease of impetuosity” (Mao, 1977f [1945]: 316).

The Party’s Understanding of Itself as Vanguard

Lastly, the party has a political understanding of itself. If we reexamine the party’s distinction between different classes and individuals, we find that the party views itself as a political leading party or vanguard party.

The party’s distinction between different classes in the revolutionary period shows that it views itself as a Marxist-Leninist political leading party. Since its founding era, the party has embraced the core idea of Marxism-Leninism: history is the development of class struggle between the oppressed and oppressive classes. In modern society, the oppressive class is the capitalist class, while the proletarian class is the oppressed. The proletariat, of course, includes the vast majority of the population.

Class struggle or proletarian revolution, however, does not happen automatically. According to the party’s theory, or Marxism-Leninism, there must be an organization that leads and mobilizes the proletariat. Without the mobilization of the proletariat and the instilling of revolutionary “class consciousness” in them, members of the proletariat would not imagine themselves as belonging to a common class, let alone imagine the possibility of revolting against the oppressive class. As Mao puts it, “if there is to be revolution, there must be a revolutionary party. Without a revolutionary party, without a party built on the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory and in the Marxist-Leninist
revolutionary style, it is impossible to lead the working class and the broad masses of the people in defeating imperialism and its running dogs” (Mao, 1977g [1948]: 284).

The party’s pursuit of distinctions among citizens in the postrevolutionary period is more complicated. The party, on the one hand, still views preventing class oppression as the fundamental will of the people. It still adheres to Marxist-Leninist ideology and views itself as the vanguard party of the working class. On the other hand, the party in the postrevolutionary period also de-emphasizes Marxist-Leninist ideology. After China adopted the Reform and Opening-up policy, the party began to hold a more equal and inclusive view of different classes as it began to view economic development as the priority of the people’s will.

The party’s subtle attitude toward class distinction and class oppression may need discussion in further work. For the purpose of my argument here, however, it is enough to point out that the party’s deemphasis of Marxism-Leninism and emphasis on economic development does not mean that the party in the postrevolutionary period has adopted a purely interests-based perspective toward citizens in which everyone’s interests count equally. After the party adopted the Reform and Opening-up policy, especially after it adopted the theory of the “Three Represents,” which includes the claim that the party represents “the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people” (Jiang, 2013: 1–2), many Chinese observers contended that the party had become an all-inclusive party representing the interests of all Chinese people without distinctions. They contended that the party should abandon its theory of the vanguard. The notion of a vanguard, they argued, is not compatible with economic development and cannot be justified in a post-Marxist era (Zhang, 2010). This view, however, contradicts the party’s claims. The party still emphasizes its vanguard character and still makes distinctions among the people. For the party, economic development does not mean that the party should always represent the economic interests of the people. Rather, the party as vanguard must represent the advanced elements in society.

The party’s view of itself can be vividly seen in its theory of the “Three Represents,” which was advocated by former party general secretary Jiang Zemin:

A review of our party’s seventy-plus-year history leads to an important conclusion: our party earned the people’s support during the historical periods of revolution, construction and reform because it always represented the requirements for developing China’s advanced productive forces, the orientation of China’s advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people. (Jiang, 2013: 1–2)
As the party’s theory of the Three Represents shows, the party views itself as not only representing “the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people,” but also “the requirements for developing China’s advanced productive forces” and “the orientation of China’s advanced culture.” Representation in each of these dimensions requires the party to make distinctions among citizens, groups, and interests. It must identify and privilege “China’s advanced productive forces,” as well as “China’s advanced culture.” The party, in short, still views itself as a vanguard party that aims to lead the people toward their own truth.

Viewed in terms of the traditional socialist/capitalist binary, there is a fundamental difference between the party in the revolutionary period and in the contemporary developmental period: the party relies much more on the market in the contemporary developmental period. But viewed from the perspective of vanguardism, the party in the two periods has remained the same. In both periods, the party identifies the leading forces within the people in order to represent the “overwhelming majority of the Chinese people” into the future. The significant difference is not in the function of representation or the role of the vanguard. It is, rather, in the changing character of the leading forces within the people.

**Preliminary Conclusions**

What is the significance of the party’s political understanding of the people, of representing the people, and of itself? To answer this question, we might reexamine Schmitt’s theory of the people, a theory that highly resembles the party’s own. Such a reexamination should help us better understand the party’s theory.

Schmitt, first of all, emphasizes the “public” character of the people. The “distinctive meaning of the people,” Schmitt writes, “reveals itself in the genuine presence of a publicly assembled people”; the public assembly brings the public as well as the people into being (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 272). For Schmitt, the people and the public are two interrelated concepts: “People and public exist together: no people without public and no public without the people” (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 272). Schmitt argues that this public character is indispensable for a meaningful concept of the people. If a certain group or association is to become an entity entitled to call itself and to be identified as “the people,” it must first gain a public character. To gain that character is not to add a new trait to an existing entity or subject. Publicness is not an accidental quality that can be added to an already-existing, collective subject. We do not find peoples, some of which are public and some of which are not. Rather, the people produce the public by being itself. By presenting themselves, “the people
initiate the public” (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 272). A people must become itself; it becomes itself by successfully presenting itself. That self-presentation is what Schmitt means by “public.” The people, in this view, are not simply those individuals who occupy the territory of the state. Rather, they must construct themselves into a public. That construction is an act of will.

In addition to emphasizing its public character, Schmitt also emphasizes the “decisionist” character of the people. Often, he locates this decisionist character in the constitution-making power of the people. In his study of constitutional theory, Schmitt argues that the people should always possess its constitution-making power, which means it must be capable of making “conscious decisions” about the constitution (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 75). For Schmitt, even after the enactment of constitutional norms, the people still “stands as the bearer of the constitution-making power outside of and above any constitutional norm.” Even if “certain competencies (elections and instances of voting) are assigned to the people by the constitution, their potential for political action and significance in a democracy is in no way exhausted or settled” (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 271). The decisionist character of the people is not, therefore, exhausted in the application of a norm.

Schmitt views the decisionist character of the people, or its constitution-making power, as indispensable. A meaningful concept of the people should always acknowledge the people as a “subject capable of acting” (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 75). Schmitt expands the idea of the people’s action to include not just constitutional creation but also the taking care of existing constitutional norms. Taking care, as Schmitt argues, can include extraordinary actions under some circumstances—those Schmitt famously characterized as the “exception.” In Schmitt’s words, a properly democratic theory should not treat the people as a passive “administrative apparatus and a mere state ‘organ’” (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 271). A people only exists by virtue of a decision to will itself into being (its public character) and an act of will must have a particular content (its decisionist character).

The most important conclusion to draw from Schmitt’s emphasis on the public and decisionist character of the people is that it embodies a radically different idea of the people from that which liberal theorists assume. Schmitt and his liberal critics simply do not make contact. The two characteristics that Schmitt identifies are both attributes of what might be labeled an “existential” conception of the people. His liberal critics work with a normative theory of what the people should be, not an existential theory of what it is to be a people.

The public character that Schmitt theorizes should be understood as a necessary condition for the continuing existence of the people. The people’s existence depends on their appearing to themselves as such. A people, we
could say today, must appear in the “social imaginary” of citizens. Citizens may not know each other, but they should hold in their minds a mental image of the people and of their mutual and reciprocal affinity. As Benedict Anderson puts it, a people or a nation must remain an “imagined community.” Members of a people or a nation may “never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1991: 6–7). There will be no people if there is no such public imagination.

Schmitt’s theory of public assembly, accordingly, should be understood as something like the militia “assembly” in early American history—an idea enshrined in the Second Amendment of the American Constitution. The militia would actually assemble on the town green. Absent a willingness to do so, the people could not survive under conditions of life on the frontier. But equally, absent the ability to imagine something like such an assembly, the people no longer exists—they have become literally unimaginable. Individuals may still defend themselves; groups of individuals may do this together. But they are no longer defending a people, because that self-conception no longer occupies the social imaginary.

The quality of being a people, therefore, is not hidden or secret. It is not revealed by polling. It is not itself the consequence of the actions of representatives. The public assembly, whether it exists in reality or in the imagination, signifies the people’s willingness to commit to preserving and sustaining themselves as a people—not as a mere aggregation of individuals. Without an expression of a willingness to assemble publicly, the people could not exist and they could not sustain themselves. There would exist only one or more interest groups, regardless of how many individuals might join the different groups.²¹ This would be true even if a majority of the citizens were to think of themselves as members of the same interest group. Long before Schmitt, Rousseau distinguished between the general will and the will of all to map this same divide between the idea of a people assembled and an account of a collection of individuals collectively pursuing their diverse interests.

Publicness is linked to decision because existence without decision is no more possible for a people than a person. The decision is the moment in which a people freely occupies the public space of its possibility. Existence and decision are, accordingly, two modes of perceiving what it is to be. For Schmitt, existence is an activity; it is the exercise of force directed in one way or another. Thus, Schmitt necessarily focuses on the decisionist character of the people. For him, the people’s decision is simply another way of describing the realization of their will. Existence, for Schmitt, is a matter of will before it can be a matter of reason. A people must decide to be; deciding, they bring themselves into being as a particular people. They do not will the universal or the abstract; they will themselves in their concrete particularity.
These two features of a people—its publicness and its decision for itself—ground, then, an existential conception of the popular sovereign. That sovereign has no being apart from its continuing decision to be. We know its decision by virtue of its public appearance. The people, if it is to be a meaningful entity, must be willing to assemble and to sustain itself. That willingness is nothing other than the assertion of the decision. The people must decide in the concrete situation and they must be willing to carry out those decisions in real life. If a group of people lack the will, or what Schmitt calls the decisionist character, to accomplish something, then it would be meaningless to call such a group a people. A people is not formal and it is not abstract. Rather, a people exists only as a public assertion of a collective will. A people occupies a world by creating that world. It creates when it decides.

Schmitt’s emphasis on the existential character of a people is meant to distinguish a people from nonpolitical associations or interest groups. A people is not simply quantitatively larger than such groups; it is not an aggregation of such subgroups. These interest groups, after all, are created to realize the interests of individuals and no matter how many such groups join together to advance their ends, they cannot become something essentially different—a people. Schmitt’s concern is to make the concept of the people qualitatively unique. The people is essentially a political entity: it is the political entity, for it bears the meaning of the political.

Viewed from the political understanding of the people, the first conclusion that we can draw is that the party’s theory of the people is consistent with a meaningful understanding of the people and of the people’s self-governance. The party emphasizes precisely what Schmitt called the “public” and “decisionist” character of the people. It views the people as an entity that should always be capable of sustaining itself and making concrete decisions.

Second, the party’s political understanding of representation is consistent with a meaningful understanding of the people. Viewed in terms of a political understanding of the people, political judgment and decision are inevitable and necessary in representation. They are inevitable because different persons will have different imaginations of the people or the people’s will. Whenever a representative tries to discover the will of the people, he/she inevitably makes political judgments to identify that will, or what Schmitt calls the public character of the people (Morgan, 1989; Anderson, 1991; Näsström, 2007: 624–58). They are necessary because the people’s will, by its nature, wants to be realized in concrete life. A meaningful activity of representing the people, therefore, requires a representative to take substantial political actions to help the people realize their will. It is simply meaningless for a representative to express the opinion of the people while taking no measures to actualize it.

Third, the party’s understanding of itself is consistent with its role of representing the people. I have argued above that any organization that claims to
represent the people must keep its vanguard character and bear the responsibility of leading and politicizing the people. A political party—including the CCP—is no exception. A political party should identify and represent the leading forces of the people. It, thereby, attempts always to represent the people of the future. It should never degenerate into what Otto Kirchheimer, a student of Schmitt’s, calls “catch-all parties,” which adjust their orientations and tactics in order to maximize their votes in elections. Such “catch-all parties” relinquish their role of leading and politicizing the people.24

Reexamining the Liberal Critique

We are now in a position to reexamine the liberal critique of the party’s theory. That critique, as I have explained above, argues that the party’s theory is totalitarian, antidemocratic, and arbitrary. Measured against the party’s political understanding of the people, of representation, and of a political party that holds itself forth as the vanguard of the people, that critique cannot stand.

The Party’s Theory Stands against the Totalitarian Critique

The party’s theory, first of all, is not totalitarian as liberal theorists claim. Liberal theorists criticize the party’s theory as potentially totalitarian because its emphasis on the unity of the people leaves little room for social dissenters. They fail to see that the party’s theory generally is not hostile to plurality or diversity among the people. As long as disagreements do not degenerate into antagonistic contradictions that pose a threat to the political unity of the people, the party generally embraces disagreements among the people. The party’s theory of contradictions among the people, after all, admits the inevitable existence of disagreements among the people. It does not imagine the possibility of eliminating disagreements; nor does it want to. As I have described above, the party even allows the contradiction between the working class and the national bourgeoisie to continue as long as the national bourgeoisie generally supports the fundamental will of the people.

In fact, the party not only accepts the existence of disagreements or contradictions among the people, it also views contradictions among the people as a source of political momentum to further unite and politicize the people, action that the party always endorses. As Mao writes,

many do not admit that contradictions still exist in socialist society, with the result that they become irresolute and passive when confronted with social contradictions; they do not understand that socialist society grows more united and consolidated through the ceaseless process of correctly handling and resolving contradictions. (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 393)
For Mao and the party, the purpose of the process of resolving contradictions is to make the people more active and united, just as the experience of a person dealing with his/her contradictory ideas can help him/her become more resolute and determined.

Viewed from a political understanding of the people, the party’s methods of solving contradictions, namely criticism and self-criticism and unity-criticism-unity, are also compatible with the concept of self-governance. The party’s method of criticism and self-criticism, for example, encourages citizens and party members to publicize and politicize their speech. Citizens and party members should engage in responsible forms of public discussion. They are encouraged to “Say all you know and say it without reserve” (Mao, 1977f [1945]: 316–17). The party worries that citizens and party members may be unwilling to participate in public discussion, whether because of a lack of interest in public life or because of a fear of retaliation by interest groups if they were to speak out on certain issues. According to the party, speakers should never use speech as a form of personal attack. The main task of criticism “is to point out political and organizational mistakes. As to personal shortcomings, unless they are related to political and organizational mistakes, there is no need to be overcritical or the comrades concerned will be at a loss as to what to do” (Mao, 1977c [1929]: 111–12). Listeners, similarly, should have an open mind and not easily take public criticism as a personal attack. When they receive public criticism, they should “blame not the speaker but be warned by his words” and “correct mistakes if you have committed them and guard against them if you have not” (Mao, 1977f [1945]: 316–17).

The party’s theory and method of criticism-unity-criticism also tries to create an appropriate form of political competition. For the party, criticism within the people or the party is not the same as market competition, let alone factional competition. Both market competition and factional competition aim at realizing the private interests of competitors; there is no requirement that competitors should always consider the public interest or public character of the people. There are inevitably winners and losers in these forms of competition. The party’s understanding of criticism, in contrast, requires competitors to view the people’s public interest as their ultimate goal. People should always unite with others, even when they win a competition or a debate.

In summary, the party’s illiberal methods of solving contradictions among the people all aim to bring about the public and political character of the people. Liberal theorists consider free competition and free speech—a “marketplace of ideas”—as the only means to help the people make collective choices. The party disagrees. For the party, without politicizing speech and competition, the people cannot politicize itself. And without a politicized people, the so-called people’s choice would be only an aggregation of individual citizens’ preferences or perhaps a reflection of certain interest groups’
preferences. Without politicization and mobilization, the people, even if were possible to identify their will, would still lack what Schmitt calls a decisionist character, that is, the ability to realize its will in concrete life. The people’s will, under these circumstances, would only exist as mere opinion or “wish.” A wish, however, is not meaningful self-governance.

**The Party’s Theory Stands against the Antidemocratic Critique**

Viewed from a political understanding of representation, the party’s theory is not antidemocratic. Liberal theories view the party’s leadership in the NPC system and in the election system as antidemocratic and self-contradictory, but they simply assume that liberal parliamentary democracy and electoral democracy are consistent with representing the people. Above, I have argued that both of these institutions, as understood in liberal theories, promote nonpolitical forms of representation. Both simply ignore the necessity of politicizing the people or transforming the opinion of the masses into the people’s will.

Representation under a liberal theory of elections assumes that representatives should follow the aggregated preferences or opinions of the population. Representatives need not—indeed they cannot—take substantial action to help the people realize its unified will because that will is assumed to preexist the act of its representation. In this view, it makes no sense to argue that representatives must themselves take up the task of politicizing the people by helping to create a unified public character.

Parliamentary deliberation does have the possibility of taking on a political form of representation. As Schmitt points out, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, parliaments were in “alliance with democracy” (Schmitt, 1985 [1923]: 2). They served as a place where representatives deliberated and expressed the people’s will by standing for the interests of the people against the king. Under modern mass democracy, however, representatives are under the direct pressure of public opinion and interest groups. They are more likely to follow the scattered opinion of the masses and the instructions of interest groups than to make political judgments identifying the people’s fundamental will. Therefore, as Schmitt pointed out, deliberation in parliament has become “an empty formality” that has no substantial influence on the decision-making process under modern mass democracy (Schmitt, 1985 [1923]: 6). It is always “small and exclusive committees of parties or of party coalitions” that “make their decisions behind closed doors.” “What representatives of the big capitalist interest groups agree to in the smallest committees is more important for the fate of millions of people, perhaps, than any political decision” (Schmitt, 1985 [1923]: 49–50).
The Chinese election system and the NPC system are efforts to achieve a political form of representation for the sake of democratic self-governance by a mobilized people. The party requires representatives or party cadres to make political judgments and to take political actions in their activity of representation. It also creates numerous small party committees (usually having fewer than twenty members) that are to employ methods such as criticism and self-criticism to politicize public discussion (Mao, 1977f [1945]: 316).

The Party’s Theory Stands against the Arbitrary Critique

The third critique argues that the party’s theory defends arbitrary distinctions among citizens. This critique, too, fails on closer examination.

Liberals criticize the party’s theory as arbitrary and partial because the party makes distinctions among the people and seems only to represent the interests of certain people. The critique ignores the justifications the party offers for these distinctions. Those justifications, too, are grounded in a politicized conception of the people and the party.

The distinction between different classes and individuals helps the party to identify the leading forces and the backward forces for social revolution and social construction. It helps the party to unite and amplify the leading forces and to attack the backward forces. Given the party’s understanding of the need to actively promote and develop the people’s will, this identification of differently valued forces is necessary. This was altogether clear in the revolutionary period, when a class-based distinction of friend/enemy was essential to the people’s project. The proletariat, as Mao and the party argued, represented the leading forces of revolution because they “have been deprived of all means of production, have nothing left but their hands, have no hope of ever becoming rich and, moreover, are subjected to the most ruthless treatment by the imperialists, the warlords and the bourgeoisie” (Mao, 1977b [1926]: 18). They were most eager to change the status quo and to fight foreign and domestic oppression. The landlord class and the comprador class, by contrast, represented “the most backward and most reactionary” force because they existed as “appendages of the international bourgeoisie, depending upon imperialism for their survival and growth” (Mao, 1977b [1926]: 13–14). They were most reluctant to change the status quo and abandon their privileged status.

The distinction between different classes and individuals today helps the party to maintain its vanguard character by absorbing the leading forces into the party. The recent “socialist rule of law” construction, for example, is an effort by the party to employ self-discipline to maintain its vanguard character (Ding, 2017). Such efforts, however, are not enough. Self-discipline must
be supplemented by the continued absorption into the party of newly emerg- 
ing leading forces if the party is to maintain its vanguard position. In short, vanguardism—an essential aspect of the party’s democratic identity—
requires continuing political judgment to identify leading forces. This neces-
sarily produces differences in treatment among individuals and groups; it 
produces a privileging of party membership at a minimum. 

The party is not alone in claiming a need to identify the leading forces for 
the people. Many Western scholars have also made similar arguments. Max 
Weber, for example, argues for the need to identify the leading classes of the 
German people. For Weber, the economic realm is not a neutral or autono-
mous domain; it does not automatically produce economic policies that 
serve the long-term interests of the state. A political leading class or a class 
with “political maturity,” Weber argues, should penetrate the economic 
realm and take responsibility for leading the German people (Weber, 1994 
[1919]: 1–28). Another example is Schmitt’s theory of democratic dictator-
ship. Schmitt contends that dictatorship can help the people realize a true 
democracy in the future. Schmitt’s emphasis on the future can be interpreted 
as requiring the dictator to identify and to represent the leading forces within 
the people.

The party’s theory of its relationship to leading forces resembles the views 
of Weber and Schmitt. The difference between them is that the party advocates 
a dialectical and developmental relationship between the people and its 
representatives. According to the notion of the mass line, to represent the 
people party cadres must engage in the activity of “from the masses” and “go 
to the masses” in “an endless spiral” (Mao, 1977e [1943]: 119). For the party, 
the identification of leading forces and backward forces is not a one-dimen-
sional activity or one-time judgment. Rather, it is a political activity made 
over a never-ending interaction and engagement between the party and the 
people. It is an activity through which the party seeks to politicize both the 
people and itself.

**Conclusion**

I have argued above that Schmitt correctly identified the nature of the people 
by emphasizing the people’s “public” and “decisionistic” character. The peo-
ple need to own their public character, which means there can be no “sleeping 
sovereign” (Tuck, 2016). The people must actively maintain themselves as a 
popular will capable of decision. The essence of the people and the people’s 
self-governance is the political will that shows itself in concrete life, not in 
abstract theory. The activity of representing the people is to provide political 
momentum for the people, without which the people will cease to exist.
Western liberalism, by contrast, has no sense of the need to bring a people into being. It often approaches the people's will as if it were an entity waiting to be tamed by a normative theory of justice or a pre-political entity waiting to be discovered. It generally ignores the question of politicizing the people, the prerequisite for the people's self-governance.

By examining the party's theories of contradictions among the people, of the mass line, and of distinctions among different classes and individuals, I have argued that the party's understanding of pluralism, democracy, and equality all presuppose a political concept of the people. The party's theory, correctly understood, is consistent with self-governance by the people. It is not inherently totalitarian, antidemocratic, and arbitrary, as liberal theorists argue. Rather, it is based on an alternative, political concept of the people—their unified will and their decisionistic character.

Finally, a caveat and reminder: my argument has focused on theories not practices. I have spoken of the party's theory and of liberal theories. I have juxtaposed both to a theory of a politicized people. My conclusion, too, is theoretical. In actual politics, theories and practices often do not match. In practice, it is fully possible that a self-proclaimed liberal democratic country may better practice the party's theory. It may better practice criticism and self-criticism, better carry out the mass line, and successfully identify the vanguard elements of the people. The party, by contrast, may move away from its theory and embrace liberal, depoliticized forms of politics. My aim has not been to study actual politics in liberal democratic countries or in China. This work remains focused on theories and their contending claims about the nature of politics and representation.

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Notes
1. See, for example, James Madison's argument in Federalist 10. According to Madison, there are "two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests." These two methods, Madison argues, are either unwise or impractical (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, 2009: 50).
2. This assertion may seem strange at the first glance. Schmitt himself had criticized Marxism, especially Marxist theory of historical development, as a mirror image of liberal thought and inadequate to understand the meaning of the political. Yet, as some scholars have pointed out, Schmitt realized that Marxism contained the germ of what he understood to be a fundamental and radical critique of liberal thought and liberal society (Fontana, 2000; Dotti, 2000; Gourgouris, 2000). My analysis of the party’s theory and Marxism, in a sense, shows that the party understands Marxism as fundamentally political.

3. As the *Federalist Papers* contends, “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” (Hamilton, Madison, Jay, 2009: 120).

4. As Wu Bangguo, the former chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, puts it, “the Chinese NPC system is a fundamental political system that ensures the national character of China and the people as masters of the state, it is also the best way for the party to practice democracy and to carry out the ‘mass line’ in state power. . . . We should fully realize the fundamental differences between the NPC system and Western bourgeois form of government” (“人民代表大会制度是贯彻群众路线的最好实现形式” [The people’s congress system is the best way to implement the mass line]), 中国广播网, Mar. 8, 2013, http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0308/c49150-20727123.html; see also Wu, 2014).

5. The party treats capitalists with strong ties with foreign imperialism as enemies of the party and the people. But the party considers what it calls the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie as friends or potential friends of the party and the people.

6. It should be noted that the party’s friends/enemy distinction and the definition of the people change over time. As the party puts it, “the concept of the ‘people’ varies in content in different countries and in different periods of history in a given country” (Mao, 1977i [1957]: 384–96).

7. Cass Sunstein (2003), for example, argues that a society is far more likely to prosper if it welcomes dissent.

8. For liberal theories that emphasize the importance of free speech to the people’s choice-making, see Meiklejohn, 1948 and 1961.

9. For the “marketplace of ideas” or “searching-for-truth” notion, see Abrams v. United States, 250 U.S. 616, 630 (1919) (Holmes, J., dissenting) (“the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market”).

10. While some liberal theorists admit that the NPC has some autonomy from the party, they nonetheless view the NPC as generally undemocratic (Allmark, 2012; Nathan, 1996; Tanner, 1995).

11. Under equal protection jurisprudence, there are two interpretive doctrines: anti-classification and anti-subordination. The party’s theory seems to violate both. For the differences between anti-classification and anti-subordination, see Fiss, 1976; Balkin and Siegel, 2003: 14–15.

12. The party’s theory, therefore, views a state of emergency as always hidden in social normality. Such a view, again, resembles that of Schmitt, who argues that
an absolute state of emergency or exception cannot be prescribed by a legal norm. 
For Schmitt’s theory of emergency, see Schmitt, 2005 [1922]; Scheuerman, 1996.

13. The party’s theory thus resembles Roberto Unger’s theory to a certain extent. 
According to Unger, democracy can only be realized through constant struggle 
and the empowerment of citizens. The difference between the party’s theory and 
Unger’s theory is that the party places more emphasis on the unity of the people. 

14. Here we can also see the similarities between the party’s theory and Schmitt’s 
theory of dictatorship. Dictatorship, as Schmitt points out, can be fully compati-
ble with democracy or the people’s self-governance: “The people can be brought 
to recognize and express their own will correctly through the right education. 
This means nothing else but that the educator identifies his will at least provi-
sionally with that of the people, not to mention that the content of the education 
that the pupil will receive is also decided by the educator. The consequence of 
this educational theory is a dictatorship that suspends democracy in the name of 
a true democracy that is still to be created. Theoretically, this does not destroy 
democracy, but it is important to pay attention to it because it shows that dictator-
ship is not antithetical to democracy” (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 28).

15. Representatives or party cadres can change their initial decisions under certain 
circumstances, but under the party’s theory, any such change should again be a 
political judgment. Representatives or party cadres cannot give up their initial 
decision simply because the masses change their opinion, especially when the 
masses change their opinion because of the hardship of realizing the initial goal.

16. The party’s theory of representation, therefore, should also be distinguished from 
the Burkean theory of representation. While Burke’s theory views the social mass 
as ignorant and passive objects incapable of thinking or acting “without guidance 
and direction” and representation as making judgments independently from the 
masses, the party views the masses as “the real heroes” and requires party cadres 
to constantly respond to the masses. It requires its cadres to always learn from the 
masses and ensure that the masses fully accept the party’s ideas that are absorbed 
from the masses. For Burke’s theory of representation, see Burke, 1949.

17. As the party puts it, “classes struggle, some classes triumph, others are elimi-
nated. Such is history; such is the history of civilization for thousands of years. 
To interpret history from this viewpoint is historical materialism; standing in 
opposition to this viewpoint is historical idealism” (Mao, 1977h [1949]: 428).

18. As the preamble to the Chinese state constitution states, “class struggle will con-
tinue to exist within certain limits for a long time to come.”

19. This has been especially true after China fully embraced the “socialist market” 
in the 1990s. After the 1990s the party gradually allowed private entrepreneurs 
to join the party, a move that shows the party no longer views certain classes 
negatively.

20. The party, therefore, adopts a different understanding of the economy and mar-
ket from some of Western mainstream economic theories. For the latter, the 
economy is an autonomous realm that should be free from state intervention.
The party, however, views economic development as social construction and developing “productive forces” and the market only as a means of mobilizing the people. The party and state must penetrate the economic realm to represent the “advanced productive forces.” For the invention of the modern concept of economy, see Grewal, 2017.

21. Schmitt, therefore, differentiates mere interest groups from the people, which has the will to assemble: “when indeed only the people are actually assembled for whatever purpose, to the extent that it does not only appear as an organized interest group, for example, during street demonstrations and public festivals, in theaters, on the running track, or in the stadium, this people engaged in acclamation is present, and it is, at least potentially, a political entity” (Schmitt, 2008 [1928]: 93).

22. Emphasizing the will, whether it is the people’s will or a person’s will, is a common thread in many of Schmitt’s works. In *Political Romanticism*, for example, Schmitt criticizes romanticism as harmful to the will of a person. “The essential feature of the intellectual situation of the romantic,” Schmitt argues, “is that in the struggle of the deities he does not commit himself and his subjective personality” (Schmitt, 1986 [1919]: 64).

23. The state or the people, Schmitt argues, “is an entity and in fact the decisive entity rests upon its political character. A pluralist theory is either the theory of state which arrives at the unity of state by a federalism of social associations or a theory of the dissolution or rebuttal of the state. If, in fact, it challenges the entity and places the political association on an equal level with the others, for example, religious or economic associations, it must, above all, answer the question as to the specific content of the political.” Under liberal theories, “the state simply transforms itself into an association which competes with other associations; it becomes a society among some other societies which exist within or outside the state” (Schmitt, 2007 [1932]: 67).

24. Under Kirchheimer’s theory, this is exactly what Western political parties became in the twentieth century. Many such parties, according to Kirchheimer, became “catch-all parties” that only seek to win elections and adjust their orientations and tactics whenever necessary. They had relinquished their responsibility to lead the people (Kirchheimer, 1966b, 1966a).

25. The party, therefore, denies that free speech has an “autonomy value.” For the autonomy value of free speech, see Redish, 1982; Strauss, 1991; Baker, 1992.

26. For example, although in many countries it is almost a consensus among the overwhelming majority of the people that society should be more equal, such a consensus or will of the people is far from being realized in concrete life.

27. As Schmitt points out, liberal theorists understand elections as secret voting, which means “every single vote was registered and an arithmetical majority was calculated. . . . Quite elementary truths have thus been lost and are apparently unknown in contemporary political theory. ‘The people’ is a concept in public law. The people exist only in the sphere of publicity” (Schmitt, 1985 [1923]: 16).

28. I owe this insight to Dominique Leydet’s analysis of Schmitt’s theory of parliamentarism. As Leydet puts it, “Schmitt’s arguments are premised on his
supposition that the effectiveness of parliament during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century was based on the dualism of constitutional monarchy and its associated series of tensions between prince and people, state and society, government and parliament, executive and legislative powers. This dualism was implied in the view that the constitution was a pact between prince and people, wherein parliament stood as the representative of society and of the people itself. Since the representative assembly was the stage upon which society appeared before the state, parliament could plausibly be seen to stand for society’s interests against those of the Crown. This meant essentially that parliament’s job was to defend society’s autonomy against executive power, thus minimizing the intervention of the state in social and economic matters” (Leydet, 1998: 111).

29. A vivid example is the drafting of a replacement health insurance bill by the Republican Party in the United States. It is the small groups, such as the Freedom Caucus, that determine the fate of the replacement of health insurance.

30. A discussion of the committees of the party requires a separate article. For now, it should be pointed out that the party’s setting up of small committees aims at having independent public discussion. In the party’s theory we can see that the party views congresses as a place unsuitable for serious public discussion, a view that resembles Schmitt’s. As Schmitt points out, parliamentary argumentative politics has become meaningless under modern mass democracy; decisions are made by small committees behind closed doors. Where the party differs from Schmitt is that it tries to politicize these small committees.

31. As Mao writes, “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution. The basic reason why all previous revolutionary struggles in China achieved so little was their failure to unite with real friends in order to attack real enemies. A revolutionary party is the guide of the masses, and no revolution ever succeeds when the revolutionary party leads them astray. To ensure that we will definitely achieve success in our revolution and will not lead the masses astray, we must pay attention to uniting with our real friends in order to attack our real enemies. To distinguish real friends from real enemies we must make a general analysis of the economic status of the various classes in Chinese society and of their respective attitudes towards the revolution” (Mao, 1977b [1926]: 13).


33. The party views theory as essentially a part of the people’s self-governance. There is no pure theory that can be severed from the practice of the people’s self-governance (Mao, 1977d [1937]: 297).

34. Within Western academia, scholars have also argued for a form of representation that resembles the party’s mass line (Hamilton, 1994).

35. In real-life politics, it is probably true that politics in both China and Western countries are depoliticized (Wang, 2006).
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