

HOW COMMUNIST IS CHINA?

The Montréal Review, April 2011

Today, when we speak about socialism or communism, we usually discuss economy. Human rights and political system always come second mostly because in the twentieth century the real competition between the two systems - the communist bloc and the capitalist "free world" - was in the field of economy (and geo-politics, of course). Besides, Marxist theory, the orthodox socialist theory, so to say, was primarily based on the economic analysis of capital accumulation and on critique of the existing in the nineteenth century labour relations. The Marxist theory had no ambition, nor, in fact, the ability to explain the political organization of future socialist/communist society, it only had vague prophecies that the future communist societies, purified from the capital owners, would be stateless, i.e. apolitical. (1)

There are no communist states today. There have never been. The former communist countries such as the Soviet Union or DDR (East Germany) were twentieth century modifications of old Oriental despotisms. Yet, today, curiously, the ruling elites of the second economic power in the world argue and insist that their country is a *communist state*. Moreover, they use Marxist rhetoric and communist symbols to define their regime, and the political organization of their country is one-party system. Is it China a communist state? Is the Chinese society apolitical? How communist is China?

However beautiful and exciting as a theory, Marxism is full of contradictions if applied in practice. Here's a paradox, a contradiction in the heart of Marxist theory: in a communist state the capitalist is the state bureaucrat. The bureaucrat is not an exclusive owner of capital, but with his power to manage and use capital, he is de facto, at least for a certain period of time, a true capitalist. Thus, there is no pure communist state, a state without capitalists. But the economic organization of contemporary China does not resemble even the "bureaucratic" state capitalism of twentieth century. In 1999, in "communist" China, more than 20 million people were employed by private enterprises and the contribution of private sector to the industrial output was 73.5%. (2) The state run newspaper "*China Daily*" reported last summer (2010) that private sector provides 90% of the new jobs in

China and quoted Vice Minister Zhong Youping who said that the country had 7.55 million private companies at the end of March 2010, up almost 14 percent year-on-year, with total registered capital exceeding 15 trillion yuan (\$2.2 trillion), up 26.9 percent. "Zhong urged local industry and commerce bureaus to continue their support for the private sector following the central government's support plan unveiled in May to boost development in the private sector," the *China Daily* reported. (3)

This short essay has no ambition to say the obvious: that China is not a communist country. The facts speak for themselves. Everyone knows *how capitalist China is*. It rather aims to partially respond to questions like Why did China accept (and still follows) the Marxist ideology? Why does its political system resemble the system of the former communist states? How communist the philosophy of the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong was?

Although a great civilization, a state with rich history, culture and traditions, China of the XIX century did not escape the fate of the non-European states that fell under the sway of the Western economic, political, and cultural hegemonism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Western societies made two crucial breaks in the chain of human history: they restricted the power of monarchy and aristocracy and developed a new economic system rewarding productivity, trade, and entrepreneurship. Such a change was achieved for the first time in human history, and it was supported by new ideologies, or beliefs, that legitimized the political ambitions of bourgeoisie. The revolution, however, did not bring immediate prosperity to all, nor did it eradicate the social and political evils. So, almost with its inception and victory the capitalist liberalism found in socialism an opposing doctrine having even more radical nature and goals. The disappointment from the new liberal order, the development of new forms of oppression, (4) created a new set of ideas that aimed to push the organization of human society even farther. Marx's re-definition of Locke's idea of the "sacrality" of private property could serve as a curious (and rare, I should say,) example of how liberalism was challenged on its own ground: Marx saw in property not just "sacral," but *absolute* individual right; being a critic of the capitalist exploitation and defender of proletariat, he argued that everyone *owns* his labour to the point that no one has the right to steal or exploit it with or without consent. The absolute right of property, in Marx's view, was therefore so radical that destroys the idea of proprietary relations itself. (5)

While Europe was in the ferment of new social, economic and political reformations, the rest of the world was still functioning according to the rules of old. China of the 19th century was ruled by a declining, inflexible dynasty -- the Qing-- the organization of its society was unchanged for centuries, and when the European traders and missionaries appeared on the Chinese shores, the Middle Kingdom fell victim to their interests. China was colonized. Yes, nominally it stayed independent, but in reality, it was divided and exploited by the West.

In the late 19th century, China bented under the yoke of an alien, modern civilization. And as Marx and Engels prophesied in their seminal essay, *The Communist Manifesto*, its fate was in the hands of capital. (6) Thus, it is not a surprise that when appeared the Chinese communism was an ally and subsidiary of Chinese nationalism, a reaction to the Western imperialistic capitalism. The Chinese communism came from the womb of the nationalist movements and never abandoned its most powerful message - to save China's integrity and independence from the "imperialistic" forces. (7) A brief look at Mao's vast political writings will convince us that their major theme was not the structure of the new socialist society or the critique of the existing capitalist order-- there was no such order in China in the time of Mao-- but the fight against the "imperialists". It should be added that Mao's revolution was never against the *industrial* capitalist class (foreign and national), but against the rich peasants, "the feudals" as Marx would say; the rich peasants, the "kulaks" if I use the Bolshevik terminology, whi were the real exploiters of Chinese labour. In 1920s - 1940s, there were no true worker movements in China represented by the communist party, no proletariat; instead, there were small cells of city intellectuals and big armies of angry peasants fighting against government that supported local despotism. (8)

Chinese communism was a result of two general and (very) unusual phenomena. First, it was born because of the processes, explained in a quoted in the footnotes below passage from the *Communist Manifesto*: "The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature..." Marx and Engels said this, and with good reason. The intellectual achievements of the Western nations penetrated everywhere, and the European communists/socialists hoped that as the political ideals of bourgeoisie were disseminated throughout the world with the rise of trade and economic interdependence, so it would happen with the socialist ideas, when the working classes, created by the capitalist

system, reach political maturity. The socialist ideas appeared in China when the Chinese came into "firsthand contact with the developed industrial society in Japan and the West", Arif Dirik noted in "*Marxism in the Chinese Revolution*." They were not a result of "objective laws" and historical logic, to use the Marxist terminology. They were not an effect of capitalism, but reflections of the intellectual influence of the Western proletariat. They were, simply said, *ideas*, the seeds of the "world literature" planted in Chinese soil by cosmopolitan intellectuals and Christian missionaries. (9)

Secondly, communism (and socialism) gained importance when in the 1920s the Kuomintang nationalists started to purge the communist factions existing within the nationalist movement. The Chinese Communist party owes a lot to the nationalists for its successful formation and later for its ascent to power. Initially, the communists were sheltered and prepared as soldiers in the military camps of Kuomintang, but thanks to the subsequent nationalist aggression against them and Chan Kai-shek's inability to attract the peasant masses, they consolidated as an independent organization and began to pursue their own political goals.

People unite when face a common threat. The external threat makes them a group, organization, class, or nation. The reports of Edgar Snow, who traveled in the 1930s in the Western parts of China, controlled by the communists, abound with evidences that explain how "communism" became a unifying force to the diverse and oppressed communities in the rural provinces. The peasants didn't know what communism is, what they knew, and it was enough to make them loyal, was that the communist organization defends their interests. When the communists became the only organized force in China able to stop the aggression of Japan, their position as a national leader was cemented for years.

So, the conclusion is that Chinese communism is neither a fruit of historical logic -- a result of a real class struggle -- nor communism at all. It is first and foremost a nationalistic ideology that, under Mao's political genius, accommodated the discontent peasant masses in the late 1930s. Chinese communism is first and foremost nationalism, and then political ideology that assures the political stability and order in China.

This partially explains why and how Marxism became the official ideology of the Chinese state and why China has never been a truly communist society. The next question, Why China has one-party system?, is easier to answer. The existence of one-

party system is because of the lack of democratic tradition. The People's Republic was created half a century after the fall of the dynasty. There was no democratic tradition in China. Moreover, Marxism is the only modern ideology that legitimize one political elite or party as far as this party or elite represents the "people"; and lastly, Marxism, with its secular ideology, resembles Confucianism. Confucianism supports the ruler who has a Mandate of Heaven; this Mandate gives him an absolute right to rule. In the 20th century, China had no choice but modernize, there were no more the more heavens to approve government, there was social and political *science*, Marxism, that served as an oracle. Marxism was the only modern social theory (and ideology) that promised both modernization and progress without the risks of liberalism that functions on political fragmentation, clash of interests and endures regular periods of political crisis. To conclude: one-party system, legitimized by the scientific social theory of Marx, accomodating the imperial traditions and Confucianism, is what China needed to oppose Western influence, stay politically stable, and modernize.

And here arises the last question, How Marxist is Mao's thought? Mao's thought is not Marxist, but rather radical and nationalist. Radicalism can be attached to every ideology, and a revolutionary, a political radical, can adopt every existing teaching. In the popular Red Book "*Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse Tung* " one can find a lot of Marxist, revolutionary rhetoric, but in the bottom of all is Mao the "fighter", the "nationalist", the "peasant", it is not the "intellectual", the "social democrat", the "worker". "Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?"⁽¹⁰⁾ Mao asks and answers, "Our enemies are all those in league with imperialism - the warlords, the bureaucrats, the comprador class, the big Landlord class and the reactionary section of the intelligentsia attached to them." ⁽¹¹⁾ In this quote, we see that the enemy is not the capitalist owner, but those "in league with imperialism", but in this league, we do not see the factory owner, the banker, the merchant. The main threat for the Chinese masses is "imperialism" and feudalism, not the "bourgeois liberalism." We can easily find how far from the orthodox Marxism Mao's thought is if we just compare his writings with the writings of communist leaders such as Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht. For instance, in one of the most popular, international communist texts, "*A Call to the Workers of the World* ", the word "imperialism" is mentioned only once, while "proletariat" appears seventeen times. ⁽¹²⁾ In Mao's writings, the order of appearance of these words is always opposite. When Mao says, "the main socialist transformation has been completed with respect to the system of ownership", he means, again, that the communists eliminated "landlord and comprador classes". ⁽¹³⁾ The landlord is the feudal, the "comprador" is the person who trades with the Western

companies -- both have nothing to do with the working class in its traditional Marxist sense. In 1949, Mao wrote, "The People's democratic dictatorship is based on the alliance of the working class, the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie, and mainly on the alliance of the workers and the peasants, because these two classes comprise 80 to go per cent of China's population. These two classes are the main force in overthrowing imperialism and the Kuomintang reactionaries." The truth was that China in 1949 was an agrarian society and the workers were an insignificant part of this "alliance", and again these two classes "overthrow" not the bourgeois capitalist, but the foreign invader and Kuomintang opposition.

Discussing the shortcomings of the Versailles Treaty (1919) in an essay, published in mid-1930s, Arnold Toynbee said that the war leaders have special mentality and temperament that correspond to their duties to save the nation from aggression. Even after the peace is assured they naturally continue the fight. Peacemaking is for peacemakers and that is why wartime leaders after First World War were not able to build a sustainable peace in Europe. Professor Toynbee's insight is universally applicable. (14) We can argue that state building is not for revolutionaries, especially for revolutionaries who liberated the country from an oppressive and brutal power. The revolutionaries are fighters, dissidents; they just cannot stop fighting after the victory, because they have special mentality and temperament. This fact explains partially the inability of old revolutionaries like Mao to understand the logic and needs of Chinese society after 1949. This also explains the revolutionary fever in the 1960s that started after a few "boring" years of a "socialist" state building. Indeed, for some twenty years after Second World War China had a communist/socialist period (in the model of Soviet Stalinism), it had a nationalisation and state controlled economy, Chinese accepted and still accept leadership of the central power, but China has never been truly communist and only now, after the reforms in the 1990s, it built a true, modern state capitalism that gave birth to a true proletariat. And here the most interesting questions come: How likely is the break out of a genuine socialist or democratic revolution in China today? Is the revolution more pressing and logical today than it was in 1949?

1 In 1949, laying the foundations of the future Chinese communist state Mao wrote: "Don't you want to abolish state power?" Yes, we do, but not right now. We cannot do it yet. Why? Because imperialism still exists, because domestic reaction still exists, because classes still exist in our country. Our present task is to strengthen the people's state apparatus - mainly the people's army, the people's police and the people's courts - in order

to consolidate national defence and protect the people's interests." (Mao Dzedung, " *On the People's Democratic Dictatorship* " (June 30, 1949), Selected Works, Vol. IV, p. 418) Every communist state begins as police state and finish as totalitarian.

2 Yanrui Wu, *Economic growth, transition, and globalization in China* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2006) p.231

3 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/10/content_9962002.htm

4 See, for example, Karl Marx's "*The Poverty of Philosophy*": " The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist." (Forgotten Books, reprinted from Martin Lawrence Edition, London) p.92

5 See John Locke's "*Two Tracts on Government*" (Courier Dover Publications, 2002): "Thought the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body and the work of his hands we may say are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property." (p.12-13) In short, Marx expanded Locke's idea replacing the "nature" with the "capitalist" who accumulated wealth that exceeds his right of proper ownership and that gives him a chance to exploit others who presumably want to benefit from his capital through their labour.

6 "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature..." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "*The Communist Manifesto*", introduction by Eric Hobsbawm (Verso, London. 1998,) p.39

7 Arif Dirik, "*Marxism in the Chinese Revolution*" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) pp. 20-25

8 Edgar Snow, "*Red Star over China*" (Grove Press, 1973) pp. 243-289

9 The other source for the first socialist ideas in China, according to Dirik, was the publications of the Christian missionaries. See Arif Dirik, "*Marxism in the Chinese Revolution*" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) p.22.

10 "*Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*" (March 1926), Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 13 (quote from the Red Book)

11 Ibid. p. 19.

12 See "*The Communist Manifesto and other Revolutionary Works*" (Courier Dover Publications, 2003) pp. 232 -235

13 *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People* (February 27, 1957), 1st pocket ed., pp. 51-52

14 Arnold J. Toynbee "The Main Features of the Landscape," in "The Treaty of Versailles and After," (George Allen & Unwin Brothers Ltd. London, 1935), p. 46.