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Marxism in China

China studies Marxism: twelve pro-capitalist lines

- Features -

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Capitalism in China is rapidly uprooting and throwing into the market-place all that seemed fixed and fast frozen since the revolution in 1949 but, as with all other forms of capitalism, this market is all but free. The bureaucracy holds in place systems of authority necessary for capital accumulation, and the Chinese state is a key player in the enrichment of a new bourgeoisie. There are particular political-economic and ideological conditions for this transition, of course, and one of the most important is the legacy of Maoism, and how the claim to be a socialist country is squared with the rapid abandonment of each and every tenet of socialism.

One obstacle that must be overcome, then, is the existence of Marxism as an ideological resource. Even as a distorted form of Marxism derived from Stalinist practice in the Soviet Union and adapted to local conditions by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there are contradictions and space for resistance to class rule that pose dangers to the bureaucracy and to the new entrepreneurs. So where is 'Marxism' in China now?

The Third International Conference on Contemporary Capitalism in October 2011 at Hangzhou Normal University was jointly organised by the Centre for Marxist Social Theory at Nanjing University, the Department of Philosophy and School of Marxism at Nanjing University and the Centre for Marxist Studies at Hangzhou Normal University. The first two conferences were held in Nanjing, and for this one many of the participants travelled south for this meeting. There are 70 participants in the group photo taken on the first day, including four Westerners; Neil Harding (not a Marxist but a 'Leninologist' now retired from Swansea University), Lois Holzman who is now effectively leader of the New York based Newman psycho-political group (formerly Maoist), David McNally a political theorist from York University in Toronto (and activist with the New Socialist Group), and myself (among other things, and the reason I was invited it seems, critical psychologist and Lacanian psychoanalyst). There were a few participants from Taiwan, an increasingly significant trade link with the mainland (especially so, the local press reported, given the increasing economic connections between South Korea and the United States), and, of course, from Beijing. The final session included a demagogic 'and now after you have had your fun remember this' kind of address from a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences flown down from the capital.

Formal introductions at the beginning of the conference, including welcome from the secretary of the CCP local committee, were followed by the real business, which was how to connect Marxist theory with capitalism today. Or rather, it quickly became clear that the task was how to speak about Marxism in such a way as to validate current government policies and to damn economic competitors. Overall, the conference was a site for rehearsing different possible permutations of arguments for the Chinese state and 'contemporary capitalism' without actually mentioning that capitalism is well and truly entrenched here. These were the main intersecting lines of argument (12 lines at least) spun out in different ways across the two days.

Probably most important (line 1) as the overall frame for all the other moves, was an argument characterised by a rather significant absence rather than a presence, which is the line that you must never directly refer to Maoism, let alone engage in a critique of Mao, as one of the forms of Marxism (neither should you directly refer to, or critique, Chinese capitalism). Discourse at the conference swerved around these issues, and never addressed questions of one-party rule, the existence of free-trade zones providing cheap labour for the West (or the suicides in factories run for the production of Apple goods in Shenzhen, for example), let alone environmental destruction as rural populations are uprooted to make way for industrial developments. Response to questions about these things raised informally outside the conference sessions was a blank smile and an attempt to change the subject, or hurt complaint that the Chinese were being picked on. There was one exception that proved the rule, which was a statement by a Chinese participant that capitalism in China would run into crisis and would eventually collapse. I learnt afterwards that he had

said this, for during the actual presentation these comments by him were not translated.

Alongside the first line as a key institutional function of this kind of conference, was the argument (line 2) that 'Marxisms' of great diversity should be rolled out for inspection so that it became unclear what could actually define Marxism as such. It was only the use of the word 'Marxism' (rather than the link between interpretation and revolutionary practice) that brought these various accounts together. It was possible to find some family resemblances among these different accounts, but these were detached from the real world, turned into academic theory, fodder for more academic debate. The Centre for Studies in Marxist Social Theory at Nanjing University (which I visited after the conference, and where they politely listened to me speak about Marxism, Stalinism, Maoism and psychoanalysis) had photos up on the walls of figures from 'Western Marxism' in the very broadest sense (Horkheimer, Sartre, Baudrillard and Foucault among them). One of the translators was doing their doctoral studies on Deleuze. I was told by one student that interest in Western Marxism was mainly focussed on the 'Western' bit of it.

One strong theme (line 3) was that we should understand what was referred to as 'American values' in order to posit 'Chinese values' as a supposedly progressive counterpoint. A paper on this topic was first up in the conference, and voiced a strong underlying assumption that the values of individual freedom and so on were shared by everyone living in the US. My objection that there was a counter-tradition of collective resistance and class solidarity which were also 'American values' was met with the statement that the President of the United States speaks for all citizens of his country and should be taken as representative. We will come to the smoothing out of class conflict in China in a moment, but this was the worst of homogenising sociological banalities in place of anything that might claim to be a Marxist analysis.

What was called 'democracy' was portrayed as something particular to 'Western capitalism', and so as not applicable to China (line 4). An editorial in the 21 October issue of Global Times, an English-language Party mouthpiece, for example, claimed that the Arab Spring had now given way to disenchantment with democracy, and recognition even in the West that democracy was failing. Democracy was defined there as a reduction to the individual and to a battle between different interests. The previous day's edition included a cartoon of Gilad Shalit waving an Israeli flag celebrating his release in the foreground while behind him in distance missiles were looming over the horizon. The image and caption, 'Dangerous Trade', would not have been out of place in the Zionist press.

Another favourite strategy (line 5) was to churn through different readings of Marx by other scholars and declare that they do not work. In many cases at the conference the theories were also mangled beyond recognition (which made the job of the translators very difficult, and occasionally led them into fits of giggles as they whispered their attempts to make sense of what was being said to us and admitted that it did not actually make sense in Chinese). Alongside this (line 6) was the insistence on specifically attacking Hegelian readings of Marx as 'useless, of course', and so to dispense with anything of the dialectic. Then there was the argument (line 7) that Marx's account was based on capitalism in Europe, and therefore was not valid in China. So, what should be made of reports that Liang Wengen, a billionaire (and number 114 in the Forbes List of the world's richest men), will be made a member of the Central Committee of the Party in 2012 (something Global Times proudly reported in September this year)? The answer is that he is still working class, but an extraordinarily rich worker. In China, I was told, you need to recognise that there is no class contradiction because there are no competing classes. Discontent can be interpreted as a function of 'ren min nei bu mao dun' (internal friendly contradiction of those with a common purpose).

Some speakers were keen to take up some critiques of capitalism in the West (line 8), and to point out that they might apply in China. One example was the use of Debord's situationist critique of capitalism as a 'spectacle' in which everything is turned into a commodity and any connection with real economic interests is lost (and this was where Baudrillard and some of Mao's work was popular). However, a crucial part of the argument here was that these critiques should then be seen as sad failings rather than structural features of capitalism in China. Then there were attempts (line 9) to use Marxist critique to bemoan particular degenerate aspects of Western capitalism that

have started to enter China. Here there were references, for example, to 'the bankruptcy of everyday life', something that steered a little too close, for some at the conference, to political critique. With the exception of Zhang Yibin (executive Vice-Chancellor of Nanjing University, head of the Marxist Institute and prominent Party member), no members of the Institute combined their academic work with politics of any kind at all. It was necessary, I was told, to make a choice between the two.

There were plenty of attempts (line 10) to clarify what 'Western thought' (that is, capitalism) and 'Marxism' are so that they can be 'integrated' with what was called the 'Chinese tradition' (which boiled down mostly to a reverence for Confucian themes of respect for elders and betters). This is where the ideological struggle to rearticulate Sun Yat-sen as founder of the Chinese Republic in 1912 (and of the Kuomintang) gets tangled in and then subordinated to the three key motifs marked on his mausoleum in Nanjing. Motifs of 'Nation', 'Livelihood' and 'Civil Rights' have been claimed for years by the Kuomintang leaders who fled to Taiwan as integral to bourgeois law and order. The CCP is now playing the same game, and 'Marxism' in the process is sharply differentiated from what is seen as mere 'leftism'. We were told that in order to understand Marxism in China, it would be necessary to 'Sinitise' it (which sounds very much like 'sanitise', but means to turn it into something Chinese), and this means (line 11) making it compatible with Confucianism (and all the old feudal baggage of respect for the family and strong leadership).

Outside the conference I heard some even more bizarre things. For example, I was told that the old Chinese written character for 'party' which was initially adopted by the CCP (before a more modern version of script was instituted) meant, if read literally, 'in favour of darkness'. In fact, it is true that the character still on the Sun Yat-sen mausoleum in Nanjing has these two elements ('in search of' or 'in favour of' as the upper part of the written character, and 'darkness' or 'blackness' as the bottom part). This is something akin to conspiracy theories in the US which are fixated on freemasonry symbols on the Dollar Bill. I was told that television channels either broadcast boring news propaganda or trivial entertainment so that choice between the two was as between Orwell and Huxley (both of whom were on sale in the huge 'Libraire Avant-Garde' bookshop in Hangzhou).

There are two lingering questions that were unaddressed by the conference, two more significant absences that should have been tackled, but were not. The first is to do with the place class struggle. We have touched on this issue already, but it is worth emphasising that while there were references by the Western speakers to struggles around the world, such as in Mexico, Chile and in the Arab World, with the exception of mention of the Wall Street protests (where A'ek's address to the activists in Zuccotti Park was described with approval) there were no references by the Chinese to such things. Nor were there any references by any of us, more importantly, to class struggle in China (or other kinds of resistance to the regime, of which there are many, ranging from factory strikes to local secessionist protests). This meant that the concrete question of the relevance of Marxism was not tested against particular movements. The second significant absence was the question of the role of Marxism, the meaning of Marxist accounts of class struggle, outside universities. We were a group of academics talking about such things, but whether such debates would have any resonance with movements outside the University was left unexplored. If Marxism is to be a theory and practice which simultaneously transforms its object (capitalism), then it should be connecting with the practice of actually-existing struggle.

The only images of Mao (apart from on the banknotes) were in tacky gift shops or in cultural revolution themed restaurants serving spicy food (a speciality of Shaoshan, where he was born) under signs which read 'the Commune is our Eden'. But, again, this is a joke, and is tolerated on condition that that you can play as much as you like if you are clear that you do not take it seriously (line 12). I saw no images of Barack Obama in China, but I saw plenty more pictures of Steve Jobs than Chairman Mao.

We were as if inside an academic seaside zoo, and actually, if you remember that a version of Marxism was the guiding force in the revolution, quite a little one. Even though there has been a recent directive that Marxist Institutes be set up in all universities, The Centre for Studies of Marxist Social Theory at Nanjing as a leading example was

pretty much confined to the seventh floor of the Philosophy department. There are, an editorial in the 26 October issue of China Daily noted, 16,383 psychotherapists and counsellors in China now, which is a lot more than the number of self-identified 'Marxists' with the right to speak about what Marxism is (and to neutralise and absorb it into the current pro-capitalist agenda of the CCP in the process). Meanwhile, 'The World Zhejiang Entrepreneurs Convention' was doing great business with many more participants than our meeting elsewhere in Hangzhou. Marxism in China is largely confined to 'studies' of Marxism, actively confined as an ideological exercise designed to confirm government policy. We were a little conference of 'Marxists' who were efficiently contained as an exotic and archaic species engaged in academic debates, our energies drained, before we went