

# The Revolution comes from East: No alternative without China

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## Introduction

In June 2019, Qu Dongyu was elected as the new Director-General of FAO, becoming the first Chinese citizen to assume this role (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2019). In an unprecedented feat, he won an outright majority over the official candidates of both EU and US, thanks to the crucial support of African and Latin American countries (Lynch & Gramer, 2019; Chadwick, 2019). His election showed once more that the People's Republic of China can lead the subaltern countries into assuming a greater and autonomous role in the world; so, despite months-long lobbying from the EU and the US, the world's multilateral institutions are not the West's preserve anymore (Stuenkel, 2016; Wade, 2002).

The classic Eurocentric view held that the West incarnated the end of history, in its capitalist mode of production and in its liberal social system (Hegel, 1975; Fukuyama, 1992). Qu Dongyu's election is instead a new step forward in the unstoppable march of history through the globe. As Hegel saw Napoleon riding through Jena, reaching out over the world and mastering it, so does mankind see today the sunset of the West-led liberal globalisation, synonym of colonialism and imperialism (Hegel, 1985; Petras & Veltmeyer, 2000; Pozo-Martin, 2006). In its place, a new *Weltgeist* emerges: multilateralism and the peaceful rise of China dawn upon the world, showing an alternative path to real global inclusion, development and cooperation (Bijan, 2005; Liu S. , 2019; Bijan, 2015).

This article discusses thus three elements of this *Weltgeist* to then propose a path forwards for progressive forces in the West in their relationship with the Chinese experience. Namely, progressive organisations and parties should acknowledge this Copernican revolution, of a former colonial nation leading the progress of mankind beyond capitalism. However, for many on the left the West retains the highest revolutionary potential; against evidence, they believe that the stage of political consciousness in the West is so advanced that it is possible to realistically envisage the hegemony of workers and intellectuals (Azcárate, 1978; Berry, 2019; Day & Karp, 2019). As happened with Eurocommunism, they look inward at their intellectual analysis and do not see the concrete achievements of actually existing socialism.

This article stems instead from the belief that the People's Republic of China is today's indispensable power, geopolitically and for the world proletariat: it passed unscathed the crisis of Western capitalism after 2008, despite numerous Cassandras, and established a new socialist society, grounded in the primacy of the State and of politics above the private interests of market agents. Through its People's Republic, China emerged from a century of humiliations and subjugation, to rejuvenate itself and achieve prosperity, and realised what other countries, not lead by Marxism-Leninism, couldn't: independence and liberation for the whole country and its working class. As the world's great powers must come to terms with China as one of their own, so progressive theoreticians must face the socialist achievements of the People's Republic. From this acknowledgement, we locate the People's Republic in the history of the communist movement, we discuss its approach to the question of power and elaborate on its role in a multipolar world. We then exhort progressives in the

West to look at the Chinese experience and engage with it, as recently done by the Italian Communist Party in the occasion of the new memorandum between Italy and China.

## The People's Republic of China within the History of the International Communist Movement

For the modern observer and for the communist militant in the West, Chinese Marxism is above all a revolutionary practice, despite the numerous theoretical contributions from Chinese thinkers. Indeed, Mao's works are generally translated and known, but most of the available Marxist literature on China is written or mediated by radical intellectuals within Western academic circles (Harris, 2015; Chen, Chen, Mao, & Zheng, 2019; Franceschini, Loubere, & Sorace, 2019; Mao, 2017). This insulates Marxist developments in the West from Chinese contributions since Western radical academics widely lack commitment to radical politics or actively oppose it (Featherstone, 2019; Norton & Blumenthal, 2019; Wolfe, 1970).

On the contrary, the concrete achievements of the People's Republic tend to pass more easily through Western cognitive channels for multiple reasons: Western tourists visit modern Chinese cities, Western companies sell their products to Chinese clients and Western elites openly discuss the need to contain China (Lynch & Gramer, 2019; Zakaria, 2020). The rise of China is thus unquestioned doxa in the West. However, the silence or distorted image of the Marxist character behind such rise makes so that China and the People's Republic of China are often conflated, in the same way as Europe and the European Union are also done.

Trivial as it may seem, the two terms mean different things and this obvious, but oft-lost distinction is necessary to properly locate the Chinese experience in the history of the communist movement. Hence, China is a continuous geopolitical entity which stretches through the millennia, as one of the world's first civilisations. Instead, the People's Republic is the ongoing political project of the Chinese Communist Party as China's current social organisation, under the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the party's political guidance. Only through these definitions it is possible to see that China embarked on a journey towards its rejuvenation through the People's Republic. Namely, the Marxist political project of the People's Republic is the force which liberated China from colonial yoke and unleashed its productive forces to unprecedented levels.

This political project can be described under two fundamental themes, which are here discussed as a contribute to the methodological and practical activity of progressive forces throughout the globe: continuity and innovation.

The People's Republic is indeed marked by continuity within itself and with the broader communist movement abroad. Namely, its political project shows a century-long temporal continuity. It was initially conceived as a tool of liberation and resurgence, after years of oppression and humiliations, when China was divided among rival warlords and had not suffered the brutal Japanese aggression yet. Decades have passed, but those ideals still resonate today in the speech of General Secretary Xi Jinping for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic, showing a coherent vision through time (Xinhua, 2019). Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the toiling masses of China liberated themselves and eight hundred million people abandoned abject poverty to savour what production for man's needs, rather than profit, is. In continuity with its anticolonial

struggle, the People's Republic created a welfare state, established a rule of law coherent with China's economic and social policies (with a fundamental support from Italian jurists) and achieved technological parity with the West. This is a Copernican revolution from subaltern nation to spearhead of the transition to socialism, which can be legitimately described as an epic process of national and class liberation, as evidenced by Domenico Losurdo in multiple occasions and writings (Losurdo, 1999; Losurdo, 2019; Losurdo, 2017; Losurdo, 2017).

At the same time, the political project of the People's Republic firmly stands in continuity with the broader experience of the international communist movement, since its beginning as the Chinese section of the Third International (Knight, 1996; Chan, 2003; Schwartz, 1951). Mao firmly framed the struggle for national independence as class struggle, in line with the anti-colonial commitment of the Baku Congress, and placed it in Lenin's, rather Gandhi's, fold (Losurdo, 2010; Zinoviev, 1920). Deng's economic reforms also learn from Lenin's own NEP, showing a capacity to recognise the presence of similar conditions in different countries at different times (Wei, 2018; Pantsov & Levine, 2015; Ziyi, 2019). However, this continuity appears most clearly in the diametrically opposite direction the People's Republic took in 1989 compared to the liquidation of the Marxist project in Eastern Europe. Nationalists and liberals tore down the Soviet Union and the other countries of actually existing socialism, claiming the end of history and dividing again the people by bloodlines (Fukuyama, 1992; Beissinger, 2009; de Waal, 2013). As other polities broke the continuity of their revolutionary political project, the People's Republic surprised many and deserves perennial memory, since most elites elsewhere acquiesced, accommodated and adapted to the new liberal and nationalist political projects (Sorini & Tiné, 2014; Colton & Tucker, 1995).

The People's Republic, more than others, took upon itself the baton of concretely continuing a path towards socialism for the whole of the international communist movement. By its very existence it refused to legitimise the end of history and the ineluctability of capitalism, which became truisms in the 1990s and early 2000s. It also quietly kept relations with foreign communist parties, large and small, becoming an important moral beacon in the darkest hour of the international communist movement (Shambaugh, 2016; Lulu & Hála, 2018; Wang J. , 2011). So the People's Republic sowed the seeds of its prestige, which germinated once the great crisis of 2007 showed manifestly that capitalism is not the natural form of social production (Guo, 2011). More than any theoretical proof, the evident success of its political project demonstrates the factual possibility of another kind of society and production, which puts collective politics above private interests and rejects the primacy of markets in favour of planning.

Nevertheless, this success would have not been possible if the People's Republic had not craftily joined continuity with innovation (Li Z. , 2013; Xi, 2013; Hu J. , 2012). Already in the beginning, Mao brought forth great developments in revolutionary theory and practice. His novel approach to farmers inverted their traditional depiction as a reactionary class and he anticipated Soviet's analysis on the unity between class struggle and anticolonial struggle till the logical necessity of large united fronts (Sheel, 1989; Losurdo, 2015; Mao, 2017). Once in power, Mao paid attention to the social developments within the Soviet Union, detecting early warning signs of its difficulties and proposing thus a different approach: a constant mass mobilisation as continuation of the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat (Losurdo, 1999). Although unsuccessful in that specific initiative, this

willingness to innovate has undeniably underpinned the success of the People's Republic. Also, Deng's reforms towards a socialist market economy linearly fits in the continuous attempt to innovate the communist practice to suit China's actual conditions (Xu G. , 2019).

Such innovative practices would have not been possible without innovative theoretical contributions from Chinese thinkers (Hu D. , 2010; Weiguang, 2011; Ware, 2013; Krawczyk, 2019). Contrary to the layman's doxa in the West mentioned above, China is a major source of theoretical elaboration for the whole communist movement, striving to adapt Marxist theory to the ever-changing modes of production. Although the language barrier still prevents their widespread knowledge abroad, China's numerous Marxist journals and institutes continuously advance Marxist thought because they, unlike Western radical academia, are grounded in daily revolutionary practice in a symbiotic feedback loop. Hence, theoreticians in the People's Republic have been able to learn from a century of real socialism and from its mistakes, without straying from the road (Shambaugh, 2008; Xu & Han, 2018). Unlike others, they have neither repudiated the story of the international communist movement, nor retreated into a sterile veneration of the past nor escaped in fantasy worlds (Bastani, 2019; Pascale, 2019; Canfora, 2019). This fruitful innovation produced so novel theoretical elaboration on ownership relations, on State-market relations and on the definition of market socialism, where capitalist production is subsumed to the public interest.

As an example of this crafty conjunction of continuity and innovation with and within the international communist movement, it is worth mentioning here how the People's Republic of China carried its legal reforms with the fundamental contribution of Italian communist scholars (Diliberto, 2012; Schipani, 2009). In the mid-1990s, Chinese scholars and administrators had indeed recognised the need of a new legal framework for market socialism and that they couldn't rely on the Soviet legal experience due to the novel situation (Ma, 2012; Wu, 2011). In the meanwhile, thanks also to fortuitous conditions, some Italian and Chinese communist scholars had already joined their forces to study Roman law and its idea of a civil code since the late 1980s. This grassroots innovation continued the previous experience of Marxist legal scholars in Italy in the study of the mixed economy and of its opportunities, through the lens of their different historical and national conditions. Thus, as Italy was turning towards the neoliberal reaction, Chinese scholars had already absorbed the lesson of their Italian peers and the People's Republic is now a major centre for legal scholarship with its own production, developments and innovations.

The long-term vision, that of the "eyes of history" of the revolutionary movement, and the capacity for renewal were so the fundamental premises of the important and inedited results achieved by the People's Republic of China and the Communist Party.

### **Renewal in continuity: the question of power**

This lesson on continuity and innovation is extremely valuable, since it concerns the economy, the concrete mode of transition to socialism and, ultimately, power itself. In this context, China has not forgotten or denied the lesson of Soviet socialism and the overall history of the international communist movement in the twentieth century, which is ultimately the question of power: the need for full exercise of power, in a socialist way, guaranteed by the fundamental and adamant leadership role of the Communist Party (Mao, 2017; Wang C. , 2013; Xu G. , 2013; Liu Y. , 2011).

Faithful to the lesson of Mao, the Chinese Communist Party has renewed its practice over and over to address the principal contradiction in each historical phase. Theoretical advancements identified the principle contradiction as conditions changed, starting from the concrete analysis of the concrete situation. In this way, the People's Republic could plan and employ political power to overcome the contraction. For the present purposes, such innovation can be schematically divided in fundamental stages based on the main contradictions the Chinese Communist Party had given priority to at that time.

During the revolutionary anticolonial struggle, the Chinese Communist Party located the main contradiction in the defence of national independence against Japanese aggression. It thus sought to include other classes in its own revolutionary project, even at times of military fight with them (Losurdo, 2015; Mao, 2017). Only after the defeat of the invaders the Party re-launched in its revolutionary campaign against the internal reactionary forces.

From 1949 to 1956 then, the People's Republic identified as priority the need for a radical change in the nature of the relations of production, in view of the development of the forces of production. At this time, it began the pivotal agrarian reform, that established ownership of the land, and a gradual nationalisation of private companies, starting with those owned by the largest capitalists (Li M. , 2008). It also started the centralization of economic and production planning along the generally agreed Marxist consensus of the time.

Through such centralisation, China achieved a fast growth rate, which registered a great accumulation of produced capital, above all in the heavy industrial sector. However, the overall economy remained underdeveloped (Li M. , 2008). This contradiction, between a fast wealth accumulation and persistent backwardness, was thus identified as the main contradiction between 1956 to 1978.

As generally acknowledged, it is possible to identify a major wave of innovation from 1978 onwards, effectively a third phase of the historical story of socialism in China after the anticolonial struggle and the Mao years. This phase identifies the main contradiction in the backward development of the productive forces and it coincides with the reforms and opening policies implemented by Deng Xiaoping: starting from those years, the development of mercantile relations is encouraged, but under the caveat that it never questions the primacy of the Communist Party and the decisive role of public and collective property in China's economic life (Losurdo, 1999; Zeng, 2012). Said otherwise, Deng placed its innovation in full continuity with the previous experience under Mao as part of a single political project. Deng recognised here that the difficulties in the construction of a new society, without precedent in human history, should not be thrown upon a single individual as collective scapegoat, as it was done in the Soviet Union. In this way, recognising and not denouncing its past, the Chinese Communist Party avoided to delegitimise its political project, the People's Republic, and instead fostered a productive, frank and innovative debate on the construction of socialism in China (Losurdo, 1999). As sign of this balance between continuity and innovation, the People's Republic gradually reviewed its position on the market in this opening process: in 2011 the Chinese reforms define the market as a basic factor for the allocation of resources, while it becomes a "decisive" factor in 2014.

More recently, the People's Republic identified a new main contradiction between the growing needs of the population and a still insufficient capacity to serve them. Since 2013, the People's Republic has focused its attention on this issue, alongside economic progress.

It progressively increased the prominence of this aspect over other, until the declaration in 2018 of the fundamental need for a balanced development and for the satisfaction of the people's material need for a better life.

From these schematic stages, it is possible to draw a common thread holding them together, in their overcoming the principal historically determined contradictions. Namely, in each case, the People's Republic built an original road of building socialism with Chinese characteristics through its punctual ability to achieve the planned objectives and keep a clear continuity in this edification process. Indeed, this long itinerary, motivated by the need to construct a path for socialism in determined historical conditions, has always maintained the continuity of the leadership of the Communist Party and the indispensable role of the most influential instruments of the socialist State: the planning and the role of public enterprises. It is largely due to these historical features of the Chinese communist leadership that the experience of China has managed to cross a stormy route like the one traced from the birth of the People's Republic until today, keeping the red flag of socialism unfurled as its inspiration and destination of the crossing in the history of the world revolutionary movement. Most lately, the Chinese Communist Party has also shown its Leninist ability to renovate itself in continuity with itself through its tough anti-corruption policy. On the contrary, the capitalist West cannot gain anymore the trust of its citizens precisely because it cannot anymore renew itself, imagine a desirable future and grant a public ethics.

This political project has defined a value system rooted in China's own history and civilisation, but at the same time universal thanks to the lesson of Marxism. In so, China's political project has renewed the thought of Marx and the historical experience of socialism, remaining faithful to it. The People's Republic has thus a vocation to universalism, while the capitalist West is marred by the crisis of its universalism, lost in the opposite particularisms of nativism and identity politics: the West is now a society that seems to have lost the material and ideal achievements won during the twentieth century thanks also to the universal drive of communist forces.

## **China and the dynamics of world liberal unipolarity**

This vocation to universalism by the People's Republic is based on a comprehensive view of humanity's goals in a human community with a shared future, as advocated by General Secretary Xi Jinping (Lingliang, 2016; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Yang & Yuan, 2018; The Central Unit of the Party Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013). Hence, thanks to this approach, the People's Republic of China can find solutions to the new problems of our time. China's political project is thus at the forefront of the compelling challenges of this epoch, starting from the climate change.

The historical experience of socialism with Chinese characteristics offers a radical alternative to the unipolar world of USA and NATO, whose militarist and neo-colonialist adventures have destabilised various regions and the whole globe. Indeed, the prestige of socialism with Chinese characteristics comes largely from its opposition to such unipolar world and from its opposite proposal of international relations and governance, based on mutual advantage and the rejection of war (Cheng, 2011; Zhang, 2011; Jian, 2014; Chen D., 2011; Bräutigam, 2011). Indeed, this stance is the more important, the more looming are the dangers of a new world conflict, whose chances are higher than ever after 1945 and whose features will be new as our times are new too (Colby & Mitchell, 2020).

Namely, part of the US establishment has been long pursuing a declared path of harsh confrontation with China and Russia, whose outcomes may be dramatic (Green, 2019; Standish, 2020; Cohen & Mearsheimer, 2018). Once again, the military and foreign policy establishment of the US confirms itself as the key threat to peace, cooperation and multilateralism in international relations. This reactionary element in the US society keeps igniting sparks of conflicts across the globe in the hope of triggering a major conflagration: from North Africa (Libya) and the Middle East (Syria and Iran) to Latin America (Nicaragua and Venezuela) and Eastern Europe (Ukraine). Here, the current presidential administration is traversed by elements of contradiction and discontinuity respect to the previous imperialist orthodoxy, as happened in relation to Syria (Posen, 2018). However, the same administration has launched a new trade war against China, for which it found support in the US establishment under the “America First” banner to maintain though new means the US/NATO dominance over mankind’s destiny.

This strategy does not reduce the risks of a global conflict, because it aims at preserving US unilateralism as rule in international relations beyond its expiry date, despite the catastrophic results of this approach across the world, as in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. The foreign policy of President Trump is as dangerous as the orthodoxy of its predecessors: US imperialism stands apart from others because it was built over the military might and the military-industrial complex of that country, which cannot live without them. Declarations in the opposite directions, such as against NATO, were limited to the presidential campaign and were quickly forgotten.

Nevertheless, risks for the world peace would not disappear if Trump was to lose the 2020 presidential election: Trump’s presidency is not an aberration of the system, but the manifestation of long-dated trends within the capitalist system that were until now hidden under a politically correct discourse. Too often liberals have endorsed the imperialist orthodoxy of his predecessors under the banner of human rights and liberal cosmopolitanism (Keys, 2014; Hetland, 2019; Hensman, 2018; Norton & Blumenthal, 2019). Similarly, the other two poles of world imperialism, the European Union and Japan, have increased the scale of their foreign interventions, chiefly symbolised in the open war of aggression against Libya.

Chinese foreign policy appears even more radically different in the light of what just said: its idea of international relations is inextricably premised upon the active preservation of world peace. Indeed, peace is a necessity for the world’s proletariat, because at the present highest stage of capitalism the call for peace is a call for anti-imperialism, rather than for a Gandhian non-violence. This is the only adequate way to foster the birth of a new epoch, which the people of the world are shaping. Earth shall reject the imperialist poles and needs instead a “world government”, to use an expression of Enrico Berlinguer.

Unsurprisingly, China has gained much goodwill in Africa, a difficult and complex region. This goodwill is proven by today’s support at FAO, but also by the cooperation agreements recently signed between China and over 40 African countries. These can hardly be compared with the attitude of the West towards Africa, marked by territorial occupation and neo-colonialism. It is an unprecedented historical process, whose challenge to capitalism has a scope is possibly larger than other attempts during the twentieth century.

## A way forward for the West's progressive forces

Progressive and alternative forces in the West must thus engage with this global political (r)evolution. If we were to hold a “lecture upon our adversaries” in Palmiro Togliatti’s style, we would say that Italy’s Salvini and the radical right, ruling today in many crucial countries, understood well the need of a clear international stance for a national policy of hegemony and consolidation; on the contrary, we would say that his nominal opponents have not understood that yet: our reference to the Sinophobia of Italy’s Democratic Party is not casual. Namely, large sections of the Italian centre-left attacked the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Italy and China few months ago (Scalfarotto, 2019; Alfieri, 2019; Alfieri, 2019). These forces tend to oppose EU integration against the sovereign independence of Italy to weave solid international relations outside the Euro-Atlantic scheme, clearly favouring the former over the latter.

For these and other reasons, the Italian Communist Party developed firmly a critical position against the European Union, its liberal rules and its outlook: the anti-fascist Constitution born out of the communist-Christian compromise has a primacy over EU’s liberal treaties and too much sovereignty has been already transferred from national parliaments to undemocratic EU institutions (Diliberto, Giacché, & Fausto Sorini, 2011; Giacché, 2015). EU economic policies have been the tool to erode workers’ rights and shift income from labour to capital. These policies are the opposite of what the socialism with Chinese characteristics has done, making China great and prosperous. These policies are supported transversally by conservative, social-democrat and liberal parties, creating the social base of unhappiness and anger in which nationalists, like Salvini and Trump, have found their consensus. As Samir Amin said, a project of “European reconstruction must pass through the demolition of the current project” to look eastwards, to China and Russia, and so return sovereignty to Europe, now caged in the Euro-Atlantic domination of US and NATO (Amin, 2017).

The Italian Communist Party defended the Memorandum of Understanding signed by Italy’s Prime Minister Conte few months ago: the New Silk Road is a wondrous tool of economic growth and cultural exchange, especially for the South of Italy and of the world, towards the new world whose birth we must hasten (Italian Communist Party, 2019). Many Italians, and the Italian youth in particular, are now discovering China and see their opportunities with China, thanks to the People’s Republic cooperation policy and multiple achievements, but also due to the humiliations and dearth of opportunities in the European Union. A section of the Italian small and medium enterprises is already pursuing growth within the Belt and Road and away from the monopolistic rentier environment at home, choosing instead to try themselves in new markets and new challenges. The material improvements of economic conditions and the satisfaction of most life expectations illustrate better than a thousand words the superiority of socialism with Chinese characteristics to Italian workers, whose wages are now lower than for their Chinese peers. Beyond this, General Secretary Xi Jinping has rightfully highlighted that Chinese-Italian relations exceed a mere commercial partnership, but are rooted in meeting of our two ancient cultures and look forward our common future.

Therefore, the support for Chinese policies on the international scene reflect the pursuit of global peace, containing mankind’s most dangerous imperialist tendencies. However, it reflects also the participation in a broader project of political transformation for the whole



society through a new approach to international relations, economy and the relation between State and market.

The support for China's positive role and multilateralism should be a necessary condition for all progressive forces trying to build an alternative to nationalism: its current rise must be defeated together with the real forces changing the world. Yet, the support for China's positive role goes far beyond our current political battles and is the unavoidable requirement to re-open the prospect of an alternative to capitalism itself.

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