

Socialists and China: An Exchange

Tuesday 12 January 2010, by [FASFALIS Dimitris](#), [LIPPMANN Walter](#), [RIDDELL John](#), [ROSENFELD Herman](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2010).

A LeftViews Exchange

John Riddell's Socialist Voice article on China's 'Great Leap Forward' [1] has prompted a discussion on how socialists should view and respond to China. The following are comments by Walter Lippmann, who maintains the CubaNews [2] mailing list, and Herman Rosenfeld of Socialist Project [3], with responses by John Riddell

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Walter Lippmann and John Riddell

Walter Lippmann: A comment on "50 Years After"

All this doom-and-gloom commentary doesn't help to explain how China, despite all of the terrible things John Riddell says the Chinese leadership has been and continues to do, has become the world economic powerhouse that it has.

Guided by the conception that China's leadership has deliberately done the wrong thing, at least according to the Canadian John Riddell, it would be hard to explain the progress mixed with the problems which has taken place in the People's Republic. As a minimum, China's "failure", as perceived by John Riddell in 2009, can be explained simply by the PRC's failure to do what John Riddell thinks they should have done instead of what they did do, long decades after the Chinese fact.

China today is one of the world's workshops. It's been so successful that the United States of America is in deep economic debt to China, which is holding large amounts of US-government financial obligations. This may be one of the reasons why Washington no longer tries to blockade China as it did for the first quarter century after the triumph of the Chinese Revolution in 1949.

Though some foreign investors have made lots of money from their Chinese investments, and social differentiation in the People's Republic is substantial, it is ALSO true the China is an international economic giant. These facts are at odds with one another from a socialist perspective, but are they entirely contradictory? Isn't it possible that both are true at the same time? It's obvious that it is.

Just why some Canadian radicals, like some in the United States and Australia as well, seem so

bound and determined to revile China, rather than focusing primarily on how to understand what has happened and why, is certainly beyond my understanding.

Instead of trying to force the Chinese square peg into the round hole of the experience in the early years of the Soviet Union, it would seem better to try to look at China through the prism of its own history, culture, traditions and experiences. The idea of historical models, against which each socialist experience is to be judged – and usually found wanting – should be jettisoned, in my opinion.

Fidel Castro has a completely different view of developments in China. [4]

John Riddell: Reply to Walter Lippmann

Walter Lippmann is right to stress the remarkable successes of China's development into "an international economic giant." He also provides a link to useful statements by Fidel Castro on the Chinese revolution.

But what is his quarrel with my article, "50 Years After: The Tragedy of China's Great Leap Forward"? Walter's comment makes no reference to my topic and no specific reference to the article. Yet he dismisses the article as "gloom and doom commentary."

Did he read the article's opening paragraphs? They state:

"On October 1, the People's Republic of China will mark the 60th anniversary of its foundation. This will be an occasion to celebrate one of the most influential victories of popular struggle in our era.

"This great uprising forged a united and independent Chinese state, freed the country from foreign domination and capitalist rule, ended landlordism, provided broad access to education and health care, and set in motion popular energies that modernized and industrialized its economy. The revolutionary triumph of 1949 laid the foundation for China's present dynamism and influence, as well as providing an enormous impetus to anti-colonial revolution worldwide."

Does Walter disagree with this assessment?

Walter refers us to Fidel Castro's comments on China. But nowhere does Fidel take up the 'Great Leap' experience. This is in fact unnecessary: one need only compare the heavy-handed methods of 'Great Leap', and its disastrous results, with the care and wisdom of Cuban policy toward farmers over fifty years of revolutionary history.

Walter seems to wonder why a socialist today – a 'Canadian', no less – would wish to analyze events that took place so far away and so long ago.

This question is answered in the sentence of my article immediately following the quote given above. It asks why *"the socialist movement and ideology that headed the revolution, identified with Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, disappeared from China soon after his death in 1976."*

The revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party began with sweeping authority and prestige in all sectors of society – more extensive than in any other anti-capitalist revolution of its century. Today the Communist Party still rules, and the flame of anti-imperialism is strong in the

consciousness of Chinese working people. But there is no socialist movement in China. No sector of the world's oppressed and exploited look to today's China for political guidance and inspiration. Despite its immense wealth and prestige, China does not carry out international solidarity work on the scale even of small, poor, and embattled Cuba.

My article aimed to take a small step toward an explanation, by describing the circumstances in which the close alliance of the Chinese Communist Party with the peasantry was shattered.

This is an issue worth debating.

Herman Rosenfeld, John Riddell and Dimitris Fasfalis

Herman Rosenfeld: Email to John Riddell

Your response is quite correct and quite measured, but it doesn't openly articulate (although it alludes to) a critical point that folks like Lippmann conveniently leave out: China no longer attempts to build a society based on the solidaristic principles and collective capacities of working people - in other words, socialism. It looks to build a modern economic defined and motivated by the private accumulation of capital in all of its most fetishistic elements.

Just because it is ruled by a single-party dictatorship that relies on its revolutionary roots and the vestiges of an earlier socialist tradition doesn't make it socialist. There are reasons that working people around the world don't look to China as a model of a different society (but possibly as a model of raw development, where a strong state can help shape that development).

John Riddell: Email to Herman Rosenfeld

You put it very well. You capture the essence of the problem in China.

But I think there is more to it than that:

* The rise of Chinese capitalism builds on the victory of the Chinese revolution against feudalism and imperialist domination. Chinese economic vigour testifies that this revolution is still strong. There is plenty of evidence that it lives in the consciousness of the Chinese people.

* China also benefits from the strength of the state as an economic player, especially with respect to the banks. This has been shown in China's ability to sail through two major capitalist financial collapses, one regional (a decade ago) and the other worldwide. I hesitate to ascribe socialist significance to the state sector; it seems more to be state capitalist. But let's recall what Lenin said about the progressive significance of state capitalism, under certain circumstances. The circumstance in China is that the strong state sector and state economic dirigism greatly strengthen China's defenses against its imperialist rivals.

* China is often called imperialist, but I don't see the evidence. Certainly Chinese international

economic policy is motivated mainly by desire for gain and only very rarely by considerations of solidarity. But the Chinese state does not appear to need at present to conquer spheres of influence and assert its economic and political domination over client states and semi-colonies. China has been helpful to countries like Cuba under U.S. attack. China leans toward defending the sovereignty of poor countries, much to the annoyance of the U.S.

* My feeling is that the need to defend China against imperialist incursions is still posed, and needs to be taken into account in approaching questions like Tibetan self-determination.

One Response to "Socialists and China: An Exchange"

Dimitris Fasfalis on 11 Jan 2010 at 8:50 am #

In response to Rosenfeld's email reply, John Riddell writes:

"China is often called imperialist, but I don't see the evidence. Certainly Chinese international economic policy is motivated mainly by desire for gain and only very rarely by considerations of solidarity. But the Chinese state does not appear to need at present to conquer spheres of influence and assert its economic and political domination over client states and semi-colonies."

The evidence, however, of Chinese imperialistic policies exists: Chinese foreign direct investments in African countries such as Angola, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroun and Nigeria are designed to secure, thus to control, energy and mineral supplies. These economic relations are not market "equal-to-equal" relations (in the sense described by Marx in Capital) but have more to do with clientelism and control by the stronger of both parties, i.e. China. The other side (the dependent states) are most often by a low development rate and a comprador bourgeoisie using the state as a source of revenues and social/international consideration.

It is nonetheless true that for many countries relations with China have been welcomed since they respect national sovereignty and provide an alternative to Western imperialism and its IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programs.

This does not however contradict the imperialistic character of China's foreign policy in economically dependent countries, since China's capital exports are often used as an instrument of power and domination, and not as any other way of "doing business". It seems to me that this is the heart of Lenin's theory of imperialism and it applies to China today even though it has been itself a dependent and imperialist-dominated country in the past.

Socialists do not have to compromise themselves with the Chinese bureaucrats and capitalists: their duty is to express solidarity with those who fight for democratic rights and against the exploitation of man by man, whoever they are, monks included.

P.S.

* LeftViews is Socialist Voice's forum for articles related to rebuilding the left in Canada and around the world, reflecting a wide variety of socialist opinion:

<http://www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=917>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [50 Years After: The Tragedy of China's 'Great Leap Forward'](#)

[2] <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CubaNews/>

[3] <http://www.socialistproject.ca/>

[4] A selection of his commentaries on China over the past ten years can be found here:
<http://www.walterlippmann.com/fc-china.html>