

David Harvey and Richard Wolff Romanticize China Out of Orientalism, if Nothing Else

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IT HAS PROVEN odd that leftist thinkers, such as Marxian economist Richard Wolff and Marxist geographer David Harvey, have proven unusually praising of China in recent comments. Wolff and Harvey have both expressed the view that China's economy represents something fundamentally different from western capitalism; this view is based on the claim that socialist legacies in China persist from the Maoist period, and this has pushed contemporary China to become something qualitatively different from western capitalism.

Indeed, this has proven fanciful, with Harvey and Wolff both neglecting the rather basic fact that China is one of the world's most unequal societies. But rather than, say, speak to an average Chinese worker about what they think about their lot in life, Harvey and Wolff have become lost in fanciful dreams about China. Harvey and Wolff seem spellbound by China's spectacular economic growth and, in a rather poor form for leftists who should by definition be critical of all forms of authoritarians, take policy declarations by Chinese leaders about the need to fight inequality at face value. This takes place at a time when Joe Biden spews similar rhetoric about the need for social inequality, though Harvey and Wolff would scarcely afford Biden's claims such seriousness.

Recent podcast by David Harvey

What Harvey and Wolff seem to do is conflate a quantitative difference for a qualitative one. China is the world's most populous country, with a population of around 1.4 billion to America's population of 329.5 million. Yet despite having a population four times larger than the US, it is only now that China is on the verge of overtaking the US to become the world's largest economy.

While for Harvey and Wolff that reflects the intrinsically superior nature of the Chinese system, flipping this logic on its head, if China is only now overtaking the US in terms of the size of its economy despite its population being four times larger, China is, in fact, an incredibly inefficient economy.

Harvey and Wolff seem to have become spellbound by China's incredible economic growth in past decades. But what are self-proclaimed Marxists so fixated on growth, a fundamentally capitalist metric that assumes an economy can simply expand without limit endlessly into infinity?

Yet Harvey and Wolff's mistake also returns to that they treat the US and China as though they were comparable entities that allow for a one-to-one comparison, without allowing for differences in population, geography, resources, and other factors. Falling into the Westphalian framework of equivalence between nation-states makes China seem superior by virtue of some secret sauce it has which the US doesn't, never mind how much larger China is than the US, to begin with. In this sense, Harvey and Wolff fall into fuzzy thinking about comparisons between the US and China, projecting the nation-state as a framework of equivalence between the two.

This all proves particularly ironic coming from western leftists. China's spectacular growth ultimately returns to the fact that it is playing catch-up with the US and western nations, as a result of conditions of uneven development. China's economic growth will consequently slow once it catches up to the US—and one notes that before the COVID-19 pandemic, [China's economic growth was already slowing](#). But its poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly set the US back in terms of economic growth projections.

There have been many efforts made to explain China's so-called backwardness and why it was Europe that rose up to become the great world power it did and not China in past centuries, the debate around the so-called "Great Divergence". Nevertheless, it is probable that it is factors of geography, access to resources, and other material factors that led Europe to take off more than some secret sauce or essentialist trait that Europe had which China did not—a point that Harvey or Wolff would probably agree on. And, as should go without saying, any prospective rise by China was dealt a significant blow by western colonialism and imperialism in past centuries, something that furthered conditions of "backwardness" in China.

If this is so, it hardly stands to reason that western leftists such as Harvey or Wolff should essentialize contemporary China as having some sort of logic outside of capitalism that the West does not have. China's rapid growth is because China is playing catch-up to a West that left China straight-jacketed in conditions of "backwards" development. Harvey and Wolff's fetishization of China's growth, then, is in some sense a fetishization and romanticization of conditions of uneven development imposed upon China by the West—except now, out of a desire to counterpose China as an alternative to the West, they now romanticize a condition of its lagging development.

Indeed, in a recent talk by Wolff, one notes that Wolff dismisses Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan as mere distractions used as wedge issues by declining US empire against China. Nevertheless, considering the global semiconductor shortage and the reliance of both US and Chinese supply chains on Taiwan, [which manufactures over half of the world's semiconductors](#), it proves for Wolff—an economist, ostensibly—to prove so ignorant of a basic facet of the world economy. One also is struck by the narcissism of dismissing China's imprisonment of over a million Uyghurs in "reeducation" camps, using rhetoric drawn from the US War on Terror.

Recent talk by Richard Wolff

This would simply be another extension of Wolff's US-centrism. In discussing US empire, he then goes off into discussing fancifully imagined fantasies of China pursuing socioeconomic equality and a heretofore never before seen vision of global equality in a way that the US does not. Nowhere does Wolff cite any evidence for this and China is only held up as some utopian alternative to the US, Wolff is dismissive of anything negative about China. This pertains especially to how China, like the US, has proven to be a carceral state.

This, then, can only be termed Orientalism, where Orientalism often involves the romanticization of what is different as superior, and a disregard of the actual lived experience of Asians. Yet this fuzzy thinking about the nation-state as a unit of analysis is common and at a time of global economic crisis, western leftists seem to be bent on fetishizing China as an alternative to what is closer to home, never mind their lack of knowledge about conditions in China and reliance on diaspora nationalists who themselves also see China in only the rosier terms.

Perhaps one simply should expect little from western leftists, who arguably are themselves trapped in a condition of imperial insularity that leaves them unable to see the rest of the world except as a distorted reflection of themselves. "The splinter in your eye is the best mirror," perhaps, as Adorno said.

Brian Hioe

P.S.

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<https://newbloommag.net/2021/12/12/wolff-harvey-china-romanticize/>

Brian Hioe is one of the founding editors of New Bloom. He is a freelance journalist, as well as a translator. A New York native and Taiwanese-American, he has an MA in East Asian Languages and Cultures from Columbia University and graduated from New York University with majors in History, East Asian Studies, and English Literature. He was Democracy and Human Rights Service Fellow at the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy from 2017 to 2018.