

No Shangri-La

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The media imposes certain stories on us, and the one about Tibet goes like this. The People's Republic of China, which, back in 1949, illegally occupied Tibet, has for decades engaged in the brutal and systematic destruction not only of the Tibetan religion, but of the Tibetans themselves. Recently, the Tibetans' protests against Chinese occupation were again crushed by military force. Since China is hosting the 2008 Olympics, it is the duty of all of us who love democracy and freedom to put pressure on China to give back to the Tibetans what it stole from them. A country with such a dismal human rights record cannot be allowed to use the noble Olympic spectacle to whitewash its image. What will our governments do? Will they, as usual, cede to economic pragmatism, or will they summon the strength to put ethical and political values above short-term economic interests?

There are complications in this story of 'good guys versus bad guys'. It is not the case that Tibet was an independent country until 1949, when it was suddenly occupied by China. The history of relations between Tibet and China is a long and complex one, in which China has often played the role of a protective overlord: the anti-Communist Kuomintang also insisted on Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. Before 1949, Tibet was no Shangri-la, but an extremely harsh feudal society, poor (life expectancy was barely over 30), corrupt and fractured by civil wars (the most recent one, between two monastic factions, took place in 1948, when the Red Army was already knocking at the door). Fearing social unrest and disintegration, the ruling elite prohibited industrial development, so that metal, for example, had to be imported from India.

Since the early 1950s, there has been a history of CIA involvement in stirring up anti-Chinese troubles in Tibet, so Chinese fears of external attempts to destabilise Tibet are not irrational. Nor was the Cultural Revolution, which ravaged Tibetan monasteries in the 1960s, simply imported

by the Chinese: fewer than a hundred Red Guards came to Tibet. The youth mobs that burned the monasteries were almost exclusively Tibetan. As the TV images demonstrate, what is going on now in Tibet is no longer a peaceful 'spiritual' protest by monks (like the one in Burma last year), but involves the killing of innocent Chinese immigrants and the burning of their stores.

It is a fact that China has made large investments in Tibet's economic development, as well as its infrastructure, education and health services. To put it bluntly: in spite of China's undeniable oppression of the country, the average Tibetan has never had such a high standard of living. There is worse poverty in China's western rural provinces: child slave labour in brick factories, abominable conditions in prisons, and so on.

In recent years, China has changed its strategy in Tibet: depoliticised religion is now tolerated, often even supported. China now relies more on ethnic and economic colonisation than on military coercion, and is transforming Lhasa into a Chinese version of the Wild West, in which karaoke bars alternate with Buddhist theme parks for Western tourists. In short, what the images of Chinese soldiers and policemen terrorising Buddhist monks conceal is a much more effective American-style socio-economic transformation: in a decade or two, Tibetans will be reduced to the status of Native Americans in the US. It seems that the Chinese Communists have finally got it: what are secret police, internment camps and the destruction of ancient monuments, compared with the power of unbridled capitalism?

One of the main reasons so many people in the West participate in the protests against China is ideological: Tibetan Buddhism, deftly propagated by the Dalai Lama, is one of the chief points of reference for the hedonist New Age spirituality that has become so popular in recent times. Tibet has become a mythic entity onto which we project our dreams. When people mourn the loss of an authentic Tibetan way of life, it isn't because they care about real Tibetans: what they want from Tibetans is that they be authentically spiritual for us, so that we can continue playing

our crazy consumerist game. 'Si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l'autre,' Gilles Deleuze wrote, 'vous êtes foutu.' The protesters against China are right to counter the Beijing Olympic motto - 'One World, One Dream' - with 'One World, Many Dreams'. But they should be aware that they are imprisoning Tibetans in their own dream.

The question is often asked: given the explosion of capitalism in China, when will democracy assert itself there, as capital's 'natural' political form of organisation? The question is often put another way: how much faster would China's development have been if it had been combined with political democracy? But can the assumption be made so easily? In a TV interview a couple of years ago, Ralf Dahrendorf linked the increasing distrust of democracy in post-Communist Eastern Europe to the fact that, after every revolutionary change, the road to new prosperity leads through a 'vale of tears'. After socialism breaks down the limited, but real, systems of socialist welfare and security have to be dismantled, and these first steps are necessarily painful. The same goes for Western Europe, where the passage from the welfare state model to the new global economy involves painful renunciations, less security, less guaranteed social care. Dahrendorf notes that this transition lasts longer than the average period between democratic elections, so that there is a great temptation to postpone these changes for short-term electoral gain. Fareed Zakaria has pointed out that democracy can only 'catch on' in economically developed countries: if developing countries are 'prematurely democratised', the result is a populism that ends in economic catastrophe and political despotism. No wonder that today's economically most successful Third World countries (Taiwan, South Korea, Chile) embraced full democracy only after a period of authoritarian rule.

Following this path, the Chinese used unencumbered authoritarian state power to control the social costs of the transition to capitalism. The weird combination of capitalism and Communist rule proved not to be a ridiculous paradox, but a blessing. China has developed so fast not in spite of authoritarian Communist rule, but because of it.

There is a further paradox at work here. What if the promised second stage, the democracy that follows the authoritarian vale of tears, never arrives? This, perhaps, is what is so unsettling about China today: the suspicion that its authoritarian capitalism is not merely a reminder of our past - of the process of capitalist accumulation which, in Europe, took place from the 16th to the 18th century - but a sign of our future? What if the combination of the Asian knout and the European stock market proves economically more efficient than liberal capitalism? What if democracy, as we understand it, is no longer the condition and motor of economic development, but an obstacle to it?

P.S.

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