

The left must stand against Xi Jinping's totalitarian China

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The Chinese communist elite is the enemy of the Chinese workers. Its Western apologists need to be confronted.

On 4 January 2022 the Hong Kong democracy activist Chow Hang-tung was sentenced to 15 months' imprisonment for writing an article in which she urged people to light candles privately to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, since they had been banned from doing so in public. She is already serving a 12-month sentence for attempting to defy the ban.

From the dock, she said: "The only way to defend freedom of speech is to continue to speak. Words have inherent vitality and can never be defined by law or authority... The dead are not a hoax, nor a conspiracy of foreign powers, but a series of lives. The real scam is to shield the murderer in the name of law, and to erase the existence of the victim in the name of the country: a country that does not even respect the deceased."

Chow's words reminded me of the 20th-century German philosopher Walter Benjamin's warning, as he tried to flee the Nazi occupation of France, that "not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious". Dictatorships need to dominate the past as well as the present. They need to erase all memory of political and moral alternatives. And the ultimate way of doing so is to control history.

That is what China is doing to Chow Hang-tung and the victims of 1989, and to all the other lawyers, journalists and novelists it has jailed for writing the wrong words. And this theft of the past is becoming systematic.

In November last year the Communist Party of China (CCP) passed a resolution on its own history. For only the third time in its 100-year existence, it issued an official account of its past. The document is a paean of praise for Xi Jinping, elevating him to the same status as Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic, and Deng Xiaoping, the leader of China between 1978 and 1989.

It contains a dire warning against "the erosive influence of Western trends of political thought, including the so-called constitutionalism, alternation of power between political parties, and separation of powers". And it blames the 1989 uprising on "anti-communist and anti-socialist forces abroad" - while, naturally, praising the party for "defending China's socialist state power" - ie, murdering, jailing and torturing thousands of democracy protesters, and erasing the memory of the politicians who supported them.

You might hope that anyone remotely connected with the Labour Party could recognise the injustices being perpetrated by the CCP; that they might acknowledge the link between the imposition of a wholly artificial narrative about the past and the crimes of the present.

But not Socialist Action. If you don't know who Socialist Action are, you haven't been following

Labour politics for the past six years. Under Jeremy Corbyn, together with a few Brezhnev nostalgics clustered around the Morning Star, its members became highly influential in the leader's office.

On 16 December Socialist Action published a definitive commentary on the CCP's history resolution [1], by the Renmin University-based economist John Ross. It argued that "The economic policies embarked on by China under Reform and Opening Up, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and the other leaders of the CPC, saved world socialism... China, rightly, never proposed to other countries to copy its 'model'. But any progressive force with sense would study China's success to understand what lessons could be applied to the situation of its own country."

By abandoning state ownership and smashing the welfare state built under Mao, argues Ross, Deng unleashed a period of economic growth unmatched by any country in world history. That is true. The problem is that this was achieved by creating vast inequalities, turning the Communist Party elite into billionaires, jailing and torturing tens of thousands of dissidents and then - when a mass movement of workers and students demanded democracy in 1989 - shooting them dead and burying their memory.

Ross's claim, then, is not simply that China's turn to capitalism after 1978 led to spectacular development and poverty reduction - but that this was a form of socialism that "progressives" around the world should copy. For him, China's achievements were not simply material. They were "a triumph of Marxist thinking". By legitimising the presence of global finance, tech surveillance monopolies and manufacturing conglomerates, in which workers were forced to sign contracts promising not to commit suicide under stress, Xi Jinping "brought China's economic structure more into line with Marx", he writes.

Let's understand what's going on here. No socialist can deny, or lament, the emergence of 850 million people from abject rural poverty through a process of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. But we can criticise how it was done. And we can support the right of China's workers and peasants to self-organise in pursuit of a better life and to seek political expression through parties and free elections, as British workers did from the time of the Peterloo Massacre in 1819.

Deng, by privatising most of China's heavy industry and opening the country to Western finance and foreign investment, did not "save world socialism". Arguably, he saved capitalism, as cheap Chinese imports suppressed Western inflation, while the jobs of millions of well-paid, unionised workers in the West moved to China and their bargaining power collapsed.

There is nothing the Western labour movement can do about that. But we can tell the truth about it. We can keep alive the history. We can show solidarity with what is left of the independent migrant workers' organisations, whose activities I covered as a BBC journalist. And we can show solidarity with those in Hong Kong struggling to maintain the last remnants of democracy.

This is what Ross, and his co-thinkers in the British labour movement, consistently refuse to do. Worse, they have begun to collude with the CCP's attempt to repossess Marxism. Under previous leaders, when Chinese bureaucrats hobnobbed with Western financiers in the strip clubs of Beijing, the CCP had little use for Marxist rhetoric. The party had become the representative of the "whole Chinese people" - ditching its claim to represent the working class and, for the first time, enthusiastically admitting the rising bourgeoisie.

The bureaucrats I met in Beijing in the 2000s talked about Keynes and Hayek, not Marx and Engels. Some were prepared to tolerate a limited and controlled democracy. One senior figure in the Shanghai party even told me the party should change its name to the "Commonwealth Party".

Those days are gone. Such was the discontent stirred by decades of inequality and self-enrichment that Xi was forced to crack down on the criminal empires and sleaze that characterised Chinese communist life. The ideology he adopted was the Marxism of the Moscow textbooks: the iron determinism created in the Stalinist academy to justify mass murder, incarceration and starvation in the 1930s.

But Xi was unlucky. Stalin faced no significant alternative form of Marxism. Even his opponents within the Soviet bureaucracy, from Leon Trotsky to Nikolai Bukharin, adhered to the same rigid historical method that was killing them. They knew nothing of Marx the humanist, Marx the philosopher of alienation, Marx the eco-socialist. They held to a rigid set of sociological certainties even as capitalism and fascism falsified them.

But Xi's adoption of Marx takes place in a world in which a critical, flexible, heterodox and humanist Marxism flourishes across global academia. Every student of film, culture or literature has heard of Walter Benjamin. Every black undergraduate has engaged with the works of Frantz Fanon. Every feminist has had to grapple with the ideas of Silvia Federici. And every politics student knows about Gramsci - whose Prison Notebooks systematically undermined the rote-learned determinism Xi venerates today. The tradition of "Western Marxism" is apparently so influential in the US that it has been declared anathema by the Republican right.

The billionaire communist elite has a problem. Not only must they destroy the truth about Tiananmen and rewrite their own history. Not only must they attack democracy, the rule of law and freedom of expression. They must also attack the humanist Marxism being taught in Western universities - and all anti-capitalist critiques of the totalitarian dictatorship in Beijing.

China is not our enemy. The Chinese people have a right to be proud of the new, global status of their country and their culture. The West needs to find a new, geopolitical equilibrium with China, not engage in fantasies of subjugation - either political, cultural or economic - in pursuit of a new Cold War.

But the Chinese communist elite is the enemy of the Chinese workers, and the declared enemy of our own democratic systems, and we need to criticise its Western apologists while we still have chance.

For, in a world dominated by Xi's "Marxism", not only would the Tiananmen Square massacre disappear from history. So, too, would the stories of Peterloo, the Chartists and the Wobblies, of Benjamin, Fanon, Gramsci and Marcuse, together with the founder of Chinese communism, Chen Du Xiu. From men like Xi Jinping, not even the dead are safe.

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P.S.

• The New Statesman. 5 January 2022:
<https://www.newstatesman.com/comment/2022/01/chinas-rise-is-a-triumph-of-capitalism-not-socialist-revolution>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.socialistaction.net/2021/12/16/the-international-and-historical-significance-of-the-resolution-on-the-history-of-the-cpc/>