

What is missing from the debate about the China-US contest

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“The people have their own war to fight, a war to restore their self-esteem and their political and economic rights to be free. Let us turn our ears in their direction and support their struggle. ”

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Beijing’s crackdown on Hong Kong has been escalating. Just before the New Year, the National Security Bureau of the Hong Kong Police froze the assets of Stand News and arrested current and former members of its management. The news agency announced its closure that night. The knock-on effect of the closure of Stand News was soon to be seen. On 2nd January this year another well-known online media outlet, Citizen News, also announced its closure to avoid possible prosecution. Carrie Lam soon dismissed that this resulted from attacks on the freedom of the press, claiming that it was simply closing of its own account.

The Crackdown on Hong Kong

Recent attacks on press freedom follow a major attack last year, when the authorities prosecuted Jimmy Lai, the boss of Apple Daily, under the newly passed National Security Law. The Daily was forced to close down this June when the authorities went on to freeze its assets.

The great purge is not just about Hong Kong. This was obvious when the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China was forced to disband this September, when its main mission was merely to hold an annual June Fourth memorial in the city.

And then on the 23rd of December, the statue Pillar of Shame at the University of Hong Kong was removed in the middle of the night. The statue was created by Danish artist Jens Galschiøt commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

There is a sector of Hong Kong civil organizations which have been disbanding or de-activating themselves in the past two years that have rarely been noticed. This sector is made up of Hong Kong organisations which have been supporting China’s civil society. Among them there have been around ten groups in Hong Kong doing China labour solidarity work. With Hong Kong trampled upon by Beijing, most of these groups have also either disbanded or deactivated.

Hong Kong is the third battle between the US and China, after their tension over the South China

Sea and then their trade war. But the Hong Kong case is a bit more complicated. Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong carries elements which relate to China's international relations, but there are also strong elements of domestic concern as well, namely the fear of people's memories of the June Fourth massacre and the fear that the democratic movement between mainland China and Hong Kong may join hands, as they did in 1989. Secondly, Beijing has to finish off Hong Kong's autonomy because it is dangerous to its continuous monopoly of power and its appropriation of the wealth of the nation - previously Mainland Chinese could learn about the rampant corruption of their leaders through the free press in Hong Kong. Nowadays, with the disappearance of the freedom of the press, Xi Jinping can sleep much better.

China as the embodiment of multiple contradictions

At the height of the 2019 revolt, Mike Pence made a speech targeting Beijing, which some consider to be a pronouncement of a new Cold War. I am hesitant to use the term 'new Cold War', however. During the old Cold War there was literally a hot war going on in Asia, and the US empire was the one who was on the offensive, while the Chinese and the Vietnamese were more on the defensive. Behind this offensive-defensive dichotomy there was also the opposition between colonialism and anti-colonialism. Anyone who was committed to democracy and self-determination for oppressed nations would not have chosen to be neutral, let alone to stand with the US.

Today's situation is very different. Beijing's current contest with the US is not a contest with imperialism per se, it is not meant to replace it with anything better. It is a contest about who has the final say in dividing up the global value chain, a contest between the ruling elites of both countries which is hence profoundly unjust as well. Just take a look at what Chinese corporations are doing around the world; their investments are the same as any imperialist or exploitative regime, namely to pursue the maximization of profit at the expense of the earth and the working people.

In trying to position oneself in the China-US contest, people are debating China's political regime. Some say China is an authoritarian regime, but this description is not very satisfactory because regular authoritarian regimes are not capable of asserting such a level of control over the whole population, from social and economic to thought control. With such a level of control it is tempting to say that China is more totalitarian than authoritarian. Again, the term carries a strong connotation of the old Cold War, although it seems that the term itself preceded the Cold War. I think one of the difficulties lies in the fact that China is a bit of everything. By some measurements it is a developing country, but by other measurements it is an emerging imperialist country. On the one hand it is the sweatshop of the world, and its sweatshops only receive a small proportion of the global value chain, something which is a typical of dependent accumulation. On the other hand, the Chinese state is pouring huge amounts of money into sponsoring indigenous innovation and is quite successful. It now also exhibits strong features of self-reliant accumulation. China is a collection of multiple contradictions.

Political Economy please

There is only one feature of the CCP which has been very consistent since 1949, and that is its hostility towards working people enjoying freedom of the press and democratic rights, and its insistence on its divine right to brainwash the people. I once had a chat with a Mainland dissident. He was detained for a month for his activity. When he was released, the secret police told him that, "our party respects freedom of thought and surely you can have your own thought, as long as you don't voice it". A thought without a voice is hardly the freedom of thought at all, however.

I think in the debate about the China-US contest, some focus too much on the merits or the demerits of this government or that government, forgetting that as socialists we should always put the people's well-being as the utmost concern. Some people may hastily proclaim that they agree with this and then roll out articles showing Beijing's performance on economic betterment, for instance how far Beijing has eradicated poverty, or how many labour laws have been passed, to prove that, "thanks to the CCP government the Chinese people's well-being has been taken care of, and hence this further proves that the Chinese state is progressive while the US state is reactionary". And then they decide to support Beijing in this global contest for hegemony.

Firstly, official figures are always misleading if not outright false, including the official propaganda that China has eradicated extreme poverty. Even top officials occasionally admit some truth. When the Premier Li Keqiang, who is very much marginalised by Xi Jinping, remarked that China has 600 million people (more than 40 percent of the Chinese population) with a monthly income of 1,000 RMB, the news shocked many people in China and the world - this is extreme poverty for many. Actually, most labour quasi-organisations or networks working at the grassroots do not need Premier Li to tell them about the dire poverty among working people. If one wants to know the real situation at the grassroots level, one needs to learn what common people have to say and how they live their lives. Unfortunately, few people who support Beijing in opposing the US are rarely concerned about real people.

Secondly, I argue that, in China's situation, the economic well-being of the working people should be judged in relation to the criteria of how many political rights do the people enjoy. One simply cannot divorce the political from the economic. When the people are denied even basic political rights, sooner or later they will lose everything. It is no accident that while the CCP could change its economic policies with a blink of the eyes (what I called "the policy variables") its one party dictatorship never ever changed (what I called "the despotic constant"), and in the worst situation it could further degenerate into autocracy, and it is exactly where China is heading to right now. The party bureaucracy knows very well that as long as they could literally vest all power in their hands it does not matter in changing their economic policies to suit the situation or to make some minor concessions. For the people, even if they have a reasonable income for the moment they are never safe; the danger of being appropriated once again by the state or by developers colluding with the party is always there. Just look at the peasants in Mao's era. They were allocated a plot of land during the land reform in the early 1950s, only to lose everything to the so-called commune within a few years. They got back their land in the 1980s, only to begin losing it again in the current land grab, often led by local party officials.

As for labour rights, when in 1995 the first labour code was enacted this was hailed as a great step forward for labour and many people praised it as the beginning of a Chinese "New Deal". Yet these people never bother about the non-enforcement of labour laws, or just shrugged their shoulders when they were told that when workers tried to claim their rights they were being arrested. With the extermination of labour NGOs in 2015, the non-enforcement of labour laws has gone worse, as the so called 996 labour dispute showed. This denial of basic political rights by the party state is enough for us to say that a judgement on the Chinese regime should never be based on economic performances alone, rather, this in itself must again be judged by political criteria. Hence from the standpoint of the working people, Beijing's Orwellian state is totally unjust and it must be replaced by a democratic one, and that the China-US contest should be judged in accordance with the people's interest of their historic fight for emancipation. We must back to the basic: the situation of capitalism demands a political economy in order to understand it fully, especially so when we are dealing with a Chinese state capitalism (even if it has a substantial private sector the state is still dominant). [\[1\]](#)

Ask the right question please

Further on, the argument about “whether or not the US government and the Chinese government are equally bad or equally strong” is also a false debate, because we don’t need to prove that the robber who robbed us is as bad as the other robber, or as strong, before we can lock him up. Maybe Beijing is not as bad as Washington, and it is definitely not as strong, but it is strong enough to crush its people, and it has been doing so for decades. Therefore, real socialists who place both the political and economic rights of the working people as their central concern, should prioritise their own struggle for emancipation above all else, and should only judge the China-US contest from this paramount struggle.

In the west a lot of good people hate the US empire. But you do not need to support Beijing in order to express your anger against the US; just as the Hong Kong localists don’t need to support Trump in order to express their anger against Beijing. It is the Chinese people that require your support. But who are the “Chinese people”? The difficulty lies in the fact that you don’t hear them much. What you hear is the CCP media claiming to represent Chinese people – the latter have been denied their own voice. In most of the international meetings among civil associations across the countries, be it trade unions or NGOs, not to mention political organisations, you rarely bump into their genuine representatives. Because real activists, not to mention genuine socialist activists, on top of being banned from going abroad to speak their own minds, are also constantly being hunted down and put into jail. At the same time pro-government scholars and governmental NGOs delegates travel around the world to prop up Beijing’s international image. Yet this voiceless-ness of the Chinese people is the loudest cry in the world! If you haven’t heard of it it is because you have not turned to the right direction, or because you take those the voice of the Party as the voice of the people.

Still occasionally the Chinese people do get heard. The wide spreading of the practice of “lying flat”, practically a spontaneous civil boycott of the state ideology of “work hard to climb up the social ladder and ask no questions about the Party’s monopoly of all resources”, is just one recent example of social discontent. As far as China-US contest is concerned, some years ago certain online media posted articles about a possible China-US war, and then one follow up comment drew a lot of attention. It said that Chinese people should support the war effort by first calling on the members of the party’s politburo to fight the war, and if they can’t win the war then the entire membership of the central committee should be sent to the frontline, followed by all the party members. In the end Chinese people will prevail. The comment shows that there are people who know that in the current situation a China-US war is not their war (the post was deleted very soon, for obvious reasons). The people have their own war to fight, a war to restore their self-esteem and their political and economic rights to be free. Let us turn our ears in their direction and support their struggle.

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P.S.

• IVP. Wednesday 12 January 2022:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7476>

• Author's note: This article is based on an interview conducted with the French media [Mediapart](#) in December 2021.

Available in French on ESSF (article 60390), [« Une grande purge est en cours à Hong Kong »](#)

Footnotes

[1] The notion that China is somehow “socialist” is equating socialism with an Orwellian society, hence instead of helping the socialist discourse it is discrediting it.