

“Not Some Other -ism”—On Some Western Marxist Misrepresentations of Chinese Socialism

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ABSTRACT

This study tackles four Western Marxist misrepresentations of socialism with Chinese characteristics, particularly as it has developed with the reform and opening-up. Each of these misrepresentations sets in opposition the economy and the state, with the former being seen as “capitalist” (in some form) and the latter as variously “authoritarian,” “bureaucratic” or simply as “interventionist.” In other words, “Chinese characteristics” designates the superstructural feature that determines—incorrectly in light of Marxist analysis—the economic base, which is mistakenly seen as capitalist. While each misrepresentation has its own distinct problems, they also have common problems: a voluntarist position on political decisions, which fails to provide any reason for a “capitalist turn”; the assumption that a “market economy,” wherever and whenever it appears, is by definition capitalist; the deployment of neocolonial and “Orientalist” assumptions coupled with a Western “betrayal narrative”; and a systemic neglect of Chinese language research. The conclusion provides a summarising assessment that focuses on the empirical flaws and methodological presuppositions of these misrepresentations. We emphasise that our focus is primarily on the internal problems and inconsistencies of these misrepresentations, although we also offer—where needed—some constructive alternatives.

KEYWORDS

Socialism with Chinese characteristics; Western misrepresentations; neoliberalism; bureaucratic capitalism; state capitalism

Some Western Marxist scholars have been engaged in misrepresenting socialism with Chinese characteristics, especially in terms of the reform and opening-up. Our focus is on four of these misrepresentations: capitalist socialism, bureaucratic capitalism, neoliberalism “with Chinese characteristics,” and state capitalism. Of these, state capitalism and bureaucratic capitalism were already deployed in polemic against the Soviet Union. The other two—“capitalist socialism” and “neoliberalism ‘with Chinese characteristics’”—are relatively new. Our conclusion is that, although the use of such terms indicates a limited awareness that China’s path is clearly different from non-Chinese contexts, they suffer from insurmountable internal inconsistencies and so fail to understand Chinese socialism. In some cases, the reasons are specific to individual authors (such as ignorance of important work on bureaucracy, or a failure to engage with Lenin on state capitalism), but they also share common shortcomings. These include: efforts to see the differences between capitalist and socialist systems purely in terms of superstructural distinctions, so much so that the political form—variously “authoritarian socialist,” “bureaucratic” or “state”—determines a blanket and ill-defined “capitalism”; the assumption that any form of market mechanism is by definition capitalist; and an alarming neglect of actual Chinese Marxist scholarship, which enables the deployment of a “betrayal narrative” that is enmeshed with neocolonial and Orientalist assumptions. It should be noted that our concern is with the internal inconsistencies and problems of these misrepresentations, although we also offer—where required—summaries of key features of socialism with Chinese characteristics based on Chinese scholarship (see further Boer 2021).

Capitalist Socialism

We begin with “capitalist socialism,” a term coined by Slavoj Žižek. Initially, he (2009, 8–17) used it in reference to the Atlantic financial crisis of 2008, and later directed it at China in an opinion piece in *Russia Today* (2018b). The most that can be said about this piece is that at least it constitutes an advance on earlier half-baked opinions, such as: “authoritarian capitalism,” which is “much worse” than the European version with its bourgeois parliamentary democracy; or the rise of Buddhist superstitions in the wake of Marxism’s purported demise; or a “Confucian Marxism” that is “distorted” because it is not the beloved European form (Žižek 2007, 18–19; 2008, 190–91, 198–200; 2015). The miniscule gain of the piece under discussion is that it does recognise some form of socialism in China, but Žižek is unwilling to let go of the “capitalist” label.

The form of argument in the *Russia Today* piece (2018b) is typical for Žižek. Instead of engaging with the work of Deng Xiaoping or Domenico Losurdo (both mentioned), Žižek prefers anecdotes and juxtapositions. The most glaring example concerns some final words from Deng Xiaoping on his deathbed. Asked—the story goes—by an “acolyte” what Deng thought his greatest achievement was, the questioner expected an answer along the lines of the reform and opening-up: “No, it was that, when the leadership decided to open up the economy, I resisted the temptation to go all the way and open up also the political life to multi-party democracy.” What is the source of this story? It comes from a “social theorist” who had “links to Deng Xiaoping’s daughter.” A third or even fourth-hand anecdote – this hardly counts as a reliable source, let alone the basis for any semblance of serious scholarly work. Indeed, if Žižek had done even a little research, beginning with Deng Xiaoping’s own materials (Deng [1979] 2008a), he would have found that China does in fact have multi-party democracy, for there are eight other political parties apart from the Communist Party. With direct and indirect elections, this consultative multi-party democracy works quite differently from those in bourgeois states, for the parties and their elected representatives operate in a non-antagonistic and thus depoliticised manner—as Marx ([1875]

1989, 519–520) and Engels ([1873] 1988, 425) first proposed regarding the function of elections and public functions in general. But wait a moment: does not Žižek recognise the multi-party system elsewhere? Indeed, he does (2018a, 67–68), although he quickly dismisses it—in an Orientalist moment—as a “totally opaque behind-the-scenes” process orchestrated by the Communist Party. We will come to see this patronising Orientalist attitude (Said 1978) throughout the works analysed in our study.

As for Žižek’s hypothesis, the two terms in “capitalist socialism” have a different function. The “socialism” part is restricted to the superstructure, designating a form of the state in which the Communist Party is in control of the whole situation, from culture through to the economy. Elsewhere, he (2018a, 18–19) mistakenly attributes this position to the CPC itself. This is nothing less than “communist authoritarianism,” from which Žižek recoils. At times, he (2010) teases readers with the hypothesis that socialism should be sharply distinguished from communism, with the former embodying “failed” forms of “authoritarian” states, while the latter becomes a well-nigh utopian ideal, a “lost cause” worth one’s faith but unable to be realised in the present.

As for the “capitalist” part of the formula, Žižek means what he perceives—through tinted glasses—as the economic situation. We have yet to find any concrete analysis of what “capitalism” means in Žižek’s work, apart from vague gestures and Lacanian formulations of the unrepresentable “Real.” So also in this piece from *Russia Today*, where Žižek speaks of “liberal capitalism” compared with the “wild capitalist dynamics” of a distinctly frontier and colonial variety. He assumes his readers will nod their agreement, so there is no need to provide any concrete analysis. If he had undertaken such analysis, he would have found sophisticated treatments of the way China’s socialist market economy is dialectically connected with an even more enhanced planned economy (see more below), let alone the historical reality that not all market economies are necessarily capitalist, and that the no-longer-existing country of which he was once a citizen (Yugoslavia), along with other countries in the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, had already engaged with preliminary experiments in this direction.¹ Indeed, this will turn out to be a recurring problem in the hypotheses that follow: the assumption that a “market” or a “market economy” is by definition a capitalist market economy.

By now it should be obvious that Žižek’s conclusion to this curious piece in *Russia Today*—where he hypothesises that “capitalist socialism” is “definitely not the socialism we were dreaming about”—is wayward and given to the utopian dreaming that often afflicts Western Marxism (Losurdo 2008b, 2017b).

Bureaucratic Capitalism

The category of “bureaucratic capitalism” has a somewhat longer history, although it functions in a manner similar to “capitalist socialism.” In this case, “bureaucracy” refers to the political structure and “capitalism” to economic matters. We will focus on Maurice Meisner’s (1996, 300–345) flawed effort to apply the term to China, although the idea runs back to the efforts by Trotsky ([1937] 1972) and Castoriadis ([1956] 1988) to denounce perceived shortcomings of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Meisner (1996, 300) defines “bureaucratic capitalism” as “the use of political power and official influence for private pecuniary gain through capitalist or quasi-capitalist methods of economic activity.” The definition is framed to set up the immediate

1 Many are the potential references, of which a few can be cited (Vanek 1972; Dubey 1975; Rusinow 1977; Szamuely 1982, 1984; Lydall 1984; Kozma 1989; Brus and Laski 1989, 87–101; Mencinger 2000). The CMEA included all Eastern European countries, along with Mongolia, Cuba, Vietnam, and Yugoslavia as an equal trading partner in 1964.

connection with older Chinese imperialist bureaucracy, its continuation during the republican period and then, after a brief hiatus with Mao Zedong, a supposed return in modified form with the reform and opening-up. For Meisner, these modifications boil down to a new level of corruption and the creation of a “new bourgeoisie.”

This hypothesis is problematic at many levels, whether in terms of historical narrative, or its inability to see how the massive poverty alleviation program has lifted hundreds of millions of rural and urban workers out of poverty and into a middle-income group for which one simply cannot use a term—“bourgeoisie” or indeed “middle class”—loaded with the assumptions of European capitalist development. We would like to address two problems in a little more detail. The first concerns economics, since Meisner simply does not understand how a socialist market economy works in both theory and practice. He persists with the assumption that any market mechanism is by definition capitalist, even in Chinese imperialist times, and that while socialism initially entails central planning it should ultimately move to a utopian image of decentred worker cooperatives without state or party (Meisner 1996, 206–10). Nowhere can one find an effort to understand a socialist market economy, a core feature of the reform and opening-up, let alone the reinvention of a planned economy—both of which are a reality in China (see more below). The result is that for Meisner socialism becomes but a fleeting moment in China’s history, governance by the Communist Party is replaced with “bureaucracy” and the interconnected socialist market economy and planned economy is replaced with “capitalism.”

The second problem concerns Meisner’s use of “bureaucracy,” which he sees in a purely negative way as “authoritarian” and “corrupt.” Whilst this a popular concept of bureaucracy in some quarters, it evinces an ignorance of Max Weber’s paradigmatic studies. For Weber ([1922] 1968, 1002; 1922, 677–678), “bureaucracy has a ‘rational’ character, with rules, means-ends calculus, and matter-of-factness predominating, its rise and expansion has everywhere had ‘revolutionary’ results, as had the advance of rationalism in general.” Rationalisation is the key, which entails a detailed division of labour in which all follow objective and explicit rules that are applied impersonally. Such a bureaucracy produces an “optimal efficiency” and thus “technical superiority” over all other forms of administration (Weber [1921] 2015, 96; 1922, 60–61). Rational, efficient, and superior: all of these apply primarily to economic activity itself and not, as Meisner mistakenly asserts, to political control over an economy. Weber’s main interest ([1922] 1968, 974; 1922, 661; see also Stanisevski 2004) was in the rise of this form of bureaucracy as a crucial enabling factor for capitalism, but at one point he suggests that a “socialistic order [*Ordnung*]” would require “the creation of a strict bureaucratic administration with a higher degree of substantial formal rules than a capitalist order” (Weber 1922, 129). In short, for Weber a socialist system would require a significantly higher level of organisation and complexity than any type of rational and efficient organisation seen thus far.

In light of these insights, we may mention two studies of the Soviet Union, which offered the world’s first model for socialist bureaucracy. Domenico Losurdo (2008a, 102) emphasises the immense skill and achievement of the Bolsheviks in reestablishing bureaucratic state order out of a failed state. This was not merely a recovery, but more a “reorganisation of individuals,” of “social organisations” and “intermediary bodies,” in light of “new and different arrangements that respect the principles of the revolution” (Losurdo 2008, 114). Further, for Periklis Pavlidis (2001) this new bureaucratic structure required an awareness and articulation of contradictions under socialism, and so the importance of division of labour within the new bureaucracy. By this Pavlidis means the division of executive and planning functions, in order to enable industrialisation and economic growth from “backward” conditions, as well as wholesale reforms

in nationalities policies, medical care, education, work, and family. For such tasks, a socialist system needs a rational and efficient bureaucratic structure (Kowalik 1992). By now we are a long way from Meisner’s caricature of bureaucracy.

Neoliberalism “with Chinese Characteristics”

A third misrepresentation of China is with reference to neoliberalism, especially through a chapter in David Harvey’s widely read *Neoliberalism: A Brief History* (2005). Harvey’s hypothesis is that, for unknown reasons, the Chinese government decided in the late 1970s to adopt neoliberal economic policies that were embodied in the reform and opening-up. The result, according to Harvey, was a process of “privatisation” of state assets and the spread of capitalist market relations. This misrepresentation has become an article of faith for Harvey, repeated whenever he has the opportunity. Already we can see a similar structure to the previous two misrepresentations: one component concerns activities of the state and other concerns economic activity. We will deal with each aspect in a moment, but let us step back a moment and ask two questions, one concerning the ideology of liberalism and the other a temporal question related to the “neo.”

Ideologically, a shorthand definition of neoliberalism is the “marketisation” of all aspects of life, or that market relations may be used to define every aspect of human existence at all historical periods. In Harvey’s words (2005, 2), it is a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” Its origins are usually—as in Harvey—traced back to the “free market” ideologues, Ludwig von Mises ([1927] 1988) and Friedrich von Hayek ([1944] 2007). As von Mises indicates elsewhere ([1927] 2005), neoliberalism is really a ramped-up liberalism, with its attendant laissez-faire economics, which promoted a thoroughly amoral “market” that cannot be held to account for any form of social injustice.

On a temporal register, neoliberalism arose at the end of the 1970s and was aggressively promoted in 1980s and 1990s, first in countries where liberalism itself first arose (UK and USA (Losurdo 2011)) and either adopted by like-minded countries or forced on others not so like-minded through direct intervention and international bodies such as the IMF and World Bank. It is precisely at a temporal level that Harvey (2005, 120–51) connects developments in China in the late 1970s. The reform and opening-up, launched in 1978, coincided with the neoliberal agenda in some other parts of the globe, and so Harvey contends that Deng Xiaoping’s reforms were of the same ilk. If he had actually taken the time to study Deng’s thought in some detail, as well as much other material on the reform and opening-up by Chinese scholars, he would have found that the reforms were nowhere near (neo)liberalism. In fact, Chinese Marxist scholars have been resolutely critical of neoliberalism, especially in light of a crucial document from the CPC Central Committee (2013) on comprehensively deepening the process of reform. They see neoliberalism as representing the interests of the international financial monopoly bourgeoisie, who seek to disrupt socialist systems through the mantra of supposedly inefficient state-owned enterprises and the glory of privatisation (Zhuang 2007; Xiang and He 2014, 87–88). As far as they are concerned, neoliberalism is not for China.

Instead, the reform and opening-up has its own distinct path within the longer project of the construction of socialism. Before outlining the economic features of this path, we would like to address another of Harvey’s weaknesses: a penchant for voluntarism. Harvey claims to be a Marxist scholar, with a background in geography; yet, he eschews many of the major features of Marxist analysis. For example, in answering the question as to why Deng Xiaoping and the

Chinese government decided on the reform and opening-up, the only reason Harvey can give is a voluntarist one: it was due to political will. There is no effort at economic analysis, apart from reading China in terms of capitalist developments elsewhere. Even here, Harvey (2005, 19) resorts to a voluntarist position, not least because he eschews key Marxist categories such as the labour theory of value and the falling rate of profit (Harvey 2017; Callinicos and Choonara 2016; Das 2017; Roberts 2020). When reading Harvey, one is reminded of Bakunin, concerning whom Marx ([1875] 1989, 518) observes: “Willpower [*Der Wille*], not economic conditions, is the basis of his social revolution.” This voluntarist approach also bedevils the hypotheses of “capitalist socialism” and “bureaucratic capitalism.” Thus, for Žižek it comes down to an “authoritarian” decision, while for Meisner it was due to the “evil bureaucracy.” Obviously, such an approach not only leaves the actual—economic and social—reasons begging, but it is a distinctly non-Marxist approach.

In light of these criticisms of Harvey, the time has come for an outline of a Marxist approach to socialist economic development, especially in light of more than a century of experience from the Soviet Union to China. The first issue one that we have seen earlier: it concerns markets and the mistaken assumption that any form of a “market” is by definition a capitalist market economy, that wherever and whenever one has markets, one has a form of capitalism. From where does this untenable assumption come? Let us go back to the recognised ideologues of neoliberalism, von Mises and von Hayek. It is often forgotten that they developed their initial proposals not merely in response to Keynesian economics, but even more extensively in sustained polemic against Marxist socialism (Mises 2006, [1932] 1936; Hayek 1938, [1944] 2007). Theirs was a minority position, which led to the exasperated slogan of von Mises ([1932] 1936, 142): “the alternative is still either Socialism or a market economy.” This slogan would become a highly deceptive truism, for von Mises slipped in the assumption that socialism entails a centrally planned economy, while a “market economy” was necessarily capitalist.² This slogan is untenable historically, philosophically, and empirically. As Marx ([1894] 1998, 588–605) already showed in relation to ancient Rome, the market economy that developed there had commodities (especially human beings as slaves), money, trade, borrowing, surplus, and profit. At a superficial level, it may seem like a nascent capitalist market economy, but Marx points out that this assumption is mistaken: the various parts were arranged differently and functioned in “altered conditions,” without a capitalist framework.³ Comparable observations may be made concerning the military market economy of ancient Persia, or market systems under European feudalism (Kula 1976; Bajt 1989, 180; Boer 2015).

Philosophically, it is necessary to deploy the universal-particular distinction (Huang N. 1994; Gao and Zheng 1996). A market economy has certain common features across all historical examples, including that of socialism. In this sense, a market economy functions as a universal. The particularity of a market economy is determined by the nature of the over-arching socio-economic system. This point entails that a market economy is a component or institutional form with such a system. As a component, the very nature of a market economy—as also of a planned economy—is shaped by the system in question. Thus, market and planned economies within a socialist system are qualitatively distinct from those within a capitalist system.

2 The most extreme expression of this assumption appears in Buick and Crump (1986, viii): “given the nature of both capitalism and socialism, their coexistence is an impossibility. In the conditions of the twentieth century, what both capitalism and socialism have in common is their all-or-nothing quality.”

3 As Kula (1976, 17) points out: “in the pre-capitalist economy, market phenomena are governed by completely different laws in many cases, and . . . these phenomena have an altogether different effect on the remaining sectors of the economy.”

A question remains: what is a socialist economic system? The “Communist Manifesto” already provides an early answer: “The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and *to increase the total of productive forces [Produktionskräfte] as rapidly as possible*” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 504; see also Engels [1877] 1989, 193). We have italicised the last phrase of this quotation for a reason, since it is often forgotten. For Marx and Engels, there are two components, one concerning ownership and the other concerning liberation of productive forces. On this matter, a bifurcation arises: for those Marxists in a context of highly developed productive forces, the tendency has been to focus on the relations of production, on the ownership of the means of production. This emphasis produces an imbalance, neglecting the liberation of productive forces. By contrast, in parts of the world where productive forces have been undeveloped, the emphasis has been on such liberation. Indeed, it is precisely in these locations that proletarian revolutions have been successful and they were certainly not interested in “poor socialism.” For example, in China we find that while Mao Zedong spoke of the liberation and development of productive forces already in the 1950s, the methods he advocated were not the most suitable (Zhu 2013). It was not until Deng Xiaoping’s ([1978] 2008, [1979] 2008b, [1980] 2008, [1985] 2008) resolute emphasis on such liberation as a key component of the reform and opening-up that the other part of Marx and Engels’s definition came to the fore. Of course, an over-emphasis on this side of the definition leads to its own problems, as we will see later in terms of the “wild 90s.”

We have arrived at the empirical point, which arises from the history of experience in developing a socialist economic system. In all cases after a successful proletarian revolution, we find that the means of production have been seized from the bourgeois and landlord classes and managed by the state on behalf of urban and rural workers. The need for this move is already mentioned in the “Communist Manifesto,” and experience has shown that this approach has led in all cases to a burst of economic activity and development (for the Soviet Union, see Cheng and Liu 2017). However, after a few decades new contradictions between the forces and relations of production arose, with the effect of stifling economic development. In order to liberate the productive forces further—now from the internal contradictions of socialist development—we find the initial tentative experiments in “market socialism” in Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary and Yugoslavia (Boer In press), and then the full development of a socialist market economy with China’s reform and opening-up.

By now it should be obvious that China has not followed a foreign historical path for which the term “neoliberalism” functions as a shorthand. We would like to ask one further question: what has happened to a planned economy? It has certainly not disappeared. Instead, it has been “reinvented,” as Heilman (2013) and Melton put it. To return to an earlier distinction: both market and planned economies are components or institutional forms within a socialist system. Ideally, they function in terms of the unity of contradictions, like “the two wheels of a cart and the two wings of a bird” (Yang 2009, 175). By this is meant the efficiency of a market economy and the justice of a planned economy with its public ownership, although the relationship always has to be managed so as to avoid the excesses of one or the other. In some works, we find a further step, with the dialectical point that in China there is taking place a “dual *Aufhebung* [yangqi] and transcendence [*chaoyue*] of a traditional planned economy and a capitalist market economy” (Zhang 2009, 139; Zhou Z. and Wang 2019, 41).⁴

4 As Horvat (1989, 234) already observed some years ago, without markets you cannot have socialism, for “a market is a planning device; without planning a market cannot operate efficiently.”

In light of this material, Harvey's misrepresentation has become quite irresponsible.

State Capitalism

Since 2008's Atlantic financial crisis, or what is now called "The Great Recession," the neoliberal project has been in disorganised retreat. Most countries in the world have rejected the neoliberal model and its global enforcers (World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank) have increasingly lost the ability to impose their agenda as they are transformed from within. In this context, the term "state capitalism" has made a significant comeback in an effort by some to describe these developments. In contrast to the previous misrepresentations, which were primarily from Marxist scholars, on state capitalism we may distinguish between two groups: liberals who still hold to laissez-faire principles and a smaller group of Marxist scholars. Both assume that under "state capitalism" the state is a large and influential corporation in its own right, a business enterprise and indeed core component that controls significant parts of a capitalist market economy. However, nearly all of them ignore the most important work on state capitalism, by Lenin.

We begin with the liberal scholars, who have begun deploying "state capitalism" to speak of a significant number of countries that have either refused or turned away from neoliberal approaches. Apart from seeing in these cases an "interventionist" state as the major controller of "the market," they are also fond of using tired old categories, such as the opposition between inefficient and efficient, and between "autocratic" and "democratic" (by which they mean Western capitalist democracy), so that state capitalism means inefficient "authoritarian" capitalism and is contrasted with efficient "free-market" capitalism. It should be no surprise that they see the spread of such state capitalism as a threat and hope to identify its shortcomings. Although they often focus on China (Gittings 2006, 3, 217; Haley and Haley 2013; MacDonald and Lemco 2015, 43–69; Naughton and Tsai 2015; Kurlantzick 2016),⁵ this type of "state capitalism" is certainly not restricted to China. The number identified is relatively large, whether one offers an analysis of the current situation or takes a historical perspective. In terms of the current context, the list includes most countries in East Asia, Central Asia, more and more Latin American and African countries, Russia and some Scandinavian countries—in short, most of the world. Historical surveys like to begin with modern state forms in Europe after the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, and then identify various forms of state capitalist "intervention" in mercantilism, European colonialism, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the welfare state in Europe (especially Scandinavia), many post-colonial states in Africa and Asia, and the Asian economic rise in the last 30 years or so, with particular focus on Singapore and South Korea (Kurlantzick 2016, 49–63; see also MacDonald and Lemco 2015, 17–42). But what is the purpose of seeing "state capitalism" at almost every point in modern history or today in most parts of the world? They clearly see that the "free market" approach and its attendant liberalism are under severe threat and even failing, so they uniformly attempt to find ways to respond, often with suggestions as to internal weaknesses in what they call "state capitalism."

With regard to a few Marxist scholars, the term "state capitalism" has a longer history. In relation to socialist countries, the term was initially applied to the Soviet Union during Stalin's tenure, and has since the 1980s also been applied to China (Cliff [1948] 2003; Pannekoek 1937; Norman 1955; Buick and Crump 1986; James 1986; Weil 1996, 26–27). The narrative goes as follows: in a "betrayal" or retreat from socialism, the state with its new ruling class imposed

5 A fashionable variation is to speak of "red capitalism," with even more apocalyptic warnings of China's imminent "collapse" (Lin 1997; Walter and Howie 2011).

capitalist forms on a population that seems curiously to have lacked a voice. Already a number of problems arise, including the voluntarist approach to political decision-making, an inability to account for why such a decision should be made, and the old “betrayal” narrative. These problems we have found to be common to the previous hypotheses.

There are three major problems with this misrepresentation, the first being that “global capitalism” is seen to be a uniform and irrepressible force, into which aspiring socialist countries cannot avoid being drawn (Buick and Crump 1986; Brink 2014). Slightly more sophisticated is the “varieties of capitalism” approach, which recognises minor variations in an overall global capitalism (Gallagher 2005; Coffey and Thornley 2009; Hundt and Uttam 2016). Seriously missing in these proposals is a dialectical approach to modes of production, in which different modes of production—historically or indeed currently—can be included within a dominant mode that is far from being uniform or global (Boer 2017). Thus, it is feasible for a socialist economies to engage with capitalist economies without being transformed into the latter.⁶

The second problem is a confusion between what is incidental (or cyclical) and what is systemic. This problem arises in particular with what may be called the “wild 90s,” which refers to widespread problems in China during the decade of the 1990s, with repercussions into the early 2000s. The problems included: erosion of the public economy (SOEs); worsening labour conditions and unrest; imbalanced income distribution; rising pollution due to a resolute emphasis on economic growth; a gap between the CPC and the people’s trust, due to corruption and ignorance of Marxism; ideological divergence, with some advocating historical nihilism (denying the importance of the CPC, the communist revolution, and Marxism), democratic socialism, and “universal values” of a Western provenance (Zheng 2008, 9–10; Thesis Group 2009, 94–98; Zan 2015, 43; Zhu 2016, 32). These contradictions led many in the West to assume that China was following a capitalist and bourgeois liberal path (Zhou X. 2016, 3). While Western liberals anticipated that China’s supposedly “capitalist” direction would lead to bourgeois liberalisation, Western Marxists denounced what they saw as a retreat from or “betrayal” of Marxism.

A Chinese Marxist answer is different, drawing upon contradiction analysis (and so dialectical materialism) in order to emphasise the primacy of internal contradictions and the need for these contradictions to be resolved through internal processes (Mao [1937] 1965; Jiang 1990, 9; Chi 2018, 8–9). This approach enables a couple of crucial insights that turn on the continuing contradictions between the forces and relations of production during the construction of socialism. To begin with, while the reform and opening-up was necessary to deal with stagnating economic performance after a few decades of an exclusively planned economy (see above), the reform process led to new contradictions as productive forces leapt ahead. This was the case particularly in the “wild 90s.” The answer was not a retreat from the reform and opening-up, but a deepening of the process itself (Zan 2015, 43). But how does this work? Here we need to distinguish between incidental (or cyclical) and systemic contradictions. The mistake made by the proponents of “state capitalism” in China is to confuse incidental problems with systemic ones (Lo 2007, 121–22, 129, 149). Instead, the contradictions of the “wild 90s” were of an incidental nature and specific to a distinct period of the reform and opening-up. The solution to these contradictions was not to wind back the reform and opening-up, but to deepen it. As Zhou Xincheng (2018, 14) observes:

Acknowledging that there are still contradictions in socialist society, it logically follows that they must be solved through reform. Moreover, once a contradiction is resolved, new contradictions will arise, which need to be solved through reform. It is in the process of constantly emerging contradictions and resolving them through reform that socialist society

⁶ Lin Chun (2013) comes close to this approach.

has developed. Therefore, reform is an eternal topic in socialist society. Reform is only ongoing, not complete.

How has the process of deepening reform enabled solutions to these problems of the “wild 90s”? As we write, the problem of corruption is well on the way to resolution under the tenure of Xi Jinping; trust in governance and public institutions as well as confidence in China’s socialist path are in the 80-90 percent range (Edelman 2020; Cunningham, Saich, and Turiel 2020); the wealth gap is shrinking as more than 800 million have been lifted out of poverty (Zwart 2020), with absolute poverty eradicated by 2021; and a more efficient and comprehensive welfare system—based on economic strength—is a major focus of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan.

The third problem with most of the “state capitalist” literature is a glaring omission: an adequate engagement with Lenin. Why Lenin? The reason for focusing on Lenin is that this is the lens through which Chinese scholars understand “state capitalism.” Lenin used “state capitalism” on a number of occasions ([1918] 1965b, [1918] 1965a, [1921] 1965a), but the fullest statement may be found in a key work, “The Tax in Kind” ([1921] 1965b). Lenin argued that in light of the sheer devastation and economic collapse caused by the First World War and the externally sponsored “Civil” War, as well as the premature state of Russian socialism, a measure of private enterprise was necessary to get the economy moving. Peasants could sell the grain left over after paying the “tax in kind,” small private light-scale industry could be established, and concessions and leases would be given to foreign capitalist enterprises. All of this would entail the extraordinary dialectical point of building socialism through capitalism, or of private capital helping socialism. How? It would enable the initial impetus for the “development of the productive forces” (Lenin [1921] 1965b, 342–43, 345–46).

Lenin had to overcome “left-wing” opposition to do so, making two crucial points. First, he mapped out a transition process, since it was not possible to move from a backward, imperialist situation immediately to full-blown socialism (see Losurdo 2017a). He envisaged a series of transitions, from petty-bourgeois capitalism (and later from “War Communism”), through state capitalism, to socialism, during which elements of capitalism would remain.⁷ More simply: from capitalism, through state capitalism, to socialism. Thus, state capitalism was, in that specific historical situation, a transitional form to socialism, not an end in itself. Second, it all depends on the over-arching socio-economic and political system. Lenin’s two examples are Germany (after Bismarck’s reforms) and Russia after the October Revolution. In Germany, this “state capitalism” was firmly in the hands of “Junker-bourgeois imperialism”; by contrast, in Russia the socialist system already emerging was the key, with the nature of the socialist state and the proletarian dictatorship playing the major roles. Thus, Lenin argues, it would be highly advisable to learn from the German model but locate it within the Russian socialist system.

Apart from a few who struggle over Lenin’s legacy,⁸ one occasionally finds a non-Chinese Marxist scholar who engages in detail with Lenin’s justification for the 1920s New Economic Policy, and argues that the reform and opening-up is a longer Chinese version of the NEP (Kenny 2007). On this question, Chinese scholars offer a more nuanced analysis. While part of the inspiration for Deng Xiaoping’s breakthrough was precisely the NEP,⁹ one must at the same time

7 Lenin ([1921] 1965b, 334) also argued that many approaches first developed under capitalism would also have a proper function under socialism.

8 For example, C.L.R. James (1986, 18–22) ignores the transition argument in Lenin and emphasises an intensification of crisis in state capitalism; by contrast, Buick and Crump (1986, 111–17) suggest that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were not socialists and undertook a state capitalist “revolution.”

9 Deng Xiaoping hints at this influence in 1985: “What, after all, is socialism? The Soviet Union has been building socialism for so many years and yet is still not quite clear what it is. Perhaps Lenin had a good idea when he

recognise specific historical conditions. Thus, in Russia of the 1920s such a transitional policy was necessary, but Chinese conditions were and are quite distinct, with the result that state capitalism as a transitional phase is not a necessary approach (Yang and Li 1998; Le 2000; Wang 2001; Tao 2008). In this light, let us stress the second of Lenin’s insights, that everything depends on the underlying system within which a market economy works. For Lenin, this point related to state capitalism, which functioned in Bismarck’s Germany in a way that was quite distinct from the socialist system under construction in Russia. As we have seen earlier, in a Chinese context this argument concerning the underlying system takes another form in light of the dialectic of universal and particular: while there may be certain universal features of market relations, there is also a distinct particularity of each market economy since its nature is determined by the overarching socio-economic system of which it is a component.

To sum up, “state capitalism” clearly has widely divergent uses: liberalism’s true believers use it as a blanket term to speak of a world that by and large has turned its back on the neoliberal project; some Marxists seek to deploy the term to dismiss the Soviet Union and China, although in doing so they misuse the term and reveal an ignorance of Lenin’s careful delineations; Lenin’s own usage as a transitional phase in a specific historical situation; and Chinese scholars who understand the term in its Leninist sense as appropriate for specific conditions in Russia at the time, but not for China.

Conclusion: Problems and Insights

Our focus has been primarily on the internal problems of some misrepresentations concerning China’s path, whether in terms of “authoritarian” socialism, corrupt bureaucratism, neoliberalism, or state control. The internal problems are many, but here we would like sum up problems common to all of the misrepresentations. They begin with a bifurcation between a state actor (“socialism,” “bureaucracy,” “Chinese characteristics,” or simply the “state”) and an economy that is uniformly seen as “capitalist.” Herein lies an initial problem, for they all opt for a voluntarist position: for some unaccountable reason, they speculate that a decision was made to go down the “capitalist road.” Yet, if we actually look at the economic decisions in relation to the reform and opening-up, this is far from reality—as Deng Xiaoping repeatedly insisted. It is very clear that they were made with Marxism as a guide for action and for the sake of socialist construction (more recently, see Xi 2020, 2021).

A second problem arose initially in our treatment of “state capitalism,” although it applies to all of the proposals. It concerns the incidental-systemic confusion, in which incidental or cyclical problems of the reform and opening-up—especially in the 1990s and early 2000s—were mistaken as systemic to the process. As we pointed out, the Chinese approach is to see the reform and opening-up as a dialectical process through which the problems would be solved through further reform. This incidental-systemic confusion has led some non-Chinese Marxists to conclude that China had embarked on the capitalist road, but in doing so they have joined a chorus of Western liberal commentators. Indeed, it was precisely this mistaken perception that enabled Western countries (former colonisers) to sympathise with China and even cheer it on, until it became crystal clear in the last few years that China has always been following its own path in socialist construction and will not deviate from this path.

A third common problem—following von Mises—is the assumption that a “market economy” is inherently capitalist, and so any type of market reform must lead to a version of capitalism. This assumption is unsustainable historically (as Marx already showed): market adopted the New Economic Policy” (Deng [1985] 2008, 139; see Losurdo 2017a, 27).

economies have appeared throughout human history, but they have certainly not been capitalist. The assumption also faces insuperable theoretical difficulties concerning the nature of market economies within different socio-economic systems. In short, the nature of a market economy is determined by the system in which it appears and by which it is shaped.

Although our analysis has focused on the internal problems of these misrepresentations, we have also found the need to provide summaries of properly Marxist analyses of bureaucracy, the socialist market economy in relation to planning, the path of the reform and opening-up, and the Leninist meaning of "state capitalism." These are necessarily summaries and require a fuller study for Western eyes (Boer 2021), but they are based on analyses by Chinese Marxist scholars of all the facts available. Why have the Western Marxists analysed here not made use of such scholarship? Initially, this is a problem of scholarly irresponsibility. We have yet to find in the works studied here a careful engagement with Chinese Marxist scholarly works. To be sure, one occasionally finds a reference to expat and usually anti-communist Chinese scholar to provide a veneer of credibility (for example, Huang Y. 2008; Li 2008, 2016), but these are clearly not in any way representative of Chinese Marxist scholarship. There is also a deeper methodological problem: one may have all of the available facts at one's fingertips, but everything depends on the theoretical framework and method within which the facts are interpreted. Are those critiqued here not Marxists? They claim to be, but it is a form of Marxism that constantly risks being infused with the neocolonial and Orientalist assumptions found in the former colonising countries known as the "West."

There are two components: the first is the assumption of a vast conspiracy that begins with an initial "betrayal"—a favoured religious motif in the West—of Marxism. There are many candidates for such a betrayal, but a Western Marxist favourite is Deng Xiaoping, who supposedly "betrayed" Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Now the conspiracy theory: since they believe that China has embarked on a capitalist road since the beginning of the reform and opening-up, it follows that all of the many and detailed statements, along with all of the scholarly research projects that are based on empirical data and show that China is actually following a socialist path, must take the form of a massive conspiracy theory with an elaborately coded language that seeks to deceive westerners as to the "real nature" of Chinese society. If one believes this highly implausible theory, then one must believe that it has been going for over 40 years and includes nearly everyone in China, from the CPC leadership to the hundreds of millions of common people.

The second and related feature is a flagrant Orientalism. This is an old Western and deeply racist trope, in which the "Oriental" is demonised as deceptive and duplicitous. Westerners—and not a few Western Marxists—assume that they can see behind the veil of deception and "know the truth" about China, which the Chinese themselves do not know or ignore. This pernicious Orientalism is replicated again and again today in the West, whether in terms of China's economic path, its forms of governance, policies in relation to minority nationalities (think of Xinjiang and Tibet), and—of specific interest here—the nature of Chinese Marxist scholarship. Given such assumptions, one should not be surprised that many Western Marxists simply ignore Chinese Marxist scholarship.

We write "many," but thankfully it is not all. To finish on a more positive note: we know of an increasing number of Western Marxists, or at least Marxist scholars in Western countries, who have been and are engaged in research on and constructive engagement with Chinese Marxism (for example, Knight 1990; 2005; 2007; Losurdo 2012; 2017a; 2017b; Mackerras and Knight 2015; Azzarà 2020). We hope the number increases.

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