

Marx and modern China

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First, I would like to thank the organizers of this Symposium for inviting me to participate in it, I am honoured. However, I do not feel well qualified to talk about the topic of the Symposium. I am not an economist, or a student of modern Chinese society or of its history. I am a philosopher, my expertise is on Marx and Hegel. My contribution will therefore be brief, and I will focus on what Marx's work implies about modern China.

I have been visiting China for more than 40 years. In that time, I have witnessed extraordinary changes. In 1974, when I first visited, China was a poor and mainly agrarian society – more than 80% of the population worked on the land. Since then, economic development has been spectacular. Now it is an industrial society and the second largest economy in the world. It has gone through changes that took more than 100 years in the industrial revolutions in Europe and America. There has been an extraordinary increase in the what Adam Smith called the “wealth” of the “nation”, in GDP.

All parts of the population have benefited from this, there has been a very significant reduction in poverty as measured in absolute terms. But this wealth has not been spread “comprehensively” to all members of society; at the same time there has also been a huge increase in inequality, and hence of relative poverty. In 1974, China was a remarkably egalitarian society (no doubt some high officials led privileged lives, but I didn't see them). Now the gap between the poor and the wealthy is immense and very visible. Great differences have opened up between the standard of living in cities and the countryside (particularly in remote rural areas), and even between the poor and the wealthy in the cities.

The changes that have occurred in China are very similar to those that Britain went through in its industrial revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which Marx described and analysed in *Capital* and other works. According to Marx, the industrial revolution in Britain led not only to great economic changes, but also to major social and political changes. It led not only to the growth of wealth and to widening economic inequalities, but also to the creation of new social classes: the industrial working class and the bourgeoisie. It then led to the growth of political consciousness and activity by these classes, and hence to the emergence of new political forces.

If Marx's analysis of these changes is correct, one would expect similar developments to occur here in China as well. There have been occasional reports of labour unrest. I am not in a position to assess how widespread or significant these incidents are; but one would expect these occurrences to grow in number and become more significant. The gulf between urban and rural conditions is also likely to be a source of political tension.

Of course, there are great differences between the situation in Britain in the nineteenth century that Marx describes and the situation in modern China. China's government has a large degree of control over economic and political affairs – much greater than existed in Britain in the nineteenth century, or than that which prevails in western capitalist countries today. The economy is not at the mercy of market forces to the same extent, and political affairs are very tightly controlled by the government.

Nevertheless, a considerable part of China's economy is now in private hands and subject to market forces, not only domestic but also global. The government tries to control and regulate these but it cannot entirely do so. For, as Marx observed, with capitalism and the operation of the market inevitably comes alienation. In the economic sphere this means that our own activities take on an alien and hostile form. They are out of our control and work against us. "Modern bourgeois society ... a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells." (Marx and Engels 1975, 489) Signs of this are already evident in the economic slowdown, factory closures, and other economic problems that China is currently facing.

A large number of China's factory workers have been and still are migrant workers from rural areas. When they are laid off from their jobs in the cities they return to their villages. However, this way of dealing with the problem of unemployment is unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term. China will no doubt experience pressure to develop its social security system, as did Britain when it faced similar problems in the nineteenth century.

Until recently, economic growth in China has occurred largely on the basis of exports. To combat the economic slowdown, however, the government is encouraging the growth of the internal market and consumerism. If the experience of the west (particularly in the 1950s-60s) is anything to go by, this will lead to a different sort of alienation: social, cultural and "spiritual" alienation (Plamenatz 1975, 141). People may have lots of consumer goods, but their lives seem to them to be pointless and empty.

An implication of this is that there is more to wealth than material well-being. Human beings have more than material needs.¹ Wealth also has a cultural and a social dimension. Many philosophers in the Marxist tradition have emphasized this, particularly in the 1960s, and there are lessons to be learned from it. Material wealth – even when it is equally distributed – is not an end in itself. The ultimate end, according to Marx, is not material wealth but "all-round human development".

Economic wealth creates the necessary material conditions for human development. It is the necessary basis and starting point for human development. As the great German playwright Bertold Brecht said, "Bread first, then ethics". However, economic development is not an automatic recipe for human development – that is an additional social and political task for which ethical commitments are also needed.

China is now the leading country in the world professing allegiance to Marxism. As a Marxist, I am pleased that it does so, and that the government has recently reaffirmed its commitment to and support for Marxism.

In China, "Marxism" is generally taken to mean "Marxism with Chinese characteristics": i.e., the policies and ideology of the Communist Party of China. In the rest of the world it means something different. It means a theory and politics, derived from Marx, which is critical of capitalism and the existing order, both in theory and practice.

According to Marx, this theory and politics grew out of the social conflicts which developed with capitalism and industry in Europe in the nineteenth century. If Marx is right about this, a similar critical sort of Marxist thought and politics is likely also to develop here. I hope that

¹ This point was also emphasized by Professor Aleksandr Buzgalin and Professor Tom Rockmore in their contributions to the Symposium.

there will be space for this in China and further opportunities for the sort of dialogue between these two kinds of Marxism that the present Symposium has allowed.

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References

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