

# Codes and Conspiracies, or, Trying to Understand the Infantile Disorder of 'Left-Wing' Communism

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From time to time, I try to understand those who believe that China has made or is still making a transition from socialism to capitalism. Earlier, I explored the orientalist dimensions of this belief, as well as the reliance on a 'betrayal narrative', but here I would like to focus on the need to rely on codes. In brief: all of the statements by the CPC, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, function as a code. They say one thing but actually mean something else. So what one needs is the key to the code, after which one can set to work deciphering the various statements.

What is the key to this code? According to those who believe in the code, the key is a conspiracy: from Deng Xiaoping onwards a vast conspiracy has been unfolding, which is nothing less than the transition from socialism to capitalism. I will not go into the details here as to why this conspiracy theory arose, based as it was on selected interpretation of events in the 1980s and even 1990s. Instead, I am interested in how the need for a code arises from the conspiracy theory.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is through a few examples.

There are more obvious examples, such as the hypothesis that the 'reform and opening up' (celebrating 40 years in 2018) is not so much the necessary process of reform after a communist revolution (already clear from Lenin's work), but simply a code for the passage to capitalism. Or the 'socialist market economy' is a coded way of speaking about capitalism with government 'interference' – neglecting the historical fact that a capitalist market economy is only one form of market economies.

But there are some more intriguing examples. To begin with, Deng Xiaoping famously said that if one wishes to cross a river, one must feel each stone on the river bed at a time with one's feet. The obvious meaning of this statement is that the passage to socialism, and then communism, requires careful attention to each problem, each fact, which requires analysis and solution. But no, for those who believe in the conspiracy theory, he was speaking in a code: crossing a river entails going from one bank to another. Since China was socialist at one point, they believe, the other bank must be capitalism. A bit of a stretch, given that Deng made it clear China was in the preliminary stage of socialism.

More recently – 2017 at the nineteenth congress of the CPC – Xi Jinping famously announced a new primary contradiction that would guide government policy. This contradiction is between uneven and unequal development and the people's desire for a better life (*meihua*

*shenghuo*). Apart from drawing straight out of Mao Zedong's major essay, 'On Contradiction', Comrade Xi made it clear that a 'better life' meant not only a 'moderately prosperous society (*xiaokang shehui*)' by 2020, but a 'strong modern socialist country' by 2050, which would be achieved through socialist modernisation. At the core of all this is Marxist political economy and the construction of socialism.

But what do our conspiracy theorists make of this? The desire for a 'better life' is a code for the full transition to capitalism.

Now we come the obvious problem of this use of a code. The more Xi Jinping makes Marxism central to China's project, the harder one must work to fit it all into the code. Anomalies appear, much thought is devoted to working the many pieces into the code ... so much so that even doctoral theses are devoted to deciphering the code (outside China). A waste of energy.

I am reminded of someone who taught me biblical languages many, many years ago. She believed that the New Testament was a massive code that really talked about specific events at the Qumran community (which wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, as many hold). I recall her coming into class on some days full of excitement: she had cracked another part of the code that had been bothering her. Do not get me wrong: she taught me Hebrew, Syriac and Coptic very well indeed. The discussions about her code-cracking were held around the edges of class time. But the experience has made me acutely aware of how much time and energy people devote to deciphering codes after they have believed in a core conspiracy.

All of which brings me back to Lenin and his great booklet from 1920, "Left-Wing" Communism – An Infantile Disorder'. Lenin's immediate target may have been different, but the problem persists. Stalin faced the problem, as did Mao, Deng and indeed Xi Jinping today. Among the international Left one can find such 'left-wing' communists from time to time and they are keen to find the occasional person in China who is happy to pander to their desires. I find it both a lazy approach and one that faces immense problems to sustain not only the great conspiracy, but also to need to believe in a vast code that they must constantly seek to reinforce.