

Core Socialist Values

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At every turn, there they are: banners, posters, signs, neon displays, videos ... promoting 'core socialist values' (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan*). On bridges or trains, in sculptures or on buildings, in restaurants and toilets, they are simply everywhere. So ubiquitous, in fact, that at the moment you cease to notice them, you have absorbed them into your deeper consciousness.

I am, of course, speaking of China and the most recent socialist publicity campaign – or in good old socialist parlance, propaganda. Such campaigns have certainly gone to a whole new level since Xi Jinping became chairman.

But what are the core socialist values?

Prosperous and strong (*fuqiang*)

Democratic (*minzhu*)

Civilised (*wenming*)

Harmonious (*hexie*)

Free (*ziyou*)

Equal (*pingdeng*)

Just (*gongzheng*)

Rule of law (*fazhi*)

Love of country (*aiguo*)

Dedicated (*jingye*)

Honest and trustworthy (*chengxin*)

Friendly (*youshan*)

What do they mean? Are they just words, government rhetoric perhaps? Do they take on a different meaning in a socialist context? In other words, are they rooted or contextual universals? And how do they relate to other contexts?

I leave aside the supposed challenge of words like 'democratic', 'free', 'equal' and 'just'. These words may have been distorted by liberal-bourgeois geopolitical games, but

they have always been central to the socialist project. Instead, I would like to begin with their adjectival form. The majority do not appear as abstract terms, but as adjectives.

This begs a question: what is the noun that is being qualified?

Perhaps an initial hint comes from one of the two terms that actually includes its referent: love of country (*aiguo*). Instead of seeing this as some nationalist replacement of Marxism, a careful study of anti-colonial struggles shows that national independence was a major feature of communist parties (fostered actively by the Soviet Union). One can see it today, in another version, with China's emphasis on sovereignty, on other countries minding their own business and not interfering in China, or the DPRK or any other place. And you can also see it in the Belt and Road Initiative, which stipulates that Chinese engagement with infrastructure and economic development does not demand any changes in governance or social structures.

So at least one referent for the adjectival terms is China itself, as a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilised, harmonious, free and friendly country.

We can go further: it is not any China but socialist China. A number of the values can immediately be seen as consistent features of the communist tradition, but others may be a little more obscure. What has 'prosperous and strong' got to do with communism? The key is that socialist construction also entails the 'unleashing of the forces of production' and not merely matters relating to social relations. This unleashing was the crucial emphasis of Deng Xiaoping and those who followed, leading to forty years of 'reform and opening up', with stunning results. As I write, there is an added dimension, for the targets of a 'moderately prosperous society [*xiaokang shehui*]' by 2020 and a 'strong modern socialist country' by 2050 are embodied in what it means to be prosperous and strong.

What about harmonious, civilised and friendly, let alone being dedicated, honest and trustworthy? The first three are crucial to the long cultural tradition of China, especially as it is infused with Confucian values. Responsibility and respect for others is indispensable, although this is also connected with the Marxist emphasis on 'non-antagonistic contradictions', which need to be managed carefully. As for being dedicated, honest and trustworthy, these are not feel-good adjectives to which everyone may assent.

The ingrained cultural sense of a good communist entails that such a person is reliable, transparent and completely committed to the cause. Anything less is a fall from grace. These values underlie the most comprehensive anti-corruption campaign since the time of Mao.

A further question is why it is precisely the government, and especially the communist party, that is promoting these core socialist values. Are they not individual and cultural items, concerned with 'changing one's attitude', rather than the task of government. If one accepts a decadent liberal approach to these matters, then one might entertain such an approach. But not in a socialist context, where ethics and politics are inextricably entwined. Actually, this socialist emphasis reveals the truth of ethics as such, which is always political and cultural at the same time. In a Chinese situation, part of the ubiquitous promotion of these values is connected with the comprehensive anti-corruption drive mentioned above. It has been underway for more than five years. Initially, some thought that it would pass quickly, like similar efforts in the past. They could lie low for a while and wait until the situation returned to 'normal'. Not this time. The seriousness of the endeavour was marked by some very high profile cases, where former members of the politburo were caught up in the sweep. And there is no tokenism in the process, with hundreds of thousands of lower-level local officials disciplined for minor financial breaches.

But negative reinforcement can go only so far. Soon enough a new series of guidelines were produced, focusing on encouraging people to reform behaviour and avoid hedonism, formalism, extravagance and autocratic work styles. Party members are expected to exhibit the honesty, trustworthiness and directness of communist ethics, focused not on themselves but on the people. And if this is good enough for the party, it is good enough for the whole population.

Another part relates to the Chinese tradition, in which responsibility and respect for others in paramount rather than mere care for the self. This dimension goes back to Confucius and Mencius, for whom it was honourable to focus on the collective good and petty to look out only for oneself. Indeed, the term I mentioned earlier, *xiaokang shehui* or moderately well-off society in all respects, comes straight out of the Confucian tradition. It

was first picked up and redefined in a socialist direction by Deng Xiaoping and has become a core marker of what China plans to achieve in not a few years.

Further, there has been a pervasive sense – especially 7-8 years ago – that with the rapid process of the reform and opening up, as China carved a path to a strong socialist country, that people had been cast adrift from the social values that have been so crucial to Chinese culture over thousands of years. The fear was that the old values had been cast aside, with nothing to replace them. I have noticed that in the last few years there has been a great emphasis on the dimensions of justice and equality from the Marxist tradition. Indeed, the forces of production may have been unleashed (as Deng Xiaoping hoped), but the social relations have been somewhat neglected. I would suggest that the emphasis on core socialist values is a new turn, or rather, a recovery of an older ethos of communism for a new era. There may be old cultural values in China, but there are also socialist values that are finding their place in that tradition.

I had originally planned to say something about the contrast with the ‘western’ European assumption that one needs religion for social values. But I do not see the need now, for it is abundantly clear that not only Confucianism, but also Marxism, have values aplenty for a society like that of China.

I would like to close on a related but different matter. The promotion of these core socialist values in China has many dimensions, some of which I have explored here. But I am also struck by the way they touch on what may be called the ‘warm stream’ of Marxism. This is the Marxism of the heart, of emotions and hopes, of commitment to a cause. It should of course not be separated from the ‘cold stream’, of cool and calm scientific analysis. As many have argued, we need both. When one side dominates, Marxism becomes strangely skewed. Perhaps I can illustrate it this way: of late, Xi Jinping has been stressing ‘faith’, ‘belief’ or ‘conviction’ in socialism. Or, more fully, ‘belief [*xinyang*] in Marxism and faith [*xinxin*] in socialism and communism are the political soul [*zhengzhi linghun*] of Communists’. The core socialist values may be seen as a way of providing some content to the emphasis on faith and belief, and not merely for communists.