

The Passing of Domenico Losurdo

Roland Boer, 2018

On 28 June, 2018, Domenico Losurdo passed away after a brief period of brain cancer. He was only 76 and his death is a shock to many who have come to appreciate his work and his person. An official announcement from the secretary of the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) can be found [here](#) (see also [here](#)). Indeed, Losurdo enthusiastically joined the re-established the PCI, after it had been dissolved back in 1991.

Many are the dimensions of his contribution to Marxist philosophy and history, with the best outline of his core positions provided in an [article](#) by Stefano Azzarà (he has also published a [book](#) building upon Losurdo's work). I do not wish to cover all of these issues here, but rather focus on the significant contribution Losurdo has made to my thoughts. I do this not in terms of a self-serving enterprise, but as a recognition of the insights of which he was capable.

The first book of his I read was *Stalin: The History and Critique of a Black Legend*. Initially published in Italian in 2008, it has been translated into German, Spanish and French (not English – I will return to this anomaly). I read the French translation and it was a stunning experience. Here was the account of how Stalin's reception moved from widespread appreciation of the practical and theoretical contribution he had made to the construction of socialism, to one of systematic demonization. Given the framework in which many perceive Stalin today, the book may initially seem like a one-sided effort in praise of Stalin. It is far from such a work, for it is no air-brushed account. Instead, it makes a careful and balanced assessment of not merely mistakes made on the way but more the significant achievements – which are so often just forgotten or dismissed.

But let me come back to the lack of an English translation of the Stalin book. Some works have indeed been translated, on Hegel, Heidegger, liberalism, class struggle, non-violence and war and revolution. They have been well-received, with their careful research and withering criticisms. But when a petition was launched to request one or two of the major left-wing publishers to produce an English version, it was met with the comment that it would 'tarnish' Losurdo's reputation. So a sanitised version of Losurdo is fine, suitable for a curiously imperialist version of 'Western' Marxism, but one that actually represents what his work is not. Indeed, by the time of

his death he had published scores of books in Italian, of which only a handful have made their way into English. The time will come when most of his material is indeed available to a wider audience in what has become – for a time and for specific historical reasons – the *lingua franca*. Then perhaps his full impact will be felt, shaking up many ‘orthodoxies’.

However, the major insights for me have come from his observations on China. I do not mean the tendency in some quarters to focus on Mao Zedong as the last true Chinese communist (you can find this still today among some ‘Maoists’ or *maopai* as the Chinese call them, with a distinctly negative tone). No, I mean his deep appreciation and understanding of Deng Xiaoping and the ‘reform and opening up’ – now celebrating forty years. Above all, Deng Xiaoping was deeply Marxist in a Chinese context and there are significant continuities from Mao to Deng. How is the ‘reform and opening up’ Marxist? There are many aspects, but at its core is the shrewd assessment that thus far the means of production had been relatively neglected in China’s effort to construct socialism. Most efforts had been directed at the relations of production, focusing on socialist equality and collective endeavour. This is all very well, but if everyone is equal simply because they are poor, few would see the benefit. So Deng and those working with him began to emphasise another dimension of Marxism: the need to unleash the forces of production. The results have truly been stunning, with a socialist market economy, the lifting of more than 700 million out of poverty (the World Bank puts it at 850 million), and so on. In an [interview](#) published in 2013, Domenico mentions the sustained anti-poverty drive as part of the ‘incredible success’ of Deng’s policies: ‘infrastructures worthy of a first world economy, growth in the process of industrialisation from its coast areas to its inland areas, rapid incrementation of salaries for several years and a growing concern for environmental issues’. He goes on: ‘By focusing on the key role of the achievement in the safekeeping of independence and of national sovereignty, and by encouraging the old colonies to pursue their own economic independence, China can today be seen as the centre of the anti-colonial revolution – which began in the 20th Century and is still in process under its different guises to this day. And by reminding ourselves of the pivotal role the public sphere should play in any economy, China constitutes an alternative in opposition to the economic liberalism and to the consensus dictated by Washington’.

It is all very well to read such thoughts, but the point came home to me in a conversation we had in Shanghai less than two years ago. In the midst of the bustle, traffic, advertising, shops, and

clear economic drive of the place, Domenico said, 'I am happy with this. This is what socialism can do!' To my quizzical look, he replied with a smile, 'I am strongly in favour of the reform and opening up'.

Ultimately, it was the conversations we had in September of 2016 that remain with me. Many others knew him far better than me, but I had invited him to participate in a conference on Chinese Marxism in Beijing, after which we travelled together to another and very different conference in Shanghai. While the first was constructive, with scholars from China and abroad engaging in creative discussions, the second was divisive, with most of the foreigners feeling they could come to China and tell these 'wayward' Chinese Marxists how they had it all wrong.

So Domenico and I talked. We did so on trains, buses, walking, a cup of tea (which he prefers because of tea's inherent slowing down of time, inviting you to sip and talk and pour another). He had noticed my review of his Stalin book, so we discussed the Soviet Union. He told me had first visited China in 1972, as the leader of a young Italian 'Friends of China' group. He liked to come here as often as possible, pleased indeed to see the construction of socialism leaping ahead. As we came to realise how much we had in common, he pointed out, 'We are of the mainstream, but we must be patient'. Yes indeed, the mainstream, from Marx and Engels, through Lenin and Stalin, to Mao, Deng and indeed Xi Jinping. Part of a living tradition. Which of course means that the myopia of 'Western' Marxist efforts to excise many parts of the mainstream smacks a little too much of utopian revisionism (as his final book did indeed argue).

At one point, he asked about my daily patterns, for we both enjoy writing immensely. I spoke of quiet days of writing, at whatever home I happened to be, of ocean swimming, of Chinese study. He said, 'I usually go for a walk of an hour or two, around the countryside, and perhaps talk with some friends. After I return home, I answer mail and I write'. He smiled, 'I am a bit of a stakhanovite when it comes to writing'.

But he also said his life feels very 'provincial', with all of the European associations. 'We prefer to speak of the countryside or "the bush"', I said. 'I am a country boy, from "the bush," and I much prefer it to the city'. He said, 'Yes, that is a much better word, countryside – "the bush"'.

We will miss him, as will 'the bush' around Urbino.