

On Historical Nihilism in Relation to China

Roland Boer (2020.02.25)

What is it called when one denies the proletarian revolution, negates the leadership of the Communist Party, and ignores Marxism or suggests that Marxism is outdated and that China has abandoned Marxism? In China, this is known as ‘historical nihilism [*lishi xuwuzhuyi*]’.

This is precisely the disaster that befell the Soviet Union. In that context there was intense ideological struggle, during which the achievements of the October Revolution and the Soviet Communist Party were denied, Lenin and Stalin were belittled, Party organisations at all levels lost their way, and the military was no longer under the leadership of the Party. The result: ‘the massive Communist Party of the Soviet Union scattered like birds and beasts [*niaoshousan*], and the vast socialist state of the Soviet Union collapsed and fell apart [*fenbeng lixi*]’ (Xi Jinping 2019). In short, historical nihilism is the favoured tool of those hostile to the communist project, those who seek to vilify and slander China and its path.

In the small number of countries known as the ‘West’ (which comprise only 14 percent of the global population), such historical nihilism in relation to China is quite common. And it includes a number of Western Marxists, who have lined up the international class struggle on the side of capitalist or bourgeois states. I suggest that the various approaches of historical nihilism in such places may best be categorised in terms of sub-genres, some of them with vestiges of the more unsavoury aspects of the Christian tradition that has an abiding influence on Western thought forms.

Secular Apocalypse

This type is also known as the ‘China doomer’ approach, in which someone seeks to predict yet again the apocalyptic crash of China’s economic and political system. One of the earlier works that set the tone was Gordon Chang’s *The Coming Collapse of China* (2001), although one can trace such fantasies back to the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949. If one is fond of recycling this narrative, then it is quite easy to get such a work published in one or another less than reputable press. Every year a new title or more appears proposing a ‘collapse’ or ‘crisis’, focusing on whatever aspect takes the author’s fancy, but each time recycling the old Judaeo-Christian myth of the apocalyptic end of the world. As this tradition makes clear, the weary repetition of such predictions does not seem to dampen the enthusiasm of those who propagate them.

Dystopian Fiction

These works peddle old anti-communist tropes, such as ‘cultural genocide’ in Tibet, ‘forced labour’ in Xinjiang, human rights ‘abuses’ in Hong Kong, ‘suppression’ of minority nationalities, a ‘surveillance state’, ‘authoritarian dictatorship’ that suppresses freedom of the press, and so on and so on. This type of material is known as ‘atrocities propaganda’,¹ an old anti-communist and indeed anti-anyone-who-does-not-toe-the-Western-line approach that tries to manufacture a certain image for popular consumption. These pieces of ‘atrocities propaganda’ feed off one another, creating a dystopia that can only be a fiction for anyone who actually spends some time in China, let alone lives there. The only way I can make sense of this type of material is that it belongs to the genre of ‘dystopian science fiction’, in which another planet is created with a country called ‘China’. This fictional representation has nothing to do with the real China here on earth.

Ghost Story

This sub-genre postulates that the Communist Party is a secretive and paranoid outfit that is terribly afraid of its own people and seeks world domination. Here too one can be assured of a publication in a less than reputable press if one suggests, for example, that the social credit system is geared to surveillance of a restive population, or that women are indoctrinated to produce the next generation of communists, or indeed that the CPC has a long-term plan to undermine global institutions and take over the world. Much like a ghost story, really, in which one has an irrational belief in ghosts, fits bits and pieces into an apparently coherent narrative of ghostly appearances, and then denies the overwhelming weight of empirical evidence to the contrary. The result: spooks everywhere.

Conspiracy Theory

This one is particularly favoured by the relatively few scholars who mostly belong to the small tributary or side-stream known as ‘Western Marxism’. The theory relies on an initial ‘betrayal’ – think of Adam and Eve and the first sin, or Judas Iscariot with Jesus of Nazareth – of Marxism by one or another leader. In a Chinese context, the favoured ‘traitor’ is Deng Xiaoping, who is cast as a ‘capitalist roader’ – even though Mao Zedong never called Deng such a name – and who supposedly undid all of the socialist

¹ The term ‘atrocities propaganda’ was coined by James Read (1976). In our time, the country subject to the most consistent atrocities propaganda is the DPRK, or North Korea. It should be noted that in the tightly controlled media environment of the UK, the BBC has, since its founding in 1922, been the cultural arm of the UK government’s cultural propaganda. In such a role, the BBC has been a prime exponent of atrocities propaganda; examples include the struggles in Northern Ireland, the invasion of Iraq, the promotion of the ‘White Helmets’ in Syria, and more recently in relation to Xinjiang in China.

achievements of Mao Zedong. Now the conspiracy theory comes into play: 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.² How massive? It has been going for over 40 years and includes CPC leadership, tens of thousands of scholars, tens of millions of CPC members, and hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens. Quite impressive really, but only if one believes in conspiracy theories.

Orientalist Mystery

An old Western and deeply racist trope, the 'orientalist mystery' has many levels. It runs all the way from the notion of 'implacable Asian faces', through the suggestion that people 'disappear' when under police investigation, to the belief that the Communist Party is 'hiding' some horrible truth. In terms of the latter, the possibilities are endless, such as the suggestion that the 'truth' of Mao Zedong in terms of what he said and did, of the Cultural Revolution, or Tiananmen Square in 1989, or indeed Xinjiang today, have all been concealed and kept from the public eye. Obviously, this sub-genre is closely connected with 'conspiracy theories', but the 'orientalist mystery' brings to the fore the deeply racist nature of such assumptions. It goes back to the idea of the mystery – both dangerous and sexualised – of the East hidden behind a curtain or veil.

Sectarian Intolerance

Once again an approach that afflicts Western Marxists, but there are many others who also respond with sectarian or ideologically-inspired intolerance and rejection. I have experienced this response on a number of occasions, when one aspect or another of socialism with Chinese characteristics has been presented or published. Some listeners and readers simply block it out, suggesting that any effort to present empirical facts – such as the achievements in poverty alleviation, ecological development, promotion of rule of law and human rights, and the nature of China's socialist democracy – is 'partisan'. Indeed,

² A good example of such a perceived code is 'crossing the river by feeling for the stones [*mozhe shitou guohe*]', which is recoded to mean crossing 'from the socialist bank to the capitalist bank'. Of course, it means nothing of the sort. The saying was originally used by the Marxist economist, Chen Yun, in order to describe pilot programs that could be tested in one area and then, subject to assessment and revision, be used elsewhere. Chen Yun wrote: 'We should institute reforms slowly and carefully. This is because the reforms we will carry out are complicated, we should not be hasty. Reforms should be based on theoretical research, economic statistics and economic forecasting, but more importantly, we should set out from pilot programs and always sum up experience whenever it is necessary. That is to say, we should "cross the river by feeling for the stones." We should take small steps to advance slowly at the beginning'.

the absurd suggestion that anything that is not a dismissal is 'partisan', along with the passionate denial the realities of China today, obviously overlaps with some of the other approaches mentioned above. But it also has a distinct air of the sectarian intolerance of Christian groups, who are so often given to a 'zero-sum' approach to other groups and reject them entirely.

In all of these various sub-genres, one finds not merely a residue of Christian narrative influences – even in Marxist scholars – but also a studied avoidance of Chinese Marxist scholarship. The obvious reason is that if a Western scholar did focus on such research, his or her pet narrative would fall apart.