Liu Xiaobo and the Nobel Peace Prize – Debate within China

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A fascinating analysis of Liu Xiaobo and the Nobel Peace Prize has been circulating in Europe but has not, to my knowledge, been reprinted in the US, in print or online. Au Loong Yu, who wrote about China for the New Politics symposium on labor's response to the global economic collapse, rejects the premises of a debate that is "primarily between the liberals who support Liu Xiaobo and the nationalists is essentially a debate of either Washington or the Chinese party state." Neither pole supports democracy, which Au Loong Yu argues is essential for democracy and workers' rights.

The piece continues, "While "liberals welcome this as encouragement for fighting for democracy in China, there are people who claim that Liu is not the proper candidate for the prize. They have a loud voice especially among those who are exiled in the west. In a petition letter to the The Norwegian Nobel Committee, a group of exiled dissidents wrote that they thought Liu is not the appropriate candidate for the prize because he has not been standing firm in upholding human rights, and has even practically cooperated with the authorities by inappropriately praising the CCP's human rights rhetoric. On the other hand, on the Utopia (Wuyouzhixiang) website, which is well known for being associated with some of the 'new leftists', articles were posted echoing the authorities' attack on Liu, suggesting that Liu is an agent of US imperialism. In one of these articles, the author Xibeifeng denies that Liu's sentences has anything to do with freedom of speech, arguing that Liu's advocacy for Charter 08 is as criminal as a drunk driver demanding freedom to violate the rules of traffic.

Those Who Act are Spared, Those Who Talk are Indicted
Not everyone who criticizes Liu share Xibeifeng's crude defense of the authorities' absolute intolerance though. Two professors in Hong Kong, Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong, agree that 'there was no need to imprison Liu'. 'Rather, there has only been a need to bring to light Liu's self-proclaimed goals. If most Chinese, especially the non-elite majority, knew about his prescribed path for China, they would turn away from him as from someone with ignoble things on offer.' By this they mean that Liu's pro-US and pro-market position is not something beneficial to the Chinese people.
In a certain sense it is true. We do not entirely share the Norwegian Nobel Committee's statement on its decision to award the prize to Liu. The Committee praises China for having 'achieved economic advances to which history can hardly show any equal', but regrets that .it is in breach of several international agreements on human rights and also its own constitution concerning these rights. We must say that anyone who praises China's economic achievement without at the same time qualifying this with the fact that labor's share of national income has dropped 15 percent in the last 20 years for the benefit of profit, a necessary outcome being political repression concerning workers' right to association and to strike, cannot be said to be a real friend of the Chinese working people who constitute the majority of the population.
Further down the statement praises Liu as having been 'a strong spokesman for the application of fundamental human rights also in China. He took part in the Tiananmen protests in 1989; he was a leading author behind Charter 08, the manifesto of such rights in China'. We have written some time ago that Charter 08, while supportable whenever it advocates basic civil liberties, is severely limited by its call for the privatization of farm land and further privatization of state owned enterprises. This, along with the obvious negligence of labor rights, leads us to believe that the Charter is far from being one for the working people.

Sautman and Yan pointed out the same limitation regarding Liu, but they lost sense of proportion in their accusation. If Liu's advocacy for privatization should be criticized, then by logic the CCP must be treated more harshly for actually pushing through two gigantic waves of privatization — first most state and collectively owned enterprises, resulting in more than 50 million workers being dismissed, then a second wave of privatization which targets urban lands, resulting in price hikes in the property market which most people cannot afford. While Liu boldly calls for privatization, but without the power and money to implement it, it has been the CCP which has acted boldly but silently (privatization is still a banned word in China). Curiously Sautman and Yan do not criticize the CCP. If they do it is just to remark that 'there was no need to imprison Liu'; in other words the CCP's only error was having taken a slightly superfluous step. One may wonder if there is more miserable misjudgment than this.

The same goes for their criticism of Liu's support of the US war in Iraq. In their second article published in the Guardian, they accused Liu's 'stand for war not peace'. We do not share Liu's position on the Iraq war, but again our criticism must be fair. While his support of the war carries no weight at all both in China and the international community, the Chinese government, with its power to veto, abstained from the vote in the UN Security Council in 1991, which thus practically credited the US and its allies with UN legitimacy to go to war against Iraq. It was done in the sacred name of expelling the invader from Kuwait, but only resulted in allowing another invader — the US – to enjoy an even more dominant role in the region, which led to the second Gulf war in 2003. If Liu should be indicted for his views supporting the US war effort, should not the Chinese government also be criticized for its action?

'Democracy is Bad for You'

What is more troubling is that Sautman and Yan went even further when they condemned Liu 'who has long been financed by the US government's National Endowment for Democracy, proposes an instant shift to electoral democracy as the solution to China's problems.' We do not share Liu's pro-American government position, but it has no bearing on the question of whether 'electoral democracy' is desirable or not. Sautman and Yan see electoral democracy as bad for China because 'states that have made the transition to electoral democracy at low levels of wealth (and China is still very much a developing country) have low levels of development and considerable instability… In many cases the transition to electoral democracy in developing countries worsens rights.' In arguing this they are taking the side of the CCP's continual denial to the Chinese people of basic democratic rights. We believe free elections are a basic right of the Chinese people and the CCP has owed this to the people for too long. Apart from this moral imperative behind the demand for democracy, there is also an issue of political necessity. It is necessary, now more than ever, to put the CCP under democratic control before one can seriously talk about controlling the plundering of public wealth by the bureaucracy. Any attempt in minimizing the importance of advocating democratic rights, including free elections, is objectively justifying the absolutism of the one party state. Sautman and Yan went even further than the CCP indeed; whereas the latter justified its despotic rule by saying that Chinese people do enjoy all rights enshrined in the constitution — an absolutely stupid defense, Sautman and Yan provided the CCP a more sophisticated argument by telling Chinese people that fighting for electoral democracy now jeopardizes their own interests. This is especially harmful in a China context where awareness of popular sovereignty and democratic rights is at its all time low since the 1911 revolution.

Re-Colonization a Real Threat?

A common trait which runs through those who are associated with the Utopia is the ever stronger statist and nationalist arguments. They are statist because they fall into the false dichotomy of state versus market, hence in opposing, rightly, the privatization of public assets they come to embrace the state as the only viable vehicle to fight privatization — not only the state in general but first and foremost the one party state, despite the fact that it is this very state which pushes forward privatization in the first place. They are nationalist, not only because they allege that the supposed value of national interest overrides all other values, be it working class interest or human rights in

general, but also because they wrongly judge the present situation. They often argue, in the light of the 150 years of contemporary Chinese history when China was invaded and humiliated by imperialism, that the greatest danger at all times for China now is the danger of re-colonization by Western or Japanese influence, not only in an economic sense but also a political sense — hence they echo the CCP's repeated alarm regarding 'color revolution'. There is a grain of truth in this argument, but only a grain. There has been features of dependent accumulation in China's economy since the 1990's, in relation to Western and Japanese economy, and correspondingly there has been growing sections of the bureaucracy and the new rich who have acquired features of a comprador mentality. However, since 2003, the bureaucracy finally settled on a decision for a more independent economic growth, with special emphasis on 'autonomous innovation'. Features of dependent accumulation in the economy still exist, but are not dominant. For instance, the 2 trillion US dollar exchange reserves which China accumulates are both a sign of dependent accumulation and a factor in the rise of China. It is a sign of dependent accumulation because it is a result of over-reliance on exports, made possible only by surrendering China's resources and surplus value to the West and Japan. However it also enables the CCP to import ambitiously modern foreign techniques and to enjoy a strong bargaining position in relation to global competition. For instance, the 2 trillion US dollar exchange reserves which China accumulates are both a sign of dependent accumulation and a factor in the rise of China. It is a sign of dependent accumulation because it is a result of over-reliance on exports, made possible only by surrendering China's resources and surplus value to the West and Japan. However it also enables the CCP to import ambitiously modern foreign techniques and to enjoy a strong bargaining position in relation to global competition. Henceforth there is even less chance that China will be re-colonized economically in the strict sense.

If China had not been colonized, as India was, between 1840 and 1949 when it was much weaker, it would be equally difficult for Western countries and Japan to dominate China economically now, in face of a China which is much stronger. The party state draws its strength from China's contemporary glorious history of anti-imperialist struggle, including fighting the US in Korea. It also benefited from the achievement of Mao's enormous industrialization drive in a vast country, which has given the party state exceptional power to bargain with the developed countries since the reform period. The first factor determines the party state's deep seated distrust against foreign influence, especially when it targets Chinese people, while the second gives the CCP enough power to fend off foreign competition, politically and economically. Hence the CCPs opening up of the market to foreign capital is always restrained by the need for the maintenance of its grip over the society. Although attacked by the nationalists for abandoning Mao's self reliance strategy, the top leaders really never went that far; on the contrary, despite internal squabbles and vacillation, they have been keen for China to develop its own domestic players in all key industries. The CCP has promoted a second wave of even more rapid industrialization, outstanding if not exceptional among the so called transitional economies, and put itself as the ultimate ruler of the most strategic industries. In order to gain a more autonomous position for its industries, the party state often go one step further by developing its own industry standards, often in defiance of foreign capital and its governments, from a VCD, mobile phone, Wifi to a credit card standard,.

The self interest of the bureaucracy also determines its decision for a relatively autonomous path of development. Increasing sections of the bureaucracy clenched its teeth at the scenario where huge profit were garnered by foreign capital; they vow to seize back at least a part of this profit for themselves. With the help of the alignment of exceptional advantages peculiar to China (which we have discussed in earlier articles), they succeeded, even if within limit.

China is deeply integrated within a global economy; hence its autonomous path of development must be highly qualified by this. There is also no doubt that China is now encountering a bottle neck for its growth model in the midst of global crisis, but how much it will hamper China's rise still remains to be seen. Even with a slower rate of growth China is already a great power. As an economy ranking second in the world, any talk to suggest that China is under threat from economic re-colonization makes no sense.

The major threat for Chinese working people today is less re-colonization than the plundering of the wealth by the ruling party and a break- down of social fibers resulting from this. To argue the otherwise is simply providing support to the party in its attempt to divert attention from domestic corruption to an alleged re-colonization threat.
As to the threat of a color revolution, again it is grossly exaggerated. There are no signs at all that the US has enough support in China so as to put a color revolution in China on the agenda, nor is it true that the party state is so weak that even the smallest political liberalization will end up in the CCP losing power. Despite economic decentralization since the market reform, politically the CCP's grip over society only grows stronger. There was and is no real civil society, no real social movement, no organized opposition. If China ever has a color revolution like those in Kyrgyzstan in a distant future, it is not because of people like Liu Xiaobo or because of free elections, but because the party state is hated so much by the people that they think any other party taking power will be better than the CCP, hence they are either indifferent to its downfall or act to make it happens. So it leads us back to the basic question which the nationalists try to avoid: the chief threat today in China is not foreign aggression, politically or economically, but the CCP dictatorship, a dictatorship which is corrupt to the core but armed to the teeth. It must be noted that it is also a dictatorship which also benefits the US ruling class, without it, it would not have been possible to hold back both wages and the Chinese workers movement for so long.

The debate between the liberals who support Liu Xiaobo and the nationalists is essentially a debate of either Washington or the Chinese party state. For us working people this is a false choice.

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