

Report: The China Question conference

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‘[T]here is a growing consensus,’ two Obama-era officials wrote recently in *Foreign Affairs*, ‘that the era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close.’ American intelligence chiefs now talk of the ‘existential threat’ that China poses to the US, while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been touring the globe lecturing nations on the risks of doing business with Beijing. There are, of course, the usual Trumpian contradictions. With his trade war arriving at an inconclusive phase-1 armistice, Donald Trump proclaimed in his State of the Union address that ‘we have the best relationship we’ve ever had with China.’ But the signs of brewing conflict across the Pacific are becoming more evident by the day.

While sections of the right have welcomed a return to the familiar rhythms of great power rivalry, progressives been slow to respond to the challenges that the new climate creates. In the US, the revival on the left-wing of the Democratic Party has been driven by domestic political issues, with much less debate on foreign policy and US imperialism. Where China has come into view, divides on the left have been obvious. Solidarity with the long-running mobilisations in Hong Kong, for example, has been far from unanimous, with some on the left siding with Beijing against a perceived Western conspiracy. The persistence, even revival, of campism—the logic that ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’—is more than simply the inheritance of twentieth-century Stalinist or Maoist sympathies for ‘communist’ China. In America, where progressives face the task of reining in the violent US empire, anything that checks or hinders that violence—even repressive states like the PRC—can look to some people like a good thing. For those who hope to see a left capable of combatting US imperialism without compromising on internationalist solidarity with struggles elsewhere in the world, America’s turn to confrontation with China calls for debate, clarification, and organisation.

With this in mind, the last Saturday in January saw a gathering of activists and academics from

across the US at the Verso loft in Brooklyn to discuss *The China Question: Towards a Left Perspective on China*. A rare forum of the left dedicated to US-China politics, some 150-160 participants spent the day not only listening and debating but building networks for the struggles that await us. Apart from Verso, the conference was co-sponsored by Haymarket, *New Politics*, *Dissent*, *Made in China Journal*, and International Committee of the DSA.

The China Question coincided with the publication of NYU historian Rebecca Karl's new book, *China's Revolutions in the Modern World* (Verso). Opening the conference, Rebecca read from her book's conclusion:

“China's rise'... names a panic-inducing challenge to white global supremacy and Euro-American-controlled capitalism, one depicted as devious and distorted—unfair, even—because it is presided over by a ruthless Communist authoritarianism that has thwarted all predictions of its inevitable political demise. However, 'China's rise' (*Zhongguo jueqi*) is not as popular a phrase in China as the now-ubiquitous Chinese term for the contemporary moment: the 'years of ascendancy and prosperity' (*shengshi*). This latter term is an entirely unironic echo of that used by the Kangxi Emperor in the eighteenth century to reflect on the achieved greatness of Qing territorial expansion—into Xinjiang, no less—and dynastic flourishing, which itself recalls much earlier versions of prosperity touted in the Han or Tang dynasties. 'Ascendancy and prosperity' is thus a designation that presents a cultural internality to China's history, imagined as benign and peaceful, that can be posed as an alternative to the 'China's rise' designation, with its reference to global antagonism and direct challenge to the hitherto-existing Euro-American-dominated world order. Yet, the ongoing popular uprisings in Hong Kong over the tightening of PRC control in that territory powerfully demonstrate that not all who might be subject to China's 'ascendancy and prosperity' are interested in succumbing to its version of the world...'

The conference's first session, on the US-China rivalry, brought out some of the key points of contention. David Harvey first offered his assessment of China's remarkably rapid rise, highlighting its ability to ride out the 2007-8 financial crisis, but also pointing to the challenge it now confronts in shifting from labour-intensive to more capital-intensive industry. Ashley Smith provided a more explicitly political perspective on what he described as a growing inter-imperialist rivalry, requiring the left to advocate a distinct third position of 'neither Washington nor Beijing,' along with support for struggles against the Chinese state, e.g. in Hong Kong. He also highlighted what he saw as a confusion, even incoherence in the current US response to China, caught between decoupling from the Chinese economy or redoubling its efforts to prise it open for American profit-making. Abdullah Younus from the DSA took a more cautious position, positioning China as part of a series of non-Western experiments with socialism, though he voiced strong criticisms of its direction, e.g. on the Islamophobic repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

As the discussion ensued, more questions emerged: could China be thought of as imperialist when its economy remained a source of so much surplus value for Western corporations? Were Beijing's dealings with African nations exploitative in the same way that classical imperialism was? If war broke out, one participant queried, would the left not be obliged to support China against the US? Is China on an ever-upward development path, or should we be more attentive to the implications of its economic slowdown? Smith, in response, insisted on the need for concrete analysis of the new situation, in which imperial rivalries would not necessarily take the same form as the old. Karl took the same view: the left could not compromise its principles in the defence of states. Harvey, by contrast, dissented from the 'plague on both your houses' view being put forward. In concluding, he

expressed a degree of hesitant admiration for Xi Jinping's official Marxism, and his measures to reassert the CCP's role in Chinese society.

The next sessions of the conference focused on specific issues on which the American left needs to educate itself and intervene. Yige Dong and Cuizi Liu discussed the state of feminist activism in the Chinese diaspora and inside China respectively, considering its relationship to various currents of Western feminism. Liu focused on online and offline mobilisations in support of victims of sexual assault. Dong pointed to the possibility of women's rights and labour issues converging in struggles surrounding social reproduction and China's feminised service industries. Moving to environmental questions, Matt Huber offered a sobering analysis both of China's considerable efforts to tackle climate change and its massive, ongoing dependence on fossil fuels. Whether in China or the West, more pressure from below will be necessary to make the transition to renewable energy that the world so desperately needs. Kevin Lin then described the changing landscape of labour activism in China, from the strikes of the early 2000s to the much more constrained environment today, with direct repression intensifying since 2018. Lin also criticised the turn to economic nationalism in the US, arguing that 'the rhetoric of Chinese workers stealing American jobs is both analytically problematic and enormously damaging to labour solidarity.' Despite the difficulties of making contact with the Chinese working class, labour internationalism remains an indispensable principle for the left today.

The third session shifted focus to the unresolved political questions of China's periphery: Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. David Brophy criticised China's racist and Islamophobic repression of the Uyghurs, then went on to discuss the historical lessons of earlier, mostly ineffective Western human rights campaigns against China. The globalised nature of the War on Terror offers a strategically valuable entry point to this issue for the left to build an alternative response. Wilfred Chan, editor of *Lausan*, reflected on the complicity of Chinese and Western elites in Hong Kong's hyper-capitalist dystopia. '[B]oth are far too heavily invested in using Hong Kong as an interface for global capital to ever support the actual freedom of Hong Kong people,' he argued, calling on the US left to support Hong Kongers in imagining a future for the city not determined by its place in the shifting landscape of global capitalism. Brian Hioe, who edits *New Bloom*, examined Taiwan's own geopolitical precarity and the influence it has on local politics. Analysing the decline of the KMT and the dominance of DPP, he emphasised the way the question of independence versus unification obscures left-right divisions. Despite the DPP often disappointing Taiwanese progressives, a form of 'lesser-evilism' has drawn activists from struggles such as the 2014 Sunflower Movement to work within it. At the same time, the unpopularity of Trump offers opportunities to shift the pro-independence camp away from its reliance on the US and in a more progressive direction.

The final session returned to the United States, and the challenges activists face confronting rising racism and xenophobia here. Zifeng Liu described the predicament of Chinese studying in the US, where their agency is constrained both by worries of Chinese surveillance, and Western liberalism that is quick to write them off as pawns of Beijing. Criticising the pretensions of this pedagogical paternalism and the obstacles it presents to genuine solidarity, he cautioned against 'packaging racist and anti-immigrant sentiments in concerns about government wrongdoing in China.' Drawing on his experiences at Cornell University, Eli Friedmann critiqued the corporate university and the compromises that its liberal administrations have made on principles of academic freedom in dealings with China. At the same time, he firmly rejected the encroachment of US intelligence agencies on university life, insisting that only a bottom-up response that democratises university decision-making could remedy this situation. Helena Wong described the landscape of Chinese-American politics, focusing in particular on the emergence of a Chinese-American right around Donald Trump and issues such as Affirmative Action in university admissions. Concluding the session, JS gave a first-hand perspective from the AI industry on the ideological shift to tech

nationalism worldwide, citing examples of Amazon's collaboration with the CIA, and Microsoft's with the Department of Defence, to highlight the hypocrisy of America's accusations against China. With a US-China tech war intensifying, the talk also gave us an inspiring case study of international organising between China and the US, in the 996 campaign to end hyper-exploitation in Chinese tech companies.

In concluding the conference, sociologist Ho-fung Hung offered an interesting preview of his ongoing research into the political economy of the US-China rivalry. Hung described the shift towards a more aggressive American stance on China as part of the fallout from the global financial crisis of 2007-8. In its wake, Beijing's stimulus package helped domestic companies reduce American market share in China and establish a firmer platform from which to compete internationally. This change served to undermine the long-standing Beijing-Wall Street nexus and open the way for security hawks to gain the ascendancy in policy debate in Washington. Striking a different note to the day's opening discussion, Hung identified features of the new rivalry which in his view were reminiscent of classical imperialism, particularly the competition to lend to the developing world.

The China Question will hopefully provide the impetus for a more confident response on the left to the challenge of what looms as a new Cold War. In wider progressive circles, of course, knowledge of China and consciousness of the strategic questions discussed here is mixed. In many ways, the debate is only just beginning. But the earlier we can lay down a set of common principles, the better. The left should reject calls to side with either the American or Chinese state in their rivalry and direct its critique to the capitalist system that has generated this conflict. In a place like the US, that requires opposition to Washington's efforts to reassert its economic and military dominance in the face of the "threat" from China, and a readiness to combat the domestic scare campaigns and racism that these competitive dynamics give rise to. But we can and should do this without any illusions in China's own brand of globalising state capitalism. Today's trends towards heightened nationalism and militarism in both the US and China will only be disrupted and defused by a confident internationalism.

Most of the conference's presentations were recorded and will be available on the We Are Many site. For those in North America, similar discussions are being organized for Historical Materialism in Montreal in May, and the Socialism 2020 conference in Chicago in July.

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