

Subhayu Bhattacharjee

Deptt. of English, Mirik College, Darjeeling, India | University of North Bengal, India

Capitalism but not quite: A postcolonial analysis of Deng Xiaoping thought

Marxism as a socio-cultural and political discourse has undergone several appropriations and approximations in the last century ranging from postcolonial reflections on Western Marxism to the European New Left (Laclau and Mouffe). Although Asiatic strands of Marxist thought have been conventionally looked upon as developments on the broader narrative of Marxism itself, more critical attention needs to be paid to their role in shaping postcolonial responses to the 'First World' questions of Marxism. In such a light, the grand narrative of Marxism does not simply undergo a refashioning as such but gets exposed to the particular conditions of the 'Third World'. Perhaps this is what led Mao As Dong to characterize and categorize geopolitics in the form of the categories of the First, Second and Third Worlds, apart from geopolitical tensions like the Sino-Soviet conflict of interest. It is interesting to note further that it was Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping who took up the issue of such a categorization in the United Nations in 1974. The conventional view of Deng has focussed on his initiative of reforms and "readjustment" and thereby often tended to diminish his image as a prominent Marxist ideologue to one who was the harbinger of capitalism in China.

However, a closer analysis of Deng Xiaoping's writings will put into question such an easy characterization of his thought. In fact, a very distinct strand of postcolonial reconfiguration emerges in the broader theoretical presumptions of Deng Xiaoping theory. This happens when one undertakes a comparatist approach and looks at the towering figures of neoliberal policies in Dan's time such as Milton Friedman and their works. In significant ways, Deng Xiaoping thought offers a resistance to complete appropriation by neoliberal discourses whilst at the same time it offers a response not just to Western Marxism but also the Western idea concerning the welfare state. To cite Derrida's play on the use

of spectral metaphors in his acclaimed *Spectres of Marx*, the conjuring activity that is associated with spectres could evoke two distinct uses: “conjure up” and “conjure away”. As a Asiatic study of Marx, Deng Xiaoping theory can be said to both “conjure up” elements of Marxist principles without associating itself too closely with the Western foundations of Marxism, and “conjure away” any hint of appropriations of its ideas on society and political economy by broader neo-liberal perceptions in the West. Thus my paper will undertake a comparatist approach to the writings of Milton Friedman and Deng Xiaoping to underscore the fundamental differences in the latter and broadly account for such differences on the basis of its postcolonial *momente, milieu and historie*.

Keywords: Marxism, post-colony, enterprise, Deng, Third World

Marxism has historically been at the center of both theoretical and praxis-centered discourses. As a European intellectual current, it has manifested itself in various forms in revolutionary practices and radical ideas both in Marx’s own lifetime and after. Its European lineage has led to its questioning by the postcolonial discursive tradition of which the most noteworthy example is Edward Said’s inclusion of Marx’s words in the beginning of his opus magnum, *Orientalism* (Said 1978, 1). Although Marxism’s existence as a ‘derivative discourse’ gains merit (and we will examine this idea further in this paper), its prevailing influence in postcolonial thought either in the form of Marx’s own writings or through its epistemic derivatives like the works of Gramsci and Althusser is undoubtedly unquestionable. In fact, the conceptual embodiments of what has been categorically presented as the ‘humanist Marx’ such as ‘alienation’, ‘ideology’, etc. has penetrated postcolonial examinations of consciousness and agency, thereby concretizing Derrida’s claim that the essence of Marxist hermeneutics can only lead to ‘spectres’ of Marx even if the memories of the Soviet Union deters the ideological specter from fashioning itself thus (Derrida 2006, 15).

Critiques of Marx in the postcolonial tradition have focused on the disparaging view of human agency in the colony that has still not rid itself of feudal remnants and that awaits the intervention of Western colonialism to undergo a transition to bourgeois modernity. This has

been argued as a quintessential Hegelian heritage that regards the progress of world history as the relative development of categorical consciousness that varies in accordance with space and time. If we turn our gaze on the specific development of movements with an explicit orientation towards Marxism in Asia, we shall witness the case of political establishments that associate their existence with the fullest development of socialism. This is nowhere better reflected than in the propaganda of Maoist China or, for that matter in theoretical aspects of Mao's own thoughts as the following lines from a speech given on the twenty-eighth anniversary of the CPC show'

Our state *is* a people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the worker-peasant alliance.

This definite nature of the assertion about the nature of social formation however underwent a sea-change in the post-Mao epoch due to contradictions that were emerging in the social and political sphere. Thus, it was during Deng Xiaoping's tenure that it was officially resolved that China was in the 'primary stage of socialism'. In other words, the idea of progressive evolution of socialism that characterized Marx's writing and aroused the ire of postcolonial intellectuals came to be revealed (as we shall elucidate further) precisely under postcolonial circumstances.

While the abovementioned argument reveals the alignment of postcolonial praxis with Marxist theory, another major development of Marxist thought happens in Dengist China through the limitations that are revealed within the compass of Western conceptions of socialism. Here my point of correspondence will be Peter Hudis' book on Marx's alternative to capitalism which will ultimately be revealed to be unmindful of the particular conditions of the postcolony. Thus Deng's writings will serve as exposition of its postcolonial analysis of Western Marxism. Thus, this paper will attempt to use Deng's works as a doorway for engaging in dialogue with Marxism from an Asian and postcolonial perspective. It is important to mention at the outset that the reference to post-colony and its equivalents would be made from the perspective of the specific impacts of the colonial period especially in the economic and political arenas. This is where references to China stand justified owing to its direct and indirect colonial influence although it was never a 'colony'.

While the reforms initiated during Deng Xiaoping's term have been conventionally held as the harbinger of free-market liberalism, its particular Marxist leanings have often been overlooked. This happens either when a study of these reforms is undertaken in isolation from its socialist forebears or when their rationale is not sought in Deng Xiaoping's writings and speeches. Thus, while it may look quite convenient in the Anglo-American neoliberal gaze to regard the 'reforms' as a departure from Marxism and socialism, the specific equivocations made by Deng reveal the specifics of Third World and hence establish the 'reforms' as a necessary component of Third World socialist transition. In engaging in a comparative analysis of the political writings of Milton Friedman and those of Deng Xiaoping, I shall underscore the integrity of Marxist transition in the latter and thereby recuperate it from the shape it takes under western eyes. Thus, another major objective of this paper would be to reveal the potency of the postcolonial condition (understood as the instinctive urge to question the uniformity of Western ideas irrespective of space) in eliminating interpretations of Asian manifestations as specters of First World thought. This only enables the uprightness of postcolonial hermeneutics in strategically avoiding the 'Selving' of the Other.

In significant ways, Deng Xiaoping thought offers a wholesome resistance to appropriation by neoliberal discourses while at the same time it offers a resistance not just to Western Marxism. To cite Derrida's play on the use of spectral metaphors in his acclaimed *Spectres of Marx*, the conjuring activity that is associated with could evoke two distinct uses: "conjure up" and "conjure away" (Derrida 2008, 38). As a Asiatic study of Marx, Deng Xiaoping theory can be said to both "conjure up" elements of Marxist principles without associating itself too closely with the Western foundation of Marxism, and "conjure away" any hint of appropriation of its ideas on social and political economy by broader neo-liberal perceptions in the West. Thus my paper will undertake a comparative approach to the writings of Milton Friedman and Deng Xiaoping to underscore the fundamental differences in the latter and broadly account for such differences on the basis of its postcolonial *momente, milieu and historie*.

The Curious Case of Marxism in Deng Xiaoping Theory

Ezra Vogel, in his seminal biography of Deng informs us that the primary criticism of Deng by the Gang of Four rested on their understanding that Deng Xiaoping had laid too much emphasis on the theory of productive forces rather than the relations of production (Vogel 2011, 91-119). In fact the justification for the same was given by Deng himself as the resolution of the primary contradiction in China. Looking at Marx's anticipation of the success of a probable socialist revolution in a semi-feudal country like Russia, one finds a considerable degree of alignment of Deng's understanding with Marxist theory. This is so because the question of advanced productive forces is prerequisite for a socialist theory of production (Hudis 2013, 210). The absence of the same in China actually generates a contradiction to Maoist affirmation by projecting the intermediary stage of capitalism as an essential condition in conformity with classical Marxism. This has led theorists like A. James Gregor to claim that Deng Xiaoping theory actually thwarted the continuity of Maoism (Gregor 1999, 117). We only add a caveat to Gregor by claiming that it simultaneously marks a conformity with Marxism. Thus, it is also possible to go a step or two further and suggest that particular conditions in a non-European context and/or setting may not automatically signal the non-applicability of First World precepts. The absence of robust productive forces in China and in many post-colonial states could be attributed to the shared history of imperialism and aggression. This particular condition exclusive to such states was what provided the impetus for a closer alignment with Marxism. In other words, the nature of the post-colony could sometimes actually result in a consensus with Western thought such as classical Marxist theory.

We have hitherto considered the close ties that Deng Xiaoping thought shares with Western Marxism. However it is also worthwhile to consider the various aspects of disjunction between the two. Like the points of accord mentioned earlier, the rationale for discord is also to be traced in the peculiar position of the post-colony. In order to engage more fully with these issues, a closer consideration of Peter Hudis's conclusive reading of Marx's alternative could be made.

First of all, Hudis argues that Marx's envisioning would run counter to various concrete models of state-enforced socialism that had emerged in the 20th century. This was because-

Free development, for Marx, is not possible if human activity and its products take on the form of an autonomous power and proscribe the parameters in which individuals can express their natural and acquired talents and abilities (Hudis 2013, 208).

Thus a top-down enforcement of principles and policies would be only a proscription of free realization of value. It is undoubtedly true that reversal of such policies coupled with the incentivization of activities such as agriculture characterized Deng's tenure. In fact, Deng's rejection of the "two whatevers" proposed by Hua Guofeng ("Two Whatevers" Do not Accord With Marxism, May 24, 1977) was a signal to the fact that a departure from diktats would characterize the new political society. Instead Deng clarified that Mao himself had resorted to contextual and indicative policies and that this would be the essence of policies undertaken by the State, as embodied in maxims like "crossing the river by feeling the stones". Nevertheless the fact that such pronouncements were made at Party congresses and were to be the cornerstone of state policy suggests that the state would continue to play a dominant role. Thus, the evolutionary pattern of Western Marxism undergoes a shift here as feudalism does not transition into markets but undergoes the creation of a statist political and social infrastructure (through state control over means of production like land under Mao) which even plays a dominant role in making space for capitalist transition. Thus, unlike the contemporaneous development of neoliberal capitalism in the West in Deng's tenure, the state does not suffer from an amnesia of its contribution to capitalist development. The persistence of a conscious state even in the phase of transition is also a legacy of the political role of leadership in the face of aggression which again is a prime feature of post-colonial societies. An article in the Washington Post dated 29th May, 2019 clarifies that-

In the West Mao is known for the tremendous suffering his policies caused... Chinese citizens are not unaware of Mao's follies but many see Mao as a national hero nonetheless—someone who successfully liberated the country from Japanese occupation and from Western imperialist exploitation dating to 19th century opium wars.

The political role of leadership created by the conditions of colonialism has granted legitimacy to the significance of the political entity of the state even during the phase of transition.

Another major area of contention that Hudis has with regard to the socialist societies from the 20th century onwards is related to the issue of wage-labour (Hudis 2013, 213). This, he argues, is a major obstacle to free creativity of the worker and a deterrent to an organic foundation of socialism that he evaluates in Marx's writings. It is this feature of these societies which makes him put them in the category of 'state capitalism' instead of socialism. However if we analyze Hudis's perception from the perspective of postcolonial specificities, we find its Eurocentric presumptions. The historical exploitation of resources in the colony coupled with an insistence on First World dependence in the post-colonial period through structural hegemony is an important cause of the impoverishment of productive forces including labour. Thus the transition to capitalism and subsequently socialism in such a society cannot simply rely on the entrepreneurial spirit of individuals. Instead an introduction to the nitty gritty of industrial capitalism could be undertaken by harnessing labour potential in a post-colonial society. In other words, Hudis seems to critique the emergence of a system in China under Deng Xiaoping for which the flagbearers of colonialism are to blame.

Another important aspect in which the category of the worker distinguishes Western capitalism from Dengist perception of Marxism is the idea of the collective. Nationalism is an important consequence of the idea of the collective. As Benedict Anderson points out, the emergence of print capitalism contributed to and coincided with the growth of nationalism in Europe. Thus the growth of an imagined community presumes the literacy of the middle-class as the single biggest contributor to nationalism. In Dengist discourse, the worker

becomes the vital force to enforce the idea of the collective. In a speech at a State Council Meeting delivered on August 8, 1975, Deng speaks of the inextricable relationship between the workers and peasants thus:

Agricultural modernization is not confined to mechanization alone; it also includes the application and development of science and technology. Cities could help rural areas set up mechanized and poultry or pig farms. On the one hand it would raise the income of the peasants; on the other it would improve the supply of non-grain food to the cities...Industry should support agriculture which, in its turn, should support industry. This is a matter of reinforcing the alliance between worker and peasant. (Deng 28)

It is noteworthy how enterprise (work) of labour helps establish links between otherwise distinct parts of the nation-state—between rural and urban provinces and their principal proletarian forces. The imagined community arises not out of bourgeois readership but out of imagined effect of enterprise on imagined labour fraternities bolstered by verbal declarations carrying the mandate of sovereignty.

Capitalism But Not Quite: Free-Enterprise and Deng Xiaoping Theory

The 1970s was marked by the rise of neo-liberal politics in England and the United States. If one considers Deng Xiaoping theory as a manifestation of this current, one would be performing a fallacy—namely that of considering temporal co-occurrences without spatial specifications. In order to raise an argument regarding how Deng Xiaoping thought runs counter to Anglo-American neo-liberalism that had manifested at this time, I would like to engage in a comparative study of the political thoughts of Milton Friedman and Deng Xiaoping. While at a first glance the two appear formally different in terms of their approach to political freedom, for example (Friedman 2002, Preface, ix), their subtle differences in the domain of political economy can be revealed through a textual analysis of their connotation of apparently common and simple terms and the textual priorities accorded to them.

The Oxford English Dictionary, in its definition of enterprise, gives a list of meanings of the word of which the first reads- “a project or

undertaking”, while the second reads- “initiative and resourcefulness”. Interestingly, the genealogy of the term shows its transformation from a verb (Latin ‘prendere’ or ‘to take’) to a noun (‘undertaking’). Thus both its genealogy and its meanings in the OED rooted in their Western lineage show the prioritization of the noun form. In Friedman’s introduction of the term in *Capitalism and Freedom* too we find its conformity to such a connotation as is evident in the following lines-

We have introduced enterprises which are intermediaries between individuals in their capacity as suppliers of service and as purchasers of goods. (Friedman 2002, 14)

Furthermore such a definition extends to his idea of economic freedom as the free ability to build enterprises without government constraints.

Many of Deng Xiaoping’s speeches and writings from 1975-1982 incorporate the noun-meaning of ‘enterprise’ but are finely balanced by the consolidation of the idea of “each according to his work” which lays emphasis on what he regards as a “socialist principle” in a system characterized by the liberalization of enterprises. This principle invests the state with the onus of ‘ensuring’ the reward of productive work (enterprise as a verb) by labour-forces equal in their potential to be rewarded thus. It is therefore interesting to observe how the incorporation of market forces actually strengthens the role of the state and the Party in their adherence to this principle. This further affirms our earlier assertion related to the greater role of workers instead of entrepreneurs in a society devoid of strong productive forces which could be attributed in large measure to colonial aggression and history. An acknowledgement of this truth cannot but balance the two connotations of enterprises with equal emphasis given to its verb form centered around the labour-force. In his analysis of American films in the post-War period, Mike Chopra-Gant underlines the propagandist nature of these films in creating a binary opposition between American-ness identified by equality of opportunity and non-American-ness (Europe/Asia) as characterized by aristocratic hangovers (Chopra-Gant 2006, 36). Chinese response to such an assertion occurs through the projection of the prevailing

importance of the collective even in the epoch of individual aspirations, thereby inverting the binary opposition. In fact, in championing the principle of “each according to his work”, Deng immediately states the importance of greater incentives for those engaged in ‘hazardous activity’. This further consolidates the difference in principle between the notion of individual creation of destiny and the sovereign assurance of rewards and incentives to bolster individual development for her contribution to collective good marked by a willingness to develop the productive forces.

Deng Xiaoping’s emphasis on the development of productive forces as a prerequisite criteria for the development of socialism characterized his regard for scientists as ‘labour’—a branding that had got him involved in a conflict with Mao. However this also helps establish the nature of the collective in his ideas. As a part of the working class, scientists play the pivotal role in development of the productive forces—the most significant collective end contextually defined. This becomes the rationale for the increased remuneration of scientists. In other words, unlike a system based simply on individual rewards for individual merit, the social system in concern also recognizes a hierarchy of merit subject to the needs of the collective. Building on this it is possible to expound on the relative importance accorded to sovereign agency in the political ideas of Friedman and Deng Xiaoping.

In an essay on the idea of equality included in the collection *Free to Choose*, Friedman talks about the fundamental coherence between the notion of liberty and equality by stating that equality entails the liberty of every individual to pursue any activity he chooses. This further stems from and supports his understanding of the market as a system that does not deliver equality simply because it remains fettered with artificial obstacles. He writes –

Like personal equality, equality of opportunity is not to be interpreted literally. Its real meaning is perhaps best expressed by the French expression dating from the French Revolution: *une carrière ouverte aux les talents*—a career open to the talents. No arbitrary obstacles should prevent people from achieving those positions for which their talents fit them and which their values lead them to seek. (Friedman 1980, 132)

However the overt primacy of removal of restrictions seems to predominate Friedman's prescription for creating equality of opportunity. In fact, the systematic nature of free enterprise seems to characterize its provision of equality without the intervention of sovereign agency as he writes of the 'private charitable activity in the nineteenth century' or of increasing government assistance in the twentieth, although the latter in order to be fair must rely on the mandate of taxpayers rather than on sovereign fiat (Friedman 1980, 140). It is also interesting to note that the Preface to *Capitalism and Freedom* contains a stringent critique of increasing government involvement.

On the other hand, we could turn our attention to Deng's insistence on the involvement of sovereign provision to create a free market to enhance productive capacity. With regard to such provisions involving the new labour-force—the scientists, he says-

As production grows, we must ensure further expansion, carry out capital construction, achieve an overall balance in the economy...For instance urban reconstruction projects—sewage systems, housing, transportation and the setting up of schools. Our teachers and scientists are faced with many difficulties in their living conditions which urgently need to be overcome... Given slightly better working and living conditions, they would be able to solve many more problems for the state and its people and create immense additional wealth. (Deng 2011, 192)

Thus although the development of individual innovation is a key concern here, it neither diminishes the role of the state in ensuring the same nor does it deny the end of individuality as being tied to the goal of the collective. In other words, liberty of enterprise is not an end in itself. The modern form of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth century could have only emerged, as Max Weber contends, by 'a stratum of entrepreneurs' whose capitalism was oriented to the market unlike its non-rational counterpart characterized by fiscal and colonial monopolies and privileges (Zeitlin 1985, 204). Dengist China however shows how such a development amidst post-colonial conditions relies on state efforts coupled with labour that is harnessed by entrepreneurial offshoots in the West. This perhaps further goes on to explain the

centrality of the category of the worker in discourses on economic and social readjustment. It is the situation of the post-colony as a nation-state bereft of strong productive forces that restricts its immediate reliance on indigenous entrepreneurship but on a shared and mutual dependence on developed technological support and the productivity of labour—the latter actually providing the impetus for Western collaboration. Thus the labour force actually plays the central role, by virtue of both its presence and productivity, in the attainment of the collective good.

In conclusion it might be said that the almost uncritical acceptance of socio-political categories such as ‘Marxism’ or ‘capitalism’ receives a tremendous jolt in the hands of an interpretive approach that paves the ground for the unique features of spatial parameters. One unique development that Edward Soja notes with regard to the rise of anti-humanist philosophical schools is the shift in focus from time to space as categories of interpretation (Soja 1989, 30-35). As an offspring of the European Enlightenment, Marx’s approach to history has investigations into both temporal and spatial parameters but Deng’s interpretations seem to assert a more credible ground for the Letter of Marxist thought in the post-colonial space. Thus as one of its specters, it haunts Marx’s own idea of the developed capitalist West as the fertile ground for socialism.

With regard to capitalism as a Western category, Dengist thought shows how post-colonial conditions significantly reshape its foundations and replace the ‘individual’ and ‘enterprise’ with ‘state/nation/collective’ and ‘labour/work’ as the central tenets of political theory. In doing so it prevents itself from being remoulded in the image of the West which postcolonial hermeneutics reveals to be a fundamental epistemic encroachment characterizing the phenomenon of Selving the Other and leveling difference.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso Publications, 2006.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*. Kamuf, Peggy, trans. New York: Routledge, 2006.

- Ding, Iza and Javed, Jeffrey. "Why Maoism still resonates in China today". The Washington Post, May, 29, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/29/why-maoism-still-resonates-china-today/>
- Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Friedman, Milton and Friedman, Rose. *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.
- Gant, Mike-Chopra. *Hollywood Genres and Post-War America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*. New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2006.
- Gregor, A. James. *Marxism, China & Development: Reflections on Theory and Reality*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1999.
- Hudis, Peter. *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Irving Zeitlin. "Max Weber's Sociology of Law". Review of *Max Weber*, by Anthony T. Kronman, *The University of Toronto Law Journal* 35, 2 (Spring, 1985): 183-214.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Publishers, 1978.
- Soja, Edward. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso, 1989.
- Vogel, Ezra. *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Xiaoping, Deng. *Selected Works Vol. 2 (1975-1982)*. California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing House, 2011.