China, Leninism and the Pandemic

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China appears to be dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic far more effectively than the United States. Could this asymmetry be due to Americans’ short memories, especially of intellectual history? Dmitry Shlapentokh of Indiana University suggests that postmodernism’s most popular assumption – that objective reality does not exist and is “constructed” to benefit the elite or experts – could be at fault.
Lenin in china: The Russian revolutionary's emphasis on the primacy of the Party has become a key aspect of the Chinese system.

(Credit: gothopotam)
Michel Foucault, one of the most prominent of postmodernists, proclaimed that doctors should be blamed for all restrictions in the life of the modern West. For example, they arbitrarily define some people as insane and place them in hospitals, which Foucault implicitly compared to jails.

Now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Foucault is not quoted. Regardless of their political persuasion, the American public does not believe that the pandemic is an ideological construction. All agree that it is a global calamity. And like many calamities, it tests two major global powers and implicitly their socioeconomic and political systems, which are opposed to each other. While both the US and China have been seriously affected by the pandemic, China is faring better than its rival.

To understand this difference, consider their sociopolitical systems.

**Federalism and the American way**

Generally, US ideology asserts that the average American is naturally good and social, and he or she understands that individual rights go along with a sense of social responsibility. Thus, citizens unite for the common good in communities, states and finally in forming a central government, which cares for the entire national body. This principle has failed miserably during the pandemic. Washington has become absolutely unable to deal with the challenge.

There is, of course, a temptation to attribute all of this to President Donald Trump. His political rivals have presented him as the embodiment of evil, almost a tyrant, and proclaim that his removal from office would change everything for the better. This is hardly the case. Trump is a symptom of the disease, not the cause. A look at the recent past of the US shows the same inability or unwillingness, or both, of Washington to deal with deeper problems.

The case of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 shows this. The storm’s approach and its intensity were not a surprise. One could expect that the federal government would use all its available resources to save New Orleans. The fleets of helicopters would rescue the residents, tent camps with field kitchens and hospitals would emerge instantly, and later
the government would help displaced people to find housing and employment. Nothing was done and thousands of people died. Not only is the federal government usually oblivious to the needs of people in case of calamity, but it has other issues.

The US government rarely listened to the views of experts if they contradicted the preconceived views of their bosses. Trump has implicitly threatened to dismiss Anthony Fauci, the respected 79-year-old scientist who has contradicted the president and his depiction of the pandemic in a bid to push states to end restrictions and closures and reopen economies. Fauci has resisted the pressure. He has been a rare exception. Most of the president’s advisors are valued by society because of their social position. There is no notion of the “noble loser,” i.e., a person who loses his position and lives in poverty because of his convictions. In the view of the majority of Americans, he becomes a plain loser, an individual who is not able to “sell” himself by adjusting his views to the needs of the “market”.

American states have also failed to behave according to the constructed image of states cooperating with other states. At the time of Katrina, none of its neighbors contributed significant aid to the beleaguered Louisiana. There has been little collective spirit during the Covid-19 pandemic. New York’s Governor Andrew Cuomo went so far as to remind the federal government that the official US official motto, E pluribus unum (“Out of many, one”) should mean that all 50 states should constitute a single body, all for one and one for all. He bitterly complained that he saw the pluribus but not the “unum”: No one was helping New York, and each state was fighting for itself, trying to outbid one another and the federal government in purchasing masks, ventilators and other essentials.

Many Americans, supposedly citizens of conscience, behaved in a similar way, ignoring the obvious risks of spreading the disease. In Michigan, armed militias even demanded that the governor end of restrictions, regardless of the fact that doing so would lead to more deaths. Others have refused to wear face masks as a measure to prevent their infecting others should they have the virus, arguing that donning one would be a curtailment of their freedom.

By late spring of 2020, major US cities became overwhelmed by unprecedented waves of violence. On the surface, this was caused by the death of an African-American man in
Minneapolis when a policeman choked him with a knee on his neck. Most Western observers proclaimed that it was caused by police brutality and mistreatment of African-Americans. In the context of the pandemic, the cause of the unrest went much deeper and broader: Millions had lost their jobs and the government checks that could hardly meet even basic living costs for more than a few weeks were not reaching everyone in need. The protests were also the result of inadequate and costly medical services. Driving them too was the general polarization of the country. The discontent and divisions in society pushed many to express their anger by turning to vandalism, looting and arson.

**Leninism and the Chinese system**

The Chinese model is based on a different tradition and premise. The Chinese leadership today often asserts that China does not follow Western democratic traditions or thinking. Yet this does not preclude them from accepting those foreign doctrines that suit China’s political needs and political culture. Leninism, for example, has provided principles underpinning Chinese communist ideology.
Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known as Lenin was the founder of the Soviet state. These days, in Russia, the revolutionary is ignored, ridiculed or marginalized, as is the entire Soviet experience. But Lenin’s ideas about the importance of the political party was among his major contributions to Marxist thought. Karl Marx, a child of European political culture, believed in self-control, self-organization and a savvy citizenry. In his ideological construction, it was, of course, not the entire society but the workers who possessed these benign characteristics. Lenin explicitly discarded this notion and stated that workers could neither acquire “class consciousness” on their own nor understand that only a socialist revolution could improve their conditions. The Communist Party alone
could lead them to victory, he maintained. But if they deviated from the right course, the party would restrain and punish them. Lenin’s views and his application of them helped to forge the totalitarian Soviet state.

Leninism has become a handy credo for present-day China, with the re-emergence of Chinese political and cultural tradition as the political template. This is related to a particular neo-Confucianism. Confucius compared the state to the family. In the context of doctrine, it would be disastrous if all members of the family have an equal voice in decision-making, i.e., children should not have the same rights as their parents, especially their father. Children would not be able to understand what is in their true self interest. Children in charge of the family would destroy it. Only adults, the father first of all, should rule the family. The father should not just restrain children, but should even punish them when necessary.

Confucianism was hardly a useful guideline during Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, with its “Bombard the headquarters” polemic that called for the purging of the party elite from below. But with the advent of the post-Maoist era, the authority of the party and state was restored and the careers of ambitious party members such as Bo Xilai, who wanted to replay the Cultural Revolution as a way to uplift himself to a leadership position, ended badly. Restored Confucianism implied that the nation should be run by an educated and morally upright elite, which has the obligation and the right to restrain the populace – and to punish them if needed. This neo-Confucianism blends well with neo-Leninism, providing the operational model to deal with major crises and operate society in general. Control and even harsh repression have the methods used to “discipline and punish”, as Foucault put it in the title of his analysis of penal systems in the West.

**Beijing and the Covid-19 response**

This is the model that was used in dealing with the pandemic. Entire regions were locked down, and harsh punishment awaited those who intentionally broke quarantine. Electronic surveillance also helped authorities to control the population. But this efficiency in controlling the population is not the only reason why Beijing was more successful in dealing with the pandemic.
Eighteenth-century *laissez-faire* American political philosophy ignored or at least marginalized the socio-economic aspects of human existence. “Liberty” does not pay the rent. “Pursuit of happiness” does not cover medical bills. And the notion that “all men are created equal” does not pay for groceries and other necessities. The US economy was in dire straits even during the so-called “Trump recovery”. There has not been much of an increase in real economic production. Consumption or financial transactions, fed more and more by dollars printed out of thin air, have been the core driving growth in the US economy for a long time.

The pandemic was not so much the cause of the economic downturn but was simply a prick which led to the bursting of the “bubble”. The lockdown has led to suffering for millions. People have been evicted from their apartments for not paying rent. They have no money for basic necessities. They are desperate. This is one of the major reasons why they resent the quarantine and some have engaged in violence.

The story is different with the *Confucian/Leninist model*. While discarding political liberties, the Confucian/ Leninist model is concerned with the wellbeing of the “children”, i.e., the population. It is clear that the Chinese people affected by the pandemic were not evicted from their homes, food and medical help were supplied regardless of residents’ ability to pay, and most of them would most likely return to their old jobs after the end of the pandemic. This is in sharp contrast to the many Americans who have found their place of employment now closed permanently.

To be sure, the pandemic has weakened both China and the US, and the weakness of both major powers may lead to the rise of smaller nations or even to geopolitical anarchy. Western capitalism, however, is much less resilient than a totalitarian system. Consider the aftermath of the second world war as an example. Both Germany and the USSR were devastated by the war. It took Germany, or, to be precise, West Germany, some 20 years to recuperate from the devastation. The USSR, meanwhile, rebounded to its pre-war industrial output in about half the time and by the 1950s had restored itself as a major industrial power. It was the second-biggest economy in the world through the Cold War years, reaching its peak in 1970 when its GDP was estimated to be about 60 percent of that of the US.
While Germany managed to restore its position as a premier industrial power, the US might find it an uphill battle despite Trump’s efforts. Consequently, as time progresses, China is likely to grow faster and will eventually tower over the US. In the future, the pandemic could well be seen as a turning point in China’s rise – the triumph of Confucian-Leninism, a peculiar blend of European-rooted Marxism with a despotism that some sociologists and historians had in the past associated with empires or regimes in Asia.

Further reading:


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