

On Ideological Purity in Universities

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The Chinese President Xi Jinping has called for greater effort in promoting Marxist ideology in the universities. He reportedly stated that as higher education “shoulders the major responsibility of cultivating successors for the socialist cause, it must adhere to correct political orientation” (Xin). This declaration met with predictable outrage in the Western media. The BBC, for example, suggested that President Xi’s suggestion was really an attempt to “exert greater control over educational institutions, raising fears of a further curtailment of academic freedoms” (“Xi Calls for Stricter”). An article in the *Washington Post* described it as a “signal of a determined crackdown that could reverberate for years” (“China’s Next Crackdown”).

This controversy, however, raises interesting questions that go beyond the immediate political realities of the Chinese state. Why, it might be asked, is a call for a greater effort to promote Marxist ideology in universities associated with new forms of repression? Why is there a link between Marxism and the suppression of academic freedom? An implicit contrast is often drawn between the liberal university which presents itself as an ideological free zone and the promotion of Marxism which is equated with state repression and one-party rule. However, both ends of this equation are false. Let’s start with the notion of the liberal university, so prized by Western academics.

Contrary to its own mythology, the liberal university was not born in the West. The earliest precursor of the university system was probably the House of Wisdom founded in Baghdad in 830 by the caliph Ma’um. This contained an observatory, a laboratory and a translation service that took ideas from other cultures. From the tenth century onwards, this type of institution spread to Europe with the formation of cathedral schools. These were designed to teach and develop an ideological cadre for the Christian church. Over a long period, these schools became autonomous and their school masters organized themselves into guilds—or *universitas*—in order to regularize instruction. They took advantage of church–state and Pope–bishop conflicts to expand the scope for what became known as academic freedom. For much of the time, however, the idea of critical inquiry was subordinated to and limited by the framework of Christian theology.

As a more secular age developed, the restricted nature of this type of university became evident. Gradually, there emerged a view that science and research had to be freed from the clutches of Christian theology and

grounded only on empirical discoveries. However, the new freedoms were still limited. The liberal university, which rested on an idea of a free inquiry, had an important qualifying condition—that academics did not propagate their own values. This was to apply particularly to inquiries about society. Academics were to voluntarily restrain from promoting their own opinions in order to allow for a gentlemanly exchange of ideas that were debated rationally, without hate or emotion. However, the much vaunted claim of “value freedom” was, in reality, a cover for academics avoiding a critical stance towards their own states and privileged elites (Gouldner 20).

One of the key figures in formulating this doctrine, Max Weber, was quite explicit in presenting it as a *modus vivendi* between the power of the German state—which he wished to strengthen—and the individual freedom of academics to pursue knowledge. He stated that the university lecturer was “under sternest obligation to avoid proposing his own position in the struggle for ideals” (Weber and Shils 20). Yet Weber was an ardent German nationalist who saw value free inquiry as the most efficient way to strengthen a scientific culture that would add to the power of his own imperial state. He never tried to hide his own imperialist outlook or stop students embracing this viewpoint. In his classic article, *Parliament and Government in Germany*, he summarized the imperialist mission which he thought had been bestowed on Germany as follows:

Only a politically mature people are a nation of masters [*Herrenvolk*] [...] Only a nation of masters is called upon to thrust their hands into the spokes of the world’s development. If nations who do not have this quality attempt to do so, then not only will the sure instinct of other nations rebel, but they also fail inwardly in the attempt. (Weber 269)

His fellow “founding father” of social science, Emile Durkheim, had an equally ideological view of the role of universities. His bourgeois republican agenda is rarely discussed with modern students. Yet Durkheim’s primary aim was the strengthening of the French state through a program of moral education in schools and universities. In an age where the mass of people were beginning to enter the political arena, Durkheim believed that democratic involvement needed to be buttressed by a particular form of moral education that stressed the unity of the nation over class conflict. In brief, an ideology that denied the existence of a fundamental conflict between social classes. He wrote:

All good citizens had the same idea; we must re-build the country. In order to re-build it we first had to educate it. A country that aspires to governing itself needs “enlightenment” above all else.

A democracy would be untrue to itself if it did not have faith in science. (Fournier 22–23)

None of this is simply a matter of the historical record. Even at its finest hour, during the Golden Age of capitalism¹ from 1948 to 1973 when there was steady economic expansion, severe limits were placed on the liberal university. The teaching program was divided into separate and distinct subjects that invariably led to partial views of the social world. Thus economics was detached from history which was detached from sociology. One result was that there was little discussion on the historical process that gave rise to capitalism in economics courses—it was simply viewed as part of the natural order. Sociology concentrated on values and norms and often failed to examine how the economic rhythms of a capitalist economy impacted on people's understanding of these norms and values.

During the cold war era, much of what passed for social science was often an uncritical promotion of Western freedoms. Yet the much vaunted “freedoms” of the West, for example, were defined as negative freedoms. People were supposedly free from state repression but there was little discussion of positive freedoms that might enable people to achieve rights to housing, health care or economic well-being. There was little understanding that particular groupings in society faced oppressive relationship on a daily basis. The sociology departments of most Western universities followed the lead given by conservative US sociologists such as Talcott Parsons and presented an image of their societies based on a consensus of values.

Until the late 1960s, there was little reflection on how the universities themselves were often bastions of privilege. They were overwhelmingly dominated by white men from fairly wealthy backgrounds. There was little reflection on how this class and gender composition might influence the outlook of academics. Even when the social movements of the 1960s raised questions about the hierarchies of universities, the result was often to create a little more space (but by no means an equal space) for more women and people of color. The class background, however, was never changed.

If these were the features of the university when it was at its most liberal stage during the Golden Age of Western capitalism, matters have become far worse under late capitalism. A number of key developments have occurred to limit the “freedom” of the university and to turn it into a space for further consolidation of the bourgeois order. Let us outline

¹ See E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short 20th Century*, and S. Marglin and J. Schor, eds. *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Re-Interpreting the Post War Experience*.

three of these developments that make a mockery of the claim that the Western university is an ideologically free zone.

First, the revolt of students and workers in the sixties brought forth a determined ideological response from elites. In the US, for example, William Simon, a former Wall Street bond trader and Secretary to the Treasury under Nixon issued his now famous memo which stated that;

Funds generated by business must rush by multi-millions to the aid of liberty to funnel desperately needed funds to scholars, writers and journalists who understand the relationship between political and economic liberty. [Business must] cease the mindless subsidizing of colleges and universities whose departments of economy, government and history are hostile to capitalism. (Andrew 44–46)

The aim was to challenge the popularity of left wing ideas amongst youth and build up an ideological cadre who could present a more forthright defence of capitalism. The Simon memo led to the creation of an octopus like network of think tanks whose participants found ready-made platforms to expound their “expert” views in the mainstream media. Thus writers of books like Milton Friedman’s *Freedom to Choose*, Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*, Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground*, and Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* became famous primarily though their authors’ association with think tanks which had ready-made outlets to a media controlled by corporate giants. One writer has described it as “perhaps the most potent, independent institutionalized apparatus ever assembled in a democracy to promote one belief system” (Lapham 2).

This ideological counter-offensive eventually made its way into university departments so that, in many cases, Marxist and left-wing ideas were marginalized. The clearest case is the discipline of economics. In 1962, for example, when one of the intellectual fathers of neoliberalism published his book, *Capitalism and Freedom*, he felt that he was “part of a small beleaguered minority regarded as eccentric by the great major of our fellow intellectuals” (Friedman vi). However, twenty years later his extreme form of market fundamentalism began to hegemonize economics departments as it appeared under the guise of the “Chicago school.” By the turn of the 21st century, writers like Perelman were describing how left-wing ideas had been effectively purged from US economics departments and the discipline had become an apologist forum for capitalism (“Economists”). It took the British monarch, Elizabeth Windsor, to ask the “why has the emperor no clothes” type question at a seminar in the London School of Economics to show the bankruptcy of conventional economics. Why, she asked, had none of the

esteemed economists noticed that a major economic crash was coming in 2008 (“The Queen Asked Why”)?

The second major assault on the “liberal university” came with a new legal framework that made private ownership of knowledge possible. In the past, an invisible barrier existed between “basic” and “applied” sciences. The universities undertook general research in scientific fields guided by intellectual interests and then provided the fruits of that research to the wider society, for free.² Capitalist companies could use this research to set up facilities which applied it to profitable projects. In the words of Robert Merton, “communism,” by which he meant the free sharing of fruits of research, was one of the key norms in the scientific community (“Normative”).

By the 1970s, however, this began to break down because of a combination of factors, not least the crisis of profitability within Western capitalism. The emergence of new industries around software and genetics led to a push to commodify and privatize scientific knowledge. In the US, in a landmark Diamond versus Chakrabarty judgement, the Supreme Court ruled that living organisms could be patented. In other words, knowledge of the genetic structure of plants, animals and eventually human beings could become the private property of owners who could, in turn, sell licenses for their use. This was followed by a Bayh–Dole Act that allowed US universities to get into the market of selling patents and intellectual property.

These developments spread beyond the US universities to the wider capitalist world. It has led to, what one writer has labelled, the corruption of science (Krimsky 57–71). The new legal context encouraged the greater intrusion of corporations into shaping the research agenda of science. As state budgets were cut back, corporations were on hand to provide grants and funding for research. But it came with significant ties. The very idea of a “republic of science” was dismantled as individual scientists were bound into “non-disclosure” and “exclusivity agreements.” By 1998, for example, only 14 per cent of US experimental biologists said they were willing to talk openly about their current research (Walsh and Hong 801–02).

The result has been a subordination of science to the immediate interests of capitalist corporations. Marcia Angell, the former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* has described the deeply problematic relationship between the corporate world and pharmacology,

Until the 1980s, researchers were largely independent of companies that sponsored their work. Drug companies would

² See R. Nelson, “The Simple Economics of Basic Scientific Research,” *Journal of Political Economy* 67.3 (June 1959). Also S. Krimsky, *Science in the Private Interest*, Chapter 3.

give a grant to an academic medical centre, then step back and wait for faculty researchers to produce the results. Now, however, companies are involved in every detail for the research—from design of the study through analysis of the data to the decision of whether to publish. That involvement has made bias not only possible but extremely likely. Researchers don't control clinical trials any more: sponsors do (Angell 100).

The third major factor imposing capitalist conformity on universities has been the wider impact of neo-liberalism. Two major processes can be identified here.

On the one hand there has been a systematic reduction in public funding for universities. These institutions have then become more dependent on corporate sponsorship and philanthropy. With private money has come an inordinate influence on the framing of research questions. But transformation of the universities goes even deeper. As public budgets are cut, there is a greater reliance on student fees. In many countries, these have been accompanied by a new form of debt bondage as young people are required to take out vast loans from banks which are often underpinned by legal measures to enforce debt collection. This in turn leads to a change in the orientation of students. Faced with the fear of carrying high debts and the need to get a “good job” students develop a more instrumental approach to education and desire high grades at all costs. University managers, in turn, come to regard the student body as a customer base and mimic the “customer is king” philosophy. The overall result is a degradation of education experience and a further enclosure of many forms of critical inquiry.

On the other hand, there has also been an intrusion of neoliberal methodologies into the faculty itself. Even though, intellectually, many academics condemn these methodologies, their lived experience is one of conformity to them. Neoliberalism is obsessed with metrics and measurement. It calculates everything from risk to waste collection to academic “outputs.” The obsession with measurement is a necessary requirement for transforming public services into commodities and for imposing pseudo-markets based on “incentivization.” The broader rubric through which these are imposed on higher education has been via the philosophy of “new public management.” The essence of this approach is that desired outcomes are achieved by “steering” rather than “rowing.” In other words, as well as direct management directives, there is an approach which sets up structures which produce desired behaviors through willing assent—even when the overseers are not observing. In practice academics are encouraged to compete against each other—like small business centers. Competition occurs around a pseudo-market in research outputs, numbers post graduate students and even “policy impacts.”

The key to the process is “buy in” by a faculty that is willing to chase after the incentives offered. The habitus of the typical academic was formed by being the good boy or girl in the school classroom. This leads them to readily chase after the publications in prestigious academic journals. They count citations, measure impacts and even when they reach the top of the hierarchy start offering “master classes” on achieving these high performance levels. The result has been a sharp increase in the gradient of the status order. Celebrity academics are those who feature frequently in the preferred peer review journals and the “reputable” publishing houses. The content of the ideas increasingly takes second place to imprints of the publisher. The overall result is far higher levels of uniformity within disciplines than has been seen for many decades.

For all these reasons the Western liberal university cannot be described as an ideologically free zone. There is a greater promotion of capitalist values than ever before. Where there are critical voices, they generally tend to present a more anemic social democratic critique of its excesses. But it is truly rare to find academics who call for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist order. The structure which frames this high level of conformity has not been achieved by direct party control. Indeed, attempts by governments to interfere in the independence of universities are likely to provoke howls of outrage. The dominant ideology within Western university arises from less visible structural changes that have accompanied late capitalism.

Chinese Marxism

Let us return to the pronouncements of the Chinese President, Xi Jinping who wants a greater adherence to Marxist ideas in universities. If such were to occur, would it mean more censorship and one-party control? Hardly, if by Marxism is meant that outlook of one Karl Marx.

Marx’s first published article was a vociferous attack on censorship of the press and, in a sign of things to come, he also attacked the half-hearted liberals who did not wage a strong enough fight. He suggested that “the absence of freedom of the press makes all other freedoms illusory. One form of freedom governs another, just as one limb of the body does another” (“Freedom in General”). Freedom of the press in this context did not mean the familiar catch cry of the Western mainstream media which is increasingly controlled by major corporations. Marx was referring to a genuine press freedom where all strands of society had a right to publish and to express their view point.

Marx’s opposition to censorship and his contempt for the bureaucratic Prussian state turned him into an extreme democrat who

despised all suggestions that the people had to be guided by their superiors. Rule by the people might bring all sorts of mistakes but Marx replied to paternalistic arguments for restricting freedom:

For [the advocate of paternalism] true education consists in keeping a person swaddled in a cradle all his life, for as soon as he learns to walk he also learns to fall, and it is only through falling that he learns to walk. But if we all remain children in swaddling clothes, who is to swaddle us? If we all lie in a cradle, who is to cradle us? If we are all in jail, who is to be the jail warden? (“On the Assembly of Estates”)

Marx displayed an equal passion in opposing state bureaucracy. He rejected Hegel’s celebration of the Prussian state and denounced the pretension of all bureaucracy to represent the common good of society:

The bureaucracy is a magic circle from which no one can escape. Its hierarchy is the hierarchy of knowledge [...] [It] degenerates into [...] passive obedience, the worship of authority, the mechanism of a fixed, formal action, of rigid principles, views and traditions. As for the individual bureaucrat, the purpose of the state becomes his private purpose, a *hunt for promotion and careerism*. (“Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine” 107–08)

When some suggested that the problem of bureaucracy could be solved with better leaders, he wrote that “hierarchical organisation is itself the principal abuse and the few personal sins of officials are as nothing compared to their necessary hierarchical sins” (“Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine” 114).

All of this put Marx far in advance of classic liberal writers who advocated more freedom but instinctively distrusted “the mob” who might interfere with the rights of property. The founders of the Western liberal tradition typically sought to restrict popular franchise through a House of Lords or an elite second chamber or a powerful Supreme Court that could overrule the popular will. Marx, however, advocated unrestricted democracy and this makes a mockery of claims that his ideas were responsible for censorship. No thinker can be responsible for those who claim adherence to their ideas, especially after they are dead, and so it makes as much sense to claim that Jesus Christ was responsible for the Spanish Inquisition as to argue that Marx was to blame for a one-party dictatorship.

The promotion of genuine Marxism in Chinese universities would therefore provide an interesting framework for discussing many aspects of society. It would mean more freedom of discussion not less. It would mean no censorship but open critical discussion. It would require an

inquiry into why bureaucratic states require censorship and repression of dissent to survive. It would explore the class roots of that bureaucracy. It would hardly take the self-proclaimed ideology of rulers as an accurate representation of reality but engage in a critical inquiry into their relationship to the means of production and of the working class who produce surplus value.

Is this what President Xi Jinping is asking for when he wants more Marxism in Chinese universities? Few would claim that it is. But if authentic Marxism—which is based on the idea of the self-emancipation of the working class—is not being promoted, then what exactly does the Chinese Communist Party mean when it uses the term Marxist?

The Chinese Communist Party takes ideology very seriously. Its leaders believe that the former Soviet Union collapsed because of the weakening of “Marxist” ideology within its ranks. Xi Jinping’s campaign is linked to the need of the party rulers to advance China’s national position—and their own position within it. In 2012, for example, Xi called for “ideological purification” to uphold four cardinal principles. These were upholding the socialist path, the people’s democratic-dictatorship. Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought (Huang).

However, the mere fact that one uses particular words and phrases does not imply that these have the same meaning as when they were originally developed. Every Marxist knows that one cannot explain the history of European society as the outcome of a Christian ideology. To hold such a view would be profoundly idealist because it would be to assert that ideas are the independent factor that shapes the material base of society. Marxists generally assume that the rise of different classes and the social context of their struggles give meaning to the particular versions of Christianity which are espoused. Even if key words and themes sound the same, the actual content of the ideology changes. Thus the Christianity of the late Roman rulers was of a fundamentally different nature to that of the radical elements within the Cromwellian revolution in Britain. In one case, the same package of ideas was used to justify slavery while, in the other, Christian ideology was used to champion a bourgeois opposition to feudal privilege. In other words, ideologies should not be analyzed in their own terms but rather how they function within class societies.

China is, of course, a class society. It is home to nearly 600 dollar millionaires but also millions of urban and rural poor. It is one of the main engines of global manufacturing with a rapidly growing working class. Inevitably, according to Marxists, there is a clash between the demands for capital accumulation and the aspirations of this class. The Chinese state has attempted to suppress this contradiction in more recent years with an emphasis on minimum wage legislation and attempts to give more credibility to state-run unions. But while these

measures may ameliorate some of worst feature of capitalism, they cannot abolish the class struggle.

According to its own ideology, the Chinese Communist Party believes that it is in the preliminary stages of socialism and is still a long way off from an eventual “communist ideal.”³ But even in the preliminary stage one would expect a growing assertion of working class power and with it a further democratization of society. Engels, for example, spelled out the classic Marxist concept of what the “preliminary stage” of socialism might look like. He stated that,

The proletariat seizes state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, and abolishes the state as state. Society thus far, operating amidst class antagonisms, needed the state, that is an organisation of the particular exploiting class, for the maintenance of the external conditions of production, and therefore, especially for the purpose of forcibly keeping the conditions the exploited class in conditions of oppression determined by the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom or bondage, wage labour). (Engels 301–03)

The contrast between this vision of the first stage of a socialist society and the current Chinese society could not be starker. The “means of production” are not fully in state control. Class distinctions are not diminishing but increasing. The state is not “withering away” but becoming stronger and more controlling. And the current Chinese state is, in fact, maintaining both “external conditions for production” and “keeping an exploited class in conditions of oppression.” Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s emphasis of Marxism with Chinese characteristics is a fairly open recognition of these features. The party no longer identifies itself as composed of workers and peasants. Ever since Zhang Zemin, then General Secretary of the CCP unveiled his theory of the “three represents,” the party now sees itself as a catch all party of the “broad masses”—which, significantly, includes capitalists and business elements.

Delving deeper into its ideology, we discover that the CCP has always—even in Mao’s time—reserved a place for the “progressive national bourgeoisie.” Mao drew a distinction between the “comprador

³ On the concept of the preliminary stage of socialism see Y. Sun, *The Chinese Re-Assessment of Socialism 1976–1992*, 195–201. See also Deng Xiaoping, for a summary of position at Third Plenum of CCP. See H. Khoo, “China, Marxism and Preliminary Stage of Socialism.”

bourgeoisie” which served imperialist interests and the “national bourgeoisie, which though weak and vacillating” was, he thought, one of the “revolutionary forces” (Mao). This perspective became particular important in the fight against Japanese occupation. Today this “national bourgeoisie” has grown stronger and is one of the drivers behind the pattern of capital accumulation. The distinctive feature of Chinese political system is, in fact, the integration of business leaders into the Communist Party. This is not to suggest that there are not tensions between the two as the periodic campaigns against corruption testify. But every capitalist state attempts to co-ordinate the general interest of capital over the individual short term concerns of particular capitalists. The Chinese state and the leadership of the Communist Party play a similar role. They promote national Chinese capitalism and seek to guarantee the general conditions for the exploitation of Chinese workers.

A particularly formalistic version of “Marxism with Chinese characteristics” has been their principle ideological vehicle for doing this. This ideology places an emphasis on the “objective laws of history” rather than the self-emancipation of workers in order to fit this task. When President Xi Jinping calls for greater use of Marxism ideology for “cultivating successors for the socialist cause,” he is primarily concerned about the future of his own party. He wants to strengthen its internal coherence so that it becomes an even more effective agent for the advancement of Chinese capitalism.

We, therefore, arrive at a somewhat unexpected conclusion. Despite the uproar in the Western media about President Xi Jinping’s request for more Marxism in Chinese universities, it is their own universities they should be more concerned about. Despite their much-vaunted claims to “freedom of inquiry” they are increasingly restricted to the needs of neoliberal capitalism. And, maybe, the type of Marxism that President Xi wants is not one that the original Karl Marx might recognize.

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