

China: A Marxist Utopia? By Jacob Buday

Abstract: *There is no doubt that China is rapidly expanding. It is therefore important to understand the history and laws of China in order to understand the culture. Marxism has been very influential in China ever since Mao Zedong took control. This has led to atheism being the official religion of China, causing persecutions not just for Christians, but for all other religions in the country. Marxism's poor understanding of human worth has also led to many totalitarian rulings that have resulted in the mass killing of many people. These rulings are also the result of the leadership presupposing that Marxism is a scientific truth. China's best chance at improving its standards of living and its attitude toward the West is by removing these presuppositions.*

“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:34-35). Many have claimed that this passage depicts the early Christians as living in a communistic environment. It certainly seems as if they were living in some sort of commune. This passage typically surprises Westerners as they have been indoctrinated for years into thinking that Communism is a great evil. However, the passage in Acts shows Christians voluntarily living *communally*. The distinction is between living communally and Communism.

The Christians were living as a community; they were fulfilling Christ's command to love one's neighbor. Karl Marx laid the foundation for Communism in his Communist Manifesto almost two thousand years later. The Communist Manifesto would go on to serve as a basis for the governments of both the Soviet Union and China. Specifically in China, the reductionisms forming the foundations for Marxism had a negative impact on the laws. Many of the laws, rulings, and acts of the leadership of China were totalitarian in nature due to the Marxist underpinnings which in turn were perpetuated by Mao Zedong.

In many ways, the theories of Karl Marx form the basis for the Communist Party in China. The Communist Manifesto helped shape the Party's ideologies and beliefs. One of the chief principles of Communism is the separation of people into two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie is the class of capitalist oppressors and the proletariat is the class of workers who do not own the means of production and are being oppressed. Marx arranges these two classes in an eternal struggle throughout history. He writes:

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.¹

According to Marx and Engels, the names of the two classes may have changed but their struggle with each other has not. The driving factor behind the oppression is money and owning of goods and services. It is purely economic. For Marx and Engels, no other factors have shaped history more than the economic class struggles of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Now, in some ways Marx is right, greed is a very strong motivating force for many people. But he has left other forces out. Religion, morality, and ideology can be equally as strong motivating factors. For instance, various popes sent thousands of men on trips to the Middle East on Crusades. Financial gain may have been a small motivating factor, but the religious factor also had to have motivated equally. In fact, for those serving, their spiritual concerns were probably more important to them as they were often offered forgiveness in exchange for their service. The Crusades were brutal to many regions and were motivated chiefly by religion. Another example is Nazi Germany. The Nazis oppressed and killed people not to gain anything economically from it, but in order to build a more perfect society. Their

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 1998), 35.

focus was on ideology. Ironically, two of the worst examples of oppression in history were driven not entirely by economic factors. In both scenarios financial gains were probably involved, but they were not the focus. By reducing the struggles to economic factors, Marx and Engels leave out many factors of human life that are equally important.

The economic reduction of history is not the only reduction that is put forth by Marx and Engels. There are two other chief reductions they commit. They follow Hegelian dialectic thought, the theory that all theses have antitheses which synthesize to make progress; and they reduce all life to nothing but matter. Marxists ignore any and all supernatural notions. Engels wrote:

Nature is the proof of dialectics, and it must be said for modern science that it has furnished this proof with very rich materials increasing daily, and thus has shown that, in the last resort, Nature works dialectically and not metaphysically; that she does not move in the eternal oneness of a perpetually recurring circle; but goes through a real historical evolution. In this connection Darwin must be named before all others. He dealt the metaphysical conception of nature the heaviest blow by his proof that all organic beings, plants, animals, and man himself, are the products of a process of evolution going on through millions of years.²

So entrenched in both the theories of materialism and Hegelian dialectics, Engels combines the two. He claims that Nature itself (matter) not only works dialectically but also proves the dialectic process. Engels is claiming that evolution follows the dialectic process. One could even argue that evolution is in fact the dialectic process. According to Darwin and Engels, this dialectic process began millions of years ago and is continuing today. Nature first began the process by using natural selection to breed mankind. Then with man being dominant, the dialectic process continues in him as he makes political, social, and economic progress. According to the Marxist, evolution continues not in biology, but in politics and in class

² Frederick Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in *Essential Works of Marxism*, ed. Arthur P. Mendel (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1961), 59.

struggles. As theses and antitheses synthesize, evolution moves on ever forward to better and better things.

Nevertheless, both the theories of materialism and dialectics have their flaws and drawbacks. These are not just mere antitheses which will make their respected theses stronger. These drawbacks are major flaws that cripple their entire theory. For instance, claiming that all life is matter diminishes it to worthlessness. Human life cannot have any meaning if it is nothing but collections of atoms and molecules that make choices due to random processes and chemical reactions in the brain. Marxists who have held this view of materialism typically have also had a low view of human life. For example, it is known that both Stalin and Mao Zedong killed millions of people due to forced labor or being executed. Dr. Montgomery writes:

Materialism so skews the overall picture of human life that it cannot avoid diminishing the importance of the ideological and spiritual dimensions of man's existence. Nothing could be more serious where human rights are concerned, for the neglect of civil liberties and the transcendent will assuredly dehumanize the citizens of any nation. It is still an empirical truth that 'man does not live by bread alone.'³

There is no basis for human rights if humans are nothing more than matter. Christians argue that humans receive their value from Christ. It is because he first loved humanity that they are worth anything. And because he died to redeem the whole world each individual human life is of infinite worth. Removing Christ from the equation, and reducing life to matter, it is easy to see how Marxists can justify murdering mass groups of people. To the Marxist, life has little to no value anyway, so why cherish it?

Hegel's dialectic process bred the idea that everything was constantly improving in the nineteenth century. This is preposterous in light of the horrors of the twentieth century.

Montgomery also writes,

³ John Warwick Montgomery, *Giant in Chains: China Today and Tomorrow* (Milton Keynes, England: Nelson Word Ltd., 1994), 81.

But today's Marxist, enmeshed in the twentieth-century world of global wars, genocidal death camps, and potential nuclear holocaust, no longer has any sociological justification for holding to Marx's unverifiable dialectic hope. Absent any transcendent, divine word to the contrary, the interaction of secular opposites can as readily lead to hell on earth as to Utopian bliss. If one is oblivious to this fact, one can grossly neglect the preservation and promotion of those human rights which spell the difference between Milton's *Paradise Regained* and Orwell's *1984*.⁴

Perhaps when Marx originally penned the *Communist Manifesto*, everything seemed to be improving. But the First World War was right around the corner, with another, even more brutal world war, following. The sequence of events could be compared to the story of the Tower of Babel. All of humanity was lumped together in one civilization at the time of Babel. They thought that they had the power to build a tower all the way up to God himself. It was not this group of people's work ethic that God had a problem with, but it was with the hardness of their hearts. They thought they could accomplish great things without him. So in order that they repent, God humbled them and scrambled them and mixed their languages. Likewise, when Hegel introduced dialectic, the ideology of unending progress for the sake of progress was at its zenith. The ensuing world wars, death camps, and economic depressions should have silenced all who think that man can accomplish utopia on his own.

Mao Zedong did not listen to any of these criticisms of Marxism. He incorporated Marxism's economic, materialistic, and dialectic reductions into his thinking, which in turn went into the government of China. Mao's reduction of humanity is demonstrated in this quotation,

Above all, Marxists regard man's activity in production as the most fundamental practical activity, the determinant of all his other activities. Man's knowledge depends mainly on his activity in material production, through which he comes gradually to understand the phenomena, the properties and the laws of nature, and the relations between himself and nature; and through his activity in production he also gradually comes to understand, in

⁴ John Warwick Montgomery, *Giant in Chains: China Today and Tomorrow* (Milton Keynes, England: Nelson Word Ltd., 1994), 82.

varying degrees, certain relations that exist between man and man. None of this knowledge can be acquired apart from activity in production.⁵

Here Mao makes the logical leap between the economic and material reductionisms written about by Marx and Engels. To Mao, man's value is found in his connection with the means of production. It is only through producing material that anyone can come to understand anything. This is reductionism taken to an absurd level. Life is more than simply working and making things. Religion, family, education, and the arts all have their own contributions to humanity. They all teach things that production cannot teach. Working can teach valuable lessons, but it is not the chief aspect of humanity. Humans can learn about the world around them from many different and various places. It is absurd to think that there cannot be more influential "teachers" than work. Marxism, however, belittles everything except for production and progress. Mao was simply following the thoughts of the Marxists before him.

In order that the population received his Marxist views favorably, Mao would often write speeches and other propaganda. One of these was a parable by the name of "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains." The story is about an old man who wanted to dig up two mountains near his home. He knew that he could not finish this work in his lifetime, but he trusted that his sons and grandsons and all succeeding generations could one day complete the job. Mao believed that with enough group participation even entire mountains could be moved.

What is even more startling is the story's end:

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?⁶

⁵ Mao Tse-tung, "On Practice," in *Essential Works of Chinese Communism*, ed. Winberg Chai (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1969), 84.

⁶ Mao Tse-Tung, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," in *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China*, ed. Donald E. MacInnis (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 15-6.

Mao essentially blamed imperialism and feudalism for all the problems of China. He united the country in a disdain for them. Then Mao placed the Chinese Communist Party as the answer and savior of the Chinese people. His final step was to usurp God and place the masses as the God of China. This is a truly Marxist view; production is the center of life, and humans are the tools with which production may come about.

If the God of Marxist China is the people, then its eschatology must be a classless society. Marxists believe that once the bourgeoisie is eliminated, then the proletariat can live together peacefully with one another. Christians know that such a utopia where everybody smiles at one another and never has a problem is impossible in this world. The Christian is aware of the pervasive problem of sin present in each individual person. Romans 3:23 states, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” As long as anyone lives on this earth, the problem of sin will remain. It is only by the grace of God bought by Jesus Christ that anyone can be redeemed. Marxists believe that somehow all oppression and sinful problems will disappear once the classless society is established. It is painfully obvious that China did not become a heavenly utopia once the Communist Party took power.

The first major example of mass pain and misery was from an initiative ironically named the Great Leap Forward. The Great Leap Forward was supposed to stimulate massive economic growth. Instead, “In the following three years, it would cause deaths estimated at up to 46 million from coercion, forced labour and, finally, the worst manmade famine ever seen on earth.”⁷ There were many factors that lead to the extremely high amount of deaths. Not only was there mismanaging of food supplies and other systems, there was also a drought that caused food to become very scarce. Fenby states:

⁷ Jonathan Fenby, *Modern China*, (New York: HarberCollins Publishers, 2008), 396.

As people were reduced to utter desperation by hunger, the Great Leap thus ended with the Chinese being dehumanized in the most basic way. The mass killings of the kulaks in the Soviet Union and the campaigns in the early years of the People's Republic were aimed at real or imagined categories of enemies. Now, there was no such discrimination. One simply died for being a peasant. People were 'not only dumb but also numb', a woman who survived a famine-racked area recalled. Nobody cried when a family member died.⁸

Not only did countless people die, but their spirits were so crushed that they became numb to pain and suffering. Marxism did its job; it reduced people to tools of production. By placing no value on human life, Marxists are free to commit atrocities against the most fundamental basic human right itself: a right to life.

Another right that Communism suppressed was the freedom of religion. Richard Bush writes, "For Marxists there is no god, but the revolutionary process, what Marxists call the dialectic of history, functions as a powerful reality that evokes their ultimate concern."⁹ Marxism is founded on an atheistic view of the world. So naturally, Marxists would want to suppress religious thought for the "good" of the society. If all were united completely under Marxism, great progress could be made. This has had quite an impact on the laws and constitution of modern China; for instance, "Freedom of religious belief stand alone in one article; freedoms of speech, the press, assembly and association, procession and demonstration, are enumerated in the preceding article. It is significant that belief is mentioned, and that practice, activity, propagation, and the like are not."¹⁰ Chinese communists have no problem letting people believe and think what they want. But when it comes to gathering in the name of religion, they do not explicitly allow it.

⁸ Jonathan Fenby, *Modern China*, (New York: HarberCollins Publishers, 2008), 416.

⁹ Richard C. Bush, *Religion in China*, (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, A Division of DLM, Inc., 1977), 77.

¹⁰ Richard C. Bush, Jr., *Religion in Communist China*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970), 15.

The suppression of the freedom of religion can be seen in China's early treatment of missionaries.

The overriding consideration in the stories of Protestant and Catholic missionaries, and their arrests, trials, and imprisonments, is that the Communist government was seldom content simply to deport them, which has happened in many countries throughout Christian missionary history. It was essential to the Communist strategy to find these missionaries guilty of some crime.¹¹

The early Chinese government did not trust any outsiders, due to their distaste for imperialism. Naturally, most missionaries are foreign to China and from Western lands. It is possible that the Chinese government viewed the missionaries as a threat to their ideology. The foreign missionaries may bring more than their religion with them to a new land. Missionaries also typically bring their own culture with them. Strangely, the treatment of the missionaries seems inconsistent with Marxism. According to Hegelian dialectic, progress is made when a thesis and antithesis synthesize. The communists should have listened to some of the points of foreign powers. Yet the communists often imprisoned and deported foreigners. They did not want to listen; the current leaders only wanted more control.

The leadership did not want to listen to dissenting views because they believed that the ideology of Marxism was true and correct. In fact, one can go as far as saying that Marxism was treated, at least by Mao Zedong, as a presupposition. Marxism was not a theory to be proved, but instead was the unquestionable universal truth by which one lives. Therefore, anyone who does not accept Marxism is simply incorrect in the eyes of Mao Zedong. He writes, "What should our policy be towards non-Marxist ideas? As far as unmistakable counterrevolutionaries and wreckers of the socialist cause are concerned, the matter is easy: we simply deprive them of

¹¹ Richard C. Bush, Jr., *Religion in Communist China*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970), 61

their freedom of speech.”¹² Mao wrote this during his famous “Let a hundred flowers blossom” speech. In this speech, Mao talked about his fascination with contradictions and the dialectic process. He encourages his people to speak their views openly to one another in order to improve each other. Mao wanted to encourage different viewpoints and ideas to enable growth in the arts and sciences. If the freedom of speech is taken away from dissenters, however, one hundred flowers are not truly blossoming. After all, Mao believed, “As scientific truth, Marxism fears no criticism.”¹³ According to Mao, Marxism could be criticized, but as a scientific truth it could never be refuted.

This certainty in the ideology of Marxism was seen clearly in the Tiananmen Square massacre. The situation began with students mourning the death of a party chief. The students then stayed and protested through April and May of 1989. They wanted freedom and democracy; they did not want totalitarian rule. Then on June 3 and 4, martial law went into extreme effect. Julia Ching writes about the severity of the violence:

Panic-stricken people fell to the pavement or hid behind trees and frail roadblocks, but the troops were burning trees, and tanks were rolling over obstructions. The merciless guns were aiming at young infants as well as grandmothers, shooting upward at houses from where people were looking out or throwing objects from windows. The masses started to fight back with what they could: sticks and stones and Molotov cocktails, as the fighting spread into many Beijing neighborhoods.¹⁴

This was clearly not just the suppression of the freedom of speech, but it was a complete massacre. The Chinese leaders who ordered this incident also suppressed the figures of the death count. This incident showed totalitarian rule at its absolute worst. Ching writes:

Just after the bloody crackdown, the Beijing Red Cross gave the figure of over 2,700 dead, not counting casualties at Tiananmen itself; students claim over 3,000 died at

¹² Mao Tse-tung, “The Chinese Thaw,” in *Chinese Communism Selected Documents*, ed. Dan N. Jacobs and Hands H. Baerwald (New York: Harber & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963), 82.

Mao Tse-tung, “The Chinese Thaw,” in *Chinese Communism Selected Documents*, ed. Dan N. Jacobs and Hands H. Baerwald (New York: Harber & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963), 81.

¹⁴ Julia Ching, *Probing China’s Soul*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1990), 31.

Tiananmen on June 3-4, and over 7,000 were wounded; another report gave 1,433 as the figure provided by hospitals, but added that 2,000 others died in the streets, making up over 3,433 dead, with nearly 40,000 wounded and another 30,000 missing.¹⁵

No one will know exactly how many innocent people lost their lives on June 3 and 4 1989. All that can be said is the classless society that Chinese leaders claimed to have is clearly far from perfect.

The abuses towards human life seen during the Tiananmen Square incident most likely stem from the foundations of Marxism. Materialism and the certainty in Marxism most likely were the main contributors to those dark days. Marxists view human life as only material. This essay has already discussed that Mao believed humans were useful only in production. While Mao had been dead for over ten years when the Tiananmen Square incident occurred, his thoughts lived on in the leadership. Because human life is extremely close to meaningless in Marxist ideology, it does not matter whether or not people are killed unjustly. The chief concern is with protecting the proletariat as a whole, not protecting the individual. Should a group arise against the proletariat, they are to be silenced. The leaders of China in 1989 must have still held to these principles. They must have believed in the cause of Marxism above all else. Their certainty of Marxism being a “scientific truth” led them to believe they could do whatever was necessary to protect the ideology. By protecting this ideology, they believed they were also protecting the Chinese people from oppression. In reality, they were murdering many of their citizens so they did not have to confront potential problems of their gerontocracy.

Curiously, while Marxist views toward human life and class warfare may have continued into the 1980s, economic views seemed to have changed. Mao’s successor Deng saw the

¹⁵ Ibid., 32

poverty of China and wanted to change it. Deng incorporated capitalistic changes into the economy. For instance,

In the once-model commune of Dazhai in Shanxi, a woman cadre recalled how , in the past, she had intervened to stop people selling produce, but now ‘you can do anything you like, raise pigs to eat or sell, make cloth tigers and sell them at market.’¹⁶

Also,

Piece rates were reintroduced after being dropped in the name of Cultural Revolution egalitarianism. Bonus payments also became more common. Under-employed workers, particularly in the state sector, found second jobs to supplement their income.¹⁷

These changes along with several others vastly improved the economy of China. It took many out of poverty and gave many people higher standards of living.

These changes are interesting, as they demonstrate that the leadership was not as close minded as it once was. When used in conjunction with Marxism, Hegelian dialectic can lead to bad results. Marxists may begin to believe that everything will get better and better simply because that is the natural order. In reality, all systems are liable to failing. It was foolish of the leaders of China to think that Marxism was impervious to problems. Deng added many capitalistic touches into the communist state of China. This is a case where dialectic was seen to be helpful. Deng took on characteristics of other nations and added them to his own. This in turn made a stronger country.

It all depends on what presuppositions one has. If a group of leaders thinks that its government system is flawless and suppresses dissenters, then they will eventually fall behind the times. If a group of leaders is more humble and thinks that their system can always be improved, they are then free to look to other systems for help and guidance. Dialectic is most useful when used critically. If it is used naively, then no progress will be obtained.

¹⁶ Jonathan Fenby, *Modern China*, (New York: HarberCollins Publishers, 2008), 554.

¹⁷ Jonathan Fenby, *Modern China*, (New York: HarberCollins Publishers, 2008), 554.

The chief problem for the totalitarian rulings of China was that the leaders thought that their positions were always correct and safe from any criticism. Christians know that this cannot be the case. All people are sinful, and perfection cannot be achieved until the second coming of Christ. Therefore, people need to be able to criticize themselves in order to improve themselves, as well as their relationships with others. This can also be said of entire government systems.

No system can be perfect if it is created and employed by sinful people. Marxism is not some infallible “scientific truth.” It is an ideology created and perpetuated by sinful men. It, too, can be criticized like anything else. When such an ideology is held as infallible, totalitarian regimes and other terrible schemes may begin to appear. Once Deng incorporated capitalistic programs into China, the living situations for many improved. This was because he criticized his own system and found ways to improve it. He did not, however, completely eradicate all problems in China. Recently, China has lifted its one-child ban; citizens can now have up to two children. While this is still not the same level of freedom seen in other countries, it is encouraging to see continued improvement. China is still not a utopia today, but if its leaders become humble and open to criticism, it may get closer.

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