

Why the West Needs to Stop its Moralising against China

Written by Kerry Brown

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Why the West Needs to Stop its Moralising against China

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/10/why-the-west-needs-to-stop-its-moralising-against-china/>

KERRY BROWN, AUG 10 2020

The great German philosopher Leibniz put it well over three centuries ago. Writing in his 'Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese' he stated, 'I did not want to examine to what extent the manner of worship of the Chinese could be condemned or justified... I only wanted to investigate their doctrines.' These days, the issue of what to think, and in particular, what to feel about China has become entangled in the domestic politics of Europe and America to such an extent that attempts to do precisely as Leibniz did so long ago and simply describe and understand without being seen as validating and condoning become next to impossible. Finding a reasonable, critical space to look in all directions has seldom been harder.

Hong Kong is one issue where this is particularly true. The UK has historic links to the city. The capitalist world has always thought of it as a benign place, despite the fact that since 1997 it has been part of the sovereign territory of a Communist country. Everyone had feelings towards this remarkable, hybrid, and unique place. Perhaps that is why it arouses such strong, possessive feelings. It might not belong to you, but it is still, in some ways, a place everyone can feel is theirs.

If there was a time in recent history when the words of solicitude and concern could, and should, have been expressed with the maximum of force and conviction, that was the 31st of July when Chief Executive of the city, Carrie Lam, declared that local Legislative Council elections due in September would be delayed for a year. Ms Lam, calling it the 'most difficult decision I've made over the past seven months', went on to say that 'this postponement is entirely made based on public safety reasons, there were no political considerations.' The COVID19 virus, which has raged across the region and the world over the last six months, was the reason for this unprecedented decision, she said. But even the least cynical would have had a hard time ignoring the fact that in the weeks and months building up to this moment, from the passing by Beijing of a new security law covering the city coming into effect on 1st July to the refusal to allow some pro-democracy party candidates to stand, even if the government was not avoiding the elections, it was doing a remarkable job of looking like that was precisely what it was up to.

Declarations followed, from the UK, the European Union and the US. Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State in the US, issued one of the most curt and forceful responses on 1 August: 'The elections should be held as close to the September 6 date as possible and in a manner that reflects the will and aspirations of the Hong Kong people,' the statement said. 'If they aren't, then regrettably Hong Kong will continue its march toward becoming just another Communist-run city in China.'

There is nothing wrong with the US statement. The concerns it expressed all needed to be said. But the context in which it was issued could not have been more tragically symptomatic of the mismatch between word and deed that has all but stymied anything currently put out on China by the administration Pompeo is a key member of, and of those that try to follow it. Only a day before the announcement in Hong Kong, the leader of the free world, Pompeo's boss, President Trump, tweeted that the imminent November presidential election in the US should be delayed. 'With Universal Mail-In Voting (not Absentee Voting, which is good),' he tweeted, '2020 will be the most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT Election in history. It will be a great embarrassment to the USA,' he wrote. 'Delay the Election until people can properly, securely and safely vote???' This was despite the fact that everyone, including senior members

Why the West Needs to Stop its Moralising against China

Written by Kerry Brown

of his own party, agreed that he had no constitutional right to demand this, or bring it about. Only Congress is able to do that. Nor that his claims about possible voter fraud are almost wholly unproven and not backed up by serious evidence.

This extraordinary example of a mismatch between word and deed is, however, not an isolated one. It is the culmination of a long, lamentable process in which the Enlightenment powers (multi-party developed democracies like the US, countries in Europe, and inclusive of others like Australia and New Zealand) have slowly, but surely, lost their moral stature. One of the many outcomes of this is to have reduced the force of words directed at China to, at best, political rhetoric, much of it performed for domestic constituencies in their home country with no real impact intended or actually achieved on the supposed target. In this situation, the conclusion is a sobering one. At a time when the outside world should speak strongly in order to uphold its values, the Hong Kong postponed election example cited above is symptomatic of how the US, UK, Europe and other democracies have never been in a weaker position. Beset by the sort of divisions seen in the protests in Portland, Oregon over the last few weeks or in the UK over Brexit in the last few years, it would be a brave leader in Beijing who would stand up to their own colleagues on the grounds that the West still offered a model attractive enough for them to consider emulating in terms of its ability to deliver stability and consensus.

This is not a recent phenomenon. Historians will probably trace this decline to the moment when the US and its allies and their values looked at their peak, around 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under Bush the elder and then Clinton, the unipolar moment dawned. Russia descended into chaos. The Chinese also underwent their less dramatic but equally profound soul searching after the uprising of June 1989. Communism was no longer a viable option. The capitalist, free market West knew how to make people prosperous, strong, and happy. No wonder the 1990s now evoke so much nostalgia.

And yet the divisions were soon visible. Perhaps the shock of September 11th, 2001 was the most dramatic moment. But it built on simmering resentments on the one hand, and complacency on the other, that allowed the management of its aftermath to cause the US and China to paper over their differences and wage a war on terror that meant the State Department Pompeo now heads allowed two Xinjiang groups to be put on an international terrorist list. From that first, albeit small, act of complicity, many others flowed.

The Chinese and others watched as the US and its most faithful allies went back into the Middle East, waging the Second Iraq War in 2003. That soon unravelled. Its grounds were spurious (no weapons of mass destruction were found, despite the use of these as the reason for going in). The war was won, but the peace became long, chaotic, and bloody. Perhaps most damaging of all, with extra renditions, enhanced interrogation techniques (for which read torture), Guantanamo Bay, and the exposure of appalling abuses in jails in Iraq itself by American soldiers, the 'free world' looked harder and harder to admire. In the end, a sort of truth prevailed. Accountability was exercised. Bush and Blair, in particular, suffered catastrophic collapse in their reputations from which they have never recovered. But the proponents of democratic, Western based values emerged from all of this battered, and often tarnished, their moral stature diminished.

The Great Financial Crisis of 2008 only reinforced the message that the capitalist world was not even able to supply answers to the very things it still maintained the strongest claims to leadership on. As historian Adam Tooze has shown in clinical detail in his 2017 book 'Crashed', mismanagement in the first place was more than supplemented by greed, protection of vested interest, and immorality. Even more devastating, it was the Chinese and their growth after 2009 that stabilised much of the global situation. Unlike with the Gulf War debacles, however, almost none were held to account for the loss of livelihood and wealth that flowed from the collapse of markets and growth around 2008. On top of the moral collapse in geopolitics, there was an even more damaging one in the world of finance and the economy.

In all of these issues, China in particular, despite many accusations levelled at it, is not guilty. It did not remotely have a role in the reasons for the US and others getting sucked into the War on Terror – and nor did it want to see 2008, despite some economists blaming its own economy for bringing about the distortions that led to the whole event. China's main issue, as has become clear since, is that, in both these historic areas, it was largely able to move

Why the West Needs to Stop its Moralising against China

Written by Kerry Brown

through without any detrimental effect to itself. In fact, by accident rather than design, as the US and other powers harmed themselves, China simply carried on economically, growing stronger.

The War on Terror and the financial crisis were political and geopolitical issues. But they have had a massive impact on the moral standing of the West and have undermined their confidence. They have created clear, and in many places tragic, divisions. No one can observe the protests that swept across the US over Black Lives Matters in mid-2020 and see people pitted against people without a deep sense of unhappiness. The US seems to be going through a terrifying breakdown, in which its most senior elected official, a person who has historically been regarded as the most important spokesperson for democratic values by the world's most successful and important democracy, seems to be trying to undermine and denigrate the values they are meant to stand for. For all the complaints about interference by parties from Russia to China in the 2016 US election, one has to be clear about one thing. Even if these claims are true (and many probably are), no one, neither Xi Jinping or Vladimir Putin, could more forcefully and effectively undermine the values of democracy than Donald Trump has done over the last few weeks. And it was, in the end, not Xi or Putin that put him there, but the electoral system and the electorate of the United States of America. If one does not apportion blame fairly and honestly in the right place, how can one really deal with the problems one is facing?

In this context, COVID19 carries deep symbolic weight. As of August 2020, China, where most believe the virus started, has managed to control the spread of the infection and is now emerging from the initial phase of economic downturn by reporting a 3.2 percent GDP rise in the second quarter of the year. As this happens, Europe is moving into a deep recession, with fears of a second spike in infections and fatalities. The UK has shrunk by a fifth of GDP in the first three months of the year while suffering one of the worst levels of death from the disease. By the end of June, America had lost around 12 million jobs and saw its GDP contract by 4.8 per cent, with a 30 per cent contraction predicted, the worst figure ever recorded. It, too, is still fighting the disease, with issues like the wearing of masks politicised and fought over.

This is not to denigrate the efforts these countries have made to deal with the pandemic. It is to acknowledge that no one has found this vast challenge easy to handle. In the very early part of the year, there were criticisms made of China being unfit to deal with an issue like this because of its governance system. This was going to be, in the words of one analysis, the country's Chernobyl moment. And yet, others quickly became consumed in events that showed their own decision making processes and governance capacity were also, albeit for different reasons, imperfect and chaotic. Had COVID19 been like the SARS crisis of 2003, it would have neatly fitted the narrative of a regional China-centric problem, and one that showed why this area and its values and governance were a problem. Any sober analysis of COVID19 would need to recognise that, in different ways, and for different reasons, almost everyone has a problem. This pandemic has been a great leveller. The narrative has clearly changed.

That means that the most prudent response should be one of humility. No one knows what sort of world we are moving into. The economic impact of the pandemic will produce a politics it is hard to predict for governments no matter what their structure and nature. The worst outcomes – high job losses, disappearance of growth – are too terrible to contemplate. At best, there needs to be more unity, more joint purpose, and far less parochial political point scoring in order to confront this vast shared problem. The need for humility and a more circumspect tone in order to achieve that have never been clearer. Instead, there have been almost toxic levels of anger and blame that have boiled over from this towards China, particularly in the US and to some extent in Britain, Australia and other democracies. The desire by some political figures, from Trump downwards, to clamber on a moral high ground that has long since disappeared for them has simply proved too hard to resist.

In 2020, there is an important moment to stand back from the chaos we all see unfolding and do two things fundamentally differently. The first is to purge our language, outside China, of the constant desire to urge it to become like us, and to be constantly wanting to preach and urge it to reform and change in ways that will, we assume, make it more like us. I write as someone who in the past did think that was what we should do. Events in the last decade or so have shown that the situation is far too complex and the variables culturally and politically in China far too great, for one to start projecting on it templates and models from elsewhere that we have no idea will really work. These range from the rise of a highly autocratic leader like Xi Jinping against some expectations that China would move in a

Why the West Needs to Stop its Moralising against China

Written by Kerry Brown

more liberal direction, to the constant predictions that the country is about to implode. It is a difficult thing to say and cuts against our usual desire to be idealistic, but at the moment, and probably far in the future, the best we can hope from China is simply to be stable. We no longer have the luxury of our own stability and its track record to sit on when making judgements about the People's Republic. The harsh fact, and one that needs to be honestly and candidly recognised, is that in the last two decades, it is the US and its allies who have been the source of more instability than China!

That doesn't mean that on issues like Hong Kong and the postponed, even cancelled, elections that the democratic world shouldn't speak out. But the most powerful thing it should do is to start living up to its own values and in that way, being the best advert for their desirability and attractiveness. That means an acknowledgement that, in the last few years, this has not been the case. Europe and the US have often been internally divided, fractious, and angry. They have acted much of the time almost as though they didn't really believe in the values they were espousing. It is no good blaming Moscow and Beijing for this. The deepest wound were the self-inflicted ones. Consensus was lost in our societies. 2020 should be the moment when that gets rebuilt. Otherwise, we will be living proof that our values are just for speaking about, not living up to. And finally, there is the second thing we can all do: inculcate the idea of a responsible attitude towards China. It is fine that, for instance, politicians in the UK now feel because of COVID19 that they have to have an attitude and an opinion about China. But it would be good if they were to also avail themselves as much as possible of some knowledge and understanding available.

There needs to be much more support for basic education about China and for knowledge-based engagement with it. The posture of the Johnson government, on the surface at least, is to be data driven. And yet, on China, there is scant evidence of even a decent level of understanding amongst most politicians, opinion formers, and commentators. This was recognised in a report recently by Professor Rana Mitter of Oxford and Sophia Garston for the British Foreign Policy Group issued on the fateful day Carrie Lam made her declaration in Hong Kong on July 31. Knowledge, humility, and honesty will be the things that help the outside world deal with the historic challenge of China's rise. Without those, it is hard to see how any impact will be made on the leaders of a country that currently see in the politicians facing them from Canberra, to Berlin, London and Washington the precise opposite.

About the author:

Dr Kerry Brown is a Professor of Chinese Studies and the Director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London. His areas of interest are on modern Chinese politics, Chinese political economic and Chinese relations with the UK and the EU. He is the author of over 20 books on contemporary Chinese politics and international relations, the most recent of which is *China: A Modern History* (Polity Press 2020).