

Working Papers

Coalition for Peace & Ethics



No. 6/3 (June 2018)

Four Short Reflections on Jiang Shigong’ s Essay on “Philosophy and History”

Flora Sapio

Abstract: This essay has been written as a part of the debate provoked by the publication of an essay by Jiang Shigong 强世功 in the “Open Times” in January 2018, with the title “Philosophy and History: Interpreting the “Xi Jinping Era” through Xi’ s Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP”



COALITION FOR
PEACE AND ETHICS

Four Short Reflections on Jiang Shigong's Essay on "Philosophy and History"

Flora Sapio

This essay has been written as a part of the debate provoked by the publication of an essay by Jiang Shigong 强世功 in the "Open Times" in January 2018, with the title "Philosophy and History: Interpreting the "Xi Jinping Era" through Xi's Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP"

I won't summarize the essay: I am assuming everyone with an academic or intellectual interest in China will have read either the original or the translation in its entirety.

Rehashing Jiang Shigong's argument would be of little usefulness, and also involve the risk that I would impose my own meaning and interpretation on the words of Jiang Shigong.

As Jiang explains in the Abstract to the essay:

"This text interprets the significance of the 'Xi Jinping era' in Party history, the history of the Republic, the history of Chinese civilisation, the history of the international communist movement, and the history of mankind from the perspective of the internal linkages between philosophy and history".

The [original version of the essay is available here](#), while the full-text English translation has been published [here](#).

1

In referring to the Report to the 19th Congress of the CCP, Jiang writes how: "**the media is circulating expert analyses and interpretations (...) in the hopes that**" the words in the Report will bring "**Party leadership into step with the people as an organic, unified, active, agent.**"

Until not very long ago, there was a time in *some parts* of Europe, when the existence of various venues and *fora* allowed persons belonging to different socio-economic strata to maintain a direct and personal communication.

At times, these *fora* were institutionalized, and took the shape of mass political parties, labour unions, and different types of associations. Some other times, these *fora* could be entirely informal – a product of urban geographies where the impoverished nobleman, the tenured university professor, the cleaner and the immigrant lived very close to each other, or even on different floors of the same building. So they would meet outside of their respective occupations and social circles, and exchange ideas on politics.

These urban geographies existed in market economies (so-called "capitalist countries"). Their existence did not depend on any top-level design. It was rather the product of the absence of top-level design and urban planning. These urban geographies did not exist as

a product of any ideology either. They were the result of the spontaneous organization of men and things.

This mixture of persons from different social and economic strata was immensely useful to European mass political parties, of any color and creed. Because – if I can to express my ideas borrowing the linguistic codes used in Jiang Shigong's article – it allowed to maintain close links between the "vanguard" and the "masses".

In Europe, the "vanguard" meant either Fascism or Communism or Socialism or Christian political ideologies, or centrist ideologies. Or even a mix of two or more of these.

The "masses" meant all those persons who were interested in how people in their society could live together in the best possible way. This group of persons was not a small group. And it was different from those who went to the polls once every couple of years, and placed an "X" on this or that symbol without understanding much about how their society worked, or what its problems were.

If some parts of Europe indeed are "[the political laboratory of modernity](#)", or the trial sites of the politics to come, then it would be worth trying to understand the reasons why this arrangement of people and things was broken up. And why such techniques as sentiment analysis – with all of their methodological flaws:

- (a) came to replace robust and reliable flows of interaction and communication
- (b) were at the heart of [recent scandals and controversies](#) about the Brexit Referendum
- (c) are something still completely unknown to the ordinary people ("the citizens" in liberal language, "the masses" in marxist-leninist language)

The results of breaking this urban ecosystem up are for everyone to be seen. Existing political, intellectual, economic elites are being challenged. One of the difference between the "elite" and the "masses" is a difference in the linguistic codes members of each group use to convey their ideas. Today, those who have chosen to place themselves on the same linguistic level of the "masses" (= disadvantaged or vulnerable groups) are in power. Their identification with the masses, however, might not go beyond the use of a simple language everyone can understand.

It is from here that any critique to democracy has to start from. Not from abstract notions, detached from the ways in which the different peoples of Europe live their political lives. Such a critique may also find ways to reinforce those institutions and structures that have guaranteed the global economic interconnectedness and stability of the European continent for the last seventy years.

2

"If we want to understand the report to the Nineteenth Party Congress, we must first understand the CCP. The CCP is a principle-driven political party that believes in Marxism"

A distinction is to be made among Marxism, Leninism, and Marxism-Leninism. Marxism is an ideology. Leninism (in my understanding) is a set of organizational principles. Marxism-Leninism blends a specific political ideology with specific organizational principles.

What are these organizational principles, when are they used, and how do they work?

In (non-leftist), (non-Marxist) plain language: these organizational principles postulate that:

- (a) there is a group of persons who are well ahead of all the others, either because they have a superior mastery of theory, ideology, religion, or because they have been "chosen", or because they are more skilled than others. In Marxist jargon, this group of persons is called "the vanguard";
- (b) there is a group of persons who are behind. In Marxist jargon, these are "the masses" or "the proletariat";
- (c) those who have a better command of theory (ideology, religion, mathematics, etc.) have the mission to educate and organize those who are behind. To awaken them, and make them realize where their real interest lies;
- (d) led by the vanguard, the masses will become better, more knowledgeable, more skilled, more powerful, and slowly move towards a final state of collective wealth, happiness, salvation, knowledge, and so on;
- (e) to effectively lead the masses, a top-down hierarchical organization is needed.

The best persons are at the top, and they represent the others, speaking and acting on their behalf. In a future, those who today are at the bottom of the hierarchy will all rise to the top of the hierarchy together. The belief in the realization of this promise is the cognitive glue allowing this organizational principle to function.

As an organizational principle, Leninism may be detached from Marxism, and applied to the most diverse spheres of activity. As long as anything meets conditions (a) to (e), it shares the fundamental traits of the theory devised by a Russian lawyer known with the name of Vladimir Lenin. It is by no chance that Leninism involves notions of representation and fiduciary duties.

The fact some of the conditions and beliefs conceptualized by Lenin can be found in the most diverse contexts and organizations has made the Chinese version of Marxism-Leninism, as it has been reinterpreted by all the General Secretaries of the CCP, appealing to the eyes of many outside of China.

The appeal is not premised on their embracing of Marxism-Leninism, but on a combination of logic and pragmatism. I will try to illustrate this point through an example:

If it is true that a CEO (or any other successful person) is successful because he has been working hard on his skills:

- and it is true that everyone has a chance to become successful one day if they work hard and follow the example of those who are successful today;
- and if this is all true because there are concrete results – achieved by others – to prove its truth, then...

this 'logic' functions across platforms, contexts, countries, and historical periods. For instance, it may be argued that success is less important than ideals or values. Alternatively, it may be argued that the most important thing in life is happiness, and that everyone can be happy provided they follow the correct path to happiness.

Side by side with the argument that China is producing "facts on the ground", in talking with Europeans I often encounter a variety of arguments based on belief in the preeminence of distinct facts, or ideas, values, ideologies, etc.

While the values of the variables at play may change from "wealth" to "culture" or anything else, the logic driving the "operating system" remains the same.

This is the point of greatest interconnection and of greatest division between China and the West.

In this case, too, any intellectual critique to any ideological system has to begin from the admission that an inter-systemic logic exists, regardless of the different value this logic can attribute to abstract variables. And that this logic is producing a consensus and divisions that categories as 'nation', 'class', 'gender' and even 'ideology' are unable to account for.

But, such a line of reasoning, and any reaction to Jiang Shigong's piece based on it would fail to respond to the argument in Jiang Shigong's article.

At the core of the argument is a premise refusing any reasoning based on a comparison of the value of abstract variables, absent the results such variables yield in the real world.

3

"Western civilisation is built on a philosophical-theological tradition of binary antagonisms, between phenomenon and existence, life on earth and in heaven"

If a theological tradition constructed around binary antagonisms is at the root of all Western thought produced since when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, then Western thought cannot easily separate itself from its theological *undercurrents*. Which may be limited to Christianity, or extend further back in time to pre-Christian systems of belief.

That German Marxism is indebted to Christianity, and Christian eschatology in particular, has been proved. The question then becomes whether any attempt at the indigenization of Marxism can avoid the import of these eschatological elements. Jiang Shigong is of course aware of this question.

This question is a question common to all the different cultures that, at a given point in their history, chose to adapt Marxism-Leninism to their conditions. In fact, Marxism – either in its "pure" version, or diluted and blended with notions of distributive egalitarianism, electoral democracy, nationalism, nativism, socialism, etc. was adopted by various countries at different points in their history.

The attempt to ground Marxism in a distinct philosophical tradition should, in theory, allow to separate Marxism from its messianic components before its adaptation takes place. Assuming those messianic component are unwanted, and they can be identified. In so

doing, however, the biggest risk is that of pulling the ground from under one's feet, and eroding the very basis of legitimacy one tries to bolster.

Marx tried to find the solution to this problem by arguing that communism had to be subject to empirical tests, the testing ground being real life. But ideas, "once they descend into the world, lose their original lustre", perhaps because the feedback loops theorized by Marx stemmed from abstract notions that still carried the mark of eschatology.

At the risk of being repetitive, I will say that this is a problem for any system relying on a set of principles indebted to or deriving from the paradigms of escathology, messianism, redemption, or the *sacrifice* (as opposed to a wise use of one's abilities) of the Self for a greater good.

From here, the question follows of whether during the transition from "natural time" to "political time", "political time" has become a "messianic time". Jiang Shigong's essay does not have the goal to answer this question. So any criticism of the essay on this ground would be intellectually unfair.

The Report to the 19th Congress of the CPC, however, has found a solution to this problem in the notion of 'not forgetting', or 'keeping' one's 初心

I will not comment on the notion of 初心, neither will I explain its etymology, because all of those who have been following the debate provoked by Jiang Shigong's essay are familiar with this notion, and the constellations of meaning where this notion has existed throughout the history of China.

Jiang Shigong's essay incidentally offers an additional answer to the problem, which is fully coherent with the content of the Report to the 19th Congress of the CPC, there where it says:

"In the annals of human history, what has always played a determining role in the unfolding of history is people, because the history of mankind was itself created by people."

This suggests that there can be a way for "political time" to be devoid of messianic and evangelizing components inherited from the binary antagonisms identified by Jiang Shigong. If the notion of 初心 plays a prominent role, other notions can be of help too.

4

"From the perspective of China's internal politics, the great revival of the Chinese nation is not necessarily in contradiction with Western liberal democratic systems. China's liberals have seen new political possibilities in this, which has resulted in divisions within the liberal ranks, in which one group has begun to adjust its strategy, seeing their past fetishisation of individual rights and free markets, and their consequent opposition to the nation and the people, as a kind of political immaturity. This group has hastened to embrace the rise of the nation as a political subject."

And yet the question of whether the nation is still a political subject – a question central to this school of thought - remains debatable. An answer to this question lies in:

- (a) finding out who or what a subject is;
- (b) explaining when a subject can be said to be political, and whether the attribute of “political” refers to a function a subject plays permanently, occasionally, or in other ways;
- (c) explaining whether political subjectivity is inclusive or exclusive; monistic, or pluralistic; innate and irrevocable, or incidental and revokable. Or it exists beyond dychotomies

This is not a question addressed by Jiang Shigong's essay, yet this question may be of relevance to those who use notions of 'state' and 'political subjectivity' in their work.