

A nighttime photograph of the Shanghai skyline. The Oriental Pearl Tower is prominent on the left, and the Shanghai Tower is the tallest building on the right. The city lights are reflected in the water in the foreground.

XI JINPING'S PASSIVE REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to argue, using the Gramscian concept of ‘passive revolution’, that Xi Jinping’s discourse, formulated around the idea of the ‘Chinese Dream’, has been able to assimilate already existent demands in Chinese society. A ‘passive revolution’ is an exercise used by existing regimes in times of crisis or need of broad reforms, which consists on the development of a new collective social discourse and political horizon able to absorb demands of opposition groups. It does not only aim to cancel their subversive potential, but also seeks to integrate discontent from social sectors into the system. This essay argues against the view of Xi Jinping as a populist leader, considering that his primary purpose has been just the contrary: to prevent a populist uprising in China and to maintain the stability of the rule of the Communist Party of China.

1. INTRODUCTION

After the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Xi Jinping became the strongest leader China has had since Deng Xiaoping. His government has left behind the low-profile attitude that has characterized Chinese leadership over the two decades before him. Xi has presented a more assertive approach in the international sphere, and an ideological reinforcement internally, articulated around the narrative of the 'Chinese Dream' and the 'Great Rejuvenation of China'.

Due to his characterisation as a 'strong leader', Western media has painted him as a kind of nationalist linked to the recent wave of populist governments (Babones, 2017; Hernandez, 2018; Muns, 2018). However, in this essay, I will argue precisely the contrary: Xi Jinping's ideological rearmament is more a 'passive revolution' aimed at stopping any kind of internal populist uprising.

Xi Jinping needs to be seen as a consequence of the West's neoliberalism crisis at the beginning of the 21st century, which also affected China's specific form of neoliberalism. He is a response to both an internal situation, but also a global situation which has been both an opportunity and a challenge for party elites. This article agrees with authors such as Kerry Brown (2018), who argue that Xi Jinping is a tool of the party for a new China in a new global geopolitical context.

However, I also believe that Xi needs to be framed along other responses which have been developed around the world in response to the crisis of neoliberal systems. The challenge towards neoliberal elites posed by political disaffection around the globe since 2015 has led to three different scenarios: first, the crystallisation of social anger in populist alternatives of different ideologies, as the victories of Syriza in Greece, Duterte in the Philippines, or Donald Trump in the US highlight. Second, the triumph of an 'anti-populist' reaction, as in the case of the victory of Macron against Le Pen in France (Norris, 2017). Third, and somewhat in the middle-ground, are the governments that, through the reconstruction of new nationalist narratives, have been able to absorb some popular demands in their discourse, as in the case of Putin in Russia, but also in the Asian context as seen by Modi in India or Abe in Japan (Detrow, 2016; Stewart, & Wasserstrom, 2016). This essay considers Xi Jinping's strategy to be within the third group.

In this sense, it is argued that Xi Jinping has taken advantage of this challenge, articulating a more consistent narrative for the Chinese government that could integrate the discontented in Chinese society, in order to prevent the emergence of counter-hegemonic movements.

2. HEGEMONY AND POPULISM

For this essay, hegemony will be considered as the ability of a dominant group to establish and anchor its political, cultural and moral leadership in order to ensure

consensus among the allied and subordinate elements (Gramsci, 1971). This concept of hegemony implies understanding that the exercise of power occurs both through techniques of coercion and accommodation.

According to the neo-Gramscian Essex School, hegemony building practices consist in the contingent articulation of a plurality of interests (ethnic identities, partisan affiliations, economic interests, etc.) with the aim of producing new political bodies with a capacity for universal interpellation. This means that successful hegemonic discourses can construct a narrative shared by a majority of the members of a given society and to explain their place in the world and their common future. Indeed, hegemony is a metonymic practice of ‘coalition building’ (Howarth, 2013: p. 199) in which a certain social group is hegemonic as long as he is able to present its particular interests as the interests of the society as a whole.

A hegemonically dominant bloc must be able to incorporate and accommodate some of the demands of the subaltern sectors within the framework of the existing institutional order, while isolating those that may harbour subversive content (Howarth, 2013: p. 202). In the action of building a hegemonic coalition, the interests of different groups are articulated through a chain of equivalences creating a new common social bloc conscience. On the other side, it is common practice of established institutions – in both democratic and authoritarian regimes – to deal with subordinates’ groups demands individually, applying a *logic of difference*, in order to avoid collusions into anti-hegemonic coalitions in case they cannot be integrated by the regime.

In this sense, a fundamental concept in the Essex School theory is the idea of populism. For Ernesto Laclau (2005), populism is not understood as a political ideology, but as a concrete form of politics based on the idea of the formation of the people ‘as a result of the articulation of a heterogeneity of demands around their common opposition to existing institutions’ (Miró, 2017: p. 23). So, populism is a way of doing politics, not an ideology, which emerges when the existing system is unable to co-opt social demands. In some manner, any political movement that seeks the formation of a new regime requires a foundational ‘populist moment’ that invokes the constitution of the people to question a previously existing order regime (Miró, 2017: p. 25).

Nowadays in the Western public sphere, populism has become a negative label used against any political opinion, which creates some confusion when talking about it. The label is more frequently used against anti-establishment movements, but not all anti-establishment movements can be considered as populist. According to the definition that is used here, the genuine element of populist politics is the mobilization of the people against the elites.

In this fashion, populist leaders try to present themselves through their language and behaviour as ‘common people’ in front of elitist governments. In the case of Xi Jinping, it is evident to most observers that he is not a ‘man of the people’, not only because of

his background, but also because of his demeanour. Xi Jinping's rhetoric and speech performance are entirely different from the behaviour of populist leaders like Donald Trump or Hugo Chavez, nor is it similar to examples in closer cultural contexts like former Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian. As we will see in the following sections, Xi's appellation to the people is not grounded in 'people's lore' regarding it as an autonomous force, but rather always attached to the rule and guidance of the Party.

Xi Jinping's appeal is something different, and the articulation of his politics has more to do with the Gramscian idea of a *passive revolution*. In Gramscian theory, a passive revolution is the response to an existing or foreseeable moment of acute crisis of hegemony, in which the established power needs to develop a top-down reform of the system. This reform seeks not only to satisfy the individual demands of a social group, but to also integrate new subaltern actors into a reformed hegemonic order. Nevertheless, such a reform will be done maintaining as much as possible of the previous correlation of forces and the previously existing social leadership (Balsa, 2006).

That kind of process should not be understood as a necessarily cynical or opportunistic practice on the part of the ruling elites, nor as a renunciation of their interests. That new hegemony goes beyond an operation of political marketing: when the demand of a subaltern group is integrated, albeit in a subordinate way, it becomes part of the fundamental nucleus of the consensus and practice of the renewed political regime. Not satisfying these demands will harm its legitimacy and stability.

As has been said above, Xi Jinping is a leader for a new era, in which China is going to have a more critical role in world affairs and pursue an internal revolutionary economic change. Any country facing this situation is likely to put its society and political system in tension. Furthermore, the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis put an end to 20 years of a neoliberal style of doing politics, which also has its resonances in China, which will be explored in the following section.

3. A CHANGING GLOBAL CONTEXT AND ITS IMPACT ON CHINA

Since the 1980's and the end of the Cold War, the neoliberal consensus - based on technocratic governments, the pre-eminence of market economies, the promotion of individualistic values and the idea of government as post-political management - became the hegemonic ideology around the world. The neoliberal promise came along with the idea of the marriage between capitalism, democracy and human rights, though in most countries, the implementation of free market and privatisation policies were prioritised over democratisation. It needs to be said that the neoliberal global consensus has more to do with the 'neoliberal way of doing politics', based on a 'managerial' rhetoric, which tries to present its policies as post-ideological and self-supported by their expected economic success – which could be adapted in non-democratic liberal contexts such as in Singapore or China – than with the full ideological corpus of neoliberalism. I will refer to neoliberalism in this paper taking

this fact into account.

From the early 2000's, that consensus has begun to be challenged in the peripheries isolated from the centres of global power when governments openly opposed to neoliberalism began to take office. One of the first signs of a crisis was the emergence of a series of left-wing nationalist governments in Latin America, such as Hugo Chavez's Venezuela or Evo Morales' Bolivia, which challenged the policies of the IMF and the World Bank (Sader, 2008).

On the other hand, in the trans-Atlantic world in 2011, social tensions from the 2008 financial crisis gave way to an explosive wave of protests across Europe and the United States. Movements such as the Spanish '15-M' or Occupy Wall Street had a huge international impact, as their discourses were articulated around a critique against the financial system, the austerity policies and the post-political tendencies of the technocratic governments. Thus, these movements were able to connect the demands of different social movements in counter-hegemonic coalitions aimed at challenging neoliberal hegemony (Errejón, 2011, Glasius & Pleyers, 2013).

China's public opinion, the blogosphere, the press and the Chinese elites were aware of these protests (Ma, 2011). An editorial in the *China Daily* even showed certain sympathies towards protests in the West, criticising the poor coverage of the Occupy movement in American media (Chen, 2011). According to the Telegraph (2011), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson Liu Weimin stated that the protests should lead to a 'time for reflection'. The same article also pointed out that the nationalist newspaper *Global Times* echoed the protests, although pointing out the differences between China and the West and asking China's citizens to stay calm.

The protests were perceived with caution, and as a warning for Chinese elites. However, they were also regarded as a sign of a wind of change in the international system (Hille, 2011). A wary attitude should not be surprising since Chinese leaders of the 90's had been following the style of the grey bureaucrats' managerial neoliberal governments, and their legitimacy was purely based on the success of their economic policies (Womack, 2017: p. 401; Xie & Zhou, 2014).

Chinese achievements, despite producing growth as never seen before, also brought about serious societal problems and environmental costs. The income gap between rural areas and coastal cities has increased since the period of Reform and Opening Up, with inequality being further accentuated by the *hukou* household registration system, which deprives rural migrants access to public services and rights in the cities (Sheehan, 2017). In addition, while the gap between rich and poor has dramatically increased, the official ideology of the PRC continues to be egalitarian, generating a sense of disenchantment between nostalgics and the losers of post-Maoist China.

On the other hand, corruption and nepotism, along with ecological problems related to pollution, have begun to be a significant factor in perceived grievances among the

urban middle class, the social base of CPC support (Gilbert, 2012). The criticism of corruption is important, because it is a demand that was also shared in the discourses of the 2011 wave of protests in western countries (Wike & Parker, 2015). Furthermore, in the context of the perceived decline of the West, nationalist sectors in China pushed for a more vigorous foreign policy, as is the case of the international relations scholar Yan Xuetong, one of the most influential intellectuals of the party (Yan 2013: p. 15).

In this fashion, in the early 2010's, China's internal disaffection had its own momentum articulated around the Red Culture and the popularity of the former mayor of Chongqing, Bo Xilai (Zhao, 2012). Bo came from a similar background as Xi Jinping, though he had a totally different way of doing politics. Bo was a charismatic leader who presented himself as an outsider – although he wasn't – and openly criticised the existing model of economic development in China. His government centred its attention towards social problems, launching initiatives to increase welfare, fighting against corruption and organised crime, and mitigating the unfavourable effects of the *hukou* system (Martin & Cohen, 2011; Sheehan, 2017).

Bo's program came along with a discourse that could be qualified as populist and aimed to appeal to the underdogs of Chinese society recovering the imagery of the Cultural Revolution. In this way, he tried to take advantage of the PRC's official symbols and China's own communist tradition by presenting an 'alternative' program, although without questioning the leadership of the party (Zhao, 2012). Precisely because of this, Bo could have presented serious danger to party elites. Despite of his fall into disgrace, thanks to a controversial corruption case (Li, 2013), Bo's popularity and the popularity of his program did not go unnoticed. Bo's success warned the party that some changes need to be made. In fact, before officially taking office, Xi toured the Chongqing province to meet with Bo (Lam, 2010), and as will be seen in the next section, later incorporated components of Bo's discourse into his own.

Another internal front opened in the PRC's special administrative region of Hong Kong. Due to Beijing's increasing influence in the former British colony, a protest movement called Occupy Central claiming civic and democratic rights emerged in 2011, and would later evolve into the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Yuen, 2015). These protests were directly inspired by Occupy Wall Street, with direct interchange of practices, imagery and social composition (Beinart, 2014). Although the protests were limited to Hong Kong, they symbolize one of the main challenges that Hong Kong's retrocessions possess to the PRC: the possibility of Hong Kong becoming a focus of democratic ideas which could irradiate into the Mainland (Ollé, 2005). In this way, what the umbrella's revolution could have left settled in the collective imagination of Hong Kong and China may in the future be a disruptive factor for Chinese political elites.

To all this, we must add that in recent years, China has seen its economic growth slow down, causing an increase in labour conflicts (Locket, 2017), the emergence of the internet as a space in which citizens express their opinions - and a place where the

party has recently begun to battle (Yang, 2017) - as well as the need to make essential changes in the economic structure to move from an industrial economy to one based on services and new technologies. This scenario has presented a significant challenge for China's political stability, which has required a renewed narrative under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

4. ANALYSING XI JINPING'S CHINESE DREAM DISCOURSE

Methodologically, this analysis is built on the analysis of official documents, Xi Jinping's speeches, and audio-visual material from China's official media, news, and relevant academic literature.¹

When Xi took office, China faced the challenge that, after more than twenty years after the inauguration of the reform and opening up policy, central problems like poverty and inequality remained while the neoliberal dream had begun crumble around the world. Secondly, because of the global financial crisis, China's position in the global economy and international realm had changed, demanding both an internal push for economic transformation and a more active role in global affairs. Hence, Chinese elites needed stable state-society relations and strong leadership.

To deal with this scenario, the first step that Xi Jinping's administration took has been to create a new common horizon, a fresh epic narrative to link the party and the people to a future China; the chosen formula has been the metaphor of the 'Chinese Dream'.

In order to label Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream discourse as an articulation of a passive revolution, we need to find three strategical movements in our analysis. First, a change with the past needs to be identified, an abandonment or modification of the narrative that maintained the legitimacy of the CPC leadership since 1979. Second, we need to see strategies of co-option of already existing social demands that can be considered as being challenging to the existing political order. Co-option comes along with a transformation of their meaning and nature dissolving their subversive component. Third, this will give birth to a new common narrative, linking different social forces together into a framework able to explain where the country is and where it wants to go. But in this aspect, what differentiates a passive revolution from an actual revolution is that the existing social relations must not be altered, and in the present case, the leadership of the CPC not only would need to be maintained, but reinforced.

5. THE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN XI JINPING'S PASSIVE REVOLUTION

First, the Chinese Dream's nationalist turn contrasts with Chinese official discourse during the 90's, which had been ideologically weak. In this fashion, the Chinese Dream aims to integrate all individual aspirations of Chinese citizens into a narrative that links them into the common cause of China's new economic reforms success. In Xi's words, 'one can do well only when one's country and nation do well' (Xi 2012a: p. 38).

In the Chinese Dream, the neoliberal imagery of a managerial bureaucracy in 'which to be rich is glorious' is abandoned, and a collective rhetoric substitutes it, recovering classical elements of Chinese nationalism as the idea of 'national rejuvenation' already present in the speeches of Sun Yat-Sen (Kallio, 2015). The main difference here with the former neoliberal narrative does not necessarily come along with an overall rejection of policies of privatization and free trade, but rather with overcoming the idea of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1989), in which politics is considered to be a mere act of management, where all conflicts can be solved through the market, and where there are no other interests or identities than those circumscribed to the individual (Gusterson, 2017). Indeed, the lack of confidence in market mechanism gains room in Xi's (2013a: p. 83) discourse: 'the market lacks order (...) market competition is not good enough to select the superior and eliminate the inferior.'

Second, the most important strategy of Xi's discourse is its capacity to absorb elements from other discourses of the growing protest movements in Chinese society, while isolating those subversive elements that could question his leadership and that of the party. This is what makes the Chinese Dream narrative a passive revolution.

Probably the clearest and most articulated example has been the co-option of Bo Xilai's narrative by Xi, as evidenced firstly in the Red Culture imagery and the recovering of Maoist-era elements in the propaganda (Zhao, 2016), and secondly in the need for welfare policies and combating poverty. Xi has also revived the traditional rhetoric of Chinese communism giving centrality to the workers within his discourse (Xi, 2017). In his closing speech of the 19th Party Congress of the CPC, Xi indicated that China is entering a new era in which the 'march toward common prosperity nobody will be left behind' and in which the goal of eradicating poverty is proposed (China Global Television Network, 2018). But Xi articulates social welfare along with economic development, instead of prioritising the second, as the Red Culture rhetoric did. Thirdly, the fight against corruption is probably the most important of Xi Jinping's early aims. Xi (2014a: 436) used to describe corruption as an enemy within the party which has to be beaten, a disease that needs to be eradicated and has used the idea of fighting corruption to promote ideological reinforcement and the necessity of greater social control (Xi, 2017: p. 61).

Furthermore, developing a new hegemonic consensus does not only come with dealing with subaltern demands, but to truly integrate them, their meaning also needs to be changed. This is why in Xi's discourse, social policies are linked to economic development, the fight against corruption is attached to ideological rectitude, and demands for greater civil 'rights' are transformed into 'government according to the law', isolating from his discourse any demand that has to do with the idea of civil liberties (Xi, 2013b). The subversive potential of these demands is nullified and integrated into a general appeal to a clearer and better governance within the party margins (Xi, 2017). On the other hand, we can see how those elements of society that are considered to be unable to co-opt are dealt with in a different manner. This is the

case with the reinforcement of the Great Firewall: to crackdown on the crescent network of netizens whose demands of autonomy and free speech can hardly be incorporated into the Chinese system (Creemers, 2017).

And third, these demands present within Chinese society are linked to a common horizon of fulfilling the Chinese Dream, which through patriotism, ties the aspirations of the Chinese people with the leadership of the party; 'to realize the Chinese Dream, we must carry forward the Chinese spirit. We need to use the national spirit of patriotism and spirit of the times centred on reform and innovation to bring forth the vigour and vitality of the whole nation' (Xi 2013c: p. 61).

The new discourse exhorts to a mobilization of the Chinese people – 'the Chinese Dream is a dream of the country, the nation as well as all Chinese individuals' (Xi, 2014b: p. 70) - and an ideological reinforcement, in which individual objectives don't need to be left aside, but are asked to be integrated within China's collective goal of 'national rejuvenation' through economic development – 'all Chinese (...) share the opportunity to pursue excellence, realize our dreams and develop ourselves along with the country' (Xi, 2013d: p. 42).

In contrast to what we would expect in populist rhetoric, the narrative of the Chinese Dream does not aim to overthrow the existing political system, but rather seeks to tie the possibility of collective success to the continuity of the party's leadership (Xi, 2017: pp. 17-18). Furthermore, Xi does not propose a rupture with previous party leaders, but rather presents the Chinese Dream as a new stage of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up Policy (Xi, 2012c: p. 73; 2017: p. 17). Xi wants to make clear that although China is moving towards the future, it is not breaking with the party's past.

In this fashion, the Chinese Dream's two proposed horizons are linked to the CPC's history: the double centenary of the CPC in 2021, and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2049, respectively (Xi, 2012b: p. 7), which will also coincide in time with the revision of the special status of Macao and Hong Kong in 2047 (Womack, 2017: p. 398). Chinese people's social forces are oriented to be mobilized to achieve the collective horizons of reaching a moderately prosperous society in 2021, and a modern socialist country by 2049 (Zhou et al. 2017), which can be only achieved through the joint efforts of the party and the people. In this regard, the message of the Chinese Dream is clear: Chinese people need to be aware that the way to reach wealth and welfare is to understand that the people and the party are bound by the same destiny. Therefore, this implicitly also means that to challenge the party means to move away from the road to prosperity.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has argued against those opinions which consider Xi Jinping a populist leader. On the contrary, this paper characterised Xi Jinping's narrative as articulated around the metaphor of the 'Chinese Dream' as a passive revolution. The main

argument of this paper is that Xi Jinping can hardly be considered a populist leader, because at no time is a split posed between the Chinese people and an elite that must be overthrown. On the contrary, Xi Jinping's rhetoric has come to contain any populist tension that could emerge within Chinese society and to channel those impulses towards the greater plan of the CPC.

Although the new role of China in the world and its road towards a change of its economic structure are the main drivers of Xi Jinping's policies, his administration needs to be understood in a context of the general crisis of the neoliberal way of doing politics on a global level. The fear among Chinese party elites of an emergence of a populist revolt, as visible in other parts of the world since 2008, needs to be taken into account to adequately frame the narratives of the Xi administration in a global context of early 21st century.

It has been argued that Xi Jinping, in front of a convulsive context, opted for the elaboration of a new stronger narrative to secure the legitimising of the party's leadership in Chinese society. The Chinese Dream is hence an attempt to use the social challenges emerging within Chinese society as an opportunity to rebuild a common horizon for the Chinese people under the leadership of the party. In this fashion, it has been presented how Xi Jinping has used the general framework of the Chinese Dream as a nodal point to rearticulate a disparity of demands. Within that discourse, Xi articulated a new sense for them preventing their disruptive potential and linking their achievement with the goal of maintaining the leadership of the CPC. However, by absorbing some of these demands, it must be taken into account that Xi has also legitimized them. Hence, the success of this operation of passive revolution on preventing the emergence of a populist revolt in China would be ultimately linked to the capacity of the party to fulfil its promises within the stated timeline. Hence, further research on this topic should combine the analysis of Xi's discourse with an examination of the existence and success of policies aimed to cope with the demands absorbed into the Chinese Dream narrative.

NOTES

1. Due to my limited knowledge of the Chinese language, I have used official translations to English of Xi Jinping's discourses provided by the Foreign Language Press of Beijing or Xinhuanet. Thus, it is necessary to recognize that some details may have been lost through not using original documents, but given that the theoretical and methodological framework used here is not intended to analyse rhetorical or syntactic resources, this shortcoming can be mitigated.

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08

PUBLISH WITH THE
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