

What Western Democracies can Learn from China?

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Western democracies have become neoliberal with all the disproportions of economic and political power that have emerged in capitalist society. The power acquired in the free market not only deforms the integrity of society and economic and political balance, but also it has become virtually impossible for democracy as a form of government to exist. As the scale of the free market became global, the economic entity has also gone global creating disproportions that have led Western democracies to be ruled by economic entities rather than political ones. However, proper education, the use of new economic decentralisation trends, changing the role of politicians and the activity of citizens, and emerging new possibilities of digital democracy give us a glimpse of how to use the opportunities of the free market for strengthening democracies. At the same time, the reforms that have taken place in China in recent years have paradoxically shown that neoliberalism can also have positive aspects for society, which, as a new balance of economic and political capital, can be applied in the West as well.

Keywords: democracy, democratic reforms, free market, decentralisation, neoliberalism, Chinese economic reforms

INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, F. Fukuyama wrote the book ‘The End of History and the Last Man’ which became popular globally overnight. In this controversial work, Fukuyama presents the end of the Cold War as the final and universal victory of liberal democracy. In his opinion, people in the West no longer need to consider alternative political systems. Fukuyama is partially correct as the number of democracies in the world is growing.¹ Sociocultural and economic powers like those of Western Europe and North America with the highest living standards and liberal democracies indicate that they are obviously correlated (Fukuyama 2006: 109). However, liberal democracies created an economic phenomenon – a *liberal economy*, also called the *free market*. Citizens can also become economic entities and use all the opportunities of the free market. In other words, next to the ordinary citizen, next to the political entity, an economic entity appeared; however, the economic entity is empowered by the capital accumulated in the free market. Economic entities create asymmetries of information and capital in society known as *neoliberalism*.

¹ <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>

The coexistence of an economic subject next to a political subject is not a new phenomenon, but in the conditions of global neoliberalism, inequality and capital asymmetries have reached such a scale that the consequences have become serious threats to the survival of democracy in the West. It is interesting to note that China has handled these challenges much better, where free markets and neoliberal economic effects have been used more wisely than in the West. China's free market capital has been distributed far more evenly across the country and across all levels of society, liberating nearly 800 million people out of poverty and creating the world's largest middle class. Before discussing why China's transformation has been so successful, let's briefly review the neoliberal reforms that have taken place in the US and Europe over the past 40 years.

WESTERN DEMOCRACY

J. Stiglitz, a geopolitical economist who received the Nobel Prize for his contributions to Economics, mainly for the development of the so-called environmental and harmonious sustainable economy, briefly summarises that liberal Western democracies are not really governed by governments, but also by economic corporate entities (Stiglitz 2012). Neoliberalism in the West became problematic not only because of disproportions of power of the global economic entity next to the citizen, but also because of all the market ideology and class divisions, the economic entity began to dominate politics. In other words, the political entity is now determined by the economic entity. Neoliberal policies have become the norm in all modern representative democracies in the West. So, when it comes to democratic decisions, the most important thing is not who answers the questions and how, but who raises the questions and how. The problem arises not only because the elected political elite no longer consider themselves ordinary citizens, but also because the citizens themselves have come to terms with the status of the 'crowd' measured by statistical indicators. Citizens in Western industrialised countries have become a resource – an object of manipulation not only in the economic sense, but also in the political sense.

There is an evident increase in populist politics when societal differences are used to divide, antagonise and polarise society itself. The divisions between political influences do not only mark the interests and powers of politicians, but they have also begun to be identified with the dividing lines of society itself (Rogers-Vaughn 2016). Wedges of forced division and control have become dangerous tools of politicians in the West. Struggles between existing or imagined public opinions increasingly serve to establish the power of politicians. Politicians use commercialised campaigns to create public opposition, although history shows that autocrats in most cases take advantage of deliberately created public opposition and crises (Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018: 117). All modern Western democracies are experiencing an unprecedented fragmentation of society, civil society is disappearing, and democratic skepticism is growing. The political elite are cynically shaping society as a passive rather than an active institution of democracy.

Although democracy is impossible without the active participation of citizens, citizen participation in many modern Western democracies has been steadily weakening over the years, with each successive generation of voters, especially younger voters less and less are interested in political processes (Hay 2007: 42). As dissatisfaction with democracies grows,² politics are based not on a wise consensus, but rather on a blind trust in statistical indicators, and binary

² The Bennett Institute for Public Policy. *Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*. Cambridge.

votes are gaining strength in the West. Voting only 'for' or 'against' escalates the so-called politics of the winner, which does not consider the needs of the losing side and also consistently increases division and confrontation in society. The binary principle of the majority³ creates an *elected* and *outcast* society, which means that instead of solving problems it exacerbates them. The continuous division and fragmentation of society causes more and more problems that modern democracies have no capacity to solve. Most of the time, referendum questions are raised to divide society, so it is not surprising that the voting results do not solve anything and serve the narrow interests of the political elite, and not the public. In such an environment, populist and Nazi formations grow stronger and provoke anti-democratic processes leading to the recession of democracy (Fukuyama 2015).

Emphasising the political incompetence of society creates a distinction between those who are allowed to participate in the political process and those who are excluded from that process. The public is clearly separated from the political elite armed with bureaucratic regalia. The citizen is considered unqualified, unable to fully understand the course of political processes and principles, and the complex nomenclature of modern democracies. Therefore, it is easy to exclude them from participating in political decisions. It is no surprise that not only people are disappointed with the meaningfulness of political processes, but also the elections and referendums themselves are starting to be considered games of the political elite (Parvin 2018). In Western democracies, *polis* is not a place for solving issues relevant to society, but an arena of politicians' own battles, where zones of influence, interests and political territories are shared. Most contemporary Western democracies have become a sophisticated performance directed by politicians, where society is not expected to be a *ruler* or even an *observer*, but only manipulatively *governed*. Political scientists are starting to worry about the active participation of citizens and the ability to democratically balance society in the future. They believe that it is not only unlikely, but even impossible (Parvin 2018). In summing up today's help from Western democracies, G. Agamben calls them regimes (Agamben 2013) that sacrificed freedom for the so-called 'security', but ultimately condemned themselves to live in a constant state of fear and insecurity.⁴

Laissez-faire effects of an uncontrolled free economy have created historically unprecedented social inequality (Giddens 2010: 3–6), pushing ordinary citizens more and more radically to the margins of political life (Bartels 2016: 2–5). J. Stiglitz observes that for a long period of time, the United States were considered the land of opportunity; however, the last 40 years of economic growth has increased inequality and antagonism of the country's population in an unparalleled way. In the history of the United States, this phenomenon reached its peak during the Trump administration (Stiglitz 2017). Stiglitz notes with concern that the Trump government, as was the case with the Fascist German government, was supported by economic corporate entities, so it is not surprising that after the introduction of tax reforms of the Trump government, the neoliberal contrasts became even more drastic in a country that already had the highest inequality in the world. Despite the fact that the GDP of the country increases every year, the largest part of society does not only participate in this growth, but instead of seeing improvement, their lives are getting worse. The US GDP per capita has risen 3x more than the average real income of citizens over the last 40 years.⁵

³ Binary majority rule.

⁴ <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/03/securitizing-bare-life-human-security-and-coronavirus/>

⁵ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_GDP_per_capita_vs_median_household_income.png

CHINA

Another example of neoliberal reforms is China. It is worth noting that in the competition of 'economic miracles' of the East, according to many analysts, it was China that carried out reforms most successfully. China managed to be the most successful in the entire Eastern region in solving the problem of poverty⁶ by creating a middle class (which is projected to be the largest in the world by the end of the decade) and achieving the highest external investment per capita and other fundamental economic points. Although China was based on the neoliberalist model of the free market, it was introducing its own carefully planned reforms, which differed not only from the destructive reforms of Russia made almost in the same period, but also from American neoliberalism. China sought advice from the West, but to everyone's surprise, most of the Western advice took on completely unexpected forms in China. Instead of following a shock therapy model, China did nothing in a hurry, but systematically grew gradually, steadily strengthening city after city. The Chinese have followed the Chinese saying, 'When crossing the river, it is important to feel the stones at the bottom.'⁷ In other words, there *was consistent growth without leaps, without taking the next step until it was possible to stand on a solid foundation.*

It is also worth mentioning the Chinese principle of consistency in privatisation. China did not use the recommended model of privatisation. Chinese consistency, for example, in agriculture, was manifested in the fact that land was only leased, and only if it was optimally used for agriculture or other activities *meeting the needs of society*. The use and processing of land and other resources, quality and other essential criteria were carefully planned and controlled by means of the competent state administration. The law of non-sale of land, which at the time was not supported by either the World Bank, or by IMF consultants, turned out to be extremely effective economically, unlike the hasty privatisation and misappropriated usage of land, as was done in Soviet countries at the same time.

WHAT DETERMINED THE SUCCESS OF CHINA'S TRANSFORMATION?

While China, the undisputed leader in global economic and trade development for many centuries, has been slumbering for the last few centuries, the West has been experiencing an intense period of industrialisation. However, it can be said that for all four Industrial Revolutions that took place in the West since the 18th century, China has accomplished that amount in four decades. China has once again become the largest industrial manufacturing economy in the world, as it had been for thousands of years before that. It is important to note that both the economy and the real per capita income grew 40x's during that time, while real per capita income in the U. S. hardly waivered, even though the U. S. economy also grew significantly at the same time. Before the economic transformation, more than half of the Chinese population lived below the poverty line,⁸ and currently, less than half a percent of the population is below this line. In other words, neoliberal reforms and free market philosophy in China have taken on completely different forms, and regardless of the large number of Chinese millionaires, the distribution of capital in the country is significantly more even than in other neoliberalist countries. Significantly fewer asymmetries in society naturally support an optimistic belief in a better future. How did China achieve such results?

⁶ An unprecedented number of 800 million have overcome poverty in human history.

⁷ 摸著石頭過河 (Mōzhe shítóu guò hé).

⁸ Less than \$2 per day.

As for the reasons for China's success, it is worth mentioning J. Stiglitz's observation that the Chinese authorities not only understood the importance of sharing and transferring ideas well, but also highly valued the importance of education, creativity and innovation for the country's well-being in general. About 10% of students at leading American universities are ethnic Chinese. It is also worth noting that most Chinese students return to their homeland, and there are many government programs and initiatives dedicated to this. The Chinese took their technological and scientific backwardness seriously, and considering it as one of the most important state-level goals, they completely renovated their economic and educational systems not once, but many times.

Another significant reason for China's success lies in Zhang Weiwei (Shanghai University Professor of Political and Social Sciences, former State Adviser) who observed that China's success is determined by completely different assumptions than what is generally believed in the West. Although China's success in the West is usually explained by the free-market model and neoliberal economic reforms, while Zhang Weiwei argues that the most important flaw in China's reforms was the peculiarity of the Chinese model. Zhang Weiwei interestingly argues that the Chinese model is paradoxically more democratic than Western democracies. He uses J. Stiglitz's ironic remarks that the popular expression 'one citizen – one vote' is better illustrated in the West by 'one dollar – one vote' (Stiglitz 2012). Also worth noting is another ironic remark by Stiglitz about Abraham Lincoln's definition of a modern democratic government. Lincoln said, '...of the people, by the people, for the people', and bearing in mind the effects of neoliberalism and the scale of inequality, Stiglitz rephrases it: 'from 1%, by 1%, to 1%'.

CHINA'S POLITICAL MODEL

The Chinese political model was almost uninterruptedly developed for more than 2,000 years. It is not by chance that China considers itself to be one of the oldest civilisations in the world, with an uninterrupted cultural heritage. It has a real historical foundation for seeing itself in this way, not only because of the ancient writing system, but also because in China every innovation was integrated into the structure of the world and was made meaningful by old wisdom. We can say that innovation here, in a certain sense, becomes the restoration of the old *status quo in the changed conditions today*. So, it is not surprising that every peculiarity or innovation is here translated into its own language and complements the tradition itself, instead of replacing it. Despite the sudden invasion of Western technology and seemingly radical changes, China is essentially returning to what it has been for millennia, a cultural and political centre striving for harmony between Heaven and Earth. Now this vision is also realised by technological modernisation and globalisation – the idea of the Old Silk Roads together with intensively developing economic, political and academic projects of an unprecedented scale.

Although China faces complex social and cultural challenges with no easy solutions, we must note that, for example, the adoption of the Communist paradigm, despite radical historical episodes, did not fundamentally reject Confucianism. In the same way, Communist principles were not rejected later when choosing the model of a Capitalist state. We would probably not be surprised to see China turn to the path of democracy and show that democracy can also be reconciled with Capitalism, Communism and Confucianism. Although neoliberal phenomena in China have provoked an unprecedentedly high gap between rich and poor Chinese, unlike in the West, as the economic, political and social structure changes, instead of competing with and denying the old order, innovations complement in a completely unexpected way. In other words, instead of displacing the old consciousness, innovation enriches it

with new aspects. So, here different consciousnesses are expressed at the same time, integrally combining archaic, Confucian, Daoist, Communist and Capitalist ideas. Hence, the order itself here seems to be adjusted to the order already prevailing in the country, which appears to be higher and more primordial than the new political system. In other words, we see very different consciousnesses: The West is *dominated by egocentric individual consciousness*, which, being limited, must discard the old to accept the new. In China we find *allocentric integral collective consciousness*, which cumulatively aggregates and integrates different forms of order, as if staying beyond them every time.

Classical Chinese culture traditionally strives for all-encompassing harmony of family, society, and different classes (Keightley 1990: 53). A wise person is considered the one who harmonises, but it does not mean he agrees with everything. In the famous formulation of Confucius, the ‘Lun yu’ text describes a noble person as someone who can always get along with others, but not become them⁹, while a vulgar person is the opposite – he wants everyone to be like him, but never agrees with anyone (Confucius. The Analects: 13.23). In other words, a wise person, even when he disagrees, respects others and strives together with them for the higher good. It is interesting to note that social harmony was not only considered the most important category in Confucian texts, but it was also used to examine civil servants in imperial China (Ferguson, Dellios 2011). Therefore, the emperor or the political leader of China was perceived as a noble sage, the ‘Great Harmonizer’, passing laws, maintaining order and a harmonious living world of society (Wechsler 1985: 212–213).

Also, it is worth noting that Confucian ideas became the basis of the 19th century Kang Youwei’s and Sun Yatsen’s ideas of the Great Unity of Utopian Society (Chung-Ying 1989: 233), where hierarchy and power in the State become unnecessary, because society is a community of equals. It is obvious that the idea of Great Unity also develops the same aspiration of harmony (Chung-Ying 1989: 234). So Communist China adopted Marxist ideas as a consistent example of the Confucian model of a harmonious society. The importance of harmony and balance is also explained during the Han Dynasty in ‘In the Zhongyong – Doctrine of the Middle Way’ described by Zi Si.¹⁰ Starting with the idea of a balanced individual, one goes to a harmonious society and finally to a political balance. It is harmony that is the essential basis of everything here, covering the entire human living world. After realising the harmony of everything¹¹ from within¹², Heaven and Earth regain their place and nourish all living things (Bary, Bloom 1999: 334).

THE INFLUENCE OF CONFUCIANISM

It is obvious that an unbalanced body gets sick. So, it is no coincidence that Confucian texts associate the inner harmony of the human body and the individual with a harmonious society in which complete freedom prevails, and everyone behaves spontaneously, completely naturally, without creating any disharmony or conflict (Redse 2015: 303). Elsewhere it is written that a good ruler is one in whose country society achieves equilibrium naturally, from within. ‘He didn’t do anything and everything was handled well. That would describe [master] Shun, wouldn’t it? What did he do? He just respectfully sat down¹³ turned to the south’ (Confucius.

⁹ 和而不同.

¹⁰ Yes Si 子思– 481–402 BCE.

¹¹ 和 – he, harmony, balance.

¹² 中 – zhong, middle, center, interior.

¹³ Traditionally the ruler’s throne was facing south.

The Analects: 15.5). Although the vision of such a society and such a ruler may be surprising, this order can be explained by Confucius' widely quoted saying: 'At fifteen I began to study, at thirty I established myself. At forty I no longer had any doubts, at fifty I understood the order of Heaven, at sixty my hearing tuned in, and at seventy I aspired to, what the heart desired, without going beyond what is right' (Confucius. The Analects: 2.4). Such autobiographically expressed experiences not only mark the stages of self-realisation, but also describe states of higher balance, which mean a non-action¹⁴ or inactive way of doing things. One lives as if spontaneously, in complete harmony with the higher order, which is called the 'Heavenly way' and the order of cultural norms and customs. Confucius calls such a person a *noble*¹⁵ *person* (Murata-Soraci 2015). How is this level of spiritual maturity achieved?

Confucius not only marvels at the imperfect society of his time, which he believes has lost the most important moral norms, but also consistently undertakes to restore them. However, harmony cannot be achieved if things are out of place or joined-up by wrong connections (Chung-Ying 1989: 233). So first, he sets out to restore the essential concepts,¹⁶ the meanings that would reflect the true essence of things. Confucius refines a whole series of concepts, including *love*, the individual's ability to perceive the whole, the relationship between the lower (e.g. members of society) and the higher (e.g. the ruler). Another concept is *justice*,¹⁷ which binds all people together and at the same time guarantees the stability of society as a system. Also, propriety and *decency*¹⁸, which ensure that when all people learn from each other, order is created in society arising from harmony, cultivated both in each individual and expressed in the general consciousness of society (Chung-Ying 1972: 269–280). Chung-Ying explains that the teaching of Confucius unlocks the seeds of harmony within each person, which when cultivated, awakens to a wider transformation of harmonisation, involving the seemingly chaotic world around man, bringing it into harmonious order according to *love*, *justice* and *decency*.

It is also important to emphasise the special trait of harmony in a noble person. A person who cultivates a harmonious relationship with the living world around him becomes like a mini temple, which is an example for others. Mencius¹⁹ writes in the 'Doctrine of the Middle Way' that people and society living in a harmonious environment are inevitably peaceful, stable and fruitful, because with an even distribution of wealth, there can be no poverty; in the presence of harmony there can be no lack of people; and in the presence of safe and stable relationships, there can be no danger of collapse (Mencius 2B.1). Even amid indecent people, a noble person says that I am me and another is another, what does another do, how can he smear me? (Mencius 5B.1). Here, preserving one's identity is at the same time tolerating another's identity, including even unacceptable behaviour. In other words, a significant example is created that can transform another without forcing or demanding anything (Chung-Ying 1989: 233). However, the person does not become egocentric everywhere the primacy of the whole is emphasised, not of the ego. The *Zhuangzi* writes, 'Referring to many things, we say there are "ten thousand", but humans are only one of them. <...> Compared to tens of thousands of things, [humans] are not even like the tip of a hair next to a horse's body'

¹⁴ 無為 – wu-wei.

¹⁵ 君子 – jun zi.

¹⁶ 正名 – Zheng Ming.

¹⁷ 義 – yi.

¹⁸ 禮 – li.

¹⁹ Mengzi 孟子. 372–289 BC.

(Perkins 2022). Both Confucianism and Daoism avoid the anthropocentric tendencies dominating the West. Man is not at the center of the universe. However, although reduced to an insignificant hair's tip (Perkins 2015), man remains the significant part of a harmoniously balancing whole.

CONCLUSIONS

In neoliberal Western democracies, we see a whole series of problems that provoke demo-skepticism and the so-called recession of democracies in all countries of the Western world. However, recessionary trends can be resolved by understanding that democracy is being built every day. Therefore, modern democracies suffer not because their problems are unsolvable, but because they are not solved. Society itself can get involved in solving the issues of concern, and this will pave the way to overcoming the main difficulties of democracies. For this to transpire, it is important to properly educate society and prepare it for life in a democratic country as active and dignified citizens, instead of humiliated industrial resources.

Trying to break free from stereotyped Western attitudes, we also look at the neoliberal reforms in China over the last 40 years. In assessing China's free-market neoliberal reforms, we must emphasise that it has led to incredibly interesting outcomes. Chinese politicians and reformers were advised by the same Western institutions: the IMF, World Bank, etc.; however, the results were so different that it is worth thinking about the neoliberal phenomenon itself, which is not necessarily only reprehensible, and about modern Western democracy which can manifest itself, and not only in defective forms. China's prosperity, economic development, free market economy, neoliberalism phenomena, and at the same time democracy are developing completely differently than in the West. In China, we see not only different economic and political principles, but also a different value system, a different concept of the individual, and consequently a different concept of the political and economic entity. So, it is not surprising that in the case of neoliberalism's inequalities and societal deformations in China, they were completely different from what the West predicted.

China's economic transformations are difficult for Westerners to understand, primarily because the concept of pragmatism, which essentially underpins any economic process in the West, is perceived differently there. Regarding pragmatism and the concept of utility in Chinese culture, we must note that the pragmatism developed in the Confucian and Taoist traditions is not only about material or superficial utility. Here, utility has many aspects and many different levels, which cover not only the material world, but also the entire ecosphere of the living world. Here we see a completely different ontology, the foreground is not things themselves, but their interactions, relationships, processes, and energy exchange, which creates a completely different whole. In other words, in the case of China, the GDP is not the priority, which is significant only in a certain sense. At the utmost importance is public welfare, relations with other countries, technology and ideas.

The world's largest logistics system, not only in the country itself, but the so-called China Belts, span the entire world and connect 139 countries which accounts for the largest share of the world's GDP. What is more important here is not the things that are produced, but the production itself that is not attached to any specific technology. Such an attitude is constantly changing and moves freely between different technologies, approaches and visions, concentrating on the very movement. The same applies to politics – it is not the political order itself, not communism or capitalism, autocracy, or democracy that are important here, but its practical suitability in specific cultural and historical circumstances. Different elements are

used in a hybrid way, all at the same time. The goal is simply to make everything fit together in living society. The West can learn a great deal from China. Instead of mechanically conforming to one political theory or another in modern democracies, society will reach a much more balanced state, and all the people in the country will be equally focused on politics.

Received 20 August 2022

Accepted 20 February 2023

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ŽILVINAS SVIGARIS

Ko Vakarų demokratijos gali pasimokyti iš Kinijos?

Santrauka

Vakarų demokratijos tampa neoliberalios ir jose išryškėja visos ekonominės ir politinės galios disproporcijos, kurios atsirado kapitalistinėje visuomenėje. Laisvojoje rinkoje įgyta valdžia ne tik deformuoja visuomenės vientisumą, ekonominę ir politinę pusiausvyrą, bet ir pati demokratija tampa neįmanoma. Laisvosios rinkos mastui tapus globaliu, ekonominis subjektas taip pat tapo globalus, sukurdamas disproporcijas, dėl kurių Vakarų demokratijos šiandien valdomos ekonominių, o ne politinių galių. Tačiau tinkamas lavinimas, naujų ekonomikos decentralizacijos tendencijų panaudojimas, politikų vaidmens politikoje pakeitimas, piliečių aktyvumas ir atsirandantys naujos skaitmeninės demokratijos lūkesčiai leidžia naujai įvertinti ir išnaudoti laisvosios rinkos teikiamas galimybes demokratijai stiprinti. Straipsnyje apžvelgus pastaraisiais metais Kinijoje vykusias reformas, galima teigti, kad jos paradoksaliai parodė, jog neoliberalizmas gali turėti ir teigiamų visuomenei aspektų, kurie, kaip nauja ekonominio ir politinio kapitalo pusiausvyra, gali būti pritaikyti ir Vakaruose.

Raktažodžiai: demokratija, demokratinės reformos, Kinijos ekonominės reformos, laisvoji rinka, decentralizacija, neoliberalizmas