

## From Lenin to Xi Jinping

The 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution this month has passed without too much discussion. This is for entirely understandable reasons: The meaning of 1917 has to a great degree been eclipsed by the meaning of 1989. The more we learn about the revolution from new archives, or rescue it from encrusted Cold War histories, the more difficult it is for even the last remnants of Communist nostalgia to hold onto any idea of commemorating it in a celebratory spirit. The revolution had far-reaching effects, no doubt. The ways in which Bolsheviks acquired, and more importantly, held onto power, still repays study.

The avoidable human catastrophe the revolution unleashed is still something the world is coming to terms with. Due to recent historiography, it has become even harder to detach the subsequent history of the Soviet Union from the revolutionary moment. The distinction between Stalinism and Leninism has become harder to sustain.

But in so far as there is some discussion of the meaning of 1917, there are attempts to recapture the revolutionary spirit in its more metaphysical form, to make some nostalgia about it more acceptable. Forget the events, this view goes, look at the meaning. The revolution was at least an assertion of political agency, a small group determined to remake the world. Without a revolutionary ideal we feel disempowered as political agents. But Hannah Arendt made short shrift of reading the revolution this way. On revolution as an act of historical agency, she wrote, "They were fooled by history and they have become fools of history."

The revolution, it was claimed, aspired at popular empowerment. It turns out its connection with popular uprisings was tenuous. It devoured the very peasants in whose name it spoke. The revolution was no dawn of freedom; like almost all revolutions it led to an unprecedented growth of state power and coercion. But the last sliver of metaphysical nostalgia about the revolution is that it had utopian aspirations. The revolution may have had a millenarian element, but it was not an embodiment of utopia.

In fact, one of the lessons is that you can hold onto a utopian imagination only if it is detached from a revolutionary one; revolution is the death knell of utopia. But finally, some hold onto 1917 as a signifier of alternative possibilities. It may have gone horribly wrong, but to entirely give up on the idea of revolution is to be trapped in current horizons, where we cannot imagine an alternative to the current system. The revolution is significant on this view as keeping open the horizon of an alternative world. But the question is: Why do you need a revolution to keep the idea of the alternative alive?

But the invocation of 1917 is dimmed not simply because the Soviet Union lost the Cold War, as it were. It has been dimmed by another spirit: The Chinese Communist Party. It could be argued that the triumph of the Leninist party system has been in China. China also sees itself as having the good sense to hold onto Communist party rule, even as it opened up the economy. The 19th Party Congress has raised the question of the extent to which China is an alternative model, a competitor that makes us think outside the current horizons of capitalist existence. China is, of course, a competitor to liberal democracy, and as it grows more authoritarian, the tensions with individual freedom become starker. There is some debate about whether China now seeks to export its model. Richard McGregor, an authority on the Chinese Communist Party, wrote in *The Guardian*, referring to the confidence of the 19th CPC: "It (China) has always extolled the value of its system, but has never explicitly suggested it was something that could be exported around the world."

There is no question China seeks greater ideological legitimacy for its model. It will propagate it as a model to learn from. Part of seeking status is to have the success and legitimacy of one's

political system acknowledged. China perceives the normative subordination to which it is subjected by the West as a matter of affront. But there are reasons to be sceptical about the idea of exporting a Chinese model. For starters, Maoism was more explicitly an exportable ideology than "Xi thought" might be.

Second, it is still worth remembering that while Xi may place himself in line with Mao, in some ways the legitimacy for order in China is a kind of anti-Maoist impulse, the dread of leaders speaking in the name of the people, causing disorder. Third, there is a more acute historical consciousness of Chinese exceptionalism. Ideologies can be exported, models cannot. This is a fatal confusion the Americans fell prey to in thinking of liberal democracy as an exportable model. That adventurism weakened America. Models require preconditions for success, and it is doubtful that the Chinese believe the conditions that made the Chinese Communist Party what it is can be easily replicated.

Fourth and finally, the Soviet-American competition was more explicitly an ideological competition, in a way that Sino-American competition, despite having some ideological elements, is not. And the nature of the economic relationship between China and the West is of a different kind.

But there might be a deeper reason to think why there are limits to China as an alternative. And these limits go back to thinking of the idea of revolution. In some ways, if there is a big lesson from recent Chinese history and self-understanding, it is just this: That the revolutionary spirit needs to be buried. Deng was a far-reaching reformer. But everything he and his successors did was predicated on an anti-revolutionary sensibility: Avoiding convulsive change, avoiding universalistic pretensions, a suspicion of political agency, pragmatism about institutional choices, improvisation in terms of the balance of freedom and control needed to retain power, the projection of continuity over change.

If the spirit of 1917 was buried, it was not just because capitalism with all its warts proved more enduring than Soviet-style socialism, or that liberal democracy became the only alternative. Ironically, 1917 has been buried, and the scepticism of revolution has been furthered even more powerfully by that Leninist Party: The Chinese Communist Party.

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