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73. EPS - EconomiaPoliticaSocietà Leviathan comes to Beijing*



Hobbes' Leviathan

Kerry Brown, professor of Chinese politics and director of the China Studies Centre at the University of Sydney asks: What is the Communist Party of China? How can its true nature and use of power be grasped? For insight, look to the English 17th-century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes.

It seems counterintuitive. But the book I have read recently which has most helped me understand the Communist Party of China (CPC) has zero connection with the country. It is not about China or produced there, nor written by a scholar of China outside the country, nor does it belong to the vast corpus of material published on the CPC in the nine decades since it was formed (including the six-and-a-half since it [came](#) to power on 1 October 1949).

In fact, reading this book made me aware of a gap in much of this literature: an answer to the question of what the essence of the party was and is. A recent case in point, among many excellent studies, is Andrew G Walder's [China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed](#). In elegant and succinct fashion it covers the whole sweep of post-1949 Chinese history and the CPC's role in it. It also makes clear the deep division between the CPC's very significant political achievements in the Maoist [period](#), at least in its foundation stages, and the tragedies that flowed from a system weighted so heavily towards the powers of one overbearing leader.

Yet for all its excellence and lucidity, as a work of history it leaves this anterior issue – what sort of entity the Chinese CPC is, its relationship with power and inner worldview – unexamined. And this is where a book that predates by centuries the communist movement and the People's Republic of China (PRC) brings unexpected insight: [Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan](#), born out of the civil war that racked England and its neighbours in the mid-17th century, a conflict that the historian [Robert Tombs](#) describes as one without a clear cause or real enemies. *Leviathan* may emanate from the remote cultural and historical context of the “wars of the three kingdoms”, but it holds up a mirror to the deep character of modern China's ruling party and system.

The Chinese commonwealth

[Leviathan](#) posits a “commonwealth” as the great principle of order in human society. In the first half of the work it appears as an overarching, unifying entity to which individuals must swear allegiance and fidelity in return for stability and order – thus avoiding the natural “state of war”, of individuals fighting against individuals, that would otherwise prevail. Hobbes's vision of pre-commonwealth chaos and lawlessness, driven by people hunting for the satisfaction of their own desires at the expense of others, closely resembles

the nightmare conjured repeatedly by CPC leaders from its earliest days: this, they imply, is what society will be if the unity offered by the party (in *Leviathan*, the monarch) disappears.

The irony here is that party leaders were, and are, optimistic about society but pessimistic about individuals: the reversal of a democratic worldview. True, this fear of chaos is fuelled by real memories of a China where war and political fragmentation led to a breakdown of authority and order. Such experiences, and relief at their passing, figure strongly in current commemorations of the end of the [Sino-Japanese war](#) of 1937-45.

Hobbes's vision of a commonwealth as the source of order and fount of sovereign authority to which individuals must give their allegiance holds two more parallels with the operations of the CPC today.

First, [Leviathan](#) shows the risks of dissidence, and the existential threat it poses: not just for the commonwealth but for the principle of order itself. For Hobbes, power is a zero-sum game. It is found in one place, and the more it dissipates, the more destabilising and disruptive it becomes. Like nuclear material, it is fissile and dangerous; it needs to be contained in protected, limited places. Moreover, Hobbes's view of the monarch as the repository of power finds easy translation into the corporate body of the CPC. The need to locate power in one place remains vital for the party – witness its ruthless recent crushing of rights lawyers and non-government activists.

Second, reading Hobbes's masterpiece illuminates the way the CPC relates to power, and the contrasts with how political parties in multi-party systems operate. It has proved hard to find a conceptual framework that can figure out what the CPC's power is. The CPC is almost like a state within itself, or its own world – an all-embracing social, cultural and ideological body. It does not submit itself to public elections, and yet it says it is the highest expression of the public will. It does not involve itself in the detail of administration and governance as such, but says it guides the core political and strategic matters of modern China. Is it then a strategising force, a money-making corporate one, a network of self-interested elites, or a risk-management entity?

Hobbes's perspective shows that the CPC can be seen as a kind of Chinese commonwealth, which somehow supplies the unifying framework, the principle of order. It projects itself as a unitary construct that enables cooperation where there would otherwise be competition. It remains pro-society and anti-individual. This makes the party leader Xi Jinping's talk of accruing power to himself as an individual most anomalous.

The greatest test

Xi Jinping is “owned” by the party: his life-story, words and ideas are important only in as far as they represent and belong to the party, are subsumed within it. That at least is the philosophical underpinning of the system he sits at the centre of, which grants him the symbolic power on the model of Hobbes's monarch. It may well be that, as is the way of things, the levers he has been given since 2012 have gone to his head. The anti-corruption campaign waged from 2013 has, for example, given him such liberties as to create the possibility of corruption in his own use of power. If that happens, he would be operating against the fundamental basis of the party, and against its interests. He risks being framed as its enemy, not its saviour, much as Mao Zedong once was.

A view of the CPC as a kind of Hobbesian “Chinese commonwealth” highlights a deep challenge, which both transcends the current dramas of Xi's moment as its leader and shows how elemental his current battle is. This clinches the point that the philosophical model of the party's authority and leadership derives from the dawn of modernity. It has an almost primitive simplicity. This model, from Hobbes to the [CPC](#), requires pragmatic subservience by subjects to the the ordering powers of the commonwealth / monarch / party.

Over China's last sixty-five years, obedience to the CPC has been enforced sometimes by argument, more often by violence and force. But in its mission for full modernity, this sort of polity is no good. It privileges fear, punishes risk and failure, rewards conformity, and prioritises control over creativity. The party served well as a unifying, overarching entity during China's phase of early and middle modernisation. The deeper questions raised by the Xi leadership – which had been emerging for several years before – is how to move beyond this primitive, almost premodern model of governance to something more suitable and consensual,

but still able to preserve order and stability.

So many Chinese leaders have promised over the last century to create a “strong, rich, modern country”. The lesson of *Leviathan* is that the greatest test of this epic mission lies not in the past, but in the future – a future that is closer than either observers, or China’s leaders themselves, might dare to think.

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