

## Book Review

Lance L.P. Gore, *The Chinese Communist Party and China's Capitalist Revolution: The Political Impact of the Market*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 180pp. + xx.

Richard McGregor's *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* portrays the picture of an omnipresent and (sort of) omnipotent Chinese Communist Party. One of the most memorable quotes in that book comes from a Chinese professor: "The party is like God. He is everywhere. You just can't see him."<sup>1</sup> However, had McGregor read Lance Gore's *The Chinese Communist Party and China's Capitalist Revolution*, he may have to modify his conclusions. True, the party is powerful, but its party organizations are not as secure as its ruling positions. Gore's book gives another picture of the party – a party in which its grassroots organizations are either in atrophy, become irrelevant, or have been assimilated by the market.

The key thesis that Gore attempts to argue is that the Leninist party organization and the market are fundamentally incompatible, and increasingly the latter has decisively prevailed over the former. In making the case why capitalism supports democracy, a leading liberal economist, Robert Heilbroner, argues that "It is certainly not that the pursuit of capital breeds a liberty-loving frame of mind, it is rather that the presence of an economy within a polity gives an inestimable aid to freedom by permitting political dissidents to make their livings without interdiction by an all-powerful regime."<sup>2</sup> Gore here is making a similar assertion about the impact of the market in China: it provides an alternative source of resources and rewards outside of the control of the party. Gore uses the theory of institutionalism and affiliated theoretical concepts such as "institutional isomorphism" to explain the impact of market capitalism on the socialist ruling party. Accordingly, the market has "an isomorphic effect in the Chinese communist institutions" (p. 34) including the nomenclature system, the residential registration system, the work unit system, shifts the interest calculation of the party members (they can now pursue opportunities outside of the party channel), reshapes social and institutional orders, and remakes the party.

The empirical chapters hence are devoted to testing this thesis, by looking at the party's presence and activities in various spaces such as village administration, private enterprises, foreign-invested enterprises, state-owned

enterprises, newly formed urban communities, universities and colleges, as well the party's interaction with various social classes. What Gore has found is either party's atrophy in the face of market forces or prevailing submission to the market rules on the part of party organizations. For example, in village politics, party leaders have to become entrepreneurial leaders who can lead the villagers to prosperity, otherwise they will simply lose credibility in the eyes of the villagers. Large numbers of migrant party members are either inactive or uninterested in party's work and affairs. In order to lure back these party members, the party organizations have to make themselves "service" centres similar to social work organizations. In private and foreign-funded enterprises, party membership can even be seen as minus point in the eyes of enterprise management. In any event, there is hardly anything for a party member or a party organization to do in these enterprises. Their presence simply is surplus to requirements of a successful business operation. In state-owned enterprises, where the party wields more influence, the criteria to recruit and promote party leaders in these enterprises look similar to how a capitalist enterprise would recruit or promote its staff and employees. In universities, where party's recruitment remains strong, overwhelmingly new recruits are interested more in how party membership enhances their future career than in party's ideology or mission. In other words, instead of recruiting party devotees, the party maybe recruiting a lot more opportunists than it desires. In urban communities, residential party members are simply not interested in party work anymore. The party does have many strategies of adaptation, but the result of implementing these strategies is the increasingly assimilation of the party into the market.

In terms of the party's relationship to its social base, Gore has also shown that the party is hardly a vanguard of the working class or workers-peasants alliance. Workers and workers-peasants combined do not even constitute half of the 80 million party members. Instead, the "middle" class appears to be the backbone of the party. Gore differentiates between the "old" middle class (concentrated in the state sector) and the "new" middle class (concentrated in the private sector). While the party still enjoys some support among the "old" middle class, its relationship with the "new" middle class is much more challenging. The "new" middle class hardly depends on the party for their wellbeing, and are active in forming NGOs to focus on various policy issues. As a dynamic social class, it is relatively difficult for the party to "penetrate, organize, and mobilize" (p. 69).

The party "is still in power, but many of its grassroots organizations are no longer ruling," asserts Gore (p. 115). This picture clearly contrasts with McGregor's portrayal of the party. McGregor focuses on the repressive power of the party, which remains tremendous, but neglects the phenomenon that in

daily battles with the market forces, the party is hardly victorious. Gore's book is a superb documentation and analysis of this phenomenon. Gore is optimistic about the democratic future of China. He argues that the market's assimilation of the party will gradually make it less a Leninist party. In addition, "it is in competitive elections that the grassroots organizations of the party may be re-energized: they would find a new mission, a new identity, new *raison d'être*, and new relevance with which they could develop new relationships with the masses" (p. 139). Gore henceforth sees the recent promotions of "intra-democracy" as significant indications of this transformation of the party.

This book is excellent, with strong theoretical and empirical components. It will be a required reading for anyone trying to understand the Chinese Communist Party.

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- 1 Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (New York, NY: Harper, 2010), p. 1.
- 2 Robert Heilbroner, *21st Century Capitalism* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1993), p. 74.

