

America's Authoritarian Use of the Word "Authoritarianism"

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We see the word "authoritarianism" all over the US media, a blanket term employed to describe countries that the United States government currently considers as threats to its interests. Although "authoritarian" refers to a society in which political power is employed as a primary means to compel people to submit to the government's authority, the term as it is used in the media has no objective basis in a scientific analysis of political systems. The term has been applied to US allies like Saudi Arabia, but not against nations like France (with the brutal suppression of popular protest by the police) or the United Kingdom and Germany (where executive authority is vested in a Prime Minister or Chancellor unelected by universal suffrage) because they are democratic allies. But in most cases, "authoritarianism" is reserved to describe Russia, China, North Korea, Iran and Syria, and any other country that resists neo-liberal ideology.

But there is one country for which the term "authoritarianism" is trotted out without failure. Just like Homer's epithet "swift-footed Achilles" the New York Times and other media outlets attach the delicate adjective "authoritarian" to "China" with a literary perfection. This withering attack on China over the last few years is an attempt to portray a nation that makes up one-sixth of the Earth's population as the embodiment of an anti-democratic political culture.

First and foremost, it is critical that American citizens have negative associations with China before they have a chance to assess it on its own merits. China is the most serious challenge to the United States today. But the challenge is not from its military, but rather from its economic and political systems.

As the United States devolves into a playground for the super-rich, China retains a government capable of putting the wealthy and powerful in prison when they violate laws and go against the common good. China has long-term economic and ecological plans focused on the needs of its citizens and considers the elimination of poverty to be a national priority. It does not allow its economy to be dominated by multinational investment banks and it does not create foreign wars to make money for military contractors.

Nothing resembling a people-centered policy has even been considered in the United States over the last forty years.

China's massive investments in renewable energy are unmatched by any other country and it refuses to engage in or to support foreign wars. That is to say, China offers a concrete, viable, alternative to a Western system whose traditional opposition parties have decayed into corrupt power-brokers and whose mainstream parties support a grotesque combination of ruthless capitalism and unfettered militarism.

The attempt to quickly dismiss any positive mention of China by slapping the authoritarian label on it has much in common with the campaigns of the 1950s to dismiss socialist approaches to governance and economics as being “anti-democratic” and “anti-American” while working overtime to render the term “communist” as a four-letter word that could only be used to describe the worst of Stalinist bureaucracy (and even that had to be exaggerated and distorted).

The Cold War strategy of attacking communism was meant to discredit various systems of shared governance and shared economic systems that were developed in Europe, Russia, Asia and yes, even in the United States without any consideration of their accomplishments. The campaign to red-bait and blacklist anything associated with the word “communism” was crude, thoughtless, destructive but ultimately successful. Today most Americans are unaware that the United States had a powerful communist party in the 1930s and 1940s, and few indeed know that the Communist Party, and not Martin Luther King, led the original fight against segregation and defended the Scottsboro Boys against rigged up accusations of rape.

For that matter, the campaigns to blackball any group or organization that was friendly to the Soviet Union in the 1950s using the tar brush of “Communism” left a generation of Americans in complete ignorance of the central role that the Soviet Union played in the war against Fascism, defeating Nazi Germany almost single-handedly. Many educated Americans in 1946 would have had no problem describing the critical role of the Soviet Union in winning the Second World War, but by the 1960s the American population had been force-fed, through the media and textbooks, the myth of the Anglo-American landing at Normandy as the great salvation of Europe.

As the United States slips deeper and deeper into decadence and corruption, the need to label China as “authoritarian” increases.

After all, China might inspire Americans to question the corrupt and bankrupt political system that they enjoy. Such books as Ann Li’s thoughtful “What the U.S. Can Learn from China: An Open-Minded Guide to Treating Our Greatest Competitor as Our Greatest Teacher” layout in very concrete terms how the United States can learn from Chinese best practices. Li’s book is uncannily similar to Ezra Vogel’s “Japan as Number One” (1979) which jolted Americans out of their complacency and forced them to take Japan seriously as an innovator.

Even CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies), a DC think tank that has thrived on promoting the China Threat, was forced to launch a Belt and Road program because so many American businessmen are no longer interested in bogeyman tales now that the Chinese economy has gone global.

There lurks a deep fear in the beltway among those who make billions off of the massive military buildup against the “China threat” that the United States could reach a tipping point where ordinary citizens see the benefits of cooperation with China and Cold War rhetoric will no longer work. As China leaps ahead in green energy and in its commitment to cutting edge research in basic science (which under-girds technological progress) that shift is becoming a reality. It is critical for the corporate media to make sure that no Americans get the wrong idea.

But there is a darker and more grotesque process that is playing out behind the surface of the campaign to label China “authoritarian.” That is a process best understood in psychological terms as projection. The radical concentration of wealth, the deep institutional corruption, the growth of militarism and of an economy driven by plunder, has created a United States which is unrecognizable to many Americans.

Actually, what is happening in the United States is not entirely a secret. But the economic and ideological contradictions are so stark and overwhelming that the vast majority of the privileged and educated find it far easier to project what is wrong with the United States onto China and thereby they can articulate dark secrets about American society that are taboo by projecting them on an imagined nightmare, China. They can also shift the blame for the problems that originate from the decay of American society onto China. China is a scapegoat on which all the sins and crimes of the United States can be heaped and then it can be attacked and humiliated in a ritual cleansing that makes Americans feel a bit more comfortable with their decadence and cowardice.

Let us take a few highlights from the current campaign to create an image of an authoritarian China for domestic consumption.

Military expansionism

There is no end to the rhetoric about how the Chinese are increasing their military power and using it to threaten and intimidate their neighbors. But China has not engaged in military conflict since 1979, and that was brief border conflict with Vietnam. You have to go back to the Korean War to find the Chinese engaged in a sustained military conflict and that one was clearly brought on by the United States. Although China has increased its military spending in response to the US buildup in Northeast Asia, it does not hold a candle to the insane increases in military spending being pursued by the United States.

The United States has been in a non-stop war since the Korean War and is reaching this very moment an unprecedented level of expansion of military threats, ranging from showdowns with Russia and China, to threats of war against Venezuela, Syria, North Korea and Iran, to criminal military operations on a large scale (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria) and a small scale (Nigeria, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Philippines).

While the US continues to destabilize and intervene in one nation after another in Latin America and the Caribbean, in the Middle East and in Central Asia, adversely affecting the lives of millions of people, the American government and press continues to harp about alleged Chinese aggression in the South China Sea over uninhabited islands long-claimed by China which do no harm to any indigenous peoples. What a carnival! Perhaps it helps to exorcise the spirits of the thousands of native people displaced from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean to make way for a US naval base, or the thousands in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific who were exiled from their homes when the islands were subject to atmospheric nuclear arms testing in the 1950s.

Oppression of minorities

Hardly an American newspaper comes out that does not describe how China is allegedly oppressing Tibetans and suppressing their natural right to be independent, or how Uyghers are supposedly being rounded up by the millions to be placed in concentration camps for a culticidal reeducation campaign. Recent investigations by delegations from a wide array of

Muslim majority nations have however demonstrated that those charges are groundless and the efforts to combat Islamist terrorism in Western China are entirely appropriate and constructive. Compared to the repression of Kashmiri Muslims in “democratic” India the status of Islam in Xinjiang is benign. The vast majority of Muslims in China, by any standard, are entirely free to practice their faith and the drive for independence by radicals is fed by black glove operators on the payroll of the United States.

If we want to find concentration camps used to round up minorities on the basis of explicitly racist ideology and to subject them to abuse and torture, the model is the United States, not China.

It may be years before we learn the full range of concentration camps set up by the Trump administration, but the illegal rounding up of Hispanic refugees as part of a drive not only to intimidate minorities, but to make such fascistic practices acceptable, and commonplace, for average Americans, is no secret.

And that is only part of the American problem. The incarceration of (often completely innocent) African Americans to work as slaves in private prisons, the constant abuse of native Americans on their own lands, and the cruel immigration policies developed by the Obama administration, and perfected by the Trump administration, go beyond anything imaginable in China, or for that matter in any other country.

Lack of freedom

It is a popular opening line at a DC think tank to lament the lack of freedom of the Chinese. Although no nation is truly free, and the definition of freedom has been debated by philosophers for millennia, this argument repeated in the US media is ludicrous. The Chinese media is far from perfect, but the sophistication of its editorials and investigative reporting is impressive and the willingness to go after high-level corruption (as opposed to the festering swamp of Jeffery Epstein and his enablers in finance and intelligence) admirable.

If you are looking for a nation free of freedom, go no further than the good old US of A.

The United States government has enforced unspeakable tyranny, punishing people of color with long jail sentences for non-violent crimes, leading to the destruction of familial bonds and cohesive communities. Whistle-blowers face exile and other forms of persecution for exposing its criminal actions, or for protesting against its dangerous militarism.

Although the New York Times has cultivated a refined patina that appeals to Upper West Side progressive sentimentality, do not be deceived. The truth about the radical concentration of wealth, or the connections between oil companies, politicians, investment banks, arms manufacturers and the corporate media will only be peripherally alluded to in that newspaper. Like the rest of the corporate media, it promulgates a dishonest narrative that the United States is a robust democracy full of opportunities that just happens to have a few “bad apples” or that all will problems will be solved by some miraculous change in policies that never materialize.

“Human rights” is one of the most popular tools in the shed for attacking China. In a comical tour de force, a country whose police killed at least 1,000 people last year, a country that has the largest prison population in the world in both absolute and per capita terms, a country whose elite traffics in under-age girls as sex slaves, and a country which heaps

unspeakable abuse on innocent children in unsanitary cages, trots out Amnesty International reports about how terrible China's human rights record is.

Surveillance state

Whenever the topic of China's growing IT prowess comes up, the American media must remind us that the Chinese government constantly subjects its citizens to surveillance, that it is a dystopia of run-away state power that spies on everyone. But closer examination reveals that more often than not the use of surveillance technology in China serves a positive purpose (such as apprehending scofflaws and deadbeats) and the emphasis has been consistently on improving the lives of ordinary people, not harassing them.



But the documents leaked by Edward Snowden and others reveal that it is rather the United States government and industry that has embraced a totalitarian vision of full-spectrum information collection as a means to control and intimidate the entire population. The genius of the American experiment is that the massive, for-profit, gathering of information on citizens is seldom mentioned in the commercial media (which makes no small profit from its participation in the surveillance state) whereas creative and constructive uses of technology in China are condemned as signs of dictatorship.

Anti-democratic China

It is one of the great ironies of history that the elections held by the United States are considered to be representative of "democracy." These elections, rampant with voter suppression and gerrymandering, following an arcane Electoral College that dramatically over-represents sparsely populated rural states full of conservative whites, offer citizens (if their vote is even counted by the corrupt electronic voting machines owned by big business) a choice between two candidates that are selected in advance by two political parties dedicated to preserving a state run by, for and of a handful of mega-industrial complexes, investment houses and wealthy families. These parties make decisions in secret meetings, completely unaccountable to the law. Moreover, much of American policy is determined within these two parties (Democratic Party and Republican Party), with help from PR and consulting firms which are tasked to manipulate public opinion, even though they are not even mentioned in, or sanctioned by, the constitution. This is not a democracy, but a sham.

By contrast, the People's Republic of China has a system of consultative democracy in which a set of overlapping committees that stretch in an unbroken chain from local village gatherings, up through the provincial committees, to the Standing Committee of the Politburo, discuss, debate and frame policies meant to address the needs of the people and the nation. The Chinese Communist Party has developed a system of governance in which best practices are identified and spread throughout the country.

It is a fascinating question which is the more democratic approach: public elections in which citizens vote for political operatives who vie for power to represent them or committees in which stakeholders from various sectors of the population participate in governance. However, as the United States does not practice anything resembling honest elective democracy, the comparison is moot.

What to do?

The overwhelming consensus around the world is that the collapsing American empire is the greatest threat to world peace, to human rights and to the environment. Yet the elaborate mythology of “authoritarian China” has become a critical pillar propping up the ideology that allows Americans to go through their daily lives without coming to terms with the profound criminality that surrounds them. The first step towards addressing this crisis will be for Americans to stop projecting their own crimes onto China and start to confront their own culpability directly.

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