

Growing Nostalgia for the USSR and China's Drift Towards Capitalism in the Post-Mao Era

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Recently, polls have outlined that up to 66% of Russians “want to go back to the USSR”, almost 30 years after its disintegration. Those outside of Russia may find [such realities](#) surprising – especially considering that Vladimir Putin’s approval ratings have, at separate times this decade, been ranked among the highest in the world – though his popularity figures have noticeably decreased during the past year, due to unpopular domestic policies.

Under president Putin, Russia has re-emerged on the international stage such as in Syria, and also by incorporating the Crimea to its territory in 2014; while Moscow reacts to ongoing NATO manoeuvres and flagrant American government interference in neighbouring Ukraine.

Yet one of the chief reasons behind a continued nostalgia for the Soviet Union, is due to the disastrous Western-designed neoliberal “reforms”, first introduced in Russia during the early 1990s.

The ideology of neoliberalism, which began to take off from the 1970s, has been a central factor behind the environmental decline witnessed around the globe, whose beginnings can be traced to about the year 1950, with the arrival of the Anthropocene – the current epoch, when humans became the driving force impacting planetary climactic conditions and life on earth, also resulting in the sixth mass extinction.

The Axis powers’ defeat in World War II was supposed to herald a bright new dawn for humanity, in which the horrors of the previous generation would be left behind. However, our fortunes could hardly have taken a worse turn. No further world wars have occurred, but the indisputable fact is that the planet has since become much more dangerous – first with the completely unnecessary initiation of the nuclear age from 6 August 1945.

Threat of nuclear war is now rivalled by environmental loss and climate change. The neoliberal era which ravaged Russian society, along with other nations past and present, has made it far more difficult to tackle these challenges. Humankind is in effect caught in a vice grips, and which will eventually impact upon all humans, rich and poor.

Principles underlining neoliberalism are, as intended from the outset, eroding of democratic foundations, attacks on social solidarity, reducing the public’s influence in determining policy, accumulating wealth in a few pockets – and other strategies like bank bailouts and austerity for the masses.

In the meantime, nuclear arsenals are “upgraded” while carbon emissions are at a record high. Government attempts to tackle climate change have been dismal to date, particularly from those countries producing the largest emissions: China, America, India and Russia, four states which posted growing carbon levels for 2018. The largest emitter, China, has

experienced for the first six months of 2019 another 4% emission increase.

Turning our attention to Russia, following the Soviet collapse, American politicians were overtly interfering in the country's affairs. In the build-up to the 1996 Russian presidential elections, US leader Bill Clinton was supporting his favourite for a second term, incumbent Boris Yeltsin.

On 21 April 1996, less than two months before Russia's populace was due to vote, president Clinton said while [dining in the Kremlin](#) that, "So I've been trying to find a way to say to the Russian people 'this election will have consequences', and we are clear about what it is we support". In other words, the Russian electorate had better vote the right way.

Yeltsin subsequently won a second stint in office, beating the Communist Party candidate, Gennady Zyuganov, with a margin of 54% to 40%. By the time Yeltsin resigned in late 1999, dogged by corruption allegations and having failed to make good on his promises, some forecasts put his approval ratings at as low as 2%.

The Clinton administration's interference in the 1996 Russian presidential elections are, undoubtedly, much more serious than those charges levelled at Moscow, relating to the 2016 US presidential vote.

There were claims too that Clinton was involved in [employing American consultants](#) to advise Yeltsin's campaign team; and that the Clinton administration's role in backing an IMF loan, for Yeltsin's Russia, was an example of deliberate foreign electoral intervention. The \$10 billion IMF deal, agreed in February 1996, was publicly supported by Clinton himself. Little of this receives mention in establishment commentary linking the Kremlin to Donald Trump's election victory.

Another crucial factor behind a yearning for the Soviet years, has been a decline in the quality of Russia's health service over the past generation. Between 1991 and 1994 alone, average life expectancy in Russia dropped by five years, and come the mid-1990s Russian men were living for just 57 years. A catastrophe had gripped the society.

Despite global scientific advancements made in the field of health, average Russian citizens today are living just five years longer than in 1960 (71 years compared to 66 years). In America, over the same six decade time span, US citizens are now experiencing a lifespan on average 10 years greater.

A 2017 study by the Lancet, one of the most prestigious medical journals, outlined that Russia's populace had "seen the social safety net provided by the Soviet system abruptly disintegrate, inequities grow sharply, and elderly, sick, and disabled people become left behind while the country painfully and erratically transitioned from a planned economy to capitalism".

The Lancet author, experienced French physician Michel Kazatchkine, [notes that](#) "Another reason for the lingering nostalgia is the persistent perception that health care should be provided by the central government, with little or no responsibility on the part of the individual". Under the Soviet institution, health care enjoyed "universal coverage, accessible to everyone, even in the most remote parts of the country".

The death rate in Russia shot up in the immediate years following Soviet demise, and the

figures “are unprecedented in a modern industrialised country in peacetime”, according to the BMJ (British Medical Journal), one of the longest-running medical periodicals in the world. Between the period of 1992 to 2001, up to three million Russians died [prematurely in middle age](#).

Yet, it may be the case too, that former Soviet citizens are reminiscing partly through a vision of rose-tinted glasses. While by 1969, the Russian lifespan was just below that of an American, from 1970 life expectancy levels in Soviet Russia remained almost identical up to the 1991 collapse.

Much of the cause behind this was due to the stagnation which occurred under president Leonid Brezhnev – who also remained in power long after his health had deteriorated, before dying in office on 10 November 1982. The Lancet report identifies that the Russian health system “rapidly deteriorated in the 1970s” because of “Reduced funding from the central government and increasing bureaucratic and economic inefficiencies”.

Education standards in Russia likewise appreciably declined in quality, as neoliberal policies were ushered in. With education under the Soviets once comprising a highly centralised government-managed structure, decentralisation of education continued apace from 1991; while vested interest groups began flocking in order to profit from unequal education distribution.

Joseph Zajda, an education and globalisation expert, noted that the assaults [upon Russian education](#) “resulted in a new dimension of educational inequality between rich and poor regions, municipalities and cities” and that “Russian policy makers had failed to understand that globalisation was an ideologically driven social change”.

To the south of Russia in neighbouring China, similar regressions in education and health standards have been witnessed during the post-Maoist years – as the Chinese state drifted towards a capitalist-style model following the death of Mao Zedong in September 1976.

It should first be mentioned that currently there are many hundreds of thousands of millionaires in China (4.4 million), and present too are almost 500 billionaires in the country. This brief insight portrays a China that hardly consists of a communist or socialist state, and such pretensions were tacitly abandoned at least three decades ago. [China has now surpassed](#) America in numbers pertaining to the world’s richest people.

On a per capita basis (per person) America is, however, still far clear in having a wealthy top brass, with a population of about 330 million, by comparison to China’s 1.4 billion.

Still, Mao Zedong must be turning over in his grave somewhat. He was unable to implement a foundation to prevent a decisive move towards “market reforms”, and which has produced growing levels of inequity in China, not to mention rising privatisation and deregulation.

Detailed, in depth and conservative estimates produced by researchers show that [inequality rates](#) in China are “now approaching a level that is almost comparable to the USA”. Modern China is also more unequal “than that of European countries”.

From 1978 to 2015, the level of private wealth in China increased four times over. In 1978, the bottom 50% of Chinese earners had about the same income share as the top 10%. Not equitable even then. By 2015, the bottom half in Chinese society was earning almost three times less than the elite. For the 40% bulk in the middle, their share of national income has

actually stagnated in the post-Mao era.

Overall, a Chinese citizen is earning greater wages than 40 years ago, but China is still a poor country – a statement which may surprise those eulogising, or warning about, the purportedly fabulous Chinese economy. The explosion in China’s economic figures is in fact highly misleading. Much of that wealth has accumulated in the top 10%, and increasingly the top 1%, of the nation’s populace.

This receives scarce focus in the many reports on China’s rocketing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Utilising GDP results to estimate a country’s living state is a deeply flawed concept, and an ideological one, as GDP is concerned with “goods” and “services”, not people. There is no reference at all to the population in such accounts, what sort of wages they are earning, how long they are living, what shape the health and education sectors are in.

To gain a perspective of Chinese societal conditions, it can be important to analyse formats like the Human Development Index (HDI) – which measures per person income, life expectancy, etc. Most recent Human Development Index figures, from 2017, places China in 86th position; [below such countries](#) as Armenia (83rd), Azerbaijan (80th), Brazil (79th), Mexico (74th) and Cuba (73rd).

Throughout this decade, readers have been informed that China has “the world’s second largest economy”, and which could soon overtake America. We can cut through the illusions, and examine cold facts on the ground; such as pertaining to Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, which covers a broader area and relates to the “residents of a country”.

According to 2017 HDI figures, the average Chinese citizen earns per annum \$15,270, compared to a yearly salary for a typical American of \$54,941, more than three times as much. The average Chinese wage per year is also less, for example, than in Thailand (\$15,516), Azerbaijan (\$15,600), Mexico (\$16,944) and Iran (\$19,130). These figures surely dismantle much of the myth regarding China’s “economic miracle”.

In recent decades, hundreds of millions in China have been lifted from absolute grinding poverty; nonetheless, a large proportion of China’s population remains poor, especially when compared to living standards in privileged Western countries.

It may be interesting to compare health and education standards per capita between two communist nations: One largely communist in name only (China), and the other (Cuba) which may well be the only communist state in reality remaining on earth.

A Chinese person today lives on average for 76 years, which is less than a Cuban citizen, who enjoys a mean lifespan of almost 80 years. With its long burgeoning “economy”, China has a decidedly inferior health system to Cuba – in spite of the latter being under a decades-long embargo by the most powerful country in history, America.

China’s health care has considerably declined in quality since Mao Zedong’s death over 40 years ago. Indeed, “mortality sharply decreased in China during the Maoist years” as the American political analyst Noam Chomsky wrote but, as he reveals, China endured [rising mortality levels](#) “with the initiation of capitalist reforms thirty years ago, and the death rate has since increased”.

Cuba likewise possesses superior education standards to that of China. One statistic is telling from the HDI. The “mean years of schooling” for a child in China totals just shy of

eight years altogether. In Cuba, the average youngster enjoys almost 12 years of schooling.

Cuba's educational system is based on a non-discriminatory and non-fee paying basis, "a free education from the cradle to the grave" - whereas privatisation, fee paying or hidden expenses have [crept into Chinese education](#), inevitably affecting poorer people the most.

The average Cuban receives a notably low annual income, at under \$10,000 a year. The reason for this could be the aforementioned and punishing blockade enacted against Cuba. There is no way to tell for certain. Though the Cuban population is far from affluent, inequality was eradicated long ago. By 2004, the Castro government had further eliminated unemployment, drug use, gambling and homelessness, while Cuba has become the only country in the world to achieve sustainable development, according to the Switzerland-based World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Most of these social ills have plagued Chinese society, along with many other states.

China is, as often reported, rivalling America in GDP terms - but the US is a wealthy state, and a particularly business-run society. Speculation regarding America being ousted by China as the world's top power any time soon, should be taken with a grain of salt. China's elite financial muscle might be attempting to match its US counterpart, through such associations as the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

This is a concern for Washington, but China also has major domestic problems to deal with: social unrest, a shrinking work force and ageing population, environmental issues, a trade war with the White House, and the fact it is almost surrounded by US military forces seaward.

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