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A post-democratic future?

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Massimo Pigliucci hears a wake up call for the West, as Eric Li predicts a post-democratic future. This article appears in Issue 61 of The Philosophers' Magazine. Please support TPM by [subscribing](#).

As short a time ago as 1992, political scientist Francis Fukuyama was optimistically (and wrongly, as it turned out) predicting "the end of history", a stable future where liberal democracies would be the norm throughout the world, leading to lasting peace and economic prosperity. A few years later we have Eric Li, who equally gingerly predicts (for example in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* magazine) a "post-democratic" future, beginning with the success of China. Oh boy.

Li's article is worth reading in its entirety, and so are many of the thoughtful responses it generated. The question he raises is important, as much as his analysis is flawed and ultimately unconvincing. Li attributes the recent economic advances of China in great part to the efficiency of the Chinese autocratic system of government, which he compares favourably to the corrupt and currently somewhat dysfunctional democracies of the United States and Europe.

Oh sure, there were some problems along the way, like the so-called Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s (18 – 45 million dead as a result), and the Cultural Revolution of the late '60s and early '70s (additional millions violently persecuted), but Li groups these disasters under the rubric of "on-the-job learning" (seriously), and proceeds extolling the China story of the last couple of decades.

One fundamental flaw in Li's analysis is that, ironically, it suffers from the same problem that doomed Fukuyama's. There is great peril in declaring the success of a given type of government, or of a certain economic system, based on a relatively short good run. After all, the slave-and-conquest based societies of the ancient Egyptians and Romans endured for much longer than the time frames Fukuyama and Li are concerned with, and yet they eventually crumbled nonetheless. Few people nowadays would look at those as paragons of how human societies ought to be built.

There is another similarity between Li and Fukuyama, though this one works differently in the case of their respective visions: they both confuse the goal of achieving a just society with that of developing an advanced economy, though in a different fashion. Fukuyama, like many in the United States until recently, simply assumed that democracy and capitalism are natural, indeed inevitable handmaidens, so that encouraging a move toward capitalism in China and elsewhere would necessarily lead to a more open society. Obviously, this is not in fact the case, and Li is correct that China (and other Asian countries, for that matter) offers a good example of economic success (for now) and "post-democratic" (or pre-democratic, depending on how you look at things) government.

But Li appears to make sort of a mirror mistake to Fukuyama's: he assumes that because people (in China and elsewhere) are thriving economically, they will refrain from demands for personal rights and democratic reforms. He attributes this in part to a China-specific cultural tendency to sacrifice other ideals in order to achieve "national greatness" (as if that hadn't be a problem in, say, Japan, or Germany, at recent points in history), apparently regarding the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989 as a blip on the screen.

In contrast to Fukuyama's assumption, a very good case can be made – both philosophically and on grounds of historical record – that economic systems are largely (though perhaps not entirely) independent of type of government. But it is also arguable that an analysis such as Li's, which focuses on economic success (and "national greatness", whatever that means) at the expense of people's moral wellbeing and flourishing is fundamentally mistaken nonetheless.

At some points in his argument, Li sounds positively naive (or demagogic, depending on the kind of motives one is willing to impute to him), as when he says that "China is seeking to defy recent historical precedents and rise peacefully, avoiding the militarism that plagued Germany and Japan in the first half of the last century". I guess that's why China has been dramatically increasing its military spending of late, why it has invaded Tibet, and why it keeps threatening Taiwan with displays of force.

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Li praises the Chinese Communist Party for its ability, beginning in the late '90s, to address the problem of corruption, reminding his readers that as far as corruption goes China only ranks 75th in the world, with a better rank than several democracies, including Greece, India, Indonesia, Argentina and the Philippines (though not even close to the United States, Canada and the overwhelming majority of the much disparaged European countries).

Whenever Li admits that there is a problem with the Chinese miracle his refrain is that "the market will sort out these problems". And therein lies another crucial mistake. Markets – as Adam Smith understood very well – are no miracle cures for the ailments of society. Yes, they have a dynamic of their own (the "invisible hand"), but that dynamic needs a number of background conditions in place in order to work (including a good deal of laws and regulations). And it works only and at best in the sense that it maximises the efficiency of certain aspects of the economy, it does not automatically improve people's lives outside by other more general criteria. It is both a philosophical and an empirical truth that a good economic situation is only necessary but most certainly not sufficient for a flourishing human existence.

All of the above notwithstanding, Li's article should be taken seriously as a wake up call for self-complacent democracies, particularly the Western ones. It is certainly the case that governing the United States of America, the self-professed "best democracy in the world", has become next to impossible. The reasons are many, from a two-party system that favours obstructionism and intransigence, to the rise of the increasingly unhinged extreme Right, to the immense influence that money ("people are corporations, you know?") has acquired. The US truly has become the best democracy that money can buy, and that is certainly not a good thing for the majority of Americans. Even agreeing with Churchill's famous comment that democracy is "the worst type of government except for all the others", we ought to pause and seriously consider why the spread of the democratic ideal has been so spotty and characterised by a mediocre level of success thus far.

In the end, even Li reins in his own enthusiasm, acknowledging that "the significance of China's success ... is not that China provides the world with an alternative but that it demonstrates that successful alternatives exist". Indeed, but alternative to what, and successful by which criteria? China shows that – for a time at the least – economic success can be achieved by a non-democratic society. But we knew that already, if we were paying even superficial attention to history. The real question is how we can build societies that are successful at facilitating the broader goal of human, not simply economic, flourishing. In that regard, democracies still have the edge, and by a long shot.

Massimo Pigliucci is professor of philosophy at the City University of New York, a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and author of *Answers for Aristotle: How Science and Philosophy Can Lead Us to A More Meaningful Life*. His essays can be found at rationallyspeaking.org.

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