

Off The cuff DON MILLIGAN'SAugust 4, 2020

“I’m literally a Stalinist, you idiot!

Apologies to Ash Sarkar



LAST YEAR I came in for quite a bit of stick from friends and foe alike for writing a broadly positive view of Aaron Bastani’s book, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. Despite its dodgy politics, and the astonishing historical ignorance on display, I wanted to endorse the bold optimism of the piece, and Bastani’s positive view of the potential of science and technology to overcome most of our perennial problems. My view of the book and review is unchanged. However, I am dismayed by recent developments over at Novara Media. OK, their

endorsement of Labour has always sat uneasily with Bastani's and Ash Sarkar's assertions of commitment to communism, but I had not counted on them being sanguine about Stalinism.

While British politicians talk of austerity, and the United States remains unable to save lives, 37 Chinese cities are in the process of building a total of 150 new subway lines.

An interventionist state works.

Aaron Bastani, 11:34am August 3, 2020

Apart from the fact that Tory politicians are no longer talking about austerity, whatever they might actually be contemplating, Aaron has clearly gone down the state-socialist rabbit hole. Dazzled by Keith Bradsher's recent article in *The New York Times*, 'China Tries Its Favorite Economic Cure: More Construction', Bastani has 'lost it' in his uncritical joy at the Chinese construction of very big machines, for startlingly large building projects.

Aaron's selective reading of Bradsher's article is interesting because it does rather underline his disregard for a number of facts about China. He clearly decided not to notice the reporter's critical caution:

Additionally, some Chinese economists say, the country does not need more record-breaking megaprojects but would instead benefit from modest programs, like building better sewer lines close to people's homes. While these less-glamorous infrastructure projects improve the quality of people's lives, they offer little glory or political reward for the local officials who oversee them.

Keith Bradsher, *The New York Times*, July 30, 2020

Aaron's comment is of a piece with the glamour of *autocratic*, rather than *luxury* communism. Between 1928 and the joint Soviet-Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, Stalin's dictatorship industrialised the country. Astonishingly, in around a decade, the communist leadership oversaw the creation of a modern electricity grid, a heavy engineering industry, built numerous new cities, and more or less abolished illiteracy.

The state socialists in Moscow during the nineteen thirties did this by giving priority to the production of steel, concrete, machine tools, and other capital goods, over and above, soap, razor blades, toothpaste, shoes, clothes, and housing, desperately needed by their citizens. They achieved rapid industrialisation by depriving masses of country folk of basic foodstuffs – causing the deaths of millions by preventing their flight from famine-stricken regions with the introduction of internal passports, and by dragooning millions more, into a vast network of labour camps and prisons engaged in everything from digging canals by hand, mining for gold, coal, and other minerals, and producing lumber for export.

Aaron surely knows that none of this is seriously contested. Something similar has been going on in China over the last forty years. Starting around 1980 from a much lower base than the Soviets in the thirties, the Chinese have inevitably taken much longer to industrialise. However, the rapidity of growth and success has been no less astonishing.

Hundreds of millions have been lifted out of absolute poverty and the country has been provided with a truly modern infrastructure of power plants, high-speed railways, airports, subway systems, and gradually rising living standards for all. This includes a relatively small, but very wealthy elite of party members, technicians, and intellectuals, that enjoys a life as prosperous as any in the West.

But China is still a very poor country – with a per capita income of \$8,250 compared to \$62,000 in North America. However, it has a huge population that destined it to overtop the USA, Japan, and Germany

in the absolute size of her economy within the next decade or so. It's no wonder that Aaron is dazzled by the birth of 'new modernities', a thesis canvassed by the former communist journalist, Martin Jacques.

Perhaps Aaron wants to be onboard with the winning team. What this involves, of course, is the acceptance of what he calls "an interventionist state", one that "works", no less. What he is not so clear about is the knotty question of tyranny. For whether we opt for Martin Jacques's historical blether about China as a "civilizational state", or for the unity of the current 'People's Republic' centred in Beijing, we are dealing with a brutal dictatorship.

The Chinese state executes people by the bushel every month, imprisons vast numbers of people for simply speaking out of turn, and sets about ensuring the forcible incorporation of Tibetans, Uighurs, and others, into identifying with the dominant Han Chinese population. Of course, the Han are not really one racial entity, but it is the preferred fiction of the dictatorship that ninety-odd per cent of China's people belong to this fabled, racially and ethnically homogenous population, that apparently evolved separately from all other human beings on the planet.

A specific kind of racism is at work here and is central to the mission of Beijing's objective in maintaining unity, order, and "harmony". What has arisen in China, (spurious historical parallels like 'The Mandate of Heaven' to one side), is a communist party-state in which central plans and policies are communicated to local and regional party leaderships, without popular involvement or free elections. It is a society without independent trade unions, free speech, or the freedom to organise opposition to the powers that be. The consequence, is endemic corruption, and arbitrary rule by the state, party officials, police, and well-placed millionaires.

It is an intrinsically lawless condition in which those with the power can do more or less what they want. If you're unlucky enough to be arrested and taken to court, you have a one per cent chance of

being found not guilty – this is because Chinese police do not arrest innocent people, and the judges know that the prosecutors are invariably right about the guilt of the defendants brought before them.

Now, I'm not alleging that Aaron and his pals at Novara Media support all this, but in his belief that China is showing the way with its undoubtedly effective "interventionist state" he is playing fast and loose with some grim historical realities concerning democracy and socialism. It will no doubt be argued that this is a bourgeois Eurocentric concern; that different conceptions of freedom, politics, and statecraft, have been, and are emerging, in parts of the world formerly under the heel of Europe's colonial powers. Perhaps we are being invited to believe that the idea of democratic freedoms that arose in Western European and North America are outmoded.

After all, the Castro Brothers ruled Cuba for 59 years and produced one of the best healthcare systems in the world, by ensuring that all elections are contested only by those who have proved their loyalty to the Partido Comunista de Cuba. Something similar might be said about all Stalinist states. One can point to the economic achievements, and social successes of all communist regimes since 1917 – they all got something done – but what they could never do is win over the mass of working people to freely support them anywhere in the world.

This is what Aaron needs to dwell upon, how is he and his comrades going to win support for "fully automated luxury communism", if dictatorship is the price that we're expected to pay for it?