

# PROF. DR. MINQI LI: BASIC TASK OF SCIENTISTS HAS TO DO WITH INCREASING PEOPLE'S GENERAL AWARENESS ABOUT PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL LAWS OF MOTION

Interview by Mehmet Aslan

Minqi Li is a political activist and Marxist academic. He is among the foremost promoters of the Chinese "New Left". He criticized neoliberal economics and its relation to economic rationality as he also examined the social and material conditions that had led to China's rise with a conclusion focusing on a criticism of capitalism and advocating socialism. Based upon an analysis of environmental data in relation to the Capitalist world economy, he claimed that the only way to avoid the inevitable collapse of civilization is to adopt a socialist world government by the middle of the 21st century. In this issue of Matter Dialectics and Society we made an interview with Dr Li to talk about him witnessing transition of China and crisis of the World System.

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**Thank you for accepting to have an interview with us. As MDS we want to document the life and work of Marxist scientist.**

**As a first question: You were born in China and you were an academic in Western countries, you have witnessed the transition of China from socialism to capitalism. Could you share your personal experiences in China, how did the transition affect you?**

I was born in an intellectual family; in Marxist terms, you might say urban middle class or petty bourgeoisie. I grew up in the 1980's so it was the time when China was beginning the transition from socialism to capitalism and when I entered the Beijing University -which is basically China's top, elite university- they already have begun to teach capitalist free market economics. So even though China was known to be a socialist country, even in 1980's they already have begun to teach Western style capitalist economics; making justification for market liberalization, privatization. In my early college years, I was a believer of free market capitalism. And then, there was the 1989 Democratic Movement that took place in complicated historical environment. We know that globally 1989 was supposed to be the end of history. In other words, the year that demonstrated the collapse of socialism, the ultimate victory of capitalism, the beginning of neo-liberal era... In the Chinese case, even though it was wrongly understood to be a student democratic movement, unfortunately most of the Chinese college students at the time were also influenced by western capitalist ideas. They believed in Western liberal democracy, they also believed in the free market



## Who is Minqi Li?

Minqi Li, born in 1969, is a Chinese political economist and world-systems analyst. After studying economics in Beijing University, he was convinced of neoliberal economics and got engaged in many protests of the existing economic system in China and activism after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Li was arrested and was a political prisoner in China from 1990 to 1992. In those years, he made a vast switch to become a Marxist after extensive reading of the works of Karl Marx and Mao Zedong until his release. He received PhD in economics from University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2002. His dissertation was on "Three Essays on China's State Owned Enterprises: Towards an Alternative to Privatization." Li also focuses on World Capitalist Systems and the work of Immanuel Wallerstein in particular. He is a member of the editorial board of Review of Radical Political Economics and author of The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World-Economy, "After Neoliberalism: Empire, Social Democracy, or Socialism?", "Long Waves, Institutional Changes, and Historical Trends: A Study of the Long-Term Movement of the Profit Rate in the Capitalist World-Economy", "The 21st Century Crisis: Climate Catastrophe or Socialism", China and the 21st Century Crisis.

model; being an economics student I was also influenced by that and then became a believer in free market, privatization.

But in the democratic movement some of my ideas began to change. First of all we know that student democratic movement have failed because of the repression by the government but part of the reason of failure had to do with the inability of these middle class students to effectively mobilize the urban workers. In the movement, there was some interesting moments. For example, workers came to the streets to support the students; but they were told how great capitalist enterprises are as opposed to socialist state owned enterprises, how efficient capitalism is supposed to be and why we should pursue the policy of privatization. By privatization what is meant is the state owned enterprise workers, who are considered to be inefficient, lazy and incompetent and therefore does not deserve the social welfare should be laid off, should be unemployed. There is no problem about that in an economics classroom. But on the street for a moment I was thinking: "these workers realize they are supporting us today, but if we were to be in power, we were going to implement privatization and put these workers onto the streets."

After the defeat of the 1989 Student Movement, as I was reflecting upon what happened in the movement, I began to remember some of the Marxist terms that I was taught in the middle school. Somehow the whole thing, the entire democratic movement, the conflict between the students and government, seemed to be best described by the Marxist term "class struggle." Then I started thinking: "maybe there is something useful about Marxism", so I went back to some of the Marxist books and I did some research in the library and found some classical Marxist books and more recent Marxist writings about developments in the rest of the world, especially what has happened since 1960s. So I began to have this evolution towards socialist-Marxist ideas. And after 1989 because of my participation in another protest movement, I was arrested, later sentenced for two year imprisonment. At the time I was charged with "counter-revolutionary propaganda", now they have changed it to something like "endangering national security". When I was in prison, one of the benefits of being in prison is that you have lots of time to read so I read selected works of Marx and Engels, Mao Zedong, Lenin: Capital as well as more recent stuff like Sweezy and Baran's Monopoly Capital, Cohen's Karl Marx's Theory of History. So that was how I used the time in prison. When I got out of prison I basically was a Marxist and began to participate in political activities as a Marxist.

**Would you like to talk about your experience as an academic in the West? Good sides and hardships of it?**

That is pretty straightforward. I came to the US in December 1994, actually on the Christmas day of 1994. I did one more year of undergraduate study in the Uni-

versity of Delaware and applied for several heterodox economics programs and got admitted to the Umass Amherst. I did my PhD study there and graduated in 2002. After that, I became a visiting assistant professor in Franklin & Marshall College, went back to job market again and got this assistant professor position in York University in the Political Science Department. From 2003 to 2006 I taught at York University, Canada. After that I applied to several economics positions again, got this position in University of Utah, and have been teaching in the University of Utah since 2006.

Good and bad sides are difficult to describe. On the bad side an academic position is still a job in the capitalist market so it is one of the conditions for you to re-produce your labor power, even though it is considered to be relatively privileged compared to nurses, Walmart workers and blue-collar workers. But you still have the tensions, pressure and difficulties associated with the capitalist labor market before you get the job but also after you got it. On the good side, let's say it is not China, in that sense it is not Turkey either. You have relatively bigger degree of freedom, in that sense there are still a few so called heterodox programs, although not Marxist programs anymore, but some limited spaces where Marxist economists could survive. But of course this kind of academic work basically takes away some time and energy from real kind of political work that a Marxist could be actually interested in.

**You have published a lot! We have your China and the Twenty-First-Century Crisis translated in Turkish. Could you explain, what is the 21st Century crisis? How it relates to environmental crisis? As a follow-up question, would you consider the economic clash between the US and China as competition or clash between Imperialist powers?**

We could talk about these questions for three days, but trying to reduce three days to three minutes... There are different levels of crisis. But by crisis, the kind of crisis I have in mind, is not what we often call a recession but a more structural type of crisis. By more structural crisis I'm not simply talking about the crisis of neoliberal capitalism but instead the structural crisis of entire capitalist system. So a lifetime crisis for the entire capitalist system. For that I'm influenced both by Immanuel Wallerstein's world system approach as well as Marx's original insight that all social systems are ultimately historical in the sense that they can only exist in certain period of time. So, basically the idea is as a result of the long term existence and development of capitalism it has generated certain internal contradictions and produced certain long-term tendencies which has in the end undermined the conditions for the existence of the capitalist economics system itself.

Without elaborating on this too much, basically I understand capitalism as a historic system oriented towards the pursuit of endless accumulation of capital.

And for that to happen it requires a massive consumption of fossil fuels, the exploitation of cheap labor as well as favorable political conditions. But now the massive consumption of fossil fuels has created conditions that is to be likely to lead to the general collapse of the global ecological system, in particular climate change. And then, as a result of a long term social transformation, especially the progressive proletarianization taking place not only in the core countries (so-called developed countries) but also many semi-peripheral countries, especially in China... with this further progress of proletarianization in China, it could potentially create conditions for another wave of labor militancy in the much larger area of the world which could fatally undermine the capitalist profit rate. And then, finally, with the decline of the American hegemonic power, and I do not expect China or any other big power to replace the US and become the next hegemonic power, so that means at this critical moment of crisis of capitalist world system will not have an effective political mechanism to regulate the crisis. That may be related to your question about whether the economic conflict between the US and China could be considered as the rivalry between American Imperialism and Chinese Imperialism. First of all, I do not think it is useful to consider China to be an imperialist country, from the Marxist perspective. Because the concept of imperialism, in the early 20th century, I think it was developed in that particular historical context. In today's context, if you talk about China being an imperialist country it will raise many questions for example whether Chinese capitalist class are going to move to a World War in order to resolve their fundamental conflict, which I do not foresee to happen. And moreover I do not think there are fundamental conflict of interests between the Chinese capitalist class and American capitalist class. I think there are still important structural factors that bond the American capitalist class and Chinese capitalist class. For example, much of the super profits of the American trans-national corporations continue to come from the exploitation of the cheap Chinese labor as a project that Chinese capitalist class is facilitating. And in fact as a result of the latest trade agreement the Chinese capitalist class has made major concessions on several issues such as the financial liberalization, intellectual property rights and exchange rate. Which, in my opinion, demonstrated that the Chinese capitalist class would provide safeguard for not only the common interest of the American capitalist, Chinese capitalist but for the global capitalist order as a whole because the exploitation of the Chinese cheap labor is not only important for Chinese capitalism but also important for global capitalist system.

So although this tension, conflict between American capitalists and Chinese capitalists is important, I do not consider that to be the most important factor that will de-stabilize the entire global capitalist order.

**You have mentioned the proletarianization of Chinese**

**working class. You claim Chinese working class could organize a revolution, probably the largest working class lies within the borders of China. What are the signs of this revolution in China?**

To be honest, we are not on the eve of a revolution yet. We are not anticipating a revolution tomorrow or next year but we know that Marx talked about the proletarianized working class will become the gravediggers of capitalism, which unfortunately has not yet quite materialized. Part of the reason has to do with, as Lenin explained, imperialism or the structural division of capitalist world system into core and periphery in general. The capitalist class in the imperialist or the core countries of capitalist system can exploit the rest of the world, and therefore could benefit from super profits or super surplus value that could in turn use the portion of the super surplus value to buy off the domestic working class. And as the history demonstrated much of the 20th century the capitalist class of the Western capitalist countries has been able to use this super surplus value to establish the so-called welfare state and therefore create this environment for social compromise in Western Europe or Northern America or Australia. So that, to some extent, created the basis for social peace in the Western capitalist countries up to around 1970s-80s. Then of course, with the decline of the profit rate the social compromise could no longer be maintained so the Western capitalist class to some extent counter-attacked by rolling back part of the welfare state. But even with that, let's say they have not completely dismantled this welfare state. So you might argue that even today Western working class is still benefiting from either a share of this world surplus value or the cheap consumer goods provided, as well as cheap agricultural goods provided by the cheap labor and cheap resources from the peripheral or the semi-peripheral countries. Of course with the development of neoliberalism now we have this growing social inequality therefore growing social conflict but so far this growing conflict has not yet translated into revolutionary potential in the Western capitalist countries. Instead, we have various kind of right wing populism both in Western Europe as well as in Northern America.

On the other hand, if we were to look where the revolution did happen in the 20th century, it tended to happen in countries where peasants tend to be the majority population: Chinese revolution was certainly a peasants' revolution, even the Russian revolution happened in the environment with the greater majority of the population being the peasants. By comparison in the early 21st century we have this unique situation in which on the one hand we have this massive capitalist industrialization in China which has produced probably the world's largest working class, on the other hand in non-imperialist countries Chinese capitalism could benefit from the super surplus value to be exploited from the world. And of course I am totally aware that today Chinese capitalists are investing in places like Latin America, Af-

rica and exploiting the workers and resources in those areas. But if we look at overall picture, the actual surplus value China could exploit from Africa or Latin America, or maybe South Asia, is still much smaller than the surplus value that China transfers to North America and Europe. And actually there is a secret interesting fact, if you look at where Chinese investment in Latin America actually takes place it is places like British Virgin Islands, in other words tax haven places. That's unlikely to be places where you can exploit cheap labor and natural resources. That's more like capital flight by the Chinese capitalists or the Chinese elite families, so has more similarity with the investment pattern by a corrupt government in the third world than an imperialist country. In that regard, Chinese capitalist class does not have the necessary resources required for social compromise or welfare state. Maybe this is part of the reason why China still has this one party dictatorship. In this case we have a situation where on one hand you have a larger and larger working class that eventually will demand democratic rights as well as social rights (some section of petty bourgeoisie also demand that) and on the other hand the capitalist class does not have the social resources to accommodate this demand within the capitalist framework. So that will create the objective conditions that are required for socialist transformation to the extent that these demands cannot be accommodated by capitalism. On the other hand China is a country with a legacy of socialist revolution back to the 1980's. Basically all the intellectuals opposing to the existing political system were dominated by the western capitalist ideas, so-called "liberals." I myself was part of the "liberals" at the time, but starting from 1990s, with these growing capitalist contradictions there are some sections of intellectuals, which had petty bourgeois background, that began to observe this growing capitalist inequality and various contradictions associated with capitalism. They began to be influenced by socialist, Marxist, in the Chinese context Maoist ideas so by the beginning of this century various Maoist groups began to be a significant intellectual and political factor in China. So now, among Chinese intellectuals you have the existing ruling class as well as some section of the petty bourgeoisie who are influenced by the nationalist ideas, and there are still some petty bourgeoisie who are influenced by free market-Western liberal democracy ideas; the kind of petty bourgeoisie that has a greater connection with the globalized capitalism. On the other hand, you have another section of petty bourgeoisie that, because of the growing capital contradictions, because of the rising education costs, healthcare costs, difficulty in job market, have become proletarianized. This kind of proletarianized, marginalized petty bourgeoisie has become this new social base for more radical leftist ideas. So if this kind of progressive section of petty bourgeoisie in the future could develop an alliance with the developing working class movement that could be the basis for the socialist movement in China in the future.

**Do you have any hopes from the American working class? There has been signs of awakening in the working class of the US also.**

We always have hope about American working class! But the reality is, American politics is very complicated. I do not want to be discouraging but we know that in American political system capitalist class has basically succeeded using their constitutional as well as political structure in order to effectively divide up the working class into several sections in conflict with each other. For example, traditional, white working class in the US now has shifted to become the social base for the Trump dominated Republican class. This is not a fault of working class itself; it is because of Clinton, Obama. Democratic Party has been in itself a server of financial capitalists as well as high-tech capitalist interest within the framework of American capitalism. So the Democratic Party, so called Democratic Party establishment has been serving the interest of financial capitalists as well as high-tech capitalists like Microsoft and Apple for several decades. They completely supported this neoliberal globalized capitalist project but interestingly in the meantime, perhaps because they support this global capitalist project they are more willing to have an open-door policy for the immigrants. Not necessarily for the benefit or the welfare of the immigrant workers but probably for the sake of supplying cheap labor for the US domestic labor market. Nevertheless, because of that you have this election alliance developed between the financial-high-tech capitalists as well as the high-end petty bourgeoisie that would benefit from that. In addition to that an election alliance, the immigrant working class, the minorities... But this alliance no longer seems to be sustainable. Now we have more progressive sections represented by Sanders<sup>1</sup>, also Warren to some degree, although Sanders would be more sincere to some extent representing the interest of the immigrant working class as well as the young students who do not find the future within the existing capitalist system, under the program of returning to some form of social democratic capitalism. Which Sanders refers to as "democratic socialism." Obviously, there is no way for that program to materialize within the capitalist framework. Nevertheless, it does capture the desire and the hope by some section of American working class as well as young people to have a potentially future system that would go beyond capitalism which people now are brave enough to call socialism. So we will see how the current election is going to develop and one thing we can definitely predict: Both the American capitalist class as well as the Democratic Party establishment will do whatever they can do under the appearance of American bourgeois democracy, in order to stop Sanders. Even if Sanders, by luck, win the Democratic Party nomination, unfortunately he would most likely lose in the general election. Therefore, in the foreseeable future meaningful social reform within the US is still unlikely

1 On the day of this interview, Bernie Sanders had not yet dropped out of the electoral race within Democratic Party.



to happen. But making the word “socialism” legitimate again in the American politics perhaps it could create the conditions to take the class struggle to the next level in the next few years.

**The Academy of Science and Enlightenment in Turkey have organized “Socialist Future and Planning” symposium this year and discussed socialism in the 21st century. What would characterize socialism in the 21st century to you? And what tasks do you think scientist have as we move towards socialism?**

In the 21st Century the challenge is no longer about how to have a system that can pursue capital accumulation or economic growth within the capitalist world system framework but about how to meet the challenge of global ecological crisis as well as provide conditions that could still satisfy the basic needs for the entire population. So in that context, it can not be accomplished by any capitalism and in fact it can not be accomplished by any system that is dominated by private ownership of means of production or so called market competition. It would require the socialized ownership of means of production as well as democratic planning at a society level. In that sense it will again demand socialism. It could only be accomplished by socialism or Rosa Luxemburg’s words: “It is a choice between barbarism or socialism”.

Basic task for scientists whether in natural science field or social science field, has to do with trying to understand the basic material reality as well as laws of motion both the physical system and social systems, and try to increase people’s general awareness about these physical laws of motion as well as the social laws of motion. Then try to connect our understanding about the natural world as well as the social system. For example, today we have many wonderful climate scientists that have developed our understanding about climate crisis and many of them have provided obvious warnings that if the current climate crisis continues to develop that have catastrophic consequences for the human society. But unfortunately they do not go to the next step, that is, they would not take this further step to understand the basic laws of motion of capitalism. Especially as this system aims to have endless accumulation of capital. As a result they could not put their climate science into a framework that would allow them to understand that within capitalism there is no way to solve this climate crisis and as a result, many of them still have sentiments about governments, about corporations. Many of them think: “We are not able to solve this climate crisis simply because people do not know about these physical facts enough. That’s why they are not doing the necessary thing on a sufficient level”. Unfortunately, that is not the case. It is not because the governments or the corporations do not have sufficient amount of knowledge or information but it’s because of the constraints of the capitalist economic system they can no do without undermining their own capacity to survive as capitalists, or to

survive as capitalist states.

We have to put all these knowledge together understanding both the physical system and the natural system so that we can pursuit the most sensible path for the entire humanity.

**Thank you so much for your time! Would you have any messages to our readers?**

Let the Turkish, Chinese, international working class work together for a much better and sustainable future!



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