

# **Fooling the World or Fooling Itself: China's Spectacular-Oneiric Society**

## An Intervention from a Critical Chinese Studies Perspective

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**Abstract** Since the '90s, China's economic power has grown massively, and with it the authorities' desire to control and craft its global image. Yet, despite policed Internet and surveillance of its citizens, contestation of the authorities' control has come from social, ecological and cultural activists. Since the start of the century, China has staged the Olympics, had a Chinese woman win the Miss World competition, and claims to wage a 'war on terror'. A spectacle of a peaceful, harmonious and 'normal' country – a 'China dream' – is projected. This article seeks to apprehend the reality behind the dream and to show how China's current condition is the result of a historical domination by, but also voluntary engagement with, the 'West'.

**Keywords** China. Spectacular society. Science. Technology. Postcolonial. Modernity. Globalization.

Whatever the future evolution of China, it is certain that it will totally destabilize the existing fragile world disorder.  
Cornelius Castoriadis, June 1995<sup>1</sup>

Since the turn of this century, China's economic power has grown massively, and with it the desire to control and craft its cultural image abroad. This has even given rise to a cultural diplomatic offensive to displace long-standing foreign discourses on and about China with a cultural imaginary and a historical narrative generated by the Chinese authorities themselves. The imposition of an official narrative of history, and thus of the present and the future, has been achieved internally by an increasingly policed Internet – witness the recent closing-down of celebrated dissident micro-

<sup>1</sup> Castoriadis 2013: 'Quelle que soit l'évolution à venir de la Chine, il est certain qu'elle déstabilisera complètement le fragile désordre mondial existant'. All translations are by the Author.

bloggers' Weibo accounts - and by close surveillance of cultural activities, and abroad by China's soft power cultural diplomacy initiatives via its network of Confucius Institutes.

But what constitutes the nature of the reality that is China, a reality that cultural diplomacy seeks to mask? The China of the twenty-first century has integrated the technic-economic world, indeed China is also responsible for shaping this 'disorder', as Castoriadis has it. This article seeks to apprehend the reality behind the dream and to demonstrate how the current condition of China is the result of a historical domination by, but also voluntary engagement with, the 'West'.

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Since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 - now out of living memory for some forty per cent of the population - China's authorities have vigorously advanced the country's integration into the world technic-economic system, gaining membership of the world's major organisations of economic and political power, modernizing the military, preparing to put a person on the moon, and claiming to be engaged in the 'war on terror'. Yet despite these aspirations to global 'normality', the government has not yet managed to control and suppress dissent and despite all its efforts the Chinese culture that the world most appreciates is not that which is promoted and sponsored by the state, but that which is unofficial and fractious.

In 2014, the central authorities condemned to long prison sentences a number of academics, the most well-known of whom is the Chinese Uighur economist Ilham Tohti. In the same year, the people of Hong Kong demonstrated massively their unwillingness to accept an undemocratic future in what became known as the Umbrella Movement. In 2015, a campaign was launched against 'Western' values and the use of 'Western' textbooks in universities. Its recent - between October 2015 and the time of writing - manœuvres to stifle external dissenting voices (the 'abductions' and the subsequent televised confessions of five Hongkong bookseller-publishers, the televised confession and expulsion of Swedish national and human rights activist, Peter Dahlin, the traducing and expulsion of the French journalist, Ursula Gauthier over an article about the CCP's treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang) indicate the far from 'soft-power' lengths to which the authorities will go to control the flow of information in, and about, China, even when such actions are detrimental to its global image.

These are the contemporary realities that academics involved in China studies in Europe have a duty to contrast against the efforts of China's authorities to project an image of China as peaceful, harmonious and 'normal'. But China's vexed investment in modernity can be traced back

to the mid-19th century, and in terms of its modern nation-state incarnation to the second decade of the twentieth century. In 1919, students who were contesting the weakness and betrayal of China's delegation at the World War 1 Versailles peace congress, which saw Germany's colonies in China handed over to Japan rather than handed back to China held up banners echoing the intellectual and political activist Chen Duxiu's call for Mr. Confucius to be replaced by Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science: 德謨克拉西先生 *demokelaxi xiansheng* and 塞恩斯先生 *saiensi xiansheng*.<sup>2</sup>

But what exactly had Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, the originator of the 'Mr Democracy-Mr Science' slogan, intended by 'science'? The future, and the first, leader of the Chinese Communist Party saw science as the positivist cure to ancient obscurantism. For Chen, 'modern Europe's superiority over other races is due to the rise of science' (近代歐洲之所以優越他族者, 科學之興).<sup>3</sup> Ignorant of science, scholars were cast as charlatans using geomancy to hoodwink the people; farmers were ignorant of seed selection techniques and the use of pesticides; industrialists' ignorance of science was responsible for dependence on foreign countries; physicians were ignorant of anatomy, bacteria and contagion, and depended on ancient formulae such as *yin* and *yang*.

The solutions to such deficiencies lay in science: "as for such unknowledgeable thinking, such illogical beliefs, if we wish to cure them at the root, we apply science (凡此無常識之思惟, 無理由之信仰, 欲根治之, 厥為科學)". In this denunciation of superstitious practices and old knowledge that was constituent of, and that propped up, a conservative regime's ideology, he simultaneously opposes science to the spontaneity and creativity of the 'imagination' that he consigns to a past moment. Indeed the sixth section of his 'Call to Youth' is entitled 'Scientific and Not Imaginative' 科學的而非想像的. For Chen, imagination is the antithesis of reason:

在昔蒙昧之世, 當今淺化之民, 有想象而無科學。宗教美文, 皆想象時代之產物。

2 Note how the two words were commonly transliterated from English as *demokelaxi* and *saiensi*. Later 'democracy' would be translated with *minzhuzhuyi* 民主主義 from the Japanese *minshu* 民主, and 'science' with *kexue* 科學 from the Japanese *kagaku* 科學. However, in Chen Duxiu's 1915 'Call to Youth' (see the note below) the Japanese-derived translation *minshu* 民主 was preferred. It is possible that in post-Versailles China when Japan had just been handed German's colonies, it was deemed preferable to avoid Japanese translations. The sexism implicit in the figure of the two Misterys is striking and unfortunate, for the reality was that numerous women students were at the forefront of the Fourth May Movement. In fact, in the fight against a patriarchal ideology that not only obliged the young to venerate the old but treated women as almost worthless, women were amongst the most ardent agitators. See Dooling 2005, 35.

3 Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, 'Jinggao qingnian' 敬告青年 (literally 'Warning to Youth', often translated as 'Call to Youth') (reproduced on *People's Daily* website, <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/BIG5/151935/151936/151965/9123165.html>) (2017-10-23).

In former benighted times there was, and today among uncultured peoples there is, imagination but no science. Religion, art and writing, were the product of the era of the imagination.

Imagination, here closely associated with myth and creativity, is assigned to the past. There can be no cohabitation between science and imagination. In his celebrated slogan what Chen would pair with 'science' was 'democracy'.

Chen would soon abandon 'democracy' in favour of historical materialism, but his belief in science that would bring 'modernisation' to China endured. And yet, it is evident from the catastrophic outcomes of the twentieth century that science, beholden to technology, was not the instrument by which democracy, in the sense of liberty and autonomy, would be brought about. Witness the state of the industrialised planet, of which China is an integral part, today. Science has not been objective, and has certainly not been neutral. And democratic control of science and technology has not been practised to date. So-called liberal democracies, just as totalitarian autocracies, are no longer the drivers of technology, they are the driven. The so-called neutrality of science has allowed a head-long and *limit-less* expansion of unnecessary, and certainly ill-considered, technologies which have not brought about 'progress' but rather an ecologically doomed environment and socio-economically unequal global society.

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Since the middle of the nineteenth century, China's élite had then felt itself obliged to re-invent the country as a modern nation-state. The 1919 post-World War One, Treaty of Versailles and the 4 May Movement to which it gave rise, convinced China's élite of the need to emulate the West as had Japan, in order to (re)create China. Or rather to create a modern nation-state China for the first time. This Western process of *nationalisation* was seen as the means to resist the colonialist system that had just humiliated it once again, and to attain sovereignty over what would become a national territory. This was an ideology shared with other colonised peoples. Sovereignty, it was held, could only be achieved via modernity, and the Versailles process had reaffirmed nationalism as the only means to achieve a modern organisation of peoples (see Duara 2008, 63).

A classical radical or Marxist reading of the outcome of Versailles would hold that it put the imperialist world in a dilemma and spelt its death-knell. For if the non-white, non-European world could not benefit, there and then, from the Wilsonian doctrine of self-determination, the principle of the essential link between nationalism and modernity had been affirmed and would sooner or later bring the decline and fall of colonialism (see Füredi 1994, 5).

But this model of nation-state modernity as a means of self-determination and attainment of sovereignty was a poisoned chalice. Once China had accepted the need for Westernisation/modernisation – let us recall that the term 西方 *xifanghua* was in the first half of the twentieth century not only synonymous with modernisation it was the ‘natural’ way of referring to the process – China’s incorporation into the world system, which has been variously called colonialism, Americanisation, globalisation, became inevitable.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, what this path rendered inevitable was the obligation to adopt Western epistemologies and to eliminate old pre-nation-state, ‘Chinese’ knowledge.

Whether or not the Versailles Wilsonian doctrine and the Western imperialist system that gave rise to it did indeed signify that there was never any alternative to mimicry of what was then still a Western system is disputable, but what will be demonstrated below is that this system had led China and the world into an impasse.

Far from announcing the end of colonialism and its procedures which were intimately imbricated in what we call modernity, these same procedures were seen as the panacea. The real success of colonialism at the start of the twentieth century, a success that continues to this day, was to have convinced colonised peoples, or rather their élites, that there was *no alternative* to the emulation, imitation and mimicry of the nation-state paradigm. For the élite what counted was access to the colonial powers’ knowledge and science.

In the pursuit of this logic an enormous contradiction was pushed aside. In order to regain sovereignty, a power of agency, China’s radical élite rejected all that was local and heterogeneous, as witnessed by Chen Duxiu’s ‘call to Youth’ quoted above. It had to homogenise its languages and cultures and customs, and sweep out diversity to install uniformity.<sup>5</sup> In short, it had to imitate, and thus even become this Western Other.

4 Duara sees globalisation as putting the former territorial model of China as nation-state under stress: “The effort to integrate the overseas Han Chinese into the nation has led to a spatial reimagination of the nation from the territorial China to the ethnic one” (Duara 2008, 63).

5 One of the first recorded appeals for the use of Guoyu 國語 was made by a group of returned students from Japan in 1906 “to train people to speak the national language in order to eliminate the dialects of the provinces”. See “Gesheng liu Hu xuesheng zonghui diyue jianzhang 各省留滬學生總會第一則簡章” (First Draft programme of the Alliance of Students in Shanghai from All Provinces) (1906) in 江寧學務 *Jiangning xuewu* (Educational Affairs of Jiangning prefecture) Nanking, 1906, cited in Chow 1960, 34. However, it was not until the early ‘20s that the national language started to be institutionalised. In January 1920, the Ministry of Education decreed that the vernacular be used in the first two years of primary education and the adoption of the vernacular quickly spread to higher echelons of the school system. In 1920-1, the vernacular was officially recognised as the ‘national language’ or *Guoyu* 國語. See Chow 1960, 279.

Science and scientism took hold of the élite's imaginary as it had taken hold of the Western popular imaginary in the second half of the nineteenth century when "in the name of science it was deemed necessary to destroy false ideas, religions, cultural traditions, myths; all that was a product of the imagination of the dark ages had absolutely to be replaced by the Light of Science".<sup>6</sup> While this logic is still dominant, with all its social, economic, and environmental consequences, it now clashes with the authorities attempts to institute a local identitarian cultural politics with which to combat the temptation of democracy.

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In recently launching a campaign against Western values in the academic sphere it is as if the authorities wished to cut off China's nose to spite its face. Where do 'Western' values stop and 'Western' science start? At stake is not only what is projected as Western culture, which we know is now a global culture, but what is perceived as Western methodology. Ironically, for the past fifty to sixty years humanistic values have been under attack in the Western academy itself where humanities scholars have been pushed and bullied into reinventing themselves as scientists and into adopting a 'scientific' methodology. So, are 'science' and 'culture' separable?

In attempting to discuss this question, the relationship between technology, which has increasingly colonised 'science' since World War 2, and economics also needs addressing. Before doing so, I need to make my position clear: it is evident that the economic strategy of growth is killing our planet, and that there is an urgent necessity not simply to opt for sustainable growth but to adopt the path of ungrowth. As the French political scientist Jacques Ellul has noted this will require a global cultural, or 'civilisational', revolution in order for humanity to achieve this ambition (cf. Ellul 2015).<sup>7</sup>

The question of the specificity of culture, or more specifically of cultural creation, is also an issue that needs to be addressed in this discussion around science and culture.

From the nineteenth century onwards the colonised world, was in part forced and in part 'chose' to adopt Western epistemology, a Western

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6 Ellul 2010, 323: "Il fallait au nom de la Science détruire les idées fausses, les religions, les traditions culturelles, les mythes, tout cela, produits de l'imagination dans les âges obscurs, devait absolument être remplacé par la Lumière de la Science".

7 This projection towards a radical departure from current beliefs and cognitive attitudes echoes the debate on transformational change, as framed in sustainability studies. A useful conceptualisation of transformative versus incremental approaches to sustainability is provided in: Hopwood, Bill; Mellor, Mary, O'Brien, Geoff (2005). "Sustainable Development. Mapping Different Approaches". *Sustainable Development*, 13, 38-52.

originated organisation of knowledge and of culture. Japan *chose* this course. To what extent this was indeed a pragmatic choice, and to what extent it was a function of a colonisation of minds is also a question to be discussed.

Over the past twenty years or so there have been attempts to broach the dilemma of modernity and identity in the context of the aftermath of colonialism. For instance, in the field of Postcolonial studies and tangential academic domains, there is a current debate on intellectual decolonisation; a sort of second-stage decolonisation beyond territorial, physical decolonisation. Departing colonialists not only leave behind problematic and improbable borders, Western forms of socio-political organisation, and a proliferation of flags and national armies. By the same token, they also leave behind cultural practices and ways of thinking.

If the colonial 'legacy' of modernity, in other words postcolonial modernity, cannot be de-reified, can it be made more homely, be somehow 'naturalised' while its apparent advantages are preserved?<sup>8</sup> Addressing this question has been the debate focused on so-called 'alternative modernities'; a debate that has taken place in the Euro-American academy, and in the Chinese academy where the idea of a specifically *Chinese* Modernity has been advanced, and posited as a good modernity.<sup>9</sup>

What is immediately pertinent to my current concern is that in the cases of both Japan and China, as in the fully territorially colonised world, Western cultural and institutional norms and forms were introduced alongside scientific and technological ones. Not only were the natural, or 'exact', sciences deployed to displace local scientific understanding of the world, but the products of cultural practices were also re-shaped and forced into foreign disciplinary categories; a simple example would be the modern Western forms of narrative: the novel, the short story. Chinese cultural practice has thus taken what was once a 'Western' path for the past century.

So when the Chinese authorities refuse Western 'values' what are we to understand, that while the form is Western the content must be Chinese? But after a century of 'modernisation', of 'Westernisation', of globalisation, what is now Chinese? Moreover, there is nothing new in this schizo-

8 See the writings of the Qinghua-based academic Wang Hui who also presented a paper at the XV EAN Workshop (Venice, 14th May 2015). See Wang 2008, 114-40.

9 The alternative modernities position was first posited and discussed in a series of turn-of-the-century special issues of the journal *Public Culture* entitled The Millennial Quartet: 1) *Alternative Modernities* ed. by Dilip Parameswar Gaonkar, *Public Culture*, 11(1), 1999; 2) *Globalization*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai, *Public Culture*, 12(1), 2000; 3) *Millennial Capitalism and Neo-Liberal Culture*, ed. by Jean and John Comaroff, *Public Culture*, 12(2), 2000; 4) *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Carol A. Beckenbridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Public Culture*, 12(3), 2000. For a summary and critique of the latter see: Harootunian 1999, 21-9.

phrenic desire to adopt Western technology to make China strong while 'preserving' an essential Chineseness. It was at the heart of the movement that followed the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars, a movement which sought to strengthen China by adopting foreign methods in military and political organisation and in industry, and, as logically follows, in education. The strategy has been applied erratically, but surely, ever since. The result has been the China of the twenty-first century which is locked into a longer moment stretching back a century and a half which we may term the dilemma of Chinese modernity.

As to China's cultural identity, a century ago it was the identity of an élite expressed in a pre-modern language inaccessible to the majority who were largely illiterate. Culture was either local, oral and popular, or it was élite and shared across Chinese space by a class whose power depended upon it.<sup>10</sup> The creation of a 'nation-wide' or national culture depended on the bringing about of a Chinese nation, and the building of that nation demanded in turn the creation and instituting of a 'national' homogenised language and modern culture. It is that new national language that it is the business of China's Confucius Institute network to disseminate beyond China's borders.

There can be no return to 'Chinese values'. There can be no dereification of a century and half of change. A return to 'authentic' Chinese culture would mean a return to a minority culture practiced by an élite, and to local cultures practiced in local languages. National Chinese culture is irredeemably modern. However, there can be, and has been, a false 'return' to Chinese values, to a political logic, the overthrow of which Chen Duxiu demanded a century ago. Confucian 'values', not for the first-time in Chinese history, have been redeployed and reinvented to reinforce and support totalitarian forms of power both in China and in other Chinese-speaking states such as Singapore.

There is a central question here regarding cultural practice, and whether it could and should be subtracted from the set of globalised practices that are now common to the whole world. Should the former colonised world keep the technology and 'return' to an Ur local culture, or even to a reinvented one?

In the twentieth-first century, what is known as 'culture' is instrumentalised to identitarian ends, as has been the case in the past with tragic consequences. It is so in China, it is so in Europe. Such instrumentalisation pertains to a politics founded on invented cultural identities, nationalised and even supra-nationalised identities. For instance, the French government exploits the French language hoping to maintain and extend its influence in the francophone world, and more broadly in the latino-

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10 See Johnson, Nathan, Rawski 1985, *passim*; Rawski 1979, 8-20,

phone world. China propagates a myth of an 8,000-year-old homogeneous 'national' culture and attempts to exploit and extend a sinophone sphere of influence.

But for a language to be exploited, it needs first to exist, and the great revolution that was needed to bring China into line with other nation states was seen to be the invention of a standard modern Chinese language. Words were invented, equivalences found, literary categories remapped to conform with Western epistemology. A new poetry, a new idea of the novel were invented, and regional theatrical practices replaced with this strange Western drama form where the actors only talked, did not sing, and where the audience could not clap, drink tea or eat snacks during the performance.<sup>11</sup> Let us take the 'novel' form as an illustration. While Western sinologists have fallen into the habit of retrospectively referring to pre-20th-century *xiaoshuo* 小說 as 'Chinese novels', Cyril Birch himself advises us that "the category novel as such may be inappropriate... prior to the twentieth century".<sup>12</sup> The appearance of the novel in the Western sense was a product of the familiarity with foreign novels - including much middle-brow fiction such as the adventures Sherlock Holmes and Jules Verne's science fiction novels - translated into the literary language towards the end of the nineteenth-century. Although short fiction started to be written in the modern vernacular in the late '10s, notably by Lu Xun 魯迅, the first full-length novels in the national language only started to appear in the second half of the '20s and in the early '30s.<sup>13</sup>

**11** Before the twentieth-century there was no word for 'novel'. The expression *xiaoshuo* 小說, literally 'small talk', referred to the 'popular' narrative, what seemed to be an 'entertainment' genre that was held in contempt by the scholar class who, at least overtly, preferred the genres of refined prose and poetry; fiction "no doubt belonged to a minor tradition rather than the central élite culture of historiography, philosophical prose, and lyric verse" see Birch 1977, x.

**12** Birch 1977, xi. It was only with the advent of Western epistemology that the terms 'novel' or *changpian xiaoshuo* 長篇小說 literally 'long-length fiction' and 'short story' *duanpian xiaoshuo* 短篇小說 'short-length fiction' were coined; there was also the *zhongpian xiaoshuo* 中篇小說 'middle-length fiction', often translated into English as 'novella', and occasionally as 'nolette'. Types of modern, national-language fiction were thus classified according to length.

**13** Lu Xun's short story "Kuangren riji" 狂人日記 was written in April 1918. However, while Lu Xun was writing in the vernacular, this was not quite the National Language. Moreover, he did not adopt a modern narrative style. For example, Charles Alber sees the 1922 "A Q [阿Q]" as "a contemporary parody of the traditional story script". Not all the conventions are there, but some are, and this is the only story that Lu Xun [魯迅] wrote in serial form. Here again, however, A Q is the exception, and the *wenyan* [文言] (literary language) influence on Lu Xun's works seems to predominate. See Semanov 2017, xxii-iii. For the translated stories of Lu Xun see Yang, Gladys (1973). *Silent China. Selected Writings of Lu Xun*. London; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Soon China had two cultures, or at least two cultural imaginaries, a new modern Westernised culture heralded by the 4 May Movement's call for Science and Democracy and an older culture that was declared obsolete. The advent of the Communist regime did not halt this process, rather its trenchant dismissal of the old advanced it.

Thus, like so much else that has been learnt and borrowed in modern China, the linguistic and cultural practices of today's China are not simply leg's of a table, they are now part of the wood that the table is made from. When we start interrogating the integrity of cultural categories, they fall apart. As for the spoken language, as we have seen, the new national language drew on the former *lingua franca* of officialdom itself based on colloquial language spoken in the northern half of the dynastic territories. It was a language known as *guanhua* 官話, literally 'official talk', or what in English we call Mandarin.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese language promoted by Confucius institutes today is not 'authentic' or 'genuine' nor is it 'millenary' or 'eternal'. What is promoted is a recently invented nation-state normalised official language. Indeed, the modern standard Chinese language is a *lingua franca* that has failed to represent the linguistic and cultural and historical diversity of the space we now call China. Nevertheless, the language promoted abroad serves to present China as a homogeneous whole, it is as deceptive as the word 'Chinese' itself.

China today is as locked into the global technic-economic system as is Europe; and it has been so for some considerable time. The notion that China's identity can now be preserved or resuscitated by the promotion of an identitarian cultural politics, that even its own intellectuals largely regard as sterile, is illusory.

China in the post-Deng era, has integrated fully not only the world economy but the whole gamut of the world's spectacular circus: tennis championships, the Shanghai Formula 1 Grand Prix, the Miss World beauty competition, and let us not forget its hosting of the 2008 Olympic games.<sup>15</sup>

In my book *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers. Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others*, I analysed at length the integration and negotiation of Western cultural and artistic practices in twentieth-century China. Even if the epistemology remained Western, there

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<sup>14</sup> There is no such things as written Mandarin, a common error of understanding amongst foreigners. Nevertheless, written Chinese, increasingly resembles written-down Mandarin or standard spoken Chinese. Nanjing Mandarin served "as the dialectal base of the *lingua franca*" from the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and "Beijing Mandarin from the second half of the nineteenth century onward... There was no attempt at codification or standardisation of the *lingua franca* as a standard form of spoken Chinese for the general public. It was not taught at school... The number of people who attained any degree of proficiency in it was minimal in areas of southern dialects" (Ping Chen 2008, 202-3).

<sup>15</sup> In 2007 Zhang Zilin 张梓琳 became the first PRC Miss World, and in 2012 Yu Wenxia 于文霞 the second.

were always attempts at adaptation and nuances introduced in the process of intertextuality, resulting in a more or less creatively imaginative hybridity. But, despite the recent campaign against 'Western values', China's current participation in these 'ludo-economic' spectacular global events reveal no attempt at mitigating, modifying or negotiating Western practices and institutions, no attempt to sinify or even hybridise. Indeed, China is now fully integrated into economic, technological, spectacular global modernity.

If China is now charged with turning the handle of the barrel organ, who made it? If I use the metaphor of the barrel-organ it is because it seems to best sum up China's predicament today. China is now at the controls of a system that emits a music according to a pre-established programme. It is a closed system in which the 'musician' produces a programmed melody, where the only variable the organ-grinder can introduce is the speed at which the handle is turned.

The repetition, the stability, the inevitability of the barrel organ is akin to the system which subjugates and dominates us all in the modern world, the 'technological system'. More complex than a simple barrel-organ, the system nevertheless, reveals itself through the interdependence of its components, through its generalisation and through its acquired stability; the system seems so stable, widespread and entrenched that there is no way to reverse it.<sup>16</sup> The handle carries on being turned and the one now turning it is China.

The technological system having now become global and generalised, China finds itself responsible for turning the handle for all of us. This is the historical logic resulting from 19th- and 20th-century colonialism, from the colonisation of China by Western science and the ideology of Versailles, and from China's élite's embracing of this course as the only means of survival and regeneration.

For the past two decades we have been talking of China's rapid change. But what seems to be an acceleration, a speeding-up, in infrastructural development over the past twenty years, this 'rapid change', is merely a result of "normal foreseeable and an almost linear consequence of prior mutation". The concept of 'rapid change', as Ellul says, is just a distraction (Ellulm 2012, 100).

China's attachment to the 'Science' that has led to the present technological system dates from its humiliation during the mid-19th-century Opium Wars. The sudden consciousness of China's military technological, especially maritime, 'backwardness' jolted a part of China's ruling élite to initiate reform initiatives in favour of Westernisation and 'self-reinforcement' 洋務運動, 自強運動, efforts renewed by the Reform Move-

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16 Jacques Ellul, *Le Système technicien*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1977; le Cherche Midi, 2012, 93.

ment of 1898, and confirmed in the post-Versailles 4 May Movement of 1919.<sup>17</sup> Thus while Deng Xiaoping's post-1978 reforms reconnected China to, and reinforced the logic of, the imitation of the Western technic-economic model, they did not constitute its starting point. However, the national wealth created by the reforms, that were re-launched after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, have supplied the conditions of economic growth which have allowed the expansion of the technological system. Thus, China's élite's dream of being part of this system stretches back to the 19th century.

From the point, in the '80s, when China re-boarded the moving train of this technological system it was condemned to imitate, repeat and finally overtake the West, and to take over the handle of the barrel-organ. However, this 'over-taking' is illusory. The fact that sensational technological discoveries will be made in China and no longer in the West is without consequence. That Chinese taikonauts will be the first humans to set foot on Mars and not American astronauts is unimportant. Both will be a consequence of China turning the handle of a machine invented in, and supplied by, the West, a "reasonable and normal consequence" as Ellul would say, of 'what already exists (2012, 100).

More than thirty years ago, Jacques Ellul analysed China's modern political history and the then Chinese authorities' policies and foresaw the technic-economic *and* political course of the subsequent three decades thus:

The technical as both model and ideology has borne its first fruits in the notable quality of young Chinese scientists and technologists whom we host now in the West where they come to hone their skills and find their feet... The current [ideological] orientation is in line with reality. But it also expresses this reality, that the technical has finally vanquished the revolutionary model of Chinese communism. This interpretation allows us to avoid a frequent error that has gained momentum over the past three years [since 1979]. All the French newspapers talk of the 'liberalization of the regime'. Whereas, I believe that this is a fundamental misconception. The commentators who take this position are always surprised when we are witness to people who stick up *dazibao* are arrested, suppressions of student or workers' demonstrations... Each time they write of 'a brake on liberalization'. But it is a nonsense. There never was any liberalization and the new political tendency has nothing to do with liberty. There is a transition from a system where revolutionary ideology held sway over technical efficiency to a system

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17 This historical narrative is one to which pro-government theoreticians gladly adhere. See Yu Keping 2012 ([http://en.theorychina.org/xsqy\\_2477/201306/t20130611\\_270481.shtml](http://en.theorychina.org/xsqy_2477/201306/t20130611_270481.shtml)).

where the desire for technical growth effaces revolutionary ideology. The technical at any price and 'efficiency first' have nothing to do with liberalization.<sup>18</sup>

Had China-watchers, journalists and academics read Ellul, it might have dramatically reduced their need to consume of humble-pie over the subsequent period. Of course, a number of appointed, as well as self-appointed, China specialists have still not tasted the pie.

However, writing in 1982, Ellul did not, or would not, foresee the sea-change that was taking place in the global politics and its economic and geopolitical. He foresaw China transforming its people into an 'advanced industrial proletariat' through industrialisation and technology which, despite his clarity regarding the absence of political change, he thought might lead to a new revolution Ellul whose writings did so much to inspire the ecological movement, saw as inevitable China's being obliged to enthusiastically engage in the technological system. Ellul understood the dilemma of China, but could not predict its political outcome. Surprisingly, he seemed to almost welcome China's aggressive participation in the system, and he did so seeing the resultant proletariat as constituting a revolutionary potential which would oblige the system to change. But China's technological industrialisation has not led to revolution and thus to liberty, but rather to a human rights situation that is getting gradually worse, and to an increasingly ecologically catastrophic and hazardous environment.

Writing in 1996 over a decade later than Ellul, and concerned about pollution in China, Castoriadis predicted "ecological catastrophes without precedent". He continued:

And the catastrophe is much swifter than in Western countries. If we lift the Third World out of its misery it will lead to the destruction of the

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18 'La technique en tant que modèle et en tant qu'idéologie a produit ses premiers fruits dans la qualité remarquable des jeunes Chinois scientifiques et techniciens que nous recevons maintenant en Occident où ils viennent se perfectionner et se situer... L'orientation actuelle est cohérente à la réalité. Mais elle exprime aussi cette réalité, à savoir que la technique a finalement vaincu le modèle révolutionnaire du communisme chinois. Cette interprétation nous permet d'éviter une erreur très fréquente qui se développe depuis trois ans. Tous les journaux français parlent de la 'libéralisation du régime'. Or nous pensons qu'il s'agit d'une incompréhension de fond. Les observateurs partant avec cette idée sont alors tout surpris lorsque qu'on assiste à l'arrestation des gens qui affichent des dazibaos, à des répressions de manifestations étudiantes ou ouvrières... Chaque fois on écrit: 'coup de frein à la libéralisation'. Mais c'est un contresens. Il n'y a jamais eu de la libéralisation et la nouvelle tendance n'a rien à voir avec la liberté. Il y a passage d'un système où l'idéologie révolutionnaire primait le souci d'efficacité technique, à un système où la volonté de croissance technique efface l'idéologie révolutionnaire. La technique à tout prix et 'l'efficacité d'abord' n'ont rien à voir avec la libéralisation" (Ellul 2015, 227).

Earth. It is to these absurd dilemmas that the pursuit of the capitalist path condemns us.<sup>19</sup>

If, then, in hindsight Jacques Ellul's optimism over China was misplaced and Castoriadis's later foreboding a more realistic assessment of where China was heading, Ellul's global strategy, one that implies recognizing ceilings and fixing limits, nevertheless remains the only "road map of a possible future". The ceilings (pollution, depletion of resources) represent the "boundaries which human action (and technology) must set so that life remains possible". That, of course, is just a minimum. For if we are interested in creating or recreating a culture it would be necessary to go further and fix "limits that constitute the blueprint of a culture".<sup>20</sup>

During the EastAsiaNet workshop at which an initial form of this article was presented, we had the pleasure of an intervention by Professor Ignazio Musu of Ca' Foscari University entitled "Towards a Green Economy". Professor Musu, an economist, has consecrated much of his recent career to ecological questions and the issue of sustainability. He has also visited China a number of times and encountered at first hand the contradictions between state directives aimed at improving environmental conditions and the state-driven imperatives focussed on economic growth. Professor Musu talked about regulation and limits and the need to constrain growth. He talked about bottom-up civil society action being necessary to bring that about.<sup>21</sup> For that to be possible in China, a revolution in China's current culture, as well as in the rest of the world's, would need to happen. That revolution would depend on a radical reassessment of the role and the nature of science and technology in society and human activity. For, technology like science itself is not neutral, and China's espousing of the dominant world technic-economic system has brought about repercussions that are not simply social and economic, but which have resulted in devastating consequences for the environment and climate of our planet.

Science is not neutral. The very concept of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' is part of what, writing in 1961, Castoriadis referred to as the "illusion of exact sciences as historical activity outside of history". He noted that while this illusion persists the temptation to transpose 'techniques', 'methods' and 'categories' from the natural sciences to the 'historical sciences' and *human* activity will exist (Castoriadis 2009, 263-7).

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19 Castoriadis 2013, 621: 'Et la catastrophe est beaucoup plus rapide que dans les pays occidentaux. Si l'on sort le Tiers Monde de sa misère, ce sera pour détruire la Terre. C'est à ces dilemmes absurdes que condamne la poursuite de la lancée capitaliste'.

20 Ellul, *Le Système*, 305 et 305 n. 25.

21 The emergence of civil society in China has been in fact closely tied to environmentalism. On the topic, see Zhang, Joy Y.,; Barr, Michael (eds.) (2013). *Green Politics in China. Environmental Governance and State-Society Relations*. London: Pluto Press.

Science, Castoriadis reminds us, comes with a history. There is a historicity to science, the 'natural sciences', the 'exact sciences' whose ideology and place in the imaginary of human society has changed radically over the past century and a half. From science as truth in the mid-nineteenth century to science as happiness, in the '20s and '30s, to science as omnipotence in the post-World War 2 years, to science giving way to technology which offers us eternal life (see Ellul 2012, 332-7).

"The current ideology of science is an ideology of salvation". Not only do we see it as the only way forward, we also refuse to see its negative aspects. Science is the solution to all humanity's problems; this is particularly clear in health and medicine.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, for Ellul, it is this ostrich-like attitude of modern humanity that explains the failure of the ecology movement.

The destruction of rain forests to create 'virtual water' (an example of this is China's growing food on cleared land in Latin America to export back to China), the massive pollution of oceans, the blue-less skies of China's cities, do not move us to act. The public feels an overpowering sentiment of powerlessness when faced with gigantic threats, to the extent that we refuse to absorb negative information: Leave it to science, it has all the answers.

Increasingly studies on China are no longer about just China, they are about the world. This reality poses a particular problem to 'sinologists' or China specialists, since not only that we have created our object of study and observation, but for over a hundred years we have watched, and watched over, China (re)creating itself as US. And yet as sinologists we often do not want to, or are ill-equipped to, question ourselves. But now, after 30 years of so-called reforms which have turned China into a productivist and consumerist society, thirty years that have seen China driven by a need, a thirst for technology and everything else that constitutes the technological, we are unable to deny that when we are looking at China we are in fact looking at ourselves.

The realities we address today demand an academic capacity urgently to dismantle disciplinary and area studies boundaries. Unfortunately, it is a capacity that has never been pronounced. What goes for the world, what goes for humanity, goes for China too. But China's authorities propagate an image of, and to, China that they also wish to market to the world. That image is a dream:

The universe we inhabit is becoming increasingly a dreamed universe, since the society of the spectacle is changing gradually into the society of the dream. This is brought about by the diffusion of spectacles of all

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22 Ellul 2012, 339: "L'idéologie actuelle de la science est une idéologie du Salut".

sorts which we ask the spectator to internalize, but also brought about by the maintained dream of a science which immerses us into a world as yet unknown and incomprehensible.<sup>23</sup>

But in the twenty-first century the dreamed universe has *not* displaced what Guy Debord critiqued as the society of the spectacle, the show society, a consumer society in which power and politics had been assimilated to the strategies of communication, showbiz and advertising hitherto largely confined to the market place. Rather what we have witnessed is a convergence. We are now living in that post-convergent moment. To the theory of the society of the spectacle must now be added the critique of omnipotent science and technology. And whereas Guy Debord described the late twentieth-century world, in which the manner of exercising power in totalitarian societies (the concentrated spectacle) and in so-called liberal democracies (the diffuse spectacle) were converging, as the integrated spectacle, we are now faced with a further element which is the dreamed universe.

Spectacular society has not been transcended, it has mutated. The convergence perceived by Debord continues. Ideologies seemed to melt away with the twilight of the twentieth century, but in fact re-disguised themselves as other dreams. The New World Order of a post-Communist era where universal happiness, made possible by technology and paid for by capitalism, had dawned.

The American ideology seemed to have won. But that dream was of short duration. It was broken by the awakening of petty, retrograde, xenophobic, nationalist and fundamentalist dreams made possible by yet another crisis of capitalism and constructed on the ruins and dregs of the logic of a (post)colonial world order.

We now inhabit a world of seemingly different imaginaries and projected dreams; dreams as individual and collective projects. But more than ever the dreams are articulated and sustained through an assemblage of spectacles which do not seek to hide widespread human misery and planet-wide environmental catastrophe, but rather to mediate them by their integration into the daily show. We are called on to live a dream not of our own imagining. It is a dream in which words are no longer needed to stimulate the imagination; the images are provided. It is a dream articulated by an array of technological gadgets, electronic entertainments, and mediated fears and hopes.

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23 Ellul 2012, 343: 'L'univers dans lequel nous vivons devient de plus en plus rêvé, car la société du spectacle se change peu à peu en société du rêve. Ceci par la diffusion des spectacles de tous ordres dans lesquels on demande au spectateur de s'intégrer, mais aussi par le rêve entretenu d'une science qui nous plonge dans un monde encore ignoré, incompréhensible'.

We have entered the moment of the spectacular-oneiric society.

For the Golden Age Spanish dramatist Calderón de la Barca, all of life was a dream, and dreams themselves merely dreams (*toda la vida es sueño, y los sueños, sueños son.*), while for his compatriot Goya over a century later the sleep of reason produced monsters (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*) for, as the Spanish teaches us, to dream is to sleep. Out of a cultural metaphor of early modern society, the technic-economic system has produced the world as dream, a dream(ed) world. For the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China coined the slogan:

同一个世界  
同一个梦

The official translation of which was:

One world,  
One dream

China's President Xi Jinping has declared his presidency to be that of what he calls the Chinese dream, 中国梦. China is enmeshed in the logic of the technic-economic system. Its people are called on to live life as a dream, to invest in President Xi's promise of a 'China dream,' of a spectacular-oneiric society.

But the reality is that behind the blinding ideology of the technic-economic system, a sleep of reason, has produced the monstrous China nightmare of environmental disaster, and social misery.

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Was what is now happening to China avoidable? Perhaps, but only if other choices had been made sixty, one hundred, one hundred and fifty years ago. What we are witness to now, is the product of the postcolonial nationalist road to salvation to which the logic of Versailles gave rise. But the inevitability of China's and Japan's being enclosed in this logic was already embedded in the imaginary of their intellectual élites at the end of the nineteenth, and the beginning of the twentieth-century. Embedded in Chen Duxiu's 1919 slogan of Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy, was the roadmap to today's China. Mr Democracy never reared his head, except perhaps in a confused way in the '80s, and Democracy or no, the technic-economic outcome would have been the same.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Let us also recall that what happened in Japan and then in China and in the territorially colonised world, that is the reorganisation of knowledge, the epistemological revolutions, the denigration of local knowledges, of what E.P. Thompson called 'common sense', had also occurred earlier in the West resulting in the kind of human upheaval, alienation and misery we now see in China's recently urbanised new proletariat.

China's failure to realise that half of Chen's sloganised ambition that was 'Democracy', is in part explained by the success of the other half, 'Science'. Science never needed democracy to flourish. The one was not predicated upon the other; the failure of the post-Communist world to shed totalitarian ways has demonstrated as much. But while science and technology may not need freedom to advance, cultural creativity craves it. While China has been capable of imitating the Western technic-economic model, its officially sanctioned art and culture has clearly failed to impress beyond its borders. Since the beginning of the 20th century hegemonic cultural production has favoured and represented the reinvention of an industrialised technological power, of the march towards sovereignty through the emulation of Western modernity.

We may go so far as to say that the official literature and culture of the Communist era has functioned as an instrument of the post-colonial poisoned chalice insofar as it has shaped, negotiated and represented the post-Versailles ideology which has led to China's transformation into a major agent of the world technic-economic system. But alongside that dominant cultural production there has always existed a current that has engaged in the critique of that system. And when, as has often been the case during most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cultural creativity has been suppressed and censored it has resulted in a critical, dissident cultural discourse, for where there is oppression and censorship, there will be resistance and dissent as surely as night follows day.

Rather than imitate and laud the technic-economic system, unofficial modern Chinese creativity has drawn on the West's, and China own, critical traditions to create alternative cultural modernities of contestation. This parallel creativity in poetry, fiction, film and artistic practice is at odds with the spectacular-oneiric vision that is the official China dream.

This disjuncture explains why China's recent cultural diplomatic policy initiatives have failed, and why Western and other Asian visions of the dreamed universe remain hegemonic. Official American, French, German, British, Spanish and other cultural diplomacies are supported by alternative spectacular cultural diplomacies of a modern global dream represented by Hollywood, Disney, the Cannes Festival, film-stars, singers and sports stars. These cultures offer an exotic to the consumer which often foregrounds the new, the innovative, the culturally vibrant and the cosmopolitan. Asian alternative cultural diplomacy has also been extremely powerful in this respect: Japanese manga and video games, Korean TV series and K-Pop, Indian cinema and Thai cinema are the most spectacular examples.

China has given the world a cultural diplomatic initiative named after Confucius, a name that evokes a millenary order, stability and obedience. This strategy of promoting an exotic that is backward-looking, out of step with today's technic-cultural realities, and that excludes its most influ-

ential living artists and creative talent, means not only that the policy is ineffectual, it is counter-productive.

The idea that Chinese Modernity can be different if it re-constructs itself within an identitarian cultural capsule, if it 'reserves' itself a 'Chinese' cultural space, if it models itself on the supposed Japanese example of a supposedly specific form of modernity, is really to misunderstand the nature of the historical processes that have unfolded and to misunderstand the reality of the dangers facing humanity. The 2011 disaster at Fukushima was not a problem of a specifically *Japanese* modernity, but of a global industrial modernity in which technology has been given the upper hand.

It is as if there were a psycho-social schizophrenia that had gripped China's authorities. On the one hand they invest in and promote a Western technic-economic model, while on the other they implement a culturally conservative policy aimed at producing a hermetic, cultural and academic system to constrain 'Westernness' to the technical sphere.

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Is there a way out of this limit-less system into which nineteenth-century and twentieth-century colonialism has led the world? Perhaps, because the system is faulty, and within this faultiness lies hope. We see in today's China the imperfections and the misfirings of the system: the high speed trains that derail for lack of respect for security provisions, buildings and bridges that collapse because built by non-qualified personnel or because the concrete has been watered down, cruise ships that capsize because warning signs are ignored. There are other obstacles and brakes on the system: the inability of institutions to move forward at the same speed, and then there is the widespread social contestation of labour. However, without China, humanity cannot retreat from the abyss. In large part, it falls to China, colonized by, and currently the agent of, the system to create a new culture, and to do so by setting 'willed-for limits'. The unlimited is incapable of founding and constituting a new culture, or a person. 'It is by establishing limits that humans institute themselves as human'.<sup>25</sup>

Without China's cooperation, even if the rest of the world co-opted for the path of ungrowth, the nightmare would continue. The 37 Chinese nuclear power reactors in operation, the 20 under construction, and those about to start construction, present not only a mortal danger for China's people but for China's neighbours also.<sup>26</sup>

25 "Ce n'est pas l'illimité qui peut en rien fonder et constituer une culture, ni une personne... C'est en établissant des limites volontaires que l'homme s'institue homme" (Ellul 2012, 305 n. 25).

26 See World Nuclear Association's website <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/country-profiles/countries-a-f/china-nuclear-power/>. I was reminded of our nationalist vision of

If China's people wish to re-route their future, if they wish to live and not just survive, then they will have to fix limits. Such a move would constitute a response, albeit belated, to the 'progress' proffered by the global system: imperialism, colonialism, Americanisation, and globalisation.

Such a course is not impossible. Once again, what has occurred in the West, will occur, is already occurring, in China: a shift in opinion consisting in "disappointment, fear, and questioning", a "widespread revolt"<sup>27</sup> of workers against efficiency and the subordination of labour to yield" (Ellul 2012, 304). In China on a daily basis there are demonstrations and minor rebellions against the system, and at the individual level, suicides in the face of inhumane working conditions are common. It is at this price that China's and the world's consumers have been furnished with the electronic trinkets and toys that fill their spectacular-oneiric lives.

However, the rise of consumerist, productivist China has not only revived and prolonged capitalism for a certain period of time, it has also permitted the expansion of the technological system it feeds. At the same time China's participation in this system brings nearer the inevitable social and environmental crisis that Ellul predicted a quarter-century ago. What Ellul three decades ago resonates even louder and truer since China's leadership fully integrated the country into a system on whose super-face the cracks are legion.

China's contribution to the world's future well-being does not lie in re-inventing itself an alternative cultural modernity, nor in marketing a cultural sand-castle that crumbles in the fingers, but rather in contributing to a global conversation focussed on limits. Only then will the real issues facing the world's present and future populations be frontally addressed. Only then will the mystique of growth be interrogated and that creativity, *poiesis*, will reassert its centrality in human society. I use the word creativity, in the sense used by Castoriadis. Poiesis is the work of the artisan and the artist that is not subordinated to the constraints of subsistence. It is creation. The artist and the artisan in the post-colonial, post-industrial, ungrowth society will inevitably need to resort to a cosmopolitan bricolage, creating out of the present and the past, out of what is to hand, and out of what may come from afar. This creativity may be imbricated with new forms of culture, but it will certainly imply a new poetry, or poiesis, of

nuclear power and of the illusion of a non-global approach to stepping back from dependence on nuclear technology during a 2014 workshop on the Fukushima disaster, when a Japanese speaker suggested that Japanese civil society was now willing and ready to push for the elimination of nuclear power plants. That is all well and good, but what about the problem of Chinese civil society on the other side of the East China Sea not being able to follow suit?

27 The *China Labour Bulletin* (CLB) provides regularly updated statistics about workers' protests in the country. An interactive strike map can be consulted on CLB website at: <http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>.

daily life, the abandonment of the dreamed universe, throwing away the barrel-organ handle, and creating a new music. Only then will the sense of *techne*, as the human capacity to make and perform, be restored.

But, if change in the sense of 'ungrowth', an abandonment of current economic dogma and a restoration of the ecological balance of our environment is to be effected, then the strategy Ellul proposed in the '80s would need prompt implementation. A new music, a new imaginary, a new ideology in the best sense of the term, together with propitious intellectual and moral conditions, would be indispensable to the creation of a new human spirit. Specifically, narrow self-interest would need to be overcome, and a commonly borne frugality and 'revolutionary austerity' instituted. All in all, a profound epistemological shake-up, and a shared and global awakening from our collective dream would be required. This could only be rendered possible by a 'cultural revolution' and the institution of 'an ethics of powerlessness'.<sup>28</sup> Alluding to the doctrines espoused by Gandhi and the civil rights movement, Ellul described the spirit of 'powerlessness' as going beyond non-violence, as constituting 'the choice... not to dominate, not to exploit, and even not to use the means of power that could be available to us'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Or 'éthique de la non-puissance' in French, where the word 'puissance' also implies capacity to do and not simply the political power to do. Ellul, *Changer de révolution*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Ellul, *Changer de révolution*, 419: '[L]'esprit de Non-Puissance, qui dépasse la non-violence,...est le choix...de ne pas dominer, de ne pas exploiter, de ne pas user même des moyens de puissance que l'on pourrait avoir;"

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