

Medal Contention

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In non-peace related fields, there are Nobel Prizes and, somewhat less famously, “Ig Nobel Prizes.” A group of scientists presents the latter annually, as a joke, but also to make a point about undeserving activity in their fields. One of the winners of this year’s Nobel Prize for Physics had several years back also received an Ig Nobel Prize.

The award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo is being celebrated globally, mainly by elites who claim to know what Liu is about. They say he is for human rights and democracy, but there is more to it than that, because much of what he is about is ignoble.

When people living in authoritarian societies demand freedom of speech, they usually do so with goals in mind that go beyond just allowing everyone to have a say. Liu Xiaobo’s political and social goals have scarcely been mentioned in the current wave of adulation, yet these goals are distinctly at variance with the interests of the vast majority of Chinese, as they perceive them.

What a few people in China know about Liu, but hardly any outsiders do, is his prescription for China’s development, first made when Liu was already in his 30s. In 1988, an interviewer asked him what condition China needs to have real historical change. He answered that China needs to have 300 years of colonization, Liu attributed what Hong Kong is today to a hundred years of colonization, so China would need 300 years of colonization for it to become like Hong Kong.

That was more than two decades ago, but in 2007, Liu stated that he did not want to take back what he had said in 1988, because it reflects a belief he retains. He attributes progress in China to Westernization and has said that the more that Westernization exists in the various spheres of Chinese society, the more progress is attained. He is either woefully ignorant of the nature of colonialism, which involved legally-mandated racial discrimination and the colonizers’ political and economic monopolies, or Liu finds it a congenial alternative because he is convinced of Western superiority. This can hardly be expected to be a sentiment shared by most Chinese.

In his 2007 statement, Liu claimed that in the economic sphere, progress could be chalked up to privatization. Not surprisingly then, “Charter ’08,” a statement he mainly authored and that called for a Western-style political system in China, also urges a “free market” transfer of state-owned enterprises to private ownership and the privatization of land ownership.

Privatization in Russia resulted in a colossal robbery of public wealth by a few oligarchs. To the extent privatization has occurred in China, it has mainly enriched for-

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mer officials and has often worsened the conditions of labor. An agrarian capitalism based on landed property would have no assured benefit, but might bring back the execrable system of landlords and landless peasants. Further privatization would likely increase the already high level of inequality in China, which is why surveys show that most Chinese oppose it.

Many observers recognize that the Nobel Peace Prize is a politics prize and a morally bankrupt one at that: do something that accords with mainstream Western elite thinking about what “advances peace” and you may get a prize. Continue, for as long as you can, a war that kills thousands or even millions of civilians, as Henry Kissinger did in Indochina and Barack Obama is doing in Afghanistan, and you may still get a prize. If you attack China, the perceived potential rival of the West’s hegemon, as the Dalai Lama and Liu Xiaobo have done, your chances for a prize increase.

The Chinese government has argued that the spirit of the Nobel Peace Prize has been infringed by awarding it to one who is imprisoned for violating Chinese law. That however is beside the point. There was no need to imprison Liu and there has been no need for a binary choice between shutting him up by fiat or treating him as a hero. Rather, there has only been a need to bring to light Liu’s self-proclaimed goals. If most Chinese, especially the non-elite majority, knew about his prescribed path for China, they would turn away from him as someone with things ignoble on offer.

The world has many political prisoners; most are in fact imprisoned in countries with governments that continue to receive all manner of assistance from other countries that proclaim themselves beacons of human rights and democracy. Among those myriads languishing in prison, most want something far better for the peoples of their country than does Liu Xiaobo and are far worthier of an award because of it.