

Did Musk and Xi Forget About the Money?

What Elon's Twitter Acquisition and China's COVID policy tell us about the essence of power

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When Elon Musk took over Twitter and the platform began to tank, the stock value plummeted, and people were leaving in droves, many of us thought he was just an arrogant doofus, a parasitic man-child who became a billionaire by throwing around free money, more recently billions in government subsidies but originally, as a kid, his massive inheritance from South African diamond mines. And he is all those things, but there is also something more going on here.

The Twitter takeover, in fact, possesses an opaque but important similarity with—of all things—the Chinese government's COVID policy. If we assume that Musk's many fumbles with one of the world's largest social media platforms is nothing but a blunder, nothing but stupidity, then we miss out on an illuminating question. Which, it turns out, is the same question we miss when we assume the Chinese government's zero tolerance COVID policy is a mere example of totalitarian inclinations or a different public health culture (both of which are explanations infused with racist stereotypes).

So what on Earth connects Elon Musk to China's COVID policy? For one thing, one of Musk's other companies, Tesla, became the first foreign company to wholly own a car factory in China when they opened an assembly plant in Shanghai in 2019. The Shanghai Gigafactory is one of Tesla's largest, though it ran into problems when the government temporarily closed it down in 2020, and again in March 2022, to enforce a COVID quarantine. As the threat of new quarantines pops up, Musk might consider sending new investments to countries with weaker regulations like India. Apple, for example, is increasingly relying on India over China for iPhone production, meaning China's COVID policy is costing them foreign direct investment.

There's the similarity. A government policy causing a loss in revenue. A new corporate policy causing a plummet in stock value. Are we to judge both of these policies failures, or at the least, ineffective, because they lost money?

And that gets us to our central question: *do companies and governments in this capitalist world system exist to make money?* Is money, capital accumulation, the fundamental driving force of our world?

If it is, then both the turbulence Elon Musk has caused at Twitter and the stagnation the Chinese government has inflicted on its own economy due to its zero tolerance COVID policies have to be viewed as blunders, as they have unarguably caused a loss of economic value. However,

in both cases, we might at least entertain the possibility that such an argument is reductionist if it hides other factors and outcomes that cannot be so easily quantified.

And quantification is an angle we need to explore to be able to answer this question. Even though the vagaries of international finance make it an obscure field, economic loss is easy to measure relative to qualitative forms of evaluation. Did Twitter lose value? Did the growth rate of the Chinese economy contract? Since both of these questions can be reduced to a number and real numbers are arranged along a single dimension, meaning we can always say whether one number is more or less than another number, then yes, Twitter lost value, and yes, the Chinese economy began to grow at a slower rate. So if it's all about money, both of these policies were mistakes.

Before considering the case closed, should we be thinking about any kinds of *qualitative* as opposed to *quantitative* analysis that might illuminate the topic? After all, the knowledge systems of all the dominant institutions of our society are heavily biased in favor of quantitative and objective frameworks of thought; in fact this epistemology is central to the rationalism of the modern state and of capitalism itself, given that they allow for reproducibility and thus industrialism as both an economic and a political or war-making mode, and they allow ethical and spiritual frameworks to be subsumed into the construction of society itself, therefore making them invisible and immune to being questioned. *If you want me to explain this idea more, let me know and I'll devote some time to it in the future, but for now, let's get back to Twitter.*

What did Musk accomplish at Twitter, aside from losing unimaginably vast sums of money and showing the entire world that he's not as intelligent as he thinks he is? He has taken a huge step to create a more right-wing media environment in what might become the biggest change to the landscape since the emergence of Fox News. True, Twitter's algorithms always favored the specific content and also the controversy-seeking, baiting tactics of the Right. It is also true that conversation on Twitter was more often than not superficial and demeaning. However, we should not deny that anarchists and other anticapitalists saw Twitter as an important space for organizing and outreach. I had never been on social media my entire life, until finally around the end of 2019, when other anarchists convinced me that it did not make sense for me to spend so much time writing if I was going to avoid the platforms where writing and political analysis were actually being distributed in the current day.

And there are other corners of Twitter where emotional supportiveness, care, and mutual aid are actually the norm, spaces important in many people's lives for building safety and opportunities for healing and connection, in rejection of the ableist, trans- and homophobic, racist culture that predominates in public space.

So yes, Twitter is a hellsite, but if we so quickly forget about some of the things that brought us there, we risk missing the relevance of this moment. Musk's takeover of Twitter has enabled a fierce campaign of censorship against anarchist and other anticapitalist accounts, frequently executed by Musk himself, to such an extent that we should seriously consider that this was one of his primary motivations, *more than making money*. We already know that restoring Trump's account was a motivator for him.

Meanwhile, the centrist media has given massive coverage to the Right's "free speech" anti-censorship alibi. They continue to portray Musk as an anti-censorship figure, restoring far-Right accounts that had been banned, and they refuse to mention the accounts that Musk has been banning.

What about the Chinese government's zero-tolerance COVID policy? Obviously, shutting everything down in a neighborhood, a city, or an entire region as soon as a rise in COVID cases is detected is going to be disruptive to the economy, as when authorities closed down Tesla's Shanghai Gigafactory and so many other thousands of factories. For a while now, Chinese planners and economists internationally have figures detailing how the zero-tolerance and other regulatory policies are slowing the economy and causing unemployment to skyrocket.

It's important to mention that GDP growth is not just a metric imposed by Western observers. The Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping has made GDP growth targets a central part of their ruling strategy and their conceptualization of development. And yet, midway through the year, when it became clear they would not even meet their already reduced target of 5.5% growth, they chose to prioritize their restrictive no COVID policies.

Most countries in the world chose to allow a massive number of deaths in exchange for better economic growth. In the US, that's over 1 million deaths, a figure we don't see the media mention very often. However, the Chinese government cannot accurately be accused of humanitarianism, given that their solutions have included locking workers into their factories. In fact, their zero-tolerance COVID policy bears a striking similarity to Mao's Four Pests Campaign, which sought to drive animals like flies and sparrows to extinction as a part of the government's ambitious agricultural program. The purpose is less to save lives and more to eliminate external, natural forces capable of disrupting a rational, quantitative planning process.

A couple notes here, for accuracy. Mao is frequently lambasted for trying to eliminate sparrows, and the disastrous ecological consequences that policy had. At the same time (late '50s) and for significantly longer, the US government was trying to exterminate the wolves. Also, Western hacks and mainstream media frequently refer to socialist states as "planned economies" and NATO states as "free market economies." Though there are significant differences in the strategies of state intervention in the economy, these labels are bogus since all modern states exist on the same continuum. The US government, from the beginning but even more so since FDR, engages in substantive economic planning, deciding which sectors will get the most capital, deciding interest rates, setting targets for inflation; and the Chinese government allows and encourages a massive private sector that is more responsive to market forces.

The reason all states engage in planning, and a more accurate framework for understanding the nature of that planning, is social control.

What is social control? The Marxist I like the most told me it is a fetishistic, meaningless category. Actually, it's a necessary concept for explaining some glaring holes in Marxism itself and in any framework that sees capital accumulation as the be-all and end-all for understanding our society.

Musk's actions make sense, even though they lost him \$9 billion dollars, because like any capitalist he is worried about fundamental questions of social control that allow him to be a capitalist in the first place. The Chinese government's actions make sense because developing techniques that allow a state to neutralize and surpass epidemics would greatly increase that state's planning powers, and even if they fail they are testing and amplifying their arsenal of social control techniques, and *social control is the fundamental concern of any state and thus the fundamental concern of capitalism*, being an economic system entirely dependent on state power.

In this context it is worth noting that the Chinese government decided to relax their COVID policy not in early July, when they were forced to choose that policy over their economic growth targets, but at the end of November, when mass protests bordering on insurrection against the

policy broke out. The policy got in the way of economic accumulation: they stuck to it. The policy got in the way of social control: they abandoned it.

Academically trained Marxists are going to be biased in favor of a quantitative analysis, like seeing capital accumulation as the fundamental force in our society, for the same reasons that all our dominant institutions are biased in favor of quantitative analysis. A qualitative analysis is not reproducible, and the modern state needs access to reproducible sciences.

This seems like a contradiction to claim that the state is fundamentally motivated by a qualitative science, like social control, and yet constantly in need of a quantitative science like capital accumulation. In fact, this contradiction traces a tense balance, a relation, that has come to shape the entire planet in these last centuries. The fundamental truth of the State is social control, an existential war waged by centralized power against all life. And the most effective motor the State has ever developed to fuel its war is not a winning religion, it's not a more streamlined process for the transfer of power, it's economic accumulation. Before capitalism, states were exponentially weaker, frequently overthrown by the societies they tried to dominate, even when state and society shared the hierarchical culture produced by patriarchy and organized religion.

Capitalism, which requires the enclosure of the commons and the alienation of all life, cannot exist without the planning and war-making powers of the State. And once capitalism emerged, created in a continuum by the Italian city-states, the Castillian-Aragonese state, and finally in its modern form by the Dutch state, it bestowed the states that adopted it with such power that henceforth it became the duty of every government on the planet to embrace capitalism, lest they be overwhelmed by those that already had. This sheds light on one of the reasons that colonialism spread in such a rapid wave, especially where there were already states that could be instrumentalized in the conquered territories. And it helps explain why socialism, by not rejecting the state, was fully absorbed by capitalism in the early 20th century, and why all Marxist-inspired states are fully capitalist, fully colonial, and every bit as imperialist as their geopolitical circumstances allow them to be.

Capital accumulation is a necessary motor for the state; it is also a favored metric for a quantitative science of power. Given that accumulation is a result of oppressive, exploitative processes and it cannot happen without the domination of society and nature, high rates of accumulation are generally a good indicator that state power is firmly ensconced, that the State is winning its war against life. Still, the fundamental question is that of social control. Many capitalists, as specialists, will lose sight of this as they become obsessed with their numbers game, but in the end it's just a game, a highly useful game, and when push comes to shove, questions of social war will always be more important for the institutions of power. The trick for them is to make sure that seeking capital accumulation and seeking social control always go hand in hand, rather than entering into contradiction.

As for anticapitalist movements, we lose sight of the social war at our own risk. The reasons for this are multiple. Marxism's predictive power regarding the development of the revolution is nil, displaying a profound lack of understanding of what revolution actually means. Attempts to combine materialist with geopolitical analysis, as with Giovanni Arrighi's development of world systems theory (on the whole an illuminating theoretical framework) also demonstrate their inaccuracy and disconnection from living history wherever they focus too heavily on quantitative questions of capital accumulation, a weakness explored in Alex Gorrión's "Anarchy in World Systems." These are not just obscure questions relating to debates from past centuries, given how academic, materialist-oriented journals and discussion groups continue to falsify the history of

revolutionary struggle as we live it, claiming, for example, that the major uprisings of the past two decades have occurred as a result of the crisis of accumulation, when in fact the uprisings preceded the manifestation of that crisis and have occurred in countries experiencing polar opposite moments in the kinds of crises capitalism constantly produces.

(I shouldn't have to provide this rebuttal, but alas, experience tells me I do: it is intellectually dishonest and a waste of everyone's time to start off by claiming that rebellion is "produced" by a specific quantitative crisis in accumulation, to then be shown that in fact rebellions are occurring in completely different economic circumstances—the crises associated with growth, the crises associated with recession, the crises associated with inflation—and then to double back around and claim that one's original argument was that crisis produces rebellion. Given that capitalism is a constant string of crises, this is a meaningless statement with nothing predictive or scientific about it, and it sets up the dishonest strawman that non-materialists believe that rebellions come out of thin air, in no way a response to their surroundings.)

Time and again, the first sign of crisis that materialists notice is the rebellion itself, meaning they are rarely on the front lines. Those who are more present tend to be those who decide to fight back even if objective conditions are supposedly unfavorable.

For our survival, we need to understand the ways the State is designing a constant war against us, and always has been, and always will be. For our liberation, we need to understand unquantifiable life, abundance without capital, and we need to develop an intelligence for a kind of struggle that also subverts the logic of warfare. A collective sight that can perceive the battlefield but destroy the opposing army by moving sideways, by burrowing, by climbing into the trees, by turning the battlefield back into a field, a forest, a community.

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