



Document III
Year I
English version.

OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS CHALLENGES

www.cescos.org
[@CenterCescos](https://twitter.com/CenterCescos)
Centercescos@gmail.com

The “Shackled Leviathan” and the “Despotic Leviathan” in action: Taiwan and mainland China in the face of the coronavirus

Pedro Isern

(Director, CESCOS, Center for the Study of Contemporary Open Societies)

How has mainland China reacted to the coronavirus outbreak? It has done so like a typical dictatorship: first, it denied it and punished those who, like the ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, informed about the appearance of an unprecedented sanitary problem. Secondly, it implemented a repressive, authoritarian and violent top-down strategy. Thirdly, it clearly manipulated numbers, like all dictatorships do, of every issue, at every moment, and in every place. Although they tried to manipulate and hide information, the virus erupted in mainland China in November-December 2019, registering 80,967 cases to date (March 20, 2020) and 3,248 deaths. Meanwhile, Taiwan has registered 135 cases and one death. The global number of cases is 253,933, with 10,407 deaths.¹

How has Taiwan reacted to the pandemic? It has done so with a clear public policy and state role. It did not manipulate information and it complemented top-down decisions with incentives to generate bottom-up solutions, in other words, from civil society towards the state apparatus. For example, the New York Post has informed that “Students at an elementary school in the southern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung have found their own unique way to fight the coronavirus and stay ahead of the curve in epidemic prevention – an automated disinfectant dispenser built from Lego...Children ranging from six to 12 years old use every school break and any chance they can get to line up to use their self-built alcohol disinfectant robot that some of their peers have assembled under the guidance of their robotics coach. “Washing hands is super,” shouts a recorded voice after the dispenser senses a pair of hands in front of its ultrasonic sensor and dispenses alcohol disinfectant from a spray bottle by pulling back its handle with a motor and gearwheel mechanism.”

Using a comparative perspective, we notice very different outcomes of typical demands on elementary and middle schools in Asian societies (such as Taiwan’s and mainland China’s). In Taiwan’s case, students contribute to innovation; they are not afraid of the government if they fail. Whereas in mainland China, young students’ failure while creating proposals to face the crisis (this one or any other) could be perceived by the authoritarian authorities as a form of conspiracy. Students in mainland China are afraid to publicly innovate because their failure will not be perceived as part of a learning process, but as part of a possible conspiracy process and, consequently, they may suffer some type of repression. On the other hand, as shown in this article on Taiwan, youngsters experience mistakes and failure as a virtuous part of the learning process. We do not know if the “automated disinfectant dispenser” will be an efficient way of dealing with the virus, but we do know that nobody will perceive a possible failure as a conspiracy and, furthermore, we know that both civil society and the state apparatus will celebrate the passion for innovation.

¹ - Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

How do the state apparatus and civil society deal with a pandemic? The state apparatus favors the collective aspect over the individual aspect; that is to say, it favors the alleged collective good over the individual good. Civil society, on the other hand, places the collective and individual good on equal footing. This is an adequate lens with which to note the profound differences that exist between how the governments of Taiwan and mainland China have dealt with the coronavirus crisis. The mainland regime has used repression and manipulation of information to favor the collective over the person. In other words, in its strategy of containment of the virus, the mainland regime has defined the individual as a potential threat. On the other hand, the government of Taiwan has summoned civil society to design the strategy to fight the pandemic. Although it is a vital public health issue, in which the government of Taiwan has determined the steps to follow, the role of civil society is paramount in the quest for innovation. Innovation is a key element societies use to face uncertainty. By involving civil society as part of the solution and not part of the problem, Taiwan has generated a virtuous cycle of trust insofar that, as mentioned, the state apparatus does not perceive conspiracies in people's potential mistakes as they try to develop innovative strategies to deal with different challenges like, in this case, the coronavirus.

On the other hand, in mainland China, the authoritarian reaction to the crisis makes individual attempts at offering solutions be perceived as threats. This has been seen in the case of the deceased ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, who informed his contacts on Wechat (something similar to WhatsApp that is used in China) of the existence of a new virus. This action was immediately perceived by the regime as a conspiracy and not as an individual, spontaneous initiative that had information and prevention purposes, meant to help his community. Information is a key input in open societies and, also, in closed societies. Sharing transparent information is a necessary condition for innovation and it creates a virtuous cycle that generates trust in open societies, even when attempts to innovate fail. That is to say, sharing the responsibility of a hypothetical failure is possible when there is trust between the civil society and the state apparatus. On the other hand, in closed societies, crises deepen vicious cycles of mistrust because the person is always a problem (in this particular situation, the individual is a problem because he or she is a vector or transmitter of the virus). If civil society's attempts at innovation fail, they will be perceived as an attempt of the opposition to destabilize the regime. The person who, like Dr. Li Wenliang, thinks and acts outside established rules, is perceived not as someone who wants to innovate in order to help, but as a destabilizing agent and, thus, a threat.

However, the Li Wenliangs of Taiwan are not only allowed but celebrated. Moreover, they encourage the Li Wenliangs not only within the medical and scientific communities but also within the whole civil society. For example, as mentioned above, they stimulate school children to think outside traditional standards. As La Nación's newspaper analyst, Inés Capdevila, states, "Social distancing, mandatory and observed isolation, extended quarantines, state of the art technology, information transparency and massive testing are the key ingredients in the two success recipes against the coronavirus to date: Taiwan and South Korea... both of them prevented and contained it successfully. South Korea carries out 20,000 tests a day and has

developed an app that informs every citizen of the transmission rate at their location. Today, this country, which has a death rate of 0.7% (low), registered more cured cases than infected ones. On the other hand, at the beginning of January, Taiwan targeted all its technology towards fast detection and strict isolation (it was the first to cut bonds with China) and thus contained the outbreak. Today (March 13, 2020), it only has 49 registered cases and one death. It is true that both have a past experience to learn from: the Sars epidemic of 2002 and 2003, which also originated in China, infected thousands and killed dozens in both countries. Thanks to this experience, Taipei and Seoul redesigned their health and biotechnology infrastructure.”²

In their fascinating recent book titled “The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty”(Penguin Pres, 2019), Acemoglu and Robinson make a point that delves deeper into stability in a moment in time of a “Despotic Leviathan”(mainland China) vs a “Shackled Leviathan” (Taiwan). Their theoretic framework shows us that the advance of what it public, in order to be virtuous, must go hand in hand with a growing interaction with civil society. This has happened in Taiwan, where the success in containing the virus is a shared responsibility among the state and civil society. It has not occurred in mainland China, where the alleged success in containing the virus will result in a stronger “Despotic Leviathan” versus a civil society that emerges from these circumstances even more controlled, more scared, and more penetrated by a repressive apparatus.

To date (March 16, 2020), both mainland China and Taiwan have been successful at containing the virus. However, on the mainland, the repressive state apparatus has been strengthened, whereas the civil society has been weakened and intimidated. Meanwhile, the success at containing the virus in Taiwan has strengthened the “Shackled Leviathan” – it has strengthened both the state apparatus and the civil society. The difference between one experience and the other is substantial but not evident. Making it evident and explicit is a possible and reasonable task for the near future. As Acemoglu and Robinson assert, the building of trust between the state and society is a necessary condition for well-being. This is so because it cannot be planned by the actors that are involved.

Are democracies or dictatorships more efficient at dealing with emergencies? Is there a trade-off in extreme situations between greater efficiency and less respect for individual rights? These two questions are trick questions – the trap lies in the definition of efficiency. What is an efficient solution to a problem? Finding a solution at all costs or finding a solution while respecting people’s rights and liberties? This is a good opportunity to rethink the definition of efficiency in terms of the coronavirus crisis, but also in terms of our own understanding of the meaning of the last 30 years’ unprecedented global prosperity.

2 - Source: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/el-coronavirus-arrasa-pero-hay-algunas-razonesnid2343260>

Why do we assume there is an economic and sanitary cost in respecting individual rights, and we do not think about the human and ethical cost that is linked to solving a delicate sanitary issue without respecting individual rights? We must point out that in the West, certain situations in which human rights must be respected are viewed as a cost. However, at the same time, we accept that in dictatorships such as China's we do not consider the systematic violation of human rights (which often entail deaths) to achieve economic –or in this case sanitary- goals as a (blatant) cost. We know that respecting human rights (for example, labor costs) generates costs, but we systematically underscore the “Chinese economic miracle” and its resulting prosperity without considering the human cost it has entailed. The hidden cost of the Chinese miracle not only includes an economic element but also a moral element. Furthermore, this moral cost is not only the Chinese dictatorship's but, mainly, ours. It is us, the inhabitants of the prosperous West, who have not considered that the economic benefit of a growing China carries an intolerable human cost.

Facing mainland China, we have the Republic of China in Taiwan. It is a democracy where human rights are respected and the economy grows while generating real prosperity. Real versus false prosperity is an issue of our time. The current comparative experiences of China and Taiwan are useful to highlight this key point: it is not true that the cost of high economic growth is the limit on freedoms and the violation of human rights. It is not true that Westerners must accept that “there are other cultures” where “rights are valued differently” and where there is a collective sense that overruns the individual one, and therefore, it is legitimate to drive economic growth at any cost. Concurrently, in this global sanitary context, it is not true that it is tolerable to look for solutions to the problem and confine the spread of the virus at all costs, especially because it entails the brutal use of police force and the violation of basic human rights. Taiwan shares the same culture, tradition, history and customs as those who have brought about the alleged “economic miracle” in mainland China and yet, on the island, they have not had to violate human rights to carry out another economic miracle. In this case, it is a real miracle because prosperity is real when a person can choose how to live his or her life and not when, as with the false prosperity of mainland China, growth comes at a person's cost, even at the cost of that person's survival.

The last two decades have been outstanding for prosperity but in many cases disappointing for freedom. Why? Because many of us have accepted that there is a possibly legitimate relationship between high growth and repression. Many of us think there is a trade-off in emerging economies (taking mainland China's experience as an example) that is fatally inevitable: poor countries need order to escape poverty and we have accepted that 1) if we want full respect of human rights, we have to settle for a mediocre economic performance or 2) if we want economic growth, we have to settle for an imposed authoritarian order which, if necessary, will be repressive. This new common sense that prevails has been a unique and silent victory for the Chinese capitalist dictatorship and, to a great degree, the West has accepted it or at least not challenged it.

However, the Taiwanese experience easily refutes this false discursive construction of the Chinese dictatorship and its allies around the world: it is not true that there is a trade-off in emerging countries between greater economic growth and the need for repression or weakening of the rule of law. It is not true that in lower income or lower-middle income countries respect for human rights entails an economic cost that will make those countries less competitive in the global market. Taiwan refutes mainland China in every sense, more so regarding the prevailing and false belief that holds that there are cultural and transcendental issues in Confucianism that make the individual an irrelevant actor in a life that only makes sense collectively. There is no single expression of the idea of community in Asia, and the Taiwanese experience shows that within Chinese culture, the respect for individual rights coexists with both an idea of community that differs from the West's and economic growth. The success of the Taiwanese experience challenges the alleged exceptional nature of mainland China's growth model.

The unequal distribution of income is one of the main worries that have contributed to the current unrest in complex societies. A point that is repeated over and over is that the opening of mainland China's trade as of 1978 has brought about a 10% annual economic growth, a decrease in poverty, and an inevitable deepening of inequality due to the appearance of a class of incredibly wealthy people who are obviously linked to the Communist Party. The explanation we have heard over the last two decades is that the impressive growth in inequality has been an unintended but inevitable consequence of a successful model. The Gini index in China reached 0.46 in 2016 and a recent study mentioned by Professor Osvaldo Rosales (author of a book titled "The Chinese Dream") states that it could reach an unprecedented 0.56, a catastrophic indicator. However, Taiwan has experienced a significant economic growth and the income distribution reflects a Gini index of 0.32 (2012), that is, a much more equal distribution. Why? The income distribution in mainland China and Taiwan is yet another myth that we must challenge.