

COMMENTARY

No Winners in Nobel Saga

By David Gosset

Updated: 2010-12-10 13:42

The 2010 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to jailed Chinese activist Liu Xiaobo has certainly become an international cause célèbre, but it is also a sad paradox, a prize without any real winner which generates mistrust and perplexity when understanding and clarity are most needed.

On a highly sensitive issue – a person is deprived of liberty, living moral and intellectual authorities have spoken, governments are divided –, two axioms have to be reaffirmed. Given the level of interdependence which links China and the world, neither conflict nor separation are acceptable options between the two, our discourses and actions have to be subordinated to the ideal of complementary, synergy and harmony. Obviously, many would like to see a radically different China before it fully integrates the world system on Western terms, one supports another historical course: a modernizing China will choose to be cooperative as a stakeholder of an upgraded global governance. What follows derives from these two postulates.

In a witty op-ed for the *New York Times*, Yoni Brenner played, one year ago, with a



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Norwegian word, “thorbjorn”, a term he coined in a reference to the chairman of the Nobel Peace Prize committee Thorbjorn Jagland. The commentator aimed to capture with this neologism the combination of awkwardness, incredulity and embarrassment which followed the decision to honor American President Barack Obama after 8 months of office in the White House. If one adds to the “thordjorn” feeling a sense of regrettable inadequacy, one depicts the mood which dominates in large segments of the Chinese society after the 2010 announcement.

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misrepresentation of the most significant story of our time, the Chinese renaissance. By awarding the prize to Liu Xiaobo as it did in the past to Von Ossietzky, Lutuli, Sakharov or Aung San Suu Kyi, the committee implicitly associates post Maoist China with the Nazi era, the South African apartheid, the Soviet regime and the Burmese military rule. Such a fallacy discredits the venerable Norwegian institution.

Imagining a paralyzed Chinese society, the committee's logic envelops two invalid arguments. From a perceived, unjust, but particular dispute, they infer a general arbitrary regime, and, presupposing without nuance that the only alternative to the Western liberal democracy – which can never generate injustice! – must be a totalitarian regime, they simultaneously categorize and judge the world's most populous country. The committee has convinced itself that Liu is, within a static and Manichean representation, the symbol of the radical opposition between the good and evil, while his personal situation only illustrates the contradictions and vicissitudes of China's modernization.

Former Czech President Vaclav Havel and archbishop Desmond Tutu, two moral authorities in their respective countries, explain that “this need not be a moment of insult for China” (Washington Post, October 22), but how to characterize such a magnification of a particular case combined with such a contempt



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for what has been achieved by the Chinese people during the last three decades!

Second, the committee overlooks the constraints of economic development when it assumes that a developing country of 1,4 billion inhabitants with a GDP per capita of 3700 US dollars can adopt en bloc the socio-political standards of the developed world without hindering its material progress. “Seeking the truth from the facts”, it appears that it is a mix of opening up, reforms and state control which liberated China from the faceless tyranny of poverty. Freedom from want substantiates freedom of expression and not the other way around.

Hyper affluent Norway (second highest GDP per capita in the world), populated by less than 5 million people who can rely on considerable natural resources in a relatively comfortable immediate geopolitical environment can not be more different than the gigantic and developing Chinese society, but the committee should have been able to empathize with China's unique conditions and complexities. In addition, the history of the West demonstrates that, if political ideals are easy to formulate, their implementation requires time.

Third, the choice made under the chairmanship of the former Norwegian Prime Minister and current Secretary General of the Council of Europe can be interpreted as “politicized” and anti- People's Republic of China. To a certain extent, it does regrettably

reignite an unnecessary ideological confrontation. Liu Xiaobo promoted the Charter 08, and readers of this political manifesto, among which, we assume, the 5 members of the committee, are aware that it calls for a revolutionary disintegration of the People's Republic of China. If Charter 08 has been formally inspired by Charter 77 the two contents can not be compared since the text signed by Vaclav Havel in 1977 was not advocating a revolution but only the application of legal rights.

The 18th objective of the Charter 08 – the notion of a federation of Chinese democratic communities made of Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang – would generate chaos if not a large scale civil war. Thorbjorn Jagland insists: “We want to see progress continue (in China), and that is why we awarded the Peace Prize to Mr. Liu.”(New York Times, October 22). Mr. Jagland should know that a rearrangement of China's national territory and borders of such a magnitude would take the country back to instability and internecine fights in a tragic regression.

Fourth, and it is a corollary of the precedent point, the committee opted for a highly divisive choice. Contrary to Alfred Nobel's will which points at the recognition of a person “who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations”, the 2010 announcement brings discord, incomprehension and confusion between China and the West when one should create the conditions for harmony and synergy.

The committee believes that a strict reference to abstract principles enshrined in international agreements is conducive to



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convergence but its choice does not integrate the subtle balance between the existence of universal values and the no less real difference between levels of development. In a sense, the committee's pure idealism excluded history whereas it is the combination of the two, a genuine political philosophy, which has relevance and significance.

Finally, given China's past two centuries and her memory of Western imperialism, the decision is, to a certain extent, counterproductive. Beijing's conservative forces opposed to the deepening of reforms always capitalize on the crusade against what is perceived as public and direct foreign interference in China's internal affairs.

The disapproval of the committee's decision is not a call for Beijing's immobility, but it stems from the conviction that necessary gradual adjustments will have to be responsibly designed within China, and, given the PRC's objective situation, within the Communist Party itself.

As a matter of fact, China's political transformation is already at work and occupies an increasingly central position in the Party's internal debates. In August, during a visit in Shenzhen to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Special Economic Zone, China's Premier Wen Jiabao explained: “Without the safeguard of political reform, the fruits of economic reform would be lost and the goal of modernization would not materialize”. Later, in a rare interview with CNN, he insisted: “Freedom of speech is indispensable for any country,” adding “the people's wishes and needs for democracy and freedom are irresistible.” Already in 2008 on the

same program with Fareed Zakaria, Wen Jiabao announced: “I believe that while moving ahead with economic reforms, we also need to advance political reforms, as our development is comprehensive in nature, our reform should also be comprehensive”.

Jefferson’s ideal, eloquently expressed in his First Inaugural Address, can serve as an universal source of inspiration: “If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it”. However, the third president of the United States of America was also the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and the Chinese people, and only them, will define the exact terms and pace of Beijing’s democratization. In the 21st century, the West’s influence can not be imposed by spectacular lessons of governance but can only be proportionate with its capacity to perfect itself.

Liu Xiaobo, the protagonist of this global cause célèbre, has certainly gained fame but, given the controversies surrounding the committee’s decision, is far to appear as an uncontested winner. Reflecting upon a particular moral and legal case, one can advocate Liu Xiaobo’s release but, at the same time, considering the dynamics of a more complete picture, disapprove the committee’s decision.

This on-going drama is also affecting the way Beijing is perceived by the world’s public opinions. The 2010 Nobel Peace Prize has not only neutralized China’s efforts to improve its image but, once again, showed its relatively weak external communication capacity. Was it appropriate to threaten the committee before its final deliberations? Was it necessary to call the result “obscene”, to use the term “blasphemy”? Why asking for an apology – and risking an escalation – when it is evident that the committee can not and will not apologize? Unperceptive communication contributes also to China’s image deficit.

In a demonstration of China’s limited soft-power, hitherto not a single article, op-ed has been published by the Chinese policy makers or opinion leaders in the mainstream Western media to explain China’s perception and position.

The Nobel Peace Prize remains a respectable institution and one can hope that in a near future it presents to the world a more accurate picture of the Chinese renaissance as an engine of global economic growth, as a pole of stability and a source of wisdom.

The committee could recognize, for example, the efforts of Chinese individuals who work patiently for the improvement of the legal system, for the protection of the environment, for more open and sophisticated media without adopting the radical approach of the dissidence.

The Oslo ceremony on December 10 could have been useful and meaningful, an inclusive celebration of the world’s best hopes, it will be a solemn ritual of accusation which will take mutual misunderstanding and mistrust between the West and China at a tragic level. However, despite the committee’s unwise choice, amidst a long series of self-serving monologues, dialogue has to go on.

26/10/2010

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THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

“The said interest shall be divided into five equal parts, which shall be apportioned as follows: /- - -/ one part to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.”

—Excerpt from the will of Alfred Nobel

Alfred Nobel was interested in social issues. He developed a special engagement in the peace movement. An important factor in Nobel's interest in peace was his acquaintance with Bertha von Suttner. Perhaps his interest in peace was also due to the use of his inventions in warfare and assassination attempts? Peace was the fifth and final prize area that Nobel mentioned in his will.

Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, shared the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901 with Frédéric Passy, a leading international pacifist of the time. **In addition to humanitarian efforts and peace movements, the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded for work in a wide range of fields including advocacy of human rights, mediation of international conflicts, and arms control.**



Editor's Note: Chairman of the Nobel Peace Prize committee, Thorbjorn Jagland, did not pick Liu Xiaobo alone. The website nobelprize.org, lists who nominates a candidate:

NOMINATION AND SELECTION OF PEACE PRIZE LAUREATES

Every year, the Norwegian Nobel Committee sends out thousands of letters inviting qualified people to submit their nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize. The names of the nominees and other information about the nominations cannot be revealed until 50 years later.

PROCESS OF NOMINATION AND SELECTION

The Norwegian Nobel Committee is responsible for the selection of eligible candidates and the choice of the Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. The Committee is composed of five members appointed by the Storting (Norwegian parliament). The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded in Oslo, Norway, (not in Stockholm, Sweden, where the Nobel Prizes in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature and the Economics Prize are awarded).

QUALIFIED NOMINATORS

The right to submit proposals for the Nobel Peace Prize shall, by statute, be enjoyed by:

1. Members of national assemblies and governments of states;
2. Members of international courts;

3. University rectors; professors of social sciences, history, philosophy, law and theology; directors of peace research institutes and foreign policy institutes;
4. Persons who have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize;
5. Board members of organizations who have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize;
6. Active and former members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee; (proposals by members of the Committee to be submitted no later than at the first meeting of the Committee after February 1) and
7. Former advisers appointed by the Norwegian Nobel Institute. The Nobel Peace Prize may also be awarded to institutions and associations.