

Imminent Collapse or Tolerable Instability?

Some two decades ago, when President Ronald Reagan announced that communism would soon become a historical footnote, people scoffed at his remarks as nothing more than neo-conservative rhapsody. Unfortunately, Reagan now appears to have been correct in forecasting the events leading to "the end of history"—the Soviet Union and the socialist states under its sphere of influence collapsed shortly after his presidency. This unexpected development embarrassed many political scientists, forcing them to rush to ferret out what had gone wrong with their "theories."

China has achieved stunning economic growth for over two decades since its late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) opened the country up to the capitalist world. In addition, the Central Kingdom has endured several internal and external political crises during this same period. Therefore, when an American lawyer of Chinese origin, previously practicing in Shanghai, announced to the world that China is facing an imminent danger of collapse, he immediately stirred up a sensation among both the general public and China experts. Since Gordon Chang's book is wrapped in colorful, anecdotal reports, in what ways can social scientists take his prophetic propositions seriously? Academics need to explore how socio-economic conditions in China might trigger a deleterious mechanism that could bring down communist rule.

China's "open-door" market reforms have inadvertently brought about unfavorable conditions for her authoritarian rulers. There are ample indicators that the state-society relationship is deteriorating: a soaring unemployment rate in the state sector, impoverished and enraged peasants, surging ethnic violence, the severe repression of Falungong (法輪功), and so on. All these social ferments are vividly discussed in Chang's book. The problem for scholars is how to determine if these factors will translate into coordinated political action that would be strong enough to topple the regime. To answer this question, Chang conjures up several scenarios, including a war with Taiwan and sky-rocketing government corruption (see particularly chapter 12, "Roads to Ruin: How the State Will Fall").

"Market socialism with Chinese characteristics" (有中國特色的市場

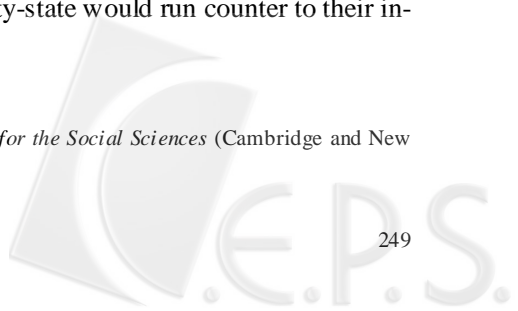
社會主義) cannot withstand tremendous transformation. The challenge for the ruling elite, opposition groups, and the general public is how to work out a "vision for change." Here this reviewer finds himself at deep odds with the author, who proclaims in the conclusion that "the Chinese need no thinkers for their next revolution, and the bandits have already started to act" (p. 285). The tragedy of the Tiananmen (天安門) massacre—the immediate outcome of an abortive student revolution—occurred at least in part due to the absence of a vision for change on the part of the movement.

In addition, a term like "collapse" is vague and elusive. It can mean "regime collapse" (which will bring about "regime transition"), "state disintegration," and even "social chaos." This reviewer did not find an operational definition for collapse in this work. Without a clear definition of the key term, a circular argument is likely to result. How much change is enough for us to call it "collapse"? And how chaotic is social chaos?

Social scientists often shun the tough job of making predictions because there are too many uncontrollable factors in the social world. Some methodologists have even asserted that predicting human behavior is hardly possible since we do not know what social mechanism will take place at a specific point of time *before* the behavior actually occurs.¹ This reviewer tends to believe that social scientists are not good at prediction not due to a lack of adequate tools for understanding the social world, but rather because they simply sometimes lack "common sense." Indeed, Chang's thesis of imminent collapse provides a perceptive antidote to the over-restraint of the "scientific practitioners."

By contrast, another possible path of transition is a chronic "decay" of political order and a slow but irreversible erosion of communist legitimacy, a process which has already been under way for many years. Under this scenario, China would not collapse in the near future because the Chinese people calculate that, without a commonly accepted vision for change, the termination of the communist party-state would run counter to their in-

¹See, for example, Jon Elster, *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).



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terests. Consequently, they would choose to seek to fulfill their individual interests amid "tolerable sociopolitical instability." The seemingly vulnerable dictatorship continues to rule, for there is no way out.² In other words, *no alternative, no collapse.*

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