

## ON N. S. LYONS'S "THE CHINA CONVERGENCE"

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We Americans sense that we live in an empire of lies. We want to understand the people and systems which control our country and society. At a minimum, we want to know how and by whom we are ruled, and what that means for both the present and the future. But we trust no source of information, because we know every channel of knowledge has been corrupted. Thus, inquiry usually ends in frustration, in obvious falsehoods peddled to us, or in esoteric conjectures which seem the more popular the more unlikely they are.

In August, however, N.S. Lyons (a pseudonym) offered a widely-read novella-length article he wrote at his Substack, *The Upheaval*. The article, titled "The China Convergence," pulls together modern thinking on, and practice of, the managerial state, beginning with James Burnham's classic 1941 study, *The Managerial Revolution*, and ending with Xi Jinping Thought. Lyons then ties this compelling analysis to both China and the United States, finding not only far more similarity than commonly believed, rather than any fundamental opposition in political structure, but also a convergence into "totalizing techno-administrative governance." He then analyzes the implications of this convergence for our future, and in so doing, answers many of the questions we have about our country and society.

Lyons begins with a history lesson, of the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. As the mass and scale of industrial organizations increased, a new social and administrative class of managers emerged to operate the organizations. Their interests differed from those of the owners, and one of their key interests was having more managers, what Lyons calls the "managerial doom loop." This class developed a managerial ideology, which while it "presents itself in the lofty language of moral values, philosophical principles, and social goods, it just so happens to rationalize and justify the continual expansion of managerial control into all areas of state, economy, and culture." Those "values" and "principles" are those of liberal modernism, essentially the emancipatory and egalitarian values of the Left, birthed in the Enlightenment (though Lyons does not much directly focus on the Left versus the Right).

Managerial ideology, both in its nature and in its ideology, was hostile to bourgeois, middle-class values, most of all the values of subsidiarity, self-reliance, tight family life and widespread participation in intermediary institutions which characterized America at the time, and whose erosion Alexis de Tocqueville had feared a hundred years before. Such values frustrated managerial governance and discouraged emancipation. Yet as the twentieth century ground on, managerial ideology gained ever more power, inserting itself not only into the industrial sector, but everywhere—education, media, the government, even philanthropy. This spread broke down the strong old fibers of America. (Some saw this even at the time; it was first discussed in Robert Nisbet's 1953 classic, *The Quest for Community*, a book Lyons does not mention.) And it was thus that the managerial regime came to dominate all of America, and the West, in the second half of the twentieth century.

At the same time, a similar-yet-different managerial regime was also emerging in China, beginning before Mao and the Cultural Revolution, but brought to full flower through Communist violence. (Lyons is a China expert, and offers much fascinating information about China—although the only truly jarring claim in his article is when Lyons identifies as “iron-fisted tyrants” Mao, Stalin, and . . . Napoleon?) Lyons identifies China's as a “hard” managerial system, as contrasted with the “soft” American version, focusing on slightly different values, but still similar in its system of governance. The major difference is that the Chinese system has long been wedded to the use of force “to coerce stability and obedience,” with the state taking a more open role than in soft systems, such as in America, where putatively private entities are the main actors, using narrative control and manipulation to control the population.

This process went on for decades, though it wore various masks, such as Reaganism, which concealed its growth from most of the population. Thus we have arrived in twenty-first-century America, where as most fully revealed in the “Twitter Files,” a vast web of unaccountable, shadowy entities, some in government, some not, have nearly unlimited, but mostly concealed, power to manufacture, and to require compliance to, fictions they find convenient. The total implementation of this regime of control, which was, and is, vastly greater in scope than mere control of Twitter, Lyons traces to the rise of Donald Trump in 2016.

It was then that the managerial elite entered the phase of desperation to resist the “revolt of the public,” in the words of Martin Gurri, which threatened to “take its revenge and drag them all back to the dark ages before enlightened managerial rule had brought the word of progress to the world.”

In a tour de force, Lyons then looks backward, and traces these fears of the managerial regime back to 1887, and to Woodrow Wilson’s fear of democracy and desire for an administration state, and forward through the twentieth century to the present day. This “managed democracy,” where what the people actually want is irrelevant to those with the power, has been attractive to many different regimes around the world, including Singapore, but has reached its “fullest conclusion” in China, in what the Party calls “consultative democracy,” where the Party “rigorously assesses the will and interests of the masses through a process of internal consultation and deliberation.”

This system is, no surprise, much more efficient than actual democracy. The problem, also no surprise, is that the populace, real men and women, don’t fit very well into this scheme. What to do about this problem has challenged both American and Chinese elites. Lyons fascinatingly traces the common origin, in China and America, of much of managerialism to John Dewey, wildly popular in both China and America in the early twentieth century. America took a different direction than Mao, though. Our managerial rulers chose an alternate to violence, instead largely following the “therapeutic state” approach of “Freudo-Marxist Wilhelm Reich.” His ideas, along with other Frankfurt School members such as Theodore Adorno, “accomplished a spectacular feat of political-linguistic jujitsu: successfully redefining public understanding of fascism—in reality the very essence of a hard technocratic managerial regime, obsessed with leveraging state-corporate fusion to promote collective strength, homogenous efficiency, and scientific progress from the top down—as synonymous with conservative democratic populism.” This, the “therapeutic state,” was then used, for seventy years, to discredit anything common citizens wanted in America. The first to realize this was Christopher Lasch in 1991, in his book *The True and Only Heaven*, and the main tool used, now and then, was Herbert Marcuse’s “repressive tolerance,” the idea that any idea not approved by the ruling class should be rigorously suppressed.

All this was in direct opposition to the core American idea of self-governance—not only of the people and the state, but even more of the individual of himself. Such self-governance is a very old idea, but the managerial state cannot tolerate self-governance, because it implies people do not need the managerial regime to decide what is best. And a people lacking self-governance, what was always recognized as an enslaved people, is ideal fodder for the managerial state. Thus, the main focus of the managerial system for the past seventy years has been breaking down self-governance in society, emancipating the atomized self from any intermediation other than with agents and tentacles of the managerial state.

One ultimate end of this process was the trading of liberty for security, a danger long recognized. "A new de facto social contract had been established: the people would offer compliance to being managed, and in return the managerial regime would provide them with ever greater comfort and safety, not only physical but psychological." This was, we all know, most fully displayed during the Wuhan Plague. The managerial state desires nothing more than that all citizens be fully dependent, fully malleable—all for their own good, of course. "The regime becomes a devouring mother, projecting weakness onto her children in order to keep them attached and under her sway," the superbly prescient Tocqueville's "immense and tutelary power."

We have reached the "you are here" point on the map, but Lyons doesn't end there. He analyzes how and why this system doesn't actually work, and what that means. As with all complex systems, it breeds more complexity to fix problems caused by the initial complexity. The problems resulting cause a crisis of legitimacy, for the only possible ground of legitimacy of a managerial regime is its technical ability. When that fails, everything fails, but a managerial regime's only possible response is more top-down control. When this process will end is hard to say, because only one managerial system (the Soviet Union) has collapsed, but end it will. Probably. Nonetheless, "stability maintenance" is, as a result, the chief focus of all managerial regimes today. (There is also a close parallel here to Joseph Tainter's theories of civilizational fracture in his *The Collapse of Complex Societies*.)

In order to maintain stability, a managerial regime must eliminate all alternative sources of authority. In Lyon's analysis, "wokeism" is a

religious cult, which Lyons interprets as the fifth wave of managerial consolidation, used, in a “revolutionary dialectic” to produce “a new, firmer order through the chaos of disorder.” I disagree that wokeism is in any way a religion (among other reasons, because no adherent makes any sacrifices for his “religion”), but it is most certainly an ideology, and, as Lyons says, one that strengthens the managerial regime, which can use it to assert yet more control in all areas of life. In reality, it is no new ideology, and nothing new to the managerial state—it is merely the most naked manifestation of the Left ideology, born in the so-called Enlightenment, of unlimited supposed emancipation and forced egalitarianism as goals which will usher in utopia. What American managerialism offers is, in substance, the same nasty and death-dealing applied philosophy first fully revealed in 1789, just polished up and opacified.

Lyons underplays the crucial role of Left ideology in American managerialism, and in fact erroneously says it is “difficult to place on the traditional left-right political spectrum,” instead trying out a new label, “extreme center.” No doubt he wants his readers to think outside the frame of present politics. Yet what he describes is indistinguishable from the Left project, which will always use whatever tools are handy—the therapeutic state in America, violence in Mao’s China.

It is true, however, that China is no longer a Left regime. In fact, quite a few recent actions of the Chinese government, from cracking down on video games and pornography to fighting against the feminization of men, could be coded right-wing in the American context. Similarly, anarcho-tyranny in the service of Left ends has become a key tool of the American managerial regime, used to reward its ideological foot soldiers and to terrorize the classes still standing in the path of total control. Yet in China there is no anarcho-tyranny, even if there is plenty of tyranny, and there is no equivalent to wokeism at all. Thus it seems managerialism necessarily leans Left, in that it opposes bourgeois values and intermediary institutions, but the divergence of China and America in ruling class ideology suggests the extremist attachment to Left ideology in America is happenstance, not a necessary consequence of managerialism.

In any case, Lyons points out that in America today the only thing standing in the way of total managerial regime dominance, and the effective ending of freedom for the populace, is middle-class “populism.”

The chief tool of the managerial state, although many others are used, is "securitization"—not the turning of financial instruments into new securities, as in the 2008 financial crisis, but an all-encompassing focus on the security of the state, and the supposed security, really safety, of the people. This can be used to permanently suspend the rule of law, claiming a Schmittian state of exception, substituting a rule by law system, in which the law is a protean thing, always changing to fit the immediate needs of the regime.

Lyons traces the evolution and implementation of this parallel process in both America and China; it is both compelling and chilling—although we already know this in our bones, don't we? The end result is a party-state, where "there is effectively no politics, only administration," and there is no clear distinction between "state" and "non-state." This is where we are in China, and to where we are arriving in America. China has commissars in each military and business unit. We do too; they are just not labeled as such. They are labeled "DEI coordinators" and "human resources employees." In the broader society the rule of the actual state is strengthened by so-called NGOs, which operate as agents of the state in what amounts to a popular front system, coordinating action across all of society, including media, entertainment, and business in general. In time, all ruling class action becomes self-coordinating, with (nearly) all those with power in society following, like a turning school of fish, the Narrative pushed by the regime—first of all, the primacy of managerialism, followed by Left ideology. Or, under another name, everyone pushes the party line.

Lyons worries that this is just the beginning. So-called artificial intelligence, he fears, will be used to monitor and control communications, and thereby to enforce compliance to the party line, an "all-encompassing regime of algorithmic gaslighting and fully-automated narrative management." The Chinese already do something similar, and are trying hard to create a system where each citizen effectively polices his fellows, encouraged by the infamous Chinese social credit system. Lyons shows, very interestingly, how twenty years ago jaywalking was ubiquitous in China, but is now essentially non-existent, as automated cameras, combined with automated fines and the display of jaywalkers' pictures, has eliminated it.

Maybe, although I doubt it. Leaving aside that “AI” is probably grossly-overrated vaporware, not only does this seem to contradict the problem Lyons identifies, that increasing complexity inevitably leads to failure, but in America (though less so in China, which as I say does not have a Left ideology anymore), basic competency is disappearing due to ideology. Moreover, the same technology used by the managerial class to control the narrative also allows citizen communication outside government control in a way inconceivable thirty years ago, which under the right circumstances will accelerate failure of the system and fracture of the managerial class.

Yes, the regime tries hard to deplatform and debank enemies, and there are several high-profile examples. Yes, centralized digital currency is a threat in this regard. Yes, this is all a deliberate plan to exert total control (even if the average regime functionary is merely reacting to incentives to ensure his own prestige and employment, not playing a knowing part in a conspiratorial master plan). But it seems likely to me that such further expansion of government control, in America at least, is likely to lead to diminishing, or negative, returns to the regime—especially if the economy turns sour, as seems inevitable, and the masses snap out of the sedation of cheap consumer goods and Netflix. That something approaching fifty percent of voters believe that Donald Trump was cheated out of being elected in 2020, despite the greatest propaganda campaign in human history being mounted and implemented to convince them otherwise, suggests Americans can’t be treated like malleable clay forever.

Lyons ends by citing George Orwell on Burnham, in a 1946 essay. He quotes Orwell frighteningly and incisively describing the end position of managerial society, in a summary which obviously underlay and closely resembles the society of Orwell’s 1984 (published in 1948). Lyons concludes “Now that world is taking shape.” But what Lyons does not say is that Orwell’s essay was titled “Second Thoughts on James Burnham,” and was actually highly critical of Burnham and his thesis—not so much his analysis, but of his prediction that this was both the inevitable future and it would replace all other political systems, that it was an evolutionary peak. Most notably, Lyons omits Orwell’s castigation of Burnham for always “predicting the continuation of the thing that is happening,” and his suggestion that in Burnham’s thought, “Power

worship blurs political judgment because it leads, almost unavoidably, to the belief that present trends will continue."

It is no doubt true that managerialism today seems to have conquered the world, to a degree that we cannot imagine an alternative. But that is a failure of imagination, and a failure to understand history. As Orwell said, in his criticism of Burnham, "Whoever is winning at the moment will always seem to be invincible." The managerial state cannot survive because it is fundamentally opposed to reality—both in its nature, and in America, in the Left ideology which rules it. Lyons is perhaps not as optimistic as me, even if he opposes the "total technostate" just as much as I do. He wants us to "reawaken and reassert the flame of the human spirit and reclaim its tradition of and natural right to self-governance," to "rise up in counter-revolution . . . and tear the false order of managerialism and all its poisonous ideological spawn root and branch from the world forever." That is a goal I think we can all get behind.