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PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA'S *BELT AND ROAD* INITIATIVE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE–THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the most visible and all-encompassing economic diplomacy proposal of the People's Republic of China (PRC), is hailed by the PRC's official representatives as an original, non-political, and benevolent vision of, and action plan for, economic and social harmony to come, domestically and globally. The BRI has also been analyzed and judged to be a threat by many scholars, journalists, and non-Chinese politicians. In our analysis we offer an alternative problematization and a critical perspective on the BRI by employing the ontological propositions of discourse theory as developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and operationalized by the so-called Essex School of Discourse Analysis. The aim of the article is therefore to gain more complex insights into the PRC's most ambitious global initiative to date, and to contextualize the findings in Chinese and "post-Eurocentric" international, political, and social theory.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), People's Republic of China (PRC), discourse theory, social antagonism, dislocation, relationalism

LA NUOVA VIA DELLA SETA DELLA REPUBBLICA POPOLARE CINESE: CRITICA SULLA SCIA DELL'ANALISI DISCORSIVA-TEORICA

SINTESI

La Nuova Via della Seta (BRI), la più eminente e onnicomprensiva proposta della diplomazia economica della Repubblica Popolare Cinese (RPC), viene esaltata dai rappresentanti ufficiali della RPC come una visione originale, apolitica e benevolente di un futuro di armonia economica e sociale, nonché un piano d'azione per ottenere questo futuro a livello nazionale e globale. La BRI è stata anche analizzata da molti studiosi e giornalisti, come pure da politici fuori dalla RPC, e giudicata come una minaccia. La nostra analisi fornisce una problematizzazione e una prospettiva critica alternativa sulla BRI, avvalendosi delle proposizioni ontologiche della teoria del discorso sviluppata da Ernesto Laclau e Chantal Mouffe e messa in pratica dalla cosiddetta scuola dell'analisi del discorso di Essex. L'obiettivo del presente articolo è quindi di arrivare a una visione più complessa dell'iniziativa globale finora più ambiziosa della RPC e di contestualizzare i risultati nelle teorie internazionali, politiche e sociali cinesi e "post-eurocentriche".

Parole chiave: Nuova Via della Seta (BRI), Repubblica Popolare Cinese (RPC), teoria del discorso, antagonismo sociale, dislocazione, relazionismo

INTRODUCTION¹

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the most visible and all-encompassing proposal of Chinese economic diplomacy² of the last decade, was first announced during the 2013 visit of the Chinese president Xi Jinping to Central and Southeast Asia. It builds on the current notion of the “Chinese dream” (*zhongguo meng*) and the notions of “harmonious society” (*hexieshehui*) or “harmonious world” (*hexieshijie*), which were put forward in 2005 during the previous administration (Hu, 2005; Zha, 2015, 2–11). Implying a harmonious, anti-hegemonic outlook was also in line with the foreign policy of “peaceful development” (*zhongguoheping-fazhan*) from the same Hu/Wen administration.

Still, there are numerous unprecedented elements to the BRI. During the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (October 2017) it was included in the constitution. Since then Xi (2017, 6) has hailed the BRI as part of developing a “community with a shared future for mankind” and encouraging “the evolution of the global governance system.” To put it differently, as seen from the numerous references to the BRI in the many official documents pertaining to it, the initiative is interpreted as being only reformatory, and in no way hegemonic or revisionist for the current state of international affairs, or its norms and institutions. On the contrary, the BRI is conceived to benefit everybody, while respecting different cultural, developmental, environmental, market, and political specifics and independence of all involved. As an original, non-ideological, non-hegemonic, and benevolent vision of, and action plan for, global economic and social harmony to come, the BRI is to be realized through enhanced “connectivity” facilitated by massive infrastructure projects across more than 65 countries and three continents (Asia, Europe, Africa). The PRC is ready to make available around USD 1 trillion for this lofty goal.

On the other hand, the BRI is considered a threat by numerous scholars, journalists, and non-Chinese politicians. For example, for Nayyar (2017) the BRI is first and foremost “a stepping stone for China’s aspirations of global leadership”, “buying of regional leadership”, “quest for hegemony”, and “a means of extending political spheres of influence” in Africa and Asia. Similarly, for Chellaney (2017) it is a premium example of “debt-trap diplomacy”, which leaves the loan-receiving developing countries “vulnerable to China’s influence”. For the group of 27 national European Union (EU) ambassadors to Beijing (at that time

excluding Hungary), “the BRI runs counter to the EU agenda for liberalizing trade and pushes the balance of power in favor of subsidized Chinese companies” (Heide et al., 2018).

Our aim is to problematize such opposing, reductive, and simplified renderings of the BRI in the PRC and outside it, as part of providing a critical explanation of the BRI’s political emergence, transformation, and maintenance. This includes the dissemination of the notion of the PRC’s civilizational uniqueness as a modernized incarnation of an inclusive, holistic, meritocratic, and cooperative world-view, and opposite to that, the so-called “China bashing”, which has effectively been a strategy of all (aspiring) presidents of the USA, reaching an unprecedented, openly racist height with the Trump administration. We argue that these are strategies aimed at (ideologically) covering over the possibly dislocating effect caused by challenges beyond both sides’ limits, which constitutively depends on the fantasies of fullness- or catastrophe-to-come (depending on whether the chosen enemy is defeated by the hegemonic agent).

To achieve this, we employ the ontological propositions of discourse theory as initially developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and operationalized in the “logics of critical explanation” approach by two of the most visible scholars of the *Essex School of Discourse Analysis*, Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007). More specifically, our exploration of the social, political, and fantasmatic logics of the BRI will be guided by the following research questions (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 171–172):

R1: How can we characterize the new phenomena and practices? Why and how did they come about and continue to be sustained?

R2: Why do the leaders of the PRC not face more (successful) revolt (at home and abroad), and why is their hegemonic logic so successful?

The article is built of three interrelated parts. Following the introduction, we will present a theoretical overview of the discourse theory and logics of critical explanation. They will serve us for the discourse analysis, which is presented in the third part of the article and divided into two subsections. In the first subsection we present some of the main proposals and practices of the BRI and their official interpretation (from the document *Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*; National Development and Reform

1 The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of institutions which authors are part of. The article is a result of the Research Programme “Slovenia and its actors in international relations and European integrations (P5-0177)”.

2 On the historical and social definition and perception of economic diplomacy, see more in Udovič and Jačimović (2019), and Ramšak (2014; 2015).

Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2015);³ while in the second part of the empirical analysis we expose its social, political, and fantasmatic logics. The article ends with a conclusion, in which we summarize and contextualize the main findings, mostly by making explicit some of their critical and normative aspects.

A Theoretical Framework: Discourse theory and logics of critical explanation

The philosophical assumptions of poststructuralist discourse theory, as set out most prominently in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987) and developed further with Laclau (1990; 2008), Mouffe (1993), with some input of Žižek (1990) and their followers in the *Essex School of Discourse Analysis* (Torfing, 1999; Stavrakakis, 2005; Glynos & Howarth, 2007), provide “a general horizon for understanding and explaining various aspects of social life” (Howarth, 2010, 313).

Two of the basic aspects of discourse theory are the *discursive* and *discourse*. The *discursive* is an ontological category, “a categorical presupposition for our understanding of particular entities and social relations” (Howarth, 2010, 313). That means that each object and symbolic order is “situated in a field of significant differences” and, following Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida, it is “marked by a lack”, incomplete, and radically contingent⁴ (Howarth, 2010, 313). Consequently, *discourse* is a particular, uneven, and hierarchical system of meaningful and articulatory practice, “constituted politically by the construction of social antagonisms and [...] political frontiers”, establishing identities of subjects and objects (Howarth, 2010, 313). At the same time, it is also a historical construction, vulnerable to the political

forces that were not included in its production and to the dislocatory effects of events outside of its control (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, 4).

Such ontological commitments are part of the five interrelated elements of our approach: problematization, retroductive explanation, logics, articulation, and critique. For problematization (relevant to both, “academic and pressing social and political issues”), we start from Foucault⁵ and his idea of a problem-driven approach (constructing “a set of phenomena as a problem”) (Howarth, 2010, 324–325). The system of explanation within this approach is retroductive, whereas the concept of logics provides the appropriate content of a future critical explanation (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 12). These logics are various types (according to complexities of historical and social circumstances), so they must be articulated together in order to explain the constructed *explanandum* (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 12). Last but not least, critique and normative evaluation⁶ are internally connected to the problematization, characterization, and explanation. They neither precede nor follow them (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 12), but lean on the specifics of historical relations of domination and subjects' responses to the condition of radical contingency, which “center on the subject's particular mode of enjoyment” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 119).

In our understanding, the concept of a *logic* (of a practice or a regime of practices) “comprises the rules or grammar of the practice” and “the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 136). Social, political, and fantasmatic logics, which respectively correspond with questions starting with *what*, *how*, and *why*, make up the three-fold typology of logics needed for a critical explanation of the practice or regime in question. To put it very synthetically, social logics characterize a

3 The criteria for choosing the mentioned document (hereby: Visions and Actions) are its “symbolic and emblematic dimensions” as seen in the words “visions” and “actions” and emphasizing the proactive vision of unified self (CPC, PRC, the people, “we”), as well as it being an answer to the critics that repeatedly state that it is vague and overly all-encompassing (Clarke, 2012, 173–174). It was put forward by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, authorized by the State Council. The document, and the particular vision of an all-inclusive globalization it puts forward, is illustrative because it provides the conceptual framework and means by which the politicians from the PRC attempt to lay claim to a distinctive agenda and mobilize various actors into a coordinated strategy for bettering international, interregional, and even inter-civilizational and interpersonal relations. What's more, this reading leans heavily on our readings of numerous other official texts (Hu, 2005; Xi, 2017), which informed our openly and inevitably biased selection of this particular document for the limited purpose of this article. To state that means that we also confess that our position cannot ever be a detached position outside discourse, which comes with the acceptance of discourse theory's assumptions on processes and forms involved in the systemic (i.e. world) discursive constitution (Martilla, 2015).

4 It is worth noting that in opposition to empirical contingency, radical contingency stresses a *sense of impossibility*, “the constitutive failure of any objectivity to attain a full identity” (Glynos & Howarth, 2008, 11). Its main approach consists in questioning “the idea of a fully constituted essence of a practice, regime or object in the name of an irreducible negativity that cannot be reabsorbed” (Glynos & Howarth, 2008, 11). Other names for this are Lacan's “lack in the Other” and Derrida's “structural undecidability” (Glynos & Howarth, 2008, 11).

5 Foucault's *method of problematization* that combines archaeological and genealogical moments of analysis (Howarth, 2010, 324–325) at the same time shares important family resemblances with the logics of critical explanation approach as a whole.

6 The “logics of critical explanation” approach is a response to claims of a normative and methodological deficit in discourse theory. For Howarth, Glynos & Griggs (2016, 99), this approach provides us with a “perspective on ethical critique and normative evaluation [going] beyond the strategy of simply inverting existing hierarchies and binary oppositions to project more positive ontopolitical presumptions”.

practice along a synchronic axis, political logics account for its emergence, constitution, and reproduction or subversion along a diachronic axis, and fantasmatic logics explain the ways in which it seduces subjects at a non-rational level (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 141; Clarke, 2012, 174).

For Laclau (2008, 105), social logics involve “a rarefied system of statements, that is, system of rules drawing a horizon within which some of the objects are representable while others are excluded” and so “consist in rule-following”. By rules, we do not mean “reified entities that subsume practices”, but a focus that enables us to describe and characterize them (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 139). In summary, with social logics we “aim to capture the ‘patterning’ of social practices, where such practices are understood in this regard as a function of the contextualized self-interpretations of key subjects” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 140).

According to Laclau (2008, 106), political logics are related to the “institution of the social”. But this means that they are also involved in “its possible de-institution or contestation” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 142), connected to the “political dimension of social relations” that indicates “the limits of a social formation” through “a dislocatory moment” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 143). Dislocation in this context signifies the presence of “the real” in Lacanian terms, a moment when a sense “that things are not quite right” emerges with “the researcher or the subject affected by the dislocation”: “Political logics thus formalize our understanding of the ways in which dislocation is discursively articulated or symbolized” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 143). There are two types of political logics: logics of equivalence and logics of difference. The former captures the substitutive aspect of relations between discursive elements by constructing and privileging antagonistic relations (“an ‘us-them’ axis”) (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 144). This means a politicization and simplification of the social space, where very disparate elements, demands, groups, and identities are made equivalent, their identities practically exhausted, in their opposition “to a common enemy” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 144). On the other hand, the logics of difference capture the combinatory aspect of relations between discursive elements, and seek to prevent and break down chains of equivalences or the “articulation of demands and identities into a generalized challenge to the dominant regime” (Glynos & Howarth, 2008, 12). The two dimensions of equivalence and difference are “always present” (“each presupposes the other”) and they stress “the dynamic process” of constructing, stabilizing, strengthening, or weakening of political frontiers (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 144).

With fantasmatic logics we try “to capture the way subjects organize their enjoyment” to show why specific practices “‘grip’ subjects” (Glynos & Howarth, 2008, 13). They are about the force behind signifying

operations and they add to our understanding of social practices’ resistance to change (“the ‘inertia’”) and the direction of change if it happens (the energy, “‘vector’ of political practices”) (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 145–7). According to Žižek (1989, 47), paraphrasing Lacan, fantasy is “the last support of what we call ‘reality’”. Its role is to fill up or complete “the void in the subject and the structure of social relations by bringing about closure” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 146). In other words, fantasmatic logics reinforce the social dimension “by covering over the fundamental lack in reality and keeping at bay what we have labelled the ‘real’” or “concealing the radical contingency of social relations” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 146). Ontically they appear in many different forms, but in general they have a horrific and a beatific dimension. The former provides a narrative of doom, if the enemy or obstacle in question is not overcome, or, alternatively, bliss, “a fullness-to-come”, if the obstacle is defeated (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 147).

Needless to say, such a description of our approach is schematic at best, but it allows us to frame the claims of our introduction and gives meaning to the rest of the article. We started with a problematization of the dominant narratives about the practices, meaning, and consequences of the BRI, which established the latter as a problem worthy of investigation. What we can claim according to our ontological and methodological commitments is that the BRI is a distinctive social and political practice, and part of the hegemonic regimes of the PRC and economic globalization. Its purpose is to defend, stabilize, maintain, and transform these regimes or their identity by covering over their radical contingency. This leads us to embark on an articulation of logics to provide a critical explanation of the BRI’s practices within these mentioned contexts (regimes), firstly by taking a closer look at the document *Visions and Actions* (2015).

The Belt and Road Initiative through the lens of discourse theory

Constructing universal harmony, constructing universal China: global “win-win” ambitions of the BRI

The *Contents* portion of the document *Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* (Visions and Actions, 2015) presents its structure as follows: Preface, I. Background, II. Principles, III. Framework, IV. Cooperation Priorities, V. Cooperation Mechanisms, VI. China’s Regions in Pursuing Opening-Up, VII. China in Action, VIII. Embracing a Brighter Future Together.

These headings *prima facie* do not sound groundbreaking; nevertheless they already imply the overarching line of argument, made explicit in the body of the

document. As already mentioned, the *spirit* of the BRI proposal, officially, is a simultaneously common-sense, novel, inclusive, economic, non-political, win-win, pluralistic, ethical, and moral way to connect people, regions, nations, countries, cultures, business (public and private), and other interested parties (cities, universities, international and regional organizations, political parties, etc.). It aims to better the economy and “lives” of all included (and even everyone else, because the bettering of the included heightens the prosperity of “mankind” and “world community” as a whole) in the most universal sense. And “China” has “principles”, a “framework”, “priorities”, and “mechanisms”, and takes “actions” to achieve such “cooperation”, seen as part of furthering domestic “opening up” (also promoting “regions”), and actively “embracing a brighter future together” globally (Visions and Actions, 2015).

All this is urgently needed given the “background” of “complex and profound changes” which “are taking place in the world”, brought about by the unceasing “impact of the international financial crisis”, “uneven” “global development”, and major changes in the “international trade and investment landscape and rules for multilateral trade” (Visions and Actions, 2015: Background, 1st paragraph). The BRI is committed to “the trend towards a multipolar world”, “economic globalization”, “cultural diversity”, “greater IT application”, upholding “the global free trade regime and the open world economy”, “orderly and free flow of economic factors”, “efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets”, “economic policy coordination” between countries, “in-depth regional cooperation of higher standards”, and “jointly creating an open, inclusive, and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all” (Visions and Actions, 2015: Background, 2nd paragraph). “China” as a country whose “economy is closely connected with the world economy” will expand its “opening-up” and “integrate itself deeper into the world economic system” to “strengthen its mutually beneficial cooperation with countries in Asia, Europe and Africa and the rest of the world” (Visions and Actions, 2015: Background, 4th paragraph). This is in line with the United Nations (UN) Charter and China’s contribution to “peace and development of mankind”, and its commitment to shouldering more “responsibilities and obligations within its capabilities” (Visions and Actions, 2015: Background, 4th paragraph). Nevertheless “the Silk Road Spirit” is the spirit of the ancient Silk Road (“peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit”) and “a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around

the world” (Visions and Actions, 2015: Preface, 1st paragraph).

Similar meaning is dispersed throughout the whole document in word-by-word iterations or some alternative word choices with similar implications (“win-win cooperation”, “promotion of common development and prosperity”, “mutual understanding and trust”, “mutual learning and mutual benefit”, “mutual political trust”, “cultural inclusiveness”, “harmonious and friendly cultural environment”, “tolerance among civilizations”, “principles of seeking common ground”, “community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility”, “common security”, “respecting each other’s sovereignty and security concerns”, “road towards peace and friendship”, etc.).

According to the document (Visions and Actions, 2015: Cooperation Priorities), the “cooperation priorities” of all involved in the BRI should be “promotion of policy coordination”, “facilities connectivity”, “unimpeded trade”, “financial integration” and “people-to-people bonds”, which are public relations with various audiences.⁷ On the other hand, in “Cooperation mechanisms”, “China” vows to use and strengthen the existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, and the role of forums, exhibitions, and other platforms. The document also states that the BRI is committed to improving “the openness of the Chinese economy” through a more balanced development of all of its regions, for example:

We should make good use of Xinjiang’s geographic advantages and [...] make it a key transportation, trade, logistics, culture, science and education center, and a core area on the Silk Road Economic Belt (Visions and Actions, 2015: China’s Regions in Pursuing Opening-Up, 2nd paragraph).

Many other provinces are mentioned further on, including the “Taiwan region”. Coastal regions and their cities in particular are singled out as intended leaders in international competition and a “main force in the BRI” (Visions and Actions, 2015: China’s Regions in Pursuing Opening-Up, 4th paragraph).

Last but not least, all of these goals cannot be achieved without joining “hands to make the Silk Road an environment-friendly one” by including the promotion of “ecological progress”, “balanced and sustainable development”, “green and low-carbon infrastructure construction and operation management”, “conserving eco-environment, protecting biodiversity, and tackling climate change” (Visions and Actions, 2015).

⁷ The “Chinese government” and/or “President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang” have been very active in terms of these priorities. Countless events have already taken place to conduct high-level guidance facilitation through high-level diplomacy, to establish cooperation frameworks through signing numerous MOUs and propositions for regional cooperation plans, and to promote project cooperation through enhanced communication and consultation with countries along the BRI on the topics of infrastructure, investment, resources, trade cooperation, culture, ecology, etc. (Visions and Actions, 2015: China in Action).

At this point we could find ourselves wondering: what is there to frown upon in such a noble enterprise, its aspirations and ambitions? We can start answering this question by initially recognizing that the narrative of the document in question is also a dominant discourse, or an attempt to build one, as part of the Xi administration's boldest attempt at a hegemonic regime. To put it another way, if we take "*another look*" at the document, we will find many very telling contradictions and (inconvenient) omissions that need to be addressed. For example, while not explicitly stated in this document (an omission that, in itself, is very telling), the PRC is at the same time Confucian, socialist, democratic, one-party, market-oriented, green, and "*open*" – "*since always*" (historic Silk Road) and increasingly so (the BRI). Its leaders do everything in the name of the "*people*" and even "*mankind*", which, at this time, also means enacting one of the most all-encompassing camera-surveillance, face-recognition, and censorship programs in the world, building up military capabilities, requiring "*reeducation camps*" in the Xinjiang province, continuing to burn coal and expanding oil-burning transport infrastructure, suppressing hundreds of environmental protests and workers' organizations (which also means suppressing the actions of people with the most literal interpretation of the socialist ideology), praising the post-WWII international order as good while calling for its reformation, and so on. With this in mind, we can finally flesh out the social, political, and fantasmatic logics of the BRI.

Social, political and fantasmatic logics of the BRI

We can identify the social logics that structure various practices of the BRI as follows: win-win co-operation, harmony (or harmonization), and economic development. If we further disaggregate the mentioned concepts and the reasons why we investigate the practices characterized by these three concepts, we can see that the logics sediment and naturalize a commonsense of domestic and international (investment) practices, such as building bridges, roads, ports, developing technology, investing abroad, giving loans to developing and poor countries, etc., which are all part of the BRI. The logics operate in a way that downplays the top-to-bottom nature of decision-making in specific BRI projects, as well as the one-sided, elite agenda-setting in the BRI, with neither democratic participation and control, nor clear and transparent rules (this is also

enabled by a kind of case-by-case logic or approach to specific cases, which does not establish unified rules on who exactly should and could participate, and under what conditions). The notion that there are no losers in these practices also becomes a kind of preemptive defense against any possible accusations of obvious harm done to those who slipped through its all-inclusiveness and any culpability in the violation of their human rights, especially when it comes to partners from the EU.⁸ Furthermore, respect for "*different developmental plans*" seems to imply unproblematic compatibility between them, without the need to consider the vast differences in power, influence, stage of development, or political systems between the places of origin of such plans. To put it another way, the logics also operate by including the mentioned developmental plans, but also all regions, ethnicities, cultures, civilizations, biodiversity, environment, religions, the media, universities, etc., which presents them as being harmonious and a function of non-ideological economic development and growth, and once again annihilates their political (subversive) potential (as we will claim more clearly when addressing the political and fantasmatic logics). It establishes the identities and meaningful actions of politicians (on the left and the right), diplomats, economists, entrepreneurs, journalists, scientists, researchers, teachers, professors, students, and all kinds of enlightened and traditional communities as being cooperative with the BRI. With this they become willing objects of the objectively higher forces of globalization and the market, except in places where China decides they need (temporary) regulation. If they fail to develop, it will be because they have failed to cooperate with the harmonizing forces of the BRI: which, again, downplays the social and structural aspects of the availability of development and places the blame on these individual actors.

Addressing the political logics (of the BRI) adds another layer to our critical explanation. There are many *obvious* and *less obvious* (radical) exclusions, omissions, contradictions, hierarchies, and possible antagonisms that the document (Visions and Actions, 2015) covers over, domesticates, and harmonizes within the dynamics of equivalence and difference. The most obvious is the production of a universal "*we*", "*us*", who together have a "*common destiny*" achieved through the BRI. This "*we*" sneaks in seamlessly, being used interchangeably to refer to the Chinese administration, China, and the countries along the Belt and

8 To make the claim less abstract, let us examine it with concrete grievances in mind. A report by the UNPO (2019) inspects three cases in detail. In the case of the expansion of the deep-water sea-port in Gwadar as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the project is being implemented without considering the predicament of the local Baloch people (serious human rights violations as the result of continuous regional conflicts). The second case describes the arbitrary detention of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang in order to prepare the environment for projects like the Urumqi International Land Port. The third case is about the ambition of the German city of Duisburg to become China's gateway to Europe without reflecting on the fact that many related practices are in contrast with the city's constitutional obligations, making it complicit with the human rights violations. These grievances nevertheless already bring us to the political logics, because they are a possible way of contesting the integration efforts of the BRI discourse.

Road, making them all the same, or even one, in the quest for development and cooperation for the sake of mankind and world community. The list of what “we should” and “we will” do is included in the document and becomes particularly pertinent, even urgent. This discourse thus interpellates “everybody” into subject positions, such as rational economic actors who fight for the environment, harmony and equality, and who logically seek development by turning to China as their “objective” partner/leader. As already stressed, any differences in developmental and political plans, stages and systems, culture, religion, geography, ethnicity, etc., which could spur antagonism, at this point seemingly lose their political dimension, getting played down by everything “mutual” and “win-win”: mutual respect, learning, trust, friendship, cooperation, benefit, etc. On the other hand, this dynamic can change when these actors become united in the fight against an enemy, which is less explicit at this point but can nevertheless be easily produced or identified. If the countries along the Belt and Road are united in striving for universal development, then the enemies of such common development are and can easily become “our” enemies. Since the BRI is a plan to achieve more development regionally and across countries, opponents of the BRI become “our” opponents. Therefore, although lacking in direct “revolutionary” language with an embodied enemy, the “dimension of difference is still weakened”, “*whether differences are understood as a function of demands or identities*”, and a frontier between “us” and “them” can easily be drawn at any time or due to a dislocatory event⁹ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 144).

Often the document (Visions and Actions, 2015) stresses the most vigorously that which it lacks the most. To put it differently, certain signifiers, like “development” and “cooperation”, stand in for the “absent fullness of a dislocated community” (Laclau, 2008, 137). Laclau (2008, 137) calls them empty signifiers and they are “*moments of naming in a radical sense – they strive*

to represent the failure of a signifying system” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 122). In this sense, we can claim that the official representation of the BRI as a “*pluralistic and open process of cooperation which can be highly flexible, and does not seek conformity*” (Visions and Actions, 2015, VII. Embracing a brighter future together, 2nd paragraph) is an attempt to close the threatening structural lack made visible with the dislocatory financial crisis of 2007/2008.¹⁰ At the same time it is a domestication of (possible future) dislocations, like new economic, ecological, and climate crises, inter-ethnic and inter-national rivalries, mass democratic protests, demands for more equally distributed gains of development, etc. By doing this, the document addresses common and very loud critiques of the globalized capitalist system and puts forward its own “*new models of international cooperation and global governance*” (Visions and Actions, 2015, I. Background, 2nd paragraph). It appears that China wants to have its cake and eat it too, because it wants to “*uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy*” (Visions and Actions, 2015, I. Background, 2nd paragraph) and integrate further in the existing international system, but also bring it into multipolarity, make it more equitable, and even-out the uneven development. In other words, a revisionist omission claims that the current system is unipolar, unjust, and brings about inequality and ecological doom. Luckily, China has a strategy for rectifying this, but the problems are so great that they can easily become seen as needing drastic measures. It is political in a way that contests¹¹ the particular combination of Western-led global organization and norms, and keeps away any possible contestations of its own particular combination of organization and norms, thus strengthening the preferred *status quo* at home and constructing itself as a benevolent alternative globally.¹² What stays the same in both worlds is a commitment to “the market”, which stays a naturally “democratic” force for good, further romanticized in the revival of the cosmopolitan openness of the historic Silk Road.

9 This is already very obvious if we read some of the more recent *Opinions* in the CPC-controlled *Global Times*, and in the arguably new confrontational diplomatic culture (“Wolf-warrior diplomacy”), which is often used to rebuke the blaming of China for the Covid-19 pandemic (Global Times, 2020). Before that, an infamous leaked internal CPC document titled *Document 9* (China File, 2013) made the sorely needed enemies explicit. Among them were Western values and ideas of freedom, civil society, journalism, constitutional democracy, human rights, “historical nihilism”, and neoliberalism – and their carriers, such as some embassies, non-governmental organizations, color revolutions, foreign media, anti-government forces, dissidents, etc. All were made equal against the chain of China, development, Chinese characteristics, the Party, the people, nation, etc.

10 Let’s not forget that the PRC decided to join the economic globalization at least since beginning the process of joining the WTO, and has been implementing some “capitalistic elements” ever since the reforms of 1978.

11 All of this is possible because the financial crisis of 2007/2008 was a dislocation that made numerous contingent ideological elements or floating signifiers (former moments of the neoliberal economic globalization discourse) available for articulation by opposed political projects striving to give meaning to them. And in the case of the BRI, an obvious hegemonic logic is at play – a logic that constructs “*political alliances and coalitions between differently positioned social actors*” and “*disparate sets of particular demands*” within a common and “more universal political project” (Howarth, 2005, 323–324).

12 Such rearticulation of globalization is also an ideological covering over of the visible contingency of its own ultimate goal of “*deepening*” its “*opening up*”, i.e. being totally open and developed (as the developed countries, while representing the ideal of what it means to be developed, are also corrupting such “*Chineseness*”). This is needed to establish and protect a very current version of the “*authentically*” Chinese order (dream, way, and model), which also still claims to fulfill all of its responsibilities as a responsible stakeholder and member of the, ideally, still neoliberal global economic order.

This attitude is a part of maintaining what is called by the Lacanian scholar Wu Guanjun (2014, 270) a discourse of China's "civilizational subjectivity". It includes "Chinese values", "the China way", "the Chinese model" or, as specified by scholar Gan Yang, a fusion of traditions of Confucius, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping. Its current incarnations are the connected discourses of the Chinese dream and the BRI. In such hegemonic discourse "Chinese characteristics" work as an empty signifier that articulates everything and anything that could be deemed incompatible with socialism.¹³ With that in mind, we must interrogate the interrelated practices of the BRI and the regime of China's civilizational subjectivity about their genealogy, their historical conditions of (im)possibility, and their "forgotten" political dimension of institution, contestation and transformation.

As stated in *Visions and Actions* (2015), Xinjiang, home of Uyghurs and other minorities, is an important part of the BRI. But the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (OHCHR, 2018) found that for combating "religious extremism" and maintaining "social stability", Xinjiang became a "no rights zone", where Uyghurs and other Muslims "were being treated as enemies of the State based on nothing more than their ethno-religious identity". What is more, this current fact has a long history, which makes obvious that the all-inclusive discourse of the BRI is also a further attempt, heavily supported by the global fight against terrorism, to forcefully domesticate this non-Han culture. The PRC and the BRI depend on this exclusion constitutively, and Han-domination is the naturalized norm, existing in many invisible and sedimented social practices.¹⁴ Reeducation camps also come with forced labor, which also makes the natural-resources-rich Xinjiang a bottomless reservoir of cheap labor, needed for maintaining China's "competitiveness" because of the rising wages in other provinces.

Moreover, such practices are made possible by the CPC's "forgetfulness" of its own imperialism at the time of its formation. Namely, after the revolutions of 1911, which ended the millennia-old empire, the place of the symbolic power became empty. "Total collapse of the indicators of certainty" (the "century of humiliation", a period of subjugation of China between 1839 and 1949) and a diminished possibility that this power could once again be embodied in a particular body (as before in the emperor's, who was the "son of Heaven") brought about the establishment of an expansive he-

gemony (Torfing, 1999, 192). For this to be possible, the empty signifiers of "the nation" and "the people", which are nodal points in the discourse of modernity, were hegemonized by being "filled" with particular content with which people can identify. Nationalism can be defined as a myth, which offers these two empty signifiers a specific substantial embodiment. It points at exercising particular social and political acts for the sake of a particular ethos (to be, in this case, Chinese) and a particular imagined national space (China as the place of "Chineseness") (Torfing, 1999, 193).

But the universality of "society" can only be captured by an empty signifier when the latter also signifies the radically excluded, the other, by which it delineates an "inside", an equivalence between different elements, from a threatening outside. In the context of the Communist overtaking of the symbolic power this meant that the "inner" enemies (the "foreign" Qing dynasty, the "feudal" celestial government in general and "the class of traitors connected with international capitalism" (Hunt, 1996, 214)) were pitted antagonistically against reason and modernization, which would be leading the progress and development of the Chinese people (equivalent chain of farmers, workers, soldiers, students, intellectuals, local rulers, rebel groups and revolutionary organizations, etc.), and their liberation from their main enemy: imperialism and its representatives (Western powers and Japan). Mythical communist discourse became a social imaginary, which meant that there were almost no limits to all the possible desires, demands, hopes, and dreams that could be projected into this ideological surface by the "people".

This meant that the 1949 constitution of a nation-state and a distinct and unified Chinese nationality (Han majority and 55 other ethnic minorities) did not give up notions of Chinese exceptionalism, where marveling at China's pure size and population (*dì dà, rén duō* – vast territory, big population) was crucial. The vastness of the former multiethnic empire continued after 1949, where tradition was often iconoclastically disavowed, and modernization was everything. But this, as pointed out by Perdue (2003, 52), is artificially constructed and impoverishes our understanding of complex cultural processes that were constitutive of "everything Chinese". In short, there have always been interactions across borders, and traditions have never stood still. Also, there were numerous characteristics and attempts at reforms in the Qing dynasty which repeated themselves in the 20th century in the reforms

13 Again, these could be the reforms made since 1978, the formerly "feudal" Confucian elements, non-democratic government, total control and ownership of the media, elaborate high-tech systems of social control, restrictions on the freedom of speech and on the rights of workers to organize, restriction of mass protests, etc. Such discourse at the same time very conveniently dispels the "side effects" of a particular, not at all "universal" development, like pollution and climate change, enormous disparities between the poor inner regions of China, like Xinjiang, and rich eastern and southern regions, the displacement of whole villages if needed (for development), "reeducation camps" for Muslims, the insatiable need for migrant workers, etc., which all become transient and repairable by means of even more socialism with Chinese characteristics.

14 Several books could be written on the history and complexities of Chinese racism (more in Dikötter, 1992).

of modern China in the 80's and 90's. Perdue's point is that modern Chinese historiography, important for Chinese nationalism until today, ignores many alternatives that could fill the empty universal space, shaping what now seems like destiny into something very different (a simple look at Japan, where modernization, democracy, and monarchy still coexist, or the controversial example of constitution of Taiwan, are proof of that). Most of all, communism was equally "*foreign*" and far from the only "*-ism*" that took root in China at the end of the traditional empire. The 1919 mass protests that grew into the "*May Fourth Movement*", the "*spirit*" of which is still part of the slogans of the CPC, was a mixture of many opposing ideas, but one of the most important ones was a call to unite for democracy, individualism, and science, and against Confucianism and imperialism. To put it another way, dislocation of the deepest kind brought about many different articulations of disarticulated moments of traditional and Western discourses into new discourses on how to "*save*" China. As already stated, the most successful was the one emerging later as the internationally recognized PRC. What's more, Mao Zedong established himself as the "*objective*" and "*destined*" leader of the PRC through very "*creative*" articulations of the orthodox communist theory¹⁵ and loathed Chinese traditions. In his version of Marxism-Leninism, the anti-imperialist rhetoric was always creatively supplemented with Legalist, Confucian, and Daoist concepts, common idioms, legends, stories, etc. (Mao, 1945).

The latter is important to better explain the current reliance on harmony as almost exclusive to Chinese "*thought*" or "*dream*" (Xi, 2017, 3). As argued by Jana Rošker (2014), modern revivals of Confucian thought, included in the notions of harmonious society and similar, are a very particular ideological appropriation of a very complex tradition. They are primarily a kind of preemptive, top-down filling of a value-vacuum after the reforms of 1978, where profit and the market increasingly became crucial parts of the socialist revolution (thereby alienating people from traditional socialist values like equality, solidarity,

etc.). What's more, this is a kind of "*crime*", one that steals "*people's history*" and with it the "*possibility of an autonomous life*" (Rošker, 2014, 22). The reason for this harsh critique lies in the historical fact that this official discourse of Confucianism depends on ignoring the differences between what Rošker labels an original philosophy, its many historical variations, and a state doctrine. As a philosophy it first emerged in the 4th century BC, and strived for a society based on communitarian values of *ren* (benevolence, humaneness) and *yi* (justice). Later, two main branches emerged, one following the thought of Mengzi and the other, that of Xunzi. In short (Rošker, 2014, 22), the main difference between the two branches is that while they both believed in the power of socialization, the former held that this should be achieved through egalitarian, "*democratic*" education, while Xunzi strived for strict punishment and discipline. Xunzi is therefore known as representing a bridge between Confucianism and Legalism, an absolutistic doctrine which led the first unification of the ethnically, politically, and economically diverse area into one common despotic empire under the Qin dynasty (221 BC). The Qin dynasty was quickly defeated by the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), where a version of Confucianism, based on Xunzi and including many of the autocratic and despotic state-building elements of Legalism, was articulated as the state doctrine. The same can be said for the current revival of Confucian notions in the official language of the PRC. Alternatively, philosophies based on the ideas of Mengzi are still being developed in Taiwan and Hong Kong, often in the light of critical questioning of the capitalist free market's mechanisms and the value of greed it naturalizes (Rošker, 2014, 25).

And this – harmonization being the social logic of the BRI, which articulates the wholeness of the Chinese society and its visions and lessons for humanity, and implicitly or explicitly points at the relativity of Western-origin human rights, mutual non-exclusivity of development, globalization, and environmental protection, and the particularity of Western-origin discipline of International Relations¹⁶ – brings us to

15 The construction of "the people" in the Mao Zedong Thought had to solve the problem of the identity of the mobilized masses, which did not strictly coincide with class identity (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987, 56). The solution came through different discursive strategies. Equivalence among peasants, workers, and soldiers diminished their different and even potentially antagonistic interests, and internationally expanded into revolutionary proletariat, which enabled even more effective suturing of the structure (reconstitution of order) and, very specifically, could get material (military) support from the "brotherly" Soviet Union.

16 An official Confucianist revival like this has support among some Chinese scholars in considerations of "international relations with Chinese characteristics" (Qin, 2010; 2018; 2020). Articulated by mixing elements of the discipline of IR and practices of international diplomacy with ancient Chinese thought, it ambitiously criticizes Western "taxonomic thinking" and "conflictual dialectics" as being insufficient to account for the complexities of 21st century global politics (Qin, 2010, 134–138). Mutually exclusive categories and binary oppositions (for example, Western vs. non-Western, democratic vs. non-democratic, market vs. non-market, etc.), combined with particularly hostile international politics (where one of the mutually exclusive poles is always better than the other), are not self-evident in the traditional Chinese context. The Chinese complimentary dialectics presupposes a harmony of poles, a unity as represented in the diagram taiji. In this representation of the yin-yang principle, the poles are never strictly exclusive to one another, but are always in a dynamic process of change and mutual codependence. This can lead to a different kind of politics, one where such notions as a "peaceful rise" are not considered oxymoronic.

the next related point of explanatory logics, the logic of fantasy.¹⁷ When taking the fantasmatic logics into account, we claim that social logics and practices constitutively depend on them. As summarized by Glynos & Howarth (2007, 107), “one condition for subscribing to an existing or promised social practice concerns the extent to which it can tap into the subject’s existing mode of enjoyment and thus fantasmatic frame”.

The operation of fantasmatic logics is obvious in the assertions of the BRI being a plan for universal prosperity. The “suggestion of the possible fulfillment of all needs and the satisfaction of all demands” is depoliticization for political purposes at its purest, one that is also a familiar neoliberal strategy (Clarke, 2012, 184). We can describe it as the fantasy of “illusory harmony”, where “imaginationizations of abundance and excess” remain “the vehicle of our (personal, social, and political) desire” (Stavrakakis, 2005, 187). This fantasy also maintains the illusion that the choice (to have this abundance and harmony) is equally available to all, no matter their social class, ethnicity, politics, etc., which puts a firm “grip” on all the “not-yet-developed”. Another fantasmatic logic is also at work in the enumeration of the actions “China” has taken to bring about this promised prosperity for all. Their abundance is also a kind of illusory efficiency, where there is no room to report on the messy details of the specific projects, such as local grievances that cooperation under the BRI is not at all win-win. Furthermore, joining incompatible elements is a typical way for subjects to cope with this impossibility (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 148). Aspects of social reality connected with fantasmatically structured enjoyment often possess contradictory features, in our case, as mentioned: being part of globalization while providing alternative globalization, being a fighter against climate change while planning to open more coal mines and expand traffic, being socialist while repressing workers’ mass organizing, etc.

We could identify many more fantasmatic logics at this “micro level” of the analyzed document, but this level depends on the wider regime, where the empty signifier is China itself. So, for the sake of brevity, we can bring our argument to conclusion with the help of Wu (2014). In his book *The Great Dragon Fantasy*, Wu researches the many intellectual currents of post-Mao China to conclude that they all (still) strive to solve “the China problem” (Wu, 2014, 122–123). What is more, Wu believes that leaning on the project of modernization and imagining China as a “nation on its way to

bright future” is a common fantasy of China’s intellectuals and officials until this day. This “great dragon fantasy”¹⁸ captures a desire to “see the reality clearly” and “to see the Real”, and it contains unreflected temporal and spatial tensions (tradition-modernity, China-the West, etc.). In the original song that the book’s title references, the civilizational essence of China, “Chineseness”, is performed as lost and effectively works as object-cause of desire, or the object of fantasy (Wu, 2014, 317–318).

Meanwhile, if we take a leap to the “other side” of the prominent antagonism of China in global, world, or international affairs, we can see that China is the one accused of stealing our enjoyment. Surely, otherwise, such common social practices as infrastructure building, lending, investing, opening development banks and multilateral platforms, supporting high-tech innovation, etc., could not bring about such excitement, or indeed, be pulled from the supposed ideological neutrality of the economy into the “much too human” conduct of politics. China is even stealing alliances, as shown by the participation of many Western countries in the BRI. In other words, it steals what the “leader of the free world” is hopelessly trying to protect as its identity (which is power) and to validate its even less compatible practices like fighting wars, etc. It seems that all of a sudden, the West suffers “more”, because the non-white, non-developed, non-democratic China maybe “got globalization wrong”, so it “slants the playground” (and even unleashes pandemics), and leads to doom (fantasy of horrific enjoyment).

The move is needed because “how we relate to ‘our Thing’ will be vital for how we relate to others and their identifications” (Howarth, Glynos & Griggs, 2016, 102) and “every utopian fantasy produces its reverse and calls for its elimination” (Stavrakakis, 1999, 100). This brings us to the conclusion, where we summarize and contextualize our findings while explicating some aspects of ethical critique and normative evaluation, implied in the articulation of explanatory logics.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the changing face of the PRC’s global perspective and practices started by problematizing the dominant renderings of the BRI as observed in numerous official Chinese documents, most explicitly in the document *Visions and Actions* (2015). In short, to the Chinese political elite, the initiative is a unique, non-

17 Inclusion of the logic of fantasy enables us to overcome the usual limitations of various types of discourse analysis, which are already very good at showing the various double standards, webs of contradictions, logics of metaphor and metonymy, etc., but lack the power to answer questions like the ones Laclau and Žižek attempted to answer: “What accounts for the power with which a hegemonic (ideological) formation exercises its hold over subjects?” (Glynos, 2001, 199). Part of the answer surely lies in the pressures, violence, threat of punishment, and censorship, which are part of the PRC and many other systems of rule, but at the same time they too operate as social practices in the common sense of formerly enumerated social logics.

18 Wu (2014) named the fantasy after a popular song from the 1980’s, called *Longdechuan ren* or “Descendants of the Dragon” (by Hou Dejian).

hegemonic, scientific, moral, and benevolent path to achieving global prosperity for all, which is also in line with the principles of the UN Charter and the rules of the international economic order. On the other hand, China's development in general and the BRI in particular are deemed to be a threat by numerous scholars, journalists, and non-Chinese politicians, who claim, sometimes simultaneously, that the PRC is taking over the world and collapsing under its own contradictions. For example, such arguments were cherry-picked by the Trump administration to blame China for everything from the United States' deteriorating domestic economy to unleashing the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our analysis shows that by using the logics of critical explanation, it is possible to conclude that the Chinese economic miracle is a revelation of the radical contingency of *"the economy"*, proof of its political institution and reproduction, which was *"forgotten"* as part of the expansive logics of neoliberal globalization and its *"human face"* version in liberal democracy. It also cuts through many of the underlying propositions of the (competing) paradigms in International Relations, which are selectively adopted in politics (left, right, and center): the PRC is a (relatively or, at least, seemingly) stable non-democracy with successful state-led capitalist participation (and even possible global leadership), while the notion of liberal democracy as the end of history justified the *"opening"* of China in the West even after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. This brought about the very profitable *"Chimerica"*, a codependence of USA as the hi-tech *"brain"* and PRC as the *"world factory"* of the global economy.

Furthermore, clashes between the USA and the PRC, particularly intense in the years under Donald Trump, are reactions to the visibility of the lack in the discourse of neoliberal globalization (also painfully revealed in the dislocations of the 2007/2008 financial crisis), the current management of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the much slower-burning threat of the ultimate dislocation, that of the climate. Similarly, *"rational"* actors and remnants of the *"third way"* politics hoping for a return of the *status quo*, criticize the PRC for *"politicizing"* the otherwise non-political neoliberal economy (by prioritizing state companies and otherwise intervening *"into"* the economy). Meanwhile, the *"populist"* Trump already used this realization of a re-politicized economy to get elected as the president of the USA. Still, he also needed a strong enemy to mobilize his electorate and to reconcile its very disparate demands *"inside"* his leadership *"of the free world"*. In short, in both cases the PRC, with its *"dangerous"* articulation of the economy, is a very convenient threatening *"other"* who *"steals"* American enjoyment.

On the other hand, PRC representatives are now accusing critics of the BRI, including Trump, of politicizing the *"economic"*, developmental BRI and its aspirations for universal social harmony, and of pro-

moting protectionism. Still, China managed to get over the crisis of 2007/2008 fairly quickly because it never did *"open"* entirely, as market fundamentalists would have liked, and it started to propose its own regional and international strategies, which was a change from the strategy of strengthening *"from within"* first.

The PRC has managed, and continues to manage, that with distinctive discursive strategies, which we analyzed at the point of the symbolic document *Visions and Actions* (2015). These visions and actions rely on social logics of harmony (harmonization), economic development, and win-win cooperation. They represent a particular historical and hierarchical discourse of human prosperity, which strives to be universal. Despite the claims about its pluralism and equity, such discourse provides an ideological closure (harmony through particular economic development on the condition of the right kind of cooperation). Specifically, to name, identify, and characterize these logics as social logics already is *"to engage in a process with a normative and political valence"*, simply by emphasizing *"that the identity of a practice cannot be taken for granted"* (Glynos and Howarth, 2008, 13). A hegemonic attempt at seamlessly uniting everybody, all the different nationalities, cultures, and developmental models, including the climate, environment, education, and media, with the possibility of truly global expansion/inclusion, shamelessly displaces the very material inequalities (economic, social, gender, ethnic, religious, regional, etc.) and possible future sources of dislocations (either as part of alternative expansive counter-hegemonic chains of equivalent demands, or simply events that will not be possible to domesticize, like environmental catastrophes) by making them all a function of joining the BRI and the very particular development, cooperation, and harmony it constructs.

This practice displays what Laclau and Mouffe (1987) name the relations of subordination (practices that appear to not invite public contestation, such as, for example, the normalcy of building certain infrastructure and developing through GDP), domination (keeping specific practices away from public contestation despite being judged as dominating by subjects, such as in off-the-record complaints and cynicism) and oppression (practices are challenged, but these challenges are met with efforts to neutralize them in the name of the *status quo*). Current facts about the *"reeducation camps"* for Muslims in Xinjiang, repression of democratic protests in Hong Kong, repression of environmental protests and workers' organizations, etc., all point at what is beyond the limits of this harmony-to-come. As shown by the entirely non-exhaustive genealogical input as part of analyzing the political logics of the PRC's institution and reproduction, the PRC depends on these exclusions constitutively. What it *"forgets"* and leaves out of its own heroic narration of

history as destiny of the Chinese people under the CPC leadership, lately held together by the empty signifier “Chinese characteristics” (but also “China”, “the people”), is the imperialism of its own institution, based on Han-nationality.

That being said, we put forward one aspect of our critique, a reactivation of the options excluded and foreclosed during the emergence and institution of a practice. What is marginalized and partly domesticized, are the many alternatives for imagining and structuring China and Chineseness, which were emerging in the many “-isms” of the May Fourth Movement after 1919 (also rekindled in the Tiananmen protests of 1989), as part of many reforms proposals even before 1911, in the different modernization path of Taiwan, and in the many critical or alternative intellectual currents that articulate democratic and Confucian or Daoist elements, etc. What is more, these imaginations are no less “Chinese” than the current dominant nationalistic narrative, but for now they are utterly unsuccessful.

The answers as to why that is can be found, at least in part, in many guises of fantasmatic logics, with the most all-encompassing one being “the great dragon fantasy” as named by the Lacanian scholar Wu Guan-jun. The document *Visions and Actions* (2015) clearly implies that if we all join the BRI, all-around harmony and prosperity will come. If not, the horrific opposite will become even stronger, which is also made explicit in internal texts, like *Document 9*, or the more confrontational reactions of diplomats to “China bashing”. That scenario is a defeat of harmony and cooperation, persistence of the uneven development and the unipolar world, a loss of humanity, and, more “internally”, another loss of Chineseness, which has already almost been stolen during the “century of humiliation”. And, with the stakes and the plausibility of such discourse being high, growth of the GDP (an unchallenged indicator of development) and indisputable economic bettering of lives of millions of people means that the PRC’s heroic, moral, and “scientific” leadership makes perfect sense.

This promise of ideological closure as part of these fantasmatic narratives that naturalize relations of domination is made even more obvious if confronted with a counter-logic explicated in discourse theory, that is, the logic of a plural and radically democratic community. But this confrontation will have to stay an unresolved task as far as this article is concerned. Still, our goal was to make a point about the need for an ethical facing-up to the political dimension of the

(global, Chinese, our, their, etc.) economy and for a reactivation of alternative articulations of conducting (global) politics.

Furthermore, one may notice how such an analysis fits into the, nowadays more and more distinguished, relational presuppositions of International Relations and social sciences as a whole. On the one hand, this is inherent for the approach to the discursive and discourse that we took (Dean, 2004; Martilla, 2015; Wright, 2016).¹⁹ On the other hand, we may add even more examples of genuine Chinese contributions to social and international theory (Morgan, 2004; Huang & Shih, 2014; Wang, 2014; Kavalski, 2017) to those used in our analysis (Qin, 2010; 2018; 2020) that are going in the same direction. This is the very same direction, or a nodal point, that connects the relationality present within diplomatic practices (Neumann, 2002; Adler-Nissen, 2015; Sending, Pouliot & Neumann, 2015) with the relational theoretical underpinnings of the International Relations theory (Jackson & Nexon, 1999) and policy analysis (Selg & Ventsel, 2020). Not going further into this (coincidental) nodal point, which is in need of further exploration and deepening, we expect more dialogue between those relational approaches, which may lead to better mutual understanding of the ontologies and cosmologies of the social disciplines and social agents that are not really engaged with each other at the moment (Trowsell et al., 2019; Kurki, 2020). For that to happen, much more work will be needed to translate and apply the same evaluative standards for the Chinese and post-Western claims (Brglez, 2008, 231; Rutzou, 2015).

Nevertheless, a comparison of our results with the previous results of the discourse analysis of Chinese practices (e.g. Debrix, 2002) further confirms that China is steadily developing from a regional to a global hegemonic power. However, as a difference from the still ongoing practices of both the United States and the EU, it is a power that is more likely to follow the flow than impose its own rules on others (Hodzi & Chen, 2018). Thus, within the developing international legal order, there also exists the opportunity for other actors to engage China (Cai, 2013), despite the inherent indeterminacy and fragmentation of international law (ILC, 2006; Koskeniemi, 2011) and the dependency of its interpretations on the underlying ideological and power relations (Krisch, 2005; Orakhelashvili, 2011). Then the signifier of Chinese “peaceful development” (like in Zeng, 2020), one we also spotted in our discourse analysis, may become imbued with a new meaning. This opportunity is still available within relational international practices.

19 While the emphasis on the ontological relational openness (before the analysis) of both – human agency and discursive structure – may lead to their becoming indistinguishable within the process and a “flat” ontology (Patomäki, 2017; 2020; Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019), fruitful dialogue with other more structured relational approaches (e.g. critical realist and pragmatic) is still possible (Dépelteu, 2018; Vanderberghe, 2018).

POBUDA PAS IN POT LJUDSKE REPUBLIKE KITAJSKJE: KRITIČNA ANALIZA SKOZI PRIZMO TEORIJE DISKURZA

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POVZETEK

Najbolj vidna in vseobsegajoča pobuda ekonomske in gospodarske diplomacije Ljudske republike Kitajske (LRK), pobuda *Pas in pot*, je po besedah uradnih predstavnikov LRK-ja vizionarski, izviren, nepolitičen in dobrohoten načrt za vzpostavitev ekonomske in družbene harmonije doma in po svetu. Slednje naj bi dosegli z vse večjo »povezljivostjo«, ki bi jo omogočila izvedba številnih infrastrukturnih projektov v več kot 65 državah azijskega, evropskega in afriškega kontinenta. Kljub temu številni akademiki, novinarji in politiki v svojih analizah in ocenah ugotavljajo, da je pobuda *Pas in pot* predvsem grožnja. V naši analizi ponujamo alternativno problematizacijo te pobude in kritičen pogled nanjo s pomočjo ontoloških izhodišč teorije diskurza, kot sta jih razvila Ernesto Laclau in Chantal Mouffe ter operacionalizirala dva izmed najbolj vidnih predstavnikov t. i. esseške šole analize diskurza, Jason Glynos in David Howarth. Pristop slednjih, poimenovan »logika kritične razlage«, nam omogoča, da presežemo omenjene poenostavljene in reduktivne opredelitve pobude *Pas in pot* v LRK-ju in izven njega ter ponudimo kritično razlago njene politične pojavitve, transformacije in ohranjanja. Cilj članka je torej pridobitev bolj kompleksnih uvidov v te, doslej najbolj ambiciozne načrte LRK-ja, ter kontekstualizacija naših dognanj v sklopu kitajske in »postevrocentrične« mednarodne politične in družbene teorije.

Ključne besede: Pobuda pas in pot (PP), Ljudska republika Kitajska (LRK), teorija diskurza, družbena nasprotja, dislokacija, relacionizem

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