

Afterword

Jodi DEAN

Why is ‘communist’ unable to qualify political theory? We have democratic political theory, liberal political theory, republican political theory, conservative political theory, the indistinct placeholder ‘normative’ political theory—but communist political theory does not appear. Marxist political theory, Marxist-Leninist political theory, and even Marxist-Leninist-Maoist political theory are intelligible as types of inquiry, although in the twenty-first century they remain at the margins of most academic and activist discourse. The proper names Marx, Lenin, and Mao legitimate, to a degree, theorisations of political economy, concepts of political power, and analyses of the struggles of the oppressed—perhaps because their individuation of the knowledge gained through collective struggle makes them easier for those ensconced in the institutions and expectations of capitalist societies to swallow. Outputs of a man’s brain, his thinking and writing, are more palatable—and more easily dismissed—than the revolutionary courage of hundreds of millions of people willing to kill and die to end their own exploitation and colonisation. Hence the radicality of an insistence on Chinese communism: the people and their struggles—their heroic victories, lessons learned, excesses, and defeats—take centre stage as the subject and object of communist political theory.

Radicality is risky. A specific challenge for communist political theory stems from the way its opponents (and some of its supporters) insist on reducing communist ideas to a few select historical examples. Inextricable from history, ‘communist’ fails to attain the level of abstraction necessary for a qualifier. It is inverted to refer to a state violence it aims to abolish. Gulags and famines take the place of the emancipatory egalitarian struggles of the oppressed. Pang Laikwan in this volume reminds us that Mao’s version of dialectical materialism emphasises humans’ struggle with history, so perhaps the stickiness of communism, its seemingly inescapable embeddedness in not just history but in a history written by the victors, its *enemies*, confirms Mao’s point.

Communists continue to battle with and over our histories. When anti-communists subsume working class victories under Cold War categories they inadvertently bear witness to the truth of communism. The struggle is real.

Call Me by Your Name

Language is a weapon in the arsenal of struggle. Communist names present the world differently from the way it is given in capitalist ideology. What was natural or traditional becomes a crime demanding redress. What workers learn through collective struggle takes form in slogans, demands, and concepts. In an era when anti-communism is the norm, the air, a mobilising theme for conservatives and liberals, and when capitalist individualism, self-interest, and cynicism reign, the language of communism can feel strange in our mouths. The terms seem not just outmoded but inauthentic. Were they ever more than propaganda designed to deceive the masses? Rebecca Karl's recovery of the emancipatory imperative of 'serve the people' in this volume illustrates this point. For Chinese communists 'serve the people' was a political injunction, social ideal, cultural expectation, economic norm, and concrete social practice, even if by the mid-1960s it had become rather empty and rote. By the 2000s, the phrase had lost its capacity to produce socialist meaning, more available for lampooning than ethical guidance. Karl excavates this capacity. She attends to Mao's initial use of the phrase in a tribute for Zhang Side, a beloved comrade. Born a peasant, Zhang was a soldier on the Long March. He died in a mining accident during the war against Japan. Mao's eulogy turned Zhang into an exemplar of socialist service. As Karl writes, 'the phrase Zhang's death inspired proposed a new form of social relation, a socialist organisation of time and society that was at once abstract and concrete, lived and "yet to be made," remembered and "not yet existing."' To serve the people was to create the people, to enable the people to become present as a revolutionary unity. It was to undertake the work of dismantling old hierarchies and producing new kinds of social relations. Karl resurrects the theoretical and practical vitality of the expectation that socialists serve the people: only by serving the people are they part of the people; only by being served is the people revolutionary.

Serving the people names a process of subjectification: the people become present as the revolutionary subject they are by being served.¹ Karl demonstrates the way that communist language produces the structure—the relations, understandings, and expectations—that makes it intelligible. This productive capacity is not absolute; it is entangled in a broad array of economic, political, social, and cultural forces. These forces are often antagonistic. Sometimes they align. Communist names rely on the antagonisms and alignments that imbue them with mobilising capacity. If an organisation instructs its members (or cadres, soldiers, workers, or students) to serve the people even as it promotes hierarchy, enables corruption, and enriches the few, the efficacy of the phrase will decline. But it may persist, for a while, as an ideal against which failures to uphold it are assessed. It may retain a symbolic authority that testifies to the struggles and sacrifices that it inspired and that inspired it. Even its cynical evocation relies on this prior authority—why else mock it?

So what do we make of Mao's currency, the way he circulates as the face of Chinese capitalism, as money? The cynical response sees nothing but authoritarian capitalism, nothing but Foxconn and billionaires—even in the Party. Using Lacanian categories, one might say that in contemporary China capitalism is Real while communism is imaginary. But why not see the face of Mao as the sign of a struggle that *cannot* be erased, that lives on, that has social value? What could enable or support this properly symbolic perspective? The faces featured on money issued by the United States Treasury Department feature slave-owners. Their legacy lives on in the raced economic inequality, institutionalised white supremacy, and ongoing damage of racism that characterise US capitalism. That US money features slave-owners marks the fact that the wealth of the United States was produced by slaves as well as by exploited workers. US money registers how the value of labour in the US, like other commodities, is inseparable from slavery and its afterlives. Does the face of Mao make a mockery of the Foxconn workers assembling iPhones they cannot afford or does it haunt Chinese capitalism as a manifestation of an aspiration and a struggle that continues? The question is undecidable, which means political. So long as communist names have symbolic efficiency, they can touch the Real that ruptures them, keeping alive the possibility of its transformation. After all, capitalism is itself driven by and structured through class struggle. The Real of capitalism is the Real of a class antagonism that will lead to capitalism's own abolition, that is to say, capitalism from a communist perspective.

Communism for Us

Close to a decade ago, a number of leading European intellectuals gathered together for a conference on the 'Idea of Communism' at Birkbeck University in London. Initiated by the philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, the conference attracted over a thousand people. It generated subsequent conferences in New York, Berlin, and Seoul as well as edited collections and follow-up books and articles. A goal of this endeavour is the reinvigoration and imagining of communism as a philosophical ideal and political project. Against the anti-communism that pervades three decades after communism's ostensible defeat, the desire for and affirmation of the truth of communism responds to the disaster of global capitalism, intensified economic inequality, rising fascism, and climate change. Emancipatory egalitarian struggle against the exploitation of people, nature, and the future is necessary for there to be a liveable future for most of the world's people.

Although in large part a theoretical project, the project for a new communism cannot be reduced to academic politics. The structures and expectations of the neoliberal academy work against thinking communism. Sometimes funding can be secured for projects that give the appearance of being sufficiently critical, artistic, or historical—sufficiently *distant* from politics, from the *actuality* of communism. Infiltration, using the meagre rewards of the university against its capitalist foundation, is better than nothing. Disciplinary norms regulate the production of what counts as knowledge, validating views that reinforce a capitalist status quo. Area studies reinforce borders: China separate from the so-called West, Latin America separate from Anglo America, the Middle East separate from everyone. In addition to supporting imperialism's ongoing fragmentation of the world to suit its own interests, these separations present

real barriers to activists. They make it hard to learn from different experiences. They reinforce particularism and uniqueness—our struggle is like no other. They mitigate against the building of revolutionary international parties, organisations, and movements.

How does the project of reinvigorating the idea of communism here and now suggest a position from which we can put to use and redeploy the knowledge generated through Chinese communist struggle? What terms and ideals, what knowledge generated and lessons learned by the courageous work of Chinese comrades do we need today? Four interconnected notions stand out with particular power: mass line, people, class struggle, and revolution.

Mass Line

In its most fecund moments, Chinese communism has been vibrant and experimental, creating new modes of generating political energy and organising political being. Marxist-Leninist ideas took on new dimensions as Chinese communists made theoretical questions central to the practice of communism. ‘Mass line’ is the most significant of these conceptual innovations. A principle of participatory governance and political accountability, the mass line ties Party work to the people. The people have to be consulted; their will must be interpreted, and policies need to carry out this will—from *the masses to the masses*. As Lin Chun reminds us in this volume, not only does the mass line promote an ideal of popular sovereignty, but it also provides ‘a novel adaptation of the Leninist principle of democratic centralism.’ According to her, the mass line aims to balance deliberation and discipline while at the same time avoiding ‘bureaucratic dogmatism and blind commandism.’ Mindful of our present context of generalised dispossession, immiseration, and political despair, Lin highlights the emancipatory power of the mass line: ‘Ordinary people can be proud of themselves as direct producers of both material and cultural wealth in the collective mastery of their own destiny.’

‘Ordinary people’ have today become a political cliché. Whether as voices of ‘common sense’ trotted out to symbolise that a given politician is in touch with the people or as ‘slice of life’ style television interviewees whose opinions take the place of actual news, ordinary people are ubiquitous. The recent turn to populism is but the latest political deployment of ordinary people. The differences between this cynical populism and the mass line are significant. In late neoliberal societies, ordinary people do not appear primarily as producers. They appear as singular national subjects, instantiations of the nation, representatives of a national interest as voices from a particular demographic position. Their source of pride arises from the way their demographic position is incorporated in the nation. Likewise, rather than collective, their capacities are individual—individual successes and failures, individual gains or losses, individual hopes and dreams. Detached from collective strength, ordinary people forfeit any possibility of mastery over their own destiny. The question is how they can cope with what life brings them. Have they prepared? Are they trained? All responsibility is downloaded onto them as individuals. Politics is either a matter of personal ethics and identity or so far removed from everyday life as to have become *post-political*. In fact, everybody knows that ordinary people have no political impact in societies run by and

for billionaires. The presence of an ordinary person in a ‘man on the street’ interview or at an address by a US President is all for show, an instant of fame that vanishes at the moment it registers.

The mass line is indispensable to the return to communism, perhaps now more than it ever was. As Lin writes in this volume, against present individualism, it inspires a political vision that embeds ‘individual worth and glory’ in the work and struggle of a political collective. One is valuable as part of the revolutionary masses, as one of the people, and not for one’s own individual insight, effort, or hot take. Ideally, parties and organisations committed to the mass line would practice a politics that exceeds empty horizontalism and participationism. There are leaders—but the leaders are leaders only insofar as they attend to the needs of the people. Lin details how through the mass line leadership pools the wisdom of the masses as it ‘collects scattered views from below and turns them into systematic positions and experimental policies, the effects of which are then investigated, debated, and fed once again back into the system.’ Political discussion is more than talk, more than sharing. It is tied directly to action for the benefit of the people. The mass line is radical democracy as communist practice, that is, a strategically minded practice with communism as its horizon.

The People

‘The people’ is the second concept from Chinese communism crucial to any contemporary reenvisioning of communist futures. Guan Kai in this volume takes up the notion of the people in Chinese history. Traditionally, ‘ordinary people’ were understood in contrast to rulers and government officials. The people are the ‘material foundation for rule’ even though they are not yet understood as themselves rulers, as sovereign. With the Chinese Communist Party’s rise to political power, the people retained its place as one side of an antagonism, naming those who supported socialism over and against those who did not—the enemies of the people. Situating Chinese communism within the revolutionary line of the French Revolution and Paris Commune, Guan presents the people as ‘the faintly discernible trace of revolutionary practice, a slogan that can be found everywhere, but the meaning of which is constantly changing.’ The idea of the people is transformed through people’s struggle, people’s war. The sea in which the revolutionary swims is turbulent. Navigating it requires winning the people’s hearts, which itself requires finding solutions to their problems.

The Chinese communist view of the people contrasts with the people of contemporary populism. Rather than given as a unity at the basis of a national project, it is a force with its own dynamics. The people is productive, active, and internally contradictory. Their engagement is the struggle, their support decisive for victory: ‘The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history’ (quoted by Guan in the present volume). But they are not a unity and they are not invariable. Always comprised of contradictory elements, some of the people will be militant and disciplined. Others will not. The Party cannot take them for granted but must always be responsive, adaptive, and creative as it seeks to mobilise them—hence, the tight connection between the people and the mass line.

Class Struggle

Chinese communism also provides an innovative view of class struggle. One objection that reappears in the contemporary discussion of communism turns on the idea of class. There is no working class in Europe and the United States, we are told. Instead we have multiple differentiated positions and identities with little relation to production. Class can no longer function as a revolutionary mode of political identity. This argument is not persuasive. Chinese communism lets us see why. First, as Wang Hui has observed, 'the identification of the working class as the leading class is a political statement rather than a positivist conclusion.'² As he emphasises, 'class politics refers to movements against the contradictions created by the logic of capitalism and its derivative class inequality.'³ From a communist perspective, the classes engaged in class struggle are irreducible to demographic categories. They are positions in the antagonistic relations at the core of a society's mode of production. Second, in contrast to the workerist reductionism prevalent in European socialism and autonomist communism, the Chinese context gives us class struggle as creative experimentation. Work teams (Elizabeth Perry in this volume) and worker universities (Alessandro Russo in this volume) suggest new modes of developing accountability and subverting the technical division of labour. Third, class struggle has affective prerequisites; class consciousness cannot be reduced to a mindset that follows automatically from class position. Class feeling has to be engendered. Nourishing class feeling is itself a tactic of class struggle. Haiyan Lee in this volume brings out the ways Chinese cultural production sought to engineer a new structure of feeling whereby comradesly love for one's class brothers and sisters supplants the rivals of kinship, romance, and pity. Fourth, Chinese communism gives us a class struggle that operates not just through the Party but that occurs within the Party. The Party is not a pure voice of the oppressed. It embodies all the contradictions already within the people and must include in itself capacities for learning and change. Contrasting the Chinese with the Soviet approach, Mao emphasises that class struggle is undertaken from the bottom to the top as well as from the top to the bottom. Pun Ngai concludes: 'The mass line and class struggle were always intertwined as the essential ingredients of the construction of socialism.'⁴

Revolution

Finally, Chinese communism leaves a distinct legacy of revolution. Benjamin Kindler in this volume contrasts Lenin's and Mao's revolutionary temporalities. Lenin's was that of the moment, the decisive instant of rupture, revolution as event. Mao takes the long view. Kindler writes: 'For Mao, revolution is a moment of rupture within continuity and continuity amidst rupture—a transformation of the strategic terrain in which the nature of both the possibilities and the dangers undergo a marked change from one state to another, but where the conquest of power by no means marks the end of the revolutionary process.' Cai Xiang in this volume also highlights the impossibility of finality; there can always be reversals. Insofar as history is always the working through of contradictions, no victory is ever certain. Absent the fetishism of completion, of an end to history, that long plagued European communism, Chinese communism remained attuned to ongoing problems, combinations of radical advance and tactical

retreat. To be sure, the long view brings its own challenges: when do compromises become betrayals? At what point do the measures designed to protect the revolution, by energising the economy, say, in fact defeat it? When can we say that counterrevolution has taken the place of people's revolution? Might it be when the interests of corporations and investors take the place of the people? When the people's own desires are too easily 'bound to the seductions of the commodity form,' as Kindler writes in this volume. When communism no longer appears as the horizon of our politics because its struggles have become blocked, repressed, outlawed?

And, perhaps, one final way Chinese communism may enable us to discern if our politics is revolutionary: it helps us ask whether ostensible efforts to serve the people fragment them into identity categories such that the people can no longer be seen as a revolutionary force. It compels us to consider whether our activists, organisers, and revolutionaries take the people as the way they are given under capitalism or work to transform them into agents of emancipatory egalitarian struggle.

All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese writer Sima Qian said, 'Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather.' To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather.

Mao Zedong, 'Serve the People,' 1944

Li Jin, Red Sister Gives Relief to a Soldier (2007)



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