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革命

Revolution

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[Translated by Rebecca E. KARL]

In contemporary Chinese discourse, what is called the ‘Chinese Revolution’ (*zhongguo geming*) usually indicates the socialist revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The core content of this revolution is Marxism, primarily Leninism, dominated by the injunction to eliminate private property. For this reason, the Chinese Revolution is seen as forming a constituent part of twentieth-century world history while, in its realisation, it can also be seen as having temporarily disrupted the developmental logic of nineteenth-century capitalism. And yet, the Chinese Revolution also possessed its own local characteristics, namely in its anti-imperialist and anti-feudal aspects (see Barlow’s essay in the present volume). Anti-imperialism indicates anti-colonialism, which means that the Chinese Revolution also had a nationalist component. Its anti-feudal aspect means that theories of enlightenment were also a special constitutive part of the revolution. In this sense, Marxism, nationalism, and theories of enlightenment comprised the complex structure of thought informing the Chinese Revolution—although, of course, after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), we must add the dimension of developmentalism (as Lin Chun has argued).¹

The modernity of the Chinese Revolution is produced in this structure, even as the structure also produces the particularities of the theory of its historical stages, from New Democracy to socialism (see also Blecher’s essay in the present volume). At the same time, the abundant experiences and complex content of the revolutionary process contributed to, while also helping produce, numerous particular revolutionary theories—for example, theories of the countryside surrounding the city, the united front, the mass line, etc.² Yet, by the same token, communism was always the ultimate horizon and the end goal of the struggle. The self-negations and theories of ‘continuous revolution’ characteristic of the Chinese Revolution can be attributed to the essential particularities of this ultimate goal.

Rupture and Continuity

The modernity of the Chinese Revolution meant that inherent to it was a strong anti-traditional tendency; for this reason, it constituted a genuine rupture in Chinese history. This rupture is responsible for much of the creativity of the twentieth century. And yet, from a different perspective, at the same time as the Chinese Revolution decisively parted from tradition, it also consciously or unconsciously utilised tradition to enhance its own creative content. For example, the CCP required its own members to ‘first eat bitterness [endure hardship], and then to enjoy themselves.’ This could be seen as akin to the spirit of the adage attributed to the ancient sage Fan Zhongyan (989–1052), a Song Dynasty statesman credited with being the founder of neo-Confucianism, who said: ‘Be the first to bear the world’s hardship, and the last to enjoy its comforts.’ Historian John King Fairbank once encapsulated modern Chinese history into an ‘impact [of the West]-response [of China]’ paradigm, yet, with regard to the Chinese Revolution, this paradigm could perhaps be more precisely expressed as ‘impact–appropriation–response.’³ Even so, in the normal course of affairs, the appropriation of resources from Chinese tradition usually congealed around the requirement to effect an absolute break from tradition.

From the late 1920s, when the CCP was mostly based in the Jinggangshan area of Jiangxi province, along with the gradual growth of the consciousness of the need for revolutionary bases, rudiments of the new nation emerged, which later came to maturity during the Yan’an period. For this reason, inherent in the Chinese Revolution was a strong commitment to institution building, which simultaneously produced a serious critique of anarchism. However, this certainly did not spell the end of discussions over where power resided; to the contrary, whether power belonged to the state or to society was consistently one of the arenas of potential trouble throughout the revolutionary years. This trouble reached its climactic theoretical and experiential limits during the Cultural Revolution and was expressed in the Paris Commune-like principles that informed the January Revolution of 1967 in Shanghai, one of the high points of the proletarian commitment to the Cultural Revolution in the city (see also the essays by Russo and Thornton in the present volume).⁴ The most pragmatic choice for restoring social order was that power belonged to the state, and yet the idealistic or even romantic yearning that power could belong to society remained a strong sentiment. Understanding this point is essential to grasping the internal theoretical contradictions and paradoxes of the Chinese Revolution.

Beyond the Political Revolution

The Chinese Revolution was never only a political revolution, but rather it was always also a social revolution, with the ultimate goal of fashioning a more egalitarian social order. After 1949, the PRC underwent a sea change to become a collective society. In the rural villages, there was a gradual transformation from a small peasant private property regime to the collective property regime of the people’s communes (see also Gao’s essay in the present volume). In the urban areas, there was a gradual nationalisation of industry and manufacture through unitary purchasing policies. In the end, these comprised the planned economy. Forbidding individuals or any kind

of interest group from putting themselves above society was one of the core ideals hidden in the background of these socialist transformations. That is, in addition to valorising the broad proletariat-peasant masses, radicalising political campaigns were used to smash the formation of any possible power blocs. Restraining bureaucratisation was about preventing the emergence of special power factions; the vigilance against markets and its corresponding commodity economy was about rejecting privatisation and the possibility of the reemergence of capitalist classes; the remaking of intellectuals to one degree or the next was about the transformation of intellectuals as a class into a form of cultural capital, whose 'red and expert' mastery could help control social anxiety about the future of communism in China (see Schmalzer's essay in the present volume). This radical socialist transformation reached a climax during the Cultural Revolution; its ultimate failure can be attributed to many different factors.

Socialism retained the nation-state form and at the same time it also retained the bureaucracy, in particular the system of cadres which not only included bureaucrats but also absorbed intellectuals. Essentially, there was no way to break through the laws of the salary-wage system, so that the problem of distribution continuously tilled the fecund soil of special privileges. In the context of the modern world system, it was almost impossible for China, in reality, to return to any autarkic form of economics—self-reliance, rich harvests, and self-sufficiency (see Yang's essay in the present volume)—even while, of course, this impossibility simultaneously is attributable to the Cold War geopolitical patterns.⁵ Even more important, perhaps, is that after 1949 there was never a pure socialist system in China. Because of nativist elements, the Chinese Revolution was at once both radical and incrementalist, and was always oscillating between compromise and struggle. This embodied the strategic spirit of the Chinese Revolution at the same time as it also formed the internal complexity comprising its socialism.

In the rural villages, what actually existed was what can be called a semiplanned, seminatural economic formation, where the small peasant economy (including its corresponding ideology) could never have been completely eradicated. The system of 'three-level ownership with production teams as the base' of the people's communes was a formation that integrated the production team, the production brigade, and the commune. The production team in many essential aspects was merely the continuation of a traditional natural village formation, with, in particular, the system of individual plots substantively retaining the idea of a private economy along with its cultural connotations. By the same token, in the cities, once socialist nationalisation had been completed in 1956, there nevertheless remained a host of consolidated ownership forms (state-owned enterprises, collectively owned enterprises, individual economy). In the midst of such a complex socioeconomic structure, exchange obviously became extremely important; at the same time, the reality of the pattern of a 'private economy in the midst of the collective' became particularly evident. In this light, we can say that the socialist revolution from 1949 to 1976 did not really cope with these problems completely.

As for the transformation of intellectuals, in addition to the clear challenges presented to professionals, the popularisation of education also produced new problems. In 1950, the horizons of this issue began to become evident, and by 1960 the problem of 'successors' drew huge political attention.⁶ On the one hand, the popularisation of education gave

rise to tense relations between intellectual youth and villagers, with a conflict between peasant children 'entering the cities' and urban intellectual youth 'returning to the villages.'⁷ On the other hand, modern education, particularly the expansion of university education, included the movement of university graduates into work environments with relatively well-paid salaried positions and social welfare provisions. This led to the gradual formation of a socialist middle class, with corresponding newly arising middle class lifestyles and cultural desires. The reforms of the 1980s in China derived from the impetus provided by the alliance of the three social strata that was forged in this period between bureaucrats, urban entrepreneurs, and the petty bourgeoisie. In the middle of this kind of socialist transformation was a continuation of conflict in Chinese tradition over the relationship between *xiaokang* and *datong* (for an exegesis of the interpretation and translation of these terms, see Craig A. Smith's essay in the present volume). That is, should one pass through *xiaokang* so as to achieve *datong* (socialism), or should one achieve *datong* in order to reach *xiaokang*? This debate continues to this day.

A Social Enlightenment

The difficulties encountered in the political or economic arenas often found their way into the cultural sphere, so that training the so-called 'new socialist person' became an urgent task (see Dai's essay in the present volume). Political scientist Tang Tsou has called Chinese society an 'all-round society,' but from a different perspective we could say that the ambition of new China was to build an 'education society.'⁸ This intention was fully expressed and contained within Mao Zedong's 1966 '7 May Directive.'⁹ Literature and arts were to throw themselves wholeheartedly into the social fray, where their goal was to transform society and to help mould the new socialist person. For this reason, these practices were far from the older (individualised) practice of literature, and rather were intended to produce a literature of society or the collective with the aim of creating the conditions of possibility for a richer public life. The design of this 'education society' clearly mobilised to a great extent ancient Chinese resources on social 'enlightenment' (*jiaohua*); in its aspirations to cover all of society, it was close to the neo-Confucianism of the Song-Ming period, and particularly the idealism of Wang Yangming (1472–1529).¹⁰ The idea that every person could achieve the perfection of the ancient sages Yao and Shun was directly cited in Mao Zedong's poetry: 'Our six hundred million Chinese can all be Yao and Shun.'¹¹

This education society naturally has a social disciplinary aspect, but, by the same token, it also retained classical educational aspirations for the cultivation of social morality: for example, excellence, brilliance, loyalty, devotion, selflessness, courage, etc. For this reason, the sublime was always the most prominent aspect of socialist aesthetics (see Sorace's essay in the present volume). Through this type of learning, which emphasised intrinsic quality (moral fibre), the hope was that the new socialist person would reject material rewards and ambitions for power so as to carry out revolution to the very end. What the Chinese Revolution sought to accomplish was the popularisation of the ancient aristocratic ideal of the 'gentleman' (*junzi*),¹² although, truthfully, this was not the innovation of the Chinese Revolution alone. For, aside from the aesthetic influences of the former Soviet Union, this also came from an internal aspect of the Song–Ming idealist school, even though the Chinese Revolution relied

upon the strength of the Party-state to realise it. However, the difficulties this education society encountered also derived from the structure of state coercion: for many people, this form of the sublime steadily created a kind of pressure which, by the 1980s, produced the beginning of the trend towards 'avoiding glory,' in the words of Wang Meng.¹³

Advocating Datong

In the twentieth century, the Chinese Revolution experienced a cycle of radicalism-retrenchment-radicalism, of temporary compromise followed by a new move on the chessboard. This makes conspicuous the fact that difficulties were not just the province of prerevolutionary activity, but that in the postrevolutionary era, the difficulties of realising socialism in one country were multisided and emerged from everywhere. Yet, the core issue, I still believe, is that the revolution was never able to resolve the problem of private property in the midst of the regime of public property. This also encompasses the problem of how to preserve individual autonomy in the context of collective life. Despite this, the Chinese Revolution has left behind a mighty legacy, inclusive of its errors and failures. Today, China has reaffirmed the system of market economy and is trying to resolve the inverse problem of 'public property in the midst of the system of private property.' This encompasses the problem of how to 'embed' the market into social structures rather than allowing the market to dominate or control society.¹⁴ For this reason, I believe renewed calls for *datong* as an ideal able to surmount the society of *xiaokang* will only become more important in the future.¹⁵

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