From "Revisionism" to "Alienation," from Great Leaps to "Third Wave"

Bill Brugger

The China of the 1980s seems so very different from that of the mid 1960s: the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is now widely denounced, seemingly both for the mid 1960s' diagnosis of the ills afflicting Chinese society and for the remedies chosen at the time to cure them. Today few would wish to defend the treatment meted out by Red Guards, but a condemnation of past actions is no substitute for an understanding of what happened and why.

The Cultural Revolution was devised to sweep away bureaucratism. It was called that then and it still exists. Many Chinese, now approaching middle-age, recall their youthful elation at the storming of the bureaucratic citadel, provided they can disassociate it from other more painful events of those years. The problem today is to separate out the reasoning inherent in the "four modernisations" from the use of that term to justify domination by a still thriving and powerful bureaucracy. Trotsky felt that bureaucratism was the result of inadequately developed productive forces. Weber, using different terminology, came to the opposite conclusion: bureaucratism was a consequence of developing productive forces. Mao's theory of "continuous revolution" held that it was a consequence of the development of productive forces without adequate corresponding changes in the relations of production. In China today bureaucratism is seen by many simply as a phenomenon stemming from old habits and not directly connected at all to the level of development of the productive forces. Diagnoses are many but the problem remains. All attest to its prevalence but there is no consensus as to how it should be dealt with. If it were just a question of old habits, technical means, that is, rectification, might suffice. If, however, it is the manifestation of systemic causes a new kind of cultural revolution may offer a solution. This article will argue that the diagnosis offered by some humanist Marxists in China, here exemplified by Wang Ruoshui, an implacable foe of the "gang of four," is in fact similar to those made by radicals in the mid 1960s. It will go on to suggest that the means offered to prevent bureaucratism, again evoke ideas from more radical times.

In the language of the early 1980s (before repressive methods were once again called in, albeit briefly in 1983, to distinguish "fragrant flowers" from "poisonous weeds"), bureaucratism was sometimes referred to as "political alienation."[1] People recalled that Engels had feared that in a revolutionary situation "the people's servants could become the people's masters." For Wang Ruoshui, the *enfant*

1. Wang Ruoshui "Tantan yihua wenti" ("Discussing the problem of alienation"), in Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan (ed.), *Renxing, rendaozhuyi wenti taolunji* (*Collected Discussions on the Question of Human Nature and Humanism*) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), pp. 388–91.

terrible of the 1980s, Lin Biao and the "gang of four" epitomized this phenomenon. Yet, although the use of the term "alienation" became taboo after Zhou Yang's famous speech of 1963,[2] in many ways the Cultural Revolution was aimed at precisely that problem. The remedies, moreover, have similarities. To counter the abuse of power in the Cultural Revolution there was much talk of implementing the spirit of the Paris Commune. In the 1980s Wang Ruoshui again evoked Marx's description of the Commune.[3] Having achieved a certain amount of fame denouncing Chen Boda,[4] Wang proceeded to use the very same texts Chen had used.

But what were the remedies proposed by the Communards? The first was universal elections with deputies subject to summary recall by their constituents. Wang spoke of this approvingly, but so had the supporters of the Shanghai Commune in 1967. Clearly, in calling for a more orthodox system of democracy within the law, Wang did not want to endorse the Shanghai Commune. But what exactly was he advocating? Was this another version of the protests of the Li Yizhe group, which in the early 1970s tried to combine the radical enthusiasm of Hunan's *Shengwulian* with formal democratic mechanisms?[5]

The second remedy of the Communards was the lowering of the wages of government officials to the level of the average earned by workers. Wang thought this was impracticable. But the principle could be accepted in spirit; there was, after all, a need to combat privilege.[6] That was precisely how people spoke in the mid 1960s. This view contrasts sharply with the meritocratic culture of recent years.

The issue here is part of a much larger one – the question of distributive or social justice. The formula which developed out of the Cultural Revolution took the form of restricting "bourgeois right."[7] Copious amounts have been written on whether Zhang Chunqiao's or Yao Wenyuan's version of this accorded with that which Marx intended in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. The textual exegesis is tedious. But behind the debates the issue is very important. The dictatorship of the proletariat might in practice be a synonym for police power. Indeed, in pursuing control, Stalin felt obliged to reinvoke the "dictatorship of the proletariat" not long after he had

2. Zhou Yang, "The fighting tasks confronting workers in philosophy and the social sciences," 26 October 1963, *Peking Review*, No. 1 (1964), pp. 19–20.

3. Wang Ruoshui, "Discussing the problem," p. 388.

4. Wang Ruoshui, "Chen Boda de lixingzhuyi shi shenmo huose" ("What sort of stuff is Chen Boda's rationalism"), *Shehui kexue zhanxian* (*Social Sciences Front*), No. 1 (1978), pp. 33–36.

5. Li Yizhe, "Concerning socialist democracy and the legal system," *Issues and Studies*, No. 1 (1976), pp. 110–48.

6. Wang Ruoshui, "Discussing the problem," p. 399.

7. Zhang Chunqiao, "Lun dui zichanjieji de quanmian zhuanzheng" ("On exercising all-round dictatorship over the bourgeoisie"), *Hongqi* (*Red Flag*), No. 4 (1975), pp. 3–12.

declared the proletariat itself non-existent in 1936.[8] The dictatorship of the proletariat might in practice be a form of thuggery as was sometimes manifested by the vigilante "mass dictatorship teams" of the Cultural Revolution. The dictatorship of the proletariat might also be a cover for the restoration of "feudal autocracy."[9] But it surely also meant something more than "political control" by elite groups in the name of the working class (indeed, the replacement of the term by the words "political control" has been advocated).[10]

Dictatorship of the proletariat in non-Marxist language is about affirmative action or positive discrimination in a situation where organizational structures reproduce power asymmetrically. Despite the sad history of attempts to implement the dictatorship of the proletariat, many on the Left view a denial of positive discriminatory action as tantamount to disqualifying oneself from being a socialist, or for that matter a social liberal. Hayek, in classical liberal vein, can argue that there is no such thing as social justice;[11] socialists cannot, nor can they accept with equanimity the slogan that the law is not higher than the economic base. Socialism demands a theory of social justice. The search for social justice in the Cultural Revolution may have led to monumental injustice. But one may not conclude from that, in Hayekian vein, that no theory of social justice involving affirmative action should be sought. This must be pondered on as one evaluates the "socialist" principle of payment according to work. It must be considered too by those who seek to make the new legal codes something more than exercises in legal positivism.

The similarity between the discussions about the Paris Commune by people like Wang Ruoshui in the 1980s and the "Left" literature of the 1960s and early 1970s they so bitterly denounced is apparent. Yet, Wang, the protégé of Deng Tuo, would contend that the "Leftists" of the Cultural Revolution mistakenly thought that the main danger was "revisionism," whereas it was not: the main danger was political alienation.[12] But was political alienation not considered in the 1960s to be a consequence of revisionism? "No," Wang assures his readers, revisionism was basically a matter of theory, and to concentrate on theory was not enough. It was not the case that all bad elements wanted to revise Marxism. The need was to focus on the actions of the bad elements. Sometimes they used selected excerpts of Marxist texts

8. See my discussion of this in B. Brugger, "Soviet and Chinese views on revolution and socialism – some thoughts on the problems of diachrony and synchrony," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol XI, No 3 (1981), pp. 311–32.

9. Wang Xizhe, "Mao Zedong yu wenhua da geming" ("Mao Zedong and the great cultural revolution") in Wang Xizhe, *Lunwenji* (*Collected Essays*) (Hong Kong: Qishi niandai zazhishe, 1981), pp. 87–141. A translation may be found in *Chinese Law and Government*, Summer 1985, p. 23.

10. Deng Liqun, "Speeches on Party history," *Proceedings of the Symposium on Party History*, 1981, pp. 74–174, *JPRS*-CPS-85-030, *China Report: Political, Sociological and Military Affairs*, 28 March 1985, p. 23.

11. F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Vol II: *The Mirage of Social Justice* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

12. Wang Ruoshi, "Discussing the problem," pp. 389–90.

to rationalize their interests, but not always. Their fetishization of those excerpts taken from Marxism was itself a form of alienation – ideological alienation stemming from the alienation of power. The way to combat political alienation was not by the struggle of the Cultural Revolution but by democracy, the legal system, stability in the Party and the abolition of tenure for life in Party and administrative posts.[13] Wang is surely wrong in seeing the use of the term "revisionism" in the 1960s purely in terms of theory. He is also wrong to reduce the politics of the time to simple opportunist careerism. But what emerges from the writings of Wang and those like him is the continued advocacy of a cultural revolution – though by other means. And most of the radicals of the early 1970s, having removed from power those whom of they considered to be "ultra-left" (plus a few of the "ultra-right"), would probably have agreed with him had they not been warned off reading the early Marx.

A second target of the Cultural Revolution was the continuation of the old superior–subordinate relationship at the work place – the third aspect of the relations of production which radicals had stressed in the early 1960s. At that time they warned that to change one aspect of the relations of production (ownership) without changing others would lead to the creation of a new exploiting class. In the 1980s this was subsumed under the title economic alienation.

Wang Ruoshui's discussion of economic alienation, therefore, had perforce to echo the current orthodoxy about adhering to "objective economic laws." The first form of economic alienation, then, arose from people not understanding objective laws.[14] Thus, when they confronted nature, lack of knowledge resulted in nature exacting, in Engels' words, a revenge. Here Wang cites cases of ecological damage and pollution resulting from ignorance. To be sure, such ignorance (and its consequences) was much in evidence in the turbulent years. But whether the level of knowledge is improving is a moot point, when one compares the amount of soil erosion produced by thoughtless action in the more radical days with the pollution which nowadays is escalating at an ever rapid rate. Visitors to China in the 1960s can remember a Beijing hardly troubled by smog – a Beijing which was determined not go go the way of Shenyang in the 1950s – a period when China's planners supposedly adhered more closely to these objective economic laws.

Secondly, alienation in the economic sphere might arise from bureaucratism; and, thirdly, it might arise from the social structure (*tizhi*). It is here that one is again reminded of the mid 1960s. Although they did not use the term "alienation," the radicals of the Cultural Revolution focused largely on the second and third of the above three manifestations of economic alienation, noting that bureaucratism could lead to new class relations; and systemic contradictions improperly handled could have the same effect. Wang

13. *Ibid.* p. 390.
14. *Ibid.* p. 392.

Ruoshui on this point sought to distance himself from the radicals of the Cultural Revolution by criticizing the notion that capitalism might be restored. In a speech in 1979 Wang expressed himself as follows:

> We have made the direct transition from a semi-feudal society into a socialist society without passing through the capitalist stage. In actual fact, the current slogan of "capitalist restoration" is inappropriate. Since capitalism never assumed a leading position, there can be no such restoration. If there is going to be any restoration, it can only be the restoration of feudalism.[15]

Though it is very difficult to argue that the society inherited by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s was in any accepted sense "feudal," it is clearly the case that the Cultural Revolution did evoke a number of traditional responses. Indeed, as noted earlier, Wang Xizhe, one of the Li Yizhe trio, saw the dictatorship of the proletariat at that time manifesting traditional authoritarian rule;[16] and some have observed that, behind a lot of the talk about the "Asiatic mode of production" in China today, is the continued influence of "oriental despotism."[17] But if, like the present author, one sees little merit in Marx's discussion of that issue one may recall his famous argument in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* to the effect that every revolution is at first imprisoned in the imagery of the past. Talking of the English Revolution, Marx noted that it took some time before Locke replaced Habakkuk.[18] Considering the coup of Louis Bonaparte, Marx stressed the importance of the peasant economy. Here Wang Ruoshui saw the roots of the problems of China's Cultural Revolution:

> The personality cult has deep historical roots in our society. Our country has been primarily dominated by small producers. The small producers' force of habit is very deep-rooted. Patriarchal behaviour and the practice of "what I say is what counts" is still a very serious problem among the rural cadres. Marx in his work *The Eighteenth Brumaire* . . . made the following analysis of the small farmers. Due to their dispersed, self-sufficient and mutually isolated nature, they were unable to form a "national bond." As a result "they can not represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must . . . appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above."[19] This kind of socio-economic condition nurtures monarchical thinking and produces the personality cult . . . .[20]

15. Wang Ruoshui, "The greatest lesson of the Cultural Revolution is that the personality cult should be opposed," speech at conference on theoretical work of the Chinese Communist Party, Central Committee, 13 February 1979, *Mingbao* (Hong Kong), No. 2 (1980), pp. 2–15; in *JPRS*, No. 75291 (12 March 1980), p. 99.
16. Wang Xizhe, "Mao Zedong and the great cultural revolution," *loc. cit.*
17. See Qi Xin, "Guanliao zhengzhi de genyuan" ("The roots of bureaucratic politics"), *Qishi niandai* (*The Seventies*), No. 7 (1980), p. 24, commenting on Wu Dakun, "Guanyu yaxiya shengchan fangshi yanjiu de jige wenti" ("Some questions on research into the Asiatic mode of production"), *Xueshu yanjiu* (*Academic Research*), No. 1 (1980), in *ibid.* (see p. 28).
18. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 17.
19. *Ibid.* p. 124. Translation of Wang's speech amended.
20. Wang Ruoshui, "The greatest lesson of the Cultural Revolution," p. 98.

One wonders whether Wang Ruoshui realized that the above quote has been used in standard Trotskyist criticisms of China or whether he would have cared. Nowadays it is permissible to invoke Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of Lenin[21] – but never Trotsky. For Wang, the root of the problem was the "feudal" nature of peasant society. Hence the importance of the "sun" symbol. Hence the use of the term "saviour" in "The East is Red," whereas the more proletarian "Internationale" specifically repudiated "saviours";[22] (ironically this had been a point made by Mao during the Lin Biao affair).[23] Hence the reversal of Mao's famous "fish and water" metaphor. Once it was held that the fish (guerrilla forces) could not exist without water (the masses). This later appeared as the masses (fish) cannot live without the Communist Party (water). All this was Marx's "rain and sunshine from above." All this was Habakkuk and not Locke.

Specifically relating the personality cult to the problem of alienation, Wang Ruoshui noted that during the Cultural Revolution feudal concepts such as "loyalty" were pressed into the service of an alienating cult which raised one man above the others. People at that time worshipped their alienated creation. In doing so people were debased. Mao, the "great leader" and "great teacher," should be seen as a man, a Party member and above all as the "student of the people." But one could not put all the blame for this ideological alienation upon Lin Biao and the "gang of four." Wang Ruoshui confessed that he himself had been guilty of superstition.[24] To be sure, the radicals of the 1960s did not understand that phenomenon Marx called Bonapartism. And it is in this kind of analysis that we do see a difference between the 1960s radicals and those of the 1980s.

An important point about Bonapartism is that it accentuates the political above all other levels. One might not agree with the present Chinese ideologists who want to give precedence to the economic above all other levels, but it is important to see the political in perspective. When one says "politics in command," what politics is one talking about? Here Wang Ruoshui is most instructive in his discussion of art and literature. For Wang, the slavish and dogmatic adherence to the injunction that literature should serve politics, in a situation where politics were already alienated, could prove disastrous. After all, what should politics serve? Surely both literature and politics should serve both the people and socialism. Indeed, it was even wrong to insist that literature should serve the people's spiritual needs through the medium of politics.[25] But, of course, art and

21. Cheng Renqian, "Some questions on the reassessment of Rosa Luxemburg," in Su Shaozhi *et al.*, *Marxism in China* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1983), pp. 96–123.
22. Wang Ruoshui, "The greatest lesson of the Cultural Revolution," p. 98.
23. Mao Zedong, "Summary of Chairman Mao's talks with responsible comrades at various places during his provincial tour" (August–September 1971), in Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 297.
24. Wang Ruoshi, "Discussing the problem," pp. 386–88.
25. Wang Ruoshui "Wenyi, zhengzhi, renmin" ("Literature, politics, people"), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 28 April 1982, p. 5; abridged version of a speech given in August 1980.

literature still serves politics. It just so happens that politics is now less coercive and only occasionally are the brakes applied.

A third feature of radical thinking in 1966 was impatience with those who believed in slow and orderly development controlled from above. Despite an official ideology, which (notwithstanding Mao's comments on the Soviet *Political Economy* textbook) has continually reiterated Stalin's "objective economic laws," there have been recurrent demands in China for a "great leap." This was said to be the cause of the impetuousness of 1956, the reckless advance of 1958–59, the "flying leap" of 1969–70, and the "foreign leap" of 1978. Research into the conditions which give rise to this is required, perhaps along the lines of a socialist counterpart to Kalecki's "political trade cycle."[26] Now in the 1980s there is much enthusiasm for the writings of Prigogine, who talks of the generation of order out of chaos in "far from equilibrium conditions." Prigogine rejects universal laws and examines the various tendencies in what he calls "dissipative structures" (structures which maintain themselves by reducing entropy in controlling the flow of energy and matter through them).[27] An extension of Prigogine's ideas into economics could easily lead to great leap thinking and it is significant that press comment warns that one should not use Prigogine to criticize the notion of economic equilibrium.[28]

There has also been much interest of late in Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave*.[29] This has been read avidly by many Chinese writers and politicians. It is acclaimed precisely because it offers a vision of transition from a "first wave" (rural) society to a "third wave" (information) society without the need of going through all the expensive traumas of "second wave" (industrial) society. Toffler holds out a vision of a decentralized economy based on the rural areas but integrated by a sophisticated information system. The way is open for a new great leap but this time the pitfalls of preceding ones may be avoided by cybernetics. One wonders whether Chinese commentators realize the radical significance of this. After all, Toffler does seem to be demanding the radical restructuring of the relations of production to make way for only one advanced productive force while the other productive forces remain backward. This is akin to the alleged error of the "gang of four." He also foreshadows the demarketization of society – an interesting notion when the general trend of economic thinking is in the opposite direction. Someone once said that we had

26. See B. McFarlane, 'Political economy of class struggle and economic growth in China, 1950–82," *World Development*, Vol XI, No. 8 (1983), pp. 659–72, reprinted in N. Maxwell and B. McFarlane (eds.), *China's Changed Road to Development* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1984), pp. 21–34.

27. I. Prigogine and I. Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (London: Fontana, 1985).

28. Sheng Xiaofeng, "Haosan jiegou lilun yu shehui shenghuo" ("The theory of dissipative structures and social life"), *Guangming ribao* (*Guangming Daily*), 6 November 1985, p. 3; a continuation of an article in *Guangming ribao*, 9 October 1985, p. 3.

29. A. Toffler, *The Third Wave* (London: Pan Books, 1981).

to wait until the 1930s to know what Genghis Khan would have done with a telephone. Will we soon know what Chen Boda would have done with a nation-wide computer system?

Many Chinese observers are only too aware of the similarities between the diagnosis of radicals in China in the mid 1960s and humanist Marxists in the 1980s:

> People who promote the "theory of socialist alienation" hold that in socialist society, labourers are, to a certain extent, separated from the means of production and "cannot directly possess their products." "The great power of operational management is not in the hands of the masses of the workers and peasants but is grasped by leaders appointed by state power at every level." From this they reach the conclusion that "power is alienated," that is "public servants are turned into masters of the people." This has become the "major danger" in socialist society. Since they ascribe the problem to the power of the leadership, they will inevitably incite the people to seize back the "power" out of the hands of the leaders through movements like the "Cultural Revolution" which caused internal strife for ten years: in this way the "masses of workers and peasants" will "possess" the great power of operational management and will possess directly the means of production and the products of labour.[30]

One may see why Deng Xiaoping was concerned about any revival of Marxist theory which considered the systemic generation of alien structures. He expressed his alarm:

> At present certain comrades have gone beyond the scope of capitalism ... asserting that there is alienation in socialism, that socialism in the course of its development has continually given birth to alien forces .... Such assertions will not only fail to help the people correctly to understand and carry out the reforms necessary in socialist society for technological and social advancement, but will actually lead the people to criticize, doubt and negate socialism. They will cause the people to lose faith in socialism and communism and to believe that socialism is just as hopeless as capitalism; that being the case (they will ask): what is the meaning of building socialism?[31]

But the very question which Deng refers to is being asked. Many radicals in the mid 1960s doubted the meaning of "socialism" constructed in the first two decades of the People's Republic. Others have doubts about the "socialism" being constructed today. An approach more consistent with Marxist methodology would be to explain people's doubts in terms of the very real problems people might have experienced in distinguishing "socialist" policies endorsed by Deng from what most Marxists had hitherto considered capitalist. Indeed it might well be the case that the utility of the concept "alienation" has been enhanced precisely because the line of demarcation between socialism and capitalism is, in practice, so

30. Chen Ruisheng and Xu Xiaoying, "Pouxi shehuizhuyi yihualun" ("A dissection of the theory of socialist alienation"), *Guangming ribao*, 3 December 1983, p. 3.

31. Deng Xiaoping, "Speech at the 2nd Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party," 12 October 1983, *Issues and Studies*, Vol XX, No 4 (April 1984), p. 104.

hard to draw. Deng might have been reminded that "*praxis* is the sole criterion for evaluating truth."

The Cultural Revolution of 1966 erupted not long after China's leaders had talked about the need for modernization. The radicals asked: modernization on whose terms? The question remains on the agenda. Will Toffler offer a vision of the future? Not all are convinced. Wei Zhangling, for example, after a study tour of the United States, saw Toffler's works as manifestations of American "trendiness" (*ganshimao*). As Wei saw it, American sociology has long been concerned with papering over the cracks of capitalism. When traditional American values could not do the job, Weber was pressed into service. For Weber, the future was "rule by bureaucracy" not "rule by the working class."[32] In the "golden age" of the 1940s and 1950s, Parsons and Merton's structural functionalism did the job. In the 1960s, however, as United States power declined during the Vietnam War, considerations of Kuhn's "scientific revolutions," Rogers' existential psychology and the wave of new-left thinking heralded an era of instability. This was the time when the Club of Rome foresaw a future which was far from rosy. It was not easy to paper over the cracks of capitalism.[33] The cultism at the end of that decade, however, paved the way for the rise of the neo-conservatives. The crises of the present are avoided by pointing to the opportunities of the future. Once again we have a version of the old "modernization theory" which posits convergence on capitalist terms.

The question arises: is the *telos* offered by people such as Toffler merely a crude substitute for the lost communist *telos* of more radical days? One suspects that China's advocates of the computer revolution are as utopian as many of the radicals of the mid 1960s. A decentralized system of mass democracy did not develop out of the movements of the 1960s. The old mixture of first-wave patriarchal bureaucracy plus a bit of second-wave industrialism triumphed – long before the official 10 years of the Cultural Revolution came to an end. One suspects that the growth of information systems in China will serve the needs of central coercion rather than basic level spontaneity and central co-ordination. Computerized systems are probably more likely to increase alienation than the opposite. The freedom of information needed to make such a system work is still too subversive. There is a lot of alienation to be overcome before one may see a socialist third wave.

32. Wei Zhangling, "Dangdai meiguo shehui sichao yu 'ganshimao' de shehuixue" ("Social currents in contemporary America and 'trendy' sociology"), *Zhexue yanjiu*, (*Philosophical Research*), No. 8 (1984), p. 19.

33. *Ibid.* p. 20.