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FORUM

Editors' note: Issue 16 of the *Journal* included seven papers that reappraised Mao Zedong from the perspective of the late 1980s. In keeping with the *Journal's* tradition of encouraging discussion, the editors have invited Edward Friedman and Andrew Walder to respond to Issue 16 with their own re-evaluations of Mao.

THE FLAWS AND FAILURES OF MAO ZEDONG'S COMMUNIST FUNDAMENTALISM

Edward Friedman

Mao Zedong became a hero to the anti-Stalinist left outside China when the Cultural Revolution exploded from 1966 to 1968. China seemed to offer an anti-bureaucratic and anti-authoritarian, even truly participatory alternative to the palpable inhumanities of the corrupt, conservative, stagnant Soviet Union, stigmatised by its crushing of 'socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia after the hopeful Prague Spring. China also seemed an alternative to a United States marked by assassinations, race riots and cities in flames, an America reviled for its bombs falling on Vietnamese. In 1968 Mao's Cultural Revolution seemed to hold, for many good people, the promise of achieving what the French of May 1968 only proclaimed.¹

¹ To recapture that mood, see the best of these efforts: Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China* (Free Press, New York, 1977); E.L. Wheelwright and Bruce McFarlane, *The Chinese Road to Socialism* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1970); John G. Gurley, *China's Economy and the Maoist Strategy* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1976). So out of touch was this understanding of Maoism that Philippe Devillers, *What Mao Really Said* (Schocken Books, New York, 1969 [1967]), p.259 preferred Mao to Brezhnev because Brezhnev

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Mao is no longer a hero to anyone who knows of the vigilante violence actually wrought by his Cultural Revolution or of the 20 plus million innocents who died as a result of Mao's Great Leap Forward. Although the government of China continues to censor and ban revelations of the horrors of the Mao era, to keep outsiders or Chinese from perceiving the reality whole, the evidence that has leaked out² persuasively establishes that the communist fundamentalism that Mao propagated was taking China down a bloody road, a 'disastrous' one as Womack (p.29) rightly finds, a road on which the genocidal Pol Pot went yet further. Womack calls this horror 'a terrorisation of practice by theory' (p.34).

Few people seeking more progressive alternatives would opt today for such communist fundamentalism. The groups who have tried to keep fighting for this Maoist line, such as the Naxalites in India and Sendero Luminoso in Peru, do not win much international support among progressive people at the end of the 1980s because it is now clear where such fundamentalist policies lead.³

The earlier hopes that many people held for Mao Zedong's attempt to 'continue the revolution' can be comprehended from three different perspectives:

supposedly was too democratic in a bourgeois way. He wrote 'The USSR's progressive evolution towards what will perhaps emerge as a new Finnish or Scandinavian type of socialism, that is, a 'social democracy', may have gradually robbed her of her capacity to understand fully the problems of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America still directly at grips with imperialism'. Of course, these scholars, all being independent, critically minded professionals of absolute integrity, revised their views in later works when new information became available. Also, their tough-minded academic adversaries did no better in comprehending Leninist regimes. In 1952 Adam Ulam in *Titoism and the Cominform* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1952) mocked those who 'assumed so glibly that the Chinese Communists would readily, and as a matter of course, shake off their Russian connections ...' (p.220). He explained Titoism as 'nothing but Stalinism transplanted to foreign soil' (p.231). The first element Ulam found in Stalinism, understood as a system of power, was collectivisation, because collectivisation was not just about land ownership, but 'primarily, as the way of destruction of social individualism, which is always a danger to the Communist state' (p.230). The next year Tito's Yugoslavia, apparently not understanding its own essence, decollectivised and restored land to private ownership. Soon thereafter Moscow and Beijing split. Despite his monumental mistakes Ulam did not turn in his Kremlinological credentials. Nor need anyone else honestly engaged in comprehending the dynamics of Leninist systems.

2 Among Chinese memoir literature on the crimes of the Mao era are Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution*; Gao Yuan, *Born Red*; Yue Daiyun, *To the Storm*; and Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai*; but more truth appears in fictional form. Compare the writings of Liu Binyan, Gu Hua et al., and Anne Thurston, *Enemies of the People*.

3 Jan Myrdal is one of the few to whom this is not clear.

- (1) as fulfilling the revolutionary project first proclaimed in the French Revolution but ended first by Thermidorean reaction and then by the crushing of the Paris Commune,
- (2) as moving closer toward communist goals promised by Leninist socialism and blocked by the institutions entrenched in the traditional Soviet model pioneered by Stalin, and
- (3) as fulfilling the historical dream of the Chinese nation for both a secure and dignified place in the world, and for an advanced prosperity that permits a humane level of existence.

In practice, Mao in crucial ways took the Chinese people yet further distant from all these valued projects. (1) Rather than establish direct democracy by the citizenry itself, corrupt personalist networks of greed and vendetta were entrenched. Popular democracy was not produced even in embryo. (2) Instead of equality between city and countryside, in the Mao era the gap actually grew between metropolitan and hinterland regions as a hierarchical, stratified and status-conscious order was consolidated, in which personal connections that won access to scarce and monopolised state resources meant virtually everything. And (3) the Chinese nation was left vulnerable to foreign enemies and awash in stagnant misery which more than once flooded over into famines, killing more people than even in the Stalin famine, more even than in all the history of post-independence India. If revolutionaries and socialists are to do better in the future, it might be helpful to comprehend the systemic sources of the Maoist catastrophe.

If one wishes to assess Mao, a major objective should be to try to understand the poison in the pudding. That is, how is it that communist fundamentalism systematically produces massive inhumanity, yet can be packaged in an attractive language of economic levelling, ending exploitation and wiping out the gap between masses and bureaucratic elites, all in the name of building a true, pure communism? Why does that effort turn out to be both less productive and more inhumane than even a typical Third-World military-market dictatorship, a so-called bureaucratic authoritarianism?

The kinds of attitudes which foster the communist fundamentalism facilitating the disasters of Mao, Pol Pot, the Naxalites, White Flags and Sendero Luminoso are very widely shared. Even the sober, anti-Stalinist E.H. Carr has voiced them. All one need do to start down the Maoist path is believe that capitalism is barbarism and that socialism of the Leninist variety is and must be the one humane alternative. Carr could agree that the Bolshevik regime ended in 'repression of the most ruthless kind' and that this mass repression which characterised the Soviet regime could well have been in place by 1921, that is, virtually from the outset. Whatever the gains in popular literacy and health or state power, the revolution 'caused endless misery and devastation', such that it would be inhumane to impose such a regime on democratic capitalist societies.

Carr believed that these gains, however, were sufficient, despite ruthless repression and imposed misery, for less advanced societies. Carr took seriously Trotsky's 1939 declaration that if a Second World War did not bring revolution to the industrialised democracies, then one should admit 'the congenital incapacity of the proletariat to become a ruling class'.

Yet if one insisted on Leninist socialism as *the* alternative to barbarism, one kept looking for an anti-capitalist revolution that would explode capitalism. Carr noted, 'Engels discovered the corruption by the capitalists of what he called a workers' aristocracy. Lenin applied the same concept to the working class of capitalist countries *vis-à-vis* the colonial world'. This led Carr, as it would lead Mao and so many others, to embrace the alleged virtues of backwardness, that is, the universal liberating potential of those in the Third World who had not benefited or been corrupted by involvement with the world capitalist market, but who had remained pure and unsullied, the most exploited of the Third World.

The Bolsheviks won their victory in 1917, not in spite of the backwardness of the Russian economy and society, but because of it. I think we have to consider seriously the hypothesis that the world revolution of which it was the first stage, and which will complete the downfall of capitalism, will prove to be the revolt of the colonial peoples against capitalism in the guise of imperialism, rather than the revolt of the proletariat of the advanced capitalist nations.⁴

It is a Marxist faith which believes that there ultimately must be a world revolution that will destroy capitalism and in so doing be historically progressive.

This anti-capitalist attitude seeks a life founded on ethics not economics, morality not money, the collectivity not capitalistic individualism. If economic gain is inherently immoral, then one seeks to eradicate from the socialist system all that rests on the laws of economics, money and capitalist individualism. Anything less would be to waste the blood of all the martyrs who have died for the socialist cause, anything less sentences humanity to the barbarisms of imperialism. To themselves, Maoists bravely proclaim they will pay the price; as experienced by the victims of Maoist mass murder, it is millions of innocents on whom the costs are imposed.

One place to turn for an understanding of Maoism is the writings of China's democratic reformers.⁵ In pinpointing the causes of the Maoist catastrophe, they highlight his Stalinism; the top-down tyranny of Leninist institutions; and

⁴ E.H. Carr, 'The Russian Revolution and the West', *New Left Review*, no.111 (September-October 1978), pp.25-36.

⁵ Especially Wang Xizhe. Compare Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen and Jonathan Unger (eds), *On Socialist Democracy and the Chinese Legal System* (M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1985); also Su Shaozhi et al., *Marxism in China* (Spokesman Press, Nottingham, 1983); Su Shaozhi, *Democratization and Reform* (Spokesman Press, Nottingham, 1988).

Marxist dogmas which legitimated collectivisation, nationalisation and the abolition of the market and commodities, thereby producing economic waste for the many and tremendously concentrated economic power and privilege for the few. These Chinese analysts contend that there was much in the traditional culture and history of China which furthered the establishment of this 'feudal' and tyrannical absolutism with a worshipped all-powerful ruler.⁶ The issue for Chinese people then is not to find what was good in Mao but a Chinese need to win the progressive blessings of the modern world: democracy, legal safeguards and modern science, all the achievements of the Western Enlightenment which are denounced by Marxist-Maoists, have to be reconceptualised not as the selfish creations of capitalism but as universal, human achievements.

Some attempts by progressive Chinese democrats to analyse the Maoist era systematically have been banned in China. It was forbidden to publish the results of a conference on the Asiatic Mode of Production.⁷ Dissection of Chinese socialism with the tools of democratic humanism was outlawed.⁸ Even Chinese writings on the European Enlightenment which draw analogies between China's Leninist state and centralised bureaucratic feudal despotism have been censored. What all these buried writings of China's insightful democrats tell us is that we have to think of the state that Leninism created in China, and not only China, as less liberating than even parliamentary democracy, more backward than bourgeois capitalism.

Such a search for the deep roots of Mao's communist fundamentalism and its horrendous consequences takes us far from the search for a supposed moment when a good Mao became a bad Mao, which is how China's post-Mao rulers construe the issue. Rather, this quest for deep continuity suggests that, as with revolutions in England, France and Russia, in the long view of history these revolutions change far less than seemed the case to many who were at first mesmerised by the drama of civil war, confiscations, exiles, beheadings and a turmoil which seemed to be a world turned upside down or right side up.

In this light, Mao is an absolute failure. The dilemmas confronting the people of China at the end of the twentieth century are quite similar to those

⁶ Many Western analysts prefer to capture this reactionary social content of Leninist socialism with terms such as traditionalism, neo-traditionalism or neo-feudalism. As with the Enlightenment's attack on mediaevalism and superstition, so Chinese democrats target the reactionary, authoritarian and irrational content in their people's inherited culture. This leaves the democrats open to counterattack by chauvinists and nativists who will not see China as less virtuous than capitalist imperialists.

⁷ Compare John Rapp, 'The Fate of Marxist Democrats in Leninist Party States: China's Debate on the Asiatic Mode of Production', in *Theory and Society*, 1988 forthcoming.

⁸ Wang Ruoshui was the key figure. See David Kelly, 'The Emergence of Humanism', *China's Intellectuals and the State* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987).

confronting Chinese reformers some four centuries earlier in the Ming dynasty. A quite conservative elite rules a traditional population and finds that appeals to military chauvinism and keeping the people pure and free from foreign pollution – Womack and Young are shrewd in capturing this theme of evil and purity – win support, even if they do not solve problems.

To carry out the basic political and ‘institutional’ reforms, the ‘structural reform of the party-state’ would help but would also threaten the basis of rule of that Leninist elite because, as Womack rightly concludes, it requires at a minimum pointing out (p.38) ‘weaknesses in Lenin’s political thought’. Just as Teiwes seems correct in concluding that Mao could not ‘formulate a coherent alternative program’, so Young seems correct in arguing that Mao’s theories were incoherent and that it is not even clear that a Leninist state is socialist (p.70). This suggests that a Leninist system may not be socialist and that its Leninist legitimations preclude its rulers from comprehending what it is that they have actually constructed. Perhaps it is to Mao’s credit that by the end ‘his confidence began to wane’, as Frederick Teiwes informs us in a major paper that will appear in Issue 19 of this Journal.

In this paper, Teiwes, the shrewdest of Kremlinologists, continues his perceptive probing of China’s deep political structure and thus reveals its ‘capacity for arbitrariness’. It is like a feudal court in its ‘intrigues and personal flattery’ and courtier use of ‘shameless flattery’ to win the favour of the monarch. Mao in his ‘extreme sensitivity to perceived challenges to his power’ is like a feudal despot. Teiwes shows Mao acting as a monarch selecting a successor to the throne, while the whole nation quakes in time with ‘sharp swings of the Chairman’s mood’. What we must ask is what are the structural dynamics of a system which gave Mao, as Teiwes brilliantly shows, ‘near absolute power’ which he could exercise ‘in an abusive, oppressive and tyrannical manner’.

Nick Knight is surely correct that we must be clear about our own theoretical bases for evaluating the failed and flawed Mao project. When scholars in the 1950s and 1960s said Mao was not a Stalinist, they basically meant his government was not a tool of the one in the Soviet Union. When Teiwes says Mao was not a Stalinist, he is distinguishing personalities, the lack in Mao of the paranoia and personal savagery that characterised Stalin. People on the left who praised Mao for not being a Stalinist tended to mean he was seeking an alternative to the bureaucratic tyranny of a Soviet-style ruling party. Yet China’s democrats insist Mao was more Stalinist than Stalin because his arbitrary, one-man rule never settled down, as did Stalin’s, to something less terrible. Four Stalins – four evaluations. While none is wrong, as Knight’s phenomenological essay reminds us, it is the perspective of China’s democrats which holds out hope for action that can better things for the people of China.

Their evidence suggests that Mao, as other Leninists, built in China a centralising bureaucratic despotism of a traditional or feudal kind. Mao then

attacked the elements within that centralising, potentially modernising, feudalism which seemed to him capitalistic, items such as merit criteria for advancement, modern scientific education, personal material incentives, household agriculture and the market. Mao thus eradicated the major elements of rationality and progress in an evolving feudal system. Mao thereby made things worse, attacking good people, while monumentally increasing the amount of economic irrationality and waste in an already poor country.

Back in 1971 the group closest to Mao's anointed successor, Lin Biao, already described this Maoist disaster.

Their socialism is, in essence, social fascism. They have turned China's state machine into a meat grinder for mutual slaughter and strife, and they have made the Party and whole country's political life into a patriarchal life of the feudal, dictatorial and autocratic type... In an historical sense he is going backward – actually he has become a contemporary Qin Shihuang... He is not a true Marxist-Leninist, but...one who dons Marxist-Leninist clothes but implements the laws of Qin Shihuang. He is the biggest feudal despot in Chinese history.⁹

And yet, as *all* these authors in the *Journal* show, it remains difficult for patriotic Chinese to criticise Mao to the core. He remains the founder of the new state. He restored dignity to a humiliated people who had suffered a century of imperialist plunder and racist degradation. Mao proved time and again that he understood the innermost hates and hopes of his nation. China's people rallied to the hope of his Great Leap that their misery could soon end and to the promise of his Cultural Revolution that the hypocritical rule of a corrupt elite could be smashed. Yet, as all these authors also agree, Mao's methods expanded the misery and the hypocritical corruption. For those committed to a democratic project to begin to understand why, one must begin where Mao and the conservative-minded among his successors cannot start, the realisation that a Leninist system resembles a late, feudal, centralised despotism¹⁰ trying to move from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century. This is why even small capitalist reforms, as in post-Mao China, liberate so much productive energy,

⁹ Translated in Michael Kau, *The Lin Piao Affair* (International Arts and Sciences Press, White Plains, 1975), pp.83-84.

¹⁰ The first persuasive analysis of Leninism as a form of traditionalism was Kenneth Jowitt, *The Leninist Response to National Dependency* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978); Rudi (the Red) Dutschke, 'Against the Popes', in Ulf Wolter (ed.), *Rudolf Bahro: Critical Responses* (M.E. Sharpe, White Plains, 1980), pp.186-212, focuses on the Leninist state as a continuation of Asiatic despotism. But the most persuasive analysis remains that of China's democrats who comprehend the problem as feudal socialism with fascist potential. Compare Friedman, 'The Societal Obstacle to China's Socialist Transition: State Capitalism or Feudal Fascism', *State and Society in Contemporary China* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1983), pp.148-71.

why even small gains in legal due process and political liberty are so welcome. In contrast, by continuing to act as if China were a socialist nation 'faced', as Starr aptly puts it, 'with the ill-defined task of successfully navigating the transition to communism', by looking to Marx instead of Voltaire and Condorcet, Mao got almost everything wrong. The Chinese people, who fell a humiliating half-century behind their East Asian neighbours, are still paying the heavy price for the crimes and errors of Mao's fundamentalist ways.

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