

Some Thoughts on the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976) and its Relevance to Revolutionaries in the 21st Century

An atmosphere of extraordinary freedom and purpose existed in those days, an intensity of life which has been noted in all the great revolutions. People talked about everything, speculated endlessly, and read everything they could get their hands on; ordinary folk had become political philosophers contemplating the years to come. It was a time when everything came to the surface--the past, the present, and the future all jumbled together.

(The Miltons, The Wind Will Not Subside: Years in Revolutionary China, Pantheon, 1976, p. 239)

This description of Beijing in the summer of 1967 gives you a glimpse of the revolutionary energy that erupted in this unprecedented event--a proletarian revolution within a socialist society. It was this spirit--the very antithesis of capitalism and bureaucratic "socialism"-- that attracted many revolutionaries around the world to China and the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s.

Prior to the 60s, it had been assumed that socialism existed once key industries had been nationalized and agriculture had been collectivized under the leadership of a Communist Party. With the further development of the productive forces and the education of the working people, socialism would march straight ahead towards the communist future. Reality has proven to be far more complex.

The reversals of the two most significant socialist revolutions in the 20th century--first in the Soviet Union long before the collapse of the Soviet bloc around 1990, and then in China in the late 1970s--cannot be ignored or explained away superficially. It won't cut it to say, "We're gonna do things different next time." Without a clear understanding of the reasons for these reversals, as well as the positive and negative lessons from building new socialist societies, we may do things differently--but not necessarily any better--than previous generations of revolutionaries.

These are not academic questions. All over the world, revolutionary and progressive-minded people have been bombarded with the message that socialism and communism have "failed," and that capitalism and various forms of bourgeois rule (ranging from bourgeois democracy to fascism) are the only possible means of organizing society. As long as political activists everywhere, including a new generation of revolutionary activists in this country, are confused about the main reasons for these reversals of socialism, and cynical about the prospects for building socialism in the future, they will be held back from devoting their lives to fighting for revolution and socialism. The next wave of revolutions, including in what is presently known as the United States of America, requires this kind of summation in order to bring about new advances in revolutionary theory and practice.

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Many of the revolutionary innovations brought about by the Cultural Revolution (e.g., Big Character Wall Posters, struggles against elitism and privilege in education, 3-in-1 Revolutionary Committees in factories, schools and collective farms) are important and worthy of serious study. (Note that Mao once commented that they would never had led a revolution in China if they had copied the Soviet model and followed Comintern directives.)

But what's most important about the GPCR is not its particular form. Mao and the revolutionary left forces in the Chinese CP launched the GPCR in 1966 because of the imminent danger of Soviet-style capitalist restoration in China; this meant that they had to go over the heads of the "capitalist roaders" in the Party directly to the masses of people and honest cadre. In addition, the Cultural Revolution's origins and characteristics cannot be understood apart from China's continuing legacy of Confucian and feudal ideology; the relative poverty and backwardness of China, particularly the countryside; and the rapidly changing international situation at that time.

The Cultural Revolution attempted to deal with a question of worldwide significance: How can a socialist society (and revolutionary movements generally) move towards ending exploitation and liberating human potential? Some of its general lessons for building socialist societies in the future, including in the U.S., are:

- Class struggle continues under socialism, in both open and hidden ways.
- Capitalist (and, ^{IN SOME COUNTRIES} even feudal) social/economic relationships and ideology continue to exist in socialist society.
- This is the material base from which "capitalist roaders" inside the leading party draw their strength domestically.
- New and old bourgeois forces also draw strength from hostile imperialist states that new-born socialist countries must face.
- All of this means that "building socialism" is an uphill battle, and will be in any country until there are many more socialist states and imperialism is much weaker on a world scale.
- Staying on the "socialist road" requires the revolutionary forces (inside as well as outside of established parties) to launch political and educational campaigns to narrow the 3 great differences--between the cities and countryside, workers and peasants, and mental and manual labor; to gradually restrict "bourgeois right" (e.g., narrow salary differences between technicians and factory workers); and to politically and materially support revolutionary struggles for national liberation and socialism worldwide.
- From the early 1960's to the late 1970s, the peasants of Dachai in northern China served as a model for how to "grasp revolution and promote production," and how to stay on China's socialist road. While these revolutionary achievements have been reversed by China's current rulers, the positive lessons from Dachai and other "socialist new things" in China must be learned from and cherished by revolutionaries everywhere. In this way, we stand on the shoulders of the Cultural Revolution as we prepare for the revolutionary opportunities in the future.

Mao and his allies kept their Eyes on The Prize--a worldwide communist future. Mao had a vision of how to unite all who could be united to get on the "socialist road," and advance on that road towards communism. For a brief, but very important, time period they were able to launch a movement of hundreds of millions of working people to revolutionize society, overthrow the party bureaucrats who were leading China back to capitalism, and to support revolutionary movements throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America and in the U.S. itself. (See Mao's message to the Black liberation movement after the murder of Dr. King in 1968.)

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At the same time, the Cultural Revolution had a tortuous path, as all revolutions do. At times it was characterized by extreme factionalism, especially among the students. All forces—including ultra-leftists who wanted to overthrow all Party leaders, and leading rightists like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping who aimed the spearhead at lower levels of the Party—raised the red flag, quoted from the Red Book, and claimed to be carrying out "Chairman Mao's line." This made it extremely difficult for the masses of people to distinguish political lines and programs for staying on the socialist road from lines and programs for restoring capitalism. Every political force claimed to speak for the Communist Party of China.

This raises an important question: Is it necessary to have one leading communist party under socialism? In his speech at the Socialist Scholars Conference in April 1999, Bill Hinton points out there were really "two parties" within the Communist Party of China: "[O]ne, an open party governing the Liberated Areas under Mao Zedong as primary leader, and the other an underground party growing up primarily in Guomindang-dominated cities where Liu Shaoqi was responsible.....The party stream under Mao developed into a proletarian headquarters and the stream that Liu led became the core of a bourgeois headquarters, all within the overall umbrella of the Party itself. That does not mean that everyone on either side was either proletarian or bourgeois."

Why shouldn't different political forces who do not actively oppose socialism be allowed to form independent political parties? Wouldn't this help bring the critical debate over the socialist vs. the capitalist road into the open, where the masses of people can jump in, join the debate, and increase their understanding and mastery over society? Would this create more favorable conditions for the development of proletarian democracy--while still protecting the new society from domestic and external enemies?

Of course, there is no organizational solution (one, two or more parties) to this fundamental political issue. However, there is undeniable evidence from the Soviet Union, China and other countries that a system with one governing communist party often becomes an obstacle to the masses of working people increasing their control over society--even while revolutionary left forces attempt to educate and mobilize people to push forward on the socialist road. In this way, communists, socialists and other progressive forces in a socialist society would have to demonstrate revolutionary leadership, and win support from the people, in an ongoing way. This, and many other conceptions and "truths" developed during the first 150 years of Marxism, must be critically examined and debated. We must be prepared to creatively develop them, or discard them if they do not serve the revolutionary struggle.

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All revolutions produce "chaos on a grand scale," and all revolutionary leaders make mistakes. Certainly Mao and the forces he was allied with at various times made errors, even serious errors. In attempting to sort this out (which we only start here), we must understand the *necessity*--both within China and internationally--that the Chinese revolutionaries faced, and the *freedom* they had to act within that framework.

One of the most important shortcomings of the Cultural Revolution is that Mao was not able to develop a stable core of revolutionary left leadership in the Party from the early 1960s until his death in 1976. First, Chen Bo-ta, then Lin Biao, and then the so-called "Gang of Four" proved unable to develop a revolutionary line and practice that could unite the bulk of the Party cadre and the masses to defeat the capitalist roaders and stay on the socialist road.

In addition, the international situation that the Chinese communists faced shifted sharply between the 1960s and the early to mid-1970s. As the Soviet Union became a growing threat to China in the early 70s (massing troops on the border and bringing in nuclear missiles to knock out China's key military bases), the Chinese government moved from targeting both the U.S. and Soviet superpowers equally, to aiming the main blow at the Soviet Union ("the main danger of war"). A limited opening to the Western imperialist bloc--which was necessary for China to deal with the imminent Soviet threat --led to serious, unnecessary errors in Chinese foreign policy around the world (e.g., welcoming U.S. puppets like the Shah of Iran to China, and providing aid to UNITA in Angola.) Far too many "pro-China" communist forces (though not all) around the world parroted the latest pronouncements in *Peking Review*. This produced serious political decay in Maoist forces in many countries, and paved the way for them to support Deng and his program for setting up state capitalism in China.

Very importantly, the opening to the West greatly strengthened the position of the rightist forces grouped around Deng Xiao-ping, enabling them to seize leadership and win over the bulk of the Party after Mao died in 1976. It should also be noted that this is not the first time in the international communist movement that one imperialist bloc was declared the main enemy of the peoples of the world, as world war threatened. See the "United Front Against Fascism" advanced by the Soviet CP and adopted by the Comintern in 1935.

(Note: This is a work-in-progress, from comrades in NYC, California and North Carolina.)