

CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND REVOLUTIONARY CULTURE

Alessandro Russo



*Cultural Revolution
and Revolutionary Culture*

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INTRODUCTION

This book proposes a new way to understand global political turmoil in the innovative 1960s and 1970s. The Cultural Revolution was a crucial turning point for China, but also the moment when a much longer and truly global “revolutionary” era ended. At the same time, it was an attempt to make sense of that history and to find new possibilities within it. That is why at that particular time the event in question had global resonance, and why we should still concern ourselves with it today, since those questions remain unsolved.

To look for a new egalitarian mass politics it is necessary to come to terms with the Cultural Revolution and the 1960s in general. It is actually impossible to find a new path without new ideas about that last great political period, a persistent tendency as regards modern revolutions. A fundamental challenge of every great political cycle is how to reassess the previous great political cycle. For the October Revolution, it was how to reassess the Paris Commune, and for the Cultural Revolution it was how to reassess all the historical experience of socialism from the October Revolution onward. Even for Marx and Engels, a crucial issue was how to evaluate the French Revolution, which they interpreted as the great bourgeois revolution preceding the proletarian revolution that was to come.

The main hypothesis of this book is that China’s Cultural Revolution was a communist movement whose aim was to undertake a thorough reexamination of communism. In essence, it was a radical

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scrutiny of the existing alternatives to capitalism. As such, the study of the Cultural Revolution must take into account two historical periods: events that began as far back as 1848, when the *Communist Manifesto* heralded the long search for a way out of capitalism, and the unique worldwide political phenomenon of the 1960s, and its Chinese hotbed, one of whose main projects was to rethink the foundations of modern communism.

The mass movements of the 1960s placed at the head of the communist agenda an urgency to reexamine the essentials of modern egalitarian politics by searching for a new beginning and not mere dissolution. Those events are not to be confused with the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, which occurred two decades later. Indeed, the collapse of the USSR and its satellites was ultimately the aftereffect of the mass movements that had radically criticized and finally discredited the political value of state communism.

For their part, the USSR and its satellites violently opposed that critical uprising, labeling as anticommunist the mass movements that criticized the socialist states' claim to be the indisputable alternative to capitalism. However, it was precisely while indignantly rejecting any doubts about the validity of "their" communism that those very party-states were racing toward a radical crisis, about which they remained in steadfast denial. When they finally started to perceive the danger, it was too late.

Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, when the Soviet bloc collapsed overnight, all those parties disintegrated and their fragments enthusiastically declared that there was no alternative to capitalism. The bureaucrats of state communism, the polemical target throughout the 1960s, were nihilistically driven to neoliberalism, but not before they had vilified and finally annihilated the mass movements that had criticized them. The self-dissolution of twentieth-century state communism is in fact one of the main obstacles to the study not only of the 1960s, but also of the entire historical experience of modern communism.

The other huge obstacle to the study of the 1960s is that in the Chinese epicenter of the decade there is still the largest communist party that has ever existed, and so far the most stable and powerful. Obviously, it exists at the price of unprecedented paradoxes that further obscure the issue. For the CCP has embraced capitalism with conviction and extreme rigor, while maintaining a substantial organizational continuity with the past, to the point of declaring itself the "vanguard of the working class" and proclaiming communism as its maximum political ideal. The "socialism with Chinese characteristics" label adds a bit of nationalist veneer, part and parcel of which has been a "thorough negation" of the Cultural Revolution, and with it the 1960s, for having hindered not only state communism but also the advent of "capitalist communism."

The official government narrative that, immediately after Mao's death, the arrest of Maoist leaders rescued China from chaos and misery was a mere pretext. In fact, the issues at stake were intensely political and the situation was one of neither anarchy nor economic collapse. However, the passage from a mass political laboratory for reassessing communism to unabashed capitalism in the end went exceptionally smoothly and calls for close examination.

Mao repeatedly foresaw that "in China it [was] quite easy to build capitalism."¹ The main reason was that capitalism is the rule of the modern social world, and socialism was an exception that could exist only if renewed by repeated movements of mass experimentation. The Cultural Revolution was the latest such movement, in its turn exceptional, since its main target was to reassess the nature of the socialist exception. The most farsighted revolutionary leaders were fully aware that a brutal termination of the experiment and a return to the rule of wage slavery was all too likely, yet they were fully convinced of the need to persevere on the path of the exception. As Zhang Chunqiao, one of the main Maoist leaders, said at the trial of the Gang of Four in 1981, "In accordance with the rules of this world, I have long thought that such a day would come."² This volume will undertake a political reexamination of that exception to the rule of this world.

There are two possible approaches to studying the Cultural Revolution. One, which prevails today, starts from the assumption (often tacitly understood) of a definitive political judgment as the yardstick for assessing those events. In fact, this perspective, being limited to the criteria of the more or less fatalistic contemporary consensus regarding the rule of capitalism, studies the Cultural Revolution inevitably as "thorough negation"—that is, just what it was not, or rather, what it should not have been. This is the tone of most of the studies that have been done in the last decades.³ The present volume explores another path, affirmative but still largely in development, which starts from the idea of a very incomplete knowledge of what the politics of today could be, and studies the Chinese events of the 1960s and 1970s as a possible resource for rebuilding an intellectual horizon of egalitarian politics.

The Cultural Revolution compels us to rethink the conceptual coordinates and fundamental paradigms of modern political theories and constitutes a decisive test case. The Cultural Revolution traces paths of thought whose uniqueness needs to be examined because those paths did not fully fit the framework of political knowledge in force in the mid-1960s, but in fact, from the beginning posed the urgency to subject that framework to a mass political test.

To study that immense ten-year political process, we need categories appropriate to its singularity, many of which must be built during the analysis

itself. We need to build a track to proceed upon. This also explains why in this book there are rigorous analytical parts in which the reader is invited to follow even minute details, and other parts that are attempts to formulate theoretical hypotheses.

This study is based on a detailed examination of declarations made by the protagonists, linked to the time they were made. They are the fundamental units of analysis for all the processes examined. I hope readers will bear with me for the superabundance of quotations I have placed in this book. They are cited in order to yield the floor to the variety of voices that spoke up at that decisive moment in modern Chinese political and intellectual history.

On the other hand, since the analytical categories are calibrated on those same political statements, the theoretical perspective constitutes a work in progress. At some points it will be necessary to dwell minutely on nuances, while at others it will be necessary to consider the general horizon and the specific categories in order to examine a single passage. These two registers are integral parts of the project itself.

The volume explores some key passages of the decade, four of them in particular: the historical-theatrical “prologue” of 1965; Mao’s original attitude; the mass phase of 1966–68; and the Maoists’ unfinished attempts to make a political assessment of the decade.

These are relatively short passages, between which, even when there is a temporal contiguity, there are essential discontinuities due to the political stakes, the extent and conditions of the mass involvement, and the balance of power at the summit of the party-state. But what links these different passages is that in each of them the thrust, the political novelties, the hesitations, the oppositions, the obstacles (most often internal), and the efforts to overcome them were essentially about the problem of how to reevaluate what had been in the twentieth century the way out of capitalism, its subsequent impasse, and how to find a new path—in other words, how to rethink the experience of the socialist states, which had been transformed into a bureaucratic machinery that mirrored those of the capitalist regimes, and ultimately how to find a new meaning in communism.

This volume will examine these passages in terms of a general hypothesis about China’s revolutionary decade. They constitute the stages of an immense mass political laboratory, whose problematic nucleus takes on different aspects in its various phases, each of which entails from the beginning a peculiar confrontation between the new political subjectivities involved in the experimentation and the framework of political culture available to the revolutionaries. In this sense, the general topic of this book is the relationship between the

Cultural Revolution, understood as the set of those subjective multiplicities, and the revolutionary culture, understood as the cultural framework of politics through which the revolutionaries acted and declared their intentions.

I will start by studying the historical-theatrical prologue (part I, chapters 1–3), namely the controversy over the historical drama *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* in the months preceding the beginning of the mass phase. That controversy, which was supported by widespread involvement of the intellectual public, with thousands of risky, first-person press interventions, has generally been neglected in studies of the Cultural Revolution.

In fact, the controversy was infused with real intellectual and political stakes, namely the urgency for a theoretical clarification about whether “historical materialism” could deal with both the peasant revolts in the history of imperial China and the political role of the peasants under socialism. Although the specific terms of the historical-political-theatrical polemic have remained unresolved, it played a decisive role at the start of the revolutionary decade.

I will then discuss, from two converging perspectives, Mao’s original intentions, one of the trickiest themes in any study of the Cultural Revolution (part II). The last twenty years of Mao’s revolutionary enterprise (1956–76) were marked by a peculiar anxiety about the destiny of socialism, which also propelled his obstinate quest for a new political path (chapter 4). I will argue that his interventions between the end of 1965 and mid-1966 aimed at removing obstacles to the participation of the masses in a critical reexamination of the revolutionary culture and its institutional space (chapter 5).

While the mass phase of the Cultural Revolution, between 1966 and 1968, is certainly the most studied and best documented in scholarly research, its most enigmatic aspects remain opaque and need to be explored from new perspectives (part III). Two problems in particular require thorough rethinking. One concerns the processes by which the creation of an unlimited plurality of independent political organizations was overturned in the space of two years in a powerful self-destructive drive that deprived those political inventions of value (chapters 6 and 8). The other problem concerns the culmination of this phase, namely the foundation, in the aftermath of the Shanghai January Storm (1967), of the Shanghai Commune and its shutdown after a few weeks with the foundation of the Revolutionary Committee (chapter 7).

The political stakes of the first two years, and the experimentation with new forms of mass organization beyond the horizon of the party-state, radically superseded the space of existing political culture by questioning the value of key concepts. The revolutionaries had to face—within themselves, clearly—the ambiguities with which concepts such as “class” and even “working class”

were used to hinder and suppress ongoing political experimentation. The point I argue is that the new subjective intentions met a decisive impasse in the face of a key concept of revolutionary culture, that of “seizure of power.”

This concept, so central to the revolutionary culture of twentieth-century communism, soon ended by becoming for the revolutionaries a substitute for yet unelaborated new concepts that could enable an intellectual assessment of their political activism. In examining their freshness and courage, as well as their hesitations, backslides, and self-destructive moves, we need to take into account the discontinuities that were opened up by that political novelty in the general framework of political culture and the feedback of that culture on the political inventions.

All those events drove the revolutionaries to reexamine the entire cultural horizon of their own politics. That need appeared most explicitly in the latter part of the revolutionary decade. In the fourth part of this volume (chapters 9 and 10) I will analyze aspects of the large mass study campaigns that took place between mid-1973 and 1976. This final phase of the decade, though in fact marked by strong theoretical intent, has also been, overall, poorly explored. The topics discussed then included not only Marxist-Leninist political theory, in particular the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but also the main currents of ancient Chinese political thought, above all the polemics between Confucians and Legalists.

These study movements intended to lay the groundwork for a mass-scale assessment of events. Mao tried in vain to propose it in the last year of his life, when he stressed the need for a thorough rethinking of the extent to which the Cultural Revolution had fallen short of its aims. An insurmountable obstacle came with the rejection by Deng Xiaoping, then the actual head of government, who mounted a counterattack against the theoretical study movements launched by Mao, especially the one on the dictatorship of the proletariat, and categorically quashed Mao's proposal for a vast campaign of self-critical reflection on the decade.

Deng's early victory consisted essentially in his preventing a political assessment of the Cultural Revolution and at the same time interrupting the theoretical evaluation of twentieth-century communism. Thus, he achieved a decisive result, whose effectiveness continues in China's present-day governmental stability. Impeding the revolutionaries from taking stock of their enterprise was the prerequisite for breaking their subjective determination, sowing political disorientation among the masses, and placing all political decisions firmly in the hands of a government elite that wished to settle accounts with whatever mass political experimentation it labeled as mere chaos and anarchy.

The revolutionary decade ended with the effort toward a vast political assessment the Maoists tried to make, but which remained unfinished, no doubt due to the political and theoretical limits they themselves were trying to overcome. The interdiction to conclude that assessment exercised leverage on these “internal causes.” The coalition led by Deng, in its turn, drew essential resources for its reactive energy from the capacity to impose that prohibition.

The fundamental themes of that unfinished assessment, as well as the long-term consequences of its interdiction, constitute the starting point for the theoretical and analytical perspectives of this book.

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- 1 毛泽东 Mao Zedong, 关于理论问题的谈话要点, 1974年, 12月 “Guanyu lilun wenti de tanhua yaodian, 1974 nian, 12 yue” [Main points of the talk on the theoretical problems, December 1974], in 建国以来毛泽东文稿 *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Manuscripts of Mao Zedong after 1949] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1998), vol. 13, 413–15.
- 2 张春桥 Zhang Chunqiao, 在法庭上的讲话 “Zai fating shang de jianghua” [Speech in court], 1981, accessed April 2019, https://blog.boxun.com/hero/201308/zgzi/15_1.shtml. In Chinese, the statement is 按照这个世界的规则, 我早就想好了有这么一天. “Anzhao zhege shijie de guize, wo zao jiu xianghaole you zheme yi tian.”
- 3 An exhaustive synthesis can be found in Roderick MacFarquar and Michael Schoenals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Chapter 1: Afterlives of an “Upright Official”

- 1 Marie Claire Bergère, *La république populaire de Chine de 1949 à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1987), 174–75.
- 2 The two main monographic studies are James R. Pusey, *Wu Han: Attacking the Present through the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); and 张湛彬 Zhang Zhanbin, 文革第一文字狱 *Wenge diyi wenziyu* [The first literary inquisition of the Cultural Revolution] (Xianggang: Taiping shiji chubanshe, 1998). Both works are intensely apologetic for the figure of Wu Han, although with opposing arguments: a champion of “anti-totalitarianism” for the former, a champion of “fidelity to the party” for the latter.
- 3 Marc Bloch, *Apologie de l'histoire ou métier d'historien* ([1949], Paris: Armand Colin, 2018). English translation: *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992).