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Why Mao?

Noel Ignatiev

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Why, in spite of its long list of crimes¹ and the reality of modern China, does Maoism continue to attract adherents among revolutionaries in the U.S.? Part of the answer is that Maoism represents in many people's minds the triumph of the will (no reference intended to Leni Riefenstahl's film of that title).

Marxism came to China around the time of the May Fourth Movement (1919), when Chinese students, enraged at the government's subservience to foreign powers, turned to the West for new ideas. It arrived as one of many imports; particularly important was the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson argued for the supremacy of the will; here are some quotes from him,

¹ My favorite of Mao's crimes, which I have seen nowhere in print, comes from a professor of Chinese Studies at Harvard who lived in China for years. He reported that in the last years of his life Mao became infatuated with an 18-year-old female railway worker. He brought her to live with him in the Forbidden City, where she became for a while his intermediary to the outside world. She was the one Communist officials meant when they made statements beginning, "A spokesman for Chairman Mao declared." According to the professor, the arrangement was an open secret among those in the know. I believe it. The irony is, it may have been the only recorded case in history of the actual dictatorship of the proletariat.

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picked off the internet: “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” “Always do what you are afraid to do.” “Our greatest glory is in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail.” “Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen.” “Passion rebuilds the world for the youth.” “Every revolution was thought first in one man’s mind.”

And the following (especially appealing to many young Americans): “An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory.”

If Emerson stressed reliance on will, Marx discovered the link between communism and the proletariat. Addressing the same questions Mao addressed, and writing at about the same age Mao was when he became a radical, Marx wrote:

Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation?

Answer: In the formulation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong generally, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no historical, but only human, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.

Maoism was the synthesis of Marxism and Emersonianism, and that was the secret of its triumph in China, a country with a tiny proletariat, and its appeal to a new generation of radicals in the

U.S., a country where the proletariat appears to be diminishing in numbers and coherence.

The history of Maoism is well known: After reactionaries crushed the workers' movement of 1925–27 and slaughtered Communists in the cities, Mao led a faction of the Party to the countryside. There they built a peasant army that, as everyone knows, overthrew the feudal regime and brought the CP to power. I am in awe at Mao's accomplishment in getting fastidious Chinese students, schoolteachers, librarians (he himself was a librarian), and mandarins, more steeped in class prejudice than any other people on earth, to go and live with peasants and eat out of filthy bowls and pick lice out of their bodies. It was one of the most heroic episodes in history, and one of the greatest revolutions.

Looking back after nearly a century, it is evident now that the dust has settled that Communism in China did not bring about the "complete re-winning of man" but was the banner under which the old, reactionary, patriarchal, feudal society was overthrown and a capitalist society built up in its place. Although Mao and his comrades called themselves, and undoubtedly believed they were, Communists, the revolution they carried out was not a communist revolution, nor could it be, because it was not based in the proletariat, and when it comes to revolution, communist and proletarian are interchangeable terms.

People looking for substitutes for the working class (and consequently infatuated with Maoism) need to ponder that lesson. Sometimes an ounce of theory is worth a ton of action.

Lastly, a word on the "mass line": The Maoist notion of the "mass line" (from the masses, to the masses) omits, and by omitting denies, the active role of the Marxist organization in refracting the mass movement into its different tendencies and then seeking to clarify the different implications of those tendencies. Instead it substitutes a notion of the Party as a neutral recorder, modestly serving the masses. It is disingenuous, even hypocritical, because while declaring its adherence to the formula "from the masses, to

the masses,” it also insists that the Party is the “leading force,” invariably short-circuiting the part where the “masses” make up their own minds. (The same criticism applies to the Zapatista formula “To obey is to lead.”) The view of the Party as the “leading force” is especially popular among those who see no social force that because of its position in society can give shape to the entire movement, and therefore fall back on the Party, an organization of people of no particular class who come together voluntarily on the basis of political agreement, to perform that function.² (The Marxist organization may indeed be the “leading force,” but it has to win its position every day; during the entire period of transition from capitalist society to communism, the period sometimes known as “Socialism,” there can be no other leadership than the soviets, workers’ councils, etc. and even they can only be provisional.) The vanguard party may not be reactionary everywhere—even C.L.R. James acknowledged its value in backward countries; but it is out of place in a country where the working class is “disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.”

² I maintain that the working class in large-scale industry, transport and communications is the only social force capable of performing this function on a world scale, but that view is of course debatable and moreover its meaning in different situations is not always easy to see. The faction that emerged on top in China after 1927 did not solve the problem of what it meant (if ever they gave it serious consideration). Forty years later, workers in Shanghai declared the Shanghai Commune (a deliberate reference to the Paris Commune, based on direct democracy); shortly afterwards all talk of the Commune ended, and the Party line became the Three-in-one committees, according to which one part of the state administration was to be drawn from the existing cadres, one part from the People’s Liberation Army, and one part from the new forces—in other words, the coopting of the insurgents. Some Italian comrades visited China right after and asked Mao why he abandoned the Commune. His reply: China has 20 million proletarians; how do you expect them to maintain proletarian rule in a country of 680 million peasants? He may have been right. The results are there for all to see. Could total defeat have been worse than what actually transpired? (We could ask the same question about the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt.)