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阶级斗争

Class Struggle

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[Translated by David Verzoni]

The concept of ‘class struggle’ (*jieji douzheng*) was one of the principal paradoxes of the Cultural Revolution (see also Thornton’s essay in the present volume). As a slogan, it was unfailingly spoken and printed at every turn of that tumultuous decade in China; yet, any attempt to examine those events in the light of ‘classes in conflict’ encounters insurmountable aporia. No less complicated is the problem of how to assess the role of ‘classist’ categories in the Chinese government’s official discourse today. In its recently amended Constitution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reiterates its hallowed role as ‘the vanguard of the working class’ (*gongren jieji de xianfengdui*). Both issues—a critical reappraisal of the Cultural Revolution, as well as an analysis of the role and relevance class plays in CCP ideology—are cut from the same cloth. The thread that stitches them together is the notion of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (*wuchan jieji zhuanzheng*), which I will elaborate in this essay.

Smashing the State

The conceptual origins of class struggle certainly predate Marx. Indeed, not only did Marx candidly admit that he had borrowed the phrase from ‘bourgeois historians and economists,’ but even Lenin later pointed out that ‘not a single educated liberal’ would have trouble admitting the existence of class struggle.¹ What was new in the Marxist view was how to do away with ‘society divided in classes’ through a specific process called the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ This conception of dictatorship was not a new form of permanent rule, but a transition to an altogether different political horizon that would end class conflict and lead to the extinction of the state itself.

The question of how to assess the discourse of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution requires a close examination of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In particular, in this essay I will consider the Cultural Revolution as a

laboratory of mass politics that attempted to test this key concept of revolutionary culture. It was definitely not a coincidence that the revolutionary decade that had started in 1966 drew to a close in 1975 with a political campaign that focussed on the theoretical study of this concept, in a reckoning pursued with tenacity but never completed.

What was the dictatorship of the proletariat? Drawing a line of thought from Marx to Lenin and then Mao, this phrase designated a space of invention within which organised communists attempted to implement the goal of downsizing the state's bureaucratic-military machinery. Far from being a particular 'form of government'—Marx was notably critical regarding the idea of a 'future state'—the dictatorship of the proletariat indicated the set of political experiments aimed at dismantling—or 'smashing' (*zerbrechen*), as Marx put it—the state apparatus as an entity separated from society, and dispersing its functions among the people.²

When, in the early months of the Cultural Revolution, Mao told the Red Guards that all of them had 'to be concerned about the affairs of the state' (*guanxin guojia dashi*), he expressed the spirit of the dictatorship of the proletariat perfectly. One of the fundamental components of the original agenda of the Cultural Revolution was initiating a series of political inventions that would entrust the carrying out of state functions to the 'concern' (*guanxin*) of the masses. Yet, putting the dictatorship of the proletariat into practice as a form of mass politics required a critical rethinking of what the socialist states, starting with the Soviet Union, had become. More specifically, the Cultural Revolution called into question the fact that in all the dictatorships of the proletariat of the twentieth century, state functions had become the prerogative of a special echelon of Party officials instead of being dispersed among the common people.

Although the Cultural Revolution never managed to complete this exhaustive account and reinvention of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a historical enterprise, it articulated a set of questions that recasted older problems in a new light, requiring further conceptual investigation and practical experimentation. A core issue among these was that of the relationship between the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the prospect of the extinction of the state.

Principles of Authority

I define 'authority' in the elementary sociological sense of the ability to command obedience. Viewing the state as a set of 'apparatuses' obscures its essential role as the crystallisation of the general principle of authority in a given socio-historical world.³ While Marx was surely right in describing different modes of production—slavery, feudalism, and capitalism—all modes of production are held together by a bond of authority by which subordinates obey their superiors. The state is better conceptualised as the form of authority that is dominant within a society, rather than a set of discrete 'places' and bounded institutions. Although the form and phenomenology of authority vary depending on the society, authority installs the general principle of obedience.

Authority has assumed a variety of dominant forms in human societies—personal, transcendent, charismatic, and so forth. Yet the relations of authority dominant in the modern world differ from all previous others because they are based on a singular tenet of capitalism—the buying and selling of labour power as commodity. Labour

power as a commodity—and the subsequent freedom of the capitalist to buy it or not depending on the self-valorising demands of capital—is the foundation of the relationship between command and obedience in the modern world. In this sense, private ownership of the means of production is first and foremost the exercise of an unconditional authority over the masses of wage earners. In other words, it is the ability to have decision-making power over the lives of those who are valued only as sellers of labour power. In the historical bourgeois society the buying and selling of labour power is the atom of authority's elementary structure. The current trend towards an increasingly precarious workforce aims at restoring the unconditional authority of the wage relation by eliminating the vestiges of constraint a century of working class politics imposed on the domination of capital.

Given this modern form of authority, what did Marx mean when he argued that abolishing private ownership of the means of production would not only signal a break with capitalist society but also play a preliminary role in the process of dissolving the state? Abolishing private ownership of the means of production entails not only an end to the commodification of labour power, but also the disappearance of the general principle of authority in bourgeois society. Thus, if the state constitutes the set of powers needed to command obedience in given socio-historical conditions, abolishing the commodification of labour power deprives the state of an essential function by suppressing capital's unconditional authority. Marx, Lenin, and Mao saw that abolishing private ownership of the means of production was a prerequisite for every communist political strategy. In fact, the abolition of capitalist private property inherent in every proclamation of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the twentieth century bore the seeds of the process that, according to Marx, was supposed to 'smash' the state and eviscerate a crucial pillar of authority of bourgeois society. Once deprived of the freedom to purchase labour power in the marketplace, that entire system of governance would be irreparably altered.

Filling the Void

What are we supposed to think of the socialist 'exception' to capitalism that lasted approximately two-thirds of the twentieth century, especially now that the 'rule' of labour power commodification has been fully reinstated globally? The current discourses of totalitarianism and despotism that dominate most historiography of socialism provide little help in understanding what socialism was in its aspirations, victories, and failures. The crux of the matter is how to assess, without a blueprint, the actual consequences produced by the dictatorships of the proletariat that appeared in the twentieth century—the abolition of private ownership and the ensuing end to the commodification of labour power. Given that the very conceptual coordinates that supported this abolition have been undone, such a reassessment is no easy task.

Yet, it is surely inadequate to dismiss the entire enterprise as unrealistic, as a mere utopian impulse, and violent imposition on reality destined to deliver only disastrous results. True, the results were more than equivocal. However, the abolition of private ownership was underpinned by a detailed analysis of the real conditions of capitalism and informed by an open-ended logic that would lay the groundwork for political

experimentation on a grand scale. The decision to do away with labour power as a commodity was, in fact, a risky and challenging endeavour, the results of which should be assessed vis-à-vis the aims of the political project to which it belonged.

Abolishing the commodification of labour power was not an end in itself—it was only the first step of a project aimed at drastically reducing the functions of the state. Indeed, without pursuing or extending experimentation that would limit the state's machinery, the results produced by that first step could not but turn into the opposite of what it aimed to accomplish. Yet, this is a conclusion that can be drawn only *ex post facto*, and only if we take into account the experimental nature of these processes. In this context, our categories are still provisional. The assumption that we can make, however, given the historical record of the dictatorships of the proletariat in the twentieth century, is that the evisceration of the state due to the abolition of private property released a kind of 'reactive' energy that filled the very void left by this process. The 'halved' state was in turn 'duplicated' by the Communist Party, with the latter replacing the former principle of authority based on the commodification of labour power with a new authority to command obedience as the party that represented the 'vanguard of the working class'.

Working Class and Vanguard

This new principle of authority, however, was as much 'ideological' as it was 'organisational,' in the meaning that Franz Schurmann gave to both concepts.⁴ It was grounded in a thorough restructuring of industrial organisation whereby the factory became a fundamental element of state administration and the worker a kind of entry-level functionary. The role of the institutional paradigm of the industrial work unit (*danwei*)—based on the model of the Soviet *kombinat*—is well known (see also Kevin Lin's essay in the present volume). A Chinese hospital, university, even a department store, shared the same administrative structure as a factory, because they all were modelled on it.

The interrelationship between working class and vanguard played a key role in the reorganisation of industrial production. It was also a notably ambivalent relationship. Installing industrial labour in the sphere of state administration was envisaged as a way to dissolve capitalist authority over wage slavery. Yet, labour's very inclusion in that sphere, and the substitution of capitalist authority with that of the vanguard of the working class, ended up reconstituting the entire apparatus of the state that the abolition of private property was supposed to have smashed. Indeed, the new organism was even more inflexible than the previous one, since it had to fill the void that the abolition of commodified labour power had left in the general principle of authority. Once we account for these peculiar circumstances, it is possible to reassess the references to 'class' (*jieji*) during the Cultural Revolution, as well as their reiteration in the current discourse of the Chinese authorities.

The persistent references to class during the Cultural Revolution can be taken as a symptom of the insurmountable impasse that had arisen between the working class and its vanguard in the socialist state. The obsession with the concept symptomatically masked the questioning of its real political value by the people who were supposedly

its subject. The proletariat—which, along with its dictatorship, was supposed to be the political subject leading to the dissolution of the state—had become an integral part of a process of reconstructing the state's bureaucratic machine.

It is remarkable that during this revolutionary decade the issue of the working class was approached from the perspective of critical reappraisal of the very organisation of industrial labour. One of the most significant political questions posed during the Cultural Revolution was what made the socialist factory different from a capitalist one. True, authority was no longer invested in the commodification of the workforce. Yet, the question that Mao and the Maoists raised ever since the late 1950s—the 1960 'Constitution of Anshan Iron and Steel Company' being one example—was that the workers themselves should be able to devise new forms of political experimentation, otherwise the industrial *danwei* would simply end up reiterating subordinate workplace relations just like those of the capitalist factory.

At stake was precisely what Marx had argued at length in his anatomy of the organisation of the modern workplace in chapters 14 and 15 of *Capital*: how to subvert the 'technical division of labour' whereby the factory command subsumes the 'intellectual powers of production' expropriated from the workers, who are then relegated to mere 'socio-functional detail' as simple accessories to the array of machine tools. That fundamental structure of factory despotism in the industrial *danwei* relied on the ambiguities in the relations between the working class and its vanguard, instead of converging in the unconditional authority of the capitalist.

As a result of these unresolved tensions, the political import of the issue came explosively to the fore with the 1967 January Storm in Shanghai. All the ambiguities in the relationship between the CCP and the working class emerged when the Headquarters of Revolutionary Rebel Workers (*geming zaofan gongren silingbu*) announced that they had organised themselves independently of the Party-state apparatus. For this reason, the Shanghai Party Committee fiercely opposed their very existence. No real analysis of that crucial episode can be formulated in the terms of class conflict. There was no deep-seated division of social condition between Rebels and Scarlet Guards, the loyalists that supported the Party authorities. The real divide was to be found in the concept of the working class itself. While the January Storm still calls for much research, it was undoubtedly the episode that smashed the preceding principle of authority under which the CCP was the only political organisation possible, as the self-proclaimed vanguard of the working class. At that point the industrial *danwei* could not continue to operate as before—it had lost its ability to command obedience.

How to deal with the decline of authority from that moment on became a crucial issue that marked the entire revolutionary decade. For the Maoists, the way forward was to organise a series of experiments aimed at a political rethinking of the socialist factory, an agenda that included the need for a thorough transformation of its technical organisation. Wherever they were strong and well-organised—as in Shanghai and in the Northeast—they promoted remarkable experiments like the 'worker universities' (*gongren daxue*) and the 'theoretical contingents of workers' (*gongren lilun duiwu*).⁵ One such model was the University of the Machine Tool Factory in Shanghai. Set up in 1968 to close the gap between executive responsibilities and shop-floor duties, it trained worker engineers to design components as well as work on the production

lines. By 1973, theoretical contingents appeared in factories where the Maoists were most active. They argued that theoretical work, including the study of philosophy, history, and economics, should be an integral part of shop-floor duties.

The Party apparatus responded to these experiments with lukewarm detachment that soon turned into passive resistance. The executive cadres of the industrial *danwei* no longer possessed the stature needed to assert their unconditional authority and were at a loss about what to do. Any pretence of reestablishing the former order was impracticable and a new order had yet to be invented. Lacking a clear principle of authority in the factories, the political system wobbled on unstable foundations.

Putting Things Back in Order

The coup d'état of 1976 imposed a solution. 'Put things back in order' (*zhengdun*)—the keyword of Deng Xiaoping's programme from 1975 on—was code for the suppression of political experimentation of any kind in the factories, labelling it as 'disorder,' 'anarchy,' and 'factionalism.' Yet, this first preliminary step towards the 'new order in China' in no way restored the former principle of authority that the Cultural Revolution had smashed. Deng's strategic acuity was to grasp immediately that such a restoration was impossible and that new approaches had to be found in order to command obedience. In truth, the means employed were anything but new. In the end, capitalism's main principle of authority was revived: the exploitation of commodified labour power. The lives of millions of migrant workers in the 'world's factory' is now regulated by the principle of buying and selling labour power as a commodity in one of the world's most flexible labour markets.

What is new about the 'Chinese miracle' of the past four decades is the fact that the CCP has maintained its claim to be 'the vanguard of the working class' alongside the often brutal exercise of capitalist authority. Obviously no one really believes this claim, let alone the ones who proclaim it loudest. Yet, it is not just a litany. It is an assertion with a precise organisational thrust—an injunction that the CCP remains the only legitimate political organisation in China, and that no independent political organisation of wage-earning slaves can be tolerated. The category 'working class' is an essential component of the government's discourse, albeit shorn of its political value. It is clearly retained as cautionary principle of interdiction, a warning prohibiting any incipient form of worker political existence.

We can even predict that the stability of the Chinese government is assured as long as the dualism holds: on one side, the capitalist principle of authority regulates the lives of wage earners; on the other, the self-styled 'vanguard of the working class' acts as a preemptive censor to prevent the emergence of any political organisation independent of the Party. The former is, to a certain extent, a given in that it reiterates the basic rule governing the modern global social condition; the latter, however, is a fiction that can retain its grip only with subsequent developments of more or less esoteric formulas that amplify its hold—such as the Three Represents (*san ge daibiao*), Scientific Development (*kexue fazhan*), Harmonious Society' (*hexie shehui*), and the latest, China Dream (*Zhongguo meng*). It is hard to imagine how China's political elite can craft a

governing discourse without resorting to enlarging, and emptying, the range of slogans. To pretend that the dreams of a billion and a half people can coincide with any unifying dream is a perversion that would make the Marquis De Sade blush.

For a new politics for workers to emerge in China, workers themselves will have to invent original forms of independent organisation and critically reappraise the political value of the entire history of modern labour politics. If the main barrier against the political existence of workers is the reference to a mummified working class enshrined in official discourse, nothing that is politically novel will be able to come into being unless there is an explicit, conscious effort to keep this fiction at bay.