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A Radical Group in Hong Kong

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One of the most essential and most difficult tasks of the modern revolutionary movement is communication between revolutionaries on either side of the Iron Curtain. A valuable contribution to this developing encounter has been made by the “70s,” a libertarian [i.e. anarchist] group in Hong Kong opposed simultaneously to Western capitalism and to the Chinese state-capitalist bureaucracy, and which is in contact with several antibureaucratic revolutionaries who have escaped from China. Over the last three years it has put out an English-language magazine, *Minus*, dealing with struggles in China and Hong Kong. It has also published two books: *The Revolution Is Dead, Long Live the Revolution*, an anthology of articles in English on the so-called “Cultural Revolution,” and *Revelations That Move the Earth to Tears*, a Chinese-language collection of stories, poems and essays smuggled out of China.

In speaking of the “70s” here, I include also the loose grouping of people who though not formal members have some ongoing association with its projects, and who can all be contacted through [obsolete address omitted].

The 70s comrades have only partially developed a clear definition of themselves and their activity. Their Chinese-language magazine started out several years ago in an underground paper format, with imports of countercultural oddments already largely outmoded in the West. The first number of *Minus* contained the quaint admonition: "Remember: the alternative press is the only news source you can trust." One only has to remember how long most of the underground press uncritically glorified the Maoist regime; or how it played down and falsified May 1968 and suppressed any mention of the 1970 workers' uprising in Poland because its narrow "Third World"-Guevarist consciousness had no way of comprehending such struggles. Most of the original underground papers have collapsed as a result of the general recognition of their confusions and illusions, or have devolved into frankly reformist peddlers of "alternative" culture. *Minus* soon dropped its underground press characteristics, though it still maintains a membership in the "Alternative Press Syndicate."

The 70s's looseness of self-definition results in the usual defects of vague "affinity groups." Nonparticipants coast along with the projects of those with more initiative or "more experience." Internal differences are seldom polarized practically or publicly. Independent ideas, instead of leading to independent projects, get lost in lowest-common-denominator collective action, leading to boredom and dropping out. Their toleration of virtually anybody dilutes the clarity of their efforts. (E.g., they accept being interviewed by the French paper *Libération*, notorious for suppressing criticism of Maoism; which is thus free to distort their positions while beefing up its image as "covering all sides.") They run the risk, especially the actual escapees from China, of being swallowed up in the spectacular role of exotic revolutionaries, admired because they present no challenge. This is encouraged by their absence of clarity on their internal functioning, on their different tendencies and splits,

cracy's need to falsify all aspects of life in order to cover up the big lie at its origin.

and on their past experiments and the conclusions they have drawn from them. A large amount of their correspondence is simply fan mail from people who never offer any criticisms (nor expect to receive any) but who seek a "dialogue" consisting of the endless rehashing of ultraleftist banalities.

The 70s comrades' lack of clarity about their own practice reinforces their lack of clarity about the Chinese revolutionary movement's practice. Their publications have presented valuable information about events and life in China (Simon Leys's *Chinese Shadows* shows how farcical are the accounts of those visitors to China who naïvely derive their information from the tightly programmed tours); but they have rarely confronted tactical problems. They have reported on struggles against the bureaucracy, but they have not examined the errors and failures of those struggles in order to suggest how they could be different next time.

The theoretical vagueness of the 70s is reflected in the eclecticism of *The Revolution Is Dead*. Even leaving aside the three articles written from Leninist perspectives — whose analyses the 70s editors explicitly reject — several of the articles contain dubious formulations which are not criticized. Cajo Brendel's "Theses on the Chinese Revolution" are determinist and reductionist. His tedious comparison of the Chinese Communist Party with the Russian one reinforces the notion of the inevitability of the bureaucratic regime. He fails to formulate the choices, the contradictions that bear on revolutionary possibilities. He plays down the great Shanghai uprising of 1927 (see Harold Isaacs's *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*) and reduces its crushing to a whim of Chiang Kai-shek's: "because he scorned Jacobinism, not because he feared the proletariat" (thesis #22). And all he sees during the sixties is a conflict between the "new class" (the managerial bureaucrats) and the old-line Party bureaucrats, in which "the ultimate victory of the 'new class' is the only logical perspective" (#60). The large-scale armed revolts touched off by the "Cultural Revolution,"

which burst the bounds of both bureaucratic factions, are mentioned only once, as “details”: “every detail cannot be fitted into this analytical framework” (#58). An “analytical framework” in which the proletariat can’t apparently play any role but that of a tool for one or another ruling class, or of a “detail,” is a strange one to be taken up by a “libertarian communist.”

Like many other commentators on China, K.C. Kwok takes the bureaucrats’ rhetoric too seriously, accepting the issues as they define them, trying to follow the constantly shifting “lines” and figure out who is to the “left” or “right,” etc. His “Everything Remains the Same After So Much Ado” is a confused hodgepodge resulting from the attempt to blend extensive, ill-digested borrowings from the Situationist International’s *Explosion Point of Ideology in China* (also included in the book) with Yang Hsi-Kwang’s “Whither China.” “Whither China” and Li I-Che’s “Concerning Socialist Democracy and Legality” are both important expressions of the development, under extremely difficult conditions, of an indigenous critique of the Chinese bureaucracy (comparable in this respect to Kuron and Modzelewski’s “Open Letter to the Polish Communist Party”). Nevertheless, their analyses are seriously distorted by their attempt to follow through with a radical antibureaucratic program while simultaneously holding up the Mao faction as a pillar of the revolution. Taken literally, the articles are merely expressions of the absurd contradictions of Maoist ideology pushed to the explosion point. To a large extent, however, the authors were consciously exploiting those contradictions. Li’s article, originally a gigantic wall poster, was allowed to remain up in Canton a whole month because local officials couldn’t be sure that this was not one more government-sponsored attack on “capitalist-roaders”; and when it was finally condemned and certain passages were singled out as “especially reactionary,” Li was able to show that they were exact quotations of Mao.

(As a result of their writings, both Yang and Li have been sent to the prison camps. The 70s is involved in an international campaign for their release, along with that of those arrested during the Tiananmen riot.)

Yu Shuet’s “Dusk of Rationality” and the two pieces by Wu Man contain valuable information and insights, but in both writers there are points where the analyses become vague and ideological. For example, Wu criticizes Mao because he “did not interpret Marxism through humanism in the endeavor to maintain its best qualities, but interpreted it as a tool for struggle with dialectics as the method” (p. 242). But Marx’s dialectical method is often a useful tool for struggle. The problem lies in the appeal to an ideological authority implied by exegetical “interpretation,” whether Maoist or “humanist.” And Yu states that “in the past, the leadership of revolutions ignored the value of the individual” (p. 203). But in the context of the present revolution this is beside the point; when people eliminate external power over them, it doesn’t matter if someone “ignores the value of the individual” — because he is not in a position to do anything about it. Of course it is natural that amidst the brutal reality of Stalinism, where even the most modest human values may become so mutilated as to be conceived only as vague, distant ideals, people cling desperately to such ideals. As Wu notes, the “altar of high ideals” found in the poems and stories of *Revelations That Move the Earth to Tears* “is something which they have created to take temporary shelter [in]” (p. 235). But as long as radical aspirations remains “ideals” — spectacular, separate from and “above” real life, expressed by an elite of artistic, ideological or religious specialists — this false dichotomy of “real” and “ideal” implicitly supports the bureaucracy by giving it credit for some sort of “realism.” Similarly, Yu’s reference to “rationality” is too ambiguous. If a vulgarized rationalism is taken up by the bureaucracy, this scarcely masks the delirious irrationality at the heart of Stalinism, the bureau-