

Maoism vs. Libertarian Socialism?

Review of Elliot Liu, Maoism and the Chinese Revolution; A Critical Introduction (2016)

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This small book is about the ideology of Maoism and its development out of the Chinese Revolution. As the author says, that revolution shook the world. The world is living with its aftermath today. And it is possible, as there is a regrowth of U.S. radicalism, that Maoism may have an influence on a revived U.S. Left. So it is important to understand Mao's legacy.

Most works on this topic are either academic (and implicitly pro-capitalist) or pro-Maoist (or sometimes Trotskyist). Unusually, Elliot Liu claims to “offer a critical analysis of the Chinese Revolution and Maoist politics from an anarchist and communist perspective.” (2)

It may not be entirely clear what that means. The term “communist” includes everything from anarchist-communism (the mainstream of anarchism since Kropotkin) to Pol Pot's autogenocide. However Liu writes that he is “in line with many anarchist and anti-state communist critics of Marxism-Leninism...” (105) He is identifying with the libertarian, autonomist, humanist, and “ultra-left” trends in Marxism—in opposition to mainstream social-democratic or Leninist versions of Marxism.

This is demonstrated by the theorists he cites and the theories he uses—which he integrates with anarchism. Liu never quite spells this out, but rather demonstrates it in the course of the book. I am in general agreement with this anarchist/libertarian-Marxist approach—often summarized as “libertarian socialism.” (See Price 2017.) This makes me especially interested in how he applies it, which is sometimes problematic.

While presented as an “introduction” to Maoism, this book covers a great deal of material. The conclusions Liu reaches are these: “*The Chinese Revolution was a remarkably popular peasant war led by Marxist-Leninists....The Chinese Communist Party acted as a surrogate bourgeoisie, developing the economy in a manner that could be called ‘state capitalist’....[This] transformed the party into a new ruling class, with interests distinct from those of the Chinese proletariat and peasantry....Mao and his allies repeatedly chose...beating back the revolutionary self-activity of the Chinese proletariat and ultimately clearing the way for openly capitalist rule after Mao's death....I consider Maoism to be an internal critique of Stalinism that fails to break with Stalinism.*” (2-3)

In places, Liu refers to Maoist China as “state socialist” without explaining what this means. Perhaps he means that the regime calls itself “socialist” due to its nationalization of industry, even though it is really not socialist but state capitalist. I agree with a “state capitalist” analysis of Maoism and the Chinese state Mao built. (For “state capitalist” theory as developed in the analysis of the Soviet Union, see Daum 1990; Hobson & Tabor 1988.) Liu supports his “state capitalist” view in several ways: by examining the history of Maoism, by considering its theory, and by a political-economic analysis of the Chinese economy.

History

This little book covers a great deal of dramatic history in a short span, and does it well. At times Liu leaves things out, probably due to this limitation of space. For example, he does not mention how Stalin, preferring to make a deal with Chiang Kai-Shek, tried to hold back the Chinese Communists from taking power after World War II—and how Mao rejected Stalin's “advice”. Nor does it mention the Korean War and its effects in speeding up statification of industry. But he covers the development of the party and its armies, the conquest of power, the Hundred Flowers, the Great Leap Forward and its concomitant famine (perhaps 35 million died due to Mao's mismanagement), the Sino-Soviet split, and so on.

Politically problematic is Liu's coverage of the Maoist "turn to the countryside." In the twenties, the Communists were driven from the cities and the urban working class. Stalin and his agents in China had told the Communists to ally with the capitalist Nationalists (Koumingtan), to trust them, and in no way to oppose them. This strategy left them open to terrible massacres when the Nationalists turned on them. They abandoned the urban working class, instead building armies based in the peasantry.

Liu describes the historical events but does not analyze their class meaning. According to classical Marxism, the modern working class is collectivized by industry, forced to work cooperatively, and living largely in cities. This creates a tendency (not an inevitability but a tendency) for workers to self-organize and rebel, to fight for their self-emancipation. The peasantry, however, has a scattered existence, away from the centers of power and knowledge. Therefore the peasantry, Marx concluded, has the ability to rise up in fierce revolutionary wars, but it needs to be led by some urban grouping—if not led democratically by the working class than by an authoritarian elite.

I am not going to argue here whether this classical Marxist view is correct—or, rather, to what extent it is correct, and under what circumstances. But Mao's withdrawal from the urban proletariat and basing his movement on the peasants organized in an army, seems to fit with this theory. In any event, Liu shows that Mao's forces constantly sought to balance their influence on the peasants: rousing them against the landlords and rich, but then holding them back from overthrowing the landlords and the rich. *"Even at the height of the CCP's victory, Mao was unwilling to sanction agrarian revolution from below or worker self-management in the cities."* (42)

This was in the service, supposedly, of building alliances with sections of the ruling classes. This included a "United Front" with the Nationalists against the Japanese imperialist invaders (which neither Mao nor Chiang fully followed) and then the "New Democracy," set up during and after the Communists' victory. Supposedly New Democracy was a non-socialist, capitalist, stage of the economy and the state, which came before socialism. It sounded like the old reformist, Menshevik, two-stage theory—except that the Communists insisted that they, not the capitalists, would be in charge as the ruling party, even during this capitalist "stage." *"New Democratic strategy positions the party as an alienated power in a given territory, standing above and mediating between different classes, while laying the foundation for the future emergence of a 'red bourgeoisie'."* (123)

The most interesting part of the book's historical survey is its coverage of the "Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1965–1967). There was a fight within the ruling layers (of the party, the army, the state, and the economy—the nascent ruling class). For support for his side, Mao roused the seething discontent of students and youth. Rebellion spread to the army ranks, to peasants, and the workers. The aroused masses went beyond what Mao had wanted. In Shanghai in 1966, workers from seventeen factories formed a Workers' General Headquarters.

"As in many cases throughout history, the social turmoil generated by the movement compelled workers to begin managing daily life themselves. Transport, water, and electricity...the WGH thus began coordinating production and transportation of goods, as well as public transit, through its own mass organizations. In many factories, worker-elected committees supplanted managers and party committees....Full power seizures eventually took place in twenty-nine provinces and municipalities." (84-85)

The Shanghai People's Commune and the other communes were crushed by force. So were all the "ultra-left" radical forces. But they had been vulnerable due to their naive trust in Mao and his supporters.

Theories

The book covers Mao's theoretical writings, such as his discussion of dialectical philosophy. It looks at Mao's "contributions" but criticizes his perspective as Stalinist and bourgeois. Frankly, I think that Liu takes Maoist theory a bit too seriously, as though it were a real part of the development of philosophy. Whatever may be the strengths or weaknesses of Hegel, Marx, and Engels in using dialectics, for Stalin and then Mao it was no longer real philosophical discourse. "Dialectical materialism," in the hands of the Stalinists, had become simply what Marx called "ideology"—not a system of ideas but rationalization to cover up class reality. It can be analyzed as ideology in this sense and Liu is best when he does that.

The book examines Mao's concept of the "mass line." This means that Communists should find out what working people wanted and develop a program which responded to these wants. As Liu shows, this concept may be interpreted in a revolutionary or an opportunist manner. What he leaves out is the underlying fact that the Communist' program could not tell the people the truth. It could not say that the Communists would replace the landlords and capitalists with a bureaucratic capitalist ruling class. It could not say that after the revolution the peasants and workers would continue to be exploited and oppressed. So methods had to be found which appeared to support the wants of the working people but really was a lie. That was why "*the mass line concept admits an incredibly wide range of interpretations, many of them authoritarian in character.*" (118)

Liu correctly condemns the "*substitutionist and idealist assumptions*" of Maoism. The party is not only one part of the working class and peasantry but supposedly a separate and most important agency. The party claims to know the true science of society, unlike the masses, and knows what to do. It is the rightful leadership of society and should be obeyed in all things. The "dictatorship of the proletariat" (which might have once meant the rule of the actual workers and their allies) is the rule of the party, which stands in for the workers and oppressed. And what makes the party the stand-in for the people is that it has the right ideas. Those who have the right ideas are "proletarian." Those who do not are "bourgeois," "reactionary," and "capitalist-roaders." "In common with many Leninist interpretations of vanguard leadership, these methods assume the validity of the party's political line and obscure proletarian self-activity." (126)

Political Economy

Liu demonstrates that the Chinese economy is capitalist by showing how it fits Marx's analysis of capitalism (his "critique of political economy"). He cites a prominent Maoist text on political economy and shows how its description of China is that of a capitalist market economy, following Marx's categories. And he himself applies capitalist descriptors to China. (Speaking as an anarchist, I find this one of the main advantages of using aspects of Marxism.)

This is true even if we focus on the most "socialist" phases of Mao's China—after New Democracy (which was officially "state capitalist") and before the current, post-Maoist, period which is openly capitalist (if still run by a "Communist Party"). The workers and peasants still worked for wages. Ruled by the law of value, they produced commodities—goods which sold on the market, inside China and internationally. Their labor was alienated—working for someone else. There was a labor market, if a controlled one. This is the capital/labor relationship at the base

of the economy. Enterprises competed with each other. The overall society produced in order to accumulate, grow, and expand its mass of commodities.

It has been argued that no society could immediately leap from capitalism into socialism—especially not a poor, oppressed, exploited nation such as China had been. Therefore there was bound to be capitalist survivals in the economy, for a period, even an extended period. So therefore the previous argument proves nothing.

Whether or not a partially-capitalist transitional stage is necessary before socialism, this does not refute the evidence. China was not ruled by workers and peasants and other oppressed people nor was it in transition to a socialist (or communist) society. It was ruled by a minority elite of bureaucrats who were agents of capital accumulation. They were increasing capitalist trends not decreasing them.

Conclusions

At times, Liu seems to be (mistakenly) seeking a balanced critique of Maoism, looking for both positive and negative aspects and bringing the positive aspects into revolutionary theory. “*Only when Maoism is subjected to an immanent critique...will it be possible to effectively re-embed elements of Maoism in a coherent political project...*” (3) In the concluding chapter, he states, “*Today’s revolutionaries have much to learn—positive and negative—from the struggles of the Chinese proletariat and peasantry, party cadres and military units, and the actions of the CCP leadership.*” (105) But learning positive lessons from the struggles of the Chinese popular classes is one thing; claiming that there are positive lessons to learn from the CCP leadership is quite another.

However, at the very end of this chapter, Liu clarifies his views, “*For revolutionaries who aim at a free anarchist and communist society, Maoism as a whole must be rejected. It may be possible to extract particular strategic concepts, work methods, or slogans from the Chinese experience....But these elements must then be embedded in a set of revolutionary politics far different from those developed by Mao...*” (126) This seems an appropriate attitude toward Maoism from the standpoint of revolutionary libertarian socialism.

Although stating his “*anarchist and communist*” perspective, Liu seems to base most of his argument on a libertarian interpretation of Marxism (which he uses well). Unfortunately, Liu does not mention that Mao’s authoritarian assumptions were not only rooted in Stalinism but even in Marxism, or at least in aspects of Marxism. In particular, Marx proposed that the working class could take power by creating a party and taking over the state (either by elections or by insurrection). Anarchists argued that for socialists to set up their own state (a bureaucratic-military machine to rule over society) would result in state capitalism and a new, bureaucratic, ruling class. (For further discussion of the differences between anarchism and Maoism, see Price 2007.)

But at the very end, Liu summarizes his view, “*Revolutionaries must oppose the establishment of a state that will direct and reproduce exploitation, and instead encourage forms of mass, federated, armed, and directly democratic social organization. There is no alternative to the anarchist thesis: the state must be smashed.*” (128) This is indeed the lesson of Maoism.

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