

‘Illusion of the Epoch’: On the Question of Socialism in Mao’s China

[A provisional text for discussion]

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An important section of the left opposed to what they consider to be the capitalist path followed by China after 1978, seems to believe that China had evolved into socialism after the victory of the Communist Party of China (CPC) under Mao in 1949. Needless to add, this was also claimed by the rulers of China (who of course continue to assert that China has remained socialist ever since). Let us discuss the issue.

According to China’s spokespersons, the CPC’s victory meant the triumph of “new democratic revolution” accomplishing the “anti-feudal, anti-imperialist” tasks. The subsequent period till the end of the first five year plan was a “transitional period” of “socialist construction”. Beginning with 1956-57 China entered socialism.

One could on the whole possibly agree with the assertion about the “new democratic” (essentially bourgeois) character of the Chinese revolution at its initial stage continuing for about a decade. However, the claim that China subsequently became socialist is highly problematic, to say the least, if socialism is understood following Marx, as a classless “society of free and associated producers” with no state, no commodity production and no wage labour (even when one accepts Lenin’s misleading version of socialism as the ‘lower phase of communism’). As we know from Marx before the lower phase of communism arrives there is a whole “revolutionary transformation period” during which the proletariat exercises its ‘dictatorship’ (the “rule of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority”) precisely in order to eliminate all classes including itself and its class rule (Marx makes no distinction between communism and socialism. It is Lenin’s ‘contribution’ which became very useful to the new rulers of Russia after October 1917 as well as to all the rulers of ‘really (non) existing socialist’ societies later to follow).

Mao’s position, concerning the character of the Chinese society for the period beginning in the late 1950s is ambiguous. On the one hand, he speaks in terms of an already existing “socialist regime” in China. On the other hand, he stresses the existence of the “proletarian dictatorship” during the same period. He refers to the “socialist relations of production” while at the same time draws attention to the existence of commodity production and wage labour in China. It is not difficult to see that these inconsistencies arise from Mao’s sense of reality of China’s social relations of production as well as his inability to transcend the theoretical limits set by the ideology of “Marxism-Leninism”.

While Mao’s practice differed considerably from Stalin’s, the same could not be said of Mao’s ideological framework. He completely accepted Stalin’s un-Marxian position that “the system of ownership is the basis of production relations”. Marx in fact stressed the opposite. Stalin declared the then Russia to be “socialist” on the basis of the juridical elimination of individual private ownership of the means of production, thereby standing Marx on his head. Mao too proclaimed the establishment of China’s “socialist system” on the basis of the juridical change in the form of the ownership of the means of production.

Thereby Mao made complete abstraction from the real relations of production or rather, he assumed equivalence between a juridical change in the ownership and a change in the real relations of production. Marx would call this a “juridical illusion”. Mao was fully aware of the real existence of wage labour and commodity relations in China, which have no place in socialism as envisaged by Marx. The contradiction is clear in Mao’s statement:” China is a socialist country... At present our country practises the commodity system, an eight grade wage system, and wage system is unequal, and in all this scarcely differs from the old society; the difference is that the system of ownership has changed”. This goes well with Stalin’s concept of socialism, certainly not Marx’s. In Marx’s own texts such a statement would hold perfectly for a capitalist society {particularly if one remembers Marx’s statement in the Ms of CAPITAL III about the “abolition of capital as private ownership *within* the limits of the capitalist mode of production itself’ (emphasis in Ms.) (The meaning of ‘private property’ [in capitalism] as ‘class private property’, this fundamental meaning of private property [as opposed to its usually accepted meaning as individual private property] in Marx’s texts seems to have escaped most of the Marx readers).

Mao’s assertion of the existence of classes in socialism is a revision even of Lenin who, following Marx, underlined that “socialism means abolition of classes”. Increasingly after the 1950s Mao conceived classes not in terms of social relations of production but in terms of ideology. This position of Mao, again, is understandable.

On the one hand, Mao had to assert, following ‘Marxist-Leninist’ ideology that China was a socialist society on the basis of the juridical elimination of individual private property in the means of production. On the other hand, he confronted, along with commodity production and wage labour—the hallmark of capitalism—country’s continuing pre-capitalist-capitalist cultural framework. This meant, among other things, bureau-cracy in the Party as well as in the state and different kinds of corruption, unacceptable in a society supposed to have succeeded capitalism through revolution.

Thus according to him, though China was already socialist, classes and class struggle continued to exist in the Chinese society. In order to prevent a ‘Soviet’ type (the word is put by us within inverted commas simply because Soviets in the original revolutionary sense of workers’ and peasants’ self governing organs ceased to exist in Russia beginning ca.mid 1918, thanks to the Bolshevik seizure [independently of the Soviets] and monopolisation of power) “restoration of capitalism”, the “capitalist roaders” in China had to be eliminated through a series of “cultural revolutions’ (We have no knowledge of the reply of the accused to this serious charge. As far as we know there was never an open debate on this issue so that people at large could know exactly what was happening and {in the case of the masses of Chinese toilers supposed to be the masters of society} participate with their absolutely free opinion).

In Marx ‘cultural revolution’ as an independent category does not exist (as far as our knowledge goes). And this is as it should be. A socialist revolution is an all embracing self- emancipatory project undertaken by the immediate producers which continues over an entire EPOCH (the formation of the proletarian power is simply the “first step” in this revolution as the MANIFESTO, 1848, underlines). (Hence, for example, there is little sense in the Left’s much used expression ‘victory’ of the October revolution, abstracting from the unpleasant fact that October,1917 did not represent a proletarian victory. The Bolsheviks seized power not from Kerensky but from the Soviets.}). There is no need for a separate cultural revolution after society has entered humanity’s history leaving its pre-

history behind, as Marx had characterized the human society after capitalism. For the period intervening between the establishment of the proletarian rule and the advent of socialism is precisely the period when, in the words of Marx, “the working class passes through long struggles, through a series of historic processes transforming circumstances and individuals”. That is why Marx calls the period immediately preceding socialism (after the establishment of the proletarian rule) the “revolutionary transformation period”. The necessity of Cultural Revolution in socialism, that is, after the transformation period is over, is indeed a contradiction in terms.

Even assuming Mao meant “proletarian dictatorship” when he spoke of socialism (never mind the contradiction!) in China, it would be hard to prove that the post-1949 China lived under such dictatorship in the sense of Marx. To start with, the CPC under Mao, with all its undoubtedly innovative practices, remained well within the bounds of a Leninist ‘vanguard’ party (which goes directly against the self-emancipatory principle of the proletarian rule). The CPC’s victory in 1949 could hardly be called a self-emancipatory act of the Chinese toilers themselves (abstracting from the fact of the proletariat forming an infinitely small fraction of the Chinese toilers) based on the principle : “the emancipation of the working classes is the task of the workers themselves”.

The CPC was, at best, and so it undoubtedly thought itself to be, a party for the toilers but could not really be called a party of and by the toilers themselves. Remaining outside the toilers’ effective control and, completely unaccountable to them and to all intents and purposes claiming to know the toilers’ interests better than the toilers themselves, the CPC, like the Bolsheviks, considered leading and directing the toiling masses as its ‘duty’. Similarly, post-1949 China lacked the basic characteristics of a proletarian dictatorship in the EMANCIPATORY sense of Marx. Armed workers did not replace the inherent instruments of repression such as the standing army and the police, nor did the immediate producers replace by the functionaries freely elected and subject to recall the bureaucracy. On the contrary, the Chinese regime, like its Russian prototype, confirmed what Marx had written about the earlier forms of political power, that the Revolution had “transferred the direction of the state machinery from one set of the ruling classes to another” instead of “smashing it” (It might fruitfully be recalled that shortly before his death Lenin himself had admitted this much for his ‘proletarian regime’ calling it a “misfortune”).

The fundamental decisions, which affected the masses of labourers in China, were, in fact, made and enforced (again as in the Russian prototype) by the party leadership unaccountable to and over the heads of the immediate producers of China who were simply exhorted to participate in executing those decisions. The general body of Chinese labourers had little to do with central questions concerning what, how and for whom to produce. Planning for economic development, the collectivisation (communication) of agriculture (its basic rationale and strategy), the division of the total national product between consumption and accumulation, the distribution of investment among different branches of the economy as well as the mode of distribution of products for personal consumption were well beyond the control of the immediate producers. For example, the regime prided itself on emphasising that “Chairman Mao personally directed and fixed the resolution on the edification of the people’s communes.”

The initiative to launch the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’ (GPCR) came not from the country’s labouring masses but from the “Chairman in person”. He on his own

set the criteria for characterising which “person(s) in authority” was (were) “taking the capitalist road”. The rhetoric of the 16-point “decision” on the GPCR about the need “for the masses to liberate themselves” is immediately contradicted by the statement that “Mao Zedong’s thought is the guide to action” as well as by the assertion that people opposing this thought were “ultra reactionary bourgeois rightists and counter revolutionarily revisionists” (As if these statements represented the freely expressed, unconstrained , views of the labouring masses themselves). In a society supposed to be marching towards the second stage of communism every move was centered on following the Chairman Mao’s “latest instructions”. Indeed, the continuing emphasis on Mao being the “great teacher (cf. Rosa Luxemburg: ‘the working class does not require a school master’), great leader, great supreme commander, great helmsman” directly contradicts, besides the regime’s rhetoric, Marx’s self emancipatory perspective of the “proletariat organised as the ruling class’ mediated by the “conquest of democracy” ultimately ushering in a “union of free individuals”. As the *Internationale* intones, “there is no supreme saviour, no god, no Ceaser, no tribune. Workers! we are our own saviours.”

It should be clear that we have not raised here the highly controversial issues such as number of famine deaths, existence and number of labour camps or the violence applied on the dissidents particularly during the GPCR. In other words, even assuming the total absence of these debatable issues, the uncontro-verted fact that the labouring masses of China only FOLLOWED the directives for executing the ‘tasks’ laid down from ‘above’ by the CCP leadership uncontrolled by and unaccountable to the mass of the immediate producers, including the existence of the “wage slaves” is enough to show the absolutely UNFREE character of the post-1949 regime in China, even leaving the question of the existence of the first phase of communism.

Let us note that even in what is usually considered as the most libertarian work in the (post-Marx) ‘communist’ tradition—“the State and Revolution” by V I Lenin—both state and wage labour are present—“all citizens” are the “hired employees of the state” enjoying “equality of labour and wages” in the ‘first phase of communism’. His reading of Marx on the Paris Commune is also strange to say the least. Marx had praised the Paris Commune for its “Revolution against the State itself not against “this or that form of state power”. (In one of his early works Marx had already emphasised, “ State and slavery are indissociable”). For Lenin, on the contrary, the Soviets in Russia would constitute a “commune state... a state of which the Paris Commune was the prototype” (“The tasks of the Proletariat...”); and he sees in the Soviets “a State of the type of the Paris Commune” (Dual Power). Unbelievable reading! Needless to add, “a society of free and associated producers” or “a union of free individuals” is totally incompatible with State and wage labour (including commodity form of the products of labour). ~~del del del~~