

'MAO : THE UNKNOWN STORY'

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The New Yorker Magazine influences intellectual and cultural opinion among many progressive people who themselves influence public opinion. So when *The New Yorker* makes mention of Mao, it's worth taking careful notice.

The October 15, 2007 issue featured a commentary about a 1967 film by Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*. A new print of the film was being shown in New York City. The film is a fictional account of the activities of a small group of self-styled Maoist students in Paris. The critic, Anthony Lane, mentions that the film came out on the eve of the upheavals of 1968, in heady times when revolution was in the air and even enjoyed pop-art expressiveness. But, he goes on to note...

"Now we know too much. According to one estimate, twenty-seven million people died in *labor camps and prisons under Mao Zedong."¹

Since no source for this statistic is cited, the reader assumes, or is expected to assume, that this "estimate" of 27 million deaths is amply documented and well corroborated. All the more so, given *The New Yorker's* fabled reputation for fact checking. It is the kind of statistical statement-of-fact that lands with a calculated shock of revelation and an all-knowing thud of authority.

Now there is a traceable source for this statistic, but there is not an established fact here. Rather, what one has is an utterly unreliable and politically biased estimate. When it comes to Mao and the Chinese revolution, one can accuse him of mass murder and toss off a number in the millions and tens of millions (safer to couch it as an "estimate"). These inflated numbers get repeatedly published and referenced in a circular and self-reinforcing way, and voila, say goodbye to intellectual accountability.

The New Yorker comment is a case in point, and it is illuminating to find the trailhead of this statistic.

1) What is the source of *The New Yorker* film critic's uncredited estimate? It comes from *Mao : The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (New York : Alfred A Knopf, 2005). The book is a vicious tirade against Mao and the Chinese revolution and is full of sensa-tionalistic claims. The very first sentence sets out its agenda in accusing Mao of being responsible for more deaths in peacetime than any other leader of the 20th century.

2) How do Chang and Halliday calculate 27 million deaths in prisons and labor camps during the Mao era? They estimate an average prison and labor camp population of 10 million per year. They further estimate an average annual death rate of 10 percent. That works out to one million deaths per year. Mao ruled for twenty seven years (1949-76), which yields a total of 27 million deaths.

3) What data are Chang and Halliday working with? ² They provide the reader with a footnote (p. 325) explaining that their "estimates" derive from R J Rummel, *China's Bloody Century : Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1991).

Rummel surveys various estimates of the population of prisons and what he calls the "forced labor camps" during the early 1950s. He cites what he calls a low

estimate of 1 million prisoners and high estimates of 18 and 20 million. He settles on a mid-range estimate that Maoist China averaged some 10 million prisoners a year. The source of the high estimate of 20 million happens to be the US government-which was telling the world at the time that Mao's China was a brutal regimented society of human drones and ants.

Two things must be immediately pointed out. First, Western scholars, governments, and journalists had little direct access to Chinese society in the 1950s and 1960s. And the Chinese government, under intense imperialist pressure and encirclement in this period, was not releasing great amounts of data, especially about its security system. So the range of estimations that Rummel works from is an uneven patchwork: from seriously undertaken but objectively limited extrapolations (a useful 1984 work by Stephen Shalom falls into this category), to wildly exaggerated estimates, to ideologically inspired statistical concoctions.

Second, in coming up with his own estimates, Rummel's methodology is highly questionable. He searches out the lowest estimate for the incarcerated population and the highest and then takes the mean-but offers scarcely any assessment of the reliability of the two estimates. And, needless to say, working with unsubstantiated high estimates will yield gross overestimation.

4) Prison-death estimates : Chang and Halliday estimate that, on average, 10 percent of prisoners died each year in China's prisons and labor camps. This is a staggering mortality rate among prisoners. What is the source of this figure? Again, Chang and Halliday's source for prison-death "estimates" is the same study by Rummel. In the section of Rummel's book (pp. 228-233) that they cite, he discusses various estimates of death rates in China's prisons and labor camps, including this figure of 10 percent.

This 10 percent figure is the handiwork of Richard L Walker, and first appeared in a 1971 study that the US Senate commissioned him to write entitled *The Human Cost of Communism in China*. Walker was a "cold war" academic and diplomat; this does not in itself rule out that there may be some important truth in his scholarship about communism.

But here's the rub: Walker's estimation of an average annual death rate of 10 percent in China's prisons and labor camps in the Mao years is not based on any investigation or empirical research-or even evaluation of research by others about policies and practices under Mao. This number, as Rummel points out, is an estimated death rate for prison camps in the Soviet Union in the 1930s! It is astonishing: Walker simply takes that mortality rate and applies it to China under Mao. Leaving aside the accuracy of this number for the Soviet Union, Walker assumes there were no differences in policies and conditions in China's prisons, even with regard to climate.

Rummel rejects this 10 percent figure, and comes up with his own estimate of total prison and labor camp deaths during the Mao years. Using the same methodology described above, he takes a low-end estimate of 625,000 deaths and a high-end estimate of 48.7 million and settles on an intermediate range figure of 15 million deaths in prisons and labor camps under Mao. But, again, this is a highly questionable methodology, with its 80-fold spread between low and high estimates, and with no real evaluation of the quality and reliability of the upper-

end estimates. Chang and Halliday up the ante and pile on 12 million more deaths for a total of 27 million deaths.

There is something very instructive in unpacking this "estimate" of 27 million deaths in prisons and "labor camps" in Mao's China. For one thing, it shows how the anti-Mao numbers game is played. Poorly substantiated data and statistically questionable methods are combined to produce sweeping historical claims about socialism. For another, it shows how wildly exaggerated estimates seep into the popular intellectual culture as near certainties, and then get spread within it. And this is in the larger context of the bourgeoisie's relentless ideological attack on communism as a nightmare and failure.

The New Yorker film reviewer invokes Chang and Halliday's menacing, inflated number to drive home a point: Mao and communism may have seduced intellectuals, artists, and youth in the 1960s and 1970s, but..."now we know better."

The fact is that the Maoist revolution saved lives. It dramatically reduced the mortality rate in society. Life expectancy more than doubled, from 32 years to 65 years, between 1949 and 1976; by the early 1970s, Shanghai, China's largest city, had a lower infant mortality rate than New York City's³.

As for prisons and punishment: The danger of counterrevolution has been a real one that socialist societies have had to deal with. And it will be a major danger in future socialist societies. Dealing with counter revolution, sabotage, and so forth will involve suppression, punishment, and curtailment of rights to those engaged in this activity. But in the name of combating counter revolution, socialist society cannot be a society of arbitrary arrest, capricious denial of rights, and vindictive punishment⁴.

With respect to crime, the economic and social conditions that force many of the oppressed to turn to crime in capitalist society, and the sort of criminal justice system that exists in the United States- where there is no genuine rehabilitation and where prisons are dehumanizing warehouses for young Blacks and Latins- all of this will be transformed in socialist society. But criminal activity will not immediately vanish in the new society, and it will have to be dealt with in a variety of ways. Socialist society will create a humane penal system. Incarceration will not be a cruel form of punishment but part of a process of enabling those who have committed crimes to change and to productively re-enter the larger society.
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NOTES

1. Anthony Lane, "Critics' Notebook," *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2007.
2. In the discussion that follows, I have drawn on the valuable research into Chang and Halliday's death toll estimates by Tom Worger at the University of California, San Diego.
3. See Penny Kane, *The Second Billion: Population and Family Planning in China* (New York : Penguin, 1987), p. 172 and chapter 5; Ruth and Victor Sidel, *Serve the People: Observations on Medicine in the People's Republic of China* (New York : Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 1973), pp. 255-56.
4. Bob Avakian has opened an important discussion about the still-existing contradiction between the individual and state under socialism, and the relevance of the "rule of law" and a Constitution in socialist society. See, for example, "Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom," *Revolution*, No. 42 (April 9, 2006).

*The term "labor camp" is intentionally misleading. It is invoked to establish an association with Hitler's barbarous labor camps, which were driven by naked economic exploitation and a subsequent genocidal program. The philosophy and organization of the Chinese system was totally different. The approach was

that people who have committed crimes should engage in productive labor as part of the process of rehabilitation and remolding their thinking. An evaluation of this is beyond the scope of this article.
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