

The Return of Maoism

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During the sixties and seventies, Maoism was a major trend on the revolutionary Left, both in the imperialist countries and the oppressed nations. From Chicago to Kerala, young revolutionaries across the world carried Mao Tse-Tung's *Little Red Book* and committed themselves to bringing the Cultural Revolution to their community. Maoism empowered Black and Chicano people in the United States to reinvent Marxism in order to fight racism, which resulted in new groups like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Black Panther Party, and the Brown Berets. In almost every communist party in the world, a pro-China trend developed, resulting in splits and the formation of Maoist communist organisations. Many of the writers in the Monthly Review tradition, such as Samir Amin and Paul Sweezy, had a pro-China orientation and were able to write their major works as a result of Maoism.¹ For the entire generation of that period, Maoism represented new life for the communist movement and the reinvigoration of Marxism.

In the 1980s, Maoism declined in almost every part of the world, except in India and Nepal. This was due to serious internal problems with Maoism, which created a highly sectarian and isolating environment for those involved. Although Maoist organisations continued to exist, they lost their emancipatory dimension and ability to empower young people to fight for a socialist revolution. Recently, there has been a return of Maoism to the communist political community. This is reflected in the publication of a few serious books on Maoism, such as J Moufawad-Paul's *Continuity and Rupture*, the republication of Max Elbaum's *Revolution in the Air*, and Badiou's *the Communist Hypothesis*. Badiou is particularly significant, as he has always remained a Maoist and has been responsible for the rediscovery of Maoism by many young Leftists. There are also a number of popular Maoist groups in the United States, such as the Red Guards of Austin, and the creation of the International Coordination of Revolutionary Organisations (ICOR) in 2009.

In this article, I will argue that the experience of Maoism has some important lessons from which we can deduce a few theoretical principles. Despite some of its excesses, the Chinese Cultural Revolutions reveal a lot about the dynamics of class struggle under socialism. Furthermore, the mistakes of the Communist Party of China, such as breaking ties with the Soviet Union, can help us to see the importance of socialist solidarity. I will argue that it is a mistake, however, to reproduce the Maoist experience in an uncritical way, and that it makes no sense to form new Maoist organisations today. Rather, we should deduce the new theoretical principles contained in the Maoist experience, while transcending the Maoist theoretical

¹ *Monthly Review* has always been one of the best sources of information about Maoism and Chinese socialism. Some *MR* books that are a good starting point to study Maoism are *the Unknown Cultural Revolution* by Dongping Han (2008), *Fanshen* by William Hinton (1966), *the Future of Maoism* by Samir Amin (1981), and *Daily Life in Revolutionary China* by Maria Antonietta Macciocchi (1972).

horizon. My hope is that this short article stimulates interest in Maoism and the Chinese Revolution. I will begin with a brief overview of Maoism and its basic principles.

What is Maoism?

Maoism was a major political tendency on the communist Left in many parts of the world in the sixties and seventies. It appealed to different groups of people for different reasons. Some belonged to traditional pro-Soviet communist parties, and were attracted to Maoism because it addressed serious problems in these groups. The traditional CP's, such as the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and the Communist Party of France (PCF), followed the policies developed by the Soviet Union. One of those policies was the view that socialism and capitalism could co-exist peacefully, and that communists could contend for power through elections. Although they still defended the view that the seizure of state-power by the working class was a necessity, they thought this could happen through fighting for an anti-monopoly programme that would challenge "monopoly property." Such a programme, which would include nationalisations and new democratic institutions, would be enforced by a popular movement and led by the working class. Most of the first Maoist organisations, such as the Progressive Labour Party (USA), emerged from splits of the major communist parties because they disagreed with this position. They argued that it would make communists water down their politics in order to make Marxist ideas acceptable to capitalist politicians and trade union leaders. This would result in the abandonment of revolution and the transformation of communist organisations into social democratic political parties. The Chinese Communist Party (CPC) led the criticism of "the peaceful road to socialism" line, and denounced the Soviet Union's attempts to build a more diplomatic relationship with the United States and West Germany. The Chinese position identified some serious mistakes by the Soviet leadership and the parties that closely adhered to it. For example, in the United States, the pro-Soviet Communist Party USA became a cheerleading group for the Democratic Party and rarely made any attempt to put out its own independent position. In other countries, such as Italy, the Netherlands, and Britain, the CP's that followed this line voted themselves out of existence in the eighties and nineties in order to create groups that would be more acceptable in mainstream political life. For many members of these organisations, Maoism was appealing because it clearly analysed the problems in the communist movement. They initially formed "pro-China" groupings in their communist parties, and then began splitting and forming new organisations at the beginning of the sixties.²

For many communists, Maoism reinvigorated Marxism and restored its revolutionary mission to liberate the working class and end all forms of oppression. However, problems quickly developed after China's departure from the socialist camp (what is called "the Sino-Soviet split"). Around 1964, the Communist Party of China (CPC) went from *criticising* the Soviet Union to *denouncing* them, and eventually broke diplomatic relations. The Soviet Union shut down its embassies in China and stopped providing them with raw materials, engineers, and other advisors. The Chinese leadership claimed that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was following a political line that *undermined* socialism, which resulted in the restoration of capitalism, and the emergence of a new "state bourgeoisie" in the CPSU. This critique was similar to Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union as a deformed workers state, although he still viewed it as a socialist country. In France, the similarity of the critique of the

² For the most comprehensive history of American Maoism, I suggest Max Elbaum's *Revolution in the Air*, New York: Verso, 2004.

Soviet Union played a small role in uniting Trotskyists and Maoists during the May 1968 uprisings.³ The Maoist critique of the Soviet Union had a negative and divisive role in the anti-colonial movements. During the sixties and seventies, the USSR and the Eastern Bloc supported national liberation movements across the world. They provided military training and weapons to the MPLA in Angola, Frelimo in Mozambique, and the NLF in Vietnam. Mao Tse-Tung claimed that the Soviets were not interested in aiding oppressed nations to fight imperialism, but that they were just trying to expand their economic and political influence across the world. For this reason, the Communist Party of China claimed that the USSR had become a “social imperialist” country, and was the enemy of all progressive movements. There were others in the China, such as Liu Shaoqi and Wang Ming, who advocated a much more gradual approach to socialist construction and looked to the Soviet Union for inspiration. Contrary to Mao Tse-Tung, they viewed the Soviet Union as a socialist country and an ally in the international struggle against imperialism. They were dedicated communists who were critical of Khrushchev and Brezhnev’s policies, but advocated fraternal relations with the USSR rather than a split. Both of them, as well as their supporters, were removed from power in the Communist Party of China and replaced with people who supported Mao. When China broke relations with the Soviet Union, the CPC adopted some very problematic policies and tended to support leaders that opposed pro-Soviet organisations. For example, in the seventies, Chinese communists supported UNITA in Angola in order to combat what they perceived was “Soviet social imperialism.” Although UNITA began as a Maoist pro-peasant faction in the Movement for the Popular Liberation of Angola (MPLA), it later became a close ally of US imperialism, with its leader Jonas Savimbi receiving military weapons from Ronald Reagan. China’s political line was devastating in that it encouraged serious divisions in the Angolan national liberation movement, which resulted in a bloody civil war that did not officially end until 2004. The CPC was also hostile to the fraternal allies of the Soviet Union, such as the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Cuba. One of the major critics from the socialist bloc was the Romanian Workers Party, who argued that the Chinese had the right to critique the Soviet leadership, but not to break the unity of the socialist countries. With the help of leftists in the Italian Communist Party, Romanian communists tried to bring Soviet and Chinese leaders to a meeting to work out their differences; their attempts at mediation unfortunately failed. Had China remained allied with the Soviet Union, it could have played a role in criticising right opportunism in the Soviet Communist Party and strengthened the revolutionary movement. Instead of breaking from the socialist community, the Communist Party of China could have united leftists to develop a left-opposition to the policies of the USSR in order to strengthen socialism. At the same time, China would have remained accountable to the international communist movement and not been free from criticism in its ultra-left mistakes. It is likely that the serious mistakes during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution may have been less severe had China been accountable to other socialist countries. It would also not have been possible for China to sponsor anti-Soviet organisations, such as UNITA in Angola, had they remained allied with the socialist bloc.

Most of the new U.S. Maoist organisations accepted the Chinese position on the Soviet Union, and produced booklets that further confirmed this thesis. Although there were a few Maoist groups that were skeptical, such as the Communist Labor Party (USA) and the Line of March (USA), most of them uncritically followed it. This resulted in serious hostility, and sometimes violence, between Maoists and the members of pro-Soviet communist parties. In the same way that the Chinese government supported forces hostile to the USSR, Maoist groups

³ Belden-Fields, A. *Trotskyism and Maoism in France and the United States*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, 1988.

struggled to win power in communist-dominated trade unions and mass organisations. This did not strengthen these groups, but simply intensified their internal contradictions, weakened them internally, and resulted in sectarian splitting. As Max Elbaum explains in *Revolution in the Air*, when many Maoists withdrew from the political scene in the eighties, these groups were left in a weakened political state with a smaller membership.

Towards the end of the seventies, the problems with anti-Sovietism became clear to some Maoists. Members of the Line of March were trying to direct Maoists away from anti-Sovietism towards a principled *criticism* of the mistakes of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. They were also trying to make alliances with the CPUSA, and put an end to hostility between Maoists and the pro-Soviet communist parties. Albert Szymanski, a member of the Line of March, wrote a book called *Is the Red Flag Flying?*, which systematically disproved every premise of the anti-Soviet position.⁴ Although Szymanski was himself uncritically supportive of the USSR, he identified some problems in the Soviet Union. One of his major observations was a lack of mass mobilisation in the USSR, for there tended to be a disconnect between the planning agencies and those implementing the plan. He pointed out that while people had a high level of material security, stable jobs, excellent education, and a decent life, the Soviet leadership did not make any attempt to mobilise the masses. Strikes were illegal in the Soviet Union, making it hard for dissatisfied workers to publicly demonstrate any discontent or raise problems at the level of production. The people most actively engaged in the USSR were scientists, engineers, and intellectuals, not the workers. Szymanski recognised that although the Soviet Union was still a socialist country by the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet leadership was not able to mobilise the masses to address problems. This mass passivity made it possible for the bourgeoisie to overthrow socialism with the help of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and restore capitalism in 1991.

One of the things not recognised by Szymanski, but perceived by Bettelheim in *Cultural Revolution and Industrial Organisation in China*, was the importance of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) in China. In 1966, Mao Tse-Tung launched a campaign across China that sought to make the workers, peasants, and students more active in the construction of socialism. Between 1961 and 1964, the Communist Party of China was dominated by Deng Xiaoping, who was in favour of “market socialism.”⁵ Deng argued that the middle peasants should be able to privately own land and sell their goods as commodities, instead of working in collectivised state farms. He believed that this would strengthen the worker-peasant alliance, and that it would encourage a high level of productivity. Also, Deng argued that material incentives should be used to encourage productivity and that planning should be decentralised to the individual enterprises. Mao Tse-Tung, who was critical of Deng, argued that market socialism was incorrect, as it encouraged capitalist practices and “put profit in command.” In 1966, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, which began in the universities and then spread to the countryside. Even after the 1949 revolution, universities in China were still highly elitist, excluded workers and peasants, and were a bastion of support for market socialism. In 1967, the students at Peking University launched a campaign to revolutionise education and make it serve the needs of socialism. Although it resulted in unnecessary violence and extreme sectarianism, it succeeded in empowering students to become active subjects in building

⁴ It is available on the Marxist Internet Archive at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-6/red-flag.pdf>

⁵ For an excellent discussion of this, see *The Chinese Road to Socialism* by E. L. Wheelwright and Bruce McFarlane, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970.

socialism.⁶ In 1969, students went to the countryside to live with the peasants in order to teach their skills to the peasants and aid the construction of schools. The Cultural Revolution spread to countryside, and peasants were encouraged to join collective farms. While there were problems, communes were highly productive economic units that functioned very efficiently and used moral incentives to promote production. In Chinese factories, the workers stood up to managers and created collectively managed workplaces where workers had real power. As Dongping Han shows in *the Unknown Cultural Revolution*, the period between 1967-1976 was a highly productive one that brought Chinese workers and peasants out of poverty by raising their material and educational level. The main mistakes of the Cultural Revolution were that there was often an anti-intellectual component to it and occasionally a sectarian approach to solving problems that frequently resulted in unnecessary violence. Although the goal was to get the whole population to study Marxism, the result was often that only a small minority actually possessed a serious understanding of it. This small minority was often attacked and silenced during the Cultural Revolution, and many people thus lacked a real understanding of Marxism. A majority of people in China had not yet developed a socialist consciousness, and China itself had not developed a strong industrial infrastructure on which to build socialism. As a result, the Red Guards often bullied people into accepting socialist ideas, rather than gradually introducing them to Marxism and proving through practice its truth.

The lesson of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution remains important for socialists today. First, as Mao Tse-Tung rightly perceived, class struggle does not disappear after a socialist revolution, but continues and even intensifies. Class struggle under socialism takes a different form than under capitalism, and it is this form that Maoist theory can help us perceive. On the one hand, class struggle under socialism can take the form of open conflict between the remnants of the bourgeoisie and the new socialist government. This was the case in Russia between 1917-1921, where the class struggle manifested itself as a civil war between the Bolsheviks and the White Guards. This is not, however the only form of class struggle in a socialist society. Under socialism, class struggle can manifest itself through the *passivity* of the popular masses, and a disconnect between the planners and implementers. Such *passivity* is a reflection of the domination of a *bourgeois* line, which is developed by the bourgeoisie but not consciously recognised as such by those following it. The content of this bourgeois line places material incentives above moral ones, and only tries to develop the productive forces (i.e. industry, technology) without changing the relations of production (the organisation of production, class relations between managers and workers). This kind of political line has a tendency to retain social practices derived from capitalism, such as using material incentives to promote production and the domination of the managers over the workers. It tends to discourage workers' control of production and self-management. Maoists argued that if this *bourgeois* line is followed to its conclusion, its result is the restoration of capitalism. It is a kind of economism because it reduces the construction of socialism to economic planning, while leaving the political and ideological elements aside. This was the case in the Soviet Union during the sixties and seventies, in which the workers and peasants were passive consumers rather than active *subjects*. Although it was still a socialist country, the political line of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union eventually resulted in the restoration of capitalism in 1991. The importance of the Cultural Revolution was that it sought to address this passivity by criticising it as a *bourgeois* line and making the working class more active in the building of socialism. Instead of making the masses complacent through state planning, it encouraged the

⁶ William Hinton provides a great overview of the struggle at Peking University in his *Hundred Day War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University*, New York: Monthly Review Press: 1972.

workers and peasants to *participate* in all projects of socialist society, whether this included building a new school, sharing educational skills, producing new cultural productions, or creatively applying Mao's writings to concrete problems. We should not try to *reproduce* the Chinese Cultural Revolution in our own social formation, as there were many mistakes made that shouldn't be repeated. Rather, it is necessary to study the Cultural Revolution in order to *deduce* the principle of the continuation of class struggle under socialism, and that it is necessary to mobilise the masses to defeat the bourgeois line of mass passivity. The experience of the Cultural Revolution teaches us that it is important not just to focus on increasing consumption under socialism, but also transforming how people relate to each other at the workplace. A future socialist society should seek to do this in a more democratic way than in China, with less bullying, dogmatism, and sectarianism.

Although Maoism was very important, it created a serious political crisis in China, for it isolated China from most of the socialist world and made the Communist Party of China less capable of leading the working class. As a result, Deng Xiaoping was able to come to power in the eighties and undermine the socialist economic foundation in China.⁷ It was the crisis created by Mao's anti-Sovietism that made Deng Xiaoping's reforms popular in the eyes of many Chinese people. The reforms under Deng Xiaoping essentially involved the privatisation of the Peoples Communes, resulting in the loss of land of the poor peasantry, as well as their access to advanced technology. Whereas under Mao, China's peasants received advanced technology from the state, such as tractors and farming machinery, under Deng Xiaoping, they lost this and had to return to less advanced, pre-revolutionary forms of production. Deng also established special economic zones that allowed imperialists to invest in China, get access to cheap labour, and operate with little regulation. According to Deng's leadership, this would allow China to develop its productive forces and create the material infrastructure needed to foster socialist relations of production. While the reforms did result in the rapid industrialisation of China, they undermined the socialist relations of production that were already established under Mao. Between 1959-1976 during Mao's leadership, the productive forces rapidly grew, especially in the Chinese countryside, and the Communist Party actively struggled to create workers' control at the point of production. Never in Chinese history did China's workers and peasants enjoy so much freedom, democracy, and equality. Although China did not see massive economic growth during these years, the Chinese people enjoyed the fruits of their own labour, had a high level of job security, and were the masters of Chinese society. The dispossession of the peasantry and the "opening up" of China to foreign investors under Deng Xiaoping resulted in the elimination of socialist relations of production. In the nineties, the Communist Party of China (CPC) approved the sale of State-Owned Enterprises, and in 2002, a new policy that would allow capitalists to join the CPC. I would argue that Deng's reforms put China on a capitalist path, but did not succeed in fully restoring capitalism. There is a developed capitalist mode of production in China, capitalist institutions, a well-developed Chinese bourgeoisie, a capitalist state machinery, and capitalist relations of production. Because of the Chinese revolution, some socialist institutions still exist in China that prevent the full development of capitalism. For example, there are still socialist planning bodies in China that conflict with the needs of the Chinese bourgeoisie.⁸ Also, there are not capitalist political parties in China, but rather capitalist domination of the Communist Party.

⁷ For a great overview of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, I suggest *China and Socialism: Market Reforms and Class Struggle* by Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett, New York: Monthly Review, 2005.

⁸ For an interesting analysis of planning in contemporary China, see "On the Nature of the Chinese Economic System" by Zhiming Long. <https://monthlyreview.org/2018/10/01/on-the-nature-of-the-chinese-economic-system/>

Because the Communist Party of China was originally founded to emancipate the working class from capitalism, it is impossible for the bourgeoisie to use it to rule a capitalist society. China today is in a transition stage between socialism and capitalism. Because there has not been a full counter-revolution, the bourgeoisie does not fully control the Chinese state or social institutions. Although some Maoists might argue that Deng's ascension to power and the Tiananmen massacre represented the bourgeois counter-revolution, I would argue that neither of these things fully transferred power back to the bourgeoisie. Rather, Deng Xiaoping, and later Jiang Zemin undermined the infrastructure of socialism in China, and thereby created the conditions for a bourgeois counter-revolution. Collective farms, worker-controlled factories, and state planning agencies have largely been replaced with private agriculture, capitalist production, and capitalist anarchy in China. However, until the bourgeoisie stages a counter-revolution by eliminating the Communist Party of China, criminalising Marxism, and eliminating all elements of a socialist infrastructure, the transition to reactionary capitalism cannot be fully completed. There remains the permanent possibility in China of a communist revival, as Maoism still remains popular with leftist CPC members and young Marxist students.

This brings me to a few concluding remarks. First, socialists need to develop a Marxist analysis of capitalist restoration in China that does not counterpose Mao against Deng. Instead, they should view China as a complex social formation, with a multiplicity of social forces and class contradictions. These are not just debates about history, but expressions of a political line that have definite political implications. Generally, a person who accepts the Maoist restorationist thesis on the USSR will tend to view socialism in a puritanical way, criticising any socialist country that does not live up to an ideal Chinese model. The source of China's problems did not begin with Deng Xiaoping, but the anti-Soviet political line of the Communist Party of China under Mao's leadership. When China broke ties with the Soviet Union, it adopted a sectarian model of socialism that resulted in a serious political crisis. It was this political crisis that put Deng Xiaoping in command of the Communist Party of China and put it on the capitalist road. The CPC's anti-Soviet approach to building socialism created the conditions for Deng's emergence and the restoration of capitalism. At the same time, it was China's departure from the Soviet bloc that gave them the autonomy to carry out their experiments during the Cultural Revolution and embark on their own road to socialism. The Soviet Union negatively dominated the international communist movement, and this hegemonic domination played a role in the Sino-Soviet split. Future socialist countries should respect the autonomy of each socialist country, while forming close, friendly international relationships.

Although Maoism declined in the 1980s after many of its problems became clear, there has been a resurgence of it today. Because of the influence of Alain Badiou and Max Elbaum, many young leftists have discovered Maoism and attempted to integrate it into their politics. It remains a major political trend in Nepal, where Maoists still play an important part in the trade unions and student movement. I think this is something to be welcomed, as Maoism has important lessons from which socialists can learn. I have argued that socialists should study Maoism and use some of its principles to elaborate Marxist theory. A Maoist dialectical approach allows us to see both the positive and negative elements of any social formation, and make a critical evaluation. This evaluation is designed to help us formulate a political analysis that can advance communist theory and theoretically elaborate it. We should not be afraid to analyse contradictions in former socialist countries, oppressed nations, and political organisations. Socialist revolution may not be on the agenda anywhere in the world, but capitalism today is in a serious crisis. This means that socialism could become a possibility

again, and there could emerge new socialist states. Socialists must be ready to respond to the challenges of socialist construction, as well as build revolutionary organisations that can lead a socialist revolution in the twenty-first century. As Mao once observed, “taught by mistakes and setbacks, we have become wiser and handle our affairs better.”⁹

Author

Fabian van Onzen received his PhD in philosophy from the European Graduate School in 2018. He is the author of *Service Workers in the Era of Monopoly Capital*, as well as numerous reviews that have appeared in the *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books* and *Capital and Class*. He has taught philosophy at community colleges in the United States and Scotland, and is currently teaching Dutch at a migrant education centre in the Netherlands.

⁹ Mao Tse-Tung. “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship” (June 30, 1949), *Select Works, Volume IV*, p. 422.



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