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Author(s): Rebecca E. Karl

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Culture, Revolution, and the Times of History: Mao and 20th-Century China*

Rebecca E. Karl

The recent spate of English-language exposés of Mao Zedong, most prominently that written by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, seems to announce a culmination of the tendency towards the temporal-spatial conflation of 20th-century Chinese and global history. This sense was only confirmed when the *New York Times* reported in late January that George W. Bush's most recent bedtime reading is *Mao: The Unknown Story*,¹ or when, last month, according to a column in the British paper *The Guardian*, "the Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly voted to condemn the 'crimes of totalitarian communist regimes,' linking them with Nazism...."² The conflation, then, is of the long history of the Chinese revolution with the Cultural Revolution, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, of Mao Zedong with every one of the most despicable of the 20th century's many tyrants and despots. In these conflations, general 20th-century evil has been reduced to a complicit right-wing/left-wing madness, while China's 20th century has been reduced to the ten years during which this supposed principle of madness operated as a revolutionary tyranny in its teleologically ordained fashion. In this way are the dreams of some China ideologues realized: China becomes one central node through which the trends of the 20th century as a global era are concentrated, channelled and magnified. China is global history, by becoming a particular universalized analytic principle, in the negative sense. That is, universality becomes a conflationary negative principle.

At first glance, it would seem that this principle represents nothing more than a continuation of the "obsession with China"³ as an autonomous but refracted discipline of inquiry, albeit in ever more rarified forms of self-negation.⁴ That is, the totality that is presumed to be "20th-century China" and its now-universalized albeit repudiated principle of historical madness can only be revived by

* I would like to thank Julia Strauss for inviting me to participate in the *China Quarterly* forum on Mao Zedong. A draft of this paper was delivered at a workshop entitled "Is a history of the Cultural Revolution possible?" convened at the University of Washington, Seattle, 23–26 February 2006. I am grateful to Tani Barlow for including me in her project on 20th-century Chinese history, of which the workshop was a part; as well as to Alessandro Russo, Claudia Pozzana, and Wang Hui for their stimulating comments in the context of our discussions. I am as usual grateful also to Marilyn Young for her intellectual acumen and generosity.

1. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Sometimes a book is indeed just a book. But when?" *NYT*, 23 January 2006, p. A15.

2. Seumus Milne, "Communism may be dead, but clearly not dead enough," *The Guardian*, 16 February 2006.

3. Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 25.

4. This phrase is borrowed and adapted from Peter Osborne's reflections on the state of philosophy in the post-Kantian world. See Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge 2000), p. 3.

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negating its historicity. In another sense, this principle represents an ideological appropriation of the historicity of the global 20th century more generally for the inevitability of the triumph of neo-liberalism and American-led normativity. This is why it is necessary to re-locate culture, revolution and the times of history into a philosophical mode, lest the significance of the troubled history of China's and the world's 20th century be erased in the triumphalist and compensatory gesture of conflation and consequent dismissal.

It is perhaps in this vein that Jack Gray's attempt to rediscover what he calls the "positive elements in Mao Zedong's thought" can be seen, although, in my reading, Gray's essay reduces Maoism to an exceptionalism, whose politics is confined to the moment of its imperfect realization in China. As such, while conflation is not Gray's problem at all, his framing of China under Mao as a problem of the "democratic" versus "dictatorial" tendencies serves to facilitate the very balance-sheet approach to Maoism that is as inimical to a reflection on the present from the perspective of a Maoist past as any conflationary gesture might be.

Thus, unlike Gray, my point here is not to "rescue" China from or for anything in particular, nor to "rescue" the 20th century as an era and philosophy for a post-Kantian grand project of theoretical knowledge in general, a task for which I am ill qualified. Nor is it to "rescue" Mao from the clutches of the exceptionalizers, reductionists and crude popularizers, a project more properly left to those whose empirical specialization in Mao studies is more complete than mine. Rather, my point is to stage an encounter in an historical register, as it were, between the 20th century and a seemingly post-philosophical, post-historical China. Or, to restate this in a different idiom, it is to restore the times of history to China and, by extension, the 20th century by insisting that any claim to the past, the present or the future must resist the displacement of politics by the epistemological idealisms that temporal conflations or exceptionalisms inform and enable. Indeed, as Alain Badiou writes of such an insistence, this is to think history within politics.⁵ And, as he notes, this "history within politics" must be specified as a particular sort of historicity, lest we flatten the times of history into an ideal, ahistorical or authentic politics of purity, or deracinate the differential times of history by gesturing towards the always-already politicized nature of all histories. It is against this flattening that this small contribution towards the 30th anniversary of Mao's death is intended.

My premise and argument in the brief comments that follow are that we must take the relationship between "politics" and "culture" as one of the primary concerns of 20th-century historical practice and philosophy in general, as well as of Chinese historical practice and philosophy in particular. In order to constitute this *topos* both

5. Alain Badiou (tr. Bruno Basteels), "The Cultural Revolution: the last revolution?" *positions*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 481–514 at p. 483.

generally and specifically, it is necessary to specify historically how these two spheres of activity are related, albeit not merely in chronological, stagist or narrative form. Thus, while I take as generally axiomatic that the relationship between politics and culture potentially harbours revolutionary or radical significance, it seems clear that this potential is realized only in time, or rather through time in everyday activity, in concrete history.

On this view, I take the grand project – and the grand failure – of the Cultural Revolution to be the attempt to reconcile and bring coherence to the asymmetries between and within politics and culture, understood in their revolutionary forms as mass activity transformed into and actualized through individuals' everyday life. (Perhaps this what Bruno Basteels means when he writes of Badiou's concept of Maoist politics as a politics where "history as external referent is absented"?⁶) In my understanding, these asymmetries reside in the apparent incommensurability in these two spheres of activity as historical effectivities, as everyday practices. For my purpose, I would take the incommensurability between and within culture and politics as most acutely manifested in the uneven temporalities of each and both as simultaneously lived times. Thus, whereas "culture" could be relegated to the sphere of the speculative dialectic, where time is abolished, politics, conversely, could be understood to belong to the sphere of actualization in real time of the alienated universality of everyday activity.⁷ Against the separation of these two spheres, the Cultural Revolution, then, can be said to have been an attempt to bring these incommensurable scales of lived temporality into a convergent commensurability, not through conflation nor idealized modernizationist notions of "convergence" requiring a "catching up," but rather through the revolutionary displacement of a pastness and a futurity on to the time of the "now." Thus it was that during the Cultural Revolution, neither culture nor politics was to wait for the other to "catch up"; rather, the whole notion of temporal lag that such a conceptualization of catching up connotes and requires was to be overwritten in the day-to-day living of the historical moment. And if the "lag" or, in other words, the project of catching up as an intra-social (rural versus urban), national and global principle of modernizationism, ultimately was re-asserted and reconfirmed after the attempt to work through and out the other side of the Cultural Revolutionary version of the modern, this outcome was not a pre-ordained and teleological result of any and all revolutionary moments of the 20th century – left or right – nor of Maoism as such, but rather of the overdetermined impossibility of its own premise. Thus, whatever the zigs and zags or mis-steps and excesses taken and

6. Bruno Basteels, "Post-Maoism: Badiou and politics," *positions*, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 593.

7. For the phrasing from which this conceptualization is borrowed, see Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, p. 5.

indulged along the way – which were plentiful and harmful – my point is that the conceptual and actual project of erasing the temporal incommensurabilities between culture as an unevenly lived experience of an historical moment and the nowness of politics as a demand for transformative actualization can be thought and tried only at the expense of abolishing the complexities of the quotidian everyday of populations and peoples unevenly absorbed into the political economy of sociality and value. This, it would seem, is an impossible and possibly utopian project.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York recently screened five documentaries made by Joris Ivens and associates in 1972–74 in China. Of these, I want to mention two: “The drugstore,” filmed in Shanghai’s No. 3 Drugstore over a period of many months; and “A woman, a family,” filmed mostly in and around the February 7th Railway Repair Factory in the suburbs of Beijing. Unlike most dramatic or documentary films on the Cultural Revolution, Ivens’ films concentrate on common people living their everyday lives in the terms of the cultural revolutionary politics – of the history within politics – of the time. These are films about the moment when what Wang Shaoguang has called “new-born things” were being lived as a principle of everydayness.⁸

On the one hand, viewing those films today is to experience a true temporal rupture, as if the time of that history were neither continuous with nor discontinuous from, but rather completely severed from the contemporary moment. This experience is not one of empathy or admiration, as such, but rather one of alienation, in the sense of marvelling at how alien and completely erased and erasable those quotidian experiences of cultural-political time actually have become. For example, the attempts, in “A woman, a family,” of each person to put into everyday practice the desire for the merging of the temporalities of culture and politics, not as mass spectacle but as individualized activity as part of a collective project of radical social transformation, appear as a genuine discovery of a political actualization that can no longer be thought today. Indeed, the rise of the female factory worker from line labour to deputy-chair of the labour union, along with her own understandings of her task and her social value, in today’s dominant scholarship on Maoism and women, would be dismissed as the mere brainwashed activities of a subjected woman, and not those of a woman subject. Meanwhile, in “The drugstore,” for example, one senses the difficulties of the pharmacists and clerks who struggle to link the business of medicine to the contrapuntal rhythms of regular customers or random purchasers, whose sense of time is usually neither constrained nor regulated by the

8. Wang Shaoguang in discussion at the “Is a history of the Cultural Revolution possible” conference in Seattle, February 2006. The *xinsheng shiwu* moment, according to his detailed analysis, followed upon the major events of the inception of the Cultural Revolution (1966–69) and should be treated as a separate moment from the earlier one.

circulation or even by the production time of the medical commodity or of drugstore service. Simultaneously, through political and social commitments to bringing medical treatment to the peasant village connected to the Shanghai store, the meaning and significance of the commodity – the medicine itself and the service – also gets re-organized around the differentiating times of the rural. There is no obvious way to bridge these times, or, rather, to make them commensurable to one another. The many scenes of drugstore employees, along with peasant cadres, struggling to come to terms with these incommensurabilities in their often contentious discussions about their responsibilities towards their urban and rural customers, towards medicine as a business relation as well as a socially transformative practice, reflect and express both their cultural/political commitments and their puzzlements over how to make history within politics a principle of everyday practice. Again, today, with the full capitalist commodification of the medical and pharmaceutical business, such transformative experiments have not only been abolished but repudiated as “unscientific,” “irrational” and “inefficient.”

It is quite clear that the commodity took a very different aspect under socialism from that which it did and continues to do under capitalism. Indeed, just as Mao proclaimed in 1958 that the “law of value” does not disappear under socialism, despite Stalinist blandishments to the contrary, similarly the commodity form did not disappear either. It is just that the nature and process of the totalization was quite different. This much was suggested, if not clarified or resolved, in the course of the debates about the socialist economy in China from 1956 to 1958, which raised a series of vital questions about the nature of development and modernization. While rapid industrialization and increasing productivity were major national and social goals in China, development was not defined solely in terms of economism, which, in Samir Amin’s words, is “a course of action based on scrupulous regard for the supposedly necessary adaptation to development of the productive forces whose spontaneous expansion seems to take the form of a natural, or supernatural, force replacing the deity.”⁹ It was this mystification and reification that was rejected.¹⁰ In the mid-1950s debates, then, what was specifically addressed was the social relations of production, or, in the terms I am using here, the relations between the culture and politics of production under socialism.

The 1956–58 debates focused on the problem of the law of value, where the Stalinist inflection of this law, which conflated the state and the economy into a totalized whole, was questioned. Mao Zedong’s

9. Samir Amin, *Re-reading the Postwar Period: An Intellectual Itinerary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), p. 224.

10. For further discussion of this in relation to China, see Carl Riskin, *China’s Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 164.

1956 essays “On the ten major relationships”¹¹ and “On the correct handling of contradictions among the people,” and his *A Critique of Soviet Economics* were all important parts of the attempt to rethink the role of and relationship between the commodity and the law of value in the attempt to re-articulate the relations of production. Without going into detail, I would just note that it was clear to Mao that so long as the division of labour and commodity production existed, the law of value would subsist. What was crucial then was not the negation of the law of value or the commodity form, but the system of domestic social relations into which this law was inserted, which would determine the principles by which social surplus was generated and distributed. At the most basic level, the law of value for Mao was the theory and method by which to ensure that society mastered the commodity relations that govern it.¹² In Mao’s theory of the law of value, then, politics, culture and economics were intimately fused, both as a matter of principle and as a matter of social practice. In this sense, all social relations had to be founded upon the transparency of equal commodity relations, themselves understood as emerging from historically-achieved socio-political forms and commitments.

Crucial to Mao’s theory of the socialist law of value, then, was the recognition that all the economic, political and social relations that constituted the social totality were to be understood as historically specific contradictions. Indeed, like all good Marxists, Mao recognized that “value” is a social and historical category; “value” would disappear only when the socio-historical conditions of which it is an expression (social division of labour and commodity production) disappear globally. In this sense, from Mao’s perspective, “liberation of the productive forces,” like “economic construction,” was an integrated political, economic and cultural-ideological concept. It was this very liberation in the form of mass mobilization and mass participation in economic, political and cultural life that would accomplish, secure and deepen the transformation of social relations, understood as a refashioning of the temporal-spatial relationship nationally among class struggle, revolutionary ideology, economic activity and cultural production.

In this light, then, for “culture” and “politics” to be conjoined in a project that seeks to abolish the temporal incommensurabilities between the two, the radical openness of the historical process as well as the increasing implausibility of restricting its spatial dimensions to national-political forms of territoriality had to be acknowledged and

11. Mao Zedong, “Lun shi da guanxi,” *Mao Zedong xuanji*, Vol. V, pp. 267–288; English: Mao Zedong, “On the ten major relationships,” *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. V, pp. 284–307.

12. Cyril Lin basically subsumes this whole problem into the problem of resource allocation. While this latter was certainly at issue, the theoretical postulates had implications beyond institutional arrangements. See Lin, “The reinstatement of economics in China today,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 85 (1981), pp. 1–42.

embraced. As we know, one key component of the Cultural Revolution was precisely its attempt to relegate the past to history and to reject the unattainability of the future; another was the third worldism of the effort, that, for all its ultimately empty rhetoric, nevertheless *meant* something in the critical global historical moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The grandness of the dissolution of the Cultural Revolution's temporal-spatial project, then, matches exactly the grandness of its envisaged totalization: indeed, as the "times of history" now get re-articulated into hierarchical combinations of autonomous social domains, the impossibility of the 20th century's cultural revolutionary iteration is easily appropriated for a conflationary temporalization that, while bringing China into the centre of global theorization as an analytic principle, nevertheless negates its every principle of historicity.

Finally, then, the fact that the concept of a cultural revolution in any of its 20th-century Chinese guises (whether late Qing, May Fourth, post-1949 or 1960s–70s) remains a potent spectre haunting China and the world testifies, it seems to me, *not* to the appeal of its totalized philosophical project, but rather to the current ideologically-dominant trend towards the separability between "culture" and "politics" as the definition of a new neo-liberal utopia of commodity culture. In this sense, these ghostly spectres represent nothing more than a *de-temporalization* of 20th-century experience, where social relations are once again de-historicized and individual experience re-naturalized as the horizon of cultural and political expectation in a presentist frame of pragmatism actualized as an eternal chase to catch up to and thence to surpass the world. This yields the universalism of a detemporalized conflation, in contrast to universality as a radically uneven temporalization of histories, lives and the everyday.