

Book Reviews

Revolution and Counterrevolution in China: The Paradoxes of Chinese Struggle

LIN CHUN

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China's Revolutions in the Modern World: A Brief Interpretive History

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Standing at the rostrum over Tiananmen on 1st July 2021, clad in a jacket identical to the one worn by Mao in the portrait displayed on the gate itself, Xi Jinping announced that “all of the struggle, sacrifice and creation through which the Party has united and led the Chinese people over the past hundred years has been tied together by one ultimate theme – bringing about *the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation*” (Xi Jinping, “Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China,” Xinhuanet, 1 July 2021, italics mine). It was a remarkable claim, delivered from his position just above the giant placard wishing ten thousand years to *the great unity of the peoples of the world*. In his address of just over 7,200 characters, he invoked either “China” (中国) or “the nation” (国家) more than sixty times; Russia, Japan and Taiwan were each mentioned once in passing, and “foreign forces” more generally were memorably warned that any attempts to “bully, oppress or enslave” the country would result in having their brains dashed against “a great wall of steel built by more than 1.4 billion Chinese people.” The Chinese revolution has, in the era of Xi Jinping, been reconfigured as a singularly insular event, waged by the Chinese people against the rest of the world.

These two new volumes from Verso press collectively offer a welcome corrective to this view, with robustly theorized historical narratives that place China’s iterative revolutions back into the global dialectics of the long 20th century. “While modern revolutions in China have of course always been Chinese,” Karl observes, “they have always been global as well, not only because world contexts and texts helped shape the successive revolutionary struggles in China, but because those successive struggles helped constitute the contexts and texts of the modern world” (p. 2). Lin likewise emphasizes that “the Communist Revolution was never merely a national event ... [it] rewrote the histories of Asia and the world, as well as China itself, [and] by transforming its national destiny it furnished conditions for change elsewhere and provided a model for Third World development” (p. 36).

Karl’s work begins with the introduction of the “modern” – “as an experience of temporality... a form of historical becoming” – to imperial China that “corresponded, directly or indirectly, to the violently imposed connectedness of an emerging world order under a global capitalist regime” (p. 2). Karl’s argument, then, is that modernity forces a rethinking of China’s revolutions in “a simultaneously global and local perspective” that highlights “how structures of capitalist accumulation, possession, and dispossession had intruded into China in ways that did not permit even intensely local spheres of social life to escape their transformative logics” (p. 3).

The main chapters focus on revolutionary “moments” – the Taiping Rebellion, the Xinhai Revolution, the May Fourth Movement and the successive competing confluences of the Nanjing Decade; then the 1949 Liberation, the Cultural Revolution and the protests of 1989. Between the main chapters that deal with the revolutions themselves, the author interjects bridging narrative “interludes” that develop these events and the themes that animate them forward (p. 5). What emerges is a richly conceptualized historical account that takes revolution itself as a sort of protagonist, locked in a dynamic engagement with the global modern – “that quintessentially modern form of fundamental social transformation ... repeatedly creat[ing] and recreat[ing] ‘China’ and ‘the world’” through iterative retellings of the past (p. 7).

Lin Chun, by contrast, offers less a narrative history than a series of nested enquiries about China’s role in the broader global history of revolutions and counter-revolutions. In the first section, “Revolution and History: China and Global Capitalism,” Lin observes that “[t]o track China’s transformations as a nonlinear series of historical passages, both forwards and backwards, is to bypass the European imagination of the world epitomized by the capitalist totality. Yet capitalism encompasses the local and the global contexts, at the same time catalysing China’s industrial growth and social contestations” (p. 4). If Karl’s narrative takes revolution and the revolutionary process as its centre, in her first two chapters, Lin puts capitalism in the driver’s seat. Her account of China’s uneven development from the end of the Qing charges that “the ruthless hegemonic agenda of global capitalism is ultimately responsible for sinking a civilisation of continental scope and unparalleled wealth. The social and governing crises in a partially colonised China were directly attributable to foreign destruction” (p. 10). As a result, “the Communist Revolution in China was never merely a national event,” but was “self-consciously part of the world revolution sparked by the storm of 1917” (p. 36) that blended – not always successfully – “the models of revolution, modernization, and globalization ... It continues to evolve and entertain contradictory possibilities” (p. 16). The lesson she draws from China’s convulsive experience of revolution and development is that the “state is a pivotal agent of globalisation, and sufficient national autonomy and complete global integration are incompatible. It looks as though the China that broke free from its imperialist chains seventy years ago is now bowing to the system as a pathway to ‘wealth and power’” (p. 22).

The second part of the book, in some ways the most interesting section, takes up the question of how the Party built the state from its base areas in the rural peripheries in the process of making revolution, which produced “a wholly new type of state that followed a distinct logic, quite different from that of the traditional bureaucratic state as well as the other communist powers” (p. 71). “The Maoist state, which aimed to be continuously revolutionary against the threat of bureaucratisation and perversion, was paradoxical” (p. 72). In many key ways, it remains so; at the very least, it is fair to say that “neither the party nor the state has ever been monolithic” (p. 74): “state bureaucracies weaved a matrix of centralized vertical (*tiao*) and decentralized horizontal (*kuai*) lines of authority, and decentralization has been a strong tendency” (p. 76) that continues down to the present day.

The third and fourth sections deal with post-Mao China, and what Lin recognizes as counter-revolution from above, a distinctive form of neoliberal developmentalism that is not yet irreversible because it “is not structurally hardwired into the Chinese state” (p. 157). Nonetheless, the process has substantially remade class and social relations across the whole of society, even as the working classes continue to apply pressure by using the party-state’s official rhetoric against it. “Vacillating between a waning hope of empowerment and actual powerlessness, labour seems to be trying

its last non-revolutionary resort: forcing the communist party and state to stick to its original legitimacy” (p. 227). The final section takes up “the impasse of ideological defeatism” and addresses the “farewell to revolution” argument of the 1990s, which recast the revolutionary radicalism that had gripped China since the May Fourth Movement as the “‘mistake of the century’ as the impulse for national salvation was allowed to overwhelm cultural enlightenment” (p. 269). To the contrary, Lin asserts that “China has paid a terrible price for its participation in the reconfiguration of global capital, and that only reinforces existing power relations: partial dependency, extreme inequalities, labour deprivation, environmental degradation – imposed from the outside, but duly internalized” (p. 325). Even still, Lin believes that not all hope is lost: socialist critics must “maintain the very synchrony of socialism and criticism,” while at the same time they work to “reclaim the fundamental justice and historicity of revolutionary and socialist practice” (p. 333).

Which brings us back to Karl’s engagement with the modern – and, by extension, the concomitant revolutions that brought it into being – as “a form of historical becoming – a historicity” (p. 2). The Conclusion that ends her story of China’s “nine years” (1919, 1949, 1959, 1969, 1979, 1989 and 2009) includes the mobilization of workers at Jasic Technology by student activists at the end of 2018 and the Hong Kong protest movement that was ignited in 2019. Karl reminds us that “modern revolutions aimed to establish a permanent principle through which radical transformations in individual quotidian life would help animate collective sociopolitical transformations at a national and global scale” (p. 207). Embedded within that notion was an understanding of “‘the world’ as a malleable revolutionary opportunity rather than as a settled normative principle,” which, if surrendered, means that “China is condemned, along with all of us, to ever more dystopian versions of the future” (p. 208). These two volumes, traversing much of the same territory and interrelated themes in very different ways, arrive at similarly disturbing conclusions: if the age of revolutions has indeed now come to an end, then what of the possibilities for the past, and for the future? Perhaps it may be worth remembering that, just as the Taiping rebels were gathering strength sufficient to found their “Heavenly Kingdom” in China, Marx observed: “Thus the awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852]).

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The World According to China

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What are China’s global ambitions, and how is it pursuing them under Xi Jinping? In this meticulously documented account of China’s actions over the past decade in global politics, Elizabeth Economy argues that Xi Jinping and the Chinese leadership seek to “reorder the world order” (p. 2) by challenging the values, norms and institutions that