

# *Vision Of Fire*

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# EDITORIAL

## THE CONTINUING APPEAL OF MAOISM

Maoism has been a guilty pleasure of mine for the past decade. From my early teens until my early twenties, I considered myself an anarchist. As an anarchist, I believed that Mao Zedong was a brutal tyrant, and the movements his legacy inspired were at best authoritarian rivals on the left (represented in the US by tedious, sectarian weirdos such as the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA or the [now defunct] Maoist Internationalist Movement), and at worst power-hungry mass murderers (such as the “Shining Path” in Peru, whose brutality claimed the lives of thousands of innocent civilians, including countless people on the Left and from the poor indigenous population they claimed to be fighting for). Still, I couldn’t help but be fascinated by the global Maoist tendency. Aside from the absolutely incredible nature of the Chinese revolution (where the Communist Party’s People’s Liberation Army led by Mao won the support of millions of people, eventually seizing power in one of the largest and most densely populated countries on the

planet, after overcoming absolutely horrific conditions and defeating both the Japanese imperialists and the rightwing Chinese nationalist forces, in order to [arguably] improve the conditions for the majority of the Chinese people), there is a rebellious spirit seemingly inherent to Maoism (represented with slogans such “It’s right to rebel,” and “Dare to struggle, dare to win”)—with a special emphasis on empowering the most downtrodden, marginalized, and exploited groups of people—that I couldn’t help but appreciate.

Unlike anarchism, which has (sadly) ceased to have any mass following anywhere in the world since the defeat of the Spanish revolution, Maoism has inspired and mobilized mass movements consisting of thousands of people worldwide, mainly in poor countries such as the Philippines, Peru, Turkey, India, Nepal, and elsewhere. Why is this so? Why do the seemingly most visionary and liberating revolutionary traditions—such as anarchism, and the various schools of libertarian/left communism—which have a sparkling history mostly untainted by the crimes committed in the name of communism (specifically its Leninist variations), fail to attract the allegiance of any sizable number of people anywhere, and especially not in the poorest countries where people have the least to lose and most to gain from radical change? Why is Maoism—despite being almost universally condemned from both the Left and the Right for the crimes (real or imagined) committed by a supposedly discredited Mao and his followers—a hugely popular doctrine amongst revolutionary leftwing forces in the Third World? What is it about Maoism that appeals to often extremely oppressed women, workers, farmers, and indigenous people in poor countries?

Some would say Maoism’s appeal to the poor and oppressed has little to do with Maoist ideology per se, and more to do with the willingness of Maoists to pick up arms. In this regard, Maoism may appeal to the oppressed for the same reasons that some forms of nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism do: mainly militancy; a willingness to fight. According to radical environmentalist author (and non-Maoist) Derrick Jensen, “Adivasis—

indigenous peoples in India—are joining the Maoist Naxalite insurgency in droves, not because the Adivasis are Maoist, but because the Maoists are resisting.” Perhaps, at least to some extent, this is true. It seems unlikely that the many poor and exploited followers of Maoism in the Third World would have any interest in the more obscure aspects of Maoist ideology (which largely consists of jargon and dogma), or the twists and turns and up’s and down’s of the Chinese Communist Party and the international communist movement; things like the mysterious death of Lin Biao; the Sino-Soviet split; the power struggle around the “Gang of Four” that ensued after Mao’s death; the Sino-Albanian split, etc. But, there are key, defining aspects of Maoism—as both a breed of Marxist ideology and military doctrine—that make it relevant if not seductive to people interested in revolutionary change, especially the most poor and oppressed in the Third World.

According to J. Sakai, author of *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat*, “Over one hundred and fifty years ago, Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels challenged capitalism to class war with their opening words in *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘A specter is haunting Europe. It is the specter of communism.’ Well, today we could say that a specter is haunting globalization. Surprising to many, it is the specter of Maoism.

“Maoism may seem like an anachronism if you’re sitting in a Starbucks accessing your 401(k) account online over here, but in the post-modern world there are many more people living in desperately poor, feudalistic rural societies ruled by landlord capitalist classes who keep their traditional positions with armies of gun-thugs.

“In that situation, Maoism is like an old but reliable weapon. Like a do-it-yourself kit crafted for precisely that situation. That has all the concepts and strategies and tactics even down to the details of organization and the slogans, that a handful of revs can use to build a mass revolutionary power and overthrow the old order. If you were a debt slave child condemned to labor until early death in the plantations of Western Nepal, Mao is like a flash of the freshest thing you ever heard of.

‘Political power comes from the barrel of a gun.’

“That’s why there is a ‘Red belt’ of Maoist guerrilla insurgencies and liberated zones involving millions of people stretching thousands of miles across India and Nepal. We’ve all learned that political weapons like Maoism can unfortunately be used against the oppressed as well as for the oppressed, but the point is to always remember how effective these weapons can be. That’s the reality in this post-modern 21st century.”

Related to this, if one wishes to understand why Mao is still a celebrated, admired, and even revered figure in China and elsewhere—despite many disastrous social, economic, and environmental policies (for more on the latter see Judith Shapiro’s heartbreaking and horrifying book *Mao’s War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*)—one needs only look at China before the communist revolution: streets littered with the bodies of people strung out on opium or dying from starvation or preventable disease; women and girls with bound-feet, many forced into prostitution; people being worked-to-death in horrible conditions in foreign-owned factories or on plots of land owned by cruel, corrupt landlords; a divided, defeated population degraded and abused by foreign imperialists and their native cronies. You get the picture.

For colonized and oppressed people living in similar conditions today—as well as, perhaps, for the most mistreated people in the wealthy countries (prisoners, immigrants, indigenous people, LGBT people, working-class people of color, and others)—the tactics, strategy, and ideology of Maoism may indeed be an enticing and effective weapon for changing awful conditions that demand to be changed. (I also think it’s worth mentioning that decidedly non-Maoist groups, such as the Anarchist Black Cross Federation or, more recently, the radical environmentalist Deep Green Resistance, have been accused—mostly unfairly—of having Maoist-tendencies. It may be that any group that takes revolutionary struggle seriously will be accused of having Maoist tendencies or sympathies; some people

believe things like discipline, organization, and determination are inherently “Maoist.”)

The point here is not to defend Mao—whose image probably will never be, and should never be, rehabilitated. The point is to identify why Mao the man, his ideas, and his legacy continue to inspire revolutionary forces (in some cases—such as the New Peoples Army guerrillas in the Philippines—forces that appear to have the most “progressive” stand on key issues, such as the rights of tribal people, children, women or LGBT people. In other cases—such as the “Shining Path” in Peru—appearing to match the state in their ruthlessness and brutality). It is unhelpful and simplistic to merely dismiss these forces as “statists,” “authoritarians,” “Stalinists,” etc when their ranks largely consist of the poor fighting against foreign imperialists and their own ruling class. And, ideology aside, that part of their struggle is valid.



I’m not an anarchist anymore. I don’t believe anarchism—as a theory or practice—provides adequate tools for understanding the world or changing it. Anarchism cannot answer the question of how to fight a war for liberation—of how to create a revolution, and defend it—without resorting to authoritarian and hierarchical methods; without, in effect, organizing a government to stop the counterrevolution and defend the interests and needs of the population (for more about this, I recommend *The Historical Failure of Anarchism: Implications for the Future of the Revolutionary Project* by Christopher Day). Stateless societies—whether the egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies that survived for thousands of years, or the short-lived

revolutionary anarchist collectives that once existed in the Ukraine or Spain—are no match for the predatory state societies that [tragically] wiped them out. This is a classic Marxist argument against anarchism; a valid argument that few anarchists bother to address (merely pointing out the failures of “successful” so-called communist/socialist revolutions does not itself vindicate anarchism). Think, for instance, what would happen if there was a revolution in the United States. There would be thousands, if not millions, of fascists, bigots, religious fanatics, corporate executive, bankers, politicians, etc who would need to be repressed. That is a reality most anarchists refuse to even think about. On a much more basic level, since there’s absolutely no evidence of an impending revolution in North America, I don’t believe anarchists in general have their act together enough to even maintain the small collectives they often fetishize. Anarchists, in my experience—despite [correctly] promoting the virtues of mutual aid, equality, and cooperation—are often completely incapable of getting along with each other for any significant period of time. Most anarchist groups—those that consist of more than one or two individuals—are short-lived. Even the most minuscule anarchist groups have a tendency to split and purge themselves apart before disappearing entirely or drifting into total obscurity (anarchist collectives often resemble the most sectarian and divisive Trotskyist and Maoist groups). I wish this weren’t true but, sadly, it is. (Here I am speaking of the North American anarchist milieu. I imagine this critique applies to the anarchist movement elsewhere too, though I also recognize that in some places the anarchist movement has been more functional and successful.)

That said, while I am not an anarchist (for reasons I have just barely touched on here), I am also not an enemy of anarchists (nor am I a Marxist). Just as I see validity in some of the fundamental arguments against anarchism offered by assorted Marxists, I also see much validity in the anarchist critique of Marxism (specifically its Leninist variations), party-building, hierarchical organization, centralized power, and statecraft generally. Nation-states tend to behave the way

anarchists expect them to (badly), and absolutely treacherous acts have been characteristic of those who seek—and seize—power. Atrocities and bloody power struggles have followed every socialist revolution—whether it’s Russia in 1917; China in 1949; or contemporary Nepal (for more info on the Nepalese situation, I recommend the article *The Predictable Rise of a Red Bourgeoisie: The End of a Mythical Nepalese Maoist “Revolution”* from libcom.org)—and the “authoritarian” communists mostly fail to provide an adequate explanation for why that is, or how it might be avoided in the future. Dogma—whether anarchist or Marxist—attempts to impose ideology on reality, and finds itself confused and embittered when ideology fails to live up to its promise. And the world is crying for something profoundly different than what authoritarian Marxism or utopian anarchism has been able to deliver.

Here I have explored various questions, but I have provided no answers, or even suggestions. That’s because I have none. But I do believe any type of truly liberating theory & practice of the future will incorporate elements of Marxism, anarchism, feminism, indigenous wisdom, etc and—perhaps most importantly—ecological thought. (Perhaps it is First World privilege that allows me to say this but, I believe the ecological crisis is the most important issue facing humanity today).

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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This journal consists of various articles—mostly, but not exclusively, focused on Maoism—most of which originally appeared elsewhere. I enjoyed reading them so much that I decided to compile them to share with others (most of them are written for reader’s already at least somewhat familiar with their contents). The message of these essays and articles is often contradictory, reflecting my own often contradictory thoughts, feelings, sympathies and allegiances. Themes for future issues, if I choose to make any, might be primitivism, nihilism, punk rock, boxing, and other topics that interest me.

Here’s a brief summary of this issue:

\**Doctrine* by Stan Goff details the author’s break with Marxism-Leninism, utilizing technology-criticism and ecological thought, as well as feminism and anti-authoritarian ideas, to make his case for a new form of liberation politics.

\**Notes Towards A Critique of Maoism* by “ultra-leftist” academic Loren Goldner is a scathing, and rather effective, critique of historical Maoism that has infuriated many Maoists on the internet (a list of where to find some of their responses is available following the article).

\**Why Mao?* is self-identified “race traitor” and veteran US communist Noel Ignatiev’s brief overview of Maoism that originally appeared on his blog at the website of radical Bay Area publisher PM Press. It is far more generous than Goldner’s essay.

\**Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution* by Robin D.G. Kelley & Betsy Esch is a fascinating—sympathetic but not uncritical—historical overview of Maoism and its influence on black radicalism in the USA and elsewhere.

\**The Maoist Cultism of the RCP is Anti-Marxist* by Eric Gordon comes from the obscure *Communist Voice* journal, published by the Communist Voice Organization, a small group consisting of several former Maoists. It is a fairly concise critique of the organization usually associated with Maoism in North America: the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (RCP USA).

\**Shining Path* by self-described “unrepentant Marxist” Louis Proyect is a sympathetic look at the bloodthirsty “sendero luminoso” organization that has lost its previous strength but continues to survive in Peru’s countryside.

\**More Than Half The Sky: The Power of Women in Peru* by Feather Crawford Freed is a liberal/human-rights based overview and critique of the Shining Path that explores how they have both empowered, and brutalized, Andean women.

\**Friendly Feudalism: The Tibet Myth* is prolific leftist writer Michael Parenti's dissection of Tibetan feudalism that destroys any notion that traditional Tibetan society [before the Chinese communist invasion] was the peaceful, spiritual utopia many Dalai Lama admirers seem to think it was.

\**"Heaven and Earth Shake with Tears for Kim Jong-Il": North Korea as a Religious State* by professor Gary Leupp examines the fanatical religious (and non-Marxist) nature of the North Korean state (written before Kim Jong-il's death).

\**The New Face of the Regime: Dynastic Succession in North Korea* by historian Bruce Cumings offers some history of the fascinating and bizarre North Korean state, and what we might expect from its new leader Kim Jong-un.

\**Suggested Reading and Websites* is my own resource compilation for people interested to learn more about Mao and Maoism. It consists of a diverse array of mainly pro-Maoist resources, since anti-Maoist resources are abundantly available. I am not affiliated with any of the people or groups listed and I don't endorse any of them (and that's not merely a disclaimer).

\**Introduction to the Kasama Project* is an eloquent primer on the new Kasama network, consisting of various collectives around the country that also runs a very impressive and extensive website.



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# DOCTRINE

by STAN GOFF, *Feral Scholar*  
from www.feralscholar.org  
November 2006

With some sadness and with not the least desire to devalue the experiences I have had with comrades, nor to minimize the hard work, nor the consciousness and conscience, nor the friendship of many comrades, I am herein announcing and explaining my definitive rejection of Marxism in its current organizational forms, be they called Marxist-Leninist or Trotskyist or Maoist.

This decision comes after months of intense reflection. I will not attempt to separate the personal from the political reasons. My personal life, as a spouse, father, grandfather, friend, and member of local and political communities, is my most direct window on the world, and the experience against which I have to measure any political belief or organizational theory. Even more so, as I now find myself indefinitely caring again for an infant; and thereby bound to the house in the same way as many women, constantly being confronted with the most immediate and practical necessities. The kind of politics that does not take these constraints as the starting point of all politics is what I am now taking under long review.

One of my primary disappointments has been what I consider the failure to take seriously the struggle against patriarchy, and to give it the same weight in our organizing as we do class and national oppression. There have been only token efforts in this regard, and no serious initiative that I have seen to go outside the canon to understand this system. Worse, there has been a reactive embrace of liberal-

libertarian “feminism” by many comrades... which I consider to be a sly academic reassertion of male power in the consumer-choice package of “freedom,” undermining the whole analysis of gender as a system. But this is not the crux of the issue for me. Feminism was the gateway to a number of other interrogations of the assumptions of organized Marxism.

My own last association with organized Marxism was with members whose work I greatly admire. In particular, I was attracted to their analysis of national oppression, which remains in advance of most of the US left, and their stated commitment to re-foundation of a politically efficacious left in the US.



It is this project, re-foundation, which carries with it wherever it goes another question, that has preoccupied me for my entire tenure in and out of Marxist formations. The associated question, of course, has been “What happened? Why is there no organized left with the attention and support of broad masses of people in the US?” What is the nature of this “Crisis of Socialism”?

The Marxist method (as opposed to doctrine) of interpreting these issues led me to address that latter question with deeper ones still: What do we mean when we say “organized”? Who do we mean when we say “masses”?

In arriving at tentative answers to these questions, I have—almost with a sense of grief—concluded that neither Marxist-Leninist nor Trotskyist nor Maoist, nor Guevarist, etc etc etc, organizations are suitable to the task, no matter the quality of the individuals who populate them. The history of these organizations has been, for more than six decades minimum, a string of failures, punctuated by periodic successes only in mass work that was self-organizing outside Marxism to some extent anyway. I have come to believe this is a failure of the

structure and of the over-reaching scope of these organizations.

Marx himself began his career preoccupied not with questions of economics, but of human happiness. What he observed was oppression of one by another, and the sense of personal fragmentation—of alienation—that permeated modern society; and he determined that these two things were related.

Since then, the accumulation of historical experience has provided us with both confirmations and rebuttals of the “lessons” of Marx and Engels. A series of thinkers and leaders after them, in the same tradition, elaborated on that connection between social power and personal alienation.

Unfortunately, the struggle to give these intellectual and practical breakthroughs organizational assertion has been one of hostile encirclement—literal and figurative—which gave rise to a bunker mentality.

This bunker mentality led to the transformation of Marx’s analytical toolbox into a quasi-religious organizing doctrine, and one that was fought out almost like an epoch religious struggle in painful cycles of orthodoxy and reformation, then reformation itself morphing into orthodoxy.

Marxism-Leninism is a term coined by Stalin to establish an imaginary line of predestination (Stalin had his opposition shot as a demonstration of his own ardency on the issue) from Marx-the-Godhead to himself as a way of mapping his encircled-and-militarized state leadership onto the collective consciousness of Eurasian masses still steeped in the epistemology of hierarchical and patriarchal religion, complete with its struggle-to-salvation teleology.

It was this disciplinary regime that inherited and ossified in its own image the notion of a Leninist Party as the last word in political organization, and “democratic centralism” as its organizing principle. It remains to this day the axiomatic faith of Marxism-Leninism and all the other variants.

From the very beginning, however, this principle that worked during the contingencies of the Russian and Chinese Revolutions—both still majority peasant societies (look at Nepal and Haiti today)—was never an organic match to the social conditions nor the prevailing consciousness in the United States. For this reason, I believe, the mismatch between the idea-driven M-L organizations and the lived experience of US society at large has consistently been a history of leadership sects without a solid, organic popular base, especially since the World War II.

Each of these sects then competes with all others for the extremely finite pool of potential recruits. In such a market competition, the competing “sellers” are obliged to explain and emphasize their differences, not their similarities—a point made very clearly by Louis Proyect—and in emphasizing differences over unity, a climate of perennial sectarianism has been created that seems inescapable. This has also created an internal climate in each of these organizations of consolidating members into an ideological conformity...to the point where members ask leadership questions like, “What do we think about this?”

This has further led us to believe that the obstacle to consistent influence—as opposed to temporary and contingent successes, mostly in mass work—has been the “false consciousness” of the masses. My own last affiliation was better than most of the other M-L formations in eschewing the establishment of the One True Revolutionary Party, not hawking sectarian newspapers, and looking self-critically at the left (as evidenced by their collective preoccupation with the “crisis of socialism”).

It is not what has been done well by members of these organizations that concerns me; it is the fact that the people who have done well would have done well with or without the organizations. In my own last group, there is a very good, very committed, and very non-sectarian impulse that is widely shared by the members. The flaws with which I cannot myself be reconciled are flaws in Marxism-Leninism itself, the organizational fetish of



democratic centralism, and the unavoidable overreach of any inorganic effort to “build a national organization” on the basis of an alien ideology and political practice. And Marxism-Leninism, as it is presently organized, as well as its Trotskyist cousin, constitutes a structurally alien formation within American culture.

It is the organizing principle of the “Leninist Party” that still carries the day, democratic centralism, and the method inhering in that organizational model, which requires “the line,” which I have come to believe is responsible not merely for a failure of the left to gain a consistent foothold among the broad masses, but which is—more significantly—an illusion that “the left,” as we define it, is the only appropriate vehicle to carry out the transformation of society. This illusion is shared by many elements in what we widely call the left, that “correct ideas lead to correct practice,” yet we have never questioned the whole notion of correctness, with its hubristic assumptions of cookie-cutter universality.

While I observed some formations last year, responding to Katrina, put the brakes on actual relief efforts in the process of trying to develop a line on the response to Katrina, it was impossible not to notice that in the spaces abandoned by patriarchal white supremacist capitalism, the more decentralized efforts of one group’s volunteers managed to move into those abandoned spaces and establish outposts, operating in a very immediate and practical way, and exercising the utmost tactical agility. This was when it occurred to me that the notion of unity at the core of Leninist organizing philosophy is one that is a centralized and imposed unity, and an imposed ideological and practical unity which reaches for a scale that cannot keep pace with social development. It is, then, constantly mismatched with the social reality of the masses these ideational vanguards wish to lead.

And yes, I still believe in vanguards...but that is another topic.

There are things the Hezbollah can teach us that the former Chinese Communist Party

cannot; and distance and scale set material limitations on the ability of political cadres to simultaneously administer themselves in a singular organization and remain conversant with emergent social and political realities.

The Leninist tradition in organization, whether taking its cue from Trotsky, Stalin, or Mao, is uniformly possessed of this crippling combination of internal conformity, external lack of an organic class-for-itself, the illusion that bigger is better, the market-trap of competing orthodoxies, and the patriarchal attachment to “conquest of nature” dualism.

It is this latter issue which led me—in familiarizing myself to the extent possible—to try and understand the epistemology, social structure, and psychic realities of gender as a system of men’s social power, and which has contributed to my own decisive break with Leninism. The other area of study that has led me to reject Leninism is that of energy as both a physical and social phenomenon. These are connected in my mind, and point directly to the major errors not only of Leninism but within the whole Marxist tradition more generally...and I still consider myself in many respects a Marxist.



The industrial utopia imagined by Marx and touted by Lenin (who even embraced the soul-killing efficiency doctrine of Frederick Winslow Taylor) is not possible in the real world, and less so each day, and it is a Man’s world in any case, a notion based fundamentally on the patriarchal belief in Man-Nature dualism (and the gendered pronoun is not an accident, nor has it ever

been neutral). It is the Marxist method of inquiry that exposes the fetishism of the machine—the idea that technology is innocent of the social system that produced it, and that a factory under socialist control works differently than one under capitalist control, even though the spirit-murdering machinery of capitalism remains unchanged. It was Lukacs theses on reification that gave rise to the most radical version of Western feminism, which also called the Man-Nature dualism to account. And these were summarily rejected by the “organized” left.



*Stalin created the term “Marxism-Leninism”*

These are not incidental errors. The theories of socialism that stumbled again and again through the world system of the 20th Century were fundamentally shaped by these basic assumptions, and the rejections of the basic premises necessarily implies at least the dramatic reformulation of the whole theory. Marxism is effective to study one dimension of capital accumulation; and Marxism has provided some valuable interpretive instruments, like fetishization, like reification, like commodification. But as Myles Horton said, Marxism is a good tool box, but a bad blueprint.

The struggle for state power here is chimeric. There is not the slightest chance of any Marxist-Leninist group ever taking state

power in the US, or of any movement under the sway of Marxism-Leninism, or Trotskyism, or Maoism, et al. It is a theoretical doctrine that is alien to the American experience: one that has made some of us smarter than the average American, in some sense, but which has no chance—because it is so culturally alien—of ever making us stronger than the mass of US residents who will continue to reject it. It is not organic to our reality; and like a failed organ transplant, it will continually be expelled from this body. This in no way reflects negatively on the people in M-L organizations, who are some of the smartest, most tireless, and dedicated people I have ever known.

There is some “sense” in the recapturing and cumulative strategic principle of mass line, as a way of assessing work within movements. But M-L organizations who employ mass line, and other doctrines, apply them to reified instances like the anti-war movement, which is not a social transformation movement at all, but a very contingent and heterogeneous response to a symptom of the crisis of empire. The role of Marxists in this movement has been mixed. On the one hand, they were quick to do the grunt work required to cohere opposition to the war into some political focus; on the other hand, they brought their competing agendas and lines into the heart of American response against the war... and we cannot know what deleterious effect that had at the end of the day, because we cannot know what might have happened without the great UFPJ-ANSWER struggle. It was, however, without a shadow of a doubt, a sectarian struggle between Marxists. We have employed our doctrines in the context of work with a national scope, in the spoken and unspoken belief that the larger scale work will be determinative of local work, and that this is a sound strategic doctrine.

If it is, then I am having difficulty seeing the evidence of it. Top-down strategies do not work. We are not turning our fingers into a unified fist. We are building one-sized beds for a thousand Procrustes.

Every one of the Marxist formations, in accordance with its most teleological assumption—that the working class, once forged in struggle as a class-for-itself—will be the inevitable midwife of socialism (claim for which there is not yet one shred of supporting evidence), have hewn to a dying trade union movement in the US, and one with its remainder so woven into the military-industrial-security complex as to be almost indistinguishable from it. The Crisis of Socialism can be found here, I believe, in the heart of Marxist doctrine, and not in treasons and deviations and contingent “errors.”

First, our conception of socialism as a blueprint for state power that addresses the questions raised by dualism and industrialism only after some imagined political victory ignores what we haven’t studied (or have selectively ignored as a “deviation”) from Ivan Illich to Alf Hornborg to Maria Mies. This inherently patriarchal, industrial, state-socialist “theory” is as dead as my great grandfathers. Second, the trade union movement is not the whole working class, and the trade unions in the US have chosen—more often than not—patriarchy and/or white supremacy and/or reactionary nationalism at almost every turn. The exceptions do not disprove the rule. There is a reason for that. An imperial working class has imperial privilege, and their livelihoods are latched to the survival of a system designed for domination and war. As a friend—Joaquin Bustelo—recently put it:

“I can’t imagine how it is possible to deny that there is not now nor has there been for a very long time a working class movement worthy of the name in the United States (a ‘class-for-itself’ movement). Does anyone disagree? Does someone want to correct me on the half-century long decline in union membership, the decline in the number of strike-days, etc.? Does someone want to let me know about the thousands of Anglo workers who organized their workplaces to walk out last May Day in solidarity with Latino and immigrant protests?

“That white male workers would try to desert their union because they don’t want to be in

the same collective as Blacks and Latinos, doesn’t that tell you something? That’s going on right now, today in my area. And things like that have been going on day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade for a *very* long time in the United States. (‘Things like that’ = white Anglo male workers identifying their interests with those of their nationality, gender and ruling class instead of with their class. But this isn’t an exclusively white, male thing. You will find varying degrees and sorts of privilege—male privilege, ‘legal’ privilege, ‘citizen’ privilege, age privilege—among women, Blacks, Latinos, and so on, where it also tends to have a corrupting influence but that is a much more complicated discussion.)

“This is not ‘a period of reaction,’ this isn’t ‘the downturn after a defeat,’ nor ‘a lull during a prolonged prosperity,’ nor anything else like that.

“You cannot explain the state of the U.S. working class movement by pointing to economic cycles or things like specific punctual or exceptional circumstances, even ones lasting many years. It wasn’t the post-WWII boom, because that ended three and a half decades ago. It wasn’t the cold war, that’s been dead and buried for a decade and a half. Try to think of the reasons why this situation has come to be...It is time we start reconstructing Marxism to explain the real world, instead of dreaming of catastrophic scenarios that will restore the real world to compliance with our Marxist class-reductionist dogma.”

And to that, I would add that it might be time to reconstruct a politics of resistance that is not Marxist, in the sense that Marx himself said, “I am not a Marxist.” This and that formation have been ahead of the pack on deconstructing privilege as a material feature of whiteness (far less so masculinity); but as “Marxist” formations, they inevitably return to the default position—sometimes by a circuitous route—of the working class as the key, and democratic centralism as the organizational principle. When we have seen all the other variables tested, and no fundamental change has happened, then it

seems time to question the untested variables. But Marxism—the organizational doctrine, not the interpretive method—may well be part of the problem of the Crisis of Socialism. I tend to believe that this is so.

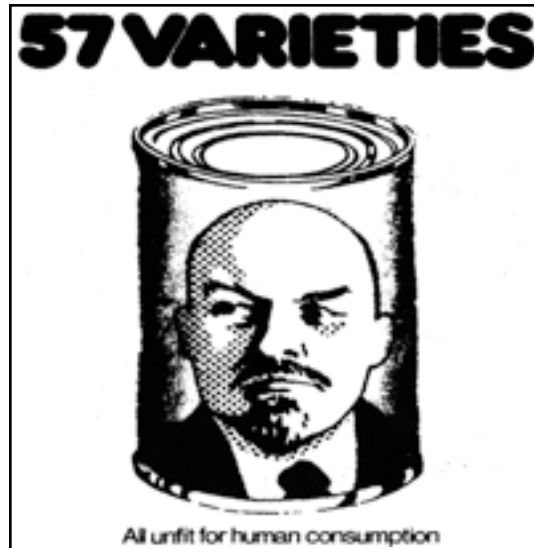
Democratic Centralism (DC) has put a series of socialist governments in power; and in almost every case, the restoration of capitalist relations of production (the instruments of capitalist production were kept, and even sought out) has been accomplished, or the society has fallen into collapse. The machinations of imperial governments cannot be discounted in this; but that is a real thing, too.

The single exception where the revolution has been effectively defended to any degree has been in Cuba, but Cuba began with smaller scale (ergo, greater social embeddedness, in the Polanyian sense), and Cuba was forced to decentralize and re-localize as a survival strategy. The centralism of DC was forced to give way to the democracy of effort required to relocalize the very basis of Cuban survival and independence; and the successes of Cuba have largely been predicated, since 1990, on implementing deviations from the norms of Marxism-the-doctrine.

My friend goes on to say:

“Building a socialist movement for the 21st Century means starting from the premise, and very palpable reality, that the socialist movement of the second half of 20th Century, viewed as a whole, largely *did not work*. And it especially did not work in the places where Marxist theory says it was *supposed* to work, in the advanced capitalist countries with a fully-developed working class that is the big majority of the population.”

Unless and until we face this fact, and ask the critical question, Why?, then re-foundation of an effective politics of resistance in the US will never happen. We will simply become more and more politically irrelevant, and grasp every contingent breakthrough, like our important roles (which I recognize) in the antiwar movement, as proof that Marxist (meaning Leninist) organization works, whereupon—with the inevitable waning of that influence as the fissures close—we rely again on the explanations that we are experiencing “periods,” “lulls,” and “downturns.”



The tendency to compartmentalize, to which I myself fall prey, and which is an essential part of the dominant ideology into which we are all trained from birth, combines with the conservatism of institutions that characterizes even very radical political formations. That combination provides us with the excuse that “the ideas are right, but the method, or tactic, is wrong.”

One of the most difficult but important realizations that I am coming to in this process of trial and error is that the ideas and the methods and the tactics are all both determinants and products of each other.

The Marxist doctrinal belief that the working class represents the potentially liberating force within the primary contradiction—a notion that is, in my view, plain mysticism posing as a “scientific doctrine”—of bourgeois-proletariat, attempts to override the demonstrable fact that patriarchy is an older, deeper, and more durable “contradiction,” that the most turbulent and transformative struggles of the 20th Century, while often under the leadership of Marxists, had a

primarily national character, and that they were more often carried out by majority-masses of peasants, not proletarians.

The Marxist history of bourgeois revolutions makes prominent note of the fact that the bourgeoisie gestated its social power outside the “primary class contradiction” of its time—aristocrat and serf. Why do we believe a metropolitan industrial proletariat will—even recognizing its exploited position—rise up against the system upon which it is completely dependent, and from which it takes its very identity? The advantage that a peasantry had in emerging capitalism was that it was not yet locked into the capitalist unity of opposites. The implications of this fact seem to have been lost on us.

The last thing a metropolitan industrial working class is going to do is embrace a project that threatens the only stability it knows. Boeing workers are not going to oppose the military-industrial complex. Prison guards are not going to oppose prisons. Agribusiness workers are not going to oppose processed foods. Auto workers are not going to oppose cars.

Our experience is that this class in the US, with occasional exceptions, fights for its privileges within that class—male, national, and white. Moreover, the collapse of the current system faces this working class with catastrophe, beginning with the fact that it is thoroughly dependent on military spending to hold back that catastrophe. I can only conclude that an imperial working class is not and never will be the midwife of anything except reaction.

It is only possible, then, in my view for now, at least—and I am enthusiastic about saying I could be wrong—to effect the basis for any genuine and sustainable resistance movement in the United States by first attending to the question of local community independence, beginning with the material basics: food security, water security, energy security, access to learning, and a health infrastructure.

We have mostly ignored the laboratories for exactly these things, calling the “utopian,” i.e., intentional communities; and we have looked on locally organized efforts to impact local politics as somehow less developed than we are... when these formations are often well advanced of anything being done by the M-L and Trotskyist left. They don’t need a line. Their practice is always responding to things immediate and concrete; and their leadership, through this practice, is very very smart, in very very practical ways.

World systems theory has gained an element of acceptance within Marxism, but only to a degree that doesn’t contradict the canon. But there are other theorists, Hornborg stands out on the issue of unequal exchange and Carole Pateman on the flaws in “labor power” as a concept, who have taken significant steps toward overcoming all that is normative in Marxism, and incorporated the best and most universal values of Marxism into theories that are far more adequate accounts of imperialism and gender than anything still residing within the canon of the M-L and Trotskyist left.

One of the reasons we have had such difficulty keeping up with these genuine breakthroughs has been our sectarian insularity—a feature of our organizations even when we struggle against it, as several aborted attempts at “integration” should be telling us. We recruit, then we push through an educational program to consolidate new membership around the line, relying on our own group-by-group canon, and our respective exegesis of dead revolutionaries in the Marxist pantheon.

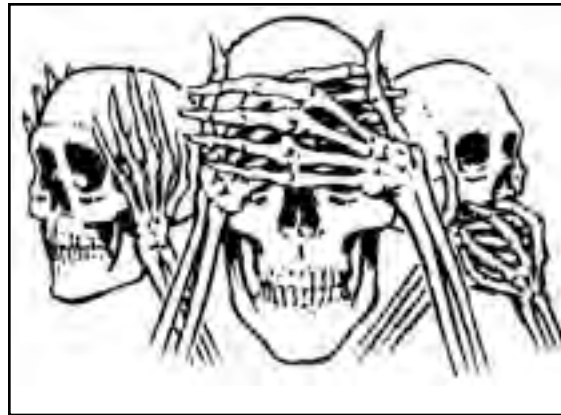
Not only have we not incorporated the laws of physics (energy) into our world view, we have not incorporated any of the discoveries that have permanently altered the science known by Marx and Lenin, except to elaborate on their Cartesian dualism. Ivan Illich wrote in 1973 (in typical sexist fashion, but accurately aside from that):

“If a ruler could draw power from sources other than men, his control over this power still depended on his control over men... Political control coincided with control over

physical power, and the control of power depended entirely on authority. Equal power and equal direct control of power [generated by individual bodies] were both features of preindustrial societies, but this did not guarantee an equal autonomy in the exercise of this control.”

This was the beginning of a comprehensive critique of industrialism, and one which Carolyn Merchant and Alf Hornborg and others have elaborated on at length. The implications of the incorporation of energetics, and chaos theory, and of the patriarchy in the very DNA of the myth of “scientific objectivity,” are not add-ons to Marxism that will leave its basic structure unaltered. They produce a comprehensive change in how we understand the world...and if we are in a DC organization, that means we reject it.

Hornborgs’ thermodynamic analysis of unequal exchange (in understanding imperialism in a measurable, non-normative way) yields dozens of new insights into the dynamic of imperialism that address aspects of the world system that Lenin and Hilferding never touched. And the reason Marxism has been so far unable to accommodate these new insights has been a kind of reactive reluctance to hear anything that might suggest that Marxist organization (and therefore practice), and the class-reductionism that has been carried forward for 150 years, no longer match reality.



By and large, we remain trapped in the development paradigm, which still fails to grasp energy physics as the zero-sum game that it is, and establishes goals that would leave the masses at the mercy of machines and bureaucrats. This has not only led us to remain insular; it continually leads us into competition for people and resources with more organic efforts that have more traction

and relevance than the projects flowing out of our DC process, making a fetish of collectivity, and stifling individual initiative and the creativity that goes with it.

Any revolutionary movement that has a prayer of taking hold in the US must be organic, that is, self-organizing...and consist of small and many independent, but networked, practical efforts. The larger any organization is, in personnel or in scope or in geography, the more the institutional tail begins to wag the mission dog. This is no longer pop science. With increased scale, the tooth-to-tail, operations-to-administration, management ratio of any organization shifts correspondingly. Larger scale, smaller ration of energy invested in operations, higher into management. The average human is only bi-psychologically equipped to handle around 150 relationships in the absence of administration (Dunbar’s number), and a bunch of those people are already family and friends. But has the left even studied this cross-disciplinary discovery? No. We just say we have to struggle against bureaucratism without ever trying to identify its origins. If it hasn’t been mentioned by the pantheon, we don’t know it. And if it doesn’t extend directly from the pantheon, we reject it.

Again, this is not a moral or intellectual failure. It is, I believe, a failure that is hard-wired into the organizations’ structural-practical dialectic, into Marxism-as-a-doctrine.

It is my opinion, at least at this point in time, that leftist organization in this disciplinary cadre model is not only incapable of bringing the re-foundation of an effective politics of resistance into being, it stands as a real impediment to any re-foundation process for a wide-scale politics of resistance.

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## NOTES TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF MAOISM

by LOREN GOLDNER  
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*Note to the Reader:* The following was written at the request of a west coast comrade after he attended the August 2012 “Everything for Everyone” conference in Seattle, at which many members of the “soft Maoist” Kasama Project were present. It is a bare-bones history of Maoism which does not bring to bear a full “left communist” viewpoint, leaving out for the example the sharp debates on possible alliances with the “nationalist bourgeoisie” in the colonial and semi-colonial world at the first three congresses of the Communist International. It was written primarily to provide a critical-historical background on Maoism for a young generation of militants who might be just discovering it. — Loren Goldner.

Maoism was part of a broader movement in the twentieth century of what might be called “bourgeois revolutions with red flags,” as in Vietnam or North Korea.

To understand this, it is important to see that Maoism was one important result of the defeat of the world revolutionary wave in 30 countries (including China itself) which occurred in the years after World War I. The major defeat was in Germany (1918–1921), followed by the defeat of the Russian Revolution (1921 and thereafter), culminating in Stalinism.

Maoism is a variant of Stalinism.<sup>1</sup>

The first phase of this defeat, where Mao and China are concerned, took place in the years 1925–1927, during which the small but very strategically located Chinese working class was increasingly radicalized in a wave of strikes. This defeat closed the 1917–1927 cycle of post–World War I worker struggles, which included (in addition to Germany and Russia) mass strikes in Britain, workers councils in northern Italy, vast ferment and strikes in Spain, the “rice riots” in Japan, a general strike in Seattle, and many other confrontations.

By 1925–1927, Stalin controlled the Communist Third International (Comintern). From the beginning of the 1920s, Russian advisors worked closely with the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) of the bourgeois revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, (leader of the 1911 overthrow of the Manchu dynasty) and with the small but important Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921.

The Third International provided political and military aid to the KMT, which was taken over by Chiang Kai-shek (future dictator of Taiwan after 1949); the Comintern in the early to mid-1920s viewed the KMT as a “progressive anti-imperialist” force. Many Chinese Communists actually joined the KMT in these years, some secretly, some openly.

Soviet foreign policy in the mid-1920s involved an internal faction fight between Stalin and Trotsky. Trotsky's policy (whatever its flaws, and there were many) was for world revolution as the only solution to the isolation

of the Soviet Union. Stalin replied with the slogan “Socialism in One Country,” an aberration unheard of until that time in the internationalist Marxist tradition. Stalin in this period was allied with the right opposition leader Nikolai Bukharin against Trotsky; Soviet and Third International policy reflected this alliance in a “right turn” to strong support for bourgeois nationalism abroad. Chiang Kai-shek himself was an honorary member of the Third International Executive Board in this period. The Third International advocated strong support for Chiang’s KMT in its campaign against the “warlords” closely allied with the landowning gentry.

It is important to understand that in these same years, Mao Zedong (who was not yet the central leader of the party) criticized this policy from the right, advocating an even closer alliance between the CCP and the KMT.

In the spring of 1927, Chiang Kai-shek turned against the CCP and the radicalized working class, massacring thousands of workers and CCP militants in Shanghai and Canton (now known in the West by its actual Chinese name Guangzhou), who had been completely disarmed by the Comintern’s support for the KMT.<sup>2</sup> This massacre ended the CCP’s relationship with the Chinese working class and opened the way for Mao to rise to top leadership by the early 1930s.

The next phase of the CCP was the so-called “Third Period” of the Comintern, which was launched in part in response to the debacle in China. In the Soviet Union, Stalin turned on the Bukharinist “right” (there was in reality no one more reactionary than Stalin) after having finished off the Trotskyist left.<sup>3</sup> The Third Period, which lasted from 1928 to 1934, was a period of “ultra-left” adventurism around the world. In China as well as in a number of other colonial and semi-colonial countries, the Third Period involved the slogan of “soviets everywhere.” Not a bad slogan in itself, but its practical, voluntarist implementation was a series of disastrous, isolated uprisings in China and Vietnam in 1930 which were

totally out of synch with local conditions, and which led to bloody defeats everywhere.

It was in the recovery from these defeats that Mao became the top leader of the CCP, and began the “Long March” to Yan’an (in remote northwestern China) which became a central Maoist myth, and reoriented the CCP to the Chinese peasantry, a much more numerous social class but not, in Marxist terms, a revolutionary class<sup>4</sup> (though it could be an ally of the working-class revolution, as in Russia during the 1917–1921 Civil War).



Japan had invaded Manchuria (northeast China) in 1931 and the CCP from then until the Japanese defeat at the end of World War II was involved in a three-way struggle with the KMT and the Japanese.

After the Third Period policy led to the triumph of Hitler in Germany (where the Communist Party had attacked the “social fascist” Social Democrats, not the Nazis, as the “main enemy,” and even worked with the Nazis against the Social Democrats in strikes), the Comintern in 1935 shifted its line again to the “Popular Front,” which meant alliances with “bourgeois democratic” forces against fascism. Throughout the colonial and semi-colonial world, the Communist Parties completely dropped their previous anti-colonial struggle and threw themselves into support for the Western bourgeois democracies. In Vietnam and Algeria, for example, they supported the “democratic” French colonial power. In Spain, they uncritically supported the Republic in the



Spanish Revolution and Civil War, during which they helped the Republic crush the anarchists (who had two million members), the independent left POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, a “centrist” party denounced at the time as “Trotskyist”) and the Trotskyists themselves. These latter forces had taken over the factories in northeastern Spain and established agrarian communes in the countryside. The Republic and the Communists crushed them all, and then lost the Civil War to Franco.

In China, the Popular Front meant, for the CCP, supporting Chiang Kai-shek (who, it will be recalled, had massacred thousands of workers eight years earlier) against Japan.

In the Yan'an refuge of the CCP in these years and through World War II, Mao consolidated his control over the party. His notorious hatchet man Kang Sheng helped him root out any opposition or potential rivals with slanderous rumors, show trials and executions. One memorable case was that of Wang Shiwei. He was a committed Communist and had translated parts of Marx's Capital into Chinese. Mao and Kang set him up and put him through several show trials, breaking him and driving him out of the party. (He was finally executed when the CCP left Yan'an in 1947 in the last phase of the civil war against Chiang kai-shek.)

Mao's peasant army conquered all of China by 1949. The Chinese working class, which had been the party's base until 1927, played absolutely no role in this supposed “socialist revolution.” The one-time “progressive nationalist” Kuomintang was totally discredited as it became the party of the landed gentry, full of corruption, responsible for runaway inflation, and commanded by officers more interested in enriching themselves than fighting either the Japanese (before 1945) or the CCP.

The first phase of Mao's rule was from 1949 to 1957. He made no secret of the fact that the new regime was based on the “bloc of four classes” and was carrying out a bourgeois nationalist revolution. It was essentially the

program of the bourgeois nationalist Sun Yat-Sen from 25 years earlier. The corrupt landowning gentry was expropriated and eliminated.

But it is important to remember that “land to the peasants” and the expropriation of the pre-capitalist landholders are the bourgeois revolution, as they have been since the French Revolution of 1789. The regime for this reason was genuinely popular and many overseas Chinese who were not Communists returned to help rebuild the country. Some “progressive capitalists” were retained to continue running their factories. After the chaos of the previous 30 years, this stabilization was a breath of fresh air. The People's Liberation Army also intervened in the Korean War to help Kim Il-Sung fight the United States and the United Nations forces. But it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that the Korean War was part of a war between the two Cold War blocs, and that what Kim implemented in North Korea after 1953 was another Stalinist “bourgeois revolution with red flags” based on land to the peasants. (North Korea went on to become the first proletarian hereditary monarchy, now in its third incarnation.)

We also have to see the Chinese Revolution in international context. Stalinism (and Maoism is, as mentioned earlier, a variant of Stalinism) emerged from World War II stronger than ever, having appropriated all of eastern Europe, winning in China, on its way to power in (North) Korea and Vietnam, and had huge prestige in struggles around the colonial and semi-colonial world (which was renamed the Third World as the Cold War divided the globe into two antagonistic blocs centered on the United States and the Soviet Union).

There is no question that Mao and the CCP were somewhat independent of Stalin and the Soviet Union. They were their own type of Stalinists. They were also a million miles from the power of soviets and workers' councils that had initially characterized the Russian and German Revolutions, on which basis the Comintern was originally founded in 1919. That is a thorny question that is too

complex to be unraveled here. But from 1949 until the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, the Soviet Union sent thousands of technicians and advisors to China, and trained thousands more Chinese cadre in Soviet universities and institutes, as had been the case since the 1920s. The “model” established in power in the 1950s was essentially the Soviet model, adapted to a country with an even more overwhelming peasant majority than was the case in Russia.

World Stalinism was rocked in 1956 by a series of events: the Hungarian Revolution, in which the working class again established workers' councils before it was crushed by Russian intervention; the Polish “October,” in which a worker revolt brought to power a “reformed” Stalinist leadership. These uprisings were preceded by Khrushchev's speech to the twentieth Congress of world Communist Parties, in which he revealed many of Stalin's crimes, including the massacre of between five to ten million peasants during the collectivizations of the early 1930s. There were many crimes he did not mention, since he was too implicated in them, and the purpose of his speech was to salvage the Stalinist bureaucracy while disavowing Stalin himself. This was the beginning of “peaceful co-existence” between the Soviet bloc and the West, but the revelations of Stalin's crimes and the worker revolts in eastern Europe (following the 1953 worker uprising in East Germany) were the beginning of the end of the Stalinist myth. Bitterly disillusioned militants all over the world walked out of Communist Parties, after finding out that they had devoted decades of their lives to a lie.

Khrushchev's 1956 speech is often referred to by later Maoists as the triumph of “revisionism” in the Soviet Union. The word “revisionism” is itself ideology run amok, since the main thing that was being “revised” was Stalinist terror, which the Maoists and Marxist-Leninists by implication consider to be the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” There were between 10 and 20 million people in forced labor camps in the Soviet Union in 1956, and presumably their release (for those who survived years of slave labor, often at the

Arctic Circle) was part of “revisionism.” For the Maoists, the Khrushchev speech is often also identified with the “restoration of capitalism,” showing how superficial their “Marxism” is, with the existence of capitalism being based not on any analysis of real social relationships but on the ideology of this or that leader.

Khrushchev's speech was not well received by Mao and the leaders of the CCP, whose own regimented rule of China was becoming increasingly unpopular.<sup>5</sup> Thus the regime launched a new phase, called the “Hundred Flowers” campaign, in which the “bourgeois intellectuals” who had rallied to the regime, recoiling from the brutality of the KMT, were invited to “let a hundred flowers bloom” and openly voice their criticisms.

The outpouring of criticism was of such an unexpected volume that it was quickly shut down by Mao and the CCP, who began to characterize the Hundred Flowers campaign as “letting the snakes out of their holes” in order to “smash” them once and for all. Many critics were arrested and sent off to forced labor camps.

Internationally, however, Maoism began to become an international tendency, becoming attractive to some people who had left the pro-Soviet Communist Parties after Khrushchev's speech. This was a hard-core ultra-Stalinist minority (who felt, for example, that their own country's CP had not supported the Soviet invasion to crush the Hungarian Revolution forcefully enough). By the early 1960s, in the United States, Europe and around the Third World, these currents would become the “Marxist-Leninist” parties aligned with China against both the United States and Soviet “social imperialism.”

In China itself, the regime needed to shift gears after the disaster of the Hundred Flowers period. There was growing tension at the top levels of the CCP between Mao and the more Soviet-influenced technocratic bureaucrats, who were focused on building up heavy industry. This was the factional

situation that led to the “Cultural Revolution” that erupted in 1965.

Therefore Mao launched the country in 1958 on the so-called “Great Leap Forward,” in which Soviet-style heavy industry was to be replaced by enlisting peasants in small industrial “backyard” production everywhere. The peasants were forced into the “People's Communes” and set to work to catch up with the economic level of the capitalist West in 10–15 years. Everywhere pots, pans and utensils as well as family heirlooms were melted down for backyard small kilns to produce steel, at killing paces of work. The result was a huge drain of peasant labor away from raising crops, leading to famine by 1960–1961 in which an estimated 10–20 million people starved to death.<sup>6</sup>

The debacle of the Great Leap Forward was also a terrible blow to Mao's standing within the CCP. It represented an extreme form of the kind of voluntarism, at the expense of real material conditions, which had always characterized Mao's thinking, as summed up in his famous line about “painting portraits on the blank page of the people” (some Marxist!).<sup>7</sup> The Soviet-influenced technocrats around Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping basically kicked Mao upstairs into a symbolic figurehead, too important to purge outright but stripped of all real power. Thus the battle lines were drawn for what became, a few years later, the “Cultural Revolution.”

The “Cultural Revolution” was Mao's attempt at a comeback.<sup>8</sup> It was a factional struggle at the top level of the CCP in which millions of university and high school students were mobilized everywhere to attack “revisionism” and return Mao to real power. But this factional struggle, and the previous marginalization of Mao that lay behind it, was hardly advertised as the real reason for this process in which tens of thousands of people were killed and millions of lives were wrecked.<sup>9</sup> China was thrown into ideology run amok on a scale arguably even greater than under Stalin at the peak of his power. Millions of educated people suspected of “revisionism” (or merely the victims of some

personal feud), including technicians and scientists, were sent off to the countryside (“rustification”) to “learn from the peasants,” which in reality involved them in crushing forced labor in which many were worked to death. “Politics was in command,” with party ideologues and not surgeons, in charge of medical operations in Chinese hospitals—with predictable consequences. Schools were closed for three years in the cities—though not in the countryside (19660–1969)—while young people from universities and high schools ran around the country humiliating and sometimes killing people designated by the Maoist faction as a “revisionist” and a “Liu Shaoqi capitalist roader” (Liu Shaoqi himself died of illness in prison). The economy was wrecked. In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping (who also performed hard rural labor during these years) returned to power, Chinese agricultural production per capita was no higher than it had been in 1949.

In such a situation, where revisionist rule was to be replaced by “people's power,” things got out of hand with some currents who took Mao's slogan “It is right to rebel” a bit too far, and began to question the whole nature of CCP rule since 1949. In these cases, as in the “Shanghai Commune” of early 1967, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had to step in against an independent formation that included radicalized workers. The PLA was in fact one of the main “winners” of the Cultural Revolution, for its role in stamping out currents that became a third force against both the “capitalist roaders” and the Maoists.

(During all this, Kang Sheng, the hatchet man of Yan'an, returned to power and helped vilify, oust and sometimes execute Mao's factional opponents, as he had done the first time around.)

Perhaps the most interesting case of things “going too far,” along with the brief Shanghai Commune, before the army marched in, was the Shengwulian current in Mao's own Hunan province. There, workers and students who had gone through the whole process produced a series of documents that became famous throughout China, analyzing the country as

being under the control of a “new bureaucratic ruling class.” While the Shengwulian militants disguised their viewpoint with bows to the “thought of Mao Zedong” and “Marxism-Leninism,” their texts were read throughout China, and at the top levels of the party itself, where they were clearly recognized for what they were: a fundamental challenge to both factions in power. They were mercilessly crushed.<sup>10</sup>

Further interesting critiques to emerge from the years of the Cultural Revolution were those written by Yu Luoke, at the time an apprentice worker and, later, the manifesto of Wei Jingsheng, a 28-year-old electrician at the Beijing Zoo on the “Democracy Wall” in Beijing in 1978. Yu's text was, like Shengwulian's, diffused and read all over China. It was a critique of the Cultural Revolution's “bloodline” definition of “class” by family background and political reliability, rather than by one's relationship to the means of production. Yu was executed for his troubles in 1970. The Democracy Wall, which was supposed to accompany Deng Xiaoping's return to power, also got out of hand and was suppressed in 1979.



*Above: Mao meets US President Richard Nixon  
Below: Mao meets war criminal Henry Kissinger*



Mao's faction reemerged triumphant by 1969. This included his wife, Jiang Qing, and three other cofactioneers who would be arrested and deposed as the “Gang of Four”<sup>11</sup> shortly after Mao's death in 1976.<sup>12</sup> This victory, it is often overlooked, coincided with the beginning of Mao's quiet outreach to the United States as a counterweight to the Soviet Union. There was active but local combat between Chinese and Soviet forces along their mutual border in 1969 and, as a result, Mao banned all transit of Soviet material support to North Vietnam and the Viet Cong, a ban which remained in effect until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Mao received US President Nixon in Beijing in early 1972, while the United States was raining bombs on North Vietnam.

This turn was hardly the first instance of a conservative foreign policy at the expense of movements and countries outside China. Already in 1965, the Chinese regime, based on its prestige as the center of “Marxist-Leninist” opposition to Soviet “revisionism” after the Sino-Soviet split, had encouraged the powerful Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) into a close alliance with Indonesia's populist-nationalist leader, Sukarno. It was an exact repeat of the CCP's alliance with Chiang Kai-shek in 1927, and it ended the same way, in a bloodbath in which 600,000 PKI members and sympathizers were killed in fall 1965 in a military coup, planned with the help of US advisers and academics. Beijing said nothing about the massacre until 1967 (when it complained that the Chinese embassy in Jakarta had been stoned during the events). In 1971, China also openly applauded the bloody suppression of the Trotskyist student movement in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). In the same year, it supported (together with the United States and against Soviet ally India), Pakistani dictator Yaya Khan, who oversaw massive repression in Bangladesh when that country (previously part of Pakistan) declared independence.

In 1971, another bizarre turn in domestic policy also took place, echoing Mao's fascination with ancient dynastic court intrigue. Up to that point, Lin Biao had been openly designated as Mao's successor. The

Maoist press abroad, as well as the French intelligentsia which at the time was decidedly pro-Maoist, trumpeted the same line. Suddenly Lin Biao disappeared from public view, and in late 1971 it was learned that he, too, supposedly Mao's closest confidant for years, had been a capitalist roader and a deep-cover KMT agent all along. According to the official story, Lin had commandeered a military plane and fled toward the Soviet border; the plane had crashed in Mongolia, killing him and all aboard.<sup>13</sup> For months, western Maoists denounced this account, published in the world press, as a pure bourgeois fabrication, including what Simon Leys characterized as the "most important pro-Maoist daily newspaper in the West," the very high tone *Le Monde* (Paris), whose Beijing correspondent was a Maoist devotee. Then, when the Chinese government itself confirmed the story, the Western Maoists turned on a dime and howled with the wolves against Lin Biao. Simon Leys remarked that these fervent believers had transformed the old Chinese proverb "Don't beat a dog after it has fallen into the water" into "Don't beat a dog until it has fallen into the water."



*Vietnamese children terrorized by US aggression*

This was merely the beginning of the bizarre turn of Maoist world strategy and Chinese foreign policy. The "main enemy" and "greater danger" was no longer the world imperialism centered in the United States, but Soviet "social imperialism." Thus, when US-backed Augusto Pinochet overthrew the Chilean government of Salvador Allende in 1973, China immediately recognized Pinochet and hailed the coup. When South African troops invaded Angola in 1975 after Angolan independence under the pro-Soviet MPLA, China backed South Africa. During the Portuguese Revolution of 1974–75, the Maoist forces there reached out to the far right. Maoist currents throughout western

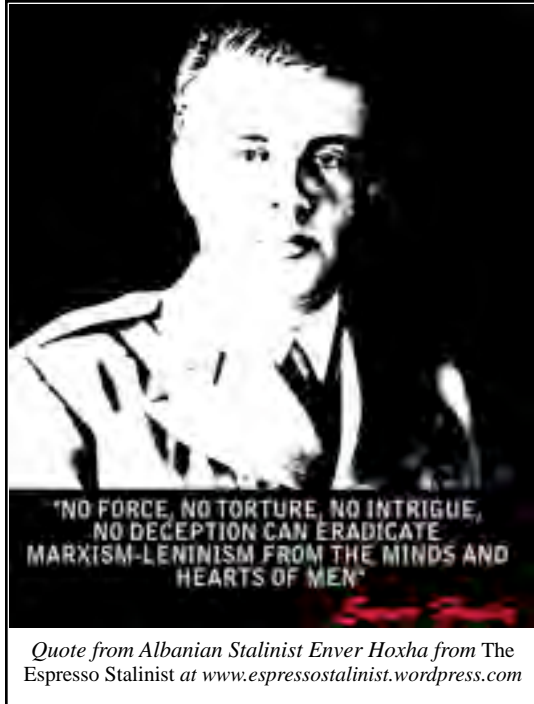
Europe called for the strengthening of NATO against the Soviet threat. China supported Philippine dictator Fernando Marcos in his attempt to crush the Maoist guerrilla movements in that country.

Maoism had had a certain serious impact on New Left forces in the West in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unraveling the factional differences among these groups would take us too far afield, and most of them had faded away by the 1980s. But "Maoism," as interpreted in different ways, was important in Germany, Italy, France and the United States. Some groups, such as the ultra-Stalinist Progressive Labor Party in the United States, saw the writing on the wall as early as 1969 and broke with China in that year. Most of these groups were characterized by Stalinist

thuggery against opponents, and occasionally among themselves.<sup>14</sup> Their influence was as diffuse as it was pernicious; ca. 1975, there were hundreds of "Marxist-Leninist" study groups around the United States, and hundreds of cadre had entered the factories to organize the working class. By the mid-1970s, three main Maoist groups had

emerged as dominant in the US left: the Revolutionary Union (RU) under Bob Avakian (later renamed the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, or RCP), the October League (OL) under Mike Klonsky, and the Communist Labor Party (CLP). To really understand some of the differences between them, one needed to know their relationship to the old "revisionist" Communist Party USA. The more moderate groups, such as the October League, hearkened back to Earl Browder's leadership during the Popular Front years. More hard-line groups, such as the CLP, looked to the more openly Stalinist William Z. Foster. These and other smaller groups fought ideological battles over the proper attitude to take toward Enver Hoxha's

Albania, which for some (after China's pro-US turn) remained, for them, the sole truly “Marxist-Leninist” country in the world. One small group trumpeted the “Three 3’s: Third International/Third Period/Third World.”



In Germany, New Left Maoism was on the ascendant after 1968, a process which it gingerly termed the “positive overcoming of the anti-authoritarian movement” of that year. A major current was the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands), which fought against the much larger DKP (Deutsche Kommunistische Partei, the pro-Soviet party, which itself still barely accounted for one percent of the vote in German elections). Out of the KPD came a multitude of smaller “K-Gruppen,” with poetic names such as KPD-ML Rote Heimat (Red Homeland, with distinct populist overtones of “soil”). Only the DKP had any influence in the working class, with its infiltration of the trade unions; it was content to sit back after 1972 when the Social Democratic government of Willy Brandt issued its “radical decree” and came down hard on the K-Gruppen, much as the Italian Communist Party (PCI), with 25 percent of the vote in the 1976 elections, not only sat back while the Italian government

criminalized the entire far left as “terrorists”; it actively helped the government in the suppression of the far left after the Red Brigades kidnapped and executed the right-wing politician Aldo Moro in spring 1978, as he was on his way to sign the “historical compromise” which would have allowed the PCI to join the Christian Democrats in a grand coalition.

In France, Maoism never had the clout of the much larger main Trotskyist parties (Lutte Ouvriere, the Ligue Communiste Revolutionaire and the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste, all of which are still around today, in the latter two cases under different names). Most of the Maoist “Marxist-Leninist” groups had been discredited by their manipulative role during the May–June 1968 general strike, such as one which marched to the barricades on the night of the most serious street fighting (pitting thousands of people against thousands of cops), announced that the whole thing was a government provocation, and urged everyone to go home, as they themselves proceeded to do. But in the spring of 1970, one small ultra-Stalinist and ultra-militant Maoist group, the Gauche Proletarienne (Proletarian Left), momentarily recruited Jean-Paul Sartre to its defense when the government banned it, following some spectacular militant interventions around the country. Sartre, who had over the previous 20 years been successively pro-Soviet, pro-Cuba and then pro-China, saved the GP from extinction, but it collapsed of its own ideological frenzy shortly thereafter. (It notably produced two particularly cretinous neo-liberal ideologues after 1977, Bernard-Henry Levi and Andre Glucksmann, as well as Serge July, editor-in-chief of the now very respectable daily *Liberation*, which began as the newspaper of the GP.) Former French Maoists turned up in the strangest places, such as Roland Castro, a fire-eating Maoist in 1968, who became an intimate of Socialist President Francois Mitterand, and was appointed to a leading technocratic position.

Maoism in Britain again had next to no influence, whereas both the Trotskyist Socialist Labor League (SLL) and the IS (later

Socialist Workers Party, or SWP), at their 1970s peaks, had thousands of members and a serious presence in the working class.

In Japan, finally, the most advanced capitalist country in Asia, Maoism (as in Britain and in France), had no chance against the large, sophisticated New Left groups in the militant Zengakuren, which not only had no time for Maoism but not even for Trotskyism, and which characterized both the Soviet Union and China as “state capitalist.” (Only the small underground, pro-North Korean “Red Army” could in any way have been characterized as Maoist.)

In 1976, as mentioned earlier, the Maoist Gang of Four, who up to Mao's death had been at the pinnacle of state power, were arrested, jailed and never heard from again, as the “revisionists” headed by Deng Xiaoping returned to power and prepared to launch China on the road to “market socialism,” or “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” beginning in 1978.

This bizarre ideological period finally ended in 1978–79, when China, now firmly an ally of the United States, attacked Vietnam and was rudely pushed back by the Vietnamese army under General Giap (of Dien Bien Phu fame). Vietnam, still allied with the Soviet Union, had occupied Cambodia to oust the pro-Maoist Khmer Rouge, who had taken over the country in 1975 and who went on to kill upward of one million people. In response to China's attack on Vietnam, the Soviet Union threatened to attack China. For any remaining Western Maoists at this point, the consternation was palpable.

As elsewhere in different forms, the Maoists in the United States did not go quietly into that dark night. Many of those who went into industry or otherwise colonized working-class communities rose to positions of influence in the trade union bureaucracy, such as Bill Fletcher of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, who was briefly a top aide to John Sweeney when the latter took over the AFL-CIO in 1995. Mike Klonsky of the October League traveled to China in 1976 to

be anointed as the official liaison to the Chinese regime after the fall of the Gang of Four, but that did not prevent the OL from fading away. The RCP sent colonizers to West Virginia mining towns, where they were involved in some wildcat strikes (some of those strikes, however, were against teaching Darwin in the schools). The RCP also supported ROAR, the racist anti-busing coalition, during the crisis in Boston in 1975. Bob Avakian, in 1978, with four other RCP members, rushed the podium when Deng Xiaoping appeared at a press conference in Washington with Jimmy Carter to consummate the US-China alliance; they were charged with multiple felonies and Avakian remains in exile in Paris to this day. In 1984 and 1988,<sup>15</sup> Maoists of different stripes were deeply involved in Jesse Jackson's run for the presidency, giving rise in 1984 after Jackson lost out to the “Marxist-Leninists for Mondale” phenomenon.

Members of the Communist Workers Party (CWP) suffered a worse fate, when in 1979 members of the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina (where they had organized in several textile towns) fired on their rally, killing five of them. But during Occupy Oakland in the fall of 2011, it emerged that no less than Oakland Mayor Jean Quan, as well as some of her key advisors, and high-level members of the Alameda County Labor Council, were former members of the selfsame CWP.

More recently, former members of the RCP who had their fill of Avakian's cult of personality formed the Kasama Project, which now has a much larger, if more diffuse influence, at least on the internet.

On a world scale, Maoists recently joined a coalition government in Nepal, and various groups, some reaching back to the 1960s or even earlier, continue to be active in the Philippines. The Indian Naxalites, who were stone Maoists in the 1970s before they were crushed by Indira Gandhi, have made something of a comeback in poor rural areas. The Shining Path group in Peru, which was similarly crushed by Fujimori, has made a steady comeback there, openly referring to

such groups as the Cambodian Khmer Rouge as a model.

To conclude, it is important to consider the post-1978 fate of Maoism in China itself.

For the regime which, since 1978, has overseen nearly 35 years of virtually uninterrupted and unprecedented economic growth, averaging close to 10 percent per year over decades, with the methods of “market socialism,” Mao Zedong remains an indispensable icon of the ruling ideology. In officialese, Mao was “70 percent right and 30 percent wrong.” The “wrong” part usually means the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, although serious discussion and research on those events remains largely if not wholly taboo.

As a result, a rose-tinted nostalgic view of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution has become de rigeur in the so-called Chinese New Left.<sup>16</sup> There have even been echoes of Maoism in the recent fall of top-level bureaucrat Bo Xilai, former strongman of Chongqing with a decidedly populist style which led some of his opponents to warn of the dangers of a “new Cultural Revolution.” Given the impossibility, in China, of frank public discussion of the entirety of Mao's years in power (and before), and the small fragments of information available to the young generations about those years, it is hardly surprising that currents opposing the appalling spread of social inequality and insecurity since 1978 would turn back to that mythical past. This hardly makes such a turn less reactionary and dangerous. Everything that happened after 1978 had its origins in the nature of the regime before 1978. There was no “counter-revolution,” still less a transformation of the previously existing social relations of production. Once again, Maoism reveals its highly idealist and voluntarist conception of politics by a focus on the ideology of top leaders, as it previously did with Khrushchev's 1956 speech and thaw. China from 1949 to 1978 was preparing the China of 1978 to the present. Even those pointing to the “shattering of the iron rice bowl,” the No. 1 ideological underpinning of

the old regime, ignore the practice of significant casualized labor in the industrial centers in the 1950s and 1960s. Until a true “new left” in China seriously rethinks the place of Maoism in the larger context of the history of the Marxist movement, and particularly its origins in Stalinism and not in the true, defeated world proletarian moment of 1917–1921, it is doomed to reproduce, in China as in different parts of the developing world, either grotesque copies of Maoism's periodic ultra-Stalinism (as in Peru) or to be the force that prepares the coming of “market socialism” by destroying the pre-capitalist forms of agriculture and engaging in forced, autarchic industrialization until Western, or Japanese and Korean, or (why not?) Chinese capital<sup>17</sup> arrives to allow the full emergence of capitalism.

*Source citations available at:*

[www.insurgentnotes.com/2012/10/notes-towards-a-critique-of-maoism/](http://www.insurgentnotes.com/2012/10/notes-towards-a-critique-of-maoism/).

*Loren Goldner's website:* [home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/](http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/).

**Some responses to this article can be found by searching the following websites:**

**CHINA STUDY GROUP**  
[www.chinastudygroup.net](http://www.chinastudygroup.net)

**INSURGENT NOTES**  
[www.insurgentnotes.com](http://www.insurgentnotes.com)

**LIBERTARIAN COMMUNISM**  
[www.libcom.org](http://www.libcom.org)

**M-L-M MAYHEM!**  
[www.moufawad-paul.blogspot.com](http://www.moufawad-paul.blogspot.com)

**RED SPARK**  
[www.redsprk.org](http://www.redsprk.org)

**SIGNALFIRE**  
[www.signalfire.org](http://www.signalfire.org)

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# WHY MAO?

by NOEL IGNATIEV  
*PM Press Blog*, September 22, 2012  
From: [www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org)

Why, in spite of its long list of crimes\* and the reality of modern China, does Maoism continue to attract adherents among revolutionaries in the U.S.? Part of the answer is that Maoism represents in many people's minds the triumph of the will (no reference intended to Lenni Riefenstahl's film of that title).

Marxism came to China around the time of the May Fourth Movement (1919), when Chinese students, enraged at the government's subservience to foreign powers, turned to the West for new ideas. It arrived as one of many imports; particularly important was the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson argued for the supremacy of the will; here are some quotes from him, picked off the internet: "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." "Always do what you are afraid to do." "Our greatest glory is in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail." "Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen." "Passion rebuilds the world for the youth." "Every revolution was thought first in one man's mind."

And the following (especially appealing to many young Americans): "An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory."

If Emerson stressed reliance on will, Marx discovered the link between communism and the proletariat. Addressing the same questions

Mao addressed, and writing at about the same age Mao was when he became a radical, Marx wrote:

"Where, then, is the positive possibility of a German emancipation?"

"Answer: In the formulation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong generally, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no historical, but only human, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself

from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat."



*The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*

Maoism was the synthesis of Marxism and Emersonianism, and that was the secret of its triumph in China, a country with a tiny proletariat, and its appeal to a new generation of radicals in the U.S., a country where the proletariat appears to be diminishing in numbers and coherence.

The history of Maoism is well known: After reactionaries crushed the workers' movement of 1925-27 and slaughtered Communists in the cities, Mao led a faction of the Party to the countryside. There they built a peasant army that, as everyone knows, overthrew the feudal regime and brought the CP to power. I am in awe at Mao's accomplishment in getting fastidious Chinese students, schoolteachers, librarians (he himself was a librarian), and

mandarins, more steeped in class prejudice than any other people on earth, to go and live with peasants and eat out of filthy bowls and pick lice out of their bodies. It was one of the most heroic episodes in history, and one of the greatest revolutions.

Looking back after nearly a century, it is evident now that the dust has settled that Communism in China did not bring about the “complete re-winning of man” but was the banner under which the old, reactionary, patriarchal, feudal society was overthrown and a capitalist society built up in its place. Although Mao and his comrades called themselves, and undoubtedly believed they were, Communists, the revolution they carried out was not a communist revolution, nor could it be, because it was not based in the proletariat, and when it comes to revolution, communist and proletarian are interchangeable terms.

People looking for substitutes for the working class (and consequently infatuated with Maoism) need to ponder that lesson. Sometimes an ounce of theory is worth a ton of action.

Lastly, a word on the “mass line”: The Maoist notion of the “mass line” (from the masses, to the masses) omits, and by omitting denies, the active role of the Marxist organization in refracting the mass movement into its different tendencies and then seeking to clarify the different implications of those tendencies. Instead it substitutes a notion of the Party as a neutral recorder, modestly serving the masses. It is disingenuous, even hypocritical, because while declaring its adherence to the formula “from the masses, to the masses,” it also insists that the Party is the “leading force,” invariably short-circuiting the part where the “masses” make up their own minds. (The same criticism applies to the Zapatista formula “To obey is to lead.”) The view of the Party as the “leading force” is especially popular among those who see no social force that because of its position in society can give shape to the entire movement, and therefore fall back on the Party, an organization of people of no particular class who come together voluntarily on the basis of political agreement, to perform

that function.\*\* (The Marxist organization may indeed be the “leading force,” but it has to win its position every day; during the entire period of transition from capitalist society to communism, the period sometimes known as “Socialism,” there can be no other leadership than the soviets, workers’ councils, etc. and even they can only be provisional.) The vanguard party may not be reactionary everywhere—even C.L.R. James acknowledged its value in backward countries; but it is out of place in a country where the working class is “disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.”

\*My favorite of Mao’s crimes, which I have seen nowhere in print, comes from a professor of Chinese Studies at Harvard who lived in China for years. He reported that in the last years of his life Mao became infatuated with an 18-year-old female railway worker. He brought her to live with him in the Forbidden City, where she became for a while his intermediary to the outside world. She was the one Communist officials meant when they made statements beginning, “A spokesman for Chairman Mao declared.” According to the professor, the arrangement was an open secret among those in the know. I believe it. The irony is, it may have been the only recorded case in history of the actual dictatorship of the proletariat.

\*\*I maintain that the working class in large-scale industry, transport and communications is the only social force capable of performing this function on a world scale, but that view is of course debatable and moreover its meaning in different situations is not always easy to see. The faction that emerged on top in China after 1927 did not solve the problem of what it meant (if ever they gave it serious consideration). Forty years later, workers in Shanghai declared the Shanghai Commune (a deliberate reference to the Paris Commune, based on direct democracy); shortly afterwards all talk of the Commune ended, and the Party line became the Three-in-one committees, according to which one part of the state administration was to be drawn from the existing cadres, one part from the People’s Liberation Army, and one part from the new forces—in other words, the co-opting of the

insurgents. Some Italian comrades visited China right after and asked Mao why he abandoned the Commune. His reply: China has 20 million proletarians; how do you expect them to maintain proletarian rule in a country of 680 million peasants? He may have been right. The results are there for all to see. Could total defeat have been worse than what actually transpired? (We could ask the same question about the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt.)

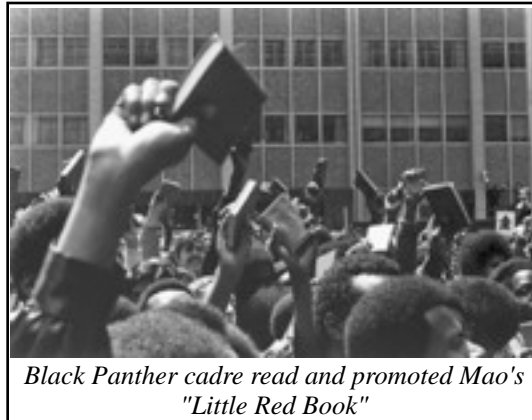
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## BLACK LIKE MAO

### *Red China and Black Revolution*

by ROBIN D.G. KELLEY & BETSY ESCH,  
from *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, Fall 1999

*"This is the era of Mao Zedong, the era of world revolution and the Afro-American's struggle for liberation is a part of an invincible world-wide movement. Chairman Mao was the first world leader to elevate our people's struggle to the fold of the world revolution." — Robert Williams, 1967*



*Black Panther cadre read and promoted Mao's "Little Red Book"*

It seems as if the Chairman, at least as a symbol, has been enjoying a resurgence in popularity among youth. Mao Zedong's image and ideas consistently turn up in a myriad of cultural and political contexts. For example, The Coup, a popular Bay Area hip hop group, restored Mao to the pantheon of black radical heroes and, in so doing, placed the black freedom struggle in an international context. In a song simply called "Dig It" (1993), The Coup refers to its members as

"The Wretched of the Earth"; tells listeners to read *The Communist Manifesto*; and conjures up revolutionary icons such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Kwame Nkrumah, H. Rap Brown, Kenya's Mau Mau movement, and Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt. In classical Maoist fashion, The Coup seizes upon Mao's most famous quote and makes it their own: "We realize that power [is] nickel plated." Even though members of The Coup were not born until after the heyday of black Maoism, "Dig It" captures the spirit of Mao in relation to the larger colonial world—a world that included African Americans. In Harlem in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed as though everyone had a copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, better known as the "Little Red Book." From time to time supporters of the Black Panther Party would be seen selling the Little Red Book on street corners as a fund-raiser for the party. And it wasn't unheard of to see a young black radical strolling down the street dressed like a Chinese peasant—except for the Afro and sunglasses, of course.

Like Africa, China was on the move and there was a general feeling that the Chinese supported the black freedom struggle; indeed, real-life blacks were calling for revolution in the name of Mao as well as Marx and Lenin. Countless black radicals of the era regarded China, not unlike Cuba or Ghana or even Paris, as the land where true

freedom might be had. It wasn't perfect, but it was much better than living in the belly of the beast. When the Black Panther leader Elaine Brown visited Beijing in fall 1970, she was pleasantly surprised by what the Chinese revolution had achieved in terms of improving people's lives: "Old and young would spontaneously give emotional testimonies, like Baptist converts, to the glories of socialism." A year later she returned with the Panther founder Huey Newton, whose

experience in China he described as a “sensation of freedom—as if a great weight had been lifted from my soul and I was able to be myself, without defense or pretense or the need for explanation. I felt absolutely free for the first time in my life—completely free among my fellow men.”

More than a decade before Brown and Newton set foot on Chinese soil, W. E. B. Du Bois regarded China as the other sleeping giant poised to lead the colored races in the worldwide struggle against imperialism. He had first traveled to China in 1936—before the war and the revolution—during an extended visit to the Soviet Union. Returning in 1959, when it was illegal to travel to China, Du Bois discovered a new country. He was struck by the transformation of the Chinese, in particular what he perceived as the emancipation of women, and he left convinced that China would lead the underdeveloped nations on the road toward socialism. “China after long centuries,” he told an audience of Chinese communists attending his ninety-first birthday celebration, “has arisen to her feet and leapt forward. Africa arise, and stand straight, speak and think! Act! Turn from the West and your slavery and humiliation for the last 500 years and face the rising sun.”



*African-American writer and civil rights activist  
W.E.B. Du Bois meets Chairman Mao*

How black radicals came to see China as a beacon of Third World revolution and Mao Zedong thought as a guidepost is a complicated and fascinating story involving literally dozens of organizations and covering much of the world—from the ghettos of North America to the African countryside. The text following thus does not pretend to be comprehensive; instead, we have set out in this essay to explore the impact that Maoist thought and, more generally, the People’s Republic of China have had on black radical movements from the 1950s through at least the mid-1970s. In addition, our aim is to explore how radical black nationalism has shaped debates within Maoist or “anti-revisionist” organizations in the United States. It is our contention that China offered black radicals a “colored” or Third World Marxist model that enabled them to challenge a white and Western vision of class struggle—a model that they shaped and reshaped to suit their own cultural and political realities. Although China’s role was contradictory and problematic in many respects, the fact that Chinese peasants, as opposed to the European proletariat, made a socialist revolution and carved out a position in world politics distinct from the Soviet and U.S. camps endowed black radicals with a deeper sense of revolutionary importance and power. Finally, not only did Mao prove to blacks the world over that they need not wait for “objective conditions” to make revolution, but also his elevation of cultural struggle profoundly shaped debates surrounding black arts and politics.

### **The Long March**

Anyone familiar with Maoism knows that it was never a full-blown ideology meant to replace Marxism-Leninism. On the contrary, if anything it marked a turn against the “revisionism” of the post-Stalin Soviet model. What Mao did contribute to Marxist thought grew directly out of the Chinese revolution of 1949. Mao’s insistence that the revolutionary capacity of the peasantry wasn’t dependent on the urban proletariat was particularly attractive to black radicals skeptical of the idea that they must wait for the objective conditions to launch their revolution. Central to Maoism is the idea that Marxism can be

(must be) reshaped to the requirements of time and place, and that practical work, ideas, and leadership stem from the masses in movement and not from a theory created in the abstract or produced out of other struggles. In practice, this meant that true revolutionaries must possess a revolutionary will to win. The notion of revolutionary will cannot be underestimated, especially for those in movements that were isolated and attacked on all sides. Armed with the proper theory, the proper ethical behavior, and the will, revolutionaries in Mao's words can "move mountains." Perhaps this is why the Chinese communist leader Lin Biao could write in the foreword to *Quotations* that "once Mao Zedong's thought is grasped by the broad masses, it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power."

Both Mao and Lin Biao recognized that the source of this "atom bomb" could be found in the struggles of Third World nationalists. In an age when the cold war helped usher in the nonaligned movement, when leaders of the "colored" world were converging in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 to try to chart an independent path toward development, the Chinese hoped to lead the former colonies on the road to socialism. The Chinese (backed by Lin Biao's theory of the "new democratic revolution") not only endowed nationalist struggles with revolutionary value but also reached out specifically to Africa and people of African descent. Two years after the historic Bandung meeting of nonaligned nations—China formed the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization. Mao not only invited W.E.B. Du Bois to spend his ninetieth birthday in China after he had been declared a public enemy by the U.S. state, but three weeks prior to the great March on Washington in 1963, Mao issued a statement criticizing American racism and casting the African American freedom movement as part of the worldwide struggle against imperialism. "The evil system of colonialism and imperialism," Mao stated, "arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people." A decade later, the novelist

John Oliver Killens was impressed by the fact that several of his books, as well as works by other black writers, had been translated into Chinese and were widely read by students. Everywhere he went, it seemed, he met young intellectuals and workers who were "tremendously interested in the Black movement and in how the art and literature of Black folks reflected that movement."



"Negroes with guns" Robert and Mabel Williams

The status of people of color served as a powerful political tool in mobilizing support from Africans and African-descended people. In 1963, for example, Chinese delegates in Moshi, Tanzania, proclaimed that the Russians had no business in Africa because of their status as white. The Chinese, on the other hand, were not only part of the colored world but also unlike Europeans they never took part in the slave trade. Of course, most of these claims served essentially to facilitate alliance building. The fact is that African slaves could be found in Guangzhou during the twelfth century, and African students in communist China occasionally complained of racism. (Indeed, after Mao's death racial clashes on college campuses occurred more frequently, notably in Shanghai in 1979, in Nanjing in 1980, and in Tianjin in 1986.) Furthermore, Chinese foreign policy toward the black world was often driven more by strategic considerations than by a commitment to Third World revolutionary movements, especially after the Sino-Soviet split. China's anti-Soviet position resulted in foreign policy decisions that ultimately undermined their standing with certain African liberation movements. In southern Africa, for example, the Chinese backed

movements that also received support from the apartheid regime of South Africa.

Yet, Mao's ideas still gained an audience among black radicals. While Maoist projects in the United States never achieved the kind of following enjoyed by Soviet-identified communist parties in the 1930s, they did take root in this country. And like a hundred flowers, Mao's ideas bloomed into a confusing mosaic of radical voices all seemingly at war with each other. Not surprisingly, at the center of the debate over the character of class struggle in the United States was the "Negro Question": that is, what role would blacks play in world revolution.

### The World Black Revolution

Maoism in the United States was not exported from China. If anything, for those Maoists schooled in the Old Left the source of Maoism can be found in Khrushchev's revelations at the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party Soviet Union in 1956 that prompted an anti-revisionist movement throughout the pro-Stalinist Left. Out of the debates within the Communist Party, USA emerged several organizations pledging to push the communists back into the Stalinist camp, including the Provisional Organizing Committee (POC) in 1958, Hammer and Steel in 1960, and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) in 1965.



The Progressive Labor Party, an outgrowth of the Progressive Labor movement founded three years earlier, was initially led by ex-Communist Party members who believed that the Chinese had the correct position. Insisting that black workers were the "key revolutionary force" in the proletarian

revolution, the PLP attracted a few outstanding black activists such as John Harris in Los Angeles and Bill Epton in Harlem. Epton had become somewhat of a cause célèbre after he was arrested for "criminal anarchy" during the 1964 rebellion in Harlem. Two years later, the PLP helped organize a student strike to establish a black studies program at San Francisco State University, and its Black Liberation Commission published a pamphlet titled *Black Liberation Now!* that attempted to place all of these urban rebellions within a global context. But by 1968, the PLP abandoned its support for "revolutionary" nationalism and concluded that all forms of nationalism are reactionary. As a result of its staunch anti-nationalism, the PLP opposed affirmative action and black and Latino trade union caucuses—positions that undermined the PLP's relationship with black community activists. In fact, the PLP's connections to the New Left in general were damaged in part because of its attack on the Black Panther Party and on the black student movement. Members of the PLP were thrown out of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1969 with the help of several radical nationalist groups, including the Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Brown Berets.

Nevertheless, the predominantly white Marxist-Leninist-Maoist parties were not the primary vehicle for the Maoist-inspired black Left. Most black radicals of the late 1950s and early 1960s discovered China by way of anti-colonial struggles in Africa and the Cuban revolution. Ghana's independence in 1957 was cause to celebrate, and the CIA-sponsored assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo inspired protest from all black activist circles. The Cuban revolution and Fidel Castro's infamous residency at Harlem's Hotel Theresa during his visit to the United Nations brought black people face-to-face with an avowed socialist who extended a hand of solidarity to people of color the world over. Indeed, dozens of black radicals not only publicly defended the Cuban revolution but also visited Cuba through groups like the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. One of these visitors was Harold Cruse, himself an ex-Communist still committed to Marxism. He

believed the Cuban, Chinese, and African revolutions could revitalize radical thought because they demonstrated the revolutionary potential of nationalism. In a provocative essay published in the *New Leader* in 1962, Cruse wrote that the new generation was looking to the former colonial world for its leaders and insights, and among its heroes was Mao: “Already they have a pantheon of modern heroes—Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure in Africa; Fidel Castro in Latin America; Malcolm X, the Muslim leader, in New York; Robert Williams in the South; and Mao Zedong in China. These men seem heroic to the Afro-Americans not because of their political philosophy, but because they were either former colonials who achieved complete independence, or because, like Malcolm X, they dared to look the white community in the face and say: ‘We don’t think your civilization is worth the effort of any black man to try to integrate into.’ This to many Afro-Americans is an act of defiance that is truly revolutionary.”

In another essay, which appeared in *Studies on the Left* in 1962, Cruse was even more explicit about the global character of revolutionary nationalism. He argued that black people in the United States were living under domestic colonialism and that their struggles must be seen as part of the worldwide anti-colonial movement. “The failure of American Marxists,” he wrote, “to understand the bond between the Negro and the colonial peoples of the world has led to their failure to develop theories that would be of value to Negroes in the United States.” In his view, the former colonies were the vanguard of the revolution, and at the forefront of this new socialist revolution were Cuba and China.

Revolutions in Cuba, Africa, and China had a similar effect on Baraka, who a decade and a half later would found the Maoist-inspired Revolutionary Communist League. Touched by his visit to Cuba and the assassination of Lumumba, Baraka began contributing essays to a new magazine called *African Revolution* edited by the Algerian nationalist leader Ahmed Ben Bella. As Baraka explained it: “India and China had gotten their formal independence before the coming of the 50s,

and by the time the 50s had ended, there were many independent African nations (though with varying degrees of neocolonialism). Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah had hoisted the black star over the statehouse in Accra, and Nkrumah’s pronouncements and word of his deeds were glowing encouragement to colored people all over the world. When the Chinese exploded their first A-bomb I wrote a poem saying, in effect, that *time* for the colored peoples had re-begun.”



Robert Williams meets Chairman Mao

The Ghana-China matrix is perhaps best embodied in the career of Vickie Garvin, a stalwart radical who traveled in Harlem’s black Left circles during the postwar period. Raised in a black working-class family in New York, Garvin spent her summers working in the garment industry to supplement her family’s income. As early as high school she became active in black protest politics, supporting efforts by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. to obtain better-paying jobs for African Americans in Harlem and creating black history clubs dedicated to building library resources. After earning her B.A. in political science from Hunter College and her M.A. in economics from Smith College in Northampton, she spent the war years working for the National War Labor Board and continued on as an organizer for the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA-CIO) and as national research director and co-chair of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. During the

postwar purges of the Left in the CIO, Garvin was a strong voice of protest and a sharp critic of the CIO's failure to organize in the South. As executive secretary of the New York chapter of the National Negro Labor Council and vice president of the national organization, Garvin established close ties to Malcolm X and helped him arrange part of his tour of Africa.



*Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana with Chairman Mao*

Garvin joined the black intellectual exodus to Nkrumah's Ghana where she initially roomed with the poet Maya Angelou and eventually moved into a house next to Du Bois. She spent two years in Accra surrounded by several key black intellectuals and artists, including Julian Mayfield, the artist Tom Feelings, and the cartoonist Ollie Harrington. As a radical who taught conversational English to the Cuban, Algerian, and Chinese diplomatic core in Ghana, it was hard *not* to develop a deep internationalist outlook. Garvin's conversations with Du Bois during his last days in Ghana only reinforced her internationalism and kindled her interest in the Chinese revolution. Indeed, through Du Bois Garvin got a job as a "polisher" for the English translations of the *Peking Review* as well as a teaching position at the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute. She remained in China from 1964 to 1970, building bridges between the black freedom struggle, the African independence movements, and the Chinese revolution.

For Huey Newton, the future founder of the Black Panther Party, the African revolution seemed even less crucial than events in Cuba and China. As a student at Merritt College in

the early 1960s he read a little existentialism, began attending meetings sponsored by the Progressive Labor Party, and supported the Cuban revolution. Not surprisingly, Newton began to read Marxist literature voraciously. Mao, in particular, left a lasting impression: "My conversion was complete when I read the four volumes of Mao Zedong to learn more about the Chinese Revolution." Thus well before the founding of the Black Panther Party, Newton was steeped in Mao Zedong thought as well as in the writings of Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. "Mao and Fanon and Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by a philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint. They had suffered a holdup by gangsters, and rape; for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force."

The Chinese and Cubans' willingness "to meet force with force" also made their revolutions attractive to black radicals in the age of nonviolent passive resistance. Of course, the era had its share of armed struggle in the South, with groups like the Deacons for Defense and Justice and Gloria Richardson's Cambridge movement defending nonviolent protesters when necessary. But the figure who best embodied black traditions of armed self-defense was Robert Williams, a hero to the new wave of black internationalists whose importance almost rivaled that of Malcolm X. As a former U.S. Marine with extensive military training, Williams earned notoriety in 1957 for forming armed self-defense groups in Monroe, North Carolina, to fight the Ku Klux Klan. Two years later, Williams's statement that black people must "meet violence with violence" as the only way to end injustice in an uncivilized South led to his suspension as president of the Monroe chapter of the NAACP.

Williams's break with the NAACP and his open advocacy of armed self defense pushed him further Left and into the orbit of the Socialist Workers Party, the Workers World Party, and among some members of the old CPUSA. However, Williams had had contact with communists since his days as a Detroit auto worker in the 1940s. He not only read the *Daily Worker* but also published a story in



its pages called “Some Day I Am Going Back South.” Williams was also somewhat of an intellectual dabbler and autodidact, having studied at West Virginia State College, North Carolina College, and Johnson C. Smith College. Nevertheless, his more recent Left associations led him to Cuba and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Upon returning from his first trip in 1960, he hoisted the Cuban flag in his backyard and ran a series of articles in his mimeographed publication, *Crusader*, about the transformation of working peoples’ lives in Cuba as a result of the revolution. In one of his editorials published in August 1960, Williams insisted that African Americans’ fight for freedom “is related to the Africans,’ the Cubans,’ all of Latin Americans’ and the Asians’ struggles for self-determination.” His support of the Chinese revolution was evident in the pages of *Crusader* as well, emphasizing the importance of China as a beacon of strength for social justice movements the world over. Like Baraka, Williams took note of China’s detonation of an atomic bomb in 1960 as a historic occasion for the oppressed. “With the bomb,” he wrote. “China will be respected and will add a powerful voice to those who already plead for justice for black as well as white.”

By 1961, as a result of trumped-up kidnapping charges and a federal warrant for his arrest, Williams and his family were forced to flee the country and seek political asylum in Cuba. During the next four years, Cuba became Williams’s base for promoting black world revolution and elaborating an internationalist ideology that embraced black nationalism and Third World solidarity. With support from Fidel Castro, Williams hosted a radio show called *Radio*

*Free Dixie* that was directed at African Americans, continued to edit *Crusader* (which by now had progressed from a mimeograph to a full-blown magazine), and completed his book *Negroes with Guns* (1962). He did not, however, identify himself as a Marxist. At the same time, he rejected the “nationalist” label calling himself an “internationalist” instead: “That is, I’m interested in the problems of Africa, of Asia, and of Latin America. I believe that we all have the same struggle; a struggle for liberation.”

Although Williams recalls having had good relations with Castro, political differences over race did lead to a rift between him and the Cuban communists. “The Party,” Williams remembered, “maintained that it was strictly a class issue and that once the class problem had been solved through a socialist administration, racism would be abolished.”

Williams not only disagreed but had moved much closer to Che Guevara, who embodied much of what Williams had been advocating all along: Third World solidarity, the use of armed struggle, and a deep and unwavering interest in the African revolution. Indeed, Che’s leanings toward China undoubtedly made an impact on Williams’s decision to leave Cuba for Beijing. Given Che’s break with Fidel and the solidification of Cuba’s links to the Soviet Union, Williams saw no need to stay. He and his family packed up and moved to China in 1966.



As an exiled revolutionary in China during its most tumultuous era, Williams nevertheless predicted that urban rebellions in America’s ghettos would transform the country. Although one might argue that by publishing *Crusader* from Cuba and then China Williams had very limited contact with the black

freedom movement in the United States, his magazine reached a new generation of young black militants and promoted the vision of black world revolution articulated by critics such as Harold Cruse. The fact is, *Crusader* and Williams's own example compelled a small group of black radical intellectuals and activists to form what might loosely be called the first black Maoist-influenced organization in history: the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).



### **The Revolutionary Action Movement and the Coming Black Revolution**

Williams's flight to Cuba partly inspired the creation of RAM. In Ohio around 1961, black members of Students for a Democratic Society as well as activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) met in a small group to discuss the significance of Williams's work in Monroe and his subsequent exile. Led by Donald Freeman, a black student at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland, the group's main core consisted of a newly formed organization, named "Challenge," made up of Central State College students at Wilberforce. Members of Challenge were especially taken with Harold Cruse's essay "Revolutionary Nationalism

and the Afro-American," which was circulated widely among young black militants. Inspired by Cruse's interpretation of the global importance of the black freedom struggle, Freeman hoped to turn Challenge into a revolutionary nationalist movement akin to the Nation of Islam but that would adopt the direct action tactics of SNCC. After a lengthy debate Challenge members decided to dissolve the organization in spring 1962 and form the Revolutionary Action Committee (originally called the "Reform" Action Movement" so as not to scare the administration), with its primary leaders being Freeman, Max Stanford, and Wanda Marshall. A few months later they moved their base to Philadelphia, began publishing a bi-monthly paper called *Black America* and a one-page newsletter called *RAM Speaks*, and made plans to build a national movement oriented toward revolutionary nationalism, youth organizing, and armed self-defense.

Freeman and RAM members in Cleveland continued to work publicly through the Afro-American Institute, an activist policy-oriented think tank formed in fall 1962. Under Freeman's directorship, its board—dubbed the Soul Circle—consisted of a small group of black men with ties to community organizations, labor, civil rights, and student groups. Board members such as Henry Glover, Arthur Evans, Nate Bryant, and Hanif Wahab gave lectures on African history and politics, organized forums to discuss the future of the civil rights movement, black participation in Cleveland politics, and the economic conditions of urban blacks. The institute even recruited the great drummer Max Roach to help organize a panel titled "The Role of the Black Artist in the Struggle for Freedom." Institute members also used random leaflets and pamphlets to influence black community thinking on a number of local and international issues. Addressed "To Whom It May Concern," these short broadsides were intended to stimulate discussion and offer the black community a position on pressing topics such as "elections, urban renewal, black economic subservience, the 'arms race,' and the struggle in the South." Within a year, the institute graduated from printing leaflets to publishing to a full-

blown newsletter titled *Afropinion*. Through the Afro-American Institute, RAM members in Cleveland worked with CORE activists and other community organizers to demand improvements in hospital care for black patients and to protest the exclusion of African and Afro-American history from the public school curriculum. The institute's most important campaign of 1963 was the defense of Mae Mallory, a black woman who was being held in the county jail in Cleveland for her association with Robert Williams in Monroe, North Carolina. Soon after Williams's flight to Cuba, Mallory was arrested in Ohio and awaited extradition charges. The institute and its allies, including the Nation of Islam in Cleveland, petitioned the governor of Ohio to revoke the warrant of extradition, and they also organized a mass demonstration in front of the county jail demanding Mallory's immediate release.

In Northern California, RAM grew primarily out of the Afro-American Association. Founded by Donald Warden in 1962, the Afro-American Association consisted of students from the University of California at Berkeley and from Merritt College—many of whom, such as Leslie and Jim Lacy, Cedric Robinson, Ernest Allen, and Huey Newton, would go on to play important roles as radical activists and intellectuals. In Los Angeles, the president of the Afro-American Association was a young man named Ron Everett, who later changed his name to Maulana Karenga and went on to found the United Slaves (U.S.) organization. The Afro-American Association quickly developed a reputation as a group of militant intellectuals willing to debate anyone. By challenging professors, debating groups such as the Young Socialist Alliance, and giving public lectures on black history and culture, these young activists left a deep impression on fellow students as well as on the black community. In the East Bay, where the tradition of soapbox speakers died in the 1930s (with the exception of the individual campaigns by the communist-led Civil Rights Congress during the early 1950s), the Afro-American Association was walking and talking proof that a vibrant, highly visible militant intellectual culture could exist.



Meanwhile, the Progressive Labor movement (PL) had begun sponsoring trips to Cuba and recruited several radical black students in the East Bay to go along. Among them was Ernest Allen, a UC Berkeley transfer from Merritt College who had been forced out of the Afro-American Association. A working-class kid from Oakland, Allen was part of a generation of black radicals whose dissatisfaction with the civil rights movement's strategy of nonviolent, passive resistance drew them closer to Malcolm X and Third World liberation movements. Not surprisingly, through his trip to Cuba in 1964 he discovered the Revolutionary Action Movement. Allen's travel companions included a contingent of black militants from Detroit: Luke Tripp, Charles ("Mao") Johnson, Charles Simmons, and General Baker. All were members of the student group Uhuru, and all went on to play key roles in the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Incredibly, the RAM leader Max Stanford was already on the island visiting Robert Williams. When it was time to go back to the states, Allen and the Detroit group were committed to building RAM. Allen stopped in Cleveland to meet with RAM members on his cross-country bus trip back to Oakland.

Armed with copies of Robert Williams's *Crusader* magazine and related RAM material, Allen returned to Oakland intent on establishing RAM's presence in the East Bay. As a result, activists such as Isaac Moore, Kenn Freeman (Mamadou Lumumba), Bobby Seale (future founder of the Black Panther Party), and Doug Allen (Ernie's brother) established a base at Merritt College through the Soul Students Advisory Council. Although the group never grew larger than a handful of people, its intellectual and cultural presence was broadly felt. Allen, Freeman, and others founded a journal called *Soulbook: The Revolutionary Journal of the Black World*, which published prose and poetry that is best described as Left black nationalist in orientation. Freeman, in particular, was highly respected among RAM activists and widely read. He constantly pushed his members to think about black struggle in a global context. The editors of *Soulbook* also developed ties with Old Left black radicals, most notably the communist Harry Haywood whose work they published in an early issue.



Although RAM had established itself in Northern California and in Cleveland, by 1964 Philadelphia appeared to be RAM's "home base." It was in Philadelphia, after all, that RAM maintained an open existence, operating under its own name rather than a variety of "front" organizations. The strength of the Philadelphia chapter has much to do with the fact that it was also the home of Max

Stanford, RAM's national field chairman. It was out of Philadelphia that RAM published a bimonthly paper called *Black America* and a one-page newsletter called *RAM Speaks*; made plans to build a national movement oriented toward revolutionary nationalism, youth organizing, and armed self-defense; and recruited several Philadelphia activists to the group, including Ethel Johnson (who had also worked with Robert Williams in Monroe), Stan Daniels, and Playthell Benjamin. Subsequently, RAM recruited a group of young Philadelphia militants who would go on to play key roles in radical organizations, including Michael Simmons, one of the authors of SNCC's famous "Black Consciousness Paper," whose resistance to the draft resulted in his serving a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence, and Tony Monteiro, who went on to become a leading national figure in the CPUSA during the 1970s and 1980s.

The RAM organization represented the first serious and sustained attempt in the postwar period to wed Marxism, black nationalism, and Third World internationalism into a coherent revolutionary program. In Max Stanford's view, RAM "attempted to apply Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong thought" to the conditions of black people and "advanced the theory that the black liberation movement in the United States was part of the vanguard of the world socialist revolution." Young RAM militants sought political guidance from a number of former black communists who had either been expelled for "ultra-leftism" or "bourgeois nationalism," or had left the party because of its "revisionism." Among this group of elders were Harold Cruse, Harry Haywood, Abner Berry, and "Queen Mother" Audley Moore. Indeed, Moore would go on to become one of RAM's most important mentors on the East Coast, offering members training in black nationalist thought and in Marxism. The Queen Mother's home, which she affectionately called Mount Addis Ababa, practically served as a school for a new generation of young black radicals. Moore had founded the African-American Party of National Liberation in 1963, which formed a provisional government and elected Robert Williams as premier in exile. These young black radicals also turned to Detroit's

legendary ex-Trotskyists James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, the former comrades of C.L.R. James whose Marxist and pan-Africanist writings greatly influenced RAM members as well as other New Left activists.

Although RAM as a movement never received the glorious publicity bestowed on groups like the Black Panther Party, its influence far exceeded its numbers—not unlike the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) four decades earlier. Indeed, like the African Blood Brotherhood, RAM remained largely an underground organization that devoted more time to agitprop work than actual organizing. Leaders such as Max Stanford identified with the Chinese peasant rebels who led the Communist Party to victory. They seized upon Mao's famous line—"The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue"—and they took it quite literally by advocating armed insurrection and drawing inspiration and ideas directly from Robert Williams's theory of guerrilla warfare in the urban United States. The leaders of RAM actually believed that such a war was not only possible but could be won in ninety days. The combination of mass chaos and revolutionary discipline was the key to victory. The Fall 1964 issue of *Black America* predicted Armageddon:

*"Black men and women in the Armed Forces will defect and come over to join the Black liberation forces. Whites who claim they want to help the revolution will be sent into the white communities to divide them, fight the*

*fascists and frustrate the efforts of the counter-revolutionary forces. Chaos will be everywhere and with the breakdown of mass communications, mutiny will occur in great numbers in all facets of the oppressors' government. The stock market will fall; Wall Street will stop functioning; Washington, D.C. will be torn apart by riots. Officials everywhere will run-run for their lives. The George Lincoln Rockwellers, Kennedys, Vanderbilts, Hunts, Johnsons, Wallaces, Barnetts, etc., will be the first to go. The revolution will 'strike by night and spare none.'...The Black Revolution will use sabotage in the cities, knocking out the electrical power first, then transportation and guerrilla warfare in the countryside in the South. With the cities powerless, the oppressor will be helpless."*



*Martyred Congolese Maoist Pierre Mulele*

The revolution was clearly seen as a man's job since women barely figured in the equation. Indeed, one of the striking facts about the history of the anti-revisionist left is how male dominated it remained. Although Wanda Marshall had been one of the founding members of RAM, she did not hold a national leadership post in 1964. Besides promoting the creation of "women's leagues" whose purpose would be "to organize black women who work in white homes," RAM remained relatively silent on women's liberation until the later 1960s, when the organization had begun to collapse. In 1969,

RAM issued a statement on the role of "Soul Sisters" in the movement. An auxiliary of RAM, the Soul Sisters were to be trained in self-defense and work to organize the female youth, but they were also supposed to educate,

care for, and positively influence potential black male revolutionaries. Their immediate tasks included “influencing non-militant Negro men to involve themselves into organized self-defense,” promote efforts to keep “white women away from all areas of Negro political and sexual life,” report any incidents of “harassment by police or any other *white* men in the ghetto or the schools,” and “promote the image of Robert Williams as the international symbol of Negro freedom struggle.” The two most telling tasks that revealed the subordinate status of women involved training “girls for taking a census of the black population” and having them “design and buy sweaters for an identity symbol.”

The masculinist orientation of RAM should not be surprising given the masculinist orientation of black nationalist (not to mention white New Left) organizations in the 1960s, whether they were advocating civil rights or some incipient version of Black Power. The masculinism of RAM, however, was heightened by the fact that its leaders saw themselves as urban guerrillas—as members of an all-black version of Mao’s Red Army. Not all RAM members saw themselves in this way, but those who did were deeply committed to a set of revolutionary ethics that Mao laid down for his own party cadre and for members of the People’s Army. We see this very clearly in RAM’S “Code of Cadres,” a set of highly didactic rules of conduct that members were expected to live by. Some examples of this code are as follows:

*“A Revolutionary nationalist maintains the highest respect for all authority within the party....”*

*“A Revolutionary nationalist cannot be corrupted by money, honors or any other personal gains....”*

*“A Revolutionary nationalist will*

*unhesitatingly subordinate his personal interest to those of the vanguard [without] hesitation....”*

*“A Revolutionary nationalist will maintain the highest level of morality and will never take as much as a needle or single piece of thread from the masses—Brothers and Sisters will maintain the utmost respect for one another and will never misuse or take advantage of one another for personal gain—and will never misinterpret, the doctrine of revolutionary nationalism for any reason....”*

The code’s similarities to the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* are striking. Indeed, the last example comes straight out of Mao’s “Three Main Rules of Discipline,” which urges cadre to “not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses.” Selflessness and total commitment to the masses is another theme that dominates *Quotations*. Again, the comparisons are noteworthy: “At no time and in no circumstances,” says Mao, “should a Communist place his personal interests first; he should subordinate them to the interests of the nation and of the masses. Hence, selfishness, slacking, corruption, seeking the limelight, and so on are most contemptible, while selflessness, working with all one’s energy, whole-hearted devotion to public duty, and quiet hard work will command respect.”

Maoism’s emphasis on revolutionary ethics and moral transformation, in theory at least, resonated with black religious traditions (as well as with American Protestantism more generally), and like the Nation of Islam it preached self-restraint, order, and discipline. It’s quite possible that in the midst of a counterculture that embodied elements of hedonism and drug use, a new wave of student and working-class radicals found Maoist ethics attractive. (Indeed, many in the



New Left and in the women's liberation movement also found Mao's idea of revolutionary ethics attractive.) Upon his return from China, Robert Williams—in many respects RAM's founding father—insisted that all young black activists “undergo personal and moral transformation. There is a need for a stringent revolutionary code of moral ethics. Revolutionaries are instruments of righteousness.” For black revolutionaries, the moral and ethical dimension of Mao's thought centered on the notion of personal transformation. It was a familiar lesson embodied in the lives of Malcolm X and (later) George Jackson—namely, the idea that one possesses the revolutionary will to transform himself. (These narratives are almost exclusively male despite the growing number of memoirs by radical black women.) Whether or not RAM members lived by the “Code of Cadres,” Maoist ethics ultimately served to reinforce Malcolm's status as a revolutionary role model.



The twelve-point program created by RAM called for the development of freedom schools, national black student organizations, rifle clubs, black farmer cooperatives (not just for economic development but to keep “community and guerrilla forces going for a while”), and a liberation guerrilla army made up of youth and the unemployed. They also placed special emphasis on internationalism—on pledging support for national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well as the adoption of “pan-African socialism.” In line with Cruse's seminal essay, RAM members saw themselves as colonial

subjects fighting a “colonial war at home.” As Stanford wrote in an internal document titled “Projects and Problems of the Revolutionary Movement” (1964), “RAM's position is that the Afro-American is not a citizen of the U.S.A., denied his rights, but rather he is a colonial subject enslaved. This position says that the black people in the U.S.A. are a captive nation suppressed and that their fight is not for integration into the white community but one of national liberation.”

As colonial subjects with a right to self-determination, RAM saw Afro-America as a de facto member of the nonaligned nations. They even identified themselves as part of the “Bandung world,” going so far as to hold a conference in November 1964 in Nashville titled “The Black Revolution's Relationship to the Bandung World.” In a 1965 article published in RAM's journal *Black America*, the group started to develop a theory called Bandung Humanism, or Revolutionary Black Internationalism, which argued that the battle between Western imperialism and the Third World—more than the battle between labor and capital—represented the most fundamental contradiction in our time. The organization linked the African American freedom struggle with what was happening in China, Zanzibar, Cuba, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Algeria, and it characterized its work as part of Mao's international strategy of encircling Western capitalist countries and challenging imperialism. After 1966, however, the term Bandung Humanism was dropped entirely and replaced with Black Internationalism.

Precisely what was meant by Black Internationalism was laid out in an incredibly bold thirty-six-page pamphlet, *The World Black Revolution*, which was published by RAM in 1966. Loosely patterned on *The Communist Manifesto*, the pamphlet identifies strongly with China against both the capitalist West and the Soviet Empire. The “emergence of Revolutionary China began to polarize caste and class contradictions within the world, in both the bourgeoisie imperialist camp and also in the European bourgeois communist-socialist camp.” In other words, China was the wedge that sharpened the

contradictions between colonial peoples and the West. Rejecting the idea that socialist revolution would arise in the developed countries of the West, RAM insisted that the only true revolutionary solution was the “dictatorship of the world by the Black Underclass through World Black Revolution.” In this, of course, they were working from today’s definitions: RAM used “underclass” to encompass all peoples of color in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere; the “Black Underclass” was merely a synonym for the colonial world. China was in a bitter fight to defend its own freedom. Now the rest of the “black” world must follow suit: “The Black Underclass has only one alternative to free itself of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and neocolonialism; that is to completely destroy Western (bourgeois) civilization (the cities of the world) through a World Black Revolution[,] and establishing a Revolutionary World Black Dictatorship can bring about the end of exploitation of man by mankind and the new revolutionary world [can] be created.” To coordinate this revolution, RAM called for the creation of a Black International and the creation of a “People’s Liberation Army on a world scale.”

For all of its strident nationalism, *The World Black Revolution* concludes that black nationalism “is really internationalism.” Only by demolishing white nationalism and white power can liberation be achieved for everyone. Not only will national boundaries be eliminated with the “dictatorship of the Black Underclass,” but “the need for nationalism in its aggressive form will be eliminated.” This is a pretty remarkable statement given RAM’s social and ideological roots. But rather than represent a unified position, the statement reflects the various tensions that persisted throughout RAM’s history. On one side were nationalists who felt that revolutionaries should fight for the black nation first and build socialism separate from the rest of the United States. On the other side were socialists like James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs who wanted to know who would rule the “white” nation and what such a presence would mean for black freedom. They also rejected efforts to resurrect the “Black Nation” thesis—the old communist line that

people in the black-majority counties of the South (the “black belt”) have a right to secede from the union. The Boggses contended that the real source of power was in the cities and not the rural black belt.



Guinea-Bissauan revolutionary Amil Cabral

After years as an underground organization, a series of “exposés” in *Life* magazine and *Esquire* that ran in 1966 identified RAM as one of the leading extremist groups “plotting a war on ‘white.’” The “Peking-backed” group was not only considered armed and dangerous, but “impressively well read in revolutionary literature—from Marat and Lenin to Mao, Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon.” The Harlem Branch of the Progressive Labor Party responded to the articles with a pamphlet titled *The Plot Against Black America*, which argued that China is not financing revolution, just setting a revolutionary example by its staunch anti-imperialism. The real causes of black rebellion, they insisted, can be found in the conditions of ghetto life. Not surprisingly, these highly publicized articles were followed by a series of police raids on the homes of RAM members in Philadelphia and New York City. In June 1967, RAM members were rounded up and charged with conspiracy to instigate a riot, poison police officers with potassium cyanide, and assassinate Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young. A year later, under the repressive atmosphere of the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), RAM transformed itself into the Black Liberation Party, or the African American Party of National Liberation. By 1969, RAM had pretty much dissolved itself, though its members opted to “melt back into



the community and infiltrate existing Black organizations,” continue to push the twelve-point program, and develop study groups that focused on the “Science of Black Internationalism, and the thought of Chairman Rob [Robert Williams].”



The COINTELPRO operations only partly explain the dissolution of RAM. Some of its members moved on to other organizations, such as the Republic of New Africa and the Black Panther Party. But RAM'S declining membership and ultimate demise can be partly attributed to strategic errors on its part. Indeed, its members' understanding of the current situation in the ghettos and their specific strategies of mobilization suggest that they were not very good Maoists after all. Mao's insistence on the protracted nature of revolution was not taken to heart; at one point they suggested that the war for liberation would probably take ninety days. And because RAM'S leaders focused their work on confronting the state head on and attacking black leaders whom they deemed reformists, they failed to build a strong base in black urban communities. Furthermore, despite their staunch internationalism, they did not reach out to other oppressed "nationalities" in the United States. Nevertheless, what RAM and Robert Williams did do was to elevate

revolutionary black nationalism to a position of critical theoretical importance for the anti-revisionist Left in general. They provided an organizational and practical example of what Harold Cruse, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X were trying to advance in their writings and speeches. More importantly, they found theoretical justification for revolutionary black nationalism in Mao Zedong thought, especially after the launching of the Cultural Revolution in China.

### **“Finally Got the News”: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers**

Although RAM might have been on the decline, its leaders continued to shape some of the most radical movements of the decade. Several leading figures in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit had been leaders in RAM, most notably Luke Tripp, General Baker, Charles (Mao) Johnson and, later, Ernie Allen. Tripp, Baker, Johnson, and John Watson were Wayne State University students active in the nationalist collective Uhuru, which in some respects served as the public face of RAM much like Challenge had done in Ohio and the Soul Students Advisory Council had done in California. Watson, who apparently was not in RAM, had worked with a number of organizations, including the Freedom Now Party (an all-black political party that endorsed the socialist Clifton DeBerry for president in 1964), SNCC, and the Negro Action Committee. Upon General Baker's return from Cuba, he moved even deeper into Detroit's labor and Left circles, taking a job as a production worker at the Chrysler-Dodge main plant and taking classes on Marx's *Capital* with Marty Glaberman, a veteran radical of the Johnson-Forest tendency (a breakaway group from the Socialist Workers Party led by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya that included James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs).

The *Inner City Voice (ICV)*, which Watson began editing after the Detroit riots in 1967, was conceived as a revolutionary publication that could build links between black radicals, particularly students and labor activists, with the broader black community. Having studied

the works of Lenin, and to a lesser degree Stalin and Mao, the militants who started *ICV* regarded the newspaper as “the focus of a permanent organization [that] could provide a bridge between the peaks of activity.” And they tried to live up to this injunction: in 1968 Baker organized a discussion group consisting largely of Dodge main plant workers at the *ICV*’s office. Not long afterward—the Vday after May Day, 1968, to be exact—four thousand workers at the Dodge main plant walked out in a wildcat strike, the first in that factory in fourteen years and the first organized and led entirely by black workers. The strike was over the speedup of the assembly line, which in the previous week had increased from forty-nine to fifty-eight cars per hour. Black radical trade unionists characterized the speedups as part of a broader process of “niggermation,” or as one worker explained it, the practice of hiring one black worker to do the work formerly done by three white workers. In spite of the fact that many pickets were white, the greatest company reprisals were against black workers. General Baker, accused of leading the strike, was among those summarily fired. In an “Open Letter to Chrysler Corporation,” Baker wrote: “In this day and age...the leadership of a wildcat strike is a badge of honor and courage....You have made the decision to do battle with me and therefore to do battle with the entire Black community in this city, this state, this country and in this world which I am part of. Black people of the world are united in a common struggle.”

No matter what role Baker played in the walkout, it is clear that the individuals

involved in the *ICV* study group were at the forefront of the strike. This core of radical workers around Baker and the *ICV* group gave birth to DRUM—the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. The spirit and militancy that DRUM represented spread to other plants: ELRUM rose out of the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle Plant, JARUM was started at Chrysler Jefferson Avenue, MERUM at Mound Road Engine, CADRUM at Cadillac Fleetwood, FRUM at the Ford Rouge, and GRUM at General Motors. Though most of these committees actively involved relatively small numbers of workers, the spread of the movement revealed the level of frustration and anger that black workers felt toward both the auto industry and the leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW).

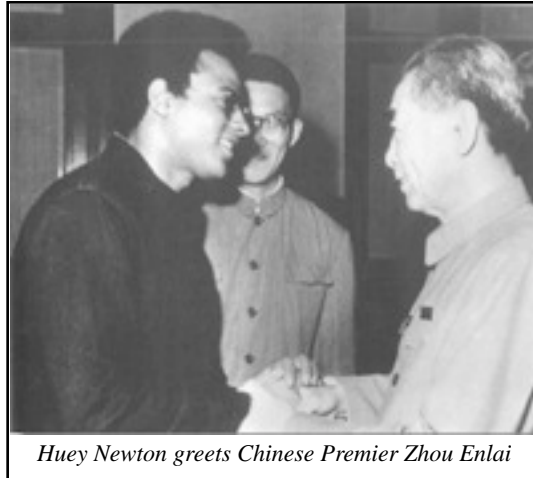


From the outset, black student radicals at Wayne State University were committed to building DRUM and the other revolutionary union movements because they saw working-class struggles as the fundamental wedge against capitalism. Besides, at a public institution like

Wayne State in which 10 percent of its student body was black, it wasn’t unusual to find part-time students in the plants or workers whose kids leapt into the revolutionary movement feet first. During the wildcat strikes at the Dodge main and Eldon Avenue plants, students walked the picket line after court injunctions prevented the striking workers from coming near the plant gates. Thus the distinctions between “intellectuals” and “workers” were always somewhat blurred. As Geoffrey Jacques, a black Detroit native active in radical politics during the 1970s recalled, “I would ride the bus full of auto workers on their way to the plant and there was always somebody reading Stalin, Lenin,

or Mao. It seemed like everyone was part of a study group.”

It is not an exaggeration to state that most DRUM leaders were self-identified Marxist-Leninist-Maoists or Trotskyists of some variety. However, at the outset their main concern was unity within the revolutionary union movement. In large measure through the work of the original core group from the *ICV*, but with the important additions of workers who had become active on the shop floor, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers came into being in 1969. Its constitution called on workers to “act swiftly to organize DRUM-type organizations wherever there are black workers, be it in Lynn Townsend’s kitchen, the White House, White Castle, Ford Rouge, the Mississippi Delta, the plains of Wyoming, the mines of Bolivia, the rubber plantations of Indonesia, the oil fields of Biafra, or the Chrysler plant in South Africa.” The organization’s belief that world revolution was immanent and that people of color throughout the world were in the vanguard reflects the Maoist-inspired vision characteristic of RAM. Indeed, when Ernie Allen became the League’s director of political education he recalled that practically everyone was reading Mao and Giap (the Vietnamese theoretician on guerrilla warfare). It wasn’t uncommon for members to use the Chinese revolution as a framework for understanding the history of the black workers’ struggles. Besides, League activists were reading more than Mao: they were interested in some of the Italian and French New Left movements, particularly *Potere Operaio*, *Lotta Continua*, and several French “workerist” organizations. Allen brought some of these heated discussions of world events back home by introducing books and articles on African American labor history.



*Huey Newton greets Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai*

Despite their deep sense of internationalism and their radical vision of trade unionism, League members were divided over strategy and tactics. One group, led by General Baker, believed that the movement should focus on shop-floor struggles, while Watson, Mike Hamlin, and Cockrel felt that the League needed to organize black communities beyond the point of production. One outgrowth of their community-based approach was the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC) held in spring 1969. At the urging of the former SNCC leader James Forman, who had recently arrived in Detroit, the League became heavily involved in the planning and running of the conference. Originally called by the

Inter-religious Foundation for Community Organizations, the conference was taken over by the revolutionary left in Detroit and essentially produced a call for black socialism. Out of BEDC came Forman’s proposal for a Black manifesto, which demanded, among other things, five hundred million dollars in reparations from white churches.

The work in BEDC led the League leadership, of which Forman was now a part, away from its local emphasis. Their efforts led to the founding of the Black Workers Congress (BWC) in 1970. The BWC was conceived more or less as a coalition of black revolutionary labor activists, and it attracted a number of Maoist and Left nationalist movements, including the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (which went on to help found the Revolutionary Workers League) and the Communist Party (Marxist Leninist). Forman was deeply influenced by Kathy Amatniek, a major theorist in the women’s liberation movement, with whom he had a relationship. She had studied Chinese at Harvard and introduced

consciousness-raising based on the “speak bitterness” campaigns in China. And according to Rosalyn Baxandall, one of the founding members of the radical feminist group Redstockings, Amatriek was a serious anti-revisionist who appreciated Stalin and sympathized with Albania. Eventually the Forman-led BWC became a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist organization in its own right, calling for workers’ control over the economy and the state to be brought about through cooperatives, united front groups, neighborhood centers, student organizations, and ultimately a revolutionary party. With Forman at the helm, the BWC called for an end to all forms of racism, imperialism, speedups, and wage freezes, and it expressed its support for the South Vietnamese Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Meanwhile, the League’s local base began to disintegrate. Several League activists, including Chuck Wooten and General Baker, had been fired and all of the revolutionary union movements were barely functional by 1972. The “General Policy Statement” of the League, which based everything on the need for vibrant “DRUM-type” organizations, seemed to have fallen by the wayside. Divisions between the leadership groupings were so entrenched that no one could hear criticism from “the other side” without assuming hostile motivations. These contradictions came to a head when Cockrel, Hamlin, and Watson left the League in June 1971 to build the Black Workers Congress. In their document “The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters” they described themselves as “the proletarian revolutionaries” and the two other tendencies as “the petty bourgeois opportunists” and “the backward reactionary nationalist lumpen proletarians.” Not long after their departure from the League the remaining core, led by General Baker, joined the Communist League under the leadership of the veteran black Marxist Nelson Peery. Several members of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers rose to leadership positions within the Communist Labor Party (CLP) and significantly shaped its industrial orientation.

They studied Mao and Stalin with even greater rigor and built a highly disciplined party in Detroit that concentrated on the plants and factories. Although the League (which was to become the Communist Labor Party in 1972) opened the China-Albania Bookstore in Detroit, it never tried to operate as a mass organization or recruit on college campuses. Baker, especially, remained committed to the Communist League through all of its manifestations—as the CLP and, most recently, as the League of Revolutionaries.



In many respects, the League’s leaders turned out to be very good Maoists—whether or not they identified with Mao. Through the newspapers and the revolutionary union movements, they always looked for ways to relate their overall political analysis to the conditions around them. They established strategic guidelines rather than a rigid blueprint for organizing. And they constantly struggled over the relationship of Marxist intellectuals, which they were in large part, to the workers they wanted to reach. In so doing they succeeded in creating a revolutionary language and making it available to black workers. Yet the promise of the League was also its peril: when the phenomenon of the

revolutionary union movements began to dissipate, and as struggles led by the revolutionary union movements were defeated, the League itself was called into question. As Ken Cockrel puts it, “We had to develop a concept of what to do when workers are fired for doing organizational activity, and you are not in a position to feed them, and you are not in a position to force management to take them back, and you are not in a position to relate concretely to any of their needs....If you make no response you are in a position of having led workers out of the plant on the basis of an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist line and having the man respond and you can’t do anything.”

But this is not the whole story. Perhaps the greatest tragedy for the League was the failure of white workers to support the revolutionary union movements. Had the UAW used its resources to support League demands rather than lining up with the auto companies to isolate and destroy the movements, the outcome probably would have been different. Race, once again, contributed to the downfall of a potentially transformative American labor movement. It was yet another installment of a very old (and continuing) saga.



### **Return of the Black Belt**

By most accounts, an explicit Maoist ideology and movement did not emerge on the U.S. political landscape until Mao initiated the

Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966. A precursor to the revolution had erupted in China nine years earlier, when Mao appealed to his countrymen to “let a hundred flowers blossom” and “let a hundred schools of thought contend.” That campaign was just a flash in the pan, however, and it was quickly silenced after too many flowers openly criticized the Chinese Communist Party.

But the Cultural Revolution was different. Hierarchies in the party and in the Red Army were ostensibly eliminated. Criticism and self-criticism was encouraged—as long as it coincided with Mao Zedong thought. Communists suspected of supporting a capitalist road were brought to trial. Bourgeois intellectuals in the academy and government were expected to perform manual labor, to work among the people as a way of breaking down social hierarchies. And all vestiges of the old order were to be eliminated. The youth, now the vanguard, attacked tradition with a vengeance and sought to create new cultural forms to promote the revolution. The people of China were now called on to educate themselves. The Cultural Revolution intensified the constituent elements of Maoism: the idea of constant rebellion and conflict; the concept of the centrality of people over economic laws or productive forces; the notion of revolutionary morality.

No matter what one’s view of the Cultural Revolution might be, it projected to the world—particularly to those sympathetic to China and to revolutionary movements generally—a vision of society where divisions between the powerful and powerless are blurred, and where status and privilege do not necessarily distinguish leaders from the led. The socialists Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, editors of the independent socialist journal *Monthly Review*, recognized the huge implications of such a revolution for the urban poor in the United States: “Just imagine what would happen in the United States if a President were to invite the poor in this country, with special emphasis on the blacks in the urban ghettos, to win the war on poverty for themselves, promising them the protection of the army against reprisals!” Of course, the United States is not a socialist country and has

never pretended to be one, and despite a somewhat sympathetic President Lyndon Johnson, black people in the United States were not regarded by the state as “the people.” Their problems were a drain on society and their ungrateful riots and the proliferation of revolutionary organizations did not elicit much sympathy for the black poor.

For many in the New Left, African Americans were not only “the people” but also the most revolutionary sector of the working class. The Cultural Revolution’s emphasis on eliminating hierarchies and empowering the oppressed reinforced the idea that black liberation lay at the heart of the new American revolution. Mao Zedong himself gave credence to this view in his widely circulated April 1968 statement “In Support of the Afro-American Struggle Against Violent Repression.” The statement was delivered during a massive demonstration in China protesting the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., at which Robert Williams and Vicki Garvin were among the featured speakers. According to Garvin, “millions of Chinese demonstrators” marched in the pouring rain to denounce American racism. Responding to the rebellions touched off by King’s assassination, Mao characterized these urban uprisings as “a new clarion call to all the exploited and oppressed people of the United States to fight against the barbarous rule of the monopoly capitalist class.” Even more than the 1963 statement, Mao’s words endowed the urban riots with historic importance in the world of revolutionary upheaval. His statement, as well as the general logic of Lin Biao’s “theory of the new democratic revolution” justified support for black nationalist movements and their right of self-determination.



*Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton*

It was in the context of the urban rebellions that several streams of black radicalism, including RAM, converged and gave birth in Oakland, California, to the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Perhaps the most visible black organization promoting Mao Zedong thought, by some accounts they also were probably the least serious about reading Marxist, Leninist, or Maoist writings and developing a revolutionary ideology. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, a former RAM member, the Black Panther Party went well beyond the boundaries of Merritt College and recruited the “lumpenproletariat.” Much of the rank-and-file engaged in sloganeering more than anything else, and their bible was the “Little Red Book.”

That the Panthers were Marxist, at least in rhetoric and program, was one of the sources of their dispute with Ron Karenga’s U.S. organization and other groups they derisively dismissed as cultural nationalists. Of course, the Panthers not only had their own cultural nationalist agenda, but the so-called cultural nationalists were neither a monolith nor were they uniformly pro-capitalist. And the divisions between these groups were exacerbated by COINTELPRO. Still, there was a fundamental difference between the Panthers’ evolving ideology of socialism and class struggle and that of black nationalist groups, even on the left. As Bobby Seale explained in a March 1969 interview, “We’re talking about socialism. The cultural nationalists say that socialism won’t do anything for us. There’s the contradiction between the old and the new. Black people have no time to practice black racism and the masses of black people do not hate white people just because of the color of their skin....We’re not going to go out foolishly and say there is no possibility of aligning with some righteous white revolutionaries, or other

poor and oppressed peoples in this country who might come to see the light about the fact that it's the capitalist system they must get rid of."

How the Panthers arrived at this position and the divisions within the party over their stance is a long and complicated story that we cannot address here. For our purposes, we want to make a few brief points about the party's embrace of Mao Zedong thought and its position vis-a-vis black self-determination. For Huey Newton, whose contribution to the party's ideology rivals that of Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson, the source of the Panther's Marxism was the Chinese and Cuban revolutions precisely because their analysis grew out of their respective histories rather than from the pages of *Capital*. The Chinese and Cuban examples, according to Newton, empowered the Panthers to develop their own unique program and to discard theoretical insights from Marx and Lenin that had little or no application to black reality. Indeed, a quick perusal of the Panthers' "Ten Point Program" reveals quite clearly that Malcolm X continued to be one of their biggest ideological influences.

Eldridge Cleaver was a little more explicit about the role of Maoism and the thought of the Korean communist leader Kim Il Sung in reshaping Marxism-Leninism for the benefit of the national liberation struggles of Third World peoples. In a 1968 pamphlet titled "On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party (Part I)," Cleaver makes clear that the Panthers were a Marxist-Leninist party, but he adds that Marx, Engels, Lenin, and their contemporary followers did not offer much insight on understanding and fighting racism. The lesson here is to adopt and alter what is useful and reject what is not. "With the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948 and the People's Republic of China in 1949," Cleaver wrote, "something new was interjected into Marxism-Leninism, and it ceased to be just a narrow, exclusively European phenomenon. Comrade Kim Il-sung and Comrade Mao Zedong applied the classical principles of Marxism-Leninism to the conditions of their own countries and thereby made the ideology into something

useful for their people. But they rejected that part of the analysis that was not beneficial to them and had only to do with the welfare of Europe." In Cleaver's view, the sharpest critique of Western Marxism's blindness with regard to race came from Frantz Fanon.



*Vietnamese revolutionaries Vo Nguyen Giap and Ho Chi Minh*

By seeing themselves as part of a global national liberation movement, the Panthers also spoke of the black community as a colony with an inherent right to self-determination. Yet, unlike many other black or interracial Maoist groups, they never advocated secession or the creation of a separate state. Rather, describing black people as colonial subjects was a way of characterizing the materialist nature of racism; that is, it was more of a metaphor than an analytical concept. Self-determination was understood to mean community control within the urban environment, not necessarily the establishment of a black nation. In a paper delivered at the Peace and Freedom Party's founding convention in March 1968, Cleaver tried to clarify the relationship between interracial unity in the U.S. revolution and, in his words, "national liberation in the black colony." He essentially called for an approach in which black and white radicals would work together to create coalitions of revolutionary organizations and to develop the political and military machinery that could overthrow capitalism and imperialism. Going further, he also called for a United Nations-sponsored plebiscite that would allow black people to determine whether they wished to integrate or separate. Such a plebiscite, he argued, would bring clarity to black people on the question

of self-determination, just as the first-wave independence movements in Africa had to decide whether they wanted to maintain some altered dominion status or achieve complete independence.

Cleaver represented a wing of the Black Panther Party more interested in guerrilla warfare than in rebuilding society or doing the hard work of grassroots organizing. The Panthers' attraction to Mao, Kim Il-sung, Giap, Che, and for that matter Fanon, was based on their writings on revolutionary violence and people's wars. Many self-styled Panther theoreticians focused so much on developing tactics to sustain the immanent revolution that they skipped over a good deal of Mao's writings. Recognizing the problem, Newton sought to move the party away from an emphasis on guerrilla warfare and violence to a deeper, richer discussion of what the party's vision for the future might entail. Shortly after his release from prison in August 1970, Newton proposed the creation of an "Ideological Institute" where participants actually read and taught what he regarded as the "classics"—Marx, Mao, and Lenin as well as Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Unfortunately, the Ideological Institute did not amount to much; few Party members saw the use of abstract theorizing or the relevance of some of these writings to revolution. Besides, the fact that *Quotations from Chairman Mao* read more or less like a handbook for guerrillas didn't help matters much. Even Fanon was read pretty selectively, with his chapter "Concerning Violence" being the perpetual favorite among militants. George Jackson contributed to the Panther's

theoretical emphasis on war since much of his own writings, from *Soledad Brother* to *Blood in My Eye*, drew on Mao primarily to discuss armed resistance under fascism. Efforts to read the works of Marx, Lenin, or Mao beyond issues related to armed rebellion did not always find a willing audience among the Panthers. Sid Lemelle, then a radical activist at California State University in Los Angeles, recalls being in contact with a few Panthers who had joined a study group sponsored by the California Communist League. The reading, which included Mao's *Four Essays on Philosophy* and lengthy passages from Lenin's selected works, turned out to be too much and the Panthers eventually left the group amid a stormy debate.

Perhaps the least-read section of *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, at least by men, was the five-page chapter on women. In an age when the metaphors for black liberation were increasingly masculinized and black movement leaders not only ignored but also perpetuated gender oppression, even the most Marxist of the black nationalist movements belittled

the "woman question." The Black Panther Party was certainly no exception. Indeed, it was during the same historic meeting of the Students for a Democratic Society in 1969, where the Panthers invoked Marx, Lenin, and Mao to expel the Progressive Labor Party for their position on the national question, that the Panther minister of information Rufus Walls gave his infamous speech about the need to have women in the movement because they possessed "pussy power." Although Walls's statement clearly was a vernacular take-off from Mao's line that "China's women are a vast reserve of labour power [that] ... should



*Exiled Filipino Maoist leader Jose Maria Sison*



be tapped in the struggle to build a great socialist country," it turned out to be a profoundly anti-feminist defense of women's participation.



*Korean leader Kim Il Sung with Mao Zedong*

While China's own history on the "woman question" is pretty dismal, Mao's dictum that "women hold up half the sky" as well as his brief writings on women's equality and participation in the revolutionary process endowed women's liberation with some revolutionary legitimacy on the Left. Of course, Maoism didn't make the movement: the fact is, women's struggles within the New Left played the most important role in reshaping Left movements toward a feminist agenda, or at least putting feminism on the table. But for black women in the Panthers who were suspicious of "white feminism," Mao's language on women's equality provided space within the party to develop an incipient black feminist agenda. As the newly appointed minister of information, the Panther Elaine Brown announced to a press conference soon after returning from China in 1971 that "the Black Panther Party acknowledges the progressive leadership of our Chinese comrades in all areas of revolution. Specifically, we embrace China's correct recognition of the proper status of women as equal to that of men."

Even beyond the rhetoric, black women Panthers such as Lynn French, Kathleen Cleaver, Erica Huggins, Akua Njere, and Assata Shakur (formerly Joanne Chesimard) sustained the tradition of carving out free

spaces within existing male-dominated organizations in order to challenge the multiple forms of exploitation that black working-class women faced daily. Through the Panther's free breakfast and educational programs, for example, black women devised strategies that, in varying degrees, challenged capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. And in some instances, African American women radicals rose to positions of prominence and, sometimes by sheer example, contributed toward developing a militant, class-conscious black feminist perspective. The most important figures in this respect include Kathleen Cleaver, Erica Huggins, Elaine Brown, and Assata Shakur. In some instances, the growing strength of a black Left feminist perspective, buttressed by certain Maoist slogans on the woman question, shaped future black Maoist formations. One obvious example is the Black Vanguard Party, another Bay Area Maoist group active in the mid to late 1970s whose publication *Juche!* maintained a consistent socialist-feminist perspective. Michelle Gibbs (also known as Michelle Russell, her married name at the time) promoted a black feminist ideology as a Detroit supporter of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and as a member of the Black Workers Congress. As a red-diaper baby whose father, Ted Gibbs, fought in the Spanish Civil War, and who grew up in a household where Paul Robeson and the artist Elizabeth Catlett were occasional guests, Gibbs's black socialist-feminist perspective flowed from her political experience; from the writings of black feminist writers; and from a panoply of radical thinkers ranging from Malcolm, Fanon, and Cabral to Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Conversely, the predominantly white radical feminist organization Redstockings not only was influenced by Mao's writings but also modeled itself somewhat off of the Black Power movement, particularly the movement's separatist strategies and identification with the Third World.

Ironically, the Black Panther Party's greatest identification with China occurred at the very moment when China's status among the Left began to decline worldwide. Mao's willingness to host President Nixon and

China's support of the repressive governments of Pakistan and Sri Lanka left many Maoists in the United States and elsewhere disillusioned. Nevertheless, Huey Newton and Elaine Brown not only visited China on the eve of Nixon's trip but also they announced that their entry into electoral politics was inspired by China's entry into the United Nations. Newton argued that the Black Panther's shift toward reformist electoral politics did not contradict "China's goal of toppling U.S. imperialism nor [was it] an abnegation of revolutionary principles. It was a tactic of socialist revolution." Even more incredible was Newton's complete abandonment of black self-determination, which he explained in terms of developments in the world economy. In 1971, he concluded quite presciently that the globalization of capital rendered the idea of national sovereignty obsolete, even among the socialist countries. Thus black demands for self-determination were no longer relevant; the only viable strategy was global revolution. "Blacks in the U.S. have a special duty to give up any claim to nationhood now more than ever. The U.S. has never been our country; and realistically there's no territory for us to claim. Of all the oppressed people in the world, we are in the best position to inspire global revolution."

In many respects, Newton's position on the national question was closer to Mao's than that of most of the self-proclaimed Maoist organizations that popped up in the early to late 1970s. Despite his own statements in support of national liberation movements and of Lin Biao's "theory of democratic revolutions," Mao did not support independent organizations along nationalist lines. To him, black nationalism looked like ethnic/racial particularism. He was, after all, a Chinese nationalist attempting to unify peasants and proletarians and eliminate ethnic divisions *within his own country*. We might recall his 1957 statement in which he demanded that progressives in China "help unite the people of our various nationalities... not divide them." Thus while recognizing that racism is a product of colonialism and imperialism, his 1968 statement insists that the "contradiction between the black masses

in the United States and U.S. ruling circles is a class contradiction....The black masses and the masses of white working people in the United States share common interests and have common objectives to struggle for." In other words, the black struggle is bound to merge with the working-class movement and overthrow capitalism.



*Black communist/playwright Amiri Baraka*

On the issue of black liberation, however, most American Maoist organizations founded in the early to mid 1970s took their lead from Stalin, not Mao. Black people in the United States were not simply proletarians in black skin but rather a nation—or as Stalin put it, "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture." The anti-revisionist groups that embraced Stalin's definition of a nation, such as the Communist Labor Party (CLP) and the October League, also resurrected the old Communist Party's position that African Americans in the black belt counties of the South constitute a nation and have a right to secede if they wished. On the other hand, groups like the Progressive Labor Party—once an advocate of "revolutionary nationalism"—moved to a

position repudiating all forms of nationalism by the start of the Cultural Revolution.

The CLP was perhaps the most consistent advocate of black self-determination among the anti-revisionist movements. Founded in 1968 largely by African Americans and Latinos, the CLP's roots can be traced to the old Provisional Organizing Committee (POC)—itself an outgrowth of the 1956 split in the CPUSA that led to the creation of Hammer and Steel and the Progressive Labor movement. Ravaged by a decade of internal splits, the POC had become a predominantly black and Puerto Rican organization divided between New York and Los Angeles. In 1968, the New York leadership expelled their L.A. comrades for, among other things, refusing to denounce Stalin and Mao. In turn, the L.A. group, largely under the guidance of the veteran black Marxist Nelson Peery, founded the California Communist League that same year and began recruiting young black and Chicano radical workers and intellectuals. Peery's home in South-Central Los Angeles had already become somewhat of a hangout for young black radicals after the Watts uprising; there, he organized informal groups to study history, political economy, and classic works in Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought and he entertained all sorts of activists, including Black Panthers and student activists ranging from Cal State Los Angeles to L.A. Community College. The California Communist League subsequently merged with a group of SDS militants called the Marxist-Leninist Workers Association and formed the Communist League in 1970. Two years later they changed their name again to the Communist Labor Party.



*BPP leader Fred Hampton; murdered by police*

Except for, perhaps, Harry Haywood's long essay "Toward a Revolutionary Position on the Negro Question," Nelson Peery's short book *The Negro National Colonial Question* (1972) was probably the most widely read defense of black self-determination in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist circles at the time. Peery was sharply criticized for his defense of the term "Negro," a difficult position to maintain in the midst of the Black Power movement. But Peery had a point: national identity was not about color. The Negro nation was a historically evolved, stable community with its own unique culture, language (or, rather, dialect), and territory—the black belt counties and their surrounding areas, or essentially the thirteen states of the Old Confederacy. Because southern whites shared with African Americans a common territory,

and by Peery's account a common language and culture, they were also considered part of the "Negro nation." More precisely, southern whites comprised the "Anglo-American minority" within the Negro nation. As evidenced in soul music, spirituals, and rock and roll, Peery insisted that what emerged in the South was a hybrid culture with strong African roots manifest in the form of slave folktales and female head-wraps. Jimi Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, as

well as white imitators like Al Jolson, Elvis Presley, and Tom Jones, are all cited as examples of a shared culture. Peery saw "soul" culture embedded in forms of daily life; for example, "the custom of eating pigs' feet, neck bones, black-eyed peas, greens, yams, and chitterlings are all associated with the region of the South, particularly the Negro Nation."

Peery's positioning of southern whites as part of the Negro Nation was a stroke of genius, particularly since one of his intentions was to destabilize racial categories. However, at times his commitment to Stalin's definition of a nation weakened his argument. At the very moment when mass migration and urbanization depleted the rural South of its black population, Peery insisted that the black belt was the natural homeland of Negroes. He even attempted to prove that a black peasantry and stable rural proletariat still existed in the black belt. Because the land question is the foundation upon which his understanding of self-determination was built, he ends up saying very little about the nationalization of industry or socialized production. Thus he could write in 1972 that "the Negro national colonial question can only be solved by a return of the land to the people who have toiled over it for centuries. In the Negro Nation this land redistribution will demand a combination of state farms and cooperative enterprises in order to best meet the needs of the people under the conditions of modern mechanized agriculture."

The Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) also promoted a version of the black belt thesis, which it inherited from its earlier incarnation as the October League. The CP (ML) was formed out of a merger between the October League, based mainly in Los Angeles, and the Georgia Communist League in 1972. Many of its founding members came out of the Revolutionary Youth Movement II (a faction within SDS), and a handful were Old Left renegades like Harry Haywood and Otis Hyde. Haywood's presence in the CP (ML) is significant since he is considered one of the architects of the original black belt thesis formulated at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1928. According to the

updated CP (ML) formulation, Afro-Americans had the right to secede "to their historic homeland in the Black Belt South." But they added the caveat that the recognition of the right of self-determination does not mean they believe separation is the most appropriate solution. They also introduced the idea of regional autonomy (i.e., that urban concentrations of African Americans can also exercise self-determination in their own communities) and they extended the slogan of self-determination to Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and indigenous people in U.S. colonies (in the Pacific Islands, Hawaii, Alaska, etc.). They were selective as to what sort of nationalist movements they would support, promising to back only revolutionary nationalism as opposed to reactionary nationalism.



The Revolutionary Union, an outgrowth of the Bay Area Revolutionary Union (BARU) founded in 1969 with support from ex-CPUSA members who had visited China, took the position that black people constituted "an oppressed nation of a new type." Because black people were primarily workers concentrated in urban, industrial areas (what they called a

"deformed class structure"), they argued that self-determination should not take the form of secession but rather be realized through the fight against discrimination, exploitation, and police repression in the urban centers. In 1975, when the Revolutionary Union transformed itself into the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), it continued to embrace the idea that black people constituted a nation of a new type, but it also began to uphold "the right of Black people to return to claim their homeland." Not surprisingly, these two contradictory lines created confusion, thereby compelling RCP leaders to adopt an

untenable position of defending the right of self-determination without advocating it. Two years later, they dropped the right of self-determination altogether and, like the PLP, waged war on all forms of “narrow” nationalism.

Unlike any of the Maoist-oriented organizations mentioned above, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—founded and led by none other than Amiri Baraka—grew directly out of the cultural nationalist movements of the late 1960s. To understand the RCL’s (and its precursors’) shifting positions with regard to the black nation, we need to go back to 1966 when Baraka founded Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey, with the help of local activists as well as folks he had worked with in Harlem’s Black Arts Repertory Theater. While Spirit House artists were from the beginning involved in local political organizing, the police beating of Baraka and several other activists during the Newark uprising in 1967 politicized them even further. After the uprising they helped organize a Black Power conference in Newark that attracted several national black leaders, including Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party, and Imari Obadele of the newly formed Republic of New Africa (partly an outgrowth of RAM). Shortly thereafter, Spirit House became the base for the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), a new organization made up of United Brothers, Black Community Defense and Development, and Sisters of Black Culture. In addition to attracting black nationalists, Muslims, and even a few Marxist-Leninist-Maoists, CFUN bore the mark of Ron Karenga’s U.S. organization. Indeed, CFUN adopted Karenga’s version of cultural nationalism and worked closely with him. Although tensions arose between Karenga and some of the Newark activists over his treatment of women and the overly centralized leadership structure that CFUN had imported from the U.S. organization, the movement continued to grow. In 1970, Baraka renamed CFUN the Congress of African Peoples (CAP), transformed it into a national organization, and at its founding convention broke with Karenga. Leaders of CAP sharply

criticized Karenga’s cultural nationalism and passed resolutions that reflected a turn to the left—including a proposal to raise funds to help build the Tanzania-Zambia railroad.

Several factors contributed to Baraka’s turn to the Left during this period. One has to do with the painful lesson he learned about the limitations of black “petty bourgeois” politicians. After playing a pivotal role in the 1970 election of Kenneth Gibson, Newark’s first black mayor, Baraka witnessed an increase in police repression (including attacks on CAP demonstrators) and a failure on the part of Gibson to deliver what he had promised the African American community. Feeling betrayed and disillusioned, Baraka broke with Gibson in 1974, though he did not give up entirely on the electoral process. His role in organizing the first National Black Political Assembly in 1972 reinforced in his mind the power of black independent politics and the potential strength of a black united front.

One source of Baraka’s turn to the Left was the CLP East Coast regional coordinator William Watkins. Harlem born and raised, Watkins was among a group of radical black students at Cal State Los Angeles who helped found the Communist League. In 1974 Watkins got to know Baraka, who was trying to find someone to advance his understanding of Marxism-Leninism. “We’d spend hours in his office,” Watkins recalled, “discussing the basics like surplus value.” For about three months, Baraka met regularly with Watkins, who taught him the fundamentals of political economy and tried to expose the limitations of cultural nationalism. These meetings certainly influenced Baraka’s leftward turn, but when Watkins and Nelson Peery asked Baraka to join the CLP, he refused. Although he had come to appreciate Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought, he wasn’t ready to join a multiracial organization. The black struggle was first and foremost.

It is fitting that the most important source of Baraka’s radicalization came out of Africa. Just as Baraka’s first turn to the Left after 1960 was inspired by the Cuban revolution, the struggle in southern Africa prompted his

post-1970 turn to the left. The key event was the creation of the African Liberation Support Committee in 1971, which originated with a group of black nationalists led by Owusu Sadaukai, the director of Malcolm X Liberation University in Greensboro, North Carolina, who traveled to Mozambique under the aegis of FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique). The president of FRELIMO, Samora Machel (who, coincidentally, was in China at the same time as Huey Newton), and other militants persuaded Sadaukai and his colleagues that the most useful role that African Americans could play in support of anti-colonialism was to challenge American capitalism from within and let the world know the truth about their just war against Portuguese domination. A year later Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the anti-colonial movement in Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands, said essentially the same thing during his last visit to the United States. Moreover, Cabral and Machel represented explicitly Marxist movements; they rejected the idea that precolonial African societies were inherently democratic and that they practiced a form of "primitive communism" that could lay the groundwork for modern socialism. Rather, they asserted that African societies were not immune from class struggle, nor was capitalism the only road to development.



*Martyred Turkish Maoist rebel Ibrahim Kaypakkaya*

The African Liberation Support Committee reflected the radical orientation of the liberation movements in Portuguese Africa. On May 27, 1972 (the anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity), the ALSC held the first African Liberation Day demonstration, drawing approximately thirty thousand protesters in Washington alone, and an estimated thirty thousand more across the country. The African Liberation Day Coordinating Committee consisted of representatives from several nationalist and black Left organizations, including the Youth Organization for Black Unity (YOBU); the All-African People's Revolutionary Party (AAPRP), headed by Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure); the Pan-African People's Organization; and the Maoist-influenced Black Workers Congress. Because the ALSC brought together such a broad range of black activists, it became an arena for debate over the creation of a black radical agenda. While most ALSC organizers were actively anti-imperialist, the number of black Marxists in leadership positions turned out to be a point of contention. Aside from Sadaukai, who would go on to play a major role in the Maoist-oriented Revolutionary Workers League (RWL), the ALSC's main leaders included Nelson Johnson (future leader in the Communist Workers Party) and the brilliant writer/organizer Abdul Alkalimat. As early as 1973, splits occurred within the ALSC over the role of Marxists, though when the dust settled a year later, Marxists from the RWL, the Black Workers Congress (BWC), the Revolutionary Workers Congress (an offshoot of the BWC), CAP, and the Workers Viewpoint Organization (the precursor to the Communist Workers Party) were victorious. Unfortunately, internal squabbling and sectarianism proved to be too much for the ALSC to handle. Chinese foreign policy struck the final blow; its support for UNITA during the 1975 Angolan civil war and Vice-Premier Li Xiannian's suggestion that dialogue with white South Africa was better than armed insurrection, placed black Maoists in the ALSC in a difficult position. Within three years the ALSC had utterly collapsed, bringing to an inauspicious close perhaps the most dynamic anti-imperialist organization of the decade.

Nevertheless, Baraka's experience in the ALSC profoundly altered his thinking. As he recalls in his autobiography, by the time of the first African Liberation Day demonstration in 1972, he was "going left, I was reading Nkrumah and Cabral and Mao." Within two years he was calling on CAP members to examine "the international revolutionary experience—namely the Russian and Chinese Revolutions—and integrate it with the practice of the Afrikan revolution." Their study lists expanded to include works such as Mao Zedong's *Four Essays on Philosophy*, Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*, and *History of the Communist Party Soviet Union (Short Course)*. By 1976, CAP had dispensed with all vestiges of nationalism, changed its name to the Revolutionary Communist League, and sought to remake itself into a multi-racial Marxist-Leninist-Maoist movement. Perhaps as a way to establish its ideological moorings as an anti-revisionist movement, the RCL followed in the noble tradition of resurrecting the black belt thesis. In 1977, the organization published a paper titled "The Black Nation" that analyzed black liberation movements from a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective and concluded that black people in the South and in large cities constitute a nation with an inherent right to self-determination. While rejecting "bourgeois integration," the essay argued that the struggle for black political power was central to the fight for self-determination.

The RCL attempted to put its vision of self-determination in practice through efforts to build a Black United Front. They organized coalitions against police brutality, mobilized support for striking cafeteria workers and maintenance workers, created a People's Committee on Education to challenge budget cuts and shape educational policy, and protested the Bakke decision. The RCL'S grassroots organizing and coalition building brought them in contact with the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS), a California-based movement formed out of a merger between I Wor Kuen, the Chinese-American Maoist organization, and the predominantly Chicano August 29th Movement (Marxist-Leninist). In 1979, the RCL and the LRS decided to unite, and one of the foundations of

their joint program was their support of the black nation thesis. As a result of the merger and the debates that preceded it, the RCL's position changed slightly: southern black people and Chicanos in the Southwest constituted oppressed nations with the right to self-determination. By contrast, for black people locked in northern ghettos the struggle for equal rights obviously took precedent over the land question.



*Political prisoner of the Maoist insurgency in the Philippines*

Invariably the merger was short-lived, in part because of disagreements over the issue of self-determination and the continuing presence of what LRS members regarded as "narrow nationalism" in the RCL. The LRS chair Carmen Chang was never comfortable with the black nation thesis but accepted the position for the sake of unity. Baraka's group, on the other hand, never abandoned black unity for multiracial class struggle. And as an artist with deep roots in the Black Arts movement, Baraka persistently set his cultural and political sights on the contradictions of black life under capitalism, imperialism, and racism. For Baraka, as with many of the characters discussed in this essay, this was not

a simple matter of narrow nationalism. On the contrary, understanding the place of racist oppression and black revolution within the context of capitalism and imperialism was fundamental to the future of humanity. In the tradition of Du Bois, Fanon, and Harold Cruse, Baraka insisted that the black (hence colonial) proletariat was the vanguard of world revolution, “not because of some mystic chauvinism but because of our place in objective history....We are the vanguard because we are at the bottom, and when we raise to stand up straight everything stacked upon us topples.”

Moreover, despite Baraka’s immersion in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist literature, his own cultural work suggests that he knew, as did most black radicals, that the question of whether black people constituted a nation was not going to be settled through reading Lenin or Stalin or resurrecting M.N. Roy. If the battle ever could be settled it would take place, for better or for worse, on the terrain of culture. While the Black Arts movement was the primary vehicle for black cultural revolution in the United States, it is hard to imagine what that revolution would have looked like without China. Black radicals seized the Great Proletarian Revolution by the horns and reshaped it in their own image.

### **The Great (Black) Proletarian Cultural Revolution**

Less than a year into the Cultural Revolution, Robert Williams published an article in *The Crusader* titled “Reconstitute Afro-American Art to Remold Black Souls.” While Mao’s call for a cultural revolution meant getting rid of the vestiges (cultural and otherwise) of the old order, Williams—not unlike members of the Black Arts movement in the United States—was talking about purging black culture of a “slave mentality.” Although adopting some of the language of CCP’s manifesto (the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, published August 12, 1966 in the *Peking Review*), Williams’s essay sought to build on the idea rather than on the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. Like Mao, he called on black artists to cast off the

shackles of the old traditions and only make art in the service of revolution. “The Afro-American artist must make a resolute and conscious effort to reconstitute our art forms to remold new proud black and revolutionary souls....It must create a new theory and direction and prepare our people for a more bitter, bloody and protracted struggle against racist tyranny and exploitation. Black art must serve the best interest of black people. It must become a powerful weapon in the arsenal of the Black Revolution.” The leaders of RAM concurred. An internal RAM document circulated in 1967, titled *Some Questions Concerning the Present Period*, called for a full-scale black cultural revolution in the United States whose purpose would be “to destroy the conditioned white oppressive mores, attitudes, ways, customs, philosophies, habits, etc., which the oppressor has taught and trained us to have. This means on a mass scale a new revolutionary culture.” It also meant an end to processed hair, skin lighteners, and other symbols of parroting the dominant culture. Indeed, the revolution targeted not only assimilated bourgeois Negroes but also barbers and beauticians.

The conscious promotion of art as a weapon in black liberation is nothing new—it can be traced back at least to the Left wing of the Harlem Renaissance, if not earlier. And the Black Arts movement in the United States, not to mention virtually every other contemporary national liberation movement, took this idea very seriously. Fanon says as much in *The Wretched of the Earth*, English translation of which was making the rounds like wildfire during this period. Still, the Cultural Revolution in China loomed large. After all, many if not most black nationalists were familiar with China and had read Mao, and even if they did not acknowledge or make explicit the influence of Maoist ideas on the need for revolutionary art or the protracted nature of cultural revolution, the parallels are striking nonetheless. Consider Maulana (Ron) Karenga’s 1968 manifesto “Black Cultural Nationalism.” First published in *Negro Digest*, the essay derived many of its ideas from Mao’s “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art.” Like Mao, Karenga insisted that all art must be judged by two

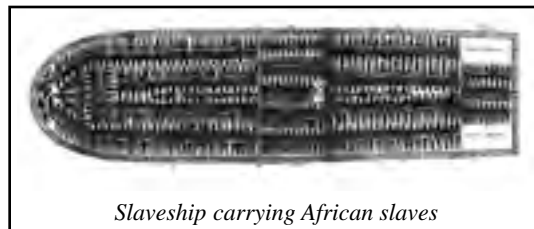


criteria—“artistic” and “social” (“political”); that revolutionary art must be for the masses; and that, in Karenga’s own words, art “must be functional, that is useful, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake.’” One can definitely see the influence of Maoism on Karenga’s efforts to create an alternative revolutionary culture. Indeed, the seven principles of Kwanzaa (the African American holiday that Karenga invented and first celebrated in 1967): unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, collective economics (socialism), creativity, purpose, and even faith—are nearly as consonant with Mao’s ideas as they are with “traditional” African culture. And it is not a coincidence, perhaps, that at least one of the principles, Ujamaa, or “cooperative economics,” was the basis of Tanzania’s famous Arusha Declaration in 1964 under president Julius Nyerere—with Tanzania being China’s earliest and most important ally in Africa.

Although Karenga’s debt to Mao went unacknowledged, the Progressive Labor Party took note. The PLP’s paper, *Challenge*, ran a scathing article that attacked the entire Black Arts movement and its theoreticians. Titled “[LeRoi] Jones-Karenga Hustle: Cultural ‘Rebels’ Foul Us Up,” the article characterized Karenga as a “pseudo-intellectual” who “has thoroughly read Mao’s Talks on Literature and Art. In fact he can quote from this work as if he wrote it himself. What he did with this Marxist classic is to take out its heart—the class struggle—and substitute no-struggle. In addition he has put ‘art’ above politics and has MADE ART THE REVOLUTION.” “‘Cultural nationalism,’ the article continued, “is not only worshipping the most reactionary aspects of African history. It even goes so far as measuring one’s revolutionary commitment by the clothes that are being worn! This is part of the ‘Black awareness.’”

Of course, revolution did become a kind of art, or more precisely, a distinct style.

Whether it was Afros and dashikis or leather jackets and berets, most black revolutionaries in the United States developed their own aesthetic criteria. In the publishing world, Mao’s “Little Red Book” made a tremendous impact on literary styles in black radical circles. The idea that a pocket-sized book of pithy quotes and aphorisms could address a range of subjects, from ethical behavior, revolutionary thought and practice, economic development, philosophy, etc., appealed to many black activists, irrespective of political allegiance. The “Little Red Book” prompted a cottage industry of miniature books of quotations compiled expressly for black militants. “*The Black Book*,” edited by Earl Ofari Hutchison (with assistance from Judy Davis), is a case in point. Published by the Radical Education Project (circa 1970), *The Black Book* is a compilation of brief quotes



Slaveship carrying African slaves

from W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon that address a range of issues related to domestic and world revolution. The resemblance to *Quotations from Chairman Mao* is striking: chapter titles

include “Black Culture and Art,” “Politics,” “Imperialism,” “Socialism,” “Capitalism,” “Youth,” “The Third World,” “Africa,” “On America:’ and” Black Unity.” Earl Ofari Hutchison’s introduction places black struggle in a global context and calls for revolutionary ethics and “spiritual as well as physical unification of the Third World.” “True blackness,” he adds, “is a collective life-style, a collective set of values and a common world perspective” that grows out of distinct experiences in the West. *The Black Book* was not written as defense of black nationalism against the encroachments of Maoism. On the contrary, Earl Ofari Hutchison closes by telling “freedom fighters everywhere, continue to read your red book, but place alongside of it the revolutionary BLACK BOOK. To win the coming battle, both are necessary.”

Another popular text in this tradition was the *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah: Freedom*

*Fighters Edition*. Bound in black leather with gold type, it opens with a line in the frontispiece underscoring the importance of revolutionary will: “The secret of life is to have no fear.” And with the exception of its African focus, the chapters are virtually indistinguishable from the “Little Red Book.” Topics include “African Revolution,” “Army,” “Black Power,” “Capitalism,” “Imperialism,” “People’s Militia,” “The People,” “Propaganda,” “Socialism,” and “Women.” Most of the quotes are either vague or fail to transcend obvious sloganeering (e.g., “The foulest intellectual rubbish ever invented by man is that of racial superiority and inferiority,” or “A revolutionary fails only if he surrenders.” More importantly, many of Nkrumah’s insights could have come straight from Mao’s pen, particularly those quotations dealing with the need for popular mobilization, the dialectical relationship between thought and action, and issues related to war and peace and imperialism.

On the question of culture, most Maoist and anti-revisionist groups in the United States were less concerned with creating a new, revolutionary culture than with destroying the vestiges of the old or attacking what they regarded as a retrograde, bourgeois commercial culture. In this respect, they were in step with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In a fascinating review of the film *Superfly* published in the CP (ML) paper *The Call*, the writer seizes the opportunity to criticize the counterculture as well as the capitalists’ role in promoting drug use in the black community. “Looking around at all the people overdosing on drugs, getting killed in gun fights among themselves, and getting shredded up in industrial accidents while stoned on the job, it’s clear that dope is as big a killer as any armed cop.” Why would

a film marketed to black people glorify the drug culture? Because “the imperialists know the plain truth—if you’re hooked on dope, you won’t have time to think about revolution—you’re too busy worrying about where the next shot is coming from!” The review also included a bit of Chinese history: “The British did everything they could to get the Chinese people strung out [on opium]. It was common for workers to get part of their wages in opium, turning them into addicts even quicker. It was only revolution that got rid of the cause of this misery. By taking their countries back, and turning their society in to one that really served the people, there was no more need to escape into drugs.”



Maoist attacks were not limited to the most reactionary aspects of mass commercial culture. The Black Arts movement—a movement that, ironically, included figures very much inspired by developments in China and Cuba—came under intense scrutiny by the anti-revisionist Left. Groups like the PLP and the CP (ML), despite their many disagreements over the national question, did agree that the Black Arts movement and its attraction to African

culture was misguided, if not downright counterrevolutionary. The PLP dismissed black cultural nationalists as petty bourgeois businessmen who sold the most retrograde aspects of African culture to the masses and “exploit[ed] Black women—all in the name of ‘African culture’ and in the name of ‘revolution.’” The same PLP editorial castigates the Black Arts movement for “teaching about African Kings and Queens, African ‘empires.’ There is no class approach—no notice that these Kings, etc., were oppressing the mass of African people.” Likewise, an editorial in *The Call* in 1973 sharply criticized the Black Arts movement for “delegitimizing the genuine national

aspirations of Black people in the U.S. and to substituting African *counter-culture* for anti-imperialist struggle.”

While these attacks were generally unfair, particularly in the way they lumped together a wide array of artists, a handful of black artists had come to similar conclusions about the direction of the Black Arts movement. For the novelist John Oliver Killens, the Chinese Cultural Revolution offered a model for transforming black cultural nationalism into a revolutionary force. As a result of his travels to China during the early 1970s, Killens published an important essay in *The Black World* (later reprinted by the U.S.-China People’s Friendship Association as a pamphlet titled *Black Man in the New China*) praising the Cultural Revolution for being, in his view, a stunning success. In fact, he ostensibly went to China to find out why their revolution succeeded “while our own Black cultural revolution, that bloomed so brightly during the Sixties, seems to be dying on the vine.” By the time Killens was ready to return to the United States, he had reached several conclusions regarding the limitations of the black cultural revolution and the strength of the Maoist model. First, he recognized that all successful revolutions must be continuous—permanent and protracted. Second, cultural activism and political activism are not two different strategies for liberation but rather two sides of the same coin. The cultural revolution and the political revolution go hand in hand. Third, a revolutionary movement must be self-reliant; it must create self-sustaining cultural institutions. Of course, most radical nationalists in the Black Arts movement figured out most of this independently and Killens’s article merely reinforced these lessons. However, China taught Killens one

other lesson that few other males in the movement paid attention to at the time: “Women hold up one-half of the world.” “In some very vital and militant factions of the Black cultural revolution, women were required to metaphorically ‘sit in the back of the bus.’...This is backward thinking and divisive. Many women voted with their feet and went into Women’s Lib. And some of the brothers seemed upset and surprised. We drove them to it.”

The other major black critic of the Black Arts movement’s cultural nationalism who ended up embracing Maoism was Amiri Baraka, himself a central figure in the black cultural revolution and an early target for Maoist abuse. As the founder and leader of CAP and later the RCL, Baraka offered more than a



*French Maoist economist Charles Bettelheim*

critique; instead, he built a movement that attempted to synthesize the stylistic and aesthetic innovations of the Black Arts movement with Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought and practice. Just as his odyssey from the world of the Beats to the Bandung World provide insight into Mao’s impact on black radicalism in the United States, so does his transition from a cultural nationalist to committed communist.

More than any other Maoist or anti-revisionist, Baraka and the RCL epitomized the most conscious and sustained effort to bring the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to America’s inner cities and to transform it in a manner that spoke to the black working class.

Having come out of the Black Arts movement in Harlem and Spirit House in Newark, Baraka was above all else a cultural worker. As he and the Congress of African Peoples moved from cultural nationalism to Marxism, this profound ideological shift

manifested itself through changes in cultural practice. Dismissing the “Black petty bourgeois primitive cultural nationalist” as unscientific and metaphysical, he warned his comrades against “the cultural bias that might make us think that we can return to pre-slave trade Afrika, and the romance of feudalism.” Further, CAP changed the name of its publication from *Black Newark* to *Unity and Struggle* to reflect its transition from a cultural nationalist perspective to a deeper understanding of “the dialectical requirements of revolution.” The Spirit House Movers (CAP’S theater troupe) was now called the Afrikan Revolutionary Movers (ARM), and a group of cultural workers associated with Spirit House formed a singing group called the Anti-Imperialist Singers. They abandoned African dress as well as “male chauvinist practices that had been carried out as part of its ‘African traditionalism’ such as holding separate political education classes for men and women.” And CAP’S official holiday, known as “Leo Baraka” for Baraka’s birthday, became a day devoted entirely to studying Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought, the “woman question,” and the problems of cadre development.

By 1976, the year CAP reemerged as the Revolutionary Communist League, Baraka had come a long way since his alliance with Ron Karenga. In a poem titled “Today,” published in a small book of poetry titled *Hard Facts* (1976), Baraka’s position on cultural nationalism vis-a-vis class struggle is unequivocal:

“Frauds in leopard skin, turbaned hustlers w/  
skin

type rackets, colored capitalists, negro

exploiters, Afro-American Embassy gamers

who lurk about Afrikan embassies fightin for

airline tickets, reception guerrillas, whose

only connection w/ a party is the Frankie

Crocker kind.

Where is the revolution brothers and sisters?

Where is the mobilization of the masses led

by the advanced section of the working class?

Where is the unity criticism unity. The self-criticism

& criticism? Where is the work & study. The

ideological clarity? Why only poses &

postures & subjective one sided non-theories

describing only yr petty bourgeois upbringing

Black saying might get you a lecture gig, ‘wise man.’ but will not alone bring revolution.”

Baraka tried to put this manifesto in practice through intense community-based cultural work. One of the RCL’s most successful projects was the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union (AICU), a New York-based multinational cultural workers’ organization founded in the late 1970s. In November 1978, the AICU sponsored the Festival of People’s Culture, which drew some five hundred people to listen to poetry read by Askia Toure, Miguel Algarin, and Sylvia Jones along with musical performances by an RCL-created group called the Proletarian Ensemble. Through groups like the Proletarian Ensemble and the Advanced Workers (another musical ensemble formed by the RCL), the RCL spread its message of proletarian revolution and black self-determination and its critique of capitalism to community groups and schoolchildren throughout black Newark, New York, and other cities on the Eastern seaboard.

Theater seemed to be Baraka’s main avenue for the Black Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Among the AICU’S many projects, the Yenon Theater Workshop clearly projected Mao’s vision of revolutionary art. The Yenon Theater produced a number of his plays, including a memorable performance of *What Was the Lone Ranger’s Relationship to the Means of Production?* In 1975-76, Baraka wrote two new plays, *The Motion of History* and *S-I*,

that perhaps represent the clearest expression of his shift. as he stated, “from petty bourgeois radicalism (and its low point of bourgeois cultural nationalism) on through to finally grasping the science of revolution, Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.” *The Motion of History* is a long epic play that touches upon just about everything under the sun—including slavery and slave revolts, industrial capitalism, civil rights and Black Power, and Irish immigration and white racism. And practically every revolutionary or reformist having something to do with the struggle for black freedom makes an appearance in the play, including John Brown, H. Rap Brown, Lenin, Karenga, Harriet Tubman, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. Through scenes of workers discussing politics on the shop floor or in Marxist study groups, the audience learns about the history of slavery, the rise of industrial capitalism, imperialism, surplus value, relative overproduction, and the day-to-day racist brutality to which African Americans and Latinos are subjected. In the spirit of proletarian literature, *The Motion of History* closes on an upbeat note with a rousing meeting at which those present pledge their commitment to building a revolutionary multiracial, multi-ethnic working class party based on Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.

*S-I* shares many similarities with *The Motion of History*, although it focuses primarily on what Baraka and the RCL saw as the rise of fascism in the United States. As a play about a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist group fighting anti-sedition legislation, Baraka wrote it as a response to the Senate Bill “Criminal Justice Codification, Revision & Reform Act,” known as *S-I*, which would enable the state to adopt extremely repressive measures to combat radical movements. *S-I* gave police and the FBI greater freedom to search and seize materials from radical groups, as well as permission to wiretap suspects for forty-eight hours without court approval. The bill also proposed mandatory executions for certain crimes, and it revived the Smith Act by subjecting any group or person advocating the “destruction of the government” to a possible fifteen-year prison sentence and fines up to \$100,000. The most notorious aspect of the

bill was the “Leading a Riot” provision, which allowed courts to sentence to three years in prison and a \$100,000 fine anyone promoting the assembly of five people with the intention of creating “a grave danger to Property.”



Harry Haywood, author of “Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist”

We don’t know how activists and working people responded to Baraka’s plays during the ultra-radical period of the AICU and the RCL, and most cultural critics act as if these works are not worthy of comment. No matter what one might think about these works, as art, as propaganda, or as both, it is remarkable to think that in the late 1970s a handful of inner-city kids in Newark could watch performances that advocated revolution in America and tried to expose the rapaciousness of capitalism. And all this was going on in the midst of the so-called “me” generation, when allegedly there was no radical Left to speak of. (Indeed, Reagan’s election in 1980 is cited as evidence of the lack of a Left political challenge as well as the reason for the brief resurrection of Marxist parties in the United States between 1980 and 1985.)

### **Farewell for Mao, the Party's Over?**

Depending on where one stands politically, and with whom, one could easily conclude that American Maoism died when Mao passed away in 1976. In China that rings true; the crushing of Mao's widow Jian Quing and the rest of the Gang of Four and the rapid ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping suggests that Maoism doesn't stand a ghost of a chance of returning. And while some protesters in Tiananmen Square in the mid 1980s saw themselves in the tradition of the student radicals of the Cultural Revolution, the vast majority did not—nor did they invoke Mao's name in the service of their own democratic (some might say "bourgeois") movement.

But to say that Maoism somehow died on the vine is to overstate the case. Maoist organizations still exist in the United States, and some are very active on the political scene. The Maoist Internationalist Movement maintains a website, as does the Progressive Labor Party (though they can hardly be called "Maoist" today), and the RCP is as ubiquitous as ever. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the RCP played a role in helping to draft the Bloods and Crips' post-L.A. rebellion manifesto, "Give Us the Hammer and the Nails and We Will Rebuild the City." The former CLP, now called the League of Revolutionaries, has a strong following in Chicago as well as some incredibly talented radicals, including General Baker and Abdul Alkalimat. More importantly, even if we acknowledge that the number of activists has dwindled substantially since the mid-1970s, the individuals who stayed in those movements remained committed to black liberation, even if their strategies and tactics proved insensitive or wrong-headed. Anyone who knows anything about politics knows that Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign was overrun by a rainbow coalition of Maoists, or that a variety of Maoist organizations were represented in the National Black Independent Political Party. In other words, now that so many American liberals are joining the backlash against poor black people and affirmative action, either by their active participation or their silence, some of these self-proclaimed revolutionaries are still willing to "move mountains" in the service of

black folk. The most tragic and heroic example comes from Greensboro, North Carolina, where five members of the Communist Workers Party (formerly the Workers Viewpoint Organization) were murdered by Klansmen and Nazis during an anti-Klan demonstration on November 3, 1979.



*French communist & writer Jean Paul Satre*

The fact remains, however, that the heyday of black Maoism has passed. The reasons are varied, having to do with the overall decline of black radicalism, the self-destructive nature of sectarian politics, and China's disastrous foreign policy decisions vis-a-vis Africa and the Third World. Besides, most of the self-described black Maoists in our story—at least the most honest ones—probably owe their greatest intellectual debt to Du Bois, Fanon, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Harold Cruse, not to mention Stalin and Lenin. But Mao Zedong and the Chinese revolution left an indelible imprint on black radical politics—an imprint whose impact we've only begun to explore in this essay. At a moment when a group of nonaligned countries sought to challenge the political binaries created by cold war politics, when African nationalists tried to plan for a postcolonial future, when Fidel Castro and a handful of fatigue-clad militants did the impossible, when southern lunch counters and northern ghettos became theaters for a new revolution, there stood China—the most powerful "colored" nation on earth.

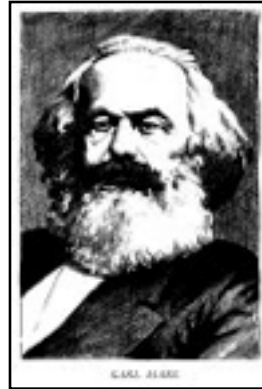
Mao's China, along with the Cuban revolution and African nationalism, internationalized the black revolution in profound ways. Mao gave black radicals a non-Western model of Marxism that placed greater emphasis on

local conditions and historical circumstances than on canonical texts. China's Great Leap Forward challenged the idea that the march to socialism must take place in stages, or that one must wait patiently for the proper objective conditions to move ahead. For many young radicals schooled in student-based social democracy and/or anti-racist politics, "consciousness raising" in the Maoist style of criticism and self-criticism was a powerful alternative to bourgeois democracy. But consciousness-raising was more than propaganda work; it was intellectual labor in the context of revolutionary practice. "All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience," Mao said in his widely read essay "On Practice" (1937). This idea of knowledge deriving dialectically from practice to theory to practice empowered radicals to question the expertise of sociologists, psychologists, economists, etc., whose grand pronouncements on the causes of poverty and racism often went unchallenged. Thus in an age of liberal technocrats, Maoists—from black radical circles to the women's liberation movement—sought to overturn bourgeois notions of expertise. They developed analyses, engaged in debates, and published journals, newspapers, position papers, pamphlets, and even books. And while they rarely agreed with one another, they saw themselves as producers of new knowledge. They believed, as Mao put it, that "these ideas turn into a material force which changes society and changes the world."

Ideas alone don't change the world, however; people do. And having the willingness and energy to change the world requires more than the correct analysis and direct engagement with the masses: instead, it takes faith and will. Here Maoists have much in common with some very old black biblical traditions. After all, if little David can take Goliath with just a slingshot, certainly a "single spark can start a prairie fire."



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## **THE MAOIST CULTISM OF THE RCP IS ANTI- MARXIST**

by ERIC GORDON  
from *Communist Voice* #36, Sept. 2005  
[www.communistvoice.org](http://www.communistvoice.org)

The Revolutionary Communist Party USA is a product of the mass movements of the 1960's. Many of its founders, including their leader, Bob Avakian, came out of the student movement of the time, particularly the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). When the RCP was founded in 1976, the formation of a new communist party of the US working class was being widely discussed among the most serious revolutionaries. But, although the party was organized under the banner of anti-revisionism, it was in fact a new revisionist party, taking up Maoism from an elitist petty-bourgeois stand characteristic of their approach then and since, and they cling to their Maoist ideology as a dogma. At first they pandered to backward ideas among the workers from the right, then they entered a phase of left economism, or left trade unionism, and then, in the late 1970's, abandonment of working class organizing altogether while furiously waving the red flag. (1) True to its Maoist ideas, the RCP's picture of socialism is bureaucratic state capitalism ruling over the masses in their name, and the equation of state ownership with a socialist economy.

Today, revolutionary ferment in society, and the study and debate of revolutionary theory, have yet to make a new upsurge. Every group calling itself revolutionary is small, with anti-revisionists (Marxists in more than name only) being the smallest of the small. In these conditions the RCP is a significant force in the leftwing movement. They get their strength,

partially, because of the weakness of the anti-revisionist trend. They attract activists through revolutionary posturing in the anti-war, anti-racist and other popular movements, posing as the most revolutionary force out there. Yet, their leftism is illusory, because their greatest source of strength is through alliances with the liberal bourgeoisie, and to make those alliances, they must drop their revolutionary phrase-mongering and fall back to liberal emotionalism. In other words, for all their left posturing, their petty bourgeois outlook and their alliance with the left wing of the liberal bourgeoisie drives them to refuse to wage a real struggle against the liberal and opportunist politics dominating these movements.

One feature of the party that stands out is their adulation for Avakian. May 1st of this year the RCP introduced a newly formatted, renamed newspaper called *Revolution* to much fanfare. In that issue they pour on the worship of Avakian particularly thick, but examples abound elsewhere also, in other issues before and after, on the web, and in talks. RCP members refer to themselves as "comrades and students of RCP Chairman Bob Avakian," and argue that "if you want to change the world...you need to know Bob Avakian." They talk of the need to "cherish him and defend" him, because "a leader like this only comes along once in a great while." We are called on to read his memoirs and listen to "the whole 11-hour DVD set" of Bob Avakian speaking, and hold parties to view it with everyone we know. One article describes an immigrant working 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, who takes his one day off on New Years day to travel to the Rose Bowl parade and "tell people about Bob Avakian," and claims that in the projects in LA people now greet each other by "putting their fists to their hearts and shouting out, 'B.A.'" Someone even "begins to cry as he hears of the future envisioned by Bob Avakian—people need this kind of leader to unleash their creativity." One acolyte is quoted on their website saying "if Lenin were alive today, he'd sound a lot like Bob Avakian."<sup>(2)</sup> At demonstrations, these students of Avakian have chanted "The earth is quakin'/ Follow Bob Avakian/The empire's shakin'/ Follow Bob Avakian!"

### **Defense of the cult of Bob**

As much as they might like readers to believe that this adulation arose spontaneously, it didn't. Avakian is a skilled self-promoter. He uses all sorts of demagogical techniques to show his supposedly great wisdom and depth of knowledge: name-dropping, referring to "back in the day", and tossing around "communist"-sounding phrases like "dialectical relationship" and "unity as well as opposition." Avakian tries to bolster this cultism by spinning a theoretical web around it.<sup>(3)</sup> He argues that people give more weight to the arguments put forth by "people who have established themselves within any field or institution as some kind of authority." According to him, in revolutionary politics, this is positive and should be fostered. He labors to assure us that he doesn't support tyrannical cults, "no matter whether they represent the proletariat or not," or cults in which "certain individuals stand outside of the party and the overall interests of the proletariat; that they can substitute their own individual will or whims." What he doesn't do is talk about the class basis of those tyrannies, or what will prevent the RCP brand of cultism from devolving into the tyrannical cultism of Stalin or Mao.

His argument rests on the correct proposal that particular ideas carry a certain prestige due to their having held up to criticism and shown their correctness in practice; this assertion is uncontroversial, one relevant example being the writings of Marx and Engels. Yet, the RCP turns this on its head: both in their theoretical justifications and in their practice, rather than analyzing the difficult questions today, instead they seek to build up their prestige, and hope no one will notice the emptiness of their answers. In fact, because they are so devoid of answers, this cultism is the only basis on which it is possible to promote Avakian's work and that of other RCP "theorists."

For example, they don't have a serious analysis of the revolutions in either Russia or China, or how and why they ended in repressive state capitalist regimes. Instead, they provide pat answers: in the Soviet Union, "when Stalin died in 1953, capitalist forces



inside the Communist Party, headed by Nikita Khrushchev, staged a coup"; in China, "after Mao died in 1976, rightist forces, led by Deng Xiaoping from behind the scenes, staged a coup..."(4) The fact that both these countries were already repressive regimes with little or no mass participation in political life at the time of these "coups" is a fact to be apologized away, as "mistakes" Stalin made, or outright denied, as in their enthusiasm for the Chinese Cultural Revolution. By contrast Marx and Engels studied the revolutions of their time deeply, and communists today need to do serious study of the revolutions since. They also studied capitalism as it existed in their day. While the basic principles they discovered about capitalism then still apply today, capitalism has developed since then. Lenin furthered their study, but capitalism has developed since Lenin's time too. Communists need to draw lessons from these developments to effectively fight the struggles of today, and the RCP has no answers here either. They also don't have any serious ideas about how to develop a proletarian movement independent of the Democrats and their allies. Instead, their answer is fear-mongering and cultism, and assertions of how really, really revolutionary they are. Marxism can't be satisfied with providing simple answers. It has to continually test and retest its basic methods and standpoint by applying them to new questions, and breaking new ground.

In place of this, on the one hand the RCP tries to promote a sense of panic, with accounts that "history is full of examples of people.... passively hoping to wait it out, only to get swallowed up by a horror beyond what they ever imagined" and that if "things are left in the hands of those in power, we *could* be living in a world where old traditional shackles meet new technology... This horrible vision would be a society where modern-day imperialism would be run by religious fanatics. *Your worst nightmare meets your worst nightmare*" [their emphasis]. (5)

On the other hand, they seek to promote a sense of security, that all of the questions are being studied and answered by a wise and thoughtful Avakian. The above quote continues: "But today, at the very moment we are haunted by a new 'Dark Ages' mentality,

the communist project is going through a Renaissance, as Bob Avakian has re-imagined the process of socialist revolution. We have a fighting chance...." Another example is from an interview, posted to several Indymedia web sites, of Sunsara Taylor, a frequent contributor to the RCP newspaper:

"Because I have followed and studied Chairman Avakian I do have answers and something to say to people! To know that there is somebody that we can have so much confidence in let me tell you, things can get really crazy in the middle of such an intense struggle... It's easy to stress out in the middle of all this, but it's important to step back for a minute and see that our Chairman is leading us to solve all these problems. He's somebody who is voluntarily and very eagerly saying that he will give his life to the people and there's a lot riding on what he does. But he doesn't stop and complain. He solves the problems and he leads people to solve the problems. I try to emulate that and it makes a big difference."(6)

The message is clear. RCP members don't need to think, don't need to ask questions, don't need to "stress out" about anything, because Avakian is going to answer everything which needs to be answered.

In the "Individual Leaders..." article and elsewhere, in place of really grappling with difficult questions, he repeatedly uses pseudo-dialectics to make it sound like he is doing so. In this technique of argumentation, he makes two contradictory statements and calls it "a dialectic", but makes no effort to talk about how they relate to each other. Then he simply picks whichever side of the so-called-dialectic suits his needs, and ignores the other. One critic on the web described this as waving the "dialectical magic wand."

For example, he brings up the "dialectical relation" between cultism and "initiative and creative critical thinking among party members and the masses following the party," but says nothing more about the question. Cultism stifles intellectual initiative among the masses, but Avakian finds it more convenient for his argument to say "dialectical relation," and then prattle on about "the

positive and necessary aspect" of cultism. In the same article, he states that "on the other hand...truth...in the beginning is always in the hands of the minority of people" and that "Mao makes the statement that people should follow whoever has the truth in their hands." He raises this point a couple of ways, and then again simply returns to his discussion of the supposed positive nature of cults. Again, he doesn't discuss the relationship between the two ideas.



*Bob Avakian, Chairman of the ridiculous RCP USA and self-appointed leader of the revolution*

These and several other examples in that article alone, clearly show that his aim is not to shed light on the question, but to obscure the emptiness of his arguments, to assure his readers that he is really thinking about things deeply, to sound "communist" and thoughtful, and to make what are often very simple-minded, empty and wrong arguments seem deeper and richer and more all-sided. Real dialectical materialism is a tool to understand and clarify the laws by which change occurs. Simply stating two contradictory things and saying they have a "dialectical relation," and then choosing one (the "unity" between

cultism and mass initiative) and ignoring the other (the "opposition" between them), clarifies nothing except the speaker's opportunism, and actually serves to obscure reality. (7)

### **Roots of the cult of Bob**

The issue is not simply that all this adulation of Avakian is unattractive, or that his wind-baggery deserves to be held up to ridicule. The issue is that cultism is really antithetical to the entire aim of communism. A communist party, a real one, not the mockery of one handed down to us by the legacy of revisionism over the last 75-80 years, is a collective endeavor to tear down the elitism and privilege which arise from class society, by tearing down class rule. Trying to do so by making a virtue of elitism and privilege is not the way to do it. A real communist party must be founded on the equality of its members: equality of rights within the party, and equality of responsibilities to the class. A working class party is a collective endeavor in which everyone has the right to be heard out. After a full hearing of a question, once decision is made, all have the responsibility to carry out the decisions of the party, although they may always raise the question again later if they still disagree with it. Cultism, in which one "comrade" is held up for adulation while others describe themselves as his "students", cuts against this spirit.

Their lack of proletarian party spirit, the elitism which comes with their cultism, the weakness of their arguments, all reveal their class orientation. Their practice shows it too: they do not organize among the workers. Doing so is difficult today, given the current lack of ferment in society, and few groups do much of it. But the RCP has given up on the workers entirely, and for the most part dropped even mention of the working class in their writings. In their *Draft Programme* (one of the few places they do mention the proletariat), they talk of fighting against a "reactionary polarization" created by the bourgeoisie, and they say that "the proletariat, through the leadership of its party, seeks to bring about a 'favorable re-polarization', by waging a 'fight for the middle.'" The phrase

"fight for the middle" is a euphemism; what it really means is ignoring the workers, and focusing on other segments of society, the petty-bourgeoisie and left-liberal Democrats.

They go further, and argue that this "fight for the middle" is really the hardest and most revolutionary work: "if the proletariat writes off potential allies, if it shrinks from waging that 'fight for the middle,' as difficult as it is, then it will fall short in making revolution." They argue that for its part, the bourgeoisie is also fighting "to enlist the support of the middle strata...seeking to convince them [the proletariat] they will have no allies when they fight back." This entire discussion sounds as if a) they believe that the proletariat is already completely behind them and does not need to be organized, or b) their declaration that they are the party which is leading the proletariat is sufficient, and it isn't necessary to take any action to actually lead the actual workers, or c) that *by* waging this fight for the middle, the RCP will convince the workers that they *do* have allies (in the kinder gentler imperialists, the liberal Democrats, mind you), and this will give them courage to organize themselves. (8)

A practical example of their abandonment of working class politics for left-liberalism is their current call to "Drive out the Bush Regime" quoted above. It reads in part: "But silence and paralysis are NOT acceptable. That which you will not resist and mobilize to stop, you will learn—or be forced—to accept. There is no escaping it the whole disastrous course of this Bush regime must be STOPPED. And we must take the responsibility to do it." While it is always good to fight against Bush, the arch-imperialist, this sort of guilt-tripping emotionalism is the stock-in-trade of the left-liberals, and it reflects the RCP's attitude toward the masses as backward and bought out, and as hopeless as a revolutionary force. This event is called for November 2nd, a Wednesday, the anniversary of Bush's re-election. It talks as though tens of thousands simply HAVE TO walk out of work and classes, or disaster will ensue. Meanwhile, even though it makes a reference to there being "no savior from the Democratic Party," it makes no mention of the imperialist nature

of that party, and no mention of the class which both Bush and the Democrats serve, the bourgeoisie.

While it is possible to find common ground in certain struggles and at certain stages during the struggle, between the working class and sections of the petty-bourgeoisie, the RCP approach—abandonment of working class politics and organizing primarily among the petty-bourgeoisie, while still trying to pose as Marxist—requires them to extract any class analysis from their writings, leaving little but empty emotional and moral appeals and sophistry, and because they are empty, the only way left to promote themselves is *by* cultist appeals.

So they have adopted this cultism for a number of reasons. In order to hide the tame liberal reformist politics they're hawking, to hide their real class allegiances, and to try to sound so very revolutionary, they talk of Avakian as "a pathbreaking Marxist thinker" who has a "vision," and who has "re-imagined the process of socialist revolution," one who "we can have so much confidence in," and therefore don't need to "stress out" about the difficult problems of building a proletarian movement. Instead of organizing among the workers, their focus is on making themselves appealing to left-liberals and petty-bourgeois radicals, and on drawing their strength from the left Democrats, summed up under their slogan "Unite all who can be united."

*Source citations available at:*  
[www.comunistvoice.org/36cCult.html](http://www.comunistvoice.org/36cCult.html).



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# SHINING PATH

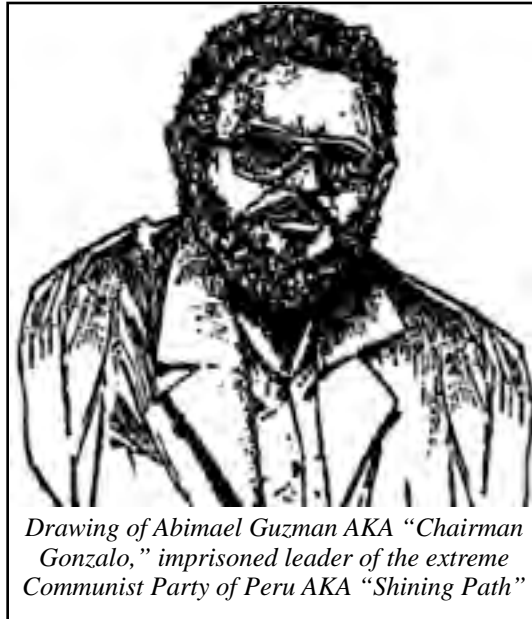
by LOUIS PROYECT  
from *The Unrepentant Marxist*  
www.louisproyect.wordpress.com  
Date unknown

There has been an abysmal failure on the part of mainstream Marxism in the United States to engage with Peruvian Maoism on its own terms. Journals like the *Monthly Review* and *NACLA* have written about the human rights aspect of the struggle, while paying scant attention to the underlying theoretical issues. We sometimes forget that the Shining Path is in a war with the Peruvian state and not the American left and its allies in Peru. We should not sweep these issues under the rug, but neither should we neglect the Maoist analysis of the Peruvian class struggle. Since these ideas have won the allegiance of massive numbers of the most exploited and oppressed peoples on the continent, they are certainly worth a closer look. It is my goal in this post to do exactly that.

The social base of the guerrillas is primarily Quechuan Indian, but the Maoist leadership of the Peruvian Communist Party has tended to discount this aspect of the struggle. It does, however, identify the agrarian crisis as key to the Peruvian revolution. This problem implicitly addresses Indian needs, since land hunger has been the primary social contradiction of Peruvian society for the past 400 years.

The Communist Party of Peru—dubbed the "Shining Path" (Sendero Luminoso) by the

bourgeois press and its leftist opponents—got its start in the 1960s. Anibal Guzman, a philosophy professor at the University of Ayacucho, decided to construct a new revolutionary movement in Peru, one that combined the ideas of Mao Zedong and José Carlos Mariátegui. From Maoism it would draw upon the strategy of "People's War," that envisioned encircling the cities from the countryside. From Mariátegui it adopted the analysis of Peru as a country that was in the grips of semi-feudal relations. While it was nominally a modern bourgeois democracy, it still had failed to achieve genuine national independence and land reform, the hallmarks of the class bourgeois-democratic revolution.



*Drawing of Abimael Guzman AKA "Chairman Gonzalo," imprisoned leader of the extreme Communist Party of Peru AKA "Shining Path"*

The leftist opponents of the PCP accused it of being trapped in a time-warp. While it was true that Peru had suffered from latifundism in the 1920s, there had been significant changes over the half-century. Most importantly, the leftist military dictatorship of General Velasco had pushed through an ambitious land reform program in the 1960s that seemed to have broken the back of the old landed estates.

We find such support of the Velasco reforms in the preface to "The Break-up of the Old Order." This is a section in the "Peru Reader." Orin Starn, Carlos Iván Degregori and Robin Kirk, three leading "Senderologists," put together this very worthwhile collection of articles. A Senderologist is an academic expert on the Shining Path insurgency, who is also a political opponent. Such experts have largely shaped our understanding of the Peruvian insurgency in the pages of *NACLA*. This would be analogous to understanding the Sandinista movement from the hostile articles written by people like Paul Berman in the 1980s. If you read Berman's articles in the *Village Voice*, you would get the impression

that the FSLN had no other agenda except to censor *La Prensa* and harass Cardinal Obando Y Bravo.

That the title of the section is "The Break-up of the Old Order" should give you some sense of the critical support the "Senderologists" had toward Velasco. In 1963 a coalition of Popular Action and Christian Democrats won the election in Peru. The social base of this coalition was urban professionals who had a strong affinity with the USA and the Alliance for Progress, which would supposedly modernize Peru. The losers in the election were the old-line Creole elites who were the main target of Mariátegui's attacks. This section of the ruling class had roots in the guano and nitrates fortunes made in the 18th and 19th centuries, and also in the latifundios. Certainly we could describe this section of the ruling class as semi-feudal. Was its loss of power a "break-up of the old order?"

Social tensions unleashed by the new government's first attempts at reform prompted a military coup led by General Juan Velasco. To everybody's surprise the Velasco government threw its weight behind the new reforms. It nationalized the oil wells of the International Petroleum Company, a subsidiary of Standard Oil of New Jersey. Most importantly, it enacted a sweeping agrarian reform, which abolished the old Andean estates as well as newer coastal plantations.

While Velasco was overthrown by another military coup that implemented some counter-reforms, the general direction of Peruvian politics took a sharp left turn in this period. Eventually Alan Garcia became president. He was the candidate of the APRA party, a left-wing nationalist formation that rejected socialism. Mariátegui had engaged in sharp polemics with Hay de la Torre, the founder of APRA, in the 1920s. Against the radical nationalism of APRA, Mariátegui countered with Marxism.

There is little doubt that the "Senderologists" believe that the best possible outcome for Peruvian society is in this general direction. They believed that the Velasco reforms and Garcia's administration were moving the

country forward. It would take some prodding from the revolutionary groups in Peru to keep the reformist governments honest, but they had no alternative. Their attitude is reminiscent of the liberal and social democratic supporters of Bill Clinton, whose only hope is that there can be sufficient grassroots pressure from the left to extract some concessions from the Clintonites. When Clinton fails to deliver, it is because we are not loud enough or strong enough to get his attention.

The Maoists rejected this accommodationist approach from top to bottom. In the midst of the euphoria over Velasco's land reform, they stubbornly held to the position that nothing substantial had changed. Peru was still semi-feudal. Guzman wrote in his 1975 speech "Let Us Retake Mariategui And Reconstitute His Party" that:

"We see it [semi-feudalism] today, despite the years elapsed, because it persists and new forms of semi-feudal roots are developed, forms of unpaid labor, family obligations and deferred salaries, personal privileges, maintenance and fusion of old latifundio and the preponderance of gamonalismo, under cover of new conditions and high sounding words. Semi-feudalism, harshly attacked in years past has developed into a self-evident truth, since the class struggle itself, with the rural explosion we have seen so many times, the agrarian reforms and the counter-revolutionary action we have seen since the 1960's, show the semi-feudal base of Peruvian society."

This seemed outrageous to many Senderologists. For example, Cynthia McClintock writes in "Theories of Revolution and the Case of Peru" (in "The Shining Path of Peru," edited by David Scott Palmer) that post-1968 Peru cannot be described as "feudal" since Velasco's reforms "swept large landlords from the countryside, and sharecropping or rental arrangements also disappeared."

The definitive counter-analysis of agrarian relations in the 1960s comes from a Maoist leader named Antonio Díaz Martínez, who wrote "Hunger and Hope in Ayacucho" during

this period. He was an official of the agrarian reform department of Prado's conservative administration in 1960 who knew about the plight of the Quechuan peasantry first-hand. Trained as an agricultural engineer, he eventually became a professor in the agronomy department of the University of Ayacucho, where many of the PCP's cadres emerged.

Díaz Martínez came to the conclusion after doing field studies in the Ayacucho countryside that the main problem was still the domination of the latifundio. The peasants still depended on the estates for grazing land, and functioned as service tenants—a form of pre-capitalist production. The agrarian reform hardly affected Ayacucho at all. While the peasants had the right to become owners of the land they resided on, they had to pay for it. As a consequence, the plantation owner was able to keep back the best land for himself.

The "gamonales" had all sorts of schemes to avoid genuine redistribution. Some became absentee landlords, while others evicted or moved the peasants to avoid the terms of the 1964 land reform. When the land did become private property, a new class of rich peasants soon emerged. This group tended to be more open to technological innovation in the countryside, but still acted against the interests of the small peasant who had less access to financing and government assistance.

He reserved his sharpest criticism for two government-sponsored cooperatives at Allpachaka and Huayllapampa. They were implemented by mestizo specialists who did not take the practical knowledge accumulated by the Indians over the centuries. All the old traditions of self-help and cooperation were suppressed.

Land hunger was not satisfied by the Velasco reforms. They simply propagated old forms of exploitation in new trappings. Hence Peru was being torn apart by massive class struggles in the countryside to which Díaz Martínez and the Maoists would orient:

"La concentración terrateniente y la profundización del capitalismo burocrático acentúan en forma violenta la expulsión, expropiación y explotación del campesinos pobres. Esta situación trae como consecuencia una gran movilización campesina, que se acentúa entre 1963-64, movilización que rompe los diques de contención establecidos en entre 500 y 600 mil campesinos - iniciaron masivas invasiones de tierras que les fueron arrebatadas en los últimos siglos. Estas luchas se van a producir en el sur (Cusco y Ayacucho) en el Centro (Junín y Pasco) y en el Norte (Cajamarca y Ancash). Veamos algunas de ellas."



So when 500 to 600 thousand campesinos rose up to take part in land seizures, the Maoists decided to launch an armed struggle on their behalf. They did not think that the ballot-box could change Peruvian society. As a propaganda act to show their disgust with

voting, four masked students from the University of Huamango destroyed ballots at the Cuschi town hall on May 17, 1980. They were armed with two non-functioning pistols. This was the first public action by the PCP after years of debate and organizational preparation at the University for years. The political understanding they brought with them is rooted in the analysis of Guzman's blend of Maoism and Mariátegui, and Díaz Martínez's study of the Ayacucho countryside. The PCP's struggle is ideologically grounded in Marxism, despite all efforts to paint them as gangsters or terrorists. Even David Scott Palmer, one of the most outspoken

"Senderologists" is forced to admit this. He says, "The insurgency has rarely engaged in indiscriminate violence and should not be compared with Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in this regard."

And what of the charge that they are anti-democratic? Surely the act of destroying ballots is a sign that you are not willing to give your ideas a chance in the "free marketplace of ideas." Cynthia McClintock is particularly obsessed with this problem. She writes:

"The electoral process has engaged the citizenry. Indeed, rates of electoral participation in Peru are among the highest in Latin America. By 1985 more than 80 percent of Peru's eligible population was registered to vote, and turnout was over 90 percent; in 1990, in a context of widespread pressures by the Shining Path against voting, about 80 percent voted in each of the two rounds of the election. Since the early 1980s in Lima, when citizens have been asked their preferred political regime, between 70 to 80 percent opt for a democratic system, while only between 5 to 20 choose a socialist revolution and a mere 2 to 10 a military regime. In addition, majorities generally assess the incumbent governments as at least somewhat democratic."

All this is of course nonsense. These are the same sorts of arguments that were used against the FMLN in El Salvador or the NLF in Vietnam. Why didn't they put down their arms and join in the democratic elections? These "demonstration elections" as Noam Chomsky refers to them are stacked against the popular movement. The whole purpose of the ballot box is to let off some steam, so that bourgeois rule can continue without interference. What is surprising is McClintock's admission that 20 PERCENT of the citizenry of Peru opt for a socialist revolution. I cannot imagine any society existing for very long when 1 out of 5 people want to overthrow the government. Can you picture what American society would look like if we had the same sort of statistical results? Even the Trotskyists would appear mainstream.

The decision to launch an armed struggle while an elected government is in power is not such a strange one. After all, the Zapatistas did exactly the same thing on New Years Day 4 years ago and for identical reasons. The Indians of Chiapas, just like the students of Huamango, were poorly armed but resolute. Both movements are led by university professors as well.



The main difference between the Peruvian Maoists and the Zapatistas is that the latter have won the support of public opinion internationally. This is partly due to the weakness of their movement. If they had the same sort of military clout as the PCP, then I doubt if the American mass media would smile so benignly on the peasants of Chiapas.

There is little doubt that the Chiapas movement could benefit from some of the militancy of the PCP, while the PCP could in turn benefit from the flexibility and openness to alliances nationally and internationally that the Zapatistas have mastered. In either case, the two movements are powerful and progressive. A successful peasant revolution in Peru based on the model of Mao's China would be of tremendous political consequence. It is a sign of the declining self-confidence of the Marxist movement that this obvious truth has been lost among endless discussion of human rights....

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# MORE THAN HALF THE SKY

## *The Power of Women in Peru*

By FEATHER CRAWFORD FREED  
From *Hidden Transcripts*, August 15, 2008  
www.hiddentranscripts.wordpress.com

### Introduction

The war between the Shining Path and the Peruvian state during the 1980s and 1990s left almost seventy thousand, mostly indigenous, Peruvians dead, and many more bereft, with emotional and physical scars. The legacy of this time of violence could appear entirely bleak, yet recently scholars have examined the opportunities the Shining Path offered traditionally marginalized sectors of the Peruvian population, particularly Peruvian women. Women made up a significant portion of the Shining Path's membership, and their visibility within the movement was one of its most striking features. Some suggest the Shining Path brought Peruvian women into the public sphere by giving them leadership roles within the revolutionary movement.<sup>[1]</sup> Other scholars give a more complex analysis of the involvement of women in the Shining Path, finding that both personal agency and exclusionary patriarchy were part of their experience.<sup>[2]</sup> In this paper, I argue that the Shining Path neither generated the significance and power of Peruvian women through their inclusion in the Revolution, nor neutralized their political agency through their co-optation into a patriarchal organization, but rather that the circumstances surrounding the war between the Shining Path and the Peruvian state unleashed the power of women, revealing their profound significance within Peruvian society, and providing them the tools and the space necessary to act politically. An analysis of the Shining Path's platform, propaganda and membership will demonstrate that the Shining Path was dependent upon women for its empowerment, by showing the instrumental role played by women in legitimizing the image and ideology of the Shining Path. Then, a discussion of the

opposition to the violence and terror of the Shining Path will reveal the power of grassroots organizations led by women. Finally, this paper will show that now, as people study and remember the violence in Peru, women, through their testimonies and interviews continue to shape the legacy of the war, and the image of both the Shining Path, and the Peruvian state.



Augusta la Torre Carrasco AKA "Comrade Nora"

Several scholars have studied the political, economic, and social context of the rise of the Shining Path, and a brief summary of the conditions in Peru in the late 1960s and 1970s is necessary to understand both the People's War, and the emergence of women into the public sphere. Poverty and deprivation marked the lives of many Peruvian citizens, especially those who lived in rural, non-Spanish speaking communities. Enrique Mayer writes of the division between "deep", or indigenous Peru, and "official", or Hispanic Peru, and describes the ways indigenous Peruvians live with structural violence, the experience of "poverty, abuse, discrimination, racism, and arbitrariness and/or indifference by the state."<sup>[3]</sup> Rights for women in Peru were very limited; abortion after rape was illegal, female poverty was on the rise, and



women of indigenous background faced virtually insurmountable obstacles.<sup>[4]</sup>

The “Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces,” led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado came into power in 1968, the year that popular movements and protest erupted in Paris, Mexico City, Prague and other cities worldwide. Velasco enacted educational, agrarian and economic reforms to combat widespread material inequality, and prevent a more radical revolution from the left.<sup>[5]</sup> Velasco’s top-down reform movement was incomplete, and therefore highly combusive, creating a potent mix of expectation and frustration in a population of increasingly educated and politicized young Peruvians, who were caught at the intersection of reformist promises and structural impediments.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1969, a strike of educational workers in Ayacucho revealed the limits of Velasco’s reform and the growing dissatisfaction of teachers and students in Andean communities, what Orin Starn describes as the “climate of sharp unrest across the impoverished countryside.”<sup>[7]</sup> The activism of members of SUTEP during the 1969 upheaval highlights the collision between the expectations and limitations fostered by the Velasco regime. This was a seminal event for the Shining Path, and used in later publications to contextualize and legitimize the uprising. Shining Path propaganda described the role of women, “In 1969, women heads of households smashed the doors at the Ayacucho food market, after the police closed it during the demonstrations ...an elderly woman,...delivered a furious and spontaneous speech to the masses.<sup>[8]</sup>

The “second “phase” of the reform movement started by Velasco was carried out by his successor, Morales Bermudez, with a significant movement to the right. Velasco’s agrarian reform led to land take-overs and peasant movements, and according to Floencia Mallon, “if official attempts at popular mobilization and social redistribution seemed to generate a radicalization even more difficult to control, then better to stop Velasco’s ill-fated experiments and once again court the confidence of the investing classes.”<sup>[9]</sup> Activists, labor leaders, and teachers were fired, repressed, and deported.

[10] Promises kept, like expanded education and socialist reform, and promises broken, such as the lack of jobs for indigenous youth, deficient land reform, and the continued repression of social movements, combined to create what Starn calls an “enormous pool of radical young people of amalgamated rural/urban identity who would provide an effective revolutionary force.”<sup>[11]</sup> Several leftist groups worked within the political and educational space opened up by the Velasco regime, while working against the repressive, inefficient, and indifferent Peruvian state. Other groups, particularly the Shining Path, refused to work within the state-defined system.



*Martyred Shining Path militant Edith Lagos*

The Shining Path arose out of the University of Ayacucho, informed by Maoist/Leninist/Marxist ideology, the writings of Mariategui, and the failures of the Peruvian state. The leader of the Shining Path, Abimael Guzman, called President Gonzalo by his followers, sought a protracted people’s war with the state, modeled after the Chinese communist revolution. He led the movement according to “Gonzalo Thought,” an ideology that was dedicated to class struggle and combating imperialism, with an emphasis on the importance of the Vanguard Party and the necessity for bloodshed.<sup>[12]</sup> While other leftist opposition groups attempted to work within the political process, the Shining Path rejected the validity of elections, maintaining connections with few other leftist groups besides SUTEP. The Shining Path continued to work with SUTEP because of the

organization's Maoist ideology and, at least partly, according to Ivan Hinojosa, because, "The education system was the greatest source of cadres for the left."<sup>[13]</sup>

On May 17, 1980, the day before Peru held elections for a civilian president after twelve years under a military regime; Shining Path members signaled the beginning of their revolutionary movement by burning ballot boxes in Chuschi, a village in Ayacucho.<sup>[14]</sup> The Shining Path was not well-known outside the Andean countryside at the beginning of the People's War. The movement was led by white, educated Peruvians, Guzman and his inner-circle who believed the rights of women and indigenous people would be ensured by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Guzman largely dismissed issues of racial and gender equality, yet at the same time, they appealed for ideological legitimacy by recruiting indigenous men and women, and by portraying their movement as a champion of Peruvian women.

A publication from *Nueva Bandera* from the mid-1990s describes the Marxist approach to gender dynamics, "Women, like men are seen as a combination of social relations, historically formed and changing as a function of the variations in society as it develops. Women are thus a social product and their transformation demands the transformation of society."<sup>[15]</sup> They rejected feminist movements that did not share their radical ideology, groups that "preach women's liberation, simply making some adjustments to this decrepit society." The article continues to condemn these types of organization, calling them "social cushions" that, "have bourgeoisie and revisionist positions and serve as instruments of oppression and backwardness for women with the aim of pulling them off the path that the proletariat and the people have traversed with the People's War."<sup>[16]</sup> Although the movement lacked space for feminist-oriented activity, it did recognize the tactical significance of women. The women of Peru were necessary to the revolution, according to Lenin, "The Success of the revolution depends on the degree to which the women participate," and Mao, "Women represent half the population... and they are a force determining the failure or

success of the revolution."<sup>[17]</sup> Mao and Lenin may have understood importance of women in revolution, but Peruvian women had much more than just demographic strength as half the population.

### **Women in the Shining Path**

Women played an instrumental role in legitimizing the ideology of the Shining Path, as teachers, members, martyrs and propaganda images. By 1990, women made up approximately one-third of the revolutionary group's membership.<sup>[18]</sup> Guzman, although aloof from bourgeoisie feminist movements, had formed the Popular Woman's Movement in 1965, and worked as the director of student teachers in the Education department, where more than half the teachers were women, and according to Robin Kirk, "By 1981 half of Ayacucho's teachers had received their degrees from the Shining Path-controlled UNSCH Education Department."<sup>[19]</sup> In this way, women were involved in the diffusion and reception of the Maoist ideas that underpinned the Shining Path. Women were not only teachers and students of Maoism and Gonzalo Thought, but also members of the movement's leadership. Guzman's wife, Augusta was the director of the Popular Women's movement, but her early visibility waned until a video of her funeral surfaced in 1991.<sup>[20]</sup> As wife, warrior, or martyr, Augusta was a symbol of the Shining Path's appeal to Peruvian women and women's ability to serve in leadership roles.

The Shining Path celebrated the image of one young female member very successfully. In 1982, Edith Lagos, a member of the Shining Path, or *Senderista*, died at the hands of the police. Earlier that year she had helped mastermind the Ayacucho prison break, and was, according to Robin Kirk, "the most famous Shining Path member after Guzman."<sup>[21]</sup> Lagos was *misti*, or a Peruvian with non-indigenous features, well-educated and the daughter of wealthy parents. Her life an example of the emergence of politicized Peruvian women into the public sphere, and her death an illustration of the power of the image of fierce, dedicated *Senderistas*. Lagos' funeral in Huamanga drew ten thousands mourners, who appeared in an

amateur video of the event as a “solid carpet of people”.<sup>[22]</sup> Since her death, Lagos’ grave has been destroyed three times, attesting to the military’s recognition of the power of her martyrdom to inspire Shining Path members and sympathizers. The Shining Path continued to use her as an icon seventeen years after her death, extolling her dedication and martyrdom in a presentation given in San Francisco by a member of the Committee to Support the Revolution in Peru at a gathering on International Women’s Day called “Women Hold up Half the Sky, The Role of Women in the Revolution in Peru.”<sup>[23]</sup>

The Shining Path appealed to women within Andean communities, building its membership and ideological legitimacy. They did this by holding trials of wife-beaters, adulterers, and rapists.<sup>[24]</sup> Later publications of Shining Path propaganda recount their role proudly, “Peru’s traditional Andean peasant culture is quite a lot more rigid than prevailing in the urban areas. Peasant women who would stray from their husbands are severely punished but sexual harassment and adultery on the part of men is rather prevalent. On the other hand, where the Party established its influence, divorce is introduced and sexual harassment is not tolerated.”<sup>[25]</sup> Previously “invisible,” in the words of Isabel Coral Cordero, and trapped within a system that recognized only their domestic contributions, the Shining Path gave Peruvian women education, social justice, and opportunities to act alongside men in the People’s War. Yet at the same time, gender issues were not part of the Shining Path’s platform, only their rhetoric. Guzman, like the primary influences in his life, Marx, Lenin, Mao and Mariategui, found gender insignificant in comparison to class struggle, but recognized the necessity of women’s involvement in the Revolution. “Only the direct and massive participation of revolutionary women, principally working women,” Guzman is quoted as saying “...in the (revolution) remains the sole guarantee of genuine defense and promotion of women’s rights within a real and concrete path of liberation.”<sup>[26]</sup> The Shining Path recognized the need for women in the movement, yet it cannot be said that they offered Peruvian women emancipation or political agency, only

that they sought their support through policies and rhetoric that validated their significance within Peruvian society and the revolution.

In contrast to the image of invisibility, domesticity, and sacrifice of Peruvian women described above, the figure of the female *Senderista* fighter inspired fear. The perception of these women warriors often had racial and gendered implications, harkening back to both stories of fierce Andean females, and the teachings of Mariategui. Mariategui described the nature of women as, “Lack[ing] a sense of justice. Women’s flaw is to be too indulgent or too severe. And they, like cats, have a mischievous inclination for cruelty.”<sup>[27]</sup> Robin Kirk conducted interviews and research on the role of women in the Shining Path and found two prevailing perceptions of the “crazy” women drawn to join the People’s war, either “sexless automatons,” or “bloodthirsty nymphomaniacs.” Kirk writes that “It was as if Nature had delivered a totally new creature...it frightened and gave Guerillas an aura of unnatural, witchy power,” and quotes her cabdriver’s sentiment that “women from the mountains were, strong-willed, warlike.”<sup>[28]</sup> *Senderistas* were rumored to regularly deliver the “coup de grace” in targeted assassinations and popular trials, further building their image as cold and deadly.<sup>[29]</sup> The Shining Path reinforced this racialized perception of Andean women in its literature, quoting a 1923 *El Tiempo* newspaper article that described Andean women’s “rich history” of involvement in rebellions in the Ancco and Chusqui districts, saying, “They mistreated the mayor and the chief tax collectors of these districts in a cruel and inhumane way, and left them fatally wounded.”<sup>[30]</sup> The Shining Path did not create this image of strong, dangerous Peruvian women, they merely applied it in order to legitimize their appeal to indigenous communities, using both fear of women’s innate cruelty, and pride in Andean resistance and independence.

### **Women Opposed to the Shining Path**

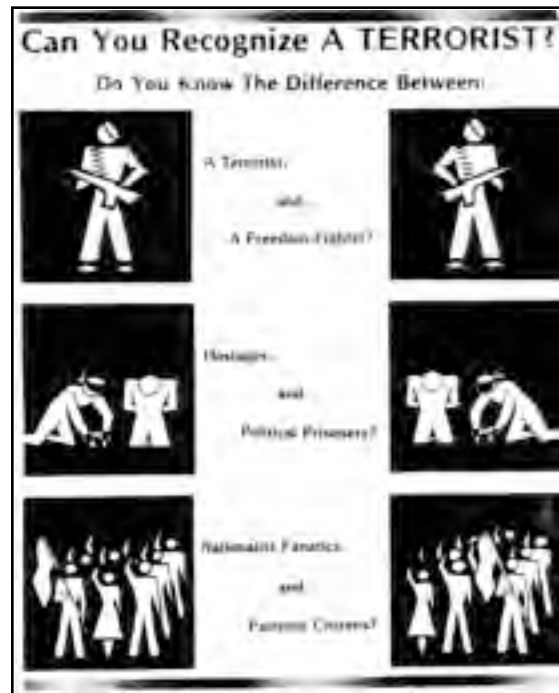
The violence of the 1980s and 1990s threatened Peruvian families, compromising parents’ ability to protect their children, separating men from their families and

leaving women to organize associations to defend and heal their communities. During the 1970s labor and political movements were almost exclusively male, but as men left rural communities, joining or fleeing the Shining Path, women “filled the void,” and formed groups that resisted the Shining Path.<sup>[31]</sup> Some women, like Maria Elana Moyano, had been politically active for years, others formed in reaction to the war between the Shining Path and the Peruvian State. The conditions in Peru, the violence, the hunger, and the terror of the areas affected by the violence, necessitated the fusion of the roles of mother and political actor. The power and significance of Peruvian women may have previously been invisible, dormant, or even repressed, but was now brought to the fore by women’s compelling resistance to the Shining Path.

Maria Elana Moyano’s years of political activism had their roots in the incomplete land reform of the Vargas regime. In 1971, when she was twelve years old, Moyano accompanied her parents in a land take over, after their expectations of land redistribution had been unmet.<sup>[32]</sup> The land they and the neighbors occupied outside of Lima became the Villa El Salvador.<sup>[33]</sup> Moyano remained politically active in the town; she was a member of a church group that was influenced by Liberation Theology, president of the Villa El Salvador Women’s Federation, and in 1987, Vice Mayor of the town.<sup>[34]</sup> In 1989, the Agency for International Development showcased Villa El Salvador as a model town. Moyano’s power was neither invisible nor radical, she worked within legal institutions and pursued social change.

The Shining Path aggressively pursued obedience and loyalty from the inhabitants of Villa El Salvador, using violence and terror to achieve the townspeople’s cooperation. Moyano would not endorse the People’s War and gave an interview to journalist Mariella Balbi in 1991, after the Shining Path had blown up a food ware house that supplied a soup kitchen.<sup>[35]</sup> “Until a little while ago, I thought the Shining Path was wrong-headed but that they in some way wanted to fight for some kind of justice,” she said, “...now they have touched grassroots organizations, made

up of the poorest people. Who participates in the soup kitchens and the ‘glass of milk’ program? People who can’t afford to eat in their houses, so I don’t understand this unbalanced group. They want to snuff out survival organizations so that levels of malnutrition and death rise.”<sup>[36]</sup> Moyano led a march to protest the violence of the Shining Path and gave interviews like the one cited above criticizing the movement’s tactics. On February 15, 1992, Moyano was murdered by female Shining Path members at a community chicken barbecue she had organized.<sup>[37]</sup>



Moyano was able to make a political space for herself in Peru, before the Shining Path invaded her town. She was neither silent nor disempowered in Villa El Salvador because her position gave her power to defy the Shining Path as a politician and a woman. Other women resisted the Shining Path informally, without political clout. Peruvian women collaborated in “Mother’s Clubs,” soup kitchens and glass-of milk programs, functional organizations that addressed nutritional needs of children and communities. Yet through the violence and terror of the war between the Shining Path and the Peruvian state, these women’s federations became politicized. In August, 1988, the Mother’s Clubs Federation

organized a march for peace, one participant saying, "Because we give life, we defend it."<sup>[38]</sup> Senderistas attempted to disrupt the march and intimidate those advocating peaceful solutions, but they were expelled by the female marchers. Without the support of women, the Shining Path struggled for legitimacy and control, in the face of explicit opposition from Peruvian women, the group asserted their influence through violence and repression. The potential contribution of Peruvian women may have been overlooked by the masculine organizations that formed in the 1970s, but within the extraordinary conditions of the war, women's foundational position within society became clear.

The war also inspired women in the Peruvian countryside to act in the public sphere in order to protect their children and their communities. As the number of casualties grew and the men left, women in Andean communities formed self-defense organizations, or *Rondas Campesinas*.<sup>[39]</sup> Although accounts of the successful opposition to the Shining Path often include gendered language and references to masculine resistance, women, or *Ronderas*, played central roles in the community organization.<sup>[40]</sup> Although some described their activities as "making ourselves macho," or "put[ting] ourselves in the position of men," the efforts of women to oppose the Shining Path dealt the People's War a serious blow.<sup>[41]</sup> Gendered language aside, the outcome of the *Ronderas'* involvement in the war against the Shining Path was significant, communities cooperated with the Peruvian state to identify, attack, and purge *Senderistas*.<sup>[42]</sup>

Andean women recognized the value of their political participation, and sought to ensure their continued political involvement. In Ayacucho in 1994 and 1995, Andean women created the "Proposal of the Women of Ayacucho."<sup>[43]</sup> The women demanded guarantees they would retain their position in the economy, state aid for nutrition and health programs, women and children displaced by the violence and attention to the mental health of Peruvian children. They recognized their role in maintaining their visibility, and pledged to coordinate and organize local,

regional and national women's groups, learn Spanish and engage in family planning.<sup>[44]</sup> This effort to claim space for themselves in the public sphere shows the dedication of these women to their goals, and according to historian Steve Stern, "women's new prominence as citizen-subjects, with their own political organizations and agendas, has left an important and probably irreversible legacy."<sup>[45]</sup>

### **Women Remember the Shining Path**

The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (PTRC) found that the Shining Path was responsible for fifty-four percent of the deaths during its war against the Peruvian state, and was principally guilty for the violence because the organization had deliberately sought to elicit a violent response from the state.<sup>[46]</sup> One key distinction between the terror perpetrated by the Shining Path and that of the military and police was the state officials' systematic application of sexual violence against women.<sup>[47]</sup> The use of sexual violence by state representatives, such as military and police, was widespread under military dictatorships in the Southern Cone, and state repression and civil wars elsewhere in South and Central America during the twentieth century. These violations were generally committed against civilian women, while in Peru, the presence of women in the Shining Path complicates the understanding of this distinction. The inclination toward rape and sexual torture, as seen in Peru during the violence of the 1980s and early 1990s could speak to the need of the state's military and bureaucratic machine to break down and reorganize marginalized and indigenous populations. Raping with impunity is a powerful tool, it breaks down family bonds and degrades the mothers and sisters of the families, damaging and disempowering the victims of state violence in ways that undermine entire communities. In Peru, as elsewhere, sexual violence was used against women to assert state control over target populations, the results were damaging to the women and their bodies, their communities, and the legacy of the Peruvian state's victory over the Shining Path.

Testimonies continue to speak to scholars and other members of the international community. The state-sanctioned sexual violence recorded in the PTRC is personalized by interviews and testimonies by both victims and torturers. For example, Betty was a militant Shining Path member, but left the party after becoming pregnant. She lived in fear of being found by either the Shining Path or state authorities. Eventually the police began questioning her about rumors of her Shining Path involvement, periodically arresting, torturing and raping her. Betty's life was ruined by this violence, she lived in constant insecurity and "never knew when one of the policemen who had raped her would pass her on the street and smile that secret smile of knowing."<sup>[48]</sup>

"Pancho" was a veteran of the Navy and fought in the early 1980s against the Shining Path in Ayacucho, and he gave an interview that is recorded in *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. He matter-of-factly told of raping and abusing girls and women, "When I searched women, the first thing I did was undress them. Old or young, I stuck my fingers in them just the same. You may not believe me, but there was one time when I found one explosive, pardon me, two. It's because they have big cunts," he said. "So from that moment I began to search all the *cholas*...sometimes little girls thirteen years old. They were sluts." "Pancho's" interview shows that as he battled the Shining Path, he victimized women he felt could be enemy combatants, perhaps this allowed him to justify his crimes, while racism also allowed him to distance himself from the pain he caused. He narrated his participation of another rape and murder of a young indigenous girl with his military comrades, asking his interviewer, "You understand don't you. This happens the world over."<sup>[49]</sup> He then reminded his interviewer of Vietnam, as if to establish their mutual culpability in wartime rape. Yet, by the time the PTRC released its report; sexual violence was increasingly acknowledged and condemned by an international community that was more responsive to reports of systematic sexual violence.

Women testified to the PTRC, and their experiences will forever be a part of Peru's official history. Remaining adherents to the Shining Path, such as the Committee to Support the Revolution in Peru (CSR)P exploited the PTRC's report, as seen in an article in the weekly newspaper, *Revolutionary Worker*, and reprinted by the CSR)P: "One of the most heart-wrenching sections of the Commission report documents case after case of torture of women revolutionaries by the military and police," the article goes on to describe acts of torture, and ends by quoting the PTRC, "The Commission concludes that sexual violence against women by the armed forces of the state was a 'generalized practice that took on a systematic character connected to the repression of the subversives in the provinces of Ayacucho, Huancaavelica, and Apurimac.'"<sup>[50]</sup> In the production of memory, the Shining Path has won an important victory, and even after its destruction in the mid-1990s, the movement continued to celebrate its treatment of women. Later in the article the authors remarks, "One of the things that really stands out about the People's War in Peru is how steadfastly the PCP (Peruvian Communist Party) has struggled against women's oppression, and how it has led the masses against every form of degradation faced by women in Peru."<sup>[51]</sup>

## Conclusion

The power of women becomes explicit when it is shown in the public sphere. Under the kind of conditions created by the war between the Shining Path and the Peruvian state, Peruvian women were able to act in ways both maternal and political, and show the influence they wielded in a variety of ways. Women acted as revolutionaries, soldiers, community organizers, and national consciences because of a combination of factors, among them: their dedication to party doctrine, the Marxist appeal to female inclusion, the dwindling number of men in many communities, their need to feed their children, and their decision to testify to the PTRC. Although the Shining Path and its remaining followers claimed to be instruments of the emancipation of the women of Peru, it was the organization that benefited from the

women's membership. The movement acquired greater ideological legitimacy and a dark air of mystery and danger associated with indigenous female warriors, adding even more to the movement's credibility. Women were visible sacrifices to the movement, and the martyrdom of Edith Lagos drew support from many quarters. Women played a crucial role when communities began to resist the Shining Path and form alliances with state representatives, and also began to act publicly by forming substantial social organizations that addressed matters of nutrition and child welfare. Finally, the testimonies of women will continue to verify claims of the Shining Path that the Peruvian state's victory was sullied by the systematic application of sexual violence during the war.

Source citations available at:  
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## FRIENDLY FEUDALISM

### *The Tibet Myth*

by MICHAEL PARENTI  
from [www.michaelparenti.org](http://www.michaelparenti.org)  
January 2007

#### **I. For Lords and Lamas**

Along with the blood drenched landscape of religious conflict there is the experience of inner peace and solace that every religion promises, none more so than Buddhism. Standing in marked contrast to the intolerant savagery of other religions, Buddhism is neither fanatical nor dogmatic—so say its adherents. For many of them Buddhism is less a theology and more a meditative and investigative discipline intended to promote an inner harmony and enlightenment while directing us to a path of right living. Generally, the spiritual focus is not only on oneself but on the welfare of others. One tries to put aside egoistic pursuits and gain a deeper understanding of one's connection to

all people and things. "Socially engaged Buddhism" tries to blend individual liberation with responsible social action in order to build an enlightened society.

A glance at history, however, reveals that not all the many and widely varying forms of Buddhism have been free of doctrinal fanaticism, nor free of the violent and exploitative pursuits so characteristic of other religions. In Sri Lanka there is a legendary and almost sacred recorded history about the triumphant battles waged by Buddhist kings of yore. During the twentieth century, Buddhists clashed violently with each other and with non-Buddhists in Thailand, Burma, Korea, Japan, India, and elsewhere. In Sri Lanka, armed battles between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils have taken many lives on both sides. In 1998 the U.S. State Department listed thirty of the world's most violent and dangerous extremist groups. Over half of them were religious, specifically Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist.<sup>1</sup>

In South Korea, in 1998, thousands of monks of the Chogye Buddhist order fought each other with fists, rocks, firebombs, and clubs, in pitched battles that went on for weeks. They were vying for control of the Order, the largest in South Korea, with its annual budget of \$9.2 million, its millions of dollars worth of property, and the privilege of appointing 1,700 monks to various offices. The brawls damaged the main Buddhist sanctuaries and left dozens of monks injured, some seriously. The Korean public appeared to disdain both factions, feeling that no matter what side took control, "it would use worshippers' donations for luxurious houses and expensive cars."<sup>2</sup>

As with any religion, squabbles between or within Buddhist sects are often fueled by the material corruption and personal deficiencies of the leadership. For example, in Nagano, Japan, at Zenkoji, the prestigious complex of temples that has hosted Buddhist sects for more than 1,400 years, "a nasty battle" arose between Komatsu the chief priest and the Tacchu, a group of temples nominally under the chief priest's sway. The Tacchu monks accused Komatsu of selling writings and drawings under the temple's name for his own gain. They also were appalled by the

frequency with which he was seen in the company of women. Komatsu in turn sought to isolate and punish monks who were critical of his leadership. The conflict lasted some five years and made it into the courts.<sup>3</sup>

But what of *Tibetan* Buddhism? Is it not an exception to this sort of strife? And what of the society it helped to create? Many Buddhists maintain that, before the Chinese crackdown in 1959, old Tibet was a spiritually oriented kingdom free from the egotistical lifestyles, empty materialism, and corrupting vices that beset modern industrialized society. Western news media, travel books, novels, and Hollywood films have portrayed the Tibetan theocracy as a veritable Shangri-La. The Dalai Lama himself stated that “the pervasive influence of Buddhism” in Tibet, “amid the wide open spaces of an unspoiled environment resulted in a society dedicated to peace and harmony. We enjoyed freedom and contentment.”<sup>4</sup>



*Tibetan serfdom: a serf with both hands amputated*

A reading of Tibet’s history suggests a somewhat different picture. “Religious conflict was commonplace in old Tibet,” writes one western Buddhist practitioner. “History belies the Shangri-La image of Tibetan lamas and their followers living together in mutual tolerance and nonviolent goodwill. Indeed, the situation was quite

different. Old Tibet was much more like Europe during the religious wars of the Counterreformation.”<sup>5</sup> In the thirteenth century, Emperor Kublai Khan created the first Grand Lama, who was to preside over all the other lamas as might a pope over his bishops. Several centuries later, the Emperor of China sent an army into Tibet to support the Grand Lama, an ambitious 25-year-old man, who then gave himself the title of Dalai (Ocean) Lama, ruler of all Tibet.

His two previous lama “incarnations” were then retroactively recognized as his predecessors, thereby transforming the 1st Dalai Lama into the 3rd Dalai Lama. This 1st (or 3rd) Dalai Lama seized monasteries that did not belong to his sect, and is believed to have destroyed Buddhist writings that conflicted with his claim to divinity. The Dalai Lama who succeeded him pursued a sybaritic life, enjoying many mistresses, partying with friends, and acting in other ways deemed unfitting for an incarnate deity. For these transgressions he was murdered by his priests. Within 170 years, despite their recognized divine status, five Dalai Lamas were killed by their high priests or other courtiers.<sup>6</sup>

For hundreds of years competing Tibetan Buddhist sects engaged in bitterly violent clashes and summary executions. In 1660, the 5th Dalai Lama was faced with a rebellion in Tsang province, the stronghold of the rival Kagyu sect with its high lama known as the Karmapa. The 5th Dalai Lama called for harsh retribution against the rebels, directing the Mongol army to obliterate the male and female lines, and the offspring too “like eggs smashed against rocks....In short, annihilate any traces of them, even their names.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1792, many Kagyu monasteries were confiscated and their monks were forcibly converted to the Gelug sect (the Dalai Lama’s denomination). The Gelug school, known also as the “Yellow Hats,” showed little tolerance or willingness to mix their teachings with other Buddhist sects. In the words of one of their traditional prayers: “Praise to you, violent god of the Yellow Hat teachings/who reduces to particles of dust/great beings, high officials and ordinary people/who pollute and



corrupt the Gelug doctrine.”<sup>8</sup> An eighteenth-century memoir of a Tibetan general depicts sectarian strife among Buddhists that is as brutal and bloody as any religious conflict might be.<sup>9</sup> This grim history remains largely unvisited by present-day followers of Tibetan Buddhism in the West.

Religions have had a close relationship not only with violence but with economic exploitation. Indeed, it is often the economic exploitation that necessitates the violence. Such was the case with the Tibetan theocracy. Until 1959, when the Dalai Lama last presided over Tibet, most of the arable land was still organized into manorial estates worked by serfs. These estates were owned by two social groups: the rich secular landlords and the rich theocratic lamas. Even a writer sympathetic to the old order allows that “a great deal of real estate belonged to the monasteries, and most of them amassed great riches.” Much of the wealth was accumulated “through active participation in trade, commerce, and money lending.”<sup>10</sup>

Drepung monastery was one of the biggest landowners in the world, with its 185 manors, 25,000 serfs, 300 great pastures, and 16,000 herdsmen. The wealth of the monasteries rested in the hands of small numbers of high-ranking lamas. Most ordinary monks lived modestly and had no direct access to great wealth. The Dalai Lama himself “lived richly in the 1000-room, 14-story Potala Palace.”<sup>11</sup>

Secular leaders also did well. A notable example was the commander-in-chief of the Tibetan army, a member of the Dalai Lama’s lay Cabinet, who owned 4,000 square kilometers of land and 3,500 serfs.<sup>12</sup> Old Tibet has been misrepresented by some Western admirers as “a nation that required no police force because its people voluntarily observed the laws of karma.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, it had a professional army, albeit a small one, that served mainly as a gendarmerie for the landlords to keep order, protect their property, and hunt down runaway serfs.

Young Tibetan boys were regularly taken from their peasant families and brought into the monasteries to be trained as monks. Once there, they were bonded for life. Tash-

Tsering, a monk, reports that it was common for peasant children to be sexually mistreated in the monasteries. He himself was a victim of repeated rape, beginning at age nine.<sup>14</sup> The monastic estates also conscripted children for lifelong servitude as domestics, dance performers, and soldiers.



*Tibetan serfdom: a serf with amputated right hand*

In old Tibet there were small numbers of farmers who subsisted as a kind of free peasantry, and perhaps an additional 10,000 people who composed the “middle-class” families of merchants, shopkeepers, and small traders. Thousands of others were beggars. There also were slaves, usually domestic servants, who owned nothing. Their offspring were born into slavery.<sup>15</sup> The majority of the rural population were serfs. Treated little better than slaves, the serfs went without schooling or medical care. They were under a lifetime bond to work the lord’s land—or the monastery’s land—without pay, to repair the lord’s houses, transport his crops, and collect his firewood. They were also expected to provide carrying animals and transportation on demand.<sup>16</sup> Their masters told them what crops to grow and what animals to raise. They could not get married without the consent of their lord or lama. And they might easily be separated from their families should their owners lease them out to work in a distant location.<sup>17</sup>

As in a free labor system and unlike slavery, the overlords had no responsibility for the serf’s maintenance and no direct interest in his or her survival as an expensive piece of property. The serfs had to support themselves. Yet as in a slave system, they were bound to

their masters, guaranteeing a fixed and permanent workforce that could neither organize nor strike nor freely depart as might laborers in a market context. The overlords had the best of both worlds.

One 22-year old woman, herself a runaway serf, reports: "Pretty serf girls were usually taken by the owner as house servants and used as he wished"; they "were just slaves without rights."<sup>18</sup> Serfs needed permission to go anywhere. Landowners had legal authority to capture those who tried to flee. One 24-year old runaway welcomed the Chinese intervention as a "liberation." He testified that under serfdom he was subjected to incessant toil, hunger, and cold. After his third failed escape, he was mercilessly beaten by the landlord's men until blood poured from his nose and mouth. They then poured alcohol and caustic soda on his wounds to increase the pain, he claimed.<sup>19</sup>



*Tibetan serfdom: a serf performing hard labor*

The serfs were taxed upon getting married, taxed for the birth of each child and for every death in the family. They were taxed for planting a tree in their yard and for keeping animals. They were taxed for religious festivals and for public dancing and drumming, for being sent to prison and upon being released. Those who could not find work were taxed for being unemployed, and if they traveled to another village in search of work, they paid a passage tax. When people could not pay, the monasteries lent them money at 20 to 50 percent interest. Some

debts were handed down from father to son to grandson. Debtors who could not meet their obligations risked being cast into slavery.<sup>20</sup>

The theocracy's religious teachings buttressed its class order. The poor and afflicted were taught that they had brought their troubles upon themselves because of their wicked ways in previous lives. Hence they had to accept the misery of their present existence as a karmic atonement and in anticipation that their lot would improve in their next lifetime. The rich and powerful treated their good fortune as a reward for, and tangible evidence of, virtue in past and present lives.

The Tibetan serfs were something more than superstitious victims, blind to their own oppression. As we have seen, some ran away; others openly resisted, sometimes suffering dire consequences. In feudal Tibet, torture and mutilation—including eye gouging, the pulling out of tongues, hamstringing, and amputation—were favored punishments inflicted upon thieves, and runaway or resistant serfs. Journeying through Tibet in the 1960s, Stuart and Roma Gelder interviewed a former serf, Tsering Wang Tui, who had stolen two sheep belonging to a monastery. For this he had both his eyes gouged out and his hand mutilated beyond use. He explains that he no longer is a Buddhist: "When a holy lama told them to blind me I thought there was no good in religion."<sup>21</sup> Since it was against Buddhist teachings to take human life, some offenders were severely lashed and then "left to God" in the freezing night to die. "The parallels between Tibet and medieval Europe are striking," concludes Tom Grunfeld in his book on Tibet.<sup>22</sup>

In 1959, Anna Louise Strong visited an exhibition of torture equipment that had been used by the Tibetan overlords. There were handcuffs of all sizes, including small ones for children, and instruments for cutting off noses and ears, gouging out eyes, breaking off hands, and hamstringing legs. There were hot brands, whips, and special implements for disemboweling. The exhibition presented photographs and testimonies of victims who had been blinded or crippled or suffered amputations for thievery. There was the shepherd whose master owed him a

reimbursement in yuan and wheat but refused to pay. So he took one of the master's cows; for this he had his hands severed. Another herdsman, who opposed having his wife taken from him by his lord, had his hands broken off. There were pictures of Communist activists with noses and upper lips cut off, and a woman who was raped and then had her nose sliced away.<sup>23</sup>

Earlier visitors to Tibet commented on the theocratic despotism. In 1895, an Englishman, Dr. A.L. Waddell, wrote that the populace was under the "intolerable tyranny of monks" and the devil superstitions they had fashioned to terrorize the people. In 1904 Perceval Landon described the Dalai Lama's rule as "an engine of oppression." At about that time, another English traveler, Captain W.F.T. O'Connor, observed that "the great landowners and the priests...exercise each in their own dominion a despotic power from which there is no appeal," while the people are "oppressed by the most monstrous growth of monasticism and priest-craft." Tibetan rulers "invented degrading legends and stimulated a spirit of superstition" among the common people. In 1937, another visitor, Spencer Chapman, wrote, "The Lamaist monk does not spend his time in ministering to the people or educating them....The beggar beside the road is nothing to the monk. Knowledge is the jealously guarded prerogative of the monasteries and is used to increase their influence and wealth."<sup>24</sup> As much as we might wish otherwise, feudal theocratic Tibet was a far cry from the romanticized Shangri-La so enthusiastically nurtured by Buddhism's western proselytes.

## II. Secularization vs. Spirituality

What happened to Tibet after the Chinese Communists moved into the country in 1951? The treaty of that year provided for ostensible self-governance under the Dalai Lama's rule but gave China military control and exclusive right to conduct foreign relations. The Chinese were also granted a direct role in internal administration "to promote social reforms." Among the earliest changes they wrought was to reduce usurious interest rates, and build a few hospitals and roads. At first, they moved slowly, relying mostly on persuasion in an attempt to effect

reconstruction. No aristocratic or monastic property was confiscated, and feudal lords continued to reign over their hereditarily bound peasants. "Contrary to popular belief in the West," claims one observer, the Chinese "took care to show respect for Tibetan culture and religion."<sup>25</sup>



*Traditional Tibet: oppressive feudal slave state*

Over the centuries the Tibetan lords and lamas had seen Chinese come and go, and had enjoyed good relations with Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek and his reactionary Kuomintang rule in China.<sup>26</sup> The approval of the Kuomintang government was needed to validate the choice of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. When the current 14th Dalai Lama was first installed in Lhasa, it was with an armed escort of Chinese troops and an attending Chinese minister, in accordance with centuries-old tradition. What upset the Tibetan lords and lamas in the early 1950s was that these latest Chinese were *Communists*. It would be only a matter of time, they feared, before the Communists started imposing their collectivist egalitarian schemes upon Tibet.

The issue was joined in 1956-57, when armed Tibetan bands ambushed convoys of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army. The uprising received extensive assistance from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), including military training, support camps in Nepal, and numerous airlifts.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile in the United States, the American Society for a Free Asia, a CIA-financed front, energetically publicized the cause of Tibetan resistance, with the Dalai Lama's eldest brother, Thubtan Norbu, playing an active role in that organization. The Dalai Lama's second-eldest brother, Gyalo Thondup, established an

intelligence operation with the CIA as early as 1951. He later upgraded it into a CIA-trained guerrilla unit whose recruits parachuted back into Tibet.<sup>28</sup>

Many Tibetan commandos and agents whom the CIA dropped into the country were chiefs of aristocratic clans or the sons of chiefs. Ninety percent of them were never heard from again, according to a report from the CIA itself, meaning they were most likely captured and killed.<sup>29</sup> “Many lamas and lay members of the elite and much of the Tibetan army joined the uprising, but in the main the populace did not, assuring its failure,” writes Hugh Deane.<sup>30</sup> In their book on Tibet, Ginsburg and Mathos reach a similar conclusion: “As far as can be ascertained, the great bulk of the common people of Lhasa and of the adjoining countryside failed to join in the fighting against the Chinese both when it first began and as it progressed.”<sup>31</sup> Eventually the resistance crumbled.

Whatever wrongs and new oppressions introduced by the Chinese after 1959, they did abolish slavery and the Tibetan serfdom system of unpaid labor. They eliminated the many crushing taxes, started work projects, and greatly reduced unemployment and beggary. They established secular schools, thereby breaking the educational monopoly of the monasteries. And they constructed running water and electrical systems in Lhasa.<sup>32</sup>

Heinrich Harrer (later revealed to have been a sergeant in Hitler’s SS) wrote a bestseller about his experiences in Tibet that was made into a popular Hollywood movie. He reported that the Tibetans who resisted the Chinese “were predominantly nobles, semi-nobles and lamas; they were punished by being made to perform the lowliest tasks, such as laboring on roads and bridges. They were further humiliated by being made to clean up the city before the tourists arrived.” They also had to live in a camp originally reserved for beggars and vagrants—all of which Harrer treats as sure evidence of the dreadful nature of the Chinese occupation.<sup>33</sup>

By 1961, Chinese occupation authorities expropriated the landed estates owned by lords and lamas. They distributed many

thousands of acres to tenant farmers and landless peasants, reorganizing them into hundreds of communes. Herds once owned by nobility were turned over to collectives of poor shepherds. Improvements were made in the breeding of livestock, and new varieties of vegetables and new strains of wheat and barley were introduced, along with irrigation improvements, all of which reportedly led to an increase in agrarian production.<sup>34</sup>

Many peasants remained as religious as ever, giving alms to the clergy. But monks who had been conscripted as children into the religious orders were now free to renounce the monastic life, and thousands did, especially the younger ones. The remaining clergy lived on modest government stipends and extra income earned by officiating at prayer services, weddings, and funerals.<sup>35</sup>

Both the Dalai Lama and his advisor and youngest brother, Tendzin Choegyal, claimed that “more than 1.2 million Tibetans are dead as a result of the Chinese occupation.”<sup>36</sup> The official 1953 census—six years before the Chinese crackdown—recorded the entire population residing in Tibet at 1,274,000.<sup>37</sup> Other census counts put the population within Tibet at about two million. If the Chinese killed 1.2 million in the early 1960s then almost all of Tibet, would have been depopulated, transformed into a killing field dotted with death camps and mass graves—of which we have no evidence. The thinly distributed Chinese force in Tibet could not have rounded up, hunted down, and exterminated that many people even if it had spent all its time doing nothing else.

Chinese authorities claim to have put an end to floggings, mutilations, and amputations as a form of criminal punishment. They themselves, however, have been charged with acts of brutality by exile Tibetans. The authorities do admit to “mistakes,” particularly during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution when the persecution of religious beliefs reached a high tide in both China and Tibet. After the uprising in the late 1950s, thousands of Tibetans were incarcerated. During the Great Leap Forward, forced collectivization and grain farming were imposed on the Tibetan peasantry, sometimes

with disastrous effect on production. In the late 1970s, China began relaxing controls “and tried to undo some of the damage wrought during the previous two decades.”<sup>38</sup>

In 1980, the Chinese government initiated reforms reportedly designed to grant Tibet a greater degree of self-rule and self-administration. Tibetans would now be allowed to cultivate private plots, sell their harvest surpluses, decide for themselves what crops to grow, and keep yaks and sheep. Communication with the outside world was again permitted, and frontier controls were eased to permit some Tibetans to visit exiled relatives in India and Nepal.<sup>39</sup> By the 1980s many of the principal lamas had begun to shuttle back and forth between China and the exile communities abroad, “restoring their monasteries in Tibet and helping to revitalize Buddhism there.”<sup>40</sup>

As of 2007 Tibetan Buddhism was still practiced widely and tolerated by officialdom. Religious pilgrimages and other standard forms of worship were allowed but within limits. All monks and nuns had to sign a loyalty pledge that they would not use their religious position to foment secession or dissent. And displaying photos of the Dalai Lama was declared illegal.<sup>41</sup>

In the 1990s, the Han, the ethnic group comprising over 95 percent of China’s immense population, began moving in substantial numbers into Tibet. On the streets of Lhasa and Shigatse, signs of Han colonization are readily visible. Chinese run the factories and many of the shops and vending stalls. Tall office buildings and large shopping centers have been built with funds that might have been better spent on water treatment plants and housing. Chinese cadres in Tibet too often view their Tibetan neighbors as backward and lazy, in need of economic development and “patriotic education.” During the 1990s, Tibetan government employees suspected of harboring nationalist sympathies were purged from office, and campaigns were once again launched to discredit the Dalai Lama. Individual Tibetans reportedly were subjected to arrest, imprisonment, and forced labor for carrying out separatist activities and engaging in

“political subversion.” Some were held in administrative detention without adequate food, water, and blankets, subjected to threats, beatings, and other mistreatment.<sup>42</sup>

Tibetan history, culture, and certainly religion are slighted in schools. Teaching materials, though translated into Tibetan, focus mainly on Chinese history and culture. Chinese family planning regulations allow a three-child limit for Tibetan families. (There is only a one-child limit for Han families throughout China, and a two-child limit for rural Han families whose first child is a girl.) If a Tibetan couple goes over the three-child limit, the excess children can be denied subsidized daycare, health care, housing, and education. These penalties have been enforced irregularly and vary by district.<sup>43</sup> None of these child services, it should be noted, were available to Tibetans before the Chinese takeover.

For the rich lamas and secular lords, the Communist intervention was an unmitigated calamity. Most of them fled abroad, as did the Dalai Lama himself, who was assisted in his flight by the CIA. Some discovered to their horror that they would have to work for a living. Many, however, escaped that fate. Throughout the 1960s, the Tibetan exile community was secretly pocketing \$1.7 million a year from the CIA, according to documents released by the State Department in 1998. Once this fact was publicized, the Dalai Lama’s organization itself issued a statement admitting that it had received millions of dollars from the CIA during the 1960s to send armed squads of exiles into Tibet to undermine the Maoist revolution. The Dalai Lama’s annual payment from the CIA was \$186,000. Indian intelligence also financed both him and other Tibetan exiles. He has refused to say whether he or his brothers worked for the CIA. The agency has also declined to comment.<sup>44</sup>

In 1995, the *News & Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina, carried a frontpage color photograph of the Dalai Lama being embraced by the reactionary Republican senator Jesse Helms, under the headline “Buddhist Captivates Hero of Religious Right.”<sup>45</sup> In April 1999, along with Margaret

Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and the first George Bush, the Dalai Lama called upon the British government to release Augusto Pinochet, the former fascist dictator of Chile and a longtime CIA client who was visiting England. The Dalai Lama urged that Pinochet not be forced to go to Spain where he was wanted to stand trial for crimes against humanity.

Into the twenty-first century, via the National Endowment for Democracy and other conduits that are more respectable sounding than the CIA, the U.S. Congress continued to allocate an annual \$2 million to Tibetans in India, with additional millions for “democracy activities” within the Tibetan exile community. In addition to these funds, the Dalai Lama received money from financier George Soros.<sup>46</sup>

Whatever the Dalai Lama’s associations with the CIA and various reactionaries, he did speak often of peace, love, and nonviolence. He himself really cannot be blamed for the abuses of Tibet’s ancient régime, having been but 25 years old when he fled into exile. In a 1994 interview, he went on record as favoring the building of schools and roads in his country. He said the *corvée* (forced unpaid serf labor) and certain taxes imposed on the peasants were “extremely bad.” And he disliked the way people were saddled with old debts sometimes passed down from generation to generation.<sup>47</sup> During the half century of living in the western world, he had embraced concepts such as human rights and religious freedom, ideas largely unknown in old Tibet. He even proposed democracy for Tibet, featuring a written constitution and a representative assembly.<sup>48</sup>

In 1996, the Dalai Lama issued a statement that must have had an unsettling effect on the exile community. It read in part: “Marxism is founded on moral principles, while capitalism is concerned only with gain and profitability.” Marxism fosters “the equitable utilization of the means of production” and cares about “the fate of the working classes” and “the victims of...exploitation. For those reasons the system appeals to me, and...I think of myself as half-Marxist, half-Buddhist.”<sup>49</sup>

But he also sent a reassuring message to “those who live in abundance”: “It is a good thing to be rich...Those are the fruits for deserving actions, the proof that they have been generous in the past.” And to the poor he offers this admonition: “There is no good reason to become bitter and rebel against those who have property and fortune...It is better to develop a positive attitude.”<sup>50</sup>

In 2005 the Dalai Lama signed a widely advertised statement along with ten other Nobel Laureates supporting the “inalienable and fundamental human right” of working people throughout the world to form labor unions to protect their interests, in accordance with the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In many countries “this fundamental right is poorly protected and in some it is explicitly banned or brutally suppressed,” the statement read. Burma, China, Colombia, Bosnia, and a few other countries were singled out as among the worst offenders. Even the United States “fails to adequately protect workers’ rights to form unions and bargain collectively. Millions of U.S. workers lack any legal protection to form unions....”<sup>51</sup>

The Dalai Lama also gave full support to removing the ingrained traditional obstacles that have kept Tibetan nuns from receiving an education. Upon arriving in exile, few nuns could read or write. In Tibet their activities had been devoted to daylong periods of prayer and chants. But in northern India they now began reading Buddhist philosophy and engaging in theological study and debate, activities that in old Tibet had been open only to monks.<sup>52</sup>

In November 2005 the Dalai Lama spoke at Stanford University on “The Heart of Non-violence,” but stopped short of a blanket condemnation of all violence. Violent actions that are committed in order to reduce future suffering are not to be condemned, he said, citing World War II as an example of a worthy effort to protect democracy. What of the four years of carnage and mass destruction in Iraq, a war condemned by most of the world—even by a conservative pope—as a blatant violation of international law and a crime against humanity? The Dalai Lama was undecided:

“The Iraq war—it’s too early to say, right or wrong.”<sup>53</sup> Earlier he had voiced support for the U.S. military intervention against Yugoslavia and, later on, the U.S. military intervention into Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup>

### III. Exit Feudal Theocracy

As the Shangri-La myth would have it, in old Tibet the people lived in contented and tranquil symbiosis with their monastic and secular lords. Rich lamas and poor monks, wealthy landlords and impoverished serfs were all bonded together, mutually sustained by the comforting balm of a deeply spiritual and pacific culture.

One is reminded of the idealized image of feudal Europe presented by latter-day conservative Catholics such as G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. For them, medieval Christendom was a world of contented peasants living in the secure embrace of their Church, under the more or less benign protection of their lords.<sup>55</sup> Again we are invited to accept a particular culture in its idealized form divorced from its murky material history. This means accepting it as presented by its favored class, by those who profited most from it. The Shangri-La image of Tibet bears no more resemblance to historic actuality than does the pastoral image of medieval Europe.

Seen in all its grim realities, old Tibet confirms the view I expressed in an earlier book, namely that culture is anything but neutral. Culture can operate as a legitimating cover for a host of grave injustices, benefiting a privileged portion of society at great cost to the rest.<sup>56</sup> In theocratic feudal Tibet, ruling interests manipulated the traditional culture to fortify their own wealth and power. The theocracy equated rebellious thought and action with satanic influence. It propagated the general presumption of landlord superiority and peasant unworthiness. The rich were represented as deserving their good life, and the lowly poor as deserving their mean existence, all codified in teachings about the karmic residue of virtue and vice accumulated from past lives, presented as part of God’s will.

Were the more affluent lamas just hypocrites who preached one thing and secretly believed another? More likely they were genuinely attached to those beliefs that brought such good results for them. That their theology so perfectly supported their material privileges only strengthened the sincerity with which it was embraced.

It might be said that we denizens of the modern secular world cannot grasp the equations of happiness and pain, contentment and custom, that characterize more traditionally spiritual societies. This is probably true, and it may explain why some of us idealize such societies. But still, a gouged eye is a gouged eye; a flogging is a flogging; and the grinding exploitation of serfs and slaves is a brutal class injustice whatever its cultural wrapping. There is a difference between a spiritual bond and human bondage, even when both exist side by side.

Many ordinary Tibetans want the Dalai Lama back in their country, but it appears that relatively few want a return to the social order he represented. A 1999 story in the *Washington Post* notes that the Dalai Lama continues to be revered in Tibet, but

“...few Tibetans would welcome a return of the corrupt aristocratic clans that fled with him in 1959 and that comprise the bulk of his advisers. Many Tibetan farmers, for example, have no interest in surrendering the land they gained during China’s land reform to the clans. Tibet’s former slaves say they, too, don’t want their former masters to return to power. ‘I’ve already lived that life once before,’ said Wangchuk, a 67-year-old former slave who was wearing his best clothes for his yearly pilgrimage to Shigatse, one of the holiest sites of Tibetan Buddhism. He said he worshipped the Dalai Lama, but added, ‘I may not be free under Chinese communism, but I am better off than when I was a slave.’”<sup>57</sup>

It should be noted that the Dalai Lama is not the only highly placed lama chosen in childhood as a reincarnation. One or another reincarnate lama or *tulku*—a spiritual teacher of special purity elected to be reborn again and again—can be found presiding over most

major monasteries. The *tulku* system is unique to Tibetan Buddhism. Scores of Tibetan lamas claim to be reincarnate *tulkus*.

The very first *tulku* was a lama known as the Karmapa who appeared nearly three centuries before the first Dalai Lama. The Karmapa is leader of a Tibetan Buddhist tradition known as the Karma Kagyu. The rise of the Gelugpa sect headed by the Dalai Lama led to a politico-religious rivalry with the Kagyu that has lasted five hundred years and continues to play itself out within the Tibetan exile community today. That the Kagyu sect has grown famously, opening some six hundred new centers around the world in the last thirty-five years, has not helped the situation.

The search for a *tulku*, Erik Curren reminds us, has not always been conducted in that purely spiritual mode portrayed in certain Hollywood films. “Sometimes monastic officials wanted a child from a powerful local noble family to give the cloister more political clout. Other times they wanted a child from a lower-class family who would have little leverage to influence the child’s upbringing.” On other occasions “a local warlord, the Chinese emperor or even the Dalai Lama’s government in Lhasa might [have tried] to impose its choice of *tulku* on a monastery for political reasons.”<sup>58</sup>

Such may have been the case in the selection of the 17th Karmapa, whose monastery-in-exile is situated in Rumtek, in the Indian state of Sikkim. In 1993 the monks of the Karma Kagyu tradition had a candidate of their own choice. The Dalai Lama, along with several dissenting Karma Kagyu leaders (and with the support of the Chinese government!) backed a different boy. The Kagyu monks charged that the Dalai Lama had overstepped his authority in attempting to select a leader for their sect. “Neither his political role nor his position as a lama in his own Gelugpa tradition entitled him to choose the Karmapa, who is a leader of a different tradition...”<sup>59</sup> As one of the Kagyu leaders insisted, “Dharma is about thinking for yourself. It is not about automatically following a teacher in all things, no matter how respected that teacher may be. More than anyone else, Buddhists should respect other

people’s rights—their human rights and their religious freedom.”<sup>60</sup>

What followed was a dozen years of conflict in the Tibetan exile community, punctuated by intermittent riots, intimidation, physical attacks, blacklisting, police harassment, litigation, official corruption, and the looting and undermining of the Karmapa’s monastery in Rumtek by supporters of the Gelugpa faction. All this has caused at least one western devotee to wonder if the years of exile were not hastening the moral corrosion of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>61</sup>

What is clear is that not all Tibetan Buddhists accept the Dalai Lama as their theological and spiritual mentor. Though he is referred to as the “spiritual leader of Tibet,” many see this title as little more than a formality. It does not give him authority over the four religious schools of Tibet other than his own, “just as calling the U.S. president the ‘leader of the free world’ gives him no role in governing France or Germany.”<sup>62</sup>

Not all Tibetan exiles are enamored of the old Shangri-La theocracy. Kim Lewis, who studied healing methods with a Buddhist monk in Berkeley, California, had occasion to talk at length with more than a dozen Tibetan women who lived in the monk’s building. When she asked how they felt about returning to their homeland, the sentiment was unanimously negative. At first, Lewis assumed that their reluctance had to do with the Chinese occupation, but they quickly informed her otherwise. They said they were extremely grateful “not to have to marry 4 or 5 men, be pregnant almost all the time,” or deal with sexually transmitted diseases contacted from a straying husband. The younger women “were delighted to be getting an education, wanted absolutely nothing to do with any religion, and wondered why Americans were so naïve [about Tibet].”<sup>63</sup>

The women interviewed by Lewis recounted stories of their grandmothers’ ordeals with monks who used them as “wisdom consorts.” By sleeping with the monks, the grandmothers were told, they gained “the means to enlightenment”—after all, the Buddha himself



had to be with a woman to reach enlightenment.

The women also mentioned the “rampant” sex that the supposedly spiritual and abstemious monks practiced with each other in the Gelugpa sect. The women who were mothers spoke bitterly about the monastery’s confiscation of their young boys in Tibet. They claimed that when a boy cried for his mother, he would be told “Why do you cry for her, she gave you up—she’s just a woman.”

The monks who were granted political asylum in California applied for public assistance. Lewis, herself a devotee for a time, assisted with the paperwork. She observes that they continue to receive government checks amounting to \$550 to \$700 per month along with Medicare. In addition, the monks reside rent free in nicely furnished apartments. “They pay no utilities, have free access to the Internet on computers provided for them, along with fax machines, free cell and home phones and cable TV.”

They also receive a monthly payment from their Order, along with contributions and dues from their American followers. Some devotees eagerly carry out chores for the monks, including grocery shopping and cleaning their apartments and toilets. These same holy men, Lewis remarks, “have no problem criticizing Americans for their ‘obsession with material things.’”<sup>64</sup>

To welcome the end of the old feudal theocracy in Tibet is not to applaud everything about Chinese rule in that country. This point is seldom understood by today’s Shangri-La believers in the West. The converse is also true: To denounce the Chinese occupation does not mean we have to romanticize the former feudal régime. Tibetans deserve to be perceived as actual people, not perfected spiritualists or innocent political symbols. “To idealize them,” notes Ma Jian, a dissident Chinese traveler to Tibet (now living in Britain), “is to deny them their humanity.”<sup>65</sup>

One common complaint among Buddhist followers in the West is that Tibet’s religious culture is being undermined by the Chinese occupation. To some extent this seems to be

the case. Many of the monasteries are closed, and much of the theocracy seems to have passed into history. Whether Chinese rule has brought betterment or disaster is not the central issue here. The question is what kind of country was old Tibet. What I am disputing is the supposedly pristine spiritual nature of that pre-invasion culture. *We can advocate religious freedom and independence for a new Tibet without having to embrace the mythology about old Tibet.* Tibetan feudalism was cloaked in Buddhism, but the two are not to be equated. In reality, old Tibet was not a Paradise Lost. It was a retrograde repressive theocracy of extreme privilege and poverty, a long way from Shangri-La.

Finally, let it be said that if Tibet’s future is to be positioned somewhere within China’s emerging free-market paradise, then this does not bode well for the Tibetans. China boasts a dazzling 8 percent economic growth rate and is emerging as one of the world’s greatest industrial powers. But with economic growth has come an ever deepening gulf between rich and poor. Most Chinese live close to the poverty level or well under it, while a small group of newly brooded capitalists profit hugely in collusion with shady officials. Regional bureaucrats milk the country dry, extorting graft from the populace and looting local treasuries. Land grabbing in cities and countryside by avaricious developers and corrupt officials at the expense of the populace are almost everyday occurrences. Tens of thousands of grassroots protests and disturbances have erupted across the country, usually to be met with unforgiving police force. Corruption is so prevalent, reaching into so many places, that even the normally complacent national leadership was forced to take notice and began moving against it in late 2006.

Workers in China who try to organize labor unions in the corporate dominated “business zones” risk losing their jobs or getting beaten and imprisoned. Millions of business zone workers toil twelve-hour days at subsistence wages. With the health care system now being privatized, free or affordable medical treatment is no longer available for millions. Men have tramped into the cities in search of work, leaving an increasingly impoverished

countryside populated by women, children, and the elderly. The suicide rate has increased dramatically, especially among women.<sup>66</sup>

China's natural environment is sadly polluted. Most of its fabled rivers and many lakes are dead, producing massive fish die-offs from the billions of tons of industrial emissions and untreated human waste dumped into them. Toxic effluents, including pesticides and herbicides, seep into ground water or directly into irrigation canals. Cancer rates in villages situated along waterways have skyrocketed a thousand-fold. Hundreds of millions of urban residents breathe air rated as dangerously unhealthy, contaminated by industrial growth and the recent addition of millions of automobiles. An estimated 400,000 die prematurely every year from air pollution. Government environmental agencies have no enforcement power to stop polluters, and generally the government ignores or denies such problems, concentrating instead on industrial growth.<sup>67</sup>

China's own scientific establishment reports that unless greenhouse gases are curbed, the nation will face massive crop failures along with catastrophic food and water shortages in the years ahead. In 2006-2007 severe drought was already afflicting southwest China.<sup>68</sup>

If China is the great success story of speedy free market development, and is to be the model and inspiration for Tibet's future, then old feudal Tibet indeed may start looking a lot better than it actually was.

Source citations available at:  
[www.michaelparenti.org/Tibet.html](http://www.michaelparenti.org/Tibet.html).

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## “HEAVEN AND EARTH SHAKE WITH TEARS FOR KIM JONG-IL”

### *North Korea as a Religious State*

by GARY LEUPP  
from *Counterpunch*, October 2006  
[www.counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org)

All three countries labeled "the Axis of Evil" by President Bush in 2002 are presently religious states. Iran is of course a Shiite theocracy, while the government of formerly secularist Iraq—to the extent it has a government at all—is dominated by Shiite fundamentalists. North Korea has long practiced its state religion, Kim Il-sungism.

According to North Korean scriptures, when the Great Leader Kim Il-sung died in 1994, thousands of cranes descended from Heaven to fetch him, and his portrait appeared high in the firmament. Immediately villages and towns throughout the nation began to construct Towers of Eternal Life, the main one rising 93 meters over Kim's mausoleum in Pyongyang. The Great Leader's son, the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, took power, declining to assume the title of President. The Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea restricts that title forever to the Great Leader, whom the Dear Leader has proclaimed, "will always be with us." The Dear Leader himself was born on Mt. Paektu, the highest mountain in Korea and Manchuria long revered by Koreans as sacred and the birthplace of their nation, in 1942. (Unbelievers say he was born in 1941 in Vyatskoye, in Siberia, in the Soviet Union.) His birth in a humble log cabin brought joy to the cosmos: a double rainbow appeared over the peak, a new star rose in the heavens, and a swallow descended to herald his birth. (Thus he is called, among other monikers, the Heaven-Descended General.) When he was 32 years old, the Workers' Party of Korea and the people of Korea unanimously elected him their leader. When he visited Panmunjom, a fog descended to protect him from South Korean snipers, but when he was out of danger, the mist

dramatically listed and glorious sunlight shone all around him. . . You get the idea.

Now, how did it come about that a socialist republic established by a Marxist-Leninist party in 1948 came under the spell of this state religion and its peculiar mythology? Some might say that Marxism-Leninism is itself a religion, but they misapply the term. "Religion" proper doesn't refer to just any ideology or thought system, but only to those that posit supernatural phenomena such as life after death, miracles and the existence of deities. Marxism as a variant of philosophical materialism explicitly rejects such phenomena. Some socialist societies have surely produced personality cults, distorted or fabricated histories, dogmatism and fanaticism. And of course when a leader dies, the party has said, "He will always be with us" in a metaphorical sense. The Soviets early on adopted the custom of embalming revolutionary leaders, and the Chinese, Vietnamese and Koreans have followed suite. But what we see in the DPRK is more than a personality cult. It seems to me more akin to the State Shinto imposed on the Korean peninsula by the Japanese imperialists after 1905.

State Shinto, itself developed after 1868 in specific emulation of European state churches, emphasized the divine origins of the Japanese emperors, descended in an unbroken family line from the establishment of the Empire by Jinmu, great-great-grandson of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. State Shinto emphasized the kokutai or "national essence," the unbreakable unity of the Japanese islands (born from the bodies of the kami or gods), the Japanese people, their divine emperor, and all the kami with the Sun Goddess at their head. It was a vague concept that boiled down to obedience to state authority and to that solar disk national flag. (We find this sun worship meme in Kim Il-sungism too. The DPRK Constitution states, "The great leader Comrade Kim Il-sung is the sun of the nation and the lodestar of the reunification of the fatherland." A monumental artwork called "the Figure of the Sun" erected to mark the 100-day memorial service for Kim in 1994, adorns a hill overlooking Pyongyang.)

The Meiji-era reformers who created Japan's state religion were well-educated men who probably didn't believe the mythology literally, but thought it would allow for the effective control of the indoctrinated masses. It did in fact work fairly well, up until Japan's crushing defeat in 1945. The U.S. Occupation then abolished it (leaving "folk Shinto" as opposed to State Shinto alone), and forced Emperor Hirohito to publicly renounce any claim to divinity. He could have been tried for war crimes; the Allies could have ended the myth-shrouded monarchy right then. But the U.S. Occupation authorities found the residual aura of sanctity surrounding the office useful. Hirohito was, to Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the "queen bee" whose cooperation would ensure mass compliance with Occupation objectives. The emperor remains a sacerdotal figure, the High Priest of the Shinto faith, enthroned in a religious ceremony, offering prayers on behalf of the nation to the gods.



Growing up under Japanese occupation, Kim Il-sung could have observed the usages of a state religion in the service of a hereditary monarchy linked to Heaven. Maybe these observations subconsciously affected the evolution of his thinking. Once in power in North Korea, from 1945, he increasingly built a personality cult, initially modeled after Stalin's but by the 1970s plainly monarchical in nature. It integrated Confucian values of filial piety and obedience, and glorified the entire family of the Great Leader, including especially the crown prince Jong-il.

Tens of thousands of "research rooms" have been constructed throughout the country, which persons are required to visit at regular intervals, bowing to the portraits of the two Kims the way that all Japanese (and colonized Koreans and Taiwanese) used to have to bow to the Japanese emperor's portrait.



As Hwang Jang Yop, once International Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, has written, "Kim Jong-il went to great lengths to create the Kim Il-sung personality cult, and Kim Il-sung led the efforts to turn Kim Jong-il into a god." (It is perhaps not surprising that the Great Leader warmly welcomed the Rev. Billy Graham to Pyongyang in 1992 and 1994, where he preached his brand of Christianity in Protestant and Catholic churches and at Kim Il-sung University. Kim was no doubt appreciative of the power of religion, having created his own.)

The Chinese communists (when they were communists) referred poetically to "heaven," as in the 1970s expression "There is great disorder under heaven, the situation is excellent." Chinese Confucianism and Daoism both allude to Heaven (Tian) in the sense of a moral cosmic order that confers its mandate

on successive dynasties of Chinese rulers. The word occurs in Chinese literature in so many contexts that it's natural for Chinese Marxists to use it metaphorically. But Kim Il-sung chose "believing in the people as in heaven" as his motto, implying perhaps that one should believe in both; and wrote a poem on the occasion of his beloved son's 50th birthday: "Heaven and earth shake with the resounding cheers of all the people united in praising him." He really seems to have wanted the people to believe in a celestial realm conferring its mandate on his dynasty.

In a Tungusic myth, the ancient Korean nation of Choson was founded by the son of a bear who had been transformed into a woman by Hwanung, ruler of a divine city on Mt. Paektu, and a tiger. I've read that this myth has been reworked to suggest to North Korean school children that the Kims came down from heaven to the top of the sacred mountain, where they were transformed into human beings. (There may be some shared memes with Shinto here. In the Japanese myth, the grandson of the Sun Goddess descends to earth, to a mountain peak in Kyushu, marries the daughter of an earthly deity, loses his immortality, and begets two sons one of whom sires the first emperor, Jinmu, by a sea princess who turns out to be a dragon. The Japanese imperial family also came down from heaven, and became human.) Heaven clearly plays a role in Kim Il-sungism as it did in State Shinto.

Where does Marxism-Leninism fit in here? According to one report, while there are portraits of the Great and Dear Leaders all over Pyongyang, "there are only two public pictures in Pyongyang of people who do not belong to the Kim family—in the main square are two smallish images, one of Marx and one of Lenin."

That suggests at least some small formal deference to the communist pioneers. But the Dear Leader stated in a major speech in 1990:

"We could not literally accept the Marxist theory which had been advanced on the premises of the socio-historic conditions of

the developed European capitalist countries, or the Leninist theory presented in the situation of Russia where capitalism was developed to the second grade. We had had to find a solution to every problem arising in the revolution from the standpoint of Juche."

This is the supposedly brilliant idea of "self-reliance" or as the Great Leader put it, the principle that "man is the master of everything and decides everything." (The "standpoint" of course sounds rather trite and vague at worst, while not overtly religious. But born out of Kim's brain supposedly when he was only 18 years old, it is the faith of the masses and the ideological basis for the state—rather like kokutai in prewar and wartime Japan.) The DPRK's new (1998) Constitution omits any reference to Marxism-Leninism whatsoever. Rather the document "embodies Comrade Kim Il-sung's Juche state construction ideology."

Still, those portraits of Marx and Lenin are there in Pyongyang. DPRK propaganda continues to describe the late Kim as "a thoroughgoing Marxist-Leninist." Juche is described as a "creative application of Marxism-Leninism." The Korean Workers' Party continues to cultivate ties with more traditional, perhaps more "legitimate," Marxist-Leninist parties including the (Maoist) Communist Party of the Philippines.

Some material by Marx, Engels and Lenin circulates in North Korea, and the Marxist dictum, "Religion is the opium of the masses" is universally known. But according to a Russian study in 1995, "the works by Marx, Engels, and Lenin are not only excluded from the standard [school] curriculum, but are generally forbidden for lay readers. Almost all the classical works of Marxism-Leninism, as well as foreign works on the Marxist (that is, other than Juche) philosophy are kept in special depositories, along with other kinds of subversive literature. Such works are accessible only to specialists with special permits." (One thinks of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages restricting Bible reading to the trusted clergy, and discouraging it among the masses.)

I imagine some with those special permits are able to read Marx's famous 1844 essay in which the "opium of the masses" phrase occurs:

"Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions."



*Kim Il-sung and Romanian Stalinist Ceausescu*

Maybe the rare North Korean student of Marxism, acquiring some real understanding of the Marxist view of religion, can see all around him or her conditions which require mass illusions and delusions in order to continue. There are some signs of resistance here and there to the Kim cult, which would seem to be a good thing.

Having said that (and always trying to think dialectically), I don't believe that life in the DPRK is quite the hell—another religious concept—that the mainstream media would have us believe it is. One should try to look at things in perspective. We hear much of the terrible famine that lasted from about 1995 to 2001, killing hundreds of thousands if not millions. But North Korea was not always a disaster. As of 1980, infant mortality in the north was lower than in the south, life

expectancy was higher, and per capita energy usage was actually double that in the south (*Boston Globe*, Dec. 31, 2003). Even after the famine and accompanying problems, a visitor to Pyongyang in 2002 declared:

"Housing in Pyongyang is of surprising quality. In the past 30 years—and mostly in the past 20—hundreds of huge apartment houses have been built. Pyongyang is a city of high-rises, with probably the highest average building height of any city in the world. Although the quality is below that of the West, it is far above that found in the former Soviet Union. Buildings are finished and painted and there is at least a pretense of maintenance; even older buildings do not look neglected. Nothing looks as though it is on the verge of falling down...

"Although a bit dreary, the shops in Pyongyang are far from empty. Each apartment building has some sort of shop on the main floor, and food shops can usually be found within one or two buildings from any given home. Apart from these basic, Soviet-style shops, there are a few department stores carrying a wide range of goods... "While not snappy dressers, North Koreans are certainly clean and tidy, and exceptionally well dressed...There is no shortage of clothing, and clothing stores and fabric shops are open daily."

There's apparently one hotel disco and some karaoke bars in Pyongyang. No doubt Kim Il-sungism can provide some with the "illusory happiness" about which Marx wrote, and it is possible that genuine popular feelings as well as feelings orchestrated from above have contributed to the production of the North Korean faith. The DPRK might not be all distress and oppression. But neither is it a socialist society in any sense Marx or Lenin would have recognized, to say nothing of a classless, communist society. It is among other things a religious society in a world where nations led by religious nuts are facing off, some seemingly hell-bent on producing a prophesized apocalypse. I find no cause for either comfort or particular alarm in the Dear Leader's October 9 nuclear blast; if it deters a U.S. attack it's achieved its purpose, and

however bizarre Jong-il may be he's probably not crazy enough to provoke his nation's destruction by an attack on the U.S. or Japan. I'm more concerned that Bush will do something stupid in response to the test.

In any case, the confrontation here isn't between "freedom" and "one of the world's last communist regimes," nor even between fundamentalist Christian Bush and Kim Il-sungist Kim Jong-il. It's between a weird hermetic regime under threat and determined to survive in its small space, using a cult to control its people, and a weird much more dangerous regime under the delusion that God wants it to smite His enemies and to control the whole world. Both are in the business of peddling "illusions of happiness." Neither is much concerned about the "real happiness" of people. Both ought to be changed—by those they oppress, demanding an end to conditions requiring illusions.

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*Kim Jong-il, son of Kim Il-sung, with soldiers*

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# THE NEW FACE OF THE REGIME

## *Dynastic Succession in North Korea*

by BRUCE CUMINGS  
from *Counterpunch*, February 2012  
www.counterpunch.org

I was in Singapore when Kim Jong-il died on December 17, 2011, so I was reading from a salutary distance what passed for expert American commentary. “North Korea as we know it is over,” according to a piece in *The New York Times* written by a specialist who had served in the George W Bush administration; the country would come apart within weeks or months. Another asked how could the callow son grapple with octogenarian leaders in the army—wouldn’t there be a coup? Might Kim Jong-un “lash out” to prove his toughness to the military? Others worried that a collapse might require US Marines on Okinawa to swoop in to corral loose nukes (a key mission for several years).

The Obama administration fretted about a power struggle, something Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had spoken of after Kim’s stroke three years earlier. The model seemed to be the USSR after Stalin died, or China after Mao. They ignored what happened when Kim Il-sung died in 1994—which was nothing.

My first visit to North Korea was in 1981. I flew from Beijing and hoped to go out through the Soviet Union on the Trans-Siberian railway. Consular officials said I should obtain a visa at the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang. When I got there, a friendly (read KGB) counsellor offered me cognac and inquired what I might be doing in Pyongyang. Then he asked what I thought of Kim Jong-il, who had just been officially designated as successor to Kim Il-sung at the 6th Party

Congress in 1980. “Well, he doesn’t have his father’s charisma,” I said; “He’s diminutive, pear-shaped, homely. Looks like his mother.” The counsellor replied: “Oh, you Americans, always thinking about personality. Don’t you know they have a bureaucratic bloc behind him, they all rise or fall with him—these people really know how to do this. You should come back in 2020 and see his son take power.”

It was the best prediction I’ve ever heard about this communist state-cum-dynasty, even if Kim Jong-il’s heart attack at 69 hastened the succession to Kim Jong-un by a few years. North Korea has known only millennia of monarchy and then a century of dictatorship—Japanese from 1910-1945 (in the late stages of colonial rule Koreans had to worship the Japanese emperor), and then for the past 66 years the hegemony of the Kim family.

On the grandson’s birthday, January 8 (his birth year, 1983 or 1984, still seems to be a secret), Pyongyang television ran an hour-long documentary attributing to him every North Korean virtue and identifying him with every place or monument visited by Kim Il-sung, but especially White Head Mountain, the vast volcanic peak on the Sino-Korean border, mythical fount of the Korean people, site of some of Kim’s anti-Japanese guerrilla battles in the 1930s and purported birthplace of Kim Jong-il in 1942. Most interesting, though, was Jong-un’s body language: tall, hefty, grinning, he already looked like a politician, at home with his sudden role as “beloved successor”. Gone was the dour, dyspeptic, cynical, ill-at-ease Kim Jong-il, swaddled in a puffy ski jacket, his face hidden behind sunglasses. Jong-un, in looks and style, is the spitting image of his grandfather when he came to power in the late 1940s; he even shaves his sideburns up high (the documentary showed photos of Kim Il-sung with the same haircut). It was as if his DNA had passed uncontaminated to the grandson (as no doubt the regime wants its people to believe).

Korean culture is steeped in the ceremony, ritual, literature, poetry, folklore and gossip of royal families—especially which son will

succeed the king. Many did so at a young age. The greatest of the kings, Sejong, under whom the unique Korean writing system was promulgated, took office in 1418 at the age of 21, assisted by the regency of his father. Like Jong-un, he was the third son: the eldest son was banished from Seoul for rudeness, the middle son became a Buddhist monk. Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-il's first son, was caught entering Japan under a pseudonym (hoping to visit Disneyland, it is said), and lives in Macao. Almost nothing is known about the middle son. Neither appeared at their father's funeral.

### Honor matters

Asians dislike anything that damages or threatens their dignity, their honor. In North Korean eyes, the prestige of the nation is bound up with the image of the leader. On the way in from the airport in 1981, as we sped by Kim Il-sung billboards, my friendly guide had one solemn admonition: please do not insult our leader. (I hadn't planned to.) The leader's ideology, then and now, was *chuch'e*, which means to put Korea first. The scholar Gari Ledyard has written that the second character used in writing *chuch'e*, when joined to the word for nation—*kukch'e*—was classically used to mean national dignity. Ledyard writes: "The *kukch'e* can be hurt, it can be embarrassed, it can be insulted, it can be sullied. The members of the society must behave in such a way that the *kukch'e* will not be lost. This sense of the word resonates with emotions and ethics that spring from deep sources in the traditional psyche." In North Korea this idea is alive and well—often displayed in overweening pride and grandiose monuments, but at bottom, in an insistence on national dignity.

The penultimate Korean king, Kojong, was just 11 when he took the throne in 1864, guided by his father—a powerful regent known as the Taewon'gun—until he reached maturity. During his regency, his father re-energized the dominant ideology (neo-Confucianism), practiced a strict seclusion policy against several empires knocking at the door, and fought serious wars against both France (1866) and the US (1871); two years

later the new Meiji leadership in Japan came close to invading Korea. This was the Hermit Kingdom at its height; and *kukch'e* was a prominent concept under the Taewon'gun.

But when Kojong came of age he sought modern reforms, signed unequal treaties opening Korea to commerce and tried to play the imperial powers off against each other. It worked for 25 years, and then it didn't: opening up merely staved off the predictable end—the obliteration of Korean sovereignty in 1910. At the Revolutionary Museum in Pyongyang, fronted by a 60-foot statue of Kim Il-sung, visitors encounter a paean of praise to the Taewon'gun, stone monuments from his era meant to ward off foreign barbarians, and tributes to Korean "victories" against the French and the Americans.

During the recent funeral procession, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law, Chang Song-t'aek, walked behind Kim Jong-un. Chang, 65, has long been entrusted with command of the most sensitive security agencies. Behind him was Kim Ki-nam, now in his eighties, who was a close associate of Kim Il-sung. Three generations walked solemnly alongside the vintage 1970s armored Lincoln Continental carrying the coffin of Kim Jong-il, while strolling on the other side of the limousine were top commanders of the military. North Korea is modern history's most amazing garrison state, with the fourth largest army in the world.

### Mourning ritual

The rituals were very similar to those when Kim Il-sung died. Pundits and officials had said the same then: *Newsweek* ran a cover story, "The Headless Beast" (18 July 1994), the US military commander in the South said the North would "implode or explode", and the imminent collapse of the regime became a CIA mantra. Almost two decades later, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is still here. And in a few more years, it will have been in existence for as long as the Soviet Union. Yet a few months before Kim Il-sung's death, I heard a US scholar of North Korea tell a conference that when Kim died, the people would rise up and overthrow



the regime. Instead the masses wept in the streets—just as they did when King Kojong died in 1919, touching off a nationwide uprising against the Japanese.

After his father died, Kim Jong-il disappeared, causing rumors of power struggles. He was doing what the heir-apparent prince was supposed to do under the ancient regime: mourn his father for three years. By the 50th anniversary of the DPRK's founding in 1998, it was clear that Kim Jong-il was in full charge, and he launched its first long-range missile to mark the moment. He often said that communism had fallen in the West because of the dilution and erosion of ideological purity. North Korea has turned Marx on his head—or put Hegel back on his feet—by arguing that “ideas determine everything”, a formulation the Taewon'gun's neo-Confucian scribes would have liked.

Will Kim Jong-un follow the same mourning ritual? So far he has not. He has visited military units and appeared in public. It is in his interest to lay low and gain experience while the old guard runs the country. With US and South Korean presidential elections later in the year (the current South Korean president, a hardliner whom the North loathes, cannot run again), top leader Hu Jin-tao stepping down in China and Putin's election now less of a certainty in Russia, biding his time is smart. He has become the face of the regime, hoped to be more agreeable to the public than that of his father.

My Soviet informant was right: I had been wrong about the significance of bodily appearances. Whatever he looks like, the king can do no wrong: he can even hit eagles on his first golf round (as Kim Jong-il was claimed to have done). In a classic European text, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton, 1957), Ernst Kantorowicz wrote that there were two kings: the frail, human and mortal vessel who happens to be king, and the perfect eternal king who endures forever as the symbol of the monarchy. The Koreans made the dead Kim Il-sung president for eternity, all imperfections erased, and now his elaborate mausoleum is the most important edifice in the country. Will Jong-un's face, so similar to

his, make people quickly forget about Kim Jong-il, whose 17-year reign brought flood, drought, famine, the effective collapse of the economy, and mass starvation leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths? He had one singular, if dubious achievement: the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

We all, consciously or not, live within and search for a usable past. Kim Jong-un may not yet be 30, but if my Soviet interlocutor is right, we are going to see his face for a long, long time.

Bruce Cumings is chairman of the History Department at the University of Chicago and the author, most recently, of *The Korean War: A History*, Random House Modern Library, 2010.

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## SUGGESTED READING

(books by or about Mao, the Chinese revolution, and movements and ideas inspired or influenced by Maoism)

*Away with All Pests: An English Surgeon in People's China, 1954-1969* by Joshua Horn

*The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* by Mobo Gao

*Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* by Harry Haywood

*Blackshirts and Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism* by Michael Parenti

*Chairman Mao Talks To The People: Talks and Letters: 1956-1971* by Mao Zedong

*Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* by Ann Tompkins and Lincoln Cushing

*Comrade Chiang Ching* by Roxanne Witke

*A Critique of Soviet Economics* by Mao Zedong

*Daily Life in Revolutionary China* by Maria Antonietta Macciocchi

*Defying the Tomb: Selected Prison Writings and Art of Kevin "Rashid" Johnson Featuring Exchanges with an Outlaw* by Kevin "Rashid" Johnson

*Dispatches from the People's War in Nepal* by Li Onesto

*Divided World Divided Class: Global Political Economy and the Stratification of Labour Under Capitalism* by Zak Cope

*Education in the People's Republic of China* by Ruth Gamberg

*Eurocentrism* by Samir Amin

*False Nationalism False Internationalism* by Kae Sera and E. Tani

*Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* by William Hinton

*Gao Village: Rural Life in Modern China* by Mobo Gao

*Global History: A View from the South* by Samir Amin

*Hello, Baster: The Untold Story of India's Maoist Movement* by Rahul Pandita

*A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* by Jean Daubier

*Hundred Day War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University* by William Hinton

*Inside the Cultural Revolution* by Jack Chen

*Jose Maria Sison: At Home in the World: Portrait of a Revolutionary: Conversations with Ninotchka Rosca* by Jose Maria Sison and Ninotchka Rosca

*The Long Revolution* by Edgar Snow

*Love and Struggle: My Life in SDS, the Weather Underground, and Beyond* by David Gilbert

*Mao for Beginners* by Eduardo del Río (Rius)

*Mao: A Reinterpretation* by Lee Feigon

*Marxism and Native Americans* edited by Ward Churchill

*The Military Strategy of Women and Children* by Butch Lee

*Negroes with Guns* by Robert F. Williams

*Night-Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neocolonial Terrain* by Butch Lee

*No Surrender: Writings From An Anti-Imperialist Political Prisoner* by David Gilbert

*On Guerrilla Warfare* by Mao Zedong

*The Origins of Chinese Communism* by Arif Dirlik

*People's War & Women's Liberation in Nepal* by Hisila Yami

*People's War..Women's War?: Two Texts by Comrade Parvati of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) with Commentary by Butch Lee* by Butch Lee and Comrade Parvati

*Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers?: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey* by Paul J. White

*Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* (aka the "Little Red Book") by Mao Zedong

*Red Cat White Cat: China and the Contradictions of "Market Socialism"* by Robert Weil

*Red Earth: Revolution in a Sichuan Village* by Stephen Endicott

*Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow

*Report from a Chinese Village* by Jan Myrdal

*Revolutionary Suicide* by Huey Newton

*Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* by Max Elbaum

*The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy* by Minqi Li

*Serve the People: Observations on Medicine in the People's Republic of China* by Victor W. Sidel

*Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* by J. Sakai

*The Shining Path: A History of the Millenarian War in Peru* by Gustavo Gorriti

*The Shining Path of Peru* edited by David Scott Palmer

*Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era* by Wang Zheng, Xueping Zhong, Bai Di, and Naihua Zhang

*Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* by Belden Fields

*The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village* by Donping Han

*Through a Glass Darkly: American Views of the Chinese Revolution* by William Hinton

*Walking With The Comrades* by Arundhati Roy

*Was Mao Really A Monster? The Academic Response to Chang and Halliday's "Mao: The Unknown Story"* edited by Gregor Benton and Lin Chun

*We Are Our Own Liberators: Selected Prison Writings* by Jalil Muntaqim

*We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* by Mumia Abu-Jamal

*We Will Return In The Whirlwind: Black Radical Organizations 1960-1975* by Muhammad Ahmad (Maxwell Stanford, Jr.)

*When Race Burns Class: Settlers Revisited* by J. Sakai

*When Surfs Stood Up in Tibet* by Anna Louse Strong

*Wind in the Tower: Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution, 1949-1975* by Han Suyin

*A Year in Upper Felicity: Life in a Chinese Village During the Cultural Revolution* by Jack Chen

## WEB RESOURCES

(websites for Maoist and Maoist-influenced organizations, or containing information on Maoism and related ideas; listing here does not imply affiliation or endorsement; all websites are listed for educational purposes only)

Afghanistan Liberation Organization  
[www.a-l-o.maoism.ru](http://www.a-l-o.maoism.ru)

Angry Marxists  
[www.angrymarxists.wordpress.com](http://www.angrymarxists.wordpress.com)

Anti-Imperialism  
[www.anti-imperialism.com](http://www.anti-imperialism.com)

A World to Win  
[www.aworldtowin.org](http://www.aworldtowin.org)

Banned Thought  
[www.bannedthought.net](http://www.bannedthought.net)

China Study Group  
[www.chinastudygroup.net](http://www.chinastudygroup.net)

Committee to Support the Revolution in Peru  
[www.csrp.org](http://www.csrp.org)

Communist Organization of Greece  
[www.international.koel.gr](http://www.international.koel.gr)

Communist (Maoist) Party of Afghanistan  
[www.sholajawid.org](http://www.sholajawid.org)

Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)  
[www.cpiml.tk](http://www.cpiml.tk)

Conference of Communist and Worker's Parties of the Balkans  
[www.balkanconference.net](http://www.balkanconference.net)

Democracy and Class Struggle  
[www.democracyandclasstruggle.blogspot.com](http://www.democracyandclasstruggle.blogspot.com)

Max Elbaum: Revolution in the Air  
[www.revolutionintheair.com](http://www.revolutionintheair.com)

Fight Back! News  
[www.fightbacknews.org](http://www.fightbacknews.org)

The Fire Collective  
[www.thefirecollective.org](http://www.thefirecollective.org)

Freedom Road Socialist Organization  
[www.freedomroad.org](http://www.freedomroad.org)

Freedom Road Socialist Organization (Fight Back!)  
[www.frso.org](http://www.frso.org)

From Marx to Mao  
[www.marx2mao.com](http://www.marx2mao.com)

Front Lines of Revolutionary Struggle  
[www.revolutionaryfrontlines.wordpress.com](http://www.revolutionaryfrontlines.wordpress.com)

Fuck Yea Marxism-Leninism  
[www.fuckyeahmarxismleninism.tumblr.com](http://www.fuckyeahmarxismleninism.tumblr.com)

Great Leap Forward Speed  
[www.greatleapforwardspeed.wordpress.com](http://www.greatleapforwardspeed.wordpress.com)

The Hong se Sun  
[www.hongsesun.blogspot.com](http://www.hongsesun.blogspot.com)

International Conference of Marxist-Leninist Parties and Organizations  
[www.icmlpo.de](http://www.icmlpo.de)

International League of People's Struggle  
[www.ilps.info](http://www.ilps.info)

Jose Maria Sison  
[www.josemariasison.org](http://www.josemariasison.org)

The Kalikot Book Series  
[www.kalikotbooks.wordpress.com](http://www.kalikotbooks.wordpress.com)

Kasama Project  
[www.kasamaproject.org](http://www.kasamaproject.org)

Kevin “Rashid” Johnson  
[www.rashidmod.com](http://www.rashidmod.com)

Kurdistan Worker’s Party  
[www.pkkonline.net](http://www.pkkonline.net)

Leading Light Communist Organization  
[www.llco.org](http://www.llco.org)

Maoist Communist Party of Turkey-North  
Kurdistan  
[www.mkp-bim.info](http://www.mkp-bim.info)

The Maoist Internationalist Ministry of Prisons  
[www.prisoncensorship.info](http://www.prisoncensorship.info)

Maoist Road  
[www.maoistroad.blogspot.com](http://www.maoistroad.blogspot.com)

Marxist Internet Archive  
[www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)

The Marxist-Leninist  
[www.marxistleninist.wordpress.com](http://www.marxistleninist.wordpress.com)

Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Revolutionary Study  
Group  
[www.mlmsg.com](http://www.mlmsg.com)

M-L-M Mayhem!  
[www.moufawad-paul.blogspot.com](http://www.moufawad-paul.blogspot.com)

Monthly Review  
[www.monthlyreview.org](http://www.monthlyreview.org)

National Democratic Front of the Philippines  
[www.ndfp.net](http://www.ndfp.net)

Onkwehon: We Rising  
[www.onkwehonwerising.wordpress.com](http://www.onkwehonwerising.wordpress.com)

Philippine Revolution Web Central  
[www.philippinerevolution.net](http://www.philippinerevolution.net)

Red Sun Magazine  
[www.redsun.org](http://www.redsun.org)

Revolutionary Communist Party (Canada)  
[www.pcr-rcp.ca](http://www.pcr-rcp.ca)

Revolutionary Initiative  
[www.ri-ir.org](http://www.ri-ir.org)

Signal Fire  
[www.signalfire.org](http://www.signalfire.org)

Socialist Movement Nepal  
[www.socialistnepal.org](http://www.socialistnepal.org)

The Workers Dreadnought  
[www.theworkersdreadnought.wordpress.com](http://www.theworkersdreadnought.wordpress.com)

World People’s Resistance Movement  
[www.wprmbritain.org](http://www.wprmbritain.org)

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# KASAMA PROJECT

*In a world at war, the times cry out for a new direction. The existing left has been unable to speak to our times, let alone provide real-world solutions. Activists, organizers and dreamers have too often relied on old formulas from bygone days. A serious, creative break needs to be made to escape this impasse.*

***Walk the revolutionary road with us***

**Kasama is a communist project** for the forcible overthrow and transformation of all existing social conditions. We are open to learning, unafraid to admit our own uncertainties. At the same time, we will not shrink from what we do know: the solutions cannot be found within an imperialist world order or the choices it provides. We are for revolution. We seek to find the forms of organization and action for the people most dispossessed by this system to free themselves and all humanity.

To take this road, we need a fearless, open-eyed debate, discussion and engagement. We need fresh analyses of the rapid changes shaping the world around us. We need to sum up a century of revolutionary strategies and attempts, victories and defeats—instead of the conventional wisdom and facile verdicts that paralyze our movements. We need to re-imagine a radical politics that can take life among people and move mountains. We need a movement that can listen, as well as speak.

**Kasama is a revolutionary project.** We intend to identify those fault lines where radical thought and action can emerge. We intend to go deeply among people to prepare minds and organize forces for the revolution; for a global transformation of human life; for the urgent rescue of the biosphere from capitalist destruction; for the radical dismantling of the U.S. empire—its military, its nuclear weapons and torture camps; for the

uprooting of intolerable racial inequalities and the archaic brutalities of male supremacy; for the final liberation of humanity from the restless, soulless rule of capitalist profit making!

**Come walk with us.** Help launch our new organizing and theoretical projects. Let's reconceive as we regroup for the coming storm. The end of this world is the beginning of the new. Everything will change. How it changes is up to us.



**In a world of profound economic crisis and war without end, the times cry out for a revolutionary new politics and direction.**

**Millions are realizing that radical solutions are needed.**

**For too long the Tea Party crackpots and militia racists were virtually the only audible voices that spoke to radical sentiments and needs.**

**Large parts of the previous Left felt trapped—repelled by the ugly Right,**

**pressured to chase “lesser evils,” unable to speak their deepest desires and dreams.**

**We need to forge an alternative to all of that.**

**This system is unfixable. It was founded on slavery and genocide. It is not possible for oppressed people to “take America back”—we never had it.**

**This system thrives day-to-day only through the exploitation in sweatshops, mines, agribusiness plantations and shantytowns all around the world. We don't want a way back in. We don't want a seat at that table.**

**The end of this world is the beginning of the new. Everything will change. How it changes is up to us.**

We don't support Obama, the president from Goldman Sachs. We don't want to whisper in his ear. Or be trapped by the politics of petty reform and repulsive business-as-usual—defined by drones, wars, unemployment lines, the corrupt rule of money, and deepening serfdom to corporations.

We don't want tactical advice from liberal pundits on “how to appeal to Middle Americans.” We intend to reach the people ourselves (especially the youth of ghettos, barrios, campuses and high schools—including in “Middle America”) with a potent subversive message that won't compute in the calculators of this system.

A serious, creative political break is needed. To throw our hearts into that, we have formed Kasama over the last three years.

**Kasama is first of all a *communist* project.**

**By that we mean:** The problems of humanity require communism—a global change that passes through the radical overthrow of a society of rich and poor, the development of a socialist sustainability to save the biosphere, the liberation of women from ancient subordination, the final overthrow of racist oppression in the U.S., the vicious demonization of same-sex relationships, an

abrupt end to this militarized empire (its global networks of mercenary forces, its torture camps and endless wars), the social takeover of monster banks and corporations—all of which requires radically new forms of democratic control by previously powerless people.

Humanity is now able to free itself from the restless, soulless rule of capitalist profit making. If we succeed, we face the possibility of a new historical epoch of mutual flourishing.

We are seeking to contribute to this. Join us in this work.

For that reason, we are actively trying to put communism onto center stage—as a necessary goal, as a fresh idea, as something that defines what is done now and at each stage. And (needless to say) that is unacceptable(!) to those bankers and empire builders who insist they are “too big to fail” (or who insist that their own enrichment is the necessary prerequisite for any economic motion.) And it is also often startling for the millions of people awakening to political life—and whose discontent and anger has still not yet found a name or a goal to be its focus. We want to speak the words that need to be spoken.

We think this is especially important because it is insisted (on many levels) that no alternative to capitalism is possible—that any attempt leads to chaos, despair, disillusionment or a worsening of human conditions. This is fundamentally wrong and a lie: Without a radical departure from capitalism—toward a radical egalitarianism on a world scale, toward a destruction of oppressive empires and parasitic corporations—the future of humanity will be dark and bitter.

We believe like the famous closing words of *The Communist Manifesto*: The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the overthrow of all existing oppressive social conditions.

We are building Kasama to serve as a catalyst. We seek to build a clear communist and

internationalist pole within a larger revolutionary movement.

For that Kasama has to be refreshingly new and shockingly revolutionary—in how we organize ourselves, in how we speak among the people, in how we understand the goals and means of revolution, and in how we engage the ideas of others.

Organizationally we are organized in collectives in several cities, and a number of non-geographic work groups (our theoretical projects, common work on South Asia’s revolutions, investigative/reporting work teams, and our moderator teams).

Our network is young. The road stretches out before us all. Join in.

### **Learning, listening, creating revolutionary strategy**

At this point, there are two painful absences facing oppressed and discontent people in the US: the absence of a clear revolutionary strategy for this moment and this society, and the absence of a creative determined revolutionary organization that can learn and lead. The whole point of forming our Kasama Project is to make a contribution to filling those voids—by engaging in the deep waters of political action and revolutionary theory.

The project has expanded into a network of revolutionaries and collectives in many cities across the U.S.

Kasama intends to identify those fault lines where radical thought and action can emerge. We want to go deeply among the people to prepare minds and organize forces for revolution.

At the same time, much remains to be fleshed out.

Any real-life revolution is a many-to-many engagement among diverse currents and interests, not a one-to-many assertion of authority and conformity. It requires a deep engagement with the people and problems of this moment and a profound creative process

involving those just awakening to political life.

An emerging revolutionary movement in the U.S. can't be envisioned out of thin air or dictated by old formulas. It has to arise from that generation of serious young revolutionaries now emerging—stamped by their experiences and invention.

**Put another way:** One old socialist movement was famous for saying “the movement is everything the final goal is nothing.” Kasama says (by contrast) “the final goal is our start, the ways of moving there are still emerging for us.”

Help expand our new organizing and theoretical projects. Let's re-conceive as we regroup in the intensifying storm.

#### **A politics that can learn and create**

This is a moment that demands some non-messianic humility from revolutionaries. We need a movement that can listen, as well as speak. Kasama strains to make real contributions. And there may be contributions that only we can make. But we expect much from many other people. And we expect to do much together with others.

We urge those eager to walk the road of revolution, to join us in igniting a fearless, open-eyed debate, discussion and engagement—and seek to build that into a creative frisson of new politics. We offer a space for this—our Kasama website ([kasamaproject.org](http://kasamaproject.org))—and are eager to participate in the spaces (online and in the streets) that emerge.

We are seeking to actively investigate and understand key revolutionary experiences around our world today. We have set aside time and effort to promote new theoretical explorations and thinking—within a left that is too often on autopilot. And we are trying to bring that with us as we dive into the deep waters of today's emerging movements against mistreatment and capitalism in the U.S.

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### **SOME RECOMMENDED LINKS**

Advance The Struggle  
[www.advancethestruggle.wordpress.com](http://www.advancethestruggle.wordpress.com)

Black Orchid Collective  
[www.blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com](http://www.blackorchidcollective.wordpress.com)

Committee to Connect the Dots  
[www.razethewalls.weebly.com](http://www.razethewalls.weebly.com)

Deep Green Resistance  
[www.deepgreenresistance.org](http://www.deepgreenresistance.org)

Malcolm X Grassroots Movement  
[www.mxgm.org](http://www.mxgm.org)

People of Color Organize!  
[www.peopleofcolororganize.com](http://www.peopleofcolororganize.com)

Unsettling America:  
Decolonization in Theory & Practice  
[www.unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com](http://www.unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com)

4StruggleMagazine  
[www.4struglemag.org](http://www.4struglemag.org)

### **BLACK BOOKS OF CAPITALISM**

*Capitalism: A Structural Genocide* by Garry Leech

*The Culture of Make-Believe* by Derrick Jensen

*Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* by Kevin Bales

*The Gruesome Acts of Capitalism* by David Lester

*Killing Hope: U.S. Military and C.I.A. Interventions Since World War II* by William Blum

*Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* by Mike Davis

*On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Reflections on the Consequences of U.S. Imperial Arrogance and Criminality* by Ward Churchill

*Planet of Slums* by Mike Davis

*The Politics of Genocide* by Edward S. Herman and David Peterson





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