
IT IS RIGHT TO REBEL

Albert Langer¹

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Marxism consists of thousands of truths, but they all boil down to one sentence, "It is right to rebel!". For thousands of years it has been said that it was right to oppress, it was right to exploit and it was wrong to rebel. This old verdict was only reversed with the appearance of Marxism. And from this truth there follows resistance, struggle, the fight for socialism. -
- Mao Tsetung

Sunday 26 December marks the centenary of Mao's birth. The 17 years since his death on 9 September 1976 has seen a complete repudiation of Mao's political line in China, and a general collapse of organized "Maoist" movements elsewhere.

In China the slogan "Only socialism can save China" has been replaced by "Only capitalism can save the Communist Party". What passes for the "left" in Western countries has abandoned progressive, let alone rebellious politics, and been reduced to impotent reactionary whining.

Are we really at the "end of history"? Certainly revolutionary communists are in greater disarray today, and have been for longer, than when the second international collapsed. But 1914 was followed by the October revolution of 1917. Low tides, as Mao pointed out, are merely periods between high tides. The upsurge of the '60s, like the more recent upheavals in Eastern Europe, was a product of less visible developments during the earlier periods of apparent political stagnation.

Can capitalism save the "Communist" Party of China? Obviously not. The current regime is doomed and knows it. They will be swept away like the Soviet empire, as will their colleagues in Cuba, Korea and Vietnam. Good riddance. When Teng Hsiao-ping overthrew Mao's regime and was widely hailed as a "democrat", Chiang Ching said he was a fascist. She was right. It may take some time before revolutionaries like Mao win power again in China, but what they achieved

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"ahead of their time" represented the future. Teng's regime, like Brezhnev's, consists of walking corpses, zombies, whose only future is to be buried.

After the defeat of American imperialism in Vietnam, Mao called for a united front against the Soviet Union, which he identified as fascist and imperialist. This was widely seen as just a tactical manoeuvre and rather extravagant rhetoric. Today Western media still insist on describing the Soviet "old guard" as "hard line communists", but cannot avoid admitting that in Russia they are seen as "the right wing", closely allied with the most rabid extreme nationalists. Mao was right about "social fascism".

Has the end of the Cold War strengthened and stabilized capitalist imperialism in a "New World Order"? United States President Bush thought so, and the pseudo-left agreed, with bizarre protests against removing Iraq from Kuwait. In fact euphoria about ending the "Vietnam syndrome" and being "the only superpower" evaporated almost as quickly as the pathetic "protests". The era when superpowers could attempt to impose their will on other countries is ending. From South Africa to Palestine the national liberation struggles Mao supported are advancing rapidly. Mao was right about "paper tigers".

Strength and stability require social and economic progress. The stagnation and decline of the West is not yet as acute as Brezhnev's "period of stagnation", but the long term implications are just as profound. All the contending parties agree that nothing can be done "until the economy improves". The economy will only improve when investment is more profitable, which requires increasing oppression and exploitation. With no alternative, the result is widespread cynicism and disillusionment. That impasse has lasted a long time, but it can't go on forever here any more than it could in the police states of Eastern Europe. As Mao points out, there is an alternative -- rebellion, struggle, the fight for socialism.

The only people who seriously claim that social progress can be achieved without upheaval are the pseudo-left, who keep insisting that mass unemployment and cutbacks in living standards etc are due to "economic rationalism" rather than the reality of a developing capitalist economic crisis. It is no coincidence that most of the pseudo-left were depressed while everybody else rejoiced when the walls fell and the Soviet empire collapsed. The pseudo-left want a more repressive society than Western style capitalism, not a more liberated one. No wonder their culture program is for censorship in the name of "protecting women" and their economic program is for erecting higher barriers between nations. They are so reactionary that they even promote greenie nature worship!

Capitalism is a major advance on what went before it - not just in narrow material terms but in the all round unfolding of human potential. It was built by rebels who could not accept the suffocating constraints of the old world. They didn't demand better treatment from their Lords and masters but overthrew them because they were in the way.

Today liberals speak of the "end of history" - a frank admission that "now we are in the way".

To most liberals the popularity of Mao among Western rebels in the '60s seemed just bizarre. Mao's contribution was not in telling us that "it is right to rebel" - we knew that already. What Mao's "Cultural Revolution" helped us understand was the need to rebel against advocates of oppression and exploitation in our own ranks.

Instead of endlessly boasting about the great achievement of defeating Japanese imperialism, overthrowing Chiang Kai-shek and building a new China, Mao denied that there had been any "end of history" in China. He drew lessons from the emergence of a stultifyingly reactionary regime in the Soviet Union and pointed out that people who called themselves "Communists" were in fact forming a new ruling class of oppressors and exploiters in China. If Mao had claimed that the "Cultural Revolution" solved the problem he would have been proved wrong by events since his death. But he was notorious for insisting on the exact opposite - that it would take many such cultural revolutions, and some more armed revolutions as well, before the issue could be settled.

The '60s upsurge in the West was impossible until new forces emerged that rejected both the established regimes and their allegedly "left" but equally useless opponents, presenting a sharp alternative to the social consensus. That hasn't happened yet, partly because the problems the next upheaval has to deal with go much deeper than issues like the Vietnam war. But consensus politics and pseudo-left opposition are already discredited. People already know that we have to develop an alternative.

While the politicians and the pseudo-left prattle about "jobs", the issue facing modern society is precisely the issue raised by Marxism -- abolition of wage labour.

Happy birthday Mao Tsetung!