

Demystifying Maoism - Book Review

June 15, 2016



Elliott Liu. *Maoism and the Chinese Revolution: A Critical Introduction*. Oakland: PM Press, 2016. 148 pages. Bibliography. Notes. Photos. Tables.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Maoism became the dominant political tendency not only in China but also in Western Europe and the United States, while it also influenced developments in Asia, Latin America and Africa. In the United States thousands of young activists rallied to Maoism, a political theory and practice that appeared at the time to be a democratic alternative to the bureaucratic Communism of the Soviet Union.

Maoism was everywhere. In France, Maoism not only attracted young militants, but also became a trend in leftist intellectual circles, attracting such figures as Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser. In Latin America it was Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s ideas that tended to influence your radicals, though Che himself was influenced by Maoism while in some Latin American countries Maoism also existed as an important if not dominant current. Today in the United States and in some other countries since the Great Recession of 2008 and the social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, we see a small resurgence of Maoism on the left—making this book timely and important.

Elliott Liu, an activist in the Bronx, has written an excellent little book that examines Mao Tse-Tung’s role in the Chinese Revolution in an attempt to find out what Maoism really represented for the Chinese people and for the socialist movement worldwide. At the same time, he hopes to engage and to challenge those who today find Maoism an attractive political philosophy and revolutionary strategy. Respectful of those who incline toward Maoism, he is also relentless in his criticism of Maoism as a fundamentally misguided political theory and practice that leads not to socialism but to what he calls “state socialism” or “state capitalism.”

While not an academic book, *Maoism and the Chinese Revolution: A Critical Interpretation* is a well documented and well written account of Maoism based on secondary sources available in English. It is simultaneously a short political biography of Mao and a basic history of modern Communist China from the 1920s to the 1970s, but most important it is a political analysis from an anarchist or libertarian communist perspective. For those unfamiliar with Maoism, one could not recommend a better book, while for those who are familiar with Maoism and have firm ideas about it, one could not suggest a more challenging analysis.

Liu provides a straightforward chronological account of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party from the beginning in the 1920s to the death of Mao and of Maoism in China in the 1970s. He touches on

all of the key developments, from the turn from the city to the countryside in the 1920s after the tragedy of Shanghai, to the guerrilla warfare and long marches of the 1930s in the struggle against the Kuo Min Tang and the Japanese, to the taking of power in the late 1940s, to the various developments of the 1940s and 1960s: Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine, and the Cultural Revolution.

In his account of Mao, he provides not only a narrative, but the facts and figures: the numbers who died in collectivization of agriculture or in the great famine, the numbers arrested or killed in the political opposition. Liu also discusses Mao's books and his political theory, arguing that Mao's thinking was fundamentally not Marxist, but either idealist or pragmatic. And it should be noted that Liu deals briefly in passing with Mao's foreign policy—from his support for the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 to his support for the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile to his support alongside apartheid South Africa and the United States for UNITA in Angola. For such a small book, it's remarkably complete.

While Liu's *Maoism* is well-written throughout, Chapter IV "The Cultural Revolution" deserves particular praise for its depiction of the dynamism and complexity of the process, the diversity of political tendencies, and the struggle of some to develop an independent organization and revolutionary theory—though they were ultimately crushed or coopted by Mao. Liu is also to be praised for returning throughout the book to look at the status of women, always a touchstone for the understanding of society. While the Chinese Communist Party often mobilized women, as Liu points out they were virtually never permitted to develop an independent feminist leadership or agenda.

Liu argues that Maoism represented an attempt to deal with two fundamental but often contradictory conditions: first, the influence of the Soviet Union and Stalinism; and, second, China's fundamentally rural and peasant society. For Liu, Maoism, responding to those two elements, is in its essence both a Chinese variant of Stalinism and a failed attempt to create a Chinese alternative to Stalinism. Reading Liu's book, we find at every major turning point, Mao remains a Stalinist, committed to the one-party state, the state's nationalization of industry and agriculture, the manipulation of and eventual crushing of social and political opposition.

My own understanding of Maoism is very close to Liu's, and, while I agree in general with Liu's view, I do have some differences. First, Liu suggests throughout the book that Mao is a socialist leader wrestling with the Stalinist legacy both politically and intellectually, while it seems to be that by the 1930s Mao has created the Communist-Party-as-army, the core of a new state, and that he is from that point forward a pragmatic nationalist leader whose only concern it to keep power in the hands of himself and the ruling group.

But how do we characterize that ruling group? My second difference has to do with the characterization of China as "state capitalist," while to me there seems to be nothing capitalist about it—until recently. China's Communist Party elite became a new ruling class who through their control of the state controlled the economy, an economy where the state plan not the market determined the outcome, and since the market was not dominant, labor was often dragooned rather than sold on the market.

China's rulers were an exploiting and oppressing class—just like slaveholders, feudal lords, or capitalists, carrying off the social surplus—but they were not, in my view, a capitalist class. I would call them a bureaucratic collectivist ruling class. But this is really a theoretical quibble, since whether we call Mao's China state capitalist or bureaucratic collectivist, it is clear that we recognize that it was not in any way socialist. Elliott Liu has done a fine job of explain just who Mao was, his role in the Chinese Revolution, and why Maoism has nothing in common with socialism.

