

## THE CHINESE TRAGEDY

Almost without exception, the British Left has never said anything informed or interesting about the Chinese revolutionary process. Social democracy and Trotskyism (the two most dominant currents) have received recent events with glee; though they have understood neither their basis or significance; but merely as a chance to lament the absence of bourgeois or proletarian democracy. Big Flame on the other hand which has had some useful things to say about China, has in the past year said very little. This has partially been a product of other priorities, but mainly a problem of coming to terms with a de-generation of a process that we had once identified with and seen real hope for socialists everywhere.

This identification was consolidated at our 1976 Conference, when we passed a motion (on the "Nature of Russia, China and post-revolutionary societies") (I) saying that China was "building socialism." We did not say it was socialist, but as a transitional society moving towards socialism in an uneven way -

"because they have put the transformation of the relations of production and society at the centre of the struggle and have fought against the emergence of new classes and elites." (from motion)

Our reference point for being interested in China was the Cultural Revolution of the late sixties, rather than the Sino-Soviet split of the 1950's which created the small 'Maoist' or orthodox Marxist-Leninist groups all over the world (2). In this BF was similar to the rest of the revolutionary left in Europe which was also pro-Chinese through the cultural revolution and like us never supported the counter-revolutionary foreign policy; as the orthodox M-L's did. The British revolutionary left remained largely insulated from the debate on the Cultural Revolution (CR), preferring the orthodox Trotskyist interpretation that it was a power struggle among factions in the Chinese Communist Party, using the masses for their own ends. Our European "connection" (particularly through Lotta Continua) and the work done on the Trotsky pamphlet (3) convinced us otherwise: so what did we see its significance as?

### The importance of the Cultural Revolution

The upheavals in China had little to do with "culture", but a lot to do with a debate and struggle on the nature of socialism. Despite the break with Russia in the fifties, only one section of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had actually made a critique of the Russian model of building socialism (ie. the section Mao led). The others had the orthodox view that socialism was state ownership, building heavy industry, technology, science and so on, through Western/scientific models; with education on highly competitive lines etc. Although it was a fluctuating situation the revisionist section (4) had begun to get the upper hand by the mid-sixties. To counteract this Mao and others launched a "cultural revolution" aimed at reversing the trends and giving China a thorough social upheaval in the process. Although the initiative was launched from the top, it spread way beyond the centres of power in the CCP (5), involving literally millions of people, especially the Red Guards, well publicised in the West.

Central to the theoretical basis of the CR was Mao's insistence that a class system and class struggle was not ended by formal transference of ownership from private capital to the "workers state." This directly contradicted the Russian idea and Stalin's writings in particular and was seen as doing by Mao (6). The concept used by Mao implied that the major tasks of transforming China in a socialist direction still had to be done; by altering the social relations of production, beyond the property relations. This is precisely what the CR did. This included:

- (i) The replacement of material incentives (bonuses etc) by moral incentives and more worker-power. As the Shanghai dockers said in 174 - "We shall be masters of the Wharf, not slaves of tonnage."
- (ii) Revolutionising work methods and technology, including trying to break down the division between manual and mental labour. Control of and reduction of power of specialists.

(iii) Emphasis on light industry, co-operative relationship between town and country, including enterprises being responsible for their own anti-pollution methods.

(iv) A new relationship between education and society, that could prepare the way for the breakdown of manual and mental divisions. Including students and academics working in the factories of and rural communes; quotas at higher education for children of manual workers and peasants etc, plus reduction of competition.

(v) The beginnings of democracy at the base of Chinese society, with revolutionary committees in factory, rural and educational institutions.

The revolutionary left in many parts of Europe quite rightly saw this as a radical challenge to orthodox marxism, as it had been perverted by the Russian experience. It challenged the supposed neutrality of science and technology and by emphasising the key role of the transformation of social relations like the division of labour enriched our definition of the basis for socialism: rejecting the Trotskyist (and in different form, CP) absurdity of Russia as a workers state because it had state ownership. Finally it gave hope, based on real experiences, that revolutions did not have to inevitably de-generate into bureaucracies. Not only did this break with mechanical fatalism, it actually indicated what could and should be done to avoid that de-generation. Of course we recognised the limits to the Chinese experience; not just the count foreign policy, but the limits of proletarian democracy, but we hoped that the transformation of social relations would encourage a progressive spread of local democracy upwards into the state apparatus and the CCP.

#### Recent events: the de-generation of the gains of the Cultural Revolution

The recent crisis and political upheavels in China have brought it back into the attention of people in the West. As indicated earlier it has been used to state the obvious. The Trotskyist press has rightly pointed out the absence of mass proletarian democracy and how those masses want to and could fight for that situation. The bourgeois press has sniffed leanings towards wanting democratic rights and a multi-party system; again undoubtedly present although not necessarily in the form they see it (ie. a restoral of bourgeois democracy). But while these factors are vitally important, they miss the main point of the Chinese tragedy: which is the reversal of the gains of the CR. After all we knew the absence of mass democracy - but now we've lost the real advances that should have taught us so much. (7)

So what has happened? In the wake of the removal of the "Gang of Four" and their supporters, following the death of Mao; the new leadership (centred round enemies of Mao and the CR) have instituted a number of measures. In the economic sphere (under the guise of an attack on the "absolute egalitarianism" of the Gang of Four) bonuses and material incentives have been re-introduced, as have work hierarchies and management power. As John Gittings wrote in the Guardian after his visit to China - referring to current opinions:

"The managers had come too close to the masses, to the point where they did not dare take decisions. 'people seized power from us,' one factory manager said with unusual frankness. The Revolutionary Committee (which has now been abolished and used to include worker representatives) was legal at the time, but we did not want it."

The basic slogan of the CR - "Put politics in Command" - has been replaced by "Politics must serve economics" - heralding the increased uncritical admiration of a capitalist science, technology and work process once seen as anything but neutral and desirable. In education, streaming and exams have been re-introduced, competition encouraged and quotas abolished, already leading to the old bias in favour of the children of the old dominant classes and the new elites. Again the element of base democracy has vanished - Gittings again school administrators:

" Children did not know how to run the schools, people replied with a cheery laugh and the mass organisations have been abolished."

And as Bettlheim indicated, the questions raised by women during the CR and its aftermath are being ignored. If it is recognised that these are reversals in real social relations, then the notion that the CR or the recent events were merely a power struggle between factions becomes a mockery of reality. Yet it is still incumbent on us to explain the basis for the reversals.

#### Why did it happen?

We have described a struggle for the character of Chinese society. In a struggle someone wins and someone loses. And it is clear that in this case the so-called "Gang of Four" (who had followers in the state apparatus, the CCP, the Army and among the masses particularly in their stronghold of Shanghai) were not only the losers, but represented the radical wing of the CCP. Hua was just a cover for the right-wing. Teng and his followers, the real 'power behind the throne.' This has led some groups and commentators sympathetic to China (as) in a similar way to ourselves to see the reversal as a "triumph of revisionism," or a "revisionist clique," centred round Teng. While this is true to an extent it does not clearly show how such a widespread revolutionary process as the CR was reversed.

It is here that the absence of institutionalised mass democracy becomes crucial. The right-wing were able to move against the radical wing, remove them from positions of influence and launch their counter-revolutionary measures precisely because it could be done over the heads of the masses: whose power and voice are largely absent from the CCP and state apparatus, except at local level. The "bad leadership" theory falls down particularly at this point. Because, why didn't the Chinese masses come to the defence of the radicals? Of course in some cases they did, and there were pockets of resistance. The answer must partially lie not only in the historic absence of the masses from government, but that the radicals themselves were implicated in that lack of proletarian democracy. They wanted the masses to "bombard the headquarters" from the localities, but they never issued invitations into the headquarters themselves! Not only did this isolate them, it made the masses suspicious of the Radicals' motives and prey to the accusations & rumours of the new leadership about the supposed bourgeois lifestyle of Madame Mao and her comrades. Bettlheim calls these "lies and slanders", which have no place in Marxist analysis. But such political tactics flourish where regularised proletarian democracy and methods of debate are missing, something which he fails to acknowledge. The Radicals often acted in an authoritarian manner, revolutionising by co-ercion and justifying their line through their control of the mass media. They restricted cultural diversity in the name of revolutionary purity and in general could be associated with censorship and lack of freedom in an opportunistic way by the right-wing. The result is that there is an element in the current situation of the Chinese masses going along with the current line, because its stabilised and normalised things and can express themselves more. Not to mention the improvement in the standard of living that "modernisation" is allowing some sectors of the workforce, like skilled workers.

#### Was Big Flame wrong?

In the importance we gave to the CR and in our understanding of the hope it gave to thousands of socialist militants we were not wrong. But there were mistakes. Not so much in a formal sense; the Trotsky pamphlets and the Conference motion clearly stated the limits of the Chinese experience. The Conference motion stated:

"However we recognise that any society in a socialist transition, can also de-generate into a new class system. In China this may happen either because of revisionist tendencies in the party/state apparatus or because they have failed to institutionalise and make permanent, mass democracy."

The Trotsky pamphlet said similar things. Referring to "structural defects" in Chinese society: it specifically criticised the notion that the party

could substitute for formal organs of proletarian power, saying:

" Because the Party is automatically identified as the means by which proletarian interests are expressed, it retains a monopoly of power and initiative." (Page 41)

But we did make the mistake of underestimating the fragility of the gains of the Cultural Revolution in the transformation of social relations. A fragility which was a direct product of the lack of democracy at state level, despite the contradiction we had noted with the partial democracy at local level. In this sense by separating social relations from democracy, we failed to make absolutely clear that the two are inter-dependent as a basis for socialism. Therefore it was wrong to use the term "building socialism," even with all the qualifications we put on it. We should have stuck to characterising China as a Transitional society, with socialist elements, held back from further development by the question of democracy.

#### CONCLUSION : A NEW LINE?

It should be obvious by now that we need a partially new line, both to take account of new developments and past mistakes. China now has a bad 'internal policy' to go with its lousy foreign policy. The latter of which is getting worse - the wrong notion of a world divided between equally dangerous imperialisms, being replaced by an even more dangerous notion of the Soviet Union as the most dangerous enemy. A development which re-emphasises that is the relations with Russia, rather than the simple fact of isolation which has been the prime determinant of Chinese foreign policy. But neither internal or external relations are static. China is still not Russia. It is still one of the most politicised countries in the world. The recent wall poster campaign, including some remarkable critiques of Chinese society, published even in the party press, indicate the relative openness and fluidity of the situation, and the continued participation of the masses (at least in the large urban centres) unleashed by the CR.

But to say something more definite, I think we should understand the historical development of Chinese society in the following phases:

1949-58: Transitional Society (TS): abolishing private ownership and class formations based on this.

1958-66: TS: consolidation of above in the light of break with Russia. Oscillation between emergent state collectivism (see Trotsky pamphlet) with formation of new elites and elements of socialist social relations.

1966-76: TS: Cultural revolution. Still contradictions between two trends, but movement towards a transition to socialism, through transformation of key social relations.

1976.....TS: Death of Mao, new revisionist leadership, reversal of socialist trend: emergent state collectivism.

China is still a transitional society and has not solidified into state collectivist one as in Russia. This (as in Russia) would take a longer period, particularly for the formation of a stable new ruling class. But more importantly China is still a fluid society, with contradictory social relations, so that a fixed characterisation cannot be made.

A motion based on the above analysis for discussion at the NC and throughout the organisation will be produced separately.

#### Notes

1. See motion re-produced separately.
2. For instance in Britain the CPBML.
3. The lateness of our position was partially because the analytical work was done mainly in the Trotsky pamphlet via an analysis of Russia.
4. Although revisionist can be taken to mean right-wing, for Mao it had the more specific meaning of "those in the party who want to take a capitalist road."
5. Sometimes too far for the liking of Mao, as in the Shanghai Commune.
6. Which is why some have seen it as a more radical critique of Stalimism than Trotsky's.
7. See for instance the articles by John Gittings in recent "Guardians."
8. For instance the French OCT and Bettelheim.

## EXISTING BF POSITION ON CHINA: PASSED AT 1976 CONFERENCE

This was a motion "On the nature of Russia, China and Post-Revolutionary Societies:"

"That Russia and similar countries in Eastern Europe are neither socialist or state capitalist. In these countries the private ownership of the means of production has been abolished, but this (combined with the dictatorship of the proletariat) in any post-revolutionary society is only a pre-condition: the starting point of socialism, not socialism itself. A transition to socialism in its full sense must involve the total transformation of the social relations of production and society. This includes movement towards:

- (1) Workers' and peoples' management of economy and society and freedom of association and criticism.
- (2) Elimination of differences between manual and mental labour, divisions of labour between town and country, men and women.
- (3) The egalitarian distribution of rewards and knowledge.
- (4) Elimination of competition and production for exchange value in the economy and replacement by democratic planning and production for use.
- (5) Elimination of the power of the old classes and struggle against the growth of new elites in party and state structures.
- (6) Revolutionising the mode of work - what is produced and how.

If the tendencies are successful, communism will then be:

- (i) The abolition of wage labour.
- (ii) The abolition of classes.
- (iii) The abolition of the state.
- (4) Full socialist development of the productive forces in the context of world communism.
- (5) From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.

On the basis of the above criteria, Russia etc are not socialist or even in a transition to socialism because the social relations of production have not been transformed and are still constructed on class lines. But it is not capitalist or state capitalist because state ownership and control of the means of production eliminates generalised commodity production, a competitive market economy and exchange value. Therefore Russia etc are class societies based on a new mode of production, where the working class and peasants are dominated and exploited by a new ruling class (based on top party, state and managerial strata) who exert power through their monopoly control of the means of production and state apparatus. The goal of the ruling class is the maintenance of their own monopoly of power and distribution of rewards and the re-production of their position and privileges.

The above criteria are meant as a methodology to judge transitional societies. On this basis we regard China as building socialism. This is because they have put the transformation of the relations of production and society at the centre of the struggle and have fought against the emergence of new classes and elites. However we recognise that any society in a transition to socialism can also de-generate into a new class system. In China this may happen because of the existence of revisionist tendencies in the party/state apparatus or because they have failed to fully institutionalise and make permanent, mass democracy. We also recognise that Chinese foreign policy based as it is on a wrong notion of the world being divided into equally dangerous imperialisms (Russian and American); produces an incorrect foreign policy, which on occasions has played a directly counter-revolutionary role (Ceylon, Pakistan, Angola, Chile etc). Other societies that have recently overthrown imperialism, we also regard as societies in a progressive transition to socialism or as building socialism (eg Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique etc). But the aim of the resolution is not to provide a shopping list, but a methodology for political analysis.

### NOTE

In terms of reading in relation to the debate in BF: the only thing written before the resolution was passed, was - China and the struggle for socialism in the USSR: IC, Jan 1976 - Some Notes on China: PA, March 1976. After the 1976 Conference, there was further debate, against the position - Who Rules China OK?: TM, June 1977, also - China - a defence of our position and a guide to further reading: PT, August 1977, which also contained an International Commission discussion on China etc. Nothing has been written since and the Trotsky pamphlet remains the best reference for the theoretical basis of the existing position.