Voluntarism & Humanism: Revisiting Dunayevskaya’s Critique of Mao

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History is not linear but evolves through dialectic movements. Mao’s China from 1950s-70s is characterized not only by state capitalism’s violence and exploitation, but also by people’s massive resistance. Informed by Dunayevskaya’s discussion of the two subjectivities, voluntarism and humanism, this article will briefly analyze the People’s Communes, the Cultural Revolution of China, and the Hundred Flowers Movement.

In Marxism and Freedom, Dunayevskaya outlines two types of subjectivity that characterized China in the second half of the 20th century. The first one is voluntarism that “has no regard for objective conditions” but is purely driven by passion, optimism, or illusion (327). Although this subjectivity permeated the thoughts of many self-claimed Marxist Leninists, it is nothing close to Marxism because Marx argues that specific material conditions, rather than purely thoughts, are necessary to make historic and social change. As he says, “legal relations as well as forms of state…are rooted in material conditions of life...” (Dunayevskaya, 54). The other subjectivity is humanism demonstrated by the masses. This humanism, Dunayevskaya argues, absorbs objectivity through its struggle for freedom, and therefore transcends both Idealism and Materialism through uniting both. For Marx, humanism is the only path to the ultimate
pursuit of freedom because it combines the desire for freedom (the abstract) and the practical conditions that make freedom possible (the concrete).

Voluntaristic Subjectivity I: The People's Communes and the Great Leap Forward

The People’s Commune during the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) is a perfect example of voluntarism. Devised by Mao, the People’s Commune is one of the Three Red Banners -- along with The Great Leap Forward and The General Line -- that transformed technologically backward China from an agricultural economy to a modern industrial socialist society within a short period of time. According to the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee Resolution, “The People’s Commune is the combination of industry, agriculture, commerce, education and military affairs within the scope of their activity” (Dunayevskaya, 296). As Dunayevskaya notes, in eight months, 120 million peasants’ households were pushed into 24,000 people’s communes, where they lived a collective life and had a set schedule for work and studying. Workers and farmers were organized in military units with strict discipline. For example, they had no choice but to follow work orders, be it to work in the field, mills, or on construction. With so large a work force and military-like organization Mao was ready to surpass the USSR in industrial development and go “without interruption” to Communism (296).

However, what followed was not the development of heavy industry, but a severe famine and tremendous numbers of deaths because of Mao and the Party’s unrealistic, voluntaristic organization of production, especially during the Great Leap Forward. With the focus shifting to industry, agricultural production lagged behind, and a food crisis started. Furthermore, natural disasters such as droughts and floods, bureaucrats’ tendency to exaggerate production, and misdistribution of food increased the levels of starvation and death. Taking the unnatural death rate statistics issued by the Chinese government at face value, Chinese historian Cao Shuji estimates that at least 30
million people died because of food shortages between 1959 and 1961, [http://www.yhew.net/famine/Research/r060628a.html](http://www.yhew.net/famine/Research/r060628a.html) But the real death rate is probably much higher given the Chinese government’s reputation for fabricating data. I remember my grandma telling me that people were so starved that they ate bark and mud. Also, based on news reports at the time, cannibalism was very common. Because Mao and the Party misunderstood, or blatantly ignored, the facts and the objective social as well as economic conditions of China, the suffering of the masses was great. While the Party shifted the focus from agriculture to heavy industry, it ignored the fact that China had a huge population and therefore food production should be the primary concern.

The leadership’s empty faith in the masses’ productivity and the building of socialism was also manifested in their exploitation of people and their plan to double the steel output in 1958. As Dunayevskaya notes, the Chinese government claimed that people produced steel on the farms. This frantic passion for making steel in rural China is documented in Yu Hua’s novel To Live. In one scene, people were summoned to give away their metal utensils so that their commune could produce more steel and contribute to the building of socialism. This “total steelmaking” was meant to involve every single person in the country so that China could speed up and go directly into “Communism.” The party believed that as long as all the Chinese worked hard, they would be able to achieve in a few years what others took decades or even centuries to achieve. Slogans about surpassing the U.S. and the U.K. in industrial and agricultural production in 15 years were widespread. However, instead of double output, such a voluntaristic planned economy yielded tons of pig iron with no industrial use because of low quality and low technology (Dunayevskaya, 296). In fact, people were driven so hard to work that their lives were no better than that of British workers in the late 19th century, but least the British workers fought for and gained a 10-hour working day and one day off every seven days, as recounted by Marx in Capital.
According to Dunayevskaya, Chinese peasants were forced to work 10-12 hours and to study ideology for two hours every day, and had only one day off every ten days. People’s hardships not only demonstrated Mao and the Party’s unrealistic economic plan and misjudgment of objective conditions, but also distinguished Chinese socialism from real Marxism, which strives for the full development of every human being.

Voluntaristic Subjectivity II: The Cultural Revolution

If the People’s Communes showed Mao’s voluntaristic economic plan, the Cultural Revolution from 1967-77 showed his opportunistic judgment of global dynamics and single-minded wish to control people’s minds. According to Dunayevskaya, Mao aspired to make China the leader of the “world revolution” after its split with the USSR. So he designed the Cultural Revolution to convince the world as well as his opponents within the Party that China had the most advanced revolutionary consciousness. Mao created a new organization—the Red Guards—that was rooted neither in the workers and the peasants, nor in the Party, to help spread his “revolutionary” quotes and thoughts under the pretense of dismantling capitalist power. These young Maoists, Dunayevskaya writes, targeted “capitalist” culture, such as Beethoven’s music and “Hong Kong haircuts,” and everything from old China, such as Confucius’s books, and most importantly, “anti-revolutionary people,” i.e., those who disagreed with Mao’s ideology (331). In essence, the Cultural Revolution was Mao’s mechanism to clear his opponents within and without the Party and further consolidate his political power.

Led by the Red Guards, however, this “revolution” went unchecked and beyond the scope of culture. As Dunayevskaya notes, the Red Guards and the “seize control committees” tried to take over factories and fight against workers. The whole country was in turmoil, and production was interrupted. Rather than bringing China to the center of the Communist Camp and filling the masses with “revolutionary” thoughts and quotes, Mao’s single-minded Cultural Revolution
dragged the country down, and the Red Guards’ terror significantly deepened people’s resentment against the government. According to Dunayevskaya, 60,000 people were put into prisons and thousands beaten to death.

Meanwhile, workers and peasants rose up and went on strikes against the Red Guards. The “irreconcilable duality between China’s new ruling class and the millions it exploits” was further exposed and finally erupted until Mao called a halt to the Red Guards and their terror in 1968 (329). I believe that uprisings and armed struggles would have occurred on a much larger scale had the government not curtailed the terror in time. Mao’s voluntaristic approach ignored the antagonism between the new ruling class and the masses, and the latter were in no way subscribed to the “new” culture under Mao’s rule. In addition, by provoking revolution from above, Mao blatantly deviated from Lenin’s notion of going “lower and deeper” into the working class (Dunayevskaya, 187). Thus this Cultural Revolution was not a real revolution but empty optimism and blind passion at best.

Humanistic Subjectivity: The Hundred Flowers Movement of 1957

However, not only voluntaristic subjectivity, but also humanistic subjectivity could be found in China in this period, particularly in the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1957. Although the masses also resisted China’s state capitalism during the period of People’s Communes and the Cultural Revolution, the Hundred Flowers Movement better captures their critical consciousness and struggle for freedom, and therefore serves as a proper example for the purpose of this essay. According to Dunayevskaya, the Hundred Flowers Movement was a brief six weeks period from May to June in 1957, during which freedom of speech was tolerated. As I remember from my high school history textbook, the full slogan for this movement is: for art and literature, a hundred flowers bloom; for science, a hundred schools contend. The movement was never meant to be a political forum.
The students and intellectuals, however, took advantage of this opportunity and voiced their concerns and criticisms towards the Party as they recounted their daily experiences with state capitalism and exploitation. According to Dunayevskaya, a newspaper from Guangdong exposed the corruption of co-operative bureaucrats and the contradictions between the leadership and the masses; Chang Po-sheng from Shenyang questioned the pseudo-democracy of China, and the six leaders’ rule over six hundred million people. Moreover, Ko P’ei-chi from Beijing, argued that “the downfall of the Communist party does not mean the downfall of China” (293). All of these dissenting voices demonstrated people’s desire for real freedom, and their objective, critical understanding that the ruling party and bureaucrats were anti-people and anti-democracy.

The last argument struck me in particular because many people, including me in the past, believed that the Communist Party of China (CPC) equals China, and therefore support for the Party equals being patriotic. My imagination for freedom was so limited that I could not think of the future of China without the CPC. But the Chinese people back in the mid-20th century had already negated such false equations and were eager to demand an alternative China!

The Hundred Flowers Movement, however short, was a moment of light against the darkness of China’s state capitalism. It showed that freedom of speech could tremendously undermine the CPC, and that the masses, far from being backward and stupid, embodied critical insights through their self-activity.

Through this brief analysis of the People’s Communes, the Cultural Revolution, and the Hundred Flowers Movement, we can see how the two types of subjectivity, voluntarism and humanism, were intertwined in 20th-century China. While Mao perverted Marxism and Leninism and imposed state capitalism using Marxist language, the masses demonstrated their dissent through the short-lived freedom of speech granted by the Hundred Flowers Movement. Thus, exploitation and resistance always co-exist. Also, this analysis shows that
critical insights for the struggle for freedom do not come from the top but from the “lower and deeper” bottom, the workers and the peasants. Therefore, Mao’s voluntaristic approach to build socialism without considering objective conditions in general, and class antagonism in particular, was dangerous and bound to fail, as exemplified by the terror of the Cultural Revolution and the severe famine that followed the People’s Communes Campaign.