

Interpreting the Cultural Revolution politically

Alexander DAY

ABSTRACT *This essay reviews the recent work of three sociologists, Andrew Walder, Alessandro Russo, and Joel Andreas, on factionalism in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CR). To varying degrees, all three authors under review question the dominant sociological interpretation of CR factionalism, which directly links factional allegiance to objective class position, and they each attempt to develop a political interpretation instead. Politics, however, is understood differently by the authors. Walder argues that, through attending to the 'event sequence' of the CR in which factionalism emerged, factional politics can be de-linked from the sociological base to which it is usually tied. Russo, influenced by the work of Alain Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus, argues that the factionalism of the CR should be linked to the emergence of a subjective 'political sequence' and not to the pre-existing structural organization of Chinese socialism. Unlike Walder, for whom mass politics seems to be firmly identified with elite intra-party power struggle, for Russo a space between elite power struggles and the pluralization of mass political organizations allowed a genuine subjective politics to emerge. Joel Andreas employs Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of political and cultural capital in order to study the development of CR factions in the Qinghua Attached Middle School and Qinghua University, painting a complex political and sociological understanding of factionalization. These works not only offer reinterpretations of the CR itself, but also help to generate interesting questions about the political relationship between the present and the 1960s, both in China and globally.*

KEYWORDS: China, Cultural Revolution, factionalism, politics, Andrew Walder, Alessandro Russo, Joel Andreas, Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Badiou, Sylvain Lazarus

The Cultural Revolution (CR) haunts the present. Forty years after the CR it is still a contested event, ramified through contemporary politics in implicit and explicit ways. It has become both the subject of nostalgia and serious political discussion. Yet almost everything about it seems unresolved. It is a site for contemporary disagreements over Maoism, Marxism, class struggle and revolution itself. Simplistic denunciation of the CR in total often leads to the rejection of revolution as well, which, as in one recent expose on Mao, can then be reduced to the totalitarian offspring of a deranged mind (Chang and Halliday 2005). Luckily, there is still work that takes the CR and its politics seriously.

Gao Mobo notes that there have been three general frameworks for interpreting the Cultural Revolution (CR): a power struggle model, an ideological struggle model, and a social conflict model (Gao 1994). According to Gao, the power struggle model frames the CR as an elite contest for political power; the ideological model interprets the CR as a struggle between ideological or policy positions; the social conflict model turns away from elite politics to spotlight the social tensions that Chinese socialism had generated in order to explain the factionalism and violence of the CR. In English language works from the 1980s on, the social conflict model has been dominant. Works by Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen, and Jonathan Unger are perhaps the most important of this genre, although the early work of Hong Yung Lee was its impetus (Chan *et al.* 1980; Rosen 1982; Lee 1978). Recently, however, the social conflict model, which anchors factionalism to pre-existing social cleavages, has come under

fire by those turning to politics in order to understand the conflicts of the CR. In this review essay I will look at two recent political interpretations of the CR, by Andrew Walder and Alessandro Russo, asking what 'political' means in these interpretations. I will also ask how these interpretations help us to understand the politics of the post-Mao period. I will end by looking at a new, socio-political interpretation of the CR by Joel Andreas that is mindful of the complexity of CR factionalization.

Interpreting faction formation among workers and students is important because the politics of the CR largely stands or falls depending on whether one can locate politics outside of the party or, on the contrary, whether mass faction formation is seen as an effect of inner-party power struggle. One of the strengths of the earlier, social interpretation, of course, was that it located politics within objective social relations and not just elite power struggles. By contesting the social interpretation, Walder and Russo attempt to sever the link between politics and objective social cleavages.

Unlike most earlier political interpretations of the CR, which focused on elite politics, Walder and Russo both focus on mass politics – although in markedly different ways. Walder argues that, through attending to the 'event sequence' of the CR in which factionalism emerged, factional politics can be de-linked from the sociological base to which it is usually tied (Walder 2002: 437 and 439). Russo argues that the factionalism of the CR should be linked to the emergence of a subjective 'political sequence' and not to the pre-existing structural organization of Chinese socialism (Russo 1998: 185–186 and 192). Yet, as I argue in this essay, what the 'political' entails for each author – interestingly, both of them sociologists by training – is very different.

Andrew Walder, of Stanford University, was originally a proponent of the social interpretation of factionalism.¹ But in two recent articles, a detailed study of factional formation in Beijing universities (Walder 2002) and middle schools and a study of the

infamous, conservative Red Guard, Tan Lifu (Walder 2004),² he has come to dispute that the source of factional divisions can be correlated either to family background or to affiliation with Party organizations. By looking at the event sequence, Walder argues that, while social divisions certainly did exist in socialist China, the events of the summer of 1966 did not present actors with clear choices based on those social divisions; in other words, there was no necessary link between consciousness of one's position in society and alliances within the political context of that summer. Walder views such a link as a crucial precondition for a social basis to factionalization. Instead, factions emerged through the varying responses to work teams, which in turn operated in different ways in different schools. In particular, it was the way that various work teams asserted their authority over the unfolding movement that sparked resistance: through the punishment of the work teams' militant antagonists, 'the foundations for student factions were laid in the universities...' (Walder 2002: 441). Factions shifted with top down policy, but it was not until September that the social make-up of factions diversified, as new actors joined the factions (Walder 2002: 441). Furthermore, it was not until late fall that Maoist propaganda surrounding the suppression of certain factions – categorized in this propaganda as reactionary offspring of high party cadre out to protect their privileges – offered a structural framework through which to interpret the social basis of factionalization (Walder 2002: 460–461). In other words, according to Walder, it was only after factions were formed that a social framework began to be used to retroactively interpret them; at the time the factions were actually forming, no such clear interpretation existed that allowed actors to link their social position to their factional identities.

This retroactive narrativization is particularly clear in the story of Tan Lifu, son of a Party official who was named a 'reactionary' after speaking in defense of the class line, which firmly links political loyalty and family background – a story fundamental to

the social interpretation. Walder argues that, contrary to the social conflict narrative of the CR, Tan's position on the class line was the same as that of his factional opponents (Walder 2004: 982, 984), as was his class position (from the elite) (Walder 2004: 980); and, Tan actually supported a second work team in his school – the Beijing Industrial University – only because it purged the leadership of his school (not because he was trying to protect his privileged position inherited from his family) (Walder 2004: 974). In October, 1966, Tan was condemned by Chen Boda, and his speech was offered as evidence of the reactionary nature of a conspiracy of Party officials, work teams, and students. This story was then widely spread in rebel propaganda (Walder 2004: 968). Walder's new narrative, thus, is difficult to fit into the old, social interpretation, which argues that Tan was simply a conservative defending the status quo.³

In the fall of 1966, Walder concludes, factions continued fighting in order to save their positions:

What mattered in the ensuing Red Guard movement was not parentage or prior ties with the party, but what you had done in June and July, and whether your faction won reliable backing from above. Factions formed as a result of political processes than [sic] can only be understood by tracing the sequence of events through time. Tracing these events shows us how political experience may recast the identities and motives that social interpretations impute to people according to their initial social positions. Red Guards were not fighting over the status quo. They were fighting not to lose. (Walder 2002: 463)

In this political interpretation, therefore, the politics of factionalization is located in the moment different people decide to take different positions within an unclear 'political context' (Walder 2004: 988). Actors then fight in order to maintain and justify their initial political positions. Mass politics during the CR is thus largely finished once factions have formed; after that moment, the

issue becomes the defense of one's continued existence. Ironically, therefore, Walder's 'political interpretation' depoliticizes mass action during the CR by reducing ideological positions to political context and then defense of those original positions. In these two articles, Walder is somewhat unclear about the nature of that political context, although in an earlier article on the CR he contends that the political context of the CR was a Maoist variation on Stalinism, on a conspiracy theory propagated by the party (Walder 1991).

Alessandro Russo, of the University of Bologna, likewise rejects interpretations of the CR that reduce factionalism to the social field. Yet unlike Walder, Russo locates the political firmly in the mass actions of the CR. Russo argues that the political categories of modern political historiography and of Marxism, the categories that link politics to history – class, class struggle, the party as representative of the proletarian class and the dialectic of objective and subjective factors – were made unviable by the CR (Russo 1998: 184–185). As Russo says, 'It is not that classes or interest groups did not exist [in China during the 1960s]; rather, it is not these categories that are able to identify the most politically relevant elements of the situation' (Russo 1998: 185). The larger project of Russo's work is a rethinking of the categories of political thought, since the categories the left has made use of up through the 1960s have become untenable; hence, his work can be seen as part of a more general re-imagining of left politics that calls for a new investigation into the political sphere and the creation of new categories.⁴

Russo suggests that the factional struggles within the working class during the CR were symptoms of the 'subjective breakdown internal to the working class' (Russo 1998: 185), in which the category of 'worker' linked to the socialist state through the representation of the party no longer seemed to offer any 'political relevance.' The worker as such was no longer the political subject. And it is here, located in this moment of categorical breakdown, that new

political questions were opened up during the CR. Interestingly, Russo focuses on the CR as an ending rather than as a beginning, for a new path for worker subjectivity was not clear at the time. But Russo does point out – perhaps echoing the Italian autonomist Marxist trope – that origins of the global disappearance of the worker as political figure should be sought in worker political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, rather than in changes in the capitalist mode of production (Russo 1998: 186).⁵ Thus unlike Walder, for whom mass politics seems to be firmly, even if unwittingly, identified with elite intra-party power struggle, for Russo the sequence of the CR was marked by two political processes: what he calls the ‘dismissal process’ and the ‘pluralization process’ (Russo 1998: 190). The dismissal process was the intra-party struggle that began late in 1965, in which high party cadres lost their positions with the state and party bureaucracy. The pluralization process designates the proliferation of local-level political organizations outside the party that began in June of 1966 and rapidly escalated in the autumn. After January 1967, however, Russo sees these two processes as joining together, leading to factional fighting and depoliticization. This ‘amalgamation’ process led, in July 1968, to a meeting between the Maoist leadership and a group of Red Guard leaders, subject to detailed analysis in the second article by Russo, ‘The conclusive scene: Mao and the Red Guards in July 1968’ (2005). At issue was a subjective impasse, in which there were no thinkable political options through which factions could go beyond a militaristic form of politics – they ‘were lacking any political content’ (Russo 2005: 563) – and, thus, in response to this impasse Mao called for the end of Red Guard organizations (Russo 2005: 545). This in turn ended the political sequence begun in June of 1966.

In Russo’s formulation, ‘politics’ is located in the pluralization process itself, where mass organizations challenged the party’s monopoly on power and created new political forms. Politics exerted itself in this short sequence because these two

processes – dismissal and pluralization – were not bound together. Whereas for Walder mass politics does not have any space to exist within the objective ‘event sequence’ – once one blindly decides one’s position with respect to the work teams, one’s fate is largely sealed – for Russo there is a short window, a ‘political sequence,’ in which mass politics can take place. Politics and the political sequence, for Russo, are subjective, and the end of the political sequence comes with a subjective impasse. In this sense, politics can be understood as a rare moment when political subjects form in relation to some event (in this case the appearance of Mao’s 16 Points) and follow its implications, such as the formation of mass political organizations.⁶ It is this subjective relationship to the event and not an objective relationship to one’s structural position within society, as understood through sociological knowledge, that explains the appearance of factions. But without breaking with older political categories and forms, this new political or revolutionary subject – a subject external to the party form itself – and the political sequence it initiates, reaches an impasse and ends.

In Walder’s argument this subjective dimension largely disappears: students happen to make a choice for or against the work teams without being able to come to any clear understanding of how it relates to their interests; in other words, there is neither a revolutionary nor a political subject outside of the party during the CR. As the sequence of day-to-day events unfolds, this initial decision comes to take on great importance and drives all further decisions. Walder gives us no general way of understanding why students made the choices they did when work teams entered the schools. As the case of Tan Lifu illustrates, it can be highly particular (Walder 2004). But Russo goes much further in delinking this subjective decision from objective conditions, seeing it as a pure political decision. Russo believes that the CR made visible the inadequacy of tying political decision directly to class position, throwing Marxist historiography into question. Yet

instead of this leading to a rejection of CR politics, for Russo it leads to its rethinking along subjective lines.

Russo's work unambiguously emerges from the very subjective impasse that his articles describe, an impasse that calls into question Marxist categories. Walder, on the other hand, grounds his work on a meticulous empirical reconstruction of events (thus the disappearance of the subjective). Yet, at the same time, one can unmistakably register a trajectory in Walder's writings from the 1980s on in reaction to his earlier, more Marxist work:⁷ as Walder shifted from a sociological understanding of the CR to a political one, the CR has come to be depoliticized in his work. It is depoliticized to the extent that politics comes to be reduced to a 'variation on a Stalinist theme' and political subjectivity disappears. If one is to attempt to understand the post-Mao period through Walder's explication of the CR, one is simply left with intra-party power struggles as a problematic. Russo points us in a different direction, suggesting that the post-Mao period can be seen as a reaction to the pluralization of politics during the CR. In addition, I would argue that much of contemporary intellectual politics in China can be viewed as a result of the subjective impasse of the CR, an impasse that necessitates the rethinking of political categories and the CR itself. And this rethinking is, of course, largely blocked in China.

Both works are generative of new questions and areas of research, which is welcome in a time when so many new primary sources have become available. Walder pushes us to investigate the detailed sequences of events and how individual actors were caught up in them. He also opens the continual process of narrativization, well underway during the CR, as his work points out, but one that also includes us in the present. Russo, engaged with his larger project of rethinking political categories, pushes us to investigate the construction of subjective positions in the CR without reducing them to sociological knowledge or to party power struggle: his narrativization of the political sequence

opens rather than closes the question of the relationship between the pluralization process and intra-party struggles.

At the same time, however, we should ask whether the work of both Walder and Russo closes the door too tightly on inquiries into the relation between the objective, structural conditions of socialism and the open struggles of the CR. While at the very beginning of the CR, in the summer of 1966, the relation between the structure of society and faction formation might have been unclear, was this the case as the CR developed? While for the early, important militants of the CR, the decisive and subjective nature of their positions might have been de-linked from structural positions and interests, what of the vast numbers of people who joined as the movement picked up steam in the fall of 1966?

Walder uses the conflict between middle-school Red Guard rebels and the rebels at universities in Beijing to argue against the social interpretation, saying that the conflicts that emerged between these two groups beginning in the late summer of 1966 are unexplained in the social interpretation (Walder 2002: 457–461). This is true if Chan, Rosen and Unger's analysis of Guangzhou middle school factionalization is mechanically reproduced in explaining university factionalization.⁸ However, a more sophisticated sociological understanding of the differences between early middle school factionalization and that of the universities does not seem as contradictory as Walder implies. Joel Andreas's study of factions in the Qinghua Attached Middle School and Qinghua University attends to the development of factional conflict by employing Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of political and cultural capital (Andreas 2002; Bourdieu 1983 and 1998).⁹ According to Andreas, both political capital ('association with the ruling party' that provides access to advantageous class position) and cultural capital ('knowledge that provides such access') were axes of contention during the CR (Andreas 2002: 466). It is only by paying attention to both that a social understanding of the CR begins to make sense. Mao's

launching of the CR led to attacks on both political elites (party officials and their families) and intellectual elites (often the sons and daughters of pre-1949 educated cultural elites) creating a complex matrix of factional conflict – too complex to outline in detail here – not simply a one-dimensional inter-elite battle.

Andreas' study shifts attention from inter-elite confrontation, the focus of most, earlier studies of factionalization, to include anti-elite confrontation as well.¹⁰ In contrast to Walder, who sees the political and social identity of middle-school Red Guards and university rebels as largely identical at the beginning of the CR, by looking at the conflicts at Qinghua University and its attached middle school, Andreas illustrates key differences in the politics of these two groups, differences that only become clear when the role of both political and social capital are investigated. According to Andreas, the factions at Qinghua's middle school were split between those who defended their political capital (the initial Red Guards) and those who defended their cultural capital (the later rebels). At the University itself, on the contrary, the student body of which – unlike the middle school – contained a large number of students of non-elite status, many students of non-elite status came to join the radical faction and attack both political and cultural capital; others, including many from the intellectual elite, joined a moderate faction to defend both political and cultural capital (Andreas 2002: 483–484).

Notable here is that Andreas sees more significance in how factions and the consciousness of their social basis develop throughout the CR than Walder, for whom it is only the beginning of the factionalization process that seems to matter. In this sense, Andreas is closer to Russo in seeing the mass politics of CR as persisting for at least a year and linking it to a pluralization of political organization beyond the elite and party. Like Walder, Andreas shows that the political implications of work team interventions varied between schools; however, far from making social interpretation of

factionalization impossible, Andreas' work demonstrates how this variation is only understandable by paying attention to the varying social and political makeup of different schools and their respective leaderships. Andreas, however, is careful to stress that, particularly in the case of university students, the decision to join a faction cannot simply be reduced to social and family backgrounds, although they often played an important role. Decisions were made by way of complex and varied considerations.

Like Russo, Andreas extends his argument to an explanation of the political reversal of the reform period, although in a very different – though perhaps not contradictory – fashion.¹¹ Andreas argues that the CR itself pushed the interests of political and intellectual elites to converge defensively, setting the stage for the reform process that began in the 1970s in which 'the foundations for a new dominant class in China' was laid (Andreas 2002: 465). Thus, Andreas' analysis offers us two linked problematics: one explaining the complexity and contradictions of faction formation, and the other providing a suggestive approach to understanding the transformation of class alliances from 1949 into the reform period. Andreas' second problematic politicizes the social interpretation by linking the class conflicts of the CR to the long trajectory of class alliances and contradictions from the time of the revolution to the present and class nature of the reform period.

These studies suggest that the relationship between the political and the social, under sustained questioning since the 1960s, must be further investigated. Clearly a mechanical reduction of political lines to two distinct social groups will not obtain, but it is as yet less clear whether a political understanding of the CR can fully reject an investigation of social class as well. As Russo suggests, the disjunction between social class and politics points to a need to question the fundamental categories we have inherited for such an endeavor, a questioning that necessarily has a political dimension. In the end, we have to ask if there is a way of holding a political interpretation and a social one

at the same time without simply reducing one to the other, an especially important problem in an age in which dialectical approaches are under attack – most resolutely, at times, by those who once espoused them most loudly.

Notes

1. For example, see his 'Cultural Revolution Radicalism: Variations on a Stalinist Theme' (Walder 1991), which argues that there is a social basis to factions even though they are in the end variations of Maoist Stalinism. It argues that factions were not, however, primarily based on 'political orientation and belief' (Walder 1991: 55).
2. Tan was considered a 'conservative' both within China during the CR and by the proponents of the social interpretation of the CR.
3. Walder particularly targets the work of Lee, *The Politics of the Cultural Revolution* (Walder 2004: 971).
4. See Sylvain Lazarus (1996); and three works by Alain Badiou: *Metapolitics* (2005a), especially chapter 2 on Lazarus, *Being and Event* (2005c), and 'The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?' (2005b). Both Lazarus and Badiou, post-Maoists active in the Maoist Union of Communists of France Marxist-Leninist in the 1970s and the Organisation Politique since the 1980s, have influenced Russo's work, see Bosteels (2005).
5. The Italian autonomist Marxists viewed the working class as productive and capitalism as recuperative. Thus, to understand any transformations in the capitalist mode of production, one needed first to look at the movement of the working class itself. See the introduction to Harry Cleaver (2000) and Steve Wright (2002).
6. Here, again, the influence of Sylvain Lazarus is particularly clear, see Russo (1998: footnote 12, 199–200).
7. See, for example, Walder (1977a, 1977b and 1978).
8. Chan, Rosen and Unger themselves did not try to make this argument.
9. For reference to Bourdieu, see Andreas (2002: 466). In particular, Andreas points us to Pierre Bourdieu (1977), 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction'.
10. One would do well, when investigating this aspect of the CR simultaneously to bring into view the anti-elitist rural educational policies during the CR, policies that are often omitted from condemnatory discussions of the CR. See for example the important work of Mobo Gao (1999), and Gao (2001) which was one of the

most controversial articles published by *Dushu* since the mid-1990s, and Dongping Han (2000).

11. This problem requires much more thought, and is another area of investigation opened by these studies.

References

- Andreas, Joel (2002) 'Battling over political and cultural power during the Chinese Cultural Revolution', *Theory and Society* 31: 463–519.
- Badiou, Alain (2005a) *Metapolitics*, London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain (2005b) 'The Cultural Revolution: the last revolution?', *Positions* 13(3), Winter: 481–514.
- Badiou, Alain (2005c) *Being and Event*, London: Continuum.
- Bosteels, Bruno (2005) 'Post-Maoism: Badiou and politics', *Positions* 13(3), Winter: 575–634.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) 'Cultural reproduction and social reproduction'. In Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey (eds) *Power and Ideology in Education*, New York: Oxford University Press, 487–511.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1983) 'The forms of capital'. In John Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1998) 'The 'Soviet' variant and political capital', *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chan, Anita, Rosen, Stanley and Unger, Jonathan (1980) 'Students and class warfare: the social roots of the Red Guard conflict in Guangzhou', *China Quarterly* 83 (September): 397–446.
- Chang, Jung and Halliday, Jon (2005) *Mao: The Unknown Story*, New York: Knopf.
- Cleaver, Harry (2000) *Reading Capital Politically*, Leeds and San Francisco: Anti/Thesis and AK Press.
- Gao, Mobo C. F. (1994) 'Maoist discourse and a critique of the present assessment of the Cultural Revolution', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 26(3): 13–31.
- Gao, Mobo (1999) *Gao Village: Rural Life in Modern China*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i.
- Gao, Mobo (2001) 'Writing history and Gao Village (Shuxie lishi Gao jia cun)', *Readings (Dushu)* 1 January: 9–16.
- Han, Dongping (2000) *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Education Reforms and Their Impact on China's Rural Development*, New York: Garland Publishing.
- Lazarus, Sylvain (1996) *Anthropologie du nom*, Paris: Seuil.
- Lee, Hong Yung (1978) *The Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Rosen, Stanley (1982) *Red Guard Factionalism and the Cultural Revolution in Guangzhou (Canton)*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Russo, Alessandro (1998) 'The probable defeat: preliminary notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution', *Positions* 6(1), Spring: 179–202.
- Russo, Alessandro (2005) 'The conclusive scene: Mao and the Red Guards in July 1968', *Positions* 13(3), Winter: 535–574.
- Walder, Andrew (1977a) 'Marxism, Maoism and social change', *Modern China* 3(1), January: 101–118.
- Walder, Andrew (1977b) 'Marxism, Maoism and social change', *Modern China* 3(2), April: 125–159.
- Walder, Andrew (1978) *Chang Ch'un-ch'iao and Shanghai's January Revolution*, Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.
- Walder, Andrew (1991) 'Cultural Revolution radicalism: variations on a Stalinist theme'. In W. Joseph, C. Wong, and D. Zweig (eds) *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge: The Council on East Asian Studies/Harvard University, 41–61.
- Walder, Andrew (2002) 'Beijing Red Guard factionalism: social interpretations reconsidered', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61(2), May: 437–471.
- Walder, Andrew (2004) 'Tan Lifu: a 'reactionary' Red Guard in historical perspective', *The China Quarterly* 180December: 965–988.
- Wright, Steve (2002) *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London: Pluto Press.

Author's biography

Alex Day studies Modern East Asian and World History in the Department of History, University of California, Santa Cruz. He is finishing his PhD dissertation on recent Chinese debates on the peasantry, rural activism, and contemporary intellectual politics. The dissertation looks at these debates in order to investigate the relationship between history and politics in the post-socialist period as well as current re-evaluations of the history of socialism.

Contact address: Department of History, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA.