

Erasing Socialism

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In *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution*, Karl Gerth argues that, counter to what scholars have held for decades, the Mao era (1949-76) is best understood in terms of its fundamentally “capitalist” political economy, rather than its self-described “socialist” ideological project. We as a field have been too credulous, he tells us, too quick to reproduce regime “rhetoric” that was forged in the binary thinking of the Cold War. Look beneath this rhetoric at how the Chinese Communist Party actually amassed and allocated wealth and resources, as well as individuals’ actual consumer practices, and it is capitalism, not socialism, all the way down. Consumerism—“the mass production of consumer products, the proliferation of a discourse about these products in popular media, and the use of such products to create and communicate identities” (1)—is industrial capitalism’s handmaiden in this formulation, its presence in Mao’s PRC evidence of a “socialistic” charade. For Gerth, consumerism and socialism cannot coexist by definition, it seems, so where he finds consumerism at work, there capitalism is and socialism cannot be.

This whole line of argument might be more convincing had Gerth not fallen into his own trap. Of all the reductive Cold War binaries, surely, capitalism/socialism is among the most significant. And yet, rather than deploy a conceptual framework—something on the order of “industrial modernity,” for instance—that would decenter this Cold War ur-dyad, Gerth summarily collapses one half into the other. Mao-period “socialism” is not even cast as the shortest path from capitalism to capitalism, as the saying goes; it barely registers here as a journey worthy of note in a de facto capitalist “world history.” Consider the book’s final sentence: “Expanding the study of the varieties of capitalism to include ‘socialist’ countries such as China presents an opportunity to render the history of capitalism and consumerism as more truly global, and to think of the Mao era as part of an integrated world history rather than an isolated ‘socialist’ interlude.” (232) It is precisely because of the ongoing legacy of the Cold War Gerth ostensibly wants to get beyond that his choice of analytic—regardless of its explanatory merits or lack thereof—feels like an exercise in historical erasure, erasure not so much of an enacted project, perhaps, but of a concerted and contested effort to imagine otherwise. He could hardly have chosen a more incendiary tack. Indeed, the turn to capitalism is so explicitly counter to recent scholarly efforts to “take Chinese socialism seriously” that the reader cannot help feeling like she is being trolled.

Allow me to put my cards on the table, then: my own politics are such that I flatly refuse to accept that the appropriate remedy for (left-leaning) naïveté—which, incidentally, does not strike me as a particularly pressing concern right now—is the wholesale adoption of capitalism as an all-encompassing explanatory framework and, by extension, an inescapable norm.

Those of us who believe that an end to capitalism as we know it is necessary for the future to be better than the past should be deeply unnerved by Gerth’s showy attempt at unearthing capitalism in all things. For this attempt ultimately turns on a remarkable asymmetry in which capitalism can appear in a seemingly endless number of varieties—ownership is a “spectrum”—while not-capitalism is relegated to a singular, ahistorical formulation of Gerth’s careful choosing. The result is an astounding foreshortening of imaginative horizons; capitalism becomes coterminous with the realm of the possible. We cannot let that stand.

Accordingly, I read this book with a simmering, visceral outrage, and, having sparred with Gerth before, I suspect such outrage will be received with contrarian glee. *Unending Capitalism* has all the subtlety of a finger in the eye. It would be easy, therefore, to get swept up in a whirlwind of (righteous) indignation, particularly as it relates to the seemingly-unchecked expansiveness of Gerth’s capitalist historiography, if the reader will indulge me this term. I would caution against this, however, for in as much as we might object to the book’s ends—to rewrite the history of the Mao era into a capitalist status quo—the means by which Gerth purports to get there are arguably as alarming.

Undergirding Gerth’s entire project, it seems to me, is the banal empiricist belief that the historian’s role is to find out what the past was “really” like. When dealing with the Mao period, such a belief clearly forecloses the possibility of exclusive reliance on the official party archive. Gerth does not simply avoid this archive or, indeed, the party-state, however. Instead, he intentionally seeks out instances in which he believes party practices/policies were at odds with articulated party goals. But rather than lean into these “contradictions”—the continued circulation of brands despite calls for egalitarianism, for example—as historically significant in and of themselves, Gerth approaches them as though they were analytical problems necessitating resolution. Nevermind whether and/or how these “contradictions,” most of which touch on issues of class and distinction, were recognized and negotiated at the time. That does not seem to be the historian’s charge. Instead, it is up to the historian to pick the “winning” side in each tug-of-war. In *Unending Capitalism*, real-world consumerism/capitalism is deemed more representative of the “actual” past than egalitarian rhetoric, which is accordingly dismissed.

To put it simply: given the choice between what the party did and what the party said, we can and should only pay attention to the former. Deeds trump words, so much so that words—“rhetoric” in Gerth’s terms—can be jettisoned completely from the analytical equation. In this book, that means marginalizing any claims of “building socialism” as so much “socialistic”

nonsense. Gerth essentially disencumbers the Mao era of its rhetorical wrapping paper, revealing capitalism underneath.

Notably, this approach requires very little of what we have come to recognize as the historian’s best practices—no need to historicize concepts, and, since words don’t matter, no close reading necessary.

Gerth’s invocation of “rhetoric,” though ill-defined, is telling, here. We are a long, long way from any Foucauldian notion of discourse. But forget Foucault for a moment. Go back to the fundamentals. JL Austin gives us an argument even an empiricist’s empiricist could love: words don’t just describe things—they do things. Language is performative; it acts on the world. It cannot be summarily excised from reality, therefore, precisely because it is part and parcel of reality. You want to know what “really” happened back in the day? You can’t afford to ignore “rhetoric,” not because it is a “true” reflection of the past but because it necessarily *impacted* the past in some way. How exactly? *That* is a bone fide historical question.

Notice that academic credulity is wholly beside the point at this level. Whether I *believe* socialism was built in the Mao era is irrelevant. It matters, rather, that the claim was made—loudly and concertedly—in myriad ways, even if only to be pushed back against and undercut. Ironically, insofar as he seeks out tension between party words and party deeds, Gerth has a nose for precisely those instances when official language was at its most performative, its descriptive capabilities under assault. I agree, for example, that stoking desire for consumer products was a feature rather than a bug of the economic policies pursued by the party-state and, further, that this desire bumped up against calls for frugality. But whereas Gerth takes this as evidence of “actual” consumerism-qua-capitalism, I would call for an examination of the very tension he unilaterally resolves.

In my own forthcoming book, *Newborn Socialist Things: Materiality in Maoist China* (Duke University Press), I cover some of the same ground as Gerth, but I do so in a way that prioritizes circulating concepts and objects from the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). My interest in the commodity during this time, for instance, is deeply historical insofar as it is informed by the contemporaneous use and understanding of the term *shangpin* (商品). This has nothing to do with believing and endorsing my sources’ take. It has to do with understanding and foregrounding the operative tensions of the period in order to better grasp the way they were navigated in practice.

As a field, we need to revel in these tensions, not artificially short-circuit them. That, it seems to me, is the only way forward. Only then can we engage in comparative discussions and talk of “world history” in non-reductive, imaginatively productive ways.