

## On *Disenfranchised:* *The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China*

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### *Depoliticization.*

The thematic of depoliticization might seem distant today, when, despite the social distancing regime amid a pandemic, the streets of the United States are filled by a new mass movement, sparked by the breaking point reached by the murder of George Floyd. Whether this is that irruption, a rehearsal for revolution, as some have called mass demonstrations, remains to be seen. This century has witnessed a number of popular movements that—although they could prove to have been significant in the midst of a future repoliticization to come—have as yet done little to affect the glacial stasis of the current interregnum (I understand that “glacial” is losing its metaphorical energy). There has been considerable scholarship on the dynamics of depoliticization over the last two decades and more. This includes work in recent years on the depoliticizing character of neoliberalism, such as that of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, Wendy Brown, and Byung-chul Han; on mutations in the character of work and the rise of affective labor, the gig economy, or the precariat; on the post-facto depoliticization through containment and memorialization of 1968, a period that many view to be the last significant irruption of politics, such as in the work of Kristin Ross on France and Susana Draper on Mexico; and on the depoliticization inherent in the abandonment or eclipse of the “communist hypothesis”, in the work of Žižek, Alain Badiou, Sylvain Lazarus, and others on the communist left. There are significant common concerns across this work: the rise of the economic over the category of the political at both the social and the subjective levels; questions of the nature of and the temporality of revolutionary subjectivity, particularly with regard to mutations in the political subjectivity of the worker; and broader changes in organizational forms such as unions and political parties.

China has loomed large in significance for those in the “communist hypothesis” group, which is a significant presence in contemporary Marxist theoretical discussion. For Badiou, Lazarus, Natacha Michel, and others in the UCF-ML (French Communist Union-Marxist Leninist), a Maoist organization that lasted from 1969 to 1985, the Chinese Cultural Revolution was the last scene of the political, the scene of the “saturation”, to use Lazarus’s term, and thus end, of the political character of the party form. For Lazarus, it was in the Cultural Revolution, particularly in Shanghai, that the factory emerges as a political site, that is, a site not of the State, but of the emergence of new forms of subjectification. This could be seen in texts from the Shanghai Commune which proposed to “open worker universities, reduce bourgeois rights, limit the division between manual and intellectual executives which is, in fact, the politics of the communist Party in the factory and the State mode of being in the factory” (a Lazarus, 152). Badiou recognizes the

fragility of the new subjective forms and the narrowness of its political scope: the “countermodel” represented by the Shanghai Commune “has no possibility of national development, in the extent to which, on the national level, the figure of the party remains the only one allowed, even if a number of its traditional elements are in crisis” (Badiou 2005, 497).

Via Bologna-based scholars Alessandro Russo and Claudia Pozzana, the Badiou-Lazarus orientation toward the political—and its distinctive reading of the Cultural Revolution in the understanding of the fate of the political—reached Wang Hui. Wang’s essay “Depoliticized Politics: Multiple Components of Hegemony, and the Eclipse of the Sixties” (translated by Christopher Connery) appeared first in a special issue on the Asian sixties in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* in 2006, followed later in 2006 in a modified version in the *New Left Review* titled “Depoliticized Politics, from East to West”. This was followed by further modified versions in Chinese in *Kaifang shidai* in 2007 and then in the 2008 collection of linked essays: *Depoliticized Politics: The Nineties and the End of the Short Twentieth Century* (去政治化的政治：短20世纪的终结与90年代). Wang’s article traced a three-decade history of depoliticization, finding its sources in the factional struggles into which the Cultural Revolution descended, its development in what he referred to as the mutation of the party-state into the state-party, and its culmination in the 1990s-era sublation of the line struggles that had characterized China’s long revolution into an emergent and soon dominant prominence of a market version of “the economic”. The concerns of the other essays that Wang included in the 2008 collection—including one essay on 1989 and the origins of neoliberalism in China, and one report on the struggles of workers in a Jiangsu factory during the firm’s privatization—brought together many of the broader thematics around depoliticization mentioned above, from across the left political spectrum, and underscored the centrality of China to depoliticization’s broader global dynamics. Through Wang Hui’s work, depoliticization became an important reference point for left theoretical discourse in China for nearly a decade. One of Wang Hui’s significant departures from the Badiou-Lazarus orientation was with regard to the Party, which in its Cultural Revolution-era “saturation” (this is Lazarus’s term, from a philosophical register aimed in part against notions like “defeat” and “failure”) exhausts its capacity, as an organizational form, to produce politics or political novelty. In Wang’s 2008 essays, the eclipse of politics comes later, with the new configuration of state, party, and the market economy, bringing with it the wave of privatizations, market-measurements, and attacks on job security and worker rights. It has been of course almost unthinkable for a PRC-based intellectual on the left to break with the party along the lines of

the Badiou-Lazarus orientation. Indeed, most of the Chinese new left, in recent years, has deepened its party orientation.

Given the centrality of the Cultural Revolution to both Wang Hui's notion of depoliticization and to Badiou and Lazarus's notions of saturation, the worker, and the factory, the relative lack of detailed scholarship on the Cultural Revolution, particularly its later years, was bound to introduce certain lacunae. Badiou and Lazarus's writing on and references to the Cultural Revolution relied largely on translations of Beijing and Shanghai publications. Although their work was focused on the revolutionary subjectivity of the worker and the rise of extra-party organizations, in its primary reliance on Party documents, or documents reprinted from recognized revolutionary organizations, it could refer only speculatively, or in broad strokes, to politics as lived. The mass of documentary material available to researchers in the last twenty years—not only the massive databases compiled by Song Yongyi and his teams, but the private collections of rebel group documents available to recent scholars, has filled in important gaps. The workers' inquiries (see special issue in *Viewpoint Magazine*) that the Badiou-Lazarus group would later champion and practice were not possible in the Cultural Revolution, and participant testimonies were often filtered through anti-communist perspectives. In 2006, Badiou and Russo, recognizing the paucity of necessary analysis and information, published a call for an "International Center for the Study of the Cultural Revolution."

For Wang Hui, a primary location of politics is in the party and in state publications, where much of the two-line struggles were carried out. Although the existence of extra-party organizations and the struggles in factories, schools, and elsewhere between rebels and conservatives were known in broad outlines, Wang's deeper theoretical discussions of the trajectory of the political in the pre-reform period seldom referenced the granular level of politics among the people. The study of the Jiangsu factory's privatization, which occurred later in the reform period, is an important exception. Joel Andreas's *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China* contributes in important respects to the study of depoliticization—although, as I discuss below, he does not use that term—from the 1950s to the 1990s and beyond. It provides a basis for fresh speculation and theoretical reconsiderations, in the spirit of Badiou and Russo's call for new Cultural Revolution scholarship. A key contribution is its attentiveness to political dynamics at a level of impressive local and ethnographic detail. Even if one has reservations about the book's broader theoretical categories, it makes crucial contributions to our understanding of the sociological, historical, political, and theoretical character of depoliticization. Further theoretical elaborations of the political significance of China's revolutionary experience will need to take Andreas's book into account.

#### *Dialectics of Autonomy*

"Citizenship" and "autonomy" are the primary evaluative rubrics in *Disenfranchised*, and it is the character of these two capacities that allows evaluation of the extent of "workplace democracy", referring to worker participation in workplace

governance. Andreas adapts "citizenship" and "autonomy" from political theorist Robert Dahl's categories of "inclusion" and "contestation", referring to "the extent to which the population is entitled to participate in democratic processes...and to the openness of these processes to competition." (10) A primary component of "citizenship" was lifetime job tenure, established as a norm fairly early in the PRC, and which for the most part grew in extent over the following four decades: the trend was generally toward greater numbers of permanent workers, and less reliance on temporary labor. The growth and strength of the working population, the high rate of participation of women, and the low unemployment rates showed impressive achievements in the area of "inclusion", and this expansion of inclusion was clear state policy. Worker achievements in the realm of "inclusion" are clear and uncontested during the *danwei* period. Contestation is, of course, the scene of politics. The primacy that Dahl gave to contestation was contested by sociologists and critics from the left, who found it insufficiently attentive to structural dimensions of capitalist and elite power. Perhaps recognizing that Dahl's category of "contestation" adheres too closely to the primacy given to the ideologeme of competition in liberal and neoliberal ontologies, Andreas's turn to "autonomy" is significant. His elaboration of the term needs quoting at some length:

*Autonomy* is commonly defined as capacity for self-governance; for my purposes, it refers to the capacity for independent action at multiple levels, from shop-floor self-management to collective action independent of enterprise and state authorities. When individuals manage their own work, this does not necessarily involve contestation, but even autonomy at this basic level is absent in despotic systems of industrial relations, in which even the most minute activities are controlled by factory authorities. At higher levels, the meaning of autonomy becomes more collective, more political, and more contentious, including the right to organize to change policies or capture positions of power (11).

Particularly for the analysis and evaluation of workers and work under socialist regimes, autonomy is a far more useful rubric than contestation, yet, as we shall see below, contestation and antagonism in several forms will structure or amplify autonomy's vicissitudes, preserving dimensions, in its absence, of Dahl's original binary.

Autonomy functioned asymptotically in worker politics in China. Similarly to the discussion of Li Lisan in Elizabeth Perry's *Anyuan*, Andreas's discussion of the workerist positions on worker autonomy such as those of Li Lisan and his successor as head of the ACFTU Lai Ruoyu point toward what could have been a very different future for worker politics in China had the ACFTU enjoyed considerably more autonomy, and more power in the workplace than the Party, in accord with Li and Lai's visions. During the *daming dafang* movement that was contained by the Anti-Rightist campaign that began in 1957, there were also voices to the "left" of Lai Ruoyu, calling for even more significant extension and deepening of worker autonomy. After 1958, with the posthumous condemnation of Lai as an anti-Party element, worker autonomy would be

permanently circumscribed. I have written elsewhere about China as a site of what I called "antinomogenesis", producing studies with titles such as "strength and fragility", "atrophy and adaptation", "fragile superpower", or "red capitalism". Andreas's contribution to that list is "participatory paternalism", which is an apt description of the simultaneous encouragement of worker supervision and the circumscription of worker autonomy by the leadership and the Party.

Nevertheless, worker autonomy would enjoy a substantial afterlife after its first setback in the late 1950s, and Andreas's study could support a claim that due to the extensive character of citizenship in the *danwei* system, and the doctrine of "mass supervision" (the title of Chapter Four), originally designed as an anti-bureaucratic measure which ebbed and flowed in its efficacy but never disappeared, Chinese workers enjoyed a degree of autonomy from management and a degree of participation in workplace governance that was probably greater than anywhere in the world in the twentieth century, until the mass disenfranchisement (Andreas's term) of workers in the 1990s. Even the formal structures for worker participation in decision-making exceeded the powers given to trade unions under German *Mitbestimmung*, which is arguably the institutional limit of worker power in the West. The primary institution for "mass supervision" were the staff and workers congresses (SWC, 职工代表大会), established in the 1950s and whose power only became permanently diminished in the late 1980s, with the rise of the factory director responsibility system.

The perspective of worker autonomy and power allows for a somewhat different periodization than does the perspective of "right" and "left", and we find neither a pure scene of autonomy at the most "radical" moments in history, nor a linear trajectory from greater to lesser autonomy. The gains made by rebel factions during the Cultural Revolution—curtailment of managerial and party cadre power in the workplace, the establishment of factory-based universities and movement toward a lessening of the contradiction between mental and material labor, a huge decrease in the number of temporary workers and a vast expansion of the ranks of permanent workers ("stronger in the 1970s than at any time before or since") persisted into the seventies, and in significant ways beyond. Andreas shows, contrary to some received wisdom on the left, that the period after the highpoint of Cultural Revolution radicalism (1967-8), up until the late 1970s and even beyond, witnesses periods of significant workplace political autonomy and worker power.

Worker politics in the Cultural Revolution were, as I will discuss below, overdetermined by factionalism, but many of the gains made by workers during the 1965-1976 period were strengthened during the period that Andreas terms "the long 1980s", from 1976 though the early 1990s. During the Cultural Revolution, charges of "economism" limited the scope of worker demands. The fading of this opprobrium led to a period of significant material improvements in worker power and in living standards.

Although Chinese authorities harshly repressed the remnants of the radical faction in factories and kept a tight lid on collective activity not overseen by the party, they initially enhanced institutionalized forms of Democratic Management, which now were concerned increasingly with welfare issues. Although there was little room for autonomous collective action within the SWC and other formal institutions of worker participation, they featured vigorous debates about wages, bonuses, housing, the employment of workers' children, and other economic problems of great importance to work unit members. Workers' influence in these areas was considerable, and they used this influence to defend egalitarian norms and push factory leaders to use enterprise resources to serve employee needs. (191)

This worker power was reflected in wage gains, expansion of workers' rights, and, in the 1980s, vast expenditure on workers' housing. Andreas notes that "[i]ndustrial workers remember the early 1980s nostalgically as an era in which their wages and benefits improved substantially, employment remained stable, and they continued to enjoy respect and influence within the party" (168).

How "political", in a sense closer to Badiou, Lazarus, and even Wang Hui, was the scene of worker autonomy from the 1950s to the disenfranchisement of the 1990s? The paternalistic dimension of "participatory paternalism" was one constraint, but another set of constraints inhered in the political character of the specific organizations, whether union, Party, or the extra-party organizational forms of the Cultural Revolution. The material and welfare gains that characterized the end of the "long 1980s" are legible within international labor politics, in both their politicizing and depoliticizing registers, and by some measures, the material gains made by workers in the long 1980s was not necessarily a measure of the political. Andreas makes an important point about the constraints on labor autonomy that is specific to China, and specific to Mao. Over and over, we see that Mao's deep anti-bureaucratic commitment to "mass supervision" was a significant source of worker empowerment, but Mao was at best uninterested, and often hostile to the organizational forms that this took. Thus, gains in autonomy remained tentative and over-determined by Party and State. Even at the height of their power, the autonomy of the extra-party organizations was constrained by Mao himself.

#### *Antagonism*

I first visited China in early 1976, in the midst of the last Anti Lin Biao Anti Confucius campaign, which we would learn later was the last effort of the Cultural Revolution group against the power of Deng Xiaoping and his allies. I was part of a student-teacher-worker socialist group, and, as with most such groups, our itinerary was heavy on factories, schools and communes, and light on historical or cultural monuments. I don't think any of us identified as a Maoist—NAM was our dominant tendency—but we had been immersed in the same materials from China that our comrades in France were reading. The younger members of the group, I among them, nurtured Stakhanovite fantasies about socialist construction, and were particularly interested in the factory and commune visits. Two things struck me about our factory visits in Hubei and Henan (the areas, coincidentally, of most of Andreas's fieldwork and

the home to most of his informants). One was the slow and leisurely pace of work. While my images of socialist construction comprised mostly the hyperactive resoluteness of the muscle-rippled bodies of workers common to Soviet and Chinese documentary film, here was a scene where there were nearly as many workers sitting on overturned buckets smoking cigarettes as moving steel. In our hotel-room meeting that night, the Latino workers in our group upbraided us young Stakhanovites for our mildly disapproving shock: "This is how work **should** be you ivory tower idiots! Workers shouldn't have to work themselves to death from over exertion". That was an important political awakening for us, and I was once again grateful to the workers in our group. What we later learned about full employment policies gave the scene additional context. But what was more surprising was the vehemence of the Big Character Posters outside the factory walls. We had learned that the high point of Cultural Revolution struggle had long passed. Like many Chinese, we were confused and disoriented by the fall of Lin Biao, and documents from the Anti-Lin Anti-Confucius movement that we had read were incoherent and confusing. We figured we had come to China too late to witness a significant politics among the people. The speeches we heard in the factories were fairly anodyne, differing little from the *Beijing Review* articles we'd all read. But on a big character poster on a wall outside: "张 XX 是个大血屎!" (Zhang XX is a big bloody cunt). What was that about? I got no clarification about that at the time from our guides.

*Disenfranchised* clears this last matter up. In many left analyses of the Cultural Revolution, the establishment of the Revolutionary Committees is viewed as a major political neutralization administered by the PLA. Andreas shows that this was not universally the case. PLA Committee members had no knowledge of factory production, and were thus fairly marginalized in many factories. This left the factional divisions between "rebels" and "conservatives" relatively untouched for far longer than they had been in universities. In the waning days of the "second Cultural Revolution" in early 1976, inter-factional antagonism was acute, but the stakes had changed from the early days of the Cultural Revolution, when the emergence of new rebel organizations presaged an era of Big Democracy and newly empowered, anti-bureaucratic mass supervision. Despite numerous rebel group victories in their challenges to structures of workplace authority structures, including greater worker access to positions of authority and to the ranks of the technical elites, greater equalization of compensation, and general improvements in workplace democracy, neither Mao nor Party authorities were willing to give worker organizations significant autonomy. The crackdown on rebels that began in 1967 would ebb and flow, alternating between suppression and tolerance. The accretion of intense political experience—all sides had periods of ascendancy and defeat—kept factional identity strong, but the limitations on autonomy put constraints on the depth of political content.

Mao was drawn to more tumultuous forms of political participation and contention, which he continued to promote

during his waning years. He did so in part by creating and manipulating a division of labor within the party, with conservative administrators on one side and radical agitators on the other. From 1973 to 1976, China experienced a kind of institutionalized political contention that had not existed since 1949. By that time, both the radical and administrative factions operated within the party establishment, and each had control over institutional resources, access to the press, and the capacity for mass mobilization. Thus, this period continued to be characterized by political competition that featured mass participation. The opening for Big Democracy that Mao had briefly created in 1966, however, had closed. There was little room for workers to autonomously organize their own fighting groups, publish their own fliers, or exchange revolutionary experiences, and, with grassroots initiative crippled, influence from below was fundamentally diminished. (163)

"Institutionalized political contention" is the depoliticized endpoint of the Sartrean trajectory from group-in-fusion, to organized group, to institution. The brutal repression of rebels and radicals in the factories that began in 1976 was the last of the generally revolutionary sequence. Politics would thereafter take a more recognizable and non-revolutionary form.

What were the dynamics of depoliticization? In an early essay on the Cultural Revolution, influenced by the work of Badiou and Lazarus (Russo was also an important influence on Badiou's and Lazarus's understandings of the Cultural Revolution) Alessandro Russo suggests three phases in the Cultural Revolution sequence: dismissal, the struggle against persons in authority; pluralization, the formation of multiple independent organizations; and finally a depoliticizing factionalism (he is referring to factional struggle in both factories and universities). In the final phase,

Antagonistic alliances were formed, not to claim an independent capacity of political judgment, but primarily to become the steel "nucleus," as they said, of a regenerated party-state, whose legitimacy was subordinated to the dismissal of a number of leaders, and eventually to the annihilation of the other faction. Thus, we can see that the previously distinct processes- the dismissal of state-apparatus authority (and officials, as well) and the pluralization of independent and self-authorizing organizations-had by this stage of the Cultural Revolution become indistinguishable. (193-194)

Taking *Disenfranchised* into account, we might modify the sequence in the following way. The commitments to mass supervision and big democracy were never actualized in appropriate organizational forms. The ACFTU had been compromised earlier, with the defeat of Li Lisan and Lai Ruoyu. It might be interesting to speculate what a strong and autonomous ACFTU would have led to: the depoliticizing labor-management compromises common to social democracies, or to another scene, and possibly another set of outcomes, of the radical political energies of the early Cultural Revolution. A moment of deep and genuine pluralization was never allowed to take place. *Disenfranchised* joins Wu

Yiching's *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins* and Russo's new book on the Cultural Revolution in the seriousness with which it takes these early radical movements. But like Wu Yiching's book, Andreas shows the party as a formidable, though somewhat inconsistent, inhibitory force on radical energies. The rebel organizations that arose in Cultural Revolution factories were clearly prepared to take on the task of mass supervision, and to effectuate significant changes in the political subjectivity of the worker and in the nature of the factory. Just as the *daming dafang* movement of the 1950s ended in repression of the left, so did Mao's support for the "tumultuous forms of political participation and contention"—as opposed to truly autonomous organizational form of longer duration—leave radical proponents of workplace democracy exposed to periodic Party restoration of stability and authority, until the radical left was permanently vanquished just after Mao's death.

### *Defeat*

The framework of depoliticization is useful for thinking both the saturation of the party form and the necessity of new organizational forms in a revolutionary situation. The organization issue is the key question on the radical left today, everywhere in the world. Whether the politics in US streets today is a question that will depend on innovations in organization. There are advocates of a new party, of taking power in an existing party, or, as in the Badiou-Lazarus tendency, for something new. Whatever one's position on the type of organization required in the current moment, the way forward will depend on a clear analytical understanding of the forms that arose within the twentieth century revolutions, and what befell them. Although Andreas's broad framework of citizenship, framing the twinned components of inclusion and autonomy, is both more neutral and more academically legible within the field of political sociology, the history he traces greatly deepens our understanding of depoliticization and political organizational dynamics in China over the last sixty-plus years.

There should be a history of PRC suppression of radical left energies, especially among workers, from its founding to the present, when the left in China is perhaps at its weakest point in the last 130 years. It would note that the most significant victims of the Anti-Rightist movement were leftists, and register the period from late 1967 until the end of the Cultural Revolution as commonly one of defeat and repression of the radical left. It would track the emergence of new political energies in the 1980s, culminating in 1989, when those who met with the most violent repression in the movement in the capital were not the students and intellectuals, whose ideological orientations ranged across the political map, but members of the more radical Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation. It would register the deliberate weakening of worker autonomy in the late 1980s and 1990s, and the growth of a new working class, the *nongmingong*, whose exclusion is inscribed in their very identity, but who nevertheless have mounted thousands of inchoate acts of resistance. It would highlight the long history of the Party's intolerance for any collective politics that takes any organizational form outside of the Party. *Disenfranchised* would be a very important resource.

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