

Notes on the Critique of Revisionism: Lenin, Mao and Us

Alessandro Russo

Abstract: Revisionism has been a major internal obstacle to the subjective body of the communism of the Twentieth century in at least two turning points, the October Revolution and the Cultural Revolution. The author examines the common points and the singularities of these two moments and discusses the contemporary pertinence of the concept.

Keywords: Revisionism, October Revolution, Cultural Revolution, Lenin, Mao

The critique of revisionism is a landmark issue. It allows us to see how close to and how far removed we are from October specifically and Twentieth-century revolutionary Marxism more generally. It also provides a focal point for 'our own tasks.' Leaving philological fine points of terminology aside – Lenin criticized Kautsky's 'opportunism' as a continuation of Bernstein's 'revisionism' – and squeezing its ideological history in a nutshell, revisionism has been the main 'internal obstacle' to the subjective body of Twentieth-century communism. This is particularly evident at two key yet radically different turning points – the October Revolution and the Cultural Revolution.

While belonging within the same ideological and organizational space of revolutionary political culture, the barbed polemics Lenin and Mao cast against revisionism were aimed in each case at a specific obstacle with a singular issue at stake. It might be useful to call the former turning point the critique of 'classic' revisionism *qua* summary of Lenin's views, and the latter of 'modern' revisionism *qua* the label the Maoists applied in the 1960s. Yet we shall also take up another, even thornier question, i.e. whether the critique has political currency today vis-à-vis 'contemporary' revisionism. We shall thus deal with the critique of revisionism as it pertains to the October Revolution, the Cultural Revolution and the current situation (our tasks). The latter is surely the most obscure, so we shall seek to shed provisional light upon it.

All three have elements in common. While the intellectual and political issues differed in each, the critique focused on the same kind of internal obstacle to the existence of the subjective body of revolutionary politics. The target was located upon two converging planes: a reckoning with singular turning points of preceding political inventions (particularly the last) and the specific tasks of what was then the contingent situation.

Since every egalitarian political invention is experimental by nature, appraising past experiences is an ineluctable task. What was

novel and what to be taken as positive and developed further? What errors are not to be repeated? What constraints to overcome in search of new directions? Ever since Marx's reading of the events from 1848 to 1871, these issues have been central to theory and the political strategy of revolutionaries and involved critiques of an 'internal' obstacle. In fact, we already see Marx developing the critique as a polemic against positions within revolutionary organization. One example is "...the Lassallean sect's servile belief in the state..." in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. The original letter long remained unpublished, just as its polemic long remained in the dark, until Lenin made it a theoretical touchstone for Twentieth-century communism.

1.

As long acknowledged, that polemic played a decisive role in preparing for the October Revolution. A final reckoning with the Paris Commune was a prerequisite for the strategy Lenin was envisioning. He set himself the task of systematically demolishing the positions then dominant among, and more especially within Kautsky's 'official social democratic' parties. Two basic traits of the critique of revisionism – or of 'opportunism' – began to emerge and will also be found in Mao: a robust theoretical voice and a certain 'doctrinal' inflection.

To begin with, revisionism inhabits the same intellectual sphere as revolutionary politics, resorts to the same concepts and theoretical benchmarks in the same idiom while deploying and moving within the same political culture. Not by accident was Kautsky a renowned theorist, viewed until a few years before (October) even by Lenin as the leading exponent of Marxism after Engels. Whence the critique's strong theoretical streak in Lenin and Mao, and why both saw it as a political obstacle to be demolished by theory.

By the same token, the critique of revisionism tends to take on a doctrinaire tone. Not only does the polemical target 'resemble' it (Lenin always made much of nuances) but it even has a more than 'orthodox' make-up. As Lenin noted, "All social-chauvinists are Marxists." Another essential aspect of the critique thus regards the 'deformation' of revolutionary theoretical arguments and the rehabilitation of the proper ones. As Lenin remarked of opportunists, "After their death, attempts are made to convert them [the revolutionary leaders] into harmless icons, to canonize them...while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*..."¹

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¹ Lenin 1917, p.6

Yet the essential core of the critique is not a 'defense of the faith' against apostasy. Rather, in Lenin as in Mao, it is a fillip to an immediate political task. Indispensable in the pursuit of the latter is a proper reckoning (the polemic is with what is said about or glossed over in revisionism) with and of political invention's last great turning point. An analytical reappraisal of the Paris Commune was the point for the October Revolution. That for the Cultural Revolution was the former and its consequences, i.e. the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a form of state. The two situations would appear to be diametrical opposites. The Commune was a 'defeat,' the October Revolution a 'victory.' Yet the points they have in common and their basic differences emerge only upon close examination of the singular issues at stake for both at the time.

Lenin coherently aimed his polemical arrows against Kautsky at three points: the political stance revolutionaries should adopt vis-à-vis the imperialist war, the proper understanding of the theories of Marx and Engels about the state, and the political reckoning with the Paris Commune in light of what both the latter had written since the 1870s. What in essence was the lesson to be learned from the Commune was decisive. It allowed Lenin to bring together argumentative fragments scattered in the writings of Marx and Engels and marshal them into a cohesive thesis focused on the governing circumstances and the tasks of revolutionaries relative to that specific experience. For Lenin, the argument that best encapsulated the thought of Marx and Engels was that it was necessary to 'smash' (*zerbrechen*) the bureaucratic-military state machine. Marx had emphasized that "the Commune's first decree" was the "suppression of the standing army and the substitution for it of the armed people."

For Lenin, Kautsky 'deformations' vis-à-vis this thesis, which were made worse by the immense intellectual and political prestige Kautsky enjoyed among revolutionaries, were the basis for his connivance with 'social-chauvinism'. Kautsky "forgets" Marx's argument and then engages in fantasies about an "ultra-imperialism" capable of exerting peaceful worldwide domination that Lenin called "ultra-nonsense." The upshot (so to speak) is that Kautsky agreed, albeit resorting to every sort of opportunism and ambiguity he could think of, to endorse the positions of the 'official social democratic' parties (the social-chauvinists).

Lenin held these positions to be execrable, even worse because they were couched in a Marxist idiom by "...those philistines who have reduced socialism to the unheard-of disgrace of justifying and prettifying the imperialist war by applying to it the concept of "defense of the fatherland." For their part, "...the German bourgeois scholars,

only yesterday specialists in the annihilation of Marxism, are speaking of the “national-German” Marx who, they claim, educated the trades unions which are so splendidly organized for the purpose of waging a predatory war!”²

Lenin rightly highlighted that Marx’s argument for smashing the state machine did not derive entirely from a general theory of the state. In fact, it came mostly from a specific analysis of the transformations of governing forms in the Nineteenth Century, especially as ‘reactive’ consequences to the revolutionary events in the latter half of the period. Marx noted in his *Civil War in France*, for example, that “...after every revolution had taken a stride forward in the class struggle, the purely repressive nature of the state was always more in evidence.” In effect, state power after the events of the 1848-49 revolution became the “public instrument of capital’s war on labor.” The need to smash the bureaucratic-military machine of the state had thus become a “... prerequisite for every popular revolution.”

Support for this argument’s deriving from an analysis of developments peculiar to governing forms is that, as Lenin noted, Marx had excluded that this prerequisite applied to Britain. When Marx was writing in the early 1870s, the country did not have a state machine comparable to what it would develop and deploy by the 1910s. “Today, in 1917, at the time of the first great imperialist war,” wrote Lenin, “this restriction made by Marx is no longer valid. Both Britain and America, biggest and last representatives — in the whole world — of Anglo-Saxon “liberty,” in the sense that they had no militarist cliques and bureaucracy, have completely sunk into the all-European filthy, bloody morass of bureaucratic-military institutions which subordinate everything to themselves, and suppress everything.”³

Lenin’s critique clearly underscores how immediate tasks and analysis of past events are linked. Three key elements provide the dynamics paving the way for the October strategy. Kautsky offered a benighted analysis of the Commune; denied the basic task Marx assigned to revolutionary politics on the basis of that reckoning and the analysis of contemporary forms of government; and helped to drag the masses into the ‘bloody morass.’ Lenin, in contrast, by collating and developing argumentative fragments from Marx and Engels into a cogent thesis, offered a theoretical analysis of the Commune that ultimately focuses on the need to ‘smash the bureaucratic-military machine of the state;’ indicated the new thesis as the criterion for rallying revolutionary

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2 Ibid., p.20

3 Ibid., p.24

action; and pointed to the imperialist war, no matter what countries were involved, as the true European government: the “...bureaucratic-military institutions which subordinate everything to themselves, and suppress everything.”

It follows that for Lenin the basic task of the revolution was as much the seizure of power as undoing the bureaucratic-military apparatus of the state. While the dictatorship of the proletariat was a novel form of the state, it could not but be a ‘half-state.’ It is the realization of this prospect alone that would make it possible to organize a revolutionary movement capable of breaking the absolute militarist grip of the governing regime imposed by the imperialist war and initiating experiments testing utterly new governing forms. The original thrust of the *soviets* aimed to dismantle those bureaucratic-military institutions by involving the mass of ordinary people in managing the affairs of the state.

2.

Half a century on but now the main target of critique in the last twenty years of Mao’s political journey, revisionism occupied the same theoretical horizon it had for Lenin and Marx. The issue at stake, however, was altogether different.

Since the later 1950s, the three elements that, as we have just noted above, had driven the thrust of Lenin’s critique had not only changed but were even inextricably overlapped. After the 20th CPSU Congress, the most pressing political reappraisal awaited the post-October socialist states. The latter comprised the governing circumstances in which the world’s major revolutionary organizations then operated. On the other hand, the main political tasks as dictated by ideology and organization had become maintaining the new bureaucratic-military institutions — a far cry from ‘smashing’ them.

In the process of dismantling the state’s bureaucratic-military institutions, the primary political mission adduced by Marx and Lenin, an equal yet opposite force aimed at rebuilding the ‘smashed’ state asserted itself. If, as Badiou argues, the state is the “meta-structure of a social-historical situation,” the communist parties doubled rather than ‘halving’ it, thereby reconstructing a kind of ‘meta-meta-structure’ that filled every nook and cranny produced by the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Mao’s critique of revisionism started as a diatribe with the CPSU in 1956 and continued to the end of the Cultural Revolution’s decade. The polemics initially focused on the need for a political analysis of

the “historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat” — a title borne by the first articles the CCP published in response to Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’. His denunciation of “Stalin’s crimes” did not, however, exhaust the issue for Mao. Indeed, the analysis of the impasse reached by the socialist forms of governance which emerged from that Congress merely aggravated the situation in his view.

On the final edge of the Cultural Revolution twenty years later, Mao again pushed for a reckoning with the issue and launched a mass study campaign on the dictatorship of the proletariat. He noted that the subject matter had to be analyzed from the foundations up and that, should there fail to emerge a theoretical reappraisal of the very nature of the socialist state, that state would inevitably be reclaimed by capitalism. A closer look at its course over those twenty years indicates that for Mao revisionism was at once an analytical forecast and the goal of mass political mobilization. In other words, it was first a diagnosis. As Mao had repeatedly noted since the early Sixties, the socialist states and communist parties had been shaken by a crisis so far-reaching as to lead, in all likelihood, to a fundamental transformation of them in a few years. Put another way, Mao realized there was nothing to be taken for granted in favor of socialism vis-à-vis its opposition to capitalism. Only a new set of egalitarian political inventions underpinned by a popular mass movement could perhaps prevent the ‘restoration of capitalism.’ For Mao, *it had already happened* in the U.S.S.R.

The crux of the issue was what forms of political organization might guide such an experiment? A pressing question given the fact the communist party, as the only such form allowed in the socialist state, was part and parcel of the same governing circumstances and facing the same foreseeable immanent crisis. Would it be possible to develop new modes of egalitarian political organization beyond the horizon of the probable failure of the socialist states? This was Mao’s fundamental dilemma, the source of his political anxiety.

The impasse Mao wanted to circumvent comprised the pressing need for a mass political reckoning of the history of socialism at one end and the PCC at the other. The elite of the latter, as well as the core role of the party per se in the functioning of the state, either denied any such need existed or tried to deflect it towards purely formalistic goals. It was why Mao insisted throughout those twenty years on locating revisionism in the CCP. In other words, the main obstacle within the subjective body of communism for Mao was its own organizing principle. A reappraisal of past experiences while identifying new political tasks would thus require exploring untrodden pathways.

The theoretical argument that for Mao ought to steer the course

of this analytical reckoning or stocktaking had to be altogether new vis-à-vis those of Marx and Lenin. “Only the masses themselves can free the masses, no one else can do it in their name.” It was thus a matter of redefining the criterion of a political subjectivity that in half a century the socialist states had reduced to a mere defense of their bureaucratic-military institutions. The new criterion had to become fundamental to every possible kind of subjectivity: no one can free anyone else, each can only liberate oneself by oneself. As the maxim of La Rochefoucauld that Lacan put in exergue of the analytical experience has it, “I cannot bear the thought of anyone but myself freeing me.”

Mass self-liberation thus posited the political tasks of communists vis-à-vis and in full polemic with what at the time was the main form of political organization admissible in socialism — the communist party. Mao’s principal suggestion in this connection was to “bomb headquarters,” i.e. suspend the very principle conferring its function as sole strategic director of egalitarian political experiments.

Neither Mao, nor anyone else, knew what new principle might replace it. The political invention Mao championed at the start of the Cultural Revolution was thus a radical experiment involving unrestricted pluralization of organizations independent of the party-state. Anyone in principle could establish a new political organization. It was a mass experiment that from mid-1966 to mid-1968 produced tens of thousands of political organizations throughout China.

In point of fact, however, the organizations generated by that pluralization began to falter by spring-summer 1967. At first and on a small but no less lethal scale, they introjected the trappings of bureaucratic-military institutions. The entire experiment thereafter began to wither and then degenerate, dissipating whatever potentialities they had possessed in a spate of senseless riots among gangs of youths. By mid-1968 these organizations were politically exhausted, and their disbanding became ineluctable.

Mao never foresaw that the potentialities for the existence of mass political subjectivities might wither on the vine. Nor did he imagine that the plethora of independent organizations would end up in a *cul-de-sac* of their own making trapped in an utterly formalistic antagonism without any political or intellectual content. An analysis of the rapid political decline of the period’s mass organizations has been a drawn-out process and is still incomplete. In effect, Mao continued to attempt an argued reappraisal of those events up to the very end in 1976. The issue, as he saw it throughout the long ‘coda’ of the Cultural Revolution, was how to think of those events in terms of a universality. He even said such a re-thinking would mean emphasizing the Cultural Revolution’s

internal limits, its shortcomings, and would only be possible through a theoretical analysis of the foundations of the revolutionary episteme, a reckoning that would also involve the masses.

The dispute that took place between Mao and Deng over the last two years verged essentially on this double-entry analysis. One was the critique of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e. the ideological and organizational space of revolutionary culture Mao had advocated in 1956. The other was that of the Cultural Revolution, its pitfalls and errors. Deng came away the winner. This was so not because China was on the verge of a collapse that he could prevent by dismissing the Maoist leaders after Mao's death. Rather, he managed to prevent that reckoning altogether. Deng's victory was a triumph of and for revisionism. He declared that in no way would there be a critical reappraisal of those revolutionary events.

3.

There seems to be something a bit amiss at first glance by placing a 'contemporary' mantle on revisionism. Isn't it thoroughly exhausted, a dead letter? Or, more to the point, if revisionism was communism's internal obstacle at key junctions in the Twentieth Century, is there today a subjective body of egalitarian politics comparable to then? Surely not. It exists but only in extremely rarefied, fragmentary form. It no longer has currency within a common ideological and organizational space like what we have called revolutionary culture. The radical reappraisal in the 1960s of that space in the organization of the communist parties and socialist states showed how much of an obstacle it had become to any kind of egalitarian political experiment. Indeed, today it must be rethought in an altogether novel horizon.

Yet we are far from realizing such a rethinking. Today's political inventions exist only in embryonal form. They constitute a 'potential' subjective body or, better, comprise a common desire for a chance to re-invent egalitarian politics. There is, as Badiou notes, a field of "possibility's possibilities". It looks in multiple directions for a principle of consistent universal existence whose theoretical coordinates and forms of organizational invention are still largely provisional, even inchoate. It is and not like sand: there is something of a collectively cultivated desire but it is always on the point of running through one's fingers. No sooner does it seem to develop a body — Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, Syriza, Nuit debout — than it again turns to dust within the prevailing governing circumstances. Yet it keeps trying to be born.

Given the embryonal, precarious nature of today's 'configuration

of possibilities' for egalitarian politics, how to identify the internal obstacle? Like Twentieth-century revisionism, what is the impediment now to defining specific political tasks and to taking stock of the political inventions of the 1960s? Here again there are two sides to the coin.

To begin with, the 'off-limits' sign placed on political stocktaking of the events of the Cultural Revolution and its immediate aftermath has raised an 'external' obstacle. Making that political era unthinkable was an essential requisite in opening the door to the new governing circumstances that were installed in the late 1970s and stabilized by the 1980s. As noted, Deng Xiaoping's victory over Mao in 1975 prevents the efforts of the Maoists to reappraise the revolutionary decade.

Everything regarding the political 1960s in China has been under strict censorship since then. The 'thorough negation' of the Cultural Revolution continues to be a fundamental component of the Chinese government's ideology and praxis. The rule of the censor's thumb in practice, and of government discourse in general, is to reduce the 1960s to mere irrationalism, ghastly horror or, in the most 'benign' version, harmless youthful pranks that went awry and soon degenerated into dark terrorist plots.

The main point here is that the ban has proven to be so effective not so much because it was imposed by repressive force under government fiat as by the sheer difficulty of an undertaking as vast as a reappraisal of the era and its events. The theoretical coordinates still need to be worked out since the preceding ones can be unreliable and end off course. The real problem is coming to grips with the nature of the 1960s *qua* mass political laboratory for investigating the entire historical experience of Twentieth-century communism. It means charting a new theoretical horizon line capable of detecting the ways in which the political configuration of the Sixties tried to reckon with revolutionary culture's ideological and organizational space — the dictatorship of the proletariat *qua* state experience — while reappraising its political advances and pitfalls.

Having arisen as an external obstacle, the government's ban on thinking-the-Sixties has been internalized. It now reduces to impotence any desire for egalitarian political re-invention in our own times and is purposed to prevent new subjectivities organizing egalitarian political experiments of universal substance. Succinctly put, the government's diktat has been readily introjected because it can hardly be refuted without a thorough political reappraisal of the Sixties. The mechanism of internalization has thus become a widespread condition, being spontaneously and unobtrusively part of every attempt to chart a new political horizon.

Four decades on, the process of interiorizing subjective impotence would not, however, have worked via passive, resigned acceptance alone. In effect, no matter how inchoate and fragile the configuration of desire for the possibility of a new politics might be, it requires that positions coalesce within that very configuration to declare how true it is that there's nothing to think of the Sixties, that no reasoned political reckoning is possible and that, in actual fact, the Sixties never existed!

Like its 'classic' and 'modern' counterparts, contemporary revisionism employs the same idiom, the same array of conceptual touchstones as those of the current 'configuration of possibilities' in order to impede the potential for 'rethinking the Sixties' from within. Since all the theoretical points of reference are haphazardly scattered, contemporary revisionism must learn to negotiate a very fragmented course in order to achieve a certain credibility. Then, too, given such conditions, it is not very hard to make oneself heard amid so many different and fragmentary voices.

Indeed, the dispersion of the subjective body today means that the contemporary critique of revisionism is not associated with high-profile names. Today we have no 'renegade Kautsky' because there is no Lenin, no 'false communism of Khrushchev' because there is no Mao. One might even argue that current revisionism is 'spontaneous,' a 'diffuse' revisionism. What we have today are *tendencies*, still inchoate, that impede a reappraisal of the 1960s. We could even classify them as leanings of the right, left and center 'wings,' the three forming the obstacle to a political reckoning of the 1960s.

The right-wing version, let's say, is that the Sixties was perhaps not the hot-bed of 'terrorist' horrors the government's directive claims. More likely is that they were some sort of vast Carnival of youthful masses under the sway of bad teachers or a few 'lords of disorder.' In short, some boisterous noise-making of no political import.

The left-wing version is that if the Sixties existed politically, they must have been an era of 'class struggle.' It is a vacuous claim since it has never produced a detailed analysis of 'class' during that era. Nor could it produce one because those years were a mass laboratory that investigated, in great but still insufficient detail, the internal limits of the classist vision of revolutionary politics. Even the revisionists were 'classist,' more dogmatically so perhaps than any others.

The center-aisle view avoids taking sides, pretending that the Sixties never existed. The upshot, however, is that everything that was in fact reappraised then, no matter how incompletely, never existed either. What are we to think of modern revolutionary politics if we can pretend the Sixties never were? How are we to think politically of

Twentieth-century China if we do so by pretending there was no Cultural Revolution?

Taking stock of the last great moment of political inventions — the preceding 'worldwide egalitarian political configuration' — remains an 'essential task' for a possible 'us' in the 'current situation,' just as it once was for Lenin and Mao. It is only inevitable that whenever this task is taken up and systematically pursued, a 'revisionist' entity will appear and coalesce. Indeed, the rule is that the more theoretically robust the task is formulated, the more of a revisionist cohort appears on the theoretical scene and seeks to impede an appraisal of the preceding intellectual configuration of egalitarian politics.

Revisionism is in a certain sense as weak and scattered as the 'us' in today's situation. As an internal obstacle, however, it inevitably gains strength as a constituent of the subjective body. We can even predict that contemporary revisionism will coalesce in a clearly identifiable entity if an 'us' gains the strength needed to experiment new political inventions and formulate new theoretical argumentations. For the moment we are beginning to glimpse the urgent need for a political stocktaking of the 1960s. Just as decidedly urgent too is the need for identifying more pointedly the governing circumstances of a contemporary capitalism established on the demise of the exception that was socialism. To begin by examining the spontaneous tendencies of contemporary revisionism can help us to pinpoint more precisely its eventual coalescing in a definite intellectual and political entity, an entity that would be the 'reactive' result of a constituting 'us'.

On a concluding note, here is an attempt to summarize *qua* diagram the critiques of revisionism. I hope it results not in underscoring the fragmentary but in delineating its opposite.

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| Invention | Governing Circumstances | Political stocktaking | Theoretical argument | Basic organizing | C R I S I S | Bibliography Lenin, V.I. 1917, <i>State and Revolution</i> , available online at https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lenin/state-and-revolution.pdf | C R I S I S |
| | | | | | & | | & |
| LENIN | Imperialist war | Paris Commune | "Smash state military-bureaucratic machine" | Soviet | C R I T I Q U E | | C R I T I Q U E |
| | | | | | / | | / |
| MAO | Dictatorship of Unrestricted Proletariat | October Revolution & socialist state | "Only the masses can free themselves" | pluralization of mass political organizations | Volume 4 / Issue 2 | | Volume 4 / Issue 2 |
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| "US" | Post-socialist Capitalism | Cultural Revolution & Sixties | ? | ? | | | |

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