MAOISM IN THE GLOBAL 1960S

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Focusing on Europe and the United States, this paper introduces two strains of scholarship on Maoism in the global 1960s that have emerged in the last decade. The first I call mea culpa Maoism, comprising the memory work of former radicals repenting their youthful fascination with Chinese communism. The second I call multi-directional Maoism, referring to the crystalloid reception studies of what Maoism meant in diverse cultural and historical contexts in the 1960s and 1970s. On the surface, the first is most concerned with what Mao means now; the second with what he meant then. I will conclude by suggesting, however, that each strain has political implications, even if the former wears its politics more openly than the latter.

**Mea Culpa Maoism and the Category Mistake of Solidarity**

To begin with the first, in the field of historical memory, scholars and non-scholars regularly present the brief fascination of segments of the European and American New Left for Maoism as one of the most grotesquely misguided and lamentable episodes of the twentieth century. These accounts are usually penned by participants from that moment themselves and are often robust acts of retroactive self-critique. The premier German example of mea culpa Maoism is the book *Unser Kampf*, or “Our Struggle,” from 2008 by journalist-historian and former ‘68er Götz Aly which recounts the “Mao Zedong fever that infected the new Left,” calling it a “modern echo of

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the romantic longing for China of past centuries, the strong attraction to the unknown, culturally interesting but difficult to comprehend, the very Far East.”² Accounts such as Aly’s unapologetically, or unreflexively, recycle the every metaphors used to describe the Cultural Revolution in the Western media at the time.³ These metaphors exile the event from the domain of rational politics into an Other of emotion, hysteria and pure collective affect. It becomes not politics but anti-politics—a mass deranged spasm of the intellectually stunted crowd. Gerd Koenen, another former Maoist, writes of “Chairman Mao’s call for a terrorist children’s crusade.”⁴ Western fascination with Maoism is dismissed as a daft seduction into unreason.

As suggested in the deliberate echoes of Aly’s title Unser Kampf with the better-known Mein Kampf, Aly goes even further, drawing an analogy between the denial of the reality of the Cultural Revolution to his parents’ generation’s denial of the reality of the Holocaust:

It is above all we--who reproached our parents for being indifferent to the Nazi crimes at the time and making excuses about their ignorance after the fact—who made the exact same arguments about Mao’s crimes, falling dumb or not wanting to remember. Analogous to the evergreen theme of “what could the Germans have known?” the question arose for former admirers of Mao: “What could they, what could I, have known about the criminal regime in China in 1967 and 1968?”⁵

Consistent with the genre of the Maoist mea culpa, Aly skewers his former self by pointing out all the ways they could and should have known—all the academic studies and factual accounts that circulated even then. A Times Literary Supplement piece from January of this year profiles one such source—the Belgian who wrote under the

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² Götz Aly, Unser Kampf. 1968 - ein irritierter Blick züruck (Franfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008), 106-09.
⁵ Aly, Unser Kampf. 1968 - ein irritierter Blick züruck, 111.
pseudonym Simon Leys. The title captures the tone of the mea culpa genre perfectly: “In the Age of Sham and Amnesia.”

What is the effect of ex-Maoist repentance? I would argue that one effect is prophylactic. By force of example, the fact of Western Maoism serves to discipline any potential future inter-racial and transnational political identifications. The common front against a second Third-Wordism helped cement what Michael Scott Christofferson calls the “anti-totalitarian moment” in the French 1970s: away from the utopia of classless society, toward what Sam Moyn calls the “last utopia” of humanitarianism and human rights. In practice, this meant that the First World relationship to the Third would now only begin—and usually end—with medication and missiles. Political self-understanding shared across continental, cultural and racial divisions was deemed a category mistake—a crossed-out term. A similar pivot happened in the French and West German women’s movement, where an early engagement and identification with the practices of revolutionary women in Mao’s China turned to a condemnation of the country, especially following the vilification of Jiang Qing at the end of the Cultural

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Revolution and the sense that Chinese family planning policy was less freedom for women to choose and more of an instrumentalization of women’s bodies by the state.9

The sentiment of “Never Again” in mea culpa Maoism means never again a reckless solidarity, and never again the displacement of the center of hermeneutic and social movement leadership from the global North to the South. An important parallel to the penitent literature has been the sustained emplotment of Mao as, in the words of a 2008 Der Spiegel cover story, “the Great Destroyer…who has killed more people than Stalin and Hitler.”10 Without passing judgment on the body count claim itself, it is worth noting that the elevation of Mao to the highest level of the diabolical podium in certain strands of historiography’s ongoing anti-Olympics of Evil solves (incidentally?) one of modernity’s most enduring riddles: how did the 20th century’s worst crimes originate in the center of the West? Casting Mao as an oriental despot “worse than Stalin or Hitler” permits the reinstatement of a reassuring 19th century civilizational schema, where the world’s atrocities emanate from the East.11

Multidirectional Maoism and the Missing Object of Solidarity

Alongside the literature of mea culpa Maoism has been another historiography, often led by younger scholars with greater distance from the past-political engagements of ’68 itself. Studies of multidirectional Maoism explore the diverse ways that people

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10 Klaus Wiegrefe, "Der große Zerstörer," Der Spiegel May 27, 2008, 44.

11 For an extended analysis of the demonization of Mao and Maoism in Western discourse see Daniel F. Vukovich, China and Orientalism: Western knowledge production and the P.R.C (New York: Routledge, 2012), chapter 3.
received and adapted the ideas of Chinese Communism to local circumstances in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. These studies identify two main strands of Maoism in the 1960s: anti-Soviet Marxist Maoism and subcultural or Dada Maoism. The former strand surfaces on both sides of the Iron Curtain and in all continents. Scholars have found evidence of the attraction of Maoism in Eastern Europe for both elderly communists who saw it as a return to a more openly revolutionary, non-détentist version of communist dogma to young people who embraced its anointment of the youth as key agents of history. June 1968, for example, saw a trial of alleged and genuine Maoists in Hungary that became the “radical cause célébre of that year,” opening to widespread discussion whether others forms of anti-imperialism were closer to the communist spirit than those sanctioned by Moscow. Historians are discovering that Maoism in the Soviet Bloc, long assumed to have its only success in Albania, presented more grass-roots challenges to Moscow-loyal parties’ sovereignty of interpretation than previously realized.

As an anti-Soviet variety of Marxism, Maoism became the self-proclaimed affiliation of splinter communist parties across the Western world, with foci in the U.S.,

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France and West Germany.  

17 These happened both with and without express approval from Beijing. In West Germany, Maoist parties—which were frequently infiltrated by East German intelligence--acted based on their own interpretation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) line as transmitted by Radio Peking and the party newspapers received in bundles from the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing and sold at local leftist bookshops and demonstrations.  

18 After Mao’s death in 1976, many Maoist mini-parties actually turned away from China and toward Albania as the true bearer of a line they saw sullied by the post-Mao government.

In the U.S., identification with Maoism had a racial component as groups like the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary Action Movement saw Chinese communism as part of an Afro-Asian “Bandung” configuration that decentered politics from the formerly imperial white global minority of the North and toward the global majority of the South.  

19 Following the Chinese challenge has revealed that the message of racial solidarity resonated for foreign students of color in the Soviet bloc too, who felt that Khrushchev’s policy of détente only meant peace for the North and the export of conflict to the global South.  

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18 See Tobias Wunschik, Die maoistische KPD/ML und die Zerschlagung ihrer "Sektion DDR" durch das MfS (Berlin BStU, 1997).


While the number of formally-organized Maoist parties is undeniable, it is also important to note that Maoism after the advent of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966 offered the prospect of communism beyond or without the Party. This took different forms. In France, West Germany and Italy, it sanctioned a version of going “to the countryside” through students taking jobs at factories for both their own political education and in the hope of mobilizing workers. In Western Europe, it also gave political weight to the emerging occupation, squatting, or commune movement. It is no coincidence that Godard’s *La Chinoise* is set in a communal apartment occupied only by young people. Commonplace now, this was still an unusual and even shocking form of living in the 1960s. West German leftists began their plans for what would become Germany’s first urban commune—*Kommune I*—by quoting Mao’s comment to Andre Malraux that “dogma has less value than cow dung. At least dung can be used as fertilizer.”

Adherents of subcultural, pop, or Dada Maoism often declared themselves in opposition to all forms of authority, hierarchy, and bureaucracy. In its more anarchist forms, it ironically used the iconography of a state (in CCP seals, pins, Mao busts and

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buttons) to question the value of the state altogether. At other times, the use of Mao’s image was more ambiguous. Certainly the most famous artistic appropriation came with Andy Warhol’s first screen print of Mao’s face in 1973 but Sebastian Gehrig has described other lesser-known examples. German artist Thomas Bayrle rigged up “dozens of vertically aligned wooden panels in the style of modern advertising boards” to spin and form a giant portrait of the Chinese leader, and Jörg Immendorff illustrated the publications of the (rather unironic) Maoist splinter group KPD/AO with Mao’s face.24 A 1968 film by Harun Farocki showed a white woman in Red Guard costume folding a page of Mao’s Book of Quotations into a dart to suggest that “words…must become weapons,” enfolding a call to militancy in a campy and theatrical form.25 In July 1968, West German socialist students interrupted a talk by the interior minister in an ensemble provocation with a nine-year old boy reading Mao’s quotations aloud, a female student ringing a cowbell, activists throwing colored eggs, and two young men in Nazi uniforms patrolling the stage.26 In 1969, German-French socialist activist Daniel Cohn-Bendit went to Rome to convince Godard to help him make a Western.27 According to a newspaper report, it was going to be about “miners and cowboys who conspire against their boss and found a cowboy commune.”28 One of the three roles was to be played by a horse that would quote Mao.29 As with the provocative demonstration, Mao’s quotations were cast as a kind of zero point of political education, able to be performed by both a child and an animal.

25 Slobodian, Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany, 179-81.
26 Frankfurter Rundschau, July 2, 1968.
It was the ambivalence of such acts that caused so much glee for those involved. Dada Maoists simultaneously reveled in the capacity of Mao to épater le bourgeois even as they took to heart what they saw as the Red Guards’ exemplary performance of self-organization and critique of authority. In 1967, sociologist Günter Amendt observed that the mainstream press seemed horrified by the spirit of anarchic, ungoverned discussion on Chinese university campuses during the Cultural Revolution. When West Berlin students imported the “wall newspapers” and dazibao, or big character posters, of the Chinese Cultural Revolution to their own demonstrations, the press criticized this too. Amendt saw a link: both practices threatened the monopoly of opinion creation by the commercial media. Radicals in West Germany and China, he said, were both modeling “non-hierarchical discussion between free individuals’ as Habermas would call this form of constructing and expressing democratic opinion.”

The provocation, in other words, did not exhaust itself in the act of irritation—it also helped to produce the basis for a counter-public.

In 1984, Frederic Jameson proposed what remains one of the more daring hypotheses about the reception of Maoism in Europe and North America. Through the idea of cultural revolution, he wrote, “for western militant what began to emerge from this at first merely tactical and rhetorical shift was a whole new political space, a space which will come to be articulated by the slogan, ‘the personal is political’ and into which-in one of the most stunning and unforeseeable of historical turns--the women’s movement will triumphantly move at the end of the decade, building a Yenan of a new

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and unpredictable kind which is still impregnable at the present moment.”31 Jameson offers here a provocation of his own that scholars have still only partially tested by empirical research. Did the turn to the geographically distant China actually produce, paradoxically, a turn to the politics of the intimate and the local on the Western radical left? Does the metaphor of the redoubt of Yenan illustrate or distort the dynamic of the social movements that emerged from 1968?

Even if its content is empirically questionable, the form of Jameson’s provocation is worth considering—as a challenge to the notion that distant political identifications always mean escapism, empty projections or flights from the everyday. Where, after all, does the interest in multidirectional Maoism come from? The political position of scholars of this topic is almost always less explicit than that of the mea culpa Maoists. Yet I would argue that they carry their own politics between or behind the lines. I would argue that it is no coincidence that scholars returned to the global 1960s after the failure of mass protests to stop the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. For many on the liberal and even radical left, the realization of the absence of any basis for imaginary, much less institutional, solidarity with the people of Iraq struck like a blow. The missing object of solidarity presented both an abstract and a practical problem. One knew what one was fighting against but what—or who--was one fighting for? I would propose that the return of interest of historians in alternative internationalisms in the years of George W. Bush and beyond was not (or perhaps not only) a self-replicating trend immanent to the academy but was also a response to perceived paucity of imagination in the global

landscape of politics. Distant objects of identification, we might conclude, are not optional but necessary for domestic orientation.

Especially in a time when China represents, in a phrase, capitalism without democracy, returning to explore if not salvage Maoism—written off as one of the bloodiest dead ends of the postwar period—has become a limit case of historical inquiry, a test of what can be found where mainstream opinion announces loudly that nothing but death and despair reside. For many, taking Maoism seriously was akin to dabbling with the political occult. It is to the credit of those who flouted this taboo for doing so. They may not have found a way out of present day political impasses but they have mapped out previously unmapped vectors of influence and perhaps, in the process, have pointed to possible and unpredictable futures of their own.