The Dialectics of Liberation: The Global 1960s and the Present

“Nostalgic commemoration of the glories of the 60s or abject public confession of the decade’s many failures and missed opportunities are two errors which cannot be avoided by some middle path that threads its way in between. The following sketch starts from the position that History is necessity, that the 60s had to happen the way it did, and that its opportunities and failures were inextricably intertwined, marked by the objective constraints and openings of a determinate historical situation, of which I thus wish to offer a tentative and provisional model”.

Fredric Jameson’s seminal 1984 essay, “Periodizing the 60s”, was an early and theoretically sophisticated attempt to periodize the sixties uprisings, to locate them within a trajectory of historical change, and to make the study of the sixties, as this opening passage suggests, not a matter of closure or judgment, but rather one that recognized the contingency and dynamism of its particular historical combinatoire. Jameson was one of many scholars who saw among the era’s particularities the irruption of new subjectivities, yet he situated this irruption within the dialectical unfolding of global capitalism. Noting the difficulty in applying Marxian class analysis to the “new subjects of history” that occupied the center of the political stages in the sixties, he nonetheless held that class analysis was in the process of coming true again, in the wake of the burst of historical energy that both animated the new subjectivities and signified the final penetration of capitalism and capital logic into the formerly unoccupied territories of the third world and the unconscious. He concluded the essay with the speculation that more familiar patterns of antagonism were in the process of re-emerging:

“traditional” Marxism, if “untrue” during this period of a proliferation of new subjects of history, must necessarily become true again when the dreary realities of exploitation, extraction of surplus value, proletarianization and the resistance to it in the form of class struggle, all slowly reassert themselves on a new and expanded world scale, as they seem currently in the process of doing”. (209).

This provisional judgment, of course, proved premature, or perhaps simply inaccurate, for the new wave of mass movement politics, at the end of the nineties and later in the first decade of the 2000s, was neither a simple reassertion of an older proletarian politics

nor a repetition of the sixties energies, but something whose political character, I would argue, remains inchoate. Similarly obscure, in terms of its historical and political character, is the afterlife of the sixties, an afterlife that many thought it would not have, given the enormous political energy expended, in Reaganism, Thatcherism, and Deng-ism, on the project of “thoroughgoing negation” (彻底否定) of the period’s provisional victories and hegemonies. The coming to political power, throughout Latin America, of veterans of the sixties struggles has ranged from the social democracy or even quasi neoliberalism of the tamed and reformed former revolutionary to those whose social visions, and whose mobilizations of political subjectivity, show significant overlap with the radicalness of the earlier period. In China, the Cultural Revolution remains largely taboo, as far as general popular discourse goes, but as people at this conference know, there is a growing proliferation of scholarship on the CR in many universities, in several cases undertaken by scholars sympathetic to at least some parts of its political program. Li Xin’s 2015 革命造反年代：上海文革运动史稿（The Era of Revolutionary Uprising: A Provisional History of Shanghai’s Cultural Revolution Movement, Hong Kong: Oxford U. Press), a 10000+ page study of Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution, had to be published in Hong Kong, but electronic reproductions have begun to circulate in China and these will have their effect. Wen Jiabao’s evocation of the Cultural Revolution in his denunciation of Bo Xilai in 2012—he cautioned against the possible recurrence of “historical tragedy” — struck many readers as excessive, but it is an indication of the extent to which the party fears that the ghosts of the sixties have not been laid to rest.

During the decadal reconsiderations of the 60s-and we are entering the fiftieth anniversary right now—it has been common to consider the period’s relationship to current politics: the relatively depoliticized climate of the 10th and 30th anniversaries occasioned certain types of reflections, the sprouts of possibility glimpsed in the 20th others. I propose here to consider an aspect of political discourse in the 60s and in the recent upsurge of the political—here I refer to the anti-globalization protests of the late 1990s but primarily to the post-2008 confluence marked by the occupy movements, the “square” and “spring” movements, and various anti-austerity agitations. For my own relationship to the sixties I take some inspiration from GDR historian Jürgen Kuczynski-who late in life, after the fall of the GDR, published Asche für Phönix: Aufsteig, Untergang, und Wiederkehr neuer Gesellschaftsordnungen (Phoenix in the ashes: the rise, fall, and return of new social orders), three linked essays on the transitions from...

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http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/14/china-political-reform-wen-jiabao.
antiquity to feudalism, feudalism to capitalism, and capitalism to socialism. Kuczynski, who had earlier in his career described himself as a “dissident loyal to the Party line,” saw in the events of 1989 not the end of socialism but a point in what might one day prove to be a longer transition than we can now imagine, reminding us that social and systemic transformations commonly proceed by false starts, reversals, and deviations before finally establishing themselves. It is of course possible that end of the global sixties—and I take that expansive view of the 60s as the global explosion of world-making lasting from the mid-50s through the mid-70s, including decolonization and national liberation struggles, anti-capitalist anti-systemic revolt, and counterculture in the over-developed world, and new political energies in the socialist world, from the Cultural Revolution to Prague spring—represented the end of one political sequence, and we are in transition now to another. Whether that is the case, or whether the sixties transformations are still in the process of establishing themselves, it might be of some benefit do a brief comparative analysis of oppositional political movements in the two periods. This is the source of my interest in the discourse of “liberation” in the world 60s and its contemporary fate.

The English word “liberation” and its European-language cognates, and the Chinese equivalent 解放 (jiefang) are very old words in their respective languages, and have been used in senses close to their present senses for over 500 years. In the Chinese case, this differs significantly from a host of other political terms—the equivalents of “democracy”, “society”, “constitution”, “politics” et al—that were borrowed in modern times from Japanese. Throughout the world sixties, it was the goal and measure of radical and revolutionary activity. National liberation, psychic liberation, sexual liberation, economic liberation, social liberation, the liberation of desire, promised a liberation from bosses, landlords, parents, men, colonizers, society, rulers, one’s own personality, from a system—capitalism, fascism, state socialism—or from a regime of gender, sexuality, or race.

It is not a word one hears much any more, and the reasons for its waning appeal in the contemporary political scene are many and complex. Common throughout the developed and developing world is its association with individual desire and its realization, which in the post-60s era came to represent a vastly expanded dimension of consumer society. Its neutralization took a different path in China. In 1948 Mao


5. This is the view expressed most cynically in Regis Debray, *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire [de mai 68]* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1978). A shortened version of this text was published in
described the goals of liberation in China as the overthrow of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. The post-1989 championing of “national studies” (国学), family values (illustrations from the *Classic of Filial Piety* are part of the party’s contemporary urban image repertoire), and the rollback of protections for women in marriage law are among many indications of a return of a host of values once associated with feudalism, and although “bureaucratic capitalism” was never a rigorous concept, the current relationship between the state bureaucracy and capital accumulation might justify that term today. Only in its resistance to “imperialism” and threats to state sovereignty is the contemporary Chinese state unflagging in its vigilance—and this is a matter to which I will return below. Somewhat symptomatically of this “post-liberation” age, when I mentioned my talk title for this conference to a Chinese friend, she said that I should be careful about using this word in China, since for most people it has a bureaucratic connotation, which would doubtless strengthen the neutralization effect. At a global level, including China, changes in the nature and discourse of antagonism and conflict, which may or may not be temporary, narrow the scope of liberatory imaginings. Central to the story I want to tell is the fact that in the post-60s era, for the first time in its lexical history the word came to be associated with phenomena such as consumerism and bureaucratization. I consider sixties liberation here in reference to two events--The OSPAAL (Tricontinental) Congress in Havana Cuba in January 1966, and the Dialectics of Liberation Congress in London in July 1967—and I will refer to some of the positions that constellated with these events’ foci. The contrasts these allow with recent movements clarify the fate of liberation, and suggest some consequences of that fate.

Havana, 1966

The Tricontinental Congress differed from the more famous and emblematic Bandung Conference (1955), commonly associated with the foundation of Third Worldism, in that its members—representatives came from the entire nonwestern world -- were explicitly allied with anti-imperialist struggle—Vietnam was of course the focal point—and allied with the socialist camp, although under the direction neither of China nor the Soviet Union. There was a feeling in the air at the conference, palpable in a range of speeches, inspired by Vietnam’s and Cuba’s defiance of the United States, that Third World Revolution was on the verge of achieving its world-historical promise. Che Guevara was a key presence at the congress, and it was here that he gave one of his most famous speeches, “Create Two, Three, Many Vietnams: Message to the Tricontinental”. From the speech:

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6. For the speech see [https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/04_67.htm](https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/04_67.htm), or an English translation at [https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm). The world-historical significance of the Tricontinental congress for Third Worldism is analyzed...
The largest of all imperialist powers feels in its own guts the bleeding inflicted by a poor and underdeveloped country; its fabulous economy feels the strain of the war effort. Murder is ceasing to be the most convenient business for its monopolies. Defensive weapons, and never in adequate number, is all these extraordinary soldiers have - besides love for their homeland, their society, and unsurpassed courage. But imperialism is bogging down in Vietnam, is unable to find a way out and desperately seeks one that will overcome with dignity this dangerous situation in which it now finds itself. Furthermore, the Four Points put forward by the North and the Five Points of the South now corner imperialism, making the confrontation even more decisive. Everything indicates that peace, this unstable peace which bears that name for the sole reason that no worldwide conflagration has taken place, is again in danger of being destroyed by some irrevocable and unacceptable step taken by the United States.

What role shall we, the exploited people of the world, play? The peoples of the three continents focus their attention on Vietnam and learn their lesson. Since imperialists blackmail humanity by threatening it with war, the wise reaction is not to fear war. The general tactics of the people should be to launch a constant and a firm attack in all fronts where the confrontation is taking place.

In those places where this meagre peace we have has been violated which is our duty? To liberate ourselves at any price.

Tricontinental liberation discourse had an epochal force that may be hard to imagine today. Vietnam’s defiance signified, to many fighters for liberation in its micro and macro registers, the weakness and decadence of the enemy. Through rhetorical efforts like Guevara’s, Vietnam became the equivalent of multivalent forms of liberation, explicitly paralleled with African-American liberation in the United States and with workers’ struggles in France, expressed in the slogan “Vietnam is in our factories.” The Vietnam War became the link for the entire spectrum of sixties liberation struggles.

London, 1967

The Dialectics of Liberation Congress in July 1967 in London was organized by four psychiatrists associated with the anti-psychiatry movement, and brought together philosophical Marxists, political-economic Marxists, psychiatrists, philosophers, poets sociologists, activists, and hippies. Participants included:

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7. Selected talks from the conference were collected in David Cooper, ed. 1968. *The Dialectics of Liberation.* Penguin. Reprinted by Verso in 2015. A vital record of the conference can be viewed in Ah! Sunflower: The 1967 Film of Beat Poet Allen Ginsberg’s Visit to London, with Bonus Film: Debriefing, directed by Robert Klinkert,
Julian Beck, avant-garde and activist dramatist
Stokely Carmichael, then head of the SNCC and a major voice in African-American radicalism
David Cooper, South African anti-psychiatrist who introduced Foucault to Anglophone readers
John Gerassi, Marxist scholar associated with J.P. Sartre
Allen Ginsberg, beat poet
Lucien Goldmann, French Marxist literary critic
Paul Goodman, anarchist, public intellectual
Emmet Grogan, founder of the San Francisco Diggers
C.L.R. James, West Indian Marxist and theorist
R.D. Laing, prominent anti-psychiatrist
Herbert Marcuse, Marxist philosopher
Gajo Petrovic, Yugoslavian Marxist philosopher
Carolee Schneeman, feminist performance artist
Paul Sweezy, Marxist economist
Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk

A premise of the conference was that liberation in its multiple registers—third world, African-American, economic, anti-imperialist, psychic, spiritual, sexual—was connected. Members of the congress generally shared the position of the Tricontinental congress that anti-imperialist war was the most significant global phenomenon of the time, and both John Gerassi and Paul Sweezy voiced agreement with Fidel Castro that the 1970s would be the decade of world revolution. Sweezy’s talk, on the imperial logic of the world system, focused on the financial character of imperialism, and was one of the first major salvos against the discourse of development/underdevelopment, arguing that the only possibility for Third World development was outside of capitalism. Stokely Carmichael was a provocative presence at the congress, drawing a clear line between his activist priorities and the more philosophical or existential preoccupations of some at the congress, and taunting some members of the congress with the admonition “What have you done” (against racism). His admonishment to white liberals asked them to focus on the correct locus of antagonism, telling them not to try to “help” the victims of racism by

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8. Carmichael addressed the Congress twice, once, at his request, to a primarily black audience. Angela Davis was also present, though not as a speaker.

9. Carolee Schneeman stood out due to the paucity of feminist activists at the congress, an all too familiar feature of the early-era sixties activist scene. She performed a “happening” at the congress that critiqued participants. In the 1990s her influence on post-war feminist art began to be widely recognized, and there have been numerous retrospectives of her work since then.
measures that ultimately amounted to assisting in their adjustment to the system, but by disarming the racist oppressors.

Herbert Marcuse’s talk, “Liberation from the Affluent Society”, contained ideas he would develop further in the well-known 1969 *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press). His point was that capitalism made people unfree, through the division of labor and its consequent one-dimensionality, and maintained that the affluent society was affluent because it satisfied the needs created by the operators of the system. He considered U.S. hippies a revolutionary force because they had dropped out of the system, and also pointed to the revolutionary potential of art—art and creativity were partial signs of the nature of the new form of life to come, although in their separation from life, or in their status as spectacle of entertainment, contributed to the false life. May ’68 in Paris was to prove the apogee of this form of total revolution, and its strength came of course from the massive participation of workers, who for a few short weeks took debates about the nature of work and production further than at any time since the Paris Commune. It should be remembered that the catalyst for the Paris events was the arrest of students at the Sorbonne, and that the movement’s first demands were “Liberez nos camarades.” (Free our comrades).

Emmet Grogan and Allen Ginsburg were the main representatives of the hippie voice. Grogan spoke in conference roundtables about San Francisco hippie communes and the feasibility of drop-out culture, but in his main speech chose to attack the conference format by reciting a speech of Hitler’s, revealing only at the end, to an outraged audience, what he had done. Ginsberg, who spent most of his time in London with members of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, defended hippies and the hippie ethos, and spoke mostly of the liberation of consciousness, with frequent reference to William Blake and the political importance of opening wide the doors of perception. LSD was an important topic at the conference, not only in Ginsberg’s and Grogan’s talks but in the talks by several of the radical psychiatrists, and it was emblematic of the conjuncture represented by the conference that here, in the middle of hard talk on imperialism, capitalism, and black power, the mechanisms of perception and consciousness were accorded the same degree of politicization. Stokely Carmichael’s LSD trips were part of the discussion (he had had bad ones), and Ginsberg tone was prophetic about the transformative power of new modes of perception and imagination. The politics of the imagination were of course to be central to the events of May ’68 in Paris (“let the imagination take power”), in which context it was mobilized against the dominant societal forces of boredom, separation, and authority. What was most salient about the politics of LSD was that it was commonly perceived as a struggle for power within the psyche, the struggle for a liberated consciousness to emerge from a conditioned one. As Charles Perry wrote, in one of the best descriptions of the LSD experience:

LSD and mescaline suppress the mind’s ability to discriminate according to levels of importance—the kind of thing that allows a mother at a noisy party to hear the sound of her baby crying upstairs—and to form persisting notions of reality based on them. This faculty causes us to focus on one thing and ignore many others. Eventually, what we are familiar with tends to become mere background. … A
chair becomes just a chair, something about which we have nothing more to learn. As adults we do not see a chair with the same intensity with which we examined one when we were children.\textsuperscript{10}

The idea of the psyche as battleground for liberation struggle was a familiar one to all of those readers in the countercultural west who had turned to the mixture of Marx and Freud represented by radical psychiatry, as well as by writers such as Eric Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, and Norman O. Brown, the latter whose \textit{Life Against Death} (1959) and \textit{Love’s Body} (1966) were major texts for those engaged in psychic liberation. Especially in retrospect, and in the eyes of more orthodox Marxist analyses, the connection between what we could call the psychic liberationists and the political or Third World liberationists was a tenuous one. Yet it must be remembered that for many participants the spectrum of liberation was a continuous and connected one. The breakdown of links between these various liberatory registers accompanied the decline of liberation as a motivating force in radical politics.

The Defeat (with special reference to China)

Those mainstream histories of the 60s that do not follow Jameson’s admonition quoted at the beginning of this paper regarding the era’s glories and failures chart with some detail the becoming-mainstream of the once revolutionary and daring forays into the terrain of psychic, sexual, and libidinal liberation\textsuperscript{11}. It need not be emphasized in our era that the body—despite its becoming more and more malleable and plastic—is no longer viewed as the natural terrain of liberation, though that is not to say that it is any less politicized. This may be in part one of Foucault’s contributions, who taught us to see less in the repression/liberation dyad than we had once assumed. On the Third World front, warnings that Franz Fanon gave in 1961 in the “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” chapter of \textit{Wretched of the Earth} proved remarkably prescient about the ability of international capital to integrate newly independent native bourgeoisies in a colonial relationship. Probably worst for Third Worldism as a globally unified political force was the combination of the changed global economic situation in the mid-1970s, which saw the beginning of the rise of the East Asian NICs as well as the worsening of conditions in Africa and elsewhere, and the hardening of the Sino-Soviet split. Early Soviet leaders—Lenin and Trotsky—held that the geopolitics of “international relations” was not socialist.

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With the Sino-Soviet split, geopolitics returned with a vengeance and fractured global anti-capitalist energies. The decade that marked the end and containment of the radical politics of the 60s in China—1969-1979—was punctuated by two military outbreaks of the new geo-political scene: the exchange of fire between Chinese and Soviet forces at the Ussuri River in 1969, which deepened the conviction in the Chinese and Soviet leadership about the inevitability of war between the PRC and the USSR; and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979, the latter a textbook case of realist inter-state strategy, albeit one with unforeseen bad consequences for China. The intensification of conflict in the late 60s had, of course, led to the resolute turn to the geo-political, in the labeling of the USSR as “fascist” or “social-imperialist”—the latter, despite the volume of words expended on it, a wholly incoherent concept—and, with greater consequences, the turn to the U.S. This geo-political turn, rather than the political-ideological division between the USSR and China, led China into alliance with Portuguese colonialism and white South Africa in Angola against the MPLA, and a Third World strategy that was determined largely by the friend-enemy logic of inter-state triangulation\(^\text{12}\). Relations with the Soviet Union would improve in late 1981 and beyond, especially as a consequence of early Reagan-era anti-communism and the final triumph of U.S. containment of its own 60s energies.\(^\text{13}\)

Parallel to the efforts at consciousness liberation had been the pharmaceutical industry’s increasingly rapid development of psychoactive drugs for the treatment of depression, schizophrenia, and other psychiatric ailments, beginning in the 1950s with the psychiatric use of monoamine-oxidase inhibitors and the discovery of the tricyclic family of antidepressants. The late 1980s, through what has been called the Prozac revolution, named after the most famous of the serotonin reuptake inhibitors, took “better living through chemistry” into an entirely new direction, and changed irrevocably the character of psychiatric treatment. Anti-psychiatry had fewer and fewer adherents. The project of consciousness expansion shaped another field with the growth of the new hacker subculture and the “hip” cybernetics associated with it. Jon Markoff’s *What the Dormouse Said: How the 60s Counter Culture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry* (Penguin 2006) traces the influence in great detail. The trajectory of Stewart Brand—whose *Whole Earth Catalog* was a bible for late 60s communards and who later became an early pioneer of social

\(^{12}\) The construction of the Tan-Zam railroad in the 1970s seems like the product of an earlier time.

\(^{13}\) It is perhaps not fortuitous that the early 1980s engagement with socialist theory and questions of socialist subjectivity in China—the discussions of humanism, alienation, etc.—were coincident with a lessening of Sino-Soviet tension. As reform deepened in China, and as Gorbachev pursued glasnost, the Sino-Soviet relationship, and all else, “normalized,” quickly contradicting those who had found in the earlier Sino-Soviet split evidence of a fundamental civilizational divide (and these included, in addition to U.S. Cold Warriors, Solzhenitsyn and Emmanuel Levinas). Emmanuel Levinas, *Les imprévus de l’histoire* (Paris: Fata Morgana 1994). Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *East and West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).
media and cybernetics futurologist\(^{14}\), in the process more explicitly embracing the libertarian rather than revolutionary ethos that had been latent in the rugged DIY orientation of the earlier communards—is also one of the transformation of a counter-cultural liberatory social vision into a vision compatible with a new center of innovative capitalism.

1989 was of course emblematic of an era’s end, changing irrevocably the context for anti-capitalist politics, and we are still living the consequences of that change. China’s transformation since that date has not involved regime change, but has been enormously consequential for the fate of a politics of liberation. The fervid commitment to stability following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the uprising in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere in the country leading up to June 4 1989 greatly strengthened the national consensus—solidified in the years immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution—that division and conflict were China’s greatest threats. What followed was a commitment to rapid and non-inflationary GDP growth with no regard to the distribution of wealth. The post-1989 consensus led to a more and more inegalitarian society, but reference to class, not to mention class conflict, was officially discouraged. There were few social or other barriers to conspicuous elite consumption, and an American-style mythos of upward class identification and of social mobility was strengthened through ever more sophisticated advertising and media. The Communist Party leadership more and more identified with the bourgeoisie, whose importance to the party was codified in Premier Jiang Zemin’s proclamation of the “three represents” in 2000. A majority of new CCP party members since then have been from the upper stratum of society.

Since the early part of the current century, sophisticated and trend-setting sectors of the Chinese urban bourgeoisie have eagerly embraced the spectrum of “New Age” practices that had grown with the commercialization of Western countercultural practices and the vastly expanded field of “care of the self”—yoga, counseling, antidepressant drugs, New Age religion, physical fitness, etc. Nationalism and national identification were newly stressed at all levels of education. The hundreds of daily outbursts of protest—most commonly workers protesting low wages or bad working conditions but also residents protesting polluting or contaminating industries—have not produced a coherent working class, and commonly assume a just and benevolent central state authority whose policies are distorted or ignored by corrupt local officials.\(^{15}\) The state has been largely effective in rendering these uprisings fragmentary and episodic. Nationalist ideology also included new and public mobilization of anti-Japanese sentiment, and an equally successful cultivation of the view that the advanced capitalist countries, particularly the United States,

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\(^{14}\) One of Brand’s intellectual mentors was the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who was also at the 1967 London Congress, and who spoke on systems and systems differentiation. See Fred Turner 2008. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism.* (University of Chicago).

were committed to inhibiting the economic rise of China. Anti-imperialism, once 
linked to Third Worldism and national liberation, and now to intercapitalist rivalry, 
has formed one of the strongest links between the pre- and post-reform regime.

Beginning in the mid-1990s and gathering speed in the early 2000s, a critical 
intellectual landscape took form in China that one could generally divide into three 
broad orientations: 1. So called liberals or neo-liberals, whose voices are far louder 
than many in the west might realize, and whose appeals are variously to notions of 
universal human rights, multi-party democracy, individual property rights, and a 
rational market-based economy free from cronyist state interference and cleansed 
of corruption. Their numbers include those we would commonly describe as 
“dissidents” as well as mainstream economists, Christians, and individual-rights 
based civil libertarians. Unlike their counterparts in the west, they are often 
concerned with the plight of the poor and the peasantry, and are more likely than 
their western counterparts to embrace an “equality of opportunity” perspective in 
addressing social inequity. 2. Socialists or social-democrats working, in addition to 
development of their broader theoretical and social concerns, for ideological 
hegemony within the context of the CCP leadership. These, often identified as the 
New Left, identify with China’s revolutionary history, especially during the years 
1949-1976, and find in this history important resources that they feel be reactivated 
and remobilized in attacking current social problems. 3. Nationalists, who believe 
that the most significant problems China faces comes from western efforts to 
contain China’s economic rise and civilizational renewal. This containment is 
perceived as comprising military, economic, cultural, and ideological components. 
Nationalists, who would not uncommonly be identified in the popular imagination 
with the “left”, stress China’s unique political and economic system, born both of its 
revolutionary legacy and of its longer history, and diagnose China’s primary 
problems over the last 150 years as having originated largely from foreign 
imperialism. These are not neat and self-contained units. Neo-Straussians, not 
insignificant in number, can be found among the neo-liberals and the nationalists. 
The New Left includes communists and “petty-bourgeois” social democrats. 
Nationalists include strong critics of capitalism, proponents of the current economic 
order as long as it is identified as a distinctively Chinese one, as well as those 
indifferent to economic structure. The last fifteen years have also witnessed a great 
broadening of the “intellectual” sphere, whose numbers include not only academics, 
but journalists, enterprise executives, and those who publish in the social media, 
one effect of which has been the insertion of the logic of media or social media 
market economic forces into the intellectual field. This division has several 
paradoxical consequences. Those most antagonistic to the regime are those 
committed to what they imagine to be a better version of the market economy. Few 
if any critics occupy the position of being simultaneously anti-capitalist and anti-
CCP. The anti-capitalist left, for a variety of reasons some of which are not explicit 
and thus difficult to discern, avoids the discourse of class conflict, anti-patriarchy 
and anti-sexism, and other politics of antagonism or negation, and makes strong 
appeals to the historical achievements of the Chinese revolution, from the late Qing 
dynasty through the reform period, and to Chinese socialist values. The dominant
affective mode is one of affirmation, even if to an idealized version of the party. This affirmation has, as one would expect, significant overlap with the nationalist position.

Rebellion Today and the Fate of Liberation

For a concluding analysis of the current period I refer to five moments, as well as to some of the theoretical texts that informed them: the anti-globalization movement prior to September 11, roughly from Seattle (1999) to Genoa (2001), with an outlying echo in the anti-WTO protests in Hong Kong in 2005; the Arab Spring, beginning with the Tunisian revolution in 2010 and continuing throughout the Arab world for two years; the Occupy movement, mainly from 2011-2012, centered mainly in the US but also in London; and the Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong and the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, sometimes classified, with good reason, with the Occupy movements, but which I will treat as a separate category due to the relationship with China.

The anti-globalization actions at the turn of the millennium singled to many a new irruption of the political after years of relative quiet. The movement seemed to represent a new political conjuncture, signified by the prominent (in visibility if not in numbers) and controversial role of direct-action anarchists, who joined forces, sometimes uneasily but often not, with labor and environmental activists. The target of the action—the trans-national WTO—made the enemy not a national power or authority, but a world order itself. Although post-festum accounts of internecine critique of black block tactics suggested that significant questions of political line had not been settled, there was also some consensus among students of the movement that its organizational form—non-hierarchical, contingent, loose—was itself a main feature of its political innovativeness. Both of these features—decentered organization and broad coalitions and alliances—made the movement seem like a harbinger of a new political era, one adequate to the diffuse de-centered imperial order that it countered. Many social movement scholars, including veterans of and scholars of the sixties, felt that the new movement had gone far beyond the 60s movements in the breadth of the alliances and the mutual respect with which different formations treated each other. With the publication of Hardt

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16 Sources on Seattle include David Solnit and Rebecca Solnit (eds.), The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle, (Oakland: AK Press, 2009); Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose and George Katsiaficas(eds.), The Battle of Seattle: The New Challenges to Capitalist Globalization (Brooklyn: Soft Skull, 2002); Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair (eds.) 5 Days That Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond (New York: Verso, 2000); Kevin Danaher and Roger Burbach (eds.) Globalize This!: The Battle Against the World Trade Organization. (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 2002)

and Negri’s *Empire* in 2000, the unfolding movement acquired a theoretical/historical scaffolding that rendered it, in the eyes of many, even more central to the zeitgeist: a new post-national global order in the process of generating a new multitude from within it, a constituent power capable of taking advantage of the weakening of national institutions that Empire had accomplished. The political syntax in the movement was not one of liberation from a repressive force or authority per se, but rather one of emergence and self-constitution. The events following the September 11 attacks brought the older form of empire back into the forefront of history, and the theoretical apparatus developed in Empire had less purchase on the radical opposition, but Hardt and Negri’s notion of constituent power would continue to suit a movement that in its early stage had an uncommonly low level of organizational unity or structure.

Arab Spring was in many respects a harbinger of the new era of politicization. It was successful in overthrowing or forcing the overthrow of governments, and it brought into public space a force for change that Western observers had not known existed, having seen in the Arab world little political initiative besides Islamic fundamentalism. In certain respects more impressive on the world stage than the overthrow of the Tunisian government was the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, both for the occupation’s duration and the mutual-aid-based solidarity among the wide-ranging participants. The Arab Spring was to end—for the time being anyway—in political neutralization, largely because too many of the occupation forces—and here there are important similarities here with the *indignados* of Spain—were content with a change of regime, a replacement of one governing figure or party with another, or for other reasons met their durational limits.

The Occupy movement built on Arab Spring’s innovations in new spatial practice, resuscitated to political activism the politics of no demands (this was a 60s innovation), and pursued further innovations in horizontal organizational form (the general assembly18), and a new figure for the multitude: the 99%. Organizationally and ideologically, the movement, inspired directly by the Arab Spring and the *indignados* movement in Spain, shared much with the earlier anti-globalization movement: “horizontalism”, coalitional and multi-centered, with a prominent and significant anarchist component. David Graeber, one of our contemporary period’s foremost anarchist thinkers, claims to have been the origin of “we are the 99%”.19

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What surprised many was the movement’s duration and geographical reach—there were long-lasting occupy movements all over the United States—and the extent of its appeal into the mainstream. The focus—assisted by social media and internet publication—on personalized dimensions of inequality gave the movement a populist appeal, and it inspired practical direct action such as anti-eviction rallies that were often successful.²⁰

On October 9, 2011, Slavoj Žižek addressed the Occupy crowd at Zuccotti Park²¹, downtown New York, in a massively widely circulated speech (an oft repeated line was his injunction to the crowd “Don’t fall in love with yourselves”) that in revised form was published in 2012 in his The Year of Dreaming Dangerously (Verso), which also contained reflections on the Arab Spring and general reflections on the politics of the moment. Like Alan Badiou, whom I will discuss below, Žižek insisted on framing the politics of the moment in communist terms, and called attention to the necessity of doing the hard organizational work needed to create a new political form:

Beneath the profusion of (often confused) statements, the OWS movement thus harbors two basic insights: (1) the contemporary popular discontent is with capitalism as a system—the problem is the system as such, not any particular corrupt form of it; (2) the contemporary form of representative multi-party democracy is incapable of dealing with capitalist excesses; in other words, that democracy has to be reinvented. This brings us to the crux of the issue at stake in the Wall Street protests: how to expand democracy beyond its current political form, which has proved impotent in the face of the destructive consequences of economic life? Is there a name for this reinvented democracy beyond the multi-party representational system? There is indeed: the dictatorship of the proletariat. (pp. 87-88).

Žižek made it clear that he was not referring to the form of communism that had died in 1990, but his prescription was clear: the 99% needed to liberate itself by exiting the system and taking political power. His concluding formulation was doubtless a challenge to the movement’s anarchists, one of whose points of

²⁰ A direct connection between the two eras as discussed in this essay was an event held on October 26, 2012, during the London Occupy movement. This was the Dialektikon, a staged recreation of the 1967 London conference, with actors recreating the speeches of Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Marcuse, Stokely Carmichael, and Gregory Bateson. The proposal for the production can be viewed here: http://www.dialecticsofliberation.com/2012-dialektikon/2011-dialektikon-proposal/.

²¹ Interested readers might want to see the video of the speech, broadcast, since there was no electricity at Zuccotti park, via the “human microphone”, where one section of the crowd repeats each line, with the section behind them repeating that line, until all in the crowd have heard the speech. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdwF3j1F2pg.
reference was John Holloway’s book *Change the World Without Taking Power* (Pluto, 2002), inspired in large part by Mexico’s Zapatistas.

Žižek’s emphasis on organization reflected a matter at the crux of the new political movements. If one could say that the syntax of the 60s movements was “liberation of X from Y”, with X as the revolutionary subject and Y as the repressive force, whether class, psychic formation, gender system, political system, political authority”, then the syntax of the new politics might be expressed as “Let form of politics X emerge”, and the composition of X becomes the location of politics. Žižek cautioned the New York occupiers not to be satisfied with their mere existence in the space of the square. The communist theoretical journal *Endnotes* made a more pointed critique along similar lines, referring to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the “whatever singularity”:

To form a community mediated by belonging itself, in Agamben’s sense, means the following: (1) The community is composed of all those who happen to be there; there are no other conditions of belonging. (2) The community does not mediate between pre-existing identities, in a coalitional politics; instead, it is born *ex nihilo*. (3) The community does not seek recognition by the state. It presents itself, at the limit, as an alternative to the state: real democracy, or even the overcoming of democracy. (4) The task of such a community is to encourage everyone else to desert their posts, in society, and to join the community, as “whatever singularities”. This description matches the self-conception of the 2011 occupiers. They, too, wanted to be whatever singularities, even if they referred to themselves in a less philosophical fashion.

*Endnotes* was related to another tendency that in the late 1990s was associated with the French group Tiqqun and The Invisible Committee: communization. As the term was used by these groups, it referred to a range of activities similar to 60s era “dropping out”—squatting, sharing, alliance-building, communal living— with spaces and social practices aimed at maximum autonomy from capitalism and property relations, which many but not all in the movement saw as having entered its phase of terminal crisis. The Invisible Committee’s first publication, *The Coming Insurrection*, was a key text in the insurrectionary movements of the 2000s and into the occupy period, and a reference point for communization.

Alain Badiou—who wrote that all mass movements reflect the desire for liberation—described the “riots” (largely referring to Arab Spring) as “the guardian

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of the history of emancipation in intervallic periods.” 24 He draws a parallel between the present time and the European restoration of 1815-1850, the “interval” between republican revolution and the gradual emergence of communist revolution. It took then a series of “riots”—short, failed, limited-- for the space of the political to open up again, and Badiou sees the present as, perhaps, the pre-history of a new politicization, one whose liberatory vector will likewise require a new organizational form. Badiou’s notion of organization is abstract, but it centers on formalizing and making concrete the truth content of the emancipatory political event. For Badiou, it is the organization to come that will realize the condition of possibility that inheres the political event. The various experiments —social, theoretical, strategic—in and focus on organizational form are best understood, perhaps, as nascent steps in this process. Badiou’s formulation is useful because it allows us a way out of constructing a simple binary between “liberation” and “organization”. There may be an historical logic behind the subsumption of liberatory energy into questions of radical organization. I suspect, though, that a reactivation of liberation discourse may be a necessary motivating factor in carrying out the organizational work.

I leave the discussion of the Hong Kong and Taiwan movements for last because, although an analysis and critique of them could be done along the above lines, the reaction to the movement of many intellectuals identified with the left in China and in Taiwan, shows a particular form of political blockage that arises out of the complex legacy of the 1960s in East Asia. Both movements were mass demonstrations that showed an array of tactics and special practices unprecedented in their respective locations, and were clearly, to participants, deeply politicizing events, signaling an opening of new forms of politics in the region that had parallels elsewhere in the world. The 2014 “Umbrella Revolution” in Hong Kong was far more limited and explicit in its aims than the Arab Spring or Occupy Movements: what was demanded was a change to the election law in Hong Kong, allowing for unlimited choice of candidates in the election of the Chief Executive. Student leader Joshua Wong, when asked in an interview if his organization (Scholarism, one of the main instigators of the Umbrella movement) would consider shifting the political terrain to the social (equality, pensions, public housing, etc.) after failure on the political front, replied that Hong Kong was a deeply conservative society, that social egalitarianism was associated negatively with the CCP, and that the movement’s focus on representative electoral politics was the only possible first step in building a social movement. 25 Despite the tame and reformist character of the movement’s demands, the reaction across the spectrum of the Chinese left was in line with the CCP’s condemnation, and often exceeded it. From fairly extreme Maoist/nationalist publications such as Wuyouzhixiang (Utopia) to mainstream left-nationalist

publications such as Guanchazhewang (Observer Website), the evil hand of the United States or the CIA was seen as pulling the puppet strings in Hong Kong. Western imperialism—the dreaded specter of an East Asian “color revolution”, manipulated by the west—was the determining context. During the Umbrella Revolution I was teaching a graduate seminar in Shanghai on social movements. I had scheduled readings and discussions of various sixties movements, as well as Arab Spring and Occupy, about which students were very excited, but given the actuality of the Hong Kong events, I decided to devote an hour a week to discussion thereon, including discussion of Chinese-language material I had found outside the Internet Firewall. I also shared videos of the movement, which were especially moving, since one could read on the bodies and faces of the movement students a new and powerful political subjectivity, something almost unimaginable in Hong Kong in recent years. My students, never shy about criticizing the Chinese government, were uniformly uneasy about the movement, and held that the Hong Kong students had an insufficient knowledge of history, by which they meant that Hong Kong students should understand that their main oppressors had been colonial Britain and that China had delivered them from this. I bring these critiques up to illustrate the mutation of the one remaining “liberatory” political value in China—anti-imperialism, which is in whichever situation it is raised always “the primary contradiction”. The Chinese academic left was not particularly vocal about the Hong Kong events, and not many publicly embraced the more extreme national line. Hong Kong based leftist Xu Baoqiang, in an essay widely circulated in China, wrote that the movement reflected the anxieties and disquiet of a generation robbed of a future by the ravages of neo-liberalism, and that the antagonism towards China was a case of misdirected rage.

A similar rhetoric on the East Asian left arose around the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan. Similar to the Occupy Central/Umbrella Revolution, the movement combined radical and spectacular tactics (the Taiwanese demonstrators occupied the Legislature) with political aims that were far more explicit and more modest than their Arab or Western counterparts: in this case, the abrogation of the Cross-Straits Service Trade Agreement, which would, according to government officials, allow more mainland Chinese investment in Taiwan’s service sector, and, according to protesters, give mainland China increased economic leverage over Taiwan. The left, including the Mainland China oriented left on Taiwan, were nearly uniform in their condemnation of the movement. Accusations of manipulation by the USA, Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party, or Taiwan independence advocates, filled the internet commentary. A collection of essays by some of Taiwan’s foremost left critics—including an essay by mainland Chinese leftist Wang Hui—was more

26. 許寶強。2013. 罷工、佔中與本土運動的政經根源。（The Political-economic roots of the strike, occupy central, and nativist movements in Hong Kong) 明報 Mingbao April 22.
27. 赵刚等 Zhao Gang et al., 2015. 我们需要什么样的“中国”理念？（Taipei：Renjian）
restrained in its accusation of behind-the-scenes manipulation, but held that the movement’s anti-China stance was a continuation of Cold War ideology, and that the movement was “right” and neo-liberal in its orientation due to its structural alliance with the United States, its perceived anti-Chinese stance, and its perceived support of an independent Taiwan. The title of the essay in place of a foreword entitled “A Western Sunflower; An Eastern Red Sun” (西方的太阳花，东方的红太阳) made the nativist and essentialist strains of the critique explicit. The movement itself professed to be anti-neoliberal, and directed its animus not only at the trade agreement itself, but also at the “black box” of closed-door decision-making in the Taiwanese legislature. But the movement was not as conservative as critics suggested, and almost no movement writings were explicitly pro-American. An image that circulated widely on the internet in East Asia showed a student leader carrying a copy of Japanese Kantian Marxist activist scholar Kojin Karatani’s Talks On Politics (政治お語る, Tokyo: Toshio shinbun 2009), wherein Karatani develops his notion of the formation of radical singular subjectivity through political activism, and in the eyes of some the movement became associated with Karatani’s thought.

The two movements shared with the Arab Spring and occupy movements characteristics of the intervallic period discussed by Badiou, mass movements ultimately yet inchoately aimed at some form of liberation but in advance of the organizational mode that would formalize this. East Asian leftist critics were not wholly wrong in concluding that the movements were circumscribed by a global neoliberalism—their radicality, present at the level of tactics and of the everyday conditions of protest, was subsumed under a modest set of demands. Some on the left have made similar critiques of Arab Spring and Occupy, holding that they too were circumscribed by an anti-austerity politics or an anti-corruption politics, failing to see that both austerity and corruption were twin faces of the neoliberal order and that the only way out of either would be a transcendence thereof.\(^3\) 28 What was unfortunate in the East Asian left reaction was the wariness about mass movement, the inability to see some potential of historical forward motion in a region of tremendous economic dynamism and disruption but at an historic low of anti-systemic energies. The primary reason for this, I would argue, is an anti-imperialism directed at the hegemonic force of neo-liberalism, the United States, which blinds the East Asian left to the complicity of the CCP in the global neoliberal order. The gamble the East Asian left is making is understandable. It is still possible to imagine that, in a communist party committed constitutionally and doctrinally to proletarian power, an egalitarian, popular democratic, and redistributive platform could one day achieve ideological hegemony. But given a party that has produced one of the most unequal societies in the world on the back of an oppressed worker-peasant class, this is a gamble with high stakes. One might want to place greater trust in the social movements.

Has the discourse of liberation been exhausted by its cooptation and bureaucratization? Will a new politics require a different syntax? Perhaps. Liberation had the advantage of clarifying the forces of antagonism and specifying the stakes. It was powerful enough in its appeal to invite its cooptation and containment. Given what was promised in the sixties’ cry for liberation, however, what the system delivered was meager fare. The desire, certainly, has not been exhausted, although it may go by a different name.