



WILLIAM HINTON ON THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

BY DAVE PUGH

originally published by *Monthly Review*, March 2005

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Ever since the major reversals of socialism in the 20th century, first in the Soviet Union and then in China, leftists internationally have been faced with a serious question: After the initial victory of the people's revolutionary forces, what can be done to keep on the "socialist road"? What measures can be taken to restrict the class differences inherited from the old society, fend off imperialist hostility and intervention, and prevent a new capitalist class from developing within socialist society itself?

The Cultural Revolution was China's answer to this question. It was an historical first—a punctuated series of mass revolutionary upsurges within a socialist country. It took place within the space of eleven years (1966-1976). Initiated by Mao Tsetung and

his supporters in the Chinese Communist Party, the Cultural Revolution was aimed at overthrowing "capitalist roaders" at the highest levels of the party who were steering China towards full-scale capitalist restoration. This unprecedented form of class struggle engaged tens of millions of workers, peasants, students and intellectuals.

In a 1999 speech at the Socialist Scholars Conference in New York City, William Hinton explained that the method of the Cultural Revolution was to "mobiliz[e] the common people to seize power from below in order to establish new representative leading bodies, democratically elected organs of power." All over China, tens of thousands of revolutionary committees in factories, farms and schools were built. Inspired by Mao's vision, people developed other socialist new things which revolutionized society, such as barefoot doctors in the countryside, and cultural works based on the rich life experiences of China's workers and peasants.

Mao understood that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a high-stakes battle to prevent the emergence of state capitalism in China. He had studied the political economy and social relations in the USSR and was convinced that capitalism had been restored there. Ultimately Mao and his allies failed, but that does not mean that they shouldn't have launched this historic struggle. Writing in the early 1970s, Hinton made a profound observation: "socialist revolution is much more complex and difficult than most revolutionaries have hitherto supposed, that the seizure of power... is only the first step in a protracted revolutionary process..."

Many people on the Left, in the US and internationally, have had a negative view of the Cultural Revolution. The corporate media has played an active role here. In the 1980s and 90s, a new book appeared every month on the theme of "how my family and I were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution." Of course, the context for these persecution stories is lacking. It is impossible to tell whether the authors were incorrectly (or correctly) targeted as capitalist roaders. Which factions of the Red Guards were involved—those honestly trying to carry out Mao's policies, ultra-leftists, or sham Red Guards organized by Liu Shiao-chi and Deng Tsiao-ping, the main proponents in the party of taking the capitalist road?

The issues surrounding the Cultural Revolution require clarification--not just for writing

history, but looking towards the next wave of socialist revolutions. What better person than William Hinton, who spent most of his adult life working in China, for learning about the Cultural Revolution and the twists and turns in his own understanding of this historic revolution within a socialist society?

William Hinton's views on the Cultural Revolution went through three periods of development. The first is most clearly represented in *Turning Point in China: An Essay on the Cultural Revolution* (MR Press, 1972). In *Shenfan* (Random House, 1983) Hinton is critical of Mao and the Cultural Revolution, and supports the new government that came to power during the 1976-1978 period after the arrest of the "gang of four."

By *The Great Reversal: The Privatization of China, 1978-1989* (MR Press, 1990), Hinton publicly opposes the new regime and supports the goals of the Cultural Revolution—even if it did not succeed in realizing them. Hinton further develops this line of thinking in his speeches and articles during the 1990s. His speech at the 1999 Socialist Scholars Convention in New York City is particularly noteworthy. (Reprinted in the September 2004 issue of *Monthly Review*.)

One of Bill Hinton's great strengths was his insistence on "seeking truth from facts."

He reported what he saw, and what others whom he trusted told him. At the same time he maintained a critical attitude and often let the reader decide how to evaluate key issues. Hinton was brutally honest and let the chips fall where they may. At one time or another, he criticized the policies or actions of just about all of the Chinese leadership—but he never wavered in his support for the Chinese people and socialism.

Turning Point in China (1972)

In the early 1970s, Hinton firmly supported the goals, methods and achievements of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. After a 1971 visit to China at the invitation of Premier Chou Enlai, Hinton wrote *Turning Point in China*:

The heart of the Cultural Revolution has indeed been a struggle for power, a struggle over the control of state power... But it has not been a struggle over power for power's sake... It has been a class struggle to determine whether individuals representing the working class or individuals representing the bourgeoisie will hold state power. It has been a struggle to determine whether China will continue to take the socialist road and carry the socialist revolution through to the end, or whether China will abandon the socialist road for the capitalist road. (pp. 16-17)

[S]ocialism must be regarded as a transition from capitalism to communism (or in the case of China from new democracy to communism). As such it bears within it many contradictions, many inequalities that cannot be done away with overnight or even in the course of several years or several decades.

These inequalities are inherited from the old society, such things as pay differentials between skilled and unskilled work and between mental and manual work, such things as the differences between the economic, educational, and cultural opportunities available in the city and in the countryside, as long as these inequalities exist they generate privilege, individualism, careerism and bourgeois ideology... They can and do create new bourgeois individuals who gather as a new privileged elite and ultimately as a new exploiting class. Thus socialism can be peacefully transformed back into socialism. (pp. 20-21)

In *Turning Point*, Hinton placed the Cultural Revolution in an international context. China faced a serious threat from US imperialism in the Pacific and Southeast Asia (the Vietnam War was still raging in 1971). In Siberia, the Soviet Union posed a growing and possibly imminent threat to China's nuclear program and plants.

The primary foreign policy issues in the Cultural Revolution were: How to deal with military threats from the USSR and the US, how to develop modern defensive armaments, and how to continue supporting national liberation struggles. China was the largest source of military aid for the peoples of Indochina.

A key question was what kind of "opening" or political alliance should socialist China develop with the West to deal with the Soviet Union's growing military threat to China, especially its nuclear program. Deng saw this opening in strategic terms, and was able to use it to rip China off the socialist road and integrate China into the U.S. imperialist-dominated global economy. While these questions "helped to define the dividing line between the contending forces in China," Hinton emphasized that the Cultural Revolution developed as a result of internal contradictions arising out of socialist construction in China.

In a breath-taking passage in *Turning Point*, Hinton situates the Cultural Revolution within a protracted, perhaps centuries long, global process of revolutionary struggle and transformation:

In the course of the Cultural Revolution Mao Tse-tung and his supporters, by mobilizing a great mass movement of the people, have confronted one great wave of capitalist restoration. Other waves are sure to follow. It will take decades, perhaps a century or two, before the working class can establish socialism so firmly in any one country that it can no longer be challenged. In fact this can probably only come about when socialism is established on a world scale.

One can expect more cultural revolutions in China and many cultural revolutions in other parts of the world wherever working people take power and embark on socialist construction....

All this indicates that socialist revolution is much more complex and difficult than most revolutionaries have hitherto supposed, that the seizure of power.... is only the first step in protracted revolutionary process and may well be easier than the steps which follow. (p. 106)

Shenfan (1983)

A decade later, Hinton's views on the Cultural Revolution had shifted dramatically.

In *Shenfan* (1983), Hinton credits it with starting off in a positive direction. However, he writes that it quickly degenerated into factionalism and unprincipled contests for power at national, provincial and local levels. In these works, Hinton bends the stick to criticize ultra-leftism; these groupings split and wrecked mass movements, allowing rightist forces to pick up the pieces and maintain power. He also dismisses the seizure of power by revolutionary workers in Shanghai in 1967. (p. 517)

Hinton asserts in *Shenfan* that Mao had to take major responsibility for these leftist excesses because he refused to initiate mass campaigns to put an end to them. Hinton also writes that Mao was making use of China's Confucian and feudal culture to build up a personality cult. (p. 766) Still, Hinton supports Mao's political outlook and policies

against Liu and other leading capitalist roaders in the Party. (p. 760) In one chapter, Hinton strongly supports the 16 Points that launched the Cultural Revolution and explains them in detail. Hinton argues that the 16 Points were in the main ignored; instead, factionalism and heightened antagonisms among the people predominated.

Shenfan picks up from Hinton's classic *Fanshen*. Hinton compiles a mainly oral history of Long Bow village during socialist construction. He demonstrates the viability of the Mao's socialist road in agriculture in Long Bow, and in the Dazhai brigade in southern Shanxi province. This model brigade was hailed for its ability to "grasp revolution, promote production." On the basis of new collective forms of organization and the stronger unity and heightened revolutionary consciousness of its members, the Dazhai brigade built new infrastructural works and made big gains in agricultural production from formerly barren hillsides.

The book also describes in detail the unprincipled factional strife and civil war from 1966-71 that left at least 800 dead in southern Shanxi. This must have come as a huge shock to Hinton, and no doubt made him much more critical of the Cultural Revolution.

After Deng came to power in 1978, Hinton sought and received permission from the Chinese government to live and work in China in the 1980s. He served as an agricultural consultant, and some of his reports and proposals (such as a UN-funded model collective villages project) are included in *The Great Reversal*. His presence in China enabled Hinton to witness and write about the process of capitalist restoration in the countryside "up close and personal." However, it also helped prevent him from drawing correct conclusions about the nature of the new regime for 10 years. During these years, Hinton's tended to be pragmatic and he uncharacteristically lost sight of the bigger picture.

On one occasion, Hinton wrote about his post-1978 thinking:

I did not leap from defender to critic overnight however. As an old friend of New China living abroad, I was certainly free to speak out. But at the beginning of the reform period, I consciously avoided passing hasty judgment. I decided, with uncharacteristic forbearance, to wait and see what the new regime, with most of the old heroes gone, would do. My particular concern, was of course, the countryside. (*The Great Reversal*, p. 13)

Hinton was more detailed and self-critical in his forward to the Chinese edition of *Shenfan*, which appeared in 1993. He even considered rewriting the book. (See *Mao Zedong Thought Lives* (1995), pp. 163-168)

When Hinton summed up what had happened to socialism in China in the 1980s, he came out with guns blazing.

The Great Reversal (1990)

As many *MR* readers know, *The Great Reversal* is a detailed study of how Deng and his fellow capitalist roaders dismantled collective agriculture in the 1980s through the imposition of the "family responsibility system." This included a frontal attack on the model brigade in Dazhai. Hinton's visits and talks with knowledgeable people inside China allowed him to refute the lies of the regime about the smashing "successes" of the so-called reforms. Hinton was also in Beijing during the Tienanmen crackdown in 1989,

in which the army killed at least 2,000 civilians and injured thousands more.

By the time he came out with *The Great Reversal* in 1990, Hinton's view of the Cultural Revolution reaffirmed his position in the early 1970s. He refuted the claims of the new rulers that the Cultural Revolution was a "catastrophe":

As things have turned out, it seems clear that Mao correctly appraised the opposition in regard to what he stood for and what it wanted to do with power. Since Mao's death and the dismissal of Hua Guofeng from office, Deng and his group have dismantled, step by step, almost the whole of the economic system and the social and political superstructure build in the first thirty years following liberation, and they are rushing to finish off what remains....

Mao foresaw this, called it the "capitalist road," and called Liu and Deng "capitalist roaders." He launched the Cultural Revolution in a major, historically unprecedented campaign to remove them from power and prevent them from carrying out their line. In the end he failed.

The Cultural Revolution unleashed action and counteraction, initiative and counter-initiative, encirclement and counter-encirclement, all sorts of excesses, leftist and rightist, and an overall situation that spun out of anyone's control. To blame Mao alone for the disruptions caused by this struggle, for the setbacks and disasters that ensued, is equivalent to the Guomindang blaming the Communists for the disruptions of China's liberation war. (p. 156-57)

Whereas Hinton in *Shenfan* was dismissive of the idea of a "bourgeoisie in the party," by *The Great Reversal* he had come to a deeper understanding of the decisive nature of class struggle within the Communist Party:

Due to historical circumstances peculiar to China, all the politics of the postwar era—all the forces that mattered, all the issued that counted—tended to concentrate inside the Communist Party. Thus the struggle took the form of an internal contest for control of the party and through it for control of the country. Mao saw this phenomenon pretty clearly and began a struggle against the opposition very early. As time went on the struggle escalated, reaching a climax in the Cultural Revolution. (p. 158)

Hinton also came to a more balanced understanding of the role of the gang of four. They included two Politbureau members from Shanghai, Chang Chun-chiao and Wang Hung-wen, writer Yao Wen-yuan, and Mao's wife, Chiang Ching. In *Shenfan* Hinton wrote approvingly of the arrest of the gang of four by the combined forces of Deng and Hua Guofeng in 1976.

In *The Great Reversal*, Hinton doesn't mention the 1976 coup; instead he focuses on Deng's coup against Hua in 1978 and the subsequent dismantling of socialism. By the end of the 1980s, Hinton concluded that Liu, Deng and other leading capitalist-roaders had been the most serious threat to the Chinese revolution, not ultra-leftists such as the "gang of four." Nevertheless, Hinton believed that the gang of four helped produce the "virtual stalemate" in which the Cultural Revolution ended:

The result was immeasurably complicated by the ultraleft ideology and activity of the gang of four. I do not subscribe to any "gang of five" theory that lumps Mao with his wife and her three cohorts politically, though he certainly was responsible for their coming to prominence to start with. They grossly distorted Mao's policies and directives, carried sound initiatives to extremes that turned them inside out and upside down, and succeeded in wrecking whatever they touched. Although in previous periods Mao had been able to correct both right and "left" excesses, in the 1960s he found himself on "Liang Mountain" in regard to "leftism"—that is, virtually immobilized by a contradiction with the right that he felt tied his hands in dealing with the "left." (158)

Two Important Speeches in the 1990s

In a 1991 speech at Harvard, published in *Monthly Review* ("The Chinese Revolution"), Hinton explained the very real obstacles faced by the Cultural Revolution:

In the Cultural Revolution, Mao mobilized millions of citizens to confront powerholders, particularly capitalist roaders, to overthrow the traditional hierarchy from below, and to build a new government structure, starting with revolutionary committees composed of citizens, cadres and soldiers. But every effort in this direction generated a counter-effort from the establishment under attack. Core functionaries were able to delay, divert, misdirect, or carry to absurd extremes every initiative from Mao's side. Far from creating a new, more democratic form of government, the movement bogged down in unprincipled power struggles that exhausted everyone and led nowhere. The failure of the Cultural Revolution laid the groundwork for a great reversal of policy in all fields. (p.10)

On the post-1949 period as a whole, Hinton wrote in this 1991 article about the systematic attempts of the rightist forces to oppose and sabotage every revolutionary initiative taken by Mao and his supporters:

A regular pattern of right-wing obstruction alternating with ultra-left wrecking made it very hard for those building socialism to consolidate any new set of production relations, any new social structure, or any new ideology. For thirty years after 1949, those who were trying to create, develop and consolidate socialism faced fierce opposition from those who wanted to block, undermine, and cripple it in order to pursue a capitalist alternative.

...[A]t no time did Mao and his supporters have a free hand to take initiatives, deepen and consolidate them, learn from mistakes, and move forward. Every step had to overcome not only the inertia of custom and tradition but also the determined opposition of a large, powerful and cleverly led faction of the party itself. "Never forget class struggle" was no idle Maoist slogan. Intense struggle between social classes over basic policy permeated the whole period. That struggle continues to this day. (p.13)

In this 1991 speech, Hinton pointed to the devastating consequences for China as it became increasingly integrated into the imperialist-run global economy, and its inevitable return to being a semi-colonial country dominated by the Western powers and Japan. (This period of rapid capitalist expansion internally and abroad is documented by Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett in the July-August 2004 edition of *Monthly Review: China & Socialism: Market Reforms and Class Struggle*.) While tending to underestimate the ability of China to stave off crisis by garnering export markets with its brutal strategy of low-wage primitive accumulation, Hinton's analysis has been borne out since then.

In his speech at the 1999 Socialist Scholars Conference, Hinton eloquently described the necessity, goals and historical legacy of the Cultural Revolution:

[T]he Cultural Revolution, after generating a tremendous storm, wound down without consolidating its goals. However, in my opinion, the movement as a whole was a great creative departure in history. It was not a plot, not a purge, but a mass mobilization whereby people were inspired to intervene, to screen and supervise their cadres and form new popular committees to exercise control at the grass roots and higher.

The whole idea that the principal contradiction of the times, the class struggle between the working class and the capitalist class, expressed itself in the Party center, and that unless it was resolved in the interest of the working class, the socialist revolution would founder, the whole idea that the method must be mobilizing the common people to seize power from below in order to

establish new representative leading bodies, democratically elected organs of power - these were breakthroughs in history summed up by the phrase "Bombard the Headquarters". They constituted, in my opinion, Mao's greatest contribution to revolutionary theory and practice, lighting the way to progress in our time.

Had Mao succeeded, I think there is no doubt we would have today a burgeoning socialist economy and culture in China with enormous prestige among the people. The economic advance might be slower than the current one, but it would be much more solid and much more useful as a development model for all Third World peoples now living in abysmal poverty and exploitation.

Mao and The Cultural Revolution's Enduring Legacy

In *The Great Reversal* and his speeches in the 1990s, Hinton marshals facts to demonstrate why Chinese agricultural production is already stagnating and in some areas is in acute crisis as a result of the capitalist "reforms." He points to high levels of unemployment, migration, social ills, and open political unrest. He points to growing social polarization and a greater vulnerability of the Chinese economy to crises in the world capitalist economy. His conclusion: The future does not look bright for Deng's successors.

Throughout the 80s, it appears that Hinton believed that the political direction of the new regime could still be reversed within the party by honest cadre. By 1989, in the wake of the Tienanmen Massacre of several thousand students and workers by units of the erstwhile People's Liberation Army from Sichuan (Deng's home province), Hinton had reached a new view.

My estimate is that there are large numbers of dedicated communists in the Chinese Communist Party and also in the army. I foresee the possibility of change brought about by the mobilization of such people—perhaps through an army coup led by radical officers who can rally all the revolutionary elements in the army, in the party, and in society. (p. 191)

Putting aside the wisdom of a "change" strategy based on the party and army, Hinton believed that the new regime COULD no longer be reformed by means of non-antagonistic struggle within the Communist Party. Hinton would be very pleased to hear of the case of the Zengzhou Four, veteran workers from Henan who passed out flyers titled "Mao Zedong Forever Our Leader" on December 26, 2004, Mao's birthday. The flyers denounced the Party leadership and called for a return to the socialist road. Tens of thousands of people from all over China attended their trial, and news of their courageous actions spread over the Internet.

In this article's concluding words, Hinton writes poetically about China's future:

The Chinese are an energetic, dynamic, creative people. They have a long revolutionary history and large reserves of revolutionary consciousness and motivation. New waves of rebellion and revolution will come. In France, after the Thermidor, came 1848, and after 1848, 1870. Events in our era move ever more quickly. One can say with confidence: "The revolution is dead. Long live the revolution." (p. 15)

In the last decade of his life, Hinton drew on his prescient writings during the Cultural Revolution about its historical significance for the people of China and the world. Revolutionary movements that succeed in defeating reactionary regimes and undertake socialist construction will be able to draw on Hinton's body of writings on the decisive

struggle to stay on the socialist road.

Like the development of Marxism itself, William Hinton's understanding of this earth-shaking event went through twists and turns, steps back and steps up to higher levels of understanding. At the end of the day, William Hinton concluded that he had to defend the Cultural Revolution in order to stand with the Chinese people, oppose the oppressive state capitalists in China, and support people's struggles against imperialism and for socialism around the world.