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Claudia Pozzana & Alessandro Russo

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CONTINUITY / DISCONTINUITY

China's Place in the Contemporary World

Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo

Translated from the Italian by Wallace Sillanpoa

ABSTRACT: Starting from issues Wang Hui raises in “The Dialectics of Autonomy and Opening” (*Critical Asian Studies* 43:2), the authors of this article focus on the problematic coexistence of continuities and discontinuities in modern and contemporary Chinese politics. China's present role in the international scene, they argue, cannot be assessed in terms of economic performance, but requires new perspectives for rethinking the search of China for an original path in domestic politics, as well as the universalistic attitude toward the various forms of thinking coming from all over the world.

“L'esprit de l'égalité n'est point que l'homme puisse dire à l'homme: je suis aussi puissant que toi. Il n'y a point de puissance légitime; ni les lois ni Dieu même ne sont des puissances, mais seulement la théorie de ce qui est bien. L'esprit de l'égalité est que chaque individu soit une portion égale de la souveraineté, c'est-à-dire du tout.” — Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just

Alessandro Russo [AR]: The line of argument in Wang Hui's essay “The Dialectics of Autonomy and Opening,”¹ features two fundamental investigations: one, a reconsideration of the experimental character of Chinese politics in the twentieth century; the other, a diagnosis of the main issues at stake in contemporary China. Looking at the great tradition of modern Chinese politics, Wang Hui assesses the experimental originality and non-predetermined character of the choices made as well as directions undertaken, the sum of which he calls “autonomy.” In regard to the situation today, that is, to the nature of what is generally called the “opening and reforms policies” of the last three decades,

Wang Hui examines in detail the complexity of transformations under way, i.e., the place of China in the framework of phenomena commonly referred to as globalization, whether examined from the standpoint of economic or political choices. The historical assessment made by Wang Hui, although written on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China, is anything but celebrative insofar as its departure point is a precise evaluation of the present-day world financial crisis. Wang Hui sees this crisis as the starting point in the decline of the hegemony of neoliberalism, a hegemony, moreover, in which China is situated at a pivotal point.

Furthermore, for Wang Hui it is essential that the problems of Chinese politics he is scrutinizing must be discussed in the framework of absolute global dimensions, and such is reflected in the breadth of theoretical and analytical references Wang Hui offers. In recent years he has conducted a series of in-depth critical analyses regarding the hegemony of neoliberalism in Chinese politics. It is clearly apparent in his book *China's New Order*,² as well as in this essay to which I am referring, how wide-ranging the international cultural references are not only in Wang Hui's work but also within the whole political and cultural debate in China.

Contemporaneity and Anticipations

Claudia Pozzana [CP]: This breadth of references is the result of a great modern Chinese intellectual and political tradition. Since the second half of the nineteenth century there has been no cessation in Chinese intellectual inquiry into the carefully examined encounter and critical discussion of a broad range of worldwide intellectual reference points, in all the fields of political, artistic, and scientific thinking. The result is that in today's China there is greater familiarity with "Western" cultural references than there is of Chinese cultural references in the "West." Entering a bookstore in China one is immediately aware of such a lack of proportionality. Even a cursory glance brings into view a sea of translations from any number of Western languages. Such is not even minimally the case in relation to what one finds on Chinese culture in European and American bookstores. China is viewed from abroad as through a dense fog that doesn't allow one to discern contours and reference points. From China, on the other hand, the gaze directed at Europe and the entire world can be very sharp, able to focus on a wide array of themes and issues. To "Western" cultural eyes the image of "China" produces an exotic fascination derived from the colonial tradition, joined with the no less colonial phantoms of a cultural "otherness" considered mysterious and even menacing. This imbalance between a "Western eye," deformed by a superstitious view of "China," and a "Chinese eye," trained by at least a century and a half of critical knowledge of the "West," is even more pronounced today now that the Chinese economy and State are playing a leading role in world geopolitics. The world importance of China today is beyond

1. Wang Hui 2011, 000-000.
2. Wang Hui 2003.

question, but that importance is seen only in economic terms as a miracle of recent vintage. In the midst of today's financial crisis, the Chinese economy appears to be "holding up" better than that of other nations. There is even talk of Chinese-American supremacy, of a "Chimerica," as it were.

AR: A name denoting a great incredulity as to any real possibility of a Sino-American duopoly. Whatever the role of China may be in today's world remains uncertain. Its economy is strong and growing, without doubt, but it could be demonstrated that this is nothing new. Except for a few moments, China's economy has been almost steadily growing stronger since the 1950s. Hence, the current, stereotyped image of "China" is a projection surface of the "narrative of modernity" that Wang Hui deconstructs in *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*.³ The "West" would be the source from which emerges the main logic of historical development, whereby China would be the exception that finally falls under the rules. Such is alleged to be the nature of China's "return to capitalism." And so it is that China returns to the "river bed" of the evolution of "modernity."

CP: Given the present financial crisis, one might expect greater caution in regard to the "historical logic" of a "modernity" focused on the "West."

AR: And yet current discourse still veers in that direction. A short while ago, on the occasion of the release of an issue of an important Italian journal of geopolitics dedicated to China's role in the present economic crisis, the director and an editor discussed prospects for the transformation of the Chinese economy toward an internal market and not primarily in the direction of exports. The editor observed, and rightfully, that among the obstacles to an extension of internal consumption there is the tendency on the part of the Chinese toward an increase in savings. This is due to their need to cover directly, at least partially, the costs of their health care, education, etc. At this point the journal's director observed that what China lacks is welfare since that country has never known a "social democratic" political tradition.

CP: A quite twisted version of the "narrative of modernity." It ignores the fact that in socialist countries, including China, welfare was extensive as never before to the point that there are those who have said it was too all-encompassing.

AR: The Chinese industrial *danwei* (work unit), just as the *kombinat* in the USSR, were highly articulated forms of sociality created expressly through State intervention whereby there existed almost total welfare: schools, hospitals, stores, in addition, naturally, housing for the workers. In the revolutionary era, it was, if anything, the monetary part of wages that was of scant relevance. In China the industrial *danwei* was a small society within which the *fuli*, the Chinese name for welfare, in a broader sense played an essential role.

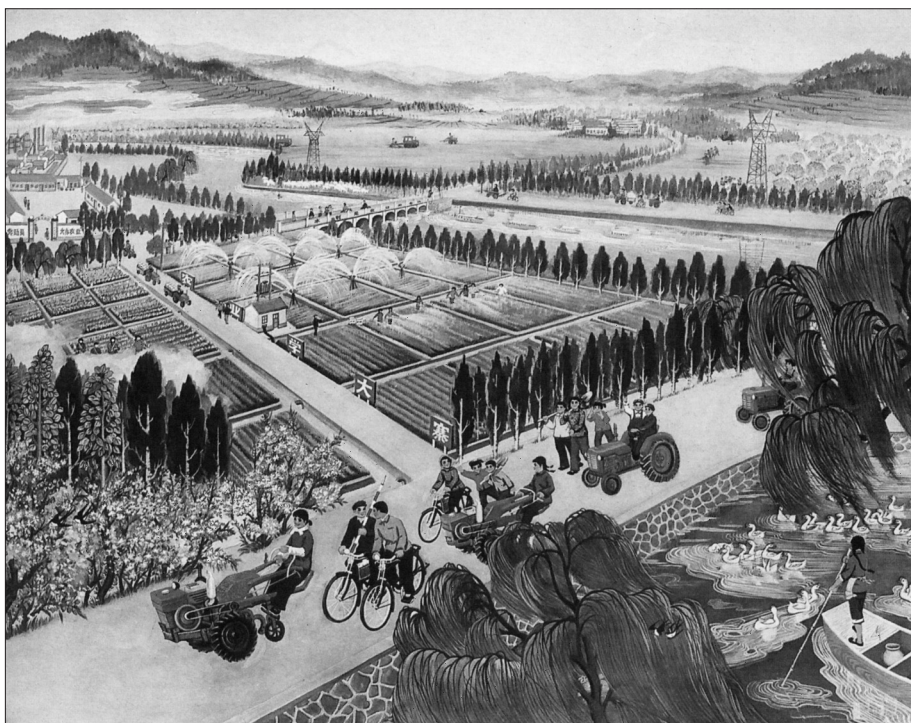
CP: Obviously, the situation of the peasantry in China was very different. Without doubt, there was much less welfare in rural areas than in the cities. But the question of how to extend schools and health care to the countryside had been, since the 1950s, a main priority of Maoist policies as well as a major source of political controversy. Mao often engaged in polemics with what he called the

3. Wang Hui 2004.

Ministry of Health of the City Lords, which he considered to be one of the greatest sources of inequality. Moreover, in the people's communes the famous barefoot doctors, peasant men and women with basic medical training, capable of curing the most widespread diseases, together with the popular-run schools, were experiments carried out with steadfastness and various degrees of success. All this was dismantled beginning in the 1980s. In the Chinese countryside today, schools and health care systems are in dire straits.

AR: Contrary to what our geopolitical journalists imagine, "Western" social-democratic welfare has been prodded by the very existence of the socialist states. And, vice versa, it is precisely the crisis of the socialist states that is triggering the crisis in social-democratic welfare. In addition, within the worldwide crisis in the conceptualization of the welfare state, China's transformations have played a decisive role.

CP: It must also be said that this model of welfare had sustained an economic development much more efficacious than is usually thought. The current image of a China that up until 1976 had wallowed in stagnation under a totalitarian regime and within an "economy of penury" from which it has emerged thanks solely to the "reforms" of Deng is completely without foundation. Moreover, this portrayal serves only to confirm the "narrative of modernity," which is completely synonymous with the "West" and "capitalism." Being "non-capitalist"



"Commune's Spring" (Gongshe zhi chun). "In the people's communes the famous barefoot doctors, peasant men and women with basic medical training, ... together with the popular-run schools, were experiments carried out with steadfastness and various degrees of success. All this was dismantled beginning in the 1980s. In the Chinese countryside today, schools and health care systems are in dire straits." (Courtesy: Stefan Landsberger)

and “non-Western,” prior to 1976 China was—to this way of thinking—“not modern.”

AR: In reality China has experienced a truly noteworthy growth in its GNP since the 1950s. Except for a few moments of extreme difficulty, economic growth has been sustained and constant. According to statistics released by the Chinese government, in 1975—politically a pivotal year—the GNP had grown by almost 10 percent over the preceding year; in the decade 1966–76 average growth stood at greater than 7 percent. The problem that brought Deng Xiaoping to power was not at all that of facing up to economic catastrophe; it was essentially a political problem, the crucial problem of China’s passage from revolution to reform. Wang Hui’s essay shows how profound and multiform is the issue viewed from within China’s historical and political debate. The essay is an invaluable source for a non-Chinese reader given the difficulty in retrieving reliable resources on these themes.

CP: Almost everything on China coming from journalistic sources reinforces a biased image, especially as far as historical perspective is concerned. The problem of continuity and discontinuity in contemporary Chinese politics is customarily treated as a series of variations that, in the last analysis, prove irrelevant within the aforementioned “narrative of modernity.” There exists a complacent ignorance in regard to the culture, knowledge, thought, and language of China. Conversely, and as Wang Hui demonstrates, in China’s intellectual universe, there is extensive awareness of foreign historical and philosophical issues, as well as of international politics. A great many Chinese intellectuals, beginning at least in the mid nineteenth century, paid special attention to the great contemporary questions of the wider world. Such attention, moreover, remains expressly critical and in no way imitative. One of the colonialist fables regarding China, and one still in vogue today, is that China has become modern by copying the West.

AR: In addition to being up-to-date with the rest of the world, modern China has always been even a bit ahead in regard to great world tendencies, often provoking surprise and embarrassment within Western ideology. Marx said sarcastically that Western armies readying themselves to invade China during the Opium Wars would find fixed to the Great Wall the words “*Liberté, égalité, fraternité.*”

CP: In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Taiping Revolution was profoundly egalitarian and foreshadowed fundamental aspects of twentieth-century Chinese and world politics, above all, in regard to the political role of the peasantry. The Taiping revolutionaries were also very egalitarian in their practices concerning the relations between men and women and even carried out a highly advanced educational reform. Also the arrival of Western thought thanks to the Chinese reformers of the 1890s included the most recent scientific, political, and philosophical theories in modern Europe. Among the most famous authors of that turn of the century are Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer, but also Montesquieu and Adam Smith. David Ricardo, for example, served as an essential reference for Sun Yat-sen.

AR: The 1911 Revolution was an inspiration to Lenin himself and in a certain sense foreshadowed the October Revolution precisely for having taken place in an Asiatic and non-capitalist country. Conversely, Marxism arriving from the October Revolution burst upon the scene in China in the course of the New Culture Movement in the second half of the decade 1910–20.

CP: It is surprising how little is known outside China about the New Culture Movement, which intellectually was one of the richest and most significant in twentieth-century Chinese history. China's place in the contemporary world was forged in the crucible of the years 1915–20. We have only to recall such a giant of world literature as Lu Xun, whose various works have fortunately been translated into most major languages. And so it is with the century's great political figures who came of age in that period: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping himself. During those years in China young people were reading Oscar Wilde and Turgenev, and they were taking part in heated debates about Ibsen's "A Doll's House." But these Chinese youth were also reading Marx and Lenin. The extraordinary thing is that these young people were reading from Greek antiquity, Plato and Epicurus, for example, while exploring at the same time contemporary writers such as Nietzsche and Dewey. (The American philosopher had spent more than a year in China precisely at the time of the May 4th Movement 1919.) From this time on, Chinese intellectual undertakings have always evidenced familiarity with everything being published and discussed throughout the rest of the world. Even during the years of so-called closure, there was an enormous quantity of translated works of every genre that proved formative to the most refined intellectuals of our times. To say that translations in China began to appear only in these past few decades is totally without basis in fact.

AR: Fundamental political phenomena of world importance in the twentieth century have been prefigured by China's great political moments: prolonged people's war that began in China in the late 1920s anticipate that which in Europe became the partisan warfare of the 1940s. The Sino–Soviet rift foreshadows the emergence of the crisis of the Socialist state and thus likewise anticipates the end of the cold war. Clearly the Cultural Revolution of 1966 foreshadows 1968 and even more deeply triggers the crisis in communist parties and the whole Party-State phenomenon of the twentieth century. Moreover, the 1976 end to the Cultural Revolution not only anticipated but in a certain way determined the end to that worldwide sequence of political events of the sixties and seventies; it likewise brought closure to the "age of revolution," thus forcing us to rethink a plethora of political reference points stretching back to October 1917 if not to the French Revolution. Finally, the "Reforms," the policies following the Cultural Revolution, likewise preview and give the starting signal to many of the worldwide tendencies of governmental and economic powers of these past few decades. Besides its economic power, which Wang Hui

4. Pozzana and Russo 1999.

5. Wang 2003.

points out as problematic, the question now is which further world phenomena China now anticipates.

The 1990s in China and Their Conclusion

CP: I am struck by a key point that Wang Hui's "The Dialectics of Autonomy and Opening" makes in its periodization of the last sixty years of the Peoples' Republic of China. I refer to his affirmation that the 1990s end in the year 2008. In a collection of contemporary poets and narrators we compiled about ten years ago,⁴ we asked ourselves this very question: the 1990s began in 1989, but when would they end? Wang Hui brings clarity to this question. We posed the question primarily within the realm of contemporary Chinese poetry and art while keeping well in mind the political context of the 1989 movement since we had been in China for many months during that period and we had made direct inquiry into those events up to the moment of their tragic conclusion. Ten years later it was understood that the way in which these events came to a conclusion had initiated in China a prolonged phase, paradoxically a phase of stability whose duration no one could know.

AR: In Wang Hui's view the 1990s were the age of neoliberalism's hegemony in China, a hegemony—he himself has demonstrated in *China's New Order*⁵—which is intimately connected to the tragic outcome of the Tian'anmen movement. The violent repression of that movement was the precondition for dynamically setting in motion an intense campaign of the Chinese government to privatize important sectors of the State industrial system by establishing a market economy while dismantling a great part of the Socialist State's egalitarian structures, above all, health care and education. In this way, for Wang Hui, too, the 1990s began in 1989. Since 2008, though, given today's world financial crisis, this hegemony can no longer be said to be uncontested.

CP: There are likewise other flashpoints that mark 2008 as another turning point for China: the Olympics that garnered full international recognition; the revolt in Tibet that brought to light (just as the 2009 Urumqi incidents) all the difficulties intrinsic to the unity of the multinational State (to these must be added clear "humanitarian" interferences); the earthquake in Sichuan wherein, in addition to the noteworthy operational capacities of the government, a decisive role was played by the aid that arrived thanks to a wide and unexpected voluntary mobilization of Chinese youth from all over the country.

AR: In any case, Wang Hui's periodization posits 2008 as marking a key passage precisely in the realm of politics and the economy. Neoliberalism's hegemony, whose dominant economic policies in China had proffered immense credit at an international level, is a hegemony that can no longer claim to be self-evident. The world financial crisis poses "new challenges"—as even important exponents of the Chinese government say by now—to which one cannot respond by simply continuing in the same neoliberal directions of the past twenty years.

CP: However, the recent end to the "1990s" appears also to mark the end to a certain kind of stabilization, as is evident in the Chinese government's insistence on the desirability of a "harmonious society." When there is a great deal of talk about harmony, you know that it is because there is much disharmony. If

2008 marks the end to a phase begun after the 1989 movement, it seems there has occurred a weakening of a fundamental element in that stability upon which the ensemble of State measures of the preceding twenty years had rested.

AR: Wang Hui has clearly demonstrated that only in the wake of the events of 1989 had it been possible to set in speedy motion a series of government measures that made way for developments of the 1990s, but a series of measures, nonetheless, that had remained uncertain in the preceding years, even months, because of numerous controversies and widespread mass resistance to these undertakings.

CP: One wonders how the Chinese government was able to affect such dynamic undertakings in the field of economy and finance despite the upheavals of Tian'anmen Square. The usual answers generally don't stray far from the charge of "totalitarianism" or even "oriental despotism."

AR: In reality, that dynamic was grounded precisely in the Chinese government's ability to annihilate the 1989 movement both in the short and the long run. In the short run the ruthlessness of the repression eliminated every possible opposition forged in the preceding months to plans for privatization and the imposition of a market economy. For example, price reforms—one of the decisive political measures in those directions—which, since the mid 1980s had long remained uncertain, were decided upon in September 1989 without any obstacle. In the long run, the violent repression of the Tian'anmen movement clearly indicated the Chinese government's intent to outlaw opposition so as to disallow any emergence of mass political movements that the government was wont to brand as mere public disorders. It was State order that precisely had to represent the complete negation of that disorder. This negation has exercised stabilizing effects for about twenty years.

CP: But this seems to support those who denounce the "totalitarian State."

AR: "Totalitarianism" is a cold war category. Already in that past era it was a tool of propaganda and even less today can it guide analysis. From it there emerges the hybrid "neoliberal totalitarianism" with which, however, it remains impossible to propagate the "democratic" virtues of a "free market." I think we have to seek other perspectives. The route I propose for analyzing the "1990s" in China is this: the foundation of Chinese stabilization these past twenty years is not totalitarianism but rather a specific process of negation and emptying out of a great moment in mass political subjectivity as was precisely the Tian'anmen movement. The existence of a period of State stability founded on the obliteration of a political event is a phenomenon that has nothing specifically "Chinese" or "totalitarian" about it. What it does point to are the dynamics of the relationship between State and politics. It can be demonstrated that in the modern age the subjective forms of the State are the reverse, or better, the emptying out of subjective forms of the last great political sequence. Naturally, there are moments of mass political subjective agency of a different intensity and im-

6. Russo 2006.

7. Russo 2009.

portance. Several prevail within a determined national setting; others have international consequences, and some unleash long-term processes while others are short-term ones. In the case of the Tian'anmen Movement the consequences in China and even worldwide have been prolonged and are very relevant.

The Hollow Imprint

CP: This is an argument you proposed already in one of our earlier discussions concerning Wang Hui's analyses in *China's New Order*. In regard to the relationship between this new order and past disorders you said that all State order is the "hollow imprint" of the last sequence of political events.

AR: I had begun to formulate this analytical perspective in regard to the relationship between the Cultural Revolution in China and the period following it. I was attempting to clarify the sense of "integral negation," that is, the formula by which the Chinese Party-State has sealed its official verdict on the Cultural Revolution, a verdict today still in full force.⁶ The "integral negation" of the Cultural Revolution has been the main source of the subjective State dynamic in China stretching back to the last great political dispute between Mao and Deng in 1975, as I proved recently.⁷ I think the same phenomenon can be pointed to in very different national situations and at very different historical moments even though I maintain that such is valid especially for the modern era, from the French Revolution on.

CP: The "hollow imprint," then, would constitute a general law in regard to the relationship between State and politics in the modern age?

AR: What interests me more than the exploration of a general theory is a conjunctural theory of the State. The perspective I intend to analyze is this: State powers of course have their kind of structural permanence, but their subjective consistency in a specific age depends, in the final analysis, on the negation of the last great political sequence. In this sense—in any determined moment—State subjectivity can be considered the hollow imprint of political subjectivity of that sequence immediately preceding. This is not a general theory of the State but rather an analytical perspective on the specific functioning of State powers in modern times and, above all, of their subjective consistency, phase by phase. These State phases begin at the moment in which a decisive occurrence of mass political subjectivity has concluded.

CP: Some would say that you are moving in the direction of a history fully *événementielle*, while classic theories of the State are instead geared toward the *longue durée*. For example, for Marx the forms of the State were a reflection of the history of class struggle; for Weber, the result of the evolution of types of domination.

AR: I think both these theories say little to us about the conditions of State power today. It would be better to pursue other ways. It seems to me that the case of today's China is particularly immune to being read both in class terms and in rational-bureaucratic ones. But this insufficiency concerns also the ensemble of contemporary State power.

CP: You say that the State has a structural persistence, but that it has a conjunctural consistency. It is not clear to me, however, in what manner you posit the problem of the relationship between persistence and change. In the ancient Chinese metaphysics there was *zhou* (cyclicality, recurrence, persistence) and *yi* (change).⁸ In each of the aforementioned theories of the State, that of Marx and that of Weber, there was a strong principle of articulation between these two planes.

AR: Both for Marx as well as for Weber, beyond their profound differences, the articulation of persistence and change is sustained above all by the fact that there is no principle of distinction between politics and the State. In the categories “history of class struggle” and “revolution,” politics and the State are indistinguishable. Weber is even more drastic: politics is nothing other than the conquest and redistribution of State power. The problem, instead, that concerns me most is how to find an articulation of permanence and change beginning with the heterogeneity of politics and State and, above all, beginning with a contemporary research of egalitarian politics and emancipation that may remain independent of State power.

CP: Sylvan Lazarus states the thesis of the rarity of politics,⁹ which is to say that politics exists only in finite determined sequences and such political sequences are the exception to the rule. No longer is it that “all history is the history of class struggle,” but rather that politics is rare, intermittent. Would the viewpoint of a conjunctural theory of the State therefore be a consequence of the sequential character of politics?

AR: Yes, it depends on the sequentiality of politics, but also on the heterogeneity between politics and State. I, too, am convinced of the importance of the thesis of Lazarus: politics exists only in determined sequences, for the most part rather brief, that come about as extraordinary with respect to the ordinary advance of the social world. Moreover, the problem of the relation between the sequentiality of politics, on the one hand, and the persistence and change in State power, on the other, is best discussed from the viewpoint of the insuperable discontinuity between politics and State. This is the principal issue at stake for a contemporary thought of politics.

CP: Certainly, the most difficult problem today is what politics could be in order to exert a decisive influence on State undertakings, to efficaciously promote a reduction in inequality, even while standing at a distance from State power, even while reasoning from a point of view extraneous to the “seizure of power.”

AR: It is in regard to the difficulty of this search for a non-power politics that the problem of how to conceive a theoretical articulation of the relationships of politics and State is posited. It is from this perspective that we are driven to rethink the mode of persistence and change of State forms, as well as the relationship between political sequences and State epochs.

8. *Zhouyi* is another title for the classic better known as *Yijing* (Book of Changes).

9. Lazarus 1995.

10. Saint-Just 2003, 25.

CP: Lazarus maintains that the State is intrinsically apolitical, understanding politics to mean the subjective mass search for forms of self-emancipation and equality. This is to say that no politics of this kind can be truly conceived and practiced from within the State; it can only be prescribed from outside the State, from the point of view of the ordinary people, at a “political distance” from the State.

AR: But this is the only conceivable outcome for a politics in our time. To the thesis advanced by Lazarus I would add that not only is the State apolitical but indeed is *anti*-political. It is this aversion of the State to politics that determines its subjective consistency in terms of a “hollow imprint.”

CP: But how can a “hollow imprint” lend subjective consistency to State action, indeed how can it impress a conjunctural dynamic on the state?

AR: The “hollow imprint” must be understood not as the structural framework of the State’s existence at a certain phase, but rather as the process of the “emptying out” of the subjective novelties of the most recent great political sequence. Dynamism, the subjective energy governing State activity, depends primarily on this process. Nevertheless, this energy of State action is only reactive, parasitical in respect to the former political energy from which it draws the very conditions of its existence and duration. Yet precisely because it is reactive this energy is not unlimited and its duration is proportional to the emptying out of the subjective energy of the most recent political sequence.

CP: In reality, every political sequence is an ensemble of infinite multiplicities, a conglomerate of unrepeatable scenes, places, voices, agents, and critical points.

AR: You say a “conglomerate.” Are you using this term with reference to the poet Andrea Zanzotto in his latest collection of verse?

CP: Yes, and Zanzotto’s is a collection of very interesting poetry, though the conglomerates of politics have an intrinsic logic different from those of poems. What the two have in common is that sense of sets of infinite multiplicities. A political sequence is an unrepeatable subjective conglomerate that has in its scope absolute equality, the equality of each one in his or her infinite potential to be transformed and perfected. Moreover, every political sequence is of absolute singularity.

AR: Agreed. Every political sequence has its own singular stake at play, but in the modern era it is always configured around the infinite theme of equality, although each time in a creative and original way. Still, such equality, at the same moment in which it becomes affirmed, reveals the inconsistency of the structure of fiction of the State order. State order “pretends” that subjective singularities can exist only if inscribed in certain defined “communities,” or “parts” of the society. The State-in-itself never allows equality spontaneously because it is not in the least interested in the unlimited unfolding of the unbound multiples, which is the essence of equality. In short, the State-in-itself never allows spontaneously that each one should count for one. Equality always constitutes a wrestling from State order.

CP: This is the problem at the origins of modern politics ever since the dispute of the Third Estate with Louis XVI.

AR: In the French Revolution Saint-Just maintained that equality in no way signifies that one can say to another that he or she has the very same “power,” but rather that everyone possesses an “equal portion of sovereignty.”¹⁰ At every great modern political sequence, when this conception of equality becomes affirmed, the pretense of State sovereignty enters into a situation of stalemate. The existence in a political sequence of the unlimited multiplication of “equal portions” of sovereignty proves the fundamental inconsistency of the State power.

CP: Lazarus theorizes that political sequences, in addition to being rare, are also brief, or rather, that they are destined to an end. They conclude when what he calls “political places,” meaning forms of political organization that do not depend on State order, are exhausted.

AR: Nor on the social order. These political places are so precarious because they do not derive from ordinary sociality, which after all is in no way different from the structures of State sovereignty in a certain historical moment. Society is made up of a network of ritual hierarchies of which State sovereignty is the supreme rule. A political sequence, understood as a conglomerate of egalitarian subjectivities, is always an exception in regard to both the State and society. For this reason modern egalitarian politics are always constituted by a determined distance from the State. Obviously, we are not talking here about what is usually meant by “politics,” which is nothing more than brutal competition between factions of the powerful striving to govern over others. This bureaucratic competition, even though commonly referred to as “politics,” is a function of the State itself. These powerful are puppets of the State-in-itself.

CP: It’s clear that electoral rites make up this type of “politics.” They structure the consensus of public opinion around bureaucratic competitions among the powerful. Politics are either experimentation with egalitarian potentialities or the empty name with which to decorate the hypertrophy of the “ego” of whoever, not knowing how best to exercise control over himself or herself, attempts to discipline others. Whoever occupies positions of power at whatever level always runs the risk of being a puppet within this automatism. He or she can be a person of worth only by making a series of efforts to keep open a space for egalitarian experimentation and through a supervision of his or her operation on the part of the masses at the same time.

AR: This is also an originary problem of modern politics. For Saint-Just the “magistrates” cannot claim to be above the “citizens.” Independent of personal qualities, they always run the risk of identifying with their State functions. Mao used to say that the risk was that of becoming bureaucrats.

CR: In colorful language, he used to say the risk was that of becoming “vampire bureaucrats.” Whenever there is a political sequence, the State stands in the shadows, it is in a stalemate. But what happens to the State when a political sequence comes to an end?

AR: When a political sequence is exhausted, the spontaneous tendency of the state is allegedly that of reconstituting itself in the form that preceded the political sequence that has just ended. But this is literally impossible. The mere “Restoration” is only a propaganda slogan: the restoration never existed, just as

the “integral negation” can never exist. The new State consistency can in no way fail to acknowledge that the last political sequence demonstrated the inconsistency of the preceding form of State fiction. Indeed, it tries to extract the maximum benefit from what the political sequence has destroyed of this fiction. Something of the preceding State order has been irreversibly abolished.

CP: A poem of Mang Ke says, “Yesterday has left nothing / all that was to be carried away it has carried away.”¹¹

AR: Perhaps not “all,” but there is an essential part of the old State order that the political sequence of “yesterday” has definitely carried away. The new State order, whether it admits it or not, cannot but rest on this destruction. It can be said that it utilizes as positive what the political sequence has negated of the old State order and its legitimacy. Vice versa, the new State order overturns in a negative way what the political sequence had affirmed: that is to say, experimentation with the egalitarian principle in its various forms—creatively organized, systematic, and endowed with a singular order. The new State order negates the egalitarian principle as mere inconsistency, as a factor of the dissolution of every order, and camouflages behind this negation the very same inconsistency of the State fiction. This specific negation of political subjectivity often takes the form of a self-negation on the part of the same principal actors of the sequence. That it is a self-negation lends it more credibility.

CP: The disillusioned, converted, penitents of all kinds: it’s a well-noted phenomenon in all politics. It aims to re-locate a unity of self-image thoroughly disrupted by political events. This self-negation carries with it a certain ritual recognition, a low-intensity “Anerkennen.” Usually, though, the new State order remains profoundly suspicious before whoever has not been prudent in keeping away from every temptation to participate in the latest political sequence.

AR: In any case, the subjective dynamism of a State conjuncture is parasitic in relation to the preceding political subjectivity though in a more contorted manner. The new State order turns positive into negative and negative into positive; it interchanges right and wrong, good and bad. The problem is that at first this operation lends subjective consistency to State order though, in the long run, once it has lived parasitically off all it can live off from the preceding political sequence, it remains void of any essential source of subjective energy, albeit indirect or better reversed.

CP: This is the view of the logic of the subjective we find theorized in Alain Badiou’s *Logiques des Mondes*; i.e., the faithful subject and the reactive subject.¹²

AR: I found confirmation and much encouragement in the formalization of the logic of subjectivity in this great recent work by Alain Badiou wherein he demonstrates, on a philosophical terrain, the dependency of the “reactive subject” on the “faithful subject.” It is the same perspective in effect in which I treated the nexus between the Cultural Revolution and its “integral negation,” and, more

11. Pozzana and Russo 1996.

12. Badiou 2007.

generally, between a political sequence and the subsequent conjuncture of State power. Badiou's theory also contains a third, decisive element, the "obscure subject" which is installed when the "reactive subject" no longer succeeds in gleaning anything from the "emptying out" of the faithful subject. In my terms, when the "imprint" becomes truly "hollow." The "obscure subject" seeks to draw its own consistency from the presupposition that it represents a completely unitary subjective body, void of discontinuity. The contemporary age is swarming with obscure subjects: just think of such sinister manifestations as those of ethnic or cultural identities.

CP: Those, too, of contemporary stamp are found in recent Chinese ideology with its growing insistence on the theme of cultural identity, of *Zhongguoxing*, "Chinese-ness." The Olympics' inaugural ceremonies in Beijing in 2008 were an example. The staging by the celebrated Zhang Yimou exhibited an extraordinarily accomplished choreography in regard to spectacle, with unquestionable various aesthetic merits. In the celebration of the Chinese State's exorbitant power there was, nevertheless, something visibly lacking. In the representation of China's history from its origins to the present any reference to the China of the twentieth century was carefully omitted except for one red flag carried by a little girl. Zhang Yimou has said he didn't want to be political but only to represent the great contributions of Chinese culture. But what would China be today without its twentieth-century political inventions?

The "Triple Agrarian Problem"

AR: In his "Dialectics of Autonomy and Opening," Wang Hui takes another route altogether: the problems of contemporary issues are tightly interwoven within an accounting of twentieth-century Chinese politics. These are the two mainstays of Wang Hui's text whose fundamental question is this: what elements of the tradition of Chinese politics, of its internationalist, revolutionary, and egalitarian experimentation, can be reformulated and still be of value today in the present conditions? The present is problematic, consisting as it does in spectacular economic growth and equally spectacular increasing inequality. Wang Hui has reason to take heart in the fact that various theories on the imminent collapse of China have themselves collapsed. But his diagnosis is very sobering and demonstrates how the present is open to many directions, open, for example, to possibilities of finding new and original political, economic, and cultural ways, but also to paths leading to a worsening of inequalities and social polarization. The "developmentalism" (*fazbanzhuyi*) camouflages and exacerbates a net of economic and social inequalities and political oppression of great masses of peasants and workers. The fact that Chinese economic growth is founded on an immense market of low-cost workforce not only guarantees little stability, it likewise leaves room for foreseeing a stormy future. The originality of Wang Hui's position is that it underscores the urgent need for a truly inventive attitude, able to confront present challenges, but at the same time he demonstrates that any truly innovative stance is today impossible without reconsidering twentieth-century China's political tradition itself, understood as a set of very original searches for new paths. Wang Hui does not consider China a unitary



Construction site, Beijing, August 2007. Many internal migrant workers from the countryside, such as this man, eat and sleep on the jobsite. "The more than 200 million *mingong*, the fluctuating labor force of peasants in perpetual internal migration, are the backbone of a labor market grounded in hyper-flexibility." (Credit: ILO/Crozet M., August 2007)

body equipped with a presumed identity but rather as a field of possibilities both at present and in the past.

CP: At present the crucial question is the peasant one. The model for development in the past thirty years has created abysmal divergencies between cities and the countryside not as the "collateral effect" of reforms, but rather precisely as the leverage point in economic development. Chinese peasants are the principal moving force behind today's "Chinese miracle." The more than 200 million *mingong*, the fluctuating labor force of peasants in perpetual internal migration, are the backbone of a labor market grounded in hyper-flexibility. It is the *mingong* who bear on their shoulders the triumphs of neoliberalism. When viewing the opulence of Chinese cities one can't help but admire the successes achieved in only three decades, but when comparing these successes to the stagnation and backwardness of the countryside I cannot but think that it is necessary to look for a whole new direction. I have even invented for myself a slogan in Chinese that I repeat to all my friends there: *chengshi wei nongcun fuwu*, "the city at the service of the countryside."

AR: In the last few years the Chinese government has had to undertake some measures to at least mitigate the most brutal aspects of peasant oppression. For example, taxes have been abolished for peasants and this has lightened an otherwise unbearable burden. It must be pointed out that this action took place in the wake of tens of thousands of local peasant revolts in addition to the fact that a more enlightened sector of the Chinese intellectual universe also raised the question of a new politics for the countryside through a series of specific research projects and theoretical proposals. In the journal that Wang Hui directed

up to 2008, *Dushu* [Readings], there was an extensive debate on the *san nong*, the “triple agrarian problems.” “Three” here refers to the peasantry, agriculture, and the countryside. The debate was set in motion by the noted agrarian economist, Wen Tiejun. The simultaneous presence of peasant revolts and theoretical activism on the part of intellectuals have exerted notable influence, but a new direction has not yet been found, and it is clear that one can’t be found without a radical reconsideration of fundamental government choices regarding the countryside. To quote one among the most serious problems today, there is growing rise in debt accumulation among the peasants despite the elimination of taxes. On the horizon for perfecting the market economy in China there is, among other things, the decision to legalize the sale and purchase of land, not yet formally possible because land remains the property of the State. Moreover, the principal creditors of the peasants are often the countryside’s local State officials or members of their family or clan. How this debt has come about in recent years is, in turn, a very distorted phenomenon. In any case, one can’t envision today how an extension of the market economy can do without the legalization of land sales though this would inevitably lead to a ceding of lands to creditor-officials by indebted peasants. Latifundia would rapidly be restored, and, moreover, entail, under the sway of the civil servants of the Socialist State, a radicalization in both economic and political inequality. The amalgam of landed property and State civil servants was the basis of social structures in imperial China.

CP: Under these conditions, what can a “harmonious society” be? The most convincing aspect of Wang Hui’s analysis is that which poses the question in terms of political subjective agency on the part of the peasants and not merely in terms of a social engineering for redistributing the surplus agricultural labor force. The question of the political subjectivity of the peasants remains an essential one in China and cannot be sidestepped through recourse to Confucian ideals of harmony nor through any philanthropic goodwill to teach the peasants how to navigate deftly the market economy. It’s clear that past modes of posing the peasant problem cannot be re-proposed. Nothing repeats itself, especially in the political arena. But in regard to this problem, too, it is unthinkable that a new way can be found without reconsidering China’s extremely rich twentieth-century tradition, which, moreover, was fundamentally based on the political activism of the peasants. Since the 1950s, the whole story of agricultural cooperatives, as fervently documented by William Hinton in his numerous books and field surveys, had involved a very innovative process. Likewise the establishment of People’s Communes in 1958 signaled a true invention, and not just in the organization of agricultural output. It was an experimentation that involved a whole range of questions regarding the collective life of men and women in rural areas. Schooling and medical care underwent great development thanks to the communes. Today it is certainly necessary to focus on what made the rapid suppression of the communes throughout the 1970s and 1980s possible. This suppression was accompanied by a radical discredit directed at anything that smacked of agricultural cooperation.

AR: At the heart of the abolition of the agricultural communes was, above all, the expulsion of the peasants from all possible fields of political subjectivity. The substitution of cooperative organization with family organization in agricultural output was only at the surface of the phenomenon.

CP: It was by no means self-evident that organization based on family was more “modern” than that based on cooperatives, especially in light of a lack of mechanization in rural areas.

AR: The whole process of dismantlement of the agrarian cooperatives was accompanied by a high degree of “ideology,” as one would say in Marxist terms. But—irony of history—this time “ideology” assumed precise forms of Marxist discourse though in a very economistic and historicist manner. The paradox lies in the fact that the abolition of the agrarian cooperation has thus been a precondition for the development of a market economy of the labor force, although the original justifications for this abolition were not made in terms of neoliberal ideology but instead with formally ultra-orthodox Marxist language. The reasons the Chinese government gave to justify the suppression of people’s communes were that cooperative organization in rural areas implied a kind of “relations of production” that was too “advanced” in respect to the level of “productive forces” that were still too “backward” at that time. The prevalence at the end of the 1970s of the “theory of the development of productive forces,” which had been at the heart of a most heated contestation during the Cultural Revolution, has subsequently become the theoretical basis of what Wang Hui calls “developmentalism.”

CP: But also in the case of what became bitterly criticized as *wei shengchanli lun*, the “exclusive theory of productive forces,” the problem was political, not economic.

AR: The core question as far as rural areas, the peasantry, and communes are concerned was essentially political and had to do with the project connected to the reduction in social inequalities. In reality, the triple agrarian problem is not a recent invention, but during the revolutionary epoch it was modulated in terms of a limitation to inequalities.

CP: It was not just about the three *nong*—peasants, agriculture, rural areas—but about the political project for a progressive reduction of what was called the *san da chabie*, the “three great differences,” that is to say, the differences between city and countryside, industry and agriculture, manual and intellectual labor. In the Marxist theory, this last difference corresponded to relations between the rulers and the ruled.

AR: The People’s Communes existed exclusively within that project and were eliminated when those political assumptions for the egalitarian project waned, that is to say, the idea of a “proletarian politics” that would have as its compass points a reduction in social inequalities and in class differences of every type. It was when the very content of “proletarian politics” was irreversibly exhausted that the people’s communes were dissolved. Their existence, however, did not aim at establishing or maintaining the social and political identity of peasants, but was geared, if you like, to reshuffling completely the cards of social divisions in China so as to make workers become peasants and vice versa. In addition, the

aims were for students and intellectuals, instead of being foreordained to the role of officials and rulers, to immerse themselves in the great mix of life and activity of the popular masses in the fields and in the factories. This at the same time that workers and peasants would have ever greater access to intellectual activities. All this implied an infinite series of very delicate practical considerations in the countryside. The Maoist project was to involve the entire Communist Party in this enterprise and in the 1960s, above all, the highest ranks in State power were directly engaged “on the ground.” This was carried out in a prolonged manner, in search of solutions to extremely intricate questions regarding political life in rural areas.

CP: A very celebrated episode is that of experimentations with the political organization of people’s communes of then president of the republic Liu Shaoqi and his wife Wang Guangmei—much more than a mere first lady but rather a high-ranking political leader. Beyond clashes with Mao, what is important to recall is that the entire leadership of the Party-State was embroiled in very direct connection to issues involving the subjective agency of the peasantry. During the Cultural Revolution this became practically obligatory for all State functionaries at every level.

AR: This is cited today as an example of totalitarianism and even compared to Stalinist gulags, all of which is foolishness. As Wang Hui beckons us to recall, China’s present-day leaders garnered from those experimentations a direct and fruitfully rich knowledge of the social base.

CP: We can here cite an inquiry we made together in the mid 1970s when we spent a month in a work team of a people’s commune not far from Beijing. The most controversial debate there in the village was that, of the five members of the leadership committee, three were women. This had created a certain malaise among the village men since among the questions to be decided upon one of the most delicate had to do with the differences in “work points” between men and women. Men there had customarily been awarded greater value in their “work points” and therefore higher pay, even for the same work, based on the presupposition of greater physical effort on the part of the males. The three female leaders were very determined, instead, to redistribute the work points in a more egalitarian manner based on the idea that men and women knew how to do the same things. It’s clear that there were symbolic implications regarding gender differences that went far beyond the question of pay. This fragment of rural life demonstrates a point of China’s contemporaneity with the most advanced political phenomenon in the world even though in those years China appeared to be a world unto itself. In the mid 1970s feminism in Europe and the United States hotly contested male power with subjective determination equal to that of those three peasant women. A much-discussed issue in that village, but an issue also debated in cities, was whether or not domestic work was the domain of women—obviously uncompensated—based on the pretense of a natural, sexual division of labor.

AR: Considering the peasantry from the point of view of their subjective capacities, aiming to reduce social differences, involved a tangle of extremely delicate

problems. The fact that the whole Party was caught up in this undertaking—in your words, “the city at the service of the countryside”—created, nonetheless, an extreme tension. Officials at all levels who were urged or even obliged to go into the countryside had to make an enormous effort not so much to adapt to the material conditions in the rural villages where they were in any case always treated with great regard, but rather to enter into the complexities of local relations. These latter were made up of the intricate relationships among everyday people, between directors and underlings, youth and the elderly, men and women, villages at different levels of development within the same commune, etc. In the end it was this situation that proved most distasteful, shall we say, to the psychology of the functionary. What did he have to do with all those issues? I believe that the unanimous approval, or at least the very few objections, with which the suppression of the popular communes was greeted in the Chinese Communist Party depended, above all, on this factor.

CP: The organization of the communes was depicted as a mix of militarization of production and welfare dependency that penalized the more capable and enterprising peasants while favoring laziness and a lack of initiative.

AR: The suppression of the communes was presented as the decision of benevolent functionaries who removed the heavy burden of the agricultural cooperatives from the shoulders of the peasants. In reality it was those very functionaries who lifted from their own shoulders the burden of having to deal with the political subjective agency of the peasants. Many of those who were working within the State apparatus detested deeply this obligation to involve themselves with those problems, which they considered very distant from the world they inhabited. In the famous memoirs of Mao’s personal physician, Li Zhisui, alongside numerous invented tales, there is one declaration that appears authentic. Li Zhisui explains that what he personally considered most odious during the Cultural Revolution was the fact that Mao had obliged him, together with all in the presidential entourage, to go into the countryside and participate in the political activities of the peasants. He came from a family that for generations could boast of many doctors; his grandfather had been the Qing court physician and for him to go into the countryside to deal with political problems of the peasants was absurd, incomprehensible.

CP: In today’s China the problem of the peasantry is crucial. The problem is not one of social identity, but rather one tied to their political subjective agency as Wang Hui correctly highlights. This had been unfolding throughout the twentieth century, or at least up to the end of the 1970s. The popular communes were the ground for experimentation in peasant political subjective agency, so how was the Chinese Party-State able to jettison this form of peasant agency, that is, the political intelligence of the peasant?

AR: The condition by which peasant agency might be a general political resource was the project for reducing social inequalities. Meanwhile this project rested on a political theory, but also on Party and State organizations that, however, at a certain moment, reached an intellectual point of exhaustion. For the Chinese Communist Party the category “proletariat” was the mainspring to

peasant subjective agency. When this political category was exhausted along with the complex events of the Cultural Revolution, the field for the experimentation of peasant subjectivity also came to an end and the popular communes were suppressed.

The Turning Point of the 1970s

CP: The decade of the Cultural Revolution constitutes one of the most enigmatic moments in contemporary Chinese history because it was there that the nexus continuity/discontinuity is located. It is clear that the 1970s witness a complete turning point, but we also see there a continuity: in 2009 the People's Republic celebrated its sixtieth anniversary and in 2011 the Chinese Communist Party celebrates its ninetieth. All of this is taking place in a world in which communist parties and socialist states have disappeared. The continuity of the Chinese Party-State might have to do with the capacity to come to terms with the discontinuity of the 1970s. At this point you would say "integral negation," and "hollow imprint."

AR: The force of negation was certainly present. Anyway, the process of the 1970s was a very dense one. Deng Xiaoping is conducting a turn toward depoliticization and the effectiveness of this turn is inversely proportional to the force of political questions dating back to the decade of the Cultural Revolution. However, Deng's success relies on his capacity to intervene on key points.

CP: The Cultural Revolution is commonly depicted as pure disaster and Deng as China's savior from the disaster.

AR: The time of the Cultural Revolution was not at all a disaster either economically or politically. Deng is the one who is managing to spearhead a complex operation involving a restoration of State power, an operation that is certainly depoliticizing, but whose strength lies in knowing how to identify the major points on which to operate in order to realize this depoliticizing re-ordering of the State. The key moment in this turning point is the year 1975, an extremely effervescent year pivoting on an intense theoretical-political dispute between Mao and Deng. Despite being little investigated both in China or abroad, that dispute was decisive and touched upon a whole range of political problems regarding the crisis in socialism that the Cultural Revolution had brought to the forefront.

CP: Deng tended to present everything as an economic problem as with, for example, the theory of productive forces. The great outcome of his reforms has been the creation of an independent economic sphere outside the State even though it is evident that the creation of a market economy has always been guided by a series of State interventions.

AR: More than three decades of reforms constitute a very long period whose internal unfolding has been one of different phases. But a decisive point is marked by Deng Xiaoping's capacity during the mid 1970s in the last two years of the Cultural Revolution, well before the start of reforms. Deng Xiaoping's capacity to intervene both on the political as well as the economic terrain and, above all, his capacity to place these interventions within a worldwide context was decisive.

CP: The political conditions were his evaluations of the Cultural Revolution. Deng's slogans "it matters little if the cat is white or black as long as it catches mice" and "to grow rich is glorious" ended up, in the last analysis, authorizing the negation of ethical principles in regard to the politics of equality and even of justice because any means whatsoever could be employed to this end. Saying this, it would not be totally wrong to say that Deng was being pragmatic. After all, this prepared the terrain for neoliberalism and the latter's deregulation.

AR: I believe, however, that even if he put great store in appearing pragmatic, Deng was very attentive to ideological questions, otherwise he would not have succeeded in "negating" the Cultural Revolution. His negation—even if he has called it "integral"—has been very selective for the reasons I stated earlier. Deng's great ability has been that of understanding the tangle of political and economic conditions of China within the world conjuncture and of intervening with precision and determination.

CP: Can economic conditions be distinguished as such in that moment?

AR: I think so. Throughout the 1970s technical and financial conditions of those processes were emerging that would come to be called globalization. At least three are decisive: one is the transition, as Pierre Giraud has written,¹³ from "sedentary," i.e., geographically circumscribed capitalism to "nomadic" capitalism. The other two are, first, what has been called the logistic revolution and then, finally, the well-known information revolution. As far as this last one is concerned, the fundamental protocol through which the Internet functions, "TCP PHP," which everyone currently uses, was officially published by two American scientists in 1974.

The publication of that algorithm made it abundantly clear to the experts who knew how to read it—and there certainly was no paucity of such experts within the Chinese government—that the technical conditions for an unprecedented acceleration in the transmission of information and data had been reached. For what was until that moment a security device for the transmission of military information created by the Pentagon was being transformed into an instrument open to all manner of use as we see today. The logistic revolution, too, takes form at the beginning of the 1970s. Container technology developed out of the need to transport U.S. war matériel to Vietnam. In the mid 1970s, this technology proved to be of absolute competitive advantage on an economic plane because the use of containers radically lowers the costs of maritime transportation. From that moment on the production of container ships becomes widespread and leads to a radical change in maritime transportation. Those technological factors favored capital's nomadic movement because they announced a breakdown of all barriers that had kept sites of production at a distance from sites of consumption.

CP: But all this is of an economic, not a political nature. On the other hand, it can't be said that these economic possibilities would have been able to develop although not in their present form without political choices.

13. Giraud 1998.

AR: On the political plane the conditions were very much hanging in the balance, and the situation was uncertain and unpredictable. The key point to the Cultural Revolution had been the existence of workers' organizations independent of the Communist Party. Shanghai's famous January Storm of 1967—in truth a very peaceful event—had been generated by precisely this political novelty. A structural element of Socialist State and Party stability was the inscription into the State of the figure of the worker. Not by chance the Socialist State called itself a dictatorship of the proletariat. When some workers began to organize themselves outside State-Party control while proclaiming themselves at the same time communists and revolutionaries—as happened in Shanghai in 1966 and 1967—the foundations of the dictatorship of the proletariat tottered dangerously. China's entire instability in succeeding years is linked to the problem of what place to give to these political novelties.

CP: Actually, in those years, some political experimentations in precisely this direction were under way: the “new born socialist things,” the “workers' universities,” the “revolutionary committees,” the workers' “theoretic groups,” etc., etc. A few political campaigns in those years also moved in this direction as, for example, the 1973–74 “Pi Lin Pi Kong” (Critique of Lin Biao and Confucius Movement) or the “Campaign for the Study of Bourgeois Right” in 1975 or even the call for an evaluation of the political positions embodied in the characters of the classic novel, *Shui hu Zhuan* (Water Margin / All Men Are Brothers). All these movements were in no way simply exercises in propagandistic rhetoric, but were propelled instead by the critical capabilities of workers' theoretic groups who launched themselves into rather rare debates on the study of Chinese history from its very beginnings.

AR: The mid 1970s is a very rich moment but also one of instability because all this political foment didn't find a pre-established place within the Party-State. These experiments we talk about trace back first to political formations arising, in the early months of the Cultural Revolution, from outside the Communist Party, which, on the other hand, had been placed at a serious impasse precisely because of those external formations. Until the very end, Mao hopes that these political jolts outside the Party will succeed in revitalizing the Party itself, but he absolutely does not intend to renounce the Party's form. The divergence that opens with Deng is that, while for Mao the instability brought about by these experimentations was salutary, for Deng it was only the source of a disorder to be eliminated.

CP: With the creation of independent organizations by the workers at the start of the Cultural Revolution, the very category “proletariat” had been buffeted by internal turmoil, and this turmoil had upset the very notion of Party and all that had to do with the workers' representation as a class within the State.

AR: The problem of workers' political subjective agency had been reopened at its very root. Deng himself understands clearly that the category “proletariat” is no longer capable of maintaining State power. In effect, both Mao and Deng share points in common in regard to the 1975 dispute. Neither one wants to renounce the Party and, in addition, both are aware of the precariousness of the category “proletariat,” following the Cultural Revolution. In 1975—few remem-



A worker monitors a machine in the Jingwei Packing Machine factory, Wuhou National Science Park, Chengdu. Deng Xiaoping depoliticized “the category ‘proletariat’ and it is precisely on this that he hinge[d] his entire plan for reforms.” (Credit: ILO/Crozet M., August 2007)

ber today, though the declaration was a crucial one—Mao openly declares that the category “dictatorship of the proletariat” has become the most obscure issue of the entire communist culture. Deng understands perfectly that the category “proletariat” can no longer serve as the foundation for State order.

CP: You are therefore saying that Deng works a “depoliticization” of the category “proletariat,” and it is precisely on this that he hinges his entire plan for reforms.

AR: He depoliticizes, yes, but he takes precise aim. In 1975 Deng does not start with an “integral negation” of the Cultural Revolution, but rather with a negation of all the experimentations that were under way in search of new political values to be attached to the figure “worker,” and he rejects all the places in which these experimentations emerged as merely hotbeds of instability.

CP: Here you would say that the “hollow imprint” is at work.

AR: “China’s new order” is a State order deprived of the political figure of the worker, or better the latter is reduced to a merely ritualistic role. And it is thanks to the “emptying out” of that political figure that Deng was able to make “China’s New Order” play the role that has been so decisive in the contemporary world’s political and economic evolution, thus anticipating and orienting fundamental tendencies of that evolution.

CP: There is usually little reflection on that annihilation of the political significance of the figure “worker” in China and on the consequences that such an epochal change in meaning had on a world scale.

AR: The precision with which Deng intervened in 1975 at several key points in order to render operational this depoliticizing “emptying out” was also decisive.

CP: A “surgical” precision, as one is wont to say.

AR: What Deng did is comparable to certain techniques of ancient Chinese hydraulic engineers who, cutting off the flow of a river at one critical point, were then able to irrigate an entire region. A visit to Dujiangyan in Sichuan makes a deep impression insofar as one finds there a spectacular landscape where such a small diversion regulates still today the flow of the river, thus permitting the region’s irrigation. Essentially, the arrest of the Gang of Four was an extremely limited coup d’état, one of the least bloody in history, whereby the Chinese State changed its course. And China still follows this course.

CP: Together with Wang Hui we say that the present state of politics is one of “depoliticization.” The evolution of contemporary China has played therein a decisive role.

AR: Two key points to today’s depoliticization are the crisis of political parties and the political annihilation of the figure of the worker. These two elements are intrinsically linked. The most visible paradox, but one that most reveals the phenomenon, is that it is precisely the Chinese Communist Party that since the late 1970s has been most engaged in the political erasure of the figure of the worker, albeit that Party-State today seems to enjoy the best health ever. We can say that the willed absence of the political figure of the worker is the specter of the Chinese Communist Party, which in its statutes continues to call itself the avant-garde of the proletariat.

CP: Strange that the destiny of this specter of Communism haunts Asia today.

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