

A Few Notes on “Some Thoughts on the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976) and its Relevance to Revolutionaries in the 21st Century”

1. Overall I think Dave has made an excellent start here. The first two pages on the general meaning, purposes and strengths of the GPCR are especially good, really quite excellent. I thought the critique of the weaknesses of the GPCR (starting on p. 3) was weaker, however, and did not get into a lot of criticisms that have been made or could be made. I think that part of the essay could be expanded on, and is kind of unfinished as it is.

2. I think the title of the essay is excellent, and brings out the point of studying history and the GPCR in particular—its present relevance. I do have one quibble about the title though: it gives the dates for the GPCR as 1966-1976. The closing date should be 1969 (or thereabouts). I know many writers, coming from very different political viewpoints—including the bourgeoisies in China and the U.S., the RCP and William Hinton—, consider that the GPCR lasted until Mao’s death. But Mao himself did not hold that view.

A revolution is an act of violence wherein one class overthrows another, says Mao. Of course changes in society continue after the date of the change in class rule—that is the whole point of revolutions, to allow changes to be made after them. But generally we talk about the date of revolutions in terms of when the change in class rule itself occurred. Thus the French Revolution was in 1789, the Russian Revolution was in 1917, the Chinese Revolution was either in 1949, or, if you want to include the whole period of struggle leading up to that, you could say that the Chinese Revolution occurred from 1921-1949. Similarly, the GPCR is correctly given the dates 1966-1969, since that is the period of struggle leading up to the change in class rule (the overthrow of the capitalist-roaders in the Party).

The reason that *reactionaries* want to say that the GPCR lasted until 1976 is that they want to tar the entire Maoist period (at least after 1966) with the confusion, factionalism, in-fighting, chaos, economic disorganization, and excesses of the actual GPCR period. (Every revolution has chaos and excesses; one way of attacking the revolution is to focus on the chaos and excesses, not on its essence.)

The reasons that many *revolutionaries* want to say that the GPCR lasted until 1976 seem to be:

- a) They want to emphasize that the proletariat retained state power until Mao died.
- b) They see that there were still struggles after 1969, such as around Lin Biao, against Deng Xiaoping, etc.
- c) Sometimes they mistakenly imagine that the GPCR itself was meant to be a permanent state of affairs.

With regard to point a), it is easy to say (and show) that the proletariat lost power after Mao’s death; we do not need to confuse that event with either the 1949 initial seizure of proletarian power, or its re-seizure during the 1966-69 period.

With regard to point b), every historical event is both preceded and followed by other struggles. It is still useful to talk about important individual events rather than try to talk about everything all at once. The defeat of Lin Biao was important, and amounted to the defeat of a bourgeois conspirator. But both before and after his attempted coup, the proletariat was in power,

so it was neither a revolution nor a counter-revolution in the Marxist sense. Ditto for the struggle against Deng in the mid-1970s.

With regard to point c), one reason that Mao said that the GPCR was over in 1969 is that he wanted to make its essential nature clear—a *re-seizure of power* by the proletariat from the capitalist-roaders within the CPC. As such it was by no means a permanent state of affairs. On the contrary, Mao predicted that many more cultural revolutions might well prove necessary in the future. (Unfortunately, the proletariat did not retain enough power after Mao's death to mount another cultural revolution before it was overthrown completely. But that's something to be discussed separately.)

So, all-in-all, I find the frequent identification of the post-GPCR period of proletarian rule (1970-1976) with the GPCR period itself to be jarring and incorrect. (I know—this is not the biggest issue in the world, but it still bothers me!)

3. Another small point: The last parenthetical sentence at the top of p. 2: “(Note that Mao once commented that they would never had led a revolution in China if they had copied the Soviet model and followed Comintern directives.)” This seems somewhat jarring because it switches the issue to the lack of wisdom in the foreign direction of a revolution, and away from the basic issue being discussed, the new forms of revolutionary struggle and social organization which arose in the GPCR itself. (True, they didn't copy the Soviet Union, but they didn't copy their own previous New Democratic revolution for the most part either.)

4. I thought Dave's point in the 2nd paragraph on p. 2 was very important: “But what's most important about the GPCR is *not* its particular form...” It is another way of attempting to get people to look at the essence of what the GPCR was all about, and not get so hung up on the factionalism, temporary chaos and other faults it had.

5. It is correct to raise the issue of factionalism, as Dave does at the top of p. 3. But I don't think it is correct to discuss this only in terms of possibly having multiple proletarian revolutionary parties under socialism. In fact, it seems to me that really this just legitimizes and institutionalizes the worst kinds of factionalism and makes it a bigger problem than ever.

6. I thought the over half-page discussion of having multiple political parties was disproportionately large and somewhat out of place in an essay on the GPCR. (See my separate essay on “The Question of Multiple Revolutionary Parties” for an in-depth discussion of this topic.)

7. The first paragraph on p. 4 raises the important issue of Mao's failure “to develop a stable core of revolutionary left leadership in the Party from the early 1960s until his death in 1976.” I wonder if this should be connected up with the cult of personality around Mao. I am reminded of the Russian proverb, “Under a great oak little acorns cannot grow”. At any rate, I think it is worth bringing up the personality cult for discussion as one of the possible reasons for the ultimate overthrow of revolutionary China.

8. I thought there were a number of other important criticisms of the GPCR and of the Maoist China of the 1970s—some valid, some not—which should be discussed. I mentioned some of these in my March 11th letter to Dave, things such as:

- a) Ray Nunes' claim that one of Mao's big mistakes in the GPCR was to rely too much on the students (Red Guards) and not enough on the factory workers. He says this is one of the sources of the excessive factionalism.

- b) The idea that the difficulty in holding on to proletarian power in China (and perhaps Russia too!) was due in large part to the extreme weakness of the proletariat there, to the overwhelmingly peasant character of the country, and to the development of a de facto national bourgeois party within the CP itself. (This connects up with Hinton's discussion of the "two parties" within the CP.)
9. I think the political economy of Mao's China of the 1970s should be discussed, at least in brief. The lie that revolutionary China destroyed production should be exposed. (This is one of the reasons for drawing a distinction between the chaotic 1966-1969 GPCR years and the post-GPCR years of 1970-1976.)
10. One topic dear to my heart that I think needs to be mentioned is the mass line. The trouble is, I'm not completely sure myself exactly what to say here. I *suspect*—but have not investigated the post-GPCR period (1970-1976) enough to say *for certain*—that the "Gang of Four" did not use the mass line (or at least use it very well) in the mass campaigns it sponsored in that period. I suspect that this is one of the reasons for their downfall. I think they may have alienated the masses. (Cf. the comments of Chen Yong-gui about them.)
11. But I'd like to repeat that I think Dave has made an excellent start, and I hope he will expand and continue what he has written so far.

—S.H. (4/12/00)