Denunciations of Anarchism in the People’s Republic of China

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Introduction

This brief examines denunciations of anarchism published in the official press in the history of the PRC, using Ed Friedman’s three line model of Leninist regimes. It should be noted at the outset that the denunciations of anarchism are not in themselves very interesting and mostly blindly follow the critique of Marx and Engels of Proudhon and Stirner as representing the interests of the petite bourgeoisie, or small producers, mixed in with denunciations by Marx, Engels, and Lenin of anarchism as an “infantile disorder” of “ultraleftism,” as typified by Mikhail Bakunin, whom Lenin claimed was an opportunist perhaps only posing as a revolutionary. It should also be noted that almost none of the people being denounced were really anarchists and that in numerous cases people condemning others as anarchists were themselves later denounced for the same reason.

However unoriginal and inaccurate these denunciations of anarchism were in practice, they nevertheless help confirm two major arguments of Ed scholarship: the lack of any true quasi-democratic elements in Maoist thought or practice, and the essential truth behind the charge of Marxist democrats that despite the major policy shifts and huge changes in society over time from the Mao to Deng and post-Deng eras, there is an essential continuity in the nature of China’s Leninist Party-state. This essay will attempt to make the latter point without falling into the trap of viewing China’s Leninist regime as an unchanging, “totalitarian” monolith, by adapting Ed’s labels of “Stalinists” who emphasize socialism as the build up of heavy industry through central planning and a command economy, “Maoists” who supposedly favor the use of ideological incentives to move towards communism without creating a huge bureaucratic state or reviving economic inequality, and “Titoists” who view socialism as the buildup of abundance of the proletariat and thus who would allow market
reforms that tolerate limited inequality. In fusing this model with labels borrowed from analyses of internal politics of the LDP in Japan, I would posit that coalitions of mainstream and anti-mainstream elements of different lines often form, such as a Maoist-Stalinist coalition during the Cultural Revolution and a Titoist-Stalinist coalition in the early to mid Deng years. After that point the differences within the Party-state could be said to focus on degrees of market reform, and thus between moderate and radical Titoists.

I. Denunciations of Anarchism from 1957-1976

Denunciations of anarchism in the PRC can be traced back to the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957-58. Indeed, the Maoist Yao Wenyuan helped begin his career at this point by taking part in denunciations of the novelist Ba Jin for anarchist themes in his early novels (virtually the only real Chinese anarchist ever criticized in the PRC, and even then a former anarchist), and Deng Xiaoping made note of the problem of anarchism in 1959 in his report at the end of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Similarly, Lin Biao used the standard denunciation of anarchism as part of the “temporary, partial interests of the small producers” in criticizing deviations within the army in 1959, probably as part of the “Campaign against Right Opportunism” launched after the purge of Peng Dehuai.

But by far the most intensive criticisms of anarchism in the history of the PRC occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Anarchism, as William Joseph points out in his excellent study, *The Critique of Ultra-Leftism in China*, represented only one, if perhaps the leading example of “ultra-leftism” that was periodically if incompletely criticized during the this period. Given space limitations, we will select only a small sample of the Cultural Revolution denunciations of anarchism. Both Stalinists and Maoists launched criticisms of anarchism at this time, if for different reasons. The Stalinists, and perhaps any closet Titoists who might have quietly survived, denounced the “chaos” of “great [or ultra or extensive] democracy” at the outset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 and revived these charges in
1967 to in effect charge that the Party Maoists had encouraged extra-Party “ultra-leftists” to push anti-“new bourgeoisie in the Party” arguments of Mao to a point that threatened continued state control of society. On the other hand, Maoists who favored continuing class struggle against “new bourgeois elements” in the Party could use anarchism as a whipping boy to prove their own truly leftist credentials and to protect themselves against Stalinist attacks. Mao himself, as Ed has long asserted, may not have been the best Maoist, as he shifted back and forth along policy lines as he saw fit and in order to keep his perceived Party rivals off balance. Thus, the Chairman first allowed the Maoist group that he created to push (rhetorically) for Paris Commune style mass democracy in 1966 while himself later denouncing the Shanghai Commune in 1967 as “extreme anarchy, which is most reactionary” and “…detrimental to the interests of the people and against their wishes.” From that point on, Stalinists could use this statement to denounce official Maoists whenever they could, causing the Maoists in turn to defend themselves by finding extra-Party Maoists to denounce as anarchists. Thus the leading Party Maoist Chen Boda could denounce anarchists as causing “splittism” and leading to the failure of unity if the revolutionary Left in 1967, while he himself became the major target of a campaign denouncing anarchism after his fall in late 1969 to early 1970. Evidently with the permission of Mao himself, in September of 1969 a major national campaign was launched against “bourgeois factionalism” and anarchism as part of preparing the country for a possible war with the Soviet Union, a campaign that continued into 1970-71 with Chen as the main, if unnamed target of a campaign against “swindlers like Liu Shaoqi.” As Joseph notes, this campaign continued into 1972 when it merged into the first campaign against Lin Biao for his “leftist” errors.

This latter campaign featured articles in Renminribao in October 1972 criticizing the “swindlers” as opportunists who only posed as anarchists, “…not because they want to do away with all forms of government, but because they want to do away with the government
of the dictatorship of the proletariat and replace it with a government of the dictatorship of
the bourgeoisie which they represent."12 This aborted campaign was perhaps the high point
of criticism of anarchism in the Mao era and a precursor to the 1977 attacks on the Gang of
Four as anarchists. From Wang Ruoshui we now know the inside story of the 1972
campaign, which he himself started.13 Though, as Wang noted, remaining Maoists such as
Yao Wenyuan themselves had earlier compared the “swindlers” to Bakunin’s “sabotage
activities” against the First International,14 the leading Maoists at the top of the Party in 1972
feared that the main thrust of the initial campaign to criticize Lin Biao as an ultra-leftist was
aimed at them, and thus they tried to quash the campaign, leading Wang to write to Mao
himself to ask whether or not the anti-anarchist articles Wang had published were proper.
Mao ruled against Wang, and probably under his orders Zhou Enlai called in Wang to a
meeting, along with all the members of what would become the Gang of Four, to get Wang to
end the campaign. Wang reported that Zhou, although admitting that he himself had earlier
criticized people for anarchism, at this meeting claimed that he only meant to refer to those
who interfered in foreign policy as anarchists and “not to the entire line of Lin Biao.”15

II. Denunciations of Anarchism during the Hua Guofeng-Early Deng Xiaoping Years

The use of denunciations of anarchism to reinforce their Maoist credentials while
limiting Maoist policies in practice is especially true of those Party elites in the Hua Guofeng
era (1977-1979), which could represent the ultimately failed rule of a Stalinist-Maoist
coalition. As such, Hua’s coalition had an interest in denouncing full Maoism as illegitimate
anarchism which they wanted to discard while retaining the supposed essence of the Mao line
of the Cultural Revolution. During the spring and summer of 1977 especially, articles
appeared in the official Chinese press criticizing the Gang of Four in much the same terms as
Lin and company were criticized in 1972, i.e., as opportunists who only fanned up the wind
of anarchism in order to usurp Party and state power.16 After that point the main tone of
criticism of the Gang shifted to other directions, even to the contradictory charges that the Gang tried to establish a “fascist dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,” but the earlier charges culminated in speeches by Hua Guofeng and Ye Jianying that mentioned the problem of “secret factions” in the Party spreading, among other things, the “harm of anarchism,” and a plank in the “General Program” of the CCP Constitution adopted in August 1977 which noted the need for the whole Party to “oppose all splittist and factional activities, oppose the independence from the Party, and oppose anarchism.”

The denunciations of anarchism did not end with the fall of the Gang of Four. The criticism of anarchism that survived in the late 1970s perhaps helps demonstrate the early Deng era as representing the ascendancy of a Titoist-Stalinist coalition, with Deng uneasily maintaining a balance between representatives of both lines, and with the Stalinists implicitly threatening to return to a neo-Maoist coalition. In this regard, Ye Jianying’s continuing denunciation of anarchism in 1978 especially represents the continuity of the Hua and early Deng eras. Ye criticized the Gang of Four in 1978 for “…incit[ing] anarchism and slander[ing] the socialist legal system and every kind of rational rules and regulations as revisionist and capitalist in their vain attempt to throw our proletarian country into chaos and seize power in this chaos,” an attempt which he would oppose by strengthening the “socialist legal system.” As criticism of the Gang for “ultra-leftist” excesses continued in the official press, now even in the former Maoist bastion of Hongqi, the tone of the articles reflected Ye’s line about the need to restore economic order and a socialist legal system, a point on which the unity of the rising Titoist-Stalinist coalition of Deng would hinge.

Especially at the beginning of market-based economic reform in 1979-80, the attack on ultra-leftism as a whole was initially intensified, as Joseph notes. Though Joseph did not himself mention examples, after 1979, those who denounced anarchism most often were people in the Party-State elite who had opposed Maoist policies for their undermining of state
control and Stalinist-style central planning. Such people denouncing anarchism in this period did so to undermine intellectual critics inside and outside the Party who tried to take advantage of Titoist economic reforms to push for political liberalization. For example, in late 1978 and early 1979 denunciations appeared in the press that tried to link Democracy Wall activists to the activities of the Gang of Four, both representing “anarchists who, masquerading under the banner of democracy, caused worsening economic conditions and social instability.” The Minister of Education directly tied the “small number of students [who] practice anarchism in defiance of organization and discipline” presumably in the Democracy Wall movement to the “corruption and poisoning of [their] minds by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four,” a theme that continued in national and provincial press articles throughout 1979 and into 1980. Once again, the culmination of this campaign was a speech by Ye Jianying before the CPPCC to mark the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the CCP, where he spoke of the need to eliminate “factionalism, anarchism, and ultra-individualism.” A report on his speech noted further the need to guard against the ideology of “ultra-democracy,” a habit of the “small producers” which once again was caused by the “spoiling of the social atmosphere” by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four which spread the “ideology of anarchism and extreme individualism…among some people,” a line that was repeated widely in other press outlets from November 1979 to early 1980. The criticism of the “anarchism” of Democracy Wall activists as a form of bourgeois individualism counterposed with the need to achieve “stability, unity, and socialist democracy” would of course presage the many campaigns against bourgeois liberalization in the 1980s.

After the repression of the Democracy Wall extra-Party critics in 1979-80 with Deng’s institution of the “Four Cardinal Principles,” the debate shifted to inside the Party, where intellectuals within the Titoist side of the coalition tried to call for political reforms, while their Stalinist opponents, led by Hu Qiaomu, continued to push against bourgeois
liberalization in the name of preserving “socialist spiritual civilization.” As reflected in denunciations of anarchism, this struggle included a debate between Ma Jia of the Titoist camp who argued in 1980 for the need to “scientifically” criticize anarchism while clearly distinguishing it from real democracy, versus Gu Zhaoji of the Stalinist camp, who wrote an article at the same time that wasn’t published until 1982, which argued that anarchists were indeed exponents of “extreme democracy” and that trying to “scientifically” distinguish what constitutes anarchism would lead people to “not find any traces of anarchism at all,” leading people to oppose bureaucratism without opposing anarchism.

This brief debate reflected the Stalinist push against bourgeois liberalization in 1981-82 begun in the criticism of Bai Hua’s screenplay “Bitter Love.” Included in this criticism were denunciations of the script for, as one author put it, “the erroneous trend of thought of anarchism, ultra-individualism and the bourgeois liberalism to the extent of negating the four basic principles.” Such denunciations were repeated in the provincial press until early 1982 and were revived in 1983-84 after the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. This campaign was again led by Stalinists such as Hu Qiaomu against what Ed referred to as the Marxist democrats inside the Party, as typified by Wang Ruoshui. Hu denounced Wang’s use of the Marxist concepts of humanism and alienation in a long article in *Hongqi* that was reprinted in *Renminribao*, where he explicitly charged that those “well-intentioned” comrades who pushed the concept of alienation in effect gave cover to those who called explicitly for “the abolition of all social and political power, all social and economic organization, all ideological authority, all centralism and discipline, and have openly propagated anarchism, absolute freedom, and extreme individualism.”

Such denunciations were echoed in numerous articles in 1984 which stressed the need to completely negate “extensive democracy” and tried to link anyone calling for democracy to the “anarchism” fanned up in the Cultural Revolution. As one article in *Hongqi* put it,
“while practicing anarchism, some anarchists and their apologists will talk at length as if they are ‘fighting for democracy.’”27 While academic articles in this period could discuss the early 20th century Chinese anarchist movement more dispassionately and even find in it some progressive elements, Stalinist critics around Hu Qiaomu continued to try to link those in the 1980s who called for democracy with the evil of anarchism, including in the aftermath of student protests in 1986,28 and especially, of course, after the Tiananmen movement of 1989, culminating in a speech by CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin in October 1989 reinforced in an interview with the PRC Minister of Justice in November that stressed the need to take as the main task opposing those who advocated “ultra-democracy and anarchism.”29

III. PRC Denunciations of Anarchism, 1992-present

Even though the period from 1989 to 1992 represented the high point of Stalinism in the Deng era, a point when Titoist reform was stalled and some Maoist, anti-imperialist rhetoric reappeared, threatening a shift to a Stalinist-neo-Maoist coalition, there were continuing denunciations of anarchism even after Titoist economic reforms returned to the forefront after 1992. To pick just a few examples, first in 1995, probably in response to academic calls for political reform, Renminribao published an article reviving Deng Xiaoping’s 1979 warning that talking of “abstract democracy” would “inevitably lead to serious spreading of extreme democratization and anarchism, total sabotage of the political situation of stability and unity, and complete failure of the four modernizations.”30 In 1999 and 2000 the PRC press denounced the founder of Falungong, Li Hongzhi, as someone who “hated, negated, and undermined our socialist state power” and to Falungong as a trouble-making group which is “anti-science, anti-humanity, anti-society, and anarchistic”31 and as an “evil cult” that carried out activities that similar to “anarchist trends and factions of all kinds [which] have occurred in history”32 In 2000, in response to demands of the democracy movement in Hong Kong, the CCP-controlled press there complained that “pure populism...
and anarchism can only throw Hong Kong into chaos…” 33  In 2003, countering Taiwan President Chen Shuibian’s call for an eventual referendum on a new Taiwan constitution, the Hong Kong Communist press denounced the “so-called ‘popular will’ [of] the Taiwan authorities…as none other than ‘populism’ or ‘anarchism.’” 34  In 2004, against international and some domestic demands for increased respect for human rights, a PRC functionary claimed that “respect and safeguards for human rights in an isolated and abstract sense…could lead to anarchism and extreme individualism in practice and bring disaster to the state, society, and the people.” 35  In July of 2008, even after the election of the KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou as president in Taiwan, the same Beijing-controlled press in Hong Kong denounced the continuing efforts of the Taiwanese opposition to carry out “Taiwan-style democracy” that would dare to “directly criticize any official, even top leaders” and “directly expose the corrupt officials and lawbreakers via the media” as “classic anarchy and personal liberalism!” 36  Finally, also in 2008, in response to calls for “returning power to the people” at an academic conference marking the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the Deng-era reforms, the Communist press in Hong Kong denounced this call as possibly leading ‘to the evil path of anarchism.” As one article concluded, “unrestrained talk about ‘returning power to the people’ will not only mislead the people with the impression that they do not need the government but will mislead them into thinking that the government had been abusing its power and now needs to rectify its ways.” 37

Conclusion

In effect, the leaders of China’s Leninist Party-state in both the Cultural Revolution and the reform era turned the label of anarchism into a cultural meme that could be wielded against anyone who dared speak up against the growth of a new Communist Party elite, or for any real degree of democracy and individual freedom. In the end, therefore, the criticism of anarchism in the PRC demonstrates essential point of the anarchist critique of Marxism. That
is, regardless of important differences among themselves, the agreement of top leaders of all
Leninist coalitions to condemn as anarchist any democrats within their coalition, and
certainly any critics outside of the Party, who argued that the state may act at times in its own
interests and not just for the economic class it supposedly represents, itself helps to remove a
check on increasing state autonomy and aids the continuing survival of Leninist state
despotism.

Notes

1. For a convenient Soviet summary of the orthodox Marxist denunciations of anarchism, see
Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism: Selected Writings by Marx, Engels, Lenin (NY: International
2. See especially Ed’s essay “Three Leninist Paths within a Socialist Conundrum,” in Dorothy
see Friedman, “Maoism, Titoism, Stalinism: Some Origins and Consequences of the Maoist Theory of
the Socialist Transition,” in Mark Selden and Victor Lippit (eds.), The Transition to Socialism in
(hereafter CQ) 13 (Jan.-Mar. 1963), 94-95.
China 1955-1959: Policy Documents with Analysis (Harvard University, Center for International
Thinking,” translated in Ibid., Doc. 46, 580, 584-5.
the classical Marxist-Leninist lines of attack on anarchism. See pages 128-144, 159-161, and 189-190
for his summary of attacks on anarchism in China, especially in 1971-72 and 1976.
8. “Chairman Mao’s Speech at His Third Meeting with Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan” (Feb. 6,
9. See Chen’s speech in Huochetou (Locomotive), February 1967, translated in Survey of China
Mainland Press (hereafter SCMP) 3898: 5-6, cited in Philip Bridgham, “Mao’s Cultural Revolution in
10. See Bridgham, 22 and articles such as Kao Zhiren, “Anarchism Is Reaction against the
11. See Joseph, 124-126, citing for example Renminribao Aug 15 and 29, 1971, in SCMP 4966, 22
and 4973, 19.
12. See Lung Yen, “Anarchism is the Counter-Revolutionary Tool of the False Marxist Swindlers,”
Renminribao, October 14, 1972, in SCMP 5241 (October 25, 1972), 58.
13. See Wang, “A Turn Around from Criticism of ‘Leftism’ to Opposition to Rightism—One
Individual’s Experiences and Reflections on Chinese Communist High Level Infighting,” Ming Bao
14. See Xiao Pin, “Be Open and Aboveboard, and Don’t Intrigue and Conspire,” Hongqi 3 (March 1,
1972), in SCMP 725-726 (April 3-10, 1972), 35.


20. As noted in CQ 126 (June 1991): 228. Such national articles were also reflected in the provincial press. See FBIS: China Report (hereafter FBIS) Feb. 28, 1979, J1 and March 13 1979, H1.


