

Reawakening a Revolutionary Party: The Ancient and Modern Princes in Wang Hui’s Political Theory

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Recent political theory has seen a revived interest in theorizing the political party, and, in particular, exploring what the political party can do to address its decline and revitalize itself. This renewed interest, however, draws largely on the political praxis of party politics of established liberal democracies in the United States and Europe. In this article, I bring Chinese thinker Wang Hui’s (Maoist) party theory into the conversation. By engaging Wang’s party theory, I demonstrate how we can understand party decline in nonliberal democratic countries with revolutionary legacies. I then analyze Wang’s solution to the decline of the revolutionary party, which focuses on the intricate relationship between individualistic charismatic politics and party politics. Finally, through reading Wang in and beyond the Chinese context, I show the problems with Wang’s theory and discuss how it can learn from the party-movement relationship in other contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties are “orphans of political philosophy,” writes Schattschneider ([1942] 2017, 10). Schattschneider’s *Party Government*, originally published in 1942, laments political philosophy and theory’s oversight of parties’ crucial role in modern democracy. Schattschneider’s critique remains true in the latter half of the twentieth century. For decades, parties “remained at the margins of normative democratic theory” and “have been largely absent from agonistic, liberal, deliberative, and participatory democratic theories” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020, 96). Despite its significant role in the history of modern democracy, contemporary political theorists overlook the party’s normative importance, unlike the extensive literature on parties in empirical political science.

Political theory’s long silence on parties is mirrored by the decline of party politics in the West since the mid-twentieth century, a phenomenon well documented, researched, and debated by political scientists (Drummond 2006; Ignazi 2017; Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 2013; Mair and Biezen 2001). Party decline in established liberal democracies takes various forms. Mair’s (2013) observations in Europe point to citizen disengagement, declining electoral participation, and the emergence of extra-party populist politics in various liberal democratic nations. Others see political personalization exemplified by Donald Trump’s and Emmanuel Macron’s presidential campaigns as evidence of the weakening of the party machine (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 116). The core of the party crisis lies in the crisis of democratic representation and legitimacy.

Party elites frequently face criticism for their detachment from the masses, providing fertile ground for anti-system, anti-elite, and populist politics. The legacy of the 1968 social movements has been identified as one of the factors contributing to contemporary anti-system politics in established liberal democracies, particularly in left-wing variants (Charalambous 2021; Maeckelbergh 2011; White and Ypi 2016, 170–5). The 1968 activists’ profound distrust of parties and party elites, their emphasis on participatory democracy and everyday decision making, and their vision of horizontal articulations of plural identities introduced a novel model of social change. It challenged the authority of political parties and the idea of party-led social progress, setting up new ways of theorizing democracy (e.g., Laclau and Mouffe 2014). Meanwhile, anti-system politics also shaped the trajectory of party politics with its own decline since the late 1960s. As Mair (2013, 45–52) contends, the downturn of anti-system parties from both the right and the left after the 1960s provided conditions for the moderation of party politics in Europe, leading to reduced competition and depoliticized policy-making.

Theorizing democracy without parties essentially challenges political parties’ credentials as a representative, democratic entity. In recent years, political theory has witnessed a long-overdue interest in parties, particularly in defending parties (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). As theorists of parties reflect on the connection between parties and representation, they have contended that parties are “principal sources of creativity” (Rosenblum 2008, 456), entities that “[consolidate] political commitment and [promote] an active democratic ethos” (White and Ypi 2016, 77), and key devices in political liberalism that “contribute both to its legitimacy and its stability” (Bonotti 2017, 175). It seems that political theorists are finally “catching up”—to use Muirhead and Rosenblum’s phrase—to the study of parties. The orphan of political philosophy seems no

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longer abandoned. However, apart from a few exceptions (see White and Ypi 2016, 164–84), the renewed normative interest in parties primarily focuses on their roles in liberal democratic contexts. The prevailing framework for most political theory studies of parties centers around bolstering legitimacy and enhancing decision making in liberal democratic regimes. Little attention has been given to parties and party politics in non-Western, nonliberal-democratic contexts.

The contemporary revival of party theory cannot afford to focus narrowly on the theory and praxis of parties in established liberal democracies in the West, because both the crisis of parties and the attempts to reconfigure their position in politics are already global political phenomena. Anti-system movements in “the long sixties” in liberal democracies drew inspiration from political ideas and practices in non-Western, particularly Third World countries. Notably, Maoism was a crucial source of influence. In France, Louis Althusser played an important role in introducing Maoism to his students at the *École Normale Supérieure*, a group eventually divided due to their teacher’s refusal to leave the *Parti communiste français* (Bourg 2005). In the United States, Maoism influenced leaders of the Black Panther Party, including Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Bobby Seale was among the “Chicago Eight” who faced charges following the mass protests in Chicago after the 1968 Democratic National Convention (Lanza 2021). Across the world, international students from the Global South who believed in Maoism “turned cities and towns across Europe and North America into sites of intense transnational and transcultural exchange” (Slobodian 2020, 67). Maoism emerged as an alternative to the declining communist parties in the West and the Soviet model. It offered the allure of self-reliance and the establishment of a new culture, appealing to dissatisfied Western leftists who were no longer content with traditional left parties as the focal point of left politics. Importantly, Maoist promises were based upon a challenge of existing party apparatuses. The idea that parties must be revolutionized even after a victorious socialist revolution became a prominent aspect of the global appeal of Maoism during the 1960s.

In summary, the global dissemination of Maoism significantly influenced the development of anti-party sentiments in social movements during the 1960s. Moreover, the shift in party orientation since that era is not limited to Western countries alone. In China, the birthplace of Maoism, the Communist Party of China (CPC) also experienced a series of transformations. After the peak of mass movements during the Cultural Revolution (1966–68), the party went through a prolonged period of re-stabilization. Then, following Mao’s death in 1976, it adopted a “pragmatist” approach, prioritizing economic development over political and ideological struggles. These transformations have also been described as depoliticization (Connery 2019; Lee and Zhang 2013; Li 2016; Pang 2012; Thornton 2011). As demonstrated later, the contextual differences between liberal democracies and China resulted in very different trajectories of depoliticization. However, the common denominator shared

by political theorists and scientists who seek to rectify depoliticization is the same: the diminishing importance of value-driven pursuits and the rise of technocracy in party politics.

This article aims to broaden the understanding of depoliticization and party renewal by exploring Wang Hui’s ideas on reawakening a revolutionary party and the criticisms he faces. Three reasons make Wang’s theory relevant. First, his theory is rooted in the Maoist legacy that is already global. This article shows that both his interpretation of the party crisis and his proposed solution are inspired by Maoism. Indeed, his insistence on the CPC’s revolutionary legacy has been criticized as nostalgic (Rong 2023). Second, Wang’s party theory addresses a central question in party politics: how to maintain future-oriented political dynamism after achieving national power. Wang identifies the struggle between future-oriented forces and a bureaucratic structure always leaning toward fossilization as a central question for party politics. *Political dynamism*, from Wang’s perspective, is the fundamental democratic issue. Third, the limits and flaws of Wang’s theory have been intensively debated in the Chinese intellectual sphere. Such debates enrich political scientists’ understanding of the ecology of political theorizing in nonliberal-democratic contexts. In other words, the purpose of reading Wang is not to endorse him as representing a distinct “Chinese” or “East Asian” alternative to the issue of party renewal. Instead, the aim is to explore the challenges faced by advocates of party politics in nonliberal-democratic contexts, the specific questions that intrigue them in their quest for solutions, and the strengths and limitations of their proposed remedies, all through critical dialogues about their theories.

The article proceeds as follows: First, I examine Wang’s concept of depoliticization, capturing the bureaucratization and fossilization of revolutionary parties, especially in China. Here, depoliticization emphasizes the technocratic turn and the disappearance of value pursuits in party politics rather than the decline in electoral performance. Second, I reconstruct Wang’s approach to repoliticization, where he proposes the identification between a charismatic leader and robust grassroots movements as the core method to rectify depoliticizing tendencies after victorious revolutions. Finally, I engage with Wang’s Chinese critics, revealing his oversight of the tension between charismatic politics and extra-party institutionalization. I then compare Wang’s theory with existing studies on the Bolivian MAS (Movement for Socialism), unveiling mutual insights between the two cases.

THE CHINESE SIXTIES AND THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

Wang Hui’s party theory stems from his understanding of the 1960s, a recurring theme in his writings. According to Wang, mainstream scholarly discussions about the Global Sixties primarily focus on the Western experience of “target[ing] the post-war party-state

[and] ruthlessly criticizing its domestic and foreign policies.” The Asian Sixties, characterized by the efforts to “re-establish independent nations and to form new forms of party states through social movements and armed struggle,” to discover unique “forms of social transformation and economic development,” and to achieve “sovereign space within a hegemonic system of international relations,” has largely been forgotten (Wang 2006, 684). To Wang, the central theme of the Asian Sixties is “alternatives.” He views this period as a series of anticolonial endeavors that sought to explore alternative ways of organizing party-state relations, accomplishing national development, and strengthening sovereignty.

Wang’s comprehension of the Asian Sixties centers on the Chinese Sixties, particularly the Cultural Revolution. He perceives the Cultural Revolution as a last effort to address a persistent issue plaguing the CPC since the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949—the problem of depoliticization. “The most important manifestations” of depoliticization, according to Wang (2006, 684), “were bureaucratization and internal power struggles within the party-state”. Here, Wang tries to capture a theoretical dilemma confronting all revolutionary parties when they achieve and consolidate political power. White and Ypi (2016, 168) interpret this as a contradiction between the party as a revolutionary device and a governing apparatus: revolutionary parties that legitimize themselves by appealing to the name of the people have to “justify the newly established system of rules to everyone and in everyone’s name ... not only on behalf of the fellow partisans who actively endorsed and promoted their shared political projects but also on behalf of all others.” This new system of rules is integral to state-building, enabling the emergence of a rationalist bureaucracy and a caste of bureaucrats responsible for implementing these rules. Bureaucratization also stems from factors like economic development, among others. In the case of socialist China, Meisner (1999, 124–5) notes that as early as the late 1950s, a CPC-led process of industrialization was already giving rise to new patterns of social inequality demonstrated by the rise of economic administrators and technological elites. For these reasons, Alain Badiou develops a critique of the party-state as a form of emancipatory politics well captured by Hoffman (2016, 28): “the commitment of the party to the construction a new state allows it to morph into a figure of the party-state that blocks a politics of emancipation.” In the process of state-building, White and Ypi observe, revolutionary parties often either resort to revolutionary terror or self-imposed amnesia, that is, forgetting the principles generated in the party’s revolutionary past to turn itself into a governing party. The Cultural Revolution, in Wang’s narrative, amounts to an endeavor to seek an alternative path of navigating the dilemma between maintaining revolutionary momentum and state-building. He interprets the Cultural Revolution as “a reaction to the statification of the party,” by which he refers precisely to the CPC’s transformation from a socialist revolutionary party to a state governing

machine. Because the target of the Cultural Revolution was the fossilizing, “statifying” party apparatus, Mao embraced his charisma and took an extra-institutional approach to mobilize students, workers, and peasants not merely to attack bureaucrats within the party but also to develop new political horizons.

In Wang’s depiction, the early stages of the Cultural Revolution saw fruitful outcomes of the masses’ political innovations. He highlights several forms of political participation he believes as carrying the potential of rectifying a statifying party, including “political debate, theoretical investigation, autonomous social organizations, political struggles within and outside the party-state system, as well as aspects such as the spontaneity and vitality of political organization and discursive space” (Wang 2006, 690). “In these early years, all over China, there appeared factories reorganized according to the pattern of the Paris Commune, and schools and other units engaged in social experimentation,” Wang argues. However,

due to factional struggles and the forceful re-assertion of the party-state system, most of these extra-state forms of political activation quickly changed into other forms. And yet, traces of these early Cultural Revolution experiments remained in later state and party reorganization ... These practices, tainted with the character of the bureaucratized state-party system and thus unable to unleash creative energies, became, at the end of the 1970s, primary among the primary targets in the party and government’s policy of ‘cleaning the mess and returning to normal’ (Wang 2006, 689).

It should be noted that Wang’s interpretation of the Cultural Revolution has been criticized by historians of contemporary China. They rightly point out that moments of free debates were often quickly replaced by violent suppression of dissent in the history of the CPC. I will return to this issue in the section “Reading Wang Hui’s Party Theory in and Beyond the Chinese Context.” Here, Wang tries to capture a transient moment of political activation to outline the possibility of challenging party depoliticization. As the party apparatus weakened at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution due to social movements mobilized by Mao’s anti-partyism, possibilities of nonparty or extra-party politics emerged on the grassroots level. Mao’s charismatic leadership, his position *above* the party, and his assault on the party structure altogether opened up a space for grassroots political actions, “unleashing creative energies” while providing cohesion to grassroots rebels (Andreas 2007). Meanwhile, although Wang values the fact that these various praxes of “social experimentation” and “political activation” existed outside the bureaucratized party apparatus, he does not interpret them as efforts to eliminate the *form* of the party as a progressive, revolutionary vehicle. What he merits is both the epistemic, creative value of such praxes and their potential to “reexamine the party’s political values” (Wang 2006, 689). By characterizing the short-lived moment of mass movement in the early stage of the Cultural Revolution in this way, Wang comes close to advancing a model dubbed by White

and Ypi (2016, 179) as “parties *with* movements.” White and Ypi (2016, 182) associate Rosa Luxemburg with this model, which does not rigidly divide extra-party actions and party structures. This model allows activists to appreciate partisanship while still pressuring parties to “preserve their potential for innovation and resist bureaucratizing tendencies.” Wang’s emphasis on the charismatic leader raises a critical question for White and Ypi’s insight: What sustains partisanship when activists themselves are challenging the party structure? This is a central concern for Wang. I will explore it further in the next section while analyzing his solution to depoliticization.

In the Chinese version of this essay, Wang (2008, 15) identifies three reasons for the rapid decline of grassroots socio-political experimentation: first, the extremism and violence of mass movements; second, the emphasis on Mao’s charismatic cult of personality; and third, the absorption of theoretical and political debates about the Party’s future into intra-party power struggles, resulting in severe political persecution and an increase in violence.¹ In Wang’s narrative, as the Cultural Revolution moved away from discussions about China’s future and de-statification, the powerful party-state regained control. “Old political elites” successfully transformed themselves into representatives of special-interest groups while retaining political power, prevailing in the process. Importantly, Wang sees violence and political persecution as a manifestation of failed politicization because they overshadowed the potential for political debates and social experimentation. He does not consider them an inevitable outcome of Mao’s call for mass mobilization. Wang’s critics challenge this view, and their debates will be explored later in the article.

After the death of Mao in 1976, Deng Xiaoping rose to the CPC’s leadership after a series of political struggles. Deng’s marketization program expedited the process of depoliticization. Marketization and privatization eroded the distinctions between political elites and the bourgeoisie. China’s reintegration into global organizations like the WTO and the focus on market adjustments and governance instead of political issues further solidified the CPC’s statist turn, transforming it into a depoliticized party and Chinese society into a depoliticized entity. To Wang (2004), this demonstrates how China has finally entered a neoliberal era. In this era, the dominant interpretation of the meaning of the Cultural Revolution, shared by the CPC’s official line (Politburo of the Communist Party of China 1981) and Chinese liberal intellectuals (see, for instance, Xu 1999), overwhelmingly focuses on moral and political condemnation. That the Cultural Revolution represents an attempt—albeit a failed one—to address the crisis of the revolutionary party has largely been forgotten

¹ There are some differences between the English translation of this essay, published in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* in 2006, and the Chinese version. Here, I am citing the Chinese version included in a collection of Wang’s essays published in 2008: “Depoliticized Politics: The End of the Short Twentieth Century and 1990s” (*Qu zhengzhìhua de zhengzhì: duan 20shìjì de zhongjì yu 90niandai*).

because the Cultural Revolution itself has become “a forbidden subject, not available for public debate or historical analysis and fit only for political condemnation” (Wang 2012). The amnesia of the meaning of the Cultural Revolution, Wang (2004, 34) argues, is the cornerstone of the status quo, as he contends that “repudiating the Cultural Revolution has turned into a defense of ruling ideology and state policy.”

Therefore, in Wang’s interpretation, the current CPC is a depoliticized, statist, bureaucratic apparatus that has, to some extent, lost its claim to the representativeness of the people since the Cultural Revolution failed to intervene in the process of depoliticization. He concludes,

The tragedy of the Cultural Revolution was not a product of its politicization—signified by political debate, theoretical investigation, autonomous social organizations, political struggles within and outside the party-state system, as well as aspects such as spontaneity and vitality of political organizations and discursive space. The tragedy was a result of depoliticization—factional struggles whose binarism eliminated the possibilities for autonomous social spheres, transformed political debate into a means of power struggle, transformed a political class concept into an essentialized identitarian concept of class, etc. (Wang 2006, 690)

Wang’s emphasis on depoliticization as the core theme of the political history of the late twentieth century echoes critical scholars of neoliberalism, who single out depoliticization as the core character of neoliberal social policies in the late twentieth century. Here, it is worth examining the similarities and differences between the various ways this concept is employed. In the literature on neoliberalism, depoliticization marks a process in which the decision-making power in liberal democracies gradually shifted toward counter-majoritarian institutions, resulting in a deterioration of democratic politics (Bourdieu 2002; Lazzarato 2009; Rancière 2007; Vázquez-Arroyo 2008). Among the many consequences of neoliberal depoliticization, Burnham (2001, 129) highlights the rise of a technocratic, seemingly nonpartisan model of governing that superseded the politicized, party-based model. Put differently, depoliticization is closely tied to the decline of parties and party politics, as technocratic governing undermines the party’s essential functions of mobilizing and representing the masses in crucial social, economic, and political decisions. The weakening of the party’s role as a representative mechanism results in various political consequences in established liberal democracies, including decreased voter turnout, vacillating voting behaviors, and reduced party competition (Mair 2013).

Scholars of contemporary China from diverse disciplines have employed the concept of depoliticization to characterize a set of social, political, administrative, and affective changes in the post-Mao era. Thornton (2011, 241) argues that the post-Mao CPC replaced the “Mao-era model of mobilizing popular opinion” with

modern survey methods, which is “depoliticized choice-making on the part of respondents selecting from a limited list of pre-screened options.” Here, depoliticization describes the change in the CPC’s attitudes from actively mobilizing and shaping popular will to surveying and monitoring public opinion. Lee (2019, 26) draws on Wang Hui’s concept of depoliticization to discuss the transmutation from class feelings to fervent nationalism in post-Mao China. She argues that when post-Mao China went through marketization, old-class feelings, intertwined with tribalist sentiments, lost their social foundation and “yielded to structures of feeling that meshed better with both traditional family-centred values and the resurrected market economy and consumer society.” Here, depoliticization refers to the CPC’s shift from emphasizing class relations and struggles to basing its governing legitimacy on economic performance. Lee and Zhang (2013, 1481) use depoliticization to capture the post-Mao CPC’s change in handling social unrest, a transition marked by “steering contestations away from the terrain of political values, power structure, and inequality and turning them into manageable, nonzero-sum quid pro quo, legal-bureaucratic games and webs of instrumental personal relations.” Here, depoliticization reveals the CPC’s focus on social stability and their adoption of new techniques to handle contentious politics.

The institutional infrastructures that led to depoliticization in the liberal democratic and Chinese contexts were notably different. In contemporary China, the absence of competitive national elections meant the CPC’s politics was never oriented toward winning elections. Moreover, as O’Brien (1990) underscores, although the National People’s Congress—established as the highest organ of state authority by the 1954 constitution—should not be disregarded as a mere rubber stamp, it played a minor role in Mao-era politics and was already marginalized before the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese case of depoliticization may be less significant in terms of institutional performance and changes, and the Chinese public sphere’s expectation of the party’s key functions may also be less dependent on electoral terms.² Nonetheless, if depoliticization is considered a historical process through which claims of representation gradually lose credibility, two points must be considered. First, extra-institutional mobilization plays a key role in conceptualizing representation. Drawing on Hannah Pitkin and Jane Mansbridge, Disch (2011, 107) argues that mobilization is crucial because democratic claims of representation cannot only rest upon reflecting existing

interests but also “forming demands and social cleavages.” Mobilization brings an anticipatory dimension to democratic representation because it trains citizens’ capacity to form a democratic will in the future. Indeed, the similarities between Pitkin’s and Mao’s concepts of representation have been analyzed by Frakt (1979). Second, representation is inevitably performative and affective. Claims of representation become plausible not only because they follow a certain set of institutional rules but also because they involve a process through which members of the political community articulate demands, form collective identity, and experience empowerment. In the Chinese context, scholars, including Wang Hui, largely employ the concept of depoliticization to describe the decline of mobilization and the weakening of the performative layer of representation.

The liberal democratic and Chinese experiences of depoliticization share a common concern: a significant devaluation of party politics. By devaluation, Mair (2013, 18–20) empirically describes citizens’ indifference toward the impact of partisan decision making. Increasingly, key decisions are made by “non-political bodies,” lacking claims of representation and clear chains of responsibility. Wang’s concerns about devaluation stem from the disappearance of contestations about value orientations and party development within the CPC. This led to a party solely focused on governing stability, viewing political debates and social unrest as threats. This phenomenon also produced a pervasive sentiment of political indifference in society addressed by other contemporary Chinese political thinkers (see Ci 1994; 2014). In both cases of devaluation, claims of representation in party politics are in crisis, as party politics is no longer perceived as the medium between, on the one hand, a general population capable of making key decisions and, on the other hand, the pursuit of modern political values like equality and democracy.

With this in mind, other parallels between Mair’s and Wang’s formulations of the crisis of representation become evident. Like Mair, Wang also sees the growth of the media in the civic sphere as a challenge to the party’s agenda-setting power (Mair 2013, 93–4; Wang 2016, 157–8). The media has been traditionally viewed as a democratizing force in the literature on democratization. Wang aligns with Mair’s perspective, seeing the media’s increasing influence in civil society as a problem, even though media in contemporary China never enjoyed a level of freedom similar to Western counterparts. He believes it highlights how parties and party elites evade their responsibilities toward the public, failing to effectively represent the people’s interests and mobilize citizens. Indeed, Wang takes this argument further, asserting that the media’s growing influence in politics should not be seen as democratization but rather as the colonization of the public sphere, as it is often driven by the power of capital. Additionally, he views the statist notion of “governance” as contrary to the party’s historical role as a representative mechanism. According to Wang, as parties shift toward governance and away from political representation and

² Party theorists have noted that our political language profoundly shapes our political thinking (Peled and Bonotti 2016), and have advocated for a concept of partisanship that challenges linguistic barriers and promotes linguistic justice (Bonotti and Stojanović 2022). I thank Reviewer 1 for raising this point. In the Chinese conceptualization of parties, Jiang (Forthcoming) notes that extensive debates among late-Qing intellectuals resulted in an understanding of parties as a guiding force for the general population, which deeply influenced the Chinese parties that later practiced one-party authoritarianism, the KMT and the CPC.

mobilization, contemporary politics transitions into a state of “post-party politics.” This concept refers not to parties vanishing from the political arena but to the vanishing of the fundamental logic of parties as representatives.

Such parallels do not drive Wang toward theorizing a multi-party system in China as a solution to the depoliticization of the CPC. Instead, Wang (2016, 160) believes that “Western democracy based on general elections is not the only model of democracy, nor is democracy a merely formal practice. Democracy must be predicated on political dynamism. Once this momentum is lost, no form of democracy can survive.” A passionate defender of party politics, Wang seeks to come up with an answer to party decline rooted in what he views as the Chinese experience of the socialist revolution. In the next section, I analyze how Wang develops his (Maoist) answer to the “breakdown of representation” in party politics in his writings from the late 2000s to now.

SALVAGING THE MODERN PRINCE WITH THE ANCIENT PRINCE

In Wang’s (2016) essay, “Crisis of Representation and Post-Party Politics” (originally published in Chinese in 2013), he proposes reclaiming the legacy of the Chinese socialist revolution to revitalize the CPC by emphasizing two key lessons from party history.

The first lesson focuses on the dynamics within the party. Wang suggests reigniting theoretical debates concerning different “lines” of party development. He again reads the Cultural Revolution as a project intended for political energization, praising the early stage of the Cultural Revolution for encouraging the expression of diverse visions about the CPC and Chinese society’s future. These visions, sometimes stemming from grassroots experimental practices, stimulate theoretical discussions on how the revolutionary party can adapt to new socio-political conditions. Wang (2016, 165–6) contends that political dynamism rests upon “the interaction between culture and politics” and is lost when “the political party overly interferes with or disciplines cultural movements, thereby destroying the interaction between culture and politics.” In other words, Wang emphasizes that freedom of speech, particularly the open and vibrant exchange of opinions on party politics and progress, is essential for intra-party democracy and political vitality. He argues that the CPC’s history demonstrates how significant theoretical debates have aided the party in recognizing and rectifying mistakes. He criticizes the pragmatist turn under Deng’s leadership for suppressing and marginalizing these crucial debates.

The second lesson focuses on the party’s relationship with the masses. Wang advocates for reclaiming the Maoist idea of the “mass line” from party history, which emphasizes active engagement with and feedback from the masses in shaping party policies and decisions. Famously summarized by Mao (1965, 119) as “from the masses, to the masses,” the mass line consists of

three interconnected layers, as aptly captured by Young (1980). First, it emphasizes the revolutionary party’s leadership in mobilizing the masses during the socialist revolution. Second, it adopts an anti-dogmatist epistemology that prioritizes the needs, experiences, and knowledge of the masses as the primary intellectual source for party officials. Third, it underscores the essential role of mass participation in translating policy into action. Wang regards the synergy between the mass line and theoretical debates as crucial for the vitality of the revolutionary party. To him, theoretical debates about party lines must surpass the boundaries of core leadership especially when the party rules over a pluralist society with diverse interests (such as post-marketization China). Theoretical debates about politics must extend to the masses. In this process, the mass’s relationship with the party changes, “as duality gradually integrates into a relative unity” (Wang 2016, 171). Importantly, theoretical debates about politics cannot be generated absent vital grassroots politics. Wang, therefore, contends that “a certain kind of social organizations” and social movements are necessary for the party’s reinvigoration in post-party conditions. Wang particularly emphasizes class-based organizations and movements in contemporary China, given the CPC’s legitimating story as a proletarian party. To him, it is through such class-based organizations and movements that new forms of class identity—those produced by new class conditions in contemporary China, such as the significant presence of migrant workers—can be articulated in praxis.

Two noteworthy points arise here. Firstly, Wang’s historical narrative comes close to Nietzsche’s (1997, 57–123) concept of monumental history, which aims to inspire by highlighting past possibilities. Such heroic narratives of history sacrifice accuracy for the sake of generating lessons. In Wang’s case, he focuses on reclaiming lessons useful for party revival from the Cultural Revolution, overshadowing the trauma and suffering that took place during this period.

Second, Wang’s concept of class significantly emphasizes subjective identification. Scholars of Marxism have long recognized that consciousness plays a crucial role in shaping class identity and revolutionary agency. The process through which the proletariat experiences and becomes aware of class antagonism is the very process of agent-making. The relationship between social reality, consciousness, and revolutionary agency is the pivot of, for example, E. P. Thompson’s scholarship. Wang’s concept of class leans heavily toward consciousness, emphasizing subjective recognition and voluntarist action. This emphasis on consciousness, as illustrated by his liberal critic (Chen 2022), reveals a politicized concept of class in Wang’s approach. Rong (2023, 207) also finds that Wang’s politicized concept of class is essentially about “the mass,” a “‘huge signifier’ capable of encompassing all classes with the revolutionary party’s ‘political integration.’” Wang (2006) argues that a politicized concept of class encourages political debates about the revolutionary agent, fostering social mobilization and enabling party renewal. He rejects an “essentialist” class concept based solely on

property ownership and instead embraces the contestation and negotiation of new class identities emerging in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape driven by economic development.

These two “lessons” set him apart from many other defenders of parties, like Peter Mair. Wang essentially favors what Bagg and Bhatia (2022) call “mass-facing intra-party democracy,” even though Bagg and Bhatia do not address one-party systems in nonliberal democratic countries. “Realist” defenders of parties like Mair—to adopt Bagg and Bhatia’s phrase—doubt that intra-party democracy (IPD) is necessary for improving democratic outcomes. The reasons are manifold. Mair (2013, 87–8) partly attributes party decline to increasing regulations imposed by public law, arguing that discretion is inherent in party politics. Advocating for transparency and accountability within parties may, according to realists, undermine their roles in democracy and the democratic process itself. Cross and Katz (2013, 3) contend that direct member decision making “made it impossible to take binding decisions” and “denied [parties] both stable and experienced representation.” Carty (2013, 19) observes that parties can “manipulate a formally popular decision making process by ensuring that members’ choices are constrained and limited to alternatives acceptable to the existing elite,” and even advocates of IPD like Ignazi (2020, 12) find Carty’s observation insightful. Katz (2013), therefore, is pessimistic about IPD’s chance of halting party decline. Realist suggestions “typically rely on a combination of inter-party competition and elite-facing IPD as the best formula for preventing systemic domination or capture” (Bagg and Bhatia 2022, 9). In a one-party context, Wang cannot rely on inter-party competition to arrest party decline. Instead, he focuses on re-engaging the masses as the crucial step to counteract the bureaucratic tendencies within the CPC.

But the more important question for Wang, who singles out “political dynamism” as the most crucial issue undergirding discussions about both democracy and parties, is *how* to reclaim such lessons. A depoliticized post-revolutionary party does not prioritize self-renewal. Undoubtedly, as Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018, 40) argue, “[when] the only meaningful political competition is intraparty competition, it breeds clientelism and corruption.” What, then, will drive the CPC toward repoliticization?

Wang’s answer is equivocal, which can be at least partly attributed to censorship. Even though Wang is sometimes criticized for being complicit in the CPC’s authoritarianism (Rong 2020), his writings are not exempt from censorship. Nevertheless, in some of his works from the late 2010s and early 2020s, a potential answer begins to surface, which I will now outline.

I start with Wang’s (2020) essay, “The Revolutionary Personality and the Philosophy of Victory”, published in Chinese to commemorate Lenin’s 150th birthday. Gramsci (1971, 129) argues that the Machiavellian prince cannot exist as an individual in modern politics. The modern prince can “only be an organism, a complex element of society ... History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party.” Developing this

concept, Wang accentuates the idea of “the people’s war,” another idea he has been trying to reclaim from the revolutionary legacy (see Wang 2016, 110–52). This Maoist military concept emphasizes building popular support for revolutionary military actions and incorporating such support into intelligence gathering, supply procurement, and guerrilla warfare strategies. Wang (2020) sees the people’s war in the twentieth century as “a process culminating in the creation of a new political agency,” namely, the CPC’s way of becoming the modern prince. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi Jinping declared a “people’s war” against the Coronavirus. Wang views the CPC’s early-stage COVID control policies as reclaiming this concept. The Party mobilized medical personnel and supplies from various social units, bypassing bureaucratic hierarchy, representing an attempt at repoliticization, Wang argues. This new people’s war “was to stop the virus through popular mobilization and scientific prevention and control, and not to generate new political subjects” (Wang 2020). Such views draw criticism from liberals. Rong (2020) chastises Wang for uncritically endorsing the CPC’s nationalism:

[M]ost Chinese scholars who devote themselves to singing the praises of nationalism are theoretical opportunists, and lack intellectual capacity and philosophical accomplishment. This includes Wang Hui... His proposals concerning a “revolutionary personality” and a “philosophy of victory” are written expressly for China’s leader: rewriting the revolutionary narrative for China’s current political needs, calling for the arrival of new revolutionaries, and reimagining a new era led by revolutionaries.

In essence, Rong’s main criticism is that his critique of the CPC’s depoliticization and his proposal to reclaim revolutionary legacies are merely rhetorical tools to legitimize the party’s actions. According to Rong, Wang’s theory is tailored to China’s leader, Xi Jinping, and lacks the intention to generate new political subjects beyond the existing party narrative. A closer examination reveals a more intricate interpretation. Indeed, Wang’s concept of the “revolutionary personality” contains individualistic traits, as it emphasizes qualities like “strategic judgment” in identifying weak points in the struggle. For instance, he highlights figures like Lenin, who identified the weak link in the capitalist system—Asia—as the potential site for a communist revolution in the early twentieth century. Wang (2020) also sees the revolutionary personality as containing an unyielding spirit of struggle, a “philosophy of victory:” “The logic of victory is in continued action, exploration and struggle, which is not the same as blind optimism or starry-eyed hope.” He urges revolutionaries not to lose hope even in adverse situations or failures and emphasizes historical analysis to prepare for future revolutions. He explored these two qualities of the “revolutionary personality” on a personal level, citing examples including Lenin, Vera Zasulich, Leon Trotsky, and Sun Yat-sen, who exhibited strategic thinking and mental strength to navigate complex circumstances and guide their revolutionary parties on the right path.

Radical political theorists have long noted that the anti-routine feature of charismatic leadership can address the crisis of bureaucratized revolutionary organizations. Gramsci, in Kalyvas's (2000, 354) rendering, appropriates "the symbolic and mythical figure of the heroic legislator and the great founder" from Machiavelli when discussing the modern prince. Wang takes inspiration from Gramsci's modern prince as a collective entity representing the national-popular collective will and wielding symbolic power to create new institutions and social relations in a new state. However, Wang goes beyond this by incorporating charismatic leadership from the ancient prince into his solution for avoiding bureaucratization in party politics. He sees the symbolic and charismatic *figure* as essential in addressing the challenges faced by revolutionary parties. In other words, Wang's "revolutionary personality," while appearing as a discussion of reawakening the modern prince, contains a depiction of a revolutionary leader whose political judgment and mentalities transcend the organizational structures of the modern prince. In the case of the Cultural Revolution, this figure was Mao.³

This tension between the Party as the modern prince and individualistic revolutionary personalities is even more salient in Wang's (2018a) English article, "Global 1968 Reconstructed in the Short Century." In this article, he restated his early critique of what he identifies as the Eurocentric memory of the Global Sixties and formulates a possibility of challenging the Eurocentric focus on student movements by drawing on recent labor movements in China. Wang pays special attention to the 2018 Jasic labor movement in Shenzhen. While Wang has written extensively about disruptive movements during the Cultural Revolution, this is a rare occasion where he directly comments on contemporary movements (Xu and Reed 2023, 249). The Jasic movement was a labor dispute in which labor activists and Maoist student groups formed a coalition to demand labor justice. Both Maoist strategies of mobilization and Mao's images featured significantly in this movement (Au 2018). Particularly, Wang (2018a, 192) notes that this movement is unique because

students from the best universities in China ... gained information from online and formed student support groups. They continued to publish lists of arrested workers for the public and report these workers' current conditions ... Unlike the liberal or neoliberal tendencies of many movements after the end of the Cold War, this wave of youth movements clearly positions itself within the Left ... These young students show courage, persistence and demonstrate an ability to think which does away the cynical attitude of the past 30 years.

³ Wang consistently interprets Mao as an antimodern thinker of modernization leading the Chinese revolutionaries toward pursuing what some may call an alternative path toward modernity. One may even argue that "antimodern modernity" is the core theme of Wang's entire intellectual project, including his recent writings on Chinese history. See Murthy (2006).

How do the Jasic labor activists' efforts disrupt the Eurocentric understanding of 1968 and challenge global depoliticization? Wang (2018a, 193) notes that the Jasic student activists "support the workers' unions and demands for the inclusion of a diverse range of legitimate struggles within the autonomously formed student associations." Emphasizing the significance of social movements transcending identity boundaries as a crucial lesson from the global 1960s, Wang finds young leftist activists in China reclaiming this lesson by decentralizing students as the core of social movements and focusing on the concept of "the masses" rather than rigid class categorizations. This approach offers a potential solution to the crisis of parties and the breakdown of representation in contemporary China. Importantly, these young labor activists "show courage, persistence and demonstrate an ability to think which does away the cynical attitude of the past 30 years." In other words, *they* exemplify "revolutionary personality" and are reclaiming political subjectivity in the name of the people. Their "continuous action, exploration and struggle" differed "from blind optimism or metaphysical hope," demonstrating the "philosophy of victory" Wang reclaims from Lenin, Mao, and Sun.

In summary, Wang believes that addressing the crisis of the modern prince requires a viable plan to build political dynamism. To achieve this, he highlights two essential entities: a mentally strong and astute revolutionary leader capable of navigating complex situations, especially in adverse circumstances. They are "truly like 'mythic figures,'" and "even in hopeless situations," they "can inspire people to persevere and discover the future" (Wang 2020). Put differently, even though Wang relies on the Gramscian idea of the modern prince to analyze the contemporary crisis of revolutionary parties, his solution to this crisis necessitates an *ancient* prince who can handle *fortuna* with *virtù*. Crucially, "in many critical historical moments," such leaders "often found themselves opposed to this political party and its guiding line" (Wang 2020). In such extraordinary leaders, Wang sees the possibility of change. On the other hand, the extraordinary leader's authority and legitimacy rely on their alignment with a robust, bottom-up, democratic movement. Through direct interaction between the leader and the mass movement—the early phase of the Cultural Revolution—a new political subjectivity is formed, fostering fresh perspectives on socialist democratic identity and generating political dynamism to revitalize the fossilized party:

If the stratification of political parties was a product of the gradual loss of vitality of the tradition of the people's war, then one of the ways to explore overcoming the stratification of political parties could not be limited only to formalistic discussions of the separation of party politics and party organization, but should explore the ways of participatory democracy or populist democracy from that gradually lost tradition. (Wang 2018b, 35–6)

Wang is not the first to investigate this complex relationship between the leader, the mass, and parties through the angle of representation. The literature on

“movement parties” has explored this relationship by focusing on how movement parties balance the vertical need of institutionalization with the horizontal demands of pluralist, radical-democratic social movements (Kim 2020; Kioupiolis 2016; Kitschelt 2006; Nachman 2023). Vertical institutionalization provides the necessary infrastructure for representation. Without representation, the pluralist interests and demands articulated in horizontal, radical-democratic social movements are more likely to pursue a logic of identification, where leaders symbolize the cause. The way Wang theorizes party renewal seems to task the charismatic leader with the responsibility of structuring the movement: whereas new articulations of class identity and class demands emerge in mass movements, the charismatic leader must recognize situations where the party needs a renewal and must structure the horizontal power of social movements into a force of party renewal. In the final section of this article, I analyze Wang’s theory in both the Chinese and global contexts.

READING WANG HUI’S PARTY THEORY IN AND BEYOND THE CHINESE CONTEXT

In this section, I read Wang Hui’s party against his Chinese critics before moving on to a comparison with movement-party relationships beyond the Chinese context. By so doing, I demonstrate the following points. First, critical discussions about Wang’s interpretation of CPC history in the Chinese intellectual sphere show how debates about party history take on future-oriented meanings, as such debates often imply judgments about what should be considered politically possible or impossible for a given society. Second, the question Wang fails to convincingly answer—how to protect future-oriented movements and preserve political dynamism—demonstrates an intriguing paradox about movement-oriented projects of party renewal: movements can efficiently invigorate a party when they are unready to be absorbed into the party. This is best understood with a comparison between Wang’s theory and the case of the Bolivian MAS. Third, Wang’s theory, in turn, symptomatically reflects the conditions under which charismatic leadership will be romanticized or become an attractive option for grassroots activists and thinkers who advocate for movement-oriented projects of party renewal.

In communist and post-communist societies, debates about the party often develop a historical orientation. Communist parties rely on interpreting their role as facilitators of historical progress for legitimacy. When historical events disrupt the “narrative harmony” of the communist legitimating story (Kolář 2012, 404), communist parties must reinterpret history to develop a new legitimating story coherent enough to maintain social cohesion. As a result, political debates about the party’s future become historicized, and historical debates about the party’s past become politicized. In contemporary China, a similar pattern is observed. After Mao’s death, the CPC issued a historical resolution, providing official

answers to questions about suffering, responsibility, victimhood, and trauma during the Mao era (Politburo of the Communist Party of China 1981). However, alternative, unofficial historical accounts about the Mao era, and particularly about the Cultural Revolution, continued to thrive despite the official stance. Debating how to interpret the history of the Mao era was “one of the structuring discussions of China’s intellectual sphere since the 1980s” (Veg 2019, 87). Below, I focus on one key political question emerging out of Chinese debates about Wang Hui’s historical narrative: what preserves the political dynamism of future-oriented grassroots movements in potential moments of party renewal?

Wang’s account of CPC history and his party theory have become integral to Chinese intellectual debates and have faced criticism, particularly from historian Yang Kuisong, who challenges Wang on historical and political grounds. The accuracy of Wang’s account of “the people’s war” and Wang’s mistakes in handling historical materials are both targets of Yang’s criticism (Yang 2013; 2014). An important segue from a historical critique to a political critique emerges when Yang criticizes Wang for glossing over the omnipresence of violence during the Cultural Revolution:

As the nationwide power struggle unfolded in 1967, workers and students from all parts of the country ... were involved in large-scale “armed struggles,” resulting in an even more serious and bloody situation of “all-out civil war.” I wonder ... where was the impressive “social experiment of autonomy for factories, schools and institutions modeled on the Paris Commune” formed? ... Can this political and cultural ecology of verbal violence, which can turn into physical violence at any time, really shed any useful light on the present generation in terms of the ideal of transforming the old state apparatus? (Yang 2014)

As discussed, Wang acknowledges that the moments of political activation he identifies were short-lived and often replaced by violence. He is not the first political theorist to conceptualize “the political” as fleeting and emerging in critical historical junctures. Republicans like Pocock (1975) and radical democrats like Wolin (2016) have, in different ways, captured the political implication of the disruption of a stable political temporality.⁴ More important here is what they identify as causes of violence and suppression. Whereas Wang contends that mass movements in the early Cultural Revolution turned violent because the critical space for politicization closed too soon, Yang maintains that it was precisely politicization that bred violence. Indeed, politicization is violence in Yang’s account, as he argues that “any attempt to ‘politicize’ human society to eliminate the side effects of ‘depoliticization’ has not only failed, but has also had disastrous consequences every time” (Yang 2014). Yang’s sweeping statement reflects a sentiment shared by the generation who had

⁴ I am indebted to Dongxian Jiang for helping me sharpen this point.

experienced the pervasive politicization of everyday life during the Cultural Revolution.

Yang is not alone in pursuing this line of critique. Chen (2022, 335) centers on a similar point, as he states that “Wang does not explain how the rigidity of class concepts leads to violence.” When Chinese thinkers like Yang and Chen critically engage Wang’s historical narrative, they are simultaneously raising questions relevant to theorists of parties. In this case, the historical question under debate—“why were social movements during the Cultural Revolution so violent”—develops a political connotation, as it invites thinkers to explore whether it is possible to *create* and *preserve* political dynamism that challenges routinized ordinary politics, and if so, whether it is desirable at all. Yang questions the possibility of a movement-oriented project of politicization. Such projects, to Yang, always lead to violence. Wang sees routinized politics as the greatest impediment to democratic political dynamism and the creation of anti-routine politics as the primary democratic task—the ancient prince can break the routinized pattern of party politics. Nonetheless, Wang provides few answers regarding the preservation of political dynamism.

Here, it is worth further contrasting Wang with another project of theorizing from social movements in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. Wu’s (2014) study of grassroots movements in the Cultural Revolution reveals that, while Mao’s attack on the bureaucratic structure did undermine established party organizations on different levels and enhanced his charismatic authority:

The enhanced power of the Leader (as in the ubiquitous Mao cult), however, was simultaneously—and paradoxically—accompanied by the weakening of his interpretive authority. With the brief breakdown of the party-state, which normally interprets and enforces the Leader’s messages, the Leader became an abstract symbol amenable to multiple interpretations, appropriations, and adaptations. (Wu 2014, 195)

In other words, Mao’s assault on the party apparatus did enable possibilities for renewal. Nonetheless, as the party’s hierarchal structure came under siege, Mao also lost the party structure’s support to disseminate authoritative interpretations of their thoughts and ideas. The weakening of Mao’s interpretive authority led to both factionalism—struggles to win Mao’s recognition—and the emergence of novel visions of democratic politics at the grassroots level. These visions, while influenced by Mao’s ideology, did not always align with his intentions. Grassroots activists trespassed Mao’s intention by, say, reducing the CPC’s dominant role in their visions of China’s future. In response to these challenges, Mao resorted to military intervention to regain control, leading to “a thinly disguised form of military dictatorship” (Dong and Walder 2012, 31). Whatever novel institutions created by grassroots activists became absorbed into state structure and, eventually, became powerful tools in persecuting former activists when the peak of mass movements passed.

Wu’s analysis is insightful for party theorists because he highlights a crucial issue: the charismatic leader’s attempt to align social movements with an agenda of party renewal entails the risk of destroying grassroots politics that contain the potential of party renewal. In other words, there is a self-destructing tendency embedded in projects of party renewal that romanticizes the role of the ancient prince. Wang’s failure to take this issue seriously invites party theorists to further investigate the relationship between social movements and projects of party renewal. At the end of this article, I bring Wang’s theory to a brief conversation with movement-party relations beyond the Chinese context. This conversation sheds light on our understanding of the relationship between the ancient prince, the modern prince, and the democratic masses.

The CPC does not often appear in comparative studies of parties. Its sheer size, expansive scope, and nonelectoral nature have been cited as exceptional features, making comparative studies difficult to conduct (Thornton 2021). Nonetheless, as I demonstrated in this article, the focal point of Wang’s party theory—party renewal under depoliticized circumstances—does speak to a core issue in the literature on parties. As mentioned above, the recent literature on movement parties also investigates the renewal of party politics and the issue of maintaining progressive momentum after assuming national power. One such case is the Bolivian MAS. Like contemporary China, Bolivia has also had ample experience with populist politics. But there are intriguing differences: as Anria (2013) observes, the MAS is a curious case in movement parties because its charismatic leader, Evo Morales, remained somewhat accountable to the social base that elected him into power. The repertoires of populist politics are also different. In Bolivia, nonelectoral participation, like mobilization and organized contestation, has historically been pivotal in shaping its political landscape through its interaction with electoral politics (Anria 2018, 223). In China, populism has significantly overshadowed discussions on electoral politics, deeply influencing democratic thinking. While some attribute this to communism (Tang 2016), Perry (2015) argues that even late-Qing thinkers like Liang Qichao held populist views about democracy, a theme consistent in contemporary Chinese democratic movements such as the Tiananmen Protests. Populist leaders can appropriate this repertoire of populist thinking in their rise. This comparison allows us to further investigate the conditions under which charismatic politics can facilitate party renewal.

Anria notes that Morales’s relative accountability is because the MAS maintains a difficult balance between the bottom-up movement logic in the rural area and the top-down populist logic in the urban area, allowing social movement organizations to have limited maneuvering space to check the authority of Morales. Morales remained a central figure of the MAS and the indigenous social movement in Bolivia until his removal in 2019, but his charismatic authority was more constrained than other populist leaders in Latin America, such as Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa. Anria (2016,

473) then points out that the MAS is relatively capable of countering bureaucratizing tendencies and maintaining its leftist momentum after achieving governing power because strong civil society organizations in Bolivia, such as neighborhood associations and peasant unions, have “mechanisms to arrive at collective decisions, and can reach agreements on candidate selection.” Under such conditions, when representatives of these organizations are incorporated into the MAS, the institutional support outside the party structure allows these representatives to defend the interests of their constituencies without being entirely subsumed into the party apparatus. The MAS, in turn, was able to “[facilitate] grassroots impact and [constrain] elite control,” thereby defying fossilization and depoliticization after achieving governing power (Anria 2016, 461). Anria and Cyr (2017) further conceptualize this strategy as the “intensive linkage” approach of party-building.

The MAS’s trajectory and strategy highlight an intriguing paradox in movement-oriented projects of party renewal. Parties can incorporate representatives of extra-party movements into their party apparatus to counter depoliticizing tendencies and maintain political dynamism. However, for these representatives to continually articulate their constituencies’ interests and influence the policy-making process, they should have some institutional support outside the party so that their political statuses are not entirely dependent on the party. In other words, having an extra-party structure unready to be absorbed into the party apparatus makes a movement-oriented project of party renewal more effective and sustainable.

This paradox, in turn, reveals what is missing in the two Chinese case studies Wang draws heavily on. During the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, grassroots institution-building was briefly possible but never guaranteed. It quickly disappeared when Mao turned toward stability and decided to suppress local movements. Similarly, in contemporary China, extra-party institution-building has been diminishing due to the crackdowns on civil society organizations under the Xi administration. Indeed, even the Jasic Movement, Wang’s example of a new “revolutionary personality,” was in part responding to the Chinese state’s increasingly harsh attitude toward labor activism. As Zhang (2020) aptly points out, the radically confrontational strategies adopted by student activists in the Jasic Movement were prompted by a widespread sense of demoralization within the activist network, which was at least partly caused by the state’s crackdown on labor organizations. The pervasive use of Maoist language and Mao’s images in this movement, which signified their identification with a charismatic leader whose symbolic power remained paramount in the CPC’s legitimating story, was a strategy adopted *in response* to the closure of the extra-party space of institution-building.

Wang’s theory of party renewal is symptomatic of the Chinese reality that he theorizes from—in both Mao’s and Xi’s China, there is hardly any guaranteed space for extra-party institutionalization. Without such space,

movements that have the potential for reawakening the modern prince constantly confront a great level of uncertainty about their survival. Meanwhile, the absence of competitive elections also means those representing such movements lack a crucial institution to consolidate their political position. Under such circumstances, appealing to the ancient prince becomes an attractive option. The ancient prince’s charismatic leadership, as Andreas (2007) notes, not only provides cohesion for the movement but also enables a space for their survival. In this sense, the symptomaticity of Wang’s theory incidentally offers a counterfactual scenario for cases like the MAS. It shows that, when contemplating possibilities of party renewal, the charismatic leader gains more consideration when the possibility of institutionalizing grassroots power outside the party becomes distant. When such extra-party space diminishes, activists may have to seek recognition from the ancient prince to salvage their sphere of action. When this happens, the political possibility of party renewal may be predicated on a populist logic of identification between the leader and the masses, surpassing the issue of institutionalization.

In sum, Wang Hui’s romanticization of the ancient prince, as it symptomatically reflects the conditions and possibilities for party renewal in contemporary China, bears intriguing insights for party theorists who seek to reinvigorate depoliticized parties by connecting them with social movements. Wang’s theory demonstrates why bureaucratic authority is not destined to overcome charismatic authority, as Weber predicted with his famous “iron cage” metaphor. The ancient prince lurks in the background, haunting all bureaucracies with their symbolic, anti-routine power. Nonetheless, the ancient prince’s efforts to shape mass movements into projects of party renewal entail a self-destructing tendency. By romanticizing the ancient prince, a theorist might overlook the chance to develop a theory that embraces a dynamic ecosystem where healthy tensions between the ancient prince, the modern prince, and the masses contribute to preserving political dynamism. Such a framework could better capture the complexity and fluidity of movement-oriented projects of party renewal.

CONCLUSION

Political parties’ democratic functions have been seriously challenged ever since the 1970s when radical democrats emerging out of antisystem movements criticized the hierarchal organization, the centralized decision-making process, and the elitist tendencies in parties. In recent years, as political parties developed linkages with various kinds of social movements to seek possibilities of renewal, political theorists have also rekindled their interests in theorizing what parties have to offer for democratic, future-oriented politics. Central to this project is a re-examination of claims of representation through parties.

In this article, I bring Chinese thinker Wang Hui’s party theory to a conversation with the political science literature on party crisis and renewal. I show that Wang

theorizes a path of depoliticization not centered on electoral performance but on the decline of credible claims of representation. I then reconstruct Wang's answer to this crisis, the concept of "revolutionary personality" that predicates the possibility of party renewal on the extra-institutional identification between a charismatic leader and the masses. Finally, by examining Wang's answer in both the Chinese and the global contexts, I demonstrate how thinking with Wang's theory and its limits helps party theorists develop a comprehensive understanding of the crucial conditions enabling movement-oriented projects of party renewal.

My analysis suggests several directions for future research. First, further research can investigate different paths toward the depoliticization of party politics in core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral states. Second, future research can further investigate the complex relationship between charismatic party leadership and the possibilities of extra-party institutionalization, and the roles electoral and nonelectoral politics play in projects of party renewal. Third, future research can further theorize the concept of representation in non-democratic contexts and how such claims condition political parties' organization and pattern of action.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARD

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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