

RUCKUS, RALF. *The Left in China. A Political Cartography*. Pluto Press, London [etc.] 2023. viii, 232 pp. £16.99. (E-book: £16.99.)

This is an important book. It is important for the topic it tackles – the long history of the oppositional left in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – but it is also important because of the approach the author takes and the clarity with which he writes. This book can and should be read far beyond the relatively small circles of those who study modern China. It is, indeed, written for a much wider audience, and it will be especially appreciated by and useful to people who are interested and engaged in egalitarian and progressive politics.

While the book is very well sourced and should satisfy the inquiring eye of any modern China specialist, Ruckus approaches the complex history of leftist social movements from 1949 to today not from the perspective of a scholar, but from that of an activist. As he details in a recent interview published in *Made in China* (<https://madeinchinajournal.com/2023/08/16/the-left-in-china-a-conversation-with-ralf-ruckus/>), his own trajectory is one of direct involvement, support, and participation in social struggles, especially of workers, first in Europe and then in China. The most recent part of the history he describes in this book is something of which he has direct experience. This perspective is in part what makes the book unique, and uniquely interesting.

Ruckus is well aware of how terms such as “left” and “left-wing” are inherently problematic, and that is even more the case for the PRC, a state which, during the Mao era, was recognized as an example of actually existing socialism by leftists all over the world, and which, to this day, makes claims to explicitly Marxist justifications for its legitimacy and mode of government. Throughout the book, Ruckus is very clear and consistent in identifying as “left-wing” those social movements and groups that fought, often against the socialist state itself, for a more equal redistribution of wealth and/or a more equal redistribution of power. His argument is that these two dimensions, “wealth and exploitation on the one hand, power and repression on the other, can be used as markers to characterize political groups in both socialist *and* capitalist societies” (p. 12). This dual focus allows Ruckus to examine struggles that centered on economic demands (which were often dismissed as vulgar “economism” during the socialist period), on attacks against the bureaucracy, corruption, capital, or on claims for people’s participation in their own governance.

The book focuses on movements, struggles, and debates that emerged out of the material and social conditions at specific historical moments. In each of the cases he examines in the volume, Ruckus describes first the “origins and composition” of that cycle of social struggle, “the forms of organizing and the protesters’ demands.” He then moves to the regime’s reactions and finally to the “involvement of left-wing actors, groups, or currents that the social struggle inspired or triggered.” [4] In his investigation, social structures come first, organizations and ideas second. With this approach, Ruckus purposely moves away from those analyses that center the ideological or factional battles within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or among different currents of “leftists.” His declared interest is in the CCP’s “other,” the oppositional left, and its challenge to the regime – be it Maoist or capitalist.

The book is organized chronologically, covering the entire historical arch of the PRC from its founding to the 2010s, but highlighting specific moments of intense social struggle. Chapter Two deals with the Mao era (1949–1976) and analyzes the labor strikes of 1956–1957 and the workers’ participation in the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1968). What Ruckus calls the transitional period, from 1976 to the full neoliberal turn of the 2000s, is the subject of Chapters Three and Four. Interestingly, he starts this section with the April 5th movement of 1976, which took place before Mao’s death, but which integrated demands for economic redress and democratic rights and, in that sense, is politically connected to later social movements, such as the Democracy Wall (1978–1980) and the Tiananmen protests (1989). For the latter, Ruckus rightfully singles out workers’ organizations during the protests, which were by far the more politically interesting, radical, and “dangerous” (from the point of view of the state). Chapter Four introduces us to rural and urban protests in the 1990s and the emergence of a critique of market reforms under the moniker of the “New Left”. In the Conclusion, Ruckus outlines the “political cartography” of these oppositional movements, distributing them along the two axes of wealth and power distribution, but also, and in my opinion, more importantly, he strives to derive from that history some lessons for global leftist strategies. Having detailed the CCP’s long anti-left record, he invites leftists to let go of any illusion that the contemporary regime is left (in fact, it is exploitative and capitalist) and to abandon any unproductive nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution era. This might not amount to a strategy, but it is wise advice for sure.

Ruckus comes from the organizational and theoretical tradition of “operaismo” (workerism), and he coherently and rightfully highlights the continuity of workers’ protest through the Mao and post-Mao eras, but he is also keen to point out the emergence of “new” groups engaged in organized protest. In all these cases, he stresses the organic and autonomous character of these movements, which were never, in his description, indebted to any kind of external, enlightened leadership. As he writes, “[i]n none of these events were workers led by any kind of ‘vanguard’ of activists or intellectuals. Social unrest of workers and peasants or everyday struggles of women inspired new compositions of left-wing activists both from the ranks of the social protesters as well as from outside” (p. 147).

I am very sympathetic to the approach in this book, and I commend Ruckus for centering his analysis on the actual social and political struggles and the people who were involved in them – rather than the sometimes esoteric and endless debates within “the Left”. Yet, I think he is rather quick in separating organizational practice from political theory, often dismissing the latter. As he clearly states in the very first pages of the book, “the ideological twists and turns are not my topic here. I do not want to discredit the analysis of ideological debates and their relation to historical events as such, but studying them is, at worst, no more than a mental exercise that earns an author academic credit” (p. 4). But ideology, especially if one adopts a Marxist framework, is never abstract and can never be separated from the materiality of struggle. It is generated, expressed, and lived through that materiality; without theory we have no way to understand or describe the meaning of the social and no way to formulate political strategies. And the importance of ideology becomes clear in Ruckus’s own analysis, for example, when he recognizes the role of

Maoist discourse in workers' political positions or the political significance of the current regime's stated adherence to some kind of Marxist language.

But this is a relatively minor criticism of what is a cogent, well-argued, clearly written volume, a much-needed scholarly and political intervention.

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ABLOVATSKI, ELIZA. *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe. The Deluge of 1919. [Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare.]* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2021. xii, 302 pp. Ill. £75.00. (Paper: £29.99; E-book: \$44.99.)

As World War I came to an end, Europe seemed to be gripped by revolutionary unrest, leading contemporaries to fear that the Russian Revolution of 1917 would spread to become a “world revolution” (p. 2). Council republics were proclaimed in Budapest and Munich. The Hungarian Soviet Republic, proclaimed on 21 March 1919, lasted four months. The Bavarian Council Republic was short-lived, lasting from 7 April to 1 May 1919. In this chaotic moment, where traditional social norms no longer seemed to hold sway, revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries each strove to impose their ideal of the new social order to come. Eliza Ablovatski shows how anti-Semitism and gender shaped counter-revolutionary violence and, more generally, contemporaries' interpretation of revolution.

Ablovatski begins by setting the scene, tracing the history of the two protagonist cities, Munich and Budapest, since the mid-nineteenth century. Both cities experienced rapid industrialization and cultural modernization. Whereas at the turn of the century they had been provincial cities, by World War I they had become cosmopolitan urban centres. The two cities were faced with the issue of assimilating growing Jewish communities, increasingly visible working-class political movements, and a cosmopolitanism that nationalist elites firmly rejected.

Chapter Two describes the political situation in Germany and Hungary during the revolution, showing its peaceful nature in contrast to the counter-revolution, which was responsible for the worst acts of political violence of the period (p. 45). Ablovatski pays little attention to World War I: the strike movements of the last years of the war are only briefly mentioned. Giving it more weight, however, might have helped to understand better what drove men and women to join the revolution, as well as the gender chaos against which counterrevolutionaries were fighting, as she brilliantly shows in Chapter Five.

The following three chapters form the core of the book, detailing the various forms of counter-revolutionary violence. Eliza Ablovatski is less interested in the two revolutions than in their repression by the Right. Chapter Three focuses on the