

## *Mao As Free Enterpriser; Or, Halbrook In Wonderland*

**M**r. [Stephen P.] Halbrook's article in the May *Outlook* is a veritable curiosity, akin to the talking dog or the two-headed man. If nothing else, Mr. Halbrook's portrait of Mao Tse-tung as libertarian and free enterpriser is certainly original. The tone of his thesis, however, has an all-too-familiar quality; one is reminded of nothing so much as the most starry-eyed of the Stalinist tracts of the 1930s: when we were treated to a picture of the happy and productive Soviet society. Under the watchful and benign eye of Comrade Stalin, the happy peasants and the industrious workers busily went about their tasks of Building Socialism and Creating the New Socialist Man, as balalaikas strummed in the background. Comrade Stalin is of course now decidedly unfashionable, and even Mr. Halbrook joins in his denunciation; oddly enough, one of the very few people who still quote Stalin with reverence is none other than Comrade Mao, whom Halbrook would offer to us as the great anti-Stalinist of our epoch. But the same *leitmotif* is there; note, for example, how the defects and evils which Mr. Halbrook sometimes concedes to exist in Communist China are *always* and unfailingly attributed to bad guys who worked against or betrayed the great Chairman, in the same way, in the 1930s, whatever flaws were conceded to be in Soviet society were invariably due to bad guys (Trotsky, Bukharin, et al.) who had betrayed the Stalinist vision. Eventually, one begins to wonder how a Leader of such

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greatness and infallibility could always surround himself with hand-picked comrades who invariably betray him and his policies.

As for Halbrook's curious portrayal of Mao and the Cultural Revolution as free-marketeers it is enough to point to Professor Walter Galenson's recent review of the Maoist tract by Wheelwright and McFarlane,<sup>1</sup> on which Halbrook relies for much of his thesis. Galenson points out what every student of China knows: that these Maoist authors portray the goals of Maoism as: universal dedication by every individual to "serve the people"; the abolition of material incentives "and their replacement by moral and ideological drives"; "the rejection of profit as a criterion of efficiency"; and, last, but not least, "the rejection of mass consumption as a social goal." Wheelwright and McFarlane join Mao in condemning Liu Shao-chi for the crime of "raising output and productivity by the non-Maoist expedients of 'putting profits in command,' of emphasizing expertness rather than 'redness' as qualification for managerial jobs, of differentiating pay, and of using the market to distribute goods."

But enough: there is no need for a libertarian to engage in a sober and quiet refutation of the thesis that the creator of the most totalitarian nation in the history of mankind has really been leading his people into a libertarian and even — ye gods! — a "free-market" Utopia. I am reminded of an instructive incident of a few years ago, when a young Maoist of my acquaintance took a flight out of Hanoi on a Communist Chinese airline. It was a flight in which "bourgeois individualism" was sweetly but firmly transcended. As the loudspeaker played incessantly the Red Chinese anthem, "East is Red," the stewardess went up to the young American, pressed a song book into his hand, and quietly but firmly insisted that he sing along; refusal to sing would, of course, be taken as an indication of hostility to the "mass line" and to the Chinese people. It was a short flight; but when he emerged, shaken and sweating a bit, the bloom of the Maoist Utopia had faded for good. One begins to think that it is far, far easier to idolize Chairman Mao amidst the comfort of a Florida campus than it would be in Peking or, worse yet, in some agricultural commune in Sinkiang.

It is far more interesting to ponder the question: how did Stephen Halbrook get this way? How in the world could he begin as a full-fledged and ardent libertarian, and then rapidly proceed to the point of being a worshipful and adoring Maoist overlaid with a patina of libertarian rhetoric?

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Galenson, "Review of E.L. Wheelwright and Bruce McFarlane, *The Chinese Road to Socialism*," *Journal of Economic Literature* (March, 1972), p. 80.

Halbrook is correct in the point that Liu Shao-chi was a bureaucrat and centralist, and that Mao's "Cultural Revolution" was indeed a prodding of the masses to destroy the Communist Party and the (then existing) State apparatus. Even here, however, his implication that the State *per se* has been smashed in China is grotesque: what happened was that the Army took over the state functions. Furthermore, Halbrook fails to mention the fact that his heroes on the "left wing" of the Cultural Revolution, notably Lin Biao, have now been repudiated and purged by Mao, and that a functioning State apparatus has been reconstituted under Chou En-lai. But let us omit this and concentrate on the aims of the "left" Cultural Revolutionaries. Yes, they were against central planning; yes, they were opposed to bureaucracy; but does this make them libertarians and free-marketeters?

The problem is that Halbrook has been misled by the anti-centralizing and anti-bureaucratic rhetoric and policies. He could indeed have strengthened his case for the moment by pointing out that Mao, in his early days, was an avowed Anarchist before he became a Marxist. But the nub of the problem is that the "anarchism," the anti-centralism toward which the Cultural Revolutionaries were pointing, was *not* individualist anarchism, or free-market capitalism. It was, rather, left-wing anarchism, or "anarcho-communism." The drive to establish decentralized communes, the push toward self-sufficiency of these communes, all of these were attempts to arrive at the anarcho-communist goal by coercive, statist means. The lesson that this should drive home to every libertarian is that we have nothing in common with communist anarchists; that their goals would mean death for the individual, death for his happiness and productivity, and death, too, for the human race, as a result of the stamping out of the division of labor which is the goal of every true communist, be he anarchist or not.

At the heart of the matter is Halbrook's adulation of the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. For the Great Leap was a desperate attempt by Mao — one of the last of the "fundamentalist" communists on the world scene — to leap into communism at one blow. The Soviets, for all their bureaucracy and statism, did have the great good sense to abandon long ago the communist dream, and to push it off to a remote future, after productivity shall have been enormously increased. But the Maoists, heedless of economics, heedless of the terribly destructive effects on production of abolishing the division of labor — the essence of the "communist stage" — tried to hurl themselves into Utopia. Halbrook is surely one of the few people in the world who think of the Great Leap Forward as a success; even the Chinese Communists themselves were reluctantly forced to abandon

that Leap, because of the economic collapse that came about through the attempts, for example, to build steel plants in every backyard. Just as Lenin prudently retreated from “War Communism” when he saw the economic disaster it had brought, so did Mao retreat from the Great Leap Forward when *its* disaster became starkly evident to everyone but Steve Halbrook. The Cultural Revolution was another attempt to accomplish a similar goal; and it too has been abandoned.

But the costs of these attempts — in human and in economic terms — were enormous. In each try the key was the attempt to abolish the division of labor; to eliminate what the Marxists idiotically call the “contradiction between intellectual and physical labor” and the “contradiction between industry and countryside.” (For “contradiction,” read specialization and the division of labor.) That is why every rural commune had to have its own steel plant; and that is why, during the Cultural Revolution, all the schools were closed for several years, and millions of students shipped permanently to rural frontiers such as Sinkiang so as to “eliminate their contradiction between intellectual and physical labor.” And this is what *all* types of communism, whether “anarchist” or Maoist, mean in the end: an evil, ant heap society of faceless automatons, with all individuality, and all individual development, stamped out by the fanatical ideologues of egalitarianism.

To say that the herding of millions of students, for example, into frontier communes was “voluntary” is surely a grotesque perversion of the term. But there is something more at stake here, for the centralizing State is not the *only* enemy of individual liberty; for the communist ideal (anarchist or Maoist) involves a *total* tyranny over each person by his own beloved decentralized commune. And that is why it is China, not Russia, which has mobilized every block, every acre of earth, into local committees in which the soul of every individual member is laid bare and tyrannized over by his neighbors. Every member is forced or induced to confess his sins in public “self-criticism” sessions: the sins, of course, being any deviation from the opinion of his “decentralized” neighbors. And the “material” incentives to production are to be stamped out in favor of an egalitarian “moral” incentive in which the “good of the mass” is supposedly the individual’s only incentive for work and action.

No sir; if I were forced to choose between the Russian and the Chinese societies, I would take the Russian every time. For all its bureaucracy and statism, Russia does have a developed division of labor and at least the rudiments of a market, and hence a fairly productive economy; and, in abandoning its absurd goal of communism, the Russian society provides at

least a portion of room for individuality and for personal freedom. For the libertarian, the triumph of Mao over Liu was something to deplore and not to cheer about; the main hope for the future of China, indeed, is that Mao and his fanatical comrades are all aging rapidly; that the younger generation cannot, after all, be imbued with the same revolutionary fervor; and that therefore the adoption of the Russian — and perhaps eventually the infinitely freer Yugoslavian — modes is the most likely prognosis for the Chinese future.

But again: how did Steve Halbrook get that way? The devolution of Mr. Halbrook is an object lesson for all libertarians, a lesson in the destructive pursuit of a one-sided logic. A few years ago, several militant libertarians began the instructive process of needling the right wing, of correcting the errors of a simplistic anti-Communism that had diverted the Right from opposition to the State itself. Pursuing this corrective beyond sensible bounds, Mr. Halbrook has lamentably wound up as an apologist for rampant totalitarianism.