Criticism

Volume 53 | Issue 1 Article 8

2011

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The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity by Wang Hui. New York: Verso, 2009. Pp. xxxiii, 274. $26.95 cloth.

It is not easy to construct a Left critique in China today. One has to work hard both to differentiate oneself from the socialist past—especially the contentious period of the Cultural Revolution—and to critique the capitalist present. It is much easier to fall into a liberal position of maintaining an opposition between the market and what is considered civil society, on one side, and the socialist state, on the other. Wang Hui, one of the strongest critics of contemporary inequality and the marketization of society and politics in China, argues against the ideological separation of the market and the state that has undergirded much of Chinese intellectual discourse since the 1980s. This argument is forcefully made in *The End of the Revolution,* a new English-language collection of his essays published by Verso. The book is a difficult read because the thread linking its essays is not always clear; they cover a broad series of topics and were written over more than a decade. But its difficulty also stems from the complexity of Wang's intellectual project and the particular politics that he has worked to construct.

Wang Hui's intellectual trajectory cannot be understood apart from the development of intellectual politics in China since the 1980s, when his academic career began and his involvement in the 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement shaped his political outlook.

Criticism Winter 2011, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 141–151. ISSN 0011-1589.

The post-Mao Chinese intellectual scene of the 1980s was dominated by a progressive narrative of tradition and modernity, in which the West was the modern standard and China was forced to catch up. Intellectuals saw themselves as agents of a new enlightenment, and Maoism was seen as an offspring of authoritarian Chinese feudal tradition based in a conservative peasant mentality. Breaking with tradition meant converging with the West. The reform-period liberalism that emerged at the time imagined this process as a liberation of society from the state, with the freedom of the market determining the measure of that liberation. This was always an elite process in which intellectuals and radical reformers in the Communist Party were to engineer the transformation and guard against populist backlash—with the specter of a violent and chaotic Cultural Revolution always a present fear. While there were debates over how this process was to unfold and what the best policies were to speed its progress, this narrative remained hegemonic within the Chinese intellectual scene until the 1990s and the emergence of the New Left critique, of which Wang Hui was a central figure.

As he outlines in chapter 4, it was in the repressive years immediately following 1989 that Wang, who was banished to Shaanxi for a year in punishment for his participation in the movement, began to develop his major, four-volume work of intellectual history, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (2004)—discussed in several essays in the Verso collection.[1] In that intellectual history, finally published in Chinese in 2004 and yet to be translated into English, Wang rejected the teleological and progressive narrative of history of the 1980s and its key dichotomies of China/West, state/society, and empire/nation, transforming the dichotomy tradition/modernity in the process. For Wang—and this marks the key divergence of the New Left from the liberals in the 1990s—the 1980s narrative of enlightenment acted as an ideological veil, concealing the repressive link between market reforms and the postrevolutionary state. Instead of celebrating the present moment as a break from the feudal state, with the market playing the role of a modernizing and progressive agent, according to Wang it is the role of intellectuals to critically tear away the ideological veil that conceals the hidden connection between the market and the repressive state, revealing a present in which the market and capital dominate the social world.

The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought attempts to open up history as a nonteleological process, full of reversals and contingencies. Ranging across Chinese history, with a focus on the period from the Song dynasty (960–1279) to the twentieth century, Wang argued

that China had its own modernity that offered resources for constructing a society different from that of the capitalist West. In doing so, Wang hoped to break down the ideological thinking that constricts present political construction and to open up avenues to new possible futures. Wang's reading of Song Confucian debates provides a model of intellectual critique, as well as itself serving as a critique of anachronistic and universalizing narratives typically used to discuss the Song. Wang is not the first to trace modernity to Song China. Japanese scholars of the Kyoto school, writing from the 1920s to the 1940s, believed that Song bureaucracy and markets signaled a modern break from the preceding aristocratic Tang dynasty. They constructed a universalizing and teleological narrative in which China had the potential to converge with the West. For the Kyoto school, the dichotomy of empire/nation-state was key to understanding this transformation: the Song was an early form of nation-state. What differentiates Wang's reading, however, is that he locates this Chinese modernity not so much in the institutional social organization of the Song—whether positively or negatively compared to that of the West—as in the dialectic between that institutional transformation and the intellectual practice of Song scholars that criticized their changing society.

By excavating categories internal to those Chinese traditions and putting them to historical work, Wang shows less a teleology of convergence than the historicity of Song critical thought. In his intellectual history as well as the essays in the Verso collection, Wang counters a universal progressive notion of world history and modernity with a "multi-interactive perspective" (84) in which modernity, instead of a product of the West that inevitably came to transform the world into clones of Western capitalist modernity, was initially the varied production of interacting societies. It was only because of a set of very contingent causes that the Western model came to dominate. This implies that even today the Western capitalist model should not be taken as the inevitable end point of modernization. Wang's work, therefore, aims to uncover how key Western categories came to be hegemonic in our discussion of modern Chinese thought. For example, Wang argues that the empire/nation-state dichotomy tells us more about Western thought—in which "the nation-state as the goal of history becomes a negation of the political form of empire in general" (126)—than it does about Song China. What Wang is attempting to do is "to break down this dualism, and to negate the dualistic relation as it appears in nineteenth-century political economy" (126). Wang cautions, however, that

> this is not to say that . . . indigenous concepts can completely represent history: we must recognize that these endemic concepts also represent a particularistic narrative or description in any given context. As a result, the particular ways of seeing that are opened up to us when we attach importance to history are very important in helping us to identify the limitations of our own ways of seeing. (124–25)

Through the process, the history of modern Chinese thought comes to be told as a story of intellectual critique, its institutionalization, and new cycles of critique;[2] only by breaking from the hegemonic categories of Western thought and the powerful teleological narrative that they help construct can Song history be given its proper historicity, and Song thought again become a resource for critical engagement with modernity.

This critical spirit is perhaps most fully articulated in Wang's engagement with the revolutionary Chinese writer Lu Xun, the subject of the last chapter of *The End of Revolution* (an introduction to a collection of political writings by Lu Xun).[3] Lu Xun is a critical intellectual for Wang because, while Lu Xun criticized tradition, he did not simplistically oppose it with a progressive modernity to be found in the West. He was as critical of progress and modernity as he was of tradition (196): again, the dichotomy itself does not help us to make political and ethical decisions. Wang follows the Japanese thinker Yoshimi Takeuchi in noting the same cycle of critique and institutionalization that Wang found in Song history:

> For Lu Xun, only "permanent revolution" can break away from the never-ending repetition and cycle of history, and the one who maintains from beginning to end his "revolutionary" spirit will inevitably become the critic of his own comrades in the past, because the moment his comrades become satisfied with their "success" is the moment they will become mired in that historical cycle—it is this cycle that is the real revolutionary's ultimate target of revolution. (201)

Critics must never, in other words, believe themselves to be outside of what they criticize—critique must always be self-reflexive (202).

As Wang argues in chapter 3, the long "Interview Concerning Modernity," modernity is not a normative concept for him, but is "in itself paradoxical, containing intrinsic tensions and contradictions" (75), and the critique of modernity arises from within

modernity itself. Therefore, one cannot adopt "a holistic attitude towards modernity" (79), transforming it into a seamless totality that one must either support or defeat. This separates Wang from both Chinese postmodernists, who, as he notes, construct narratives of a shift "from modernity to Chinese" or "from modern to postmodern" (79), and Chinese liberal enlightenment scholars, whom he sees as arguing for a complete and uncritical adoption of Western capitalist modernity, for both treat modernity as a tensionless whole. In contrast, Wang argues that Chinese modernity since the colonial period should be characterized as an "anti-modern modernity": China's experience with Western modernity has always contained this contradictory tension—anti-tradition, but also anti-imperialist and anticapitalist (79).[4] Whereas the proponents of enlightenment tend to view the second, critical aspect as derailing the first—modernization—Wang argues that this "self-contradictory structure is the source of modernity's self-renewal" (79) and necessary to any project of social justice or equality.

All the essays in the Verso collection were published between 1994 and 2007, during a period of time Wang calls "the Nineties." Not consonant with the calendrical 1990s, Wang's "Nineties" cover the period from the 1989 democracy movement to the present, when the market came to dominate Chinese society. It denotes the end of both the revolutionary era—the "short twentieth century"—and the Cold War. The 1980s, though clearly part of the reform period, were, according to Wang, "the final act of a revolutionary century" (xi), for issues and debates of the 1980s "emerged from the history of socialism through the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies" (xi–xii). With the end of revolution, "the Nineties," by contrast, marked a new beginning—not the end of history—in which the key categories of the economy, politics, culture, and the military were transformed. One of Wang's criticisms of Chinese liberalism is that it does not recognize this transformation and thus anachronistically utilizes categories across this historical divide as though their meanings were unchanged. "The Nineties" and their political categories have to be understood in relation to the rise of neoliberal globalization and the dominance of the market. Although the essays in this collection do not focus on the revolutionary "short twentieth century," they do begin to demarcate its ending just as Wang's *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* concerned the era before the revolutionary period. Wang states that it was through writing about the postrevolutionary period that he began to think more about the revolutionary period itself.

The first essay of the collection, "Depoliticized Politics: From East to West," is the most direct and innovative in dealing with the "de-revolutionary process" that defined the politics of the reform period (3). The main characteristic of post-revolutionary politics is its *depoliticization*—an emptying out of political content to be replaced by a formalist politics. Political institutions and practices become simply a formal structure through which the market dominates society; the market, in turn, becomes the substantive content, while the social force of human collective action is formally restricted from politics. Wang holds that the tendency for depoliticization existed in China since the success of the revolution, although it was kept in check by the continuation of revolutionary politics. Bureaucratization and party power struggles constituted the main forms of depoliticization in the revolutionary period, and, launched to counter these tendencies, Wang argues, the Cultural Revolution was an attempt at revolutionary self-renewal. Yet the Cultural Revolution, in particular through factionalization and political repression, ended up leading to a further depoliticizing "rigidification of the party-state" (4). Public debate on "political values or strategy" disappeared following the Cultural Revolution (6). As those who were attacked during that movement returned into power in the 1970s, they sought to repress political struggle in the name of party unity, rather than analyzing how political struggle "had degenerated into mere power play" (7)—furthering the depoliticization of the party.

At the same time, economics became the focus of party work. Here, the "party-state"—a state that was guided by the political values of a party—was replaced by a "state-party," in which the party loses its political values and social goals as it becomes but "a component of the state apparatus" (9). Wang follows Italian sociologist Alessandro Russo in noting that this statification of political parties has been a worldwide phenomenon, true no less of Western-style multiparty representative democracies than of the Chinese Communist Party. Neoliberal market dominance has meant the formalization, statification and, ultimately, depoliticization of all political parties: the consolidation of special interests has led to a "gradual disconnection of democracy as a political structure from the basic units of society" (xxx). A linked process has been the professionalization of intellectuals and departmentalization of knowledge production: "Since the university institution has as its premise precisely this particularization of the disintegration of knowledge, it has not reflected—and cannot possibly

be reflecting—on this social process in general, and on the problem of increasingly disintegrated knowledge in particular" (207).

In the end, depoliticization insulates the market from democratic political intervention, and Wang's project is a critique of the ideological veils that naturalize this separation by hiding the history of its implementation. Chapter 2 of the collection, "The Year 1989 and the Historical Roots of Neoliberalism in China," clarifies the work that liberal ideology and neoliberal ideology—the two are often treated as equivalent within Chinese discussions, including Wang's—does to cover the concrete and active process of integrating the Chinese economy with global capitalism. The common use of the category "transition" to describe the reform period, for example, is an expression of neoliberal ideology, which operates to mask the contradictions of market economics—the growing gap between rich and poor, increasing unemployment, and the faltering social security system (19–20)—as if they were temporary problems of the shift. More importantly, the essay argues that the condition for realizing Chinese neoliberalism and the dominance of the market was the violent crackdown on the democracy movement of 1989. Liberal narratives that view modernization in terms of an opposition between the market as a spontaneous order—Friedrich Hayek, a founding father of neoliberalism who was critical of state intervention into the market, has been quite influential for Chinese liberals, and a target of critique for Wang—and the state conceal the active role of the Chinese state in creating the conditions for market economics. As Wang states,

> neoliberalism, in truth, relies upon the strength of transnational and national policies and economies, and it depends upon a theory and discourse of economic formalism to establish its own hegemonic discourse. Its extrapolitical and anti-state character is thus utterly dependent upon its inherent links to the state. (19)

Wang argues that it was only through the state's violent repression of the 1989 movement and the social forces that found political expression at the time that the full market reforms could be implemented in the 1990s.

Whereas liberal narratives focus on the role of students and intellectuals in calling for formal democracy during the 1989 movement, Wang notes the full range of social sectors that participated and the complexity of the movement. In this reading, the movement is understood as a response to new social

contradictions that remain hidden within the Cold War ideological framework of democracy/totalitarianism. In Polanyian terms, Wang states,

> As a movement for social self-preservation, the 1989 social movement was inherently a spontaneous protest against the proliferating inequalities spawned by market expansion, and a critique of the state's handling of the process of reform; as a movement of social protest, however, it also pursued a critique of authoritarianism and the methods of authoritarian rule. (30)

This is an important formulation for Wang, and it points to a major problem of Chinese political discourse. Often the New Left is criticized for supporting the Chinese Communist Party and not calling for democracy. But the problem is much more complex than this implies: it is not a matter of whether one is for or against democracy, but how democracy gets defined and what its limits are.

Wang has a very expansive idea of democracy. For Wang, and the New Left in general, democracy is not only a concept implying formal elections, but must also include economic democracy: the ability of workers and the masses to influence the operation of economic entities such as enterprises, as well as to decide how social resources are to be used. This borrowing from the revolutionary period—Wang asks us to investigate what the "mass line or the popular democracy of this new era" is (xxxii)—runs counter to the separation of politics and economics that is the foundation of the depoliticized politics of contemporary capitalism and neoliberal globalization. Likewise, politics is not just the realm of the state. Repoliticization would mean "granting greater political capacity to mass society" (xxxii); democracy would mean finding new political forms through which to express social forces for equality. China has the advantage of a revolutionary history sensitive to social equality, but it also has powerful special interests arrayed against repoliticization, both within and outside the party. The party is in the process of being transformed into a depoliticized representative of special interests, losing the political values it was based upon, most importantly social equality. Yet the party is still a site of political struggle, and this, too, separates the New Left from liberals—the state cannot simply be abandoned as a terrain of struggle for society. Social forces need the state's capacity to counter marketization and neoliberal globalization, just as the state needs social forces to maintain the political values that keep it from simply turning into a bureaucratic expression of

depoliticized special interests, an "empty form" without social content (xxx).

One must ask why such an expansive discussion about the meaning of democracy is usually interpreted as its reverse—as a threat to democracy—within contemporary Chinese intellectual discourse. Here it is important to note that the Cultural Revolution remains a figure of chaos associated with unrestrained social power for which the authoritarian state can become a vehicle—a fear of politics itself. In this understanding, protection must be sought in the formalization of democracy and the insulation of the economy from populist and state intervention. For the contemporary depoliticized state, this protection is expressed as a formal "rule by law"; for liberal intellectuals, it is based on individual rights anchored in naturalized property rights. Both are elitist formulations despite their surface opposition, for both attempt to limit collective social forces, limit active participation of the masses in politics and reconstruction of the social order.

It is through this liberal configuration—authorized by the figure of Cultural Revolutionary violence—that Wang Hui's expansive democracy is understood as its opposite, becoming an authoritarianism when the collective breaches proper, formal notions of property relations, or a dangerous populism when the masses transgress upon the individual. Even opening such a discussion—or an investigation into the resources of the Chinese revolutionary or prerevolutionary period—threatens the depoliticized politics of Chinese intellectual inquiry. Instead, liberal discourse adheres to *universalization*—China must follow the path of Western modernization—and *naturalization*—the foundation of individual property rights is a natural human right. Wang Hui's very discussion of social forces and expanded democracy—the inclusion of economic democracy—contravenes these rules of depoliticized intellectual discourse.

In contemporary China, according to Wang Hui, repoliticization must be constructed around the category of *equality*. Equality is a politicizing category because the naturalization of inequality is a foundation for the neutral, depoliticized neoliberal state that simply manages technical issues for the spontaneous development of the market. Wang points out that "class" played the role of politicizing category during the Maoist period. Class was politicizing to the extent that it was a subjective, and not structural, concept. And this dichotomy suggests that Wang's understanding of politics is far more Badiouian than Marxist, in that he divorces the subjective from the structural instead of theorizing a link between the two. During the Maoist period, according

to Wang, the concept of class "denoted the attitudes of social or political forces toward revolutionary politics, rather than the structural situation of social class" (10). Thus, Wang does not seem to see a dialectical relationship between the structural and subjective; instead, class becomes a purely subjective politics. In fact, moments in which class came to be understood as a structural identity were instances of depoliticization for Wang: the disintegration of the Cultural Revolution, for example. Wang, however, says little about why class can no longer play this politicizing role.

In a related move, Wang does not discuss the political-economic shifts of "the Nineties" in terms of capitalism; instead, he tends to use the categories "globalization," "the market," and "neoliberalism." This plays to Wang's strengths: his primary goal is to critique the ideological obfuscation within the intellectual scene that conceals the political and economic transformations of contemporary China. In addition, Wang perhaps wants to avoid the political capitalism/socialism dichotomy that so defined earlier Chinese politics. Yet at the same time this seems to trap Wang within the discourse of the 1980s and 1990s that he wants to escape, for the terms "globalization," "the market," and "neoliberalism" play a double role in Wang's work: both as ideological categories to be critiqued and as categories used to name material and social processes themselves. A more direct confrontation with class and capitalism would seem warranted here. This problem is also tied to the issue of periodization: The 1980s fit uneasily in Wang's account. Are they the final scene of the revolutionary era or are they a full expression of post-revolutionary depoliticized politics? This problem of periodization may reflect Wang's own transformation on the issue and his increasing concern with the revolutionary era, which has perhaps shifted his attention from 1989 towards the Cultural Revolution. Again, more attention to the relationship between the economic and the political—between structural changes and subjective politics—would be useful.

Wang's collection has implications beyond the field of China studies: it is a nuanced and highly theorized investigation into the relationship between revolutionary traditions and the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Unlike most other studies of reform-era China, which tend to view the era as a simple political break from Maoism, *The End of the Revolution* relates the politicization of the revolutionary period to the post-Mao reforms in a complex way. The processes of politicization and depoliticization are bound up with the contradictions of the revolution itself, and the bureaucratization of the revolutionary state was the foundation

of post-Mao neoliberal marketization. Furthermore, Wang's innovative deconstruction of neoliberal ideology uncovers the often hidden linkage between depoliticizing authoritarian states and the marketization of society, a process reiterated around the world. Perhaps most importantly, in envisioning an expanded democracy, Wang points to a way to repoliticize politics strategically and counter the forces of authoritarian marketization.

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NOTES

1. For more on *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought,* see Viren Murthy, "Modernity Against Modernity: Wang Hui's Critical History of Chinese Thought," *Modern Intellectual History* 3, no. 1 (2006): 137–65; Ban Wang, "Discovering Enlightenment in Chinese History: *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought,*" *boundary* 2 34, no. 2 (2007): 217–38; and Zhang Yongle, "The Future of the Past: On Wang Hui's *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought,*" New Left Review 62 (March–April 2010): 47–83.
2. For a more detailed exposition on this point, see Zhang, "The Future of the Past," 80.
3. Wang Hui's dissertation, later published in Chinese as "resisting despair," is an innovative rereading of this important Chinese intellectual, whom Wang sees as a model for contemporary intellectuals. See his *Fankang juewang: Lun Xun jiqi "Nahan" "Panghuang" yanjiu* [Resisting despair] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe [Shanghai People's Publishing House], 1991).
4. Wang most famously developed this idea of "anti-modern modernity" in the essay "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity" (see *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], 139–87).