

BOOK REVIEWS

CHENG, YINGHONG. *Creating the “New Man”. From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities. [Perspectives on the Global Past.]* University of Hawai‘i Press, Honolulu 2009. x, 265 pp. \$60.00; doi:10.1017/S0020859010000581

Yinghong Cheng explores the rise and fall of communist projects to create new types of people who would be motivated by collectivist dreams and officially approved desires rather than personal and material or family interests. He relies chiefly on Chinese and English sources, but comments on Russia, China, and Cuba. His geographic focus is well chosen to encompass a series of failed efforts that extended through much of the twentieth century. He stresses that communist revolutionaries drew on their national philosophical traditions as well as a shared Western one in assuming that human nature could be remade. From this vantage point, he traces the ways in which communist governments integrated the notion of a new person into their economic policies, educational programs, and public definitions of citizenship.

In the first chapter on the Soviet Union, he traces ideas of human malleability back to the Enlightenment, the radical Russian intelligentsia of the 1860s, and Russian Marxism. In the second, on China, he adds “the Confucian perspective on human nature” (p. 48) to the mix, as well as the special problems that derived from the fact that China largely lacked a proletariat. In the case of Cuba, he notes the ready availability of Jose Marti’s nationalistic notions of a new Cuban identity. In a fourth and final chapter he explores the wider influence of such notions beyond in Africa and elsewhere.

Cheng argues that in nineteenth-century Russia radical members of the intelligentsia narrowed and focused ideas originating in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in their efforts to change Russia and improve the lot of the common people. He demonstrates that the Bolsheviks seized the notion of the malleability of human nature as the basis for a whole series of programs and discourses aimed at transforming Soviet society. He also shows how Chinese and Cuban leaders as well as sympathetic postcolonial leaders elsewhere adapted these notions to their own needs and requirements. To see the variety of programs and promotions that depended on the dream of creating a new kind of person is instructive. This represents the chief contribution of Cheng’s wide ranging study.

The subject is in one sense puzzling. It curious that a concept that was so poorly defined and inherently contradictory should have had such a long life in so many different societies. It was never absolutely clear whether the imagined new socialist people would have a heroic elitist role in remaking the world or a subservient one in their own societies. After all, the promotion of the idea of a new socialist person went hand in hand with the rise of Leninist parties and the one-party state, and not only in Russia, China, and Cuba. The tension between the official images of new citizens and activists on the one hand, and new political systems on the other is obvious. Cheng defines the traits of the new Soviet person as “ideological conformity, political loyalty, devotion to the party, selflessness, and self sacrifice” (p. 220). He further notes the use of the metaphors of the “cog” and the “screw” (p. 134). This certainly suggests a follower rather than a leader. Yet Lenin and the Bolsheviks drew on ideas of elite leadership that were well developed among late nineteenth-century Russian radicals who imagined themselves as superior individuals. China was no exception to this elitist tradition with respect to Confucianism.

Cheng points out, moreover, that Mao was very taken with Nietzsche's idea of the superman. He notes that the "saints" or supermen had the mission "to lead, educate, and transform the unwashed" (p. 52). He could have made the same point, even though he does not, with respect to the Bolsheviks, who also found Nietzsche's idea of the great and superior person unbearably attractive. Similarly, though the Cuban revolutionaries proclaimed the slogan "Let them all become Che", they could hardly have ruled the country as they did if they had imagined that they had created a nation of leaders rather than followers. The author might have done more with this issue.

The national traditions on which the communist leaders later drew were often associated with the self-improvement or perfection of extraordinary individuals. That was certainly the case with N.K. Chernyshevsky's famous novel of the 1860s *What Is To Be Done?*, whose hero Rakhmetov sleeps on a bed of nails to toughen himself. The successful realization of any of the projects of transforming the passive and backward masses of ordinary citizens into new people such as Rakhmetov who were capable of leading society on their own would, of course, have made the Leninist party obsolete. Did the leaders of the Leninist-type parties deliberately or cynically blur the distinction between leaders and followers when they championed various national heroes of labor, or did they partially delude themselves? The answer is perhaps a bit of each. The author of this volume might have unpacked this apparent contradiction more fully.

It is worth noting in this respect that whereas the Leninist models of the elite party and of the one-party state had great appeal throughout of the developing world in the post-colonial era, the notion of the new socialist person proved rather less attractive. The reason is obvious. The leaders of the former colonies seized on the Leninist party as a means of ruling their countries and reaping the benefits of ruling. Although in some cases they employed some communist economic practices, usually with dire results, the new socialist person proved illusory and in practice virtually useless. Even in Tanzania, whose postcolonial leader Julius Nyerere (known as the teacher) was much taken with the examples of Russia, China, and Cuba, the simple dynamics of government and investment in education, health, and infrastructure necessarily took precedence over such a utopian project as the formation of a new socialist person.

Another area that the author might have explored is the link between religion and the transformation of people. After all, the closest thing to a true conversion of a backward unwashed person into a revolutionary "saint" in Mao's terminology was a religious experience of conversion. Maxim Gorky in his pre-revolutionary classic that was so loved by the Soviet authorities, *Mother* (1907), chronicles such a personal transformation in which the mother of the revolutionary activist undergoes what can only be described as a conversion experience. The author's unwillingness to bring religion into the discussion is notable.

Despite these drawbacks and the author's occasional tendency to let the narrative stray into a general historical account of policies and decisions, this is useful tour of the varied incarnations of a grand idea that failed. It is particularly instructive to see how the notion of new people played out in a range of national programs, from educational policies and systems of non-material incentives, to the great brutally counterproductive campaigns of mass mobilization that were undertaken in all three countries.

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