

# Looking Back at Maoism and the Global Left

January 30, 2021



As against nearly a century of debates over Stalinism, the international left has never come to terms with Maoism, especially its global impact. Disillusionment with Stalinism is marked by clear, indeed tragic, dates in international politics: the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 that launched World War II, the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. These events are well remembered and sometimes debated, in this journal and elsewhere. With Maoism, the following dates also mark tragic events for the global left, yet they have not gotten the attention they deserve: the collapse of the Maoist Indonesian Communist Party in 1965 due to miscalculations that brought on murderous repression by the military with the help of the CIA, China's rapprochement with U.S. imperialism in 1971-1972 as Nixon was carpet-bombing Vietnam and embarking upon his reelection campaign, the Maoist Khmer Rouge's autogenocide, or Mao's lean toward South Africa and Mobutu's Zaire against African revolutionaries in 1975-1976. To be sure, the fact that these Maoist-impacted events took place in the Global South rather than Western and Central Europe goes some distance toward explaining the relative lack of attention. But that is no reason to continue such a marginalization today.

Maoism became a pole of attraction in the 1960s for the Black Panthers and Students for a Democratic Society in the United States, for a number of African revolutionaries and nationalists, and for the French far left, among others. Many saw Maoist China as the product of a successful socialist revolution carried out by people of color. And while it gradually lost its sheen as an international phenomenon, this came not so much with a bang as a whimper, without the furious debates that marked 1939, 1956, and 1968. The fact that there was no clear reckoning has helped the ideological influence of Maoism to persist to this day, often indirectly.

One example can be found in the structuralist and post-structuralist theories that have impacted so many academic fields. These theories pushed for a concentration on what orthodox Marxists termed the superstructure, especially its cultural and ideological dimensions. Here the affinity with Maoism lies not merely in the fact that some of the intellectuals associated with structuralism and post-structuralism were influenced by Maoism, people like Louis Althusser, or Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida early on. Their affinity with Maoism also lies in an indisputable theoretical point, that Maoist thought sought to displace structure with superstructure, most famously with the Cultural Revolution.

A second example is the extreme voluntarism of Maoism, from slogans like “Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win” or “U.S. Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger” to adventurism or worse in the sphere of revolutionary politics: the Indonesian Communist Party, Pol Pot’s Cambodia. Again, while few on the activist left today identify with Maoism, aside from groups like the Naxalites in India, the Maoist parties in Nepal, or the Communist Party of the Philippines, its voluntaristic spirit persists in more subtle and indirect ways in some of the far reaches of Antifa and anarchism. This continuity makes Julia Lovell’s brilliant book important for the left, and not just in historical terms.

While there are countless histories of international Communism focusing on the parties, groups, and intellectuals associated with Stalinism from the 1920s onward, Lovell’s book fills an important gap as the first comprehensive history of Maoism as a global phenomenon. It is the product of archival research, of participant interviews, and of a careful synthesis of previous scholarship. Lovell is not part of the radical left but an academic historian whose book is nonetheless of paramount importance for us. And some of her findings are eye-opening.

One of these concerns the gestation of Edgar Snow’s hagiographic 1937 account of Maoism just after the Long March, *Red Star over China*. Lovell shows that Snow’s book was choreographed and closely edited by Mao and other party officials: “Snow’s English transcript of the translator’s version of Mao’s words” was “translated into Chinese, corrected by Mao, then translated back into English” (76). As the book progressed, party representatives continued to shape its narrative: “As Snow toiled on turning notes into copy through the winter of 1936, his interviewees continued to send him a stream of amendments: telling him to remove any trace of dissent with Comintern policy, to expunge any praise for out-of-favor Chinese intellectuals, to tone down criticism of political enemies turned allies, to talk up anti-Japanese patriotism” (76-77). This was the first, but not the last, romanticization of Maoism on the part of the global left.

Another key juncture Lovell elucidates is the massacre of half a million Indonesian leftists and suspected leftists in 1965 by the army and its Islamist allies, with considerable assistance from the CIA. How did this transpire? It was widely known by the early 1960s that Mao had formed an alliance with the left-leaning nationalist Sukarno, who had sponsored the 1954 Bandung conference of “Nonaligned” countries. Attended by Chinese but not Soviet representatives, Bandung was an important marker in the birth of the third world. It was also common currency on the left that the massive, legal Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), which after the Sino-Soviet split became the largest ally of China among the world’s Communist parties, was caught off guard by the ferocity of the repression in 1965-1966. Indonesia was also seen at the time as the greatest debacle of Maoism as an international movement by the independent revolutionary left, which noted that the PKI did not act substantially differently from the pro-Moscow Communist parties in opportunistically sidling up to a nationalist dictator without building up enough of an independent political or military capacity. But the truth turns out to be more complicated—and more damning to Mao.

The events leading up to the PKI-led abortive insurrection and the brutal repression that followed have long been shrouded in secrecy. Lovell does not succeed in fully cracking this secrecy, given the Chinese regime’s suppression of its own history. Nonetheless, she marshals enough evidence to confirm that the defeat of the Indonesian left lay at Mao’s doorstep as much as that of the PKI leadership and that the PKI’s disastrous miscalculations were impacted by Mao’s own voluntarism. To demonstrate this, Lovell reproduces a version of an August 1965 conversation between Mao and PKI leader D.N. Aidit, in which Mao calls upon Aidit to “act quickly” against the conservative army leaders at a time when Sukarno’s ailing health placed the PKI alliance with him in jeopardy (178). If this is true, Mao made a strategic miscalculation on a par with Stalin’s decision not to allow German Communists to ally with the Social Democrats as Hitler was coming to power. Be that as it may, the ideological influence of Maoism on the PKI was equally deleterious.

As Lovell recounts, alluding to Mao's disastrous effort to transform the Chinese countryside via "People's Communes," which caused the mass famine of the late 1950s, "In the voluntarist style of the Great Leap Forward, Aidit began to eschew the kind of careful, patient mobilization that had taken place through the 1950s, in favor of statements that emphasized high Maoism's 'spirit, resolve, and enthusiasm'" (168). And while Aidit talked of organizing a paramilitary force to counter the regular army, and Sukarno did so as well, and China promised vast amounts of armaments, nothing substantial was actually done even as PKI rhetoric against the military escalated. Then, on September 30, 1965, the PKI, acting with apparent Chinese encouragement, moved to incapacitate the military leadership. They killed a number of generals, but the action quickly backfired due to lack of support on the streets or within the military, especially after the ailing Sukarno refused to join their cause. All this allowed the remaining Indonesian generals to orchestrate one of the greatest political massacres in history and to set up a conservative, anti-labor regime that persists today in modified form in a somewhat more democratic polity.

A second revelation on Lovell's part concerns Mao's relationship with Pol Pot and what is sometimes called the Cambodian autogenocide, when up to two million people—a quarter of the population—died from starvation, overwork, and executions during the years 1975-1979. The U.S. war in Vietnam, which Nixon extended to Cambodia in 1970, had led to massive bombings that killed a large number of civilians. As peasants fled the bombs raining down on rural areas, where the Khmer Rouge—essentially the Cambodian Communist Party—was based, the population of the cities swelled, making famine a real possibility.

When the U.S. war effort collapsed in 1975, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge took power, entering the capital, Phnom Penh, and evacuating virtually the entire population at gunpoint. This was part of a harebrained scheme, inspired by Maoist projects like the Great Leap Forward, to empty the cities and build "socialism" in the countryside based upon a precipitous increase in the working day along with minimal food allowances. It all came crashing down as Vietnam invaded in 1979, overthrew the Khmer Rouge, and installed a more rational version of Stalinism closer to the Soviet version to which it was allied.

While the fact that the Khmer Rouge was inspired by Maoism has been known for decades, Lovell puts a point on it: "The evacuation of the cities was an extreme version of Cultural Revolution-era rustification. The creation of the mess halls and the abolition of family dining replicated the collectivization of the Great Leap Forward" (255). Moreover, she shows that Maoist China was deeply committed to the Pol Pot regime, awarding it the biggest aid package Beijing had ever offered, \$1 billion in grants and interest-free loans. Even the black cloth for the pajama-like uniforms imposed by the regime was imported from China. In 1975, soon after the Khmer Rouge came to power, but after they had completely evacuated the cities at gunpoint, top leaders Pol Pot and Ieng Sary met privately with Mao. During their conversation, Mao reportedly said, "We approve of you! Many of your experiences are better than ours," to which Pol Pot replied, "The works of Chairman Mao have led our entire party" (241). The aging and infirm Mao, who had only a year to live, seemingly felt thwarted by the way he had been forced to call off the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. He also stated, "What we wanted to do but could not manage, you are achieving" (241). Pol Pot expressed similar sentiments three years later but with the suggestion that he had outdone even Mao: "Mao stopped his Cultural Revolution, but we have a Cultural Revolution every day" (259).

The horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime led to a rude awakening for many left-wing intellectuals who had embraced Maoism as a more militant and anti-bureaucratic alternative to Russian Stalinism, especially in France. Foucault and others now distanced themselves not only from Maoism, but also from Marxism altogether. In this era, the Parisian New Philosophers targeted "totalitarianism" in such a way that they were unable to support genuinely left-wing movements like

the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, all the while taking inspiration from the gifted but very right-wing Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. All of this helped usher in something like neoconservatism in France.

The chapter on Africa chronicles a remarkable and sustained commitment on Maoist China's part to support African nationalists and revolutionaries in the 1960s, almost always in competition with the Soviet Union. China gained substantial support via Julius Nyerere's Tanzania, one of the few African countries liberated in the first wave of independence movements to avoid either right-wing military-strongman rule (Congo-Kinshasa[Zaire], Ghana) or ostensibly left-wing authoritarianism (Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea). Nyerere, who espoused *ujamaa*, a form of rural socialism, and who supported liberation movements in southern Africa as the leader of the chief "front-line" African state in the struggle with apartheid South Africa, received considerable Chinese aid. So did Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union, an avowedly Marxist revolutionary party that later established a brutal left-wing dictatorship. Lovell highlights these relationships and paints a much more positive portrait of Maoist policy toward Africa than other regions. This has some validity, given accomplishments like the Tan-Zam railway, completed in 1975 at tremendous cost to the Chinese and which freed Zambian copper mines from economic dependence upon South Africa by creating a rail line through Tanzania.

But Lovell ignores completely Maoist China's greatest failure in Africa, one that sullied its reputation within the global left almost as much as did the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime. This was the Angola war of 1975, which took place as this mineral-rich southern African country was prying itself loose from Portuguese colonialism. Over the years, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) became the most left-wing and deeply rooted of the country's African liberation movements. But because the MPLA was backed by the Soviet Union, China from the 1960s onward supported the more right-wing National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), which based itself in Mobutu's Zaire. Mobutu, one of Africa's most reactionary and kleptocratic rulers, had come to power by orchestrating the assassination of renowned African liberation leader Patrice Lumumba. Portugal began to pull out of Angola and its other colonies in 1975, having experienced in 1974 its own left-wing revolution to overthrow a fascist regime in power since the 1920s. Portuguese revolutionary officers, who had themselves been radicalized by contact with African revolutionaries, sought to hand over power to the MPLA.

At this point UNITA (and another smaller right-wing nationalist group) made a bid for power, backed not only by Mobutu and the United States but also by apartheid South Africa, which dispatched troops into southern Angola. This placed China on the same side as South Africa. When UNITA, Zaire, and South Africa suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of some 36,000 Cuban troops sent over with Soviet aid, that humiliation was also China's, as Mao now found himself exposed to the world as an ally of South Africa. For those on the left with the strongest commitments to African and Third World liberation, China's betrayal of the African liberation movement in Angola became a point of no return. Tragically, the MPLA regime, hardened by the long decades of civil war with the U.S.-funded UNITA that followed, devolved into an authoritarian and kleptocratic state. Still, Mao's support for forces allied with South Africa played a role in the disillusionment with Maoism across many sectors of the left, especially those involved in Black liberation. For some, this resulted in a disillusionment with Marxism, period.

It is not surprising that Lovell, a scholar of China, is on surer footing when analyzing Maoism's impact on nearby countries like Indonesia or Cambodia than in discussing Africa. Still, she is to be commended for having written the first survey of Maoism as a global project. Overall, this is a work of deep scholarship and careful judgment. It contains a wealth of material indispensable for the twenty-first-century left to consider if we are to avoid the terrible mistakes of the past. And given the fact that Maoism—or at least theoretical and political patterns similar to or derived from it—persists

today, from some forms of academic radicalism to some tendencies in the activist left, this book also speaks to us today, if one is able to read it with an expansive frame of mind.