

Symposium on Roberto Unger's *Politics*

Two Crises in the History of France and China

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Roberto Unger's massive opus turns on the two interwoven axes of theory and applied history. It is to the latter, and for him the less important of these two dimensions, that we address our remarks. Our limited purpose here is to consider two events in the context of his work. The focus of our concern centers on Unger's urgent perception of the latent plasticity of most historical "arrangements." n1

I. PLASTICITY IN EARLY MODERN CHINA

The Chinese puzzle for comparative history and social theory is this: Why did the most technologically advanced and bureaucratically organized society of the middle ages, the Chinese Empire, fail to emerge as a great power in the modern world of capitalism and science?

For a long time in the Western world, images of a changeless China, timeless and stagnant, seemed a sufficient answer to this question. Because they lacked an adequate appreciation of the historical diversity and progression of Chinese civilization, Western social theorists overlooked the openness of China's early modern culture and politics, with its potential for development along a different historical path. They saw

instead in the abject China of c. 1840-1945 a picture of ageless political and cultural debility, held in place by an ideology with no critical or innovative standpoint.

But if we form a more detailed picture of Chinese developments contemporary with the early modern breakthrough in Europe, we see a society deep in the throes of institutional malaise and of economic and cultural changes. Here was a situation that held the promise, or so it seemed, of many possibilities for new directions in social forms and self-conceptions. In sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century China, the "formative institutional and imaginative assumptions of social life" n2 were widely challenged in both theory and practice. China was in a period of relative "plasticity" amidst intensifying social conflict. n3 If we look only at this period itself, without assuming in advance the actual outcome of the struggle, it is evident that Chinese society had before it many potential new paths to increased wealth and power. When we observe how this period of plasticity ended, with power struggles decided in favor of a reinforced backward-looking orthodoxy, we can arrive at a more interesting idea of why China "failed to progress" in a way

comparable to the early modern West.

In many important respects, the Chinese case dovetails well with Unger's reflections on history and the mechanisms of social change set forth in *Plasticity into Power*. His account of the political options available to agrarian empires could have been constructed with China specifically in mind. In stressing the key role of collective struggles from below in shaping history, Unger echoes Mao Zedong's celebrated dictum which holds that the struggle of the people has always been the motive force in historical progress. Unger's own account of later imperial China is blurred, no doubt due to the defects in his Western language sources. However, the fundamental link he sees between constraints on collective conflict and the failure of institutional invention is well illustrated in the history of early modern China.

A. Later Ming China: An Age of Plasticity

The age of Machiavelli, of Galileo and Kepler, and of Mazarin and Descartes in Europe was the period of the later Ming dynasty in China. These were for the Celestial Empire years of disconcerting changes. In the economy, commercialization spread through the countryside; the landed gentry became deeply involved in commercial transactions, and the peasant producers in some areas depended on the market for their food while working to grow cash crops. With the increasing monetization of the economy, the state and the landlords were time and again able to substitute payments in money for the diverse taxes and rents, payments in kind, and labor services due from the

rural masses. Simultaneously, in politics, the later Ming was a time of deepening alienation of the upper class, educated, cultured Chinese from the central state that was supposed to be the focus of their loyalty -- and the guardian of their interests. Later Ming culture saw the emergence of a vibrant vernacular language literature into respectability, the proliferation of printed books, and the spread of various movements of popular education and moral uplift. Open challenges to the conventional customs and roles and standards of right and wrong emerged, as well as attacks from all quarters on the governmental institutions of the time. In the writings of the elite, an ominous mood of growing unease with the status quo developed -- a feeling that change must come, that society had slipped its moorings and was drifting off toward the unknown. The high art painting of the period portrays a world contorted by inner pressures, its latent design twisted and brought to the surface, yet unable to reach a new equilibrium.

1. *Development from the Early Ming.* -- The Ming regime had begun in the later fourteenth century, as Mongol rule over China crumbled in response to widespread millenarian-inspired rebellions from below. Throughout central China, heterodox religious communities who believed in the imminent coming of the Future Buddha and a new age of social justice and harmony staged open armed uprisings in attempts to form their own ruling systems. Throughout the 1350s and 1360s various local statelets warred against each other and against the remnants of the Mongol power system.

The founder of the Ming dynasty

emerged from the military leadership of one of the millenarian organizations. However, as military success brought nationwide power within his grasp, it seemed more politic to disavow millenarian expectations and to assume the mantle of protector of social order. Once in power, the Ming regime quickly banned as heterodox the very sort of millenarian White Lotus Buddhism in which it had been rooted, returning instead to the formative institutional and imaginative frameworks of traditional Chinese statecraft as practiced in the last generations of the (Mongol) Yuan dynasty.

These frameworks entailed a comprehensive system of ascribed statuses, which classified people and assigned obligations accordingly. For example, soldiers were drawn from a set of hereditary "military families" who were registered with the government and obligated to furnish men for the army. A similar system was in effect for the low-level bureaucratic personnel of the local governments. Craftsmen were expected to hand down their specialties to their sons; they were registered and taxed in products and services. Buddhist and Taoist monks, nuns, temples, and shrines were classified by type and required to have government permits. Locally prominent landed families were assigned duties as tax-captains and village-heads. Responsible for organizing tax collections on behalf of the state, they made known to the common people the commands of the imperial bureaucracy. Through the mouths of its officials the government tried to instruct the people in the basic maxims of orthodoxy.

The early Ming regime did everything in its power to bring to a close the mid-

fourteenth-century period of intense social upheaval. The early Ming policy ideal was thus the antithesis of plasticity: everyone in his place, now and forever, all contributing to maintain the status quo.

2. Destabilizing Forces and the Transition to the Later Ming. -- But even though the Ming regime wished to freeze the formative frameworks of society into a stable perpetual system, many forces both within and beyond China remained outside its control.

Culture was the first field of dissent. Despite its resolve to close the door on subversive religious beliefs and to sanitize and limit Buddhism and Taoism politically, the Ming government was never able to erase by legal fiat long established popular religious organizations and beliefs. Because temples and clergy retained local connections and sponsors, quotas on the numbers of Buddhist and Taoist temples and clergy were never enforced widely. Millenarian scriptures were burned, White Lotus inspired groups were discovered and dissolved, but the Ming state failed to eradicate heterodoxy. White Lotus rebels were still active in the peasant wars that brought down the Ming regime in the seventeenth century. Their continued belief in the inevitable downfall of the present order and a utopia to come under Maitreya the Future Buddha provided an enduring imaginative framework abroad in Ming society.

The imperial state had always had to deal with subversive heterodox religions, and it was possible to view these travails as an intermittent problem. "Mainstream" versions of Buddhism,

Taoism, and Confucianism which the state had to tolerate posed a more difficult problem. By the middle of the Ming period, however, these groups began to sprout new forms with disturbing critical implications for existing imaginative frameworks. Here was a second field of discontent: the social elite felt increasingly equivocal toward the state, ideally the focus of their loyalties and the protector of their interests and culture. Confucian gentlemen began to doubt that they could maintain their personal integrity if they entered state service. Some opted out and avoided politics; some took the risk of advocating reform and criticizing the status quo. Inspired by Buddhist and Confucian ideals of moral leadership, some members of the educated elite worked as popular teachers, moving outside the channels of the status quo to bring the lessons of the classics to the masses.

It matters critically here that the bureaucratic state was the key formative institutional framework in old China, drawing into its service as officials educated men of propertied families from throughout the country. The gap in this respect between expectation and reality was another source of deep disorder.

As is well known, an official career was the focus of ambition for the elite men, because it provided the best route to family honor, wealth, power, and fame. The goal of elite education was preparing sons to pass the examinations that led to official rank; the curriculum was designed to produce gentlemen generalists solidly grounded in orthodox political and moral thought.

Orthodoxy from the later Yuan dynasty through the Ming and Qing stressed an absolute ontological basis for the system of roles and values for cultured gentlemen codified in Confucianism. The formative frameworks of orthodox society were hypostatized -- projected as inherent parts of the true pattern of reality. Moral self-cultivation guided by the classics would prepare the gentleman to fulfill his proper role as the natural leader of local society and a loyal minister to the monarch. Though only a few thousand men in each generation would win examination success and serve as officials, it was nonetheless true that a whole class of families had sufficient wealth or culture or both to treat officials as respected peers and to aspire to official careers for their sons. By rights and self conception, the Chinese state should have been their state.

The officials served the state as its representatives in the localities (roughly a thousand districts called *xian*) and staffed its central ministries in the capitals. Local officials were shifted through a series of postings away from their home areas. They were expected to get along with local high society, keep the peace, and enforce tax and service quotas. The entente between central state and local society was expressed in fixed tax quotas set in the early Ming and retained unchanged thereafter, almost sacrosanct. The local officials and the propertied elite of the area were responsible for enforcing the quotas, but were left the power to apportion payments as they saw fit on the local scene, and to keep a share of tax revenues for themselves.

Ideal in its principle, this bureaucracy

often failed in practice. In local society the face of the government was not so much the centrally appointed officials, who were lofty and faraway figures (except to local high society), but rather the petty functionaries employed at the government offices who carried out the dirty work. Chinese records abound with vilification of the *xu-li*, the petty functionaries, often hereditary occupants of the role. Armed with the power of the law, these functionaries were feared and loathed as petty tyrants and grafters who extorted money and services and deference from the commoners. Their unscrupulous greed was proverbial. Principled Confucian officials often lamented that despite their best intentions, the entrenched corruption of the petty functionaries made it impossible to put into effect a truly moral administration. In the immensely popular sixteenth-century vernacular novel *Tales of the Water Margin (Shui Hu Zhuan)*, the heroes are indomitable common men pitted against evil officials and their henchmen: the novel suggests that the commoners saw the government as capricious, oppressive, and unjust. In peasant uprisings, and in particular in the great revolt in North China that toppled the Ming dynasty, the functionaries and officials were special targets of the rebels' violent wrath.

Officials confronted the peasant masses, and in a more modest register, the state as well. Bureaucrats were not the only force within the apparatus of the state. In the central state itself, the officials worked with the emperor and the executive organs of the imperial household. The Ming regime was distinctive among variants of the Chinese imperial state because of the initial antipathy between the central

power and its "natural allies," the cultured propertied gentlemen. The Ming founder, a plebeian-born war-chief distrustful of educated gentlemen, contrived to place the six traditional departments (Finance, Works, War, Ritual, Punishments, Appointments) directly under the Emperor. This eliminated the Prime Minister's office, which in the past had been staffed by men of the bureaucracy in charge of day-to-day executive direction.

As time wore on and the heirs to the Ming throne became preoccupied with interests outside of politics, the power of the throne was wielded by a series of Grand Secretaries who presided over Privy Councils. The Secretaries received powerful assistance from organizations "within the palace" whose personnel, often eunuchs, functioned as investigators, ad hoc project managers, and political police. From the middle of the Ming on, the officials and members of their class often viewed the ruling directorate as guilty of unprincipled factionalism, or worse, of surrendering real power to eunuchs and their cliques.

The role of these eunuchs and the traditional image of that role need to be emphasized. The figure of the evil eunuch in high places was popular in traditional official Chinese histories. The eunuch was portrayed as cruel, cunning, uncultured, an avaricious nouveau riche, morally depraved, politically dangerous -- the master villain, the source of wrong policy, the misleader of emperors. To the Confucian-minded writers of official Chinese history, the eunuch in power was the archetypical anti-man, the representative of the central power against the interests of the social elite. Confucianism was a political philosophy

of local elites looking in to a center; they owed the center loyalty, but the center in turn was to abide by certain norms and do nothing against the elites' local power and position. Cultured gentlemen had the supreme duty of monitoring and criticizing the conduct of the ruler and his government in light of Confucian norms of government. The central power could rule well only by drawing the talented and virtuous from among the educated elite into its service.

The much-resented eunuch was the negation of this peaceful vision. He was the man who had no existence except as tool of the state, no normal family life, no culture, and no breeding. He was a man with no independent moral standpoint, no loyalties in civil society. Ming history is replete with stories of evil eunuchs holding effete emperors under their spell and wielding independent power through their own cliques. Special scorn was reserved for those officials who made their careers as collaborators with eunuchs. Confucian historiography treats high eunuchs with disdain and horror; they personify the central power gone out of control from the standpoint of the cultured, propertied elite.

The figure of the eunuch within this framework of the Confucian political imagination exemplifies one of the general structural themes of Chinese history critical to our understanding of historical plasticity: attempts to strengthen the power of the center and to increase its share of the surplus were greeted with dread and condemnation by the social elite. Proponents of reforms to strengthen the center were castigated as "Legalists," that is, spiritual heirs of the cruel and ruthless anti-elitist policies of

Qin Shi Huangdi (First Emperor of the Qin dynasty and original unifier of China in the third century B.C.) and his advisers.

These various issues (commercialism, cultural schism, taxes, and the symbolic role of eunuchs) were still in contest during later Ming times. In the late sixteenth century the Ming government attempted to increase its revenues to meet rising military expenses. The infamous (to the Confucians) Zhang Juzheng, Grand Secretary and "traitor to his class," attempted to increase central government revenues through stricter application of the land tax rates. Zhang used his executive powers to harass the private Confucian academies that were focal points of opposition to his policies. But in the end, local landed society and its representatives within officialdom checkmated Zhang and after his demise ousted his followers from positions of influence. When the Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s led to more military expenses for the Ming, the regime resorted to ad hoc levies on various enterprises and resources. Special eunuch commissioners dispatched from the center used full coercive power to enforce the levies, despite great local resentment. With the rise of the Manchus in the 1620s, military pressures increased, but the Ming regime never found a way to obtain more of the wealth of society without exacerbating inequality and bringing the people's discontent with their precarious livelihood to the boiling point.

During the last century of Ming rule, c. 1540-1640, tension and dissonance increased in the intertwined institutional and imaginative formative structures

which linked the Ming state to the rest of society. Throughout Chinese society, economic structures shifted. Many payments previously made in labor and in kind were commuted to money payments. More people depended on the market economy; more people traveled in search of work. More towns became major trade centers and more of the countryside was devoted to specialized production for market. Middlemen proliferated not only in commerce but also in rent-collection and in crafts-production. Urban mercantile culture became rich and self-conscious enough to support a bountiful literature of vernacular stories with characters who were commoners, often merchants; the business of printing and selling books boomed. By the late sixteenth century, silver was flowing in from the European dominions in the New World and European merchants were established in East Asian waters.

The institutional framework and policy outlook of the Ming state often conflicted directly with emerging trends in the society's economic life. Officialdom was open to men of merchant class backgrounds, but only when they had proven themselves converts to the traditional agrarian bureaucratic outlook of the state. The officials were always wary of large concentrations of workers, whether in workshops or mines; they might be strong and wild fellows difficult to control in such numbers. The state's use of monopolies and licenses to garner part of the profits in the salt, tea, and liquor trades gave rise to elaborate counter-organizations of smugglers.

For much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Chinese state,

at odds with peasants, bureaucrats, and Confucians, was also at war with dynamic mercantile elements of its own coastal populations, futilely trying to enforce a ban on private overseas trade, and prosecuting as pirates those Chinese who engaged in it. Special government commissioners sent to enforce the maritime prohibition had to proceed cautiously and deliberately, gradually building up bases and forces, and using threats and bribes to split up the "pirate" alliances. The imaginative framework of the central state policy makers was blind to potential enrichment from overseas traders; it saw only the threat of political subversion by overmighty Chinese merchants using foreign contacts. So it happened that just as the European merchant-adventurers were arriving offshore, the Chinese state placed itself mortally at odds with its own most powerfully organized seafaring entrepreneurs. If all of pre-modern history was a race to power in the international world that has developed since early modern times, this was a major strategic blunder by the Chinese authorities, a major failure of imaginative vision, a major failure of institutional invention in the face of entrenched privilege.

3. *Contending currents and Plasticity in the Late Ming.* -- The existence of other possibilities in Chinese history, the openness and potential for new directions, is most apparent in the avant-garde high culture of the later Ming period, and in the associated trends in popular education and broadened culture characteristic of the time. Here we can see attempts to construct new formative frameworks to replace the moribund and corrupt imaginative and institutional structures of the status quo. The late

Ming educated avant-garde argued not only that the institutional and imaginative structures of the status quo were out of touch with current reality, but that they went against the true intent of the ancient sages, which moderns must *reinvent to be worthy of*. Their mood was one of deep frustration with the status quo, in some cases giving way to a kind of frantic despair. Nevertheless, their basic theoretical viewpoint was in principle optimistic, recognizing everyone's inherent capacity to return to the Way of the Sages and to create institutions appropriate for a truly civilized society.

Confucianism in the later Ming period shifted its emphases under the influence of Wang Yangming (d. 1527) and his followers. Accused of yielding to Zen Buddhist influence, this stream of Confucianism maintained that all people possess an innate moral intelligence, even a potential for sagehood, which they can and must cultivate. This innate moral faculty, properly developed, can serve people in all stations of life as a sure guide to action through all shifting circumstances. Adhering to their belief that knowledge and action must be united, many Confucians of this stripe created careers as popular educators, preaching to assemblies and founding study associations. Because they appealed to the people directly in the name of the classic values, such Confucians often aroused the ire and opposition of local elites and officialdom, whom they accused of having lost the Way of the Sages. These Confucians emphasized the absolute necessity of social solidarity. At stake here was the desire to restore "village compacts" in which local people from all walks of life in a given locality explicitly

affirmed the duties and mutual obligations of their social stations.

Despite their impact on Confucian thought and action, the followers of Wang Yangming in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had little influence on national state policy. But another faction in late Ming Confucianism which labeled itself the "Pure Stream" did directly challenge the status quo within the bureaucracy, and tried to rally a return to purist values among the official class. During the last two generations of the Ming period, they became a persistent and organized critical force which used the lofty ideals of the Confucian sages to call into question the routine practices of the time. The "Pure Stream" had a wide following among propertied men, especially in the economically most developed parts of China, and was linked with influential private academies that trained young literati and sponsored great public lectures on morality and politics. This was a deliberate attempt to shape elite public opinion. The "Pure Stream" took the ruling authorities to task for their corruption and immorality and lack of positive policy, for deviating from the Way of the Sages, and for bringing calamity on society. To their enemies, the "Pure Stream" were self-righteous factionalists lacking the capacity for compromise so necessary in bureaucratic life. When the "Pure Stream" got their brief chance at power in the 1620s, their attempts to clean up the bureaucracy touched off a ferocious counterattack and eventual counter-purge, intensifying the severe factionalism that hampered the Ming regime as it faced its final crises.

Another trend of social criticism in late

Ming elite culture appalled both the "Pure Stream" and the business-as-usual bureaucrats. Scoffed at by its opponents as "Crazy Zen," this stream of thought was propagated by Confucian-educated gentlemen who rejected root and branch the social norms and personal roles current in late Ming society. They questioned and rejected even sacrosanct values such as male supremacy and the patriarchal imperial state. Their most brilliant and famous spokesman, Li Zhi, wrote works with titles like *A book to be Burned* and *A Book to be Hidden Away*. He attracted much acclaim and avant-garde elite patronage, but also increasingly bitter opposition from official society. Deeply versed in the classics and histories, Li Zhi delighted in presenting novel interpretations of classic historical exemplars, using them to support his own iconoclastic views. He complained that the imperial state was a big thief, and recommended that the government promote instead of dampen the energies of the commercial classes.

Li Zhi had a strong historical sense that times had changed. He challenged his elite contemporaries, arguing that blind allegiance to past norms was stupid and wrong. To be worthy followers of the ancient sages, he maintained, we must do as they did: independently invent forms of social life that fit our times and our true selves. Li Zhi was branded a heretic, and eventually hounded to suicide, but he exerted a wide influence in elite society. Indeed, it is an indication of potential plasticity in late Ming society that such opinions could become explicit and much debated among the elite.

In common with many of the late

sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Confucian activists, and despite mounting political pressures and the turmoils of his inner life, Li Zhi adopted the optimistic view of the Wang Yangming school (also basic in Buddhism) in his philosophy of human nature. This view holds that our true identity is to be good: every individual has the innate potential for accurate perception and correct action. The problem becomes how to recover this pristine capacity for true moral judgment when it has been screened out by misguided or corrupt customs, social patterns, and conditioned desires.

This program for personal realization was adopted by many in the social elite (and also by many below) during the late Ming. It calls for Zen-style meditation plus worldly action which applies correct values, so that meditation and action clarify each other. Thus the first step in political action is popular education: if people could just heed their innate mind, they would make the correct moral choices. Then they would pick customs and institutions -- "formative frameworks" -- that correspond to their true nature, the cosmic pattern, and the trend of the times; this would recreate social and political harmony. Meanwhile the cultured man who truly honors the Way of the Sages must work to educate the people, to encourage them to return to their true mind, and to follow the lessons of the Sages. Late Ming Confucianism produced many elite men who made this their career. They worked, as we would say, to create awareness of new possibilities among various classes of people -- not only the social elite, but also the commoners who had enough time for reflection. They advocated *spontaneity* and *innovation* as

the distillation of the wisdom of the classics.

This type of intellectual ferment was heightened during the late Ming, as it had been earlier, by the influence of Zen Buddhism on the cultured elite. Zen contained teachings on the relativity of judgments and perceptions, and warnings against conditioned opinions and conventional views. Zen and certain forms of Taoism offered techniques for reintegration of the personality beyond the confines of the conventional world. Though few pursued such studies to their ultimate depths, Zen exerted a perennial attraction through its provocative sayings and the air of freedom around its practitioners. Its critics blamed Zen for the antinomian current and taste for innovation which ran through late Ming elite culture.

Other streams of Confucianism rejected Buddhism and Taoism completely. Some stressed the shared intent of the "Three Teachings." By the sixteenth century "Harmonizing the Three Teachings into One" was a common attitude; the so-called "morality ledgers" prevalent in the later Ming illustrate this vividly. People used books and booklets published in various price ranges to keep track of their good and bad deeds, quantify their merits and demerits, and thus keep a moral balance sheet on their lives. The ledgers invoked Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist sets of values side by side to define and rate the seriousness of good and bad deeds. Though religious skeptics and cynics abounded in the late Ming period, as the vernacular novels show, one does find a widely shared belief, high and low, in karmic retribution for wrongdoing, which would befall oneself or one's family and

descendants. Evil excess was known to damage one's vital energy, and destroy one's health and peace of mind. It was as if Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism had joined forces in an attempt to deter greed and violence and folly.

No one can examine the contending currents in late Ming elite and popular culture and remain unimpressed by the sense of flux, of uncertainty and unease and rising contention, of reaching out for new answers. The sheer diversity and fecundity of the period is especially striking. Ming era Confucianism fostered lively social criticism, holding the status quo up to a lofty standard of solidarity and sagely creativity. Buddhism and Taoism perpetuated their inner traditions of transcending common sense reality, and spawned a myriad of outer worldly forms -- some practicing acquiescence and soothing anxieties, some joining with Confucianism to promote ordinary social morality, some organizing counter communities as seeds of the utopia to come, some promoting transcendence in this lifetime.

This surely constituted a moment of *plasticity* in China's social history, a moment when new possibilities and newly imagined roads to alternative futures were open -- a time when embryonic forms of new formative imaginative and institutional structures were abroad in society. During this period, moreover, numbers of committed people with a "transformative vocation" worked conscientiously at all levels to introduce change. Such are the golden moments of historical possibility, according to Unger's vision.

Yet no breakthrough to new forms of thought and society happened in

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China. China went on from its early modern moment of plasticity to become a prototypical case of "oriental stagnation," enduring nineteenth-century purgatory as a downtrodden semicolon.

B. The Late Ming Failure

What went wrong? What led Ming/Qing China to its later institutional ossification and military weakness? What decided the fate of the many contending interpretations and imaginative frameworks? What was the role of contests between entrenched privilege and collective struggle? From countless European examples we are all too familiar with the major impact that "pressure from below" can have on struggles among the social elite to adjust their differences and come to new formative arrangements and distributions of power. This was also the norm of Chinese history in this epoch. Imminent threat from below acted as a bracing tonic for factious elites, impelling disparate elite parties to somehow stand together against the common threat.

The generations of Chinese intellectuals who lived through the fall of the Ming and the ensuing age of stability in the eighteenth century had their own answer to these questions. They looked back with horrified condemnation on Ming intellectual trends, and repudiated the Ming innovative spirit as reckless and doomed to fail. They blamed the cultured elite of the late Ming for abandoning all standards of conduct: moral failure led to political failure. They also faulted Ming Confucians for their unwarranted, Buddhist-influenced interpretations of the words of the Confucian Sages. In sum, the very

plasticity of the later Ming era was condemned as a terrible aberration and an invitation to disaster.

As modern observers looking on from afar, we can discern some broad outlines. As contemporaries often lamented, the political situation in China went from bad to worse throughout the later Ming period. The rift between the central executive "within the palace" and the official class widened and began to disrupt the state apparatus. A number of emperors forsook state affairs for personal extravagance and outlandish religious pursuits. The real power-holders, whether high eunuchs or cliques of officials, commanded no real allegiance among the political class. Very moral, or simply prudent, people of substance began to shun government service. Would-be reformers warned of the progressive breakdown of social solidarity, the rising hatred and tension between rich and poor.

Telling evidence of class antagonism is provided in the *Wu Bei Zhi (Treatise on Military Preparedness)*, a compendium of military technique and theory from 1628 in the historical-encyclopedia style typical of the Ming. This vast book describes the state of the art of warfare and quotes liberally from the great classics of Chinese military thought on all topics, including strategy and tactics, troop training, logistics and supply, command and communication structures, and techniques for determining lucky and unlucky days. This was a tradition that placed primary emphasis on the political and psychological aspects of war and of organizing the people. Its basic premise was that a nation can only be strong militarily if it is morally united within, with strong solidarity and mutual

loyalty between the leaders and the led.

In striking contrast, the writings from the Ming period itself that are included in *Wu Bei Zhi* now made it evident that the primary enemy to the strategists were Chinese peasant rebels; hence the emphasis on the defense of walled towns -- on organizing patrols throughout the surrounding countryside to watch for raiding bands, registering reliable elements in the population so that they could be enlisted in defensive efforts, working with wholesalers to procure goods and keep prices steady, and organizing advance plans for bringing all supplies and stores of wealth quickly inside the town walls in order to withstand rebel attack. According to this account, local officials should cooperate with military specialists on their staffs and with the propertied people in their areas to organize the population for defense against the "robbers," the peasant rebels. Here was a view that ran counter to what Chinese political theory saw as a picture of good order; according to the military classics, a state on guard against its own people cannot be militarily strong.

Necessity gave practical embodiment to this divisive strategy. The emergence of well-armed enemies from beyond the frontier -- the Oirat Mongols, the Japanese in Korea, the Manchus in the northeast, the Europeans by sea -- now made it urgent that Ming China make the institutional changes necessary to add to its "national strength." Increasing military expenses after the 1550s put growing pressure on the existing formative institutional structures of state finance, which were a patchwork of local variations all geared to fixed tax quotas and inefficient collection

methods. The drain of war on society was felt more acutely in North China, which was poorer in natural endowments than the South and more directly linked to the most militarized frontier.

The upper levels of Ming society were thus constrained in their efforts to solve their inner ideological and factional struggles -- by rising pressure from below, by the mounting tide of rent resistance and even armed outbreaks, and by increased threat from abroad. Even gentlemen infatuated with antinomian subjectivism and spontaneity, who despised the hypocrisy of Confucianism in official society, might need the ultimate backing of the state's force to guarantee their income from their tenants. The defenders of orthodoxy argued that the "every man a sage" faith of "Crazy Zen" might have disturbing and subversive political implications, if taken up by ignorant commoners claiming the right to interpret morality and duty however they saw fit. Many propertied men saw danger in allowing zealous Confucian activists to appeal directly to the authority of the Sages when talking to the people, over the head of the moral leadership claims of the local elite. From here it was a short step, they feared, to totally unorthodox "monks of the people" spreading wild ideas of a new age to come, "deluding the masses with the Left Path,"ⁿ⁷ organizing secret millenarian cults with subversive plans. Thus, the increased plasticity of late Ming times, the rise of openly contending ideological currents, was anything but a welcome development from the point of view of the entrenched elite. A precarious feeling pervaded the "political class." As many rallied to particular viewpoints, and as

partisanship intensified, the field of contending imaginative structures might narrow. True, the pressure of the fight and the need to keep disparate allies together might also promote plasticity in institutional arrangements. But it was also true that at a given point down a particular path, new formative structures might not have the time to jell from within before shocks from outside imposed another order.

In early modern China, a tension of this kind was resolved when the period of unusual plasticity that had existed for a century came to its conclusion in the 1640s. Still riven internally and estranged from its natural allies, the Ming government lost control over wide sections of North and Central China to leagues of peasant rebels. Government forces holding out in scattered centers lost their overall cohesion, and the state began to break apart. In 1643, after more than a decade of war shifting across the North China plain, the rebels captured the northern capital. They took vengeance with executions and expropriations against the official class there. Ming military commanders in the northeast made a pact with the Manchu leaders, and invited their forces into China to help defeat the rebels. The Manchus not only drove the rebels back, but stayed on to rule the country, courting the Chinese elite with promises of restoration of lands lost in the rebellion.

At first the Manchus employed a ruling system based upon their military structure of hereditary banner armies; they used their own ethnically mixed bannermen as garrison soldiers and administrative officials. n8 Gradually the traditional Chinese bureaucratic

structure reemerged and gained authority alongside the banners. As the conquest organizations atrophied, the bureaucracy regained its old prominence. After three generations of state-building, and a generation as masters in China, the Manchu Qing dynasty became patrons of Chinese culture in the traditional imperial manner. But under the new masters, gentlemen of culture were well advised to steer clear of discussions of politics and recent history, except to condemn the Ming for moral failure. Qing Confucians turned to textual philology to correct earlier misinterpretations of the classics on the part of Song and Ming Confucians; the Qing blamed these misunderstandings on Zen Buddhist influences. The flamboyance, spontaneity, and unbridled subjectivism of late Ming imaginative culture were abandoned, along with its mood of openness and uncertainty. Now polite opinion knew where the straight and narrow lay.

With the moment of plasticity gone, with the old pattern of formative structures reinforced by a superimposed conquest state, with imagination driven underground, the Qing Empire grew to formidable proportions and enviable stability while society in Europe went from Reformation to Enlightenment. Not until the mid-nineteenth century did "runaway social warfare" within China, intensified by economic invasion from overseas, create a new moment of plasticity in which high Qing certainties crumbled and new imaginative and institutional structures emerged over decades of struggle.

C. The Chinese Case and Unger's Theory

When we reflect on the great plasticity of the later Ming period and the reinforced rigidity of the Qing period that followed it, we are left with a less optimistic feeling about the directionality of history than Unger wishes to create in *Plasticity into Power*. We note the tenacity of formative contexts, the way they can be reestablished after long decades when they falter in the face of widespread challenge. We feel the great inertia of routine, the deeply rooted habit-energy behind the institutional and imaginative patterns of the status quo. The social struggle in China highlights vividly for us both the role of a balance of forces and an element of sheer contingency in determining why certain formative contexts prevailed and others did not.

It is easy to imagine other routes that China might have taken from the sixteenth century onward. The secession of the most economically advanced areas in the southeast from the central state -- in the manner of the revolt of the Netherlands from the Hapsburg empire - - would have provided a potential locus for the development of novel social patterns and structures. A new concept of the state that allowed private commercial interests legitimacy might have emerged within this territorial base area, and congealed into a new formative structure. If the Manchu state across the border had not been at a peak of military power, tight organization, and skillful leadership through the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, the great peasant revolts in North China that brought down the Ming regime would have had more time to develop and solidify new institutional patterns. If the Western Europeans had not, in their own period of early modern plasticity, undertaken a global search for

profit, the network of Chinese merchant communities firmly established throughout Southeast Asia and the South Seas -- and influential at royal courts throughout the region -- might have eventually, with the backing of a more mercantilist oriented Chinese state, jelled into a Chinese commercial-colonial sphere.

Examining such alternative possibilities, what was and what might have been, we are necessarily struck by the importance of the relative timing of developments in different cultural worlds, and by the resulting series of impacts and foreclosures. The late Ming sprouts of capitalism in China were scorched not only by endogenous factors; in a China "left to itself" and "given time" the embryonic forms of new imaginative and institutional patterns might have matured to reshape the society. But what revolution -- or even mild reform -- has ever been "left to itself" or "given time"? Such plasticity as emerges comes about under duress and unwittingly, not only because of the opposition of vested interests, but also because the lifelong habits of whole populations resist change. Even when interrupted by catastrophe, the old ways are most often re-created later by the survivors and persist, in forms that only gradually slide toward qualitative change.

This observation does not deny or minimize the role of struggle in the forward progress of human affairs. In the history of early modern China, much explicit evidence shows quite well that the bitter revolt of the peasants at the end of the Ming dynasty did induce the ruling landowners (restored by the Qing regime) to liberalize the terms of servitude of the cultivators of the soil.

Revolt also increased landowners' awareness of their responsibilities for maintaining social solidarity and for moderating excessive exactions from the direct producers. In the Maoist interpretation of Chinese history, even the losing struggles of the broad masses played a positive role, because they forced the ruling stratum to allow for more freedom and thus let society advance. This conception accords well with the account of historical progress Unger seeks to build.

But Unger's vision -- runaway social struggle leading to periods of plasticity that enable fundamental, progressive revisions of the formative imaginative and institutional contexts -- could equally well be judged from another quintessential Chinese point of view, usually called "Taoist." This raises a tactical consideration valuable to rebels and progressives in all historical moments: namely, that extremism tends to evoke a corresponding opposition. Acute polarization can lead to wild shifts "backwards" as well as "forwards." Strategically, plasticity will lead to progressive syntheses only when those with "transformative vocation" are well aware of the exact dimensions of the resistance they are likely to provoke, and temper their public program with this in mind. They would have to consider the deep-seated habits of deference and patterns of perception inculcated into all strata of society under the "old order," and carefully design programs of belief and action that bring the various segments of the population gradually, despite themselves, to new levels. To hit the mark, self-conscious social revolutionaries would thus have to know how to adjust their aim, and renounce their personal biases, bearing in mind

how routine conceptions and habitual action patterns will deflect the proclaimed purposes of programs of reform and change. This is a very subtle science, far from the realm of pseudo-objectivity, strident self-righteousness, and blinkered partisanship more familiar to us under the name "political commitment."

D. Comparing China and France

Can we meaningfully compare the moments of plasticity embodied by Revolutionary France and Late Ming China to speculate further on Unger's view of historical progress? Any such comparison is made difficult by the obvious disparity in the historical discourse that addresses these two key periods. The gap is both quantitative and qualitative. A classic event in European history and hence in modern world history, the French Revolution has been studied in exhaustive detail from many angles. Whole libraries have been written to chronicle the sequence of events, to gauge the motivations and policies of major actors, to unravel particular junctures, and to assess overall meaning. The case of early Modern China is entirely different. Even the basic facts of the period are barely known to the Western historians, much less the detailed sequences and nuances of interpretation given to them. In the Far East itself historiography on the subject has been in the grip of restrictive ideological preconceptions that reduce historical judgments to pre-ordained clichés.

Nevertheless, some lessons about plasticity and formative contexts emerge from a comparison of revolutionary France and China. In French history, we

have the contrast between the feeling of total openness and plasticity in the early revolutionary years, and the external Tocquevillean observation that a substantial continuity in formative contexts links the Ancien Regime through the revolution to the nineteenth century and beyond. Profound social change and the progressive empowerment of the nation were thwarted somehow from within. Likewise, attempts in China at a new ruling system and a reordering of society -- such as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in the nineteenth century and the Communists in the twentieth -- have clearly borrowed much from the preexisting stock of images of authority and patterns of deference, to the detriment of revolutionary ambitions.

It does not seem too bold to suggest that the juxtaposed study of China and France and their possibilities for social change can lead us to reflect usefully on some of the basic issues involved in Unger's approach to history. Both French and Chinese history offer concrete examples of people in past ages trying to remake the formative structures of social life. In the West we sigh with admiration at the optimism and hard-won faith in rationality of the European Enlightenment, at its confidence that the world could be measured and remade. Its later day descendants, shriveled by the historical failures of our century, have shrunk away from the *philosophes'* vision of empowered freedom. But their lucid social thought stands as a monument. It still offers revolutionary lessons for us today. Likewise in the China of our own times, whether mainland or overseas, the uncompromising individualism and bold freethinking of sixteenth-century

ancestors still stands out as shocking and iconoclastic to all but a few.

The compared histories of the two nations also show that the formative contexts of historical experience must be located in everyday life, which includes routine activities and attitudes that mutually reinforce each other and give shape to a status quo. Unger's "modern Western" view of this issue has analogues in Chinese Buddhism or Taoism. Under stress, these everyday arrangements may be challenged or set aside, but customary attitudes and self-definitions linger, ready to recreate a semblance of times gone by once the crisis has abated.

The history of these two ancient nation states reveals finally that to advance the process of "transformative vocation" to a new level, radicals must transcend the partisan mentality and self-righteous focus that have blinded the strategists of so many innovative political movements and engendered results contradictory to original goals. Radicals must see through to what holds the formative contexts in place, so as to patiently undo these bonds. At stake are the arenas of social and political action which play directly on the structural gaps that weaken the prevailing formative contexts. It is their task to keep motivations intact and to adjust their tactics without relying on simplistic systems of belief. Given the mentality of the leadership and the fighting forces of great movements of social change and revolution in the past, this in itself would be a change of some magnitude.

II. PLASTICITY IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

The stunted evolution of Chinese society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the central cultural and political puzzle of Asian history. The inability of the French Revolution to conciliate individual liberty and social equality is, in terms of its importance for world history, the political analogue in Europe of "non-capitalism" in the history of the Far East.

In his *Prelude*, Wordsworth, who was in France in the early 1790s, wrote:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But
to be young was very Heaven! n9

Seldom before -- if ever -- had the sense of opening, which is so important to Unger's *Weltanschauung*, been so strongly felt. Unlike Americans, who took some time in the mid 1770s to understand their Revolution as a world historical event, but very much like the Chinese, who took it for granted that the fate of their Empire in the sixteenth century had inherent universal value, the French immediately assumed that they had, with the fall of the Bastille, turned over a new page in the history of mankind. This apprehension was rationalized and made explicit in the works of contemporary German idealist philosophers, Fichte and Hegel especially. n10 Indeed, it was not enough for the French to have opened a new path for the future. After 1789, many of them felt it necessary to rewrite the past as well, so that it might fit their rejuvenated vision of human nature. In 1790, the Jacobin playwright and politician Fabre d'Eglantine, later to become the author of the Revolutionary calendar as well as a victim in 1794 of the Committee of Public Safety, staged his *Philinte*, a rewrite of the

Misanthrope, a new text whose aim it was to correct Moliere's ironic satire of unbending virtue. Nor was this an isolated instance. In that same year, Collot d'Herbois, another Jacobin writer who would later be a key member of the Committee of Public Safety, presented a play entitled *Socrates* that ended with the gathering of a mob intent on releasing the condemned philosopher. The Jacobins were not content to transform French society as it had become, or even Europe as kings and priests had made it. They wished also to reinterpret history and literature, and to change the configuration of space and time, at least in France, by renaming places and institutionalizing Fabre's new anti-Christian calendar. Their sense of social plasticity was unrivaled, and it is against that standard that we gauge the disappointments of 1794-99.

Historical hindsight forces us to set the history of the French Revolution in a different, more modest, and far more pessimistic register. We do still see the fall of the Ancien Regime as an exceptional moment of sociological opening in the history of Europe, but we also sense that it may have been the sequel, as Tocqueville thought, of some determining and illiberal incidents in the history of France. Contemporary historians of the Revolution often lean to a hypothesis of inherent decay. For the followers of Francois Furet, n11 the Terror of 1793-94 was embedded in the events of 1789, just as we apprehend also that Robespierre's tyrannical reign of virtue foreshadows the unrelenting totalitarian closures on our own century.

A. *The French Revolution*

With the Night of the 4th of August and

Le Chapelier law of June 1791 (which Marx rightly understood to be the critical legislation of the entire period), that is to say, with the dissolution of the guilds, estates, provinces, and *corps* of every kind, the French Revolution stood at the threshold separating the organicist, corporatist *Gemeinschaft* of "traditional" Europe, and the socially individualistic and politically parliamentary forms of "modern" systems. Here was the moment when a society of individuals replaced in the legal order an expiring and corporate traditionalism as the organizing principle of social life. 1789 is one of those rare moments in history when the void left by the decomposition of older social structures has -- seemingly at least -- not yet been filled by new, possibly liberating but possibly constraining, institutional structures, and in some deep sense, Frenchmen were right to think that their society had become uniquely plastic, that they might rebuild it in unprecedented fashion.

In no small measure, contemporaries also had reason to see the political opening of 1789 as the belated fruition of numerous profound and antecedent economic and technological innovations. The century that preceded the French Revolution presents to us many of the ingredients which Unger has characterized as material grounds for an optimistic appraisal of radical and empowering politics. Culturally, technologically, and economically, the eighteenth century was a period of unprecedented growth for France. Rates of literacy and readership rose significantly. Though French agriculture remained essentially untransformed, mass starvation became a thing of the past; the last great famine took place in 1709. With varying degrees of success, a

more sizable peasantry did manage to feed a growing urban sector. France's overall population rose by more than a quarter in the century before 1789. Diderot's *Encyclopedie* speaks also to the technological wizardry of the age, just as Buffon's taxonomy and Cook's or La Perousse's voyages do to a spirit of inquiry -- and to the Enlightenment's confidence in its ability to make of the cosmos a finite, *lisible*, and therefore improvable entity.

In line again with Unger's overall argument, the weakening in eighteenth-century France of corporate solidarities, deployed as it was by technological and economic change, also brought into the public sphere collective forces that had before been passive or even mute. In many parts of France, peasants more or less ceased to pay feudal dues. One can point also to the new consciousness of propertiless laborers in modern urban centers like Lyon where strikes took on a new, more modern face. (The French word for strike, *greve*, was coined in 1785.) So did the workers' perception of their propertied employers, who like them were members of a *corps*, but unlike them were wielders of economic power. A new enlightened and propertied elite drawn from both the aristocracy and the "rising middle class" appeared on the ruins of the older estates, remolding French social structure. This subject has been the object of raging debate, but by now revisionist historians have mounted a good case to show that adherence to new cultural forms had by 1789 produced a new class of enlightened landlords and officials -- some of them nobles, some of them not. In this new arrangement, the older conflict of nobles and bourgeois lost much of its relevance. Obviously,

this social reordering offered the possibility for institutional reconstruction which is for Unger a critical aspect of synthetic moments of historical change.

The collapse in 1787-89 of the Ancien Regime as a political system dramatized these patterns of material or social change and of public empowerment. Nearly half a century ago, Georges Lefebvre familiarized the idea of a multiple Revolution, where the fall of the monarchy in the summer of 1789 had as its immediate cause the conjunction of very different political movements. n14 These movements, placed end to end, encompassed the whole French nation: a revolt of the aristocracy against the intransigence of the Parlements; a revolution of the new Enlightened elite in the Estates General; a revolt of the peasants against the "Grande Peur"; and a revolt of the urban poor in Paris and many other cities as well.

Recent work on the Revolution has likewise heightened our understanding of the involvement of new broad categories of people in the political process during the Great Revolution itself. The mobilization of the nation in 1789 proved to be a durable phenomenon. The new historiographic emphasis on the power of cultural forms as a tool of political mobilization is of great relevance here; for Mona Ozouf, n15 Judith Schlanger, n16 and Lynn Hunt, n17 for example, the salient aspect of Revolutionary politics is its reliance on imagery and symbolism as means of communication. Through these symbols, everywhere present, spontaneously developed and often imposed by the Jacobin clubs or the Revolutionary state, the mass of the population was for the

first time in French history truly involved in politics. The rhetoric of Jacobinism, rather than its social foundation (as in the classic work of Brinton), is now a central concern for historians. That shift of method enables us to grasp, as was not possible before, how widespread and empowering the political effect of the French Revolution was.

B. The Failure of the Revolution

But why then did the French Revolution fail? What went wrong? Why did the Revolution, Saturn-like, devour its children and debouch on a military dictatorship whose first purpose was to suspend politics? Why did the political struggle of the French nation in 1789 not definitively and fundamentally revise that society's formative and imaginative social and cultural contexts? Why did France's moment of political plasticity, like the opening of Chinese society a century and a half before, have as its most obvious consequence the institutional ossification of the state as the shield of social retrenchment?

The explanation -- or, more realistically and modestly, another explanation -- of that failure, whose explanation has mobilized the energies of historians for nearly two centuries, starts from two statements, the first on the assertion of possessive individualist values in 1789-91, the second on the nature of Jacobinism in 1792-94.

1. *1789-1791*. -- It is common to speak of a terroristic *derapage* in 1793-94, in which the revolution slid away from a liberal assertion of the natural rights of man, and toward a proto-totalitarian assertion of a communitarian and

determining reign of virtue. However this was actually the second *derapage* of the Revolution, the first being the radical individuation of French social and economic forms that took place between the calling together of the Estates General in May 1789 (or even before) and the immediate sequels of the king's flight to Varennes in June 1791.

In 1787-89, during the introductory moments of this individuating *derapage*, the task of the Enlightened and propertied elite was to destroy the Ancien Regime, or rather, to abandon it to its fate. Unable to pay its way, unable to rely on corporate groups that its bureaucratic practice had itself done much to destroy, unable to enforce its absolutist will on reticent Parlements that had become the spokesmen of aristocratic resistance, the French Ancien Regime suddenly collapsed.

The convocation of the Estates General marks the true beginning of liberal empowerment and general social upheaval. In August 1789, the deputies of the Third Estate, together with their allies in the liberal wings of the clergy and the aristocracy, proclaimed the rights of man. More practically, they also wiped out the bloodless remains of the corporatist body social: provinces were wiped out, as were guilds, feudalism, the judicial system, charitable institutions, and in some measure the Church itself. In 1792, divorce was not only legalized, but made readily accessible. The rights of the family were lessened, and the rights of those individuals which comprised the family increased. The symbol of this first and liberal *derapage* is the celebrated Le Chapelier law of 1791. n18

Not surprisingly, this extreme and unprecedented individuation of social forms, so extreme as to be unique in world history, aroused fierce hostility, first on the traditional right, but soon on the left as well. n19 The neo-corporate opposition of clerical "obscurantists" in 1790-91 is one side of a coin on which were also impressed, after 1792, the equally anti-individualist communitarian claims of the Parisian *sans-culotterie* and of their Montagnard allies. In late 1791-92, the liberal, parliamentary, and individuating arrangement gradually decomposed. On August 10, 1792, the *sans-culottes*, abetted by the more radical wing of the bourgeois party, overthrew the king, who had tried to flee to Varennes the year before. In the ensuing months, a now radical Revolution was further radicalized by war and run-away inflation.

Our central focus in these pages will be to consider the causes of this first revolutionary and liberal *derapage* or failure of 1789-91. n20 It is in that setting that we can best gauge for the history of France (and perhaps of Europe) the relevance of Unger's theoretical vision of empowerment and social change to applied history. Sadly, as will be shown, a sound argument can be mounted to show that here, as in the case of late Ming China, empowerment was to a large extent illusory because the very factors which brought down the Ancien Regime had embedded within them the cause of subsequent disappointment. But before turning to that question, it will be useful to deal briefly with the problem of Jacobinism, that is to say, with the nature of the next and communitarian phase or *derapage* of the revolution.

2. 1792-1794. -- This second phase ran from the failure of liberal, constitutional monarchy in 1791-92 through the fall of Robespierre in July 1794. n21

For classic center-left historians of the Revolution like Aulard, n22 the problem of jacobinical excess is not as critical as might at first appear. This extraordinarily sophisticated and developed scholarly corpus explains the leftward drift of French politics essentially through reference to contemporary events, such as the war, economics, paper currency, food shortage, the natural savagery of the people, institutional disorganization, and counterrevolution. Much is to be said for an explanation focusing upon these types of factors, whose analogues in Chinese history are numerous and obvious.

For the classical Marxists, whose point of view few historians would defend today, the dictatorship of the Montagne is more interesting, but again, readily explicable. In 1789, one readily identifiable class (the bourgeoisie) displaced another readily identifiable class (the aristocracy), and then reshaped both state and society to suit its individualistic ends. The French Revolution of 1789 cleared the decks of history for the growth of nineteenth-century capitalism. The appearance of yet a third class or proto-class -- the *sans-culottes* -- owes to the unexpected difficulty that the bourgeoisie encountered in trying to extirpate feudalism entirely. The Terror is a plebeian way of completing the overthrow of the Ancien Regime. 1794 is not the negation but the completion of 1789. During the Terror, the bourgeoisie used the people to carry through its own historical mission, namely the

destruction of "feudal modes of production." But, of course, in this closely choreographed ballet, the people were allowed to act only within narrow and well-surveyed limits. The inability of the populist *enrages* to create in 1793-94 a self-sustaining *sans-culotte*, or Parisian popular movement; the defeat of the counterrevolutionary Vendean peasants at the same time; and the countervailing collapse of the politically exhausted but basically triumphant bourgeoisie when Napoleon rose to power, all are in some sense foreordained. The politics of the French Revolution are in some sense of limited interest because they do no more than actualize a set of latently present relationships of social power.

Recent revisionist work on Jacobinism, however, has presented it in a less favorable light. n23 Jacobinism here is not perceived as a weapon of social change, even of a predetermined and close-ended kind. It is seen instead as a mask for the bourgeoisie's social and ideological impotence during the second phase of the Revolution, from 1792 to 1794.

In this view, the first premise of Jacobinism centers on the "transparency" of society. Social forms, as they exist, are and must remain irrelevant to politics. For the Jacobins, economic forms, however unequal, are immanent because they are determined by nature as well as reason. The domain of revolutionary politics is therefore to transcend but not to reshape the inevitable differences of material and social life. Jacobinism sidesteps social and economic problems. This escapist instinct explains those innumerable aspects of Jacobin rituals and *fetes* that

obsessively emphasized complementarity, whether of men and women, of the aged and the young, of choirs and soloists, of the past and the present.

Jacobinism, in the revisionist perspective, did indeed reject the hobbling limits that traditionalist corporatism had by its very nature placed on individual empowerment. But Jacobin doctrine accomplished this rejection only to insert individual becoming into a new and even more constraining ideological totalism, expressed intellectually in Rousseau's General Will, and politically in the rule of the Committee of Public Safety. The abbe Sieyès' prophetic *What is the Third Estate*, published in January 1789, justifies the rule of the bourgeoisie, but it also *excludes* the noble-born from civic rights through a joint reference to the inclusive principle of productivism and to the totalizing myth of national sovereignty. Jacobinism asserts the material status quo, decrees the death penalty for hypothetical agrarian communists, the partisans of the *loi agraire*, and simultaneously asserts the totalizing claims of republican fraternity.

In summary, 1789-91 can be perceived as a phase of individualist *derapage* whose failure engenders in 1792-94 a second, antithetical but socially sterile communitarian sliding-out. In 1789-91, a possessing elite imposes its individuating will on the French nation. But unable to sustain that will ideologically, it perversely masks its determination to make private property the center of social life by elaborating in 1792-94 a deceptive rhetoric of falsely universal values.

C. Plasticity in the French Revolution

The point to consider now is the measure of plasticity present at any point of this Revolutionary drama if it is to be seen in the perspective that we have described. In the Marxist eschatology, plasticity is not basically at issue. It is at once fated and denied because history and the interaction of class move inexorably through the Le Chapelier law, to Jacobinism (with its successes and its failures), towards the eschatological emergence of an unpropertied class with its understood and promised goal. n24

In the more recent views of Jacobinism, the verdict on plasticity is differently understood but no less severe. Jacobinism is presented here as a self-destructing snare. Its failure is pre-ordained: its simultaneous defense of property and universal myth cannot be sustained. It is of relevance as well that the full-blown appearance of Jacobinism as the cardinal principle of French politics is itself an effect of the earlier, liberal failure in 1789-91. Last but not least, as shall now be seen, our pessimistic argument also suggests that this initial liberal failure was itself largely pre-ordained. The French Revolution can thus be gloomily conceived as a series of interlocking catastrophes that play out in a concatenated way the earlier deformations of pre-revolutionary French life.

1. *Pre-revolutionary France*. -- At stake here are recent studies on the curiously asymmetrical fate of organic traditionalism in pre-revolutionary, late monarchic France. On the face of things, that is to say, in terms of its *formal* institutions, Christian and corporatist

organicism appeared to have been thoroughly discredited there. As Tocqueville pointed out a century and a half ago, its integrity had been sapped by the absolutist state, which used guilds and venal office as fiscal milch cows. Its social authority was mined as well by physiocratic, neo-capitalist, and Enlightened propaganda. So great was the dislike of corporatist practice that monetized relationships, which we see as central to relations of capitalist dominance, were perceived instead as liberating alternatives to the constraints of unequal feudal relationships. The rejection in the name of Enlightenment values of both formal corporatism and, after 1780, of bureaucratic centralism had deep roots.

As an *informal* system of values, however, the ethic of corporatism remained well-entrenched in French life. Individualism was negatively construed, not in entrepreneurial terms, but as aristocratic prowess, and as a mere brake against the ravages of despotic absolutism. Frenchmen might unite against the state, but they had little experience of positive political and social action. Corporate loyalty as a principle and conspicuous consumption remained instinctive to an aristocratic culture for which possessive individualism held only limited appeal. Even the French bourgeoisie did not see productive investment as the logical conclusion of thrift and prudence. For the peasantry, who kept their contact with the market to a minimum, property remained a means of social disengagement. The impact of Augustinian jansenism, with its fatalistic rejection of the world, ran very deep. Its Pascalian emphasis on inner intellectual coherence and on personal integrity

certainly did turn the French legal bourgeoisie away from the traditionalist aristocratic state; but so did it preclude capitalistic venture and promethean self-empowerment. No longer feudal, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France was nonetheless resolutely anti-modernist.

The Enlightenment complicated rather than resolved this cultural dilemma. Physiocracy, the first systemic presentation of a market economy, inflected but did not transform the particular conception of the self that had become instinctive for the French elite. True, physiocracy did legitimize capitalistic accumulation, albeit in a ruralist context, but for the physiocratic capitalist -- as had been true for the jansenist and the aristocrat -- society in a sense did not truly exist. The individual found his empowerment not in the world, but against it. For the friends and disciples of Dr. Quesnay, the inventor of physiocracy, the enrichment of those who already possessed presupposed the working out of Turgot's iron law of wages, which held that the poor could not rise above a level of subsistence barely exceeding starvation. ⁿ²⁵ To Rousseau's vision of an individual whose true will could only be that of the community, the Physiocrats countered with a vision of *homo economicus* at war with the world. The physiocrat employer measured his prosperity by the distress of the masses. Here was a defense of individualism that might appeal before 1789 to those who despised the Ancien Regime, but it could not appeal in practice to the nation at large. It was the presence of the Ancien Regime that made physiocracy appealing, rather than the inherent strength of its world view.

The simultaneity of corporatist and anti-individualist presence and disappearance had a determining effect on France's cultural situation on the eve of the Revolution; older social institutions had, it seemed, collapsed. But the social principle they embodied remained deeply felt. New cultural constructs had emptied traditional society of its formal content, but without pointing the way to viable new social forms.

The economic trajectory of French society in the eighteenth century, it can be added, underwrote this mixed cultural ensemble. France, as the second commercial power in the world, did witness a considerable development of monetized relationships. But France, unlike England, did not witness any general movement of capitalistic rural enclosure. Capitalism, that is to say, economic individualism, did not transform French society, whose involvement in the international trade of the day resembled that of China's comprador economy during the nineteenth century. A more sustained capitalism might have given the principles of physiocratic individuals greater social resonance. That in turn would have stabilized the individualist *derapage* of 1789-91. But capitalism in eighteenth-century France remained uncertainly grounded, an accretion rather than a transforming principle.

2. *1789: Plasticity and Failure.* -- It was in this double context of a promising but illusory sense of social space that the French elite's dreams of empowerment and of political opening were set in 1787-91. The constraints of corporatism had been left behind, or so it then seemed, but contemporaries had no sense of the liabilities which

physiocratic capitalism -- soon to be deployed by industrialism -- would visit upon them. The Revolution of 1789 was indeed the beginning of modern European history and the start of a "bourgeois" politics, but this was a beginning whose possibilities were far more limited than contemporaries envisaged.

The idea of foreordained revolutionary failure is not new. Tocqueville's fame, for example, rests on his interpretation of the revolutionary decade as a mere interlude within a single bureaucratic continuity. For this disillusioned aristocrat, French society in the 1780s was deeply divided against itself. The dissolving action of French absolutism, he explained, had reduced feudalism to a shadow of its former self, so that Frenchmen were now more alike than they had ever been. But the gap of memory and hope between them remained vast. To worsen matters even further, the destructive action of intellectuals exacerbated the many institutional differences that still separated nobles as a class from non-nobles as another class, differences encouraged by the fiscal policy of the state. For Tocqueville in 1856, the benevolent but weakened monarchy of 1789 could no longer impose its authority on a warring scene for which the state itself was largely to be blamed. The course of France under the Ancien Regime was set, it seemed to him, for both revolutionary upheaval and revolutionary failure. Politically inexperienced as they were, Frenchmen soon proved unable to resolve the chaotic problems that are typical of revolutionary times. 1789 was for Tocqueville not only the end of the monarchy, but the beginning of yet

another historical cycle whose peak would be Napoleon's coup of 18th brumaire.

Our own analysis of pre-revolutionary France shifts the terms of the argument away from Tocqueville's emphasis on the state's fiscal policies and toward a judgment on the sterile content of individualism as defined by the forces at work in French history, be they economic, religious, or institutional. But the basic conclusion is unchanged, or made even more discouraging. Our view deploys Tocqueville's earlier and more institutional explanation of French political failure.

France in 1789 could not go on as a corporatist state, but its future either as a liberal society or as a civic Republic was uncertain. Looking backward, we can now apprehend that the aggressive, acquisitive individualism of the Feuillants in 1789-91 originated in an incomplete understanding of the importance of the corporatist ethos in French life. Looking forward to totalitarian regimes so foreign to Unger's inspiration, we can also see why the sequel of this rejected, over-individuated state should have so easily become the tyrannical reign of Republican virtue -- a modernized and Rousseauist restatement of the fundamental reluctance of French culture to make of individualism the central value in either its politics or its social life.

III. CONCLUSION

In our observations on periods of plasticity in France and China, it is not our intent to minimize the place of popular struggles and movements in social change. Rather, we mean to

question the role of polarization and clashing ideological conceptions in relation to the "directionality" of the social change to which they contribute. In social struggles, does the sharpening of ideological and practical conflict necessarily promote the goals the rival parties set out to accomplish? After so many painful historical examples of supposedly self-conscious movements achieving anything but the results they ostensibly intended, it seems we have to look again and seek the origin of this self-defeating tendency. In Unger's terms, this means finding out where the formative structures are "located" and what gives them the regenerative capacities they have so often shown over the course of the most severe upheavals.

Unger's overall *projet* engages our sympathy, and its optimism challenges us to strengthen our basic resolve to conciliate individual empowerment with the social good. If we are to find ways of making good the rationalism of our Enlightenment forefathers, we must indeed make new formative structures answerable to standards of Reason and Liberty and an adequate vision of Humanity.

Informed by a depolemized study of history, willing to see something new, those in our own times with Unger's "transformative vocation" must then develop a keener understanding of the ruses of History and of society's awesome powers of resistance. They must find out what holds the formative structures in place, what reinforces them, what undermines them. Our brief survey of French and Chinese politics in periods of havoc reminds us that the sense of plasticity characteristic of "interesting times" can be painfully illusory. Intense,

explicit polarization and the clash of rival currents in society has seldom produced unmixed results, whether definitive qualitative change, or the movement of society in the direction the contenders envision in advance. This of course comes as no surprise to a writer like Unger, who emphasizes the need for practical work for reform wherever it can be achieved, and who has himself undertaken that difficult assignment. Unger's opus has for us a powerful and durable message, but we add a caveat. Only with a sober look into the intricate interplay of warring conceptions can people nurture and properly cherish their "transformative vocation" and hone it to accuracy.

When given this historians' elaboration, the striking optimism of Unger's work is somewhat tempered. The first shoots of latent new possibilities may appear in conditions of plasticity, but how can they be brought to fruition intact? The moral of history may be that Unger is right to think that blows must be struck, but as Walter Benjamin remarked, they may have to be struck with the left hand.

FOOTNOTES:

n1 See PLASTICITY INTO POWER at 131-34.

n2 Cf. SOCIAL THEORY at 411.

n3 For primary sources on sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century China, see N. TRIGAULT, THE CHINA THAT WAS: CHINA AS DISCOVERED BY THE JESUITS AT THE CLOSE OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY (J. Gallagher trans. 1942); THE GOLDEN LOTUS (C. Edgerton trans. 1972). The work of Frederic Wakeman provides a social-historical account of the Ming-

Qing transition in the mid-seventeenth century. See F. WAKEMAN, THE GREAT ENTERPRISE: THE MANCHU RECONSTRUCTION OF IMPERIAL ORDER IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA (1985). There are also a number of accounts in Chinese: COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ON THE HISTORY OF SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN THE MING PERIOD (Zhou Kangxie ed. 1975); FU YILING, MERCHANTS AND MERCHANT CAPITAL IN THE MING AND QING PERIOD (1956); JI WENFU, THE HISTORY OF LATE MING THOUGHT (1944); LIANG FANGZHONG, THE SINGLE WHIP LAW (1936); RONG ZHAOZU, A HISTORY OF MING PERIOD THOUGHT (1962); WANG YANGMING, COMPLETE WRITINGS (1933); Li Shoukong, *A Study of the White Lotus Religion in the Ming Period*, 4 J. CULTURE, HIST. & PHIL. (1952); Liu Yan, *The City People's Movement Under the Impact of the Urban Economy in Late Ming*, in COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ON THE HISTORY OF SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN THE MING PERIOD (Zhou Kangxie ed. 1975); see also WU CHENG'EN, JOURNEY TO THE WEST (1972) (the classic vernacular novel, dating from the sixteenth century, turning a shrewd satirical eye on all customs, religions and human foibles: its stories are still widely known. It was deemed by Taoists and Buddhists to be an esoteric design for the perpetuation of truth in the early modern upheaval); YUNQI ZHUHONG, DHARMA COLLECTION OF THE MASTER OF YUNQI (1897) (a vivid portrayal of sixteenth-century popular religion by a leading Buddhist teacher of the time); ZIBO ZHENKE, COMPLETE

RECORD OF ZIBO (1912) (teachings of the leading Zen teacher of the late Ming, who laid down his life protesting against the government).

n4 PLASTICITY INTO POWER at 50-61.

n5 For sources on the early and middle Ming period during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see 5 CAI MEIBIAO, COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY OF CHINA (1978); LI GUANGBI, OUTLINE HISTORY OF THE MING DYNASTY (1957); LI JIANNONG, DRAFT HISTORY OF THE ECONOMY OF SONG, YUAN AND MING (1957); YUNQI ZHUHONG, OUTLINE STUDIES OF EMINENT MONKS OF THE IMPERIAL MING (1912); *see also* CHUSHI FANQI, RECORDED SAYINGS (1912) (leading Zen teacher of the period); WU HAN, THE BIOGRAPHY OF ZHU YUANZHANG (n.d.) (the story of his rise from starving orphan-monk to millenarian war-chief to emperor of China and defender of the status quo).

n6 *See* sources cited *supra* 3.

n7 The phrase "deluding the masses with the Left Path" is a standard phrase in official sources from the Song period onward: for example, it is found in the Ming Law Code. All heretical and subversive religious groups and teachings were grouped under the term "the Left Path," and were forbidden by law.

n8 The Manchu "state" began as a military organization: the sworn followers of the Manchu leaders organized into units called "banners." As

the organization expanded with success, new banners were organized, so that there came to be not only Manchu banners but also banners composed of Mongols and other peoples as well as banners of Chinese loyal to the Manchus. The banners provided the military might and executive personnel of the Manchu state in the seventeenth century.

n9 Wordsworth, *Prelude*, BOOK XI, lines 108-09.

n10 G. HEGEL, PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY (J. Sibree trans. 1944); J. FICHTE, BEITRAG ZUR BERCHTIGUNG DER URTEILE DES PUBLIKUMS UBER DIE FRANZOSISCHE REVOLUTION (1793).

n11 F. FURET, PENSER LA REVOLUTION FRANCAISE (1978).

n12 For an elaboration of this view, see P. HIGONNET, SISTER REPUBLICS: THE ORIGINS OF FRENCH AND AMERICAN REPUBLICANISM (forthcoming).

n13 For a general discussion of this mood, see R. PALMER, THE AGE OF DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION: A POLITICAL HISTORY OF EUROPE AND AMERICA 1760-1800 (1964).

n14 *See* G. LEFEBVRE, THE COMING OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (1957).

n15 M. OZOUF, LA FETE REVOLUTIONNAIRE, 1789-1799 (1976).

n16 J. SCHLANGER, L'ENJEU ET LE

DEBAT (1979).

n17 L. HUNT, POLITICS, CULTURE,
AND CLASS IN THE FRENCH
REVOLUTION (1984).

n18 *See supra* section II A (noting that
Marx correctly saw the Le Chapelier law
as the pivotal legislative act of the
French Revolution).

n19 Indeed, the terms left and right were
coined in Paris at this time.

n20 For a description of this first
derapage, see P. HIGONNET, *supra*
note 12, ch. 6.

n21 For a description of the second
derapage, see F. FURET, *supra* note 11.

n22 A. AULARD, HISTOIRE
POLITIQUE DE LA REVOLUTION
FRANCAISE (1901).

n23 For examples of recent revisionist
work on Jacobinism, see F. FURET,
supra note 11; M. OZOUF, *supra* note
15; *see also* Higonnet, *Le sens de la
Terreure*, 35 COMMENTAIRE 436
(1956).

n24 *See supra* Section II B 2 (1792-
1794) (discussion of classical Marxist
position).

n25 *See* W. REDDY, THE RISE OF
MARKET CULTURE (1984).