

## Edward Friedman's Reflections on the Revolution in China

Bruce Gilley, Portland State University

*The largest number of all drifted away, speechless and agog, until the years had passed and they could no longer remember having participated in the New Left and its several manias and fanaticisms...the kind of people who, in their respectable middle age today, would indignantly deny having ever been anything but ardent liberals. – Paul Berman, Power and the Idealists*

Updated: 22 September 2009

Edward Friedman's views on China's revolution have evolved from an enthusiastic embrace in his early decades to a disgusted rejection in his mature years. More recently, Friedman has sought to reclaim a positive view of revolutions, while continuing his critique of the China case. Friedman's views thus track the full arc of normative views on revolutions: radical, conservative, and liberal. Reading Friedman on China's revolution is to be reminded of how normative ideas and political realities are in constant conversation. It is also to be reminded of why the study of revolution cannot evade the case of China.

### The Radical Phase: 1965 to 1977

Friedman began his intellectual life as an admirer of the communist revolution in China. Like many in the Western academy, he saw Asian revolutions as progressive strikes against Western imperialism and exploitation.

In 1966, Friedman wrote that Mao's Hundred Flowers campaign of 1956 showed that China's revolution was "an attempt to realize a liberalizing vision connecting increased freedoms with rapid progress, the vision of the united front, the promise of the new democracy."<sup>1</sup> The CCP had won legitimacy through "humane reforms creating the basis of a better society". Decision-making was

characterized by “what one might even describe as a large measure of liberal democracy.” The CCP had become “the group in which the conflicts in Chinese society are momentarily resolved.” The contrast to the repressive the Soviet regimes of Eastern Europe could not be greater.

In 1970, based on his dissertation, he notes that “No stable government able to continue and speed up the task of national regeneration was established in Peking until 1949.”<sup>2</sup> This of course is the theme of his fabulous first book<sup>3</sup>, the story of how one revolution failed to gain power before another succeeded? The underlying assumption: revolutions deliver positive results. “One can hardly exaggerate the monumental human progress stemming from such egalitarian transformations”.<sup>4</sup> Revolutions like that in China afforded new opportunities for such soul-stirring outcomes as “an essentially new socialization of children”, the elimination of “singular religious devotion”, “more suprasexual roles”, and “tendencies away from the big family ideal.” Revolutions is “the enhanced humanity of the heroic transcendence”. It is also “a vigorous red flower which sprouts from the blood of countless young people.”

The same year, Friedman debates the question of whether Mao or Che is more revolutionary in the fight against U.S. imperialism and capitalist exploitation. He sides with Mao -- “a populist with faith in the people” whose troops “are at one with the people.”<sup>5</sup> He recognizes that “Revolution is usually a long, tortuous, bloody struggle.” But it is a worthwhile one, the only question is how to succeed: “to end the death-like conditions that make the risks of revolution preferable to the inhumanity of the status quo.”

In 1975, he notes that the CCP’s broad alliance “became more than the voice of a class or an economic segment. It became, more than most revolutions, the hopes and claims of a people.”<sup>6</sup>

In his most explicit praise of Mao, in 1977, Friedman called Mao a great 20<sup>th</sup> century innovator and wrote that “Mao was almost invariably responding in a uniquely creative and profoundly ethical way to deep political crises.”<sup>7</sup>

The same year, he is engaged in another fellow-travelers debate: was Mao’s interpretation of Marx correct? It was unnecessary to prove the obvious point, Friedman notes, that “Mao actually was in no way a Stalinist” because only the latter murdered millions and created a massive gulag archipelago. Mao by contrast was “a great revolutionary innovator and creator, perhaps the greatest ever”.<sup>8</sup> Mao’s factory workers enjoyed “true gains of the revolution”. There was a danger of a reactionary Bonapartist takeover of Mao’s revolutionary project. Millions had died in the Great Leap Famine due to “the vicious U.S. embargo”.

I do not want to exaggerate Friedman’s flirtation with Maoism. Paul Hollander perhaps unfairly cited Friedman and the above 1977 quote in his 1981 book *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978*, a citation then repeated in Arthur Schlesinger’s *New York Times* review of the book in 1981.<sup>9</sup> The term “fellow traveler” is a grave aspersion. It groups together fervent Maoists with those like Friedman who maintained a critical approach. Friedman never lost his independence, never fell into a group-think, and remained skeptical of bold claims made on behalf of the CCP.

Nonetheless, most everyone tilted left in this period and so did Friedman. In part this was due to sincere normative attractions to revolution as a progressive endeavor – something that, as we shall see, Friedman has recently reiterated. In part, it was because of a lack of information. The extent to which Mao was creating political crises, rather than responding to them, and the awful extent of inhumanity of the Chinese revolution was unknown, while exaggerated claims of its achievements were legion.

### The Conservative Phase: 1981 to 2000

Deng's gentle critique of Mao in 1981 opened up the floodgates for a critical reappraisal of the revolution by Western progressives. Friedman too goes through his "burning love letters" phase here. The echoes of Edmund Burke are strong: China's revolution has torn up the precious social fabric on which all decency, progress, and happiness depends. Mao is no longer a revolutionary but a tyrant, and revolution is not a good idea but a bad one. The virulence of Friedman's criticism is a different from the melancholy tone of Burke however, for the latter was never smitten by the idea of revolution.

Friedman will write in this period that "many good people" were once duped into a belief in Mao but "of course, these scholars, all being independent, critically minded professionals of absolute integrity, revised their views in later works when new information became available".<sup>10</sup> Friedman, being all those things, does exactly that.

The seminal eye-opening piece comes in 1981, which opens with the memorable words: "How little we knew about China!"<sup>11</sup>. Now Friedman is suspicious of *all* claims about the revolution: critics are now given the benefit of the doubt. "We suddenly seem smarter because in fact the real China is no longer so hidden by gaudy, phony technicolor." Serf-like work assignments, secret police, privilege, and corruption are now the order of the day. The emphasis is on the many ways that the revolution destroyed the fabric of society. The "tranquil home neighborhood" has been replaced with "mistrust, anger, locked doors, vengeance, and criminality." The hurt he expresses for the "innocent victims" -- who expressed support for the revolution "not because they were liars" but because they were either ignorant or afraid -- is personal. In the days of Mao, progressive Western intellectuals had felt "one had to choose sides" and

therefore they chose “the cause of the liberating left.” The agenda now is to understand “how the dream becomes a nightmare.”

By 1983, Friedman is accusing Mao of having practiced “a unified dogma of continuous revolution, unbalanced growth and endless class struggle, a dogma beyond the reach of reason or mere empirical data”<sup>12</sup>. By trying to apply modern physics to revolutions, “Mao would...rip and shred Chinese society, Chinese humanity.” China’s revolution is no longer rooted in the hopes and claims of a people but rather in “the self-interested soil of Party dictatorship.”

In 1987, it is now clear that Mao was a murderous tyrant and that the Chinese revolution has taken China further from, not closer to, the goals of those progressives who supported the revolution, namely “a secure and dignified place in the world” and “an advanced prosperity that permits a humane level of existence.”<sup>13</sup> To understand the failures of the revolution, one need only consider the “poison in the pudding...[of] communist fundamentalism”. No good can ever come of communist revolutions. Mao is “an absolute failure.”

Again in 1987, citing new works on the rural misery created by Mao and the revolution, and fully informed by the fieldwork that formed the basis for his two landmark works on rural China with Pickowicz and Selden<sup>14</sup>, Friedman strikes a decidedly Burkean tone.<sup>15</sup> The “quest for a singular revolutionary liberation” makes real progress impossible. It was not just the economic and political disasters wrought by the revolution – something that left-progressives had now admitted. No less damaging was the destruction of “lineage, religion, and tradition – the sacred world of popular culture”. Friedman no longer believes that such obstructions should be bull-dozed in the name of social progress.

In the 1990s, Friedman’s personal journey from radical admirer of China’s revolution to a conservative critic is moderated by a new concern: democracy.

There is now a clear, progressive *alternative* to revolution and it is (bourgeois) liberal democracy, the preferred route to modernization even for Leninist states.<sup>16</sup> The revival of traditional Chinese culture has generated a chauvinist nationalism. Maybe the radical revolutionaries had a point. But the way to embrace progressive change is to advocate democracy, not revolution.

Friedman, discovers the richness of the China-India comparison in this decade to emphasize the value of gradual, democratic modernization like that of India compared to the violent, revolutionary path of China<sup>17</sup> (with obvious implications for Barrington Moore's moral equivalence of the two<sup>18</sup>). The "painful gradualness" of democracy is more humane and enduring than anything ever delivered by revolution and dictatorship.<sup>19</sup>

### The Liberal Phase (Since 2000)

Completing the transition from conservative to liberal critic of China's revolution, Friedman has in recent years sought to salvage revolution from the clutches of empirical scholarship. In 1990, he had sought to rescue the good name of revolution from the clutches of Maoism.<sup>20</sup> Now he wants to reclaim revolution from *all* phases of the Chinese revolution, and from the human disaster that has characterized revolutions throughout history.

The gradual democracy that was still consistent with conservatism, and which could be reasonably hoped for after the events of 1989, is now unlikely. Pessimism about a gradual democratization seeps into Friedman's writings, and with it the hopes for progressive change.<sup>21</sup> Friedman now returns to the possibility and need for more dramatic democratic change -- "democratic revolutions" . This is the way to reclaim his earlier revolutionary self. The CCP has now become just another corrupt propertied elite and it is not to be wondered that China's disadvantaged might seek, to use his 1970 phrase "to end

the death-like conditions that make the risks of revolution preferable to the inhumanity of the status quo." Friedman has, in other words, returned to his radical origins, appropriately clothed in a post-1989 liberalism.

His 2009 essay "Rethinking Revolution"<sup>22</sup> is a tribute both to Friedman's complexity as a thinker, as well as to the precarious nature of seeking to embrace revolution as a normative ideal. Friedman departs from conventional process-based definitions of revolution – the sudden, violent overthrows of existing political and socio-economic orders and their replacement by orders *claiming* a more egalitarian and transformative nature – and seeks to use an outcome-based definition -- "the invention of the means to defeat injustice and enslavement in all its forms" or "a project of freedom, justice and dignity. " In other words, revolutions are only revolutions when good things result – "degrading outcomes hardly seem revolutionary." And, for good measure, when good things result from gradual or piecemeal change, that too is revolution.

Thus most every political movement that we have hitherto described as revolutionary – the revolutions in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Iran, Nicaragua, Russia, France – is now reclassified as non-revolutionary. And achievements previously considered the result not of revolution but of prudent gradualism – empowering women politically, slow democratic transformations such as those in Taiwan or Indonesia, settling indigenous people's claims, raising environmental consciousness, finding the cure for diseases -- are also described as revolutions. Revolution takes the credit for everything. Conservatism can take the credit for nothing. In particular, gradual, continuist, and steady democratic transformation – that epitome of conservative political ideals of reform – is now claimed by the modern liberal – a radical in a three-piece suit.

Friedman's current thinking thus reflects the unresolved tension between his earlier radical self and his instinctual conservatism in the face of the

degrading outcomes of the Chinese revolution. The liberal middle ground is an attempt to remain progressive and committed to universal ideas of “justice” and “dignity” without accepting the fanaticism of revolutionary processes.

Unbearable conditions give rise to revolutionary movements promising humanity, decency, welfare, and freedom. When they seize power, they attract initial gusts of enthusiasm from all but the most peevish observers. Once the crimes of the regime are revealed, the peevish are exonerated. Attention now shifts conservatively to the madness of it all. A certain time passes. Nostalgia for the revolution grows. Was there really nothing worthwhile? Haven't the reactionaries, the rich, and the nativists returned to power in the post-revolutionary stage? Now the liberal fudge emerges. Their hearts were in the right place. The idea of revolution must be reclaimed by progressives.

Edward Friedman's writings take us on an intellectual journey through the idea of revolution. China must stand at the center of all speculation about that ideal. We should be grateful to have had such a perceptive and critical observer sifting through the evidence for the better part of half a century.

### References

- Friedman, Edward. 1966. Power and Progress in Revolutionizing China. *Journal of Asia and African Studies* 1 (2):118-128.
- . 1970. Neither Mao, Nor Che: The Practical Evolution of Revolutionary Theory. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12 (2):134-139.
- . 1970. Revolution or Just Another Bloody Cycle?: Swatow and the 1911 Revolution. *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (2):289-307.
- . 1974. *Backward toward revolution; the Chinese Revolutionary Party, Michigan studies on China*. Berkeley,: University of California Press.
- . 1975. "The peasant war in Germany" by Friedrich Engels—125 years after *Journal of Peasant Studies* 3 (1):117-123.
- . 1977. Mao Tse-tung, Twentieth Century Innovator. In *Mao Tse-tung in the Scales of History*, edited by D. Wilson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1977. Marx and Mao and..." *Modern China* 3 (4):419-426.
- . 1981. Learning About China After the Revolution...for the First Time. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 13 (2):41-43.



- . 1983. Einstein and Mao: Metaphors of Revolution. *China Quarterly* 93 (1):51-75.
- . 1987. The Flaws and Failures of Mao Zedong's Communist Fundamentalism. *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 18 (2):147-154.
- . 1987. Maoism and the Liberation of the Poor. *World Politics* 39 (3):408-428.
- . 1990. Was Mao Tse-tung a Revolutionary? *Issues and Studies* 26 (8):12-42.
- . 1991. Permanent Technological Revolution and China's Tortuous Path to Democratizing Leninism. In *Reform and Reaction in Post-Mao China*, edited by R. Baum. New York: Routledge.
- . 1998. Development, Revolution, Democracy, and Dictatorship: China Versus India? In *Democracy, Revolution, and History*, edited by T. Skocpol. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 1999. The Painful Gradualness of Democratization. In *Democracy and Its Limits*, edited by H. Handelman and M. Tessler: University of Norte Dame Press.
- . 2004. Peasant Revolution in China? *China Review International* 11 (2):498-504.
- . 2005. Why Democracy Matters. In *Asia's Giants: Comparing China and India*, edited by E. Friedman and B. Gilley. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2009. Rethinking Revolution. In *The Past and Future of Revolution*, edited by D. Postel.
- Friedman, Edward, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden. 1991. *Chinese village, socialist state*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 2005. *Revolution, resistance, and reform in village China*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> The quotes here are: (Friedman 1966: 128, 122, 123, 127)

<sup>2</sup> (Friedman 1970: 289)

<sup>3</sup> (Friedman 1974)

<sup>4</sup> (Friedman 1974: 220,220,220,209)

<sup>5</sup> (Friedman 1970: 136, 139)

<sup>6</sup>(Friedman 1975: 122)

<sup>7</sup> (Friedman 1977: 300)

<sup>8</sup> (Friedman 1977: 420, 422, 424)

<sup>9</sup> "Through Red-Colored Glasses", New York Times Book Review, 11 October 1981.

<sup>10</sup> (Friedman 1987: 147, fn.1 p. 148)

<sup>11</sup> (Friedman 1981: 41, 41, 42, 42, 43)

<sup>12</sup> (Friedman 1983: 52, 63, 75)

<sup>13</sup> (Friedman 1987: 149, 149, 151)

<sup>14</sup> (Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden 1991);(Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden 2005)

<sup>15</sup> (Friedman 1987: 428, 426)

---

<sup>16</sup> (Friedman 1991)

<sup>17</sup> (Friedman 2005)

<sup>18</sup> (Friedman 1998)

<sup>19</sup> (Friedman 1999)

<sup>20</sup> (Friedman 1990)

<sup>21</sup> (Friedman 2004)

<sup>22</sup> (Friedman 2009)