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The continuing relevance of Daoist anarchism

As noted in the prelude to this book, at least two types of critics would object to the whole concept of Daoist anarchism, including some students and/or practitioners of Daoist spiritual beliefs and physical practices and some scholars of and/or sympathizers with anarchism. The former type of critic might point to the lack of survival of Daoist anarchism within China itself, while the latter type would object to universalizing anarchism beyond the “official” anarchist movement of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, perhaps revived in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The latter might especially object to the this work’s application of the “neo-anarchist” label to Chinese dissidents in the previous two chapters since they take pains to deny they are anarchist and for the most part are far from advocating anarchist solutions. A third type of critic would object to the possible “reification” of the state contained in this book, denying that there is any real unified body at all that could be defined as having its own interests, that in fact states are made of up many different levels and types of institutions that often work at cross purposes. This brief conclusion tries to answer all such objections by pointing out how the recent, highly ironic simultaneous revival of Maoism and Confucianism in the PRC might open up space for an anarchist critique, perhaps harking back to radical Daoist themes and language.

What the nearly simultaneous revival of Maoist and Confucian themes in the PRC may show is that for all their different and, at times, conflicting interests and perspectives, different state elites have a common interest against their own subjects in limiting checks on their authority. The ancient Daoist anarchists criticized both the Confucians who called for humane rule through leaders’ supposedly moral example and education in traditional rituals, and the Legalists who called for implementing harsh system of rewards and punishments, knowing full well the differences between the two schools but finding them to be two sides of the same coin. Likewise, in Chapter 7 we saw how modern Chinese Leninist state elites could be usefully

analyzed as being divided along three basic lines of different social control mechanisms yet have a common interest in maintaining state hegemony over their subjects. Certainly there may be more divisions and differences among ruling elites in non-Leninist states and more ability of sections of such elites to go outside the state elite to seek a popular base, but this potential ability does not negate the common interest of all state elites in at least attempting to maintain and expand their autonomy from their subjects.

This book argues that anarchists are at their strongest when they focus on state autonomy as the heart of the anarchist critique and weakest when they make compromises with states in order to pursue other, seemingly more central goals, such as reducing economic inequality or increasing chances for individual intellectual critics to survive and prosper within certain political regimes. To pick just three examples of such acquiescence in state power that we have seen in earlier chapters, some ancient Daoists reinterpreted Daoist principles to allow them to accept taking office, some early twentieth-century Chinese anarchists defended participating in the Nationalist regime because it would allow them to continue work-study experiments whose goal was to end the division between mental and physical labor, and some official PRC leaders during the Cultural Revolution, including Mao himself, limited their new class critique in order to preserve space for seemingly radical officials within the state elite to pursue policies allegedly aimed at keeping revolutionary egalitarian policies alive. In all these cases the state interests of such compromising elites in the end overwhelmed their radical critiques, and the differences they had with other state elites in the end paled in comparison with the gaps between them and their subjects. To the extent that they maintained aspects of their radical critique, they were easily overwhelmed by their state elite rivals and perished anyway despite their compromises with state power.

There are other individuals in China, on the other hand, who kept to what this book argues is the heart of the anarchist critique, the focus on the constant danger of the state ruling for itself and gaining autonomy from its subjects—the idea that most distinguishes anarchism from other political ideologies. Far from having an unchallenged authoritarian political culture, we have seen that individuals raising the basic anarchist critique have popped up time and time again in Chinese history.

The current political moment in China would seem to be the least hospitable for anyone attempting an anarchist critique of the state to emerge. After all, not only are political dissidents being harassed, jailed, and tortured, even their lawyers and family members are being punished to the point that they are afraid to speak out. Almost all talk of meaningful political reform and democratization has been forbidden in the buildup to the 2012 Communist Party Congress, and any revival of the neo-anarchist themes of the extra and inner Party democrats of the 1980s seems highly unlikely any time in the near future. Nevertheless, these harsh actions against dissent would also indicate that the regime is running scared, to say the least.

In a great irony, given their past antipathy toward each other, the regime has allowed two supposedly heterodox and seemingly opposite types of themes to be raised. On the one hand, some figures, notably the Chongqing Party boss Bo Xilai, have revived neo-Maoist egalitarian rhetoric in propaganda initiatives, while on the other hand the regime has revived Confucian language of benevolent and harmonious rule at the same time as it retreats from market-based reform and insists on protecting state-owned industry and local government investments at the expense of its subjects' economic well-being.

The Confucian revival includes not just setting up "Confucius institutes" around the world to promote the study of Chinese language and culture nor the temporary setting up of a statue of Confucius in front of the National History Museum alongside Tiananmen square, but the official stress on building a "harmonious society" as a key goal of the regime, a goal which includes some stress at least on the supposed positive values to be found in Confucian thought.¹ At the same time, officials such as Bo Xilai are pushing for a revival of Mao-era songs and slogans and a stress on supposed revolutionary purity as a way to ensure social control.² The two trends are often at odds, of course. For example, some Maoists who abhor the stress on Confucianism (perhaps reflecting the Cultural Revolution campaign to denounce Confucius that we referred to in Chapter 9) succeeded in getting the Confucius statue removed, while would-be neo-Confucians would note the violent and far from harmonious class conflict and struggle at the heart of real Maoism. In fact the regime seems to have accepted more than a little bit of each side's rhetoric in claiming to favor more balanced growth of interior and coastal regions of China as the key way of building a harmonious society. In the end, of course, talk of harmony cannot even thinly disguise the real institutionalized violence still going on in China, as not just political dissidents but even those protesting poor earthquake relief and public school building standards or those who try to get redress for purely economic grievances such as failure to pay promised back wages of laid off workers at state-owned enterprises or promised reimbursements for local governments' seizure of land, are very often all jailed, sent to mental treatment centers, or otherwise forcibly "disappeared." Just as in nearly all other periods of Chinese history, revived official stress on Confucian themes coincides with increased state repression, while emphasis on Maoist egalitarian and revolutionary rhetoric coincides with increased inequality between Party elites and the masses, recalling the radical Daoist sentiment that talk of morality and harmony only occur when such principles are absent. All these nervous and even paranoid attempts of state elites to adjust official ideology only serve to demonstrate the main point of Daoist anarchism: attempts to justify rule on the grounds of increasing benevolent treatment of people or achieving peaceful order only serve in reality to justify the power and wealth of state elites. Likewise the return to claims of Maoist revolutionary fervor and equality only come when in fact the fervor has long waned and

when most citizens know instinctively and through direct experience that state leaders are only out to preserve their own power. The time is perfect in China for the revival not of the relatively weak heterodox Marxist themes of alienation and the AMP, but, since no one really believes in Marxism any more, for things like Daoist study societies that might fit in with the call to learn from Chinese tradition, and even for radical Maoist ideas of true mass democratic checks on authority—this time without the stress on class violence and reliance on top leaders to define when direct democracy may be allowed. Undoubtedly any such attempts would eventually be repressed as well, but only at an ever growing cost for a regime that may be increasingly facing contradictions between its avowed goals of wealth for all and the reality of protecting vested state interests.

The basic anarchist idea has broken through the surface at widely spaced geographic places and many different points in time throughout history, almost always to suffer severe repression, but the fact that anarchists of all kinds have been a small minority of all thinkers or that anarchist interpretations of traditions as different as Christianity, Marxism, or Daoism are all almost equally put down as heretical or blasphemous can never extinguish the anarchist impulse as long as states inevitably seek to augment their own power and autonomy at the expense of their subjects. What Daoist anarchism would teach anyone trying to revive a radical critique of state autonomy is that people must constantly be on guard for making compromises with the state out of their own interests as intellectuals and political activists. Radical Daoist thinkers at their best (as in Bao Jingyan) and at their most contradictory (as in Wu Nengzi) may teach other anarchists the crucial difference between everything and nothing: without an underlying positive vision of society as always able to thrive on its own without a state, though certainly without trying to turn that vision into detailed blueprints to be imposed on anyone else, any anarchist or neo-anarchist critique can too easily degenerate into nihilism and/or compromises with state authority. If necessarily based on such an underlying positive vision, however, it is the constant and consistent critique of state autonomy that must come first and foremost for any true anarchist.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of the revival of Confucius and Confucian themes in the PRC, see John Dotson, "The Confucian Revival in the Propaganda Narratives of the Chinese Government."
- 2 For the recent revival of Maoist themes by Bo Xilai (who has most recently suffered a spectacular fall from power) and other PRC leaders at the same time as the revival of Confucianism, see Francis Fukuyama, with response by Jonathan Fenby, "China Is Looking to Its Dynastic Past to Shape Its Future."