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Re-reading Chalmers Johnson

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Chalmers Johnson, co-founder and president of the Japan Policy Research Institute at the University of San Francisco and long-time professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley and University of California, San Diego, died on November 20, 2010. (Here are several notices — The Atlantic, the New York Times, and The Nation.) In the past ten years or so Johnson has become widely known for his critical books about American empire (Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire (2004), The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic (2005), Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic (2008), and Dismantling the Empire: America’s Last Best Hope (2010)). The bulk of his career, however, was devoted to the study of China and Japan, and this posting examines one of his most notable contributions to these areas.

His earliest contribution to China studies was his 1962 book, Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945. The core of the book was written as a Ph.D. dissertation at Berkeley, making use of archives of secret Japanese wartime materials collected by Robert Scalapino. (Johnson describes the origins of the book in "Peasant Nationalism Revisited: The Biography of a Book.") The book was one of the early efforts to provide a more systematic explanation of the success of the Chinese Communist Party in mobilizing mass support during the Anti-Japanese War. The book became one of the linchpins of later debates about the Chinese Revolution. As a political scientist, Johnson was mindful of the inherent unlikelihood of a successful revolution anywhere, and this seemed particularly true in China in the 1920s and 1930s. Large-scale mobilization is inherently difficult to sustain, and local discontents rarely escalate to national scale. (Lucien Bianco made this point about China, writing in Peasants Without the Party: Grass-Roots Movements in Twentieth-Century China that "The essential difference between chronic peasant agitation and revolutionary action is that the latter is deliberately offensive in nature, whereas the former resembles the defensive reaction of a beleaguered organism. If peasant agitation was chronic ... , it was because the occasions for such conduct were endemic in rural China" (4).)

Johnson’s book is based almost entirely on secret Japanese archives, and Johnson takes special care to attempt to validate these sources as legitimate indications of the nature of events in China during these war years. He believed that the fact that these documents were “secret” gave them an evidentiary status they would lack if they had been produced for the sake of propaganda or political influence by the army or other officials; but rather than representing an effort to spin events in one direction or another, they were intended as “realistic appraisal of military and political developments in China by Japanese leaders” (x). So Johnson is emphatic in arguing that these secret wartime archives provide a valid window of knowledge into both Japanese and Chinese strategies and actions.

So what structural or institutional factor was present in China that permitted mass mobilization by the Communist Party during this period? According to Johnson, it was nationalist identity and a patriotic desire to resist the Japanese invaders on the part of millions of rural Chinese people. The Communist Party was able to offer itself as the most effective force available to achieve the patriotic goals of
defeating the Japanese and restoring China’s peace and security. The central thesis of the book, then, and the element that generated the greatest controversy, is Johnson’s view that the Communists succeeded in the crucial period because they mobilized a mass following around patriotic resistance to the Japanese invaders.

On the basis of a study of wartime resistance in China, the view advanced here is that the Communist rise to power in China should be understood as a species of nationalist movement. (ix)

It is the thesis of this study that the rise to power of the CCP and YCP [Yugoslav Communist Party] in collaboration with the peasantry of the two countries can best be understood as a species of nationalism. (19-20)

Johnson’s definition of nationalism is what he labels “functionalist”. What he means by this, however, is not a Mertonian “structural-functional” analysis; rather, it is closer to a behavioral-causal analysis. “This study employs a functional definition of nationalism — in other words, one which identifies specific physical pressures that by acting upon given political environments give rise to nationalist movements” (ix). He draws largely from Karl Deutsch’s Nationalism And Social Communication: An Inquiry Into The Foundations of Nationality (1953) in laying out a definition of nationalism and mass mobilization. Johnson identifies social mobilization of the masses around a national myth as the heart of modern nationalism. This is what nationalism is, according to Johnson; and the causes that brought it about in China were Japanese invasion and subsequent harsh treatment of rural people, and skillful mobilization of the countryside by Communist political officers in enhancing a sense of shared cause.

In essence, the Party is seen as the leader of a war-energized, radical nationalist movement.... The Chinese masses, the peasants, were unified and politicized as a concomitant of the drastic restructuring of Chinese life that accompanied the Japanese conquest of north and east China.... This wartime awakening became the basis for a new order in China following Japan’s collapse. (ix-x)

Since patriotic nationalist mobilization is primary, then radical mobilization around peasant interests must be secondary. So Johnson is particularly concerned to refute the idea that it was economic issues and class exploitation that led to peasant support. (Mark Selden’s The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China (1971) was a central advocate of this position.) Johnson expressly rejects the idea that the Communist Party’s overall strategy depended on a class appeal to poor peasants during these years. One key argument to this conclusion is the markedly different fortunes of the Communist movement in China in the 1920s versus the wartime years. The Communist movement in the 1920s was plainly based on a mobilization strategy around revolution and social change, and, according to Johnson, it failed in achieving mass following. The Japanese invasion and subsequent brutality in attempting to govern the rural areas, however, coincided with a massive increase in the movement’s following in the countryside; and, according to Johnson, the mobilization rhetoric of Communist leaders of that period was about patriotic self-defense rather than social upheaval.

Although the Communists were in effective control of various small enclaves in the Chinese countryside from 1927 on, their painful efforts during that period to set up rural “soviets” were incomparably less successful than their activities during the blackest period of the Sino-Japanese War. (1)

During the Anti-Japanese War period the Party abandoned the radical land program altogether and carried out a policy designed to create maximum unity for national defense. All plans for agrarian reform were abrogated during the war while a mild policy of rent reduction and general rationalization of debts was carried out. (19)

Later historians have largely taken a critical view of this central theoretical argument. Some historians — notably Donald Gillin in a 1964 review in the Journal of Asian Studies — have argued compellingly that Johnson mis-estimates the importance and persistence of class strategies during the period. (Johnson had harsh words for Gillin in his retrospective article in China Quarterly.)

Probably the most consistent line of response to Johnson’s peasant nationalism theory in the intervening years is that it is too comprehensive and couched at too high a level. The concept of
nationalism paints too broad a brush when applied to tens of millions of Chinese rural people in many different settings. Conditions varied across the many base areas where the CCP held power, and subsequent historians have concluded that patriotism and village self-defense played a highly variable role across China. As Odoric Wou writes, "In a recent article, Tony Saich called our attention to the fact that the Chinese Communist revolution was a series of local revolutions.‘ Unless we go deeply into the localities, carefully examining the social structure and networks, patterns of elite dominance, and local politics of these communities, it is not likely that we can obtain a clear picture of the actual process and dynamics of the Communist base building and the reasons behind the success in its revolutionary mobilization."

Subsequent historians such as Chen Yung-fa (Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937-1945), Odoric Wou (Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan), Pauline Keating (Two Revolutions: Village Reconstruction and the Cooperative Movement in Northern Shaanxi, 1934-1945), and others have argued instead for a more differentiated and local approach to the success of Communist mobilization in the 1937-1949 period. Tony Saich summarizes much of this consensus in these terms:

Writing on the Chinese revolution has always attracted proponents of the "Grand Theory." This is not surprising, for the revolution itself was on a grand scale in both time and space. New research has made the field more hesitant to put forward bold ideas to encapsulate the majestic sweep of the revolution and has contented itself with compiling details and hammering away at previously held explanations. The debate between those who argued that the Communist success was primarily a result of its nationalist appeal in the anti-Japanese war and those who stressed the CCP’s capacity to mobilize the peasantry through its socio-economic programmes, while stimulating, has been left behind by recent research. There is now an infinitely more complex picture of the Party’s policies and its relationship to the different social forces in China than was possible previously.

Joseph Esherick puts some of the current understanding of the Chinese Revolution into a series of theses, and several are particularly important in the context of Chalmers Johnson’s argument:

1. The triumph of the CCP was the product of a series of contingent events.
2. The revolution was produced by a conjuncture of domestic and global historical processes among which the worldwide depression and Japanese imperialism were particularly important.
3. The larger structures of China’s state and society did not make revolution inevitable, but they imposed significant constraints on the agents of revolution and counterrevolution.
4. The CCP was a social construct of considerable internal complexity, not an organizational weapon of obedient apparatchiks commanded by the Party Center.

So the nationalist hypothesis has not prevailed as a comprehensive explanation of Communist success at mobilizing revolution. In fact, even the project of providing a single theoretical framework for explaining this success has largely been abandoned.

What is not often recognized, however, is the fact that Peasant Nationalism also contains a substantial empirical historical core that is valuable whether or not we accept the overriding nationalism interpretation.

First, Johnson provides a detailed accounting of Japanese military-political strategies and failures that could not have been conceived of without Johnson’s deep and extended immersion in the Japanese secret archives. He makes sense of the very complex and confusing story of Japanese invasion and occupation of north and east China, with multiple military commands and a difference of opinion within high leadership about the best way of defeating Communist opposition.

Equally interesting and important is his lengthy narrative of Communist military and political strategies during the period. This narrative takes up almost half the book, and it is still one of the most detailed and clear expositions of this complex story. (There is also some detail on Guomindang strategies as
In short, Johnson’s narrative of military and political developments of the Anti-Japanese War is an important permanent contribution.

So we might say that the theoretical framework of the book has run its course; whereas the empirical and historical findings continue to be an important source of knowledge about the period. And in an ironic way, this suits rather well Johnson’s later polemics against rational choice theory and his insistence on the primacy of close, factual research in area studies. (These arguments are found in “A Disaster in the Making: Rational Choice and Asian Studies” (with E.B. Keehn) and “Preconception vs. Observation, or the Contributions of Rational Choice Theory and Area Studies to Contemporary Political Science.”) Here is how he characterizes these issues in a 2005 interview with Hidenori Ijiri:

What we mean by area studies, however, it seems to me, is simply empirical, inductive research about other cultures. Not research that is theoretically driven but driven by knowledge of the culture and a proficiency in the language. In that sense, it is more in the classical anthropological mode of trying to understand a culture that is alien to you by personally, inductively getting inside of it, reading the main classics in the field, being able to talk with fellow scholars in the area, and in some cases, doing field research in a particular topic for which your research may very well have theoretical implications. But such research was not driven by a theoretical issue at first.

The more serious challenge to area studies — one that I have been deeply involved in fighting against and that has affected above all my own field of political science — is the influence of mathematical economics. The charge is that area studies are un-theoretical, that they do not partake of grand systems of theory. Moreover it is argued that the amount of time spent learning a language like Chinese or Japanese is a waste of time. According to this fad, what a good scholar needs is an education in abstract theory. If he understands theory he can study any place.... Today, political science departments have very elaborate models, often mathematical, and formal ones from which you can supposedly deduce outcomes.... A political science Ph.D. today has been increasingly defined in terms of an ability in rational choice theory, game theory, the manipulation of economic models, and the formal creation of models in which the mode of analysis is deductive rather than inductive.

The central point here is that theory can only be a support for concrete historical and social research, not a substitute. But this is no less true in the study of Communist mobilization in China than in
Japanese technology policies. And perhaps there is a larger point here as well: Chalmers Johnson did a great job of "area studies" in his *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945*, in spite of his adherence to the single theoretical framework of nationalism.

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