

GLOBAL MAOISM AND THE LONG 1960s AS A TURNING POINT IN ASIAN STUDIES: THE COMMITTEE OF CONCERNED ASIAN SCHOLARS IN RETROSPECTIVE

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*The End of Concern. Maoist China, Activism and Asian Studies*, Fabio Lanza - Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017, XII-262

In the last few years, interest in global Maoism and its impact on the West in the 1960s and 1970s has been one facet of the current rewriting of Cold War history after the «global turn» in historical studies. The multiple histories of the Maoist movement outside China have attracted increasing attention, as they were a significant part of the wider change in political culture and social values in that pivotal age. Nevertheless, most works have assumed that, outside China, intellectual and political interest in Maoism had little to do with a thorough understanding of China and its Revolution. One example is Richard Wolin's *The Wind of the East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), where the author analysed the appropriation, use – and misuse – of Maoist ideology by French intellectuals. In Wolin's view, at any rate, there was an important legacy of Maoism in France, namely the transformation of intellectuals' identities and attitudes, who developed a new sensibility towards social justice and human rights.

Convinced that no global analysis of the 1960s and the 1970s could ignore the role of Maoist China, Fabio Lanza addresses the intellectual and political radicalism of those years from a different perspective. His *The End of Concern* is a rich and detailed narrative of the history of an organisation of radical young scholars and Asian studies students in the United States, the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS). This organisation was active from 1968 to 1979 and published the influential journal, *The Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. Its activities developed alongside the Vietnam war, the Cultural Revolution in China, the rapprochement between the United States and the People's Republic of China ending with the shift in Chinese economic policy and the demise of Maoism in the early 1980s. During its lifetime, the CCAS was an important laboratory of ideas in American academia. Contesting previous American scholarship on Asia – and especially on the Chinese Revolution – it sought a different intellectual and scholarly approach. The CCAS' attitude was characterised by the implicit rejection of any orientalist or 'othering' posture and by the belief that Asian and especially the Chinese Revolution (the core of the CCAS scholars' political and academic interests) had a global relevance and should be taken seriously. With their intellectually self-critical attitude,

these scholars were also destined to reshape their field and, according to Lanza, even anticipated several theoretically-grounded issues in Asian studies which emerged in the 1990s.

Lanza's book includes an introduction, four chapters and an epilogue. In the introduction, 'Of Ends and Beginnings; or When China Existed' the author explains the genesis and concerns of his research work. He defines his book as 'an investigation into that political and intellectual break' (p. 2) which made him, as a young Italian student discovering the CCAS *Bulletin* in 1987, puzzled by 'the collective statement of a position of «concern» inscribed in the *Bulletin's* title' (p.2). The gap between his own experience of Asian studies in the late 1980s and the political commitment of CCAS scholars stimulated him to better understand what made the militancy in the CCAS possible, how it was practised and how it came to its end. But his goal has also been an effort to assess the CCAS' historical importance and its political and intellectual legacy.

In the first chapter 'America's Asia: Discovering China, Rethinking Knowledge', the author has reconstructed the origin of the CCAS, placing it in the contestation against American foreign policy in Asia, and especially the Vietnam War, and emphasizing how this political position generated strong disagreement with previous scholarship, especially regarding the pretence of political neutrality and scientific objectivity of older scholars (whose position was historically connected to the heavy costs paid by Asian scholars in the United States due to McCarthyism in the early 1950s). Attacks especially addressed the intellectual hegemony determined by modernisation theory as the only rational approach to understand (and foresee) modern Asian pasts and present times. At the same time, these debates implied a novel self-reflective attitude towards the problematic relationship between knowledge and power.

Chapter 2, 'To Be, or Not to Be, a Scholar: The Praxis of Radicalism in Academia' illustrates the tensions generated by the CCAS scholars' wish to satisfy the 'twin commitment to scholarship and activism' (p. 87), in light of the Chinese Cultural Revolution's and Maoist influence on the relationship between culture and politics. Lanza focuses his attention on some exemplary cases, as the debates about the foundation of a new academic journal, *Modern China*, that aspired to become the elective place for the publication of innovative academic research and whose agenda suggested, contrary to the belief of the CCAS, that professional scholarly work was something distinct from political activism. Quite interestingly, the debates also touched upon the still unresolved problem of the connection between scholarly specialisation (pursued by *Modern China*) and concern for global issues (pursued by the CCAS).

Chapter 3, 'Seeing and Understanding: China as the Place of Desire', analyses the impact the CCAS's trips to China in 1971 and 1972 had on the organisation's internal debates. The relation with China became a divisive

factor in the Committee, as it is testified in divergent memories of those events. But Lanza has also traced the contradictions and problems in the CCAS's contemporary discussions and debates.

Chapter 4, titled 'Facing Thermidor: Global Maoism at Its End', describes how the need to come to terms with the demise of Maoism in early 1980s in China put an end to the CCAS (disbanded in 1979) and the *Bulletin's* agenda, as the change in China weakened the concepts and notions (from class, to the meaning of culture in everyday politics) that formed the basis of political activism and novel scholarship in the previous decade.

Finally, the epilogue 'Area Redux: The Destinies of «China» in 1980s and 1990s' retraces the evolution (or better, 'devolution', as Lanza writes at p. 176) of 'China' as an object of specialised study, but also gives an outline of the theoretical paths opened by a younger generation of scholars, committed to Subaltern and Post-Colonial Studies. According to Lanza, these new orientations, though quite distinctive due to their stronger theoretical engagement, echo several assumptions and beliefs of the CCAS. Lastly, he offers a critical reflection on the debates about the place of theory in critical Asian Studies and beyond.

There are several points in Lanza's rich volume that deserve attention. First, by choosing to study a scholarly organisation dedicated to Asian studies, Lanza implicitly refutes the idea that 1960s and 1970s intellectual and political engagement with Maoism was evidence of Western intellectuals' tendency to project their own expectations and hopes onto China in the absence of any solid knowledge of it. Most young scholars involved in the CCAS were attracted to China for political reasons, and were experts in Asian history, languages and culture; several among them became important academicians in contemporary Chinese studies. Secondly, Lanza argues that the CCAS's will to develop a novel perspective towards Asia was initiated by the recognition that 'Asian people had become the subjects of their own politics, and by so doing they had stated the possibility of alternative solutions to issues not confined to Asia' (p. 35). Asian revolutionary experiences and ideas were not only taken seriously, but also recognised as a source for rethinking global modernity from a different perspective and envisioning alternative paths for development and progress. In this sense, the CCAS's radical intellectual challenge reshaped the relationship between academic work and political engagement. Lastly, he put the CCAS's history and intellectual enterprise, somehow distinctively tied to the American academic and political context, in a global framework, making continuous references to the coeval phenomenon of French Maoism, which provided theoretical grounds to fully analyse the issues debated in the *Bulletin*.

Lanza was at pains to contextualise the experience of the CCAS and the agenda of the *Bulletin* in time and space. His research was based on an accurate reading of the journal and the oral histories, personal memories and letters of the CCAS members. But his book is not just a detailed por-

trait of a generation or a historical narrative of an interesting time for Asian studies in the United States, nor is it mainly an intellectual enquiry into the genealogy of critical thinking in Asian studies. Reflecting the author's personal commitment, it is also a call to look at that past as an inspiration for a shift in perspective and attitude in the scholarly profession. As Lanza suggests in the epilogue, rescuing CCAS's experience from oblivion is a reminder of the political and intellectual possibilities open to all Asian scholars, in this age of relativism and 'academic impotence' (p.192), by thinking not *about*, but rather *with* the people they study.