Chapter Six

The Confucian Turn:
New Democracy and Ethical Hegemony

The Gramscian conception of moral-intellectual hegemony, as Althusser has argued, exemplified a noticeable trend among Comintern strategists to transform Marxism into an “ideology,” a “religion,” or a “faith.” Such a “religious” shift was nowhere manifested more clearly than in the Confucian turn within Chinese Marxism—a distinctive Marxist movement that emerged in the late 1930s during the course of the Chinese mass revolution and represented “a sophisticated effort” to mesh a mass democratic revolution with the Confucian ethical tradition. We start with the Chinese version of the paradox of hegemony.

The Problem of Hegemony in the Chinese Revolution

In the history of the 20th-century China, the Republican Revolution of 1911, with its pathological consequences, played a decisive role in shaping the general direction of historical development. The revolution toppled the ancient regime and resulted in the founding of the Republic of China,

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1 Central to Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, as Althusser and Balibar have pointed out, was the concern for “the practico-historical role” of what can be called the great “conceptions of the world,” “ideologies,” or “conceptions of religion” as articulated by Croce. All these terms refer to “theoretical formations which are capable of penetrating deep into men’s practical lives, and hence of inspiring and animating a whole historical epoch, by providing not only the ‘intellectuals’ but also and above all the ‘ordinary’ men, with both a general view of the course of events and at the same time rules of practical conduct” (Althusser and Balibar, Reading Capital, pp. 127–128).

which began with prominent attributes of liberalism—a free press; elected assemblies representing the local elites in many counties, prefectures, and provinces; and a national parliament organized by political parties. Post-revolutionary China, however, soon found itself caught up in a situation characterized by warlord strife, massive social and cultural disintegration, and “virtually incomprehensible chaos”—situation in which “all social classes were weak and none dominant.”

This Chinese version of peripheral liberal deformation explained why the liberal forces committed to parliamentary democracy in 1911 rapidly declined and were so readily overwhelmed by a variety of rival forces—cultural conservatives, anarchists, and, most importantly, radical forces premised on the mass movement and the agrarian revolution. The crisis of liberalism also explained the tremendous appeal that the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had for Chinese revolutionaries. As we have seen, the Leninist theory and practice of hegemony provided theoretical constructs and organizational devices for dealing with similar social crises that had occurred in Russia at the turn of the century.

However, what upheld the revolutionary strategies of the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP) in its formative period (1921–1927) was Lenin’s thesis on the national and colonial questions rather than his concept of hegemony. Until 1927, the principle of collaboration with the national bourgeoisie underlay the main thrust of Comintern instructions on the

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