CHAPTER TWELVE

POST-SOCIALISM REVISITED: REFLECTIONS ON “SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS,” ITS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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On this occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (also the thirtieth anniversary of the “reform and opening”), I would like to reflect on some issues I raised in an essay published two decades ago, “Postsocialism? Reflections on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” That essay was written in the midst of uncertainties concerning both socialism and the future of the PRC. The present is also a time of uncertainty, this time concerning the future of the capitalist world-system, as well as of the PRC (now an integral part of that system, but with continued insistence on a commitment to a socialist future). In 1989, socialism appeared as a residue of a fading past. China’s integration into a globalizing capitalist economy over the last two decades has demanded the erasure of the last residues of an earlier revolutionary socialism, making official claims to socialism less convincing than ever before. With “capitalism in ruins,” as a recent newspaper headline put it, those claims need to be reconsidered—especially for the historical experience that continues to inform them, and for the important part these past legacies may have to play in confronting challenges thrown up by the current crisis. Postsocialism offers a fruitful point of departure for such reconsideration.

I. Postsocialism, China, and Global Capitalism

“Postsocialism” was written in response to simplistic (and ideological) readings of reform and opening in the 1980s: predictions of imminent restoration of capitalism, on the one hand, and an unquestioning affirmation

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of socialism on the other hand. Opponents of socialism hailed Deng Xiaoping as a revolutionary leader who was prepared to return China to the capitalist path. Friends of Chinese socialism, ready to follow whatever line the leadership proposed, pretended that despite its repudiation of the revolutionary past, “reform and opening” did not imply any significant retreat from socialism.

In my reading at the time, reform and opening signaled the end of the revolution and reopened the question of socialism with regard both to goals and the strategy of achieving them. The years 1956–1978 (from the Eighth Party Congress to the end of the Cultural Revolution) witnessed a failed revolutionary attempt to secure the transition to socialism. In its economic and political policies, “reform and opening” was reminiscent of the policies of New Democracy that had brought the Communist Party to power, and guided the changes of the initial years of the People’s Republic. But those policies acquired a new significance in light of the abandoned hope for a revolutionary transition to socialism, and required reorientation in response to changes in the world situation. In short, they required a rethinking of socialism. The Cultural Revolution had been inspired in part by the rethinking of Soviet-style socialism. This time around, it was the Chinese revolutionary experience with socialism that required rethinking, reopening the whole question of socialism. Any reading of the situation in the 1980s had to take this rethinking as its point of departure.

“Postsocialism” represented a conceptual effort at grasping this situation. It was informed by:

...a historical situation where (a) socialism has lost its coherence as a metatheory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in its historical unfolding; partly because of a perceived need on the part of socialist states to articulate “actually existing socialism” to the demands of a capitalist world order, but also because of the vernacularization of socialism in its absorption into different national contexts; (b) the articulation of socialism to capitalism is conditioned by the structure of “actually existing socialism” in any particular context which is the historical premise of all such articulation; and (c) this premise stands guard over the process of articulation to ensure that it does not result in the restoration of capitalism. Postsocialism is of necessity also postcapitalist, not in the classical Marxist sense of socialism as a phase in historical development that is anterior to capitalism, but in the sense of a socialism that represents a response to the experience of capitalism and an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of capitalist development. Its own deficiencies and efforts to correct them by resorting to capitalist methods of development are conditioned by this awareness of the deficiencies of capitalism in history. Hence postsocialism seeks to avoid a return to capitalism, no matter how much it may draw