

BIG DEMOCRACY

The Cultural Revolution was a direct continuation of the Four Cleans movement, but using very different means. The main target remained the same—“those in authority in the party who are taking the capitalist road.” By this time, however, Mao was convinced that the party organization was incapable of mobilizing effective mass supervision of its own cadres and he decided to go around the party to directly mobilize students, workers, and peasants. He encouraged them to form their own autonomous “fighting groups,” fomenting a “rebel” movement that directed its fire at the party organization and pledged loyalty to no one but Mao.

In some ways, the Cultural Revolution recalled the *daming dafang* episode of the spring of 1957, the only other moment since 1949 when citizens were called upon to raise criticisms of party cadres outside of forums carefully managed by the party organization. In fact, after disappearing from the Chinese press for several years, the *daming dafang* slogan was resurrected during the Cultural Revolution, at which point it was amended to include two other expressions that had gained currency in 1957—*da bianlun* (大辩论 big debates) and *dazibao* (大字报 big character posters); together they became known as the “four big freedoms” (*si da ziyou* 四大自由).¹ A fifth was subsequently added to the list, *da chuanlian* (大串联 big linking up), which referred to the right of activists to travel and develop ties with groups in other areas. All five were associated with the term “Big Democracy” (*da minzhu* 大民主), which became indelibly connected with the violent upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. This term also had its roots in the earlier *daming dafang* movement, but it played a very different role during the two episodes.² To more fully understand the Cultural Revolution, it is necessary to go back and examine the origins and evolution this concept.

Evolution of Big Democracy

Mao first introduced his idea of Big Democracy in a speech delivered at a meeting of the Central Committee in late 1956. Big Democracy was, per Mao’s definition, mass political action outside of institutional channels—disturbances, rebellions, and revolutions. He cited as examples famous rebellions that had punctuated Chinese history, culminating in the revolution that brought the CCP to power. Although he began the speech by celebrating this history, his point was to warn

¹ The “four big freedoms” were formally affirmed in the revised PRC Constitution adopted by the Fourth National People’s Congress in 1975 (the first revision of the constitution since 1954). They were eliminated from the Constitution five years later, in 1980. See Leng and Chiu (1985, pp. 19 and 43).

² For a quantitative analysis of the evolution of the use of these terms in the Chinese press, see Andreas and Dong (2017).

his comrades that they should not think they were immune. “Big Democracy,” he told them, “can be used to deal with [Communist] bureaucrats too.”³ Mao brought up the recent uprising against the Communist regime in Hungary, which he characterized as a reactionary example of Big Democracy. He was clearly apprehensive that the CCP might face a similar popular upheaval. The typical response of a state leader to such a threat might be to suppress popular protests or to channel discontent into safe institutional venues. Mao instead suggested a more eccentric response—to welcome outbreaks of Big Democracy as the most effective antidote for the regime’s defects.

If Big Democracy is to be practiced again, I am for it. You are afraid of the masses taking to the streets, I am not, even if hundreds of thousands should do so... There are people who seem to think that now that state power has been won they can take it easy and act like tyrants (*hengxing badao* 橫行霸道). The masses will oppose such people, throw stones at them and strike them with their hoes, which I will welcome because I think it will serve them right. Moreover, sometimes the only way to solve a problem is to fight. The Communist Party needs to learn a lesson. Whenever students and workers take to the streets, you comrades should see this as a good thing.⁴

Mao noted that many of his comrades were afraid that opening the way for criticism from below would lead to chaos, but he warned them:

There are two ways to go, two ways to lead the country: One is to *fang* (放open up) and the other is to *shou* (收close down). Strike—just let the workers strike and let the students shut down classes. When there’s too much bureaucratism and you don’t allow Big Democracy and there’s no small democracy, not even a little bit of small, small democracy, then you will drive people to revolt (*bishang Liangshan* 逼上梁山)⁵

In 1956, however, Mao only invoked Big Democracy as a threat. His discussion of Big Democracy served as a prelude to announcing plans for the Party Rectification campaign that would take place the following year. After warning his comrades about the possible repercussions of failing to listen to the masses, he reassured them that the upcoming campaign would not “adopt a Big Democracy method of kicking up rough winds and heavy torrents; rather

³ Mao (1977, p. 324).

⁴ Mao (1977, p. 324-325).

⁵ Mao (1968a). This passage is from another version of Mao’s speech to the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, which was published unofficially during the Cultural Revolution. The phrase *bishang Liangshan*, which literally means to be forced to go to (join the rebels in) the Liangshan range, is taken from the classic novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳).

we must adopt the method of small democracy, of fine winds and gentle rains.”⁶ Mao’s message was not subtle—Big Democracy was lurking under the surface, ready to erupt if the party failed to rectify itself.

Big Democracy made a dramatic reappearance on November 3, 1966, this time as a call to action. The occasion was the sixth of the huge rallies in Tiananmen Square at which Mao greeted hundreds of thousands of young people who had joined the Red Guard movement. Mao did not address the crowd himself, but rather allowed Vice Chairman Lin Biao to issue the refrain that would immediately be taken up as a banner of rebellion against local authorities. “Big Democracy,” Lin declared, “is about the party having no fear of letting the broad masses use the forms of *daming*, *dafang*, *dazibao*, *da bianlun*, *da chuanlian* to criticize and supervise leading party and state organs and leaders at all levels.”⁷ The meaning of Big Democracy had become more or less synonymous with *daming dafang*, but with a more antagonistic edge. In Mao’s estimation, previous attempts to rectify the party had failed, and it was now time to try a more radical approach. The Cultural Revolution would be much less civil than the “fine winds and gentle rains” of the 1957 Party Rectification and much less orchestrated by the party organization than the Four Cleans movement. Mao’s earlier warnings about the bureaucratic tendencies of party cadres had by this time hardened into more concrete and incendiary rhetoric about capitalist roaders. With the offending party cadres now defined as class enemies, Big Democracy became an appropriate means of rectification.

While Mao intended to unleash the masses from the tutelage of party work teams, however, he still hoped to exercise personal control. A key passage in a joint editorial published in the party’s two leading organs, the *People’s Daily* and *Red Flag*, a few weeks after the November 3 rally expressed succinctly what Mao was hoping to accomplish: “Big Democracy means arousing hundreds of millions of people *under the command of Mao Zedong’s thought* to launch a general attack on the enemies of socialism and at the same time to criticize and supervise leading organs and leading cadres at all levels” (emphasis added).⁸

Mao always had an affinity for the type of disorderly politics—protests, strikes, and rebellions—that he associated with Big Democracy. He saw these as effective means by which the masses, marginalized by routine politics, were able to make their voices heard. He was distinctly less interested in formal institutions of political participation and representation and his lack of interest extended to the new structures created by the CCP regime as venues for institutionalized popular participation. For instance, he seldom mentioned the local people’s congresses, the trade unions, or the workplace-based staff and workers congresses. Mao was a man of movements, not institutions.⁹

⁶ Mao (1992, p. 190). This passage is from yet another version of Mao’s speech to the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, this one also published unofficially during the Cultural Revolution.

⁷ Lin cited in *People’s Daily* (1966).

⁸ *People’s Daily* and *Red Flag* (1967).

⁹ A number of scholars have used Weber’s concept of charismatic authority to describe Mao’s leadership style and particularly the role he played in the Cultural Revolution; see, for instance, Andreas (2007) and Dittmer (1987).

This personal disposition was reflected in the division of labor among top party leaders. While others—including Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping—were responsible for day-to-day governance, Mao was in charge of making sure the party was advancing in the direction prescribed by its revolutionary vision. He was responsible for initiating mass movements for this purpose and when they erupted, he was in charge. Mao's personal power ebbed during normal times, when institutions functioned according to established routines, and it was enhanced by the arrival of a new movement. Politics, as understood by Mao, followed the pattern of unity-struggle-unity, and he lived for the moments of struggle. "We Marxists," he declared in the 1956 speech in which he introduced the term Big Democracy, "hold that disequilibrium, contradiction, struggle and development are absolute, while equilibrium and rest are relative."¹⁰

It is evident that Mao did not have a step-by-step strategy for carrying out the Cultural Revolution. In December 1966 he told Zhou Enlai, "You learn to swim by swimming and learn to struggle by struggling; we'll learn how to do Big Democracy in the course of the Cultural Revolution."¹¹ Nevertheless, Mao had drawn a number of lessons from the debacle of 1957 and the shortcomings of the Four Cleans campaign. Six characteristics of the Cultural Revolution can be interpreted as strategic attempts to rectify problems that had derailed earlier efforts. The first four of these characteristics clearly distinguished the Cultural Revolution from the 1957 *daming dafang* campaign:

- 1) The movement was much broader than in 1957, when only intellectuals actively participated; this time workers and peasants were encouraged to join as well, reinforcing the ranks of those who challenged the authority of local party officials.
- 2) These officials were now vulnerable to being attacked as capitalist roaders, a category Mao defined as class enemies.
- 3) Although party cadres were the main target, as they had been in 1957, this time the movement's targets were extended to include intellectuals and members of the old elite classes.
- 4) During the Cultural Revolution the attacks on Communist cadres came *only* from the Left, as any possibility for critiques from the Right had been closed off as a result of the Anti-Rightist movement.

As a result of these four characteristics, party cadres could not as easily dismiss their critics as they had in 1957, when those who raised their voices were denounced as bourgeois Rightists hostile to socialism and proletarian power. The Cultural Revolution shared all four of these characteristics with the Four Cleans campaign. Two additional characteristics, however, made the Cultural Revolution different from any previous mass supervision movement, including both the 1957 Party Rectification and the Four Cleans campaign:

¹⁰ Mao (1977, p. 314).

¹¹ Mao (1968c).

- 5) Not only were party cadres instructed not to suppress criticism, as they had been in the past, but the party organization was effectively paralyzed.
- 6) Not only were people urged to raise criticisms on their own (without the guidance of party work teams), as they were in 1957, but they were explicitly encouraged to form their own organizations, autonomous from the party.

These six features became the essential conditions for Big Democracy as it was practiced in 1966. All six fostered the emergence of a rebel movement that was in a much better position to mobilize criticism of party cadres than the individuals who had raised their voices in 1957, producing very different battle lines and very different results.

Opening the way for Big Democracy in factories

Like the 1957 *daming dafang* campaign, the initial focal point of the Cultural Revolution was in schools, but this time factory workers were involved from the first days of the movement. The earliest events of the Cultural Revolution, beginning in June 1966, had a profound impact on factories, and by the end of the year, industrial workers had become the main protagonists of the movement.

In factories, as in schools, the movement was initially led by officials—factory party committees or work teams dispatched by local party authorities. In many factories, party work teams sent to lead the Four Cleans campaign remained in charge, while in others new work teams arrived. Shortly after the new movement was launched, however, Mao began commissioning newspaper articles and radio broadcasts that undermined the authority of the work teams and at the end of July he demanded the removal of work teams from schools. On August 5, he penned what he called his “first big character poster,” titled “Bombard the headquarters,” in which he sharply denounced work teams and party authorities for suppressing divergent views. “In the last fifty days or so,” he wrote, “some leading comrades from the central down to the local levels...have enforced a bourgeois dictatorship and struck down the surging movement of the great cultural revolution of the proletariat. They have stood facts on their head and juggled black and white, encircled and suppressed revolutionaries, stifled opinions differing from their own, imposed a white terror, and felt very pleased with themselves.”¹²

Then on August 8, the Central Committee—at Mao’s insistence—issued new guidelines, known as the *Sixteen Points*, which called for a striking change in how the movement was to be conducted. “The only method is for the masses to liberate themselves, and any method of doing things in their stead must not be used,” the guidelines insisted. “Trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast out fear. Don’t be afraid of disturbances.” Much of the document was dedicated to advising party leaders not to suppress critics and, cognizant of the fact that those who had challenged local authorities were almost invariably in the minority, it specified:

¹² Mao (1966).

“Any method of forcing a minority holding different views to submit is impermissible. The minority should be protected, because sometimes the truth is with the minority. Even if the minority is wrong, they should still be allowed to argue their case and reserve their views.”¹³ A commentary on the *Sixteen Points* published in *Red Flag*, the party’s leading journal, issued an even sharper warning to party leaders:

There is a very dangerous tendency among some comrades who are bent on standing on a commanding height and divorcing themselves from the masses. On the political and ideological level, they lag far behind those previously unknown, those youngsters, who have the courage to break through. Nevertheless, they regard themselves as nobles head and shoulders above the “lower orders.” They are accustomed to monopolizing everything themselves, giving orders and reducing the masses to inactivity; they have often developed from standing aloof and fearing the masses to opposing and oppressing them. ... Taking the stand of the reactionary bourgeoisie, they oppress the revolutionaries, put a damper on dissenting opinions and exercise the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.¹⁴

From that moment on, efforts by party officials to stifle autonomous activity—commonly referred to as carrying out the “bourgeois reactionary line” (*zichan jieji fandong luxian* 反右路)—became the main target of the fledgling rebel groups. The *Sixteen Points* specified that going forward the movement was to be led by “Cultural Revolution groups, committees, and other organizational forms created by the masses.”¹⁵ The document, however, remained ambivalent about extending the movement to factories and villages. Although it called for the election of Cultural Revolution committees in industrial enterprises, it reiterated that schools and government offices would continue to be the focal point of the movement. In factories and villages, it stipulated, the Four Cleans campaign “should continue in accordance with the original arrangements,” while being “enriched” by the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶ In practical terms, this meant that although work teams had been recalled from schools, they would remain in place in factories.

Responding to the *Sixteen Points*, factory authorities—whether the enterprise party committee or an outside work team—oversaw the election of new Cultural Revolution committees, composed largely of workers, which formally took charge of the movement. Taking a cue from developments on school campuses, party leaders also encouraged the organization of “Red Guard” groups. But while on school campuses most of these groups were actually self-organized, the initial wave of factory Red Guard organizations were creations of the party organization and they were composed exclusively of workers who were deemed to be politically reliable and had impeccable class backgrounds; efforts by workers to organize autonomous

¹³ CCP Central Committee (1966a).

¹⁴ *Red Flag* (1966, p. 6).

¹⁵ CCP Central Committee (1966a, Points 4 and 6).

¹⁶ CCP Central Committee (1966a, Points 9 and 13).

groups continued to be suppressed. Mao's sharp criticism of the work teams, however, emboldened recalcitrant workers and many were no longer willing to follow the direction of any authorities appointed by the party establishment. Guo Zhenghua, the filter manufacturing plant technician who had been dismissed from a Four Cleans committee after he raised questions about the committee's methods, was among the early rebels. "We grabbed hold of the *Sixteen Points* as our weapon," he recalled. "We became braver and our enthusiasm grew—we didn't have to operate underground anymore, we could operate openly."¹⁷

Zhu Jingxian, the electronics factory production team leader, recounted how workers began butting heads with the work team that had been sent to his factory that summer. "The work team was too strict, it tried to restrict the masses, it wouldn't allow this, it wouldn't allow that, it was just too much," Zhu said. "So, the masses wouldn't listen to them and they finally ran them out." The climactic incident came after workers posted a big character poster denouncing the arrogant and domineering style of the factory party secretary. The leader of the work team responded by admonishing the party secretary for "stirring up a hornets' nest." The authors of the poster were insulted by the implication that they were hornets, Zhu recalled, and a large crowd of angry workers surrounded and berated the work team leader: "Whose side is your ass sitting on? You aren't speaking for us workers; you're speaking for the cadres, you're speaking for the capitalist roaders." A few days later, municipal authorities were compelled to withdraw the work team. I asked Zhu, who had joined the rebel camp, why workers were not scared of the work team leader, who was an important local party official. "Scared of what?" he replied. "The higher levels were all in trouble. It was Big Democracy!"¹⁸

Mass organizations autonomous from the party

By early November, workers in factories around the country began openly establishing their own rebel groups, and in Shanghai, Wuhan and other cities they even formed incipient citywide coalitions. On November 9, several thousand Shanghai workers commandeered a train to Beijing, seeking to gain Mao's blessing for their citywide rebel organization, which the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee had refused to recognize. Local authorities stopped the train in Anting, just north of Shanghai, but many workers refused to return to work and instead blocked the railroad line. The Central Cultural Revolution Small Group (CCRS), the *ad hoc* body set up by Mao to guide for the movement, dispatched Zhang Chunqiao to negotiate with the workers and, in a stunning move, he signed off on their demands, recognizing the legitimacy of their organization.¹⁹

Shortly thereafter, Mao endorsed Zhang's decision and within days the CCRSG issued a decree declaring that workers not only had the constitutional right to establish their own Cultural Revolution organizations, but they also had the right to link up with workers in other

¹⁷ Interviewee W4.

¹⁸ Interviewee A3.

¹⁹ For accounts of the "Anting Incident" see Hunter (1969, pp. 138-141), Perry and Li (1997, pp. 32-36) and Walder (1977, pp. 29-31).

factories and form federations and associations. The decree encouraged workers to visit schools and students to visit factories to “exchange experiences in the Cultural Revolution.” Expanding on the *Sixteen Points*, the CCRSG insisted that the movement in factories be led by Cultural Revolution committees and congresses elected by the masses. “These organizations,” the decree stipulated, “must not be manipulated behind the scenes; they must be based on the election system of the Paris Commune, including full deliberation by the masses, repeated discussions, and the implementation of a comprehensive election system allowing for the recall [of those elected] and new elections at any time.”²⁰ This initiative was sharply debated at a series of central meetings held over the next few weeks, with top party leaders insisting that workers should not be allowed to form rebel groups and that “students and workers must not be permitted to join forces in rebellion.”²¹ This, however, was precisely what Mao had in mind. He prevailed, and in early December the Political Bureau issued an authoritative decree affirming the right of workers to form their own organizations.²²

Since the first days of the movement, workers had been visiting universities to read big character posters and listen to debates and some had begun to develop ties with student groups. In October and November, large numbers of students—including emissaries of the most influential university rebel groups—moved into factories and they played a critical role in helping fledgling rebel workers groups formulate demands, articulate criticisms of factory leaders, write big character posters, and publish fliers.

One such factory was the aluminum mill in which Liu Zhenbang worked. Liu, a brash youth league activist who had been named to head the semi-official Red Guard organization in the mill, recounted the process through which he became alienated from factory party leaders and helped organize the rebel opposition. “The party committee formed the Red Guards; we were hired to protect the emperor, we were palace guards,” Liu he recalled contritely. He was soon influenced, however, by radical students who came from Beijing to investigate problems in the mill and he was upset when factory leaders tried to drive the students out. Noting that the newspapers were denouncing local party committees for suppressing criticism, he called a meeting of the Red Guards. “I told them that under normal circumstances we have to listen to the party committee, but under abnormal circumstances we have to listen to Mao and the center.” He and others then posted a big character poster asking why the factory party committee was attacking the students and why it had failed to distribute key Cultural Revolution documents in the factory. Party leaders immediately removed Liu from his position as head of the Red Guards and organized a mass meeting to denounce him. Unbowed, Liu used accumulated vacation days to travel hundreds of kilometers to Beijing, where he visited prominent universities and went to the reception center of the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group. At the center he met with a military officer and asked him whether workers could form their own organizations, as students were doing. “He told me ‘Of course you can—you must educate yourselves and liberate

²⁰ Central Cultural Revolution Small Group (1966).

²¹ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, pp. 142-144).

²² CCP Central Committee (1966b).

yourselves.”” Soon after Liu returned to the aluminum mill in early December, he and other workers jumped on the stage while the party committee secretary was addressing a whole factory meeting, grabbed the microphone and appealed to the crowd to organize themselves and oppose the party committee’s suppression of criticism. “That was the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in our factory.”²³

During the final months of 1966, rebel workers around the country—encouraged by ever more astounding pronouncements from Beijing—grew increasingly aggressive and factory leaders grew more hesitant to suppress their challengers. Yuan Yunshan, the Henan textile mill worker, recounted how workers who joined the rebel camp adopted a new attitude, completely at odds with the way the CCP had run mass campaigns in the past. “If they wanted to really have a Cultural Revolution, they had to have their own organizations. Only by having their own organizations, could they represent their own will.” In late September, Yuan helped organize a rebel faction to challenge the official factory Red Guard organization and by mid-November there were two competing Cultural Revolution Committees in the mill, the official one, which had an office in the administration building, and an unofficial one, which operated out of the factory’s residential compound. “When the Cultural Revolution started, every work unit formed a Cultural Revolution committee,” Yuan explained. “But once the majority of people realized that the official committee couldn’t represent their own thinking, they rejected it and organized their own.”²⁴

Rebels versus conservatives

Employees in factories across China typically split into two broad camps. On one side were the new rebel organizations, which attacked the party establishment. On the other side were conservative organizations, which emerged in response to rebel attacks in order to defend the factory party leadership and the status quo. While the rebels enjoyed Mao’s support, they were loosely organized and in most factories they were in the minority. On the other hand, the conservative groups, established by the factory party organization, were typically larger and better organized. Nevertheless, the rebels made up for their disorganization and numerical disadvantage with enthusiasm as they eagerly took up Mao’s call to “bombard the headquarters.”

The rebel activists on whom Mao relied to advance his agenda during the Cultural Revolution were very different from the activists on whom the party had relied to carry out previous mass movements. As noted in Chapter 3, the party had painstakingly cultivated a select group of “activist” workers who had characteristics the party identified as “advanced,” including actively participating in the affairs of the factory and placing the public interest above individual interests. Workers identified as advanced were recruited to join the Communist Youth League and the party and they played key roles in organizing production and mobilizing political participation. Mao, however, could not expect these “advanced” workers to serve as agents of

²³ Interviewee H6.

²⁴ Interviewee H11.

Big Democracy. The party's recruitment system systematically selected for conformism and it fostered relations of dependency between activists and leaders. Because they were close to the factory establishment and accustomed to working within the system, these activists were generally not inclined to challenge party leaders (exceptions like Liu Zhicao notwithstanding). Big Democracy required insurgents and Mao found them among the disaffected, non-conformist, discontented, alienated and unfettered. Thus, the Cultural Revolution upended normal politics and political categories, leaving Mao at the head of a rebel movement that depended on workers who had been considered "backward" according the CCP's conventional standards.

The leaders and core members of conservative organizations, on the other hand, had typically been very active in factory affairs in the past; they were basic and middle-level cadres, shop floor supervisors, "backbone" workers, rank-and-file party members, youth league activists, union representatives, militia members, and so on. On the rebel side, in contrast, many of the previously "non-activist" workers were now on the front lines of the movement. Rebel leaders were generally young, relatively well educated, and intensely interested in politics, even if they found it difficult to conform to the demands of the party organization. They were typically workers; very few were cadres. Many were disaffected rank-and-file party members, but others were independent-minded individuals who were never able—or never inclined—to join the party. Rank-and-file members of the rebel camp were generally young workers who had not been closely associated with the party establishment or particularly interested in politics, at least as it was practiced by the CCP. Workers joined the rebel camp for a variety of reasons—they were attracted to Mao's radical ideas, they were dissatisfied with the status quo, they didn't like the party's tight system of control, they had grievances against factory leaders, they figured rebel activism might bring opportunities for political advancement, or they followed trusted friends, family members, and fellow workers.²⁵

The essential question that split work unit members into opposing camps—whether to attack or defend the factory party committee—was expressed in striking terms in the publications of the rebel and conservative factions in Zhengzhou's Number Six Cotton Mill. Both organizations claimed the Red Guard moniker, but the rebels called their conservative opponents the "Cadres' Red Guard Brigade" and styled their own organization the "Workers' Red Guard Brigade." A rebel broadside declared that while their adversaries could claim the allegiance of most party and youth league members, those on the rebel side were more independent-minded. "As we know," the authors declared, "in the Cultural Revolution, those who are capable of

²⁵ These impressions of the conservative and rebel camps in factories are similar to those presented in Perry and Li's (1997) study of Cultural Revolution factions in Shanghai factories, Liu's (1986-87) extended essay on Cultural Revolution factional contention, Wang's (1995) analysis of contending factions in Wuhan, and Walder's (1996 and 2015) descriptions of the early rebel movement in factories. Based on surveys conducted by the main rebel organization in Shanghai, Perry and Li (1997, p. 43) reported that the initial cohorts of rebel activists were much younger and somewhat better educated than the workforce as a whole (the second characteristic was undoubtedly related to the first). Over 18% were party members, a higher proportion than in Shanghai's industrial workforce as a whole. The relatively high rate of party membership indicates that many of the early rebels were politically-inclined workers, but by all accounts party members as a whole were far more likely to support the conservative camp; the surveys analyzed by Perry and Li did not include data on members of conservative organizations.

thinking and acting are the young people and the masses of workers and peasants, while the higher ranking cadres, the party members and youth league members become conservatives; because of their constraints they don't dare to rebel."²⁶ Later, rebel leaders calculated that 83% of the factory's 682 party members "stood on the wrong side of the Cultural Revolution."²⁷ The conservatives, for their part, did not dispute the rebel claim that the majority of the factory's employees—3000 of the 5800—had joined the rebel camp, but they insisted that their own camp was more concerned about quality than quantity. Their organization was selective, they declared, while the rebels let in "whoever wanted to join." They went on to condemn the rebels for indiscriminately attacking and driving out of office not only the factory party secretary, but every single one of the secretaries of the factory's party branches and 81% of the middle-level cadres.²⁸

The descriptions of the rival camps provided by interviewees who had been on opposing sides were congruent on basic points. "Those who joined the rebel faction all had a rebellious spirit, that is, they dared to raise objections, to stand up and fight," said Dong Laifu, a young worker who became a rebel activist in a plywood factory. "Most of the rebel leaders were the type of people who were always dissatisfied with the world, dissatisfied with the leaders."²⁹ Those who chose to join the conservative organizations, on the other hand, explained that they were averse to the disruption caused by the rebels. "The workers divided into two factions, one defended the factory leaders and the others opposed them," recalled Tian Dingxin, the steel mill worker who had been punished for speaking out during the 1957 *daming dafang* campaign. He joined the conservative camp, he said, because "I was against overthrowing everything and smashing everything. If there's a problem, you should discuss it, right?"³⁰ Wang Miaoxin, the production team leader who had been a Four Cleans activist in his radio factory, joined the conservatives because he thought the rebels were too extreme. Some leaders deserved to be criticized, he said, but the rebels went too far.

According to the thinking of the rebels, the most serious problem in the factory was not this or that person's problem, it was that the leaders as a whole did not understand Chairman Mao's revolutionary line. So their targets included the old factory party committee secretary, the party committee members, along with the party branch secretaries, the workshop directors, all of these people, including us, everyone was reactionary. It was a problem of the system—the whole system was reactionary."³¹

Wang was disturbed when some of his fellow workers drove out the work team that had been sent to lead the movement. "I thought driving out the work team was like driving out the

²⁶ Zhengzhou Engineering School Mao Zedong Thought Field Army and 54 other revolutionary organizations (1967).

²⁷ Zhengzhou No. 6 Cotton Mill Revolutionary Committee (No date).

²⁸ Henan Revolutionary Rebels Headquarters (No date).

²⁹ Interviewee G3.

³⁰ Interviewee W8.

³¹ Interviewee A2.

revolution; the work team was sent by the party, if you want to drive them out, that's opposing the party." He remembered that most of the older workers ended up joining the conservative camp. "They were not comfortable with the word *zaofan* (造反, rebel). It made them feel uncomfortable—under the Communist Party, who are you rebelling against?"³² Zhang Mingtang, a young rebel leader in a meatpacking plant, echoed this interpretation. "Many workers, especially older workers, supported the status quo," he explained. "Their reference point was 1949. Before liberation, conditions for them were bad. After liberation their conditions improved—there was no unemployment, they had health care, they had a stable life. And their status improved, the working class was respected, it was the leading class. So they wanted to protect the existing order, they didn't want to undermine it."³³

From the perspective of conservative activists, their own camp was filled with "higher quality" workers who played an active role in the factory, while the rebel movement was filled with "lower quality" workers who took little responsibility for factory affairs. Chen Zhongfa, a shift supervisor in a textile mill, described those in the conservative camp as "respectable people (*liangmin* 良民), law abiding citizens, who did what we were supposed to do, followed the rules, were morally upright and dependable in every way, the ones who had strong abilities, were steadfast and hardworking, and did not cause trouble (*naoshi* 闹事)." The rebels, he said, were made up of "unruly troublemakers, who did poor work, and goofed off."³⁴

Rebels, of course, disputed these characterizations. When a friend suggested that the rebel movement was made up of *wuhe zhizhong* (乌合之众, rabble), Dong, the rebel activist in the plywood factory, responded viscerally. "Those who participated in the rebel faction had a rebellious spirit," he contended. "Some were uncouth, but only a few. Most were decent people (*laoshi* 老手), they were dissenters, but they still wanted to make the factory better."³⁵ Some rebels, however, acknowledged that—if one used the party's conventional standards—the workers in their camp did not stack up well against those in the conservative camp. "In terms of people's political level, political consciousness, and theoretical level, the loyalists (*baohuang pai* 保皇派) were stronger than the rebels; in terms of their positions at work, their education, they were better," Zheng Chengyi, a rebel leader in a Beijing electronics factory, admitted, adding, "The people who were with me, they were the *wuhe zhizhong*." Because he was a party member and had been selected as a model worker, many of his fellow workers were surprised when he joined the rebel camp. The reason he did, he explained, was because he had an independent spirit and thought the rebels were right for standing up and criticizing the leaders.³⁶

³² Interviewee A2.

³³ Interviewee H4.

³⁴ Interviewee H25.

³⁵ Interviewee G3.

³⁶ Interviewee A1.

Although the Cultural Revolution has been identified with an array of radical industrial management practices, support for these practices was not what drove workers to join the rebel movement or what divided rebel workers from their conservative counterparts.³⁷ Indeed, the kind of workers most likely to be inspired by these practical reforms—those who regularly took responsibility for factory affairs, got involved in technical innovation, and were recognized as “advanced producers”—were more likely to be found in the conservative camp. Throughout their brief existence, the rebel organizations’ main purpose was to attack the overbearing control of the party organization in their workplaces. Inspired by Mao’s slogan “to rebel is justified” (*zaofan youli* 造反有理), rebel workers groups coalesced around a common aspiration to challenge the authority of party officials, which in the past had been unassailable.³⁸ The rebels criticized the privileges enjoyed by leading cadres and they were particularly eager to condemn their arrogant and domineering behavior and their suppression of criticism and contrary views. They detested the culture of conformism, tutelage, and patronage promoted by the party organization and denounced the “slave mentality” of those who supported the party committee.

Broader and louder damping

Just as in 1957, the opening for freewheeling criticism in 1966 generated tremendous excitement in schools, but this time the excitement was extended to factories and other workplaces, unleashing a much more powerful movement with much broader participation. Although workers had been mobilized to participate in party-led mass supervision movements in the past, including the second round of the Party Rectification campaign in the fall of 1957 and the Four Cleans campaign, participation had largely been passive and formalistic. Mao’s call for rebellion in 1966 inspired participation that was far more intensive and passionate. The majority of workers were much more involved, including many who had never been very active in party-organized activities in the past.

Rebels recognized that the existence of their organizations was only possible because Mao had undermined the authority of the party hierarchy. “If you want to have a real mass movement, if you want the masses to really participate, you have to make the party committee stop its activities,” Zhao Yingjie, a rebel leader in an aluminum mill, told me. “If they are exercising control at every level, how can you do anything? You have to let the masses liberate themselves and educate themselves, you have to let them compete among themselves to find

³⁷ These practices, which will be discussed in the next chapter, included including employing moral incentives in place of material incentives, developing factory-based education and technical training, promoting technical cadres from among the ranks of the workers (rather than recruiting graduates of conventional technical schools and universities), creating triple combination technology innovation teams composed of workers, technicians, and administrative cadres, reforming strict rules and regulations, devolving managerial responsibilities to the small team level, and requiring regular participation by cadres in physical labor.

³⁸ Mao’s statement, often cited in the official and the Red Guard press during the Cultural Revolution years, was: “In the last analysis, all the truths of Marxism can be summed up in one sentence: ‘To rebel is justified’” (cited in Solomon 1972, p. 474).

problems and discover the truth, let them make mistakes and debate right and wrong. ...I participated in all the movements since I started working in 1958, but before the Cultural Revolution the majority of workers couldn't really participate...you didn't really have the right to speak (*fayan quan* 发言权)." The extraordinary events of 1966 generated a very different kind of political atmosphere. "The ordinary people dared to speak up," he recalled. "It was Big Democracy, you dared to post big character posters and raise complaints."³⁹

Even the conservative organizations mobilized workers in a manner that previous campaigns had not. In the face of rebel attacks, they were able to mobilize large numbers of ordinary workers to become fervent defenders of the party leadership and the status quo. Moreover, those who ended up at the forefront of the conservative movement during the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution were often not the same people who had thrived in the routine politics of the party and youth league organizations.

The Cultural Revolution polarized Chinese factories and, because it did, it engaged—on both sides—much larger segments of the workforce with much greater intensity. "In past movements the masses hadn't all participated," said Han Xianglin, a worker in a large ball bearing factory. "They were all under party control; mass participation was limited." The Cultural Revolution, he said, "was a higher form—all the masses participated in the movement, it didn't matter whether you were a conservative or a rebel, everyone participated."⁴⁰

Factories, like schools, became sites of fervent debates, which took place among groups gathered in residential compounds, cafeterias, and production facilities, in public meetings called by competing organizations, in fliers and big character posters, and via factory public address systems. Competing factions convened "criticism/struggle" meetings in which factory leaders were hauled up on stages to be criticized by subordinates. "When we called meetings there were debates," recalled Gao Jingwen, the railroad worker, who ended up joining the rebel camp. "The leaders didn't dare talk—they were the targets. We made them make self-criticisms. The conservatives insisted that the party committee had not made any mistakes. It was a debate among the masses. We debated all the time—when we were working, when we ate, after work."⁴¹

Rebels loyal to Mao

As he had in 1957, in 1966 Mao once again went outside the party organization to summon popular criticism of party cadres, but this time he created in the rebel movement an organizational instrument to pursue his agenda. As a result, he was better able to steer the direction of the criticism. Steering the rebel movement, however, still proved difficult. The rebel groups that emerged during the Cultural Revolution were unlike any other mass organizations that had existed since 1949. They were self-organized—their leaders nominated themselves and

³⁹ Interviewee H5.

⁴⁰ Interviewee H23.

⁴¹ Interviewee H2.

recruited their own followings. They first organized small fighting groups, usually composed of people in the same workshop, which coalesced into factory-wide coalitions. These coalitions linked up with groups in other factories and schools, forming municipal and eventually provincial alliances.⁴² Although they generated intense participation, all of these alliances, from top to bottom, were unstable combinations with fluid memberships and little in the way of a formal organizational structure or a chain of command. Even within each factory, the rebel camp was a loose coalition of fighting groups, each of which published their own fliers and called their own meetings, often with contrary opinions and agendas. Although the CCRSC, composed of a handful of Mao's radical lieutenants, sought to guide and manipulate local rebel organizations, these efforts were often frustrated.

As unruly as they were, however, most rebels fervently believed in Mao. Moreover, they also could scarcely afford to stray from his auspices, as their existence depended on his support. Although rebel groups were self-organized and were independent from the party organization, they did not arise spontaneously, nor were they completely autonomous. They rose up in response to Mao's call, they embraced his goals, and sought to follow his leadership. Moreover, despite the great pride rebels took in their "rebel spirit" (*zaofan jingshen* 造反精神) and "independent thinking" (*duli sikao* 独立思考), their dependence on Mao severely limited their autonomy. Although the rebel movement initially embraced a wide range of popular demands, rebel leaders were ultimately compelled to restrict their agenda to Mao's agenda.

The contradictions between spontaneous demands unleashed by the rebel movement and Mao's agenda became starkly evident in December and January, as the authority of local party organizations was faltering and many workers began raising economic grievances. Temporary workers demanded permanent status, apprentices demanded promotion, employees in collective enterprises demanded more extensive social insurance, regular state workers demanded the resolution of housing problems and adjustments in wages and job assignments, and so on.

Temporary workers, in particular, became a major force in the early days of the rebel movement, animated by a deep sense of injustice fueled by the CCP's egalitarian rhetoric and its longstanding promise to provide permanent employment for the entire population. In cities around the country, hundreds of thousands of temporary workers, many of them women, banded together to demand regularization. They even formed a national organization, the National Red Laborers Rebel General Regiment, which on December 25, 1966 mobilized some 50,000 members to surround and occupy the Ministry of Labor in Beijing. The organization won the support of members of the CCRSG, including Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and it compelled the ministry to issue a declaration that promised enhanced job security, prohibited enterprises from dismissing temporary workers, and required enterprises to rehire those who had been dismissed since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.⁴³

⁴² Rebels were prevented from creating national coalitions, although there were links between organizations in different provinces. On the prohibition against national rebel organizations see Lee 1983, p. 53.

⁴³ Feng (2018, Chapter 6, pp. 6-17).

Mao, however, viewed all economic demands as an unwelcome diversion from the political direction he had set for the movement. Just as in 1957, workers' economic claims were harshly denounced in the press as reflecting selfishness and a lack of public spirit, and most rebel leaders quickly followed suit, echoing the official condemnation of "economism."⁴⁴ The temporary workers movement became a particular target of efforts to suppress economic demands and by February 1967, during a new wave of repression against rebel activists, the concessions made to temporary workers were rescinded and their organizations were outlawed.⁴⁵ For the remainder of the upheaval, rebel leaders were compelled to avoid economic issues and focus exclusively on the task Mao had given them—criticizing party officials for bureaucratism, privilege-seeking, and political transgressions.

If rebel organizations were constrained from advancing economic demands, they were even more constrained from advancing political ideas deemed too radical. Mao's rhetoric about overthrowing capitalist roaders and seizing power (see below) inspired among some rebel activists visions of radical political and social change. The heady atmosphere and the breakdown of mechanisms of social and political control encouraged the flowering of ideas about overthrowing an entire class of "Red capitalists."⁴⁶ Despite Mao's inflammatory language, however, his aim was to reform the Communist Party, not overthrow it. Workers were encouraged to challenge the authority of the local party organization and condemn the capitalist roaders in the party, but not challenge the legitimacy of the party as a whole. Any criticism of Mao was forbidden and rebels who interpreted Mao's call as an opening for systemic change were denounced as anarchists and ultra-leftists, and many eventually faced severe repression. Although workers were encouraged to attack local party authorities, the bounds of ideological and political toleration were quite narrow.

The criticisms of the party establishment raised by rebels during the Cultural Revolution were similar in many ways to those raised by intellectuals in 1957. This is not surprising because in both cases the critics were responding to Mao's call to criticize bureaucratism among party officials. There were, however, crucial differences. First, the intellectuals who spoke up in 1957 could easily be denounced as defenders of the old order, in which they had been part of the privileged elites. This was especially true because although most of the critics in 1957 carefully couched their criticisms in socialist language, the vantage point from which they raised these criticisms was typically to the Right of the CCP. Many favored a more liberal version of socialism and they criticized what they portrayed as Leftist practices by dogmatic officials, enunciating views easily associated with those of contemporary liberal critics of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe.

In contrast, the worker rebels of 1966 could not be so easily dismissed by party leaders. They were less vulnerable in part because they were workers, celebrated as the leading class in

⁴⁴ For accounts about how rebel groups in Shanghai ended up stifling economic demands, see Perry and Li (1997, pp. 97-117), Walder (1978, pp. 39-76), and Wu (2014, pp. 97-124).

⁴⁵ Feng (2018, Chapter 6, pp. 6-17).

⁴⁶ The most famous of the "ultra-Left" tendencies that promoted these ideas, the *Shengwulian* (省无联) coalition in Hunan, is described in Wu (2014, pp. 142-189) and Unger (1991).

socialist society, but also because their criticisms were raised unambiguously from the Left. Their fiery denunciations were made under Mao's banner and they condemned party cadres as betrayers of the Communist cause. This language was not simply strategic; it came naturally to a generation of workers educated by the Communist Party. The liberal ideas of the 1957 critics had been proscribed in China after of the Anti-Rightist movement, and they were foreign to most Cultural Revolution rebels.

Moreover, although rebel workers directed their fire mainly at Communist cadres, they had no compunction about also criticizing members of the old elites, including senior technical cadres in their factories. These individuals were legitimate targets under the official guidelines for the movement, including the *Sixteen Points*, and they had been favorite targets of the semi-official Red Guards in the summer and fall of 1966. Even when factory rebels criticized party leaders, complaints about their recent behavior were often combined with accusations involving "historical problems" and problematic family ties, a line of attack more reminiscent of the Anti-Rightist movement and the Four Cleans campaign than the 1957 *daming dafang* movement. Thus, although the primary target of both 1957 Rectification campaign and the Cultural Revolution was the bureaucratic behavior of the Communist cadres, the protagonists and the discourse of the two movements were significantly different. For these reasons, the worker rebels of 1966 became a far more potent challenge to the party officialdom than their intellectual counterparts had been in 1957.

Top and bottom versus the middle

Ultimately, the Cultural Revolution was far more powerful than the 1957 *daming dafang* campaign because of the link between Mao at the top and the rebel fighting groups at the bottom. The party organization, located between the two and the target of both, proved particularly vulnerable to this combination.⁴⁷ Rebel groups became ardent agents of Mao's campaign to uproot bureaucratism, enthusiastically attacking local authorities, and—with Mao's patronage—they were in a much better position to do so than those who had raised their voices in 1957. "You had support from above, from the center, so things were opened up, you dared to raise opinions," explained Zhu Jingxian, the production team leader who recounted how workers drove the work team out of his electronics factory. "Big Democracy broke down the relationship between leaders and led, between the leaders and the masses. You didn't have to be scared that the leaders would retaliate, so you dared to speak out, you dared to stir things up, to really speak your mind. That's why all the accumulated grievances came out."⁴⁸

Virtually all party leaders became susceptible to the charge that they were capitalist roaders and, therefore, might well be considered class enemies. The meaning of the term was ambiguous and the size of the group to which it referred was also unclear.⁴⁹ On the one hand

⁴⁷ This top-and-bottom-versus-the-middle dynamic is discussed at length in Andreas (2009) and Luper (1996).

⁴⁸ Interviewee A3.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the ambiguity of the term, see Kraus (1981).

Mao insisted that the great majority of Communist cadres were “good” or “relatively good,” while on the other hand he called on workers in every factory to “seize power” (*duoquan* 夺权) from the leaders of their enterprise. The clear implication was that all leaders were at least suspect of taking the capitalist road. This rhetorical ambiguity marked the entire stratum of leadership cadres as targets for attack, while it allowed for the differentiation of individual cadres into “good,” “relatively good,” and “bad” categories depending on assessments of their behavior.

In practice, in most industrial enterprises all factory-level leaders were removed from power as were most leaders at the workshop level. Many had to endure struggle/criticism meetings and admit their mistakes before their subordinates, who were tasked with determining whether or not they should be considered capitalist roaders. “It wasn’t clear who was a capitalist roader—you didn’t know,” Zhu Jingxian, the electronics worker, recalled. “So it was up to you to expose them, it was up to the masses to decide.”⁵⁰ For rebel activists the operative meaning of the term was clear—it referred to party leaders who abused subordinates, managed in an autocratic fashion, and suppressed criticism, especially those who repressed the fledgling rebel movement in the early months of the Cultural Revolution (and were, thus, guilty of implementing the “bourgeois reactionary line”). Although previous mass supervision movements had been harsh, the untethered mass supervision of the Cultural Revolution was even harsher. Party leaders were often cruelly humiliated and physically abused. Many of the rebel workers I interviewed said that in retrospect they realized they had mistreated factory leaders and exaggerated their problems and shortcomings.

The cadre behaviors that Mao was particularly concerned about—those associated with bureaucratism—came under far more severe assault during the Cultural Revolution than they had in any of the past mass supervision movements, including the 1957 Party Rectification and the Four Cleans. As was noted in the previous chapter, while the work team method employed in the latter campaign was effective in rooting out corruption, its top-down nature made it inherently ineffective in controlling the ills connected with bureaucratism. In contrast, the rebel movement—born to challenge authority—was specifically fitted for this task.

As will be recounted in the next chapter, most of the old leaders were ultimately brought back into positions of authority, but only after a protracted process that usually involved the consent of rebel factions. Moreover, when they returned their authority was circumscribed. Workers I interviewed reported that the Cultural Revolution had a profound and lasting impact on the attitudes of both workers and cadres. Zhu Jingxian, the Beijing electronics factory worker, described the impact on cadres. “There was a big change in cadres’ attitude towards the masses. Cadres who have been attacked—who have been through the masses putting up big character posters—are different than those who have not been attacked, ...their work style was much better.”⁵¹ Luo Yaohua, who worked in a smaller electronics factory, described how these changes in attitude impacted authority relations. “The previous aura of power and prestige was gone. ...If the factory director said something, I thought, ‘If I don’t want to listen to you, I won’t.

⁵⁰ Interviewee A3.

⁵¹ Interviewee A3.

The rebels long ago rebelled against you, so who's scared of you anymore?' You can imagine what a heavy blow this was to the authority of the lower-level cadres!"⁵² Wen Guowei, the ball bearing factory worker, who sympathized with the conservative camp, had a similar assessment:

Before we felt that the status of the cadres and the common people was not the same, we were not equal. But after going through the movement, we realized that you and I were equal. Workers felt like their status was higher. For instance, if you weren't satisfied with something, you could directly raise it with the leaders.... Before, common people wouldn't dare say anything, and even if they did, [the leaders] wouldn't change. ...In the late years of the Cultural Revolution [decade], when something came up, they'd generally consult with workers. ...It was a little more democratic, not as authoritarian."⁵³

Not everyone was as sanguine about the changes brought about by the Cultural Revolution. Xu Jianlong, a workshop director in a large ball bearing factory, described the era before the Cultural Revolution nostalgically: "Back then, relations between cadres and workers were very good, they were very close. Workers back then were very pure; they felt being a worker was very honorable. ...Whatever a cadre said, the workers would do it. Your position as a cadre was very respected, very powerful; the workers had to listen to you." Things went downhill, he recalled, as a result of the events of 1966. "During the Cultural Revolution," he reported, "there was a big change. Peoples' thinking was not stable, it was a little anarchic, so relations [between cadres and workers] were not as good. ...They criticized the old cadres for *guankaya* (controlling, restricting, and repressing). ...So [afterwards] the cadres did not manage things as tightly. ...They were scared of making a mistake."⁵⁴

Zheng Chengyi, the model worker who joined the rebels, described the impact of the Cultural Revolution in similar terms, but with a different assessment. "When I first entered the factory, I believed the party secretary was like a god. ...When a leader said something, it was like an imperial edict—I'd do whatever he said. We didn't have much ability to think for ourselves. After going through the Cultural Revolution, we learned to make distinctions—this is correct and this is not." The cadres, he noted, also changed. "They were more respectful of the masses. ...After the Cultural Revolution, they had to be more careful, they had to think about what they said, they had to consider how the masses would react, whether they would oppose you. ...If you said something wrong, the masses would spot it right away and they wouldn't listen to you. Some cadres complain that after the Cultural Revolution it was difficult for leaders to lead, that the masses wouldn't listen to them. But I don't think there's anything wrong with that."⁵⁵

Seizing power

⁵² Interviewee B1.

⁵³ Interviewee H39.

⁵⁴ Interviewee H14.

⁵⁵ Interviewee A1.

In January 1967, Mao called on rebels throughout the country to overthrow the party authorities in their workplaces and local governments and “seize power.” This pivotal decision led to the wholesale removal of incumbent party and administrative leaders and a radical restructuring of power in China’s factories. It would also eventually lead to the reining in of the rebel movement and the dismantling of the rebel organizations.

The general call for rebels to seize power was the culmination of a series of remarkable events that began in Shanghai on January 3. On that day, a group of rebels took over *Wenhui Daily* and two days later another group seized control of *Liberation Daily*, two of the city’s leading newspapers. Rebels in other major cities were also attempting to take over major newspapers, hoping to convert them into vehicles for the mass dissemination of their views. On January 4, however, Mao’s emissaries Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan arrived from Beijing and encouraged the rebels to take the much more radical step of overthrowing the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee.⁵⁶ On January 6, the Workers General Headquarters, a coalition of rebel groups from many of Shanghai’s factories, organized a rally—reportedly attended by 100,000 people—at which rebel leaders criticized the top municipal officials and declared that they were taking power in the city. Mao quickly endorsed the proclamation.⁵⁷ Over the next two weeks, precocious rebel groups began mounting power seizures in their own work units, and the press celebrated the overthrow of party committees and the establishment of “revolutionary production committees” by rebels in the Shanghai Glass Machinery Factory, the Beijing Guanghai Wood Products Factory, and other plants. Then on January 22, *People’s Daily* published a fiery front page editorial calling on rebels everywhere to seize power.⁵⁸ The response in factories around the country was immediate.

At 2:00 in the morning of January 23, a few hours after the *People’s Daily* editorial appeared, sixty workers marched into the headquarters of a major electronics factory in Beijing and announced that they were seizing power from the enterprise party committee. The workers were members of the Revolutionary Rebel Liaison Station, a coalition founded a little over a month earlier by eleven fighting groups from various factory workshops. The Liaison Station had gained a reputation as the most radical and tempestuous of the many mass organizations that had sprung up in the factory over the past three months. The previous summer, workers who would later become leaders of Liaison Station had famously posted big character posters criticizing the work team sent to lead the Cultural Revolution in the factory. They had suffered the work team’s retribution and they had been waging a relentless campaign against the new party committee—put in place by the work team—demanding that “black materials” assembled about them and other rebel workers be destroyed and those responsible for repressing them be punished. They had also forced enterprise leaders to allow university and middle school students to camp out at the factory. By mid-January, with the factory party committee on the defensive, Liaison Station

⁵⁶ Zhang and Yao were both Shanghai officials who strongly supported Mao’s radical initiatives during the early days of the Cultural Revolution and were recruited by him to serve on the CCRSG.

⁵⁷ See Yan and Gao (1996, pp. 382-387) and Walder (1977, pp. 51-55).

⁵⁸ For a translation and an account of the origins of this editorial see Hu (2017, p. 6-7).

leaders had compelled individual leaders to account for their actions before mass meetings and they had taken control of the factory broadcasting station. Then, after the publication of the *People's Daily* editorial, the band of Liaison Station activists roused the party secretary out of bed and forced him to sign a document handing over power to their organization. They then took possession of the party committee's official seal. The next day, while hundreds of Liaison Station members marched to the city center to celebrate their accomplishment, other mass organizations—including more moderate rebel groups as well as conservatives who had supported the party committee—rushed to seize power in the various workshops and departments of the factory.⁵⁹

The events that took place in this factory were duplicated in factories and other work units throughout the country, as rebel groups seized official seals and attempted to set up new factory leadership bodies. Some were more successful than others; most factories ended up in the hands of competing mass organizations. Attempts by rebel groups to seize power at the municipal level were seldom any more successful in establishing authoritative governing bodies. Nevertheless, the wave of power seizures definitively put an end to the operation of factory party committees. These committees—which had dominated all aspects of factory life in the past—had already largely ceased functioning before the wave of power seizures, but the dramatic events of January 1967 completely paralyzed factory party organizations and they remained dormant for at least two years.

The power seizures left no doubt that the Cultural Revolution was directed not simply against a few individuals or even against a specific segment of the party leadership that could be identified as taking the capitalist road, but rather against the entire social stratum of leadership cadres. While official statements invariably referred to the number of capitalist roaders as “a small handful,” it was clear that Mao intended to spur power seizures in every work unit, leaving no party committee in place.⁶⁰

The power seizures and the prospect of forming new organs of power changed the nature of the Cultural Revolution. Until then, local authorities had seen the rebels as dangerous troublemakers, but they never imagined that they might actually take over positions of power, nor could the rebels themselves have imagined this outcome. Most rebel leaders were ordinary workers, they were young and inexperienced, and only a few were party members. Starting in January, however, veteran cadres began to see the rebels—and they began to see themselves—as contenders for power. As might be expected, the power seizures led to chaotic struggles for power, marked in many provinces by violent confrontations.

Reining in Big Democracy

⁵⁹ Revolutionary Rebel Liaison Station (1967).

⁶⁰ Zhou Enlai reported that in January Mao told central leaders that rebels everywhere should go ahead and seize power without making “fine distinctions” about who was and who was not a capitalist roader. See MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, p. 158).

Because Mao had prohibited soldiers from rebelling against their officers, the People's Liberation Army was the country's only remaining bastion of stability and he now asked military officers to help restore order and oversee the rebuilding of structures of power. He turned to the army despite profound misgivings about commanders who had been protecting local party leaders. On January 23, the day after the *People's Daily* editorial called on rebels to seize power, the Central Committee issued a directive demanding that military commanders stop serving as "an air raid shelter for the handful of party power-holders taking the capitalist road" and instead actively support "the broad masses of revolutionary Leftists in their struggle to seize power."⁶¹

In early February, after several weeks of uncertainty about what new power structures would look like, Mao endorsed the formation of "revolutionary committees," which were to be composed of veteran cadres, mass representatives (rebel leaders), and military representatives. The goal was not only to thoroughly reorganize structures of governance, but also to bring a close to the freewheeling upheaval of Big Democracy, which had upended China's social order. This chapter will close by briefly recounting how the rebel organizations were reined in, leaving the complicated process of selecting new revolutionary committees, which inaugurated a distinct era in factory governance, for the next chapter.

The factional fighting that followed efforts to seize power extended through 1967 and into the summer of 1968, causing great economic disruption and generating political polarization that brought some provinces to the brink of civil war. At that point, Mao moved with greater determination to curb the unruly forces he had unleashed. That fall, rebel organizations were pressed to disband, turn in their weapons, and stop publishing their newspapers. Those that resisted were accused of anarchism, ultra-Leftism, and factionalism, all of which were vehemently condemned in the press. By reining in the rebel movement, Mao was pulling back from full scale civil war, but he was also demonstrating that he remained fundamentally committed to the principle of centralized political leadership. A steady stream of articles denounced the idea of multiple centers (*duo zhongxin lun* 多中心论) and insisted on the need for unitary leadership (*yi yuan hua ling dao* 一元化领导).

The ways in which the contending mass organizations were demobilized varied greatly, and in some provinces it entailed tremendous violence. As will be discussed in the next chapter, while some rebel leaders were included on the new revolutionary committees and a few gained positions of power, all factional organizations were compelled—at least formally—to disband.⁶² The dissolution of the mass organizations was followed by a three year period in which rebel leaders and activists were subjected to a series of harsh punitive campaigns conducted largely by local military authorities, who became the dominant power in most of China's provinces.

The limits of Big Democracy

⁶¹ CCP Central Committee, et al. (1967).

⁶² In some provinces, particularly Guangxi and Guangdong, this period of repression involved large-scale violence directed both against rebel groups and against members of the old elite classes and other politically marginalized groups, resulting in many deaths, especially in rural areas. See Su (2011).

“Some people say that China has already been making socialist revolution for ten years,” Mao told a delegation of communists visiting from New Zealand in March 1967. “Actually, it’s not that way at all. Genuine socialist revolution only began with the Cultural Revolution.” Mao’s guests must have been surprised by this unorthodox redefinition of socialist revolution, which he went on to explain this way: “In the past, all of our rectification campaigns were just carried out among cadres; the masses were not unleashed to rise up and supervise the cadres. This time the masses have been unleashed to rise up and supervise the cadres.”⁶³ For Mao, socialist revolution had come to mean mobilizing the populace to criticize the new strata of officials who had come to power in 1949. Moreover, he dismissed previous efforts to do this, which in his view had failed to genuinely arouse the masses, and he was now placing his hopes on a much more radical remedy.

Mao’s attempt during the Cultural Revolution to spur a more autonomous wave of mass criticism of Communist cadres was in some ways quite successful. By undermining party control, he fostered the emergence rebel groups that became ardent champions of his efforts to combat the bureaucratic behavior of China’s new officialdom. Because the rebels were self-organized and largely autonomous from the party organization, they were able to effectively challenge the authority of local leaders, opening them up to a torrent of criticism from below. The impact was lasting and, as we will see in subsequent chapters, the authority of party officials never fully recovered.

The costs, however, were enormous. The movement unleashed tremendous violence, greatly disrupted industrial production, and shook the foundations of the social and political order. The violence was driven by a very real struggle for power, unleashed by Mao’s call on rebels to overthrow local party committees and seize power. It was aggravated by Mao’s incendiary rhetoric and by the political culture of the CCP, which celebrated revolutionary violence. This culture, inculcated in veteran cadres by the harsh realities of decades of insurgent warfare, was eagerly embraced by young rebels as well, along with a Manichean, winner-take-all conception of politics.

Despite the costs, the Cultural Revolution ultimately failed to establish a lasting model for introducing autonomy into mass supervision. The autonomy of the rebel groups was compromised in two critical ways. First, the scope of the issues they could raise was limited. They were free to attack cadres’ privileges, corruption, and authoritarian and bureaucratic ways, but raising economic demands was off limits. Organizations so constrained could never truly represent the workers. Second, the rebel groups were only allowed a momentary existence. They came into being with Mao’s blessing and once this was withdrawn they were compelled to disband.

Under Mao, *daming dafang* was not a permanent condition, but a movement that had a beginning and an end. Observing the two *daming dafang* episodes, the first in 1957 and the second ten years later, it is clear that each time the beginning required Mao’s impetus and

⁶³ Mao cited in Dongfang (2017).

protection and the end entailed repression. Compared to the events of 1957, however, the *daming dafang* period during the Cultural Revolution was much more protracted, disruptive, and violent, and the subsequent repression was also much harsher. Both in 1957 and in 1968, Mao was complicit in the suppression of those who had answered his call to speak out. Moreover, this repression seems to have been a necessary element in Mao's improvisational strategy, as he tried to harness Big Democracy to reform the party he had brought to power.

Mao recognized that effective mass supervision required organized forces that were not under party control, but he was not willing to permit the permanent establishment of autonomous organizations. His solution was to call into being temporary organizations that were autonomous from the party establishment, but loyal to him. If the rebels were allowed to permanently maintain their organizations, we can surmise, he feared they would stray from his leadership and his vision of a communist future. Unwilling to countenance lasting autonomous organizations, Mao instead placed his hopes on repeated upheavals. In late 1967, not long before he ordered rebel organizations to disband, he warned that there would be more such episodes: "The current Cultural Revolution is only the first; there will have to be many more in the future... All members of the party and all the people of the country must not think that after one, two, three, or four cultural revolutions things will be calm and peaceful."⁶⁴ This threat, along with lingering factional tensions, would continue to unsettle Chinese factories for the next decade.

⁶⁴ Mao (1996, Vol. 12, pp. 352).

