Is the Post- in Postsocialism the Post- in Posthumanism?

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It has been twenty years since Kwame Anthony Appiah’s sharply critical essay, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?,” brought to our attention the deep complicities of the postcolonial intellectual with global capitalism’s management of cultural commodities out of Africa via the fetishism of the self as other. An unthinking inheritor of the figure of the colonized intellectual that Frantz Fanon had presciently warned against earlier, this elite postcolonial intellectual flaunts an aesthetics of postmodernism, regardless of whether the intention is ethical or for the sake of commodification. As an aesthetics without the economic basis of postmodernity, such as the flexible mode of accumulation and the predominance of finance capital, this postmodernism has lost touch with culture as it is practiced on the ground. In postcolonial Africa, late twentieth-century culture, especially popular culture, is surprisingly or perhaps refreshingly unconcerned with postcolonialism and neocolonialism and does not share either the dark vision or the commodifiable “alteritism” of the postcolonial-cum-postmodernist intellectual. Hence, the postcolonial as a majority social condition is resoundingly not postmodernist.

Similar arguments had been made before: modernism without modernity and postmodernism without postmodernity in the third world. When these arguments were made by nationalist and nativist intellectuals, the claim was that the westernized, thus “compadore,” intellectuals had jettisoned their native tradition in favor of the West and had thus thoroughly emptied their work of usable content in the service of the nation. When they were made by scholars of third-world modernism and postmodern-
ism, these scholars were expressing their exhaustion with Eurocentric or universalistic assumptions of (post)modernism and defending third-world specificity. Additionally, we may make the perverse argument that third-world modernism is therefore hypermodernist (it critiqued the ills of modernity when the society was not yet modern) and its postmodernism hyperpostmodernist (it lacked the economic foundation, hence was even more superficial and shallow as is characteristic of postmodernism).

My point here is not to repeat the clichés of nativist critique or the dangers of decontextualized aesthetics within the global political economy of cultural commodification, but to bring two other terms to a project such as Appiah’s for a geographically and historically sensitive analysis of the “post” as a phenomenon: postsocialism and posthumanism. At first sight, postsocialism appears to apply only to either the former socialist countries (the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union) or the actually existing socialist countries that have hybridized their economies (China and Vietnam), not to the continuously socialist or newly socialist countries, and never to the capitalist countries in different parts of the world, especially Western Europe and the United States. The apparent inapplicability of the postsocialist framework to the West (i.e., Western Europe and the United States) is the major reason for the general lack of interest in the topic in American academia, where the discussions of postsocialism are largely confined within the now nominally debunked but actually existing area studies, the assumption being that it lacks universal significance. This is despite the fact that postsocialism, even in the narrow sense used above, affects more than 30 percent of the world’s land mass and more than 50 percent of the human population. It has of course never been the case that Western Europe and its more modern variation in the United States can ever make an argument for their universality based on size or population—even if they were to combine themselves into “the United States of the West” — so we are likely to run into a dead end here. Universalism has not been a value determined by size or number; we might even consider it a Eurocentric resistance, no matter how oxymoronic and ironic this phrasing sounds, to the tyranny of the majority.

In a broader sense, then, postsocialism ought to be considered as a condition affecting the entire world. The collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the Cold War reconfigured the world in specific ways. For instance, the Cold War divided the world around a particular kind of dichotomy of East and West—socialism and capitalism—not the East and the West of Orientalism and Occidentalism. The collapse of this dichotomy has given rise to a new dichotomy with a different geographical pivot—the North and the South—as a way to understand the economic inequality in today’s world. The end of the Cold War, furthermore, greatly hastened the onward march of the neoliberalization of the entire world in economy
and politics. If postcolonial studies had in the past unabashedly privileged Western European colonialisms (especially British and French), the post–Cold War present demands the study of the Soviet Empire as well as other non-European empires and colonialisms, old and new. For instance, socialism in China could be seen as a postcolonial strategy against the imperial powers occupying parts of China in the first half of the twentieth century. If so, the postsocialism of China then is post-postcolonial—not postcolonial, as some Chinese intellectuals on the so-called New Left have mistakenly claimed, in a mode similar to Appiah’s alteritism—which suggests an entirely new set of implications. We cannot understand the rise of China and the effects it has on the world without considering this aspect of postsocialism; we need to seriously ask the question whether the two “posts” in the post-postcolonial do indeed cancel each other out. If yes, then what has been seen as postcolonial ressentiment by predominantly Han Chinese intellectuals against the West will need to be fundamentally and critically reconsidered, especially in light of Han-centrism’s systematic marginalization of the languages, religions, and cultures of ethnic minorities. In this case, postsocialism is resoundingly not postcolonial, and this is one major complexity of the post–Cold War condition that Western academics have had tremendous difficulty comprehending, leading to gross misunderstandings of the contemporary Chinese intellectual scene. There is no post–Cold War condition without postsocialism, and vice versa; hence postsocialism is, simply, a contemporary historical condition that affects all and that demands us to hold a non-unitary perspective on the world, even as this perspective ruffles all of our preconceived notions of postcoloniality. The relationship between postcoloniality and postsocialism needs much greater unpacking.

In a different way, the understanding of posthumanism as the condition arriving after humanism, as in the antihumanism of orthodox Marxism (à la Louis Althusser) and post-Enlightenment thinking in poststructuralism (à la Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault), appears to have given way to the posthuman as a condition in which cybernetics, virtuality, and informatics have made the human more and more obsolete. Alongside this technologically driven move toward the posthuman, however, there have also been inventive reappropriations of Althusserian antihumanism and Derridean poststructuralism to serve as theoretical support for humanist pursuit of recognition, identity, and agency in such fields as postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, and gender studies. For instance, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak came up with the notion of “strategic essentialism” to mitigate the antihumanist thrusts of poststructuralism within postcolonial studies, and postpositivists such as Linda Alcoff and Satya Mohanty continued to make their case for a kind of humanism that recognizes different identities, as has largely been the case in Native American, African American,
Asian American, Chicano/Chicana, and Latino/Latina studies as well as in gender, women’s, sexuality, disability, and feminist studies as far back as these disciplines go. If Edward Said was posthumanist in *Orientalism* in that he deployed a Foucauldian method in analyzing the structure or order of Western knowledge about the Orient, his very last book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, returned to philological research as a quintessential humanist endeavor that, through careful analysis and a healthy dose of curiosity and openness, champions vernacular and democratic potentialities. In his own words, humanism is a way of “letting vernacular energies play against revered terminologies.” The heroes here are Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach, models of the “exertion” of our “faculties in language in order to understand, reinterpret, and grapple with the products of language in history, other languages and other histories.” Late Saidian humanism had to have taken the posthumanist detour to get there; or, rather, this is a reinvented humanism appropriated from posthumanism.

Caribbean American thinker Sylvia Wynter and African American philosopher Charles W. Mills, in their search for a new humanism, summed it up well in their respective critiques of the relegation of the colonized and the racialized as the subhuman in the West. When certain people have not been considered and treated as humans, posthumanism serves as an alibi for further denial of humanity to these same people. Cybernetics might be a step beyond old-fashioned Enlightenment humanism, technologically speaking, but the newly emerging subjects of history — colonized peoples, women, minorities of all kinds — need to be respected and dignified as humans first. Here the question is not about temporality — the subhumans are asking for old-fashioned humanism and hence are hopelessly anachronistic — but about priority within the same historical moment shared and lived by all. It is useful for us to recall Abdul R. JanMohamed’s caution that this humanism should not be conflated with the pseudo-emancipatory liberal humanism, but that it is a trenchantly political and collective one against dehumanization. This was also Fanon’s project of a new humanism, which in turn profoundly influenced Wynter and many others.

As in all discussions of the “post” conditions, our historical sense requires us to understand those conditions from which they came in the first place: socialism and humanism. I would argue that our current displacement of postsocialism and relegation of posthumanism to cybernetics, as well as the apparent disjunction between postsocialism and posthumanism, indicate the elision of a global history of Marxist humanism since the 1950s that has cut across the first, second, and third worlds. Arguably, Marxist humanism could have offered the possibility of conjoining the two terms *socialism* and *humanism* productively into a compound term, with consequences for both postsocialism and posthumanism. The disappearance of Marxist humanism as a viable alternative to totalitarian social-
ism and the neoliberal humanism of the market has led to other specific consequences in China, France, and the United States, not to mention the former Eastern bloc. Fanon's new humanism, based on critiques of both Enlightenment humanism's complicity with colonialism and orthodox Marxism's limits when it comes to the colonized and the racialized, but drawn heavily from both Enlightenment humanism and Marxism, can also be squarely considered Marxist humanist.

A crucial point that I hope to make concerns the relational and mutually constitutive dynamics of these “post” conditions in different parts of the world, to show that taking a historically and geographically sensitive, necessarily comparative and multi-angled perspective fundamentally unsettles prevailing and often unreflective binarisms in comparative studies. The first, and a beguilingly simple, task, then, is to bring more than two terms into relation. For heuristic purposes, without intending to privilege the number three, I will take what I call a “trialectical” approach, in the sense of triangulation or tripling of the elements or agents brought into consideration for their actually existing dialectical relations. The numbers in question could be more than three, but three is a good place to start. The geographical triangulation that is activated in the following discussion will involve historical and intellectual developments in China, France, and the United States, with some references to Eastern Europe.

In Asian studies scholarship with some comparative bent, China is usually posited in relation to either the United States or France, but not simultaneously to both, and almost never to China’s role in the relationship between France and the United States; not to mention that all three entities are monolithically constructed as majoritarian entities without due consideration of internal diversity or minority issues. If internal diversity were activated as a lens, such as that of ethnicity and race, Asian studies would have a much more productive relationship with Asian American studies, for instance. In Asian American studies scholarship, the erstwhile overwhelming focus on the United States has shifted to account for the transnational dimensions of the Asian American experience, but the focus has been more on Asia, with some emerging scholarship on the Caribbean and the Americas but very seldom on Europe. At times it seems as if Asian American studies has given up on Europe for fear of the slightest contamination by Eurocentrism. The fact that the past is as global as the present is evinced specifically by the fact that Asian American studies as a legacy of the civil rights movement is squarely a part of the global decolonial movements of the 1950s to the 1970s—the so-called global 1960s. My collaborator Françoise Lionnet and I have tried to show the intellectual enmeshment of American humanities and French poststructuralism as a legacy of global decolonial movements of the 1960s, arguing that theory, like the creolized world we live in as a consequence of the colonial turn...
of the late fifteenth century, needs to be creolized; thus the proposal, the creolization of theory. Building on this argument, I show below that among the most astounding and forgotten legacies of the global 1960s on the women-of-color feminism in the United States, therefore important to Asian Americans, are the debates on Marxist humanism in Eastern Europe, France, China, and the United States from the late 1950s all the way to the 1980s. Seen historically, the formations of critical race theory, women-of-color feminism, and postcolonial studies are interconnected, and the connecting point may well be the humanist appropriation of Marxism. Marxist humanism as an intellectual formation, though largely forgotten and suppressed, cuts across (post)socialist, (post)colonial, and (late) capitalist worlds.

**Marxist Humanism and the Global Sixties**

It is well known that the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev’s speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956 denouncing Stalin were the openings that many Eastern European countries needed to consider alternatives to Stalinism. Wide-ranging theoretical discussions of Marxist humanism via a recuperation of the work of early Marx, especially the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, took place alongside major political events: the Polish October of 1956, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the most active output of the Yugoslav Praxis group, as well as the Prague Spring of 1968. As much as the Eastern European philosophers drew freely from the Frankfurt School, existentialism, and phenomenology, this zeitgeist had its own specific French echoes in the so-called humanist controversy of the 1960s, a controversy sparked by Althusser’s categorical statement that Marxism is a “theoretical anti-humanism,” leading to Althusser’s becoming a target of criticism as well as to Althusser’s criticism of then intellectual guru Jean-Paul Sartre’s particular conjoining of existentialism, Marxism, and humanism. By this time, Sartre had become a Marxist and had already written important works to wed his humanist existentialism with Marxism, especially since his visit to China in 1955. As in Eastern Europe, the French discussions had to do with a reevaluation of Marxism after Stalin, but Marxist humanism in Eastern Europe had the immanent political agenda of anticolonial resistance to the Soviet Empire. By 1968, the Marxist humanist ferment in Eastern Europe was pretty much crushed by the Soviets except in Yugoslavia, and leading intellectuals of Marxist humanism had all been forced into exile.

This is the history that constitutes an important chapter of the global 1960s, broadly inclusive of political and intellectual ferments from the 1950s to the 1970s all around the world, that gave rise to, however various,
the civil rights movement in the United States, the Vietnamese Revolution, and the worldwide anticolonial, student, and other radical movements, including May 1968 in France. It is not an exaggeration to say that humanizing Marxism was a crucial thread running through the global 1960s, as seen in Leopold Senghor’s self-proclamation as a Marxist humanist and Fanon’s own humanist version of Marxism that influenced the civil rights movement (especially the Black Power movement) and the Algerian war as well as other third-world anticolonial and decolonial movements. Taking stock of the preeminent role Fanon’s thought played in American academia’s development of postcolonial theory, we may even propose that the best of postcolonial theory evinces a particular conjoining of Marxism and humanism. For ethnic studies, created as a consequence of the civil rights movement, the claim of agency and humanity of the internally colonized can also be considered a variety of Marxist humanism. This Marxist humanism is manifested in the particular intersection of class and race that ethnic studies has explored: racial inequality understood as disparity in economic class. Class and race became almost interchangeable categories.

In China, Krushchev’s secret speech was circulated among all upper cadres by April 1956, and vocal criticism of Stalinism was made by the Chinese Communist Party as well as Mao himself.17 Similar to what was happening in Eastern Europe, the Hundred Flowers Movement was now under way in early 1957, in which the Chinese state encouraged open discussion of political issues. The new sense of “freedom” (ziyou) and “openness” (kaifang) felt by intellectuals was not only in regard to expansion of the variety of cultural expressions and the neutrality of science over ideology but was most importantly about “opening the space of emotion and affect that has been sealed off.”18 In less than two months, however, the anxiety produced by the unleashing of this very short-lived movement led to a crackdown in the form of Mao’s Anti-Rightist Movement. The crackdown on the Hundred Flowers Movement was also a direct reaction against the thaw that had been occurring in Eastern Europe, with both Mao and party theorist Zhou Yang openly criticizing the Hungarian Revolution. The Anti-Rightist Movement was followed by the Great Leap Forward, whose absurdly unrealistic policies led to the great famine that lasted three years and resulted in millions of deaths. Given this history, which can be partially interpreted as a history of defensive reaction against Marxist humanism, how and why Mao’s China came to be seen as a socialist alternative to Stalinism by left-leaning intellectuals in Europe at this time—leading to the immense following Mao and the Cultural Revolution garnered throughout the global 1960s—says more about Left romanticism of some sort than true understanding either of Maoism or of China under Mao. Effectively suppressed, Marxist humanism in China was not to resurface until the early 1980s.
The global 1960s history of Marxist humanism involving China can, however, be specifically nuanced by taking a closer look at Sartre’s visit to China in 1955, the way Sartre’s comments on the Eastern European movements were relayed in China, and a brief life story of Sartre’s work in China from the 1950s to the 1980s. Together with Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre was received by the prime minister of China, participated in the National Day celebrations atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square, and was treated to a forty-five-day tour around the country, from the most urban to the most rural, from the most industrial to the most underdeveloped, and from the most futurist to the most historical and cultural. Sartre was soon to write the important essay “Search for a Method,” in which he explained his move to Marxism and which served as the introduction to volume 1 of his magnum opus Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960). After Sartre returned to France, he sent back an essay titled “My Observations of the New China,” which was published in the official party organ People’s Daily in November 1955. Addressing the Chinese people in the second person, as “you,” he remarked on how the Chinese people’s “synthesizing and dialectical spirit” and “vision and limitless patience” can amply deal with all of the challenges facing China, and thus China embodied hope for the future. He analyzed two particular characteristics of China that were very impressive to “foreigners” like him. First, socialism for China was not simply a social ideal but a necessity for survival. Second, collective affinity and friendship among the people is the motivating force behind China’s modernization. Using the approach of friendship as well as persuasion (not coercion), Chinese socialism was the realization of “the most human of relations among the people.”19 Sartre declared: “La Chine, terre de l’avenir” (“China, land of the future”).20 The same year, he would send another article back to be published in China, titled “French Writers and Their Struggle for Peace,” in which he expressed the French Left’s solidarity with the Chinese people in their shared resistance to American imperialism.21

Contrary to the common assumption that there were no discussions of Sartre’s work in Mao’s China, selected works of Sartre, especially literary works, were translated, and discussions on Sartre and reports on his activities, however brief, were available in several major journals, including publications that were for internal circulation only among the party’s ranking officials. Scholar of French literature and philosophy Luo Dagang, who spent time with Sartre when he visited China, declared in 1955 that Sartre’s conversion to Marxism was “an important victory for the progressive forces among the French people in the cultural battlefield.”22 The journal that published Luo’s essay also published Sartre’s essay denouncing McCarthyism upon the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953, followed by a report on his support for the Hungarian Revolution
and his critique of Stalinism in January 1957, immediately preceding the Hundred Flowers Movement.²³ Several years later, a long scholarly essay summarizing Sartre’s philosophy and literary works served as the lead piece in the newsletter for internal circulation, *Reports on Conditions in World Literature*.²⁴ The occasion was Sartre’s refusal to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 because of its Eurocentric and capitalist biases and his refusal to visit the United States because of US involvement in the Vietnam War—all treated approvingly, of course.

On the one hand, if Sartre’s essays, sent back to China and translated into Mandarin, did not specifically flaunt the term “Marxist humanism,” the highly selective reports and essays on Sartre point to the circumvention exercised by the Chinese writers and reporters. It is significant, for instance, that after ten years of positive reporting on Sartre and his work, a short report on Sartre in 1965 for internal circulation only quoted heavily from Mary McCarthy’s denouncement of him as philosophically passé and politically irrelevant.²⁵ The time was the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Earlier, *Being and Nothingness* had already been translated into Mandarin, however, and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was soon to be translated during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution as one of the “gray-cover books” (*huipishu*) for internal circulation. The clandestine circulation of these gray-cover books constituted part of the intellectual underground during the Cultural Revolution.²⁶

On the other hand, Sartre was, by the early 1960s, embroiled in the humanist controversy in France. The most pertinent aspect of the controversy in relation to Sartre is Althusser’s vehement criticism of Sartre’s espousal of Marxist humanism. Althusser accused him of sacrificing “intellectual and scientific work” to “political and ideological conflict,” placing theory second to praxis, and dismissed Sartre as a revisionist and an idealist.²⁷ Though Althusser might have been at the center of criticism for his instigation during the controversy, the ensuing intellectual turn in France privileged theory over praxis and proved Althusser’s structuralism to be more in line with later developments. This would have important American consequences. This was the “linguistic turn” that Fredric Jameson lamented as the beginning of depoliticization in French thought, leading to poststructuralism as we know it and largely dispensing with the conjuncture of existentialism, Marxism, and humanism that Sartre had championed.²⁸ Those of us situated in the United States live daily the consequences of this linguistic turn, because the depoliticization that Jameson laments was in no small measure aided and enabled by American academia, which financed the lectures and visits of French poststructuralist thinkers and translated their work for worldwide dissemination, thanks to the economic prosperity of American late capitalism and the preeminence of global English. This French (post)structuralist thought was dominant
in American academia in most of the humanistic disciplines for several decades, with American academia playing a significant role in the particular shapes it took then and since. Spivak’s translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* in 1976 would not only inaugurate deconstructionism in the United States, but it would also serve as a significant theoretical basis for Spivak’s formulation of postcolonial theory.

While it is well known that Marxist humanism of the global 1960s involved several prominent British intellectuals—Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and John Berger—American involvement in this discussion has largely been forgotten. Erich Fromm, who was born in Germany, associated with the Frankfurt School, but is now remembered mainly as a psychologist, spent much of his life teaching and practicing in the United States. It was Fromm who had invited Althusser to write what came to be the instigating and inaugurating article of the controversy, “Marxism and Humanism,” for the anthology Fromm was putting together, *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*. He later disinvited Althusser upon reading the essay’s antihumanist thrust. Althusser recounts this event with sarcasm in the introductory section of the long essay, “The Humanist Controversy.” It was Fromm who helped foster the discussion of Marx’s 1844 manuscripts with his 1961 *Marx’s Concept of Man*, which included a translation of the manuscripts. This book was followed in 1965 by the aforementioned anthology, *Socialist Humanism*, which included Senghor’s declaratory piece, “Socialism Is Humanism.”

But the leading figure of Marxist humanism in the United States is undoubtedly Raya Dunayevskaya, who is considered its founder there, beginning with the 1955 establishment of the News and Letters Committee that continues to exist today. Even though Adrienne Rich called her a “major thinker in the history of Marxism and of women’s liberation,” Dunayevskaya is regrettably not much remembered these days. However, her particular conjoining of Marxist humanism with women’s liberation as well as her pioneering version of critical race theory (what she called the “Black dimension”) have an enormous significance that is yet to be evaluated and appreciated fully. Her long collaboration with C. L. R. James during his years in the United States also deserves attention, for their efforts to bring feminism and antiracism to Marxism. It was she, after all, who first translated Marx’s 1844 manuscripts into English, and it was she, also, who insisted on the importance of Marx’s little known last writings, *Ethnological Notebooks*, in which he was critical of the ethnocentricity of mainstream European ethnographers who disavowed the genocide of American Indians and were otherwise ignorant about issues of cultural and racial difference. In many articles and lectures throughout her life, Dunayevskaya offered her trenchant views on the black dimension, whether in the abolition movement, women’s movement, or revolutionary struggles.
for freedom in general, arguing that it “extended the whole philosophy of human liberation.”

Contrary to the little-red-book-waving Maoists in France and elsewhere, Althusser’s short but approving remarks on Mao’s theory of contradiction, or Sartre’s hopeful romanticism about Maoist China in the 1950s, Dunayevskaya may be credited as the Marxist humanist with the prescient foresight to be critical of Maoism throughout this period. She pointed out that the specter haunting Mao since the Hungarian Revolution was that of Marxist humanism (which she preferred to call Marx’s humanism), and she specifically critiqued party theorist Zhou Yang’s negative views expressed in 1963 on Marx’s 1844 manuscripts. On Mao’s theory of contradiction, which Euro-American Marxists somehow ended up fetishizing, her words were extraordinarily sharp: she attacked it, as early as 1957, as “pretentious phrasemongering,” full of “vulgari-ties that pass for philosophy,” calling Mao a “state-capitalist tyrant.” Unlike most Marxists in the 1960s, she denounced the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, using a quote from Hegel, as a “giddy whirl of self-perpetuating disorder.” Throughout, she was also critical of the romantic tolerance of Maoism among the Euro-American left, which mistook Mao and Mao’s China as the agent of third-world anti-imperialism against the United States while willfully ignoring Maoist China’s state capitalist and totalitarian practices. Consider, she noted, China’s failure to assist North Vietnam in the Vietnam War, the “counterrevolutionary rolling out of the red carpet for Nixon,” and the attempt to create a Peking-Jakarta axis following the carefully engineered Sino-Soviet split: China was in fact using a calculated strategy to become the “new universal for ‘world revolution,’ ” the “sole leader” of “world revolution.” Hence, she wrote later that there was in the end “no sort of revolutionary legacy [Mao] could possibly leave the Chinese masses.” In historical hindsight, Dunayevskaya’s critique of Maoist state capitalism, totalitarianism, and the Cultural Revolution was far ahead of the times, and it was based on a rigorous interpretation of Marxism, not the soapy liberal humanism that has been pouring out in the West in commodified representations of the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese Marxist humanists of the early 1980s, who critiqued Maoism from positions within Marxism, would have had much more theoretical ammunition for their convictions had Dunayevskaya’s works been known in China.

That C. L. R. James’s work on Caribbean revolutions and black emancipation in the United States continues to be valorized while Dunayevskaya’s Marxist-humanist-feminist critique of American imperialism is continuously marginalized follows a predictable logic that suppresses internal dissent, especially feminist dissent, within the United States. We will always have our favorite third-world male intellectuals who live in or
return to the third world (in this case, Trinidad), but we will always ignore our own internal, feminist critics, even though James and Dunayevskaya worked very closely together for about two decades and developed many of their major ideas through collaboration. Overall, as well, the American marginalization of Marxist humanism in the 1960s and after is part of its global suppression, ironically not so much by capitalist forces as by the so-called progressives of many hues, first by the Soviets in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, then by Mao and his party theorists, and by the proponents of the linguistic turn in France. Unfortunately as well, similar to the fate that confronted Sartre, whose humanist Marxism lost ground in the contest during the linguistic turn in France, Dunayevskaya’s Marxist humanism was not popular among those who mistakenly conflated different humanisms, as if being critical of male-centric and white-centric Enlightenment humanism precluded meaningful engagement with Marxist humanism, which is attentive to questions of gender and race. In the specific context of the United States, the Marxist humanism of Dunayevskaya offered models of coexistence between Marxism and feminism, between Marxism and antiracism; but monolithic feminism and antiracism ignored these models in their push for liberal feminism and what I would call an easy and simplistic form of identity politics. In our current rethinking of humanism, there is much Dunayevskaya’s work has to contribute.

**Marxist Humanism and Chinese Postsocialism**

Roughly two decades after the eruption of Marxist humanism in Eastern Europe, Wang Ruoshui, who was at the time no less than the deputy editor of *People’s Daily*, wrote: “A specter is haunting China’s intellectuals — the specter of humanism,” which provocatively rewrote the famous beginning of Marx’s “Manifesto of the Communist Party”: “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism.” Wang was taking on nothing less than a historically situated, context-specific reinterpretation of orthodox Marxism for China, this time occasioned by the death of Mao in 1976. By the time he published this provocation, the actual debate had been going on for about three years, involving major intellectuals as well as party theoreticians. As a chief theorist of Marxist humanism, Wang’s objective was to redefine the human in China as not merely a classed subject but one with subjective consciousness; not just a socialist worker but a consumer; not just endowed with spirit and thought but also desire, emotion, and will. He asserted that one needed to overcome “the socialism of poverty” (*qiong shehui zhuyi*; Chinese under socialism were equal but only equal in poverty) and to confront realistically the material and spiritual needs of the new socialist subject, whose character, talent, physical ability, and versatile personality needed to be fully developed.
As was the case in France, Eastern Europe, and the United States, the major basis of this humanism was the 1844 manuscripts, in which young Marx had cast communism as humanism. According to young Marx, man is a being with natural impulses, emotions, and passions; is sensuous and corporeal; endowed with physical and mental senses (thinking, loving, wanting, acting, willing, etc.), man has both physical and aesthetic needs; man’s essential being is social and objective, but it is also subjective. Man can be, in short, an “individual social being,” in “the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being,” Marx writes. Communism as humanism thus resolves the conflict between objectification and self-confirmation, the individual and the species. Again, as was the case in Eastern Europe, the rediscovery of the 1844 manuscripts was nothing short of shattering.

Starting from a position critical of the dehumanizing effects of the Cultural Revolution and building on Eastern European interpretations of Marxist humanism, Wang sought similarities and consistencies in early and later Marx to challenge the version of orthodox Marxism propagated in Maoist China. His targets of criticism were the dogmatism of the extreme Left, the Maoist cult of personality, and the bureaucratism of the party, all of which caused alienation even within a socialist society where the value of the human had been discredited. Arguing that Cultural Revolution was “anti-human” in his first controversial essay published in 1980, “On the Problem of Alienation,” Wang uses the experience of the Cultural Revolution to suggest that, other than the alienation of labor that Marx critiqued for capitalist societies, there were actually three forms of alienation in socialist China—spiritual, political, and economic. The cult of personality, developed to the extreme, had become a kind of superstition in which Mao was the sun and the father (if not the god), leading to the spiritual alienation of the people. Bureaucrats, supposed servants of the people, had become the masters of the people, leading to the political alienation of the people as well as the alienation of the party from the people. The lack of adequate economic knowledge combined with bureaucratism led to environmental devastation, industrial pollution, and the alienation of workers from labor (in the sense that their labor did not benefit them even though free of capitalist exploitation). Wang ends the article by encouraging his readers to read the works of early Marx, previously considered unimportant and difficult to understand. Wang then characterized his version of Marxist humanism as “revolutionary humanism” as opposed to capitalist, bourgeois humanism.

Parallel and related to the astounding furor caused by the debate on Marxist humanism, with hundreds of articles debating its pros and cons, was the rediscovery of the work of Sartre on the occasion of his death in 1980. No less than the inaugural issue of *Contemporary Foreign Literature*
(Dangdai waiguo wenxue) reported the death of Sartre and declared him “a friend of the Chinese people.” Alongside this is an article titled “Sartre and Existentialism,” in which, though the article is rather critical of Sartre’s individualist tendencies, the phrase “revolutionary humanism” is used to describe Sartre’s existentialism. The most influential book that helped spur the ensuing Sartre (Sartre fever), however, was Liu Mingjiu’s edited volume Research on Sartre, published in 1981, which quickly went into seven printings. In Liu’s widely read foreword to the book, he declared that “the death of Sartre has posed a challenging research topic for the theorists of [our] big socialist country.” Now the Sartre fever was officially on: Existentialism Is a Humanism could be found in the hands of numerous students and intellectuals, and Being and Nothingness became a best seller. Sartrean aphorisms filled the air, becoming “superhot phrases” (chaoji reci); Sartre, in short, became the object of “intellectual first love” (jingshen chulian) for the generation of students and intellectuals that immediately followed the Cultural Revolution. A college student whose major was French broke into a bookstore to steal Sartre’s books one night, was discovered, ended up punching an old man accidentally to death during his escape, was caught, and was summarily executed. The extent of Sartre’s popularity would also be confirmed when he was named as a pollutant during the ensuing Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983, alongside pornography, Western dress, and other signs of bourgeois decadence.

The launching of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign meant that Research on Sartre was purged, but a graver fate awaited Wang. He was stripped of his job as deputy editor of People’s Daily and later expelled from the party. But the damage was already done: Marxist humanism remained part of the larger cultural zeitgeist of the 1980s and beyond. Despite the violent crackdown in June 1989, new discussions on the question of the human subject in a socialist society were to emerge continually. Landmark literary works from Dai Houying’s classic 1980 Human, Ah Human! (Ren a ren) to 1990s classics such as Wang Anyi’s Songs of Everlasting Sorrow (Changhenge) negotiated Marxism and humanism in complex ways. The translation of Paul Fussell’s book Class: A Guide through the American Status System into Taste: Social Status and Style of Life (Gediao: Shehui dengji yu shenghuo pinwei), which was a best seller in 1999, might be an extreme case of the rethinking of Marxism, by now corrupted into a liberal, market-friendly humanism that placed a high premium on tasteful consumption.

A long scholarly report published in book form in 2002, Research Report on Contemporary Chinese Social Stratification (Zhongguo dangdai shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao), is notable as a widely known effort to rethink the question of class within the parameters of socialism. Commissioned by the Central Politburo and drafted by a designated research group at
the Sociology Institute of the Academy of Social Sciences, the report was based on three years of exhaustive research and data gathering in twelve provinces. It went to three printings within two months, selling about twenty thousand copies, was banned soon afterward, but was made available again later. The report states that there are now five statuses (dengji) and ten different strata (jieceng) of people in China, as opposed to the old “two classes and one stratum” (liangge jieji he yige jieceng) system (the working class, the peasant class, and the intellectual stratum). It asserts that the increased layering of Chinese society into ten strata is the precondition for the modernization of Chinese society, as evidenced by the examples of Europe, America, Japan, and South Korea. It argues that the old socialist model of social development based on conflict between the classes is outdated, and that the new model is “utilitarian” and emphasizes mutual benefit and social harmony among different social strata to achieve the goal of socioeconomic development in order to build a “modernized socialist nation.” The old system of classes based on identity at birth (one’s being born into a peasant, worker, or cadre family) was “very unjust, very unreasonable,” and worked as a systematic barrier to the social mobility necessary for modernized societies. Through the process of increased diversification of professions and jobs and by the degree of possession of political, economic, or cultural (technological) capital (note the language of different capitals, à la Pierre Bourdieu), the ten strata of people belong to five socioeconomic statuses: the upper, the upper middle, the middle middle, the lower middle, and the lower. The report does recognize that there is increasing economic disparity between those who are engaged in mental labor and those who are engaged in physical labor, between the managers and the managed, but sees this disparity as the “necessary consequence” of “technological progress and social structural development for an industrialized society.” What should be eliminated, instead, are the privileges of those with political capital who are the largest holders of socioeconomic resources, a situation that causes Chinese social stratification to be a “pyramid structure” with those who have political power on the top and the majority of the people on the lower and lower-middle statuses. The modernization of Chinese socioeconomic structure will be complete only when this pyramid structure gives way to an “olive structure,” with a narrow top and bottom and the largest strata in the middle. Currently, the middle ranks are still too small, constituting only 15 percent of the population, which points to the “inequality of distribution of social resources and the large gap between rich and poor.” Only when the middle statuses become the majority can there be a more equal, open, and rational society.

People occupying the middle statuses are thus ideal citizens. They are defined as “those who engage mainly in mental labor, depend on salary for
a living, have the ability to acquire a higher paid profession in a superior working environment, and have corresponding ability for consumption for the family with a certain leisure and quality of life; those with a definite ability to manipulate the object of labor and work; and those with consciousness of citizenship, public morality, and corresponding virtues. In sum, people of the middle statuses are civil and moral citizens who exercise a good degree of control over their work and life with the ability to consume and to enjoy leisure. The ability to consume is defined as meeting “the rich cultural and spiritual needs” of the individual and his or her family members by meeting the “necessary material conditions, such as owning private property, a car, taking periodic vacations, and engaging in corresponding cultural and social consumption.”

What makes this report particularly shocking is its thorough debunking of the Maoist concept of the human, which, according to Donald Munro, drew heavily from late Marx filtered through Russian lenses. Mao considered man’s biological nature for self-preservation and self-interest to be trivial and bourgeois and gave primacy to man’s social nature. For Mao, feelings and interests are social products, human nature is class-determined, and individual identity is derived from group identity. In contrast, the report defines the desired characteristics of the new socialist human along lines similar to, yet exceeding, Marx’s 1844 manuscripts as well as Wang’s revolutionary humanism. It is only in the report’s deep concern about economic and social inequality and in its critique of the monopoly of economic capital by political capital that it echoes Wang’s critique of socialist alienation and remains in the tradition of Marxist humanism. At least two other major reports on the question of class and subjectivity, with presumed scholarly neutrality, appeared the same year, with numerous others following. With the tide of renxue (human studies) ranging from Marxist to Confucian to liberal persuasions, and in cultural genres as diverse as art, film, literary works, and academic scholarship, these reports were part of the larger trend to rethink the human, to take socialist men and women to a phase that comes after—namely, to usher in the birth of the postsocialist human. If we understand the “post” in postsocialism in its polysemous implications not only of “after,” “against,” and “in reaction to” but also of “ineluctably connected to” and “as a consequence of,” we approach a generally inclusive understanding of the postsocialist human. Seen from the trajectory of Marxist humanism in China, then, the postsocialist human is most certainly not posthumanist.

Ethnicity, or Whose Humanism?

I have so far provided a short history of Marxist humanism as an intellectual formation exceeding the usual first world/second world, first
world/third world, and China/the West binaries and to show that Marxist humanism is crucial to a fuller understanding of worldwide historical developments of the global 1960s and beyond, with implications important for, but not limited to, postsocialism and posthumanism. The Marxist humanism of Fanon, Senghor, Sartre, Dunayevskaya, James, and Wang, to name just a few leading figures in varying geographic locales, has been central to these movements, whether they are colonies, communist countries, or capitalist states. From the Soviet, Eastern European, and Chinese eruptions of Marxist humanism, we can see how it was an effective means to critique the domination from within communist states. From American discussions of Marxist humanism, we can see how it was what could have linked revolutionary movements along class lines with those of gender and race. Its usefulness therefore cuts across first, second, and third worlds, across communist and capitalist blocs, and across the East and the West.

The suppression of the legacy of Marxist humanism, however, has led to a profound misunderstanding of Marxism’s relationship to humanism in anticolonial, decolonial, women’s rights, and minority rights movements in different parts of the world. In the context of the United States, because postcolonial studies took a detour through poststructuralism and could approach the question of the subject only with suspicion, the agency of the anticolonial or decolonial human subject often got lost in a mesh of confusing theoretical elaborations. The problem arose from the obvious necessity to critique Enlightenment humanism, but the simple fact is that not all humanisms are the same, and Marxist humanism should not have been conflated with other varieties of humanism.

Instead, we can view Marxist humanism as a theoretical intervention on liberal, Eurocentric humanism and, as such, as a potential that was not realized in postcolonial theory, because Marxist humanism alone could have offered the possibility to conceive of the oppressed or the colonized as the human involved in revolutionary action. This revolutionary subject is fully human; hence one’s gendered and racialized—not just classed—subjectivity must be brought to bear as constitutive of one’s social experience. For the women’s movement, which unfortunately became dominated by liberal feminism, the unrealized potential of Marxist humanism lay in the possibility for Marxism and feminism to build on each other rather than cancel each other out through the fight over the priority of class versus gender. For minority rights of the racialized within women’s and other social movements, the mutual distrust of feminists and antiracists perhaps could have been avoided. Dunayevskaya wrote about these concerns as early as the 1950s, engaging with the works of the Harlem Renaissance and the black dimension in the women’s movement.

We can also view Marxist humanism as a theoretical intervention in
the dogmatic Marxism of communist states, and as such it was a potential that was not realized prior to many of these communist states’ post–Cold War and postsocialist onward march toward market economy and neoliberalization, which instituted the liberal humanism of the market as the implicit standard. The potential for arriving at a humanism from within Marxism, such as the movements in Eastern Europe and China, was crushed each time it emerged as a possibility. In the China of the present, the liberal humanism of the market—the false consciousness of the consumer as an individual—is deftly managed alongside pseudocollectivist slogans of the “harmonious society” (hexie shehui), now unabashedly more Confucian than Marxist. In this context, it is the primitive-accumulation-type capitalists armed with political and economic capital who have the greatest right to be humans. Those living in “peace under heaven” (taiping tianxia) are much less likely to be the ethnic and religious minorities, the working poor, the peasants, and the urban proletariats.

Drawing from these two interventions of Marxist humanism, we need to combine the urgency of the question, which humanism? with the question, whose humanism? everywhere, but especially in China today. Mass riots and uprisings are common occurrences in China, but those involving ethnic minorities might be the most volatile and compel us to ask, whose humanism? in terms of ethnicity. Minority writers in China have been shifting the question this way, about how ethnicity has conditioned their experience under Chinese socialism, especially after the period of high socialism (1949–76). The larger question here is the changing relationship between postsocialism and what I would call “socialist multiculturalism” that borrowed heavily from Soviet nationality policy, but a more specific question concerns the search for a new humanism among minority writers and thinkers throughout the postsocialist period.

Three observations need to be made, however briefly, at this point. First, due to the wounds from Western colonialism and “yellow peril” racism, the question of race and ethnicity had always been framed in terms of the binary of China versus the West. This framing largely displaced a concerted discussion of the question within China, thanks also to the ongoing “Hanification” policies of ethnic minority areas by the party-state. Second, due to this binary frame, the rise of ethnic consciousness in postsocialist China is often seen as manipulation by Western media, as in the unrest in Uyghur and Tibetan areas. Third, intellectual debates throughout the postsocialist period automatically assumed “the Chinese” to be a unified entity and seldom questioned their underlying Han-centrism. In this regard, American anthropologist Ralph Litzinger’s plea that the “ethnic margins” need to be “written into new theorizations of postsocialism” in China is notable, as is the New Qing historiography’s turn to the
study of ethnicity in the Qing empire, which has profound contemporary implications.59

Ethnic Hui, or Sinophone Muslim, writer Zhang Chengzhi’s genre-defying, award-winning, and deeply religious 1991 text, *A History of the Soul* (*Xinling shi*), like the works of many ethnic minority writers in China, does not, for instance, consider the framework of China versus the West to be of any consequence, nor does it engage with it. In his attempt at an “ethnoreligious historiography,” Zhang individuates major historical figures in the long history of suffering and persecution of the Jahriyya sect of Islam in the Chinese northwest throughout the centuries.60 He writes of his pursuit of humanism this way: “In my own way, I have tried to search for a true form of humanism. Even though I suffered enough of the immense difficulties Chinese culture has thrown my way when pursuing ideals, the great suffering and the shedding of blood by the common people of the Jahriyya in the Great Northwest has given me great joy to the extent that I have willingly accepted [their ideals].”61

It is through identification with the sufferings of the subaltern people and through the (re)writing of the histories of the leading figures of this particular Sufi sect that Zhang offers his own challenge to “orthodox China” (*zhengtong de Zhongguo*) and the “butchering knives of the state” and his challenge to escape from “the expansive prison within the nation.”62 The framework here may be characterized as an opposition within China, between the Han Chinese and the Hui Chinese, between socialist atheism and Islamic religiosity, and between the state machine and the ethno-religious subalterns, but resolutely not between China and the West. The grand binarism of China versus the West requires putative internal coherence within the entities thus opposed, and it is a convenient way to occlude China’s internal diversity on the part of those who claim to represent China. Whom does such binarism serve? This question returns us to Appiah’s critique of elite postcolonial intellectuals with which I started this article. The China-versus-the-West binarism operates similarly on opposition, ressentiment, and the more commercially useful “alteritism,” in which elite intellectuals either nurture their wounds or commodify their cultures and histories. But, as Appiah noted, actually practiced and lived African popular culture does not heed or care about this, and neither do minority writers in China like Zhang, who has discovered Arabic to be his long-lost mother tongue. The battlefield now is calibrated along ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural lines. More damagingly, the China-versus-the-West framework actually contributes to greater Han-centrism precisely because Han-dominant major intellectual discourses can easily dismiss other concerns, particularly ethnicity and religion, as secondary or irrelevant. After all, Chinese intellectuals can fall back on Mao’s theory of
contradiction to say that ethnicity and religion are minor contradictions, not the principal contradiction of China versus the West.

The works of scholars of ethnic studies and critical race studies in the United States may be seen as broadly Marxist humanist endeavors, and they may be considered the deserved inheritors of American Marxist humanism of the last century. What this means is that Chinese studies would do well to draw comparative insights from ethnic studies and critical race studies in order to fully engage with questions of race and ethnicity in China. The triangulation among France, China, and the United States through the pivot of Marxist humanism in history from the 1950s to the present that I have offered here is not only about the crisscrossing of knowledges and ideas but also about methodologies. Just as Marxist humanism imbricates all parties involved, critical race studies also imbricates all. French philosopher Étienne Balibar, for instance, draws heavily from American critical race studies in thinking about the question of race in Europe. For China, we may ask what further questions can be raised when we consider the “ethnic margins” as constitutive of Chinese history and culture. New Qing historians have done important work in this regard, especially for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as have the anthropologists in their ethnographies of minority peoples in the postsocialist period, but the task yet to be done is a sustained humanistic critique of mainstream intellectual discourses throughout the socialist and postsocialist periods from the perspective informed by questions of ethnicity and race. Such a methodological cross-fertilization, I would add, is not simply about methods, as if they were decontextualized from history. The rise of ethnic consciousness is part and parcel of the postsocialist condition in China and elsewhere, and this is the condition of the present.

Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Stanford University, University of Toronto, University of Washington, Vanderbilt University, and University of California, Los Angeles. I would like to acknowledge helpful research tips from Xie Zhixi of Qinghua University and Liu Dong of Beijing University that greatly enhanced the portion of this paper on Sartre’s trip to China. I consider Xie’s gift to me of his personal copy of the Mandarin translation of Being and Nothingness, heavily marked and underlined by him during those heady years in the 1980s, an ultimate gesture of friendship. I also gratefully acknowledge the influence of his major work, Existentialism and Modern Chinese Literature (cunzai zhuyi yu Zhongguo xiandai wenxue), on my own work. Finally, I would like to thank the guest editors and anonymous reviewers of Social Text for their careful reading and critical engagement with this piece. All translations in this essay from the Mandarin original are my own.


3. Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism?”


5. The array of articles included in the reader *Posthumanism* is indicative of this trend. It includes excerpts of classic articles by Roland Barthes, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and Louis Althusser, then moves on to posthuman gender, solar system, cyborgs, and so forth. Neil Badmington, ed., *Posthumanism* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).


8. Ibid., 28.


11. The limited space of this article will not allow me to expound the notion of trialectics, which I will take up in later work, but see my discussion of triangulation as method in Shu-mei Shih, “Comparative Racialization: An Introduction,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1347–62.


16. Incidentally, this is the history that gave Western academia Zgymunt Bauman, who was exiled from Poland.

17. See Wang Ruoshui’s recounting of the turn of events in China during the late 1950s and early 1960s in regard to criticism of the cult of personality of Stalin and Mao’s own later adoption of the cult of personality leading up to and during the Cultural Revolution, in Wang Ruoshui, *In Defense of Humanism* (Beijing: Sanlian, 1986), 38–44.


20. This French phrase from the essay (my translation) appears in the reminiscences of Luo Dagang, who met and conversed with Sartre several times during the latter’s visit. Luo Dagang, “Dao Sate” (“Mourning Sartre”), *Shijie wenxue*, no. 4 (1980): 285–99.


23. See Jean-Paul Sartre, “Huan quangquanzheng de shoulei” (“Rabies-infected Beasts”), *Yiwen* (June 1956): 70–75; and the news item “Sulian zuojia fabiao gongkaixin dafu faguo zuojia sate deng de kangling” (“Soviet Writers Publish Public Letter Responding to the Protest of French Writers such as Sartre”), *Yiwen* (January 1957): 185–87.


33. Ironically, Althusser’s short mention of Mao’s theory of contradiction may be Mao’s only claim to fame in the realm of theory, leading to, for instance, Slavoj Žižek’s “presenting” of Mao in a new anthology of Mao’s work, *On Practice and Contradiction* (New York: Verso, 2007). Žižek agrees with Althusser that Mao’s theory of contradiction is his main contribution to Marxist theory.
37. Ibid., 158.
40. Ibid., 1, 85, 208–11.
41. Ibid., 271–72. Here he is quoting a June 1980 editorial in the newspaper Zhongguo qingnian on the new definition of the socialist subject as echoing his own position.
43. Ibid., 86, 84.
44. Ibid., 186–99. For a succinct discussion of Chinese theories of alienation during this time, see Jing Wang, High Culture Fever (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), chapt. 1. She notes, especially, the extensive translation of Eastern European Marxist humanist works in the prestigious journal Zhexue yicong (Translation of Philosophy) between 1979 and 1982.
52. Ibid., 57.
53. Ibid., 7.
54. Ibid., 73.
55. Ibid., 252.
56. Ibid., 253.


