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# The Shadow of Democracy

**REBECCA E. KARL**

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> Depoliticization is the oldest task of politics, the one which achieves its fulfilment at the brink of its end.… — Jacques Rancière[1]

It is next to impossible to write today, now, in this fraught historical moment about the May Fourth Movement and its centenary with anything other than sheer astonishment—still!—over the number of different sorts of people in China who organized themselves at that time, and who, in the extended process of self-organization, articulated—however inchoately and sometimes even incoherently—an intellectual and activist program of resistance and opposition to the corrupt domestic governmental systems, global institutions, local organizations, and specific individuals who were betraying the very principles of democracy and sovereignty that were supposed to be upheld.[2] The betrayal of democratic and sovereign principles was part of an ongoing process of the elaboration of an establishment political position exercised by and through the wished-for domination of political and economic possibility by the powerful and by those who strove for power. As that process of imperialist-colonial expansion along with anti-democratic state-formation and sociocultural hegemonizing—sometimes in tandem with one another, and sometimes separately—became ever more evident, an increasingly vocal opposition posed itself as an active political force and not merely as a detached or abstract form of remonstrance. Through their activist political interventions and in the ensuing contingent realization of an incipient mass movement—incomplete, urban-based, and often elitist, to be sure—a new political consciousness and a new political discourse arose: a consciousness and discourse of the possibilities of and in mass mobilization, of a political practice of mass democracy.[3] The May Fourth Movement, in its temporal proximity to and political juxtaposition with the Korean and Indian movements of the same year, and in the political space created by

Rebecca E. Karl (rebecca.karl@nyu.edu) is Professor of History at New York University.

[1]Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), 20.

[2]The title of this article was suggested to me by a fortuitous rereading of Stefan Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[3]Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Recent commentary in the PRC on the May Fourth Movement and its aftermath is far less positive than it used to be. During the last anniversary, May 2018, articles and social media posts on WeChat and other sites were circumspect. A new historical consensus has formed to focus on what is deemed the most deleterious effects of May Fourth: that the demonstrations were illegal, gave free rein to mob rule, and were violent manifestations of the lack of the rule of law. See *Dafeng Hao* 大风号, WeChat forum, May 5, 2018, especially the essay by Prof. Feng Xiaocai 冯筱才.

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the ongoing revolution in Russia, helped constitute a world historical moment. That protracted moment can be seen as the inflection of the forces of global capitalism and imperialism into modern historical consciousness and political activism in China, as elsewhere.

While the narrative contours that comprise the May Fourth Movement, narrowly defined, are well-known to China scholars, let me provide a brief précis for nonexperts. With the Versailles Treaty ending the Great War in 1919, the Chinese state's aspirations to recover its colonized territories were thwarted. This was, to be sure, not a fate singularly attached to China, as many peoples around the world—Koreans, Egyptians, Palestinians, Indians, etc.—faced the frustration of their desires for sovereignty when the allied victorious Western powers, plus Japan, traded away the principles of self-determination for immediate political-economic gain in the settlement of war hostilities. Having already started to mobilize intellectually around a number of cultural and political challenges to the conservative hegemony still dominant in lived social practice (labeled "traditional" or "Confucian"), urban denizens in China's cities learned the news of the Versailles betrayals via telegraph and burst into spontaneous but soon organized resistances to the Chinese delegation's proposed signing of the treaty in Paris. The resulting "May Fourth Movement"—as a discrete event, starting among Beijing University students and radiating out over urban spaces while uniting urban classes behind a set of basic sociopolitical and cultural demands—soon gained iconic status in modern Chinese studies. Later, historians also came to label the May Fourth Movement an "enlightenment" movement, because of the leadership of intellectuals and the visibility of "Mr. Democracy" and "Mr. Science," the twin ideals blazoned on banners that festooned urban spaces through the spring of 1919.

The centrality of the May Fourth Movement to the birth of modern China has long been one of those well-established paradigmatic norms that mostly went unexamined until recently. In this mode of scholarship, the movement was credited with all things modern, all things enlightened, with bringing to social consciousness a full appreciation of the ills of Chinese "traditional" society—in its family, gendered, hierarchical, language, literary, cultural, and other structuring forms. After the thoroughgoing May Fourth critique, it was said, all of those "traditional" forms were rendered obsolete and slated for historical erasure. Meanwhile, the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial activism, and of global solidarities in every radical form imaginable were said to have sprung from the May Fourth moment. It is in this sense that the launching of modern Chinese history was said to have begun from May Fourth.

Have all of the many claims retrospectively made for the consequences of this activist moment been accurate? Was May Fourth, as has been variously claimed, the clarifying dawn of enlightenment, of renaissance, of communism, of Marxism, of socialism, of feminism, of liberalism, of internationalist anti-colonial solidarity, of anti-Confucianism, and so on? Did the moment erupt from nowhere, as Hera from Zeus's head? It is now clear, of course, that there were always lines of intellectual and cultural filiation leading from earlier to the May Fourth moment that cannot be shorn from that moment, but rather must be reattached to it. It is these challenges to the ruptural nature of May Fourth that have dominated the last several decades of scholarship across the political spectrum and have helped deconstruct and decenter May Fourth as an originary moment of China's modernity and of China's modern history. In debunking the excessive claims on the May Fourth Movement, and in the process of decentering it, the historical

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significance of that extended moment has also been buried and is being lost. In my opinion, and even recognizing its historical derivations, one can and should still make claims for a political and activist consciousness born of and in the May Fourth Movement without deconstructing the moment so completely that it disappears from view.

May Fourth was not a single event, but rather an over-determination of several events; it was a historical duration during which a number of concerns were articulated coherently and systematically for the first time. This brief essay on the centenary of May Fourth is primarily intended as a reminder to take seriously those historical moments such as the May Fourth Movement in China—or analogous movements elsewhere, such as in Korea or India in 1919—when a politics of mass democracy happens, even if the potential of that politics is inadequate in its own time and it almost inevitably—if not immediately—presides over its own erosion.[4] On this view, the extended May Fourth moment is a Chinese-located world historical movement whose political and cultural democratic resonances and reverberations not only helped shape modern China, but also helped inform the emergent post–World War I global environment of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist political and cultural revolutions. By "cultural revolution," I mean an extended moment during which there was great aesthetic reflexivity yielding a serious interrogation into how artistic modes might relate to the history in which they are imbricated; or more generally, even, in Fredric Jameson's terms, cultural revolution can be understood as interventions that helped organize the social world of thought and cultural production in a new way, without being a clean break from the past.[5] By "political revolution," I mean the envisioning of possible futures in which political arrangements correspond to dramatically transformed and more equitable social and economic relations, possibilities that yield the beginning of a working towards the realization of the future.

Arguing for the central importance of May Fourth to modern Chinese history may place me in the more conservative—or at least, apparently less forward-thinking—wing of our field. For, just as the past decades have witnessed a real and ongoing successful effort to decenter the May Fourth Movement, the claims of May Fourth on modernity in China and its hold on the imagination and accounts of historians and scholars of most persuasions have also been loosened. Modernity as a category is now discredited. In the trendy heat of this conceptual rejection of existing paradigms, decentering the moment became an urgent endeavor by revisionist scholars and their many students. In my view, and in general, this decentering has led to an *inflation* of modernity in ever-proliferating and multiple adjectival forms, a process through which endless numbers of institutional

[4]This is derived from Rancière's argument in *On the Shores of Politics*, *op. cit.* note 1, a point recently recalled to me by reading Walid el Houri, "Beyond Failure and Success: Revolutions and the Politics of Endurance," *Radical Philosophy* 2.02 (2018), https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/beyond-failure-and-success (accessed July 3, 2018). As el Houri comments, the "failure of politics *as* politics is … precisely its transformation into a new order." This point has been made by many historians of Mao's China, including by me, Maurice Meisner, Arif Dirlik, and others; it was Mao Zedong's argument that institutionalization was the death of revolution and politics.

[5]I am indebted to Harry Harootunian for a long set of comments on a draft of this piece, from which the above insights are derived. Jameson's argument comes in many places, but see Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," *Social Text* 9/10 (1984): 178–209.

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and sociocultural formations are now used as modifiers of "modernity." This adjectival inflation has yielded, essentially, institutional modernization as a synonym for modernity. The return of modernization theory in this form of rationalized institutionalization is thus one of the many products of this inflationary process. At the same time, through this inflationary process, we get a diluting and indeed an erasure of modernity as a tendentially unifying and defining *problematique*—locally lived in differential fashion—of global connectedness in the nineteenth-century world and beyond. Modernity has now become an empty signifier in much historical writing: it is a name calling itself, with no theoretical rigor or substance whatsoever.

Yet, whether or not one takes modernity to be a locally lived, globalized problematic of and within capitalist imperialism as a foundational premise of how one sees the May Fourth Movement and its aftermath must be considered a *political* line of academic division. Indeed, in the field's mainstream—in China as in the United States and elsewhere—the tendential totalization of global capitalism has been discarded in favor of the atomized adjectival approach. This is not a neutral move. The consequence is, as Walter Rodney remarked in a different albeit conceptually related context with regard to the Russian Revolution, that the problem of political perspective is reduced to a problem of taxonomies "which presume the same order of difference between sheepdog, wolf, cat and lion," rather than being acknowledged as a problem of the political-ideological premise of scholarship itself.[6] Put differently, without what feminist scholar Rosemary Hennessy calls a "global social analytic," we are left with endless differences—adjectival forms—whose political and structural relations seem random and unknowable.[7]

To be sure, within the taxonomical realm, individual aspects of the historiographical trend towards adjectival decentering—and hence detotalizing—have been informative. These empirically grounded studies have identified and filled in different gaps in historical filiations; they have reseeded certain swathes of the field with new flowers (among a number of weeds); and they have opened areas of inquiry long closed-off or rendered invisible by a previous rigid form of event- and great person-centeredness (those old refuges of many historians). Decentering, thus, has allowed us to see longer historical derivations, continuities rather than the ruptures, persistences and resiliences rather than the breaks from historical practice that were the backbone of previous May Fourth historiographical and historical claims. This dense archival and empirical research—not trivial of course—has yielded vital albeit intentionally fragmented results. The new work is not made to add up to more than the (now) required implicit or explicit repudiation of "the" May Fourth Movement as a signifying temporality (modernity), or as a signifying event.[8] It is as if, by adding more and more facts into the case, we allow ourselves

[6]Walter Rodney, "The Two World Views of the Russian Revolution," in *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World*, eds. Robin D. G. Kelley and Jesse J. Benjamin (London: Verso, 2018): 1–24, 9, 11.

[7]Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1993). Much feminist analysis today takes this as its premise. See Mrinalini Sinha, "Mapping the Imperial Social Formation: A Modern Proposal for Feminist History," *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1077–82.

[8]This repudiation sometimes is as complete as the ones depicted by Bai Xianyong (Pai Hsien-yung) in his 1970 short story "Winter Nights" (in *Taipei People* [bilingual ed.], trans. Bai Xianyong and Patia Yasin, ed. George Kao [Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999]). In the story, one

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the illusion that we have finally reached a truth, that the record has finally been set straight. This is no more than a different ideological claim on history in general and China in particular. For, at the same time as adding endless details, it has contributed to the idea that "China" is enduring and eternal as a historical subject moving through and in time: with continuity and endurance of the new norms, "China" can only ever be primordially "Chinese."

We need not believe that May Fourth inaugurated historical time *as such* to appreciate that May Fourth was an important, indeed central moment of modern recognition.[9] It was a moment in which the past collided actively with a present, whose arrival could not be foretold from the patterns of that past. This led, undoubtedly, to continuity and rupture at the same time, to the old alongside the new—what Gramsci might have called a passive revolution in a cultural register. Why not be as politically bold in our work and our claims as May Fourth intellectuals were in theirs? To that end, I want to be insistently and openly ideological and political by asking: what happens when the May Fourth Movement is temporally decentered? More specifically, what happens when May Fourth, as a durational and hitherto historically unique moment of democratic, sociopolitical activism and cultural critique, is dissolved into a continuous causality and chronology, where everything has antecedents and thus nothing appears new under the sun? What happens when it is deconstructed for its marginalized silences, without possibility for reconstructing meaning-production as a coherent historical *problematique* that encompasses rather than disunifies? I suggest that what happens or has happened is that politics disappears, the past and its histories are depoliticized, and democratic promise is discarded, even disallowed by a dystopian future always already foreshadowed in the disappointments of political impossibility.

Events are slippery.[10] They are slippery because they are always the products of historical conceptualization and retrospective reconstruction. In this sense, they are totalizations, and in their constitution as eventful by historians, there can only ever be a gap between the conceived and the lived. As Massimiliano Tomba reminds us, events are simultaneously historical "because they belong to the past," and yet they are also "non-historical because they leap out of the past as a possible future."[11] Perhaps May Fourth has been so deconstructed and repudiated because its possible futures—democracy, justice, radical redistribution of resources, peace—are no longer in sight or have

repudiation is by an unnamed young scholar from Harvard, who delivers a conference paper condemning Chinese intellectuals for their May Fourth abandonment of Chinese tradition; the other is by the two main characters, who were active participants in the May Fourth Movement and yet, in the course of the story, come to rethink that participation as youthful delusion. (I thank Ben Kindler for reminding me of this story.)

For a discussion of the more general repudiation of revolution in China, see Wang Hui, "The Prophecy and Crisis of October: How to Think about Revolution after the Revolution," trans. Benjamin Kindler and Harlan Chambers, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 4 (2017): 669–706.

[9]For a long time, May Fourth was understood to have "inaugurated historical time" in its critique of the putative stagnation of Chinese "tradition." This was always an inflationary claim.

[10]William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005). Also see Manu Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1461–85.

[11]Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), xi.

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been thoroughly betrayed and distorted, or, as in China today, they have been thoroughly tarnished by censorship and disinformation. Thus, perhaps, May Fourth has been so deconstructed *in order* to conceal and retrospectively albeit preemptively eject the historical premise and promise of (mass) democracy from our present and future. Yet, just because the promise of democracy that was the potential hallmark of May Fourth in its rhetorical political, mass activist, and cultural reflexive forms became a dark shadow—or, just because democracy never actually came to pass in many of its utopian ambitions, in China, Korea, or India—should not make its advent less present, unless one wishes ideologically to erase the possibility of radical mass democratic activism from historical memory and potential future imagination.

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The May Fourth Movement—as an extended historical moment lasting from the Great War through at least the May Thirtieth Movement (1925) and beyond—helped disorder the world. This was a disordering of temporality, history, narrative, social formation, and life. In its simultaneity with other such movements around the world—Korea, Egypt, India, and so on—and in its historical dialogue with the proximate Russian Revolution, this disordering helped to instantiate and substantiate an ongoing crisis in global colonial, imperialist, and capitalist arrangements and to think through how this crisis was manifested in and through Chinese life forms. At the same time, it was an attempt to begin to think about a new ordering of that world, a world that was as relentlessly global in its realization as it was ineluctably local and perhaps national in its everyday articulations.[12] In this dual sense, the May Fourth Movement in *its* time presented a potential remaking of worlds; it was a revolutionary movement that aspired to the radical rethinking and transformation of the social, cultural, and political arrangements theretofore imagined or materially inscribed as normative and proper. Any reconsideration or reflection upon it in *our* time—as an event, a movement, a moment, an extended argument for or against the world as it was then and now known—must be attentive to how the dialectics of "1919" and "China"—expansively understood—mutually constituted one another, by shaping each other into a new and necessary form of historical analysis.

"1919" and "China" helped forge a new world historical *problematique*, not only because the mutually constitutive moment presents a ruptural temporal disordering, but also because, from this time onwards, the social forms of local and global life were set along an utterly different path. This ruptural historicity may be difficult to retrieve these days, as there is no doubt that today there is no longer a totalizing democratic revolutionary transformative impulse as a matter of urgent social concern in China (or maybe in many places). Rather, as theorist Dai Jinhua recently has outlined, concern today centers more and more on how power has infiltrated into and restructured the interiority of everyday life and knowledge. Hence, as Dai puts it, if today we are to say "farewell to revolution," it is not because revolution was a twentieth-century aberration (as Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou had it), but, to the contrary, it is because that kind of revolution may no

[12]This is the point John Maynard Keynes makes in his book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1919). As he writes: "The proceedings of Paris all had this air of extraordinary importance and unimportance at the same time. The decisions seemed charged with consequences to the future of human society; yet the air whispered … that it was futile, insignificant, of no effect, dissociated from events" (2).

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longer answer to how we must come to understand the experiences of the embodied realization of power—state and capital—in our own lives.[13] This embodied realization, perhaps, requires a different scope of theorization than that to which we are more accustomed.

Taking this insight about interiority in our contemporary moment as a historical analytical principle for the May Fourth Movement presents us with one possible way to rejoin the newer empirical-adjectival deconstructive moves to older historical claims and thence to tendential totalization. That is, we can focus on the problem of the everyday, although not merely as a catalogue of individual practices and consumer desires, of controlling institutions and supervising bureaucracies, but as a newly experienced disjunct temporality of social life.[14] This everyday can be thought as an incipient form of the restructuring of interiority that manifested, in the May Fourth period and after, as a daily lived experience of capitalist unevenness (local, national, regional, and global) and would-be state power, whose potential remedies were to be found, often enough, in collective action rather than further individuation.[15] This disjunct everyday is what Henri Lefebvre theoretically interrogates under the rubric of "how the social existence of human beings is *produced*."[16]

In taking seriously the local productions of social existence as a major problem of modernity in a global capitalist-imperialist analytic, we can see the May Fourth Movement as an extended expression of a global crisis that was elaborated not only in economic and political terms but also in deeply social and cultural ones as well. This was a crisis that appeared outside China in the post–Great War, state-delivered capitalist restorations and Russian Revolutionary restructurings of lives through the social and class upsurges and violent suppressions of those years.[17] And, in China, also violently, but in addition

[13]Liu Zaifu and Li Zehou argued in *Gaobie Geming: Huiwang Ershi Shiji Zhongguo* [Farewell to Revolution: Recuperating Twentieth-Century China] (Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu Youxian Gongsi, 1997) that modern revolution had taken China off its otherwise designated historical track and should be discarded as the center of historical understanding. Dai's understanding of revolution, by contrast, is materialist: as she puts it, we must say "farewell to revolution as a form of [historical] consensus." For Dai's argument, see Zhang Zhiqi, "Dai Jinhua: Jintian de Nianqingren Dui Quanli You Yizhong Neizaide Tiren Yu Zunzhong" [Dai Jinhua: Today's Young People Have an Innate and Respectful Form of Embodied Understanding of Power], *Jiemian Wenhua* [Books and Fun], WeChat forum, July 5, 2018 (accessed July 9, 2018).

[14]See Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[15]As Stefan Jonsson writes of the repudiation of the French Revolution by such theorists as Edmund Burke or such novelists as Flaubert, collective life is condemned as the "seedbeds for prejudices and stereotypes. The human being is prevented from thinking independently, and his or her head is loaded with delusions, half-truths, and stupidities" (Jonsson, *A Brief History*, *op. cit.* note 2, 54). In other words, among such theorists—of which there are similar articulations and counterparts in China then and today—life cannot be lived in any manner other than individually.

[16]Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New York: Transaction, 1999), 23 (emphasis in original).

[17]Clearly, these restorations in Western Europe also had to make their accommodations with leftism, so as to forestall socialist revolutionary movements. Yet, as Geoff Eley pointed out in a talk delivered in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in March 2017, the pre-1914 proletariat was now dead on the battlefields and the post-1918 proletariat was susceptible to being contained by state-led institutions.

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and more specifically, the crisis appeared in the guise of a sociocultural rejection of the family as a site of sociopolitical unity and ritual (*lijiao*); as a political aspiration for a sovereign, autonomous, and unified state; and as an economic-commercial ambition for the proliferation of consumer-driven markets and advertising. In these new demands on interiority and sociality—sometimes in concert with and sometimes in contradiction to one another—the May Fourth Movement produced new unities and new social divisions, as well as new historical possibilities and impasses. For example, at the level of intellectuals, such participants as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao moved leftward in the wake of the May Fourth events—emphasizing and organizing around the divisiveness of capitalist development and bourgeois global order to argue for class struggle and revolutionary necessity; whereas others, such as Hu Shi, "retreated to the study" and withdrew from social movements altogether, arguing for the superiority of intensive scholarship and intellectual detachment from the world.[18] These unities and divisions came to characterize, in all sorts of variety, the post–May Fourth era of political, economic, and sociocultural civil war, whose temporary resolution (of sorts) came in 1949. And yet, beyond specifics, we can also clarify that the extended May Fourth moment made new worlds conceptually thinkable even while old worlds were rendered conceptually fungible.

As historians, we can grapple with the totality of these issues by noting, first, that the polarities of history and the everyday cannot be reconciled, as the former is filled with eventfulness while the latter is not much more than routine and repetition. Removing the crowded conceptual clutter by resorting to ever more facts and adjectival inflations fails to acknowledge this problem just as the previous mode of exaggerated claims also failed to register the problem of incommensurable temporalities. What we need are approaches that directly grapple with the problem of simultaneity, as a problem in and of modernity, as a problem of historical totalization and possibility, and as a problem of small and large scales operating at different speeds and levels at the same time.

In China, as elsewhere, the everyday materiality of these displacements and potential social transformations came to be articulated and popularized through the mode of journalistic print media, a commodity form that facilitated and mandated the local production of a supralocal co-present temporality. That is, journalism in its print media form helped to produce and allowed for the local and supralocal massification of everyday life—both its individuation into mass consumerism and individuality and its potential collectivization into a new form of mass sociality: a dual process of the "generalization of *private life*," that could be as corrosive—as a form of "privation"—as it potentially was revolutionizing.[19] Capitalist commodity that it is, mass print media helped render visible spatial co-temporality even as it also rendered unavoidable the temporal and spatial unevenness within China and between China and other parts of the world. By the same token, the massifications made possible through and by print media as a material form presented

[18]See Wang Fanxi's account, "Chen Duxiu: Founder of Chinese Communism," in *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo*, ed. Gregor Benton (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 585–93.

[19]Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 2 (London: Verso, 2002), 77 (emphasis in original).

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the utopian potential that everyday life could, in Lefebvre's phrase, be a "'subject' rich in subjectivity," rather than an "'object' of social organization."[20]

In the event, transformations in the capitalist-imperialist order after the Great War became, in China and globally, part of the state institutionalization of the crisis in capitalism in two forms: communist, and liberal or fascist. One Chinese particularity is that these alternative state forms cohabited in the same national space after 1927. In this context, the decades-long violent contestation between becoming a subject of history and an object of social organization was recollected into different and competing forms of political totalization through left- and right-wing revolutionary movements, with Communists on one side and Nationalists (Guomindang) on the other.

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If in May 1919 and after it was the specter of democracy, revolution, and communism whose nineteenth-century hauntings had taken up material presence in the twentieth-century world, one hundred years later it seems a shadow has fallen over all democratic political promises—socialist or liberal. We face, yet again, a historical reckoning that is intensely local and global simultaneously. The current weary resignation about the broken possibilities of collective mass politics should not mask the earlier moments when such a possibility appeared filled with potential promise. Democracy and revolution have been major thematics in Chinese history since the early twentieth century and particularly since their rhetorical and material centrality to the extended May Fourth moment. The May Fourth Movement has been invoked repeatedly over the course of the past hundred years, as a disruptive social event worth emulating (1989), as a spirit worth replicating (youthful enthusiasms), as a moment worth repudiating (too radical), and as a past worth burying (too revolutionary, too Westernized). Now that the reality of democracy and revolution are in retreat the world over, the academic and scholarly abandonment of mass activism as a bearer of democratic promise can only appear as a "retreat into the study." This small essay proposes that we bring May Fourth out from the shadow and away from the study, so as to begin to shed new light that might speak to then and now as moments of crisis *and* possibility, moments that allow us to embrace and reimagine rather than merely catalogue or reject and condemn the ever-necessary distance in radical democratic politics between words and things, events and lives.

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[20]Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*, *op. cit.* note 16, 59.

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