

## Get Ready for the Struggle Session

In America, and even more so on Twitter, there's a whiff of China's Cultural Revolution in the air.

1147 Comments

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Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in China, 1966.

Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in China, 1966. PHOTO: UIG VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Chinese Cultural Revolution was a bitter thing, a catastrophe comparable in its societal effects, and similar in its historical feel, to the terrors of Stalin and the French Revolution. No one knows how many died; historians say up to two million. But what I find myself thinking of these days is the ritual humiliations, the “struggle sessions.”

In the mid-1960s Mao Zedong, suspicious of those around him, wary of the moves of erstwhile Soviet allies, damaged by a disastrous famine his policies had caused, surveyed the scene and decided it was time for a little mayhem. The problem wasn't his disastrous ideology, it was, he wrote, “feudal forces full of hatred towards socialism . . . stirring up trouble, sabotaging socialist productive forces.” The party had been “infiltrated” by pragmatists and revisionists. He wrote—it is the epigraph of Frank Dikötter's “The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976”—“Who are our friends? Who are our enemies? That is the main question of the revolution.”

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He would find and purge his foes, the usual suspects: intellectuals and other class enemies, capitalist roaders, those who clung to old religions or traditions. In “Mao's Last Revolution,” Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals tell of a Ministry of Higher Education official brought up on charges of enjoying a “bourgeois lifestyle.” He'd been seen playing mah-jongg.

Mao unleashed university and high school students to weed out enemies and hold them to account. The students became the paramilitary Red Guards. They were instructed by the party to “clear away the evil habits of the old society” and extinguish what came to be known as “the four olds”—old ideas and customs, old habits and culture. “Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons,” the state newspaper instructed them.

With a vengeance they did.

In the struggle sessions the accused, often teachers suspected of lacking proletarian feeling, were paraded through streets and campuses, sometimes stadiums. It was important always to have a jeering crowd; it was important that the electric feeling that comes with the possibility of murder be present. Dunce caps, sometimes wastebaskets, were placed on the victims’ heads, and placards stipulating their crimes hung from their necks. The victims were accused, berated, assaulted. Many falsely confessed in the vain hope of mercy.

Were any “guilty”? It hardly mattered. Fear and terror were the point. A destroyed society is more easily dominated.

The Chinese Catholic Margaret Chu, a medical-lab assistant, was dragged into the office of her labor camp in 1968 and made to answer invented charges. “Their real motive was once and again to force me to admit all my alleged crimes,” she wrote decades later. “ ‘I did not commit any crimes,’ I asserted.” She was accused again, roughed up. She denied her guilt again. “Immediately two people jumped on me and cut off half my hair.”

She was tortured, left in handcuffs for 100 days, and imprisoned for years. While being tortured she sometimes prayed for death so her suffering would stop.

The Cultural Revolution lasted roughly a dozen years and died with Mao in September 1976. In time a party congress denounced it as what it was: ruinous.

So I ask you to entertain an idea that has been on my mind. I don't want to be overdramatic, but the spirit of the struggle session has returned and is here, in part because of the internet, in part because of the extremity of our politics, in part because more people are lonely. "Contention is better than loneliness," as my people, the Irish, say, and they would know.

The air is full of accusation and humiliation. We have seen this spirit most famously on the campuses, where students protest harshly, sometimes violently, views they wish to suppress. Social media is full of swarming political and ideological mobs. In an interesting departure from democratic tradition, they don't try to win the other side over. They only condemn and attempt to silence.

The spirit of the struggle session is all over Twitter . On literary Twitter social-justice warriors get advance copies of new books and denounce them for deviationism—as insensitive, racist, appropriative, anti-LGBTQ. Books on the eve of publication have been pulled, sometimes withdrawn by authors who apologize profusely. Everyone's scared. And the tormentors are not satisfied by an apology. They're excited by it and prowl for more prey.

A few weeks ago a young woman on Twitter thought aloud: "What if public libraries were open late every night and we could engage in public life there instead of having to choose between drinking at the bar and domestic isolation." This might get people off their screens and help them feel "included and nourished."

A nice idea. Maybe some local official would pick it up. Instead there was a small onslaught of negative reaction. "Libraries are already significantly underfunded and they struggle to make do with what they've got." "Before you suggest this understand that librarians are maxed out—our facilities are understaffed, we're underpaid." The idea would only work in "mainly affluent urban & suburban communities with already well-funded libraries whose wealth insulates them." A woman soon to marry a librarian warned of "what this would do to the lives of the people who work there."

After being batted about, the young woman apologized: "I made insensitive tweets abt public libraries & the individuals that staff them. I apologize for

those tweets. I have much to learn abt the difficult challenges public librarians face, the services they provide, & how much they strive to meet the needs of communities they serve.”

She abased herself for having had a pretty idea. But that is dangerous when thought-cops are out there, eager to perceive insufficient class loyalty.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand understood the mood of things when she self-abased all over television after she announced for president. Once a Blue Dog Democrat, now a progressive, she nervously expressed remorse at her past deviationism. Her previous conservative stands, she said, were “callous.” “They certainly weren’t empathetic.” “I did not think about suffering in other people’s lives.” She was “embarrassed” and “ashamed” of past stands. “I was not caring about others. . . . I was wrong.”

At least no one cut her hair. Maybe that will be in the 2024 cycle.

Joe Biden understands the moment. He quickly apologized last week after calling Vice President Mike Pence “a decent guy.” Progressive Cynthia Nixon denounced Mr. Pence as “America’s most anti-LGBT elected leader and asked Mr. Biden to “consider how this falls on the ears of our community.” “You’re right, Cynthia,” he quickly responded.

All the Democratic candidates have apologized for something. Elizabeth Warren is abjectly sorry she took a DNA test.

Leaders of great liberal newspapers are in constant fear because so many of their readers—and writers—are more doctrinaire in their views, and angry. The struggle session is in the internal chatroom.

There’s a feeling in the air, isn’t there? We’re all noticing pieces of the story here and there, in this incident and that. But maybe it has an overall meaning. And maybe that meaning isn’t good.

I don’t know if we’re a crueller, more aggressive country than in the past. We’re certainly a louder one, and more anonymous in our cruelties.

And none of it portends good.

Am I wrong? If so, comment below. We can have a struggle session.