# 8. Theoretical Reflections

In this book I have illustrated a theoretical statement about the nature of communist societies with a study of industrial authority. The comparisons have sharpened my conception of the differences between Chinese and Soviet institutions, but they have also convinced me that they share the same underlying pattern. Much further research needs to be done to test the applicability of this neotraditional image to communist regimes other than China's and to social settings other than industry. I have been able, through brief comparisons with the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries, to document the generic pattern of dependence better than I have been able to document the generic institutional culture. I have found evidence of a subculture of instrumental-personal ties in the Soviet Union, but how this actually works in the factory is still unclear. And, though I have established basic similarities in party organization, in "principled particularism," and the allied notion of "privileged access," no study of Eastern European factory life exists in English that shows how all of this actually operates in workshops or addresses the nature of the vertical ties between workers and shop officials. I nonetheless feel sufficiently confident of this suggestive pattern of evidence to offer the general statements I have made in this book. I hope that others will seek to test, refine, and correct them with research of their own.

In this final chapter, I specify some of the broader implications of this study for theory and research on communist societies. The first set of implications is for the study of the class relations and social structure of communist societies; the second about theories regarding the stability and legitimacy of these regimes. A third set regards the type of industrial authority analyzed in this book: the ways that it is structurally distinct from that in other settings and whether this type of authority is part of a master process of bureaucratization

that appears to be characteristic of modern industrialization. And the final set of implications is about evolution and change in communist societies.

## The Structure of Communist Societies

Although not an explicit theme of the preceding chapters, the analysis of authority relations in industry has direct relevance for efforts to understand social stratification and class relations in communist societies. I have examined, in its institutional setting, the exercise of authority over an industrial working class or, more abstractly, the political relationship between capital and labor. In a capitalist setting, this would involve the relationships between labor on the one hand, and the private owners of capital and their paid white collar executives and managerial staff, on the other. In the communist setting, authority is exercised by a class of petty officials—salaried enterprise administrators and party cadres—who control capital owned nominally by the state and who use this capital "in trust." When I have examined "authority in the workplace," I have simultaneously examined the essentials of a class relationship central to communist civilization.

My examination of this class relationship, however, points to the importance of some social-structural principles rarely hinted at in prior examinations of the social structure of these societies. When political sociologists have examined social stratification, it has invariably been for the purpose of defining the boundaries between social groups by specifying as precisely as possible differences in income, standards of living, and mobility opportunities for both individuals and their offspring (e.g., Lane 1982; Parkin 1971). This pervasive interest in defining group boundaries is inspired by an implicit concept of social structure as a constellation of groups and a definitional-deductive approach to the relationship between social structure and politics. To understand political allegiances and the social basis of conflict as well as stability according to this approach, one must first define distinct groups based on common income and consumption patterns, occupational and educational characteristics, and opportunities for upward mobility. The approach is deductive: once groups based on common characteristics

are identified, one deduces (or sometimes simply guesses at) political interests, attitudes, and allegiances. This approach has guided efforts to understand the place of intellectuals in society, to determine the social sources of regime support, and indeed has guided virtually all efforts to identify the "group" basis of conflict and policy making in communist regimes.

My approach has been quite different. It has not been guided by the identification of groups and the definition of boundaries between them, nor has it been deductive in nature. Instead, I have looked at the relationships between members of different groups, and have not deduced individual interests and orientations based on group characteristics. I have grounded this analysis of political orientations and interests, instead, in data about the political orientations and relationships themselves. When I have referred in this book to social structure, I have not meant a collection of groups, but instead, as Radcliffe-Brown (1952) puts it, a pattern of "actually existing social relationships": to social networks rather than groups.

This difference in approach to the study of social structure is of more than theoretical interest: it leads to a different understanding of political orientations, allegiances, and social conflict, precisely the phenomena that people have sought to illuminate with a "group-deductive" approach. The preceding chapters indicate the difficulty faced by any attempt to deduce the "group" interests, orientations, or political allegiances of workers, no matter how finely one differentiates them by skill, pay, or industry. No matter what their current income or skill level, worker political orientations are determined by their adoption of active-competitive or passive-defensive strategies. Every occupational group or stratum, no matter how defined, is divided by the social distinction between activist and nonactivist that pervades everyday life. The activists are linked to the petty officials in the enterprise by well-developed networks of communication and command, and by a clientelist relationship with superiors in which loyalty is exchanged for future career opportunities and privileges. Every social group, in other words, is riddled with cross-cutting networks of allegiances that are central to the exercise of power. Information about group characteristics, boundaries, and their inferred interests, no matter how complete, cannot tell us anything about these networks and allegiances. We need data about behavior and relationships, not about group characteristics.

If these social networks are so central to political allegiances and

orientations, then they should be reflected in the workers' own perceptions of their interests, and their political self-identification. We have already seen, in chapter 5, the pronounced social gulf between activists and nonactivists that occasionally surfaces in open antagonism and even physical violence. There is a pronounced feeling of "us" versus "them" characteristic of relations between these two groups of workers. Each of the two political groups, further, reacts to political campaigns in a different way: their perceptions, strategies, and overt behavior distinguish them publicly from one another. The most dramatic evidence of the importance of these network allegiances in dividing groups against themselves emerged in the factional allegiances that split workers during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1969. At the outset of the movement, workers divided into two antagonistic factions: a "royalist" faction supportive of the party leadership in the enterprise, and dominated by party members, activists, and model workers, and a "rebel" faction made up of disgruntled nonactivists victimized by the system in the past, political dissidents, and frustrated activists whose careers had been jeopardized by a single political mistake or soured personal relations with superiors. These networks provided the fissures along which state workers divided during the Cultural Revolution.[1] Network, not group, is the structural principle that shaped this political behavior.

Group theorists view the subjects of concern in this book simply as leadership practices and reward systems, not as aspects of social structure. But in a communist society these leadership and reward practices have definite social-structural consequences. They create and maintain stable networks of identification and allegiance. These structures are just as "real" as those based on common income levels, occupation, skill, and education. Indeed, in the social setting I have analyzed, the network allegiances are in many ways more "real" than the group ones. Communist society may indeed contain groups defined by their common characteristics, and it is undeniably valuable to know about them. But, if we wish to understand how political rule is exercised or the sources of political stability, we must start with a realization that all of these social groups are di-

1. I spell out this argument more fully in Walder (1987b), and I am currently working on a book that will explore the social basis of mass political activity among workers and other groups in this period.

vided by enduring network ties that create conflicting interests and loyalties, are clientelist in content, are continually cultivated and reinforced with social activities and material exchange, and lead ultimately to the organization of the ruling party itself.

## Social Stability and Legitimacy in Communist States

This analysis of workplace authority relations has not been framed solely as a study in industrial sociology for an important reason: Chinese workers relate to plant officials as employees, but at the same time they relate to these state functionaries as citizens to their government. When workers routinely comply with party and managerial authority, they are also consenting to the political authority of the state. This allows us a different perspective on longstanding questions about the social sources of political stability and about the nature of political legitimacy and consent in communist regimes. These questions are usually approached either as a matter of gauging public opinion, the effects of media control, political indoctrination, and appeals to nationalism (Inkeles 1950), or through the study of social trends as they affect key social groups: trends in standard of living, the supply of goods and services, material expectations, opportunities for education and upward mobility. This aggregate picture of publics, analogous to group approaches to social structure, is an indispensable part of the puzzle. But this study of the integration of a working class into a communist state as it occurs at the site of integration, shows that citizen consent (and the legitimacy of the regime) is also a socially structured phenomenon. It grows directly out of complex patterns of interaction in everyday life. And a central feature of this pattern of relationships is a party organization that works tirelessly and systematically to maintain this structure of consent.

The first, and perhaps most important, structural source of consent is the network of clientelist ties that links the activist minority to the party and management. This not only provides a bedrock of positive support among key workers, but it divides workers as a group (often shifting antagonisms away from management and toward the activists themselves) and provides a structural barrier to concerted worker resistance. The party reaches out to the citizenry through constantly cultivated patronage relationships, in which ac-

tive support and loyalty are exchanged for mobility opportunities, material advantages, and social status. This exchange relationship is not an impersonal one: factory leaders have considerable flexibility in rewarding activist-clients, they work closely with them, come to know them well, and intervene personally on their behalf with higher authorities. In this relationship, the institutional and personal aspects are closely intertwined: public loyalties to the party and the orthodox versions of its ideology are subtly mixed with private and personal loyalties to one's leader-patron.

A second structural source of consent is the diffuse web of purely personal relationships through which most individuals—not just activist-clients—can bend rules in their favor or circumvent formal channels of rationing and application making. This has the effect both of giving the average worker the sense that he or she has "beaten the system" through individual, not collective, action and of reinforcing a propensity to retreat from coordinated group action and indeed from "politics" in general. Burawoy's (1979) ethnography of work in an American machine shop portrays consent as something that emerges from an elaborately structured "game" on the shop floor. A complex legal framework of workplace governance, with individual appeals to grievance committees and individual bidding on job openings, gives the workplace a sense of legitimate due process, while the individual machine operator works at breakneck speed, trying to "make out" individually in piece rate systems. The worker that plays—and wins—according to these structured rules of the game, Burawoy argues, will not be one likely to question the system itself or engage in collective action to change it.

An analogous game operates in the very different setting of the Chinese factory. Systematically demobilized as a group, and facing a reward system that penalizes the voicing of genuine criticisms of conditions and of group demands, workers can beat the system without being coopted by it through the cultivation of purely personal relationships based on petty corruption or the exchange of favors. Workers who "make out" by playing the game in this manner are funneling their efforts into individual action motivated for personal benefit. The real satisfactions of beating the system are not the most important source of consent to emerge from this "game": workers who focus their attention onto these matters will be less likely to think about abstract issues of justice and equality in a

political way; they exhibit routine compliance and an unfocused acceptance of the political status quo because they know there is always the possibility of winning a personal exception to formal rules. This focusing of individual efforts onto private and personal matters, and the apolitical mentality that it reinforces, might appear as a detrimental outcome to those who interpret formal political institutions literally, but it is in fact an important (if unintended) source of worker consent and routine acceptance of the status quo.

A third structural source of consent, and especially of legitimacy, is the practice of paternalism by the enterprise. The extraordinary job security and benefits, the goods and services distributed directly by the state enterprise in a situation of scarcity that affects other sectors of the workforce more severely, is an important source of acceptance of the system (see also Connor 1979; Fehér 1982). This sense of acceptance is enhanced to the extent that enterprises go out of their way to procure extra ration coupons, material for housing construction, and foodstuffs for the cafeteria. Indeed many managers do this habitually in order to boost morale and win the cooperation and goodwill of their workers—and they are always sure to remind "their" workers of this generosity in mass meetings and at annual congresses of workers and staff. The negative reaction of several of my informants to the fast work pace, low job security, minimal insurance and benefits characteristic of factory work in Hong Kong (often expressed in terms of moral disapproval) convinces me that paternalism is an important source of regime legitimacy in China.

This structural perspective on consent reveals a far more complex and subtle pattern of authority than that suggested by a formal system of party mobilization that demands unquestioning loyalty to a rigidly orthodox official ideology. Even for committed activists, the object of loyalty is ambiguous. It is both public and private: activists are loyal both to the party as an institution, and to their superiors as patrons. They work for the good of the nation as defined by the party, but they also reap considerable personal benefits from their acts of selflessness and personal sacrifice (although sometimes the benefits are deferred until later in their careers). Even in the continually reenacted ceremonies of *biaoxian*, in which activists are expected to express positive support of the public and orthodox definitions of party ideology, the content of the ideology, or its current practical interpretation, is distinctly secondary to the act of ex-

pression itself. When activists engage in public displays of approval, they are siding publicly with the party, taking a stand that isolates them from other workers and often earns them enmity as well. It is a ritual not because it is meaningless, or the act of loyalty empty and formalistic. It is a ritual in the deepest social meaning of the term: it publicly marks activists from the rank and file; it reaffirms the personal loyalty of the party's clients; and, by forcing the activist to publicly side with the party instead of with coworkers and friends, it binds them ever more tightly to their patrons in the leadership. Activists deprived of social support from their coworkers become more dependent on their patrons for this support and approval. The social consequences of this ritual are real.

This pervasive personalization of party rule—in the clientelist nature of party-activist relations, in the diffuse web of personal ties used for individual advantage and mutual support, and in the practice and ideology of paternalism in the enterprise community—could properly be viewed as a corruption both of the formal system of party mobilization and of its official ideology. Definitionally, this is characteristic of political corruption the world over, and it was certainly viewed as corruption by Maoists who sought to revitalize the party organization and its ideology during the Cultural Revolution. But, in an unintended way, this partial "corruption" of the system promotes social stability by creating personal loyalties and obligations among a minority of workers that run parallel to formal leadership ties, and by encouraging the rest to withdraw from politics and political thinking into private and individual pursuits hidden by a facade of conformity. This complex web of personal loyalty, mutual support, and material interest creates a stable pattern of tacit acceptance and active cooperation for the regime that no amount of political terror, coercion, or indoctrination can even begin to provide.

## The Varieties of Modern Industrial Authority

There can be little doubt that the factory regime typical of the contemporary Chinese enterprise is "bureaucratic," at least in one sense of the term: the size of the administrative structure and the scope of its powers. Like the bureaucratic managerial hierarchies that emerged from prior subcontracting systems in the United

States early in the twentieth century, Chinese management completely controls hiring, promotion, and wages, and it defines careers and the succession of jobs that comprise them. Also like their bureaucratic American (not to mention Soviet and Japanese) counterparts, Chinese managers control the conception, pace, and execution of work itself; they draw up these plans in white collar staff offices; they have proprietary control over skill and its acquisition; and they design jobs for workers with job-specific skills. And in some ways, especially in the scope of administrative powers, the Chinese firm is much more bureaucratic than the American. Management control over mobility, residence, and the direct supply of a wide array of goods and services gives Chinese administrators powers that no American or Japanese manager can contemplate. In this regard, the Chinese managerial bureaucracy encompasses a number of functions that are handled by commodity markets or by separate public and private institutions in other countries.

However, in another important, Weberian sense of the term, Chinese management hierarchies are only partially bureaucratic. The content of the social relations and roles embedded in the organization are incompletely impersonal; rewards are not tied solely to performance of formal functional roles; the authority of the individual is by no means distinct from the authority of the office; formally rational means-ends calculation does not dominate the behavior of supervisors. The often decried consequences of bureaucratization in the American workplace—the treatment of workers as interchangeable cogs in a production process, the impersonal character of authority, the alienating lack of personal interaction among coworkers, and the extreme stress on productivity—are not characteristic of industrial life in China.

The point of this last observation is not merely that Chinese industry represents a deviation from the ideal type of bureaucracy formulated by Weber. Certainly every researcher of real world bureaucracies has found a number of such deviations. This is not at all surprising—Weber, after all, called his an "ideal" type for a reason. The point, instead, is that Chinese industrial hierarchies, viewed from the perspective of the way that authority is exercised in them, are approximated by a different ideal type of authority. When personal ties and understandings enter into the reward of persons, this is not a deviation from formally universalistic standards of evaluation, but from the principled particularism of reward practices.

Formal reward systems demand evaluation not simply of performance of role tasks, but of an entirely separate realm of individual behavior, attitudinal orientations, and personal loyalties. The ideal type of political community that is closest to Chinese industrial bureaucracy is not Weber's "bureaucracy," but his "patrimonialism"; the type of authority is not his "rational-legal," but his "traditional." What is significant from a comparative perspective about Chinese industrial bureaucracy is not that it deviates from the ideal type of bureaucracy, but that it represents the integration of patrimonial rule with modern bureaucratic form. This is precisely why I (along with Jowitt) describe this modern institutional setting as "neo-traditional."

The point of this argument, further, is not merely that clientelist patterns have been discovered or that the informal organization of the Chinese enterprise is larger in scope or analytically "more important" than in comparable organizations elsewhere. Every organization has its pattern of informal personal relationships, and clientelism exists in some form in a wide range of historical and institutional settings. When I apply the concept *clientelist bureaucracy* to the Chinese enterprise, I am pointing to a structured pattern of particularistic rule that has both formal and informal dimensions. These clientelist networks have a definite personal aspect, but they operate in conjunction with well-developed and officially prescribed institutional roles. They elicit personal loyalties, but these loyalties grow up out of the regime's effort to create public political loyalties. What is notable about this pattern is not that there is a personal and informal side to the organization, but that the entire complex of formal and informal, public and private relationships represents a form of particularism that is at the very core of this type of industrial bureaucracy.

## The Evolution of Communist Societies

A full appreciation of the character of this type of authority affords us a different perspective on the evolution of communist societies than that commonly reflected in studies of their modernization. By far the dominant motif is that of the decay of the mobilization system, based on Leninist principles, because of the demands of economic modernization, which require the increasing

adoption of Western bureaucratic organization and modern technologies. In this view, the dominant trend is one in which Leninist patterns of organization—demanding allegiance to a unitary ideology, political loyalty, and the mobilization of efforts to concentrate on party-defined tasks—give way to more familiar forms of modern bureaucracy in which the ideology becomes an ornament, in which job performance is stressed, and administration becomes routine. Looked at from the perspective of technique and form, one sees convergence under the impact of modernization.

This study of bureaucratic authority, though not a study of the problems of administration, identifies another aspect of this trend of evolution away from classic Leninist organization: one that alters the way we interpret patterns of change. We have seen that Leninist forms evolve, by their own logic, into a form of clientelist rule. The particularism remains embedded in "decayed" Leninist institutions. Maoists recognized this trend with tragic clarity: they publicly censured as "capitalist" the trappings of rational-legal bureaucracy, but their proposed remedies reflected a realization that the Leninist forms were being corrupted from within. That realization led to their failed effort to revitalize the public and orthodox spirit of these Leninist forms. The failure of this revitalization reflects not the triumph of the "demands of modernization" for rational-legal bureaucracy, but the inability to halt this evolution toward a stable, "corrupted" form of organization. The implication is that there is a particularism in these institutions that does not melt away with the demands of industrialization. The tension between particularism and universalism, between affective and instrumental action, is deeply entrenched and is resolved not by the erosion of the "traditional," but by efforts to combine demands for loyalty with demands for performance in ways not seen in modern Western civilization. In other words, we are not witnessing a single process of bureaucratization, but more than one; and these types of bureaucracy evolve along separate, and not necessarily converging, paths.

This statement should not be surprising. Few of the social conditions that Weber specified in his *Economy and Society* as leading to the peculiar rationality of Western capitalism, subsequently embodied in its modern bureaucracies, have characterized China since the revolution (see also Anderson and Anderson 1978; Delaney 1963). These conditions—the freeing of labor from social and legal encumbrances to land or social institutions; the existence of labor as a

commodity bought and sold freely on markets; the universalization of labor and commodity markets and their associated money ethic and the consequent ability to rationally calculate costs and act to minimize them; and the universalization of the profit motive that embeds formally rational means-end calculation more deeply—are instead conspicuous by their absence. On the contrary, in China labor is tied to the enterprise, labor and commodity markets are weakly developed, and the enterprise is a budgetary arm of the state whose existence and prosperity are linked weakly to capital and labor efficiency. China's revolution has succeeded in creating a type of modern civilization that is profoundly anticapitalist. The type of bureaucratic authority analyzed in this book is one of its defining features.

China's revolutionary leaders did not set out to create neotraditional patterns of authority exercised by a clientelist party. On the contrary, theirs was a vision of politically pure commitment to national purpose and principled social discipline. But, due to their planned response to intractable demographic and social problems and the unintended consequences of these new institutional forms, this vision translated into a different reality. In this process of translation, Marx's historical vision of a working class that arises collectively in the course of capitalist industrialization to contend for and seize their share of power has given way to another: one in which a powerful party-state calls into being a working class that is, from the outset, dependent politically and economically on their enterprises and the petty officials who operate them. The political and cultural consequences of this development defy categorization along the conventional spectrums of right and left, reactionary and progressive, traditional and modern; they comprise a historical development that we have only dimly begun to understand.