Introduction

All human history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature.
—Karl Marx

The communist movement of the last century was remarkably successful worldwide in establishing the party-state and carrying out projects aimed at a total social transformation. But behind the ideological, political, and social changes was a more ambitious and comprehensive goal: to remold the mind, psychology, and even character of individuals by means of various party and state policies designed for a “new man” and, through this “new man,” to make history and perpetuate the revolution.¹ The “Soviet Man,” “Mao’s good soldiers,” and “Let them all become Che” are only a few examples of the regimes’ aspirations for the creation of such a new person. Even in the early 1980s, when socioeconomic stagnation plagued the Soviet Union and omens of decline began to loom larger, Mikhail Suslov, the Soviet ideology and propaganda chief, was still declaring that “the formation of the New Man is the most important component” of the endeavors of the Soviet state.²

As a global movement, world communism has not received adequate attention from historians adopting “global perspectives” in recent years, and, more generally speaking, political history of the twentieth century seems to be a less favorable topic for many world historians. Colonialism, empires, comparative economic development, migration, trade, cultural exchange, race and ethnicity, gender, family, and diseases are some of the most popular world historical themes. This trend in global historical discussions is perfectly justifiable in the sense that global history focuses on long-term socioeconomic and cultural development, whereas political history often deals with sociopolitical changes that, at least in most specific cases, take place in a relatively short time span and often are driven by domestic dynamics. Another reason for inadequate attention paid to world communism in today’s global historical discussions is perhaps a scholarly fatigue caused by too much attention paid to the issue from the mid- to the late twentieth century,
with enormous scholarship involving invaluable data collection and regime analysis. Quite understandably, produced in such a historical context and often with a sense of urgency to meet very immediate political and ideological needs, a great many of these works today read to some extent like the diagnosis, prognosis, and autopsy of a particular regime.

More than a decade into the postcommunist era and with the increasing effectiveness of a global perspective in interpreting worldwide developments, the time has come for scholarly discussion of world communism in parameters appropriate to its magnitude. In this book I treat world communism as a global historical phenomenon and focus on a more humanistic dimension: the interaction between revolutionary change and human nature. This global perspective is mainly reflected in a three-case study examining the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, buttressed by tracing the intellectual and ideological roots of the communist concept of human malleability and perfectibility back to the Western intellectual and political tradition since the Enlightenment, as well as the historical traditions in those countries themselves. The global perspective also extends to include the responses from contemporary social movements outside the communist world to its aspiration for changing human nature.

The communist revolution’s impact on the human mind in various forms is anything but new in communist studies. For example, political education and ideological development are hardly topics to be found missing in any survey works on the communist regime, let alone in studies focused on its political and ideological dimensions. A more specific subject, and the one perhaps closest to the issue of the new man, is thought reform, or brainwashing. The term “thought reform” was coined by the Chinese communists in the early 1940s when they were engaged in the “Yan’an Rectification” to make party members identify completely with the organization, whereas the term “brainwashing,” with a negative connotation, was created by Western observers in the early 1950s as the Chinese communists came to be known for applying the techniques invented in Yan’an to control people’s minds nationwide. As Hu Ping, a Chinese political and intellectual author, well known since the late 1970s, once noted, the techniques used by a government to influence or even shape people’s thoughts and attitudes could be traced back to the very beginning of political history, but communist thought reform/brainwashing distinguished itself from those traditional techniques in a number of ways. One is that thought reform/brainwashing is meant to replace people’s old ideas with new ones, whereas in most other techniques the intention is to more firmly implant ideas that already exist and are endorsed by tradition and culture. The sort of replacement of ideas found in thought reform/brainwashing is therefore bound to create
tension and conflict in the human mind. The other distinguishing feature is that thought reform/brainwashing is by definition exclusive and therefore becomes possible only in a closed system that rejects any ideological alternatives, whereas in most other techniques a ruling ideology or mainstream value system does not necessarily monopolize all ideological or moral discourses. In addition, although thought reform/brainwashing is imposed on the individual in a closed system, in theory it must take effect through the individual’s cooperation; therefore incarceration or a similar situation in which the individual is completely deprived of freedom could not be taken as a typical example of the thought reform/brainwashing process.4

The above discussion is important in understanding how the communist revolution’s subjection of the human mind to political power constitutes an important part in the concept of the new man. But the issue of a new man itself is much more sweeping: it includes a calculated and systematic cultivation of ideas and perceptions, consciousness and subconsciousness, personal character, psychology, and even physical constitution. The new man was created not just to ensure that new ideas would replace old ones and that the party’s tasks would be carried out, thus avoiding becoming merely a topic in political history, but also to stand up as an alternative human model that dwarfed all prior or contemporary types of human being. In this sense the new man obtained a significance in world history or even beyond, as a new stage in human evolution. Communist leaders and their propagandists explicitly and repeatedly articulated this aspiration, clearly indicating their awareness of the significance of their revolution in human evolution. In the early stages of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky believed that the ultimate purpose of communist revolution was to “harmonize” man as an animate being and to “master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious process in his own organism.” He went on to say that “even purely physiological life will become subject to collective experiments.”5 More than sixty years later, a Soviet propaganda pamphlet entitled The Soviet People proudly pronounced that the country had become the “motherland of a new and higher type of Homo sapiens: Homo sovieticus.” It went on to give the reader a balance sheet of the progress; as a critic summarized it, “millions of years had been needed for the cell to advance to the stage of Homo sapiens, to reach the level of man endowed with reason, but it took only sixty for him to be cleansed of all impurities,” thus giving birth to “a new biological specimen.”6 Driven by the same aspiration, during the heyday of the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro announced that human evolution had stopped for two to three thousand years, but his revolution would bring mankind out of this “prehistoric” stage by creating a new type of Cuban.7
The fundamental concern of the present book, therefore, is how com-
munist revolution strove to create a new model of human being, morally
and psychologically superior to all other types hitherto known in world
civilization, and how this task paralleled its efforts in creating a new society,
which was also believed to be superior to all known human societies. In
examining these topics, the book addresses a number of questions, such as
these: What are the intellectual and ideological roots of the idea of the new
man? How was this idealistic and utopian goal linked with specific politi-
cal and economic programs? How much were national and cultural tradit-
tions reflected in the respective regimes’ policies for the new man, a concept
based on a universal communist ideology? In what ways did the develop-
ments of the new man in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba affect each
other? How did communist efforts in search of an alternative human model
attract people beyond the communist world in a time of social crisis (in the
West) and nation building (in the newly independent countries)? Given
that this is a subject regarding the relationship between political power and
human development, a moral concern is perhaps inevitable: Was the com-
munist experiment with human nature a new moral and spiritual crusade—
a Sisyphean labor doomed to failure, nevertheless arousing admiration? Or
was it just another case of terrible abuse of ideology and state power in
manipulating people’s psychology and shaping their lives, something that is
not unique in world history?

In the first chapter, I discuss some origins of the idea of remaking peo-
ple during the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and other European
intellectual and political movements. The major part of the chapter, how-
ever, is devoted to the creation of the Soviet Man, the first such communist
new man in world history. I start with a discussion of the Russian intelli-
gentsia’s expectation, which influenced the Bolsheviks, for a revolution-
ary new man in the mid-nineteenth century. The chapter details ideological
and political developments related to the Soviet new man and analyzes how
the profile of the Soviet Man gradually softened as the country experienced
industrialization and modernization. These developments inevitably led to
the revival of old-fashioned social stratification and occupational division,
which compromised the revolutionary traits entailed by the communist
new man.

Chapter 2, on China, begins with its expectation of a new character
for the nation’s revival at the turn of the twentieth century. The communist
experiment with human nature in China can be divided into three stages:
the Yan’an period (the late 1930s and the first half of the 1940s); the 1950s
to the early 1960s; and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The chapter
details how the idea of the new man was developed and put into practice
through various vehicles, such as thought reform, model emulation, and large-scale resettlement from cities to the countryside, along with productive campaigns. It also describes how the Chinese efforts were stimulated by China's perception of the "Soviet lesson"—that the goal of the new man was compromised by economic efficiency.

Chapter 3, on the Cuban experience, starts with the nationalistic discourse on the new Cuban, who was expected to accomplish the task of national independence and development; it then focuses on the revolutionary effort toward creating the new man in the 1960s. The chapter details the Cuban perception of the new man and his role in pushing the revolution through stages, from nationalist to socialist and even communist, in a relatively short time, culminating in the Revolutionary Offensive (1968–1970). It also examines how the issue of the new man was associated with Cuba's relations with China and the Soviet Union.

The fourth chapter surveys the global influence of the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban new men. It first introduces how theory and practice in these three countries were emulated or echoed in many other socialist countries or revolutionary movements, and then examines how Western intellectuals, discontent with their own societies in the 1930s and the 1960s, were drawn to the communist "new man" in hopes of finding an alternative human model. The chapter also looks at how, to a certain extent, some Third World leaders were inspired by the communist new man to seek moral and political resources for the sake of their own nation building and national character formation.

The literature on the communist new man is scattered in numerous scholarly works, but focused narratives and analyses are fewer than what the importance of the topic merits. Among those focused works, Mikhail Heller's *Cogs in the Soviet Wheel* (1988) is an excellent sociological and historical analysis of the mechanism and process through which *Homo sovieticus* was planned and fashioned. The main value of Heller's work is in its insightful analysis of the innate drive behind the professed sociopolitical goals of the Soviet leaders (especially the founding figures of the regime) to reshape human nature, and in its systematic description of the way the regime managed to destroy traditional and institutional boundaries protecting people from state power and "atomize" them into defenseless individuals subject to remolding. One particularly interesting point in Heller's book is his conceptualization of "nationalization of time." Heller argues that, by manipulating the concept of time, the Soviet authorities established a new temporal horizon on which people's lives were confined to a "past-present-future" framework; thus a person who so understood history and accordingly positioned himself on this temporal/spatial coordinate axis, as a result
was willing to accept his party-assigned task in his life span with an outlook to the future. Such an argument helps identify the communist revolution's significance in the history of human civilization in terms of the correlation between the human perception of time/space and a life goal confined by a ruling ideology.

Many authors have also highlighted the importance of the new man in understanding the ultimate goal and fundamental dynamics of communist revolution in their works on particular communist regimes. For example, Richard Pipes, in his *Russian Revolution* (1990), highlights the issue and traces the origin of the idea back to Enlightenment thinkers such as Claude-Adrien Helvétius. Andrei Sinyavsky’s *Soviet Communism: A Cultural History* (1990) includes a chapter focusing on the image of the Soviet new man, especially in official propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s. Gao Hua’s book *That Is How the Red Sun Rose: The Origin and Development of the Yan’an Rectification* (published in Chinese, 2000) examines how Maoist theory and practice of remolding human mind and character started in Yan’an as early as the late 1930s. In the studies of Cuban communism, attention to the new man has been reflected in some American scholars’ works. Among them, Michael Lowy’s *The Marxism of Che Guevara: Philosophy, Economics, and Revolutionary Warfare* (1973) and Sheldon B. Liss’ *Fidel Castro’s Political and Social Thoughts* (1994) recognize the essential role of the new man in the vision of the revolution and future society held by both Cuban leaders. Monographic efforts devoted to the issue, however, have been insufficient.8 John Kosa’s *Two Generations of Soviet Man: A Study in the Psychology of Communism* (1962) is a rare exception. The book discusses how the Soviet model of the new man was introduced to Eastern European peoples after World War II and how the character of the Soviet Man was modified in other lands to suit national traditions. Anita Chan’s *Children of Mao: Personal Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (1985) studies the “political socialization” of Chinese youth under Mao and their “political desocialization” after Mao, thus delineating the trajectory of the regressive evolution of the new man.

In the following chapters, in which the above literature is referenced and discussed, the descriptions and analyses of the development and global influence of the communist new man attempt to identify the significance of the communist revolution in world history. Within the field of communism studies, the evolution of the new man not only reflects the fundamental goals and the rise and fall of the three most influential communist regimes but also demonstrates their interactions regarding one of the most critical issues. When extended to a broader world-historical vision, the examination of the new man vertically connects communist revolution

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with a more profound and enduring tradition of human society throughout history, instead of treating it as merely a twentieth-century political phenomenon. Horizontally, it shows the connections between communist revolution and contemporary noncommunist social movements worldwide, instead of limiting our understanding of communist revolution to a narrowly defined ideological and political framework. Overall, I think that the communist experiment of creating the new man serves as an example of an overarching theme throughout world history: whenever significant social transformation proceeds, a much deeper and more anxious concern about human development amid the changing circumstances may lie beneath the various political and economic goals people claim at the time. This concern consists of two parts: one is to what extent and for what purpose the new circumstances can shape or reform human nature, and the other is to what extent and for what purpose this “remade” creature can serve political power and make history.