

Was mao a marxist

Sociology



" The socialists might conquer" Michels prophesied, " but not socialism which would perish in the moment of its adherents' triumph"(Michels, 1959, p. 341). Certainly there are examples of conclusions made by Mao at one point in time being demonstrably different to those of Marx at a specific moment in his work. On this basis some have judged that " Maoism is far removed from the original ideas of Marx and Engels, and even from the concepts of Lenin"(Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970, p. 252). Plainly to describe Mao simply as 'a Marxist' without qualification is misleading.

On the other hand it is equally misleading to claim that Mao was 'not a Marxist. ' To do so is to mistakenly treat Marxism to be a conventional dogma, and to define 'Maoism' merely by the absence of certain ideas of Karl Marx. Mao's thought was crucially informed and stimulated by Marxism, but this was distinctively tempered by his views on the proper role of theory and by China's specific historical experience. Mao was a Marxist, but an exceptional one. Mao's thought will be shown not to contradict Marxism in that his methodology is complimentary to it. Secondly, Mao's specific prescription for China was a fundamentally Marxist project.

Mao contended that, " knowledge starts with practice" (Mao, 1951, p9). From this premise Mao could not approach Marxism as if theory was factual knowledge in abstract form. Mao stated quite clearly in 'On Dialectical Materialism', " thought arises from social practice and at the same time actively shapes practice" (1939, p. 124). Mao cannot be satisfied that an idea is valid merely on the basis of its apparent logical rigidity. Only when theory has guided our actions to enact real change has its worth been shown. Marxism as a dogma cannot coexist with Maoism.

This was the 'Marxism' accepted by many in the party as he rose through its ranks (Wakeman, 1973, p. 229). It was not, however, a Marxism consistent with much of the writing of Karl Marx himself. " In practice man must prove the truth," Marx wrote, " that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness [Diesseitigkeit] of his thinking"(1859, quoted in Feuer p. 243). In the Communist Manifesto Marx did not argue that revolution was inevitable because of the strength of argument for it. Revolution was inevitable because interrogation of historical and contemporary events showed it demonstrably to be their consequence.

Marx presented 'Marxism' as a systematically deduced depiction of an industrialising world, not as a rigorous description of an inspired idea. More fundamentally, Engels (along with Kautsky and Plekhanov) argued that once we had accepted the validity of the dialectic we must understand " the mind [as] a passive receptacle of sense impressions, not an active creative agent" (Femia, 1993, p. 108). Hence, Mao's view that theory was historically produced and worthy of note only in so far as it guided successful action was a Marxist one.

Both thinkers understood there to be a need for Marxism to prove its utility, and both relished " the process of testing and developing theory, the continuation of the whole process of knowledge"(Mao, 1951, p, 10). Mao's methodology was also complimentary to Marx's in that both took human understanding of the world to be historically developing. 'On Practice' begins by praising Marxism for its belief in the historical progress of human knowledge (Wakeman, 1973, p. 229). For Mao even the efforts of the most

inspired among us all were " merely part of a spiralling movement toward truth"(Wakeman, 1973, p. 31).

" The concrete process at each given stage of development is only relatively true"(Mao, 1951, p. 12). Hence when Mao addresses the need to make " the leap from rational knowledge to revolutionary practice" (Mao, 1951, p. 9) he ought not to assume that Karl Marx wrote under some special state of inspiration. That Mao comes to conclusions on specific issues that differ from those of Marx personally, therefore, does not preclude him from being identified a Marxist - so long as these conclusions are part of the " process of testing and developing theory. Marx himself described historical evolution " as a process of natural history. "(1959, quoted in Feuer p. 136).

Commentators such as Wakeman describe Mao's wish " to temper the universal theory of Marxism with the specific practice of revolution in China. "(1973, p. 229) This is misleading in that it presumes Marxism is necessarily defined by what was apparent to Karl Marx at one point in the development of human knowledge. Indeed, Mao is not the only figure in the Marxist tradition to embrace the potential for Marxism to evolve within its own discourse.

Palmiro Togliatti led an Italian Communist party that campaigned for 'polycentrism' throughout the 1950s and 1960s on the basis of evidence in the Soviet Union (Femia, 1993, p. 120). Mao's methodology was such that it can be fairly termed Marxist. As to the nature of the Maoist era it is certainly clear that had Karl Marx seized power in China, history would have developed in a sizeably different way. Indeed, had any other Communist

party around the world (most clearly, of course, the Soviets) taken power the results could not have been as distinctive as the CCP produced.

The exceptional way in which China developed as a communist state is mirrored in the distinctiveness of its predicament before the revolution. Chinese historical experience was recognised as distinctive by Marx and Engels themselves in 'On Colonialism' as they speculated " Chinese socialism may stand in the same relation to the European variety as Chinese philosophy stands to the Hegelian. " Meisner contends that " what distinguished Marxism from other nineteenth-century theories was precisely its acceptance of capitalism as a necessary and progressive stage in historical development. (Meisner, 1989, p. 344) Acceptance was based on the fact that capitalism was deemed to be doomed to destroy itself, and as such produce the desired socialism.

It was not an acceptance that capitalism was valuable in itself. The capitalist mode of production was seen to have produced a mass proletariat. Here Marx saw the mechanism for the overthrow of the oppressive forces of capital. Marxism, unlike Utopian Socialism, understands 'the oppressed' to be not only characterised by comparative poverty and disempowerment but also by a particular dynamic potential. Do not build a new world out of the fruits of the earth" as Marx put it, change will rise from the " material conditions of a new society. " (quoted in Meisner, p. 345).

Nonetheless, this implied the 'material conditions' of a new society are already there in the present one. That this needs to be stated shows that this need not, for the Marxist argument, be evident already. In fact, the very fact

that the 'material conditions of a new society' can be hidden shows the pervasiveness of the forces that oppress them, and that prevent them breaking free.

Marx identified forces that were regressive and that once removed would no longer stifle production. Marx's faith in the proletariat as agents of revolution was corollary to his understanding of how internal contradictions within systems brought corresponding changes. This is how he understand the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The 'economic dialectic' " propelled history from one stage to another. "(Femia, 1993, p. 109) Mao's project was to propel China from its confused feudalism to the bright new dawn of Socialism that the rest of the World had yet to realise.

This was a Marxist endeavour but in circumstances that Marx did not consider specifically. In China " the present is burdened not only by a heritage of economic backwardness but also by China's long history of feudalism"(Meisner, 1989, p. 353) In other words, the 'oppressive forces' in China were different to those of nineteenth century Europe. It is small surprise, therefore, that " the 'sinification of Marxism' led, step by step over four decades, to the emergence of a specifically Chinese political theory of Communism. "(Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970, p. 10)

On the basis of this specifically Chinese variant of Marxism Mao defined the two main tasks of the Chinese revolution as " first: to carry out a national revolution to overthrow foreign imperialist oppression" and second " a democratic revolution to overthrow feudal land lord oppression" (Mao, quoted in Holt, Rinehart, Winston, p. 221). The first of these objectives

recognises that pre-revolution China was "largely controlled by foreign powers"(Holt, Rinehart, Winston, p. 221). It is fairly simple to point to this concern for national pride as simple, if deeply un-Marxist, populist Nationalism.

The popularity of that message does, however, reflect the legitimate concern that the influence of foreign powers undermined traditional Chinese social structures without supplying the impetus to transform them to something new. In that the only beneficiaries of foreign influence in China were those powers themselves they were defined as an 'oppressive force.' Similarly, the overthrow of feudal landlords would liberate Chinese peasants from their oppressive force. Chinese revolutionaries faced very a country built upon an unusual economic base.

In the countryside, "the rich peasants occupied only a very small proportion of the total population but were markedly feudal in character."(Shaozhi, 1981, p. 4) Most of the population of China had little reason to feel oppressed by the urban bourgeoisie, and much to feel oppressed by in the actions of these landlords that formed no more than 10% of the population but shared 80% of land between them. Mao took the special circumstances that China faced not to be evidence of the inapplicability of Marxist ideas. For him "the basic aim of the socialist revolution is to liberate the productive forces"(Shaozhi, 1981, p.).

Standing as a contradiction to this liberation stood the oppressive forces of imperialism and feudalism. What appeared to Marx to be fulfilling this function in industrialised Europe was bourgeois capitalism. Again we see

differences between the two thinkers emerging on specifics rather than in approach. Marx, of course, believed the overthrow of capitalism to be inevitable and claimed to have identified the structures that showed this to be so. So too, however, Mao claimed " China will go over to socialism in the future, that is an irresistible law.

Moreover, the democratic revolution would be " inevitably be transformed into a socialist revolution" (Mao, quoted in 212). Both men felt it compellingly necessary to resist 'oppressive' forces and to make latent potential forces empowered. For Mao this reflected his " profound faith in the creative force of the people" (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970, p. 222). For Marx this reflected a profound distaste for the effects of capitalist development. The 'oppressive' forces are in a different form, but we can still see that Mao's thought was in the spirit of Marx's.

There are many that take a contrary view, not least Soviet Russia. Soviet observers were damning in the indignation at " Mao's recipes"(Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1979, p. 256). They intone " in the economic sphere there would be virtual forced labour organized on a military pattern... a concentration of all available means on the state's military power in the interests of great power-politics. " They go on to argue that individuals would be treated as " personifications of economic categories" (in Feuer, 1959, pp. 135-7).

Yet, howsoever distasteful some might find it, this is not a contradiction of Marxism. Labour organized on a Military pattern' simply describes a model of planned efficiency. The famous maxim " from each according to his abilities" would appear to suggest that labour being forced is unfortunate - the

individual should want to do it for the common good. That it be forced would not be troubling for Mao's Marxist credentials. Indeed, Marxism describes how the substructure determines the superstructure. Hence, even where individuals chose to do work for the 'common good' it would be an artefact of the power structure within the country.

On this basis, it is not so important if as society develops the state needs to 'force' individuals to fulfil their duties. Similarly, in that capitalism can be reinforced by super-structural concerns it can be argued quite simply that distinctions between public and private spheres are arbitrary. In fact " the degradation of the human personality to a minute cog in the state machine" could be seen as progress. For Mao the mind was a social entity, not a creative one (Wakeman, 1973, p. 235).

Marx argued that " the same men who establish their social relations in conformity with their material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations. "(Marx, 1875, p. 93) As such whether it were a socialist regime or not, the 'human personality' is a product of social conditioning not of personal expression. In short for both Mao and Marx it is a choice between being a 'cog' in the machine of a dynamic state that works in your interests or a state that more subtly makes you a 'cog' and works against your interest.

Building on this, the Soviet's accusation that " in the sphere of intellectual life there would be a negation of the entire wealth of national and international culture, an emphasis on Mao's ideas" is much less pointed than they perhaps suspect. Ideological hegemony is necessary for the dictatorship

of the proletariat in that the free exchange of ideas does not necessarily bring us closer to truth because any world-view can be seen to be a social construct.

Michels prophesy that, " The socialists might conquer but not socialism which would perish in the moment of its adherents' triumph"(Michels, 1959, p. 341) supposes Marxism to be a strictly defined programme of anti-capitalist reforms. Maoism is at times far removed from some conclusions made by Marx. If we describe Mao quite simply as 'a Marxist' we are not sufficiently recognising the unique way in which Mao set about reforming China. Marxism, however, is not a conventional dogma. It is built upon the supposition that abstract theorising will not bring about tangible change.

Instead, it privileges scientific analysis of concrete reality. In this regard Mao is a Marxist. Secondly, Mao's thought was focussed on freeing the natural dynamism in Chinese society from the oppressive forces generated by foreign imperialism and the legacy of his country's past. Mao was a Marxist, but an exceptional one. Mao's thought does not contradict Marxism in that his methodology is complimentary to it. Secondly, Mao's specific prescription for China was a fundamentally Marxist project.