

'At this time we arranged for a conference at West Lake, Hangchow. This was early in 1922. The leading participants were Chen Tu-hsiu, Li Ta-chao, Chang Kuo-tao, I think, Chiu Chiu-pei, and one other, a very capable Hunanese student whose name I do not recall.'

Henk Sneevliet (alias Maring) to Harold Isaacs, 1935

'Since ancient times, those who create new ideas and new schools of thought have always been young people without much learning.'

Mao Tse-tung, 1958

These notes have been written with several related purposes. First, I want to show that there is a unity between the philosophical views assumed or defended by Mao and his political practice, a unity which, by the way, Mao's philosophy itself is incapable of accounting for. Many people persist in thinking that Mao must have been some kind of Marxist, since he led the Chinese Revolution, and his Marxist genius was proclaimed to the four corners of the earth. His philosophical essays continue to be placed on reading lists for basic study-groups by revolutionary Marxists. They may feel there is something odd about those works when they actually read them, but they can't put a finger on what it is. These notes are offered as a help to wavering fingers. In them, I shall argue that the apparent easiness of Mao's essays does not give them virtue as introductory texts in Marxist philosophy. Rather, that easiness stems from the fact that they are based on under-developmental (or 'statist petty-bourgeois' for those who like the jargon) versions of familiar empiricist and idealist doctrines, which have long been established as an intellectual feature of our own Western capitalism.

Which brings me to my second aim, namely, to resist the contemporary revival of that romantic idealism and revolutionary nationalism, out of which the more advanced sectors of the international working class were already beginning to move towards a practical grasp of the materialist dialectics of class struggle, by the latter part of the nineteenth century. By what might be termed 'the Cunning of Unreason', obsolete theories of revolutionary empiricism were successfully foisted on people outside the imperialist metropolis, only to be reimported from them nowadays with rhetorical enthusiasm by small groups of youth and students inside it. Indeed, they seem to offer a glamorous perspective for such marginal elements, in which they could become the leaders of the revolutionary 'people', just as Byron or Petofi did in the brave days of yore. If nothing ever comes of such bold dreams, at least they provide the wherewithal to decorate their lives. Western Maoism is only one present form of the protest ideology of expostulating liberal intellectuals, generically known as Populism. I believe it owes much of its intensity to an unrecognised desire to evade the increasing proletarianisation of intellectuals in modern capitalism. By speaking for the working class, so to speak, it may be possible not to become a part of it; or, to become only a special part, at least. Beside this must be set a sincere but incoherent demand for the universal realisation of those goals and values (the 'rights' of 'man') laid down for humanity by ... capitalism.

It's not much intellectual strain in 1977 for revolutionaries to come on like good old Tom Paine, William Godwin, Winstanley, Rousseau and bits of the US Constitution. How much harder it is proving, finally to put such ideas behind us on the bookshelves

of history (where indeed they have an honourable and sometimes glorious place), and to think instead the new ideas which are needed for the practice of the international proletarian revolutionary movement today.

These notes make only a negative contribution to that task. From an avowedly 'philosophical' dimension, they explore events central to the world we are all variously engaged in, the Chinese civil war or Revolution. I have tried always to attend to the material reality of the 'thoughts' I shall criticise. And I mean to show, not the obvious fact that Mao Tse-tung was central to those events, but the less obvious one that those events were themselves constitutive of what is perhaps misleadingly (at least for non-Marxists) called his 'philosophical' work.

But do Mao's philosophical ideas deserve this much attention? Aren't they just the fag end of a historical process through which 'dialectical materialism' became little more than a misnomer for a pseudo-dialectical empiricism? Which may be appropriate, perhaps, for the theoretical politics of state capitalism, but can hardly interest radical theoreticians today, whichever continent they work in? Well, that may be so, but negative theoretical work can be as important as positive contributions, if less satisfying. I have not the time, nor for that matter the interest to spur me to a comprehensive examination of the long sad history through which Marxism gave rise to 'Marxism'. But I think it may be worth while to discuss in some detail one famous but not too massive example of the process, still rampant within 'Western Marxism', by which bourgeois philosophical ideas appropriate or infiltrate the theory which should rather be opposing and undermining them. The problem of the practice of the theory of a future communist society within capitalist society is of the first importance to our socialist politics today. Whether we like it or not, few people will come to understand Maoism through reading up on the politics of great Populist philosophers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, whose ideas have in fact been transposed into the 'revolutionary' orthodoxies of under-developed nationalism in our own day. Maoism needs to be criticised as such, and I take Mao's philosophical views as a means to indicate the outlines of criticism of his politics as a whole.

The value of these notes, if any, can only be that of additional reflections to add to other more concrete accounts of the Chinese Revolution, a few of which are mentioned below. To see fully what I am getting at must require in the reader a further, or an existing acquaintance with the history of Maoism, rather than its hagiology. A history of the Chinese Revolution could in fact be written around an orientation to its philosophers, but although the groundwork for such an edifice has already been laid down in a number of important monographs in English, nothing so ambitious will be attempted here.

Lastly, it is nothing less than prudent for me to conclude this introduction by stating in the plainest of terms that the criticisms I shall go on to elaborate do not mean that I think Mao succeeded in China only by 'luck'. I am as willing as any Maoist, Third Worldist or fellow-traveller to attribute the eventual victory of the CCP to the politics, military genius and overall line evolved by Mao Tse-tung. I would add that it was his shrewd perception of the objective requirements for a successful struggle for power, more than anything else, which brought about both Mao's politics and his related philosophical rationalisations. (1)

'... the outstanding thing about China's 600 million people is that they are "poor and blank" ... On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written ...'

Mao Tse-tung, 1958

'... the criterion of truth proposed in "On Practice" would be hard to disagree with.'

Jonathan Rée (2)

The opening pages of Mao's essay 'On Practice' (3) are an impressive and skilful re-statement of empiricist ideas in Marxist terminology. Knowledge may not be itself practice. But while the Great Conjuror dispenses with the core of Marxist epistemology with his right hand, he almost succeeds in distracting our attention from this with the flourishes of his left. Knowledge 'depends on', 'arises from', and 'can in no way be separated from' practice. Furthermore, it depends 'mainly on ... activity in material production'. Indeed, no knowledge of 'certain relations that exist between man and man' 'can be acquired apart from activity in production'. (Except, as we shall see, if one happens to be a 'scholar'). Besides being the 'source' of knowledge, practice is also the sole 'criterion of truth of ... knowledge of the external world', and it is by practice that 'knowledge is verified'. The science of Marxism itself could not have been formulated 'until the modern proletariat emerged along with immense forces of production (large scale industry)'.

One way to characterise the philosophical problems with which Mao was faced would be to say they were those which resulted from his prior political commitment to Marxism, which he was obliged subsequently to deepen and defend intellectually so as, almost, to become the Marxist he had decided to be sixteen years before. And this task had to be undertaken in the absence or neglect of those very forces and relations of production which Mao himself acknowledged to be constitutive of Marxism! (4)

The distinctive elements in Mao's account of knowledge and practice are already beginning to emerge by the end of para. 5. Sense experience itself is an absolute passivity to external causation of some kind;

1 Professor S. Schram's arguments in favour of an early date for Mao's philosophical essays, in 'Mao Tse-tung as Marxist Dialectician', *China Quarterly* (CQ) 29 1967, appear to me conclusive. Thus I accept a rough date 1937-40 for the substance of Mao's philosophical views and for at least the original drafts of the texts. For the textual analysis of 'On Dialectical Materialism' with its extensive plagiarisms from Chinese translations of Soviet texts, see Prof. K. A. Wittfogel's translation and comments on Part 1 in *Studies in Soviet Thought* 3 1963, and also Schram's 'Mao and the Theory of Permanent Revolution 1958-69', CQ 46 1971 n. 5 pp223-4.

2 J. Rée, 'Philosophy in China', *Radical Philosophy* 14 1976

3 I have used the Foreign Languages Press 1968 edition of *Four Essays in Philosophy*. But since 'On Practice' is available in so many different editions, I have followed Professor Wakeman's lead in referring to it by numbered paragraphs, which its shortness makes possible without inconvenience.



Mao Tse-tung in 1923



Mao's mentor in Communism, Li Ta-Chao

practice is valuable only as the means to more varied and more relevant inputs to the senses; there is an active 'internal' aspect to thought and knowledge but it is rarely spoken of as material, and never as practice. Such doctrines cannot add up to the Marxist one of a unity of practice with knowledge, no matter how heavily they are camouflaged in Marxian terminology. People are regarded as active by Mao in two ways, both in their physical 'practice' (i.e. 'behaviour' in the original vocabulary of modern empiricism), and also in their internal mental faculties. But these activities are inter-dependent, not united. What is more, the interdependence is indirect, for the free potentialities of the inner mental powers are never thought of as in any way constrained by the actual nature of those gross behavioural activities Mao understands by 'practice'. The free mental subjectivity is limited in its scope only by the range of the mysterious data, said to be garnered from the body's encounters with the world. And even this limitation is virtually withdrawn, once Mao concedes that 'developed technology' can give the scholar adequate access to the immediate experiences of everyone else (para. 9). (This makes it possible, amongst other things, for the son of a moderately well-off peasant in a rural district of China in the first part of this century to transmute himself into the quintessence of the understanding formulated by the modern industrial working class.) But apart from these familiar divisions of labour, to which we shall return, enough has been said, perhaps, to indicate the very fundamental distinctions which Mao either postulates or assumes between the physical and the mental activities of human beings. The two forms of activity are allegedly connected by two mysterious but again familiar transducers - 'perception' and 'will'. The broad outlines of all this are to be found in several pre-Kantian philosophies, of course.

Mao himself illustrates this schema very well at para. 7. Let us suppose it is indeed the summer of 1937, nearly a year after Mao completed the Long

4 It was not until 1936 that Mao set himself to study at all seriously the theoretical foundations and sources of Marxism. The works that then became available to him (since he read only Chinese) were either translations or sequels to philosophical work by the avowedly Stalinist group which succeeded Deborin and his followers in all positions of power in Soviet philosophy, such as Mitin, Yudin et al. The low esteem in which Mao's first efforts in the field were held by more experienced theoreticians within the CCP is indicated by some evidence discussed by Wittfogel, loc. cit. The delay between their original restricted circulation within the Party, and their subsequent inclusion in the official *Selected Works*, is attributable to a combination of Mao's own low evaluation of them (and it is noteworthy that he wrote very little more on such matters), his supposed embarrassment at the obvious plagiarisms, and the increasing possibility, as his politics began to diverge more openly from Stalin's, of setting his earlier failure to work within the intellectual guidelines of Stalinism in a more positive light. But of course it never was a merely intellectual disagreement, even as early as 1937.

March; nine months after the heavy defeats suffered by the Red Army when it tried to fight both the Japanese and the Kuomintang together; six months after the Sian Incident and the signing of the Anti-Japanese Agreement with the Kuomintang; and two months before the tactfully re-named 'Eighth Route' and 'Fourth Front' Armies will cross the Yellow River a second time into action against the Japanese (5). The entente with the Kuomintang has made it possible to refurbish not only the supplies, but also the politics and overall ideology of the Army. Mao faces the problem of vindicating the new line to his cadres. Whether he is ready for this task or not, he knows he must lead in the work of education, both to gain more support for his line, and generally to confirm his recently gained but by no means uncontested supremacy within the Party (6). Since he is challenged on basic principles, he must fight back on the same ground. To cobble together his notes, he refers constantly to basic Soviet texts (7). But they cannot give him the kind of example he needs to make this stuff even halfway real to his audience. So what can he come up with? Aha, that's it!

'For instance, some people from outside come to Yen-an on a tour of observation. In the first day or two, they see its topography, streets and houses; they meet many people, attend banquets, evening parties, and mass meetings, hear talk of various kinds and read various documents, all these being the phenomena, the separate aspects and the external relations of things. This is called the perceptual stage of cognition, namely the stage of sense perceptions and impressions. That is, these particular things in Yen-an act on the sense organs of the members of the observation group, evoke sense perceptions and give rise in their brains to many impressions together with a rough sketch of the external relations among these impressions: this is the first stage of cognition. At this stage, man cannot as yet form concepts, which are deeper, or draw logical conclusions.

'As social practice continues, things that give rise to man's sense perceptions and impressions in the course of his practice are repeated many times; then a sudden change (leap) takes place in the brain in the process of cognition, and concepts are formed. Concepts are no longer the phenomena, the separate aspects and the external relations of things. Between concepts and sense perceptions there is not only a quantitative

but also a qualitative difference. Proceeding further, by means of judgement and inference one is able to draw logical conclusions. The expression in *San Kuo Yen Yi*, 'knit the brows and a stratagem comes to mind', or in everyday language, 'let me think it over', refers to a man's use of concepts in the brain to form judgements and inferences. This is the second stage of cognition. When the members of the observation group have collected various data and, what is more, have 'thought them over', they are able to arrive at the judgement that 'the Communist Party's policy of the National United Front Against Japan is thorough, sincere and genuine'. ' (paras. 7 and 8)

The agreement with the Kuomintang, which will stand for three years, has also made possible visits by sympathetic national democratic elements from the rest of China to the Communists' base area in northern Shensi. After a certain amount of 'practice' in familiarisation with the Party's United Front Policy as presented in documents, banquets and meetings, they are imagined, plausibly, to become convinced of the virtues of the CCP line. But notice first of all that the practice of such an 'observation group' is a very special kind of practice, and one which fits well into Mao's empiricist account of knowledge. Given that they are outsiders, the observers do not directly engage in the formulation of that line; still less do they take any part in the work of production, training and combat, which are the central practices of the line, and to which the entertainment of sympathetic guests is decidedly peripheral. Mao does not discuss the unity, nor even the inter-dependence, of the Party's material anti-Japanese activities with the corresponding policies as understood by its own cadres or followers. For in fact the new policy was not worked out by all the Party members in and through their practice. It has been formulated for them by their leaders. The observation group, in their marginality to the practices which they come to 'know', are the inverted counterparts to the directing 'mind' of the Party, into which the rich detail of Party members' experience must first be reflected along the appropriate upward and inward channels for such reports, and out from which are then subjectively and boldly generated the 'logical knowledge' encapsulated in the new line, along with suitable commands (acts of pure will or leadership) to direct the behavioural 'practice' of the lower organs or limbs of the Red Leviathan.

*Bull. de l'Univ. de l'Aurore* 3 1947, it can be seen that Mao also had other sources to draw on, in the first published works by Yeh Ch'ing and Ai Ssu-ch'i. The latter is particularly interesting, since he is admitted by Brière to have had a knack with down-to-earth examples and applications of philosophical ideas to the Chinese context, which is precisely almost the sole positive feature in Mao's own philosophical work on which all commentators agree. Brière points out that all Chinese Marxist works on philosophy in this period devote some discussion to the war, so this feature of Mao's essays was by no means unique to their author either. The same writer illustrates the importance attached to philosophy by the Chinese Left in this period, by pointing out that Yeh Ch'ing's Marxist bookshop in Shanghai, where he was a regular customer, had about half its stock in philosophical titles. Many of these were translations, as we should expect from Yeh Ch'ing's own prominence in this field. I know of no thorough comparison of earlier philosophical works by Chinese Marxists with Mao's own. According to Brière, Yeh Ch'ing moved rapidly from a 'mechanicist' position in 1934, in line with Minin, Enchmen and Stepanov, to one at least superficially in line with the victorious Deborinists in 1936, with a book not inappropriately titled *Philosophical Problems*. Ai Ssu-ch'i published *Popular Philosophy* in 1936 (though Brière sarcastically remarks that he never saw any but students buying it, and even they didn't seem to find it intelligible), and is said by Wittfogel to have produced a work on the relation between theory and practice 'before 1936', which may or may not have been the same book.

- 5 See for instance C. A. Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power*, Stanford UP 1963 pp73-4. But the general framework and conclusions of this work have been very effectively refuted by E. Lerner's *Critique*, Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars 6 1974. Schram accepts a very similar evaluation of Johnson to Lerner's at *Mao Tse-tung*, Penguin 1977 p203n
- 6 The turning-point at the Tsun-yi Conference, at which Mao's group took over the Central Committee, was two years past. But Mao did not enjoy an undisputed supremacy until about 1942. A striking illustration of this was the re-publication in Yen-an itself, in July 1940, of Wang Ming's *The Two Lines*, a central document of the pro-Comintern faction or '28 Bolsheviks'. See J. E. Rue, *Mao Tse-tung In Opposition 1927-1935*, Stanford UP 1966 Ch. 1 n. 17 and passim. I find this fact hard to reconcile with Prof. Schram's judgement, op. cit., that Wang Ming had 'ceased to play any real role by the end of 1939'.
- 7 See (1) above for partial analyses revealing the extent of plagiarisms in 'On Dialectical Materialism', and for Schram's shrewd observation that Mao's reported disclaimer in respect of this essay, in conversation with Edgar Snow, was very far from a categorical denial of authorship. Wittfogel argues persuasively that one of the texts with which Mao worked on Marxist philosophy from mid-1936 was the translation of the article on Dialectical Materialism written by Mitin et al for the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, to which both his discussions of Deborinism and his use of the famous quotation from Lenin, 'antagonism and contradiction, can be attributed. But from O. Brière, S. J., 'L'effort de a philosophie Marxiste en Chine',

With the device of the observation group, then, Mao turns his back on any attempt to discuss knowledge as an integral part in the same material practice (e.g. class struggle) of which it is knowledge. There is no conspiracy or intellectual failure; the politics of Marxist epistemology is just not Mao's politics, for many reasons. Instead, he holds a modified version of traditional empiricism, with its view of knowledge as a privileged subjectivity, alien to its object. The idealist and elitist consequences of such a position are transformed perhaps, but far from avoided. Not only Locke, but also Bacon looms in the background. For a comprehensive survey of the data of experience, so far as we have managed to gather them in, some inner light or faculty of understanding can be relied on to distil, intuit or 'disclose' the true natures or the essences of the reality underlying them.

As in the West, so in its Eastern guise, empiricism will do intellectual 'coolie service' for a ruling group, by vindicating the important division between manual and mental labour. Already in 1930 Mao had written his revealing essay 'Oppose Bookism' (8). This was aimed principally at proving that the best way to carry out the directives issued by the distant Central Committee in Shanghai, with whom Mao was in acute disagreement, was in fact not to follow them, but to rewrite them in the field, according to the 'objective and subjective conditions of the struggle' as interpreted by Mao himself. The essay shows clearly the empiricism of his epistemology; the complementary exhortation to the cadres' will; and thirdly, that it was for just such an audience of cadres that Mao wrote:

'Many doing leadership work only sigh when confronted with difficult problems, instead of solving them. They become frustrated and ask for a transfer on the grounds that their "talent is too small for the job". These are the words of a coward. Stretch your legs, take a walk around your work area, and learn the Confucian way of "enquiring into everything". Then, no matter how small your talent, you will be able to solve problems. Though your mind may be blank when you go out, it will no longer be so by the time you return: it will be filled with the facts you need for the solution of the problems, and in this manner they will be solved. Must you go out? Not necessarily. You may call an investigative meeting of those who understand the situation, and by this means locate the "source" of a problem that you consider difficult and clarify its "present conditions". The problem is then easily solved.'

(Rue, op. cit., p306)

As a description of the methods to be followed by a conscientious trade union bureaucrat today, these lines could hardly be bettered. The extent to which they were a nostalgic self-portrait may be debatable, though I should guess they were very much so. One can wonder how much use it could have been to inexperienced cadres of lower calibre, to be told in this hectoring manner that one only needs to look at problems and solutions will be spontaneously genera-

ted. The almost poignantly defensive 'Must you go out? Not necessarily', showing that Mao already found it hard to keep in touch with those he led, we shall return to shortly.

Not only was this text aimed at people engaged in 'leadership work'. It also expressed the vital importance to the senior leadership of frequent, accurate and comprehensive information, relayed from the junior and peripheral sense organs of the Party. In reality, it would not be such people who were expected to exercise their conceptual 'audacity', or to make 'leaps' into fresh interpretations of a situation whenever the spirit moved them. The thinking subject was nominally a collective one, but such privileges were not shared by all its parts. However, while Mao was still struggling to secure for himself an absolutely undisputed mastery within the Party, something not generally reckoned to have been his before the early 1940s, democratic-sounding versions of his theory can often be cited. And they would continue to recur, in periods of acute intra-Party strife, even later. Why this was possible, I hope to show in what follows.

## Marx's place in Maoism

But even as early as 1930, the 'leaps' expected of junior cadres have a distinctly Follow My Leader air about them. The argument was not so much about the Follow bit, as about who should play Leader. Eventually the inconsistency, between a formally collective subject and a philosophical theory worked out in the Western bourgeois revolutions for isolated individual subjects, was to be resolved through the total substitution of the Leader for the Collectivity (Party or Nation, never the unmentionable industrial proletariat). And later still, that substitution was to prove not unfruitful with its own internal contradictions, whether 'non-antagonistic' or the other kind. Once any ideology is attenuated to the emptiness of a theology, it becomes easy enough for all opposing forces to fight in the name of the same Church (9).

Both in 'On Practice' and elsewhere, for instance in his 1942 speech on 'Reform in learning, the Party, and literature' (10). Mao got into embarrassing difficulties due to his empiricism. In general, he favoured what may be called the 'D. Phil' approach to the training of leaders and theoreticians. They must have some contact at first with actual social practice and material reality (the distinction between people and the 'world' they have contact with is his, not mine). But once they have gone through this necessary initiation, they are excused thereafter from remaining in constant contact with the real social world, provided they still 'go out' occasionally. Thanks to modern technology, Mao writes in para. 9, 'the "scholar" can indirectly "know all the wide world's affairs"'. What is more, 'most of our knowledge comes from indirect experience' (my emphases).

As for the notoriously bookish Arch-Theoretician, tormented by his boils in the British Museum Reading Room, He achieved 'real knowledge' because after all He did 'participate' in the revolutionary movement. Mao entirely begs the question as to just what the nature or the extent of Marx's participation

8 Translated as an Appendix in Rue, op. cit.

9 Marxist readers may feel I am rejecting the theory of democratic centralism. But not so. The difference, as so often in politics, lies in the details. Stalinist and Maoist political practice alike effectively deny access by junior Party members to central decision-taking bodies. Instead these claim to take their decisions on behalf of the members, and on the basis of reports of rank-and-file opinion together with some higher understanding of the global situation. But rank-and-file members are un-

able to see these reports, or to engage in open intra-Party debate over the wisdom claimed by their chiefs, still less to elect other Central Committee members in their stead. I try to show in these notes that the philosophical rationale constructed to defend such authoritarianism neither is nor can be a Marxist one.

10 Extracts in S. Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung*, revised ed. Penguin 1969, p174ff

was (11). As if aware of this, in the 1942 speech he added another, stupefyingly Platonist account of Marx's theoretical work on 'research on commodity production' in which a theory was derived from 'observations on universally existing phenomena', and in which investigation was carried on 'by turning to a reality that was all-inclusive'. Mao finds that his own subdivision of mental labour, between the primary reception (or 'reflection') of data, on the one hand, and the activity of systematising and interpreting them, on the other, threatens to degrade Marx to the status of the 'half-intellectuals' whom he is upbraiding. And so he anxiously hastens to revise this latter activity into a contemplative idealist passivity (and thus another good example of all that Mao can manage to mean by 'practice'). It is 'observation' after all, the observation of real universals. The Sage of the Reading Room has done 'personal research'. Through inner reflection he has somehow encountered reality or science; his writings simply report his discoveries in that mysterious realm. On the idealist assumptions, within which he is trying to formulate something which looks like Marxism, this is about the best that Mao can do.

'Whoever wants to know a thing has no way of doing so except by coming into contact with it, that is, by living (practising) in its environment.'

'As to the sequence in the process of cognition, perceptual experience comes first; we stress the significance of social practice in the process of cognition precisely because social practice alone can give rise to human knowledge and it alone can start man on the acquisition of perceptual experience from the objective world ... Knowledge begins with experience - this is the materialism of the theory of knowledge.'

(O. P. paras 9 and 16, my emphases)

In other words, practice is only significant because experience, the passive acquisition of data from the world, is primary. Mao writes as if this Lockean position was what Marxist epistemology was all about. There are serious difficulties, however, for anyone trying to reach even seemingly Marxist conclusions from such pre-Kantian assumptions about the unproblematic nature of sense perception. Mao can say nothing to explain why some people's experiences are to be preferred to those of others, let alone as to why some people's experiences may not even be available to others. On the contrary, as we have already seen, 'developed technology' means that, in principle at least, any person can have indirect access to the experiences of any other, no matter how estranged may be their respective living practices (12). If all are endowed with the same 'physical sense organs', why may not all who meet

11 Mao lacks any conception of the work of theory as itself a part of practice, and also any realisation that a person is a materially active totality, in which no sub-sections can be isolated from others merely by dubbing them 'judgements'. That is why an 'ignorant' person is fully entitled to judge the work of an expert, for there will often be aspects of the expert's total practice which are quite clear, even more clear to the 'ignorant' person than to the expert herself. Nor does Mao pay any attention to one of the most important epistemological features of Marx's theoretical work, even when it is looked on as 'pure' theory in the bourgeois sense, namely its claim both to prove and to illustrate that effective progress in science can no longer be made except in the context of a proletarian commitment to the abolition of class society. But perhaps Mao's neglect of such aspects of Marx is scarcely to be wondered at, in view of the analysis of the references in the four-volume *Selected Works* made by V. Holubnychy, 'Mao Tse-tung's Materialist Dialectics' CQ 19 1962. Only 4% of Mao's references are to works by Marx and Engels, and none of those are to any of Marx's 'economic' writings (the term is Holubnychy's).

12 Amongst other things, this doctrine legitimates as 'science'

with the same physical stimulation (with minor variations) through practices which bring them 'into contact with' the same phenomena, then 'proceed further' to reach the same understanding or 'logical knowledge'? In terms of another of Mao's illustrations, why cannot the Nationalist officers (for of course it is of officers on both sides that we are speaking here) draw the same conclusions from the Agrarian Revolutionary War as their Communist counterparts?

Well, we know the Nationalists are supposed to be the baddies, and baddies are always stupid, as in Hollywood so in Peking opera. But setting aside such satisfying, but simple-minded, calvinisms, what can Mao say as to why wisdom is only to be found on the Communist side? Don't the Nationalists also 'experience a good deal of fighting and ... suffer many defeats'? Then why is it not true for them that 'this experience ... enables them to comprehend the inner thread of the whole war'? (para. 13). Blinkered with the empiricist notion of experience as a neutral, universally available, exchangeable and objective raw material for science, Mao cannot see the Marxist dissolution of this problem, the denial that any two such sides have experiences which are the same, the denial that they are in any sense fighting or 'having' the same war, even. Marxism supplies what Mao lacked, a theory of experience as the activity of a material subject, and hence as an activity which varies as subjects vary in their material and historical being. (The association in Mao's mind between defeats and the lessons of experience is richly significant. His own schooling in political and military defeat was most intensive between the Autumn Harvest Uprising of 1927 and the close of the Kiangsi Soviet period in 1934. The next year, after the Long March had already begun, the tide began to turn for the Red Army when Mao began to share the overall military command with Chu Teh.)

Ironically, the irrationality of Mao's position is identical with that of the progressive materialists of the European Enlightenment, who also derived their theory of knowledge from Locke. Ironically, because Li Ta-chao, Mao's intellectual godfather in the years when both Mao and the CCP were being formed, objected to just such an inconsistency between materialist determinism and revolutionary activism in 'Marxism', which only goes to show the debased form in which Marxism was current even then (13). But Marx himself criticised this inconsistency in the eighteenth-century materialists with devastating force in The Holy Family, the Theses on Feuerbach, and The German Ideology, and his answer to it was what deserves the name of Marxism or nothing does (14). But such is the inertia of ignorance that the political and intellectual struggle against the same irrationality still continues.

view of people in China as a passive 'sheet of paper' on whose 'poor and blank' surface either the wily Communist militarists (Johnson) or the 'true military leaders' (Mao) are subjectively free to write whatever 'characters' they choose.

13 M. Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, Harvard 1967, esp. Ch. VI

14 Obviously I have some opinions, no matter how inadequate, as to what Marxism is as well as what it isn't. If I have partially shown what these are, without defending them, that is because it is impossible to write about everything at once. I intend to develop my ideas further in a contribution to the current debate on the 'possibility of a dialectics of nature' in *New Left Review*, *Marxism Today*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Critique* and other journals of the British Left.

the production of weighty tomes on Marxism, on revolution and on the working class by scholars who are avowedly neither workers, nor revolutionaries, nor Marxists - the Lichthiems, Brandts, Poppers, McClellands, Johnsons etc. Lerner's *Critique of Johnson*, loc. cit. in (5) above, brings out very clearly, though probably without the author's intention, the extent to which both Mao and Johnson agree in an a-historical



(Briefly, if experience is not itself a practice which can be either more or less successfully engaged in, but simply a uniform raw material or 'Nature' encompassing each essentially identical human being, we are left with an inconsistent combination of acute optimism with simultaneous acute pessimism. Anyone who 'looks' often enough can understand, unless they wickedly refuse to activate their inner faculties. But on the other hand, if we ourselves originate from the natural 'given', it is a mystery how we can ever radically change it or ourselves. Activists such as Mao smother the mystery with undefended assertions of naked possibility or romantic will, sometimes coupled with an 'emergence' theory to account for the causal independence of human beings from their natural origins. Those who are more aware of the inconsistency, on the other hand, are often reduced to political inactivity. The growth of Western 'pessimism' in recent years, in which the removal of the 'dialectic' from 'Nature' goes together with the absence of the theoreticians from class struggles in their own society, is an urgent case in point. It is only possible to continue in politics with such views at the price of a massive intellectual concession to the opponents of Marxism - the concession of dualism.)

## Maoist empiricism

For Mao, theoretical understanding has to be both based in, and entirely independent of the data of experience. A free and, to all intents and purposes, immaterial internal subjectivity, variously termed 'judgement', 'concepts' or 'inference' (15), alone determines itself to acquire a true understanding of the matter in hand, or not, as it chooses. The passivism of Mao's Lockean epistemology forces him into a complementary idealist view of 'man' as possessed of an innate capacity for immediate intuitions of the truths underlying presented phenomena. Just a little 'thinking over', and conclusions can successfully be reached. And just as all good common-sensical empiricists have always believed, once that internal miracle has been accomplished, it leads to modifications in future behaviour.

Since anybody can do this, anybody who doesn't has either been too lazy to gather in the necessary data, or else must be wilfully refusing to 'see' their meaning in the approved manner. The remedy in either case must be to coerce her will, though possibly by different methods. (Echoes of the Holy Office are not accidental.) Mao's position means that reasoning from the experiential base can take us only a small way along the road to knowledge. After that, something more convincing than reason

has to take over. (The Humean nature of all this should be evident.) Quite often, in reading Mao, one meets with important conclusions which are radically unsupported by argument; the explanation is that these were in fact decrees, and doubtless they were well understood to be such by those for whose benefit they were originally promulgated (16).

Much of the later part of 'On Practice', as well as the long footnote at the beginning, is taken up with attacks on groups inside the CCP which resisted Mao's rewriting of Marxism, during his long slow rise to supremacy. In the footnote Mao repeats his favourite tag, that 'Marxism is not a dogma, but a guide to action'. (17) The obstructive 'dogmatists' were Party leaders to the left of Mao (a majority in the early 1930s) who, admittedly in the course of imposing on the CCP the rigid and misguided instructions dictated to them by Stalin through the Comintern, had inconveniently insisted on pointing out some of the things Marx had actually written about the connection between his theory and the revolutionary practice of an advanced industrial proletariat. Such obstacles were to be overcome, not by any rethinking of collective experience and the categories of the Party's material subjectivity, but rather by the free mental faculties of 'true revolutionary leaders', so gifted as to be 'good at making themselves and all their fellow-revolutionaries progress and change in their subjective knowledge' (para. 20). Notice that once a Leader is allowed to be capable of making himself progress in this way by his own spiritual and voluntarist bootstraps, the question of his relationship to the practice of any class becomes entirely irrelevant (18). Failing historical materialism, idealism is the only possible theory for revolution. No wonder, then, that 'As early as 1930, Ch'u Chiu-pai, echoing Comintern complaints, accused Mao and his small band of revolutionaries of being "petty bourgeois populists" who had turned their backs on the urban proletariat' (19). And Mao himself, who only three years before had 'stood up' as an ardent Hunanese nationalist, seems almost to have given his own admission of this in 1923, by arguing that since there were hardly any workers in Hunan anyway, how could he be expected to base his politics on them? (20)

The eventual result of the mistrust with which 'dogmatism' was regarded was to be an increasing difficulty for most people in the Chinese People's Republic to gain access to works written by Marx and Engels, since after all their European and proletarian content was irrelevant to the needs of 'China', and their revolutionary tone of voice or

- 15 I have tried not to make anything out of the more or less verbal tangles which Mao, or perhaps his translator, sometimes gets into, such as saying at one point that concepts are reached by the activity of judgement and at another that judgements are made possible by concepts, or more often, contrasting the 'stage of conception, judgement and inference' with the rather more intelligible 'stage of perception'. I am not interested in picking on elementary confusions in the essay, but in expounding and criticising its overall sense.
- 16 Demands by Red Guards in 1965-66 for the emphasis to be taken off 'redness by background' and placed instead on 'conscious redness', and on overt 'manifestations' of ideological purity, were a consistent result of Mao's idealist politics. See D. Munro, 'The Malleability of Man in Chinese Marxism' CQ 48 1971, esp. the section on 'The Social Nature as Mental Phenomena'.
- 17 This sentence, with slight variations, was repeatedly and indiscriminately attributed by Mao to Marx, to Engels, to Lenin, and to Stalin. His official editors do not offer any textual references to back him up. And alone amongst Western commentators, Father Briere does actually locate it, on p320 of Zinoviev's 'Leninisme', Paris 1926, through which I have traced it back to a citation by Lenin, Complete Works 1974 Vol. 17, p39, where it is clearly attributed to Engels alone,

but unfortunately without a reference. Despite, or rather because what it says is true, this slogan has been a godsend for Lenin's Stalinist or revisionist epigones in their capitulations to 'practical politics'.

- 18 The frequency with which such views can be found in the utterances of revolutionaries today proves nothing, one way or the other, as to whether or not they are consistent with Marxism. The true proposition 'All Marxists are revolutionaries' does not entail its converse 'All revolutionaries are Marxists', despite the frequent but fallacious assumption that it does. The fallacy is one which many people on the Left seem happy to share with the extreme Right, or with analysts in the US State Department, which is a pity.
- 19 M. Meisner, 'Leninism and Maoism: Populist Perspectives', CQ 45 1971
- 20 A. W. Macdonald, 'Mao and the Hunan Self-Government Movement, 1920', CQ 68 1976. Chang Kuo-tao's not unbiased recollection of Mao's views, as expressed at the CCP's Third Congress, is quoted by Dov Bing in his Reply to Mrs Muntjwerf's Comment 'Was There a Sneevlietian Strategy?' at CQ 54 1973 p353. What makes Chang's memoir ring true, for me, is Mao's known diffidence and lack of success as a trades unions organiser at this period; see Rue, op. cit., Ch. II

'guide to action' had long been successfully transferred to, and surpassed by the Sun Chairman. (21) By the 1960s, it was even possible for Lin Piao to say that after all Marx was only a bookish half-intellectual anyway, who despite his 'excellent foresight' 'never personally led any proletarian revolution', and anyway 'The population of China is over ten times larger than that of Germany...' (22)

Passivity and assiduity in experience for those at the bottom, together with dutiful readiness to leap wherever their betters have leapt before them, are harmoniously complemented by freedom in subjective interpretation and in the direction of the collective effort, for those at the top. Such leaders need from theory, more than anything else, a vindication of their right to opportunism, as expressed in one of Mao's favourite Hunanese proverbs: 'There is no pattern for straw sandals; they take shape as you work on them.' (23) Mao wrote to defend that right, not only against the 'dogmatists' who wanted more contentful interpretations of Marxism, but also against any in the Party who might threaten to steal the Maoists' stage-thunder from below, the 'empiricists'.

'On the other hand, mistakes are going to be made by those comrades engaged in practical work who make an incorrect application of their experience. It is quite true that such men have had a great deal of experience and should be valued highly. But there is great danger if they are satisfied with their experience. They should realise that the greater part of their knowledge is gained from immediate perception and is therefore limited, and that they fall short when it comes to reasoned, universal knowledge, that is to say, they fall short in theory. Thus their knowledge, too, is comparatively incomplete. Yet without comparatively complete knowledge it is impossible to finish the revolution...' (24)

Or, as he puts it rather more bluntly in O. P. para. 17, if such 'vulgar "practical men" ... direct a revolution, they will lead it up a blind alley.' It is the old argument from the man at the top to those below, that they have no right to reach independent conclusions, because they simply cannot see the whole picture; meanwhile, he is careful to see that they never do. Later, when he needed to have senior cadres and professionals shaken up by young-

- 21 See for instance the composite 'Hong Kong interview' in R. Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution*, Delta 1973, where Peking students of the late 1950s are said to have had good reason to be envious of businessmen in this respect! And at p221 of Mao Tse-tung, Schram refers to a text in Boyd Compton's *Mao's China*, in which Mao criticised those who 'repeat quotes from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin from memory', and spoke of 'seventeen and eighteen-year-old babies' being taught to 'nibble on *Das Kapital* and *Anti-Dühring*' instead of learning about their own country.
- 22 Quoted in F. Wakeman, *History and Will*, U. of California P. 1973 pp20-21
- 23 Schram, loc. cit. in CQ 46 p231, gives an example of Mao's use of this proverb in January 1958.
- 24 In Schram, *The Political Thought* p178, from the speech referred to at (10) above.
- 25 Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works* Vol. 1 1954 p135
- 26 Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works* Vol. 4 1956 p10
- 27 As in the famous Report of an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan, in *Selected Works* Vol. 1
- 28 This distortion of the history of philosophy is related to the more general Stalinist orthodoxy, under which it was not permissible to think that any 'mechanical' (i.e. pre-nineteenth century) materialists had ever conceived of motion as an internal or natural property in matter. Whether or not Mao went along with this falsification so far as Europe was concerned, his closer feeling for the history of Chinese thought can hardly have permitted him to apply it universally. For the more balanced indecision which prevails in recent Soviet history of philosophy, see the summary at pp88-95 in M. Iovchuk, *Philosophical Traditions Today*, Progress 1973

# JASO

Journal of the Anthropological  
Society of Oxford

Contents of vol. viii, no. 2 :

Malthus and formal analysis  
Hermeneutics in anthropology  
What science is saying about  
the Celts  
Review articles on S.J. Tambiah  
and on biosocial anthropology

Three issues a year; enquiries,  
contributions and subscriptions to  
Journal Editors, Institute of Social  
Anthropology, 51 Banbury Rd., Oxford.

ger inexperienced people, he did not tolerate from them the kind of argument he uses here himself. Such reasoning depends for its cogency, it turns out, on just who is speaking, and when; this is the logic of opportunism. By now it may be clearer how Mao was able to put on a mask of democracy in the course of intra-Party struggles. In 1933, 'This great evil, bureaucracy, must be thrown into the cesspool' (25), presumably along with the higher Party authorities who were demanding that Mao comply with their decisions. And in 1941, with internal disputes still continuing, 'It is my wish that, together with comrades of the whole Party, I should continue to be a pupil of the masses and learn from them.' (26) The message is plain; other comrades must learn whatever Mao says is there to be learned from the masses. The inarticulate masses have no other voice through which to express what they have to teach. And any other voices pretending to such a function will be those of 'empiricists', who can give no more than a partial reflection of the truth from their limited experience. The 'spontaneity' of the masses is precisely this tendency to hasty over-generalisation, which must always be restrained by the well-guided 'consciousness' of the Party. But when this very argument was used against his own parochial rural populism in the early years, it was Mao who argued the 'empiricist' line (27). And as for over-generalisation, it could be said with some justice that Mao himself tended to think of the whole world in terms of the unique theatre of his greatness, the specificities of China between 1911 and 1976.

In philosophical terms, once he had adopted classical European empiricism under the label of 'dialectical materialism', Mao was obliged to invent a spurious candidate for the name 'empiricism', both as the mistaken theory to be replaced by 'Marxism', and as the theoretical content to the mistaken politics of the 'empiricist' comrades within the CCP. At O. P. para. 17, he set out a version of 'empiricism' which has never been held by anyone since Protagoras, though it bears some striking resemblances to the faked up dummies of 'inductivism' which first Hume, and more recently Popper, have so stoutly, self-importantly and repetitiously 'defeated'. (28) According to 'empiricism', then, 'knowledge can stop at the lower, perceptual stage' (or, relatively junior cadres can think for themselves and know what they are doing). In the shadow-boxing that ensues, Mao devalues the 'data of perception' as 'merely one-sided and superficial,

continued on page 15

his 'revised' theory of philosophy as the 'class struggle in theory'. Since it is a discourse without an object, there can never be an epistemological break which would constitute philosophy as 'theory' in a sense parallel to that of scientific theory. Thus Althusser has conceded the point made against him by Desanti in the sixties, that it is precisely the function of ideology to prevent the splintering of scientific discourse by closing it off from 'third-level', i.e. 'philosophical', conflict(24). According to the new Althusser, philosophy must remain a constantly-shifting field of forces in which there can be no absolutely 'correct' position, since correctness and incorrectness do not depend on correspondence to an object, but are determined by a conjuncture which is largely 'outside' philosophy and which - although philosophy does not like to think so - constitutes philosophical discourse as such(25). This means that the task for those attempting to be both Marxists and philosophers (it would be mistaken to believe that there is any easy or ready-made conjunction of the two) must be one of intervention rather than construction. For any attempted Marxist philosophical edifice will find its foundations sinking into sand as the balance of class forces in

other instances of the social formation alters, and this can only be avoided if the Marxist in philosophy is distinguished by his or her awareness of what Althusser terms 'the primacy of the practical function over the theoretical in philosophy itself'(26). The need for this awareness was surely what Marx was pointing to when he levelled the following accusation at the thought of the Left Hegelians: '(it) has proclaimed itself the pure, resolute, absolute Criticism which has achieved self-clarity, and in its spiritual pride has reduced the whole process of history to the relation between the rest of the world, which comes into the category of the 'masses', and itself'(27). It is perhaps in terms of this criticism that the problematic Marxist notion of the 'end of philosophy' can best be understood. Certainly, as the 'disembodied' nature of Edgley's position illustrates, Marx's reminder of the inherent limitations of philosophy - of its obligation to refer itself to social and political practices - has lost none of its relevance for Marxists concerned with philosophy today.

24 See Jean-Toussaint Desanti, 'Materialisme/Epistemologie', *Tel Quel* 58

25 See Louis Althusser, op. cit. pp142-50

26 *ibid.* p143

27 Karl Marx, *Early Writings* op. cit. p381

## On 'On Practice'<sup>continued</sup>

reflecting things immediately and not in their essence'. The debt to Plato's *Theaetetus* is no less certain for being indirect, as it almost undoubtedly was. But we can search in vain for any trace of that Kantian insight, that the very possibility of sense-perception is dependent on, and hence not prior to the forms of subjective apprehension, which lies behind the modern dialectical tradition in philosophy (That insight was of course to be much modified and transformed through consideration of the historical and collective nature of human subjectivity, the central issue treated in the historical materialism of Marx and Engels. But such notions could be nothing but 'idealism' for the idealism of Mao.)

Knowledge and practice are 'united' for Mao, then, only through being inter-dependent, as all good empiricists have always maintained. They are not united, because in the last analysis knowledge is not entirely active, since it depends on a 'given', and since also, in transforming that 'given', knowledge is active as a free non-material subjectivity, little resembling the physical practices of production. But never mind. So long as both one's social practice and one's free theorising, or 'conscious redness', are 'pure' and 'revolutionary', there is no need to enquire too closely into how they are possible. And this retention of an empiricist distinction between knowledge and practice underpinned the allocation to the cadres/intellectuals of the status of a 'class' within the united 'people', though this was not coupled with any too close examination into their actual relationship to the productive practices of the 'masses'. Nevertheless, if joined with the admission in the 1949 Constitution, that the People's Republic of China was a state capitalist society, this was a complacent anticipation of almost all that Marxist critics of the Chinese Communists later tried to prove against them.

The rejection of 'dogmatism', on the other hand, was also aimed at relieving the Chinese 'people' (more or less) of the necessity for anything so characteristic of the Western barbarians as their shameless propensity for all-out military class war-

fare within one 'nation'. In the 1930s and 1940s it was vital to assure intellectuals, officials and businessmen that there was no thought in Communist heads of actually fighting the war against Japan by means of a full-scale social revolution of workers and peasants. On the contrary, winning the war of national liberation before and instead of the Nationalists was supposed to count as winning the class struggle also. It was peace and land reform, but not socialism, which dissolved the armies of Chiang Kai-shek.

Some kind of neutral or objective observational basis for knowledge is always claimed by theories of 'national unity' or 'national interest', whether of the Right or of the 'Left'. Only on such an assumption could both the democratic visitors and their Red Army hosts 'see' the validity of the United Front policy; perish the divisive thought that one class might be inherently bound (and not just by its different experiences, but by what it was) to see things differently than another. As for human activity, when our own European empiricism could no longer credit its earlier theological account of the nature and goals of human action, it fell back upon categorical assertions of national will and personal subjectivity, in the movement known as Romanticism. In the same way, Mao both postulated and came to identify himself with a free subject, 'China', to which all class divisions were irrelevant, and in which all might share, if they chose, including the working people of Brixton or Columbus, Ohio.

In 1949 Mao won a battle that was lost in Europe in 1848. The European defeats set revolutionaries the task of working out a theoretically improved practice. Mao's victory inhibited such progress in China for a time. But later setbacks, in the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, were to prove more fruitful. From them, not Mao but the Chinese proletariat began to take its first hesitant but decisive steps forward, almost, since the bitter defeats of the 1920s and 1930s. To do so was at the same time to abandon the rubbishy theoretical equipment with which they had been brow-beaten for thirty years, during the forging for China's new rulers of their very own empiricist version of the 'Mandate of Heaven'.