

The ‘Philosophy’ of the Yen-an period: Mao Perverts Lenin

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‘We are opposed to the die-hards in the
revolutionary ranks ... We are opposed
to the idle talk of the left.’

Mao Tse Tung.

The drastic change from the first “Soviet” period (1928-9) to the second (Yenan period, 1935-1945) was naturally questioned by many Communists. When some in his “Red Army” called the merger with the Chiang regular Army “counter-revolutionary,” Mao replied that they were “dogmatists.” This political struggle underlies the period of Mao’s alleged original contribution to the philosophy of Marxism.

Objective research has since cast considerable doubt as to the date (1937) when the essays “*On Practice*” and “*On Contradiction*” were written; they weren’t published until 1950-52. We, however, are willing to accept the official date for their writing at face value because they are objectively, subjectively, for yesteryear and for today, so very Maoist that it does not matter that Mao may have back-dated them to make them appear prescient or re-written them to suit his present style. The point is, in order to sell the policy of class collaboration, Mao evidently thought a frontal attack on “dogmatists” would be insufficient. Hence he chose the form of “Philosophic Essays.” These are so filled with empty abstractions that it is difficult to discover either his subject or his aim.

In “*On Practice*”, Mao writes, “The epistemology of dialectical materialism . . . regards human knowledge as being at no point separable from practice.” If knowledge is at no point separable from practice, he would have done well to tell us what practice he is talking about. But, no, Mao is anxious to make this reduction of theory to “practicality” appear to be based on nothing less authoritative than Lenin’s *Philosophic Notebooks*. Mao quotes Lenin’s sentence, “Practice is more than cognition (theoretical knowledge) .” He fails to tell us, however, that Lenin was only restating Hegel’s analysis of the relationship of the Practical Idea to the Theoretical Idea before the two are united, as Lenin puts it, “precisely in the theory of knowledge.”

Far from theory being reduced to “practicality,” Lenin asserts, in the very section from which Mao quoted one sentence, the following: “Alias: Man’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it.” Since this preceded the quotation Mao used, it would have seemed impossible for even a Confucian like Mao so totally to have misunderstood its meaning – unless, of course, he had set out deliberately to pervert Lenin. In any case, the world the sophist

Mao created was for such a low purpose – to compel obedience to a new united front with Chiang – that one hesitates to dignify the writing as “philosophy.”

Only because this state-capitalist tyrant rules over no less than 650 million souls is one compelled to attempt an analysis of his “original contribution to Marxism”.

Evidently, Mao failed to convince his hearers or his readers (we are not told which) because he soon followed with still another “philosophical essay”, once again directed against the dogmatists and this time called “*On Contradiction*”. We are told that it was delivered as a lecture at the anti-Japanese Military and Political College in Yen-an, August, 1937.

In “*On Contradiction*” Mao used some “practical” examples. This has at least one virtue: it shows exactly how he has to rewrite his own previous period of rule in order “to balance” the mistakes of “dogmatists” against those of the Kuomintang. It turns out that only “*after 1927* (my emphasis – R.D.), the Kuomintang turned in the opposite direction” from the “revolutionary and vigorous” period of united front in 1925. The defeat of the Chinese Revolution is now laid at the door of “Ch’en Tuh-siu-ism,” that is to say, the revolutionary Trotskyist leader, Ch’en Tuh-siu! Even the loss of “Soviet China” (now called merely “revolutionary bases”) is blamed, not on Chiang’s extermination campaigns, but on the “mistakes of adventurism”.

“Since 1935”, Mao pompously continues amidst a great deal of pretentious phrasemongering on the philosophic meaning of “Contradictions,” “it (the Communist Party) has rectified these mistakes and led the new anti-Japanese united front”. It follows that after “the Sian Incident in December, 1936, it (the Kuomintang) made another turn,” obviously in the “right revolutionary direction” since they are once again in a united front. In “*On Contradiction*” this demagogic class collaborationist says benignly, “We Chinese often say: ‘Things opposed to each other complement each other.’”

So permeated to the marrow of his bones is Mao with Confucianism that it is doubtful he is even conscious that he is thereby perverting *in toto* the Hegelian-Marxian theory of development through contradiction. Seen in all its profundity for the first time by Lenin, in 1915, as he re-read and commented upon Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, this development through contradiction, transformation into opposite, helped Lenin get to the root of the collapse of established Marxism, the Second International. Blind to the developing oppositions, contradictions, antagonisms, Mao on the other hand invented a “truly original” division in the concept of contradiction, which he called “Principal Aspect of the Contradiction.” This division between “the principal contradiction” and “the principal aspect of contradiction” permits Mao to make as complete a hash of philosophy as he has previously made of history. Thus it turns out that under certain conditions, “even principal contradictions are relegated temporarily to a secondary, or subordinate, position” and because of “uneven developments” and “mutual transformations,” the economic basis becomes “subordinated” while “political and cultural reforms become the principal and decisive factors.” Trying to make up for this insipid subjectivism, Mao proceeds to tell his readers that Communists “of course” remain materialists since “as a whole,” they see that “material things determine spiritual things ...”. All one can say of such a hodge-podge is what Kant said of “the cosmological proof”, that it was “a perfect nest of thoughtless contradictions.”

A recent traveler to China cited what a local party secretary from Shensi said: “Through the study of theory, I clearly understood the principles of uninterrupted revolution and of revolution

by stages and put them into concrete application in pig breeding”. Senseless as the local party secretary’s statement is, it is only the logical conclusion of “The Leader’s” reduction of theory to “practice” compelling the Chinese to follow his dictum that “dogrnas are more useless than cow dung.”

Before, however, we flee in disgust from the vulgarities that pass for “philosophy”, and become too anxious to dismiss what totalitarian China lovingly calls “Mao’s thought”, let us bear in mind his present power. Let us remember, also, that when Mao made the Chinese Communist Party accept the new united front with Chiang and initiated his “three-thirds” principle – that one-third Communist Party members, one-third Kuomintang, and one-third non-party people constitute the administration in Communist areas – the fight against Japan stiffened. This was the period when visiting foreign journalists, whose cultural standards were greater than those of Mao’s cohorts, were impressed with his “exciting speeches on culture”. Wearied of the Kuomintang corruption and its ineffectualness in fighting Japan, they were impressed by the Communists, not only in the fight against Japan, but in the dedication “to go to the people”, i.e., to establish schools among the peasants in remote areas, and proceed with agricultural reforms. Still others, including many of the bourgeoisie and landlords, were attracted by the moderate agricultural program, and hence, many anti-Communists began accepting the Chinese Communists as mere “agrarian reformers”. Mao contributed nothing to Marxian philosophy, and denuded its politics of its class content. But he certainly carved out an original road to power.

**[On Contradiction, Mao](#) | [On Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks](#), Cliff Slaughter
[Dunayevskaya Internet Archive](#)**