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Benjamin I. Schwartz

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The Essence of Marxism Revisited

A Response

BENJAMIN I. SCHWARTZ
Harvard University

It is, of course, entirely possible to treat the ideas and actions of Mao Ze-dong apart from their relationship to Marxism-Leninism. Many find it more meaningful to see Mao within the context of the Chinese cultural heritage. Others see his thought as a creative original response to the concrete revolutionary experience of China in the twentieth century. I have myself suggested elsewhere (1968) that to the extent that there is a Western dimension in Mao's thought, it may be fruitfully related to more general notions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western thought rather than simply to Marxism in particular. Thus, to assert that Mao belongs within the broader stream of the history of socialist-communist ideas is not the same as to identify him as a Marxist. Again, it is possible to consider the validity of Mao's social and political ideas entirely on their own terms. Mao may after all be right where Marx was wrong.

Richard Pfeffer will have none of this. It is somehow essential to his view of Mao to see him as the culmination of true Marxism-Leninism (Leninism of course, is also true Marxism).

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[461]

He thus continues to share with the writings he attacks a strong conviction that the question of Mao's relations to Marx and Lenin is a question of crucial importance

Now, in attempting to recall over a rather long stretch of time why the question of Mao's relationship to Marxism-Leninism seemed so important to me when I wrote *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (1951), the following thoughts, among others, come to mind.

1. The question of what certain Marxist-Leninist terms actually meant in the practice of the Chinese revolution was by no means "academic." The language employed was largely the language of Marxism-Leninism as used in the Soviet Union (the Maoist overlay was still thin). How did this language relate in fact to Chinese situations and Chinese practice? As I stated in my introduction, "it is only by grappling with the details of doctrine that we can attempt to judge what elements of doctrine are still the mainsprings of action."

2. At the time, one had to deal with the overwhelming claims of Joseph Stalin (a figure curiously absent from Pfeffer's essay) as the infallible and universal interpreter and "applier" of Marxism-Leninism. The claim involved the notion that the success of the Chinese revolution was wholly due to the genial guidance of the theories of Comrade Stalin. I will confess that my doubts concerning Stalin's claim as the infallible applier of Marxism has perhaps spilled over to doubts about such infallible guides in general.

3. I was at the time and continue to be deeply interested in the question of what happens to the visions and doctrines of great thinkers and founders of religions once they become widely accepted. The question cited by Pfeffer—"How far can a historic movement based on certain beliefs drift from basic original premises and still maintain its identity?"—still seems to me a question of agonizing importance whether one deals with Marxism, Liberalism, Confucianism, Christianity or any other belief system. The subsequent career of a doctrine or faith relates to the question of how man can be both a truth-seeker and rationalizer; of how ideas can become enmeshed with other ideas and with interests and yet continue to play a role. It also

seems to me that what happens to the founder's doctrine may reveal not only the distortions of the followers but also the limits and blind spots of the founder himself. Many questions remain as puzzling as ever. It is obvious that certain simple answers will not do. Pfeffer regards it as arrogant for us to question Mao's own claim that he is an authentic Marxist. Does Pfeffer then accept the Marxist claims of all who call themselves Marxists? Shall we simply say that a Marxist is one who calls himself a Marxist? I rather suspect that Pfeffer rejects the claims of Kautsky, Khrushchev, and Bernstein. Anyone seriously interested in the history of a tradition must inevitably become involved in the constant conflicts which take place within that tradition concerning the essential doctrines of the faith.

We thus come back to the question: what are the essential premises of Marxism? Unfortunately, given the vast literature on this subject, neither Pfeffer nor I can adequately deal with it in the few pages allotted to us. There is a large literature, for example, which concerns itself almost wholly with the philosophic anthropology of the young Marx and his deep concern with the concept of alienation—a concept which is not even mentioned by Pfeffer, presumably because it does not interest Chairman Mao. Otherwise, he tends to use a familiar litany of expressions to attack the writings under consideration. Marx's thought is treated as immutable, static, orthodox, fundamentalist, mechanical, "Europe-centered"—as dogma rather than as method, as a matter of means rather than as a matter of end-goals, and so on. This particular type of litany is now used by almost all Marxist sects against all others. In an age when dynamic is automatically good and static bad, who would admit that he adheres to a static Marxism? Does this mean that Marxism is without any basic constant premises (to be constant is, of course, to be static)? Is it totally protean? Something which is totally protean is, of course, not a something at all. Does one escape dogma if one talks of method? A method must also be described in terms of identifiable propositions. Hence it is quite possible to be dogmatic about method. Is the notion that the same "method" can be applied to all times and places

less abstract, formalistic, and dogmatic than an idea concerning the substantive evolution of human history?

For purposes of argument I would suggest that Marx was *not* fundamentally interested in the elaboration of formal methods but in illuminating the actual content of world history in his time. He was interested in dialectic and "method" only to the extent that he felt that they helped him to understand the actual past, present, and future course of human history. The vast Soviet and somewhat smaller Chinese scholastic literature on "dialectic materialism" does not draw on texts from Marx but on Engels' philosophy of nature and Hegel's logic. In the end, it may be just as well for us to jettison all the epithets about what is dogmatic and what is mechanical and simply admit that we differ about the essential elements of Marxism. One man's "central component" is another man's static dogma.

Turning to Pfeffer's own account of the essential core of Marxism we find that it includes (1) Marx's conception of the "ultimate goal"—the socialist-communist society of the future, (2) "the dynamic theory-practice relationships, the dialectical reasoning, the historical materialism and . . . themes of consciousness," and (3) the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

I would question whether Marx's account of the ultimate goal, central as it was to his vision, was what he regarded as the heart of his own particular message. We know and Marx knew that the fundamental concepts of socialist and communist society had not been his own invention. Indeed, I think that he would have freely admitted that his fragmentary writings on postcapitalist society owed much to Hegel, St. Simon, Proudhon, Hess and others. What he added of his own seems to me indissolubly and organically linked to his view of *how* socialism and communism would be achieved. A socialism which would have arisen on the basis of an advanced industrial economy would basically have solved the problems of scarcity even if it had not yet achieved abundance.

Indeed, I see no evidence in the Gotha program that the passage from socialism to communism (the two terms are not even clearly differentiated) would involve whole epochs of

time-filled with strife and a kind of inertial tendency to drift back to capitalism. There might be remnants of the old ruling bourgeoisie to suppress (they would after all constitute a relatively small group). There might be persisting habits of thinking in terms of bourgeois rights, but since these habits would now be deprived of their material foundations why would they not simply fade away? Once socialism had been established it would have "its own foundations." Since the habit of merely thinking in terms of "bourgeois right" does not constitute an economic base, I see no warrant whatsoever in Marx for Yao Wen-yuan's assertion that "the existence of bourgeois right provides the *vital economic basis* for . . . [the] emergence . . . of new bourgeois elements" (emphasis added).

Some of Pfeffer's quotations seem to me to prove the opposite of what he claims. Thus the assertion that "Communism is . . . not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. . . . communism [is] the *real movement* which abolishes the present state of things" (emphasis added) seems to me expressly to preclude the notion that communism will be "established" by some infallible vanguard or leader. The "real movement" is precisely not the intent of an individual leader. It rather reflects the general movement of an entire class which "forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness." The imagery is at the opposite pole from that of the Great Social Engineer who tests "the limits imposed by material and subjective conditions on the achievement of Marxist-Leninist goals." This type of rather repulsive social-engineering image seems to me alien to Marx's view of the ultimate goal. It reminds one of a battery of metallurgical tests in which the metallurgist tests out the heat or stress properties of metal. The metal is an inert object, but in Marx the "material and subjective reality" is itself a dynamic force of history. In the case of the metallurgist, the test is at least performed within the limits of a definite time period and there is at least the possibility of a negative result. Would Marx

believe that the goal can be achieved by "testing" in any historical conditions whatsoever?

The presence of a fully developed industrial economy bequeathed by capitalism would not only have basically solved the problem of material scarcity but would also have created the *necessary* prerequisites for overcoming the fatal division of labor and made possible the "administration of things." It was precisely Marx's dialectic which led him to believe that a society without a division of labor presupposed a society in which the division of labor had reached its maximum development. Would he have approved attempts to overcome the division of labor in a society where scarcity still existed—where one spoke of overcoming the division of labor in terms of such categories as peasants, workers, and soldiers? Would soldiers still exist in such a society? Tragic as the division of labor had been, was it not the necessary progressive precondition of a state of affairs in which the division of labor would be "aufgehoben"? Would not efforts to overcome the division in a society of scarcity be historically reactionary?

Do Mao and Marx indeed completely share the same end goals? Mao's own utopian writings are fragmentary but they dwell above all on the joys of collectivity and seem to deprecate the "high" cultural heritage of the past. Marx very much stresses the rich and varied cultural life of the individual. The individual would, to be sure, be thoroughly socialized, but he would inherit all that was richest in the cultural heritage of the past, including Marx's beloved Shakespeare and Iliad. Pfeffer may tell us that Mao's secret goal is the same as Marx's, but the burden of proof is on him. I also see no warrant in Marx for the notion of struggle and conflict continuing into the endless future.

Turning to the "dynamic theory-practice relationship" and the "themes of consciousness" in the corpus of Marx's writings, this introduces us to a vast polemical literature which neither of us can summarize by the invocation of a few catch-phrases. What indeed does "praxis" mean in Marx? Does it necessarily mean the intentional free act of an individual or may it be used in a manner comparable to the use of the term "behavior" in

American social science? When Marx speaks of "material praxis" I think that the latter is indeed the case. When used thus it can by no means be juxtaposed to the "objective forces in history." On the contrary, man's material praxis, which is "independent of the will" of the individual, is the very stuff of the objective forces themselves. The practice of human beings provides the energy of history, but this practice is itself organized and channeled by a total process (at least in precommunist society—by the social relations in which man is necessarily enmeshed.) "The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations" (Marx, 1970: 122). When Marx speaks of "revolutionary praxis" he may indeed mean something else clearly related to his earlier writings on the overcoming of alienation. It is not easy to know how he would have explicated an obscure phrase such as the "coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity" (the fact that Marx said it does not eliminate all philosophic difficulties). It is, however, clear that the only class capable of realizing this "revolutionary praxis" will be the industrial proletariat—a class which emerges in history only as a result of the "material praxis" of the entire historical past.

As for "consciousness," Pfeffer creates something of a straw man when he implies that others deny the role of consciousness in Marx's view of human history. Consciousness, true or false, obviously mediates all human behavior. The proletariat can fulfill its destiny in human history only when it has a true proletarian consciousness—when it becomes a class "for itself." "[T]heory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses," but it can seize the masses only when the mode of production has made such seizure possible. None of this contradicts the notion of the primacy of "being" (the forces inherent in the mode of production) over consciousness during the period before the arrival of socialism. Nothing implies any "dialectic" equality of being and consciousness before the arrival of a socialism which presupposes the existence of capitalism.

In the manner of Lukacs, Pfeffer insists that the emergence of the industrial proletariat as a vast majority is not a sufficient condition for the creation of a socialist consciousness. Even if one grants that this is the case, one does not preclude the fact that it is a necessary condition. It has often been stated that Marx does not assume that the industrial proletariat will "automatically" achieve socialism. Automatic or not, the question remains—why should the proletariat not achieve socialism? No doubt Marx believed that thinkers such as himself could help to "raise" the consciousness of the proletariat to a higher level. Does he anywhere hint that this will be an enormously difficult "Leninist" task? Or did he not believe that the proletariat was the first exploited class in history whose historic situation would lead it unproblematically to a true consciousness of its own situation and destiny?

There is also the crucial question—whose consciousness? When Marx spoke of the "communist consciousness" emanating from the proletariat which forms "the majority of all members of society," I see here no anticipation of the need for a Leninist type of party or for the Great Guide who goads the class along the necessary path. There is rather the notion of something like a class general will which, as Avineri (1971. ch 8) points out, even led Marx to suggest on occasion that the socialist revolution might be realized by universal suffrage.

This leads us to Pfeffer's final "central component"—the dictatorship of the proletariat. Now the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat is neither methodological nor epistemological. It relates to Marx's substantive account of world history. There may be considerable debate concerning the meaning of the word "dictatorship," but there can be no debate about what he meant by the term proletariat. It meant the industrial proletariat constituting the majority of all members of society. Hence, in dealing with this term we are once again forced to contend with Marx's "Europe-centered" ideas. The writings which Pfeffer attacks deal with the question of whether the "dictatorship" in Marx meant anything like Lenin's Communist Party after 1917 or how Mao's use of this phrase relates to the usage of Lenin and Marx. Pfeffer does not really address

this question. His most telling argument seems to be that if Marx could visit the People's Republic he would accept Mao's interpretations. We have, of course, no way of knowing whether Marx would have been converted to the "thought of Mao Ze-dong." I am afraid that this has little bearing on the meaning of the phrase.

At this point, may I reiterate my own view concerning one of the "central components" of Marxism. It seems to me that the concept of the "mode of production" remains one of the essential elements of Marx's thought. This conception attempts to fuse into one conceptual framework two ideas which otherwise could exist quite separately and neither of which were invented by Marx: (1) the idea of what we now call economic development as a basic driving force of history, (2) the idea of the class struggle as organically tied to and yet carrying forward and mediating the process of economic development ("historic materialism"). It is the class struggle side which relates (although the later Marx would probably not admit it) to Marx's moral concern with exploitation, deprivation, liberation, and socialism. The Marxist conception of the industrial proletariat represents a fusion of both these "moments." Its very existence presupposes the entire economic history of mankind up through capitalism. Its nature as most thoroughly alienated and socialized class of human history makes it the destined bearer of human liberation. This view is indeed "Europocentric," but the Europocentrism is not adventitious. Capitalism happened to have arisen in the West, but capitalism was also the first universal mode of production which would engulf the entire world within its embrace. This still allowed for somewhat erratic developments in peripheral areas such as Russia, but, taking the main thrust of his argument, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it would be the Western industrial proletariat which would lead mankind into socialism.

I see no contradiction between the older Marx's stress on the "mode of production" as the dynamic principle of "prehistory" and the philosophic anthropology of the younger Marx with his stress on human alienation and the inherent higher potentialities of human nature (potentialities which remain, however,

essentially unactualized during the entire course of presocialist history). I do, however, see a contradiction between this view of Marx and views which stress the centrality of vacuous methodological formulas such as the "unity of theory and practice" or which regard socialism as something attainable in the most disparate sociohistoric conditions provided that one has the presence of the Great Social Engineer who can shape almost any condition to the attainment of his end-goal.

As Pfeffer points out, I have never denied the historic link between Mao and Marx through the history of Marxism-Leninism. This kind of historic relationship, however, leaves open the question of whether Mao is or is not Marx's most authentic disciple.

Pfeffer deals not only with the relations of Mao to Marx, but also with the question of why we (Schwartz, Schram, Meisner) think that way. I can, of course, only speak for myself and am acutely aware of the fact that anyone's account of why he thinks that way is open to suspicion. I freely concede that none of us is "value-free" and that all of us—including Pfeffer—reflect the historic currents of our generation. While I regard Marx as one of the greatest social thinkers of the nineteenth century and have been influenced by many of his insights, I am essentially not a Marxist. It may well be that there is a relationship between my negative attitude toward Mao's credentials as a Marxist and my view that some of Marx's *essential* doctrines are wrong. This is, however, not a necessary relationship. Many fervent Marxists also believe that Mao is no Marxist. I remain committed to certain values of political liberalism, but these values are in no way linked in my mind to any faith in the "theory of modernization." I also feel no commitment to the religion of the free market and "socialization" as such does not frighten me (neither does it elate me). I am also convinced that the Western world faces a host of social, cultural, and spiritual problems to which liberalism is irrelevant. In fact, most of the sociopolitical ideologies we have inherited from the last century may no longer be relevant as *total* ideologies.

Finally, there is an implication in the writings of Pfeffer and others that there are only two possible attitudes toward the People's Republic of China. One is either a "cold war enemy" or a convert to the "thought of Mao Ze-dong" as a total sociopolitical philosophy. In Pfeffer's case this would also involve the proposition that we must accept Mao as the true interpreter of Marxism. There are many who will not accept this pigeonholing. I personally feel that there have been many deeply impressive accomplishments in China in the fields of social and economic strategy, particularly since the departure from the obsession with Soviet models. Other policies seem to me deplorable and I see no necessary functional relation between what is impressive and what is deplorable. Mao Ze-dong has in recent years raised some exceedingly interesting questions in the realm of social and political philosophy. His answers leave much room for discussion. As for his utopia, it seems to me to have some serious limitations as a *Utopia*. It seems to project a very constricted view of human (including Chinese) needs and aspirations. For better or worse, China is more than Mao. The Chinese people are more than the material with which Mao will construct his utopia.

ADDENDA

1. Since the final draft of Pfeffer's essay differs somewhat from the draft which I saw, I would like to add two observations. In the original draft, he spoke of "dialectical materialism" as a central component of Marxism. This has been changed to "dialectical reasoning and historic materialism." The change in wording makes a significant difference. Historic materialism implies the centrality of the notion of the "mode of production." As for "dialectic reasoning" all sorts of philosophers use it for all sorts of purposes. It is not the same as "dialectic materialism."

2. Turning to Pfeffer's note 2 In *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (1951) I did not call the Chinese revolution a

“peasant revolution” and did not ignore “the vital nonpeasant elements” I criticized Trotsky’s characterization of the Chinese Communist Party as a “peasant party” The thesis was that *political groupings* (not classes in the Marxist sense) such as the Chinese Communist Party may constitute “a vital non-peasant element.” There was no need to define the Communist party as either proletarian or peasant. If Pfeffer’s nonfundamentalist Marxism can contemplate the possibility that highly motivated political groups can play a fundamental, dynamic role in sociopolitical history, I have no quarrel with him. I still remain unsure of what Pfeffer means when he speaks of Mao using “Marxist modes of analysis,” unless he means his constant use of the vocabulary of Marxist class analysis. I would still contend that the use of the terms “proletarian” and “bourgeois” in present-day China (if the terms still are related to Marx’s “historic materialism”) tend to obfuscate rather than illuminate the reality of group relations in present-day China.

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Benjamin I Schwartz is Leroy B Williams Professor of History and Political Science and Associate Director of the East Asian Research Center at Harvard University He is the author of Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao; In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West; Communism and China, Ideology in Flux, and numerous other works and articles