

# Modern China

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

---

## **Mao and Marx: Understanding, Scholarship, and Ideology—A Response**

Richard M. Pfeffer

*Modern China* 1977; 3; 379

DOI: 10.1177/009770047700300401

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Modern China* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://mcx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/3/4/379>

## *Mao and Marx*

### **Understanding, Scholarship, and Ideology—A Response**

**RICHARD M. PFEFFER**

*Johns Hopkins University*

Let us be clear about two very fundamental facts. First, the issue of what constitutes a (good) Marxist has been a matter of fierce and continuing worldwide debate and struggle for decades. And second, the China field for over 20 years has generally treated this issue as if the answer were rather obvious, while explicitly and implicitly concluding with unseemly ease and near unanimity that Mao is not a (good) Marxist. Relatedly, although the implications of Marx's historical materialism and dialectical understanding—and more particularly the implications of the primacy of the mode of production in Marx's thought—are exceedingly complex, they have not been treated accordingly by liberal scholars in the field. Our scholars of Mao, who, to the best of my knowledge, rarely if ever have developed a materialist approach and have never written seriously about any mode of production, do not for such reasons hesitate to authoritatively declare that Mao has misunderstood or ignored just these matters and thereby violated the essential nature of original Marxism. These fundamental facts are, I submit, virtually undeniable.

MODERN CHINA, Vol. 3 No. 4, October 1977  
© 1977 Sage Publications, Inc.

[379]

In criticizing the widely read and influential writings of Schwartz, Schram, and Meisner regarding Mao's Marxism as objectively and on the whole one-sided, basically incorrect, and therefore not infrequently misleading, I implied no special claim to profundity. My article (Pfeffer, 1976) is subtitled in part "a Contribution to a Preliminary Reappraisal." My aim, commensurate with my understanding, was modest: to contribute to reopening a legitimate issue that had been prematurely closed. Walder's subsequent article has taken understanding considerably further.

But we still have a long way to go. There is no justification for self-righteousness on any side. Speaking for myself, it is only very recently and in connection with my forthcoming book, *Working for Capitalism*, that I have even begun to understand and to utilize a Marxist materialist and dialectical approach. More generally in the China field, with a few notable exceptions like Andors and Gray, not many other established scholars can even, or would want to, say that much. One hopes, therefore, that this symposium may make some contribution to furthering our understanding.

The symposium involves at least two related clusters of legitimate intellectual/political issues. The central one concerns the nature of Mao's thought, the nature of original Marxism, the relation between the two, and more broadly, the relation between theory and practice, especially in the Chinese revolution.

Another concerns the sociology of knowledge—the matter of why we think what and the way we do. If we were speaking of another age, no one would question the use of this approach. There is no reason to believe it is any less valid and necessary as an aid to understanding the intellectual history of our own age and field. Its significance for the China field should be particularly obvious, since we write from within a liberal, capitalist society about another society that has been striving to establish a system antithetical to liberalism and capitalism. Under such circumstances it would be surprising indeed if our scholarship were not pervasively biased. What we have said and written inevitably has been related to, among other things, the political

economy in which we live; our values and interests; and more specifically, how the China field has been affected by the forces of ethnocentrism, the Cold War, and American imperialism—for example, by the field's management from a few major university China-centers, foundations, and government agencies, which have significantly influenced the way monies, appointments, and prestige have been allocated. Why we think and act as we do about Mao, Marx, and the Chinese revolution is surely as legitimate a question as why Mao thought and acted the way *he* did.

In the relationship between these two issue-clusters lies much of the intellectual and political history of the China field as it was developed since World War II to its present state. Given the societal and world context in which the field was developed, it is not surprising that nearly without exception our most influential interpreters of Mao, Marx, and the Chinese revolution have been non-Marxists at best and anti-Marxists at worst. Nor is it surprising, therefore, that we have all too often misunderstood the theory and practice of all three. That we have indeed misunderstood and that fundamental criticism of the field is warranted is confirmed by the very responses of Schwartz and Schram to criticism.

The main argument in Schwartz's response, shorn of all its qualifications and asides, predictably boils down to this: Mao cannot be understood as a (good) Marxist because the China in which he led a revolution to establish socialism had not previously undergone capitalism and consequently did not have a large and developed proletariat. To Schwartz, in his reduction of original Marxism to "essential premises," capitalist industrialization appears as a necessary and universal precondition for the establishment of socialism (1976: 464, 466-467). When Schwartz says that "the concept of the 'mode of production' remains one of the essential elements of Marx's thought" (p. 469), what he seems in particular to mean is that according to Marx a socialist revolution can only be made on a capitalist base.

But, of course, one can certainly grant, as I do, that the mode of production of any society was for Marx the central factor shaping development, without presuming that Marx held that a

socialist revolution at any time and in any place can develop only out of indigenous capitalism (Pfeffer, 1976: 455-456). If this is not to suggest that a socialist revolution can take place under any material conditions, which is preposterous, neither is it to mechanically—yes, mechanically—assert that, according to Marx's historical materialism, there is only one route to socialism. Such an assertion makes a mockery of the concrete history of every society. Of course, it is true that before the final state of communism can be reached in any society, the division of labor and problems of scarcity would have to be overcome, but that could be achieved under the auspices of a developing socialism. So, the dispute with Schwartz is not over whether the concept of the mode of production is important in Marx, but over what it means to affirm that truth.

Similarly, the dispute between us about the nature of the socialist transition to communism is not, I think, really a disagreement about what Marx said, but is about what Marx should be understood to have meant. Schwartz says, for example, he sees "no evidence in the Gotha program that the passage from socialism to communism . . . would involve whole epochs of time—filled with strife" (1976: 464-465). Schwartz, therefore, concludes it would not. And in accordance with that understanding of Marx, he writes that once under socialism, "persisting habits of [bourgeois] thinking . . . would . . . be deprived of their material foundations," that socialism would be established on "its own [material] foundations," and that those habits therefore would simply "fade away" (p. 465).

But, regardless of whether Marx was explicit on this specific point, it is clear that Marx conceived such historic transitions, say, from feudalism to capitalism, as class struggles occurring over decades, even centuries. Why, then, understand him to have held that the transition to communism would be effected quickly and simply? Classes and class struggle continue to exist under socialism.

The materialist point is precisely that socialism, like capitalism before it, is not at the outset established on its own foundations—the material basis for bourgeois habits is not eliminated, as Mao

and Yao Wen-yuan, whatever his other "sins," correctly said. On the contrary, the beginning of every era that marks an historic change in the mode of production bears, as Braverman (1974: 19) has pointed out, greater resemblance in many ways to conditions obtaining in the era preceding it than it does to conditions obtaining at its own end. Thus socialism is not erected in the first instance on its own foundations. It is erected, rather, on the deeply rooted and extensive foundations of the previous epoch, including those many relations and forces of production that persist well after the revolutionary seizure of state power and the socialist transformation of juridical ownership of the means of production. Socialism, in its material aspects, is therefore best understood as a transition in two related senses: in the sense of transcending its concrete inherited material foundations and establishing itself ever more fully on its own material foundations; and in the sense of furthering the development toward communism. In the task of transcending both their particular historically inherited material foundations and their particular "superstructural" inheritances, socialist revolutions must vary from country to country and period to period.

Which brings me to my final point. Schwartz and I certainly can agree that Marx made mistakes and could not have anticipated all the problems Mao would have to face in China or the means Mao would develop to cope with those problems. We also can agree that Marx was neither a "Leninist" nor a "Maoist." But that does not mean, conversely, that Mao was not a (good) Marxist, although Schwartz does not understand him as such. Schwartz's claim that he "never denied the historic link between Mao and Marx through the history of Marxism-Leninism" (1976: 470) obscures the fact that the "link," as he conceived it, was decisively severed.

Schram's response (1977) likewise confirms the criticism, even as its author indulges in personal abuse of his critics. Since the use of personal abuse usually reveals more about its user than its target, and since answering it distracts attention from the issues, I choose not to respond. Instead, I wish to emphasize that Schram himself, through his own limited self-criticisms, ex-

plicitly admits the validity of the criticisms directed at his writings.

Thus, Schram concedes that even in his 1968 revisions of *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* [Mao Ze-dong] he did not “give much consideration to Mao’s thought as a ‘revolutionary development strategy’” (1977: 170). He says, “I now see . . . Mao Ze-dong as closer to the mainstream of the Leninist tradition than I did in 1969” (1977: 172); he confesses “an excessive emphasis in my earlier writings on the gulf between Mao and Marx” (1977: 177); and he agrees it is “perfectly justified to compare Mao’s ideas with those of Marx . . . to see how he has revived certain concerns of original Marxism which had been largely lost sight of in the Leninist and Soviet experience” (1977: 181). He admits he went too far in the direction of “suggesting that Mao was more of a populist than a Leninist” (1977: 182); and he finds in conclusion “Mao’s thought as a whole . . . during the last quarter-century of his life . . . to be . . . in many respects far more Marxist, than I had previously believed” (1977: 183).

All quite correct and commendable. But what all this self-criticism concretely means for Schram’s and our understanding of Mao’s Marxism is quite difficult to say. For Schram also declares that he believes “the problem to be rather more complicated than Pfeffer suggests when he concludes . . . that ‘Mao is more than anything a Marxist-Leninist’ ” (1977: 183). And Schram continues to assert

that there are certain basic postulates of Marx’s own thinking which cannot be rejected without *revising Marxism to the point where the label becomes largely meaningless*. One of these is the axiom of working-class leadership over the socialist stage of the revolution, and over the peasant allies of the proletariat in agrarian countries. I make no apology, therefore, for the statement quoted by Pfeffer to the effect that it is “wildly unorthodox” to talk about the sons and daughters of the working class learning proletarian class consciousness from the peasants. [1977: 183; emphasis added]

So, what are we to conclude from all this? That Mao is more than anything something other than a Marxist-Leninist? That

Mao, indeed, is more Marxist than Schram previously had imagined, but only in a “largely meaningless” sense? Or does Mao’s Marxism have some substantial meaning in Schram’s mind? If so, perhaps the reader can determine what that meaning is from his response. I cannot. Consequently, despite appearances and Schram’s assertions to the contrary, the significance of Mao’s Marxism remains essentially unexplored to date in his scholarship. This is confirmed by the fact, which any reader can verify, that Schram’s introduction to *Chairman Mao Talks to the People* (1974) in truth is unenlightening on this important matter.<sup>1</sup>

The reason so little has changed, I submit, is that the main underlying problem with Schram’s earlier writings is not, as he claims, “the perspective in which the Chinese revolution presented itself to all of us” (1977: 170) then, nor the lack of adequate information on which to base correct conclusions—although, doubtless, subsequent history and the increasing availability of Mao’s post-1949 speeches have expanded the potential for understanding. The main underlying problem, rather, has been the dominant liberal ideology infecting the China field. If Schram was not simply a passive victim of that ideology, his own understanding of China, Mao, and Marx, nonetheless, was shaped by it, even as he became one of its premier contributors. Without appreciating the constraining and distorting effect of ideology on our understanding, Schram’s explanation that the 13 years separating China’s liberation from the time when he first wrote *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung*, and the 19 years from 1949 until he revised the book, were somehow insufficient to be able to understand Mao as a Marxist is unpersuasive. If, on the other hand, the problem at base is recognized as ideological, then the mere passage of time understandably would not cure it. That is why our ideology must be repeatedly criticized and the substantive issues opened and reopened—reason enough to have this symposium.

Understandably, liberal scholars are defensive of their scholarship and, notwithstanding protestations to the contrary, of their ideology. That ideology has contributed to their adopting an understanding of Marx that is strikingly similar to the “con-



gealed and simplistic conception of Marxism" that, Bettelheim argues, came to dominate "European sections of the Third International" and Soviet theory and practice (1976: 19). Whether our scholars absorbed this conception as former students of the Soviet Union or as former progressives, or whether they developed it on their own, the fact remains that most of them have misunderstood Marx and misunderstood Mao.

#### NOTE

1. For a marked contrast to Schram's approach, see Gurley (1976).

#### REFERENCES

- BETTELHEIM, CHARLES (1976) *Class Struggles in the USSR*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- BRAVERMAN, HARRY (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- GURLEY, JOHN (1976) *Challengers to Capitalism*. San Francisco: San Francisco Book.
- PFEFFER, R. (1976) "Mao and Marx in the Marxist-Leninist tradition: a critique of 'the China field' and a contribution to a preliminary reappraisal." *Modern China* 2 (October): 421-460.
- SCHRAM, S. R. (1977) "Some reflections on the Pfeffer-Walder 'revolution' in China studies." *Modern China* 3 (April): 169-184.
- (1974) *Chairman Mao Talks to the People*. New York: Pantheon.
- (1969) *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung*. New York: Praeger.
- SCHWARTZ, B. (1976) "The essence of Marxism revisited." *Modern China* 2 (October): 461-472.

*Richard M. Pfeffer teaches courses at Johns Hopkins University about socialism in China and capitalism in the United States. He is the author, most recently, of a book on work in America entitled Working for Capitalism (forthcoming from Columbia University Press).*