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Mao and Marx in the Scholastic Tradition

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It is quite understandable why pronouncements from Beijing [Peking] should proclaim Mao Ze-dong to have been *the* true disciple of Marx, and "Mao Ze-dong Thought" the highest stage in the development of Marxism-Leninism. Less understandable is why academics in Baltimore and Ann Arbor feel the politico-ideological need to contribute to the celebration through purely scholastic exercises wholly divorced from Chinese social reality. Whatever the explanation for this peculiar American academic phenomenon—and I have no interest in attempting to explain any of the many peculiarities in American academic life—it must be noted that Pfeffer and Walder have chosen to ignore the major historical point made in the writings they attack. And that point is *not* that Mao was a "heretic" or an "infidel" who violated timeless truths and orthodoxies. In attempting to explore the relationship between Maoism and the Marxist-Leninist tradition, however inadequately, nowhere have I suggested that Mao "sinned" against some sacred body of canonical texts. The point is precisely the opposite. And that, briefly put, is that revolutionaries who adhered to orthodox Marxist-Leninist teachings proved politically irrelevant in the modern Chinese historical environment, whereas it was precisely Mao's departures from

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many of the premises of Marxism and Leninism (and the departures are enormous) that formed the essential intellectual-ideological prerequisites for a revolution to be made in a country where a revolution was desperately needed. Whether that revolution was a socialist one, or one that is leading to socialist ends, is of course quite another question. Unfortunately, it is not a question that either Pfeffer or Walder consider worth raising, although it might have proved a more fruitful one to pursue than the Talmudic exegeses which they have labored to produce.

Mao himself, of course, was far more explicit and candid than are Pfeffer and Walder in recognizing how far his own thought had moved from the theories of Marx and Lenin. From his study of Soviet socioeconomic development, for example, he drew the following conclusion:

Lenin said: "The more backward the country, the more difficult its transition from capitalism to socialism." Now it seems that this way of speaking is incorrect. As a matter of fact, the more backward the economy, the easier, not the more difficult, the transition from capitalism to socialism. [Mao, 1969: 333]

It would be difficult to imagine a more fundamental revision of Marxist theory than the proposition "the more backward the economy, the easier . . . the transition . . . to socialism." However, it is easy to imagine that Pfeffer and Walder do not see much of a difference here between Mao and Marx or Lenin. Or at least not one that they would be willing to acknowledge until it is officially laid down as such in the *Peking Review*.

However that may be, I long have shared Pfeffer's concern over the proclivity of American academic authorities to suppress the study of Marxist theory—and not in "the China field" alone. With rare exceptions, Marxism is excluded from the American university curriculum, and inquiries which proceed from a Marxist perspective are beyond the pale of acceptable academic discourse; students who wish to learn something about the theory are discouraged from doing so; and Marxists (and even those deemed to be tainted by the doctrine) are not likely to find a place in the academic hierarchy. Pfeffer suggests that he himself long

has been an unconscious victim of this national bias, having only relatively recently embarked on the study of Marxist theory—an effort apparently at first stimulated in part by the writings of Schwartz, Schram, and Meisner, whose baneful influences he now claims to have “transcended.” While one can only applaud Pfeffer’s struggle to master the Marxist intellectual tradition, his article suggests that he has not yet progressed very far in correcting this deficiency in his education. Take, for example, his “critique” of Schwartz, who, while not a Marxist, is certainly one of the world’s most perceptive *and serious* students of Marxist theory. Schwartz is taken to task for believing that “Marx saw the proletariat as the universal savior of mankind and [that] Lenin saw a communist party as necessary for the creation of a revolutionary proletariat” (Pfeffer, 1976: 424). Having dispensed with the revolutionary role of the proletariat and with the role of the vanguard party to boot, one wonders what Pfeffer might possibly conceive Marxism-Leninism to be—and where his efforts to “transcend the reigning conceptions in our field” will take him next. Pfeffer does not keep us waiting unduly long to answer the latter query, for he soon abandons entirely his self-proclaimed “Marxist mode of analysis” and flees into the fantasy world of H. G. Wells. What, he asks, would Marx have done had he been transported through time and space from nineteenth-century Europe to twentieth-century China? We are assured that Marx would have thought and acted precisely as did Mao Ze-dong. With this new and innovative methodology on hand, Pfeffer might have carried his analysis a step further to ask what Mao Ze-dong would have done were we to transplant him in nineteenth-century Europe. No doubt he would have repaired to the British Museum and written *Das Kapital*.

But one cannot fault Pfeffer for playing with the Time Machine; it is a temptation few of us can resist. What really calls into question Pfeffer’s credentials as a Marxist, or even as a serious student of Marxist theory, is his treatment of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a notion that he sees as crucial in linking Mao to Marx and on which he dwells at considerable length. One might well argue, as Pfeffer does, that

the Chinese Communists have performed many of the functions that Marxist theory assigns to the era of the dictatorship of the proletariat, albeit without much participation by the proletariat as such. Over the past 25 years we have witnessed the elimination of the old ruling classes, the abolition of private property through nationalization and collectivization, the introduction of policies which have aimed to reduce the distinctions between town and countryside and between mental and manual labor, programs designed to bring about a combination of agricultural and industrial production and a combination of education with productive labor—in short, many of the measures that Marx specifically advocated be undertaken during this transitional phase. What is absent in Pfeffer's discussion of the dictatorship of the proletariat—as it indeed is absent in Chinese Marxist theory and Chinese social reality—is any Marxist conception of the relationship between state and society. Marx, after all, viewed the state as a form of alienated social power, and it was from that perspective (in large measure) that he set forth his conception of socialism and the transition to communism. "Only when [man] has recognized and organized his own powers as social powers so that social force is no longer separated from him as political power," Marx wrote, "only then is human emancipation complete" (Marx, 1967a: 241). While a newly born socialist society would be forced to employ coercive political measures against the remnants of the exploiting classes of the old order, Marx emphasized that "where its organizing activity begins, where its own aim and spirit emerge, there socialism throws the political hull away" (Marx, 1967b: 357).

These views lie at the very heart of the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which above all would be a time when the social powers usurped by the state would be returned to society as a whole. More specifically, it would be a time when political power, both in its repressive and constructive functions, would take the form of what Marx termed "the self-government of the producers." Moreover, Marx took it for granted that the dictatorship of the proletariat would not do away with conventional bourgeois-democratic rights, but would

expand them and make them realities in a society moving toward the elimination of class distinctions and the abolition of the tyranny of the division of labor.

Now if Pfeffer really had taken seriously the study of Marxist theory, as he enjoins us to do, he might, on having read Marx's writings on the dictatorship of the proletariat, have been moved to ask whether the masses of producers in China have the political means to determine the conditions under which they work and to control the products of their labor. That, after all, is the first and essential condition of socialism. He might have posed the question of whether the bureaucratic state apparatus in the People's Republic is really under popular control. He might even have pondered the question of how a presumably socialist society could have produced so extreme a form of alienated social power as the cult of Mao. In short, he might have employed Marxist theory as a tool of critical analysis to probe the question of the relationship between state and society in the People's Republic. Instead, he is content to reproduce the ideological rationalizations of Yao Wen-yuan, who, unhappily, now languishes in jail—presumably by authority of “the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

In the end, Pfeffer tells us nothing about Chinese social reality—and in the process of failing to do so he misinterprets both Marx and Mao in a futile effort to prove the two are more or less the same. Walder inflicts far more extensive distortions on the body of Marxist theory. Unfortunately, the space allotted here does not permit addressing the issues he raises. I will attempt to do so later in a full-length article the Editor has invited me to submit.

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