

Modern China

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

Mao and Marx: A Comment

Stephen Andors

Modern China 1977; 3; 427

DOI: 10.1177/009770047700300407

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>

Mao and Marx

A Comment

STEPHEN ANDORS

Columbia University and Bard College

In this symposium, the willingness to debate and discuss the broad philosophical and intellectual implications of Marxist thought confronts a narrower but clearly wavering insistence that the fundamental concepts of Marxism must be defined in terms of the categories Marx used in his analysis of and predictions for nineteenth-century European capitalism—specifically and most importantly in terms of the genesis and role of the industrial proletariat. I do not think it is stretching this second view too far to infer that it implies two things about Marxism in general: one, that its relevance as a critique of contemporary twentieth-century capitalism is limited at best, and two, that the relevance of Marxism to noncapitalist or non-European societies is extremely dubious. It is in this context that the discussion of the relationship between Mao and Marx takes on its real significance. What is at issue, in spite of debating accusations to the contrary, is not to prove or disprove Mao's (or Lenin's) fidelity or "purity" with respect to a given set of categories or a doctrine, or the degree to which one or another scholar has or has not changed an interpretation of Mao. Rather, the issue is the nature of Marxism: the degree to which it is indeed a "doctrine" or

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

[427]

instead can be considered a most sophisticated body of analytic thought uniquely suited to understanding all human societies as well as a set of explicit and implicit values which influence human action. Once the principal aspects of this thought and this value system are set out coherently, it is then argued, we may decide if Mao (or anyone else) in fact utilized this mode of thought and those values in analyzing and trying to resolve problems in China.

Without recapitulating the debate which has taken place or risking comment on the level of overall argument in the various essays, I would like to add a few words on the question of the industrial proletariat and the role of the communist party, because it is on these two points that I think those who argue that Marxism is a "doctrine" base their strongest case. To phrase the questions as precisely as I can: in what sense is the proletariat connected to capitalist industrialization, and can it be considered "Marxist" to separate the existence of the proletariat from capitalist development? Does a role for a communist party mean a "deviation" from "Marxist doctrine," or does the concept of a vanguard party follow from more basic elements in Marx's way of thinking about historical change and the revolutionary process?

Marx never discussed the existence of an industrial proletariat divorced from its specifically capitalist origins. Nor did he discuss industrialization in general apart from capitalism. There is, therefore, a good deal of clarity concerning Marx's view of the relationship between capitalism and industrialization, and between capitalism and the industrial proletariat. There is, however, very little clarity about how Marx viewed the prospects for and patterns of noncapitalist industrialization, except that his notion of historical materialism led him, at least toward the end of his life's work, to clearly affirm it as a possibility under certain conditions. (See Walder's fine discussion of this point.) But because Marx himself never studied noncapitalist or non-European societies in detail, this does not mean there can be no "Marxist view" of this process, unless, of course, one wishes to discard Marxism in principle.

There is no doubt that Marx saw not only the development of a proletariat as an inevitable result of capitalism, but that the

proletariat would also be revolutionary. Not only did the relationships embodied in and absolutely essential to the system require a proletariat, but they ultimately had to deny this class its chance to develop into a group of "truly human" beings, and, hence, capitalism made this class revolutionary when its members realized this truth. Thus, the proletariat's revolutionary role of creating communism flowed from two things: one was capitalism, the other was Marx's concept of humanity. It was not just capitalism that made the proletariat revolutionary, but the alienation that people suffered and perceived under capitalism. By extension, any society that deprived human beings of their chance to be truly human was potentially a revolutionary society.

There was nothing in all of this that implied that only an industrial working class created in the course of capitalist industrialization could be revolutionary, or that communism could only result from the prior development of capitalism. Communism for Marx was an inevitable result of the human condition. Even in capitalist societies, while essential relationships between capitalists and workers were fixed by the essence of capitalism and the concept of hired labor (see *Capital*, Vol. 1; or *The Grundrisse's* chapter on money, throughout, and "Theories of Surplus Value"), there could be differences between the working classes of different societies accounted for by history or tradition. Moreover, if economic development and technological change proceeded under noncapitalist relations of production in a society with a weak or nonexistent capitalist history and in a different international environment, there is every reason to assume that a working class which appeared along with industrialization might be different from the European or American proletariat and might stand in different relation to other classes in society (*The Grundrisse*, ch. 1 no. 3, "The Method of Political Economy"). Since production relations (relationships between human beings and between economic sectors) and productive forces (levels of laborers' skill and commitment to their work as well as available technology) would in all likelihood differ from those evolved in the course of European and American development, Marx's historical materialism points clearly in the direc-

tion of diversity of paths of development, and not toward a priori historical stages whose existence in the mind of dogmatic "social engineers" means twisting reality to fit prejudice. Historical materialism also allows for the fact that development is shaped by previous development, so that those who begin the process of industrialization can learn from the experiences of those who came before. The only universal Marxism assumes to be the fate of humanity is the goal of communism, and this evolves historically as the result of the human drive to build a truly human civilization. It was not to be imposed by social engineers, either.

Although there are indications that the Chinese do not explicitly and precisely interpret Marxism in this way, and do seem to see the inevitability of communism as rooted in universal historical stages rather than universal human alienation,¹ even this does not mean that Mao (and Lenin) somehow departed from Marxism in separating industrialization from capitalism and the industrial proletariat from capitalist development. Being the first to attempt this in practice, and also being quite close intellectually, geographically, and historically to a still powerful and as yet unchallenged European capitalist civilization, Lenin and the Soviets did not go very far. Mao and the Chinese people have gone considerably further, and it should be no surprise if others to come later go further still.

It should also be noted that while Marx and Engels were much taken with the industrialization and technological development of capitalism and the growth of mighty urban centers, they by no means ignored the blight and filth of pollution, the overcrowding, and the unbalanced development that accompanied capitalist growth (see *Capital*, Vol 1, "Machinery and Modern Industry," and Engels' polemic "Anti-Duhring"). If Europe's peasants were not to play the same revolutionary role for Marx that China's peasants were to play for Mao, Marx did envision a resurgence of agricultural and rural elements into a transformed postrevolutionary society. The linking of urban and rural, industry and agriculture, and the destruction of the economic and cultural inequalities that existed between them was, after all, an integral

part of Marx's vision of communism. It is quite properly "Marxist," therefore, to envision a society where agriculture and people involved in agriculture have not been obliterated by urban sprawl, asphalt and concrete, and rural decay. I see nothing in Mao to indicate that he viewed the immiserated Chinese peasantry as anything less than a powerful reality and a reminder that Chinese development strategy could not ignore the necessity to change the conditions of peasant life. Even though Mao does not use the term "alienation," he does concern himself with its typical manifestations. Not only did he seek to retain the desirable in rural life in the attempt to break down the rural-urban split, but he was constantly concerned with the mental labor-manual labor split as well.

But, even granted this interpretation of Marx and Marxism, what about the party's role in all of this? Is not the Leninist notion of the vanguard party, which Mao inherited and defended strongly, a departure from Marx's idea that people would make their own history and move toward communism because of their basic humanity?

Marx viewed the question of revolution in profoundly dialectical terms. It was to him a process in which the unity of theory and practice and the concepts of true and false interests played central roles. One only has to read *Class Struggles in France* to see the subtlety and sense of reality that infuses Marx's treatment of the relationship between social revolution and the participation of individuals and classes in it. Revolution was on the one hand a politically crucial event where groups and individuals fought over different conceptions of life and different understandings of their interests, and these differences at any one time cut across the historically operative long-term categories of class interest and collective understanding. Revolution occurred within a fairly short period of time, and broke out when growing and unresolved ambiguity marked the shifting power relations that constantly infused society. It was conditioned by the organization and daring of those involved in it as well as by the level and intensity of understanding and the numbers of people who under-

stood their interests in the same way. Yet this profoundly political event was also part of a larger revolutionary process, part of a long historical period defined by identifiable human, material, and ideological relationships on a global, national, and sub-national scale. All these relationships shaped and limited human perceptions and will. Revolutions were at once single events and whole historical periods, processes and instances in time, profoundly political and ultimately determined, creatures of immediate human consciousness and creators of it as well.

Only a very superficial understanding of Marx's concept of revolution could suggest, therefore, that a revolution would in any single political upheaval provide the unique and mechanically neat occasion for a complete intermeshing of politics with history—the opportunity for all members of a revolutionary class or even a revolutionary party to understand reality and their own interests in precisely the same way in order to act as a unit to play their “proper role” once and for all.

This Marxist understanding of revolution is the basis for Lenin's and Mao's conception of the role and organizational structure of the party, and for Mao's conception of uninterrupted revolution. Of course, the Soviet and Chinese revolutions have evolved significantly different practical embodiments of this theory because of the particularity of the individuals and movements involved. But the enormous and very important problems concerning political procedure and democratic control that emerge from the Marxist concepts of political interest, and from Lenin's and to a lesser degree Mao's theories of the Party based on this Marxist notion of true interest and false interest, should not be ignored. It would be as wrong to dismiss Stalin as an aberration of Marxism as it would be to equate him with it.

Certainly Mao was grappling with these problems until the end of his life. His own sense of history and his awareness of the problem of restoration made him sensitive to the possibility that bureaucrats could easily substitute desires for power and privilege for the task of education and revolutionary leadership. By linking organizational position to ideological hegemony, the interests of

a new ruling class could be defended in the name of revolution. Mao's awareness of his own society's history and the experiences of others did not, however, make him less of a Marxist. On the contrary.

All of this should mean that Marxism, as a constantly developing and broad intellectual, economic, and political tradition, has not yet solved some crucial problems. But refusing to allow Marxism to be treated as a "doctrine" or a "belief system" and insisting that the roots and future of Marxism lie in the reality and needs of individual and social life are not only the best ways to evaluate the Marxism of Mao, they also promise more exciting and ultimately more fulfilling solutions to our own problems than the doctrines of liberalism which present themselves increasingly as pessimistic, cynical, irrelevant, or undesirable evaluations of the human condition.

NOTE

1. See for example, the book, *Fundamentals of Political Economy*, a translation of a major text on political economy published in Shanghai in 1974. The book is probably one response to Mao's desire to have the Chinese write their own text on this subject, since he felt that the Soviet text which he had read was seriously flawed. The book was translated into English as part of the China Book Project, M. E. Sharpe, Inc. (formerly International Arts and Sciences Press), White Plains, New York, 1977.

Stephen Andors is author of China's Industrial Revolution: Politics, Planning and Management 1949 to the Present (Pantheon, 1977), and numerous articles on China and political economy. He is presently a Research Associate at Columbia University's East Asian Institute, and Associate Professor of Government at Bard College.