

Mao's Dialectical Materialism as an Individualism: Theory and Practice.

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Over the many years since his passing, Mao Tse Tung has been accused of several things, but it is a rather oblique discourse indeed that will consider Mao's dialectical materialism as a form of a reification of the liberal humanist subject; in fact, it would appear that such a claim is corrupt at the outset for those familiar with the intricate operations and nuances of dialectical materialism as it is grounded in Marx and in other post-Hegelian schools. But in consideration of Mao himself, as it has also pertained to other Marxist interpreters, we can make such critical distinctions between the *ought* of the theoretical constituents of dialectical materialism and the actuality of its practice. It is by no mysterious convention that, among the plenum of Marxist interpreters who utilize dialectical materialism as the vital organ in inscribing policy in very specialized scenarios over and beyond the Marxist ideals, we usually append the use of the hyphen in regard to Marx and a subsequent interpreter; hence, why we can speak of a Marxist-Leninism or a Marxist-Leninist-Maoism. And so we suspend this question of liberal humanism as-it-appears in Mao's dialectical materialism, a question we may pose *quid juris* as we move through the erratic drumbeats and asynchronic rhythms of how this figures in the actual historical manifold of events. We will begin with an opening, plenary discussion of Mao's dialectical materialism—in no way exhaustive or without its own host of aporias—before tending to the sphere of historical praxis.

Dialectical materialism is a philosophical doctrine of the real; that is, there is no recourse to transcendental or metaphysical valuations of truth, no dependent grounding of the actual in abstract concept. It is a doctrine that places matter at the forefront of the mind's activities, as that which occurs both temporally and logically prior to the sentience of the subject. Its first most germinal formulation occurs in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* when he details the relation between the master and slave dialectic as an analogue of the subject-object relation. It is at that moment of Geist that the slave, who had hitherto

been in abject service to the master's desires, realizes his own self-consciousness in that it is he who devises the strategies for procuring the goods for the master's consumption, that it is his thinking and labour reflected in the production of consumptive goods.¹ Borrowing again from Hegel, the dialectical formulation is made possible by the organic dynamism of things, i.e., the interconnectiveness of matter. The complexities of this formulation cannot be captured in such capsule form, and so we proceed to Mao's interpretation/deviation model of dialectical materialism, subsequent to one last definition.²

Liberal humanism is an umbrella term that has under its domain all the ideals Western democracy holds as sacred (even if only touted for a "patriotic" response). Roughly put, liberal humanism believes in the individual subject, a subject that has rights intrinsic to its being such as the right to property, the right to choose one's path in life, the right to security, etc. Originally defined during the *Ausklarung* with figures such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Locke, it found fuller development in Mill and more recently with John Rawls.³ This theory undertakes to resolve all human problems in the *socius* through the management of its welfare, dignity, and well-being. However, what is suspect—among so many other propositions in the theory—is its foundational character: from where do these "intrinsic rights" come from? What in nature guarantees them? But it is not our purpose here to do anything more than to illustrate how it is at odds with the seemingly converse materialism. Liberal humanism privileges the mind (as Reason) before matter, which is seen as subservient to the aims of the subject. In opposition to this, dialectical materialism removes the privilege surrounding the notions of property and mind, but maintains a sense of rights—but rights as guaranteed by the laws of nature. Both share a telos of a possible utopia at the full realization of their theories.

Mao the theoretician...Mao was familiar with these popular theoretical strains, and was perspicuous enough to notice the conflict between idealism and materialism. In a sense, Mao echoes Whitehead's remark that one is either a Platonist or an Aristotelian: "All philosophical currents and schools are manifestations of these two fundamental schools."⁴ Recall that Plato's theory of the forms presupposes a mental idealism, whereas Aristotle's categories grant more privilege to the matter of the universe. But curiously

enough, the same symptoms plague both Marxist materialism and Mao's practices in such a way that bespeak of liberal humanism; that is, the privileging of a state-centralized authority that "watchdogs" the populace. Regard how crucially essential "Mao Tse-Tung's Thought" permeated the society insofar as we witness a singular example of privileged reasoning over matters of brute fact (which later becomes "matter" by the production of books that carry the message of this thought, as a monoculture emerges...very much akin to a medieval scenario—also mono-bibliocentric—that privileges the "one book" as being the Bible). The internalization strategy of this "Thought" is in itself somewhat suspicious in that this "Thought" must regulate all activity in the socius. This is an altogether familiar "paternalist" strategy that is inherited from other political models other than Marxist-Leninism.

Like Marx, Mao was not a Marxist all of the time. Evidence of this is apparent in his "One Hundred Flowers" campaign of 1955. This campaign—though only six weeks in duration before a reversion took place! -- was ostensibly an attempt to encourage free thought and discourse, even if the aim was to refute it. In fact, this was a combative gesture: Lu Ting-Yi, Propaganda Department Secretary, issued the challenge to scholars to create and to criticize.⁵ It was a "prove us wrong, we dare you" scenario that did not threaten punishment as a response to such a challenge. According to Mao, this would strengthen his own party position, for this free exercise in thinking would reach its terminus, be confronted by its own fallacies, and the people would return to the established ideological fold, thereby finally laying to rest these dissenting opinions. Moreover, the campaign had two reflexive qualities: 1) it would allow the people to "sow their wild oats" so to speak, and speak without fear of persecution, which by proxy would rejuvenate the established ideological apparatus of its perceived oppressive function, and 2) those who were "astray" would be given the opportunity to become disenchanted with their own dissenting views and would return—with healthy struggle—back to the ideological platform. More importantly, this campaign improved the condition of the intellectual class. After Chou En-Lai's "The Question of Intellectuals" was given on January 14th of that year, intellectuals were privy to salary increases, better research access, and given more available materials.⁶ My sources have not indicated whether or not this practice was widespread, or more localized around Peking, for it would be my

assertion that areas more removed from Mao's sphere of influence would no doubt be still enforcing the same standards as set down in Mao's agenda before the campaign.

What is particularly and distinctly a liberal humanist phenomenon in this political move, beyond granting this reprieve to the intellectual class, is the notion of varied opinions on all matters political and sensitive. One will find as an essential quality in J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*, especially in concerns to education, that the well-being of the society depends on there being contradiction, for without oblique or challenging perspectives, a society's intellectual capabilities stagnate, and people will follow the rules without understanding what the rules mean, thereby transforming the populace into functionary automata. It was perhaps Mao's intention to avoid ruling over a populace who merely functioned, and so he devised a program that would re-invigorate the intellectual fortitude of the People. Why would anyone refuse to govern over a society that merely obeyed without question? We must suspect that Mao was very proud of his ideas, and that for people to merely follow them without meditating on their meaning would 1) make them susceptible if they could be persuaded by an opposing position, and 2) would diminish the import of meaning that Mao inserted in his writings. In sum, it would be tantamount to having undergone an enormous expenditure of time and energy into a novel only to receive the blind praise of a publisher who merely accepts the work because of the name. On unsubstantiated grounds, I would assert that Mao wanted the people to come to his thought after careful deliberation and critical discrimination; he wanted a loyal class, and the only loyalty worth having was the type that truly "felt" the "Thought." Spurred by the events of the Hungarian uprising in the mid-fifties, the CCP did not want to underestimate the opposition or give license to uprising in China, which would no doubt become a possibility if the relaxation of thought-suppression continued. Rather, Mao quickly abandoned his "Unity-Criticism-Unity" model that would allow the "weeds" in current thought to emerge and be uprooted, thereby bringing a return to unity in thought. We could criticize the short-lived campaign as being teleologically motivated toward homogeneity, a potential trap to rout out the dissenters of the more bourgeois persuasion, or as a devious plan to eventually increase party membership. And indeed this campaign has been subjected to these full frontal attacks, but one must always counterpose this with the terror of the Su Fan and the liquidation of counter-revolutionary thought. For good or

ill, people were being granted the opportunity to criticize the state without fear of deadly reproach. Mao was not—in this period—overtly hostile to dissenting opinions, but rather played the paternal role of diminishing the import of the “counter-revolutionary” strain of thinking as backward as opposed to advanced, but also recognizing the necessity of “backward” thought. According to Mao, reminiscent again of Mill, societal progress is best affected by the constant emergence of contradictory views that the established order must contend with.⁷

As a corollary of this phenomenon, education was stressed, and it was—almost by definition—a right. Even if the purpose of the education was to further disseminate propaganda, to indoctrinate the students to become loyal Maoists, the point is that the education was there at all in a very substantive way, as opposed to the dynastic rule where only the rich could afford to take the provincial exams. Moreover, the education was diverse, meeting the demands of the quickly emergent modernization of China; that is, in response to burgeoning industries, one could receive a formal education in trades that reflected the demands of the society. The pursuit of knowledge, no matter what form it took (though vocational training was valued more highly), was the prime goal—despite its monolithic character.⁸

Some of these education trends are worth noting. Enrolment in higher education increased from 155 036 in 1948 to 434 600 in 1958. In terms of China’s population, this does not seem to be a considerable percentage, but it is still a threefold increase. During this same period, arts education went down drastically from 11.6% to 5.4% whereas engineering soared from 25 579 to 177 600. The reason for this may be twofold: a) stress on practical vocational skills and China’s industrial demands (public works, etc) that widened the employment base in this area and b) the dramatic economic reforms between 1949 and 1952 caused a boom in mining and manufacture, the reconstruction of railways, and a host of civic projects—all of which entailed the need for engineers. Political science, a pernicious subject that was perhaps perceived as a discipline that would foster opposing thought by exposure to different political models, went from 37 780 to 9300.⁹ There was, in the perception of the state, little need to devote study to political science, for the political information was widely available to everyone.

Another important qualification for liberal humanism is the notion of property rights. Under the Maoist regime, property was more “equitably” distributed during the Agrarian Reform Law that effectively vanquished the landlord class. And although Mao believed in a national property, especially against the threat of a re-armed Japan (prompting an agreement in 1950 between China and the USSR to guard against Japanese or American hostilities), he failed to recognize the sanctity of private property per se, and there are numerous (and horrific) accounts of this, most notably during the purges of the Cultural Revolution, and the Great leap Forward which saw the forced herding of people into communes. It is perhaps on the notion of property that Mao is at his most Marxist.

But in terms of nationalism, the notion of citizenry (itself a liberal humanist concept) was employed by the CCP. The Common Programme, issued in September of 1949 by the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, granted the rights of citizenry to those who formally qualified as the People, giving them the rights of People (zhurenweng) to dictate over the exploiting classes and groups that constituted the remainder.¹⁰ Dictatorship aside, the notion of citizenry—albeit in a nascent and exclusive form—is still imbued, like the liberal humanist model, with various inalienable qualifications. Rather than the right to vote, etc., the citizen’s rights are established according to the CCP’s qualifications. These rights are “recognized” by the state and granted in like manner. This parallels the liberal humanist model which also depicts the state as recognizing the rights of its citizenry; that is, both the Maoist and liberal humanist methods are instances of state paternalism.

We can criticize Mao for adhering to a rank individualism, having himself portrayed in an almost demi-god fashion, a cult figure for the adoration of the masses. This in itself is a very powerful proof in illustrating Mao’s paternalist features. Also, himself something of a poet in addition to his more political role, seems to suggest that he does place some value in the arts, in expression, and not merely a unilateral fixation on all things “material.” Art itself is a form of transcendental behaviour in that it does not lend itself to the real. And when he was not writing poetry explicitly, his political works convey a deep poetic sensibility, imbued with such beautiful and memorable phrases such as the wonderfully figural “paper tiger.” In fact, one could perhaps engage in a literary analysis of Mao’s writings to find there the tremendous effect and influence the dynastic

period in literature had on Mao, thereby showing a direct conflict between this sensibility and his Cultural Revolution to purge “all things old.” He was, incontrovertibly, a kind of metaphysical poet, also enamoured with Qing period romanticism in poetry. Moreover, Mao had impeccable calligraphy skills, and for those in the know about Chinese writing, calligraphy is not only a respected art form, but it conveys something intrinsic about the soul of the person who employs it. This, again, presents a contradiction (not to mention an anachronistic cultural belief), for Mao’s dialectical materialism demands that we abandon all recourse to transcendentals—this includes the soul. In all fairness, similar charges can be directed to Marx and Lenin, both competent and artful writers in their political prose (and Marx himself enjoyed writing love poetry for his lifelong beloved).

Despite how one seeks to locate a form of liberal humanism in the actions and policies of Mao, this cannot be construed in any fashion as a means of either salvaging him through an apologia or, among that contingent of Western pro-Maoists, to see in him a flawless figure of effective and beneficial ideological conviction. By the same token, we cannot rest complicit with that opposite contingent of Cold War relics who have made their careers vilifying Mao in their works as a further distorting caricature of China presented to the West. All said, Mao was no saintly figure, and he did occasionally lapse into various contradictory instances in order to buttress his political hold upon the country, and far too numerous are the real conditions of suffering at the hands of his dictates. One need only consider the broad testimony of those considered dissenters and enemies of the State who indeed suffered or were executed due to Mao’s nefarious purges, the livelihoods of innocent people that were effectively trampled in the somewhat inaptly named “cultural revolution.” However, although one cannot completely absolve or vilify Mao as a political and cultural figure, he remains an enigmatic one at best, one whose ideas and works merit continued study, albeit with a sensitive eye to those cruel conditions he occasionally produced via his ideological and personal compartment to the governance of China.

In this ongoing effort to make this link between Mao and liberal humanism, we have only been able to indicate a few cursory and isolated examples—the rest is awash in

an enigma, or would prove to be a pedantic exercise of grasping at straws. The abovementioned examples are perhaps the most notable and least contentious examples of Mao's nascent liberal humanism. But we must conclude as we have begun...knowing that Marx wasn't always a Marxist (which sounds rather paradoxical), it should be no different that Mao was not always consistent with his proclaimed principles in dialectical materialism. But it does not suffice to say that he was a closet humanist either. Mao, like most political figures, was a motley of political views without a center, a panache of ideological weaves that erupted in strange ways. Perhaps it is this that will mark out the future seduction and scholarship of Mao as a historical figure: not to apprentice to how he was a dialectical materialist through and through, but when and where he *wasn't*. This will perhaps prove the more challenging and exciting task indeed.

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.111-118. It must be said that this translation is by far the most reputable and in accord with the original German. This section on lordship and bondage had such a degree of pathos to Marx that it could almost be said without controversy that this one section most influenced Marx's writings on the relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

² The interested reader is directed to the massive literature produced in this area, including Marx and Engels as the platform of the theory; Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School, Freud Lacan, and Guattari for the developments of dialectical materialism in psychoanalysis; Sartre, Marcel, Wahl, and Queneau for the earlier reception of the dialectic in France; Habermas of the New Frankfurt School, and; Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Nancy for the post-marxist (post-structuralist, deconstruction, postmodernist) view in France.

³ Cf. Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, Locke's *Treatise on Government*, Mill's *On Liberty*, and Rawls' *Political Liberalism*. These are just a few highlighted "big name" theorists in this milieu.

⁴ Mao Tse-Tung, "Dialectical Materialism" in *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*, ed. Stuart R. Schram (New York: Praeger, 1974), p.180.

⁵ And indeed this program of criticism as destruction, which in turn is necessary for the constructivist activity of Reason, has been with Mao Tse-Tung thought from the beginning. Perhaps one of the later examples of the restating of this tenet can be found in the "Circular of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" which is a direct attack on P'eng Chen who (according to this document) did not consult the Group of Five before submitting an outline report which surreptitiously critiqued Wu Han. On another note, we witness the importance of the relationship between destruction and construction for the teleological purposes of fostering Reason: an inherently liberal humanist by way of fin de siecle view.

⁶ Rene Goldman, "The Rectification Campaign at Peking University: May-June 1957" in *China Under Mao: Politics Takes Command*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge: MIT, 1966), p.255.

⁷ Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao-Tse-Tung*, vol. V (Peking: Foreign languages Press, 1977), pp. 172-5.

⁸ C.T. Hu, “Communist Education: Theory and Practice” in Mao: Politics Takes Command, p.243. The claim of the education being monolithic is Hu’s assessment based on a double criteria of the trends in education and the sustained indoctrination effect in schools. I, however, feel it to be a bit of a hyperbole, though I employ his word here.

⁹ Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, “Higher Education in Communist China, 1949-61” in Mao: Politics Takes Command, pp. 290-3. What Hsu does not indicate, especially in terms of the diminishing enrolment in arts and political science, is whether or not this was the result of a decrease in faculty or vice versa.

¹⁰ Bill Brugger, China: Liberation and Transformation, (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p.52.