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辩证唯物主义

Dialectical Materialism

PANG Laikwan

While the teaching of ‘dialectical materialism’ (*bianzheng weiwuzhuyi*) is part of secondary and university curricula in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), young Chinese citizens probably consider it a hackneyed, dogmatic, and fussy logic. After all, their job is simply to mechanically recite official definitions and methods instead of engaging intellectually with them. From this point of view, the ossification of the term indirectly demonstrates how Chinese communism is deprived of an afterlife in China. In this essay, I will put dialectical materialism into a historical context and explore how this once very powerful concept has degenerated into such a cliché. More importantly, I will investigate how this concept might still be productive for our current political understanding.

A Brief Genealogy of Dialectics

Dialectics as a Western philosophical concept can be traced back to ancient Greece, where good citizenship and social relations were grounded in dialogue, from which agreements and disagreements arose. The idea of dialectics gained a new life in the nineteenth century thanks to Hegel, whose dialectics of *Aufhebung* (sublation) describes how oppositional elements, in the forms of thesis and antithesis, engage in struggle with each other and then synthesise into a whole that in turn becomes a new thesis from which another Hegelian triad forms. Hegel believed that continual dialectical development leads ultimately to the fulfilment of absolute spirit. In his opinion, it was this ‘becoming’ that allows us to transform ourselves in order to reach the ultimate ideal.

Hegelian theory was then borrowed and challenged by Marx, who developed his own theory of dialectical materialism. In Marx’s theorisation, until we reach a classless society, each intermediate historical stage entails the exploitation of the lower classes

by the dominant one, a situation that motivates the former to struggle against the latter. Bourgeois capitalism is exemplary of this kind of dynamic: while the bourgeoisie needs to exploit the proletariat for its own capital accumulation, at the same time it also supplies proletarians with some education, such as general working and organisational skills, to facilitate their participation and integration in the production process. In the end, however, education enhances the political consciousness and skills of the workers, making them more likely to ultimately overthrow the dominating class. To quote the famous words of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: 'What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.'¹ This famous statement implies that history progresses according to its own laws, which cannot be altered by anyone, no matter how powerful.

Engels further elaborated this Marxist historical view by referring to the natural sciences.² He came up with three laws of dialectics. The first is the law of the unity and struggle of opposites, according to which opposites condition each other. The second is the law of the passage from quantitative to qualitative change, referring to the qualitative change of physical phenomena triggered by enough intensity of quantitative changes. The third is the law of the negation of the negation, which poses the controversial question of whether a negation, which still retains traces of what it negated, itself requires negation for the radically new to emerge.³ Together these laws, supposedly supported by physical and biological sciences, not only define class struggle as the engine of history, but also illustrate the universal manifestation and development of all matters.

One detrimental effect of Engel's overemphasis on the scientific dimension of Marxism is that it turns the original theory of history, which featured an important role for humanity, into one deprived of human inputs. It was when Marxism took on the halo of science that it came to claim a totalising understanding of human history. Via the combined efforts of many intermediate thinkers and the various Leninist parties of the 1920s and 1930s, Engel's laws of dialectics gradually evolved into the orthodox doctrine of dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union.⁴ Through Soviet-trained revolutionaries, this doctrine of linear evolutionary historical progress was then exported all over the world, including China, as a theoretical resource for legitimising the allegedly inevitable communist revolutions in other countries. The mechanical understanding of dialectical materialism being taught in the PRC over the last half century was also a result.

The notion of 'historical materialism'—which has largely been seen as interchangeable with dialectical materialism—came into being in this same historical context. It is clear that Marx developed a materialist conception of history, but he never separated society from nature. Engels deliberately provided Marxism with the additional non-humanistic dimension of natural sciences, implicitly arguing for the superiority of the studies of sciences to the studies of history. Stalin integrated this reading into official discourse. In 1938, in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, he wrote that the studies of nature and society should be clearly differentiated to become two Marxist doctrines:

Dialectical materialism is the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party. It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of studying and apprehending them, is *dialectical*, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of

these phenomena, its theory, is *materialistic*. Historical materialism is the extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the study of social life, an application of the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of the life of society, to the study of society and of its history.⁵

According to this authoritative definition, dialectical materialism is the basic Marxist doctrine that should be used to understand nature—i.e., everything—while historical materialism is a branch of dialectical materialism devoted specifically to the study of human society and its history. This genealogy of the term is important for us to understand the specificity of Maoist dialectics.

Maoist Dialectics

Based on the state-commissioned work of the Chinese Marxist thinker Ai Siqi, since the 1960s most Chinese Marxist theorists have adopted the Stalinist differentiation, considering dialectical materialism as a term that encompasses all kinds of science, and historical materialism (*lishi weiwuzhuayi*) as specifically designated for the studies of human history.⁶ However, Mao Zedong, although being much more interested in history and the humanities than natural science, mostly used the term dialectical materialism. What I would like to emphasise here is that Mao's fascination with human history made his dialectical materialism a doctrine much less rigid and contained than Stalinism. If there is a legacy of Maoism which might still be useful for our current political actions, I believe it is his sensibility regarding the unpredictable nature of history.

Mao's historicism is heavily marked by a deep conviction that the wilful human subject can change history. The major structure of Mao's dialectical materialism is precisely the struggle between humans and history. The Maoist subject is 'poor and blank' (*yiqiong erbai*), and history is the stage on which he or she struggles. Mao announced:

Apart from their other characteristics, the outstanding thing about China's 600 million people is that they are 'poor and blank.' This may seem a bad thing, but in reality it is a good thing. Poverty gives rise to the desire for changes, the desire for action, and the desire for revolution. On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written; the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted.⁷

To Mao, it is the poverty and blankness of the Chinese people that allows them to engage in the most spectacular historical upheavals.⁸ Being 'poor and blank' and deprived of all identity tags, the Maoist subject becomes an empty vehicle ready to be invested with revolutionary will, so that he or she can engage in the most ferocious struggles and bring seemingly impossible historical transformation to fruition. We can understand this rhetoric as one particularly constructed for the Great Leap Forward, which therefore is highly historically confined. But we can also approach this Maoist subject theoretically as the one who performs the negation, instead of allowing negations to be performed on him- or herself. This Maoist hero is not invincible, and under Mao's dialectical materialism there is a subtle fatalism. People do not act on

history unidirectionally, but rather engage in a dialectical struggle with it. Dialectical materialism did not provide Mao with a clear historical direction. Instead, it enlightened him to the exact opposite, so that it was the courage and the will of the people against an uncertain future that made them so heroic.

In the 1930s, when Mao's basic philosophical worldview was already formed, he clearly identified himself as a student of the orthodox Marxism developed in the Soviet Union. As he admitted to Edgar Snow, his famous 1937 lectures on 'On Contradiction' and 'On Practice' were written in response to a request from the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College in Yan'an for philosophy lectures for its students. Still, while written on commission, these lectures show that besides being interested in orthodox Soviet theories, Mao was also most invested in two notions: contradiction (*maodun*) and practice (*shijian*) (see the essays by Rojas and Aminda Smith in the present volume). In both lectures, Mao works out the core dialectical mechanism of his understanding of dialectical materialism: 'dialectical' as historical laws and 'materialism' as human practices. He made clear that it is the constant arising and resolution of contradictions that make up historical forces, and that there is undoubtedly a universal law, which is the continuous confrontation of opposing forces. However, according to him, it is impossible to predict what these antagonistic clashes will lead to, because historical reality is built up through a myriad of human practices, and is therefore unstable. What we can do is to learn from history how contradictions have formed, developed, and transformed. While we cannot predict the future, these historical patterns can still guide our future action.

Reading history was one of Mao's most devoted pastimes. He studied not only all the major historical Chinese texts, but also a variety of alternative histories, historical novels, family histories, and local gazettes. Mao was particularly interested in understanding the circumstances and fates of historical figures, and he frequently referred to historical details in his political speeches, poetic expressions, and everyday conversations. It could be argued that Mao was drawn to the dialectic because he already believed in constant transformation. The mechanical teleological view of the progression from feudal to bourgeois capitalism and then socialism is seldom mentioned in Mao's writing. Instead, he displayed more interest in the struggles of the people, whether these might or might not lead to a better future.

A Distaste for Grand Narratives

Being so captivated by history, Mao disliked any grand narrative. He frequently asserted that no 'theory' (*lilun*) can really explain history. The universal law, in other words, is only a form within which practice and knowledge interact, but it does not tell us where history goes. In his lecture on dialectical materialism, which is considered to be the blueprint for his two lectures on contradiction and practice, Mao emphasises that the universe is open, so that there is no end to history.⁹ Similarly, he never conceptualises an end to the revolution, and instead insists that revolution must be continually carried out in order to keep the power structure open.¹⁰ With so much emphasis on 'practices,' Mao's history can only be an unfinished one. Mao's unyielding confidence in the human spirit rests on an awareness of the ruthlessness of historical forces. In his 'Reading Notes on the Soviet Union's "Political Economics,"' Mao openly

criticises Soviet Marxist orthodoxy for focussing too much on historical laws, and Soviet textbooks for always '[starting] from laws, tenets and definitions, an approach which has all along been opposed by Marxism.'¹¹ Instead, he argues that one must perform empirical analysis before principles and tenets can be discovered and verified.

In Western liberal societies and postsocialist countries alike, the rigidity of the concept of dialectical materialism describing historical progression as governed by universal laws has attracted many criticisms. A new generation of leftist critics, particularly those from the Frankfurt School, has challenged the teleological dimension of Marxist dialectics, claiming that such universalisation prevents us from seeing history as open and contingent. For example, Adorno has argued that the ideal formulated by Hegel can only be conceptualised retrospectively, when changes have already happened. Any attempt to theorise a universal without acknowledging particulars as unpredictable is naïve.¹² At the same time, dialectical materialism as a philosophical concept continues to be discussed and explored among sympathetic critics, allowing the idea to gain new lives.¹³ In contrast, this has not happened in China yet, because the ruling Communist Party continues to see this doctrine as a part of its founding myth, and therefore considers any serious questioning and revamping of it to be a challenge to its ruling authority.

For this reason, one of the few available ways to reconsider the heritage of Marxism and socialism in China is to revisit Mao's understanding of history. This is not, once again, to turn Mao into a cult, but rather to critically—and strategically—engage with his struggles with, on the one hand, the imported Soviet orthodox, and on the other, the petrification of a Party corrupted by power.¹⁴ This might help us face the more insecure and authoritative Chinese Communist Party of our time. By deliberately adding physical and biological sciences to Marxism to reinforce its universal application, and by further separating dialectical materialism and historical materialism, Engels and Stalin transformed Marxism into an orthodoxy in which the current Chinese government is still deeply entrenched. Mao, instead, rescued the political dimensions of Marxism, encouraging us to be ready to face, build, and eventually be defeated by an open future.

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