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实践

Practice

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In Yan'an, the wartime base area of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there were a number of dogmatists in the Party. They tried to impress people with their knowledge of Marxist texts and saw Marxism as an unquestionable and timeless truth, rather than a guide to action. Conversely, there were also a number of Party members who were empiricists. Those people based their thinking on their fragmentary, individual experiences. They failed to understand the bigger revolutionary picture and did not see the importance of theory at all. To correct these comrades' divergent but equally erroneous, subjectivist ideas—especially those of the dogmatists, who had already caused the Chinese Communist Revolution to suffer several losses—Mao Zedong wrote 'On Practice' in 1937. Or so says the introduction to the essay in the official collection, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*.

'On Practice'—subtitled in the *Selected Works* as 'On the Relation between Knowledge and Practice, between Knowing, and Doing'—was not the first time Mao had written on the importance of practice. In his 1930 essay 'Oppose Book Worship,' he excoriated the 'disgraceful' comrades who 'always keep their eyes shut and talk nonsense,' insisting that 'unless you have investigated a problem, you will be deprived of the right to speak on it' because 'when you have not probed into a problem, into the present facts and its past history, and know nothing of its essentials, whatever you say about it will undoubtedly be nonsense' and 'talking nonsense solves no problems, as everyone knows.' The claim that a core feature of Maoism is anti-intellectualism is often evidenced by Mao's insistence that all knowledge comes from engaging in actual practices, especially those of labour. In fact, Mao was only anti-intellectual in the specific sense that he distrusted bourgeois intellectuals and their exploitation-abetting methods and pursuits. Mao was deeply devoted to some of the defining tasks of intellectual work: producing knowledge

and verifying it, which also required critiquing and evaluating methods of knowledge production (see Schmalzer's essay in the present volume). He did not want to halt the pursuit of knowledge; he wanted to pursue revolutionary knowledge.¹

A Technology for Revolutionary Knowledge

Mao offered a technology for revolutionary knowledge production and truth verification: the 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian*, see Lin Chun's essay in the present volume). Encapsulated in the shorthand phrase 'from the masses, to the masses' (*cong qunzhong zhong lai, dao qunzhong zhong qu*), the mass line was premised on the Marxist claim that ordinary working people were best positioned in terms of class perspective to most clearly see objective realities, produce the best analyses of problems, and point the way to the best solutions. Why were the masses so ideally positioned to know? For Mao and other Marxists, it was because the masses engaged in labour:

Man's knowledge depends mainly on his activity in material production, through which he comes gradually to understand the phenomena, the properties, and the laws of nature, and the relations between himself and nature; and through his activity in production he also gradually comes to understand, in varying degrees, certain relations that exist between people. None of this knowledge can be acquired apart from activity in production.²

The most successful revolutionary praxis would produce knowledge by beginning with that practice of participating in the concrete daily experiences of production and paying attention, observing, and investigating the concrete conditions created by those practices, while listening very closely when other labourers describe their own practices and conditions. According to Mao, when you come to see through that mass perspective, through the viewpoint of the people who labour, you will know some of the truest truths about the concrete conditions of the world.

Crucially, however, Mao's insistence on practice was not a dismissal of theory. For him, the dogmatists were worse than the empiricists, but both were guilty of subjectivism. All truth came from the concrete conditions of the masses, but not every interpretation of those conditions was true. Members of the masses, and the Communists who observed and worked with them, could hold incorrect views, or correct views that were 'scattered and unsystematic.' It is rarely possible for any individual to see fully the broader implications or imperatives contained in their own experiences. Mao famously likened the role of the Party to that of a processing plant for the ideas of the masses: the Party's responsibility was to 'listen attentively' to the masses; to engage in the practices they engage in; to use Marxist-Leninist theory to help identify the correct ideas that emerge from concrete work; to show the masses how to apply Marxist/Leninist/Maoist theory to understand the full scope of their ideas in a 'concentrated and systematic' form; and then to propagate the systematised ideas until 'the people' came to understand and accept them as their own.³ The mass line knowledge production and truth verification technology operates through an open-ended and recursive process of new truths becoming lived realities and new sets of practices, the results of which are observed, discussed, and recalibrated.

Anti-intellectualism?

Mao was not anti-intellectual. He did not deny that we must produce knowledge about the world. But he also argued that we ought not simply seek to interpret the world when the point, of course, is to change it. He envisioned the dialectical method as ideally being able to produce new, verified knowledge, which could be used to change practice in revolutionary ways, to reshape the very conditions of the world (see Pang's essay in the present volume). Nevertheless, from Mao's perspective no revolutionary should become too invested or too certain about new practices, or the knowledge that informed them, or they would be vulnerable to those subjectivist ideas of empiricism or dogmatism. Revolutionaries must think in an 'infinite way'—from practice, to theory, to practice, to theory, to practice—in an endless 'ascending spiral' of mass line knowledge production.⁴

Some worry that the Party's recent attempt to revive the mass line means a return to the disasters of the Mao era, but the mass line also offers the possibility for Maoism to transcend Mao.⁵ In the official Party view, Mao Zedong Thought is alive. It did not die with him, nor must it be killed to prevent repeating his mistakes, as its method can improve and disprove its founder's preliminary conclusions. A recent article in a Party theory journal claimed that the CCP's continuous use of the endless 'ascending spiral' of mass line knowledge production 'is precisely why socialism is still flourishing, vibrant and alive in China, and why the Chinese nation is still walking along the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics toward its great rejuvenation.'⁶

Many observers find 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' or 'market socialism' to be little more than cynical attempts to preserve the legitimacy of a Communist Party working with practices and theories that are seemingly far removed from the ideas Marx advocated and the practices he observed. Yet those phrases could be entirely logical within a mass line epistemology, if the progression from Marxist thought to Maoist praxis to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms to Xi Jinping's efforts to tie it all back together is the path lit by practice. Infinite practice-theory-practice processing could certainly take a party and a society in unexpected directions; if Marx could have set the course for revolution from his armchair, there would have been no need for a praxis of ongoing investigation and evolution. Of course, practice is not the sole criterion of truth, and the appearance of having been borne from experience does not, alone, make knowledge Marxist or emancipatory. It is only through the dialectical method of considering practice in light of theory and vice versa that one can approach truth and the possibility of revolutionary change.

Marxist Futures

What might Mao say on the debate over the nature of China's economic and political system in the twenty-first century? He would probably be unsurprised that dogmatists still want to impress others with their knowledge of Marxist texts and thus attempt to falsify the 'socialism' in 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' by pointing to the way the practices of Chinese communism have failed to correspond with Marx's nineteenth-century theory. Yet Mao might also instruct empiricists to remember that their

fragmentary, individual experiences and practices must always be contextualised with theory. And that theory cannot be one that takes us farther away from the promises of equality, liberation, and communism. The present progress toward those revolutionary goals can only be judged by engaging in the practices of material production, observing the relations between people, and investigating the concrete realities of the people's daily lives.

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