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Maoism and Marxism in Comparative Perspective

A. James Gregor and Maria Hsia Chang

A great many curious things have befallen Marxism as an intellectual and political tradition, not the least of which was its adoption by the revolutionary forces under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung. Originally, the Marxism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was a eurocentric doctrine that addressed itself to a post-industrial revolution that would liberate society from the disabilities produced by intensive industrialization. For classical Marxism, industrialization produced not only the "idiocy of over-production," the inability to effectively distribute the abundance produced by capitalism, but generated restive populations that were "overwhelmingly proletarian." Capitalist industrialization produced both the circumstances precipitating, and the historic agents responsible for, vast social, economic and political change.

Since the turn of the century, however, Marxism has become a rationale for revolutionary movements in industrially underdeveloped, non-European societies, peopled by essentially non-proletarian populations. Rather than the mobilizing belief-system of a postindustrial, European and international revolution, Marxism has become the vehicle for a number of preindustrial, modernizing, extra-European and national revolutions.¹ In environments innocent of proletarians, "declassed petit-bourgeois elements" lead nonproletarian masses through processes calculated to industrialize backward economies. One finds just such singular Marxisms lighting revolutionary enthusiasms in the most economically primitive environs—in Africa, in Southeast Asia and in the fastnesses of Latin America. China has been host to such a revolution, Marxist in inspiration, mass-mobilizing, developmental and populist in character.

The recognition that something singular had befallen the Marxism, left to us as a heritage by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, does not require much sophistication. The Marxism of Chairman Mao—that Marxism that is at once Leninized, sinified

¹ Cf. J. Kautsky, "Neo-Maoism, Marxism and Leninism," and "From Proletarianism to Modernizing Movement," in *Communism and the Politics of Development* (New York, 1968).

and bowdlerized—is a true Marxism only to true believers. The rest of us find ourselves left with a great puzzlement. If Maoism is a Marxism, how does one begin to explain its curious features? To be told that Mao “creatively developed” Marxism to meet the requirements of China’s needs is not to be told a great deal.² Implicit in such remarks is the assumption that Mao Tse-tung was fully cognizant of the theoretical substance of classical Marxism and subsequently made a conscious choice between constituents, altering (“creatively developing”) some, persisting in others, and perhaps abandoning others. The fact is that Mao, at the time of his conversion to Marxism, knew very little about Marxism. He had apparently read some or all of the *Communist Manifesto* but little else. He could read only Chinese, and the *Manifesto* was perhaps the only work by either Marx or Engels that was available to him. Karl Kautsky’s *Class Struggle* was also available in translation at that time, but other than that, at the time Mao opted to become a Marxist revolutionary, there was little to which he could appeal to obtain anything other than the most superficial grasp of the intricacies of the theoretical system of Karl Marx.³

Throughout the major part of Mao’s revolutionary activity, his writings reveal only the most general comprehension of theoretical Marxism.⁴ Most of his insights were purchased by perusing Soviet texts on Marxism, a Marxism that had already suffered its own “creative development” at the hands of the Bolsheviks. To this day there is no serious evidence that Mao ever read the bulk of the writings of Marx or Engels (most of the references in his writings to much of the Marx-Engels corpus appear to be subsequent palimpsests by pious editors). Given the kinds of activities that oc-

² Cf. “Memorial Speech by Comrade Hua Kuo-feng . . .,” in *Great Leader Chairman Mao Will Live Forever in Our Hearts* (Hong Kong, 1976); Liu Shao-chi, *How to Be a Good Communist* (Peking, 1965), pp. 21f.

³ Cf. E. Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York, 1961), pp. 155f. There were other writings available: in 1908 the second chapter of Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was translated, and in 1912 Engels’s *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* was published in Chinese. In 1919, Marx’s “Wage Labor and Capital” appeared in Chinese, and it was only in 1920 that the first complete version of the *Communist Manifesto* appeared. By that time, Mao had already opted for a Marxist solution to China’s problems. In effect, Mao (who could only read Chinese) could only have read fragments of the writings of Marx and Engels at the time he became a Marxist.

⁴ Cf. S. Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (New York, 1969), pp. 88f., 169f.

cupied Mao for a good part of his adult life, the fact that he was not a well-read Marx scholar is perfectly comprehensible.

All of which leaves one with a recognition that most of Mao's revolutionary inspiration must have come from sources other than the theoretical writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is, in fact, common knowledge that Mao's commitment to "Marxist revolution" originated in his personal concerns, his youthful commitments, his moral principles, and the aspirations he entertained for humiliated China—rather than any familiarity with the writings of Marx and Engels.⁵ But once again, that is not to tell us very much. It seems reasonably clear that Mao's Marxism can be traced to transparently non-Marxist sources.⁶ What those sources might be and how they might have shaped his Marxism is less clear. For the purposes of this exposition, two sources of Maoist inspiration will be considered—and an effort undertaken to suggest how they might have influenced the singular Marxism we now identify with Mao Tse-tung.

Non-Marxist Sources of Maoist Inspiration

Almost all commentators on Maoism have identified at least two sources of Maoist ideological inspiration. One such source is to be found in the popular Chinese novels which we know fascinated the young Mao, and the other is the intellectual current that originated in the philosophic and social science speculations of Li Ta-chao, Mao's superior in the library of Peking National University, and one of the founders of China's Communist party. Both were to contribute to the articulation of Mao's political thought and were to give a singular cast to his sinified Marxism.

We have Mao's own testimony concerning the influence of the "romances of Old China" on his intellectual development. He spoke of learning those tales "almost by heart," discussing and rediscussing them "many times." Mao was certain that he was "much influenced by such books" having read them at "an impressionable age."⁷ The novels to which Mao subsequently referred were the historical *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and the bandit novel, *Water Margin (Shui Hu)*, also known as *All Men Are Brothers*.

⁵ Cf. S. Schram, *Mao Tse-tung* (Baltimore, 1966), chaps. 2 and 3.

⁶ For a brief discussion, cf. A. J. Gregor, *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics* (Princeton, 1974), pp. 205-210.

⁷ Snow, *Red Star Over China*, p. 127.

The novel *Shui-hu Chuan*, *Water Margin*, probably written by Shih Nai-an during the late Yuan or Ming in the fourteenth century, was a fictionalized account of an actual rebellion that took place during the Northern Sung Dynasty (1119-1125 A.D.). It recounts the exploits of Sung Chiang and thirty-five other rebels who were forced by corrupt government, and all its attendant evils, to take up arms in their own, and in the people's, defense.⁸

That this particular novel exercised influence on Mao's revolutionary development is instructive for a number of reasons. It suggests something about Mao's Marxism and provides some insight into his revolutionary aspirations. Not too long ago, it was suggested that the *Shui Hu* constituted "a classic text for motivational research into Chinese revolutionary movements."⁹ For our purposes, it affords heuristic insight into the traditional Chinese origins of what George Lichtheim identifies as the "revolutionary peasant populism" of Mao Tse-tung.¹⁰

The story of Sung Chiang and his fellow rebels is one version of a familiar theme running through the fabric of Chinese history. Revolutionary change in dynasties was vindicated by the insistence that the preceding emperor had violated the "Mandate of Heaven" by his corrupt and inefficient rule. Rebel leaders and their cadres were not understood to be revolutionary by disposition. Indeed, most of them had once been minor officials, landlords, gentry, scholars and merchants. They had no desire to rebel in the first place, and would have been contented members of a normal society. They became revolutionaries only when a bitter experience convinced them that there was no other way to survive under the system except by joining forces with the community of rebel-bandits up in the mountain fortress of Liang Shan P'o. Their sense of desperation is expressed in the phrase *pi shang Liang Shan* ("forced up the Liang Shan mountains").

Pi shang Liang Shan aptly identifies the motivations behind traditional rebel movements in China. There is, for example, an interesting poem in the novel, *Shui Hu*, which provides a clue to the circumstances which "forced the people up to the mountains" to be rebels against a ruling dynasty:

⁸ Chao Ts'ung, *Chung-kuo Szu Ta Hsiao-shuo chih Yen-Chiu* [The study of the four great novels of China] (Hong Kong, 1964), p. 3.

⁹ R. Ruhlmann, "Traditional Heroes in Chinese Popular Fiction," in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. A. F. Wright (Palo Alto, 1960), p. 169.

¹⁰ G. Lichtheim, *Imperialism* (New York, 1971), p. 150.

The red sun is flaming like a burning fire,
 The rice in the fields is withered and parched;
 Poor farmer's heart is desperate as boiling water,
 But the gentleman prince calmly fans himself.¹¹

This indifference of the rich to the misery of the poor is the dry fodder on which revolutionary flames feed themselves. Dynasties were toppled for precisely such reasons.

In this regard, Communist reviewers and critics of this kind of literature see *Shui Hu* as more than an instance of the traditional cry for a change of mandate. For them, the novel is prototypic of the genre of peasant rebellion literature. The Chinese Communists have showered accolades upon *Shui Hu* and its rebels. Attempts have been made to depict Sung Chiang and his rebels as harbingers of the Marxist-Maoist man—peasant leaders with class consciousness.¹²

Mao Tse-tung himself chose to regard Sung Chiang as a prototypic peasant leader and identified his rebellion as the uprising of the peasant classes of old China. In his article, "Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," Mao maintained:

The cruel economic exploitation and political oppression of the peasants by the landlord class had forced the peasants many times to organize uprisings. . . . From the Ch'in dynasty's Ch'en Sheng, Wu Kuang, Hsiang Yu, Liu Pang . . . to the Sung dynasty's Sung Chiang . . . up till Ch'ing dynasty's T'ai P'ing T'ien Kuo. . . . All were peasant resistance movements and peasant revolutionary wars.¹³

That Chinese Communist authors, and Mao himself, have selected the heroes of *Shui Hu* for such treatment is interesting. Noncommunist authors have been quick to point out that Sung Chiang and the other rebels in the novel were *not* of peasant origin. Most, if not all, were of nonpeasant provenance. C. T. Hsia indicates that:

Communist critics have invariably praised the *Water Margin* as a great revolutionary novel. They are mistaken insofar as they conceive of the Liangshan band as the vanguard of a class-conscious peasant force striving for enlightened political and economic revo-

¹¹ Shih Nai-an, *Shui Hu*, 2 vols. (Peking, 1972), p. 178.

¹² Chiang Shu-feng, *Shui-hu ti Hao-ch'u* [The virtues of Shui-hu] (Shanghai, 1953), p. 1.

¹³ Mao Tse-tung, "Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," *Mao Tse-tung Hsuan Chi*, II: 619.

lution. Among the major heroes of the novel, perhaps only Li-K'uei can be called a peasant.¹⁴

That the heroes of *Shui Hu* were nonpeasant in origin hardly constitutes an embarrassment for Maoists and need not, in fact, constitute an embarrassment for Leninists. As early as the turn of the century Lenin argued that "revolutionary class consciousness" could be brought to the revolutionary elements of society by "de-classed bourgeois agents." Lenin went so far as to insist that without the intercession of such agents, the masses would forever remain bourgeois in orientation.¹⁵ Maoists, as students of Lenin, clearly recognized that the leadership of China's revolution originated, almost to the man, among nonpeasants. Almost the entire leadership of China's Communist party derives from old China's elite population.¹⁶ Mao, himself, identified his family as "rich peasant."¹⁷

In point of fact, Chinese Communist authors could both recognize that the rebels of *Shui Hu* originated among the elite strata of the population and still conceive them to have been, in some sense, "vanguard fighters" for the revolutionary peasantry. Maoist authors regularly allude to such "declassed rebels" as "models" for the "people." Li Hsi-fan specifically identifies "*Shui-hu's* most outstanding accomplishment" as having "created hero models for the people of the lower classes."¹⁸ Chiang Shu-feng makes the same claim: "another accomplishment of *Shui-hu* is that it has successfully created many images of heroes for the people."¹⁹ The revolutionary bourgeois and petit-bourgeois heroes of the novel constitute models "of the true hero in the hearts of the people."²⁰

China has had a long tradition of employing historical and fictional characters as role models for behavior. Ruhlmann reminds us that "to teach by imitation has long been the practice in China,

¹⁴ C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York, 1968), p. 106f.

¹⁵ V. I. Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1961), 5:375f., 383f.

¹⁶ Cf. R. C. North and I. De Sola Pool, "Kuomintang and Chinese Communist Elites," in *World Revolutionary Elites*, eds. H. D. Lasswell and D. Lerner (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 376-384.

¹⁷ Snow, *Red Star Over China*, p. 123.

¹⁸ Li Hsi-fan, *Lun Chung-kuo Ku-tien Hsiao-shuo ti I-shu Hsing-hsiang* [On the artistic images in Chinese classical fiction] Shanghai: Wen-i ch'u-pan-she, 1961), p. 130.

¹⁹ Chiang Shu-feng, *Shui-hu*, p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

where, traditionally, education has relied on models and precedent more than on rules."²¹ Unlike the westerner's penchant for appeal to abstract normative prescriptions and injunctions, the Chinese have traditionally attempted to influence behavior by referring to mimetic example. When Chinese youngsters are taught the virtue of filial piety, for example, they are not referred to a precept, Honor Thy Father and Mother. Rather, they are made to read of one Huang Hsiang, who at nine years of age, already knew how to warm the bed of his parents. Buddhist preachers employed the same technique of personalized models. Buddha and Bodhisattva are employed as models of altruistic self-denial, while the Taoists used an assortment of exemplary drunkards, poets and hermits to illustrate their ideal of conformity to nature and the principle of noninvolvement.²²

Every society uses role models in its socialization. The Chinese may perhaps have exploited such a device more regularly than others. Ruhlmann seems to hold this view when he maintains that, in the Chinese context, "hero worship is a touchstone for the social historian: Tell me who your hero is, and I'll know who you are."²³ Given this information, it seems plausible that not only was Mao influenced by his early exposure to the role models of *Shui Hu* but that contemporary Maoists persist in employing the same devices for socializing their citizenry that the Chinese have traditionally utilized for centuries.

Much of the inspirational literature of Maoist China is devoted to exemplary accounts of the "heroes of the Peoples Liberation Army" or the "honest party functionary" or the "dedicated peasant farmer"—all of whom attempt to live the life of Chairman Mao, the "never-setting Red Sun in their hearts."²⁴ Thus it can be argued that not only was Mao influenced by the folk classics of China's revolutionary peasant tradition, but that contemporary Maoists, in their efforts to inculcate what they understand to be revolutionary and civic virtue, have adapted traditional techniques to shape the public attitudes of their citizenry.

There is little precedent in classical Marxism for appeals to such techniques. Both Marx and Engels had little patience with

²¹ Ruhlmann, "Chinese Popular Fiction," p. 154.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 154f.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁴ Cf. the accounts in G. Urban, ed., *The "Miracles" of Chairman Mao* (Los Angeles, 1971).

the notion that some hero-model might shape the character of revolutionary events or the consciousness of revolutionary recruits. For Engels the "historic event" was "the product of a power which works as a whole unconsciously and without volition. . . . [What] emerges is something that no one willed." For Engels, history, and revolution, proceed "in the manner of a natural process," rather than as a consequence of mimetic behavior on the part of "masses" in response to a hero-model.²⁵ He explicitly rejected the thesis that any "so-called great man" might effectively intervene in the "natural processes" governing the course of history. For Engels, a suitable man for every historic necessity was always available. If Napoleon had not existed, history would have found a suitable substitute. Even Marx had not made a nonsubstitutable contribution to historic development. In Engels's judgment, the "time was ripe" for the discovery of Marxism—and with or without Marx "it simply *had* to be discovered."²⁶

Georgii Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism, argued precisely the same thesis. The "final cause" of historical sequences, in his judgment, was nothing other than "the state of the productive forces." Robespierre, for example, seems, in retrospect, to have influenced the course of the French Revolution—but, in fact, according to Plekhanov, "if the accidental fall of a brick had killed him . . . his place would, of course, have been taken by somebody else . . . [and] events would have taken *the same course*."²⁷ The same could be said for the historic role of Napoleon, and Marx, and, presumably, Mao.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to square all this with the Maoist disposition to accord special significance to the mimetic influence exercised by Mao and the declassed bourgeois hero-models of the Chinese revolution. Maoists characteristically insist that "Just like the tender seedlings which cannot grow without sunshine, I cannot make an iota of progress without learning from Mao Tse-tung's thought. . . . It is entirely due to Mao Tse-tung's thought that I have been able to grow at all. . . . I will forever consider myself a seedling which cannot do without the sunshine even for a single

²⁵ Cf. Engels to J. Bloch, letter of 21-22 September 1890, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 499.

²⁶ Engels to H. Starkenburg, letter of 25 January 1894, *ibid.*, pp. 549f.

²⁷ G. Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History* (New York, 1940), pp. 44, 46f.

moment.”²⁸ Revolution is possible only because China’s masses were “nurtured on Mao Tse-tung’s great thought”—for men “armed with Mao Tse-tung’s thought” possess power that is “incalculable. . . . With this power miracles can be performed. . . .”²⁹ “In the final analysis,” according to Maoist orthodoxy, “the history of the seizure of political power . . . is a history of Mao Tse-tung’s thought gripping the masses. . . . As the masses have aptly put it: ‘Without Mao Tse-tung’s thought, there would have been no new China.’ ”³⁰

For Maoism, it is not “economic relations” or the “state of the productive forces” which constitute the ultimate determinants of history, but the availability of a single man’s thought which provides the example that inspires the dedication and informs the will of masses. Just as the heroes of China’s antiquity determined the fate of dynasties, the heroes of Communist China shape history. Such notions seem clearly, if only in part, the product of a long tradition that found expression in the romantic novels that so much influenced the intellectual development of Mao Tse-tung himself. That tradition found more sophisticated expression in the thought of another revolutionary who was to work considerable effect on the political and intellectual evolution of Mao: Li Ta-chao.

Li Ta-chao and the Thought of Mao Tse-tung

In contemporary China, Li Ta-chao is celebrated as the real founder of the Communist party and the intellectual pioneer of Chinese Marxism.³¹ We have Mao’s own testimony that his Marxism was derived, in substantial part, from Li.³² In Stuart Schram’s judgment, it seems clear that Mao’s commitment to Marxism originated, to a considerable extent, through Li as an intermediary.³³ Li succeeded, in the winter of 1918-1919, not only in communicating his Marxist views to Mao, but it is equally clear that

²⁸ Wang Tao-ming, “To Remould My World Outlook with Mao Tse-tung’s Thought,” in *Mao Tse-tung’s Thought Is the Invincible Weapon* (Peking, 1968), pp. 60, 73.

²⁹ “Mao Tse-tung’s Thought Is the Invincible Weapon,” *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁰ “Long Live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” Editorial of *Red Flag*, No. 8, 1966, in *The Great Socialist Cultural Revolution in China*, vol. 4 (Peking, 1966), p. 3. Cf. “Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman,” Editorial of the *People’s Daily* of 15 August 1966, in *Great Socialist Cultural Revolution in China*, vol. 7 (Peking, 1967), p. 16.

³¹ M. Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 261.

³² Snow, *Red Star Over China*, p. 157.

³³ Schram, *Political Thought of Mao*, p. 32.

those views, at best, were idiosyncratic, if not heretical.

The earliest intellectuals who evinced an interest in theoretical socialism in China had alluded to the primitive economic conditions that characterized the Chinese environment. They recognized that socialism in China could hardly be construed as a reaction to indigenous capitalism, since there was little native capitalism in evidence on the Chinese mainland.³⁴ The response to such recognition, as early as 1907, was to suggest that socialism might somehow be introduced into an economically primitive environment more readily than into one that was industrially developed.³⁵

The acknowledgment that China offered only an economically underdeveloped productive base created serious theoretical tensions for those intellectuals who occupied themselves with the socialist alternative. In an essentially agrarian economy, the urban proletariat offered little in the way of recruitment potential. If China were to undertake a socialist revolution, it would have to seek support among population elements other than the urban working class.

By the time of the advent of the First World War, Chinese intellectuals were wrestling with just such a complex of problems. Among them, Li Ta-chao had begun to put together a belief-system predicated on nationalism, peasant populism, activism, voluntarism and an unmistakable form of intellectual elitism in which the educated revolutionary youth would bring "revolutionary consciousness" to the peasant masses still somnolent in the precapitalist "stupor of centuries."³⁶

Contrary to the orthodox Marxism that animated the socialism of Europe, Li argued that China's economic, social and political retardation afforded a vast reservoir of potential energy for social change. While Engels had argued that nations that had not yet produced a fully matured bourgeoisie and a class-conscious proletariat could not undertake socialist revolution,³⁷ and classical

³⁴ Cf. the discussion in Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (under the pseudonym Yin-ping), "Tsa-ta mou-pao" [Miscellaneous answers to a certain paper], *Hsin-min ts'ung-pao*, nos. 84-86 (4 and 24 August and 3 September 1906).

³⁵ Cf. Hu Han-min (under the pseudonym Min-i), "Kao fei-nan min-sheng chu-i che" [To the critic of the Min-sheng chu-i], *Min-pao*, 12 (6 March 1907).

³⁶ Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, p. 81.

³⁷ "The revolution sought by modern socialism is, briefly, the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie and the reorganization of society by the abolition of all class distinctions. To accomplish this, we need not only the proletariat, which carried out the revolution, but also a bourgeoisie in whose hands the productive forces of society have developed to such a stage that they

Marxists, even after the advent of the Russian Revolution, insisted that socialism could only be a function of the availability of advanced capitalist production,³⁸ Li maintained that Chinese intellectuals, with their inspired will and activism, could mobilize the nonproletarian masses of China to socialist revolution.

Li had been significantly influenced by Henri Bergson's voluntaristic "theory" of "creative free will," which he conceived as licensing the conviction that, given willed commitment, "we are capable of everything."³⁹ Li maintained that China's intelligentsia, given the appropriate will and the requisite dedication, might awaken the peasant masses of China to their "historic responsibility."⁴⁰ Critical of the economic determinism he understood to be explicit in classical Marxism, Li insisted on the historic role of "ethical" and "spiritual factors" in history. Where Lenin, as late as 1894, could insist that "the conscious element" of man played only a "subordinate" role in historical development,⁴¹ Li was emphatic about the necessity of moral invocation and the awakening of the consciousness of the "somnolent masses" of China.

By 1919, when he exercised most influence over the young Mao, Li had put together a belief-system that he conceived appropriate to an economically underdeveloped and internationally oppressed China. After the May Fourth Movement, Li became one of the most important intellectuals in the socialist revolutionary movement, and ultimately the cofounder of the Communist party of China and the martyr-hero of contemporary Maoists.

Whatever efforts Li was to make to render his belief-system more Marxist, there forever remained features that were to distinguish it from any form of Marxism, classical or Leninist as the case might

permit the final elimination of all class distinctions. . . . Only during a definite, for our period, very high stage of development of the productive forces of society does it become possible to increase production to such an extent that the abolition of classes becomes a truly progressive move. . . . This stage of development is only reached in bourgeois production. . . . A person who says that this revolution can be carried out easier in a country which has no proletariat or bourgeoisie, proves by this statement that he has still to learn the ABC of socialism" (Engels, "Russia and the Social Revolution," in *The Russian Menace to Europe*, eds. P. W. Blackstock and B. F. Hoselitz [Glencoe, 1952], p. 205).

³⁸ Cf. K. Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Ann Arbor, 1964), chap. 3.

³⁹ Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, pp. 21, 23, 28.

⁴⁰ Cf. Meisner's comments, *ibid.*, pp. 84f.

⁴¹ V. I. Lenin, "What the 'Friends of the People' Are . . .," *Collected Works*, I: 166.

be. For Marx, human consciousness was clearly a function of "objective economic conditions." When, for example, Marx deplored the incompetence of German socialism, he attributed its failings to the fact that German "social conditions" were primitive.⁴² For Engels, the fact that "productive forces have . . . outgrown the capitalistic mode of using them" was a "fact [that exists] objectively, outside us, independently of the will and actions even of the men that have brought it on," and Marxism is "nothing but the reflect [of that fact] in thought . . ."—an "ideal reflection in the mind. . . ."⁴³ Primitive economic conditions, conversely, could only find primitive ideological reflection in the mind of man.

For Li Ta-chao, nothing could be further from the truth. The "consciousness" requisite to his revolution was not an "objective reflex" of economic circumstances—it was a function of the inspiration of a "declassed intellectual elite" whose example could move the passive masses of China to regenerative struggle. In Li's judgment, China's very economic backwardness provided the potential energy for massive social and political change. The entire population of China, oppressed by foreign exploitation, constituted the proletariat of an "international class struggle."⁴⁴ For Li, China in its entirety, constituted a "proletarian nation" opposed to the advanced and privileged "capitalist nations" of the world.⁴⁵ In effect, Li was to argue a thesis that was at once voluntaristic, activist and nationalistic.

That the young Mao Tse-tung found this formulation attractive is intuitively understandable. Mao had already found the notion that select hero-models, through mimetic example, might mobilize mass energy in the service of national regeneration. Li's arguments could be construed as sophisticated formulations of the general revolutionary strategies embodied in the romantic novels of Chinese tradition. In that tradition, declassed heroes precipitated social revolution through instructive example. For Li, declassed bourgeois elements performed the same function in the contemporary world. That all this could be couched in Marxist vocabulary does little to obscure its origins.

It seems reasonably clear that both Mao and Li were Chinese

⁴² Cf. Part III, "German, or 'True' Socialism," of *The Communist Manifesto*.

⁴³ F. Engels, *Anti-Duehring* (Moscow, 1962), p. 367.

⁴⁴ Schram, *Political Thought of Mao*, pp. 28-34.

⁴⁵ Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, pp. 144f.

nationalists oppressed by the international inferiority suffered by China. Their political aspirations and intellectual development early reflected the influence of Chinese traditions. For its part, the Bolshevik Revolution intervened in a process that had already begun long before its advent. Lenin's own notions about the historic role of imperialism allowed both Li and Mao to reformulate their views in Marxist jargon, but little of the substance of their non-Marxist views changed as a consequence.

Both Li and Mao recognized the economic retardation of China, and Li was emphatic about the paucity of "urban proletarians" on the Chinese scene. As a consequence, classical Marxism was transparently irrelevant to Chinese revolutionaries. Only by radically reinterpreting Marxist categories could they be made applicable to China. This was done by Li (and subsequently by Mao) when he insisted that the Chinese *peasants* constituted the revolutionary recruitment base for a revolutionary party—and that their revolutionary consciousness could only be the consequence of the intercession of China's "educated youth." Finally, the belief-system could be held together only if the entire population of China was understood to constitute a "revolutionary class," that is to say, only if the entire population of China was assigned the historic task Marx had mandated exclusively to the proletariat as an economically defined class. China, in its entirety, became a proletarian nation opposed to those that were capitalist and imperialist.

For Mao, Li's views afforded the opportunity of pursuing his fascination with the tradition of the bandit-revolutionaries of the Chinese romantic novel. It further allowed him to indulge his nationalist aspirations by making the Chinese *nation* an historic and revolutionary protagonist. Li's notions reinforced Mao's early nationalism and the lessons he had learned from the romantic novels that so attracted him in his youth. What ultimately resulted—irrespective of the successive overlays of Marxist categories and time-conditioned preoccupations—was a revolutionary peasant nationalism that has precious little relationship to classical Marxism and only superficial similarities with the Leninism of V. I. Lenin.

Soviet Critique of Maoism

For all its tendentiousness, Soviet criticism has focused on those elements of Maoism that make it difficult to assimilate into the Marxist tradition. First and foremost, Soviet critics maintain that

because China was essentially agrarian at the time of its revolution, whatever revolutionary consciousness informed its population, given the notions of classical Marxism, could only have been "primitive."⁴⁶

In some sense, Mao seems to have accepted such notions. He has characterized the conditions of China as "poor" and the consciousness of China's masses as "blank." Mao has insisted that "apart from their other characteristics, China's 600 million people have two remarkable peculiarities; they are, first of all, poor, and secondly, blank. That may seem like a bad thing, but it is really a good thing. Poor people want change, want to do things, want revolution. A clean sheet of paper has no blotches, and so the newest and most beautiful words can be written on it."⁴⁷

Such an account can hardly pass as Marxist, but it accords remarkably well with Mao's youthful convictions about the generation of collective revolutionary consciousness. For Soviet critics all this implies that Maoists understand consciousness to be a function of elite instruction and mimetic inculcation.⁴⁸ The notion that six-hundred-million people are "blank," and that they constitute "sheets of paper" upon which words are to be written suggests little else.

However one understands these Maoist convictions, they appear to be of dubious Marxist orthodoxy. They appear to be transliterations of some of the earliest commitments of the young Mao and Li Ta-chao. What Soviet critics identify as "subjectivism," "activism" and "voluntarism" are elements endemic to Maoism since its first formulations when Mao had only the vaguest notions of classical Marxism and Li Ta-chao resisted the determinism he conceived explicit in the works of Marx and Engels. When the Maoist *Kwangming jihpao* insists that "the working class must direct everything," and such an injunction is understood to mean

⁴⁶ Cf. A. Rumyantsev, "Maoism and the Anti-Marxist Essence of Its Philosophy," *Kommunist*, 2 (1969), in *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 2, nos. 3-4 (July-October 1969), p. 243; V. A. Krivtsov and V. Y. Sidikhmenov, eds., *A Critique of Mao Tse-tung's Theoretical Conceptions* (Moscow, 1972), p. 64.

⁴⁷ Mao Tse-tung, "China Is Poor and Blank," in Schram, *Political Thought of Mao*, p. 352; cf. Krivtsov and Sidikhmenov, *Critique of Mao*, pp. 57f.; Rumyantsev, "Maoism," pp. 252f.

⁴⁸ "Thought of Mao Tse-tung Versus Marxism," Editorial in *Einheit* (German Democratic Republic), 4-5 (1968), in *Maoism Through the Eyes of Communists* (Moscow, 1970), p. 42.

“Mao Tse-tung’s thought must direct everything,” one seems to have an operational meaning for the contention that the masses of China are “blank sheets of paper” on which the “most beautiful words can be written.”⁴⁹

That all this is pressed into the service of a nationalist policy for a regenerate China is evident not only to Soviet commentators.⁵⁰ The contention that China in its entirety constitutes a proletarian nation affords the Marxist rationale for a nationalist policy of industrial development, modernization and regional, if not international, hegemony.⁵¹ That all this is somehow a function of revolution in underdeveloped economic circumstances is suggested by Soviet critics, but for a variety of reasons no effort is made to systematically place these ideological “involutions” in comparative perspective.

Maoism in Comparative Perspective

That Maoism developed largely out of indigenous impulse is now generally recognized. What is not equally acknowledged are similar developments in European Marxism after the crisis that settled down over theoretical socialist theory with the turn of the twentieth century. Recently, Domenico Settembrini has argued that the crisis that afflicted Marxism at the turn of the century was resolved in two different, but analogous, fashions by two men who were themselves leaders of revolutionary socialism: V. I. Lenin on the one hand, and Benito Mussolini on the other.⁵² Each was compelled to adapt classical Marxism to retarded economic environments peopled by largely nonproletarian masses. Both opted for a form of elitism in which mass-mobilization would take place under the auspices of declassed intellectual elites, inspiring passive masses with a revolutionary creed which in no sense could be conceived as simply “reflecting” the “objective economic con-

⁴⁹ Krivtsov and Sidikhmenov, *Critique of Mao*, p. 203.

⁵⁰ Cf. A. Kruchinin and V. Olgin, *Territorial Claims of Mao Tse-tung* (Moscow, n.d.); A. Malukhin, *Militarism—Backbone of Maoism* (Moscow, 1970); P. Fedoseyev, “Maoism, Its Ideological and Political Essence,” in *A Destructive Policy* (Moscow, 1972), pp. 101f.

⁵¹ Cf. O. Leonidov, *Peking Divisionists* (Moscow, 1971); G. V. Astafyev and M. V. Fomichova, “The Maoist Distortion of Lenin’s Theory of the National Liberation Movement,” in *Leninism and Modern China’s Problems*, eds. M. I. Sladkovsky *et al.* (Moscow: Progress, 1972), pp. 207f.

⁵² D. Settembrini, “Mussolini and the Legacy of Revolutionary Socialism,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11 (1976), 239-268.

ditions" of their respective circumstances. Both, in their individual manner, reshaped what had been an internationalist ideology to national purposes, one by adopting a form of developmental nationalism and the other by arguing that international imperialism made "national liberation" a predictable phase of "Marxist revolution."

Some of this is readily acknowledged by most commentators. What is not as readily appreciated is the fact that Mussolini's heretical interpretation of classical Marxism shares a number of interesting parallels with the interpretation imposed on Marxism by Mao Tse-tung and his mentor, Li Ta-chao. Long before he founded the movement, history recognizes as fascism, the young Mussolini had given classical Marxism a voluntaristic and activist interpretation.⁵³ More than that, like Lenin, the young Mussolini was an elitist, conceiving the intercession of a select number of declassed intellectuals essential to the development of revolutionary consciousness among the "torpid" masses of the economically retarded Italian peninsula.⁵⁴ For the young Mussolini, masses in such circumstances are marshaled to revolutionary purpose only when inspired by self-selected elites who, by their example, provide a guide to revolutionary behavior.⁵⁵

That the young Mussolini, like the young Mao, should have found such inspiration in the literature available in his native environment is perhaps less interesting than the fact that such convictions were ultimately lodged in a network of beliefs that made such mobilization a necessity because of the economic retardation of the Italian peninsula. The young Mussolini, long before he could lay any claim to political sophistication, found the notions of men like Gustave Le Bon and Giovanni Papini convincing. Both had argued that masses were mobilized by inspired example, and so moved were capable of shaping their historic destiny and the destiny of their nation. Le Bon's *The Crowd* and Papini's autobiographical *Un uomo finito* both suggested that political and historic events were shaped by masses inspired by heroic models,

⁵³ Cf. Mussolini, "Tentativi di revisionismo," and "Il socialismo rivoluzionario," in *Opera omnia* (Florence, 1953), 5:175f., 204-206.

⁵⁴ Cf. Mussolini, "L'attuale momento politico," and "Socialismo e socialisti," *Opera*, 1:120, 137.

⁵⁵ Mussolini, "Intermezzo polemico," *Opera*, 1:51, and "L'evoluzione sociale e le sue leggi," *Opera*, 2:251; cf. "Le parole d'un rivoltoso," and "Intorno alla notte del 4 agosto," *Opera*, 1:51, 62.

mimetic elites, capable of mobilizing collective energies to historic purpose.⁵⁶

By the time of the First World War, the young Mussolini understood such mobilization to be necessary because of the general economic retardation of the Italian peninsula. Italy was an underdeveloped nation, and as a consequence could boast but few class-conscious proletarians. The syndicalists, who had significantly influenced Mussolini, had long argued that the population of Italy possessed little in the way of revolutionary consciousness because of the limited industrialization that characterized their environment. As early as 1908, Roberto Michels, himself a revolutionary syndicalist, and one of the Marxist theoreticians who influenced the development of Mussolini, maintained that the population of Italy remained caught up in the psychology of economic underdevelopment, a psychology that made them difficult to mobilize for revolutionary purpose.⁵⁷ Michels went on to argue that mobilization could take place only if revolutionary leadership could effectively employ "moral" or "spiritual" invocation to that end. Like Li Tachao, Michels insisted that declassed "student youth" were possessed of the spiritual impetus that might animate the non-proletarian masses of the peninsula—an impetus that might render them amenable to the purposes of revolution.⁵⁸ By 1909, syndicalist theoreticians could insist that revolution could invest the marginally developed Italian peninsula only if a revolutionary "elite," a revolutionary "aristocracy," could succeed in inspiring the "anonymous masses" with revolutionary intention.⁵⁹

Given these convictions, syndicalists, and ultimately the young Mussolini, were prepared to argue that economic retardation had rendered the entire population of the Italian peninsula proletarian. In a world dominated by capitalist nations, Italy found itself as disadvantaged as the historic working class. Italy was a proletarian

⁵⁶ The young Mussolini was impressed by Le Bon's *The Crowd* before the turn of the century. Under that kind of influence, he subsequently found Papini's voluntaristic and activist *Un uomo finito* a "marvelous work." Cf. Mussolini, *My Autobiography* (London, 1936), p. 36 and Mussolini's letter to Torquato Nanni of 2 July 1913, *Opera*, 5:358. See the emphatic voluntarism of Papini in *Un uomo finito* (Florence, 1974), p. 144.

⁵⁷ Cf. R. Michels, *Il proletariato e la borghesia nel movimento socialista italiano* (Turin, 1908), pp. 22-26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33; cf. p. 372.

⁵⁹ A. O. Olivetti, "I sindacalisti e la 'elite,'" *Cinque anni di sindacalismo e di lotta proletaria in Italia* (Naples, 1914), p. 269.

nation oppressed by the imperialist and plutocratic nations of the world.⁶⁰ By the time of the advent of the First World War, the "heretical" revolutionary syndicalists, who were to shape the political convictions of the young Mussolini, were arguing for a form of "proletarian nationalism" that would restore to Italy its place in the sun—a place denied it by centuries of foreign domination and international inferiority.

When Mussolini organized the founding meeting of what was to become the victorious fascist movement, he had transformed his Marxism into a developmental, voluntaristic activist and elitist national populism. His heresy was inspired by his familiarity with the non-Marxist literature of his native environment. It was shaped by the sophisticated syndicalist heresy that he made his own. Like Mao, the young Mussolini had transformed the internationalistic, deterministic and proletarian revolutionism of classical Marxism into a nationalistic, voluntaristic and populist developmental ideology. Like Lenin, both Mao and Mussolini had adopted a form of elitism appropriate to underdeveloped and nonproletarian circumstances. Mussolini, like Mao, employed nationalism to mobilize the passive and irresolute masses in the service of national regeneration. Leninism, for its part, was to become national in orientation only with Stalin's decision to undertake industrial development within the confines of a given self-contained national environment. Both Mussolini and Mao opted for autarchic development at the very commencement of their successful revolutionary mobilization. For Mussolini that phase began with the mobilization of nonproletarian masses after the termination of the First World War, for Mao that phase commenced with the mobilization of peasants with the Japanese invasion in the thirties.

Whatever the differences between them, Mussolini and Mao both articulated belief-systems that significantly departed from the classical Marxism that had presumably been their original inspiration. Both committed themselves to a form of elitism and nationalism alien to the convictions of Marx and Engels. That both, independently, evolved in surprisingly similar fashion suggests that they were responding to functional requirements that were emphatic and pervasive in their respective circumstances. Both aspired to

⁶⁰ Cf. R. Michels, *L'imperialismo italiano* (Rome, 1914), pp. 92ff. and A. Labriola, "La prima impresa collettiva della nuova Italia," in *Pro e contro la guerra di Tripoli*, eds. G. Barni et al. (Naples, 1912).

regenerative national revolution in an environment characterized by economic retardation, in nations peopled by nonproletarian masses. Both conceived declassed elites mobilizing "torpid" and "blank" masses in the service of national regeneration—their enemies the advanced imperialist nations of the world. Both understood their national communities as proletarian and their intention was to conduct a class struggle on an international scale. Both conceived economic development their immediate goal and the inculcation of a psychology of obedience, sacrifice, discipline and military virtue their instrumental purpose. For Mao, the numberless masses of China were "blank sheets of paper" on which the "most beautiful words" were to be written. For Mussolini, the Italian people constituted a mass of "precious material" that awaited the hand of the master artist.⁶¹

Conclusions

What has been suggested is that the various forms of mass-mobilizing, developmental dictatorship of our century share certain sustained similarities. They originate in the complex doctrines of classical Marxism, but quickly "creatively develop" into something unanticipated by either Marx or Engels. If Engels insisted that anyone who advocated socialist revolution in environments in which a fully matured bourgeoisie and a fully matured proletariat did not obtain had failed to learn the "ABC of socialism," most mass-mobilizing revolutionaries of our time must be recognized as not advocating "socialist" revolution. But Engels's reservations notwithstanding, most revolutionaries of our time have sought to make revolution by mobilizing nonproletarian population elements in circumstances devoid of a mature bourgeoisie. When Mussolini argued that the "productive bourgeoisie" of Italy had not completed its historic cycle and therefore had a role to play in the "national revolution" he was not saying much, in principle, that was different from Mao's insistence that China's "national bourgeoisie" constituted part of the "revolutionary people" and might enter into the coalition that constituted the revolutionary dictatorship.⁶² Lenin's grudging recognition of the necessity of allowing

⁶¹ Mussolini, "L'azione e la dottrina fascista dinanzi alle necessità storiche della nazione," *Opera*, 18:360.

⁶² Cf. the discussion in "The Situation in the People's Republic of China," *Proletariat*, 1, no. 2 (August-September 1970), 2-6; and V. Khlynov, "Development of State Capitalism in China and the Maoist Attitude to the National Bourgeoisie," in Sladkovsky *et al.*, *Leninism*.

the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie room to further develop in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution is reflected in his invocation of the New Economic Policy.

All of this implies that in Italy, China and Russia at the time of their respective revolutions, the industrial bourgeoisie had not yet fully matured. The absence of such a class further entailed a recognition that whatever proletarian elements were to be found in such an environment, they alone could not constitute the population resources for successful revolution. Recruitment must take place among nonproletarian elements. However non-Marxist such a policy might be, it was clearly effective in nonindustrial or marginally industrialized circumstances. If Marxist revolution can only invest advanced industrial nations, underdeveloped communities are compelled to adopt non-Marxist alternatives. The historic record suggests that such has been the case.

In effect, there is a family of movements, that arises in industrially retrograde circumstances, that might best be characterized as a collection of mass-mobilizing, developmental dictatorships under elitist auspices and the dominance of "charismatic leaders." Such movements take their initial inspiration from classical Marxism but quickly devolve into one or another "national socialist" heresy. They all, at some time in their evolution, reflect the impact of indigenous, non-Marxist intellectual influences. In Mao's case, the influence of the Chinese literary romantic tradition is clearly evident, as is the influence of Li Ta-chao and, through him, of bourgeois thinkers such as Henri Bergson. In Mussolini's case, similar traces can be identified in the indigenous literature of the peninsula and the impact of the thought of bourgeois theoreticians like Bergson and Gustave Le Bon. For Lenin, similar influences can be traced to the writings of native Russian theoreticians such as N. G. Chernyshevsky.⁶³

The leaders of such movements apparently responded, early or late as the case might be, to the evident absence of Marxist preconditions for their revolution: Marx and Engels had made economic maturation a clear and nonsubstitutable prerequisite to socialist revolution. Industrial maturity would provide the vast majority of class-conscious revolutionaries necessary for socialist

⁶³ Cf. Gregor, *Fascist Persuasion*, pp. 199ff.

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success. Neither China, Italy nor Russia at the time of revolutions possessed either the mature industrial base or the class-conscious proletarian mass necessary for Marx's "inevitable" revolution.

To offset the disabilities which attend such circumstances, Mao, Mussolini and Lenin introduced a special function, discharged by declassed intellectuals, that produced an alternative strategy for mass mobilization, and consequently, an alternative revolution. Whatever their differences, influenced, no doubt, by the varying degrees of industrial and economic maturation of their respective situations, all such movements have shared, and continue to share, notable similarities. That clearly discernable similarities marked the intellectual development of their respective leaders is suggestive. How much those similarities influenced the subsequent institutional and policy developments can hardly be considered here. But that all such movements have been characterized by behaviors that turn on the issues of rapid industrial development, and insistent appeals to nationalism, suggests that the similarities alluded to are more than skin-deep—more than interesting pieces of biographical and intellectual gossip.

That the family of movements and successive regimes alluded to includes instances as different as Lenin's (and Stalin's) Bolshevism, Mussolini's fascism, and Mao's peasant nationalism, suggests that we still have a great deal of classificatory and analytic work to do before we have any leverage on a plausible interpretation of the political and intellectual history of our time. That the Marxism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels has suffered some considerable "creative development" at the hands of the late Mao Tse-tung seems evident. That the process began early in the formative years of Mao's intellectual development seems equally evident. That all this was not unique to Maoism merits reflection and suggests something about the events that have loomed so large in our time.