

Roger L. Dial

MAO TSE-TUNG:

ON HIS RATIONALITY AND MARXIST LEGITIMACY

FOR THE PAST TWO DECADES the study of China has in large measure been the study of Mao Tse-tung. In more recent years, however, "Sinology" has been taking on new perspectives and new foci. The study of Mao ("Mao-ology") is being moved rapidly into a perspective more consistent with the man's actual role in Chinese politics. The central-totalitarian-figure idea that has dominated the study of Chinese politics for so long has been attacked from a number of sides. Not the least of these detracting forces has been Mao's own desperate attempt to regain power—very upsetting for those who considered him to be "in power" if not "the power" in China—through something called a "cultural" revolution. Social science models have been the other major pins in the "Mao-ology" balloon. Society and total environment, the absent factors in the calculus of the totalitarian theory, are beginning to be seen as rather tight and often assertive perimeters on the "centralized" decision-making processes of the Chinese communist bureaucracy. Alas, it is not so easy to "build socialism", let alone create "new socialist man". These trends in the analysis of Chinese political behavior reflect an increase in analytical sophistication—a movement away from centralist foci to decentralist foci, from "Mao-ology" to Sinology, from the amorphous and simplistic to the systematic and complex.

This may seem a strange opening for an essay ostensibly primed to discuss Mao's rationality and revive one of the oldest "Mao-ology" questions of all—the matter of his Marxist credentials.¹ Why not let a collapsing paradigm such as "Mao-ology" slip away gracefully? The answer to this, of course, is that Mao and Maoism are hardly collapsing; rather it is the explanation of Chinese behaviour which seeks to cast every movement into a Maoist frame of reference

that is—read: should be—passing. An infinitely more useful and suggestive conceptualization of Mao sees him as an influential environmental factor affecting a considerable amount of what happens in *certain areas* of official Chinese behavior. In that perspective it seems that lately Mao has been capable of initiating some rather pervasive and lasting behavioral scenarios. But it is equally important to realize that to initiate is not to control, and therefore the accuracy of Maoist causation explanations declines with the linear progress of any scenario.

Furthermore, as Mao Tse-tung prepares to see his god (as it was put to Edgar Snow),² the outside world must prepare to judge him as an intellectual as well as a revolutionary leader. The normative problems for the Western analyst can not be over estimated in this respect. Central to the problem will be the question of his rationality. Mao, himself, has insisted that the actor is responsible for the effect, as well as the intent, of his actions; and that he be assessed as an actor, not just a thinker. Thought without action is meaningless; action without thought is infantile. While we are well aware of Mao's actions, his thought in the past decade remains obscure and amorphous. It is definitely premature to judge his actions during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as irrational on the basis of dated assumptions about Mao's thought in the past and general assumptions about the nature of "communist behavior" and the role of Marxist thought in it.³

Any attempted analysis on the basis of a textual study would be doomed at this time to inadequacy. Those familiar with the more recent literature of Mao are taxed by its general scarcity,⁴ the effects of ghost writers,⁵ and the effects of the very immediate embroilment on the substance of the works. Therefore, we shall take a different tack for the most part. Our first focus will be the "revolutionary instrumentality" (the leadership mechanism), followed by discussions of the "revolutionary developmental process" (how revolutions happen) and the "revolutionary vision" (toward what end). The concluding focus will consist of an exploration of the "logical" relationships between them and propositions about Mao's rationality and legitimacy as a Marxist.

Revolution Development Process

The Cultural Revolution has given us a fairly clear (if oversimplified) view of two competing theoretical models of revolutionary instrumentalities: that of Mao Tse-tung, and that identified with Liu Shao-ch'i. We add the qualification "theoretical" because in practice neither instrumentality works in

total congruence with the ideal model. A number of environmental and psychological factors always intercede on men's ideas as they are implemented. This is not just a Chinese problem derived from its unsettled and impoverished state. In the West, representative democracy in practice hardly corresponds to the ideal model, yet men continue to intellectualize on the ideal. Mao, we would assert, has been particularly tenacious in this respect.

The Maoist revolutionary instrumentality has at least one continuous prejudice—"revolution from below." Mao takes very seriously the old Marxist maxim that "the people make history", and seems convinced at all times that the people, particularly the downtrodden classes, but also a considerable proportion of the "upper classes" (bourgeois), are revolutionary. The pre-1949 course of events did much to substantiate this theory and ingrain it forever in Mao's mind.⁶ In the early 1950's the land reform program was shaped by this prejudice. In 1957 Mao seemingly allowed this bias to become a miscalculation in launching the Hundred Flowers Campaign, and again in the early 1960's Mao's thought turned confidently to the lower and middle peasants as the rectifying agents for a Party that had gone far astray in the Great Leap Forward.⁷ Finally 1966 saw Mao put his faith in the revolutionary spontaneity of the youth of China. That Mao has at times misplaced his faith in the "revolutionaryness" of the people can not be doubted. This compulsive inclination to see revolution as spontaneously coming from below has been discussed by Chalmers Johnson as Mao's basic "idealism".⁸

Liu Shao-chi'i, on the other hand, has come to see revolution as "coming from above"; that is, only with strong elite leadership. It is important to emphasize that Liu apparently did not always subscribe to this theory, or at least did not see his off-and-on attachment to the "revolution from above" idea as necessarily contradictory to Mao's attachment to the idea of "revolution from below."⁹ John Lewis has characterized this variance in "work styles" as complementary rather than contradictory during the armed revolutionary period (1927-1949).¹⁰ In a locational sense Liu was, in fact, closer to more of the people during the revolutionary days of the Yen'an Period than was Mao by virtue of his extensive travels between the various (and detached) revolutionary bases. Yet the function of Liu in this scheme was decidedly organizational. Other cadres, with more permanency in the various locales of struggle, were charged with the interpretation of the will and level of consciousness of the masses. Liu's concern remained policy formulation, directives, implementation, and intraorganizational integration.

With the accession to power in 1949, Liu became the author of the land reform document incorporating the "revolution from below" principle.¹¹ Nevertheless, Liu's concern for developing a party apparatus co-extensive with the vast new territories ruled by the communist armies led him further and further from the principle of "revolution from below." He apparently agreed with Mao on the question of massive decentralization in 1957, but, while this policy removed power from Peking, it in fact tightened the control of the Party organization (of which Liu was a principal architect) at the commune level. As G. William Skinner's work has shown, the new locus of authority was, in fact, *above* that social-economic-political (and perhaps most important, psychological) level of interaction that was explicit in the idea of "revolution from below."¹²

From the biased views for "revolution from below" and "revolution from above" come a number of other attributes of the competing models of revolutionary instrumentality.

Decentralization vs. Centralization: Mao's view is, of course, that decision making should reflect the basic demand substance of "the people."¹³ If revolution must come from below then the "correct" leadership style is one that emphasizes the upward information-cum-demand flows of society. The Party should receive the interest articulation of the people, although, paradoxically, Mao does not rule out the idea of articulating their interests before they can do so for themselves. However, he has recognized the Leninist problem of vanguard directorship. Mao's writings are filled with prescriptions that the cadre must not become removed from the masses, particularly if the cadre are to indulge in the tricky business of calculative prearticulating (guessing?) the direction and substance of mass interests. Thus a decentralized leadership is called for; one which gets the cadre out of the bureau office and into the field, out of the Ministry and into the bureau office, and so on. The recurrent rationalizing slogan of Mao's bias for organizational decentralization is: to lead the people one must "be one with the people".

On the other hand, apparently Liu Shao-chi'i has, partly by virtue of being an architect of the Party organization, fallen sway to centralist notions. Organizations must recruit, control, and retain memberships. The CCP, probably by necessity, has had to utilize some of the oldest known devices in this respect—norm systems based on rewards and punishments. Principal among the sanctions is Party demotion. Abstract incentives, so useful during the revolutionary war period when scarcity was universal and alternative courses of

organizational behavior were limited (defection to the Kuomintang held little promise), broke down almost immediately when stability and social and economic development came into being. The locational dimension of this became centralization; and the organizational consequence was bureaucratization—the haves must protect levels of physical and rank prosperity from the have-lesses and have-nots. Liu Shao-chi'i, by virtue of his administrative role, if not his own personality, fell heir to maintaining this kind of organizational calculus.

However, there is a more positive side to Liu Shao-chi'i's centralism. It can be argued that the functions of development and governance vary immensely from the functions of making revolution. The principal revolutionary function is to mobilize people for struggle; in the Chinese case a struggle of sufficiently low technological demand that skills (e.g., how to hide, run, turn around, and swing a club) were already present in the mobilized. The need to develop new technologies for national development functions required a centrality of effort and investment beyond the basic interaction of vanguard cadre and masses. Stable and complex institutions are necessarily called into being. Steel can be made in the backyard, but if economy and rapid industrial development features in the goals, then it is *best* made in a centralized, urban, organizationally defended and technologically underwritten milieu.

Elitism vs. Populism: "Revolution from above" in its personnel dimension becomes an elitist revolutionary instrumentality. Leaders reach and stay on top because of the sophisticated skills they have acquired. Furthermore, since they themselves dominate in a large way the establishment of group norms, they can be counted on to require similar sophistication (not available to everyone in a society of considerable scarcity) for intraorganizational mobility. The circle of leadership at the top continues to grow tighter and tighter. One pathetic manifestation of this divulged by the Cultural Revolution in China was the favoritism given scions of Party members and bourgeois allies in education.

On the other hand, the Maoist revolutionary instrumentality carries with it a serious strain of populism.¹⁴ The basic leadership figure in the Maoist leadership schematic is not the urban Party boss; but rather the mobilized peasant who has developed a class consciousness, who knows the problems of his own village, who very well may not be able to read, and who may or may not have fought in the revolutionary war. Even knowledge of local kinship patterns is a kind of expertise in the Maoist leadership concept.¹⁵

Urban vs. Rural: It can further be said that there is a variance between the two revolutionary instrumentalities with respect to urban vs. rural biases. This, however, is obscured by the fact that the "revolution from above" model in China has sought the most pervasive control of the rural area, while at the same time regarding the urban sector as the most fundamental and vital in a developmental sense. Economic investment figures bear this out particularly in the First Five Year Plan period. However, the nature of the collapse of the Great Leap Forward precluded any serious attempt to follow the classic "revolution from above" model (Stalin's) and drain the resources of the rural sector into the bottomless investment pit of the urban industrial sector. Instead, the early 1960's saw both the revolution from above and below proponents largely in agreement on rural investment, particularly in the progressive areas of chemical fertilization, water conservation, and rural electrification.

Class Analysis: Finally, at the heart of the difference between the two theoretical models lay a variance in class analysis. While the Maoist model insists on the continuation of class struggle (rationalized for post-liberation utility by Mao's distinction between "antagonistic" and "non-antagonistic contradictions"), the Liu model has tended toward down playing class differentiation and importance.¹⁶ The "revolution from above" model saw a strong Party organization as an effective deterrent to dialectical revisionism. The Maoists saw the Party organization as becoming revisionist as a consequence of its increasing strength. Furthermore, the Party's apparatus for controlling deviation was, from the Maoist point of view, incapable of seeing, or unwilling to see, the deviation within. The Party unhesitatingly attacked its enemies; but its enemies very often were the people regarded by the Maoist instrumentality as the "most revolutionary"—e.g., 1962-4, the poor and the middle peasants and basic level cadres, and 1966, the rebelling students.

Leaving aside the matter of revolutionary instrumentality for the moment, let us look briefly at what may be called the revolutionary developmental process.

The Revolutionary Developmental Process

This, put most simply, is the question: "What is a revolution" in the Marxist conceptualization? The basis of Marxist thought is, of course, the materialist view of history. In Marx's conception all manifest attributes, social and political, religious and cultural, rise from the existing system of economic production and distribution. The latter is said to be the "base" and the former concepts represent a "superstructure" described at a high level of generality.

Change of the base would bring changes in the superstructure, but an alteration of the superstructure was not possible without prior changes in the base. Like so many Marxist theories, the propositions about base and superstructure were to be tested by other men in different times.

The completed revolution—that is the vision or utopian view—would presumably see a total and equilibrated integration of all levels of the superstructure and the base manifest in a single proletarian body. The post “bourgeois state” pre-“communist era” period has come to be called the “transfer culture” by some western social scientists and the “building of socialism” by the Marxists.¹⁷ The difference in descriptive terminology is significant in that the idea of a “transfer culture” provides a focus of greater dimensions vis-à-vis the base-superstructure concept than does the idea of “building socialism”. Similarly, we would assert that the Maoist phrase “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution”, though not all that new even in China,¹⁸ implies a different focus from the concept of “revolution in production” so often used by Mao’s recent opponents.

It is a truism that men’s thoughts are largely fashioned by their experience and perception. Mao, unlike Marx, has had the opportunity to see building of socialism processes first hand, has found the Marxist conceptualization of the transfer culture inadequate (though not wrong), and has provided some added theoretical propositions.¹⁹ These appear to be of two sorts: the relationships between the various dimensions of the revolutionary process; and the relationship between the dimensions as a whole and the utopian vision.

In the first case Mao has apparently added some qualification to Marxist theory. Where Marx asserted that changes in the economic base would consequent changes in the superstructure, Mao holds that, other things being equal, this is true. However, certain conditions *can* prevail which prevent the fulfillment of the materialist historical process. His perception of the USSR may have led him to this proposition. He has seen in the Soviet Union a failure to “get revolution into” the superstructure. Either by independent observation of the Soviet Union, or by concurrent observations of Soviet behavior and the rapid development of an alternative revolutionary instrumentality within China itself, Mao has apparently found the deterring bottle neck to be in the political superstructure. The failure of the Soviet political system, a system declared to be the agent of the proletariat in the transfer culture, has prevented the development of a cultural revolution. In Mao’s view, Khrushchev’s belated interest in developing a “new socialist man” has been deterred

by the very existence of Khrushchev himself—to the extent that Khrushchev represents a kind of managerial revolutionary instrumentality.

Mao's theoretical increment to a theory of the relationship of the revolutionary developmental process, in all its structural dimensions, to the vision may in fact be more a matter of clarification or of emphatic stress. Any careful reading of Marx would find some notion of the necessity of equilibrium—i.e., balanced development—in the revolutionary developmental process. However, Marx's commitment to the idea that the superstructure would automatically reflect the base could only make the matter of balanced development (within the revolutionary process) one of passing importance. Mao's point of emphatic stress is that without a concurrent revolutionary development in the superstructure, evident in its most removed (from the base) dimension (the cultural dimension),²⁰ the revolutionary development of the base itself can not be secured, and that the consequent revisionism deters accomplishment of the vision. The substance of the vision in this calculus remains Marxist; but, as we shall note below, Mao's argument may, in fact, be leading him unconsciously to a new vision—a revolutionary one but not, perhaps a Marxist one.

The Vision and The Effect of the Revolutionary

Instrumentality on the Revolutionary Developmental Process

Can the revolutionary instrumentality identified now with Liu Shao-chi'i stimulate and lead the revolutionary developmental process? It is fairly clear that this, in part, depends on the criterion imposed by the vision. If the vision is a socialist economy, the decline of scarcity, and the increasing pervasivity of urban living patterns, then the revolution from above instrumentality can work—or at least has in the case of the Soviet Union. However, with little deference to Khrushchev's idea of "the whole people" the Soviet Union by most accounts fails (and will likely continue to fail) to meet the Marxist vision with respect to the maintenance of class. One could argue that the still absent unknown ingredient—i.e., one which allows all of these things *plus* the decline of class distinctions and the political interest groups which reflect those distinctions—could appear in time.²² For whatever reason, Mao has not accepted a position of patience regarding the adaption of the ruling instrumentality.²³ He has, instead, struggled for a new political system—one which he thinks will not lead to the Stalinist conclusion, socialism in the base with classes in the superstructure.

Can Mao's instrumentality in theory stimulate and lead the revolutionary developmental processes at all levels? Again the criterion of the vision are

necessarily brought forth. Mao's attachment to a decentralized instrumentality, where authority relationships (between cadre and "the people") are replaced by a relationship of "oneness" (between cadre and "the people"), may well lead to a demise of class distinctions. Furthermore, not to reverse Marxism, this may come *not* as a matter of the superiority of human will which Marx thought singularly erroneous (the liberal myth), but as a direct reflection of the changes in the economic base. However, that economic base is not likely to be fundamentally an industrialized or an urban one for two reasons. First, as many economic analysts have often noted, China's relative distance from industrial modernization is enormous compared with the Soviet Union of 1920. Second, with a longer row to hoe, so to speak, the decentralized instrumentality is not likely to generate the kinds of technologies or the implementers of those technologies necessary to accomplish the task. Thus the effect of the Maoist instrumentality on the revolutionary development process could likely result in classless, socialist, largely rural and agrarian communism. Is this the Marxist vision, and is Mao either a "non" or an "anti-Marxist"?

The first part of such a question is quite obvious. Marx dabbled less in utopian reflections than did Engels. Nevertheless, the whole Marxian thought rests on assumptions that the bourgeois stage of materialist history was consistent only with the existence of extensive capital accumulation, industrialization, and the generation of a proletarian component of society. While at times Marx's vision displayed some pastoral qualities in terms of a cultural superstructure, the economic underpinnings of this simple fulfilling life style were decidedly urban and industrial. Thus the logical extension of Mao's "practical ideology", as Franz Schurmann might put it, yields a utopia at odds with Marx's vision (as did Stalin's in a different manner).

However, before accusing Mao of casting his vision beyond the perimeters of Marxism, we should note that Mao has yet to subscribe totally to the theoretical conclusion we have constructed for him.

In Practice

Perhaps sensing the logical problem (*vis-à-vis* Marxist doctrine) of his penchant for decentralization and revolution from below, Mao has consistently kept his fences (intellectual and manifest behavioral) mended with the government. This entity, symbolized by the managerial talents of Chou En-lai, represents a duplication in function of some aspects of the alternative revolutionary instrumentality. That is, the government, being a highly centralized

apparatus, can apparently approach industrialization, urban development, and defense problems with some effect. However, the government's power—i.e., the pervasivity and focus of its authority—is for the present co-extensive with something Mao might regard as the areas of necessary, albeit regrettable, centralization and technical expertise. The fact that centralization may still be regarded as regrettable by Mao probably indicates his residual captivation with the Marxist vision. Certainly a rationalization or explanation of the government of China in terms of a Maoist theory of purposive action would be one of the weakest (though, in fact, all too recurrent) approaches if one's essential interest is in the government itself.

In Conclusion

The matter of Mao's rationality and the rationality of China itself (not to suggest that the two are measurably synonymous) has for western analysts become largely a matter of their own irrationality. The failure to define rationality in terms of any criterion recognized implicitly or explicitly by the subject himself (or itself) has seriously marred the study of China and other "communist" behavioral systems. Similarly, it has all too often been overlooked that "mistakes", even serious and numerous ones, can occur within a larger pattern of rationality.

In this paper I have attempted to show that Maoist theory may indeed be quite logical, and using certain kinds of criteria—i.e., a particular vision—the theory, and much of the behavior, of the man can be rationalized and explained. In finding proper criteria for rationalizing the theory that Mao has incremented into the public arena in recent years, we have had to go beyond the standard Marxist "goal culture" conception. It is doubtful that Mao himself would want to make similar conclusions at this time. Nevertheless, to borrow from another area of Mao's thought, a revolutionary actor is what he does, not what he thinks himself to be.

Postscript

As was emphasized at the beginning, the Chinese revolution is considerably larger than Mao Tse-tung. Its outcome will be determined by a number of men and a number of historical-cum-environmental forces which perimeter their behavior. Our interest in this article has been the thought of Mao as a separate question; much as we might analyze the thought of Trotsky, Jefferson, or perhaps Christ. Like the visions of these men, Mao's vision will never be translated into reality, rather it will be twisted by his successors to rationalize quite different historical conclusions. Ultimately, how-

ever, his thought may come to be regarded by us in proper perspective—an explanation of the man, rather than a largely erroneous shortcut explanation (explanation on the cheap) of the course of events in contemporary China.

NOTES

1. The major polemical round on this issue can be found in Benjamin Schwartz and Karl Wittfogel contributions to the first issues of the *China Quarterly* (no. 2-3, 1960).
2. "Interview with Mao", *New Republic*, January 20, 1965.
3. This we feel has been done by John Lewis in his otherwise very enlightening article: "Leader, Commissar, Bureaucrat: The Chinese Political System in the Last Days of the Revolution", in Ping-ti Ho and Tang Tsou, ed., *China in Crisis*, Book 1, Vol. 2.
4. The exchange of letters between the CC-CPSU and the CC-CCP provides perhaps the best source with respect to the new thought of Mao Tse-tung. His older thought is of course widely available in bound form.
5. Some of Mao's "office help" possess considerable intellectual prowess in their own right—e.g. Chen Po-ta.
6. A good discussion of the relationship of perception to theory, and theory to behavior in turn, is to be found in Davis B. Bobrow, "The Chinese Communist Conflict System", *Orbis*, Winter 1966.
7. See: Richard Baum and Frederick Teiwes, *Ssu-Ch'ing: The Socialist Education Movement of 1962-1966*.
8. Chalmers Johnson, "Chinese Communist Leadership and Mass Response: The Yen-an Period and the Socialist Education Period", in *China in Crisis*, Volume 1, Book 1.
9. In fact, Liu may not now subscribe to this theory. Nevertheless, the type does exist in China (and elsewhere) and justly or unjustly Liu has been given the honor of wearing the label.
10. John Lewis, *op. cit.*
11. See Liu Shao-chi'i, *Report on the Problem of Land Reform*, Jen-Min Jih-Pao, June 30, 1950.
12. G. William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China", *Journal of the Association of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIV, numbers 1, 2, 3 (1964-65).
13. Subject, of course, to Mao's changing conception of who "the people" are in different times and circumstances.
14. Stuart Schram has identified this with Mao's early relationship with Li Ta-chao. See: *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung*.

15. See: John Lewis, "The Leadership Doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party: The Lesson of the People's Commune," *Asian Survey*, October 1963.
16. We need not accept the Maoist's position here, which was shaped by their perception of the Soviet experience. At best, the "revolution from above" proponents have probably only held out for a continuation of the "New Democracy" scheme of class rationalization in the past.
17. The "transfer culture" concept comes originally from Anthony Wallace, *Culture and Personality*; but applied best to communist studies in general, and Chinese studies in particular, by Chalmers Johnson. See *Revolutionary Change*, p. 84.
18. The cultural revolution in China extends at least as far back as the May Fourth (1919) Movement.
19. In the proposition that Mao has "added" to Marxism we are following Thomas Kuhn's conceptualization of a thought paradigm being "filled out" by succeeding thinkers. That is to say, Mao has not found the Marxist explanation of change (dialectical) in history to be wrong, merely inadequate in the presence of variables unknown to Marx. However, the logical extension of these additions may indeed be a revolution in (against) Marxist thought. See: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In the heat of ideological conflict it should not be overlooked that Marx did, in fact, provide a "scientific explanation" of social history.
20. The sense of "removed" is also to be found in a psychological frame of reference. That is, "culture" is more a matter of sub-consciousness than the "social" which is a more conscious state of mind.
21. In Franz Schurmann's terms Mao has done nothing so far that is not a matter of creative development in practical ideology. However, these may in fact have the consequences of changing his pure ideology, albeit incrementally.
22. An interesting account of the conversion of class interests into political dimensions is to be found in Milton G. Lodge, "Soviet Elite Attitudes in the Post Stalin Era", *American Political Science Review*, September 1968.
23. In retrospect it appears that Mao was possessed with a higher degree of patience at the 9th and 10th Plenums with respect to this question. However, between 1962 and the 11th Plenum of August 1966 his patience declined, his behavior changed, and we might accordingly assume that his "thought" underwent some fundamental alterations. We would, however, suggest a larger causal pattern behind these changes than the matter of "patience". The narrow psychological reductionist explanation is taken by R. J. Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality*.