Redefinition of "Maoism"

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THIS paper sets forth the outline of the position that the "thought of Mao Tse-tung" represents a systematic body of ideas having distinctive features. More specifically, it seeks to sketch the dual proposition that (1) from a structural point of view, the undeviating theme in Mao is "revolution," and (2) from an interpretive standpoint, the most adequate theme for approaching him is "philosophical instrumentalism."

The term "philosophy" as used in connection with Mao Tse-tung will be given a restricted meaning. Specifically, it is employed to refer to certain epistemological precepts and certain ontological precepts, a theory of knowledge and a theory of being.² By "philosophical instrumentalism" is meant the proposition that knowledge—itself a product of society—must be turned into an instrument of social change. Knowing for the sake of doing, knowledge for the sake of action—such is the essence of the instrumentalist position.

The theme of "revolution" is quite explicit—and virtually self-explanatory—in Mao Tse-tung; it constitutes the fundamental core and the basic foundation of the various aspects of his thought. No other available theme—"nationalism,"³ "chauvinism,"⁴ "the problem of the peasantry,"⁵ etc.—none of those can serve the function of bringing together and unifying the entire corpus of the writings of Mao. Every pronouncement of Mao can be comprehended within the framework of four interrelated groups of questions, all bearing on revolution. These questions may be stated in the following terms:

1. How does the revolution begin? What are the instigators of the revolutionary movement?

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¹ This article represents a preliminary report on a much larger study of Mao Tse-tung now in progress.
² Mao's epistemology is spelled out in "On Practice" (July 1937), Selected Works, I (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1964), 295–309; his ontology is found in "On Contradiction" (August 1937), ibid., 311–47.
2. How does the revolutionary movement unfold? What are the stages through which it must go?

3. What keeps the revolution going? What are the dynamic forces that move it forward?

4. What functions does the revolution perform? What are the objectives that it seeks to attain?

These questions combine to make "revolution" the major unifying theme capable of bringing coherence and meaning to all aspects of the "thought of Mao Tse-tung."

Mao's revolutionary thinking has two principal ingredients: a Marxist-Leninist world outlook is superimposed on the cultural legacy of the ancient civilization of China. The "thought of Mao Tse-tung" aims at nothing less than an updating—indeed, a rewriting—of Chinese history from the Marxist-Leninist point of view. To be effective, Mao insists, Marxism-Leninism must be integrated with the actual circumstances in which it finds itself. A "Marxist theoretician" is one who can adapt Marxism-Leninism to the concrete requirements of changing times and conditions. Wholesale imitation must be replaced by critical adaptation.

Mao's revolutionary thinking is underscored by a distinctive approach to Marxist philosophy. The thought of Mao Tse-tung, this paper holds, is not sheer ideology. For Mao, Marxism-Leninism comprises a series of precepts—social, political, military, economic, and ideological—all of which are fused together in terms of an overriding and all-inclusive philosophical system. Mao, in other words, has a commitment to Marxist philosophy per se. A functional, instrumentalist formulation of dialectical materialism provides Mao Tse-tung with a set of conceptual tools consistently utilized in the analysis of the multitude of problems confronting him in the social, political, military and economic spheres. The interjection of a highly instrumentalist, pragmatic (and opportunist) strand into Marxism-Leninism permits Mao Tse-tung a maximum degree of flexibility in adapting it to the circumstances of the revolutionary movement in China. Although the philosophical instrumentalism in question finds earlier expression in Marx, Engels, Lenin and others, with Mao it is carried to a height unforeseen by any Marxist theorist before him.

Mao Tse-tung, it should be stressed, is not here viewed as a Marxist philosopher; he is looked upon as a student and interpreter of Marxist philosophy. Mao's basic importance lies not so much in the content of his philosophy as in the way in which he approaches and utilizes a particular philosophical system. There is nothing in Mao Tse-tung that can qualify as an "original" contribution to the substance of Marxist philosophy. But to say—and this is crucial—that Mao is not original in his treatment of Marxism is not to deny his originality in applying it to the concrete conditions of the revolutionary movement in China. Put otherwise, though not a Marxist philosopher, Mao Tse-tung may be viewed as a Marxist theoretician in whose writings can be seen a coherent and interdependent set of ideas underscored by a distinctive approach to Marxist philosophy and embracing a number of applied theoretical innovations.