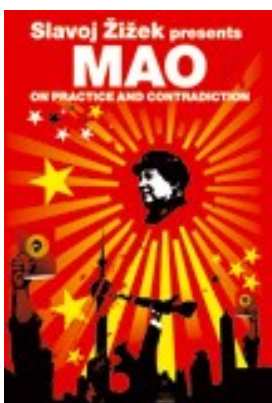


Rejecting both Mao and Deng: Slavoj Žižek and Waiting for the Leftist Critique to Come

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Review Article of Mao Tse-Tung. 2007. *On Practice and Contradiction*. London: Verso



If the liberal consensus nowadays is that Robespierre's French Revolution went too far in the pursuit of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, then that's not as damning as it at first may appear. If so, it must lie to the moderate end of the revolutionary scale: of those that went too far, those that really went too far and those that really, really went too far.

On the other hand, Mao Tse-Tung's tenure of the Chinese Communist Party lies precariously on the extreme side, somewhere between going too far (like Lenin) and those ultimate bad guys (Stalin, Jean Paul-Marat etc.) who really, really went too far. The exact border lies in what the Chinese Communist Party consider the transition from Good Mao to Bad Mao. In

the Sixth Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of 1981 it was conceded that Mao was probably 70% right and 30% wrong, but that to his credit, he was at least 100% right for the first 70% of his career and 100% wrong for the rest; 1959 being the axis point where the scales suddenly tipped¹.

However, that was then. It is patently unimaginable for any contemporary commentator to agree with Mao being 70% right, 30% wrong - more like 70% dictator, 30% genocidal madman. In the age of *the Black Book of Communism*, human rights, the good governance agenda etc., the disownment of the excesses of the 20th century's radical politics is accompanied by a disownment of the violence inherent to any utopian struggle. And yet, the lingering idea of a turning point, from Mao the nationalist hero of the peasantry to Mao the Marxist Lord of Misrule does at least give him a glimmer of acceptability. Clearly *Verso*, the publisher of the *Revolutions* series, acknowledges that line too. It is difficult to imagine the collected speeches of Pol Pot being packaged up like this release: with a trendy cover and sympathetic reading by a hot critical theorist of the day. But Mao, ok we think, we tut tut at the Cultural Revolution, but our politically correct respect for Otherness obliges us to see there must have been a certain purity in his early struggles - right?

The problem with this Good Mao-Bad Mao redemptive strategy is immediately apparent when you actually take seriously Mao's writings. *Verso's* new release is incredibly useful to this end. It is a beautifully presented compendium of Mao's key passages, which span a period from 1930 to 1964. They range from laboursome tracts on the dialectical constitution of the world (during the period of Good Mao), to amusing ruminations on how to learn to stop worrying and love the American A-bomb (Bad Mao at the height of his infamy). What we learn from this broad chronological sweep is of the noticeable decline in the quality and volume of Mao's theoretical work as time went on. Of the essays reproduced here only two are post-1959 and both of questionable merit. However, contra the Good Mao-Bad Mao paradigm, it is disconcerting to see the ideas behind the Cultural Revolution embedded as far back as the 1937 essay 'On Contradiction.' Not coincidentally, 1937 also marked the year when Mao and the CCP began a project they dubbed the Sinification of Marxism, a bizarre culturalist term, which although hushed up in the mid forties, in spirit became the ever lasting Party orthodoxy². "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" they

now call the latest market-led interpretation.

What did Sinification mean in practice? For Mao all things could be placed into the framework of generality and particularity. Generality was, of course, the truth of Marxism; particularity was, in the case of Leninism, the Russian variant. But more over, this desire to de-universalise Lenin, led Mao to fundamentally reinvent dialectical materialism. Questioning what Mao calls the dogmatism of Hegel's 'idealism', the Sinification of Marx involved the positing of certain irresolvable categories of opposites as a rebuttal to the resolvability of certain social contradictions. Only a hammer, not historical mediation, can then crack them. He asks us, by way of example, to understand:

Why can an egg, but not a stone be transformed into a chicken? (97)

This leads us to the second popular narrative of Mao: that of Western Marxists who, at first inspired by the Cultural Revolution, later sank into a despondent sense of betrayal, as the realities of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution became apparent. Take ex-Maoist Bernardo Bertollucci's 2003 film *'The Dreamers.'* An idealistic, young American, Matthew, spends the summer bunked up with tearaway French film buffs Theo and Isabelle, superficially flirting with the events of Paris 1968 unfolding outside their window. When they come to blows, it is between Theo's naïve enthusiasm for all things exotic and radical and Matthew's down to earth American liberalism.

THEO

Then why don't you think of Mao as a great director making a movie with a cast of millions. All those millions of Red Guards marching together into the future with the Little Red Book in their hands...

MATTHEW

A book. Just one book. The Red Guards that you admire they all carry the same book, they all sing the same songs, they all parrot the same slogans. So in this big, epic movie everybody is an extra. That's scary to me. That gives me the creeps.

If this new release of Mao is anything it is a rebuff to this kind of pap sentiment. You would imagine contrarian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who writes the introduction for this release, and recently releases a text called *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008), to have something positive to say in retort. Yet even Žižek cannot ignore the liberal critiques, such was the scale of the bloodshed.

This includes the hundreds of thousands killed in public executions, the tens of millions driven to starvation and the wholesale anarchy of the Cultural Revolution.

But perhaps, butchery aside, the biggest obstacle in approaching Mao from a leftist perspective is today's inert political climate, where Revolution has become more widely known as a chain of vodka bars. Furthermore, we could even say that the very terms of Maoism are in the process of being dialectically mediated from under our feet, as stone turns into chicken through capitalist co-optation. The 2007/08 Christmas issue of the *Economist* put Mao on the front cover and extolled his virtues to CEOs, demanding that they:

Consider the truth and clarity of "serve the people" compared with the average company's mission statement, packed with a muddle of words and thoughts tied to shareholders and CSR's, that employees can barely read, let alone memorise. (124)

Thus Mao is reclaimed by the right, through a sense of contempt for the gullibility of ordinary workers and an admiration for his authoritarian rhetoric. All the free marketer need do is put a 70% discount on Mao's leftism and reclaim the 30% management speak. The leftist position is obviously far more vexed.

If the Good Mao-Bad Mao paradigm does not make much sense, at least from the interpretation of Mao's ideas, and crying foul over 'betrayal' and such like is off the table, how do we retain the meaning of Maoism other than that of a sobering history lesson? And how should this interpretation lead us to assess the ideology of contemporary China, a nominally Communist state pursuing the most explosive generation of capitalist development the world has ever seen? But before we get there, we must take a detour, following Žižek back to his beloved October Revolution, which occupies a strangely large role in his introductory essay. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 plays the Shakespearean double act in leftist folklore of the purist revolution, descending to the lowest Stalinist squalor. The decades charting this process are archetypal of what revolutionary historians call the Thermidor at work. The utopian capture of the state, soon gives way to a process of normalisation where one set of leaders is replaced by a new set, one class of aristocrats and industrialists swept away, and a new state class of apparatchiks installed, culminating in the gulags. And, of course, we all know the good old tale of Trotsky's elimination by

Stalin for daring to continue the work of the revolution, long after its sell-by-date.

Therein you have the depressing pattern of twentieth century revolutions. Is Mao therefore simply the Stalin of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the Cultural Revolution only the analogue of the great purges? Rather, I think we should consider the situation differently. What if, instead, Mao was both his own Stalin *and* Trotsky? Or at least a lonely Stalin dreaming of the day he will meet his own Trotsky. Mao had adversaries in the CCP, but there was never a more radical challenger to his leadership. Žižek comes to the same conclusion:

And did Mao himself ultimately not play a similar role, a role of secular God who is at the same time the greatest rebel against himself? (19)

This, for Žižek, was also Mao's greatest failing. But to fully appreciate Žižek's critique, we must first tackle his prickly fidelity to Hegel's *Logic* and particularly the pre-eminence of the concept of the *negation of the negation*. Parallel to an understanding of this concept, is the related political stance of choosing whether to see the dialectical schema as a process of cracking or merging.

What played out in the debate of whether the One Splits into Two or the Two resolves into One, in the early days of Maoism, is not merely Marxist obscurantism taken to its final extreme: the implications were epochal. Alain Badiou (1999) neatly surmises the role of the debate as homologous to differences in revolutionary subjectivity.

Is it the desire of division, of war, or is it instead the desire of fusion, of unity, of peace? In any case, in the China of the time those who hold to the maxim 'one divides into two' are declared leftists, and rightists those who advocate 'two fuse into one'.

To elaborate, the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic depends on the assumption of synthesis, where resolution is solidified by its negation on the same terms. Žižek uses the excellent example of Blair's Third Way as the affirmation, even in partial negation, of Thatcher's free market revolution. Opposed to this, Mao's most unsettling proposal is that of absolute contradiction (the egg and the stone). You could either see it as a proto or post-dialectics, pre or post-modern, but Mao was insistent on the impossibility of synthesis, of actually existing, irreconcilable opposites in endless contradiction. This is how he puts it in 1957:

Quite a few people fail to make a clear distinction between these two different types of contradictions – those between ourselves and the enemy and those among the people. (138-139)

In other words, amongst the 'people' the dialectic can continue its course, but between the CCP and counter revolutionaries there can never be any resolution, only a continual battle to suppress absolute opposites. And to rout these elements from hiding a process has to be initiated that shatters the One into Two and exposes these opposites for what they really are.

For this reason, Mao is marked down to a B+ student in the Slavoj Žižek School of Revolutionary Science. What he fails to understand, according to Žižek, is of the power of the negation of the negation to affect progress amongst even irreconcilable opposites. And, in that failing, lies the roots of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. So although Žižek states in the opening passages "...it is too facile either to condemn his reinvention of Marxism as theoretically inadequate..." (2), after all is said, these are exactly the terms in which Žižek does condemn him. Which gets to the problem of facing Žižek and others like him. Whilst the humanist critique remains a closed door for Marxist theoreticians wishing to maintain fidelity to the twentieth century's leftist revolutions (just do the math on the body count attributable to many of Verso's revolutionary thinkers) the differential element can only be in the history of ideas.

Whilst this is a refreshing corrective to the crass anti-intellectualism that predominates today, that frames everything in terms of the politics of fear and cost to the economy, it has some questionable implications. It implies that if only Mao had understood the profundity of the negation of the negation then not only would the destructive misrule of the Cultural Revolution have been averted but so too would have been the principle-less capitalism inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping. Mao's theory of contradiction is thus the root cause of China as the:

...ideal capitalist state... the emerging superpower of the twenty-first century thus seems to embody a new kind of capitalism: disregard for ecological consequences, repression of workers' rights, everything subordinated to the ruthless drive to develop... (18)

'Well, I'm awfully sorry' you can almost imagine the 400 million Chinese lifted from poverty

retorting. There is, unsurprisingly, much evidence to contradict this hyperbole. Opposed to Žižek's characterisation of China as the ultimate capitalist state, rather, the fact is that still 50% of exports are from state owned enterprises. Additionally, in the recent 11th five year plan, the consensus reached was that Deng Xiaoping's 'let them get rich first' is to be replaced by a return to efforts at increasing social equality, including redistributive efforts to the poverty stricken inland provinces. But Žižek is not alone in the Western left in chastising China's post-Mao reforms. Fellow traveller Badiou (1999) has this to say about the capitalization of Deng's China.

Deng unfurled, during the whole of the eighties and up to his death, a completely savage and completely corrupt sort of neo-capitalism, all the more illegitimate as it maintained the Party's despotism

It is not difficult to understand the increasing frustration of many Chinese intellectuals with the Western left, who seem happy to valorise the principles of the Cultural Revolution, whilst going all out to attack the reform programme, on the basis of its actually existing contradictions. Inevitably this has led to accusations by some scholars of neo-orientalism on the part of Western Marxists such as Frederic Jameson, Alain Badiou and Žižek³.

During a lecture in Athens, October 2007⁴, Žižek discussed how on a recent trip to China he managed to speak to a CCP representative regarding the \$1 billion + project to reinvigorate Marxism in China⁵. After probing as to what this "Chinese Socialism" actually constitutes, Žižek discovered that in fact it means "social cohesion" to which he retorts to the audience: "In the West we just call that fascism." But wait a minute we think; Žižek must have come a long way from his early candidacy for the Slovenian liberal-democratic party and its third-way nationalist corporatism. Take Žižek's (2006: 13) criticism of the Western left's critique of the Eastern European abandonment of socialism out of context and it reads as an interesting reflection on his own position on China.

...the true object of fascination was the supposed gaze of the East...a kind of 'subject supposed to believe' – in the East, the West found a sucker...

History doesn't give us many exact correlates, but as Noam Chomsky astutely observed, occasionally we are blessed. In this case let us compare for a moment the experience of China

with that of the post-Communist Russia and Eastern bloc. Whereas China lifted millions from misery, the 'shock therapy' administered by the IMF and European Central Bank caused catastrophe in Russia and the Eastern European states: precipitous mortality, booming poverty and wholesale primitive accumulation by the oligarchs and gangsters aligned with the Yeltsin government.

This is not to deny the many problems in China, provoking the thousands of not widely heard of forced evictions in the coastal cities and massive peasant riots in the interior, but to cast China's post-Maoist endeavours in world demonological terms seems more than a bit misplaced. After all, aren't these developments all also symptoms of what European states experienced during the industrial revolution? And doesn't chastising China over such matters as its environmental record stink of the kind of sanctimonious hypocrisy that materialists are supposed to be immune from? There is, however, something impressively original in Žižek's critique. Refusing the double bind that demands the left choose, at least as a weighted average, which side they are on (Mao or Deng), the logic of his critique, rather, rejects them both as a continuation of the same faulty understanding of Hegel's negation of the negation. For Žižek, Deng's reform programme is nothing more than the continuation of the logic of Mao. Mao's irreconcilable opposite re-emerges with a form of capitalism that is the absolute negation, or negative dialectic, of what positive economic and cultural changes Mao affected in China.

What this says about the parallel situation in Russia, where presumably Lenin well understood the negation of the negation, if not Stalin, his bureaucratic successors, and later Putin's reinvigorated corporatism, is questionable. Perhaps the fundamental failing of Mao is much more pedestrian. Perhaps in abandoning all semblances of humanism, he jeopardised the preservation of what good he achieved. Ultimately, perhaps, there is not as much to be learned from reading Mao as we would like to believe. Or maybe, as Lui Kang (1995: 9) puts it:

...this does not mean the collapse of the Chinese revolutionary legacy itself; a left-wing critique of it has yet to come.

This release and Žižek's argument is not a bad place to start. But a negation of the negation is definitely in order.

¹ For an in depth discussion of the Good Mao-Bad Mao discussion of the 1980s see John Starr (1986)

² Mao Tse-Tung was not alone in demanding this adaptation of Marxist-Leninism to the needs to the China. Ch'en Po-ta was, if anything, even more scathing about the simplistic mapping of Leninism onto the Chinese situation. It is clear that neither Mao nor Ch'en anticipated that the reinterpretation of Mao would represent a challenge to its universalism, which would later form an analogue to Althusser's culturalist reinterpretation of Marxism. Rather, they mistakenly took the critique of Hegel's 'idealism', in his dialectical logic, as a particularistic adaptation. For a further elaboration of the history of the Sinification project see Raymond Wylie (1979).

³ Gou Jian's (1999) argument is the most sophisticated of these that I have come across. Claiming that Maoism has been airbrushed from the history of post-modern thought from the 1960s onward, Guo argues that authors such as Frederic Jameson, in their stubborn fidelity to the Cultural Revolution, at the same time need to distance it through a process of exotisation and by abandoning the normative criteria they would apply to similar 'movements' in the West. Similar themes are taken up by Ian Arnold (2007).

⁴ See the complete videoed lecture on 'The Liberal Utopia' recorded at the University of Athens, Greece on the 4th of October 2007. View at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMp8P3C_J7I&feature=related

⁵ New Statesman (2006)

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